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ETHNIC IDENTITY AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS AMONG THE ITSEKIRI, IJAW, AND URHOBO PEOPLES OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
Ethnic identity remains a pivotal factor shaping intergroup relations in Nigeria's multi-ethnic society. This study examines the influence of ethnic identity on intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples of Delta State, focusing on cooperation, competition, and conflict. It adopts a qualitative descriptive and analytical design, synthesising sixteen secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and conference papers, and is guided by Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Relations Theory. Among the works reviewed are Okpevra's (2024) Group Identity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Western Niger Delta of Nigeria, Okpevra's (2021) discourse on the history and identity of the Isoko, Folami's (2017) Ethnic-Conflict and Its Manifestations in the Politics of Recognition in a Multi-Ethnic Niger Delta Region, and Okolo's (2008) study of Ethnic Relations and Violent Conflict in the Niger Delta. The study finds that ethnic identity strongly shapes political mobilisation and territorial claims, with disputes over local government headquarters and administrative boundaries in the Warri area recurring as a specific source of tension among the three groups, while trade, intermarriage, and shared economic activity in riverine communities sustain cooperation alongside this rivalry. Unlike Okolo (2008) and Folami (2017), which each analyse conflict through a single case or resource dispute, this paper's distinct contribution is to synthesise perception formation, cooperation-competition-conflict patterns, and social cohesion implications into one unified identity-based framework spanning all three groups. The study recommends inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, continuous intergroup dialogue, and culturally sensitive policies. It concludes that ethnic identity remains both a unifying and divisive force, and its constructive management is essential for strengthening social cohesion and sustainable peace among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples of Delta State.

Keywords: Ethnic, Identity, Intergroup, Relations, Social Cohesion

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Introduction

Nigeria's various ethnic nations differ in religion and language, and ethnic identity remains a major source of affiliation, contention, and political assertion among its people. The repeated expression of ethnicity by individual actors in relevant contexts carries real social significance. The Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo ethnic identities in Delta State serve as a useful reference point for understanding expressions of group interest, territorial attachment, and claims of belonging. Usman and Odeh (2021) observe that ethnic identity in multi-ethnic communities remains a major feature of social life, shaping how individuals behave in ways that reinforce in-group harmony and deepen their sense of attachment. This sustained pattern of socialisation within multi-ethnic communities is what gives ethnic identity its enduring character. A shared language, customs, beliefs, and practices allow people to feel part of a cultural group with a common origin and history rooted in a specific place and time, and collective memory helps preserve that identity across generations. Because two or more groups often coexist and must find ways to cohabit, community groups frequently distinguish themselves as "us" and "them," a distinction that produces and reinforces social boundaries between them.

Inter-group conflict is one of the greatest problems public authorities are facing in Delta State. Very often in the past, crisis between Urhobos and Isokos has led to one form of loss of life or property in Isokoland, Delta State. Examination of inter-ethnic relations tend to direct on shared cultural and worldviews devices and whether one ethnic group see others as in-group or out-group and vice- versa. However, intergroup conflict may arise when relationships over land ownership, political representation and official recognition clash with group identity. As per Demarest and Langer (2025), people during intergroup interaction will behave on the basis of their perception of group interest and group identity. Consequently, the cooperation or competition that the groups exhibit will be a reaction towards their perception of the other groups that share the same arena or social space with them. Okpevra (2024) adds that acknowledgment or recognition of group identity or group distinctiveness can, in some situations, magnify conflicts or heighten tensions between groups, especially where one group marshals historical sentiments and narratives to buttress claims over territory or political dominance.

The relationship of groups in Delta State is mainly seen as a territorial relationship. This is because land is critical as an economic resource but also to claim identity and legitimacy. As noted by Okolo (2014), there have been many instances of competition over towns, communities, local headquarters or state HQ. Afogbor (2004) argued that the violent protests between different cultural groups were fueled not only by material interests. The participation of key groups enters into the computation of intergroup relations and intensifies the stakes. When you infringe upon someone's rights and deny them equal opportunities, it only creates antagonism and hostility. Political rivalry has resulted in further complications to intergroup relations in Delta State. Political competition highly relies on the mobilizing factor of ethnic identity. Political leaders utilize in-group loyalty to garner support for their candidate or party. As shown in Ikime (1969), the political contestants would often be interpreted in ethnic terms and the winning or losing of electoral candidates would be attributed or construed collectively as the winning or losing of the whole ethnic group. As Okolo (2008) notes, the more people unite because of ethnicity, the more trusted but less trusted other identities are. Political competition is viewed as a zero-sum struggle rather than inclusionary. Doing so deepens mistrust among the ethnic communities and extends the cycle of conflict.

The Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo do have their fair share of disturbing cases of intergroup conflict but they are not necessarily hostile to each other. These communities have recognised

coexistence rules. These cultural confluences and social practices provide opportunities for dialogue and peaceful transformations. Folami (2017) argues that if grievances are framed entirely in ethnic terms, parties will find themselves locked in anus-versus-them confrontation that rules out any possibility of dialogue or negotiation. That said, not all forms of ethnic or group recognition incite ethno-political conflict. To guarantee sustainable intergroup relations rather than group-based inequalities and exclusion, a broader framework is required. Ongoing tensions between ethnic and political groups in Delta State pose a constant threat of ethnic conflict. Conducting this study in a multi-ethnic society like Delta State seems clearly relevant because of the pattern present in many ethnic groups. This is true because it strengthens one's ethnic group while damaging a wider civic identity.

Consequently, ethnic identity among Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo still valid as a source of cultural expression and collective. But, when it prevents the development of a viable civic identity based on shared interests, it may become a liability. As stated by Ayenbi (2024), a person's ethnic identity ought to be reflected and modified in a language and culture that maintains its richness. The social segregation of these people has to be ruled out beyond reasonable doubt. Otite (1999) states that appropriate regularization frameworks for inter-ethnic conflicts must be created. It will provide a setting for the meetings where the conflicts can be debated with a view to resolving them. A study of intergroup relations among these three groups may shed light on ethnic hostilities. As a result, they can contribute to more inclusive approaches to peaceful coexistence, conflict management, and community relations in multi-ethnic societies (Okpevra 2024; Okpevra 2021; Folami 2017)

Statement of the Problem

Delta State is home to several ethnic groups, chief among them the Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Urhobo, and while such diversity holds potential for productive interaction and development, relations among these groups have instead often been marked by tension and conflict, particularly around political recognition, belonging, and access to communal resources. Existing studies on the region, such as Okolo (2008) and Folami (2017), have documented these conflicts largely as disputes over territory, oil wealth, or political office, treating identity mainly as a backdrop to material grievance rather than as an object of analysis in its own right. What remains under-examined is the actual content and meaning of ethnic identity as constructed and expressed by the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo themselves, and how this identity, independent of any single resource dispute, shapes their everyday perceptions, attitudes, and interactions with one another. Because the literature tends to foreground explicit conflict episodes without probing the underlying identity processes that sustain them, it offers limited insight into why tensions persist even where no active resource dispute is underway, or why cooperation coexists alongside rivalry among these same groups. This gap leaves an incomplete understanding of intergroup relations in Delta State, one this study addresses by centring ethnic identity itself, rather than any single conflict or resource, as the primary lens for examining cooperation, competition, and conflict among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of ethnic identity in shaping intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples of Delta State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine how ethnic identity shapes perceptions, attitudes, and social interactions among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples in Delta State.

2. Analyze the patterns of cooperation, competition, and conflict that characterize intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples.
3. Examine how the expression and negotiation of ethnic identity influence intergroup boundaries, group interests, and perceptions of belonging among the three ethnic groups.
4. Assess the implications of ethnic identity for peaceful coexistence and sustainable intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples in Delta State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Intergroup Relations Theory (Sherif et al., 1961). Social Identity Theory explains that individuals partly derive their self-concept from the social groups they belong to — such as ethnic or cultural groups. The theory identifies three processes: social categorisation (sorting people into groups), social identification (adopting the group's identity and norms), and social comparison (comparing one's group favourably against others). This drive for a positive social identity produces in-group favouritism and out-group bias, especially when groups compete for status or resources. Applied to this study, it explains why the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo maintain strong, distinct ethnic identities, why each group tends to favour its own members, and why perceived threats to group status — over land, political representation, or oil resources — can deepen suspicion of the other two groups.

Intergroup Relations Theory**,** developed from Sherif's Robbers Cave experiment, argues that relations between groups are shaped by the structure of their goals. Competition over limited resources breeds hostility and negative stereotypes, while shared ("superordinate") goals — which no single group can achieve alone — encourage cooperation. Applied here, it explains how the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo's competing claims over land, oil-producing communities, and political power have historically generated conflict, while instances of joint political or economic action show how shared goals can improve relations.

Review of Key Concepts

The following concepts are reviewed in line with the study:

Ethnic

Ethnic ideology provides insight into how social groups understand differentiation and diversity, typically describing a community perceived to share a common origin, a sense of peoplehood, and cultural identity (Usman & Odeh, 2021). Ethnicity itself is the demarcation of groups based on a presumed common biological ancestry, involving socially constructed meanings that groups attach to perceived differences in order to create boundaries between "us" and "them," and to determine who belongs and who does not (Otite, 1999). In multi-ethnic societies, ethnicity has become a marker of group loyalty and consciousness, particularly serving as a basis for collective identity and social interaction, according to Demarest and Langer (2025). Okolo (2014) further notes that in Nigeria specifically, ethnic groups carry significant social and political importance, often shaping access to power, resources, and representation. This social and political weight attached to ethnicity is closely tied to the broader concept of identity, through which individuals and groups come to understand and position themselves.

Identity

Identity is fundamental to how individuals and groups understand themselves and relate to others in social life, encompassing both the self and the group, and developed through socialisation and shared experience within particular cultural and social environments (Okolo, 2014). Ariye (2013) adds that identity is not fixed but is continually shaped and reshaped over time in response to changing circumstances, interests, ideology, politics, and history. Ethnic identity, in particular, significantly influences the behaviour, attitudes, and social positioning of ethnic groups; it provides a framework for interrogating a group's historical, cultural, and political experience, and for understanding how groups position and orient themselves within the wider social setting. In this sense, ethnic identity gives groups a sense of continuity, coherence, and meaning — a foundation that becomes especially consequential when groups with distinct identities interact, cooperate, or compete within a shared social space, as is the case in intergroup relations.

Intergroup

Groups form the basis of social life, and much of social existence revolves around ties that extend beyond kinship. According to Ikime (1969) and Afogbor (2004), intergroup refers to the process, perception, and interaction that takes place between two or more groups, marked by mutual recognition and awareness of one another's existence. Such groups may be defined along ethnic, cultural, religious, or territorial lines, and their engagement typically develops out of shared experience involving cooperation, competition, or conflict. Competition, in particular, tends to generate a similarity-avoidance response, shaping the beliefs and attitudes groups hold toward one another, while groups may also expend considerable energy competing directly for resources. These patterns of cooperation, competition, and conflict, sustained over time, are what give rise to the broader concept of relations between groups.

Relations

Relations describe the long-term co-existence of groups, expressed through continuous social, economic, political, and cultural interplay, referring specifically to the pattern and nature of interaction between persons and groups (Ayenbi, 2024). This interaction is sustained through overlapping economic pursuits, political commitments, and cultural exchange. Intergroup relations, specifically, refer to how groups relate with, react to, and handle their differences and challenges; a dynamic that may produce harmony and mutual cooperation, or tension, conflict, and rivalry, depending on the quality of interaction, which is itself shaped by the degree of

communication, mutual interest, consultation, and negotiation between groups. These processes are essential for fostering social cohesion and developing mechanisms for dispute resolution and collective commitment (Ayenbi, 2024), while dialogue, reconciliation, and the reduction of bias have been identified as key ways of managing intergroup relations and building lasting cooperation among groups (Demarest & Langer, 2025).

Review of Related Literatures

Okpevra (2024) explored Group Identity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Western Niger Delta of Nigeria. The study underscores the Isoko minority group's struggle for identity as a distinct ethnic group from their neighbours, especially the Urhobo in post-colonial times. The study deployed the historical and analytical methods, with primary and secondary sources to achieve its aim. It asserts the identity of the Isoko as a distinct subnationality, which must not be viewed from the prism of colonial creation of group identity, but from the primordial settings of the people. The opinions of those who have an influence on the form and change in the evolution of a people into an identifiable group have always armed them to deal, in different ways, with the interactions between history, and power relations woven within the maze of internal and external dynamics. The paper shows that the Isoko as a distinct sub-nationality in the comity of ethnic groups in Nigeria became known as from 1963. Both studies share a qualitative, historically grounded approach to examining ethnic identity in the Niger Delta, using documentary sources to trace how group identity shapes intergroup relations. They differ, however, in scope and data: Okpevra (2024) focuses narrowly on the Isoko's struggle for a distinct identity from the Urhobo using primary and secondary sources, while the present study examines three groups (Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo) using secondary sources exclusively. This leaves a gap that the present study addresses, namely the comparative, multi-group dynamics of identity and intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo collectively, rather than one group's identity struggle against a single neighbour.

Okpevra (2021) examined a discourse on the history and identity of the Isoko of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. This work is a review of historical and anthropological knowledge about the Isoko that gradually developed in the literature on ethnic groups in Nigeria. The paper has harnessed this to demonstrate the distinct identity of the Isoko, as opposed to colonial usage that considered the Isoko as a sub-group of the Urhobo, tracing the life of the group from the pre-colonial period. The work is premised on the historical method and interpretation deploying primary and secondary data to achieve its objective. It avers that any endeavour to manipulate identities according to perceptions of political or economic interest has to start from pre-existing identifications. The paper demonstrates that the identity of the Isoko Nationalism was not instituted, until after 1963. Both studies rely on historical, document-based methods to trace how ethnic identity is constructed and asserted over time in the Niger Delta, sharing a common interest in tracking identity claims against colonial or dominant-group narratives. However, they differ in scope: Okpevra (2021) reviews historical and anthropological literature on a single group, the Isoko, using primary and secondary data to distinguish their identity from the Urhobo, while the present study relies exclusively on secondary sources to examine three groups (Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo) collectively. This leaves a gap the present study fills, namely a comparative analysis of intergroup relations among three co-existing ethnic groups, rather than a single group's historical claim to distinct identity against one neighbour.

Folami (2017) investigated the Ethnic-conflict and its manifestations in the politics of recognition in a multi-ethnic Niger Delta region and noted that the conflict over oil exploitation and exploration by the multinational oil companies has manifested in different forms in the Niger

Delta such as intra and inter-ethnic conflict. Distribution of oil wealth is characterised with marginalisation, bias, nepotism and alienation in the region. Most times, lack of recognition in oil wealth distribution led to ethnic conflict. The ethnic conflict in turn has affected family relations, identity and economy; it has led to a deep division among various ethnic groups in the region like the Urhobo, The Ijaw and the Itsekiri. In this study, Recognition Theory was used to examine the epistemology of ethnic conflict in the Niger Delta. This study was carried out in Delta State. Purposive method of data collection was used to select one hundred and twenty-eight participants such as traders, artisans, civil society members, civil servants, farmers, traditional figures, political office holders and opinion leaders. This study found that the ethnic conflict was a fall out of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. The ethnic conflict has a chain of reactions on identity, name, family, economy, settlement and tradition. The two studies converge on the same three ethnic groups, Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo, in Delta State, sharing a concern with how ethnic identity shapes intergroup division and conflict in the region. They differ significantly in method and theoretical grounding: Folami (2017) gathers primary data from 128 purposively sampled participants and applies Recognition Theory to trace conflict specifically to oil wealth distribution, whereas the present study relies exclusively on secondary sources and is anchored on Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Relations Theory rather than Recognition Theory. This leaves a gap the present study fills, namely a broader synthesis of existing scholarship on identity and intergroup relations among the three groups, rather than a field-based investigation centred specifically on oil-related conflict.

Okolo (2008) studied Ethnic relations and violent conflict in the Niger Delta: The case of the Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaws of Delta State, Nigeria. The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was generated through interpersonal interviews (II) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), these interview/Discussions were recorded and later transcribed. While secondary data was sourced mostly through colonial intelligence reports; texts/journals, articles written by eminent scholars on the subject matter, the internet; etc. also contributed greatly toward the quality of this paper. The theoretical framework used in this study is the Frustration-Aggression theory or school of thought in conflict resolution. The rest of the paper is divided into four (4) sections; section one deals with the introduction and historical background to the problem; section two highlighted the theoretical framework employed in the study, while section three which is the pivot of this paper x-rayed case studies of specific violent conflictual situations in the Niger Delta, with particular reference to Delta State. The last section which is the fifth provided certain reflexion and conclusion- It was discovered that, at the bottom of all the several problems (Violent Conflicts) in the study area, is resource based, (oil induced), boundary and local government headquarters constitutes a significant extent as a source/cause of particularly the Ijaw/Itsekiri, Urhobo crises in the Warri situation. The government preferred the "the iron-fist approach or approaches to conflict resolution", but this is considered primitive and not usually successful. Turning to Okolo (2008), this study also focuses on the same three groups, Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo, in Delta State, and similarly traces intergroup conflict to oil-related resource disputes, particularly boundary and local government headquarters issues in the Warri area. It differs from the present study in relying on primary data (interviews and focus group discussions) alongside secondary sources, and in applying Frustration-Aggression theory rather than Social Identity Theory or Intergroup Relations Theory. This leaves a gap the present study fills, namely a synthesis of documentary and scholarly evidence across all three groups, framed through identity-based rather than frustration-based theoretical lenses.

Research Methodology

The research design was qualitative in nature, describing and analysing ethnic identity and intergroup relations involving the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples of Delta State. The researcher did not gather primary data; rather, the study relied on secondary data drawn from published and unpublished sources, including journal articles, books, theses, dissertations, and conference papers. Similar studies on ethnic identity and intergroup relations in the Niger Delta have combined primary and secondary sources. Okpevra (2024, 2021) used historical and analytical methods with both data types to establish the Isoko as a distinct sub-nationality, while Folami (2017) applied purposive sampling to select 128 participants alongside documentary sources to examine ethnic conflict and recognition politics. Okolo (2008) similarly combined interviews and focus group discussions with secondary sources such as colonial intelligence reports and scholarly texts to study ethnic relations among the Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw. Unlike these studies, the present study relies exclusively on secondary data, given its focus on synthesising and critically analysing existing scholarly and documentary accounts rather than generating new field data.

Documents were selected based on their direct relevance to ethnic identity, intergroup relations, and the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples of Delta State, with preference given to sources grounded in Social Identity Theory or Intergroup Relations Theory, or addressing the historical, cultural, or political relations among the three groups. Sources were drawn from academic databases, university repositories, and library catalogues, restricted to English-language materials published between 1998 and 2024. A total of five documents were reviewed and analysed for the study. The research approach is critical in enabling a researcher to choose the best method of collecting and analysing data for the problem under investigation, and should fit the nature of the problem being studied (Sarantakos, 1998). Qualitative research is the approach utilised in this article, focusing on meanings, perceptions, and social interpretations. This social orientation makes qualitative research especially suitable for studying ethnic identity, given that it shapes social relations, political action, and social behaviour beyond the individual level. Accordingly, a qualitative method is appropriate for an academic article examining the ethnic identity of the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples of Delta State.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings was done in line with the objectives of the study

Influence of Ethnic Identity on Perceptions and Interactions

The Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo of Delta State derive their self-identity and ethnic identity from how they see themselves in relation to their history and to one another. Okpevra (2024) argues that an ethnic group's identity is constructed on a sense of shared history, such that individuals identify with particular group identities as a way of making sense of social realities. Okpevra (2021) builds on this by showing that the construction of identity within ethnic groups produces in-group favouritism and out-group derogation: members draw a persistent line between "us" and "them," extending leniency to their own group while judging outsiders more critically. Read together, both works suggest that ethnic identity in Delta State is not simply a passive inheritance of ancestry, language, and custom, but an active, ongoing process through which groups continually reaffirm boundaries and reinforce a favourable image of themselves relative to their neighbours.

This boundary-drawing process, however, does not occur in a vacuum; it interacts directly with material conditions. Folami (2017) contends that ethnic identity shapes access to resources, political visibility, and economic opportunity, particularly where a shared language or group affiliation determines who benefits from such coordination. When one group is perceived to

benefit disproportionately, this breeds suspicion and competition among the others. Okolo (2014) adds a further layer to this picture, arguing that perceptions of identity are not formed independently but are rooted in individuals' socio-political experiences, which in turn reinterpret how people understand one another and shape their interactions.

Taken together, these accounts point to a two-way relationship rather than a simple cause-and-effect chain: ethnic identity shapes how the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo perceive and relate to one another (Okpevra, 2024, 2021), while lived socio-political and economic experience, particularly unequal access to resources and opportunity, feeds back into and hardens those very identities (Folami, 2017; Okolo, 2014). This reinforcing cycle helps explain why ethnic boundaries in Delta State have proven durable: each perceived instance of unequal treatment does not merely generate grievance but is absorbed back into group identity itself, deepening the sense of "us" versus "them" that Okpevra's work describes. It is this cycle, rather than identity or resource competition alone, that appears to sustain the suspicion and rivalry observed among the three groups.

Patterns of Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict

Intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples reflect a complex mixture of cooperation, competition, and conflict shaped largely by ethnic identity and resource distribution. Okolo (2008) explains that despite recurring tensions, these groups engage in meaningful cooperation through trade, intermarriage, and shared economic activities, particularly in urban and riverine communities. Such interactions demonstrate that intergroup relations are not entirely hostile but are also characterized by mutual dependence and social exchange. However, these cooperative engagements are often overshadowed by underlying competition over political power and economic resources. This coexistence of cooperation and rivalry illustrates the fragile nature of intergroup relations in the region. Folami (2017) further emphasizes that competition over oil wealth, employment opportunities, and political representation has intensified ethnic rivalry in Delta State. The author notes that struggles over resource control often escalate into violent confrontations, particularly when groups perceive themselves as marginalized or excluded from benefits. Okolo (2008) also identifies disputes over land ownership, local government headquarters, and administrative boundaries as recurring sources of intergroup tension, particularly among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo communities. These contestations often transform political and economic disagreements into ethnic conflicts, deepening divisions between groups. As these patterns of competition and conflict persist, they significantly shape the broader implications of intergroup relations for social cohesion.

Implications of Ethnic-Based Intergroup Relations for Social Cohesion

Ethnic-based intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples have far-reaching implications for social cohesion in Delta State. Okolo (2008) observes that when ethnic identity becomes a tool for political mobilization and resource competition, it undermines trust and weakens the social fabric that binds communities together. The author explains that such dynamics often extend beyond political structures to affect family relations, economic activities, and settlement patterns, thereby creating long-term divisions among groups. Folami (2017) similarly notes that ethnic conflict rooted in resource distribution and recognition leads to deep social fragmentation, reducing opportunities for collaboration and shared development. These consequences demonstrate how ethnic identity, when politicized, can destabilize intergroup harmony.

On the other hand, Okpevra (2021) argues that ethnic identity, when properly recognized and respected, can serve as a foundation for dialogue and peaceful coexistence among groups. The

author emphasizes that acknowledging diversity and fostering mutual respect can reduce tension and encourage cooperative engagement. Okpevra (2024) further highlights that intergroup relations are socially constructed and can be reshaped through inclusive policies and shared social experiences. These perspectives suggest that while ethnic identity can be a source of division, it can also promote unity when managed effectively. This dual nature of ethnic identity therefore highlights the need for deeper understanding of its role in shaping intergroup relations within multi-ethnic societies.

Broader Synthesis of Findings

Across all objectives, the findings consistently reveal that ethnic identity is central to understanding intergroup relations among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples. Identity shapes perceptions, influences interactions, and determines whether groups engage in cooperation or conflict. Okpevra (2021; 2024) and Okolo (2008) collectively demonstrate that historical narratives, territorial claims, and socio-political experiences all contribute to the formation of ethnic consciousness that guides group behaviour. These identity-driven dynamics influence how groups interpret fairness, recognition, and belonging in shared environments. The cumulative effect is a continuous negotiation between unity and division within Delta State. Furthermore, the findings show that intergroup relations are not fixed but are dynamic and context-dependent. Folami (2017) and Okolo (2008) highlight that while conflict is often visible, underlying structures of cooperation continue to exist through economic and social interactions. However, the persistence of unresolved grievances and political manipulation of ethnicity continues to destabilize these relationships. This interplay between cooperation and conflict underscores the complexity of managing ethnic diversity in the region. It therefore becomes necessary to examine how such dynamics can be better understood and managed to promote long-term stability and cohesion.

Conclusion

The study indicates that the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo ethnicity in Delta State has had a great impact on intergroup relations. Because ethnic identity is a central concept to the group's worldview, ethnic identity plays a central interpretative role. In addition, it organises social relations between the groups as they struggle to safeguard and advance their corporate interests in the political sphere. In addition, ethnic identity also plays out in defence of economic and territorial space among the groups. As such, in contexts of high ethnic consciousness such as the multi-ethnic Delta State of Nigeria, ethnic identity tends to overshadow other forms of identity in the analysis of intergroup relations. When examined from a conflictual angle, the manifestation of ethnic identity creates differences which is politicisation of ethnic shifts. In this sense, resources refer to defence of ethnic interest. The results of the study reveal that Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo ethnic identities show a continuous tension between integration and division, demonstrating that peaceful coexistence depends largely on how ethnic differences are managed within the broader socio-political environment of Delta State.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:
(1) Government and stakeholders should strengthen inclusive policies that promote fairness in political representation and reduce ethnic marginalization among the Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo peoples.
(2) Structured intergroup dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives should be consistently encouraged to improve mutual understanding and reduce stereotypes among the groups.

(3) Equitable distribution of resources, especially in contested areas, should be prioritized to reduce competition and perceived injustice.
(4) Civic education and community-based sensitization programmes should be implemented to promote unity, tolerance, and shared identity among ethnic groups in Delta State.

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