

Ethno-Religious Conflict in Zangon-Kataf, Kaduna State: Rethinking Government Response for Sustainable Peace

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Abstract

Nigeria's political history has been shaped by the persistent interplay of ethnic and religious identities, which often overlap and fuel recurrent crises. Zangon-Kataf in Kaduna State offers a striking case, where disputes over land, markets, and political recognition have repeatedly escalated into violent clashes between Atyap (Christian) and Hausa (Muslim) communities. This paper examines government responses to these conflicts—particularly the 1992 crisis and subsequent outbreaks in 2000 and 2011—through the twin lenses of Conflict Transformation Theory and State Legitimacy Theory. Adopting a historical-analytical case study approach, the study draws on commissions of inquiry reports, newspaper archives, government documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship to assess both the logic and outcomes of state interventions. Findings reveal that government strategies, ranging from tribunals to curfews, relied heavily on regulatory containment rather than structural transformation. While these measures temporarily restored order, they failed to resolve deeper grievances of exclusion, marginalization, and recognition. The opacity of commission reports and perceived bias of tribunals further eroded state legitimacy, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and recurrence of violence. The paper argues that sustainable peace in Southern Kaduna requires a paradigm shift from reactive regulation toward proactive transformation. This includes institutionalizing inclusive governance, ensuring transparent and participatory justice mechanisms, empowering multi-level actors in peacebuilding, and addressing socioeconomic inequalities. By doing so, the Nigerian state can move beyond coercive management to a legitimacy-based peace that affirms diversity while promoting national unity.

Keywords: Ethno-religious conflict; Zangon-Kataf; conflict transformation; state legitimacy

Introduction

Nigeria's political landscape is shaped by the convergence of ethnicity and religion, two enduring and deeply embedded identities that structure everyday life as well as national politics. The three predominant ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—collectively represent more than half of the nation's population, while hundreds of minority communities, though smaller in number, possess rich histories, languages, and traditions. The demographic reality of this plural society has generated a delicate balance of coexistence, periodically disrupted by fierce struggles for political authority, resource control, and cultural recognition.

Political competition in Nigeria has historically been filtered through ethnic and religious affiliations. Under colonial rule, the British system of indirect governance entrenched these categories by privileging certain groups while marginalizing others, thereby institutionalizing the “we-they” divide (Falola and Heaton 112). Post-independence governments inherited this fractured system, oscillating between civilian administrations characterized by ethnically-based party formations and military regimes dominated by narrow regional factions (Suberu 45). Whether in democratic or authoritarian form, the Nigerian state has frequently relied on ethnic patronage networks, leaving minority communities vulnerable to exclusion and recurrent cycles of grievance.

Within this context, conflict often takes the form of ethno-religious contestations, where struggles over land, economic resources, or political participation are refracted through dual lenses of ethnicity and faith. The result is not merely competition for material resources but also contests over symbolic recognition, identity, and legitimacy. Such conflicts, as Horowitz observes, are especially intractable because they mobilize deep emotions tied to belonging and survival (Horowitz 101). In Nigeria, the recurring violence in Jos, Maiduguri, and Kaduna reflects this dynamic, but perhaps no case illustrates it more starkly than the protracted conflicts in Zangon-Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State.

Zangon-Kataf represents a microcosm of Nigeria's pluralism and its vulnerabilities. Situated in Southern Kaduna, the area is home to the predominantly Christian Atyap (Kataf) people alongside a Hausa Muslim community that settled there during precolonial and colonial periods. While daily interactions produced patterns of coexistence, longstanding grievances over land ownership, market relocation, cultural domination, and political representation simmered beneath the surface. These grievances erupted violently in 1992, with subsequent clashes in 2000 and 2011, leaving deep scars of mistrust and loss.

Government responses to these crises have been varied yet patterned: commissions of inquiry tasked with fact-finding, tribunals and courts mandated to assign punishment, and security deployments aimed at restoring order. While these interventions projected an image of state authority, their regulatory orientation—focused on managing violence rather than transforming its root causes—proved inadequate. In particular, the opacity of commission reports, the perceived bias of special tribunals, and the limited follow-through on structural reforms reinforced rather than healed divisions.

This paper argues that the failure of state responses lies not only in implementation gaps but also in the very logic of regulatory containment. By privileging short-term stability over long-term justice and reconciliation, the Nigerian state has consistently

undermined its own legitimacy. Drawing on Conflict Transformation Theory, the study contends that peace requires more than the cessation of violence; it demands the creation of relationships and structures that address inequalities and enable inclusive participation (Lederach 85). Similarly, State Legitimacy Theory provides a lens to evaluate why state-led interventions, when perceived as partial or unjust, often exacerbate rather than resolve communal tensions.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a historical-analytical case study design. It reconstructs the trajectory of crises in Zangon-Kataf from archival reports, media coverage, and secondary scholarship, while subjecting government responses to critical theoretical evaluation. This approach balances narration with analysis, situating Zangon-Kataf not merely as a local disturbance but as part of broader debates about governance, identity, and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section defines the key terms—conflict, ethnic conflict, religious conflict, and ethno-religious conflict—while situating them within contemporary scholarly debates. This is followed by a detailed examination of government interventions in Zangon-Kataf between 1992 and 2011, analyzed through the twin lenses of conflict transformation and state legitimacy. The discussion then turns to lessons for sustainable peace, exploring how inclusive governance, local empowerment, and structural reforms might break cycles of violence. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications of Zangon-Kataf for Nigeria's broader project of national integration.

Definition of Terms and Conceptual Clarifications

Conflict, in both everyday and academic usage, refers to a clash of interests, values, or objectives between two or more actors. While in common parlance the word often implies physical violence, scholars emphasize that conflict can take both violent and non-violent forms (Burton 76). At its core, conflict emerges when one party perceives that its goals are incompatible with those of another, thereby prompting resistance, competition, or confrontation. Non-violent conflicts, such as electoral competition or labor disputes, can generate constructive outcomes by enabling negotiation and compromise. However, when left unresolved, conflict may escalate into violence, producing destabilizing effects on communities and institutions. In societies with fragile governance structures, such escalation often reveals deep-seated structural inequalities and identity-based grievances (Francis 18). Thus, conflict is best understood as a dynamic process with both destructive and transformative potential.

Ethnic conflict specifically describes disputes rooted in ethnic identity, defined by shared ancestry, cultural markers, and language. Horowitz underscores that ethnic affiliations differ from other social categories because they are largely ascriptive, leaving individuals with limited choice in determining their group membership (Horowitz 55). Ethnic conflicts may take the form of inter-ethnic clashes, where distinct groups struggle over resources or recognition, or intra-ethnic disputes, where factions within the same ethnic group compete for leadership or dominance. Globally, the stakes of ethnic conflicts have often escalated into campaigns of "ethnic cleansing," forced displacement, or even genocide, underscoring their potential severity (Mamdani 204). In Nigeria, ethnic cleavages are historically entangled with the politics of resource distribution and regional dominance, producing recurring disputes over federal allocations, land tenure, and political representation (Osaghae and Suberu 21).

Religious conflict refers to hostilities that derive primarily from faith-based identities and doctrinal differences. Such conflicts often involve inter-religious struggles—between Christians and Muslims, for example—or intra-religious divisions, as in disputes among different denominations or sects within the same faith. Juergensmeyer argues that religion intensifies conflicts by endowing them with “cosmic war” dimensions, transforming political grievances into existential struggles (Juergensmeyer 149). In Nigeria, religion has historically served as a mobilizing force for political actors, with disputes over Sharia law, missionary expansion, and proselytization shaping inter-communal relations (Ibrahim 63). Religious conflicts thus do not arise in isolation but intersect with broader issues of identity, governance, and resource access, amplifying tensions in already fragile contexts.

Ethno-religious conflict, as employed in this study, denotes disputes in which ethnicity and religion operate simultaneously as fault lines of division. Osaghae and Suberu describe such conflicts as “complex identity wars” in which boundaries of culture and faith overlap to produce multiple layers of exclusion (32). In plural societies like Nigeria, where ethnicity and religion often reinforce rather than counterbalance one another, disputes easily escalate into violent confrontations that engulf entire communities. The Zangon-Kataf crisis exemplifies this duality: while ostensibly rooted in disagreements over land and market relocation, it quickly assumed a Christian-Muslim dimension, mobilizing entire populations along ethno-religious lines. The analytical category of ethno-religious conflict thus captures the reality that such disputes cannot be neatly separated into ethnic or religious domains but must be understood as mutually reinforcing identities that shape patterns of violence and peace.

Literature Review: Ethno-Religious Conflict and State Response in Nigeria

Scholarly engagement with ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria has expanded over the past three decades, reflecting the recurrence of violence in Jos, Kaduna, Kano, and Maiduguri, among other sites. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) argue that the Nigerian state has historically managed conflicts through “regulatory containment” rather than structural transformation, relying on commissions, tribunals, and ad-hoc security deployments without addressing underlying inequalities. Their work highlights how such strategies achieve short-term order but often perpetuate cycles of mistrust. Similarly, Best (2007) emphasizes that ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are not simply local skirmishes but part of a broader crisis of state legitimacy, where minority groups perceive exclusion from the political and economic benefits of federalism.

Other scholars focus on the identity politics dimension of these crises. Eriksen (2010) suggests that identity politics in plural societies emerges when ethnic and religious categories become politicized, serving as vehicles for claims to recognition, representation, and resources. In Nigeria, these dynamics are visible in disputes over local government creation, chieftaincy recognition, and the distribution of oil rents and agricultural land (Suberu 2001). Horowitz (2000) further notes that such identity-based disputes are among the hardest to resolve because they are framed not as negotiable interests but as existential struggles for survival and dignity. This literature underscores that interventions must therefore move beyond mere power-sharing formulas to address the symbolic dimensions of belonging and recognition.

A parallel body of research examines state violence and transitional justice in African contexts. Mamdani (2001) contends that African states often oscillate between coercion and neglect, leaving minority communities trapped in cycles of violence and mistrust.

Hovil (2013) and Hamber (2009) stress the importance of transitional justice mechanisms that address historical grievances, ensure accountability, and foster reconciliation. Applied to Nigeria, this scholarship raises questions about why commissions of inquiry often fail to release reports publicly, why tribunals lack transparency, and how these practices reinforce perceptions of bias. These gaps point to a crisis of legitimacy that undermines the credibility of state responses.

Within Kaduna specifically, scholars such as Kukah (1993) and Ibrahim (2015) have examined the Zangon-Kataf crisis as emblematic of Nigeria's ethno-religious fragility. Kukah argues that the crisis revealed the inability of the Nigerian state to rise above sectional interests, while Ibrahim highlights how narratives of historical dispossession fueled both Hausa and Atyap mobilization. More recent work by Suleiman (2011) situates the Southern Kaduna crises within a broader struggle for minority identity and autonomy, echoing long-standing calls for the creation of additional states and chiefdoms. Together, these studies suggest that Zangon-Kataf is not an isolated case but a manifestation of Nigeria's wider crisis of pluralism and governance.

Government Intervention in the Zangon-Kataf Crisis (1992-2011)

The 1992 Crisis and Immediate Government Responses

The Zangon-Kataf crisis of 1992 marked a watershed moment in Nigeria's history of ethno-religious violence. Though disputes between the Atyap (Kataf) and Hausa communities had simmered for decades, the official creation of Zangon-Kataf Local Government Area in 1990 heightened tensions by reopening old grievances about land ownership, market relocation, and cultural recognition. The February and May 1992 outbreaks, in which hundreds of lives were lost and property worth millions destroyed, drew unprecedented attention from both the Kaduna State and Federal Governments. What distinguished this episode was not only its scale but also the ferocity of state responses, which revealed the Nigerian government's preference for regulatory containment rather than transformative engagement.

In July 1992, the Kaduna State Government inaugurated the Justice Rahila H. Cudjoe Commission of Inquiry, tasked with investigating the immediate and remote causes of the conflict, identifying perpetrators, and recommending preventive measures. On paper, this initiative aligned with the principles of conflict transformation, which stress the importance of understanding root causes and devising structural solutions (Lederach 91). However, in practice, the Commission's report was never formally released, and much of what became known emerged through *Citizen* magazine's leaked coverage. The opacity of this process undermined the credibility of the findings, reinforcing perceptions of selective justice and secrecy. From the perspective of state legitimacy theory, the refusal to publish the report weakened the government's claim to neutrality, as citizens judged legitimacy not only by coercive capacity but by fairness and transparency (Weber 35).

The Commission recommended, among other measures, the removal of the local government chairman, Juri Babang Ayok, stricter regulation of firearms, and relocation of the disputed market to a neutral site with better infrastructure. While these proposals addressed practical triggers of violence, they fell short of grappling with deeper structural grievances. The Commission's emphasis on "disciplinary action" and "security sweeps" reflected a regulatory approach, aimed more at restoring order than addressing historical inequities or identity-based exclusion. This aligns with Osaghae and Suberu's (2005) critique that Nigerian conflict management often prioritizes surface-level regulation over structural transformation (28).

The Federal Government's subsequent actions further illustrated this regulatory orientation. Two presidentially appointed tribunals—the Okadigbo and Adegbite panels—were established under the Civil Disturbances (Special Tribunal) Decree No. 2 of 1987. These tribunals convicted dozens of suspects, including prominent Southern Kaduna elites such as General Zamani Lekwot, who was sentenced to death. Yet, the legitimacy of these proceedings was widely challenged. Critics noted irregularities, such as President Ibrahim Babangida's assertion that suspects would be treated as "guilty until proven innocent," an inversion of due process that directly contravened constitutional protections (Ibrahim 70). Moreover, the composition of the tribunals reflected ethno-religious imbalances: the Okadigbo Tribunal included four Hausa-Fulani Muslims out of seven members, while the Adegbite Tribunal leaned toward Christian membership. Both configurations fueled accusations of bias, further polarizing communities already engulfed in mistrust.

From a theoretical standpoint, the tribunals illustrate how state legitimacy is eroded when justice mechanisms are perceived as partial or politically motivated. Hovil (2013) argues that in transitional societies, the credibility of judicial processes is as crucial as their outcomes, since perceptions of fairness influence whether communities accept or reject state authority (59). In Zangon-Kataf, the tribunals' perceived partiality delegitimized state justice, deepening rather than resolving grievances. The withdrawal of defense lawyers in protest, leaving the accused without adequate representation, only reinforced perceptions of structural injustice. Ultimately, while the death sentences were commuted under domestic and international pressure, the process left a legacy of bitterness that continues to shape Southern Kaduna's relationship with the Nigerian state.

Beyond legal measures, the government also attempted limited rehabilitation efforts, such as releasing ₦25 million for reconstruction in Zango town and relocating the Hausa community's Eid ground. Yet these initiatives, though important symbolically, did little to address underlying demands for political recognition, cultural autonomy, and equitable governance. From the perspective of conflict transformation theory, these responses represented short-term remedies without long-term structural reorganization, leaving communities trapped in cycles of mistrust. This explains why, despite the intensity of the 1992 response, subsequent outbreaks occurred in 2000 and 2011, highlighting the inadequacy of regulation without transformation.

Later Interventions: 2000, 2011, and Beyond

Although the 1992 crisis was the most devastating, subsequent outbreaks in 2000 and 2011 underscored the persistence of ethno-religious tensions in Zangon-Kataf and the limitations of earlier government responses. By 2000, Nigeria was under civilian rule following the return to democracy in 1999. Optimism was high that democratic institutions might offer more participatory and inclusive avenues for conflict management. Yet the recurrence of violence in Zangon-Kataf revealed how structural grievances—particularly the Atyap community's long-standing quest for political recognition and autonomy—remained unresolved.

In 2000, renewed clashes erupted following disputes linked to political representation and local resource allocation. The state government deployed security forces and imposed curfews, measures that temporarily restored order but did little to mend fractured inter-communal relations. From the perspective of conflict transformation theory, these responses reflected continuity with the regulatory logic of the 1990s: prioritizing containment and coercion over reconciliation and reform (Lederach 93).

Civilian administrations, despite democratic credentials, often replicated authoritarian practices of coercive peacekeeping, suggesting that regime type alone does not determine conflict outcomes. Instead, the deeper issue lay in the state's inability—or unwillingness—to restructure governance arrangements in ways that addressed Southern Kaduna's demands for recognition.

By 2011, violence resurfaced in the context of Nigeria's post-election crisis, during which ethno-religious violence swept across northern states. In Zangon-Kataf, longstanding grievances intersected with national political tensions, particularly perceptions of exclusion under shifting federal leadership. Once again, the government's response relied heavily on deploying military and police forces, detaining suspects, and enforcing curfews. These measures, while necessary for restoring immediate order, carried unintended consequences. Security deployments were often accused of partiality, with soldiers allegedly protecting one community while intimidating the other, further eroding confidence in state neutrality (Suleiman 7). Such perceptions of bias are critical, since state legitimacy theory emphasizes that citizens judge state authority not merely by its ability to suppress violence but by its perceived fairness and inclusivity (Weber 41; Mamdani 208).

Despite these cycles, one significant though limited step toward transformation emerged in the push for new chiefdoms and local government reforms in Southern Kaduna. Beginning in the early 1990s, and gaining momentum after 1999, communities demanded recognition of their traditional institutions as a way of achieving cultural and political autonomy. The establishment of some chiefdoms, though contested, symbolized an important form of reorganization—shifting beyond regulation toward structural change. Suleiman (2011) interprets these demands as part of a broader minority struggle for self-determination, a struggle that highlights the inadequacy of regulatory measures in contexts where identity recognition is central to peace. Still, implementation was uneven, with many memoranda ignored or deferred, leaving large segments of Southern Kaduna dissatisfied.

Another recurrent shortcoming was the failure to institutionalize peacebuilding mechanisms beyond state-led commissions and tribunals. Religious and traditional leaders, as several observers note, remained largely absent from proactive peace campaigns, preferring private appeals over public reconciliation initiatives (Kukah 145). This absence deprived the peace process of local legitimacy, reinforcing the state's overreliance on coercive force. Conflict transformation theory stresses that sustainable peace must involve multi-level actors—state, community, and civil society—working collaboratively (Lederach 107). The Nigerian government's tendency to centralize responses thus undermined opportunities for grassroots peacebuilding that might have fostered long-term reconciliation.

Overall, the pattern of interventions between 1992 and 2011 reveals continuity rather than change. Whether under military or civilian regimes, state strategies emphasized regulation, coercion, and symbolic concessions while neglecting structural reforms. By failing to address underlying grievances—particularly around political representation, land ownership, and identity recognition—the government inadvertently perpetuated conditions for recurrent violence. As Osaghae and Suberu (2005) remind us, a state that manages conflict through coercion without legitimacy risks reproducing the very insecurities it seeks to resolve (32). Zangon-Kataf stands as a clear illustration of this paradox: intense government involvement without durable peace.

Analysis and Discussion

Regulation versus Transformation: The Limits of State Responses

The government's handling of the Zangon-Kataf crises illustrates the persistent reliance on what Osaghae and Suberu describe as "regulatory containment"—a strategy designed to suppress violence without addressing the conditions that produced it (28). The 1992 Cudjoe Commission, while broad in mandate, emphasized disciplinary measures and market relocation but ignored demands for structural reforms such as enhanced political representation and recognition of minority identities. Similarly, the tribunals that followed sought to punish perpetrators rather than foster reconciliation. In doing so, they treated the crisis as a criminal matter rather than a symptom of deeper structural inequalities.

From the perspective of Conflict Transformation Theory, these responses failed to move beyond short-term management. Lederach argues that transformation requires not just ending violence but rebuilding relationships, addressing inequalities, and reshaping social structures that sustain conflict (Lederach 106). By neglecting this dimension, the Nigerian state left intact the very grievances—land disputes, cultural marginalization, and political exclusion—that fueled violence. Hence, the recurrence of conflict in 2000 and 2011 was not anomalous but predictable, given that regulatory mechanisms were never coupled with structural reforms.

Legitimacy and Perceptions of Justice

A second major weakness in government responses lies in the erosion of legitimacy. Max Weber defines legitimacy as the recognition of state authority as rightful, based not solely on coercion but on the belief that state actions are guided by fairness, legality, and accountability (Weber 41). In Zangon-Kataf, both the opacity of commission reports and the perceived bias of tribunals undermined this legitimacy. The secrecy surrounding the Cudjoe Commission report created suspicion of selective justice, while the ethnically skewed membership of tribunals reinforced perceptions of state partiality.

Legitimacy theory explains why state interventions, though forceful, often deepened rather than resolved grievances. Hovil (2013) notes that in transitional societies, justice mechanisms must not only be effective but also be seen as impartial and transparent, since legitimacy depends as much on perception as on outcome (59). In Zangon-Kataf, the withdrawal of defense counsel and reports of intimidation by tribunal judges amplified community perceptions that justice was skewed against them. This delegitimization of state justice institutions helped entrench cycles of mistrust, as both communities came to view the state not as a neutral arbiter but as a partisan actor.

The Politics of Recognition and Identity

The recurrence of crises also underscores the centrality of recognition politics in plural societies. Eriksen (2010) argues that identity-based conflicts often persist because they involve struggles for recognition of dignity and belonging, which cannot be resolved through material concessions alone (44). For the Atyap community, demands for new chiefdoms and local autonomy symbolized the quest for cultural recognition as much as political control. The government's hesitance to act decisively on these demands reflected broader tensions between maintaining centralized authority and acknowledging minority identities. While some chiefdoms were eventually created, the piecemeal and contested nature of these reforms limited their pacifying potential.

From a conflict transformation perspective, recognition is not a peripheral issue but a structural one. Lederach emphasizes that peace requires the construction of inclusive social spaces where identities are affirmed rather than suppressed (110). By failing to institutionalize mechanisms for recognition—whether through chieftom reforms, participatory governance, or inclusive representation—the Nigerian state perpetuated feelings of alienation among Southern Kaduna minorities.

The Absence of Multi-Level Peacebuilding

Another key insight from the analysis is the near-total absence of multi-level peacebuilding mechanisms. Government responses relied heavily on formal commissions, tribunals, and security deployments, but religious and traditional leaders were rarely mobilized into public reconciliation campaigns. Kukah (1993) observes that religious leaders often confined their interventions to private sermons rather than community-wide peacebuilding, limiting their capacity to foster genuine intergroup dialogue (145).

Lederach's model of conflict transformation stresses the importance of multi-level engagement, involving top-level political leaders, mid-level community leaders, and grassroots actors working in synergy (Lederach 107). In Zangon-Kataf, the absence of such layered initiatives meant that government actions were experienced as external impositions rather than participatory processes. This lack of inclusivity not only weakened outcomes but also reinforced perceptions of state dominance rather than shared ownership of peace.

Synthesis: Why Responses Failed

Taken together, the analysis reveals that the failure of government interventions in Zangon-Kataf was not merely a matter of flawed implementation but of flawed logic. Regulatory measures prioritized order over justice, tribunals undermined legitimacy, and concessions were too limited to meet demands for recognition. Without addressing structural inequities or involving multi-level actors, these responses reproduced the very conditions that fueled conflict. As such, Zangon-Kataf illustrates a broader paradox of Nigerian governance: the more the state seeks to manage conflict through coercion, the more it erodes its legitimacy, thereby sustaining cycles of violence.

Toward Sustainable Peace in Zangon-Kataf and Beyond

The recurring nature of ethno-religious conflict in Zangon-Kataf highlights the limitations of short-term regulatory interventions and underscores the need for sustainable peace strategies rooted in inclusivity, justice, and recognition. Drawing from Conflict Transformation Theory, sustainable peace requires addressing structural inequalities, fostering new patterns of intergroup relations, and building institutions that can accommodate diversity (Lederach 112). Similarly, State Legitimacy Theory reminds us that peace cannot be secured without a state perceived as fair, transparent, and accountable (Weber 45). Building sustainable peace in Zangon-Kataf therefore requires a shift from reactive measures toward proactive, participatory strategies that integrate both state and community actors.

Strengthening Inclusive Governance

First, sustainable peace demands reforms that enhance political inclusion for minority groups in Southern Kaduna. The creation of new chiefdoms, districts, or local government areas should not be seen merely as symbolic concessions but as structural mechanisms for recognition and empowerment. Suleiman (2011) has argued that the absence of adequate representation fuels perceptions of exclusion, making conflict almost inevitable. Policies that devolve authority to local institutions can help bridge the gap between central state structures and community demands, thereby institutionalizing recognition. Such reforms should be accompanied by transparent mechanisms for resource allocation to prevent elite capture and ensure that benefits reach ordinary citizens. By enhancing inclusivity, the state can transform perceptions of partiality and begin to rebuild legitimacy.

Institutionalizing Transparent Justice Mechanisms

Second, peace requires credible and transparent justice systems capable of addressing grievances fairly. The opacity of the 1992 Cudjoe Commission and the partiality of subsequent tribunals illustrate how flawed justice processes can exacerbate divisions rather than heal them. Transitional justice scholarship emphasizes that accountability, truth-telling, and reconciliation are critical for breaking cycles of mistrust (Hovil 64; Hamber 92). In Zangon-Kataf, this could take the form of locally grounded truth and reconciliation initiatives that allow communities to articulate grievances, acknowledge harms, and chart a shared path forward. Importantly, such processes must ensure broad participation across ethnic and religious lines, resisting the temptation to impose top-down narratives. By institutionalizing transparent justice, the state can signal its commitment to fairness and thereby strengthen its legitimacy.

Promoting Multi-Level Peacebuilding

Third, sustainable peace depends on multi-level interventions that engage not only political elites but also community and grassroots actors. Lederach (1997) emphasizes that durable peace requires synergy between top-level negotiations, mid-level initiatives, and grassroots reconciliation (109). In Zangon-Kataf, traditional and religious leaders possess significant moral authority but have historically limited their engagement to private sermons rather than public campaigns. Harnessing these actors in formal peacebuilding platforms could generate broader legitimacy for state initiatives while cultivating intergroup trust. Civil society organizations, women's associations, and youth groups must also be incorporated, since these actors are often closest to the daily realities of conflict. Multi-level engagement ensures that peace is not externally imposed but internally owned.

Addressing Economic and Structural Inequalities

Finally, no sustainable peace strategy can succeed without addressing the economic inequalities that underlie identity-based conflicts. Zangon-Kataf, like many parts of Southern Kaduna, suffers from underdevelopment, limited infrastructure, and uneven access to state resources. Alegbeleye (2014) has shown that ethno-religious conflicts often disrupt economic activities, deepening cycles of poverty and marginalization (142). Policies that prioritize equitable development—such as rural infrastructure, agricultural investment, and educational opportunities—can weaken the appeal of divisive identity politics. Conflict transformation theory reminds us that peace is not only the absence of violence but the presence of justice and opportunity (Lederach

115). By addressing socioeconomic disparities, the state can reduce the structural incentives for conflict mobilization.

The case of Zangon-Kataf demonstrates that sustainable peace requires a departure from the state's historical reliance on coercion and regulatory containment. Instead, peacebuilding must be rooted in inclusivity, transparency, and structural reform. Inclusive governance enhances recognition; transparent justice restores legitimacy; multi-level engagement fosters ownership; and equitable development addresses the material roots of conflict. Together, these strategies align with both Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasizes structural change and relationship-building, and State Legitimacy Theory, which stresses fairness and trust in state authority. Unless these strategies are adopted, Zangon-Kataf is likely to remain a site of recurring violence, symbolizing the broader challenges of managing diversity in Nigeria's plural society.

Conclusion

Since the designation of Zangon-Kataf as a Local Government Area in 1990, the region has witnessed recurring episodes of ethno-religious conflict, with major outbreaks in 1992, 2000, and 2011. These crises, while triggered by disputes over land, markets, and cultural recognition, quickly escalated into broader struggles for identity, legitimacy, and belonging. The Nigerian state's responses—ranging from commissions of inquiry and special tribunals to curfews and military deployments—highlight a persistent reliance on regulatory containment rather than transformative peacebuilding. While such measures restored short-term order, they failed to address the structural grievances of exclusion, inequality, and recognition that sustained cycles of violence.

The analysis reveals that two interrelated factors explain the limits of government intervention: the absence of conflict transformation strategies and the erosion of state legitimacy. By privileging order over justice, the state repeatedly undermined its own credibility, reinforcing community perceptions of bias and partiality. This failure was compounded by the opacity of commission reports, the ethno-religious imbalance of tribunals, and the neglect of multi-level actors in peacebuilding. As a result, interventions often deepened rather than healed mistrust between Atyap and Hausa communities.

Yet, the Zangon-Kataf experience also points to pathways for sustainable peace. Drawing on Conflict Transformation Theory, sustainable peace requires structural reforms that go beyond managing violence to building new social and political arrangements capable of accommodating diversity. State Legitimacy Theory further underscores that peace depends not only on coercive capacity but also on perceptions of fairness, transparency, and inclusivity. By institutionalizing mechanisms of recognition, transparent justice, multi-level engagement, and equitable development, the Nigerian state can begin to transform Zangon-Kataf from a site of recurring violence into a model of coexistence.

Ultimately, Zangon-Kataf is not an isolated case but a mirror of Nigeria's broader pluralism and its fragility. The lessons drawn here resonate across the country: without structural change and renewed legitimacy, state responses to conflict will remain reactive and insufficient. Conversely, by embracing inclusive governance and participatory peacebuilding, Nigeria can move closer to realizing a sustainable peace that honors its diversity while safeguarding national unity.

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