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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discrimination and social identity: interrogating the impact of local lingua francas on inclusion politics in public institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study is concerned with addressing discrimination in public spaces and interrogates the extent to which the social identity function of a local lingua franca impacted inclusion politics in leadership selections for public institutions in Africa. Guided by social identity and ethnolinguistic identity theories, selecting Ahmadu Bello University in Northern Nigeria as a case study, and using the qualitative research technique, this study found a three-level ethno-religious discriminatory categorization – Core Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Non-Northerners – accommodated within the institution's power hierarchy. Fluency in Hausa, the local lingua franca in Northern Nigeria, was the common factor. Although the language was not a requirement for appointment, it turned out to be the marker of social identity that positively impacted inclusion politics. With extensive linguistic acculturation, African nation states are better off investing in the propagation of the local lingua franca to address negative discrimination in public spaces.

Résumé

Cette étude s'intéresse à la lutte contre la discrimination dans les espaces publics et se demande dans quelle mesure la fonction d'identité sociale d'une lingua franca locale a eu un impact sur les politiques d'inclusion dans la sélection des dirigeants des institutions publiques en Afrique. Guidée par des théories d'identité sociale et d'identité ethno-linguistique, en sélectionnant l'Université Ahmadu Bello dans le Nord du Nigéria comme étude de cas et en utilisant la technique de recherche qualitative, cette étude a révélé une catégorisation discriminatoire ethnoreligieuse à trois niveaux, à savoir les Nordistes centraux, les Nordistes périphériques et les non-Nordistes, au sein de la hiérarchie du pouvoir de l'institution. La maîtrise du haoussa, la lingua franca locale du Nord du Nigeria, était le facteur commun. Bien que n'étant pas une condition requise pour la nomination, la langue s'est avérée être un facteur d'identité sociale qui a eu un impact positif sur les politiques d'inclusion. Avec une acculturation linguistique importante, les États-nations africains ont intérêt à investir dans la propagation de la lingua franca locale pour lutter contre la discrimination négative dans les espaces publics.

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Resumo

O presente estudo tem por objetivo abordar a discriminação em espaços públicos e interrogar até que ponto a função de identidade social de uma língua franca local teve impacto nas políticas de inclusão na seleção de dirigentes de instituições públicas em África. Orientado pelas teorias da identidade social e da identidade etnolinguística, seleccionando a Universidade Ahmadu Bello, no Norte da Nigéria, como estudo de caso, e utilizando a técnica de investigação qualitativa, este estudo encontrou uma categorização discriminatória etnorreligiosa a três níveis – núcleos do Norte, núcleos periféricos do Norte e não-núcleos do Norte – acomodada na hierarquia de poder da instituição. A fluência em Hausa, a língua franca local no Norte da Nigéria, era o fator comum. Embora a língua não fosse um requisito para a nomeação, acabou por ser um fator de identidade social que teve um impacto positivo na política de inclusão. Com uma aculturação linguística extensiva, os estados-nação africanos têm mais vantagem em investir na propagação da língua franca local para combater a discriminação negativa nos espaços públicos.

Introduction

Across the world, the issue of discrimination continues to take centre stage in the discourse of the crisis of intergroup relations. Identity instrumentation, territorial belonging, inclusion and the consequential conflicts that arise from the associated discriminatory practices continue to subsist as universal phenomena of human interaction (Widlok 2015). Contemporary literature has extensively analysed the dynamics of different objects of discrimination, such as citizenship, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion, class and gender (Giulietti *et al.* 2015). These subjects have been interrogated within different shades of intergroup relations across global regions and national and subnational spaces in their respective nuances of territorial belonging. It is striking that war, insurgency, terrorism and all forms of political violence in human history have links with discrimination. Due to the high frequency of the cases, the need to interrogate the social problems associated with discrimination thus remains compelling.

The superiority of national citizenship over other objects of discrimination has been enhanced by post-modernization and globalization in Western Europe and the Americas (Isin and Wood 1999). However, national citizenship in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and some parts of Eastern Europe has continued to be subverted despite post-modernization and globalization (Widlok 2015). The interrogation of the crisis of citizenship in Africa has apportioned blame largely to such factors as ethnicity, indigeneity and religion (Kendhammer 2014). Concerted scholarly attention has not been focused on language as a stand-alone object of discrimination, and neither has its contribution to inclusion politics been subjected to interrogation. This is probably because it is taken as a proxy for ethnicity, and may be because it is closely aligned with religion, given the relationship between Arabic and Islam. Very few scholars – among them Anderson and Paskeviciute (2006) – treat ethnicity and language as detached, independent variables when analysing their political impacts. Their work affirms that population heterogeneity in the form of ethnic and linguistic diversity affects citizenship behaviour and the quality of civil society in a country. Despite that affirmation, due to the wide academic interest in interrogating those other

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aforementioned notorious objects of discrimination, the issue of the political impact of lingua francas, given its social identity function, in the politics of inclusion and territorial belonging in public spaces has attracted far less scholarly attention.

The emergence of Barak Obama (of African descent) as president in the USA (2009–17) and Rishi Sunak (of Indian descent) as prime minister in the UK (in 2022), despite their race and colour, are classical cases that underscore the primacy of social identity in citizenship practices and its potentiality to override those other notorious objects of discrimination. Language is particularly noted to be an effective builder of social identity. It is theoretically established that language often plays decisive psychological roles in inter-ethnic behaviour in a social context (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and that language identity largely strengthens individual and group belonging in multi-ethnic territories (Giles and Johnson 1981). Given the prevalence of ethno-religious sensitivities and inter-regional acrimonies in the struggle for access to public spaces, which continues to degrade national citizenship in African nation states, it becomes reasonable to interrogate the extent to which the social identity function of local lingua francas in multi-ethnic regions in Africa impacts the politics of inclusion and territorial belonging in public spaces.

The dynamics of politics at the level of subnational public spaces in Nigeria can be used to exemplify the African situation. There are instances of geo-regional belonging in multi-ethnic territories with a local lingua franca and huge public postures of collective oneness in Nigeria. These include 'Northerners' with the Hausa language as the local lingua franca in the northern region; 'South-Westerners' with the Yoruba language as the local lingua franca in the South-West geopolitical zone; and 'South-Easterners' with the Igbo language as the local lingua franca in the South-East geopolitical zone of the nation state. The multi-ethnic society of the South-South geopolitical zone of the country, sometimes called the Niger Delta region, is the only exception in this respect. The public postures of political cohesion of those subnational collectives, and the local lingua franca associated with their respective collective oneness, are so huge that they challenge Nigeria's national political cohesion and degrade the development of national citizenship.

Focusing on those types of multi-ethnic subnational public spaces in African nation states, therefore, the principal research question is: to what extent does the social identity function of the local lingua franca impact the politics of inclusion and territorial belonging in public spaces? To interrogate that question, this article is divided into eight sections, including this introduction. The next segment, on materials and methods, is section two. Section three discusses the theoretical connection between social identity and language. Section four discusses language policy and power relations in Africa. Section five highlights the factors that make up the collective oneness of the northern region of Nigeria. The sixth section explores consequential factors in the inclusion politics of leadership selection in a first-generation public institution in the region. The seventh section presents a comparison with universities in the southern region. The conclusion is the eighth section.

Materials and methods

Concerns have been expressed about the growing phenomenon of discriminatory politics of inclusion in staff and leadership appointments in tertiary education

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institutions in Nigeria (Egbokhare 2017). Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) is one of those federal universities that is specifically mentioned in this regard (Arowosegbe 2016). Therefore, in engaging the aforementioned research question, the politics associated with the appointment of principal officers in ABU, an institution located in Zaria in the northern region of Nigeria, was interrogated qualitatively. ABU, a first-generation university in Nigeria, was established in 1962 by the then Northern Region government to meet the tertiary education aspirations of Nigerians, particularly from that region. At that time, the Eastern Region government had established the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), in 1960, to meet the higher education aspirations of Nigerians, especially from its region. Similarly, the Western Region government had established the University of Ife (UNIFE) (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), in 1961, for Nigerians, particularly from its region. Nigeria was a federation of three regions at that time. Thus, as of 1962, the federal government had two federal universities, University of Ibadan and University of Lagos, for all Nigerians irrespective of ethnicity or region of origin. The three regional governments had one regionally owned university each: UNN, UNIFE and ABU. Hence, since its inception, ABU had been a unifying factor for the different ethno-religious groups in the northern region of Nigeria.

The northern region of Nigeria is largely home to the Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri, plus another 305 minority ethnic groups closely affiliated with the Hausa language, which had become the local lingua franca in the whole region. Thus, in addition to ABU as a tertiary education institution, the Hausa language is another very strong unifying factor for all 308 ethnic groups indigenous to the region. However, ABU and the other two regionally owned universities at the time, UNIFE and UNN, as well as all the other state government-owned universities that were founded later, after the Nigerian federation had been broken into twelve state units in 1967, were annexed in 1977 by the federal government, and they all became federal universities. Subsequent state creation exercises have brought the total number of state units in Nigeria to thirty-six, with one Federal Capital Territory, culminating in the proliferation of federal universities. These historical and sociological factors make the northern region and ABU suitable for the issue under interrogation. Primary data were gathered through key informant interviews (KIIs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). The study interrogated the perception of fifteen purposively selected respondents from groups connected with the principal officers' selection politics in the institution. Some data were also gathered via KIIs at the University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and University of Lagos to compare the phenomenon of ethno-religious domination of federal universities by the ethnic majority in the location of the institutions.

Those interviewed – all judged to be prominent actors across multiple episodes of the principal officers' selection politics in ABU – included members of staff unions, staff ethnic associations and staff religious associations, failed applicants for principal officer positions, incumbent/former principal officers, incumbent/former university governing council members, and former observers from the Federal Character Commission. The selection ensured a fair multi-ethnic spread and Muslim/Christian balance, although gender parity could not be achieved in the selection due to the dearth of female key actors in the top hierarchy of the selected groups in the institution. The study accessed other relevant primary data from the university registry. Secondary data were generated largely from contemporary literature on the

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social and ethnolinguistic identity functions of language, language policy in Africa, inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria, and university governance law. The fieldwork was first done between June and October 2017, and later updated between June and October 2021, and between June and August 2023. The data gathered, which were analysed thematically, covered the period from 1980 to 2021.

The theoretical connection between social identity and language

The social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979) and the ethnolinguistic identity theory of Giles and Johnson (1981) are combined in this study to explain the theoretical connection between social identity and language. The principal ideational springboard for the social identity theory, which originally seeks to explain how intergroup conflicts are caused by group-based self-definitions, is that individuals are social animals with a penchant for defining, protecting and strengthening their own identities in relation to social groups (Islam 2014). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), group identities entail the classification of one's in-group in relation to an out-group, and an inclination to have a favourable predisposition towards one's own in-group in relation to an out-group. In the competition for positive identity, the processes produce negative evaluation, stereotyping and resource denial for the out-group, and a depersonalized identity that is constructed on devoted membership and infused with positive evaluation for the in-group. Intrinsically, therefore, the predispositions and actions towards out-group members are directly connected to the desire to protect or enhance the self, using the in-group as an instrument. In essence, self-enhancement motives via group-based categorization are the social identity bases for discrimination (Islam 2014).

Ethnolinguistic identity theory, brewed from social identity theory, postulates the connection between group belonging and language use in social contexts. The theory outlines four conditions, distilled from social identity theory – namely, social categorization, social identity, social comparison and psychological distinctiveness – that are considered necessary for creating a favourably valued ethnolinguistic distinctiveness. It presumes that where such ethnolinguistic distinctiveness has been created and adopted as a lingua franca in a multi-ethnic society, language identity largely strengthens individual and group belonging in the multi-ethnic territory. The four aforementioned conditions emphasize an individual's view of another as a member of the in-group and the individual's cognizance of the values associated with their in-group. They also underscore the individual's desire to support their in-group more than an out-group, and the individual's positive perception and self-identification with their in-group. As conjectured, all these are a collective by-product of a favourably valued ethnolinguistic distinctiveness in social contexts (Giles and Johnson 1981).

Some shortcomings have been identified in both social identity and ethnolinguistic identity theories. The first, concerning both, is their inability to explain multiple group memberships. The second, also concerning both theories, is their use of individual-based social identity to explain group behaviour. The third shortcoming, which concerns ethnolinguistic identity theory, has to do with its tendency to put different people in constricted categories of ethnolinguistic identity by not taking into consideration the characteristic differences between groups and individuals (Edwards and Liu 1997). However, it is gratifying that the two theories have made

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noteworthy contributions to the understanding of the intersection between language and social identity.

Unequivocally, language has two principal functions. The first is that it is a means of communication. The second function is that it helps to assert one's identity as distinct from others (Giles and Saint-Jacques 1979). This makes language a strong marker of social identity, with the capability to bind groups, divide groups and displace other identities (Jaspal 2009), thus contributing to social cohesion on the one hand, and social fragmentation and conflict on the other (Kulyk 2011). Tajfel (1978: 63) defined social identity as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group'. This presupposes an individual's self-conviction, as a function of their awareness of public acceptance, of their membership in a social group. While there exists a strong emphasis on the relationship between language and ethnicity, however, it is indisputable that identity is context-specific (Cohen 2000), and, in certain contexts, language identity supersedes the notion of ethnicity as a factor determining social group membership (Jaspal 2009).

Concerning the politics of social identity, power remains its ultimate goal. The connection between language and power in today's world pivots on two points. The first is the de-territorialization of all languages. Due to the development of new media and communications technology, all languages are given an outlet via a modern transnational framework that is not restricted by any geographical boundary. Logically, this puts all languages in global competition for international recognition and relevance (Bourdieu 1991). The second is the concept of 'social, linguistic and cultural capital', just like the idea of 'investment capital' in economic terms. Morrison (2000: 471) defines linguistic capital as 'fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status, worldwide language which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural and political power and status in local and global society'. Linguistic capital involves an appreciable variety of linguistic abilities and orientations that gives individuals and groups some competitive edge in social identity and thus becomes a form of capital for investment in social, economic and political power relations (Bourdieu 1997).

Language policy and power relations in Africa

Language policy in Africa is entangled between two ideological positions: the 'nineteenth-century European nation state ideology' versus the 'twentieth-/twenty-first-century African renaissance ideology'. The first ideological position, inspired by European historical and cultural experiences, is entrenched in Eurocentric perspectives such as Western 'modernizing mission convictions' and European exceptionalism, both being by-products of orientalism. It features linguistic homogeneity in state formation. The second ideological position, underpinning anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist philosophies, is inspired by idealistic romanticism regarding notions of universal human rights, linguistic rights, and African identity, personality and self-rule. It features the appreciation of Africa's socio-linguistic realities, characterized by ethnolinguistic multiplicity (Wolff 2017: 2).

Generally, African nation states have set policies to bridge the ideological divide. This finds expression in their language policy windows showcasing their decisions on

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foreign and indigenous languages in terms of their usage status in education, media, business, government and international relations. Logically, the dynamics of power relations and the national needs of the respective nation states have unavoidably resulted in language policy diversity and instability on the continent. Spitulnik (1998: 164–5) has argued that the use or non-use of a particular language in a certain context carries a lot of values, and in managing language in the public space, some types of power relations are maintained through 'linguistic hegemonies'. For Africa, the declared national needs – which, in some cases, made power relations drive language policy, and, in other cases, made language policy drive power relations – are largely underpinned by racial and or ethnic hegemonic politics.

Mauritania provides a typical example of how language policy drove power relations. During the colonial era, the French colonial officers initially tolerated Arabic as the country's language of inter-communal communication, being the language of Islam and Qur'anic education, and they heightened its central place as a unifying lingua franca in the country. This was to minimize areas of friction with the local population while completing the political conquest of the country. Later, as they consolidated their hold on the territory, the colonial officers gradually relegated Arabic by promoting and enforcing French as the official language in education and government. The aim was to enhance the French assimilation policy in the entire territory. This largely attracted and favoured those from slave lineages and some other notable ethnic groups, such as the Wolof, Soninke and Halpulaar, categorized as Trab al-Sudan, the 'black moors' of the sedentary south of the country. This was because the opportunities provided by development moved those ethnic groups into front-line power positions, bringing them to par with other ethnic groups in the colonial setting (Pettigrew 2007).

However, with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania's independence in 1960, the new leaders of the country, who were largely from those categorized as Trab al-Bidan, the Saharan 'white moors' of the nomadic north of the country, started a national re-orientation towards the Maghreb and Middle East as part of their socio-cultural decolonization agenda for the nation state. Their measures explicitly promoted Arabic as the language of education, media and government. Thus, with language as the battleground for power struggles, the Trab al-Sudan populations in the south of the country, who had gained some advantages by virtue of their participation in the French colonial education system, suddenly discovered that their front-line status and opportunities occasioned by their French language skills had been overthrown by the Trab al-Bidan populations of the north of the country, given the latter's Arabic language skills favoured by the ruling elite's Arabization measures.

The turbulent protests by the Trab al-Sudan population against the ruling Trab al-Bidan Arabization measures challenged nation building for quite some time before both sides arrived at a compromise. Consequently, while Arabic has remained the sole official language, three other indigenous languages also enjoy national status under the constitution. These are Pulaar, Soninké, and Wolof of the Trab al-Sudan population. Although French has no official status, it is still widely understood and used as an inter-communal language and in the media and in business in the country (Pettigrew 2007).

Ethiopia offers a classic example of how power relations drove language policy. The nation state had about seventy-five identified ethnic groups and eighty different

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indigenous language groups, including larger ones, such as Afan Oromo, indigenous to 33.80 per cent, and Amharic, indigenous to 22.99 per cent of the population (Salawu and Aseres 2015). However, Amharic had long been Ethiopia's official language despite the small size of its indigenous population in relation to Afan Oromo. Amharic shot to the fore when Emperor Tewodros II (1855–68) of Ethiopia, from the Amharic-speaking ethnic group, legitimized it as a better substitute for Gèez for use in writing his royal chronicles. Amharic thus became the language of the king's court and consequently grew in status to become a symbol of national unity and identity. Succeeding kings of Ethiopia, after Tewodros II, sustained its use as their literary language. This official status meant that it was spoken nationwide and became the dominant language in the nation state. However, King Menelik II of Ethiopia, in 1908, brought in English as a language of international trade, diplomacy and global reach, and established modern, Western-type schools that relied exclusively on English as a medium of instruction. But this did not tamper with the national status of Amharic (Dires 2019).

The 1955 constitution of Ethiopia, instituted by King Haile Selassie I, also from the Amharic-speaking ethnicity, formerly proclaimed Amharic as the official language of Ethiopia. To enforce the language policy in non-Amharic-speaking provinces, the king took drastic actions that were interpreted by other language groups as the government's desperation to obliterate their linguistic identities. This resulted in civil war when citizens from both Eritrea and Oromo provinces embarked on armed rebellion to restore their identity. The crisis culminated in the deposition of the king by a Marxist military junta in 1974, with the aim of according each nationality full rights of self-government and rights to use its own language, without demoting Amharic as the official national language (Salawu and Aseres 2015).

The decision by the military junta not to tamper with the long-held prestigious position of Amharic displeased the rebellious provinces, which continued their armed struggle. This culminated in the fall of the military junta in 1991 when the armed Tigrean ethnic group overran Addis Ababa. The new government rolled out a new language policy that made provision for primary school teaching in the indigenous language of each ethnic group, eighty in total, thus relegating the official national status of Amharic. Eritrea eventually gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 (Dires 2019).

Given the language-inspired political turmoil in Mauritania and Ethiopia, it becomes instructive for Africa's ruling elite that the promotion of a local lingua franca is better situated outside ethnic hegemonic politics. For now, it is gratifying that national language policymaking in many African nation states draws inspiration from several well-debated thoughts. First, to further the goals of modernization, linguistic homogeneity is more appropriate than linguistic diversity. Second, linguistic homogeneity serves the purposes of nation building more than linguistic heterogeneity. Third, accommodating colonial languages, considered as neutral media, to enhance modernization in Africa is tantamount to entrenching the exploitative economic interests of the former colonial powers. Fourth, no language is superior to others. Fifth, real political decolonization calls for socio-cultural decolonization, hence the need to promote a locally sourced national lingua franca. And sixth, nation states need to liberalize their citizens' access to multiple languages, given the phenomena of globalization, postmodernism and universal linguistic rights (Salawu and Aseres 2015).

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Nevertheless, with the incidence of identity consciousness in Mauritania and Ethiopia despite the global reach of the European languages in use there, it can be assumed for now that the social identity function of local lingua francas, devoid of ethnic hegemonic politics, can be a more worthwhile tool for nation building, rather than that of a colonially imposed national lingua franca. For Nigeria, the main question for this article is: to what extent does the social identity function of Hausa as a local lingua franca impact the politics of inclusion and territorial belonging in public spaces in Northern Nigeria?

Collective oneness of the northern region of Nigeria

The public image of the oneness of the northern region of Nigeria is huge, despite its reputation as a multi-ethnic society, parading 308 ethnic groups indigenous to the territory, out of Nigeria's estimated 400 ethnic groups (Reed and Mberu 2015: 419). Northern Nigeria also contains nineteen out of the present thirty-six state units of the Nigerian federation. The region thus has diverse socio-religious structures and is acclaimed as having 54.2 per cent of Nigeria's population, according to the 2006 census. Observably, the oneness of the northern region is given expression in the ease with which the military elite of northern extraction mobilized and carried out successful military coups that imposed northern military officers such as Yakubu Gowon (1966–76), Murtala Muhammed (1976), Muhamadu Buhari (1983–84), Ibrahim Babangida (1984–93), Sanni Abacha (1993–98) and Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–99) as military heads of state. The only military coup led by a southerner in the history of Nigeria was the January 1966 Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuma Nzeogwu-led putsch that collapsed within two days and culminated in the 1967–70 civil war.

The ease with which the northern political elite also mobilized during a number of democratic elections, installing Ahmadu Bello as prime minister (1960–66), and Shehu Shagari (1979–83), Umar Yar'Adua (2007–09) and Muhamadu Buhari (2015–23) as presidents of Nigeria, also attests to the significant role of the oneness of the northern region. Some instances of southern leadership of the federal government – Nnamdi Azikiwe (ceremonial president, civilian: 1960–66), Aguiyi Ironsi (military: 1966), Olusegun Obasanjo (military: 1976–79/civilian: 1999–2007) and Earnest Shonekan (interim head of government, civilian: 1993) – largely occurred thanks to the political concession of northern military and political elites. However, there are a few exceptions to this. The annulled 12 June 1993 presidential election presumably won by Moshood Abiola (southerner) against Bashir Tofa (northerner) as sole contender; the 2011 presidential election won by Goodluck Jonathan (southerner) against Muhamadu Buhari (northerner) as the main contender among many; and the 2023 presidential election won by Bola Tinubu (southerner) against Atiku Abubarkar (northerner), as the main contender among many – these were a few cases that defeat the logic of the strength of the political oneness of the northern region in democratic elections. Nevertheless, it can be said that the north has largely continued to dominate Nigeria's political landscape, producing nine of Nigeria's military heads of state and civilian presidents between 1960 and 2023, compared to six from the south. This was the main basis for the southern elite's agitation for the adoption of a rotational presidency system in the country's democratic practice (Tom and Attai 2011).

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The following nine outstanding factors can be adjudged as being responsible for the perceived oneness of the northern region in relation to the southern region of Nigeria. The first was the region's collective experience of Usman Dan Fodio's nineteenth-century Fulani jihadist invasion and the ravaging of all the ethnic territories in the Sokoto/Borno/Ilorin axis in the precolonial period (Philips 2017). The second was the colonial protectorate system, which grouped colonial Nigeria into Northern and Southern Provinces, with each province having a distinct system of administration and mutually contradictory educational agenda. Third, there was the British colonial indirect rule system, which foisted the Sultan of Sokoto and the emirs on all the indigenous communities in the former Northern Province (Obiakor and Agajelu 2016).

Fourth, there was the structure of authority in the British indirect rule system in the colonial Northern Province which centred on the emir, to whom submission was a symbol of religious devotion. As the emirs became entrenched in their role as dependable agents of the indirect rule system, colonial authorities were content to maintain the status quo (Lugard 1922: 134–8). The colonial authorities barred Christian missionaries, harmonized the limited government efforts in education with Islamic institutions, and recognized, facilitated and promoted Hausa as the official language in the north, with knowledge of Hausa expected of colonial officers working there (Ochonu 2008). This can be said to have laid the foundation for the emergence of Hausa as the local lingua franca in the Northern Province.

Fifth, there was the unfriendly and disrespectful political behaviour of the colonial-era political elite of the southern region, which created the suspicion of the existence of a southern agenda to dominate the country's political landscape in the eventuality of independence from colonial rule. This compelled the northern elite to coalesce to protect their sectional political future and interests (Obiajulu *et al.* 2017). The sixth is the popularity of agriculture and allied activities as the mainstay of the collective economy in the northern region as distinct from the southern region's industrial and oil-related endowments. The seventh is the large socio-economic infrastructural deficit in the northern region, entrenching a very wide developmental disparity between the northern and southern regions of the nation state (World Bank 2011) and serving as an object of rivalry and suspicion between the two subnational regional blocs.

Eighth, there is the issue of the multiplicity of small minority ethnic groups, 308 in total, including the relatively bigger Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, in the northern region alone, out of Nigeria's total of about 400 ethnic groups. This enabled Hausa to be entrenched as the uncontested local lingua franca in the whole region, differentiating the North from the southern region of the country (Sabiu *et al.* 2018). Ninth, there is the concentration of tertiary education institutions in Kaduna State, making it the educational headquarters of the northern region. There are fifty highly-rated federal and state government-owned tertiary education institutions, including civilian, police, paramilitary and military training establishments, that are located in Kaduna State alone. This facilitated social aggregation and multi-ethnic interactions among the different ethnic groups of the north, aiding the consolidation of Hausa as the local lingua franca in the whole region, thus enhancing the geopolitical oneness of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious region.

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Nevertheless, ethno-religious violence has been a regular feature of intergroup relations for many decades in the region. State units of the Nigerian federation that are hotspots for violent conflicts in the region include Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, Plateau, Taraba, Bauchi, Benue, Yobe and Borno States. The phenomenal notoriety of social upheavals in the region is made worse by the description of certain types of social upheavals as being characteristic of the three geopolitical zones in the region. In the North-West geopolitical zone, social upheavals and criminalities include the indigene–settler crisis, ethno-religious conflicts, the tension between mainstream Islam and the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, conflicts between Fulani herdsmen and other ethnic farmers, and urban and rural banditry, all of which have destructive effects on trade and commerce, inter- and intra-group relations, state–society relations and human security (IPCR 2017). In the North-Central geopolitical zone, a polyglot region, the recurring fatal disputes between Fulani herdsmen and non-Fulani farmers ravage the territory (Mercy Corps 2015). In the North-East geopolitical zone, the Boko Haram insurgency has decimated and impoverished the people of the area. The recurring crises have negatively affected land use and administration, and the real estate market enterprise, resulting in the emergence of settlement patterns along religious and ethnic lines in the major cities. These have led to alliances among ethnic and religious groups against others (Gambo and Omirin 2012).

Now, in the midst of all these, to what extent does the social identity function of Hausa, as the local lingua franca in the northern region of Nigeria, impact the politics of inclusion in principal officers' appointments in ABU?

Inclusion–exclusion mix in leadership selection in ABU

The processes for the appointment of principal officers in ABU provided a feasible platform for engaging the concerns of this article. Interrogations with the selected respondents in the institution proceeded sequentially through six principal analyses that turned out to be consequential. The following constitute a report of the interrogation and findings.

Identity distribution in the institution's workforce

The university registry did not provide specific ethnic distribution of the university workforce. Although available registry records provided the local government area of origin of each member of staff, their ethnic identity could not be ascertained. Therefore, since the social identity function of the Hausa language is the main concern of this article, the interrogation of the identity distribution of ABU's workforce had to be aggregated into notable territorial groups: regions, geopolitical zones and states. From university registry data covering 2003 to 2015, the aggregated percentage of ethnic groups from the entire northern region in the institution's workforce was 92 per cent; the remaining 8 per cent were ethnic groups from Southern Nigeria. This means that at least 92 per cent of the workforce spoke Hausa as the local lingua franca. Divided by geopolitical zone of origin, 65.1 per cent were from the North-West geopolitical zone, the zone where the institution is located, while 20.6 per cent were from the North-Central and 6.2 per cent from the North-East geopolitical zones. In terms of states of origin, ethnic groups from Kaduna State, the

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state in which the institution is domiciled, constituted 53.3 per cent of the institution's entire workforce. All the remaining thirty-five states and the Abuja Federal Capital Territory followed with paltry percentages.[1]

The study interrogated the causes of the ethnic imbalance in the institution's workforce. Three consequential factors were discerned from respondents' responses. First, since the tail end of colonialism to the present day, Kaduna State has enjoyed prominence as the educational centre of the northern region due to the establishment of many tertiary education institutions there. Many ethnic groups of Kaduna State thus annexed the benefit of proximity to those institutions to acquire academic and professional training that readily positioned them for employment opportunities that eventually came up in ABU. This was further enhanced by the catchment area policy of the federal government that favoured indigenes of the federal institutions' geo-ethnic locations in student admissions and junior staff recruitment.

Second, with the establishment of more federal and state government-owned universities across the northern region, many senior-level ABU staff left to join those newer universities, thus creating vacancies that members of ethnic groups in Kaduna State, and some from other proximate states, readily filled. Third, the majority of the respondents insinuated that the institution's staff recruitment was politicized to sustain the hegemony of those whom they categorized as 'Core Northerners', to the disadvantage of those classified as 'Peripheral Northerners' and 'Non-Northerners' by the ratio 6:3:1, using the institution's Appointment and Promotions Committee as a tool. Those considered as Core Northerners were Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri Muslims. Those referred to as Peripheral Northerners were Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri Christians together with all other northern ethnic groups irrespective of religious faith. Non-Northerners were southerners.[2]

This necessitated the interrogation of the geopolitical zones of origin, states of origin and ethnic identity distribution of the members of the institution's Appointment and Promotions Committee who were in office in 2005, 2010 and 2015 for cross-referencing. In the interrogation, it was found that the alleged metrics of the unofficial three-level inclusion politics of territorial belonging – Core Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Non-Northerners in the ratio 6:3:1 – also featured in the membership of the institution's Appointment and Promotions Committee. That alignment suggests some ethnic bias in staff recruitment. However, a few of the respondents disagreed with the suggestion. They claimed that all staff appointments in the institution were by due process and merit. They explained that the 6:3:1 ratio represented the reality of the population proportions of the various ethnic groups proximate to ABU in their territorial aggregates. They suggested that Nigeria's 2006 population census, if demographically analysed by ethnicity, would show that the Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups, put together, constituted not less than 60 per cent of the population of the northern region.[3]

Three findings stand out. First, the ethnic groups of the entire northern region constituted 92 per cent of the institution's workforce, while the remaining 8 per cent were from ethnic groups of the southern region of Nigeria. This meant that at least 92

[1] Registry records, ABU, 8 June 2017.
[2] IDI, 10 June 2017.
[3] *Ibid*.

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per cent of the institution's workforce spoke Hausa as the local lingua franca. Second, it was alleged that, via an unofficial inclusion scheme, power relations in the institution's politics involved three socially constructed groups: Core Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Non-Northerners. Third, those categorized as Core Northerners likely constitute an estimated 60 per cent of the population of northerners, with implications for power relations and linguistic acculturation at institutional and subnational levels. These set the agenda for further interrogations.

The identity distribution of principal officers appointed over time

This study succeeded in analysing the identity distribution of all the principal officers appointed in ABU between 1980 and 2015. Following the alleged unofficial three-hierarchy ethno-religious categorization, it was found that Core Northerners constituted 66.6 per cent, Peripheral Northerners 26.6 per cent and Non-Northerners 6.6 per cent of appointed principal officers during that period. It was also found that, apart from one Christian northerner who was vice-chancellor between 1991 and 1995, all the other seven vice-chancellors, seven deputy vice-chancellors (administration) and eight registrars appointed between 1980 and 2015 were all within the Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri ethnic Muslim bracket categorized as Core Northerners. Five of the six deputy vice-chancellors (academic) were all Christian northerners: that is, Peripheral Northerners. The sixth was a Christian southerner: that is, a Non-Northerner. All six deputy vice-chancellors (academic) were Christians.

To ascertain the extent of participation of the different identity groups in appointment processes, the study interrogated identity distribution in the candidates' pool in 2009–11 for appointment as principal officers in the institution. Considering ethical issues, the university registry refused to provide the identity details of applicants for the positions. This study therefore relied on respondents' oral recollections, largely using estimated statistics and leads in aggregated identity groups. For the position of vice-chancellor, all the respondents agreed that, of the fourteen candidates, eleven (79 per cent) were Core Northerners and three (21 per cent) Peripheral Northerners.[4] For the positions of deputy vice-chancellors, respondents affirmed that the vice-chancellor at the time nominated two Core Northerners as deputy vice-chancellors (administration) and two Peripheral Northerners as deputy vice-chancellors (academic) for senate consideration and voting, thus limiting the choices of the senate to the respective identity groups.

For the position of registrar, respondents said that, of the six applicants, four (67 per cent) were Core Northerners, while two (33 per cent) were Peripheral Northerners. For the position of bursar, respondents said that Non-Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Core Northerners had two (33 per cent) candidates each among the six applicants. For the position of university librarian, respondents agreed that, of the seven applicants, two (28 per cent) were Non-Northerners, three (44 per cent) Peripheral Northerners and two (28 per cent) Core Northerners. The majority of the respondents explained that all the respective identity groups in the institution were familiar with

[4] Candidates either intentionally applied for appointment or did not intend to apply but were approached and persuaded by the Search Committee to do so.

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the longstanding appointment politics, hence the absence of Non-Northerners in the vice-chancellor and registrar candidates' pool.[5]

In essence, it was gleaned from the interviews that, between 1980 and 2015, by ethno-religious sensitivities, Core Northerners were favoured for appointment to the positions of vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor (administration) and registrar, while Peripheral Northerners were favoured for appointment to the position of deputy vice-chancellor (academic). In different periods, persons from the two aforementioned categories of northerners as well as Non-Northerners were appointed to the position of university librarian, and could be appointed to the position of bursar, principally based on the level of the appointees' academic, professional and managerial aptitudes in open competition.[6]

The majority of the respondents explained that the main cause of the unofficial inclusion politics was the ethno-religious interest of the Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri Muslims who constituted the majority (70.8 per cent) of the population of northerners. The passion for the consolidation of Islam in the northern region, and its expansion into the southern region, was reportedly uppermost in their minds, and they considered themselves the most trusted allies and champions of the Islamic mission in Nigeria. Respondents explained that the propagation of that mission, which had engulfed the whole of what then became colonial Northern Nigeria, continued to create sparks of fatal conflicts in the region in the postcolonial nation state, with the numerous minority ethnic groups of the North-Central geopolitical zone, sometimes referred to as the Middle Belt region, posing the most enduring resistance. Hence, the cautious accommodation of those other ethnic groups in the power hierarchy in the institution.[7]

From this subsection, two findings stand out. First, the 6:3:1 ratio of the three socially categorized groups – Core Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Non-Northerners – in the institution's workforce found expression in the identity distribution of appointed principal officers over time. Second, ethno-religious sensitivity was the main driver of unofficial inclusion politics. Now, what were the processes for principal officers' appointments in ABU? Did the processes conform to the provisions of relevant statutes?

The processes for principal officers' appointment

The processes for the appointment of principal officers in ABU between 2003 and 2015 were interrogated for this study. The appointments were navigated through a robust selection and election system that involved four principal bodies: the university senate, congregation, convocation and governing council. The university senate was composed of all professors; heads of colleges, faculties, departments and units; and delegates elected by accredited constituents of the university community. The congregation was composed of all staff of the university. The convocation was composed of all graduands of the institution. The university governing council was

[5] KIIs, 28 July–7 August 2023.
[6] KII, 10 June 2017.
[7] IDIs, 18–21 October 2021.

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composed of three groups. In the first group, the federal government directly appointed the pro-chancellor/chair of the council and five other external members representing the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the federal government and the whole federation. In the second group, there were seven elected internal members. In this second group, by statute, the university senate elected four representatives, the congregation elected two representatives, and the convocation elected one representative. The seven elected internal members and the six appointees of government presided over the principal officers' selection and appointment processes that produced the third group. The third group consisted of four ex-officio members of the council based on their principal officer positions: the vice-chancellor, the two deputy vice-chancellors, and the registrar as statutory secretary of the council. Two other principal officers, the university librarian and the bursar, though not statutory members of the council, carried the status of 'principal officers in attendance' as a tradition at governing council meetings.

The processes for appointments to that third group, the principal officers, involved two other ad hoc organs, the Search Team and the Joint Council and Senate Selection Board (JC&SSB), which were set up especially for the purpose, with prescribed guidelines for assessing the merits and aptitudes of applicants for the principal officer positions. The university senate elected two different sets of representatives in the two organs and the governing council did the same. In every instance, a council member appointed by the governing council served as chair of the Search Team while the pro-chancellor regularly served as the chair of the JC&SSB. All these were cross-referenced and found to align with the statutorily prescribed procedures as established by the Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act No. 11 of 1993 and amended in 1996, 2003, 2012 and 2014, and with the ABU's statutes. In the interrogation, all the respondents agreed that the following critical activities under the established processes followed due process: internal and external advertising, setting up of the Search Team and the JC&SSB, and headhunting, shortlisting and interviewing candidates. It was also agreed that the governing council's superintendence over the entire process was generally seen to be diligent, though at times infested with rancour.[8]

There are two critical findings in this subsection. First, the processes for the appointment of principal officers in ABU conformed to the university laws and statutes. Second, the processes were a hybrid of bureaucratic and democratic elements, given the semblance to an 'electoral college'. The question here is: how were these robust processes breached by discriminatory politics of identity-based inclusion? Seeking the answer to the question necessitated the interrogation of identity distribution in the membership of the principal officers' selection organs and the extent to which the merit assessment instruments deployed in the selection processes allowed subjective preferences.

Identity distribution in the membership of the principal officers' selection organs

The study continued to annex the insight of the alleged three-level social categorization for further interrogation. Given the respondents' familiarity with each member of the

[8] Registry records, ABU, 6 June 2017; KII and IDI, 10 June and 18 October 2017.

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principal officers' selection organs, because there were not many members of these organs, all the respondents' estimates for Core Northerners ranged between 60 per cent and 65 per cent; for Peripheral Northerners, they ranged between 25 per cent and 30 per cent; while Non-Northerners consistently constituted 10 per cent of the membership of the JC&SSB between 2003 and 2015. Interrogations of the identity distributions of the membership of the Search Team and the university governing council according to the unofficial three-level inclusion politics produced quantitative and qualitative data similar to those generated on the JC&SSB. All the respondents agreed that the three-level socially constructed categories of staff identity distribution were reflected to some extent in the composition of the principal officers' selection organs: the Search Team, the JC&SSB and the university governing council.[9]

A decisive finding in this subsection is that the identity distribution in the three socially constructed groups – Core Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Non-Northerners – in ABU's staff composition in the ratio 6:3:1, which found expression in the principal officers' strata, was also reflected in the selection organs. The extent of objectivity of the instruments deployed for assessing the aptitudes of applicants for principal officer positions is therefore suspect.

The extent to which the deployed merit assessment instruments allowed subjective preferences

From the interrogation of candidates' merit assessment instruments deployed in the principal officers' selection processes held between 2003 and 2015, two issues were noted. First, it was found that there were several subjective, discretionarily scored items in the university governing council's guidelines on the assessment instruments used by the JC&SSB. It was agreed by all the respondents that such items, particularly in interview questions, constituted between 15 per cent and 30 per cent. Second, after scoring and ranking, the best three candidates were presented to the governing council for final decision. Picking one from among the best three candidates was sometimes by council member votes and not necessarily by objective merit scores. Respondents agreed that this put subjective pressure on the final selection. There was no evidence that the selection organs officially factored ethno-religious sensitivity or linguistic identity as variables in determining principal officers' appointments. However, all the respondents agreed that the assessments, which factored candidates' academic, professional and managerial aptitudes, spanning across objective and subjective items, were directed at capturing and assessing the academic or professional excellence, managerial acumen and communal acceptability of candidates. The communal acceptability factor was specifically suspect because it appeared to be the window through which the objective merit principle for appointments was breached.[10] What, then, were the rudiments of the communal acceptability factor?

The rudiments of the communal acceptability factor

Two intertwined issues – the definition and content of 'communal acceptability' – were interrogated. All the respondents agreed that 'communal acceptability of a

[9] Registry records, ABU, 10 June 2017; KII and IDI, 15 June and 20 October 2017.
[10] KII and IDI, 10 June 2017 and 18 October 2021.

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candidate' referred to the extent to which the candidate enjoyed the goodwill of the members of the university community as represented by the cumulative behaviour of the members of the selection organs in the course of the appointment processes. They described the 'goodwill of the members of the university community' as communal favour that was a function of the aggregate of subjective factors that positively impacted the objective assessment of the candidate's aptitudes. There was a convergence of opinion that it was impossible for an unknown applicant, and an unpopular candidate, to scale through to final appointment in the selection and election system, irrespective of the level of their academic, professional and managerial aptitudes. In essence, the appointment system was institutionalized to favour candidates who combine demonstrated academic brilliance and good leadership or managerial reputation with campus popularity, from the purview of the aggregate behaviours of the members of the selection organs at the time of the appointment process.[11]

A key question was: what were the elements that determined the campus popularity of candidates? Two principal and two ancillary subjective elements were described by all the respondents as determining the level of campus popularity of candidates. The two principal subjective elements were the candidate's ethno-religious alignment and social identity. The two ancillary subjective elements were the candidate's interpersonal relations and reputation in previous positions of responsibility. Respondents agreed that 'ethno-religious alignment' played the role of institutionalizing the three-level hierarchy of power relations, as Core Northerners, Peripheral Northerners and Non-Northerners, through which Core Northerners were favoured for appointment to the positions of vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor (administration) and registrar; Peripheral Northerners were favoured for appointment to the position of deputy vice-chancellor (academic); while Non-Northerners could gain appointments as bursar or university librarian in open competition with others. All the respondents agreed that social identity principally determined the type of Non-Northerners who could be appointed to the positions of bursar or university librarian; it was not just any Non-Northerner with demonstrable academic brilliance and a good leadership/managerial reputation who could scale through to final appointment. The ancillary subjective elements of candidates' interpersonal relations and reputation in previous positions of responsibility enhance the popularity of candidates who have satisfied the principal subjective elements of ethno-religious alignment and social identity, in the respective identity categories.[12]

Now, what specifically facilitated social identity for the Non-Northerners who were appointed into principal officer positions in ABU? Respondents' insights about the biographies and career trajectories of the Non-Northerners appointed as principal officers between 1980 and 2015 in the institution, corroborated by their curriculum vitae found online, revealed that they had very impressive academic and career records; though born outside the northern region they had been tested in various leadership positions; and they had each been in the service of the institution for not less than twenty years prior to their appointments to principal officer positions.[13]

[11] IDI, 15 June 2017.
[12] IDI, 20 July 2017.
[13] KIIs, 8 June, 20 July and 15 August 2023.

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All the respondents agreed that the appointed Non-Northerners were fluent in the Hausa language, they were familiar with and had appreciably assimilated the traditions of the geopolitical region, and they had access to and expanded friendships with both elite and non-elite northerners. There was a convergence of opinion that the appointed Non-Northerners' fluency in the Hausa language was key to their assimilation of the traditions of the geopolitical region, particularly those of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. They also displayed simplicity, transparency and approachability in interpersonal dealings and social interactions, irrespective of social status, and a fondness for traditional Hausa food and the dress codes that have become the most noticeable trademarks of northern Muslims. It was unanimously agreed that these traits must have boosted their mass appeal and expanded the scope of their friendship, which in turn enhanced their popularity among different categories of northerners, culminating in their communal acceptability for the principal officer positions. 'Communal' in this regard refers to the university community.[14]

It is therefore not out of place to conclude that ethno-religious alignment and fluency in Hausa influenced inclusion politics in ABU and defined the characteristics of territorial belonging in the northern region.

Comparison with universities in the southern region of Nigeria

For the purpose of considering the general applicability of the issue of ethno-religious domination that underlay the main variables interrogated in this study, one vital question was probed in other federal universities in Nigeria: does the appointment of principal officers in the institutions predominantly mirror the majority ethnic, linguistic and religious contexts of their regions or geopolitical zones? Table 1 summarizes the data gathered from the University of Ibadan (UI), the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) and the University of Lagos (UniLag), which were all first-generation federal universities in the southern region, all contemporaneous with ABU.

Table 1 speaks clearly to the question raised. UI and UniLag were dominated by Yoruba Christians, with Yoruba as the local lingua franca in the South-West geopolitical zone, while UNN was dominated by Igbo Christians, with Igbo as the local lingua franca in the South-East geopolitical zone, in the same way as ABU was dominated by those categorized as Core Northerners (Hausa/Fulani/Kanuri Muslims) with Hausa as the local lingua franca in the whole of the northern region. It can thus be said that ethno-religious sensitivity was a feature of the staff and principal officers' appointment politics in ABU, UniLag, UI and UNN. However, the patterns of discrimination and the character of the inclusion/exclusion mix may differ in the institutions.

Conclusion

Ethno-religious sensitivity may look very strong in some Nigerian universities today, especially in older, federal universities. It is not unexpected because ethno-religious

[14] IDIs, 15 June, 2 July and 6 October 2021.

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Table 1. Staff ethno-religious domination data from UI, UNN and UniLag, 1980–2021

	UI	UNN	UniLag
City	Ibadan	Nsukka	Lagos
Geopolitical zone of location	South-West	South-East	South-West
Majority ethnic group	Yoruba	Igbo	Yoruba
Dominant religion	Christianity and Islam near parity	Christianity	Christianity and Islam near parity
Local lingua franca	Yoruba	Igbo	Yoruba
Staff composition	79% Yoruba	96% Igbo	70% Yoruba
VCs' ethnic identity	100% Yoruba	88% Igbo	100% Yoruba
VCs' religion	100% Christian	100% Christian	63% Christian
DVCs' ethnic identity	89% Yoruba	100% Igbo	100% Yoruba
DVCs' religion	80% Christian	100% Christian	80% Christian
Registrars' ethnic identity	75% Yoruba	100% Igbo	100% Yoruba
Registrars' religion	88% Christian	100% Christian	75% Christian
Bursars' ethnic identity	71% Yoruba	100% Igbo	100% Yoruba
Bursars' religion	71% Christian	100% Christian	83% Christian
University librarians' ethnic identity	86% Yoruba	100% Igbo	100% Yoruba
University librarians' religion	100% Christian	100% Christian	100% Christian

Note: VCs = vice-chancellors; DVCs = deputy vice-chancellors.
Source: KIIs, 15 June, 18 July and 20 August 2023.

sentiments cannot presently be denied in Africa's transitional society, and majoritarian rule in the respective institutions cannot be wished away. With the example of the political impact of the Hausa language in the competition for access to the leadership strata of ABU over time, and if the same can be said for the Yoruba language in UI and UniLag and Igbo in UNN, the local lingua franca may help to obliterate discriminatory power relations in principal officers' appointments in the universities. This is possible by extensive local linguistic acculturation. While discrimination appears unavoidable in public spaces, linguistic capital seems a worthwhile resource for penetrating ethno-religious consciousness and displacing ethno-religious identity-based exclusion. Rather than capitalizing on measures such as the federal character principle for inclusion in public spaces, African nation states may be better off investing in the propagation of local lingua francas to address negative discrimination in public spaces and institutions.

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