

**RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC SYMBOLS IN NIGERIA:
IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL UNITY****Authors & Affiliations****Dr. John Clerk Koko**

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Abstract

Nigeria's multi-religious and multi-ethnic character makes the management of public symbols a critical issue in the pursuit of national integration and political stability. In recent decades, the increasing visibility and institutionalization of religious symbols within public spaces and state structures have generated intense debates regarding constitutional neutrality, religious pluralism, and inclusive citizenship. While national symbols such as the Nigerian flag, national anthem, coat of arms, and national pledge were historically designed to foster collective identity and patriotic consciousness, they appear to receive diminishing civic attention in comparison to religious symbols and loyalties. This study critically examines the politics of religious and national symbols in 21st-century Nigeria and evaluates their implications for national integration. Employing qualitative methodology through philosophical, historical, and socio-political analysis, the paper interrogates the symbolic presence of religion in state institutions, including the use of Arabic inscriptions on the national currency, the constitutional recognition of Sharia courts, and the incorporation of Islamic architectural motifs in public institutions. The study argues that the disproportionate visibility of particular religious symbols within public spaces may contribute to perceptions of exclusion, deepen identity-based tensions, and weaken the development of a shared national consciousness in a religiously pluralistic society. The paper further contends that the declining emphasis on national symbols undermines civic nationalism and collective patriotism. It concludes by advocating inclusive symbolic representation, constitutional fairness, and the revitalization of national symbols as essential instruments for promoting national unity, democratic coexistence, and sustainable integration in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religious Symbols, National Symbols, Religious Pluralism, National Integration, and Civic Nationalism, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most religiously pluralistic states in Africa, characterized by the coexistence of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion within a highly diverse ethnic and cultural environment. Religion occupies a central place in the social and political life of Nigerians and significantly shapes public morality, identity formation, political participation, and communal relations (Mbiti, 1969). In contemporary Nigeria, religious consciousness has increasingly transcended the private sphere and become visibly embedded within public institutions, state policies, political rhetoric, and national spaces. Consequently, the presence and institutionalization of religious symbols in the public sphere have generated significant intellectual and political debates concerning secularism, constitutional neutrality, religious pluralism, and national integration.

Symbols are important instruments of collective identity because they communicate values,

loyalties, and social meanings within a political community. According to Geertz (1973), religious symbols function as powerful cultural representations that shape human perception and social orientation. Similarly, national symbols such as flags, anthems, coats of arms, and pledges are designed to cultivate civic loyalty, patriotic consciousness, and collective national identity (Anderson, 1983; Koko, 2016). In plural societies, national symbols are expected to transcend sectarian identities and serve as integrative mechanisms for social cohesion and state legitimacy. However, in Nigeria, the growing visibility of religious symbols within public institutions appears to challenge the symbolic neutrality expected of a multi-religious state. Several developments have intensified this concern in 21st-century Nigeria. These include the continued use of Arabic inscriptions on the Nigerian currency, the constitutional recognition and expansion of Sharia courts in Northern Nigeria, state sponsorship of religious pilgrimages, and the incorporation of Islamic architectural motifs in certain public institutions. While defenders of these practices often interpret them as historical or cultural expressions, critics argue that they may create perceptions of symbolic exclusion and religious preference in a constitutionally plural state (Falola, 1998; Koko, 2020). At the same time, national symbols that were intended to promote unity and patriotic attachment appear to receive diminishing public reverence amid rising ethno-religious loyalties and identity politics. Therefore, this study critically examines the relationship between religious pluralism, national symbols, and national integration in 21st-century Nigeria. The paper argues that the politicization and disproportionate visibility of religious symbols in public spaces may undermine inclusive citizenship and weaken the unifying function of national symbols.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research approach which involves the use of philosophical reflection, historical analysis, and socio-political evaluation. This methodological approach is important because the subject matter concerns the interpretation of meanings, symbols, identities, and socio-political realities that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative techniques. This agrees with Creswell & Poth (2018)'s position that qualitative research is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to understand the social construction of meaning, institutional practices, and human experiences within their natural contexts. Since the research investigates the relationship between religious pluralism and national symbols in Nigeria, it prioritizes interpretive analysis over statistical measurement. The study therefore employs three complementary analytical approaches: philosophical reflection, historical analysis, and socio-political evaluation. Philosophical reflection provided the normative basis for examining concepts such as religious pluralism, constitutional neutrality, civic nationalism, equality, and justice, while critically evaluating the ethical implications of state engagement with religious symbolism (Audi, 2000). Similarly, historical analysis was employed to trace the evolution of religious and national symbols from the colonial period to contemporary Nigeria, thereby demonstrating how historical experiences have shaped present-day controversies surrounding public symbolism (Carr, 1961). In addition, the socio-political evaluation approach was used in line with Bryman (2016)'s protocol to facilitate a critical examination of the interaction between religion, politics, identity formation, and state institutions in Nigeria's democratic experience. For purpose of credibility, data for the study were derived through archival / documentation sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, constitutional provisions, government policy documents, judicial decisions, and other relevant documentary materials on religion, symbolism, and national identity in Nigeria. Data analysis was done using thematic and documentary approaches. Documentary analysis was considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to examine authoritative texts, legal frameworks, and existing

scholarly debates systematically and critically (Bowen, 2009). The integration of these methodological approaches allows the study to provide a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of the symbolic dimensions of religion and nationalism in Nigeria. In this sense, the chosen methodology was appropriate because it facilitated a rigorous analysis of the historical, philosophical, constitutional, and socio-political factors that shape public symbolism and its implications for national integration within a religiously pluralistic state. In all, the relevance of this research lies in its contribution to scholarly discourse on religion and public life by advocating inclusive symbolic representation and civic nationalism as essential foundations for sustainable national integration in a religiously pluralistic Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

The discourse on religious pluralism, religious symbols, national symbols, and national integration in Nigeria requires conceptual clarity because these concepts are interconnected within the broader realities of religion, politics, identity formation, and state legitimacy. In plural societies such as Nigeria, symbols are not merely decorative representations; they embody social meanings, ideological commitments, and collective loyalties that influence public consciousness and political relations.

Religion is generally understood as a system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols through which human beings establish relationships with the sacred or transcendent reality (Durkheim, 1912). Beyond spirituality, religion functions as a social institution that shapes morality, communal identity, and political behavior (Weber, 1922). In the African context, religion permeates virtually every aspect of life and social organization, making it inseparable from politics, culture, and public identity (Mbiti, 1969; Koko, 2020). Consequently, religious affiliation in Nigeria often extends beyond personal faith to become a marker of ethnic, regional, and political belonging.

Religious symbols refer to material, visual, linguistic, or institutional representations associated with particular religious traditions and beliefs. These symbols communicate sacred meanings and reinforce communal identity among adherents as Geertz (1973) observes. Religious symbols may include architectural designs, inscriptions, dress codes, rituals, emblems, legal institutions, and sacred languages. In Nigeria, examples include mosque domes, crosses, Arabic inscriptions, Sharia courts, clerical garments, and public religious monuments. Tillich (1959) believes that such symbols often possess deep emotional and ideological significance because they represent both spiritual authority and socio-cultural identity. However, in religiously plural states, the public institutionalization of specific religious symbols may generate perceptions of exclusion, domination, or symbolic inequality among citizens belonging to other faith traditions. In extreme cases, it can generate inter-religious crisis like the Maitatsine and the University of Ibadan crisis in 1985 (Koko, 2020).

National symbols, on the other hand, are officially recognized emblems and representations designed to foster collective national consciousness and patriotic loyalty. These include the national flag, national anthem, coat of arms, national pledge, and other state insignia that embody the sovereignty and identity of a nation-state (Anderson, 1983). National symbols serve integrative functions by promoting shared citizenship beyond ethnic, religious, or regional affiliations (Hobsbawm, 1990). In postcolonial African states such as Nigeria, national symbols were consciously constructed to facilitate unity among diverse populations brought together through colonial amalgamation. Ideally, national symbols should function as neutral civic

representations capable of generating inclusive political belonging and loyalty to the state. But this is not the case in Nigeria.

Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple religious traditions within a society alongside the recognition of religious diversity and equal citizenship (Eck, 2001; Koko, 2020). It goes beyond mere religious diversity by emphasizing peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and institutional fairness in the management of religious differences. In democratic societies, pluralism requires the state to avoid undue preference for any particular religion in order to preserve social harmony and political inclusivity (Rawls, 1993; Koko, 2022). The challenge in Nigeria, however, lies in balancing religious visibility with constitutional neutrality in a deeply polarized religious environment.

National integration denotes the process through which diverse social groups develop a common sense of belonging, shared identity, and collective commitment to the political community (Deutsch, 1966; Koko, 2022). It involves the promotion of social cohesion, political stability, and civic nationalism across ethnic, religious, and regional divides. In the Nigerian context, national integration remains a major challenge due to persistent ethno-religious tensions, political distrust, and competing loyalties (Suberu, 2001; Koko, 2020). Consequently, the management of public symbols becomes crucial because symbols significantly influence perceptions of inclusion, citizenship, legitimacy, and national unity within plural societies.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Symbolic Interactionism and Civil Religion as complementary theoretical frameworks for analyzing the relationship between religious symbols, national symbols, and national integration in Nigeria. Both theories are adopted because they explain how symbols shape social identity, political belonging, inclusion or exclusion, and citizens' loyalty to the state within plural societies.

The theory of *Symbolic Interactionism* is associated principally with George H. Mead and Herbert Blumer. It emphasizes that human beings construct meanings through social interaction and symbolic communication (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). According to this theory, symbols are not inherently meaningful; rather, their meanings emerge through collective interpretation and social experience. Religious and national symbols therefore become important instruments through which individuals and groups define themselves and interpret their relationship with society and the state. In plural societies, symbols shape perceptions of inclusion, legitimacy, and citizenship because they communicate who belongs within the symbolic structure of the nation and whose identity is recognized or marginalized.

Within the Nigerian context, public religious symbols such as Arabic inscriptions, religious architecture, and institutional religious representations may acquire meanings that transcend spirituality and become interpreted as indicators of political dominance or cultural preference. Conversely, national symbols such as the flag, anthem, and coat of arms are expected to generate shared meanings capable of transcending ethnic and religious divisions (Anderson, 1983). Symbolic Interactionism therefore provides an analytical basis for understanding how the unequal visibility of symbols may influence national consciousness, social trust, and civic belonging.

However, critics like Turner (1991) argue that Symbolic Interactionism pays excessive attention to

micro-level social meanings while neglecting broader structures of political power, historical inequalities, and institutional domination that shape symbolic relations in society. Consequently, the theory may not sufficiently explain how state power influences the institutionalization of certain symbols over others.

The theory of *Civil Religion*, popularized by Bellah (1967), further strengthens this analysis by explaining how national symbols can function as sacred civic instruments that unite citizens beyond sectarian identities. Civil Religion refers to the collection of beliefs, rituals, symbols, and national narratives that provide a society with a sense of collective moral purpose and political unity. National symbols such as flags, national anthems, constitutions, and memorials often acquire sacred significance because they embody collective aspirations and loyalty to the state (Bellah, 1967). In this sense, national symbols serve integrative functions by promoting civic nationalism and allegiance to the political community rather than to religious or ethnic affiliations.

Nevertheless, critics of Civil Religion contend that it may obscure structural inequalities and unintentionally legitimize state ideology in ways that suppress minority identities (Richard Fenn, 1976). Others argue that in deeply pluralistic societies, civil religion may fail where competing religious loyalties are stronger than national consciousness. Despite these criticisms, the combined application of Symbolic Interactionism and Civil Religion provides a robust framework for examining how symbols shape identity formation, social inclusion, political legitimacy, and national integration in contemporary Nigeria.

Historical Context of Religious and National Symbols in Nigeria

The historical development of religious and national symbols in Nigeria is closely connected to the country's colonial experience, ethno-religious diversity, and postcolonial nation-building process. Nigeria emerged as a political entity through the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the British colonial administration under Lord Frederick Lugard (Crowder, 1978). This colonial construction brought together numerous ethnic groups, cultures, and religious traditions with differing historical experiences and identities. Consequently, religion became one of the most visible markers of social and political identity in the evolving Nigerian state.

Before colonialism, religious symbols already occupied important positions within indigenous political and cultural systems. Traditional African societies in present-day Nigeria employed sacred objects, shrines, masks, ritual spaces, and ancestral emblems as symbols of spiritual authority and communal identity (Mbiti, 1969). In Northern Nigeria, the spread of Islam through trans-Saharan trade and the Sokoto Jihad of Usman dan Fodio in the nineteenth century institutionalized Islamic symbols, Arabic literacy, mosque architecture, and Islamic legal traditions within the socio-political structure of the caliphate (Last, 1967). Similarly, Christian missionary activities in Southern Nigeria during the nineteenth century introduced Christian symbols such as the cross, church architecture, biblical education, and ecclesiastical institutions that later became influential within public life (Ajayi, 1965).

The colonial administration significantly shaped the symbolic relationship between religion and governance in Nigeria. British indirect rule in Northern Nigeria preserved Islamic institutions and symbols as part of administrative governance, while Christian missionary education expanded predominantly in the South (Falola, 1999). This uneven colonial policy contributed to the regionalization of religious identities and

reinforced the association between religion and political authority. According to Kukah (1993), colonial governance unintentionally transformed religion into a major instrument of political mobilization and identity formation in Nigeria.

At independence in 1960, Nigerian leaders recognized the need for national symbols capable of promoting unity within the newly independent multi-ethnic state. Consequently, symbols such as the Nigerian flag, national anthem, coat of arms, and national pledge were created to foster patriotism, collective identity, and national consciousness (Coleman, 1958). The green-white-green flag symbolized agriculture and peace, while the national anthem emphasized unity, faith, and service to the nation. These symbols were intended to transcend ethnic and religious loyalties and encourage allegiance to the Nigerian state.

However, postcolonial political developments complicated the symbolic neutrality of the Nigerian state. Military rule, regional politics, religious competition, and constitutional controversies increasingly intensified public expressions of religious identity (Suberu, 2001). The Maitatsine crises of the 1980s, the implementation of Sharia law in several Northern states after 1999, and persistent Christian-Muslim tensions further expanded the symbolic role of religion in public institutions (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Koko & Oko, 2024). State sponsorship of religious pilgrimages, public construction of worship centers, and the incorporation of religious symbols within governmental spaces became common features of Nigerian public life.

In contemporary Nigeria, the historical interaction between religion and politics continues to shape debates surrounding public symbolism and national integration. While national symbols were originally designed to unite citizens under a shared civic identity, the increasing visibility of religious symbols within state institutions has raised concerns regarding constitutional neutrality, equal citizenship, and inclusive national belonging in a deeply pluralistic society.

Issues, Debates and Controversies of Religious Symbols in Nigerian Public Space

The place of religious symbolism within Nigeria's public sphere remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary debates on religion, constitutionalism, and national integration. As one of the world's most religiously diverse countries, Nigeria faces the difficult task of balancing freedom of religion with the constitutional obligation of ensuring equality among all citizens. Although Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended) provides that "the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion," the interpretation and practical application of this provision continue to generate divergent opinions. At the crux of the debate is the question of whether the increasing visibility of religious symbols within public institutions reflects legitimate cultural and religious accommodation or constitutes symbolic preference capable of undermining national cohesion? (Falola, 1998; Kukah, 1993; Koko, 2023).

One of the most enduring controversies concerns the *Arabic inscriptions* that appear on Nigerian currency. Those who defend the continued use of Arabic inscriptions on the Naira argue that the inscriptions are not religious symbols, but Ajami transliterations introduced for historical and linguistic purposes during the colonial period. According to this position, Arabic functions as a language rather than an exclusively Islamic symbol, just as Latin inscriptions found on the currencies and emblems of many Western countries do

not necessarily imply governmental endorsement of Christianity. Supporters further contend that Arabic literacy predates colonialism in parts of Northern Nigeria and therefore constitutes part of Nigeria's historical heritage (Last, 1967; Suberu, 2001; Koko, 2017). Proponents of this school of thought are usually Islamic scholars.

Despite these arguments, critics mainly from the Christian cycle maintain that public symbols derive their significance not merely from their historical origins but from contemporary public interpretation. They argue that in the Nigerian context, Arabic is overwhelmingly associated with Islam because it is the liturgical language of the Qur'an and occupies a central position in Islamic worship and education. Consequently, its appearance on the national currency is not merely a historical but undue privilege of one religious tradition, particularly Islam over others (Christianity and ATR) (Agbaje, 1990; Falola, 1998; Koko, 2024). Moreover, from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, the controversy is less about the linguistic function of Arabic than about the social meanings attached to it by different communities (Blumer, 1969). Thus, even if the state's intention is historical or administrative, public perception remains politically significant because symbols communicate belonging and recognition.

A second and perhaps more complex controversy relates to the constitutional recognition and expansion of *Sharia courts*. Advocates who are majorly Islamic scholars usually argue that Sharia courts are constitutionally recognized institutions designed primarily to adjudicate matters concerning Islamic personal law. They maintain that extending Sharia reflects democratic accommodation of religious diversity and protects the constitutional rights of Muslim communities to practice their religion without interference (Ostien, 2007). This position further emphasizes that legal pluralism exists in many democratic societies where customary, religious, and civil legal systems coexist without necessarily threatening national unity.

However, Christian and other religious critics question whether the expansion of Sharia beyond personal status law into criminal jurisprudence in several northern states after 1999 is consistent with the character of the Nigerian state? According to Ibrahim (1991), the politicization of Sharia transformed what was originally a religious legal institution into a highly charged political symbol. Rather than serving purely judicial purposes, the implementation of Sharia became closely associated with electoral politics, identity mobilization, and regional assertion. Kukah (1993) and Koko & Mpigi, (2025) similarly argue that religion has frequently been instrumentalized by political elites seeking legitimacy and popular support. Consequently, many non-Muslim communities interpreted the expansion of Sharia not merely as an exercise of religious freedom but as evidence of unequal state recognition. The controversy therefore extends beyond constitutional legality to questions of symbolic equality, inclusive citizenship, and national unity within a federal republic.

Another area of sustained debate concerns the use of *religious architecture* in public institutions. It is common knowledge that in Nigeria, government buildings, airports, legislative complexes, and other public facilities have sometimes incorporated architectural features that many observers associate with Islamic aesthetics, including domes and crescent-inspired designs. Again, defenders of such architecture mostly Islamic scholars argue that architectural forms cannot automatically be interpreted as religious symbols because domes are widely used in governmental buildings across different cultures for structural and aesthetic purposes. They further maintain that many public institutions also contain Christian chapels, crosses, or other

facilities that accommodate Christian worship, suggesting that the Nigerian state recognizes the religious needs of multiple communities (Elaigwu, 2005; Koko, 2023. Koko, 2016).

Nevertheless, critics mainly from the Christian religion contend that symbolism operates through perception as much as through architectural intention. And where particular religious motifs become repeatedly associated with official institutions, citizens may reasonably question whether public architecture reflects the diversity of the federation. Elaigwu (2005) argues that political symbols derive much of their influence from their capacity to communicate authority and legitimacy. Consequently, architectural symbolism within state institutions should avoid creating impressions that public authority is culturally or religiously aligned with one segment of society. In plural democracies, symbolic neutrality is not achieved merely by denying religious intent but by ensuring that public institutions visibly represent all citizens equally. Unfortunately, in the Nigerian context, this neutrality is obviously lacking.

Coupled with the issues already raised is the issue of *state sponsorship* of religious pilgrimages which has generated equally vigorous controversy. Supporters, both Muslims and Christians argue that government sponsorship of Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca demonstrates fairness because both religious communities benefit from public support. They further maintain that pilgrimage programmes contribute to moral renewal, religious harmony, and national unity by enabling citizens to deepen their spiritual commitments (Kukah, 1993). And since religion occupies an important place in Nigerian public life, complete governmental disengagement from religious activities may appear culturally unrealistic.

This justification has, however, attracted substantial criticism. Agbaje (1990) for example argues that state funding of religious pilgrimages contradicts the constitutional principle of religious neutrality by committing public resources to sectarian activities. Critics further observe that equal sponsorship of Christianity and Islam does not necessarily satisfy the demands of constitutional impartiality because it excludes practitioners of African Traditional Religion and citizens who profess no religion. Moreover, in a country facing serious socio-economic challenges including poverty, unemployment, inadequate healthcare, and failing infrastructure, the allocation of public funds to religious pilgrimages raises important questions about governmental priorities (Agbaje, 1990; Koko, 2023; Koko, 2020). The controversy therefore concerns not only constitutional interpretation but also distributive justice and responsible governance.

Public educational institutions have likewise become important sites of symbolic contestation in contemporary Nigerian. For example, debates surrounding the wearing of the hijab in public schools, the establishment of campus worship centers, compulsory religious observances, and denominational control of publicly funded educational institutions continue to generate legal and social disputes across Nigeria (Imo, 2014). Advocates of expansive religious expression maintain that constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion necessarily include the right to display religious identity within educational environments. Restricting religious symbols, they argue, would amount to discrimination against believers and undermine fundamental human rights (Taylor, 1996)

The counterargument is that public educational institutions serve citizens from diverse religious backgrounds and therefore require greater institutional neutrality than private faith-based schools. Excessive institutional identification with any particular religious tradition may unintentionally create environments in which minority students perceive themselves as outsiders. As Geertz (1973) observes, symbols shape social

reality because they communicate shared meanings and establish systems of belonging. Consequently, educational spaces that visibly privilege any particular religious identity may unintentionally reinforce symbolic exclusion rather than civic inclusion (Koko, 2016).

More broadly, Nigeria's political class has frequently employed religious symbolism as a strategy for *electoral mobilization* and political legitimacy. Presidential and gubernatorial campaigns often emphasize religious balancing, while political office holders publicly identify with churches, mosques, and influential religious leaders. Supporters regard such engagement as inevitable within a deeply religious society where citizens expect leaders to demonstrate moral commitment. Falola (1998) and Koko (2016) note that religion has become an indispensable component of public life in Nigeria and cannot simply be separated from politics.

However, this close relationship between religion and politics carries significant risks. Osaghae & Suberu (2005) argue that when political legitimacy becomes excessively dependent upon religious symbolism, national identity is weakened because citizenship increasingly becomes interpreted through sectarian rather than constitutional categories. Political actors may consequently manipulate religious symbols to consolidate support, deepen communal divisions, and divert attention from governance failures. Such developments undermine civic nationalism and weaken confidence in the impartiality of democratic institutions.

It is equally important to recognize that the symbolic landscape of Nigerian public life is not contested only between Christianity and Islam. African Traditional Religion remains significantly underrepresented within state symbolism despite its foundational contribution to Nigeria's cultural heritage (Mbiti, 1969). This imbalance raises broader questions concerning whose identities are recognized within the symbolic order of the Nigerian state. Genuine symbolic inclusivity therefore requires moving beyond the binary competition between Christianity and Islam toward a more comprehensive understanding of religious diversity.

Given the above, it could be argued that the controversies surrounding the use of religious symbols in Nigeria ultimately reveal the broader challenge of managing religious diversity within a deeply plural society. Symbols possess enormous social and political power because they shape perceptions of belonging, legitimacy, and identity. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, the unequal visibility of religious symbols in public institutions have generated perceptions of exclusion among minority groups and weakened confidence in the neutrality of the state. Such perceptions can deepen mistrust, reinforce ethno-religious divisions, and undermine efforts toward civic nationalism and inclusive citizenship.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that religious symbols themselves are not inherently problematic. In democratic societies, freedom of religious expression remains a fundamental human right. The central challenge lies in ensuring that public institutions maintain symbolic inclusivity and constitutional fairness in ways that prevent the domination of one religious identity over others. In a multi-religious state such as Nigeria, the management of public symbols must therefore balance religious freedom with the principles of equality, neutrality, and national cohesion as required in religious plural states.

National Symbols and the Challenge of Civic Patriotism in Nigeria

National symbols are essential instruments for the construction of collective identity, political

legitimacy, and civic patriotism within modern nation-states. As already stated, in plural societies, symbols such as the national flag, national anthem, coat of arms, national pledge, and constitutional ideals are designed to cultivate loyalty to the state above ethnic, regional, and religious affiliations (Anderson, 1983). In Nigeria, national symbols emerged at independence in 1960 as integrative mechanisms intended to unite diverse ethnic and religious communities within a shared political community (Coleman, 1958). However, despite their symbolic importance, the capacity of Nigerian national symbols to inspire patriotism and national cohesion has significantly weakened in the 21st century due to persistent socio-political crises, ethno-religious polarization, and declining public trust in state institutions.

The Nigerian flag, with its green-white-green configuration symbolizing agriculture and peace, was intended to represent unity and collective aspiration. Similarly, the national anthem and national pledge emphasize service, loyalty, justice, and national solidarity. According to Smith (1991), national symbols function as emotional and cultural resources that help citizens imagine themselves as members of a common national community. In the Nigerian context, however, these symbols have struggled to generate enduring emotional attachment because many citizens continue to identify more strongly with ethnic, regional, and religious communities than with the nation-state itself (Suberu, 2001).

One major factor undermining civic patriotism in Nigeria is the persistence of ethno-religious politics. Since independence, political competition has often been organized around ethnic and religious identities rather than shared national interests (Osaghae, 1998). Consequently, loyalty to ethnic and religious groups frequently supersedes commitment to national ideals. According to Nnoli (1980), the politicization of identity in Nigeria has weakened the development of civic nationalism and contributed to recurring tensions over representation, power sharing, and resource distribution. In such a context, national symbols lose their unifying force because citizens perceive the state through the lens of sectional interests rather than collective belonging.

Corruption and governance failure have also contributed significantly to the erosion of patriotic consciousness in Nigeria. Civic patriotism depends largely on citizens' confidence in the legitimacy, fairness, and effectiveness of state institutions (Ake, 1996). However, widespread corruption, unemployment, insecurity, electoral malpractice, and infrastructural decay have generated deep public distrust toward the Nigerian state. According to Joseph (1987), the personalization of public office and prebendal politics in Nigeria have weakened citizens' emotional attachment to national institutions. As a result, national symbols often appear disconnected from the lived experiences of ordinary Nigerians struggling with economic hardship and political exclusion.

The decline of civic education further compounds the problem. Civic education plays a critical role in transmitting national values, historical consciousness, and patriotic responsibility among citizens (Durkheim, 1912). In post-independence Nigeria, schools once emphasized respect for the national anthem, flag ceremonies, and civic obligations as part of nation-building efforts. However, the weakening of civic education within educational institutions has contributed to diminishing public reverence for national symbols and democratic values (Fafunwa, 1974). Many young Nigerians today demonstrate stronger emotional engagement with religious organizations, ethnic movements, or global popular culture than with national civic identity.

Moreover, the increasing prominence of religious symbols within public space has overshadowed the symbolic authority of national symbols. Public officials frequently invoke religious identities and participate in highly visible religious activities, while national ceremonies and civic rituals receive comparatively limited attention (Kukah, 1993). This imbalance contributes to the perception that religious affiliation provides greater social meaning and political relevance than national citizenship. Bellah's (1967) concept of civil religion suggests that national symbols can function as sacred civic instruments capable of promoting collective unity. However, in Nigeria, the weakness of civic nationalism has limited the ability of national symbols to command broad emotional loyalty across religious and ethnic divides.

The challenge of civic patriotism in Nigeria therefore reflects a broader crisis of national identity. National symbols cannot effectively promote integration where citizens experience exclusion, inequality, and insecurity within the political system. As Renan (1882) argues, a nation ultimately depends on the collective willingness of people to live together and share common aspirations. For Nigeria, revitalizing civic patriotism requires strengthening democratic governance, promoting inclusive citizenship, revitalizing civic education, and restoring public confidence in national institutions. Only within a framework of justice, equality, and constitutional fairness can national symbols regain their integrative capacity and function as genuine instruments of national unity.

Towards Inclusive Symbolism and National Integration in Nigeria

The challenge of managing religious and national symbols in Nigeria underscores the urgent need for an inclusive symbolic framework capable of promoting national integration within a deeply pluralistic society. In multi-religious states, public symbols play a crucial role in shaping citizens' perceptions of belonging, equality, legitimacy, and political participation (Anderson, 1983). Where symbols are perceived as favoring particular religious or ethnic groups, they may reinforce exclusion, distrust, and identity-based tensions. Consequently, Nigeria's democratic stability and national cohesion depend significantly on the development of symbolic practices that reflect constitutional fairness, civic equality, and inclusive citizenship.

One important step toward inclusive symbolism is the strengthening of *constitutional neutrality* in matters relating to religion. Although the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits the adoption of a state religion, controversies surrounding public religious symbols continue to generate perceptions of imbalance and symbolic preference (Agbaje, 1990). In plural societies, constitutional neutrality does not require the elimination of religion from public life; rather, it demands that state institutions avoid privileging one religious identity over others (Rawls, 1993). According to Taylor (2007), democratic secularism should create a framework in which diverse religious communities coexist under conditions of equality and mutual respect. Therefore, public institutions in Nigeria must consciously ensure that official symbols, policies, and practices reflect inclusivity rather than sectarian dominance.

Another important strategy involves the *revitalization of national symbols* as instruments of civic nationalism and collective identity. National symbols such as the Nigerian flag, anthem, and pledge were originally intended to transcend ethnic and religious divisions by promoting common citizenship and patriotic loyalty (Coleman, 1958). However, decades of political instability, corruption, and identity politics have weakened their symbolic authority. Bellah's (1967) concept of civil religion emphasizes that national symbols

can function as sacred civic representations that unite citizens around shared democratic values and collective aspirations. To restore the integrative power of these symbols, Nigeria must strengthen civic culture through public ceremonies, national commemorations, and civic education programs that emphasize unity, constitutionalism, and collective responsibility.

Civic education remains particularly essential in promoting inclusive national consciousness. Educational institutions play a central role in shaping citizens' understanding of democracy, tolerance, and national belonging (Durkheim, 1912). In Nigeria, civic education should encourage respect for religious diversity while simultaneously emphasizing loyalty to constitutional values and national identity above sectarian affiliations. According to Dewey (1916), democratic societies sustain social cohesion through educational systems that cultivate shared civic ideals and participatory citizenship. Consequently, schools and universities should function as spaces where students learn the principles of pluralism, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence rather than arenas for religious polarization.

Interreligious dialogue also represents a critical mechanism for reducing symbolic tensions and promoting mutual understanding among religious communities. Nigeria's history of religious conflict demonstrates the dangers of allowing symbols to become instruments of political competition and social exclusion (Kukah, 1993). Structured dialogue among religious leaders, civil society organizations, and policymakers can help foster cooperation and discourage extremist interpretations of religious identity. According to Habermas (2006), democratic societies require communicative engagement between religious and secular actors in order to sustain inclusive public life. Such dialogue may contribute to developing consensus on the appropriate role of religious symbols within public institutions.

Furthermore, inclusive symbolism requires *equitable representation* within public institutions and national spaces. The symbolic marginalization of minority groups, particularly practitioners of African Traditional Religion, undermines the principle of equal citizenship in Nigeria's multicultural environment (Mbiti, 1969; Koko, 2016). Public institutions should therefore adopt policies that reflect Nigeria's religious diversity without privileging one tradition above others. This approach aligns with Kymlicka's (1995) argument that multicultural democracies must recognize and accommodate cultural diversity within frameworks of justice and equality.

Ultimately, national integration in Nigeria cannot be sustained through coercion or political rhetoric alone. It requires the deliberate construction of a civic culture in which all citizens perceive themselves as equally represented within the symbolic structure of the nation. Inclusive symbolism promotes social trust, democratic legitimacy, and shared belonging by ensuring that national identity transcends sectarian loyalties. In a society as religiously diverse as Nigeria, the effective management of public symbols therefore remains essential for strengthening civic patriotism, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable national unity.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the relationship between religious symbols, national symbols, and national integration in 21st-century Nigeria within the broader context of religious pluralism, identity politics, and civic nationalism. The paper demonstrates that symbols are not merely cultural representations or decorative emblems; rather, they are powerful instruments that shape social consciousness, political

belonging, perceptions of legitimacy, and collective identity. In deeply plural societies such as Nigeria, the symbolic structure of public institutions significantly influences citizens' understanding of inclusion, exclusion, and national loyalty. The study observed that the increasing visibility and institutionalization of religious symbols within Nigerian public spaces have generated persistent controversies regarding constitutional neutrality and equal citizenship. Issues such as Arabic inscriptions on national currency, the expansion of Sharia courts, state sponsorship of religious pilgrimages, and the incorporation of religious architectural motifs in public institutions have contributed to perceptions of symbolic imbalance within the federation. While these practices are often defended on historical, cultural, or constitutional grounds, they nevertheless raise important concerns about the management of religious diversity in a multi-faith democratic state. At the same time, the research established that national symbols intended to promote collective patriotism and civic unity appear to have weakened in their integrative capacity due to corruption, political instability, ethno-religious polarization, and declining civic education. Consequently, many citizens increasingly demonstrate stronger attachment to religious and ethnic identities than to the Nigerian nation-state itself. This development undermines civic nationalism and complicates efforts toward sustainable national integration. Using Symbolic Interactionism and Civil Religion as theoretical frameworks, the paper argued that symbols derive social and political significance through collective interpretation and institutional practice. Public symbols therefore possess the capacity either to unify citizens around shared national values or to deepen social fragmentation where they are perceived as instruments of exclusion or dominance. The study concludes that national integration in Nigeria requires the development of inclusive symbolic practices grounded in constitutional fairness, civic equality, and democratic pluralism. Based on the findings of this research, the following strategic recommendations are therefore made:

- i. The Federal Government, through the National Council of State and the National Orientation Agency (NOA), should develop a comprehensive policy framework for management of religious symbols within public institutions.
- ii. The Federal Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), should strengthen civic education at all levels of education by placing greater emphasis on the historical significance and civic value of national symbols such as the Nigerian flag, national anthem, coat of arms, national pledge, and the Constitution.
- iii. The Federal and State Governments should undertake a comprehensive review of policies relating to state sponsorship of religious activities, including public funding for pilgrimages and other sectarian programmes.
- iv. Government should strengthen existing interfaith structures such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) by giving them a more proactive advisory role in matters relating to religious symbolism, public policy, and national cohesion
- v. Relevant public institutions including the Federal Ministry of Works, the National Assembly, the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA), and state governments should ensure that the design, naming, and symbolic representation of government buildings and public spaces reflect Nigeria's constitutional commitment to inclusivity rather than sectarian identity.

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