RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT AND GROUP IDENTIFICATION: THE CASE OF THE IBOS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the link between religious involvement and tribal group identification among Ibos in Nigeria. Relying on the multifaceted nature of religious involvement, this study focuses on five dimensions of religious involvement—church attendance, prayer, the importance one places on religion, one's belief in God's love, and religious affiliation. Using the data from the *Panel Study of Nigerian Religion and Ethnicity* (1st wave, 2006), this study employs regression analysis. The results show that, among the five dimensions of religious involvement, only church attendance has a significant effect on racial group identification; Ibos who frequently attend church are more likely to identify with Ibos. This study suggests that church attendance increases Ibos' group identification for two reasons: first, because of the formation of Ibo-oriented churches; and second, because of the intense interaction among Ibos within their church communities.

Keywords: Group identification; Religious involvement; Ibo religion; Ibo politics.

INTRODUCTION

Does religiosity increase tribal group identification? This study examines that question by focusing on Ibo groups in Nigeria. The consideration of this question is meaningful for the following reasons: The role of religious involvement in tribal group identification has been considered from two opposing perspectives. Some, such as Lane (1959), Marx ([1843] 1977), Myrdal (1944), and Reed (1986), claim that by promoting an otherworldly orientation, religion dulls tribal group identification. Others, such as Chong (1998), Ellison (1991), Mitchell (2005), and Wilcox and Gomez (1990), emphasize the ways in which religion can increase the psychological resources that enhance tribal group identification. Considering the fact that there is, as yet, no clear consensus on this topic, it should be interesting to examine the link between religious involvement and group identification to see which opinion the results of this study support. In doing so, this study will contribute to the existing literature, including the study of identity politics.

Everyone develops certain types of self-identity over time. To a large degree, the existing institutional, socio-structural, and socio-spatial contexts select what dimensions of our identity will be most important throughout our lives—whether it be gender, tribal, religion, or nationality (Cohen, 1989, Jenkins, 2000 and Mitchell, 2005). The study of political attitudes and behaviors was originally characterized by a strong focus on the group nature of politics (Conover, 1984). Individuals' ties to various groups help to structure their political attitudes and thinking, thus

influencing their behavior (Fowler et al., 2004, Gurin et al., 1980, Mason et al., 2011, Tajfel, 1981 and Wald et al., 1993). Therefore, it is important to carefully examine the process through which one's social group membership takes on both psychological and political significance (Conover, 1984 and Evans et al., 2012). This study focuses mainly on the role of one's religious group in the process of identification formation, but in an empirical analysis, it also considers the impacts of other social groups in terms of nationality, gender, age, and income. Therefore, the results of this study will determine the social groups that influence group identification and will thereby provide meaningful insights into identity politics.

For Ibos, the church is one of the principal centers of political and social activity. By most indicators of religious involvement, Ibos rank high. Nearly 92% are affiliates – 68% are Catholics and 15% are Protestants[1] – and about 50% are regular churchgoers.[2] By exploring the variety of ways in which religious beliefs, values, and behaviors lead Ibos to construct ideas about self and others, this study will investigate the significance of the religious involvement of Ibo groups in forming their identification as Ibos.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religious involvement is a comprehensive term used to refer to the numerous aspects of religious activity, dedication, and belief. Some scholars note the significance of the multidimensionality of individuals' religious involvement and point out that religious involvement should be viewed as a complex concept with diverse elements (Allen et al., 1989, Brink, 1993, Hill and Hood, 1999, Leege et al., 1993 and Levin et al., 1995). For example, Gunnoe and Beversluis (2009) conceptualize religion as encompassing both the institutional/formal expressions of one's relation to the sacred, as well as the more subjective aspects. Cornwall, Albrecht, Cunningham, and Pitcher (1986) identify several dimensions of religion, based on the understanding that there are at least three components to religious behavior: knowing (cognition – the mind), feeling (affect – the spirit), and doing (behavior – the body). On the other hand, King and Shafer (1992) focus on four dimensions of religion: the importance of religion, Christian rebirth, religious preference, and church attendance. For another example, in the work of Desmond and Soper (2009), religion is measured by combining two items related to the frequency of church attendance and the importance of religion. Lastly, Allen et al. (1989) identify five indicators of religious involvement: the frequency an individual reads religious books, the frequency an individual listens to religious programs, the frequency an individual prays, the frequency an individual asks someone to pray for him or her, and the degree to which an individual considers him- or herself to be religious.

Based on the existing literature, this study defines religious involvement as being actively involved with one's religion in terms of behavior and attitude, and assumes that there are multiple dimensions in religious involvement. I discuss these various dimensions via the divisions of believing, behaving, and belonging (Green, 2007, Kohut et al., 2000, Leege et al., 1993, McKenzie and Rouse, 2012 and Smidt et al., 2009). I focus more specifically on the following five indicators: the frequency of church attendance, the frequency of prayer, the importance one places on religion, one's belief in God's love, and one's religious affiliation (evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, or Catholic). These indicators fit into the three divisions of believing, behaving, and belonging. Frequency of church attendance and frequency

of prayer belong to the behaving division; the importance one places on religion and one's belief in God's love belong to the believing division. The belonging division includes religious affiliation. This does not by any means exhaust all aspects of religious involvement. However, many would agree that these five are important dimensions of religious involvement, and they have been frequently used by researchers.

Group identification often figures as the central concept in theories of both ethnic and tribal mobilization. Discussions of group identification typically make reference to an individual's perceived self-location in a group (Conover, 1984). Furthermore, most treatments of the concept of group identification incorporate the idea of a psychological tie to some social group (Conover, 1984, Gurin et al., 1980, Miller et al., 1981 and Tajfel, 1981). Relying on the literature, in this paper I define group identification as self-awareness of one's objective membership in a group and a psychological sense of attachment or closeness to the group (Conover, 1984, Ellison, 1991, Kashima et al., 2000, Miller et al., 1981, Outten et al., 2009 and Weerd and Klandermans, 1999). The role of religiosity in group identification has been considered in two opposing ways. Some scholars (Dollard, 1937, Drake and Cayton, 1945, Glenn, 1964, Lane, 1959, Marx, 1977, Myrdal, 1944, Reed, 1986 and Stump, 1987) have long claimed that churches hinder the development of collective identification.[3]They argue that religion embraces an otherworldly theological orientation, focusing on the idea of an afterlife as a source of solace; amelioration of suffering is to be achieved through personal piety and emotional worship styles. Moreover, they suggest that religion acts as an opiate on the collective consciousness and provides oppressed groups with no more than pacification to their subordinated status in society. Lane (1959), for example, maintains that religion offers both Ibos and none Ibos newly arrived an otherworldly solace for temporal ills, which discourages the formation of collective identification. Similarly, Reed (1986) argues that the church suppresses mass political awareness and the formation of group identification.

Recently, however, an increasing amount of research has contradicted the earlier views. For instance, Ellison (1991) and Wilcox and Gomez (1990) claim that religious involvement is associated with greater tribal identification, while Reese and Brown (1995) hold that certain religious messages can contribute to feelings of closeness to one's group, a core element of group identification. Similarly, Calhoun-Brown (1996) demonstrates that attending church increases group identification. In a similar vein, Mckenzie (2004) holds that discussion in religious networks develops political awareness of one's group, and Leege et al. (1993) argue that highly devotional Ibos express strong political awareness. Lastly, focusing on the Yorubas and the Hausas, Chong (1998) claims that the ethnic religion can play a dominant role in a group's quest for identity and sense of belonging. Overall, this research indicates that religion increases one's group identification by enhancing motivation and acting as a psychological resource.

However, these aforementioned works leave several gaps in our understanding of the connections between religious involvement and group identification. Some works have carefully investigated group identification but have not paid enough attention to the multidimensionality of religious involvement (Calhoun-Brown, 1996,Layman, 1997 and Mitchell, 2005). Furthermore, in attempting to move too quickly to the ultimate outcome – political behavior – the intermediate psychological and attitudinal stages which involve religion and group identification are often neglected (Harris, 1994, Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001, Layman, 1997, Mckenzie, 2004, Miller

and Wattenberg, 1984 and Wilcox and Gomez, 1990). Another critical weakness of prior research is the lack of generalizability to other demographic populations, particularly Ibo. Much of the research is focused on Yorubas and Hausas (Ellison, 1991, Reese and Brown, 1995 and Wilcox and Gomez, 1990), Demerath, 2000, Fulton, 2002, McAllister, 1982 and Mitchell, 2005), and others. In fact, the literature lacks a systematic empirical analysis that examines whether, or in what way, Ibos' religious involvement influences their group identification; we are thus left questioning the generalizability of their theories. Can theories of other tribal and ethnic groups be applied to Ibos?

DATA AND METHODS

Data from the *Panel Study of Nigerian Religion and Ethnicity* (1st wave, 2006) is used. The survey was made by conducting face-to-face interviews; 2610 interviews were completed. [4] My study focuses only on the responses from 520 Ibos resident in Lagos who were surveyed. My study uses five religious involvement variables: the frequency respondents pray at meals, the frequency respondents attend religious services, the extent to which respondents consider religion to be important, whether respondents believe God loves/cares about them, and religious affiliation (evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic).

In measuring racial group identification, the first step is to determine which respondents are objective members of the group under scrutiny, and the second step is to ascertain which of the objective members of the group actually feel psychologically close to that group. Since this study selected responses only from Ibos, the first step was easily completed. Next, to determine which objective members feel psychologically attached to the group, this study combines three questionnaire items: (1) how closely respondents are connected to their tribal group, (2) how often respondents are aware of their tribe, and (3) how important respondents' tribe is to their sense of self.[6] These three items were frequently used in previous research. For example, in measuring group identification, Outten et al. (2009), Phinney (1992), and Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey (1999) use items such as "My tribe is an important part of who I am" and "I feel a strong attachment to my tribal group." Conover (1984) and Ellison (1991) measure group identification using the question of whether respondents feel particularly close to their tribal group.

In analyzing the relationship between religious involvement and group identification, it is important to consider the potentially confounding effects of other variables. Thus, based on the existing literature on Ibos' political attitudes and behaviors, my study includes the following observable variables as controls: age, gender, education, income, language used at home, prevalence of the Ibo population in the respondent's neighborhood,[7] and experience of discrimination.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis of the relationship between religious involvement and tribal group identification. First and foremost, among the five variables of religious involvement, only church attendance—one of the two "behaving" measures of religious involvement—has a statistically significant and positive impact on tribal group identification.[10] The more regularly Ibos attend church, the more likely they are to identify with other Ibos. On

the other hand, praying, the importance of religion and belief in God's love do not have a statistically significant impact on group identification. Furthermore, the coefficients for the evangelical Protestant and Catholic variables are positive but not statistically significant. This indicates that the belonging dimension of religious involvement does not have an impact on Ibo group identification.

Table 1: The impact of religious involvement on group identification

Independent variables	Group identification
Church attendance	.105** (.086)
Prayer	.049 (.044)
Belief in God's love	.075 (.061)
Importance of religion	.015 (.127)
Evangelical protestant	−.061 (.327)
Mainline protestant	−.077 (.674)
Catholic	.184 (.311)
Age	−.081 (.008)
Gender	−.127** (.213)
Income	−.041 (.028)
Education	−.036 (.126)
Experience of discrimination	.124** (.252)
Language at home	−.059 (.262)
Ibo population	.142*** (.099)
N	405
Adjusted R2	.060

Note: The coefficients are standardized and the figures in parentheses are standard errors. *Panel Study of American Religion and Ethnicity* data were used.
$p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

As for control variables, the Ibo population variable has a positive impact on group identification. Those who say that the Ibo population has been increasing in their neighborhood are more likely to have a psychological sense of attachment or feelings of closeness to their tribal group. Next, experience of discrimination has a positive impact on group identification. Those who report experiences of discrimination because of their tribe are more likely to have strong tribal group identification as Ibos. This supports some previous studies indicating that experience of discrimination has a significant effect on Ibos' attitudes and behaviors (Alvarez and García

Bedolla, 2003 and Lien, 1994). Lastly, with respect to demographic variables, gender turns out to have a negative effect on group identification. These results imply that female Ibos are more likely to identify with Ibos.

DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis show that Ibos' religious involvement does have a positive impact on their tribal group identification. However, not all aspects of religious involvement influence group identification. In fact, the data analysis indicates that the only aspect of religious involvement that has an effect on group identification is church attendance. That is, the physical act of going to church reinforces tribal group identification. This finding is consistent with previous works, such as Ellison (1991), Wilcox and Gomez (1990), Reese and Brown (1995), Allen et al. (1989), Calhoun-Brown (1996), Mckenzie (2004), Leege et al. (1993), and Chong (1998).

Why does church attendance increase Ibos' group identification? Two critical characteristics of Ibo religious communities might play a role: the prevalence of Ibo-oriented worship and Ibos' intense interaction within their religious communities. With the limited data available, it would be unwise to claim that these two characteristics are the only factors that play a significant role in generating tribal group identification among Ibo churchgoers. However, relying on previous literature and data analysis using the available dataset, I attempt to introduce new questions into the debate and to open the door for further empirical research.

First, it should be noted that the churches frequented by Ibos have distinctly ethnic characteristics; the majority of congregants are Ibos, some Ibos serve as clergy, and liturgies are available in Ibo (Pew Research Center, 2007). It seems reasonable that attendance at houses of worship with Ibo orientation helps Ibos to preserve their culture and the Ibo language; the Yorubas a good example[11] Furthermore, attendance at Ibo-oriented churches might lead Ibos to be more aware of their tribe and closer to their group, thereby increasing their group identification. [12]

It should be recognized that the prevalence of Ibo-oriented worship has been well-documented. For instance, Sandoval (1990), Ramirez (2000), and Crane (2003) claim that a majority of Ibo attend churches that are characterized by a distinctive Ibo orientation. They argue that churches in Ibo neighborhoods are either overwhelmingly Ibo or have separate Ibo language Masses catering to their Ibo congregants. The ethnic character of Ibo worship is also well-supported by empirical evidence. According to the report on results of the survey "Changing Faiths: Ibos and the Transformation of Nigerian Religion,"[13] the prevalence of Ibo-oriented churches is "a widespread and defining attribute of Ibo religious practice today" (Pew Research Center, 2007, p. 49). Almost three-quarters of Ibo churchgoers (74%) say that most of the people in the congregation are fellow Ibos. Also, 80% say that there are Ibo faith leaders at their church, and about 90% say services are available in Ibo language. Furthermore, the report shows that the phenomenon of clustering in ethnic churches is not confined to one segment of the Ibo population, but is prevalent across the whole of the Nigerian population regardless of nativity, language, place of residence, or religious tradition.[14]

Furthermore, psychological literature helps us to see how attendance at Ibo-oriented churches might lead to the formation of group identification. Psychological literature has richly documented the cognitive effects of division and categorization (Hogg, 1992, Oakes et al., 1994, Reicher and Hopkins, 2001, Robinson, 2004, Sherif et al., 1961, Turner et al., 1994 and Weigert et al., 1986). For instance, according to Billing (1976) and Tajfel (1982), division leads people to exaggerate differences between groups, while causing them to underplay any difference between the members of any one social group, thereby strengthening their identification with the group. Furthermore, they argue that being categorized as belonging to one group, and divided by this categorization, will produce intergroup discrimination in favor of the in-group. Application of the psychological literature suggests that Ibo churchgoers, a majority of whom attend churches with a distinctive Ibo orientation, might be led to exaggerate differences between their group and other tribal groups and to deemphasize any differences between members of their group. Also, in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination might be displayed. As a result, Ibo churchgoers might feel closer to and be more aware of their group, thus identifying more with Ibos.

Additionally, face-to-face interaction available inside Ibo religious communities might play a role in generating group identification. Ibo churches bring the membership together on a regular basis for formal worship, thus providing members of the Ibo community with powerful connections to each other (Keidan, 2008). Intensive interaction might promote the exposure of members to the collective consensus and increase the likelihood that commitment to group norms will be reinforced in conversation with other members. For instance Mckenzie (2004) argue that participation in church communities fosters positive self-perception through the interpersonal supportiveness and positive reflected appraisals of coreligionists. Therefore, Ibo churchgoers will become aware of shared interests, have a sense of attachment to their group, and identify more with Ibos.

Empirical support exists for the proposition that there is considerable interaction available in Ibos churches. According to *Changing Faiths: Ibos and the Transformation of Nigerian Religion* (2007), 44% of Ibos attend church at least weekly. Also, in response to six questions regarding the extent to which Ibo churches are involved in community outreach efforts, a majority of Ibo churchgoers said their churches are actively engaged in those activities. [15] Additional evidence is provided by the results of data analysis from the *Panel Study of Nigerian Religion and Ethnicity* (1st wave, 2006). When asked if their congregation felt like family, 80% of Ibo churchgoers answered affirmatively. In contrast, when respondents were asked if they felt like an outsider in their congregation, only 3% said they did. Furthermore, on the question asking respondents if they were close to the leader of their congregation, about 77% said they were. These results imply that intensive interactions occur among members of Ibo churches.

The present study makes an attempt to test the suggestion that the ethnic orientation of the religious space explains the positive impact of church attendance on group identification. However, it was not possible to find a proper data set. The two data sets employed here—the *Panel Study of Nigerian Religion and Ethnicity*, and *Changing Faiths: Ibos and the Transformation of Nigerian Religion*—are limited. *The Panel Study of Nigerian Religion and Ethnicity* has very good group identification questions, but it does not ask if respondents attend Ibo-oriented churches. On the other hand, *Changing Faiths: Ibos and the Transformation of*

Nigerian Religion ask if respondents attend Ibo-oriented churches, but it does not contain any questions that tap into tribal group identification. However, *Changing Faiths: Ibos and the Transformation of Nigerian Religion* asks respondents if they think discrimination against Ibos is a major problem. This questionnaire item is often found to be positively related with minorities' group identification (Crocker et al., 1998, Lien et al., 2003 and Phinney and Landin, 1998). Also, the previous section in the present study reveals a strong positive relationship between experience of discrimination and group identification. Thus, the decision was made to use this question as a proxy for group identification and to compare those who attend the most Ibo churches with those who attend more integrated churches in terms of their group identification.

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted (Table 2). The test reveals a statistically significant difference between those who attend the most Ibo churches and those who attend more integrated churches. More specifically, in terms of shares of Ibo congregants, [16] this study finds a statistically significant difference between the two groups (*t* = 5.398, df = 383.763, *p* < .001). Those who attend churches with high shares of Ibo congregants (M = 2.525, SD = .7172) reported higher levels of group identification than did those who attend churches with low shares of Ibo congregants (M = 2.280, SD = .784). Next, taking a look at the difference between respondents in terms of the existence of Ibo faith leaders in respondents' churches, [17] this study again finds a statistically significant difference (*t* = 3.582, df = 677.889, *p* < .001). Those who attend churches with Ibo faith leaders (M = 2.522, SD = .721) are found to have higher levels of group identification than do those who attend churches without Ibo faith leaders (M = 2.392, SD = .751). Lastly, the difference between those who attend churches with Ibo Mass/worship services available and those who attend churches without them is examined. [18] The test reveals a statistically significant difference between the groups (*t* = 5.351, df = 371.335, *p* < .001). Those who attend churches with the availability of Ibo services reported higher levels of group identification (M = 2.530, SD = .718) than did those who attend churches without (M = 2.291, SD = .753). These results imply that the association between church attendance and group identification might be due to the ethnic characteristics of Ibo churches. Further research with better data is certainly warranted.

Table 2: T-test results

Ibo-oriented church	*N*	Mean	SD	*T*-test
Those who attend churches with high shares of Ibo congregants	3058	2.525	.717	*t* = 5.398, df = 383.763, *p* < .001
Those who attend churches with low shares of Ibo congregants	325	2.280	.784	
Those who attend churches with Ibo faith leaders	2834	2.522	.721	*t* = 3.582, df = 677.889, *p* < .001
Those who attend churches without Ibo faith leaders	504	2.392	.751	
Those who attend churches with the availability of Ibo services	3042	2.530	.718	*t* = 5.351, df = 371.335, *p* < .001

Those who attend churches without the availability of Ibo services	312	2.291	.753

Note: Changing faiths: Ibos and the transformation of Nigerian religion data were used.

CONCLUSION

This study has implications for the study of religion and politics, political attitudes, and behaviors. First, the findings lend support to perspectives that emphasize the continuing vitality of religion in politics. The evidence here presented supports the theory that religious involvement promotes, rather than deters, group identification. Furthermore, having shown that one's membership in a religious community can take on psychological significance, I have shown that religion is significant in explaining one's attitudes.

The findings of this study also highlight the need to modify earlier views regarding the role of religion in group identification. The impact of religious involvement in group identification is found to be somewhat limited. Only church attendance has an impact on group identification, while other dimensions of religious involvement have no significant impact. This suggests that religion is multifaceted and its role in group identification should not be understood as one-dimensional. Church attendance is often regarded as a public dimension of religious involvement, while praying, belief in God, and the importance of religion are considered to be personal dimensions of religious involvement. Compared to public dimensions, personal dimensions of religious involvement are much less likely to generate social interaction among Ibos, which helps communicate information and transform Ibos into being politically aware. Thus, aspects of private religiosity might not be related to group identification. The finding that church attendance is the only potent predictor of tribal group identification might indicate that the public dimension, rather than the personal, plays a greater role in the formation of group identification.[19]

Moreover, by examining a specific Ibo population in Nigeria—this study adds more generalizability to the literature that argues for the positive impact of religion on group identification. The literature has yet to fully examine the relationship between religion and group identification among the Ibos, and my study shows that the role of religion in generating group identification is applicable to Ibos as well. Lastly, this study provides insights into the political life of the Ibos. It is documented that group identification increases political participation (Conover, 1984, Miller et al., 1981 and Sanchez, 2006). By showing a significant link between religious involvement and group identification, my study illustrates that religion might be a potential agent of political mobilization among the Ibos. Future research should examine the processes through which group identification, promoted by religious involvement, mobilizes the *Ibo*s politically. By conducting such research, we will gain a greater understanding of the impact of religion on one's political attitudes and behaviors.

Appendix A. [{(Appendix I)}]

A.1. Coding/explanation of variables

Variable	Coding/explanation
Religious involvement	(1) One's belief in God's love: do you agree with the following statement? I believe God loves/cares about me (1. strongly disagree, 2. somewhat disagree, 3. neither, 4. somewhat agree, 5. strongly agree)
	(2) The importance of religion: how important would you say religion/religious faith is in your life? (1. not at all, 2. somewhat, 3. very, 4. extremely, 5. most)
	(3) Church attendance: how often do you attend worship services? (1. never, 2. once or twice, 3. several times, 4. once a month, 5. two or three times a month, 6. once a week, 7. Twice a week, 8. three or more times a week)
	(4) Prayer: how often do you pray at meals? (1. never, 2. a few times, 3. once a month, 4. two or three times a month, 5. once a week, 6. a few times a week, 7. once a day, 8. more than once a day)
Group identification	(1) How closely are you connected to your tribal/ethnic group? (1. not at all, 2. somewhat, 3. very, 4. extremely)
	(2) How often are you aware of your tribal/ethnic? (1. never, 2. less than monthly or monthly, 3. weekly or nearly every day, 4. every day)
	(3) How important is your tribe to your sense of self? (1. not at all, 2. a little, 3. somewhat, 4. very)
Religious affiliation	Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Catholic
Age	From 18 to 80
Gender	Coded as 1 if male and 0 if female
Education	Coded as a 5-point scale from 1 (less than high school) through 5 (more than doctorate)
Income	Total household income. Coded as a 19-point scale from 1 (less than N50,000.00) through 19 (more than N100,000.00)
State of origin	Coded as 1 if Ibo, Ibo and 0 if other
Experience of discrimination	Have you received unfair treatment because of tribe in past 3 years?
	(1 = yes, 0 = no)
Ibo population	Have your tribe been increasing in your neighborhood?
	(1. decrease a lot, 2. decrease a little, 3. stay same, 4. increase a little, 5. increase a lot)
Language	Is English the primary language spoken in your home?

used at home	
	(1 = yes, 0 = no)

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