

FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INCLUSIVE RELIGIOUS AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

By

Oyedapo, Philip Olugbemiga

Christian Theological Seminary, Ibadan, Oyo State.

08034029680

gbengaoyedapo@gmail.com (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0177-6244>)

Abstract

This study explored the potential of inclusive religious and educational practices for fostering intercultural understanding and sustainable development in Nigeria. Education and religion play a significant role in shaping individual and collective values, beliefs, and practices that are crucial for peaceful coexistence in today's globalized world. Intercultural understanding implies the ability to recognize, appreciate, and navigate cultural differences and similarities effectively. The study employed qualitative research approach engaging the instruments of focus group discussion and case studies of four educational institutions and four religious institutions where inclusive practices are practiced and observed. The study was situated in Cultural Communication Theory while thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, and themes related to intercultural understanding and sustainable development. Findings show that inclusive religious and educational practices that value and respect diverse cultural backgrounds are essential for promoting intercultural understanding, critical thinking, and sustainable development. The study concludes that sustainable development is feasible through inclusive religious and educational practices for promoting social cohesion, global citizenship, environmental stewardship, peace and security. The study, therefore, recommends a more nuanced understanding of cultures, equity, and inclusivity in religious and educational practices based on culturally appropriate mechanisms to foster sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Intercultural religious practices, Sustainable development

Introduction

Intercultural understanding encompasses both knowledge of cultural differences and affective components, as well as behavioral skills for navigating intercultural situations. Intercultural knowledge fosters understanding, awareness, and appreciation of different cultures including one's own, and promotes sustainable social interaction across cultural boundaries. In the light of intercultural understanding, it is imperative to know how one's own cultural background influences perceptions, behaviours, and style of communication. Intercultural understanding involves cultural awareness, cultural responsiveness, courtesies, and cultural

sensitivity to foster sustainable development. Inclusive religious and educational practices are versatile factors for promoting understanding, especially in a multicultural setting where adaptability is *sine qua non*. Thus, the indispensability of intercultural understanding in the practice of religion and in educational curriculum makes it a principal factor for fostering societal transformation and sustainability of growth, peace, and security.

Intercultural education and skills make intercultural knowledge and understanding robust and applicable. Culture involves beliefs, traditions, customs, and language and all have to be understood to make intercultural communication effective (Oyenuga & Akwen, 2025). Social structures including religion and education, based on equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) always guarantee intercultural understanding that culminate in human capital development, peacebuilding, epistemic justice, and sustainable development. Exposure to other cultures with due empathy and respect is descriptive of good social attitude and behaviour that could foster receptivity, tolerance, cooperative efforts and social cohesion (Oyedapo & Alade, 2022; Oladipo, 2022).

One way to promote culturally relevant, responsive, and sustainable assessment of intercultural competence and responsiveness is to refocus attention on the educational design of curriculum that aligns with the culture and represents dominant culture, values, and funds of knowledge intentionally accumulated, culturally developed, and applied for harmonious living within intercultural settings (Oluwadele, Adediran, & Olaogun, 2025). To this purpose, the dynamics of culture should be understood with openness, humility, and competence.

The social imperative of intercultural communication

Cultural Communication Theory draws upon key concepts from anthropology, psychology, sociology, religion, and educational studies to understand how culture shapes intercultural processes and understanding. The theory emphasizes individualism in relation to restraint, power dynamics, masculinity in relation to femininity for analyzing how intercultural communication shapes understanding and sustainable development through communal interactions possibly from religious and educational practices. Cultural communication theory in this study is a synthesis of cultural dimensions theory, high-context versus low-context cultures, face negotiation theory, and accommodation theory. This theory highlights dynamics exchange of information, ideas, and meanings within and across diverse cultural group involving the interplay of verbal and non-verbal cues, language gestures, art and music, and other symbolic expressions. Culture profoundly shapes individual perception, interpretation, and shared values (Durko, & Martens 2021). Cultural values ingrained in religious and educational practices often have long-term impression on the community since both religion and education are strong social institutions upon which the society depend for both rituals and knowledge (Otuniyi, & Otuniyi, 2022); Berkane, 2025). Cultural competence is often the starting point of diversity, equity, and inclusivity. Ability to use knowledge and have a nuanced understanding of different cultures to interact effectively within cultural settings enhance unity and cooperation in the community (Bernett, 2008; Thomas & Inkson, 2017); Sharma, B. 2018). Both religious and educational leaders and stakeholders have to develop and deploy skills that affirm that they actually value cultural diversity.

Fostering global citizenship

Culture encompasses customs, religion, beliefs, language, rituals, art and music, attitudes and behaviour, and all of these are expressed in form of values, practices, roles, courtesies, thoughts, relationship, roles, educational and religious practices. Since culture is learned and shared, it is a symbolic and integrative tool which requires diffusion of cultural ethnocentrism into cultural relativism to allow for intercultural competence through intercultural communication (Moderood, 2021; Moosung, 2024). Intercultural competence enhances individual ability to understand and respect values, attitudes beliefs and mores that differ across cultures for planning, implementing, and evaluating religious and educational practices that are inclusive and equitable. Both religion and education are social institutions that require cultural competence and cultural humility beyond simply being culturally sensitive.

Fostering global citizenship is a function of intercultural understanding which is crucial in today's interconnected world. Effective intercultural understanding enhances peace, security, stability, and sustainable development by facilitating positive relationships, social justice, and human dignity. When cultural awareness and empathy are robust, the dynamics between different cultures would shape social relationship and bring global impact and sustainability of institutional structures. For instance, there are over 250 tribes in Nigeria with diverse backgrounds, hence, the need to intensify efforts on intercultural education to foster social relations, and tolerance thorough power dynamics, stakeholder engagement that are beneficial and equitable to all the tribes. Cultural anthropology is significant in intercultural understanding since it involves social structures, patterns, and human behaviour across different societies. Symbolic, representational, and ideological dimensions of culture are imperative for having nuanced understanding of culture. Similarly, the relationship between language and culture, including language acquisition, and language variation are essential ingredients for adequate intercultural communication (Neuliep, 2012; Berkaine, 2025). Intercultural enhances mediating, linking, and bridging between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds to reduce conflicts.

Criticality of language to global knowledge formation

Language is critical to intercultural understanding and competence. Language is essential for cultural brokerage to reduce conflict or facilitate positive change. Language plays a pivotal role as a catalyst for fostering intercultural understanding among people of different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural understanding is an imperative addition to global knowledge formation to avoid culture shock. Intercultural understanding enhances development of diverse frames of perspectives and critical reflection as a shift from ethnocentric positionality (Petersdotter, Niechoff & Freund, 2017; & Legget, 2020). This position on intercultural exchange of ideas is ideal for the development of intercultural communication, intercultural education, and cultural competence, enhancing broader worldview and perceptive as observed in a study where the outcome revealed a shift in orientation and disposition of students who study abroad and participated in off-campus experiential activity was better than students who were in a closed, local system (Berry & Robinson, 2012; Chua, Morris & Mor, 2012;; Crotty, & Brett,2012; Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012; Howard & Gulawani, 2014).

One aim of the intercultural understandings elective course is for students to be provided with a different experience of their own through cultural immersion in other contexts to afford them experiential learning which eventually contributes to cultural engagement, cultural competence and societal transformation (Legget, 2020). All these affirm inclusive educational practices that would culminate in global citizenship enhancing the mind through intellectual development and reflective observation. The focus of global citizenship is to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values to become responsible to promoting peace, justice, and sustainable societies.

Implication of paucity of kindred spirit for sustainable development

There is a gross scarcity of kindred spirits whose attitudes, interests, perspectives, and values are similar to one another owing to age long historical and primordial factors. Feeling of resonance and compatibility that goes beyond superficial similarities is being eroded by some inexplicable phenomena such as religion, politics, and other social elements. Kindred spirits align on fundamental principles and perspectives including shared enthusiasm about life. Intercultural understanding enabled by kindred spirits lead to deep understanding of each other's thoughts, emotions, and motivations, often with minimal explanations. The sense of connection between the northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria is being eroded on a daily basis owing to prebendal politics in Nigeria.

Politics, ethnicity, and religion are principal determinant factors in a pluralistic society. Nigeria has different religions, several political parties, social classes, and tribes and they continue to exert their different traditions and interests on both religion and politics. Intra-party conflicts due to god-fatherism or patronage engendered by external forces and contends that shadow parties have been implicated in both religious and political travails of Nigeria. Patrons of war are now found in religion (Aleyomi, 2013). Prebendalism here is a sign of arrogance in which a certain political system in government uses their offices to benefit supporters, ethnic loyalists, and co-religionists at the expense of other citizens. Traits of prebendal and patronage politics are observable in Nigerian politics right from independence till date. Religion as well as politics in the Nigerian society is fraught with contradictory features including neopatrimonialism, clientelism, and prebendalism summarily described as 'patronage system' (Peter & Blanch, 2020; Oyedapo, 2024).

The feeling of natural bond as an extension of nationhood is not deep in Nigerian polity, except in football and other national games where such games are played between Nigeria and any other country. Intercultural understanding and sustainable development thrive well where kindred spirits are robust to share things in common, supporting and promoting national interests aligned with global idea and perspectives. Key signs of kindred spirit that could evolve a long-lasting instinctive connection characterized by mutual intercultural understanding includes effortless communication, comfort, and peace for sustainable development. Inclusive religious and educational practices avail citizens the opportunity for mutual support, encouragement, sense of belonging and completeness for intercultural understanding and peaceful coexistence among others.

Data Collection, Analysis and Report

The study employed qualitative research approach engaging the instruments of focus group discussion and case studies of four educational institutions and four religious institutions

where inclusive practices are observed. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, and themes related to intercultural understanding and sustainable development.

Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me about your background and experience with intercultural understanding and sustainable development?
2. How do you think inclusive religious and educational practices can contribute to intercultural understanding and sustainable development?
3. How do you think religious leaders and institutions can promote intercultural understanding and sustainable development?
4. What role do you think culturally responsive pedagogy plays in fostering intercultural understanding and sustainable development?
5. What challenges do you think exist on implementing inclusive religious and educational practices?
6. What recommendations would you make for promoting intercultural understanding and sustainable development through inclusive religious and educational practices?

Intercultural Educational Institutions

No	Participant's Name	Institution	Service years
1.	Femi Ogundipe	CACTS Ibadan	10
2.	Kola.Adegboye	Rhema Theological College, Ibadan	17
3.	Temitope Oyewumi	Sacred Christian College of Theology, Ibadan	15
4.	Emmanuel Ayodele	Christian Theological Seminary Ibadan	22

Table 1: Lead Key Information on Intercultural Educational Practice

Intercultural Religious Institutions

1.	Chris Oluwatosin	CAC, Aperin, Ibadan	33
2.	Bola Adepoju	Fullstature Missions, Ibadan	37
3.	Bukola Omoniyi	Sacred Cherubim & Seraphim, Ibadan	26
4.	Stephen Adewole	Nigerian Baptist Church, Ibadan	43

Table 2: Lead Key Informants on Intercultural Educational and Religious Practices

Tables 1 and 2 highlight the key informants interviewed from purposive sampling technique predicated on the multicultural nature of the religious and educational institutions that are

strategic for this study. Pluralism was observed in all with insignificant ethnocentrism; therefore, the results of the interview are valid and reliable.

Thematic Analysis of Responses to Interview Guide:

(IG) 1: Background and experience with intercultural understanding and sustainable development varies according to the respondents, but their religious and educational exposure and practices within multicultural settings added value to their understanding and tolerance.

IG 2: Inclusive religious and educational practices are crucial factors for the promotion of intercultural to understanding and sustainable development.

IG 3: Religious leaders and educational leaders who are responsive and sensitive to cultural diversity engage religious adherents and students in intentional intercultural education and integration, enhance harmony and peace building in the community.

IG 4: Culturally responsive pedagogy goes beyond academic theories, rather it allows for participatory system in religion and education including language, custom, arts and music, food and drink, thoughts, attitude and behaviour for transformational goals.

IG 5: Culture shock, fear, distrust and vulnerability of foreigners or nationals among the locals but the fears fade away as inclusive practices are put in place.

IG 6: The study recommends openness, accommodation, receptivity on the part of host community just as equity, diversity, and inclusivity allow for peace building, societal transformation and globalization.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study confirmed that personal, experiential and intercultural education are crucial for peace building, security, and sustainable development. Religious and educational leaders in this study expressed their personal growth from experiencing the strangeness of something outside their usual experience and stereotypes, though they had to grapple with the experience of future shock but they moved from the position of vulnerability to self-efficacy. Cross-cultural communication and understanding underscore global citizenship and universality of orientation and disposition. The study reveals that both religion and education are social structures that foster intensive human interaction and inter-connectedness to make peace building and sustainable development feasible. Cultures have to be recognized with due respect and empathy, and intercultural understanding leads to reflection, critical thinking that culminates in taking responsibility. Cultural responsiveness and sensitivity are significant factors depicted by the study to enhance co-operation, tolerance, and intercultural relationship. Culturally responsive and sensitive pedagogy is a catalyst for promoting intercultural understanding right from childhood to adulthood to foster global citizenship and responsibility.

The focus of this study in intercultural understanding and sustainable development was facilitated by inclusive, diverse, and equitable religious and educational practices. Based on the results of the study, inclusive religious and educational practices are critical factors for transforming the society from localized, parochial, and monopolized community into a global society where human ideas are exchanged and new and integral learning is achieved for knowledge formation and robust.

Participation is a must in a universal community where “best practices” are cultivated for a socially-conducive living. Findings reveal sub-optimal openness, accommodation, receptivity on the part of host community interviewed and the trend has led to lack of equity, diversity, and inclusivity in governance. Historical and primordial factors are largely responsible for lack of trust among people which has hindered or slowed down the concerted efforts geared towards societal transformation and globalization in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Religious and educational institutions are found as agencies for engaging intercultural education, participatory communication, community engagement and interfaith dialogue to facilitate peace, security, human capital development and sustainable development. Both religious and educational leaders have not had very sound cross-cultural orientation owing to primordial and prejudicial mentality they were indoctrinated with since childhood and this has had ripple effects on their disposition and perspectives to life. The study found out that ‘culture shock’ exacerbated by terrorism, poverty and underdevelopment in Nigeria, has led to stigmatization and labelling syndromes. Effective communication, based on nuanced intercultural understanding, equips individuals with the skills to relate seamlessly among cultural people without fear of being misunderstood or intimidated. The wide religious and educational gaps are obvious everywhere with the consequence of promoting ethnocentrism, cleavages, patronage, and neo-colonialism, distrust, hostilities, and corruption in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following in a bid to achieve intercultural understanding and sustainable development through equitable, diverse, and inclusive religious and education practices in Nigeria.

- Development of intercultural and citizenship education, especially in early childhood curriculum to gain cultural nuances of Nigerian society.
- Openness, accommodation, receptivity on the part of host community to allow for equity, diversity, and inclusivity towards sustainable peacebuilding, societal transformation and globalization.
- Culturally responsive and sensitive school curriculum to allow for trust, respect, and tolerance among religious people, students and teachers.
- Peacebuilding, peace education, and advocacy should be inculcated and practiced right from the community to national levels by supporting inclusive, diverse, and equitable religious and educational practices through formal mechanisms for cultural competence and stakeholder engagement.
- Human rights education, transparency, and globalist perspectives should be given priority in religious and educational institutions, conducting cultural responsiveness and sensitivity assessment to identify and address unconscious biases and cultural blind spots
- Strengthen both religious and educational structures to enhance culturally responsive and sensitive fora, procedures and participatory engagement by promoting research and development to support praxis-oriented religious and educational practices that could foster sustainable growth and development.

References

- Berkaine, R. (2025). Fostering cultural competence: Teaching intercultural understanding through project-based training. *European Journal of Education and pedagogy*. (EJ-EPU) volume 6 No 1. PP39-53. <https://www.ej-edu.org/index.php/ejedu/>.
- Aleyomi, M. (2013). Intra-party Conflicts in Nigeria.: The Case study of People's Democratic Party (PDP). *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*.,pp78-93
- Bernett, J. M. (2008). Transformative training. Designing programs for culture learning. In M.A. Moodian (Ed). *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations* (pp 95-110), Sage.
- Berry, M, & Robinson, T (2012). An entrance to exit polling: Strategies for using exit polls as experiential learning projects. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45, 501 – 505, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1012000431>
- Chau, R.Y.U., Morris, M.W.& Mor. S. (2012). Collaborating across cultures: cultural metacognition and affect based trust in creative collaboration. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, 118, 116 – 131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.obhdp.2012.03.009>.
- Durko, A.. & Martens, H (2021) Fostering higher level cultural learning among tourism students through virtual interaction. *Journal of Teaching in Travel E Tourism*, 21(3), 235-247.<https://doi.org/10.9744/jmk.21.1.89-94>.
- Falk, J.H., Ballantyne, R., Packer, J., & Benckendorff, P. (2012). Travel and learning: neglected tourism research area. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 908 – 927. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.11.016>.
- Howard, K., & Gulawani, M. (2014). Student perceptions of study tour learning. A case study. *Aweshka Research Journal* 18(2) 101-114
- Legget, N.(2020). A fish out of water. Developing intercultural understanding of students in higher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(12), pp 42-56, <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol45/iss12/3>.
- Moderood, T (2021). Can interculturalism complement multiculturalism? *Multicultural Education Review*, 13(4) 275-284.<https://doi.org/101080/2005615x.2021.2006115>.
- Moosung, L. (2024). Intercultural understanding implications for multicultural education vol.16, issue 2 pp.89-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615x>. 2024.2376305 (Taylor & Francis).
- Neuliep, J. W. (2012). *Intercultural communication: A contextual approach* (5th ed). London: Sage
- Oladipo, S.A (2022). Perception Engineering in religious education in Nigeria. *Religions, Educator*. Vol. 21 No 2, pp 1-14.
- Oluwadele, L.B, Adediran, A, & Olaogun S.M. (2025). Ethnic and cultural diversity in Nigeria: panacea for National Development or Decapitation? *Integrity Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4(4) 62-70

- Otuniyi, A. T., & Oluniyi, A.O (2022). Curriculum innovation and practice of Dawah of Daru-d-dawah wal-irshad in Lagos state. *Religions Educator*, pp49-68.
- Oyedapo, P. O., & Alade, A (2022). Peace building in Nigeria through religious engineering and epistemic justice. *Religions Educator* pp114-131.
- Oyedapo, P. O. (2024). *Patronage System in Religion and Politics and its Implication for the Nigerian Society*. **Gombe University Creative Business Journal**, (87-92).
- Oyedapo, P. O. (2025). Power, privilege, and predation: The case of king Leopold's Regime in Congo and its implications for Africa. *Lead City University, 4th FMSS Journal*, pp132-146
- Oyedele, O. M. & Iember, A.A (2021) COVID – 19 and the future of higher education. *IEEE Technology Policy and Ethics* 6(4), 1 – 3, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ntpe.2021.9778140>.
- Oyenuga, M. O., & Paul Iorkeh Akwen (2025). Tourism and intercultural understanding in developing nations. *African Journal of culture, History, Religion and Traditions*. Vol. 8, Issue 1, pp 1 – 14.
- Peter, G. & BlanchPeter, G. & Blanch, C. (2020). *Patronage and the Public Service: A Dynamic Performance Governance Perspective*. <https://www.researchgate.net.>343>.
- Petersdotter, L., Niechoff, E., & Freund, P.A. (2017) International experience makes a difference: Effects of studying abroad on students self-efficacy. *Personality and individual Differences*, 107, 174-178, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.040>.
- Sharma, B. (2018). Training workers for intercultural communication. *Language and intercultural communication* 18(4), 408-423, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1478849>.
- Thomas, D.C & Inkson K (2017). *Cultural Intelligence: living and working globally*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Berrel Koehler Publishers