

URBANIZATION AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN NIGERIA, 1914-2023

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Abstract

Urbanization in Nigeria has profoundly shaped intergroup relations, fostering both opportunities for integration and sources of tension. From the colonial times to present, rapid urban growth transformed Nigeria's social, cultural, and political landscapes as rural-urban migration brought diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups into close proximity in cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Kano, Port Harcourt, Kaduna, and Abuja among others. This process facilitated cultural exchange, economic collaboration, and the emergence of cosmopolitan identities that challenged rigid communal boundaries. However, the pressures of competition for resources, housing, employment, and political representation also generated conflict and reinforced ethnic and religious cleavages. This study, used the primary and secondary sources to generate the data needed for the study. It adopted the Intergroup Contact Theory as template for analysis. The work revealed that colonial policies of spatial segregation, post-independence struggles for indigene-settler rights, and contestations over urban governance further complicated intergroup relations. It showed that the oil boom of the 1970s, structural adjustment in the 1980s, and democratic transitions from 1999 accentuated urban inequality, shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The study established that in contemporary Nigeria, urban centers remain both melting pots of, intergroup relations, cultural and religious ties, national integration on one hand and flashpoints of violence, as seen in ethno-religious clashes in Jos and identity politics in Lagos and Port Harcourt on the other hand. The paper recommended promotion of inclusive urban governance and political representation, integration of cultural education and national identity programs in urban schools, and support for community-led initiatives for intergroup dialogue and collaboration among others. It concluded that inclusive urban governance and equitable development are crucial to transforming Nigerian cities into engines of peaceful coexistence and national integration.

Keywords: Intergroup Relations, Urbanization, Development, Competition, Integration

Introduction

Urbanization is one of the most drastic changes in the social life of the Nigerian history that establishes settlement patterns, economic practices, cultural interaction, and the relations

between populations. Since the colonial era of early twentieth century to the present time of democratic era, the cities in Nigeria have grown at a high pace to become melting pots of various ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Urbanization in Nigeria has been triggered by a number of forces that include the centralization of administrative authority by colonial powers, the establishment of trading ports, infrastructural development (rails and roads), industrialization immediately after the independence of the Nigerian state and more recently, globalization of economic opportunities. These processes have not only remodeled the demographic environment in Nigeria, but have also established new avenues of inter-group communication, collaboration and conflict (Chinda, 2025).

During the colonial era, the British established administrative and commercial centers such as Lagos, Kano, Port Harcourt, and Kaduna, which quickly attracted migrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds in search of opportunities. These cities became hubs where indigenous populations interacted with settlers, traders, artisans, and laborers from across the country and beyond. While this encouraged cultural exchange and the growth of cosmopolitan identities, it also sowed seeds of rivalry, particularly as colonial policies often privileged certain groups economically or politically. For instance, the emergence of Sabon Gari (strangers' quarters) in northern Nigeria highlighted the spatial and social segregation that structured inter-group relations, as migrant communities were separated from indigenous populations. Nevertheless, urban centers facilitated the rise of nationalist movements and pan-Nigerian identities, underscoring the dual role of urbanization in shaping unity and division (Ebube, 2025).

The post-independence period from 1960 witnessed an intensification of rural-urban migration, as cities offered greater access to education, employment, and infrastructure. The oil boom of the 1970s accelerated this process, with Lagos, Port Harcourt, Warri, and Abuja experiencing unprecedented population growth (Chinda, 2025). This influx of diverse populations heightened inter-group relations, where ethnic and religious pluralism often translated into both cooperation and tension. Urban centers became arenas for cultural fusion, intermarriages, political mobilization, and economic collaboration, yet they also witnessed ethno-religious conflicts, especially in northern Nigerian cities such as Kano, Jos, and Kaduna. Such conflicts, often rooted in competition over political power, land, economic resources, and identity, illustrate the fragility of inter-group relations in rapidly urbanizing societies.

From 1999, Nigeria's return to democratic governance coincided with renewed patterns of urbanization, fueled by globalization, technology, and population growth. Abuja, conceived as a neutral federal capital, became a microcosm of Nigeria's diversity, hosting communities from all ethnic and religious backgrounds. However, the promise of peaceful coexistence has frequently been tested by resource competition, religious polarization, indigene-settler dichotomies, and political rivalries (Ebube, 2025). Contemporary urban centers like Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt continue to serve as crucibles of inter-group interaction, where integration is facilitated through commerce, education, and popular culture, but where tensions persist due to economic inequality, unemployment, and governance deficits. Thus, the study, examined urbanization and inter-group relations from 1900 to 2023. It assessed how urban spaces have simultaneously fostered integration and competition in the Nigerian socio-political context.

Statement of Problem

One of the most remarkable social changes in Nigeria since the colonialism era up to date has been urbanization. Since the turn of the 20 th century, the growth of cities like Lagos, Kano, Enugu, Ibadan and Port Harcourt has provided the space of intensive inter-group contact, as the urban centers received economic, educational, and political inflow of people of different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Although urbanization was supposed to develop integration and erosion of parochial identities, it has had the opposite effects that created chances of cooperation and continued tensions among the diverse groups in Nigeria. Since the colonial times, the cities were created to be centers of unequal economic distribution, competition among ethnic groups over limited resources and discriminative colonial policies favoring the privileged groups over the disadvantaged groups. The post-independence also experienced the politicization of both ethnicity and religion in the cities, which led to violence outbreaks, land tenure disputes, indigene and settler conflicts, and political supremacy battles. In a case example, frequent communal conflicts in Jos, Kano, Kaduna and Lagos indicate the ways in which urbanization may both bond and separate communities.

Moreover, rapid and unplanned urban growth in Nigeria since the 1970s has intensified socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty, housing shortages, and inadequate infrastructure. These conditions have aggravated inter-group rivalries, crime, and mistrust among communities competing for survival. At the same time, urban centers have served as incubators of cultural fusion, inter-ethnic marriages, and cosmopolitan identities, demonstrating the dual nature of urbanization as both a force for integration and fragmentation. Despite the significance of these dynamics, scholarly attention has often focused on either the economic or infrastructural dimensions of urbanization, with less emphasis on its implications for inter-group relations over time. There is also a limited historical analysis that traces how colonial urban planning, post-independence politics, and contemporary globalization have jointly shaped patterns of coexistence, conflict, and cooperation in Nigerian cities. Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the complex and contradictory relationship between urbanization and inter-group relations in Nigeria from 1900 to 2023. Specifically, it seeks to understand how urban growth has contributed to both conflict and cooperation, the factors that have shaped these outcomes, and the implications for national integration, peace, and development.

Methodology

The methodology used in the study is qualitative, with the use of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected by means of oral interviews, archival sources, government reports, and newspapers, which provided first-hand information on the city development and its effects on the social life. The books, journal articles, theses and reports that were sources of secondary sources offered critical interpretations as well as contextual analysis of historical and contemporary trends. This integrated method provides the holistic picture of how the process of urbanization contributed to the intergroup relations, developing the cooperation, competition and conflict between the many ethnic, cultural and religious groups in Nigeria with time.

Conceptual Review

Intergroup Relations

Sherif (1966) defined intergroup relations as the structured interactions and perception that ensues as two or more groups interact in a social context. Such a definition focuses on the behavioural results of contact between groups, that are cooperative or competitive, based on the aims that inform such interactions. According to Sherif in his work, Robbers Cave Experiment, it was observed that intergroup conflict can be very common when groups have mutually exclusive goals, and that collaboration can help to decrease the hostilities. Thus, intergroup relations are not simply the relations of coexistence but the patterns of interaction that make groups dynamics in the society.

According to Tajfel (1981), intergroup relations can be referred to as the interactions that exist among people and they are not determined by the personal relationships and are dominated by the membership in various social groups. The view was based on the framework of Social Identity Theory and emphasized the importance of categorization, in-group favoritism, and out-group discrimination. In this case intergroup relations are determined by the mental and emotional values that people ascribe to group identity like ethnicity, religion or nationality. Therefore, the definition presented by Tajfel emphasizes that intergroup relations can be attributed to identity-based processes, which have a direct impact on the way people view themselves and other people.

Baron and Byrne (2003) define intergroup relations as the psychological as well as social processes which mediate the methods through which various groups cooperate, compete and occasionally inter-relate in conflict. This definition has incorporated both the positive and negative aspects since intergroup relationship can lead to cooperation that supports social development or hatred and prejudice that propagate discrimination. The conceptualization presented by Baron and Byrne is offering a balanced perspective, as the relations between groups are complex and multifaceted, and contingent on situational elements as well as historical backgrounds and social frameworks.

Bobo (1988) states that intergroup relations entails hierarchical organization of power, status and resource between dominant and subordinate groups. This definition focuses on the macro-social aspect, in which intergroup relations are not merely on the perceptions or psychological processes of the interpersonal level but on institutionalized inequality. Bobo points at the fact that prejudice and discrimination are systemic constructs sustaining the intergroup relations, and thus, the social justice and the power relations are subtly rooted in the issues of intergroup relations. This perception expands the concept of intergroup relations to the societal structures that perpetuate either the inclusion or marginalization.

Urbanization

Urbanization tends to be considered as the demographic phenomenon whereby a growing percentage of a population begins to reside in towns and cities, and not in rural locations. As stated in the United Nations (2018), urbanization is the process of the population moving out of the countryside and settling in the cities and the emerging cities changing the economic, social, and political situations. This definition puts an additional focus on the statistical and demographic transition, which is that cities are growing by the inflow of people, natural population increase, and the redefinition of settlements as urban rather than rural. In

that regard, the urbanization has not been gauged by the absolute increase in the population living in the urban areas but by the relative increase in the percentage of the population living in the urban areas.

Urbanization is the process through which rural societies are converted into industrialized and urban societies, changes in the employment base (as rural societies are now employed in non-agricultural sectors) and changes in lifestyle, education and social interventions (Davis 1965). This definition makes urbanization more than a demographic phenomenon, it is a structural change of economies and cultures. This is usually stimulated by industrialization, commercial growth, and services-related jobs. Urbanization is therefore a process of modernization, in which humans incorporate the urban characters, urban technologies as well as urban ways of life, which define their socio-economic lives.

According to Pacione (2009), urbanization was a process of the increase of the built-up territory and physical infrastructure to support the rising population and economic activities. This definition gives importance to the geographic and environmental dimensions of urbanization, which refers to the changes in the land use, housing developments, transport network, and planning of the city. In this perspective, urbanization may be the cause of urban sprawl, urban congestion, and environmental deterioration, yet it offers possibilities of better infrastructure, civic facilities, and connectivity. It is in this definition that we can highlight the physical expression of urbanization in the constructed environment.

According to Todaro and Smith (2015), urbanization is defined as interactions of various forces, migration, natural growth, industrialization, and globalization, that determine the way cities develop and operate. Such definition reflects the complexity of urbanization as it is not only a result but also a cause of the larger development processes. Urbanization has many impacts on governance and education health, social equity, and environmental sustainability, which is why it is among the most influential phenomena in the modern societies. This definition is holistic as urbanization in the 21st century incorporates various dimensions.

Nobody had a more authoritative account on this, Mabogunje (1968) recorded that cities such as Lagos, Kaduna and Enugu were created or greatly developed as an administrative and extractive node. It resulted in the formation of plural cities in which different ethnicities came to be united under the colonial economy, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba, etc. Empirical research conducted in this era, like those of Abner Cohen (1969) on the Hausa community in Ibadan, show that there was a two-fold reality. Cities required daily communication and economic reliance in marketplaces and workplaces, which developed a new, practical cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, Cohen has also emphasized that migrant populations tended to reproduce ethnic solidarities via voluntary organizations (e.g., the Igbo Union) that offered them a social security to bargain their position in the urban hierarchies. Therefore, the colonial city was at once introducing the seeds of integration and institutionalizing ethnicity as a major form of social organization.

The example of Barnes (1986) work in Lagos neighbourhoods demonstrated that a specific urban identity founded on social classes, occupation, and city-specific network may overcome primordial ethnic identities. The necessity of cohabitation in overcrowded living areas appeared to promote a type of a civic nationalism. Yet, this integration was not very deep. In line with Peter Ekeh theory that argues that there are two publics (1975), the migrants retained a primordial public that was connected to their ethnic homeland, to which they had a

moral duty and a civic public that was often looked at with disdain and used to make personal acquisitions in the city. This schism implied the integration of cities was weak and it depended on the financial stability and good governance.

SAPs resulted in industrialization on a grand scale, unemployment skyrocketing and the resultant cutback of any government service (Forrest, 1993). The city, which used to be a centre of opportunity, turned into a stage of high competition over scarce resources. Economic scarcity in this period was ethnicized as empirical research reveals. As an example, Okwudiba Nnoli (1995) examined how job, housing, and political patronage contests were not only, but more and more, becoming ethnic and indigenous-settler contests. The violent interactions between the so-called indigenous people and the so-called settlers evident in such cities as Kano and Kaduna were often between Igbo or southern migrants. Religious identity also proved to be a very powerful fault line, as the Pentecostalism and reformist Islam, which developed in urban areas, established new arenas of contention as discussed by Matthew Kukah (1993). Urbanization ceased to thin out conflict and intensified it and gave it a geographical character.

Human Rights Watch (2006) as well as many other scholars have conducted empirical studies that revealed how this law system institutionalises the discrimination of non-indigenes in area of education, employment and political representation even to individuals who were born and nurtured within a city. This has been the root cause of chronic violence in the so-called Middle Belt of Nigeria in places like Jos and Kaduna whose history has been filled with violence between the indigenous people (in most cases Christians) and the settlers (in most cases Muslim Hausa-Fulani). Also, the emergence of urban vigilantism and ethnic militia groups, including the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) in Lagos or the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) in the north, which Adebanwi (2011) has analyzed demonstrates how groups are now organising to take control of urban territories through violent means to protect both perceived ethnic interests.

Robinson (2002) on "ordinary cities" highlights how urban life is characterized by a daily struggle for space and resources between the elite and the vast informal sector. Furthermore, the threat of urban terrorism from groups like Boko Haram and banditry has created a new, security-focused dimension to intergroup relations, fostering suspicion and profiling of certain ethnic groups. Nonetheless, empirical studies also note countervailing trends. Social media, youth popular culture (Afrobeats), and class-based movements (e.g., the #EndSARS protests against police brutality in 2020) occasionally forge pan-urban, non-ethnic solidarities that challenge the dominant narrative of division, pointing to the enduring, complex potential of the urban experience.

Theoretical Framework

Intergroup Contact Theory

The Intergroup Contact Theory, pioneered by Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), posits that under appropriate conditions, direct interaction between members of different groups reduces prejudice, fosters understanding, and improves relations. Allport outlined four optimal conditions: equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities or social norms. Later scholars, such as Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), expanded the theory, emphasizing that even without all conditions present, contact often enhances empathy, reduces anxiety, and facilitates positive intergroup attitudes. When

applied to the topic of study, the theory provides a lens to understand how rapid urban growth reshaped ethnic and religious interactions. Colonial and postcolonial urban centers such as Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt became melting pots where diverse groups converged for trade, labor, and education. Urbanization created spaces for cooperation in markets, neighborhoods, and workplaces, fostering interdependence and cultural exchange (Albert, 1995). However, when Allport's conditions were absent—such as unequal access to resources, political exclusion, or lack of institutional support—urban contact sometimes intensified tensions, manifesting in ethnic riots or sectarian conflicts (Osaghae, 1998). Thus, Intergroup Contact Theory explains both the integrative and conflictual dimensions of Nigeria's urban intergroup relations over time.

Historical Evolution of Urbanization in Nigeria

Urbanization in Nigeria is a complex narrative that mirrors the country's socio-economic and political transformations, evolving from pre-colonial settlements to the sprawling, chaotic megacities of the twenty-first century. The pre-colonial period (before 1800) was characterized by organic urbanism, where cities emerged primarily as political, religious, and economic centers for various kingdoms and empires. Notable examples include the ancient city of Ile-Ife, regarded in Yoruba mythology as the cradle of creation, and the walled city of Kano, a major hub of the trans-Saharan trade routes dealing in salt, gold, ivory, and kolanuts (Mabogunje, 1968). The Benin City, with its famed walls and sophisticated urban planning, also exemplified this era of indigenous urbanization, which was largely sustainable and integrated with its agricultural hinterland, exhibiting a clear socio-spatial order defined by palaces, market squares, and craft quarters (Adejumo, 2018).

The colonial era (c. 1860s – 1960) fundamentally altered the trajectory of Nigerian urbanization, imposing an extractive and administrative logic onto the urban landscape. The British colonial administration established new port cities like Lagos (the capital), Port Harcourt, and Calabar to facilitate the export of agricultural commodities and, later, minerals, while also developing administrative capitals in the interior such as Kaduna, Ibadan, and Enugu. This period saw the introduction of racist town planning policies that created a stark dual city structure: the well-planned, spacious "Government Reserved Areas" (GRAs) for European officials and a select few African elites, juxtaposed with the overcrowded, underserved "native towns" where the majority of the indigenous population resided (Njoh, 2009). This segregationist planning not only embedded spatial inequality into the fabric of Nigerian cities but also initiated massive rural-urban migration as people moved to these new centers of economic opportunity, laying the groundwork for future urban challenges.

The post-independence period (1960 – 1999) witnessed an explosive and largely unmanaged acceleration of urban growth, driven by the oil boom of the 1970s and concomitant socio-political factors. The newfound oil wealth led to a massive concentration of government investment and infrastructure in urban areas, particularly the new federal capital of Abuja (master-planned and built in the 1980s to replace Lagos), further pulling migrants from the rural countryside with the promise of jobs and a better life (Adelekan, 2010). However, this rapid growth far outstripped the planning capacities and provision of services of municipal authorities. Consequently, the proliferation of extensive informal settlements and slums became a defining feature of cities like Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt. This era was also

marked by the devastating Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), which displaced millions and funneled refugees into urban centers for safety, exacerbating pressures on housing and infrastructure. The subsequent period of military rule and economic instability following the oil bust in the 1980s led to a near-total collapse of urban governance, as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) forced cuts in public spending on essential services, leaving cities to grow organically and chaotically without effective guidance or investment (Gandy, 2006).

The contemporary era (1999 – present) is defined by the rise of the megacity and the profound challenges of unprecedented scale and informality. Lagos, Africa's most populous city with an estimated 20 million inhabitants, epitomizes this phase, functioning as a massive economic engine while grappling with extreme congestion, inadequate sanitation, and housing deficits. Urbanization has also become more widespread, with state capitals and smaller towns experiencing rapid growth, though this is often disconnected from industrialization, leading to what is often termed "urbanization without industrialization" or "poverty-driven urbanization" (Fox, 2012). The drivers have expanded to include environmental degradation and climate change in the Niger Delta, forcing rural populations to seek livelihoods in urban areas, and the persistent insecurity in the Northeast, which has caused large-scale displacement into cities like Maiduguri. The contemporary Nigerian city is a paradox: a vibrant center of economic innovation, cultural production, and social dynamism, yet simultaneously a landscape of severe inequality, infrastructural decay, and governance failures.

Urbanization and Intergroup Interactions in Nigeria

With a total population of more than 250 ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo being the largest Nigerians historically faced the world as a nation whose social structure is dominated by the trends of ethnic homogeneity on the territories and territorial competition of groups. Nevertheless, the tremendous rural-urban migration caused by economic desperation, employment seek, education, and perceived greater opportunities has resulted in complicated urban melting pots in which these separate groups are compelled to be exposed to each other on a level like never before. This urbanization has produced a dualistic influence on inter-group relations, both providing a possible engine of integration, cosmopolitanism, and the formation of the national identity and the pressure cooker that intensifies already existing ethno-religious conflicts and generates new types of conflicts over scarce urban resources. On the one hand, urbanization creates a special atmosphere of cultural interaction and erosion of parochial identities. The economic demands of the city require interaction; markets, workplaces and schools are all places where people are forced to interact, collaborate and negotiate with each other across ethnic lines in order to survive and prosper (Adelekan, 2010). The result of this close interaction is that a shared urban culture may be created, which is usually reflected in the use of Nigerian Pidgin English as a lingua franca, blending of musical and food cultures and the development of social networks founded on professions or classes that at times override ethnic affiliations. According to Ukawuilulu (2007), the city acts as a crucible of new forms of social as well, and migrants, who are no longer bound by the strict social regulations in their native lands, are able to try on new identities and establish relationships, which would be hard or impossible in their ethnically homogenous villages. This process can cultivate a sense of shared urban citizenship and a more pragmatic, cosmopolitan outlook, potentially weakening the salience of

primordial ethnic attachments and fostering a more cohesive national identity from the bottom up.

On the other hand, the very conditions of Nigerian urbanization often intensify inter-group animosities and provide a fertile ground for conflict. The rapid pace of urban growth has far outstripped the capacity of municipal governments to provide adequate housing, infrastructure, jobs, and social services. The result is intense competition for these scarce resources, which frequently becomes framed in ethnic or religious terms. Political elites, mirroring the patronage systems at the national level, often exploit these divisions, using ethnic rhetoric to mobilize support and distribute jobs and contracts along group lines, thereby institutionalizing competition and resentment (Egwu, 2016). Furthermore, migrants often cluster in ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods or "stranger settlements" for mutual support and security, which can reinforce stereotypes and create physical boundaries between groups. These enclaves, such as Sabon Gari (strangers' quarters) in northern cities, originally meant to protect southern migrants, can become flashpoints for violence when tensions flare. The most devastating manifestations of this are seen in the frequent ethno-religious riots that have plagued cities like Jos, Kaduna, and Kano, where disputes over political representation, land ownership, or religious symbols quickly escalate into large-scale violence, pitting "indigene" groups against "settler" communities (Higazi, 2011). In this context, urbanization does not erase ethnic identity but rather reconstitutes it, transforming it into a potent tool for mobilizing groups in the struggle for urban space and political power. The anonymity of the city can also paradoxically allow for the proliferation of extremist ideologies and criminality that thrive on social dislocation and the weakness of state institutions, further complicating inter-group dynamics. Therefore, the impact of urbanization on inter-group interactions in Nigeria is profoundly paradoxical: it holds the potential for integration and the creation of a new, hybrid urban identity, yet it simultaneously creates a landscape of heightened competition where ancient prejudices are modernized and violently enacted in the struggle for the resources and soul of the contemporary Nigerian city (Chinda, 2025).

Implications of Urbanization on Intergroup Relations in Nigeria

Urbanization is one of the most transformative forces in modern Nigeria. With an annual urban growth rate of around 4.3%, one of the highest in the world, the country is rapidly shifting from a predominantly rural society to an urban one (World Bank, 2022). This massive demographic movement, primarily driven by rural-urban migration in search of economic opportunities and better services, is fundamentally reshaping the social fabric of the nation. The implications for intergroup relations—the interactions between Nigeria's estimated 250 ethnic groups—are profound and multifaceted. Urban centers act as a crucible where longstanding identities are both diluted and intensified, creating a complex landscape of conflict and cohesion. Some key implications of this process are: the reconfiguration of identity, the intensification of competition and conflict, the potential for increased tolerance and integration, the emergence of new urban fault lines, and the evolution of governance challenges (Ebube, 2025).

Reconfiguration of Identity: From Primordial to Pragmatic

In rural settings, ethnic identity is often primordial, deeply rooted in land, ancestry, and tradition. Urbanization disrupts this. In the city, individuals are exposed to a multitude of

identities—ethnic, religious, professional, and class-based. This forces a renegotiation of the self. The sheer diversity of cities like Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt means that no single group can dominate entirely, necessitating a shift from rigid ethnic affiliation to more fluid and situational identities (Anugwom, 2019). This does not mean ethnicity vanishes. Instead, it often becomes "compartmentalized." An individual may prioritize their ethnic identity in cultural associations or hometown meetings but adopt a neutral, professional identity in their workplace or a class-based identity in their neighborhood (Mberu & Pongou, 2016). This pragmatic approach to identity is a survival and advancement strategy in the competitive urban economy. The city, therefore, becomes a site where the salience of ethnicity is context-dependent, potentially weakening its absolute hold on an individual's life and creating space for supra-ethnic civic identities to emerge.

Intensification of Competition and Conflict

Paradoxically, while urbanization can dilute identity, it can also intensify intergroup competition to a volatile degree. Cities concentrate resources—jobs, housing, political patronage—that are perpetually scarce. This scarcity turns the city into an arena of fierce competition, which is often structured along ethnic and religious lines. This is a classic case of "realistic group conflict theory," where groups come into conflict due to competition over tangible, real resources (Campbell, 1965). Politicians frequently exploit these divisions, using ethnic sentiment to mobilize voters and distribute resources to their "kinsmen," a practice known as prebendalism (Joseph, 1987). When economic conditions deteriorate, this competition can erupt into violent conflict. Historical examples include the Jos Plateau crises, where competition over land rights, political representation, and economic opportunities between "indigene" and "settler" groups has led to repeated deadly clashes (Higazi, 2011). Urbanization brings groups into closer proximity, but without equitable resource distribution and strong institutions, this proximity can fuel conflict rather than harmony.

Potential for Increased Tolerance and Integration

Despite the potential for conflict, urbanization also holds immense potential for fostering tolerance, cooperation, and integration. The daily necessity of interaction in markets, schools, and public transportation creates a form of "functional integration." People from different backgrounds are compelled to cooperate for mutual benefit, breaking down stereotypes and building pragmatic relationships (Levy, 2015). Inter-ethnic marriages, though still facing social hurdles, are more common in urban areas than in rural homelands, creating literal and symbolic kinship across group lines. Furthermore, youth in cosmopolitan cities often develop a "Nigerian" urban identity centered around shared popular culture—music (Afrobeats), fashion, and sports—that transcends ethnic origins. This shared cultural space can act as a powerful unifying force. Educational institutions in cities, bringing together children from diverse backgrounds, are critical sites for sowing the seeds of national unity and reducing prejudice through sustained contact under common goals (Allport, 1954).

Emergence of New Urban Bias: Class and Religion

A significant implication of urbanization is the gradual shift in the primary axis of division from ethnicity to class and, in some contexts, religion. The sprawling slums of Makoko in Lagos or the luxurious estates of Maitama in Abuja illustrate the stark economic inequalities that

define Nigerian cities. These class divisions often cut across ethnic lines, creating alliances of the poor versus the elite, regardless of ethnic background. A poor Igbo man and a poor Hausa man in a Lagos slum may share more common interests (access to water, sanitation, security) with each other than with wealthy elites from their own ethnic groups (Mberu & Pongou, 2016). However, religion can also become a potent and sometimes more salient fault line in urban areas. Cities are the epicenters of religious revivalism, both Christian and Islamic. The competition for space and souls can be intense, and religious processions or the construction of new places of worship can trigger violent clashes, as seen in Kaduna over the years. In the North, the urban poor are particularly susceptible to recruitment by radical groups like Boko Haram, which frames its message in religious terms but is fundamentally rooted in urban marginalization, unemployment, and poor governance (Agbiboa, 2013). Therefore, the urban landscape creates new, and sometimes more complex, layers of intergroup relations.

Evolution of Governance Challenges: Indigene-Settler Dichotomy

Urbanization places immense strain on the governance structure of Nigerian cities, particularly the anachronistic "indigene-settler" dichotomy. The Nigerian constitution grants preferential treatment to "indigenes" (those considered original inhabitants of a locality) over "settlers" (migrants and their descendants) in access to scholarships, political quotas, and government employment. This system, manageable in homogeneous rural areas, becomes a major source of tension in melting-pot cities where the majority of residents may be classified as "settlers" (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Cities like Jos have become explosive precisely because of this legal distinction, which creates a permanent class of second-class citizens who contribute to the city's economy but are denied full rights and recognition. Effective urban governance requires abolishing this distinction and moving towards a residency-based citizenship, where rights are accorded to all who live and pay taxes in a city, regardless of their ethnic or geographic origin. The failure of municipal and state governments to adapt to this urban reality is a major impediment to peaceful intergroup relations and sustainable urban development (Parker, 2025).

Urbanization and Nigeria's National Integration

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, and the country with one of the highest urbanization rates in the world, therefore, the process of its unity is inevitably associated with the dynamics of the rapidly growing cities. The connection that exists between urbanization and the national integration is extremely paradoxical since it creates a powerful catalyst towards unity and a huge amount of disunity. On the one hand, cities serve as important melting pot where the boundaries of ethnicity and regionalism are critically dismantled due to the constant interaction, the interdependence of economies, and the formation of the common urban culture. The daily influx of people of diverse ethnicities in metropolitan centres, such as Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt, necessitates a negotiation of difference that is pragmatic and that means the cosmopolitanism is pragmatic and vital in the cohesiveness of the nation (Egbuche, 2020). Such high-density urban settings built around some common need, like traffic navigation, use of state services, or economic prospects, can lead to the formation of a new hybridized identity formed around a shared urban experience and not ethnic ancestry (Ajala, 2018). Moreover, the economic motor of urbanization, which is propagated by commerce, industry and a large informal sector, build networks of interdependence that traverse ethnic

lines, and cooperation becomes a source of survival and thriving. The centralized national education system, which is based in urban centres, also has an integrative effect as young Nigerians with different backgrounds are brought together, socialised into a national system, and in many cases English is a lingua franca, thus helping to defuse language divisions (Albert, 2017).

However, the integrative potential of Nigerian cities is severely undermined by the particular character of its urbanization, often described as "urbanization without industrialization" or growth without development. This has resulted in a reality where cities frequently become theatres for the exacerbation of the very divisions national integration seeks to overcome. Rather than melting pots, many Nigerian cities are better characterized as "archipelagos" of ethnic and religious enclaves, where migrants often settle in communities dominated by their kin group, replicating rural ethnic identities in an urban setting (Egbuche, 2020). This phenomenon perpetuates stereotypes and limits the meaningful intercultural exchange necessary for integration. More critically, the fierce competition over scarce urban resources—jobs, housing, political patronage—often becomes framed in ethnic and religious terms, transforming economic struggles into destructive identity conflicts. Urban centres have thus become the epicentres of violent communal clashes, indigene-settler conflicts, and religious extremism, as seen in the persistent conflicts in Jos and the emergence of groups like Boko Haram in Maiduguri (Ajala, 2018; Albert, 2017). The concept of "indigeneity," which grants certain rights and privileges to those deemed original inhabitants of an area, is particularly pernicious in this urban context, legally institutionalizing discrimination against "settlers" and creating a class of second-class citizens within cities, directly contravening the principles of national citizenship and unity (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Consequently, the city, instead of being a unifying national space, often fragments into hostile camps, reinforcing sub-national identities and breeding resentment against the state apparatus, which is often seen as partisan or ineffective in managing these conflicts (Parker, 2025).

The state plays a crucial role in deciding whether urbanisation will bring Nigeria together or push it apart even more. The failure of urban governance—evident in poor planning, inadequate provision of essential services, and the absence of inclusive policies—exacerbates the socioeconomic tensions that drive fragmentation. When the government can't provide safety, sanitation, water, or energy, people turn to ethnic and religious groups for help and protection. This makes these groups even more important as a source of safety and belonging (Egbuche, 2020). The Nigerian government needs to make intentional and open policies in order to use urbanisation as a way to bring the country together. This means getting rid of the unfair distinction between natives and settlers and replacing it with a strong residency-based citizenship that gives all Nigerians the same rights, no matter where they came from. Also, to lower the poverty and inequality that cause urban violence, we need to make big investments in urban infrastructure, affordable housing, and job creation.

Conscious urban design that supports diverse neighbourhoods and creates public spaces (parks, libraries, community centres) that make it easier for different groups to get along is also important for promoting national integration (Ajala, 2018). To sum up, urbanisation in Nigeria is both good and bad for national integration. It has the clear potential to create a unified national identity through economic interdependence and cultural hybridisation, but its current path, which is marked by bad governance, a lack of resources, and the politicisation of identity,

often makes existing divisions worse. The future of Nigeria's unity will depend a lot on how well it handles its urban transformation. It needs to turn its growing cities from places of strife into real places where people can come together and build a strong, unified Nigerian nation.

Recommendations

The story of Nigeria's urbanisation from the colonial merger of 1914 to its current status as Africa's most populous country is a complicated one that involves coming together, competing, and fighting. Urbanisation has created more jobs and opportunities for cultural interchange, but it has also made ethnic and religious conflicts worse, which often leads to political conflict, rivalry for resources, and bloodshed. The following suggestions are very important if you want to use urbanisation as a force for unity instead of division.

i. Promote Inclusive Urban Governance and Political Representation: The impression of being left out is a major cause of conflict between groups in Nigerian cities. Urban governance institutions must be intentionally inclusive, guaranteeing fair representation of all resident communities in municipal planning and decision-making entities. Policies like making leadership posts in metropolitan local governments change hands regularly and requiring cabinets to be made up of people from different backgrounds can help prevent one group from taking over. Additionally, in metropolitan areas, the differences between citizens and indigenous settlers must be removed so that all inhabitants have the same rights and access to services, regardless of their ethnicity or how long they have been there.

ii. Make sure that land use and resource allocation policies are fair. When there aren't enough urban resources like land, housing, jobs, and public services, competition for them typically has an ethnic aspect. To stop this from happening, urban master plans need to be made in a clear way and followed fairly. Zoning laws should stop the building of neighbourhoods that only have people of one race and encourage neighbourhoods that have people of various races living and working together. There should be no political favouritism or ethnic favouritism when deciding where to put critical infrastructure projects like water stations, schools, and health clinics. Instead, they should be based on population density and need. It is also important to set up clear, fair, and easy-to-use ways to settle land disputes in order to lower tensions.

iii. Combine programs for cultural education and national identity in urban schools: Schools in cities that are growing quickly are a powerful way to shape how groups get along in the future. The national educational curriculum should be improved to incorporate compulsory civic education that emphasises Nigeria's many cultures, common history, and the principles of tolerance and national unity. Extracurricular activities, such as cultural festivals across schools and programs that let students from different backgrounds switch schools, can help kids break down stereotypes and grow up thinking of themselves as "Nigerian" first.

iv. Support Community-Led Initiatives for Intergroup Dialogue and Collaboration: The government can't do it all by itself to bring people together. It must actively support and fund community-based organisations (CBOs), religious leaders, and traditional rulers who bring people together. Setting up interfaith and inter-ethnic conversation forums in city wards gives people a safe place to voice their complaints and settle disagreements before they get worse. Supporting collaborative economic projects, like multi-ethnic trader groups or cooperative

societies, gives people real reasons to work together and shows how living peacefully together can be good for everyone.

v. Use urban planning to bring people together, not keep them apart: The way people interact with each other depends on the space they are in. Policies for urban planning must make sure that cities are built in a way that brings people together instead of keeping them apart. This means putting money into public areas like parks, libraries, and community centres that everyone can use and feel welcome in. Instead of going around different neighbourhoods, public transit networks should be built to connect them. This will make it easier for people to get around and interact with each other. To stop social differences from becoming permanent, it's better to avoid building large public housing estates for specific groups and instead encourage housing complexes that are mixed-income and mixed-ethnicity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the course of urbanisation in Nigeria from the colonial period to the present has been a significant, dual-faceted influence on intergroup relations. The first urban planning done by the British, which made ethnic segregation official, set the stage for long-lasting social and spatial differences. But the growth of cities after independence also offered new places for people to meet, share cultures, and establish new, mixed urban identities that often cross ethnic borders. Even though increasing urbanisation could lead to more integration, it has also made competition for limited resources, housing, and political power worse. Increasing has often led to ethnic and religious tensions that were always there becoming violent. Consequently, the Nigerian metropolis persists as a multifaceted and contentious domain—a crucible wherein the potential for a cohesive national identity and the threats of entrenched division are shaped. The future of harmony among groups in Nigeria will depend a lot on implementing urban government policies that are open to everyone, actively manage diversity, make sure resources are fairly distributed, and use the unifying power of its busy, dynamic cities.

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