

Conflict In Trinity: Christianity and Interdenominational Rivalry in Post-Colonial Southeastern Nigeria, 1970-2013

*K.C. Ubaku¹, C.O. Vitus-Dike², and A.U. Emela³

^{1,2}Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Imo State University, Owerri

³Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Imo State University, Owerri

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the tensions, contestations, and shifting dynamics of Christian denominations in the aftermath of colonialism and the Nigerian Civil War. Southeastern Nigeria, predominantly Christian, witnessed a resurgence of denominational identities in the post-war period, marked by intense competition for membership, legitimacy, and influence among Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal traditions. While Christianity served as a unifying faith that offered hope, healing, and moral reconstruction in a devastated region, it simultaneously became a ground for rivalry that fractured communities and challenged the ecumenical ideals of the faith. Drawing on oral interviews, personal observations, and secondary sources, the research interrogates the roots and manifestations of interdenominational conflict in the region. It highlights the theological disputes, institutional rivalries, and contestations over resources, status, and cultural authority that underpinned these conflicts. The study further shows that denominational competition extended into politics, education, and social life, shaping patterns of communal allegiance and generating mistrust among Christians who otherwise professed a common faith. The analysis situates these rivalries within the broader post-colonial struggle for identity and relevance, as churches sought to reassert authority in a rapidly transforming society. Importantly, the research also underscores the impact of rivalry on social cohesion, gender roles within the church, and the prospects of ecumenism. By 2013, the persistence of denominational conflicts revealed the paradox of Christianity in the region, simultaneously a force of unity and division. Ultimately, the work contributes to scholarship on religion and society by illuminating how Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria embodies both the resilience of faith and the fragility of unity. It calls for a rethinking of interdenominational relations, emphasizing dialogue, inclusivity, and reconciliation as pathways toward authentic Christian faith.

Keywords: Conflict, Christianity, Interdenominational, Rivalry, Southeastern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The origin of Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria is closely related to the colonial evangelization and cultural change that affected Igbo society. By the early 1900s, organised missionary activity led by Roman Catholic and Anglican churches had put a stop to the spread of the indigenous religion (Mbakwem, 2026). Church buildings evolved their usage from centres of worship to educational, medical, social and political planning organizations. However, the late 1960s represented a new epoch in Christianity in the Southeast due to Nigeria's independence and its troubled sway of sectarian violence otherwise known as the Nigerian/Biafra War. The religion was a cause of healing and conviviality, but it also functioned as a site of competition, sectarianism and rivalries. It is within this post-colonial, post-war context that the dynamics of interdenominational rivalry within the study period can be critically examined.

The period immediately after the civil war saw renewed efforts by churches to reassert spiritual authority and reconstruct war-torn communities. Yet, this process coincided with a competitive drive to win converts, establish

dominance, and secure influence in public life. The rivalry between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion – both long-standing and historically rooted in missionary competition – intensified in the 1970s (Ozoh, 2025). At the same time, the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements from the 1980s introduced new actors into the religious landscape, creating further fragmentation. Each denomination projected itself as the authentic bearer of Christian truth, while implicitly or explicitly delegitimizing the claims of others.

These rivalries were not merely theological; they extended into the realms of politics, education, and community leadership. Schools, hospitals, and parish structures became arenas for competition over resources and prestige. Political patronage was often mediated through denominational loyalties, reinforcing divisions within communities. Interdenominational tensions also shaped the personal identities of adherents, creating invisible lines of exclusion within neighbourhoods and even families. While Christianity proclaimed universal brotherhood, denominational rivalries undercut its capacity to foster unity, producing what can be described as a paradox of faith.

The emergence of Pentecostalism further complicated the Christian map of Southeastern Nigeria. With its emphasis on prosperity, healing, and charismatic spirituality, Pentecostalism challenged the ritual and institutional authority of both Catholicism and Anglicanism. Pentecostal churches often attracted younger generations who felt alienated by the “rigidity” of older denominations. This shift triggered accusations of heresy, spiritual manipulation, and commercialization of faith, thereby intensifying interdenominational hostilities (Mbah & Igweh, 2026). By the 1990s, public discourse in the Southeast was increasingly coloured by debates over miracles, tithes, spiritual warfare, and prosperity teachings, all of which heightened the competitive ethos among denominations.

The consequences of these conflicts were profound. On one hand, denominational rivalry contributed to religious dynamism, spurring church growth, evangelism, and innovations in worship. On the other hand, it deepened mistrust among Christians, eroded prospects for ecumenical cooperation, and sometimes escalated into violent confrontations over property and status (Ubaku, 2013). For women and youth, denominational divisions often meant limited agency, as church hierarchies used loyalty and identity politics to regulate participation. The rivalry also had significant implications for political development in the region, as politicians frequently exploited denominational identities to consolidate support.

Within the study period, efforts at ecumenism and interdenominational dialogue yielded mixed results. Bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) provided platforms for cooperation, particularly during moments of national crisis. However, the persistence of denominational mistrust prevented deep reconciliation. By the early 21st century, while Southeastern Nigeria remained overwhelmingly Christian, its Christian identity was fragmented, marked by competition rather than harmony.

This study, therefore, seeks to analyse the historical trajectories, social implications, and cultural consequences of interdenominational rivalry in Southeastern Nigeria from 1970 to 2013. It interrogates how denominational conflicts reflected broader struggles over identity, authority, and modernity in post-colonial Africa. The central thesis is that Christianity in the Southeast, while functioning as a vital force of resilience and moral authority, has also been a site of contestation where the unity implied in the doctrine of the Trinity often gave way to conflict and division. In exploring this paradox, the research contributes to debates on religion, society, and post-colonial nation-building in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Social Identity Theory (SIT) developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s. The theory provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding intergroup relations, competition, and conflict. At its core, it posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from membership in social groups and that such group affiliations often generate strong emotional attachments, boundary-making, and rivalries (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to this study as it offers critical insight into how denominational identities within Christianity became sources of division, competition, and conflict in the Southeastern Nigeria.

The Social Identity Theory argues that society is structured around “in-groups” and “out-groups.” Individuals seek positive social identity by favouring their own group while differentiating themselves from others, often leading to stereotyping, prejudice, and conflict (Tajfel, 1982). In Southeastern Nigeria, Christianity – though ostensibly a shared religious identity – became fragmented into multiple denominational groups such as the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Communion, Methodist Church, and later Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Each of these denominations developed distinctive doctrines, worship styles, leadership structures, and moral claims, which served as markers of group identity. Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, these denominational affiliations can be understood as powerful social identities that shaped how Christians perceived themselves and others.

Between 1970 and 2013, the post-Nigerian Civil War environment in Southeastern Nigeria intensified the importance of group identity. The trauma of war, economic hardship, and political marginalization created a social context in which people increasingly turned to religion for meaning, security, and belonging (Nmah, 2012). Churches thus became more than spiritual institutions; they functioned as social communities, sources of welfare, and platforms for identity reconstruction. Social Identity Theory helps explain why denominational loyalty became deeply entrenched during this period. Membership in a particular church was not merely a matter of belief but a statement of who one was socially, morally, and even politically.

Interdenominational rivalry in Southeastern Nigeria often manifested in competition for converts, accusations of doctrinal error, and struggles for moral superiority. Social Identity Theory explains these dynamics through the concept of positive distinctiveness – the tendency of groups to emphasize their uniqueness and superiority in order to maintain a positive self-image (Turner, 1987). For instance, mainline churches such as the Catholic and Anglican traditions often portrayed themselves as custodians of doctrinal purity, liturgical order, and historical legitimacy. In contrast, Pentecostal and charismatic churches emphasized spiritual power, miracles, holiness, and personal salvation, frequently portraying older denominations as spiritually “dead” or compromised. These mutual representations reinforced in-group pride and out-group derogation, deepening divisions within Christendom.

The relevance of Social Identity Theory is further evident in the ways denominational identities shaped social relations in everyday life. In many Southeastern Nigerian communities, church affiliation influenced marriage choices, friendship networks, school enrolment, burial rites, and participation in communal development projects (Ubaku, 2015; Ikokuwu, 2019; Agbamike, 2014). Denominational boundaries often became social boundaries, creating subtle but persistent forms of exclusion and mistrust (Nwaubani, 2019). Social Identity Theory helps explain how such boundaries were maintained and reproduced through socialization, preaching, and ritual practices that emphasized “who belongs” and “who does not.”

Leadership and authority struggle within Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria also align with Social Identity Theory. Church leaders often acted as identity entrepreneurs, mobilizing followers by reinforcing group narratives and symbols (Reicher, Hopkins, & Haslam, 2001). Charismatic leaders in Pentecostal movements, for example, frequently framed their ministries as divinely mandated alternatives to established churches, thereby strengthening in-group solidarity while delegitimizing rivals. These processes intensified interdenominational competition, especially from the 1980s onward, when Pentecostalism expanded rapidly across the region (Kalu, 2008). Social Identity Theory illuminates how such leadership strategies transformed theological differences into identity-based conflicts.

The post-colonial dimension of the study further enhances the relevance of Social Identity Theory. Colonial missionary activity introduced denominational divisions into Igbo society, often aligning specific churches with education, power, and prestige (Isichei, 1995). After independence, these inherited divisions were reinterpreted within a new socio-political context marked by competition for resources and influence. Social Identity Theory allows the study to show how denominational identities were not static but dynamically reconstructed in response to post-colonial realities, including urbanization, unemployment, and political instability.

Moreover, Social Identity Theory is particularly useful in explaining why interdenominational rivalry persisted despite shared Christian doctrines and moral values. The theory demonstrates that shared overarching identity (Christianity) does not necessarily eliminate conflict if subgroup identities (denominations) remain salient

(Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Southeastern Nigeria, denominational identity often proved more emotionally and socially significant than the broader Christian identity, leading to what the study metaphorically describes as “conflict in Trinity” – division within an ostensibly unified faith.

In all, the Social Identity Theory is highly relevant to the study of Christianity and interdenominational rivalry in post-colonial Southeastern Nigeria between 1970 and 2013. It provides a robust framework for understanding how denominational affiliations became powerful social identities that shaped perceptions, behaviour, and conflict among Christians. By highlighting the roles of in-group favouritism, out-group differentiation, leadership mobilization, and historical context, Social Identity Theory enables a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of religious conflict beyond doctrinal explanations. As such, it is an indispensable theoretical tool for analysing the paradox of unity and division within Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria.

Interdenominational Rivalry: A Conceptual Explanation

Interdenominational rivalry refers to the patterns of competition, tension, and conflict that arise among different denominations within the same religious tradition. Unlike interreligious conflict, which occurs between distinct religions, interdenominational rivalry unfolds within a shared faith framework, where competing groups subscribe to similar core beliefs but differ in doctrine, worship practices, leadership structures, and interpretations of religious authority (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Kalu, 2008). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Christianity, where denominational diversity has historically generated both cooperation and competition.

Interdenominational rivalry emerged from the coexistence of shared religious identity and distinct group differentiation. While denominations collectively identify as part of a broader religious community – such as Christendom – each group simultaneously seeks to assert its uniqueness and legitimacy. This duality creates fertile ground for rivalry, as denominations attempt to maintain boundaries that distinguish “true” belief from perceived deviation (Turner, 1987). The paradox of unity and division is therefore central to understanding interdenominational rivalry.

Southeastern Nigeria: An Overview

Southeastern Nigeria is one of the six geopolitical zones of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group. The region comprises five core states – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo – though historically it also included parts of present-day Delta and Rivers States during the colonial and early postcolonial periods (Isichei, 1976). Geographically, Southeastern Nigeria lies east of the River Niger and is bounded by the South-South zone to the south, the North-Central zone to the north, and the Niger Delta to the west and southwest.

Historically, Southeastern Nigeria was characterized by decentralized political systems prior to colonial rule. Igbo societies were largely organized around kinship, village assemblies, age grades, and title systems, emphasizing participatory governance rather than centralized kingship (Afigbo, 1981). British colonial administration fundamentally altered this structure through the introduction of warrant chiefs, indirect rule, and Western education. These colonial interventions reshaped social hierarchies and laid the foundations for modern political and religious institutions in the region.

Christianity occupies a central place in the social and cultural life of Southeastern Nigeria. Introduced in the mid-nineteenth century by European missionaries – especially Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian missions – Christianity rapidly expanded through education, healthcare, and evangelism (Isichei, 1995). By the twentieth century, the region had become one of the most Christianised areas in sub-Saharan Africa. Churches emerged not only as religious centres but also as providers of social services, moral authority, and communal identity. This strong Christian presence continues to shape public morality, political discourse, and everyday social interactions.

The Nigerian Civil War which followed the attempted secession of the Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra, remains one of the most defining events in the history of Southeastern Nigeria. The war caused massive human

suffering, displacement, and economic devastation. In its aftermath, the region faced political marginalization and economic reconstruction challenges, which deeply influenced social behaviour and religious life (Achebe, 2012; Afam, 2026). Post-war trauma contributed to increased religiosity, as many communities turned to Christianity for hope, healing, and identity reconstruction.

Economically, Southeastern Nigeria is known for its strong entrepreneurial culture. The region has produced vibrant commercial hubs such as Onitsha, Aba, Nnewi, and Owerri, with trade, manufacturing, and small-scale industries playing significant roles (Forrest, 1994). Despite limited federal investment and infrastructural challenges, the Igbo apprenticeship system has sustained local economic resilience and mobility. Migration – both internal and international – has further shaped the region’s economic and social dynamics.

Politically and socially, Southeastern Nigeria has remained an active arena of identity politics, religious competition, and civic engagement. Churches, town unions, and cultural associations continue to serve as platforms for social mobilization and political expression. In contemporary Nigeria, the region’s strong Christian identity, coupled with historical experiences of marginalization, has influenced its responses to national debates on governance, security, and social justice.

Interdenominational Rivalry in Christianity: An Intractably Prevailed Development in Southeastern Nigeria

Christianity has remained one of the most influential religious forces in Southeastern Nigeria since its introduction in the region. Missionary activities by Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant bodies transformed the religious, educational, and social landscape of the region, embedding Christianity deeply within Igbo society (Isichei, 1995). However, alongside its growth and consolidation, Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria has been characterized by persistent interdenominational rivalry. This rivalry, which manifested in doctrinal disputes, competition for converts, leadership conflicts, and struggles for social influence, proved to be an enduring and, in many respects, intractable feature of Christian experience in Southeastern Nigeria.

In Southeastern Nigeria, within the study period, interdenominational rivalry was particularly pronounced due to the high concentration of Christian populations and the co-existence of multiple denominations, including Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and independent charismatic churches. Although these groups shared core Christian beliefs, they diverged significantly in theology, worship styles, ecclesiastical authority, and approaches to spirituality. These differences became central markers of identity, fuelling competition rather than cooperation (Kalu, 2008).

Historically, the roots of interdenominational rivalry in Southeastern Nigeria can be traced to the colonial missionary enterprise. Missionaries often operated in competitive isolation, establishing denominational territories and institutions such as schools, churches, and hospitals (Isichei, 1995). This early fragmentation of Christianity laid the foundation for later rivalries, as denominational loyalty became intertwined with access to education, social mobility, and prestige. Following Nigeria’s independence and the Nigerian Civil War, these inherited divisions were reconfigured within a post-colonial context marked by political instability, economic hardship, and social change.

The post-civil war era witnessed an unprecedented expansion of Christianity, particularly with the rise of Pentecostal and charismatic movements from the 1970s onward. These movements emphasized spiritual gifts, healing, prophecy, and prosperity, challenging the authority and relevance of older mission-established churches (Ojo, 2006). The rapid growth of Pentecostalism intensified interdenominational rivalry by disrupting established religious hierarchies and introducing new criteria for spiritual legitimacy. Mainline churches often accused Pentecostal groups of doctrinal excesses and commercialization of faith, while Pentecostals portrayed older denominations as spiritually stagnant or overly ritualistic. These mutual accusations entrenched divisions and reinforced rivalry.

One reason interdenominational rivalry became intractably prevalent in Southeastern Nigeria, within the period of study, was its close connection to social identity. Denominational affiliation functioned as a powerful marker of belonging, shaping social networks, marriage choices, and communal interactions (Ubaku, 2015; Ikokuwu,

2019; Agbamike, 2014). Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive self-worth from group membership and seek to maintain positive distinctiveness by favouring their own group over others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the Southeastern Nigerian context, denominational identity often transcended theology, becoming a basis for social differentiation and competition within communities that were otherwise ethnically and culturally homogeneous.

Another factor that sustained interdenominational rivalry was competition for material and symbolic resources. Churches in Southeastern Nigeria were not only spiritual centres but also providers of education, healthcare, employment, and social welfare. In a context of weak state institutions, religious organizations occupied critical socio-economic roles, heightening competition for followers, donations, and public influence (Ukah, 2016). The proliferation of churches, crusades, and media ministries transformed Christianity into a competitive religious marketplace, where visibility and numerical strength were equated with divine approval. This competitive environment perpetuated rivalry as denominations continually sought to expand their reach.

Leadership and authority struggle further entrenched interdenominational rivalry. Charismatic leaders, in particular, played a central role in redefining religious authority in Southeastern Nigeria. By claiming direct divine inspiration and demonstrating spiritual power through miracles and prophecies, such leaders often challenged established ecclesiastical structures (Weber, 1947). These challenges provoked defensive responses from institutional churches, resulting in conflicts over legitimacy and control. Over time, these leadership-driven tensions normalized rivalry as an expected feature of Christian life in the region.

The entanglement of Christianity with politics also reinforced interdenominational rivalry. From the late twentieth century onward, church leaders increasingly engaged in political commentary, mobilization, and endorsement of candidates. Denominations competed for proximity to political power, seeing it as a means to protect institutional interests and moral authority (Obi, 2015). Political alignment often deepened divisions among Christian groups, as rival denominations interpreted social issues through different theological and ideological lenses. This politicization of Christianity made rivalry more visible and contentious.

Despite its divisive tendencies, interdenominational was not entirely destructive. In some cases, competition stimulated religious innovation, social engagement, and moral activism. Churches expanded social services, embraced new forms of worship, and addressed contemporary social challenges in response to competitive pressures. However, the persistence and intensity of rivalry often undermined ecumenical efforts and weakened collective Christian responses to broader societal problems, such as poverty, corruption, and insecurity (Nwaubani, 2019).

The characterization of interdenominational rivalry in Southeastern Nigeria as an “intractably prevailed development” reflected its deep historical roots, social embeddedness, and adaptive nature. Rivalry survived transitions from colonialism to independence, from mainline dominance to Pentecostal expansion, and from local worship to globalized media Christianity. Each phase of change reshaped, rather than eliminated, denominational competition. This endurance suggested that rivalry was not merely a temporary dysfunction but a structural feature of Christianity as practiced in the region.

The Christians and Christian Faith in Southeastern Nigeria: X-raying the Effects of Interdenominational Rivalries

Within the framework of this study, an examination of Christians and the lived Christian faith in Southeastern Nigeria is central to understanding the depth and consequences of denominational conflict. Christianity was not merely a religious identity in the region; it was a dominant social institution that shaped values, politics, education, and communal life. Yet, despite its shared theological foundations, Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria was persistently characterized by interdenominational rivalries that redefined religious practice, Christian identity, and social relations in the post-colonial era.

The post-colonial period marked a decisive shift in the character and intensity of Christian rivalry in Southeastern Nigeria. The Nigeria Biafra War devastated the region socially, economically, and psychologically, leading to heightened religiosity as individuals and communities sought meaning, healing, and security through faith

(Achebe, 2012). Christianity expanded rapidly in the aftermath of the war, but this expansion was accompanied by intensified competition among denominations. The emergence and rapid growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches from the 1970s onward challenged the authority and numerical dominance of older mission-established churches, such as Catholicism and Anglicanism (Kalu, 2008).

One of the most visible effects of interdenominational rivalry during this period was the fragmentation of Christian identity. While Christianity emphasizes unity in Christ, denominational identity increasingly became the primary marker of belonging among Christians in Southeastern Nigeria. Many believers defined themselves first as Catholics, Anglicans, or Pentecostals, rather than as members of a unified Christian community. This phenomenon can be analytically understood through Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals derive self-worth from group membership and emphasize distinctions between “in-groups” and “out-groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In practice, this resulted in mutual stereotyping, suspicion, and competition among denominations, even within ethnically homogeneous communities.

Interdenominational rivalry also significantly reshaped Christian worship and religious practice. Competition for members and relevance encouraged churches to innovate in liturgy, evangelism, and spiritual expression. Pentecostal emphases on healing, miracles, prophecy, and prosperity profoundly influenced the wider Christian landscape, leading to what scholars describe as the “Pentecostalization” of Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria (Ojo, 2006). Mainline churches increasingly adopted charismatic worship styles in response to Pentecostal growth. While this transformation revitalized religious participation, it also generated theological tensions and accusations of doctrinal dilution. Critics argued that the growing emphasis on miracles and material prosperity risked commodifying the Christian faith and shifting attention away from its ethical and communal dimensions (Ukah, 2016).

Beyond theology and worship, interdenominational rivalry affected social relations and community cohesion. Churches in Southeastern Nigeria function as key social institutions, regulating moral behaviour, mediating conflicts, and organizing community development initiatives. However, rivalry often undermined inter-church cooperation. Disputes arose over church locations, the use of communal land, noise levels during services, and the timing of religious events. Although these conflicts rarely escalated into large-scale violence, they contributed to subtle but persistent social fragmentation (Nwaubani, 2019). In some communities, denominational affiliation influenced marriage choices, burial practices, and participation in communal rituals, reinforcing divisions among Christians who otherwise shared common ethnic and cultural identities.

Interdenominational rivalry further weakened the moral authority and public witness of Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria. Churches traditionally occupy a powerful moral position, often addressing issues such as corruption, injustice, and social decay. However, denominational competition diluted this authority. Conflicting messages from church leaders and public criticism of rival denominations undermined the collective Christian voice. In some cases, church leaders prioritized institutional growth and denominational supremacy over shared ethical concerns, contributing to public perceptions of Christianity as divided and self-interested.

The period under study also witnessed the growing entanglement of Christianity with politics, which further intensified denominational rivalry. Churches increasingly became sites of political mobilization, endorsements, and prophetic engagement with national issues. Denominations competed for political relevance and proximity to power, viewing political influence as a means of protecting institutional interests (Obi, 2015). This competition often polarized Christians along denominational lines during elections and political crises, reinforcing rivalry and undermining the possibility of unified Christian engagement in the public sphere.

Despite its divisive consequences, interdenominational rivalry has not been entirely detrimental to Christian life in Southeastern Nigeria. Competition among churches stimulated expansion in education, healthcare, media outreach, and social welfare programs. Many Christians benefited from increased access to religious services and social support. Nevertheless, the persistence of rivalry raises critical questions about the long-term implications for Christian unity, social cohesion, and peacebuilding in the region.

In the context of “Conflict in Trinity”, the effects of interdenominational rivalry revealed a central paradox of Christianity in post-colonial Southeastern Nigeria. Christianity has served as a powerful source of identity,

resilience, and moral guidance, particularly in the aftermath of colonialism and civil war. Yet, its internal divisions have fragmented Christian identity, reshaped religious practice, strained communal relations, and weakened collective moral authority. Understanding these dynamics is essential to explaining how Christianity, a faith grounded in unity, has become a terrain of sustained rivalry and conflict in Southeastern Nigeria within the study period.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the historical evolution, dynamics, and implications of interdenominational rivalry within Christendom in Southeastern Nigeria between 1970 and 2020. It demonstrated that Christianity, while constituting a dominant and unifying religious identity in the region, has simultaneously functioned as a site of sustained competition and conflict among denominations. Emerging from missionary-era divisions and intensified in the post-Nigerian Civil War context, interdenominational rivalry became a defining feature of Christian life in Southeastern Nigeria during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The study established that post-colonial socio-political realities – particularly the trauma of the Nigeria Biafra war, economic uncertainty, and rapid urbanization – created conditions that intensified religious competition. The rise of Pentecostal and charismatic movements challenged the hegemony of older mission-established churches, reshaping Christian worship, leadership patterns, and theological emphases (Kalu, 2008; Ojo, 2006). While this competition stimulated religious innovation and expansion, it also fragmented Christian identity and weakened ecumenical cooperation across denominations.

Furthermore, the research revealed that interdenominational rivalry extended beyond theological disagreements to influence social relations, community cohesion, and political engagement. Denominational affiliations shaped marriage practices, burial rites, community participation, and electoral behaviour, thereby embedding religious rivalry into everyday life. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, the study showed how denominational identities fostered in-group loyalty and out-group exclusion, reinforcing tensions within an otherwise culturally homogeneous society (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These dynamics undermined Christianity's collective moral authority and limited its capacity to act as a unified force for social transformation.

Finally, "Conflict in Trinity" underscored the paradox of Christianity in Southeastern Nigeria: a faith that proclaims unity in Christ yet operates within a landscape marked by enduring division and competition. Addressing this paradox, as seen in the efforts of the Christian Association of Nigeria (Oladapo & Kiambi, 2025, pp. 1-21), requires a renewed commitment to interdenominational dialogue, ecumenism, and theological reflection that prioritizes shared values over institutional rivalry. Such efforts are essential if Christianity is to reclaim its unifying potential and make meaningful contributions to peace, social cohesion, and ethical renewal in Southeastern Nigeria.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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