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**How to Cite:** John, S F 2018 Genocide, Oppression, Ambivalence: Online Narratives of Identity and Religion in Postcolonial Nigeria. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 14, pp. 1–28, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.284>

**Published:** 20 September 2018

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ARTICLE

# Genocide, Oppression, Ambivalence: Online Narratives of Identity and Religion in Postcolonial Nigeria

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Digital media platforms have emerged as important socio-cultural sites that enable the engagement of historical and contemporary contestations around religion and identity against the background of ethno-religious conflicts and social tensions in Nigeria. The post-election violence of 2011 and subsequent mass killings of mostly Christians in rural Southern Kaduna saw the emergence of several online groups and practices contesting these, and other forms of oppression and violence (real or imagined) in Southern Kaduna. This article details a study that applied a postcolonial perspective to analyse the content of one such online forum. It identified two dominant narratives on the forum. In the first, users represent Southern Kaduna Christians as oppressed and experiencing genocide; and in the second, forum users reveal an ambivalence of admiration and revulsion in the ways they construct the identity, religion and privileges of Hausa-Fulani Muslims, viewed as the oppressor. The study also shows that forum users were more likely to be critical of religion during conversations about preferences regarding political candidates and elections. I argue, among other things, that the self-descriptions of Southern Kaduna people as oppressed and endangered, are more than mere descriptions of experiences but can also be viewed as forms of identity. Thus, to better understand peoples such as Southern Kaduna and their experiences in the context of social conflicts, their identities need to be analyzed beyond the usual limited focus on religion and ethnicity.

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Digital media constitute a site for the narration, performance and experience of conflicts, wars and their commemoration, observes Adi Kuntsman (2010). Reports and digital museums of wars, conflicts, genocides, postwar trauma, protests, personal memories and histories are numerous on digital platforms; and offline conflicts and wars are sometimes accompanied by propaganda and information warfare online. He further argues that the way human beings feel, witness and recollect traumatic events is being changed by digital media, which operate as a site for literal and figurative conflicts where past tensions are conjured up and new ones shaped. Although concerned with a different context to this study, Kuntsman explores the content and user practices of several social media platforms used to explore the issues and experiences prevalent in Nigeria, especially those concerned with historical and contemporary events, hostilities, conflicts and grievances in Kaduna, Nigeria.

Kaduna state is the site of some of the most intense conflicts and contestations that have shaped Nigeria over the past three decades. In their engagements with these contestations, scholars predominantly construct religion as a politicized form causing or aggravating conflicts, and/or as an identity around which people are mobilized for conflicts (Ibrahim, 1989; Kukah, 1993; Ayantayo, 2009; Onapajo, 2012; McCauley, 2017). In addition to the spaces in which ethnic and religious identities are articulated and contested, digital media platforms have emerged as sites utilized for mobilization, sectarianism and for pursuits and practices that reflect offline tensions and grievances, but where also where alternative ways to redress them can be sought. However, there is a dearth of studies exploring 1) these emerging social and cultural spaces in Nigeria, and 2) the religious forms and ideological practices that are (re)produced and invoked in such spaces to engage, sustain or attempt to redress ethnoreligious tensions and grievances. This paper presents some of the findings from a study that explored these issues, with a particular focus on the articulation and contestation of religion and ethnicity by members of a closed Facebook forum for Kaduna, Nigeria.

Kaduna state, with over six million people, has over 50 predominantly Christian ethnic groups, which commonly identify as Southern Kaduna due to shared geography,

histories, similarity of cultures and shared socio-political visions and aspirations.<sup>1</sup> Some of these include Atyp, Ayu, Ham, Adara, Gwong, Gure, Fwantswan, Gbagyi, Takad, Sholio, Tsam, Bajju, Atachaat, Ninzo and Oegworok. The state also has a large population of Hausa-Fulani, one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups, dominant in northern Nigeria and predominantly Muslim.<sup>2</sup> While Hausa-Fulani and Southern Kaduna communities have benefited each other as neighbours, relations between them have also been shaped by oppressive power dynamics, inter-ethnic and inter-religious animosities and political grievances that sometimes translate into violent conflicts (Kazah-Toure, 1999; Blench, 2010; Harris, 2011; Gandu, 2011; Ochonu, 2013).

After a violent post-election conflict in 2011, Kaduna experienced several violent attacks by suspected members of the extremist group Boko Haram. Perhaps more troubling for the people of Southern Kaduna, however, was a series of attacks on rural communities by Fulani herdsmen, which caused major loss of lives and properties, and displacements (HRW, 2013). The persistence of these violent attacks and mass killings prompted responses from civil society organizations, activists and some politicians. It also saw the emergence of several online forums and platforms on which these killings were challenged, and several other historical and contemporary grievances were discussed: religion was widely invoked in this process. This paper discusses two of the primary narratives on one such forum. These include narratives of oppression and genocide, where forum users represent Southern Kaduna Christians

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<sup>1</sup> The latest Nigerian census (2006) puts the population of Kaduna state at 6,113,503 (NPC, 2006). It is difficult to estimate the population of the people in the identity category 'Southern Kaduna', since the headcounts did not take ethnicity into account. Kaduna also has a large migrant population from within Nigeria and beyond.

A simplistic categorization of all Southern Kaduna peoples as Christian and all Hausa and Fulani as Muslims is not intended here. While majority of Southern Kaduna people identify as Christians, there are some who practice Islam and while Hausa-Fulani people are predominantly Muslims, there are some who adhere to Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> Hausa and Fulani are two distinct groups, with the Fulani being historically a dominant minority and Hausa a dominant majority (Osaghae 1998). The two are compounded as Hausa-Fulani because of the high level of integration between them, and their intertwining histories and religion in Nigeria. I am aware of opposition to the use of the hyphenated term. Its usage here is for analytical reasons, and because most scholarship and statistics use it this way.

as an oppressed people experiencing genocide; and the narratives of revulsion and attraction, which reveal an ambivalence in the ways forum users construct the identity, religion and privileges of the Hausa-Fulani Muslim Other, portrayed as the oppressor and aggressor. The study shows, among other things, that forum users were more likely to be critical of religion during conversations about preferred political candidates and elections; and more likely to unquestioningly accept and reproduce ideas about religion—especially Islam—when discussing violent and painful events such as killings in Southern Kaduna. Past conflicts and grievances also reemerged and were redirected to inform narratives and identities, and current feelings about such events become useful for making sense of the past. I argue that to better understand peoples such as those in Southern Kaduna and their experiences in the context of social conflicts, it is useful to analyze their identities beyond the ethnic and religious to include conceptions of themselves and others, which might appear as mere descriptions of experiences, but are, and function as, identity types.

### **Narratives, Identity and Representation**

Margaret Somers (1994) argues that identities are constructed through locating oneself or being located in social narratives. Nancy Ammerman (2003) also observes that narratives are helpful as metaphors for understanding identities. Narratives assist with the framing of conversation and language as important sites for analyzing identity. By linking them to historical and special practices and relationships, people come to understand their experiences, and events become part of a plot through narratives (Somers, 1994). Thus, 'we may understand identities as emerging, then, at the everyday intersections of autobiographical and public narratives' (Ammerman, 2003: 215). Narratives further enable people to define who and why they are, through representation—the language used to imbue events, social conditions, groups and social practices with meaning (Wenden 2005).

Central to the question of identity, narrative and representation are social relationships, often involving identification and social comparison (Stets and Burke 2000). Thus, Karkaba suggests that identity, in postcolonial thinking, is destabilized and fragmented because of the 'increasing awareness that it is a question involving

the relationship between the self and the other' (2010: 93). In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) exposes the discursive construction and representation of identity through media, force and different knowledge regimes in the historical relationships between the West and the Arab world. The West mirrored itself as superior to an imagined Other, which it considered uncivilized, exotic, and barbaric and thereby legitimized western domination. This critique also inspired investigations into European creation and representation of Africa, and Africa's role in reinventing itself (Mudimbe 1988; Appiah 1992; Mudimbe 1994; Biakolo 2006).

Religion and ethnicity are the primary categories through which many Nigerians identify themselves and navigate their social, political and economic challenges (Akinade 2014). Traditionally, 'majority' and 'minority' are the main categories for describing Nigeria's ethnicities, descriptors that were highly contested since these categories are not always separable from regional, religious and other political identities (Osaghae and Suberu 2005). Egosha Osaghae and Rotimi Suberu (2005) argue that such categorizations are limited because they are based on an understanding of Nigeria's ethnicities as primarily linguistic, ignoring the importance of self-definition and definitions by outsiders. They also note that the minority-majority distinction in Nigeria emerged out of power configurations of colonialism and regionalism. This traditional grouping remains politically relevant and active with the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani considered majorities and others as minorities. Moreover, indigene, migrant and settler identities have gained prominence in citizenship contestations, but these are based on ethnicity and region; and on the practice of excluding settlers, migrants and non-indigenes from rights and access to resources and services (Osaghae and Suberu 2005).

Among Hausa-Fulani Muslims, religious identity is often more salient than ethnic identity (Osaghae and Suberu 2005). This is sometimes also true of ethnic minorities in northern Nigeria whose shared Christian identity is also of considerable importance for forging political alliances (Campbell, 2013). This is significant given the view that Nigeria's minorities are:

Culturally, linguistically, territorially, and historically distinct groups, which because of their diffusion, numerical inferiority and historical evolution within the modern Nigerian state, have been subjected to subordinate political, social and economic positions in the federation and its constituent units (Osaghae, 1998: 4).

Addressing this condition has been the focus of the politics of many elites of minorities (Osaghae 1998: 4). Osaghae also notes that this does not apply to certain minorities, such as the Fulani, which is historically a dominant minority. Furthermore, while minorities in other parts of Nigeria are mainly ethnolinguistic, several in the north are, additionally, religious minorities. Thus, in his categorization, Osaghae classed several northern minorities as 'non-Muslim minority groups' marked by their resistance to Islamization and Fulani domination since the Jihad of 1884, and their openness to Christian and Western influence. The proximity of Southern Kaduna groups to Zaria, a major center of Muslim Hausa-Fulani politics and dominance, made them more accessible for internal colonialism and made resistance more daunting, unlike minority groups that resisted from a more regional standpoint (Osaghae 1998).

### **Sociohistorical Development of Conflicting Identity Categories in Kaduna**

Tunga Lergo (2011) illustrates how regional identities based on majorities and dominant groups alienated, silenced and blurred diversity because, to access political and economic resources, minorities had to identify with their respective regional majorities. The north had also developed a hierarchy of ethnicities with Hausa-Fulani at the top, followed by Muslims of any background, then other regional majorities (Igbo and Yoruba), and northern non-Muslim minorities at the bottom (Lergo 2011). This has contributed to the disavowal of the north by several minorities in the middle belt region. As Lergo rightly observes, the question, 'who is a Northerner?' animates a vibrant discourse among minorities as they struggle for separate identity from the Hausa-Fulani.

These issues highlight the need for a deeper exploration of the postcolonial dynamics of identity and representation in the context of perennial memories of

past violence, collective trauma and an unaddressed history of sub-colonization in northern Nigeria. Historical scholarship and studies on social conflicts in Nigeria indicate that sub-colonialism, in the shadow of indirect rule, was a major encounter between the Hausa-Fulani and Southern Kaduna that continues to shape how they define and interact with each other.<sup>3</sup> The jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio, a Fulani Islamic teacher, in the 1880s, which aimed to expunge from the practice of Islam imported pre-Islamic Hausa practices and led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate (Falola & Heaton 2008), had major implications for non-Hausa, non-Muslim groups in the region. Southern Kaduna groups were closer in proximity to Zazzau (Zaria), one of the most important emirates of the Caliphate, who saw Southern Kaduna people as legitimate targets for frequent slave raids (Kazah-Toure 1999). Narratives from this slaving era still surface to fuel conflicts (Blench, 2010).

When the British conquered the Sokoto Caliphate in 1903, making it the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, their indirect rule system applied only to the Hausa-Fulani. Moses Ochonu (2013) has rightly argued that for the several non-Muslim minority groups in the region, it was a case of sub-colonialism or colonialism by proxy. The British viewed these minority groups as ungovernable and uncivilized due to their lack of centralized authorities, and thus, extended the political and administrative structures and institutions of the Caliphate into these communities. Hausa-Fulani agents were deployed to 'civilize' them without any consideration of the 'troubled precolonial status and semiotic resonance of Hausa as a socio-political category in the non-Muslim sector of northern Nigeria' (Ochonu 2008: 100). Kazah-Toure observes that the colonial government in northern Nigeria viewed the Sokoto Caliphate, its emirates and ruling circles 'both in theory and practice, as the most ingenious, intelligent, cultured and politically sophisticated' in the territories

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'sub-colonialism' is from Moses Ochonu's *Colonialism by Proxy* (2013) and denotes the system whereby the task of colonizing minority ethnic groups in northern Nigeria was outsourced to the Hausa-Fulani Muslim authorities because those minority groups were viewed by the British as too backward for indirect rule. Moses Ochonu (2013) describes how the Hausa-Fulani agents, who saw themselves more as agents of Muslim civilization than of the colonial agenda, oppressively and ruthlessly exercised their sub-colonial powers, thereby leaving a legacy that still shapes contemporary conflicts.



(Kazah-Toure 1999: 115). Although they viewed Islam as inferior to Christianity, it was, in their imagination, the highest form of spirituality that Africans could attain, superior to indigenous religions and offering the level of civilization they could not find in the cultures of minorities in the region (Weiss 2004). Non-Muslim groups were described as raw pagans, savages, uncivilized, primitive, and of 'inferior stock' and these representations impacted how Hausa-Fulanis—deployed to these communities as Native Authorities (NA)—carried out their colonial responsibilities; and the violent ways both the Hausa and colonial authorities responded to minorities' grievances and resistance (Galadima and Turaki 2001: 88).

Both the British and Hausa-Fulani elites imagined non-Muslim groups as needing monotheistic governance and colonization. Thus, the British tilted existing struggles to the advantage of the Hausa-Fulani, and equipped them with superior resources to aid their physical, political, economic and religious dominance and suppression of resistance (Ochonu 2013). The violence of this system grounded a persistent perception of the Hausa-Fulani as the oppressor among minority groups in northern Nigeria. While Nigeria received its independence from British rule in 1960, the sub-colonization of non-Muslim groups in northern Nigeria remained as its structures were left untouched and continued to shape life and relationships for nearly four decades. Additionally, political leadership at different stages of the evolution of contemporary Kaduna has been successively dominated by Hausa-Fulani Muslims since independence, with the exception of the circumstantial emergence of a Southern Kaduna Christian, Patrick Yakowa, as Governor in 2010 and his short-lived election into the same office in 2011, punctuated by one of the most violent conflicts Nigeria had seen (Bello 2015). These and other events aggravated several conflicts often involving ethnic and religious identities and expressions including minorities' resistance to Hausa-Fulani Muslim dominance and structures, the search for independence from the Zaria emirate, conflicts over attempts to implement Sharia in the state, and post-election violence (Suberu 1996; Ochonu 2008; Weimann 2010; Suleiman 2011; Angerbrandt 2011; Bello 2015). They also serve as key sources for identity, differentiation and othering narratives.

## Methodology and Forum Characteristics

Two years' content (2013–2014) of a closed Facebook group owned by a Kaduna-based socio-political pressure group was investigated. Available documentation shows that the group was founded by a few professionals to unite members of the diverse ethnic groups in Kaduna to pursue the emancipation of Southern Kaduna people from oppressive socio-political conditions and poor self-esteem. It also aimed to enlighten and empower people to tackle daily life challenges. During the study period, the group's online membership was one of the largest among similar groups, comprising over 11,000 users of various Southern Kaduna ethnicities, living in Nigeria and the diaspora. The group also describes itself as a non-religious and non-partisan group, and clarified on several occasions that religion was not a membership criterion. Members needed to be indigenous to Southern Kaduna by birth or through their parents. Nonetheless, the result of an online survey administered for this study indicated that 99% of the 108 respondents were Christian, and 1% did not indicate their religion.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I treated the group as Christian on this basis, also considering the heavily Christian rhetoric on the forum and the explicit identification of Southern Kaduna on the forum as primarily Christian.<sup>5</sup>

The online forum enjoys membership and participation from known politicians, academics, professionals of different fields, activists, civil servants, religious ministers as well as other individuals of varying levels of education, economic status, and social status. The majority (80%) of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 40, and 15% were aged 41–50. This is, perhaps, indicative of the age range of persons with

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<sup>4</sup> This survey was not intended for use as primary data, but was administered to help develop a better idea of the forum and assist with interpretation of content analyzed. Figures from this survey are not precise, but suggestive of general trends among users.

<sup>5</sup> Nigeria's population census does not take account of religion and ethnicity as variables. Thus, it is difficult to tell the current Christian–Muslim composition of the Kaduna state, or to verify claims to religious majority status. The last census to include religion was conducted in 1963 and like subsequent ones, is surrounded by controversy (Okafor, Adeleke, and Oparac 2007). Literature generally affirm that the vast majority of Southern Kaduna people are Christians and Hausa-Fulani are majorly Muslims. After the violent conflicts of 2000 and 2002, there was a huge migration of people towards areas of the state inhabited by members of their own religion and ethnicity: Muslims to the north and Christians to the south of Kaduna state (Harris 2011: 293).

sufficient literacy, political awareness and involvement, as well as familiarity with and access to social media among the Southern Kaduna population.<sup>6</sup> The online forum investigated was very busy, with several posts by different people every day. In the two-year content examined, an identifiable average of about 20 users posted more frequently (daily or every couple of days) on political topics, but not consistently for the entire two-year period; and there were several other posts by users who did not have any identifiable pattern of posting. Many more members posted on incidences of violent attacks in Southern Kaduna. Thus, while some frequent posters and commenters could be identified, they did not dominate conversations. Comments and reactions to posts, especially about killings, political and other topics on the themes of marginalization and fears of extinction, could number in the hundreds.

Membership and activity on the online forum indicate an appetite to transfer political struggle to online social media platform and outside the traditional loci of political action. The online platform allowed for the circumvention of traditional channels and hierarchies. It allowed actors to mobilize and to utilize diaspora relations in the pursuit of their interests. It also seemed to enable users to deal with the negligence and misrepresentation of minorities' issues by established traditional media.

The online content collected covered different events, as discussions were often tied to specific issues and events in Nigeria. Since the online forum was started in 2011, content from 2013 to 2014 was preferred because discussions and behavior on the forum appeared to have become more determined and purposeful after about a year of consistent growth and activity. Difficulty in accessing older group posts on Facebook partly contributed to the choice of the period. However, such recent data also provided access to more current ideas and development on the forum and society. Attempts to capture content dating back to early 2014 and 2013 using various algorithms failed. Thus, many search terms and keywords were generated

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<sup>6</sup> Statistics show that 54% of the population of Kaduna state are between the ages of 15 and 64, and 43% between 0 and 14. Youth literacy in the state is up to 79% (for literacy in any language) and 67% (English), and the Southern Kaduna Senatorial District has up to 88% literacy rate (any language) and 77% (English) compared to Kaduna North Senatorial District with 64% (any language) and 33% (English) (National Bureau of Statistics 2010)

based on familiarity with the nature of conversations on the forum, the nature of content that was accessible, and my research objectives and questions. Many different key term combinations and formats were also used within the group's page. These keywords returned results on the exact search terms, or parts thereof, going back to 2012. This method allowed access to older data without browser freezes or crashes, which was a problem with previously used methods. The content obtained was printed in PDF format. The fact that several different keywords returned the same content enhanced rigour in the data collection process as it indicated that the search was thorough. While this method returned a high volume of content, there was no way of determining whether the process gave access to *all* the content for the targeted period. The data were thematically analyzed using Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic data analysis. The content was also specifically read with a postcolonial optic to identify representations and narratives of religion and identity. Having met the ethical requirements of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, I received full ethical clearance for the study (reference number: HSS/1080/014D).

The online forum is an extension of an offline politically involved group and the online and offline are shaped by each other. Many of its members obviously met and interacted in person, and knew each other offline. They also organized and executed offline events together some of which were discussed online. This online-offline connection enabled the forum to monitor the identity of its users and the kinds of content they shared, because it appeared to be invested in maintaining its integrity both offline and online. Some members also had reputations and personalities offline which they sought to protect online; others sought to protect their online reputation offline. A reminder to observe 'decorum' was pinned to the forum's page, such that it was the first thing users saw when they access the group or any of its contents. This included expectations of respectful participation, civility and other forum principles and objectives. Members could invite others to participate, but joining the online forum required approval from the forum administrators. There were occasions in the period reviewed when posts considered inappropriate were reported to the administrators and discussed, and when the identity of some

users was questioned to guard against intrusion and espionage. The online-offline connection and interaction of forum users increased the chances that the online content accurately represented the views of members.

### **Narratives of Oppression and Genocide**

The overarching narrative on the online forum is that the people of Southern Kaduna are oppressed and experiencing gradual genocide. This is the lens that focusses how users interpret history and ongoing events in the state and in Nigeria. For example, in a reflection about the challenges of the people of Southern Kaduna, a frequent forum user in 2014 posted '[t]he annihilation of my beloved southern kaduna people has started'. 'We are killed like animals', wrote another user (March 2014), and a year earlier (March 2013), another user had expressed frustration against 'the carefully orchestrated and sustained pogrom of the Southern Kaduna people ... the Extinction agenda of Southern Kaduna by Feudalistic and Religious zealots'. Such conversations—employing terms such as 'pogrom', 'annihilation' and 'genocide'—are rife on the forum, especially in reference to attacks on rural Southern Kaduna following the post-election conflicts of 2011. This is often reinforced by media shared by group members and any material that gives credence to feelings of oppression and genocide. Forum users also reported their visits to the scenes of such attacks and shared their experiences, sometime supported with images.

While members often engaged each other in debates on almost any topic, the content examined indicates that most users agreed, first, that the killings and destruction of communities in Southern Kaduna were an intentional, carefully planned gradual genocide. Second, while these killings were specifically reported as carried out by Fulani herdsmen, forum users did not always make a distinction between Fulani herdsmen and Hausa-Fulani as an ethnoreligious category. Stories of Fulani violence were woven into narratives of Hausa-Fulani hegemony, and applied to support the view of Hausa-Fulani as the oppressor and aggressor. Thus, third, forum members conflate these killings with ethnoreligious conflicts, religious extremists' violence, and the other historical and contemporary contestations between minorities and the Hausa-Fulani. Fourth, forum members take for granted that their

'Faith and Tribe' (May 18, 2013) were the key reasons for their oppression and ethnic cleansing. Content was sometimes shared and discussed that reinforce the widely held belief that there is an 'Islamization agenda' in Nigeria, whereby Muslims have a grand, longstanding scheme to Islamize Nigeria by all means possible. Conversations about this draw on events such as the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio in the 1880s, the registration of Nigeria in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1986, the several sharia debates in Nigeria's constituent assemblies after independence, the efforts to implement Sharia in northern states (and consequent violence), and regionalism (Weimann, 2010; Simon, 2011; Bello 2015).

Forum users further view the people of Southern Kaduna as marginalized and excluded politically and economically. This often emerged in conversations about political leadership and civil service employment. For example, the fact that there had been only one Christian and Southern Kaduna democratic governor in Kaduna state despite Southern Kaduna Christians constituting a significant population; the political and ethnoreligious violence that followed his victory in 2011 and his demise in a plane explosion about a year later indicated, for forum users, the commitment of Hausa-Fulani Muslims to the oppression of Southern Kaduna. The governance structures in Kaduna were also viewed by forum members as systematically marginalizing Southern Kaduna because the number of electoral wards and constituencies was significantly higher in Hausa-Fulani and Muslim-dominated locations than in Southern Kaduna, making it difficult for democratic processes, such as voting, to favour Southern Kaduna Christians. Several vocal members took their views of oppression further by using the rhetoric of slavery. One user, responding to seeming undermining of the purpose of the forum by others retorted, '[f]or most [users] it [participation in the forum] is a passion, passion for the emancipation of a people from the shackles of mental, political, historical and economic slavery' (January 6, 2013). Members employed such rhetoric to emphasize their perception of the nature and depth of Southern Kaduna social, political and religious conditions. Forum members' responses to the Fulani herders' violence indicate that narratives of oppression are increasingly

retuned and redefined to emphasize genocide and heighten fears of extinction among users.

### **Narratives of Attraction and Revulsion**

Narratives posted by users of the online forum reflected their ambivalence about first, their imaginary of Hausa-Fulani Muslims and Islam in northern Nigeria; second, the status and relationship of Muslims to the Nigerian state; and third, the privileges that Hausa-Fulani Muslims are perceived to enjoy. In these narratives, members reviled some perceived characteristics and privileges of Hausa-Fulani Muslims and were attracted to others. For example, when members engaged media about the impenitent attitude of an arrested suspected mastermind of a Boko Haram bombing, a user noted, 'I condemn his heretical disposition to non-muslims and what they stand for. I also wish most of us with feeble minds, copy his unwavering and stone-hard mind...'. This is a typical response which does not always make a distinction between extremists and other Muslims, but views the attitude of extremists as typical of many Muslims in northern Nigeria. Thus, while the bomber was defined by users as the enemy, the qualities he appeared to portray, such as commitment and unflinching support for Islam, were praised and valued as ideals to be emulated by Christians. Another member once said, for example, that 'they (Muslims) r dedicated @ all times, infact we shouldn't complain but take dat as a challenge, they can do anything 4 their religion and politics' [Muslims are dedicated at all times, in fact we shouldn't complain but take that as a challenge, they can do anything for their religion and politics] (January 28, 2014). Members generally engaged such content and particular events in ways that represented Hausa-Fulani Muslims as a people who take their religion seriously, look out for each other, and are united and unwavering in their pursuit of Hausa-Fulani and Muslim interests.

Yet Hausa-Fulani Muslims and Islam in Nigeria were also explicitly constructed by participants as evil. For example, a video showing one of the Boko Haram leaders, Abubakar Shekau, claiming responsibility for the abduction of over 200 girls in Chibok on April 14–15, 2014 was shared. In it, he threatens Nigerian Christians, as well as Muslims who have social relations with Christians, claiming that Boko Haram

was defending Allah and following Allah's will. Several forum users drew on this video as evidence that violence and inhumanity are enshrined in and sanctioned by the Qur'an, and that when some Muslims are violent they are only being true to their religion. A member, for instance, reacted, 'I now know it... they pretend, but their koran told them to killed anybody that don't follow their ideology' (May 5, 2014).

Such views of Islam are also contested by members who consider such negative sentiments and generalizations to be unacceptable because they lead to intolerance and stifle efforts towards peace. A member, for example, once enjoined, 'we should have respect for other religion. religious tolerance is expected of us!' (June 7, 2014), while another argued that, 'd muslims I kwn re swt n loveable pipo n so also d Islam dai preach 2 me' [the Muslims I know are sweet and lovable people and so also the Islam they preach to me] (July 18, 2014). Most members did not dispute depictions of Hausa-Fulani Muslims in Nigeria as aggressors and Southern Kaduna as victims. However, many did not think this warranted generalizations and demeaning commentary about Islam. While such positive counter-representations of Islam and Muslims existed on the forum, there was generally a more dominant sense of aversion and this was heightened during conflicts, extremist violence and loss of lives in which Muslims are implicated.

Additionally, Muslims and Islam in Nigeria were admired and envied insofar as they were perceived to be privileged and accorded a certain high status in Nigeria, leaving them immune to state laws beyond the reach of law enforcement. For forum members, this explains Muslims' impunity for violence in the country and the unfair treatment that non-Muslims were believed to receive. When, for example, it was shared on the forum that officers of the Nigerian police interrupted a church service to make arrests, members generally agreed with a post stating that 'this cannot happen in a mosque' (January 12, 2014). Other incidences were reported by forum members as indicative of disregard of Christian religious spaces, events, and religious life by government and law enforcement authorities. A typical observation by members was that such could not happen to Muslims. One member observed that if such things happen to Muslims, '...bloodshed will follow', while another stated that



'the whole nation would have reacted' (January 12, 2014). Muslims were constructed as easily offended by comments about Islam; and as feared by authorities because they were prone to register their discontent through violence, and had more control over political power in Nigeria. Members viewed these factors as working together to deny religious freedom to Christians in Nigeria. Members, for example, would argue that interrupting a religious programme to make arrests is a disregard for freedom of worship. For these forum members, religious freedom also meant having the space and freedom to practice one's religion without any interference by the state. This perception appears also to be extended to other forms of association in religious environments. Since Muslims were believed to be privileged and operating religiously beyond the state, they were considered to enjoy religious freedom, and this was admired by members who encouraged each other to be more like Muslims in terms of piety and politics.

### **Representations of Religion**

In addition to the narratives and representations specifically of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, forum members also engaged in two dominant representations of religion. These depictions of religion emerged mostly from heated debates about Nigeria's 2015 general elections and the place of Southern Kaduna interests in state and federal politics. Most frequently in the last quarter of 2014, debate occurred over disagreements about which candidates to support and whether religion should matter in such decisions. The study generally shows that members were more likely to be critical of religion when discussing politics and political candidates than when discussing other events on the forum.

The first key idea about religion on the forum was that religion stalls thinking and evokes unwarranted emotional responses, therefore posing a problem for society and democratization. One member, for example, challenged the way others responded when religion entered conversations on the forum, by noting that 'just the mere mention of religious affiliation then all sense of reasoning goes ablaze. Religion truly is the opium of the masses' (October 14, 2014). This member also challenged the inaccurate representation of some issues, and the uncritical weaving of stories that appear to affirm already held views into already existing grand narratives. Forum

members who advanced this line of thought challenged fixations on religion and the tendency among members to interpret events through religious lenses. They also argued that using religion as the basis for decisions on voting is regressive. They suggested that other values should take precedence because religion detracts from important issues. This position did not seem to be in keeping with the overwhelming invocation of religion on the forum; nor the fact that conversations and activities of members during the period analysed largely revolved around different kinds of ethnic and religious contestations and tensions in Nigeria.

The second representation of religion was that it is an intrinsic part of society. This was often expressed more specifically in relation to politics. For example, while challenging arguments for the separation of religion from politics, a member asked, '[d]id religion not birth politics? How can the two then be apart?' (February 20, 2014). While this member did not ground his claim, he sought extensively—and with the support of other members—to show that there is a deep and inseparable link between religion and politics, and therefore efforts to separate them are futile. Such arguments reveal ambivalence towards Islam, as well as an attraction to the perceived lack of separation between religion and politics in Islam. One user argued that '[w]hat makes Islam politically palatable and fascinating is that it has never attempted ... to divorce religion from politics' (February 20, 2014). These members branded secularist positions on the forum as 'fake liberal' ideas, arguing that liberals had either internalized their oppression or that their suffering had caused fear of religion. The view that religion is intrinsic to society and politics also shaped expressed political decisions whereby some members explicitly declared their intention to support only political candidates of their own religion, partly because this is what they believed Muslims did. They considered the prioritization of religion in political and other decisions to be a mark of true religiosity, citing Muslims as example.

### **Conclusions: Religion, Identity, Ambivalence and the Opportunities of Alternative Spaces**

Relations between the people of Southern Kaduna and Hausa-Fulani from precolonial to postcolonial times have been widely documented in the literature on northern Nigerian conflicts and the grievances of the people are often discussed as causal

factors in these conflicts (Salawu 2010; Suberu 2011; Sulaiman 2012). Emerging reports also attempt to examine and explain Fulani herders' violence. Media reports on this violence in the past five to seven years have shifted from labelling them as attacks by 'unknown gunmen' to identifying the attackers as Fulani herders, and more recently, describing them as conflict between farmers and Fulani herdsmen. This shift could be an indication of growing understanding of the conflicts, the politics of naming, or the different dynamics of the violence. Chom Bagu and Katie Smith (2017) observe that criminals and conflict entrepreneurs who take advantage of Boko Haram violence, insecurity and existing tensions for economic purposes, are responsible for the violence. They argue that these criminals rustle Fulani cattle and carefully orchestrate attacks on rural communities across Nigeria in ways that create tension and suspicion between farmers and pastoralists. However, a report by SB Morgen Intelligence (2017) observed that most of the many outbreaks of deadly violence in the Southern part of Kaduna in recent years were inflicted by Fulani herdsmen. The report also argues that this violence must be understood in the context of broader incidences of attacks on rural communities by herdsmen, and reprisals in northern Nigerian states; as well as the previous history of conflicts between Southern Kaduna and Hausa-Fulani dating back to the 1980s. As with other reports, including that of the Human Rights Watch (2013), the SB Morgen report argues that the violence might have been retribution or revenge by Fulani herdsmen over loss of relatives, cattle and other properties in previous conflicts, and also that perpetrators in recent attacks might have included herders from other west African countries. Yet the frequency and prevalence of these attacks and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators remains a major source of concern (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In the face of mounting local and international pressure, the Kaduna State governor Nasir El-Rufai in 2016 made the highly criticized claim to have tracked down the Fulani herdsmen responsible and paid them off to end the killings and destruction of communities in Southern Kaduna (Vanguard, 2016). These explanations show the complex and evolving character of the violence.

The literature also indicates that many of the grievances and feelings expressed on the online forum existed long before the forum came into existence. Toure

Kazah-Toure (1999), for instance, illustrates how the view of Hausa-Fulani as the oppressor of minorities emerged during colonial times. Thus, the online forum serves as a space where historical and contemporary grievances are aired, interpreted, translated, worked out, and to an extent, transformed without offline limitations. The identities of forum members as marginalized, Southern Kaduna, and/or Christian were not caused by participation in the forum, and members did not seem to embrace these identities through participation. It is more plausible that the forum is a symptom of existing group identities, since people who already embrace these identities gravitate to this and similar forums of like-minded people. However, the forum reinforces these identities, heightens their significance and value; and contributes to their further development and transformation into identity-constructs through narratives.

The narratives of genocide and oppression illustrates this process and the ways grievances are distilled, mobilized and return to find new meanings and expressions. They show that any experience can become a part of, and reinforce, a narrative and identity if it has value and supports the interests that drive and sustain the narrative and identity. This is consistent with Landon Hancock's (2014) findings in Northern Ireland, where historical narratives of old conflicts persist and consistently resurface as a framework for interpreting new ones. They are used in the production of identities informed by fears of extinction, that is, a fear of domination and anxiety that a group's survival is under symbolic, cultural, and physical threat. Hancock argues that fears of extinction work like 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in that they are strengthened and spread through the negative interpretation of provocations and events, leading to further escalations and full-blown conflicts (Hancock 2014: 433). However, unlike in Hancock's case, there is no evidence of conversations on the online forum leading to escalations or full-blown conflicts. Moreover, the examined narratives indicate that current events and provocations give rise to further narratives that are also used to interpret historical events. Thus, while the narratives of genocide emerged specifically in relation to recent violence, past conflicts have been reread to argue that, to an extent, everything had been working towards the ultimate goal of the extinction of Southern Kaduna people.

In their treatment of identities in Nigeria there is a tendency to focus on ethnic or religious identities and mobilization, and to treat other factors as grievances that cause or contribute to conflict. However, some grievances also reflect other forms of identity that are laden with memories and meanings, and evoke emotional responses. The narratives presented in the present article suggest that the self-definition of Southern Kaduna as an oppressed or marginalized people and as a people facing genocide is as important as religious and ethnic identification in this context, and not mutually exclusive. The self-understanding as 'marginalized' seems to have gained the same weight as other labels of self-definition or self-categorization—almost synonymous, for this group, with the unifying 'Southern Kaduna Christian' identity. Thus, 'marginalized' could benefit from being analyzed as a type of identity. Identity, in social identity theory develops through self-categorization, or identification (in identity theory). It is the awareness or knowledge, by an individual or group, of belonging to a social category or group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identity is also formed through social comparison, whereby people similar to the Self are viewed as belonging with the Self (in-group) and others, different to the Self, to an out-group category (Stets & Burke, 2000). This process is observed in the group not only in relation to the categories 'Christian' and 'Southern Kaduna', but with the category 'marginalized' as well. It is also what distinguishes them from the 'oppressor' or 'aggressor', a Hausa-Fulani Muslim outgroup category, and from Christians in other parts of Nigeria who do not have the same experience of oppression or genocide. The emphasis in the forum on the pursuit of unity and collective engagement of shared experiences reflects a self-categorization process whereby special significance is attached to in-group similarities and outgroup differences, emphasized and sometimes exaggerated, to construct the (group) self as unique (Lawler, 2008). Through this process, insignificant differences with the outgroup may be amplified and important similarities downplayed, and differences become imagined as natural or obvious, rather than produced (Lawler, 2008; Ellison, 2013). The existence of a 'marginalized' identity category also holds true when the narrative practices of the online forum are viewed through the lens of identity theory where the Self and Other are identified as 'occupants' of a role or position in society. The meaning attached to

these roles and their performance become incorporated into the way an identity is understood, as a yardstick for behavior (Stets & Burke, 2000: 225–226).

The narratives of attraction and revulsion are a curious response to the Other. The French theorist René Girard (1996) might have highlighted this when he observed that people do not only imitate the behaviours of others, they also mimic their desires. Desiring other people's desires leads to mutual desire for the same thing, hence competition and rivalry. While imitation means, for Girard, the positive reproduction of other people's desires, he uses the term *mimesis* to highlight the downside of rivalry. *Mimesis* can become metaphysical, whereby a person does not merely desire the same object as their mediator, but desires to be their mediator, and this can result in violence (Palaver, 2013). *Mimesis* does reflect some of the dynamics in the narratives of revulsion and attraction. Hausa-Fulani Muslims mediate and shape the preferences and desires of Southern Kaduna Christians expressed online. However, there is no indication that Southern Kaduna Christians desire *the same thing* that Hausa-Fulani desire. What the Hausa-Fulani desire is not known from the content analyzed. Thus, the data indicates more of imitation in terms of a desire to *be like* (rather than *to be*) the Other, and to imitate certain qualities the Other is imagined to possess, such as piety, commitment and superiority.

To be sure, forum users imagined Muslims to enjoy a certain elevated and privileged status, and they desire the same, perhaps seeking to find it in the free, disembodied, and exclusive space offered by the online platform. The digital space could be viewed as offering forum members a sort of freedom: a sense of being beyond the reach of the state and its restrictions, and of being on a plane where they could be as religious as they pleased without fear of confrontation or interference. Thus, if the online rhetorical practices on the forum are to be viewed as religious expressions, practices and productions, then it represents an ideal space for religious freedom. It is not only a space for contesting the status of Islam in Nigeria, but an opportunity to also enjoy similar privileges and envied status. The online space allows forum members a certain amount of immunity too and lets them operate on a higher plane while at the same time contesting the status of Islam or pursuing the same status offline. However, this can only be deemed a mimetic desire if there

were indications that Hausa-Fulani Muslims desire the same thing.<sup>7</sup> Thus, mimesis is applicable only when it can be confirmed that both the imitator and the mediator share the same desire.

The ambivalence of revulsion and attraction on the forum is more consistent with Peter Stallybrass' and Allon White's suggestion that 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire' (1986: 191). In their study of the bourgeois subject, they argue that the bourgeois construct their identity through the act of exclusion of what they considered to be repulsive, dirty, contaminating and low. The low, which is othered and expelled, evokes 'nostalgia, longing and fascination' (Stallybrass and White 1986: 191). Thus, 'the difference of the other becomes a displaced and intensified facet of the same, the object of desire and disgust' (Dollimore, 1991: 247). Postcolonial theorists also recognize this ambivalence in racial and other relations of domination, which suggest a necessary connection and dependence between the savage and the civilized. This is disguised through distinction, as both categories and the meaning attached to them depend on each other for existence (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Young, 1995). Thus, despite the negative representation of Hausa-Fulani Muslim Other on the online forum, the Other returned as an object of longing and fascination.

The representations of religion on the forum reveal a greater likelihood of being critical when engaging religion during conversations and disagreements about politics and suitability of political candidates than when discussing other events and issues. More users were willing to question the religious bases for political decisions, and more open to engaging critical comments on religion and to offering reasoned arguments when talking about political candidates than on any other occasion. This shows that while religion is consistently invoked and serves as a key unifying factor in identity, it is capable of being overridden by political concerns, unless it forms a part of the political question or strategy. Additionally, depictions of ethnic and religious identities were stronger, more violent, and more unanimous when responding to posted media reports about violence or when there were strong feelings of

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<sup>7</sup> This might be determined through a study of Hausa-Fulani social media forums, which has not been attempted here.

marginalization. Thus, online representations of ethnic and religious identities are not fixed but situational and dependent on the intensity of the conflicts that evoke or fuel them.

The idea that Muslims do not separate religion from politics or create a distinction between the religious and the secular is prevalent in Nigeria (Onapajo 2012). Ezra Laguda (2013) argues that while Nigerian Christians historically distinguished between the sacred and the profane, and applied this to religion and politics respectively, Muslims saw their religion as applicable to all spheres of life. Given northern Nigeria's history of Islam, early partisan politics were tied to Islam and religious concerns formed important political agenda (Onapajo 2012). Toyin Falola (2009) notes that Islamic symbols remain effective for political ideology and legitimization in Nigeria. However, Ibrahim Uthman and Lateef Abbas (2014) argue that it is a question of the relationship between Islam and modernity rather than a mere mixing of religion with politics in Islam. They observe that Islam upholds a different vision of modernity and critiques Western ideas of modernity and progress. Thus, while differing and conflicting views exist within Islam about modernity, there is a common vision that diffuses 'Islamic principles and values in both the intellectual and political projects of modernity' (2014: 171).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** John, S F 2018 Genocide, Oppression, Ambivalence: Online Narratives of Identity and Religion in Postcolonial Nigeria. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 14, pp.1–28, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.284>

**Published:** 20 September 2018

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