

SHARIA IN YORÙBÁLAND: NAVIGATING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ETHNIC TENSIONS IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Introduction

Religion has played a critical role in global and national development, offering hope and strength in times of crisis (Boro et al. 2022). While often seen as personal, some states impose religion to promote unity and peace. It remains a central factor in many global conflicts. Secularism has been adopted by some nations to foster harmony. Despite its role in social cohesion, religion has also sparked conflict, particularly in multi-ethnic or

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post-colonial nations. Africa exemplifies this, with countries like Congo, Rwanda, and Nigeria experiencing deadly religious conflicts, displacement, and refugee crises.

Nigeria is a diverse nation with over 450 languages, 374 ethnic groups, and a landmass of 923,768 square kilometers (Thompson and Adams 2021). With a population of about 230 million, it is divided into six geopolitical zones. The major ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani, Yorùbá, and Igbo are collectively called 'Wazobia.' Ten groups comprise 80 percent of the population, with four language groups, Hausa (21 percent), Yoruba (20), Igbo (17), and Fulani (7) dominating. Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) are widely practiced, with the north predominantly Muslim and the south largely Christian. Despite constitutional federalism and secularism, ethnic and religious tensions persist. Nigeria's legal system blends customary, religious, and statutory laws. The extension of Sharia courts beyond the traditionally Islamic north, particularly into Yorùbáland in southwest Nigeria — a region with a sizable Muslim population alongside strong Christian and traditionalist influences — has sparked debates on legal pluralism and religious freedoms.

Numerous studies have explored the intersections of ethnicity and religion (Ukiwo 2005; Nwauche 2008; Paden 2015; Lichtenheld and Ogbudu 2021), as well as ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. However, there has been relatively little scholarly focus on the rising issue of Sharia implementation in Yorùbáland.

This paper examines reactions to the imposition of Sharia courts in Yorùbáland and its impact on intergroup relations, governance, and national development. Major Yorùbá towns include Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun, Osun, and Lagos. The study addresses key research questions: What are the Yorùbá people's laws and customs? What is the nature of North-South relations in Nigeria? Why is the North advocating for Sharia in Yorùbáland, and how is it perceived across regions? What are the implications for intergroup dynamics? This study is significant because it provides a theoretically grounded analysis of contemporary Sharia debates in Yorùbáland, an area often overlooked in existing scholarship on religion and law in Nigeria.

Literature Review: Religion and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Religion is as old as humanity and remains a central force in social organization. Durkheim (1964) defines religion as a unified system of beliefs

and practices related to sacred things that fosters social cohesion, while Giddens (2021) emphasizes its profound influence on culture, including art, music, values, and everyday life. Globally, major religions include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, alongside smaller faith traditions (CIA n.d.). In Africa, Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATR) are dominant. Mbiti (1990) explains that traditional African belief systems are rooted in ancestor veneration, animism, and communal rituals. Christianity, introduced largely through colonial encounters, has grown significantly, with over 650 million adherents across Africa (Pew Research Center 2015). Islam, introduced earlier through Arab traders, is deeply entrenched in North Africa and parts of West and East Africa (Michalopoulos, Naghavi and Prarolo 2018). Scholars such as Chitando and Adogame (2012) and Ellis and ter Haar (2020) highlight religious syncretism — the blending of indigenous beliefs with Christianity or Islam — as a defining feature of African religiosity, shaping politics and social life while serving as both a unifying force and a potential source of conflict.

Religious tension in Africa often emerges from historical, political, and social dynamics, particularly in regions where Christianity and Islam coexist and compete. Ukah (2020) notes that such competition frequently produces insecurity, identity crises, and cultural violence. Several African countries illustrate these dynamics. In the Central African Republic, Furcoi and Essa (2017) document violent clashes between Christian and Muslim militias that resulted in mass killings and nearly one million displaced persons. In Egypt, tensions between the Muslim majority and the Coptic Christian minority have periodically escalated into violence. Meral (2018) recounts how protests by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood following President Morsi's removal led to widespread attacks on Christian communities, including the destruction of churches and property.

Religion has also played a decisive role in Sudan's prolonged conflicts. Tounsel (2025) argues that the civil wars between North and South Sudan were deeply rooted in religious domination, particularly the imposition of Islamic identity and Sharia-based policies by the Khartoum government. Measures such as the nationalization of missionary schools, changes to public holidays, and the enforcement of Islamic laws on non-Muslims intensified grievances. The adoption of Sharia criminal law in 1983 contributed to renewed conflict, with punitive measures such as amputations applied to non-Muslims. Southern resistance framed the struggle as one for a secular state, eventually culminating in South Sudan's secession in 2011. Elsewhere, Ethiopia has experienced recurrent religious violence between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, often exacerbated by political manipulation of religious identities

(U.S. Department of State 2021). Ongoing crises involving Islamist militancy in Somalia and religiously framed conflicts in countries such as Libya and Tanzania further illustrate religion's role in instability across the continent.

Despite its association with conflict, religion can also serve as a powerful instrument for peacebuilding. Chigudu (2024) argues that recognizing the fluid and overlapping nature of religious identities is essential for conflict resolution in Africa. Majemu (2024) similarly contends that interfaith dialogue and religious moderation can counter radicalization and promote sustainable peace. These insights are particularly relevant in contexts such as Nigeria, where extremist groups like Boko Haram exploit religious narratives for political violence, intensifying inter-religious mistrust.

In Nigeria, religion intersects closely with ethnicity and politics. Suberu (2020) observes that the country's ethnic diversity and near parity between Christian and Muslim populations have been repeatedly exploited to fuel political tensions and undermine national development. Edewor and Aluko (2007) argue that federal arrangements, rather than mitigating divisions, often reinforce them by framing access to power and resources through ethnic and religious identities. These divisions are evident in electoral politics. Jabo (2025) notes that the 2023 general elections reflected strong religious and ethnic alignments, with candidates drawing support largely from co-religionists and ethnic bases. Mustapha (2019) warns that such patterns deepen marginalization, distrust, and national fragmentation.

The consequences of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria have been severe. Salawu (2010) estimates that such conflicts have claimed over three million lives since independence. More recent data indicate thousands of incidents of ethnic, religious, and ethno-religious violence between 1999 and 2021, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths (Adenuga et al. 2023). Scholars increasingly argue that religion should function as a tool for unity rather than division. Salisu et al. (2024) recommend prioritizing competence over religious or ethnic considerations in governance, while Salawu (2010) calls for proactive conflict prevention, institutionalized dialogue mechanisms, and poverty reduction to address the structural roots of ethno-religious crises. Despite extensive scholarship on religion and ethnicity in Nigeria, limited attention has been given to the recent resurgence of Sharia-related imposition and controversies in Yorùbáland, which this study seeks to address.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which explains how dominant social groups secure leadership by shaping moral, political, and cultural values that subordinate groups come to accept as legitimate (Gramsci 1991). Hegemony involves the exercise of power not solely through coercion but through a strategic combination of force and consent (Bailey and Clegg 2007). Within the state, it describes relationships among social groups in which dominance is sustained by presenting particular interests and worldviews as natural and universally beneficial (Martin 2023).

Gramsci emphasizes that hegemony relies heavily on consent where there is popular acceptance, ambivalence, or opposition. While coercion may be present, durable authority cannot be maintained through force alone; it requires the cooperation and acceptance of subordinate groups (Gramsci 2000). Consent is produced through ideological processes that align the values of the ruled with those of the ruling class, thereby legitimizing existing power relations. As Ateed and Ozel (2023) note, hegemony operates as a system of ideas through which dominant groups secure compliance and minimize resistance. Thus, power is exercised simultaneously through domination and persuasion, making hegemonic rule appear stable and legitimate while masking the underlying inequalities it sustains.

Gramsci's theory views hegemony as domination maintained primarily through consent rather than overt coercion, making power appear natural and legitimate (Ateed and Ozel 2023). It emphasizes the interplay of culture, politics, and ideas in sustaining authority. This framework is useful for analyzing ethnic relations in Nigeria, where historical and ongoing tensions, especially perceptions of northern Muslim dominance over the Christian South, shape political and socio-economic interactions (Badmus and Lafenwa 2022).

Table 1: Operationalising Gramscian Hegemony in Nigeria’s Sharia and Legal Pluralism Context

Concept	Gramscian Application	Nigerian Sharia Context
Legal pluralism	Competing hegemonies	Sharia framed as moral common sense
Constitutional supremacy	Ideological weakness	Constitution overridden in practice
Gender & rights	Normalised domination	Patriarchy legitimised religiously
State arbitration	Hegemonic compromise	State avoids confrontation

Source: Authors compilation.

Table 1 shows how some concepts can be understood as interconnected sites of hegemonic struggle. Legal pluralism in Nigeria involves the coexistence of statutory, customary, and Islamic law, but from a Gramscian perspective, these systems do not operate on equal footing. Yusuf (1976) argues that, despite these laws in the six northern states, they conflicted with one another. In northern Nigeria, Sharia law functions as a hegemonic moral and legal order rather than merely one legal option among others (Adesoji 2010; Agbiboa 2015). Political and religious elites frame Sharia as an authentic Islamic identity, a moral alternative to corruption, and superior to Western-derived secular law. Through religious institutions and public discourse, this framing generates popular consent, turning Sharia into “common sense” within society. Legal pluralism therefore reflects a struggle between competing hegemonies rather than neutral coexistence.

This dynamic exposes tensions between Sharia and constitutional supremacy. While the Nigerian Constitution is formally supreme, its authority is often weakened by Sharia’s deep cultural legitimacy in civil society. Mosques, scholars, and community leaders cultivate consent that frequently outweighs constitutional abstraction, leading governments to tolerate Sharia despite legal ambiguities. Gramsci (1991) illuminates how Sharia is presented as a moral, authentic or divinely mandated virtue within society, including its implications on gender and human rights. Patriarchal interpretations are normalised as divinely ordained, transforming inequality into moral obligation and limiting resistance. Consent, reinforced by socialisation, sustains these practices, while coercion enforces compliance where consent fails. It also interprets institutional mediation, examining the role of religious leaders, traditional authorities, courts, and the state in sustaining or contesting Sharia, as well as the adoption of consent and resistance, and coercion and accommodation, as forms of selective legal enforcement and state tolerance used to manage conflict.

This article has two interrelated objectives. The primary objective is theoretical: to apply Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explain contemporary debates over Sharia in Yorùbáland. The secondary objective is historical: to situate these debates within the longer trajectory of Yoruba religious pluralism and state–religion relations in Nigeria. The historical discussion therefore serves an explanatory function by illuminating the social conditions under which hegemonic struggles unfold. Overall, Nigeria's Sharia debates represent a crisis of legal hegemony in which law, morality, identity, and power are deeply contested.

Methods

The study adopts a qualitative research design in the collection of data. A qualitative research paradigm places emphasis on understanding through observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of people's words, actions, and records (Ejimabo 2015). This research approach aided the gathering of primary data from observations and interviews. Its importance cannot be overemphasised (Howard 2021).

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy, complemented by snowball sampling. Initial contacts were made through professional, religious, and civil society networks, after which interviewees recommended additional participants with relevant expertise. Selection criteria were based on religious affiliation, professional role, and community influence, in line with the study's theoretical focus on hegemonic authority. A total of 19 interviews were held with at least two respondents from each state. Fifteen were males while four were females. The gap between sexes was a result of the differing level of willingness, as some of the females contacted were reluctant to speak on the subject. Their reasons were either because they did not have sufficient information or that it was a delicate matter on which their husbands or male counterparts could speak. The six states in Yorùbáland were used for the field work excluding some Yoruba speaking people of Kogi and Kwara states. They are Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun, Osun, and Lagos⁶. These states were selected for fieldwork because they represent the Yoruba states in southwest Nigeria. Recruitment was based on knowledge on the subject

6 Olasupo Thompson covered interviews in Ogun State and Lagos State; Tokunbo Dada covered the interviews in Oyo, Ondo and Ekiti; Olugbenga Aina supported with the interview in Ogun and Oyo States; Bamidele Jinadu Covered the interviews in Lagos State; and Suraju-deen Oladele covered the interviews in Osun State.

matter, willingness, and interest to take part. These include adherents from the three major religions in the states including legal professionals.

Table 2: Biography of participants

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Religion	Occupation	Location	Date
1	Alhaji Sheik	71	Male	Islam	Islamic Missioner	Ibadan, Oyo State	11/01/2025
2	Linus	58	Male	Christianity	Business man & Political Party Chieftain	Iyana Ipaja, Lagos	11/02/2025
3	Kunlele	36	Male	Christianity	Farmer	Ondo	18/02/2025
4	Ofana	29	Male	Islam	Civil Servant	Ondo	18/02/2025
5	Brukeme	43	Male	Christianity	Civil Servant	Ekiti	21/01/2025
6	Chi Baba	44	Male	Christianity	Lecturer	Abeokuta, Ogun State	03/02/2025
7	Yinks	43	Fem.	Christianity	Architect/Lecturer	Mowe, Ogun	17/01/2025
8	Alhaji Sura	52	Male	Islam	Business Man	Osogbo, Osun State	19/02/2025
9	Josh	44	Male	Christianity	Teacher	Apapa, Lagos	05/01/2025
10	Baba Kay	51	Male	Christianity	Teacher	Abeokuta, Ogun	12/02/2025
11	Papi	45	Male	Christianity	Law Enforcement Officer	Abeokuta, Ogun	12/02/2025
12	Buki	37	Fem.	Christianity	Lawyer	Ibadan Oyo	11/01/2025
13	Abike	52	Fem.	Christianity	Lawyer	Ekiti	21/01/2025
14	Baba Ropo	71	Male	Christianity	Farmer	Ekiti	21/01/2025
15	Teju	45	Male	Christianity	Business owner	Abeokuta, Ogun	12/02/2025
16	Haji Kay	55	Male	Islam	Real Estate	Epe, Lagos	09/01/2025
17	Yem	70	Fem.	Christianity	Retiree	Ondo	18/02/2025
18	Baba Onifa	78	Male	Traditional	Ifa Priest	Oyo, Oyo State	11/01/2025
19	Baba Akeweje	61	Male	Traditional	Native doctor	Abeokuta	12/02/2025

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The interview questions were sent to the researchers in advance via telephone calls, WhatsApp messages, and during one-on-one interactions. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to reflect freely while ensuring comparability across cases. An interview guide was used by the authors and by a trained research assistant. All interviews conducted by the assistant followed the same guide and protocol to ensure consistency. This assistant helped conduct one-on-one interviews with some participants, while the authors did the same with others. For a few who could not attend an in-person interview, they agreed to speak by phone or via WhatsApp. Each interview lasted between eight and fifteen minutes. The study also gained from the use of participant and nonparticipant observation of religious activities in Nigeria. Apart from the fact that the authors belong to different religions, they were also directly involved in and observed the incidents across the country, and they engaged in discussions with colleagues and friends in both workplace and religious communities.

The primary data collected were complemented by secondary sources, particularly newspaper reports of activities, as well as responses and reactions from different religious bodies and representatives. Additional secondary materials included books, journals, and archival documents obtained from the National Archives in Ibadan.

The primary analysis was conducted by the lead author. The research assistant who participated in data collection provided contextual clarification and assisted in reviewing selected transcripts, but final coding decisions and interpretation were undertaken by the lead author. The authors' positionality as Nigerian scholars familiar with Yoruba religious pluralism informed the interpretive process, enabling contextual sensitivity, while remaining analytically critical. Reflexive attention was given to how this positionality shaped interpretation, particularly in relation to religion, law, and intergroup relations.

Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic approach informed by Gramscian theory. Interview transcripts were manually coded into themes aligned with the research questions, including laws and customs, the nature of North–South relations, motivations behind advocacy for Sharia in Yorùbáland, and the implications for intergroup relations. The study adopted a qualitative interpretive approach rather than a positivist coding model. Interpretation was intersubjective, grounded in iterative reading of the data, theoretical sensitivity to Gramscian concepts, and reflexive engagement with the researcher's positionality. While the analysis does not claim statistical reproducibility, transparency was ensured through clearly defined thematic

categories, systematic coding procedures, and the triangulation of interview data with secondary sources.

The study took place in the months of January and February 2025. Consent was obtained from all participants, and they approved the use of aliases or pseudonyms instead of their real names. The approval for the study was granted by the Department's Ethics Committee with approval number PDS/ICGNS/Ethics Approval/Sharia/2025.Vol.3

Yorùbáland: History, Culture and its People

The Yorùbá people trace their origins to either the Near East or the Niger River region (Lange and Dietrich 2005). Their founding figure, Odu-duwa, is believed to have settled in Ile-Ife, where he encountered an existing Yorùbá-speaking population. Oduduwa's son, Okanbi (or Idekoseroake), had seven descendants, who played significant roles in Yorùbá history (Atanda 1980; Thompson and Nwaorgu 2024). Today, the Yorùbá predominantly reside along the West African coast, especially in Nigeria, with communities also in Benin and Togo. The transatlantic slave trade established Yorùbá-descendant populations in Brazil, Cuba, the Caribbean, and the U.S. With an estimated 30 million speakers, Yorùbá is one of Nigeria's three major languages and has spread to Ghana, Sierra Leone, and the U.K., playing a vital role in cultural preservation.

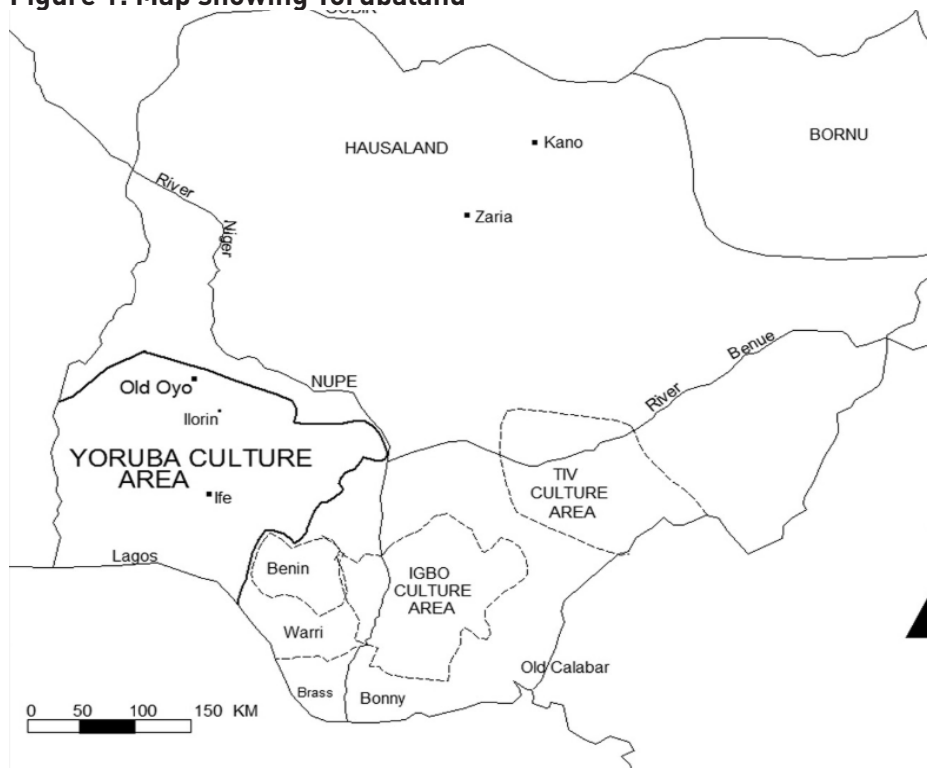
In pre-colonial Yorùbá society, political systems were led by the *Oba* (traditional rulers), who appointed *Baale* (local leaders) to govern smaller communities. The *Oba* were seen as intermediaries between the people and deities. The Yorùbá spiritual system includes over 400 deities (*Orisa*), with worship often assigned to towns or families. Incest was a grave offense, requiring sacrifices to family gods, while attitudes toward suicide depended on its cause — those who died from suffering were honored, while others who took their lives due to shame were cast out without burial⁷. Land was typically owned by families until the colonial era (Ajisafe 1924).

Titles like kingship were not strictly hereditary, despite being reserved for royal lineages. Yorùbá legal systems were sophisticated, with criminal cases referred to deities and civil disputes adjudicated by the *Osugbo* council, palace authorities, or *Baale*. Legal proceedings could take place at any time, reflecting Yorùbá society's adaptable justice system. Divination, especially through *Ifá*, was central to resolving issues and foretelling events. Sorcery

⁷ Oral interview, Baba Akeweje. Native doctor from Abeokuta. Interviewed on February 12, 2025.

and medicine were encouraged professions, often learned through apprenticeships under experienced practitioners (Ajisafe 1924).

Figure 1: Map showing Yorùbáland



Source: Usman and Falola (2019, 2).

The Yorùbá experienced significant cultural shifts with external influences, including Fulani invaders promoting Islam and European missionaries introducing Christianity. Christianity likely arrived in Nigeria in the 15th century, with missionary activities recorded in cities like Benin and Warri. Today, religion and ethnicity are central to Yorùbá identity, shaping their sense of belonging. Despite the dominance of Christianity and Islam, Yorùbá communities have maintained interfaith harmony, with interfaith marriages and families often living peacefully despite religious differences (Adogame 2013; Usman and Falola 2019). The blend of indigenous customary laws and statutory regulations continues to guide Yorùbá communities, sparking debates about integrating Islamic legal frameworks alongside existing traditions.

A History of North-South (Muslim-Christian) Relation

Before colonial rule, Northern and Southern Nigeria existed as separate entities. Islam entered the Northern region in the 9th century through Arab travelers, gaining dominance in the north. Initially led by the Hausa, political power shifted to the Fulani after the 1804 *Jihad*, which expanded their control from Sokoto to Yola, stretching from the Sahara to the Equatorial Belt. Although Islam faced resistance in North-Central and Southeastern Nigeria, it took hold in Yorùbáland in the Southwest.

Islamic social and religious structures, influenced by the Songhay Empire, were integrated into local administrations. Many northern and western rulers adopted Islam to legitimize their rule, unify communities, and enhance administration, military strength, and trade within the broader Islamic world (McLoughlin and Bouchat 2013). Islamic courts led by Sharia scholars provided impartial justice, and Sharia law historically governed the predominantly Muslim northern regions (Lugard 1920).

When the British colonized Nigeria, the Northern Province was marked by fragmented despotisms, characterized by slave raids, peasant exploitation, cruelty, and corruption (Lugard 1920). Fulani horsemen could not penetrate the dense southern forests, where around 7.75 million southerners, described as being of purer Negro stock, excelled in agriculture. Many delta tribes adopted semi-aquatic lifestyles, relying on fishing and oil palm harvesting for trade and sustenance, transported by middlemen to coastal merchants.

Lugard (1920) also depicted the southern region as largely influenced by fetish worship, witchcraft ordeals, human sacrifices, and the killing of twins. He described the Igbo people as primitive and savage, in contrast to the Yorùbá in the west, who had a more organized system of governance under recognized rulers. Coastal areas were inhabited by educated traders and middlemen, some of whom had attended mission schools and controlled access to the interior. Towns like Lagos and Calabar had a few educated professionals, including doctors and barristers. These regional disparities fostered tensions that surfaced during Nigeria's early nationalist movement. Despite their unity in fighting colonial rule, key figures like Obafemi Awolowo, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, Sir Tafawa Balewa, and Nnamdi Azikiwe remained wary of each other's political ambitions (Adebaniwa 2009, 2014; Undiyaundeye 2021). In a 1953 parliamentary session, Ahmadu Bello declared, "the mistake of 1914 has come to light," expressing opposition to further integration of northern and southern Nigeria. Despite later efforts to reassure southern Nigerians,

Bello's sentiments about regional divisions persisted into the country's independence era. As he observed:

The new nation called Nigeria should be the estate of our great-grandfather, Uthman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent the change of power. We use the minorities in the north as willing tools, and the south as conquered territory, and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to rule over their future (Iyekekpolo 2020, 757).

Of the Igbos, Sardauna of Sokoto opines in 1962 that:

The Igbos are the type of people whose desire is mainly to dominate everybody. If they go to a village, they want to monopolize everything in that area. If you'll put them in a labor camp as a laborer, they would try to emerge as head man of that camp (Unaegbu 2023, 55; Bello 1962, 161).

In the 1980s, Muhammadu Buhari supported Nigerien candidate Idi Omaro, a Fulani Muslim, over his country's representative Peter Onu for Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), reportedly prioritizing religion and ethnic identity over national representation. This exemplifies how religion and ethnicity, including the issue of Sharia, have played pivotal roles in Nigeria's history.

In the 1990s, protests erupted in the south over Head of State Ibrahim Babangida's plan to involve Nigeria in the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), reflecting deep-seated mistrust among Nigeria's major ethnic groups. The introduction of Sharia law in 1999 in northern states led to violent conflicts, significant loss of life, and displacement. Similarly, a 2016 proposal to establish Ecclesiastical (Christian) Courts faced strong rejection in the north, highlighting persistent religious tensions.

The election of Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 intensified fears due to his past rhetoric and perceived favoritism in policies and appointments. Allegations of attempts to "northernize" and "Islamize" Nigeria emerged, especially with the controversial Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) initiative (Afolabi et al. 2020) and his perceived silence on violence in north-central Nigeria. Tensions were further heightened when his party, the APC, nominated a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket for the 2023 elections, fueling suspicions of a northern and Islamic agenda.

Reigniting Sharia in Yorùbáland, Southwest Nigeria

Though it has been established that there have been Sharia panels in most mosques operating in Southwest Nigeria, these panels were discreet. The bold move to re-introduce not just the panels but to also spread it across the Yorùbáland of Southwest Nigeria in recent times began when a proposal was made on December 20, 2024, through one AbdulQowiyy Olalekan Imam-Oníde on his X account (formerly twitter) handle (@A_QowiyyBadmus). He wrote:

Since the Southwest states have left Muslims without any trial court of competent jurisdiction on their matters, despite S. 275 (1) of the 1999 CFRN allowing every state to have one, Muslims have resorted to ISPs. Oyo Alaafin is launching its own in January (Imam-Onide 2024).

The post included an invitation from the Supreme Council for Shari'ah in Nigeria, Oyo chapter, for the inauguration of a Sharia Court in Oyo town on January 11, 2025. The event, to be held at the Muslim Community Islamic Centre, Mobolaje Area, Oyo was reported to feature prominent figures, including the Basorun of Oyo land, High Chief Yusuf Olayinka and Alhaji Tajudeen Kamorise, the Aare Musulumi of Oyo land. Also on the invitation is the spiritual father of the day, Alhaji Abdul Lateef Eleyele, who is the Mufasiru of Oyo land and the Amir li-Mumeen of Oyo land, Alhaji Yaqub Mainazara, among others. After public outcry over the incident, a message was released postponing the inauguration. The statement read:

On behalf of the Oyo Muslim indigenes, this is to inform the general public that the inauguration ceremony of the Supreme Council for Shari'ah in Nigeria (Oyo branch) previously scheduled for January 11th, 2025 at the Muslim Community Islamic Center, Oba Adeyemi High School Road, Mobolaje Area, Agbongangan, Oyo, has been suspended until further notice. Islam portrays peace (Sulaimon 2024, n.p.).

The panel will hold another meeting in Ekiti State. The Chief Imam, Kewulere, confirmed the establishment of the committee, which had already resolved a marriage dispute and was handling another case, emphasizing that it was solely formed to address inheritance matters for Muslim members, dismissing any claims of sinister motives, crisis creation, or external influence.

As if the incident was over, it was not too long that a similar incident played out in Ogun State. A flier inscribed:

Alhamdulillah, it's eventually established in Ogun State. A Sharia Court, which Ogun State Muslims have been yearning for, for ages, is finally here. You can now seek redress or have your case adjudicated based on Qur'an and Sunnah by reputable Islamic jurists. The Shari'ah Court, under the able leadership of eminent, reputable and erudite Islamic scholars like Shaykh Dr. Khidri Mustafa – Grand Qadi, Shaykh Abdu-r-Rasheed Mayeleke, Dr. Musa Afis and a host of competent Islamic jurists, is opened is to all Muslims, male and female. The Shariah Court handles cases on the marital dispute; Imamship tussle; organisational conflict; child custodian and guardianship; and inheritance imbroglio (Taiwo, Akinselure and Olumense 2025, n.p.).

A Muslim missionary stated that there should be no opposition to Sharia. He argued that if the Yoruba people were sincere to God and humanity, they would not oppose it, emphasizing that the issue of hand-cutting witnessed in the north does not end in the Sharia court. He explained that cases could be taken to the Sharia Court of Appeal and even to the Supreme Court, which includes Sharia experts, assuring that there was nothing to fear in Sharia law⁸.

The Politics of the Sharia Courts in Yorùbáland

The debate over the establishment and operation of Sharia courts or related Sharia arbitration panels in Yorùbáland highlights the intricate interplay of religion, law, cultural identity, and politics within Nigeria's religiously pluralistic society. This section examines the reactions to efforts aimed at introducing or promoting Sharia courts (and alternative Sharia panels) in Yorùbáland, underscoring how these developments influence interreligious relations and governance in the region.

Historical Antecedents, Fear of Domination/Extremism and Cultural Incompatibility

One of the issues raised in the rejection is the historical antecedents, fear of domination, and cultural incompatibility. These respondents

⁸ Oral interview, Alhaji Sheik. Islamic Missioner from Ibadan Oyo State. Interviewed on January 11, 2025.

argue that the presence of religious courts in a legally pluralistic society may undermine national unity, lead to religious discrimination, and infringe on the rights of non-Muslims. Linus contend that:

It is also clear that some Yorubas have forgotten how Alimi (Fulani man) in cohort or collaboration with Afonja (Yoruba generalissimo), to disintegrate the OYO empire. The notion of using religion in the name of sharia, is a ploy and tactics to penetrate and silently conquer the Omoduduwa land by the same people who conquered Hausa land in 1804. It is time to interrogate the motives behind the rush and quest for something that has been there for a long time immemorial. The Yoruba intelligencers should question the motive for it's said that thunder doesn't strike twice in one spot⁹.

Kunlele stated that the people in North-Central and even Southern Nigeria suffered during Buhari's presidency because of his policies and ethnocentrism, which allowed the Fulani herdsmen to go get with murder so how can the Yorubas now trust anything that has to do with Islam¹⁰. Ofana queries if the Yoruba Muslim could dealer sighting of the Crescent and the Muslim North would oblige. He opined that the northerners see themselves as the better Muslims while the southerner Muslims are inferior so there is no need to trust them¹¹. Brukeme ask:

In the north where they claim they practice Sharia and they have Christian, have they not killed some Christians or punished them for not fasting? So how do we trust them that this Sharia law or court that they want to bring to Yorùbáland will not later be extended to everybody. Give them a step and they will fly¹².

Chi Baba fears that it may be a step by the Fulani to capture Yorùbáland, which he believes is more tolerant than the North, adding that the Yoruba must be vigilant¹³. Yinks stated that what is panning out today is a script prepared from the days of the Muslim-Muslim ticket which is a hidden

9 Except from oral interview, Linus. Business man and Political Party Chieftain from Iyana Ipaja, Lagos. Interviewed on February 11, 2025.

10 Except from oral interview, Kunlele. Farmer from Ondo. Interviewed on February 18, 2025.

11 Excerpt from oral interview, Ofana. Civil Servant from Ondo. Interviewed on February 18, 2025.

12 Except from oral interview, Brukeme. Civil Servant, Ekiti. January 21, 2025.

13 Except from oral interview, Chi baba. Lecturer from Abeokuta, Ogun State. Interviewed on February 3, 2025.

agenda that God is exposing. She continued “they want to Islamise Nigeria but God will not allow them”¹⁴.

On January 31, the Yorùbá Nation Youths, both in Nigeria and the diaspora, warned the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammad Sa’ad Abubakar against promoting Sharia courts in the South-West. Their leaders, Prophet Ayodele Ologunloluwa and Comrade Oyegunle Oluwamayowa Omotoyole, condemned the move as destabilizing, citing Northern states’ poverty, corruption, and terrorism under Sharia law. They argued that Sharia contradicts Yorùbá culture and traditions. The Yorùbá Regional Alliance (YRA) and Yorùbá Nation Religious Council (YONAREC) challenged the proposal in court. Speaking on behalf of YRA and YONAREC, which include Muslim Association of Yorùbá Nation (MAYON); Yorùbá Nation Christian Association (YORNCA); Imo Oodaiye (*Isese* Yorùbáland), among others. Mr. Opeoluwa George Akinola, addressing journalists, described the Yorùbá as historically peace-loving, tolerant, and harmonious people, with families often encompassing Christianity, Islam, and *Isese* traditions, an arrangement that has endured for centuries and should be preserved (Anyanwu 2025). He argued that Sharia practices are incompatible with Yorùbá cultural values and warned that their introduction is politically motivated and risks undermining peaceful coexistence, questioning whether Sharia law could achieve beyond existing penal codes and legal frameworks. Alhaji Suraj noted that the extension of Sharia, in whatever form, into Yorùbáland will not be accepted because its punishments do not align with Yoruba ethos and culture. He added that will be a tall dream for anyone to attempt to Islamise Nigeria, given the heterogeneous nature of the State¹⁵. According to a respondent who had lived in the north before coming down to Yorùbáland, he says:

¹⁴ Excerpt from oral interview, Yinks. Architect/Lecturer from Mowe, Ogun. Interviewed on January 17, 2025.

¹⁵ Excerpt from oral interview, Alhaji Sura. Business Man from Osogbo, Osun State. Interviewed on February 19, 2025.

We are already having negative impact of sharia in the north too, before the sharia law in the north, we were living peacefully with one another i.e we were having religious tolerance but after the introduction of sharia everything went bad. I don't support it ooo, because Yoruba Moslems doesn't understand what our northern Moslems are bringing to them, all those terrorists will begin to have space down here and there will be no peace again ooo. Let me tell you, if not because Southern Governors kicked against Buhari's RUGA's plan, it would have been bad in the south because those terrorists would have caused trouble down south. A 12-year Old boy was amputated in Gombe for phone theft. His hands were chopped off by Sharia Court. Is this suitable for Yorùbáland? No Way!¹⁶

The Chief Imam of Yorùbáland, Sheik Abdulraheem Aduanigba, asserted that Sharia law could never work in the South-West due to religious diversity, the absence of Muslim dominance, cultural practices like Masquerade festivals, alcohol consumption, and thriving entertainment industries. He warned it could disrupt governance, contradict traditions, cause legal inconsistencies, and invite social unrest (Elijah 2025). Similarly, Sheikh Muhammad Habbibullah Adam Abdullah El-Ilory, Director of Markaz, criticized calls for Sharia courts in Yorùbáland, labeling them politically motivated rather than religiously necessary. He argued that Muslims already practice their faith freely and warned against creating unnecessary crises (Elijah 2025). He asked, "Are we already practising Shari'a or not? We are. So why demand it now? It could create a crisis when no one is stopping us from living according to Islamic principles," (Abdulkareem 2025, n.p.). Baba Kay says:

I think external influence is responsible for the noise around sharia in the southwest. It is apparent the people themselves are vehemently against it including practicing Muslims. The Yoruba people by nature are not given to religious extremism, they're very Liberal when it comes to religion¹⁷.

Some groups outside southwest Nigeria also rejected the sharia in Yorùbáland, even when they are not in south-west Nigeria. For example, some Okun people of Kogi State have distanced themselves from threats of *Jihad* against Yorubas following the rejection of Sharia Law in South-West Nigeria. Ambassador Akenson Rotimi, President General of the Okun Development

¹⁶ Excerpt from oral interview, Josh. Teacher from Apapa, Lagos. Interviewed on January 5, 2025.

¹⁷ Excerpt from oral interview, Baba Kay. Teacher from Abeokuta, Ogun. Interviewed on February 12, 2025.

Association (ODA), affirmed that the Okun people, predominantly Yoruba, identify as “Yoruba Ponbele” and are deeply rooted in Yoruba history, language, customs, and cultural expressions. He called for a reversal of historical injustices dating back to 1903 and proposed a referendum to redefine their political and cultural identity and also emphasized building alliances with groups that share similar heritage and developmental aspirations (National Concord 2025).

Constitutional Inconsistencies and Fundamental Human Rights

The Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion (Section 38) and a secular state (Section 10), while allowing Sharia courts in states with significant Muslim populations. In December 2024, a group in Ibadan proposed a Sharia panel, sparking public concern. Ahmed Raji (SAN, the Senior Advocate of Nigeria) clarified that it was not a court but a voluntary mediation panel for consenting Muslims, with no punitive measures or binding authority without mutual agreement. Proponents argue that Sharia panels provide accessible justice aligned with Islamic faith. However, debates continue over their alignment with constitutional provisions and human rights. Mallam AbulGaniy Ezra, Osun State Coordinator of the Supreme Council of Sharia in Nigeria (SCN), stated plans to persuade Governor Ademola Adeleke to elevate the state’s Sharia panel to a full-fledged court. He emphasized that both Sharia and customary courts are constitutional under Section 278. Imam Haroun Muhammad Eze, Deputy National Legal Adviser of the NSCIA, also advocated for Sharia Arbitration Panels in Ekiti, Oyo, and other South-West states, citing Section 275 of the 1999 Constitution, which allows for Sharia Courts of Appeal similar to Customary Courts of Appeal. As the NSCIA stated:

The NSCIA strongly supports the establishment of Independent Shariah Arbitration Panel in Ekiti and Oyo States for the purpose so intended, especially where the Muslims in the states have been denied their constitutional right to a Shariah Court of Appeal in all the states of South-Western Nigeria. The Council cannot find any legal justification for the unnecessary alarm and unwarranted resistance. All the states in the North have Shariah Courts, and some, in addition, have Customary Courts (NSCIA 2025, 1).

Opponents argue against Sharia courts using constitutional provisions. Governor Dapo Abiodun of Ogun State rejected their establishment, stating only legally recognized courts can handle disputes, and any unautho-

alized Sharia entity must dissolve (Taiwo, Akinselure, and Olumense 2025). Papi says Sharia is against women, children and human rights as they cut hands, legs, etc for ordinary common crimes and yet they have bigger crimes in the north¹⁸. Another legal personality opined that Sharia is a sort of customary law which is in southern Nigeria because of the mixed religions as compared to the north where there is a monolithic religion¹⁹. He furthered that they are going about it the wrong way. As a respondent contends that though the constitution is clear on fundamental human rights and the place of secularism, in Nigeria, bringing in Sharia is an anathema because the constitution is clear that it can only be applicable to the northern part of Nigeria just like penal code²⁰. Ekiti's Attorney General, Dayo Apata, also noted the state's legal structure doesn't recognize Sharia courts. Traditional leaders like the Ewi of Ado Ekiti, Oba Adeyemo Adejugbe, supported the ban. However, the Oluwo of Iwo and supporters from Kogi advocated for Sharia law, citing religious freedom and Muslim rights. Some took a harsher stance, threatening opposition and calling for political action in the 2027 elections ("Kogi jihadist threatens..." 2025). Aside, a former University Professor, Ishaq Oloyede advised that although some panels in southwest states have handled Muslim cases, the establishment of a dedicated court and legal framework should be supported by all. He emphasized that Muslims in the south have long suffered from being governed by customary or civil courts, while their counterparts in the north benefit from the application of the Sharia law (Sulaimon 2025).

Socio-Economic Implications

The Aare Ona Kakanfo of Yorùbáland, Gani Adams, expressed concerns that the introduction of Sharia law in Oyo State would create significant challenges. Although he stated he had no objection to Sharia law itself, Adams noted that its implementation is more feasible in the North and even faces limited enforcement in the Christian-majority Middle Belt. He emphasized that the South-West adheres to a modern constitution that upholds religious coexistence and unity (Lawal 2024). On January 27, 2025, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Yoruba socio-political group Afenifere firmly rejected the introduction of Sharia law in Yorùbáland based on the secularity

¹⁸ Excerpt from oral interview, Papi. Law Enforcement Officer from Abeokuta State, Ogun. Interviewed on February 12, 2025.

¹⁹ Excerpt from oral interview, Buki. Lawyer from Ibadan Oyo. Interviewed on January 11, 2025.

²⁰ Excerpt from oral interview, Abike. Lawyer from Ekiti. Interviewed on January 21, 2025.

and modernisation as well a religious tolerance celebrated in Yorùbáland (Taiwo, Akinselure, and Olumense 2025). Rem denounced it, arguing that it would be akin to returning to the dark ages and would negatively impact Christians and the development of the church. Similarly, Baba Ropo opposed the move, stating that it contradicts Yoruba culture, laws, and traditions. He highlighted that punitive measures such as stoning and amputations are entirely incompatible with the values of the Yoruba people²¹. Others who took turns to oppose the creation was the Afenifere, the pan-Yoruba socio-political organisation. Its Organizing Secretary, Abagun Kole Omololu, said importing religious law into the Yoruba culture would not be tolerated, stating that the focus of the South-west region was development. In his words:

What Yoruba wants is not religious bigotry, we are too closely knit as a race. Religion is the last on the pedestal of our priorities. Ecclesiastical or shari'a law will not make us Dubai or Singapore. My grandfather, who died in 1957, was a Babalawo (herbalist), and yet Baba Egbe (elder) in the church. The concoction he prepared against smallpox is still at the back of my father's house. Yet, my dad was a chairman of a church too. Because we are uniquely homogeneous as a race, what binds us together is our tradition and not religion. Hardly can you find any family in Yorùbáland that does not co-habit as traditional believers, Muslims and Christians. Introducing religious law into our family will encroach into our traditional family setting (Akinselure et al. 2025, n.p.).

Professor Banji Akintoye, a prominent leader of the Oduduwa nation, criticized Fulani herdsmen's attacks on Yoruba Muslims and non-Muslims, blaming the Sultan of Sokoto's silence for their rejection of his authority. He asserted that Sharia court attempts in Yorùbáland have failed due to Yoruba religious tolerance and urged the Fulani to abandon dominance efforts (Eric 2025). Akintoye further advised that rather than seeking dominance over Nigeria, the Fulani should focus on solving their internal issues, such as the significant number of their population that still practices traditional spirituality instead of Islam. He also urged the Fulani to abandon their "born-to-rule" mindset and adopt a more respectful and cooperative stance toward fostering national unity (Eric 2025). Teju avers that "it is not responsible for the North to use style to introduce Sharia in Yorùbáland while they reject beer in their own land"²². Haji Kay stated that what is being proposed amounts

21 Except from oral interview, Baba Ropo. Farmer from Ekiti. Interviewed on January 21, 2025.

22 Except from oral interview, Teju. Business owner from Abeokuta, Ogun. Interviewed on February 12, 2025.

to political sharia, which he believes would only be applicable to the poor in Yorùbáland; therefore, he argued that the idea should be rejected²³. Yem argued that Sharia law would be incompatible with Yoruba society, which thrives on businesses not accepted by Islam, such as prostitution and alcohol production, particularly in Ogun and Lagos. He warned that implementing Sharia could deter tourists, negatively impacting revenue in commercial hubs like Ikeja, Lekki, and Agbara²⁴.

Implications for North-South, Inter-Group Relations and National Development

The Sharia court imbroglio has significant implications for North-South relations, inter-group dynamics between the two regions, and national development overall. For North-South relations, it undoubtedly leads to increased religious tensions. The move exacerbates historical religious tensions between the predominantly Muslim North and the religiously pluralistic South, deepening suspicions of an Islamisation agenda. The issue of the Islamisation agenda has been well enunciated by many scholars and the fear in recent times seems not only to be brewing but also precipitating and reaching a toxic and pulsating level. Also, it accelerates political frictions, as it could fuel regional distrust and further widen the existing North-South divide, ultimately affecting political alliances and governance stability.

The second aspect concerns its implications for inter-group relations. There is no doubt that the issue will create ethnic, identity, and religious polarization within the Yoruba communities, particularly between Muslim and non-Muslims Yorubas. Already, these groups, despite sharing the same ethnic identity, sharply divided during the 2023 general elections. As a result, the Yoruba identity may be threatened. The Sharia issue could reshape Yoruba identity by challenging the region's long-standing reputation for religious tolerance and syncretism, values the Yoruba have historically claimed as defining features of their culture. Over the years, fears of an Islamisation agenda have persisted, and the recent push to introduce Sharia in the southwest is now amplifying those concerns. Additionally, it is a potential recipe for conflict and violence. Already, there have been violent conflicts among the Christian,

23 Except from oral interview with Haji Kay. Real estate actor from Epe, Lagos. Interviewed on January 9, 2025.

24 Excerpt from oral interview with Yem. Retiree from Ondo. Interviewed on February 18, 2025.

Muslims, and African Traditional Religion adherents in the south-west and even in some north-central areas particularly Ilorin; the recent issue will be one of those issues. Thus, there is a strong possibility of opposition from traditionalists and Christians, which could lead to communal conflicts or legal battles over jurisdiction.

Thirdly, it threatens national development and cohesion. The Nigerian State has oscillated between weakness and fragility. There is no doubt that such incursions and renewed push for Sharia, in whatever guise, may fuel tensions, war, and disintegration of a country already regarded as standing on the brink (Campbell 2011; Thompson, Afolabi, and AbdulBaki 2019). An *Ifa* Priest said it will cause conflict in Yorùbáland²⁵. When the Islamic missionary was asked if the introduction can cause conflict, he replied:

Yes, it can lead to crisis. And the root of the matter is the sore relationship between the Muslims and the Christians which shouldn't be there. We are brothers and we should recognise that and live in peace. The Christian can put up their own idea of court/laws and watch if Muslims will go against it²⁶.

Religious tensions will deter investments and disrupt economic collaborations, not only between the North and the South but also among foreign investors. Notably, the North-South crises in 2021 led to the North boycotting the shipment of foodstuffs to the South. There is no doubt that such a move may not only lead to hunger and starvation but could also result in a high mortality rate, especially among vulnerable populations such as women, children, and the elderly. In fact, the Yoruba Regional Alliance (YRA) protest in Ekiti State was kept under control by police intervention, preventing any potential chaos or violence. Finally, it may affect governance and stability. This is because increased regional tensions may distract the state from pressing national issues, diverting government focus from security, infrastructure, and economic reforms.

25 Except from oral interview, Baba Onifa. *Ifa* priest from Oyo, Oyo State. Interviewed on January 11, 2025.

26 Except from oral interview, Alhaji Sheik. Islamic Missioner from Ibadan Oyo State. Interviewed on January 11, 2025.

Of Hegemons and Hegemony: Discourse on Debating Religion in a Multiethnic State

The findings reveal that, historically, the practice of African Traditional religions before the introduction of Islam and Christianity — through the Fulani and missionaries, respectively — produced a pluralist society based on tolerance, which now functions as a counter-hegemonic resource against the expansion of Sharia. Despite the dominance of these two religions, Yoruba communities have generally coexisted peacefully, with intermarriage and mutual tolerance being common, although occasional conflicts do occur and are typically manageable. Bouchat (2013) noted that many Muslim, Christian, and animist Yoruba live peacefully, not only in the same cities but also in the same households. Peel (2016) emphasized that the Yoruba take pride in their deeply rooted culture of religious tolerance, shaped by historical and cultural experiences. Unlike Northern Nigeria, where extremist ideologies like Islamic fundamentalism and Boko Haram have taken hold, such movements lack fertile ground in Yoruba society. In 2025, Bola Tinubu, a Muslim President, attended the Eyo festival in Lagos state. This a sign of tolerance as a way of managing the pluralistic society in Yorùbáland (State House 2025)

The findings also reveal that the North-South relationship was interdependent prior to colonial rule. The amalgamation of these culturally distinct regions created underlying animosities. Although they collaborated to end colonial rule, post-independence leaders harbored mutual fears and distrust, which persist in public policies, laws, and on social issues today. Kukah (2013) asserted that the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria is intricately linked to the state's history, and the colonial state laid the groundwork for many of the ongoing tensions.

Findings also show the controversy surrounding the introduction of Sharia panels and courts in parts of Yorùbáland, beginning with Oyo State and later extending to Ekiti and other areas. While proponents, primarily Muslims, advocated for these courts as a means to address perceived injustices in civil courts and uphold cherished religious practices, the broader Yoruba community strongly condemned the move. Olaniyi (2011) suggests that the reintroduction of Sharia aimed to address policing challenges. However, the rejection of Sharia courts stemmed from several factors, including historical antecedents, cultural incompatibility, constitutional and legal debates, socio-economic issues, and political and sectarian concerns. Historically, references were made to the Fulani conquest of the Oyo Empire, particularly the role of Afonja, whose actions symbolized the modern perception of Muslims

inviting external influences to reintroduce Sharia. This historical event also marked the Fulani's entry into Ilorin and the spread of Islam into the Oyo Empire. Any wonder Bailey and Clegg (2007) contends that it could either be a forceful way or consent. While the Afonja debacle was a forceful way, there is no doubt that the people view the introduction of Sharia courts as a more subtle strategy, which explains their fears.

Additionally, the cultural differences between northern Nigeria, where Islam dominates, and Yorùbáland, where three religions coexist, raised questions about the compatibility of Sharia with Yoruba traditions and values. The coexistence of multiple religious groups in Yorùbáland makes Sharia courts a sensitive issue. Some view their introduction as potentially fostering inclusivity, while others see it as deepening religious divisions. The debate also centers on Nigeria's constitutional provisions on religious freedom and secularity, highlighting legal tensions over the establishment of Sharia courts. While Sharia panels operate within hegemonic negotiation, not outside the state; the silence and tolerance of the State over the years especially under both the late President Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu who are both Muslims further exemplifies this. The fears of state silence or favouritism toward Islam — and by extension, Sharia — over Christianity have shown in utterances and countenances of both leaders. Although Buhari is often perceived as being extreme, Tinubu is viewed as relatively more liberal (Owonikoko 2025).

Socio-economic concerns also shape opposition to Sharia law in Yorùbáland, with critics warning that its expansion could undermine urban life, tourism, entertainment, and alcohol-related businesses that are central to the region's economy. Although Nigeria operates a plural legal system in which customary and Islamic courts are legally recognised, their authority remains constitutionally subordinate to the 1999 Constitution. In principle, any customary or Sharia ruling that violates fundamental rights, particularly gender equality, should be nullified by superior courts. In practice, however, state institutions often respond cautiously or remain silent. Federal authorities and appellate courts have been reluctant to decisively challenge controversial Sharia or customary rulings due to fears of political backlash, regional instability, and accusations of religious or cultural intolerance. This pattern reflects a hegemonic compromise rather than legal neutrality. This dynamic is illustrated in *Yahaya Sharif-Aminu v. Attorney General*, where the Nigerian Court of Appeal upheld the constitutional validity of a state Sharia blasphemy offence involving a singer sentenced to death for allegedly insulting Prophet Muhammad via a WhatsApp song. While the High Court quashed the conviction on procedural grounds, the Court of Appeal held that Section

10 of the Constitution prohibits the adoption of a state religion but does not invalidate Sharia laws applicable to Muslims, ordering a retrial. A dissenting judge, however, found the offence unconstitutional and favoured acquittal (Global Freedom of Expression n.d.). Such legal outcomes have reinforced Nigeria's patriarchal order, where women's rights are frequently compromised (Makama 2013). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, customary and Sharia justice often sustains male dominance in marriage, inheritance, divorce, and punishment (Ogbe 2020; Bajaj 2024). From a Gramscian perspective, these inequalities persist through hegemonic consent, with state inaction subordinating constitutional principles to political stability.

There are also security concerns, with fears that Sharia courts could create a platform for extremist elements, heightening religious tensions and risks in the region, as well as fear of ethnic domination through religion. Political and sectarian motivations also play a role, with some stakeholders perceiving the push for Sharia courts as politically driven rather than religiously necessary, potentially influenced by Northern Nigeria. Notably, concerns persist about the political and socio-economic influence of the Muslim North and its perceived efforts to assert control over the Christian South (Badmus and Lafenwa 2022). This has led to strong opposition from traditional rulers, religious leaders, legal experts, and civil society groups, who fear the erosion of Yoruba cultural identity, religious extremism, and the potential for conflict. Additionally, regional and ethnic identity concerns fuel the debate, with some framing it as part of a broader struggle for Yoruba political autonomy and cultural preservation.

The Sharia court controversy has significant implications for Nigeria's North-South relations, inter-group dynamics, and national development. It heightens religious tensions between the predominantly Muslim North and the religiously diverse South, fueling suspicions of an Islamization agenda. Ejiofor (2021) had argued that the consequence of these suspicions is the rejection of governmental policy initiatives geared toward resolving the conflicts. This could deepen distrust, escalate political friction, and widen regional divides, destabilizing governance and political alliances. In Yoruba communities, the controversy risks polarizing Muslim and non-Muslim groups, threatening historical religious tolerance and syncretism. Communal conflicts and legal disputes may arise, as seen in past clashes in the South-West and Ilorin, with opposition from traditionalists and Christians. As Lamidi and Raji (2025) argue, unlike Nigeria's conflict-prone North, Southwestern Nigeria maintains religious harmony through inclusive Yoruba cultural practices that promote interfaith coexistence. The controversy could also undermine Nigeria's secular, federal structure, already strained by state

fragility and economic instability. Heightened regional tensions could deter foreign investments, disrupt food supply chains, and increase mortality rates among vulnerable populations, similar to the 2021 North-South crisis. Moreover, these tensions may distract the government from addressing critical national issues, such as security, infrastructure development, and economic reforms, further jeopardizing national stability and development.

Conclusion

The push for Sharia courts in Yorùbáland transcends legal discourse; it is a litmus test for Nigeria's secular democracy, federal balance, and fragile inter-group relations. While Muslim communities in the Southwest are entitled to religious adjudication within constitutional limits, the manner and timing of Sharia's reintroduction have amplified historical grievances, stoked suspicions of northern dominance, and risked undermining the region's long-standing culture of religious tolerance. The controversy threatens to deepen North-South divides, disrupt socio-economic stability, and erode public trust in governance. Mitigating these risks requires a deliberate, transparent, and participatory approach rooted in genuine federalism, constitutional safeguards, and sustained interfaith engagement to ensure that religious diversity strengthens rather than fractures Nigeria's unity.

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ABSTRACT

The reintroduction of Sharia courts in Yorùbáland has rekindled debates on religious pluralism, ethnic relations, and constitutionalism in Nigeria's multi-ethnic democracy. This study examines the historical, legal, socio-political, and cultural dimensions of the Sharia controversy in the Southwest, assessing its implications for inter-group harmony, governance, and national unity. Anchored on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the research employs a qualitative design, drawing on interviews with 19 participants across the six Yorùbá states, supported by archival records, media reports, and observations. Findings reveal that while proponents frame Sharia courts as a constitutional right for Muslim communities, opponents perceive them as instruments of cultural domination, religious extremism, and political manipulation. The study underscores tensions between Nigeria's secular constitution and its plural legal system, highlighting fears of Islamisation, cultural incompatibility, and socio-economic disruption. It recommends constitutional clarity, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive federalism to balance religious rights with national cohesion.

KEYWORDS

Ethnicity. Religion. Peacebuilding. Conflict. Islamisation. Nigeria. Yoruba. Sharia.

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