AKARA AND PAP DEMOCRACY: SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Democracy in Nigeria and its religious landscape are growing fast, with so many challenges of social divisions, doubt, and political breaks. This study examines the socio-religious implications of political disunity in Nigeria using "akara and pap democracy" as a homegrown food metaphor to examine the effective realities of democratic practice. From history, akara (fried bean cake) and pap (corn cereal) are consumed together as a matching pair, one is structurally and textually incomplete without the other. This study argued that sustainable development remains unachievable so long as sectional identities displayed in ethnic, religious, and political spheres continue to displace unified national identity, thereby weakening collective resistance against poor governance and permitting extractive leadership patterns to persist. Although many citizens desire political change and social transformation, the absence of national unity weakens collective resistance against poor governance and allows ineffective leadership patterns to persist. Adopting a qualitative, descriptive research design, the study examines peer-reviewed literature, policy reports, media documentation, and contemporary socio-political developments in Nigeria. The study is grounded in Social Cohesion Theory, emphasizing shared identity, social trust, mutual obligation, and civic solidarity as vital basics for institutional stability. Findings show that while the general public greatly desires economic transformation and accountability, religion which ought to serve as a driver for peacebuilding, social justice, and national integration is usually misused as a tool for democratic positioning and sectional division. The study concludes that sustainable democratic practice and development, requires a change from transactional individuality politics to a cooperative governance model which is determined by intentional interreligious dialogue, ethical leadership, and well-organized civic orientation. The study recommends a conscious unity, cooperation, ethical leadership, religious tolerance, and value orientation, interreligious dialogue as required pathways to achieve sustainable democratic practice in Nigeria. The study concludes that sustainable development in Nigeria can only be achieved only through unity, collective social responsibility, and national interest not fronted in the practice of true democracy.

Keywords: democracy, socio-religious relations, political unity, sustainable development,

Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria is blessed richly with human and natural resources, yet the nation continues to struggle with underdevelopment, poverty, insecurity, and political instability. One major factor responsible for this situation is the absence of national unity among citizens. Democracy is expected to promote equality, participation, justice, accountability, and development. However, in Nigeria, democracy has often produced division rather than unity. Democracy and development are global phenomenon. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's political trajectory has been defined by leadership deficits, institutionalized corruption, ethno-religious rivalry, and violent instability (Achebe, 1983; Ake, 1996). Despite successive transitions between military rule and civilian governance, the promised dividends of democracy remain elusive for the majority of the population. The Nigeria's democratic experience has remained one of the most discussed issues in contemporary African political and religious discourse. Since independence in 1960, the nation has struggled with challenges of leadership, corruption, ethnic rivalry, religious intolerance, political instability, insecurity, and economic hardship. Despite numerous democratic transitions and political reforms, the expected dividends of democracy have remained largely inaccessible to many citizens. Poverty, unemployment, social unrest, and infrastructural decay continue to characterize the socio-political landscape of the country. The problem this paper addresses is the division among citizens, which is a major barrier to development. The metaphor of *"akara and pap democracy*" offers an original, investigative lens to examine this structural disconnect. In Nigerian cooking backgrounds or traditions, *akara* (fried bean cake) and *pap*(fermented corn cereal), form a complementary meal. To say that one relies on the other to achieve balance, sustenance, and completeness. Reordered into political concept, this metaphor reveals the structural interdependence required between political leadership (*akara*) and the population (*pap*), as well as the necessity of social cohesion across various ethno-religious groups. Governance, like *akara* and *pap*, fails to nourish the body politic when its primary components are artificially severed or placed in opposition to one another. According to the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Development Framework, sustainable development cannot happen in an atmosphere characterized by social division, institutional distrust, and religious hostility.

Religion occupies a significant position in Nigerian society. It shapes moral values, social interactions, political behavior, and communal identity. Nigeria is largely divided among Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. While religion has the potential to promote
peace, social justice, and national development, it has also been manipulated by political actors for selfish interests. Religious sentiments have influenced elections, governance, policy decisions, and even violent conflicts. Similarly, ethnicity continues to define political loyalty in Nigeria. Citizens often prioritize ethnic and religious

identities above national identity. Political appointments, voting patterns, and access to public resources are frequently influenced by tribal and religious considerations rather than competence and merit. The problem this paper addresses is not simply just religious sentiments and ethnic differences, the problem is that unity and cooperation is yet to be achieved. This state of affairs has weakened national unity and hindered sustainable development. Sustainable development involves meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encompasses economic growth, social inclusion, political stability, environmental protection, and human development. According to the United Nations, sustainable development cannot thrive in an atmosphere of social division, political instability, and religious intolerance. A lot of persons are yearning for change in terms of unity but, the Nigeria experience presents a contradiction. A situation where the populace mostly complains about wellbeing. The socio-religious implications of political disunity in Nigeria through the lens of "*akara and pap democracy,* evaluates the story of eighty people, who disliked eating akara and pap every morning, while only twenty of them enjoyed it. Consequently, the eighty in their food preferences were always divided, whereas, the united twenty won the votes. This suggests how ethnic and religious divisions weaken democratic governance and frustrate sustainable development practices in Nigeria. Nigeria is richly blessed with human and natural resources, yet the nation continues to struggle with underdevelopment, poverty, insecurity, and political instability Democracy should promote equality, participation, justice, accountability, and development. Howbeit, the analogy displays Nigerian democracy which has often produced division rather than unity. Religious institutions that should promote peace and moral discipline are sometimes drawn into partisan politics. Some religious leaders openly endorse political candidates and encourage followers to vote based on religious identity instead of competence and integrity. As a result, political decisions are increasingly influenced by emotional and sectional interests rather than national development goals.

The inability of citizens to unite against corruption, poor governance, injustice, and economic hardship has further weakened democratic accountability. Many Nigerians complain about bad leadership, yet ethnic and religious loyalties often prevent objective political judgment. This situation has contributed to the persistence of poor leadership and underdevelopment. The problem therefore lies in the disconnect between democracy, religion, and national development in Nigeria. Without social cohesion, religious tolerance, and collective responsibility, sustainable development may remain difficult to achieve. The major objective of this study is to examine the socio-religious implications of political disunity on sustainable development practice in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of "Democracy"

Democracy is conceptually defined as a system of governance wherein sovereign power is vested in the people, exercised either through direct participation or elected

representatives. Diamond (2008) emphasizes that true democracy requires meaningful competition for office, inclusive civic participation, and robust protection of civil liberties. In Nigeria, while democratic structures were formally restored in 1999, democratic practice remains compromised by electoral malpractice, political godfatherism, weak judicial independence, and systemic voter suppression (Ojo, 2007). Democracy simply put, is a system of government in which power belongs to the people either directly or through elected representatives. Abraham Lincoln famously defined democracy as "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Democracy encourages citizen participation, freedom of expression, accountability, equality, justice, and rule of law. According to Larry Diamond, democracy involves meaningful competition for political office, broad political participation, and protection of civil liberties (Diamond, 2008). In Nigeria, democracy officially returned in 1999 after several years of military rule. However, democratic practice in the country continues to face challenges such as corruption, electoral violence, political godfatherism, insecurity, and weak institutions.

The Concept of "Socio-Religious Relations"

Socio-religious relations describe the multi-dimensional interactions between religious systems and societal institutions. In the Nigerian context, religion functions as a dual-edged force: it offers moral frameworks, extensive social welfare networks, and community safety nets, while simultaneously serving as a primary fault line for elite manipulation (Nwachukwu, 2015). When socio-religious relations are governed by tolerance, they foster civic integration; when exploited for partisan gain, they generate polarization (Huntington, 1991; Weber, 1905/2002).

The Concept of "Sustainable Development"

Sustainable development refers to development that meets present socio-economic requirements without compromising the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). As outlined in the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly Goal 16—sustainable development requires peace, institutional justice, reduced inequality, and transparent governance. Political instability and ethno-religious conflict directly impede the realization of these objectives (Okoye, 2018). Moreover, Sustainable development simply put, is the development that meets present needs without destroying the opportunities of future generations. The concept gained global recognition through the Brundtland Report of 1987. Sustainable development involves economic growth, environmental protection, social inclusion, good governance, education, peace, and human wellbeing. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize peace, justice, strong institutions, quality education, poverty reduction, and partnerships as necessary conditions for sustainable development. Political instability, corruption, and social conflict therefore constitute major obstacles to sustainable national growth.

The Concept of "Political Unity"

Political Unity: Political unity refers to collective agreement and cooperation among citizens toward national goals despite differences in ethnicity, religion, language, or political affiliation. Political unity strengthens democracy because it encourages cooperation, accountability, social trust, and national integration. In the Nigerian context, political unity remains weak due to ethnic rivalry, religious intolerance, regionalism, and competition for political power. This has contributed to instability and weakened national development.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cohesion Theory

This study adopts **Social Cohesion Theory** as its foundational framework. Originating in the sociological scholarship of Durkheim (1893/1933), social cohesion denotes the degree of trust, solidarity, and mutual connectedness within a social system. Durkheim posited that societal stability relies on collective consciousness and social solidarity. When social bonds weaken, societies enter a state of isolation characterized by institutional breakdown, moral division, and rampant conflict. Social cohesion states that there should be level of trust, cooperation, solidarity, and unity existing among members of a society. emphasizing shared identity, social inclusion, collective responsibility, and mutual respect as important conditions for peaceful coexistence and national development. Social Cohesion Theory directly illuminates the challenges facing Nigerian democracy. Nigeria's structural fragility is not an inevitable consequence of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, but rather a reflection of decayed social cohesion. When citizens prioritize primordial attachments over national citizenship, political institutions lose public legitimacy. Corrupt leadership persists because elite actors intentionally fracture social trust, preventing the emergence of unified civic coalitions capable of demanding accountability. The theory is relevant to this study because Nigeria's democratic challenges are closely connected to weak social cohesion. Ethnic distrust, religious intolerance, political opposition, and corruption. This has resulted to a weakened sense of collective national identity among citizens. Social cohesion theory therefore, explains why sustainable development becomes difficult in a divided society. Development thrives where there is trust, cooperation, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Where division, hatred, and suspicion dominate, democratic governance and national growth suffer. The "*akara and pap democracy*" metaphor aligns with the expectations of social cohesion theory. Just as akara and pap complement each other to create satisfaction, democracy requires unity and cooperation among citizens for national progress.

The "*akara* and *pap*" Metaphor

The native combination of *akara(*fried bean cake) and *pap(*fermented corn cereal*)* provides a rich conceptual framework for evaluating state-citizen relations in Nigeria. In local cooking practice, *akara* provides basic firmness and protein, while *pap* offers fluid, nourishing temperature control. The failure of Nigerian democracy is

fundamentally a failure of governance support. Democratic governance requires an active, harmonizing placement between the state or leadership (*akara*) and the populace (*pap*). To capture this dysfunction, the study employs "akara and pap democracy" as an indigenous culinary metaphor. Culturally, *akara* (fried bean cake) and *pap* (fermented corn cereal) are consumed as an organic, complementary pair where each balances the texturally incomplete nature of the other. In Nigerian political practice, however, this complementary pairing is artificially severed as Political actors manipulate religious and ethnic fault lines during electoral cycles, forcing citizens to defend elite interests under the guise of protecting their faith or tribe (Ibrahim, 2007; Obasanjo, 1999). Consequently, the electorate becomes structurally divided, demanding democratic dividends in principle, yet validating corrupt leadership in practice based on primordial loyalties.

Socio-Religious Implications of Political Disunity

Ethnic and Religious Division in Contemporary Elections

Political disunity worsens ethno-religious division. Electoral campaigns in Nigeria frequently decentralize into identity mobilization, where political actors utilize hate speech and sectarian propaganda to consolidate voter bases (Kukah, 2011; Richardson, 2004). Religion becomes a mechanism for political exclusion rather than a bridge for moral reconciliation. Recent empirical work on the 2023 presidential election cycles shows how identity opposition continues to shape democratic behavior. Evaluating post-independence voting patterns, Odogwu (2023) reveals that candidate selection and voter turnout remain heavily constrained by regional and religious identity politics. Extending this analysis, Bako and Goma (2026) reveal that ethno-religious division during elections creates a two-fold "we versus them" civic mindset. This psychological division fractures social trust and creates a political development. Nigeria's democracy looks like a table where all groups must contribute for national stability.

The "*akara and pap* Democracy" metaphor further illustrates the irony of Nigerian politics. Many Nigerians desire change and complain about poor leadership, corruption, and economic hardship. Yet during elections, citizens are often divided by ethnic and religious sentiments. One major implication of political disunity in Nigeria is ethnic and religious division. Political competition often increases tension among ethnic and religious groups. Politicians frequently manipulate identity differences to secure support. For example, election campaigns sometimes involve hate speech and propaganda targeting specific ethnic or religious communities. This creates suspicion, hostility, and division among citizens. According to Kukah (2011), religion in Nigeria has become heavily politicized, thereby contributing to social instability. Instead of voting based on competence, integrity, and national interest, political loyalty is frequently shaped by tribe, religion, and personal gain. This situation weakens collective political resistance against bad governance. The same political actors continue to recycle themselves in power because citizens lack unity. The metaphor therefore, exposes the contradiction between public dissatisfaction and political

and reinterpreting aspects of Igbo traditional religion, often incorporating elements such as ancestral veneration, the revitalisation of various deities linked to different natural elements, seasonal festivals, and rites of passage (birth, marriage, death), sometimes adapted to modern contexts to accommodate contemporary life and perspectives (Isiani et al., 2022). Another significant feature is the veneration of Mother Earth, illustrated in the worship of the earth goddess. In traditional Igbo society, the earth goddess (*Ala*) occupies such a central role in the people's beliefs that any modern practice or revival of the pristine Igbo religion without reference to her seems illusory.

Neopaganism in Igbo society can be described as rooted in nature. Followers are convinced of *Ala*'s potency, and many avoid actions that might offend her designs (Onwuatuegwu & Mmadudiri, 2020). Although adherents believe in the transcendence of the sacred, which exists beyond every living creature in spiritual entities such as gods and goddesses, deities, and spirits, they also maintain that the sacred is present in every living being. They often perceive nature as sacred and interconnected with the divine. In their rituals, they utilise natural objects, animals, and living beings to connect with life, nature, and otherworldly entities. Rituals are, therefore, not merely performances but highly transformative events that can influence an individual through the power they are believed to invoke when performed.

There is significantly more involvement of the youth than the elders in Igbo Neopaganism. This can be attributed to factors ranging from their ease of adapting to change to the quest for exploring alternative spiritualities and the prevailing get-rich-quick syndrome within Igbo society, which is championed by the youth. Unlike their forebears, who showed genuine devotion to the gods, many of today's Igbo youth are attracted to Neopaganism due to promises of a brighter future and greater material wealth.

An offshoot of these beliefs is the infamous *Oke-ite* ("significant pot") ritual, which is believed to make someone who engages in it instantly rich. Here, traditional cultural practices of sacrifice and blood rituals, along with their potency, combine with the modern quest for quick wealth among Igbo youths. It is crucial to understand that this is not a traditional or accepted part of mainstream Igbo culture or religion (*Odinani*), but rather a dangerous and often criminal deviation within the current Neopaganism in society. The ritual consists of a charm or concoction prepared in an earthenware pot ("ite") using various ingredients. These ingredients are often reported to include bitter herbs, animal parts (such as dogs, elephants, monkeys, and bats), and, alarmingly, human body parts, sometimes specifically those of virgins or individuals who have not given birth (Nnatuanya, 2022; Mefor, 2025). The purported aim of the *Oke-ite* ritual is to bring sudden and immense wealth to the person who performs it, often without requiring hard work or legitimate means.

The *Oke-ite* ritual has been portrayed as an evil, barbaric, and satanic practice

behavior. Socio-Religious Implications of Political Disunity in Nigeria Ethnic and Religious Polarization: One major implication of political disunity in Nigeria is ethnic and religious polarization. Political competition often increases tension among ethnic and religious groups. Politicians frequently manipulate identity differences to secure support. For example, election campaigns sometimes involve hate speech and propaganda targeting specific ethnic or religious communities. This creates suspicion, hostility, and division among citizens. According to Kukah (2011), religion in Nigeria has become heavily politicized, thereby contributing to social instability.

The consequence is reduced national trust and weakened social cohesion. Citizens become more loyal to ethnic or religious identities than national identity, or get confused what they actually desire. Weak Democratic Institutions: Political disunity also weakens democratic institutions in Nigeria. When citizens are divided, accountability becomes difficult. Corrupt political leaders exploit social divisions to avoid criticism and maintain political control. Electoral malpractice, vote buying, political violence, and judicial manipulation continue partly because citizens lack collective resistance. Ethnic and religious sentiments often prevent objective political judgment. Weak democratic institutions negatively affect governance, economic growth, and social development. Insecurity and Violence: Religious and ethnic conflicts have contributed significantly to insecurity in Nigeria. Violent clashes between communities, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and terrorism have threatened national stability. Religion and ethnicity occupy central positions in Nigerian public life, exerting a profound influence on moral values, social interactions, political behavior, and communal identity (Falola, 1998; Nnoli, 1980).

Groups such as Boko Haram have used religious extremism to justify violence. Farmer-herder conflicts, communal clashes, and separatist agitations further establish the dangers of political disunity. Insecurity discourages investment, destroys infrastructure, increases poverty, and disrupts education and healthcare systems. Poverty and Underdevelopment: Political instability and social division have serious economic implications. Resources that should be used for development are often diverted toward security management and conflict resolution. Corruption and bad governance also contribute to poverty and unemployment. Many Nigerians lack access to quality healthcare, education, electricity, clean water, and infrastructure despite the nation's enormous resources.

The Role of Religion in Promoting Sustainable Development

While religious organizations in Nigeria maintain huge social reach, their moral authority is often compromised by political co-option. In terms of grassroots socio-economic development, faith-based institutions frequently step in to address institutional deficits in public service delivery. As stressed by Iyayi and Obani (2021), local church structures significantly drive community awareness and capacity building

around the SDGs. This critical contribution is further highlighted by Emeaku (2023), who evaluates the general role of religious leadership in promoting or, on the other hand hindering the successful realization of developmental targets in Nigeria. Nevertheless, Religion remains one of the most influential institutions in Nigeria. Churches, mosques, and traditional religious institutions reach millions of people daily. Therefore, religion possesses enormous potential for promoting sustainable development viz:

Religion as a Tool for Peacebuilding: Religious teachings generally promote peace, love, justice, forgiveness, and human dignity. Religious institutions can therefore serve as platforms for conflict resolution and national reconciliation. Interfaith dialogue between Christians, Muslims, and traditional worshippers can strengthen social trust and reduce religious hostility. Religion and Moral Development: Religion contributes to moral discipline by encouraging honesty, accountability, compassion, and social responsibility. Ethical leadership can emerge when religious values are properly applied. A morally conscious society is more likely to resist corruption, injustice, and exploitation. Religion and Social Welfare: Many religious organizations in Nigeria contribute to healthcare, education, poverty alleviation, and humanitarian services. Churches and Islamic organizations operate schools, hospitals, orphanages, and charity programs. These contributions support national development and improve social wellbeing.

Religion and Civic Responsibility: Religious leaders can educate citizens about responsible voting, peaceful coexistence, and democratic participation. Instead of encouraging blind loyalty to political actors, religious institutions should promote justice, integrity, and accountability.

Democracy and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Democracy and sustainable development are closely associated. Good governance creates opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion, and political stability. Nevertheless, sustainable development requires more than elections. It depends on transparent leadership, functional institutions, accountability, social justice, and citizen participation In Nigeria, sustainable development remains unattainable by corruption, insecurity, poor leadership, unemployment, and political instability. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes peace, justice, strong institutions, and partnerships as important foundations for development. Without social cohesion and national unity, achieving these goals becomes difficult. The Nigerian government, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and citizens consequently, share a collective responsibility for national development. Challenges to Social Cohesion in Nigeria can be summarized as follows: Corruption, Unemployment: Youth empowerment through education, entrepreneurship, and job creation, Religious extremism, Lack of Civic Consciousness etc.

Recommendations

Institutionalizing Non-Partisan Civic Education: The Federal Ministry of Education, in coordination with civil society organizations, should revise national civic curricula. Civic education must focus on democratic rights, institutional oversight, cross-cultural literacy, and the dangers of electoral identity manipulation.

Targeted Socio-Economic Empowerment for Youth: To reduce the pool of vulnerable youth recruited for political violence, the state must prioritize vocational technology hubs, agricultural enterprise grants, and accessible credit schemes across all geopolitical zones.

Promotion of National Unity:
Government, religious institutions, schools, and civil society organizations should promote national unity above ethnic and religious divisions. Citizens should be encouraged to see themselves first as Nigerians.

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Civic Education and Political Awareness: Citizens should be educated on democratic values, responsible voting, and accountability. Political decisions should be based on competence, integrity, and national interest rather than ethnic or religious sentiments.

Ethical Leadership: Nigeria needs leaders with integrity, accountability, and commitment to public service. Religious institutions should emphasize moral leadership and social justice.

Citizens Empowerment: Government should invest in education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, and employment opportunities for citizens. Empowered youths are less vulnerable to political manipulation and violence.

Strengthening Democratic Institutions: Independent electoral bodies, judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, and security institutions should be strengthened to ensure justice, accountability, and transparency.

Religious Responsibility: Religious leaders should avoid partisan politics capable of dividing citizens. Religion should promote peace, tolerance, and social responsibility**:** Key socio-religious organizations—including the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA)—should

establish joint civil oversight committees. Rather than endorsing political candidates, these bodies should monitor budget performance, public service delivery, and human rights compliance.

Conclusion

The metaphor of "akara and pap democracy" demonstrates that democratic stability in Nigeria cannot be sustained on a foundation of socio-religious division. Just as *akara* and *pap* require complementary union to provide sustenance, effective democratic governance requires structural integration between political leadership and a unified populace.

Overcoming Nigeria's socio-political crisis requires deliberate action: transitioning from identity-driven politics toward shared civic responsibility, institutional integrity, and national solidarity. Sustainable development will remain unattainable so long as sectional loyalties eclipse the public good. Nigeria can only achieve enduring democratic consolidation when justice, mutual trust, and a unified national vision define its political practice.

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