International Journal of Intellectual Discourse (IJID)
ISSN: 2636-4832 Volume 9, Issue 1. March, 2026

Between Faith and Fanaticism: Investigating the Psychological and Social Drivers of Religious Violence in Africa

*Yunana Diqson Bishugad

Department of Sociology, Sa'adu Zungur University, Gadau, Bauchi State, Nigeria.

*Corresponding Author: diqsonyunana@sazu.edu.ng

Abstract

Religious violence in Africa is often attributed to theological extremism; however, interdisciplinary scholarship suggests that religion more often functions as a mobilising frame embedded within structural inequality, political exclusion, and contested identity than as an autonomous cause. Drawing on a critical interpretive synthesis of peer-reviewed literature and major institutional reports published between 2000 and 2025, this article argues that religious violence emerges through the interaction of structural drivers—economic marginalisation, uneven development, governance deficits, corruption, and regional exclusion—and socially embedded psychological mediators, including identity threat, moral disengagement, cognitive closure, and the quest for significance. Comparative illustrations from Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic show how material grievances become sacralised and organisationally embedded in extremist movements. The article advances a Structural–Psychological Interaction Model that conceptualises violence as a recursive process in which structural vulnerability and identity-based meaning-making mutually reinforce one another. By bridging macro-structural inequality and socially mediated cognition, the study contributes to sociological debates on conflict and state fragility and argues that sustainable peacebuilding requires integrated governance reform, economic inclusion, institutional legitimacy, and community-level recognition.

Keywords: Extremism, Identity politics, Religious violence, Radicalization, Political psychology.

1. Introduction

Religious violence has become one of the most destabilising features of contemporary African politics. From Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria to Al-Shabaab in Somalia, jihadist expansion in the Sahel, and sectarian militias in the Central African Republic, religious language is frequently invoked to legitimise armed mobilisation and intensify communal polarisation (International Crisis Group, 2023; UNDP, 2023). These conflicts have displaced millions, weakened already fragile institutions, and reshaped everyday patterns of trust, authority, and insecurity.

Yet explaining these conflicts primarily through theology risks analytical reductionism. Although extremist organisations often speak in explicitly religious terms, sociological research shows that religion typically operates as a symbolic and organisational resource embedded in wider struggles over inequality, legitimacy, and identity rather than as an independent cause (Juergensmeyer, 2017; Toft et al., 2011). Religious narratives can sacralise grievance, confer moral legitimacy, and recast political competition as existential conflict.

Across many African settings, persistent youth unemployment, uneven regional development, corruption, patronage-based governance, and weak institutional capacity generate durable experiences of exclusion and distrust (Bayart, 2009; World Bank, 2020). In peripheral regions such as northern Nigeria, northern Mali, and Cabo Delgado, these structural inequalities are experienced not only as material disadvantage but also as political abandonment. Research by UNDP (2017, 2023) further indicates that perceived government injustice, abuse by security forces, and corruption frequently function as tipping points in recruitment into extremist organisations.

Structural inequality, however, does not automatically produce violent mobilisation. Many communities experience deprivation without radicalising. This variation directs attention to socially embedded psychological processes through which grievances are interpreted and acted upon. Social Identity Theory highlights the role of threatened group belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Uncertainty-Identity Theory explains the attraction of tightly bounded groups under conditions of instability (Hogg, 2021), and work on moral disengagement clarifies how violence can be reframed as righteous defence or sacred obligation (Bandura, 1999). These mechanisms are socially transmitted through community discourse, religious authority, peer networks, and digital platforms.

This article therefore argues that religious violence in Africa emerges through the interaction between structural inequality and socially embedded psychological mediation. Structural conditions generate grievance and weaken institutional legitimacy; psychological processes shape how grievance is moralised, collectivised, and translated into mobilisation. The article develops a Structural–Psychological Interaction Model and applies it comparatively to Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic.

By integrating conflict sociology, political psychology, and African political economy, the study contributes a relational account of religious violence that moves beyond both theological determinism and simple deprivation models. It also highlights the policy implication that sustainable peacebuilding must combine governance reform, economic inclusion, institutional legitimacy, community recognition, and careful attention to the digital circulation of grievance narratives.

Research Questions

Grounded in this integrated sociological framework, the article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do structural inequalities—particularly economic marginalisation, governance deficits, and politicised identity
2. competition—shape the social conditions under which religious violence emerges in African societies? Through what socially embedded psychological mechanisms are collective grievances interpreted, legitimised, and transformed into extremist mobilisation?
3. How do digital communication networks reconfigure the interaction between structural vulnerability and identity-based radicalisation?
4. What implications does an integrated structural–psychological framework hold for designing sociologically grounded deradicalisation and peacebuilding interventions?

2. Methodology

This study adopts a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) approach to examine the structural and socially embedded psychological drivers of religious violence in Africa. As developed by Dixon-Woods

et al. (2006), CIS is designed for concept formation and theory building rather than for statistical aggregation. It is therefore appropriate for a phenomenon that cuts across conflict sociology, political psychology, African political economy, and radicalisation studies.

The review proceeded in three iterative stages. First, database searches were conducted in JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: "religious violence", "extremism", "violent extremism", "radicalisation", "Africa", "state fragility", "governance", "inequality", "identity", "political exclusion", "youth unemployment", and the country names Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic. Second, backward and forward citation tracing was used to identify foundational works and more recent studies directly relevant to the emerging argument. Third, targeted searches of UNDP, World Bank, and International Crisis Group reports were undertaken to incorporate policy-oriented empirical material on recruitment dynamics, governance deficits, and regional conflict patterns.

The source base was limited to material published between 2000 and 2025 so that the review would capture contemporary debates on post-Cold War state fragility, jihadist mobilisation, and digital radicalisation while retaining a manageable analytical scope. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and institutionally credible reports with clear empirical grounding. Included studies had to satisfy three criteria: (1) substantive engagement with religious violence or extremist mobilisation in African contexts; (2) theoretical relevance to inequality, governance, identity, radicalisation, or state fragility; and (3) empirical grounding through fieldwork, interview data, survey research, conflict datasets, or policy analysis.

Institutional reports were treated primarily as empirical and contextual sources rather than as substitutes for peer-reviewed theory. In particular, UNDP and International Crisis Group reports were used to supplement academic studies with interview-based evidence, regional conflict mapping, and policy analysis on recruitment, security-force abuse, and governance failure. They were interpreted alongside, rather than in place of, the scholarly literature.

1. Because CIS is interpretive rather than exhaustive, the review does not claim PRISMA-style comprehensiveness or statistical generalisability. Its purpose is to generate an analytically coherent explanatory framework by comparing how different literatures illuminate the relationship between structural inequality, identity processes, and mobilisation.
2. This limitation is important: the argument is best understood as theory-building and comparative interpretation, not as a representative meta-analysis of all available studies.

This methodological strategy suits the present article because religious violence is a multi-layered social process shaped by political economy, institutional arrangements, collective identities, and moral narratives. A narrowly disciplinary or purely quantitative design would risk fragmentation. CIS allows the study to synthesise diverse forms of evidence into a single structural–psychological framework while retaining sensitivity to regional variation across Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic. The selected cases were therefore analysed not as standalone studies, but as comparative illustrations designed to test and refine the Structural–Psychological Interaction Model.

3. Theoretical Framework: Integrating Structure and Meaning

Understanding religious violence in contemporary Africa requires an approach that bridges structural political economy with socially embedded processes of meaning-making. Violence is rarely reducible to doctrinal deviation or economic deprivation alone; it emerges at the intersection of inequality, institutional fragility, identity construction, and moral legitimation. This section develops a sociological framework integrating these dimensions.

3.1 Structural Inequality and State Fragility

Relative Deprivation Theory provides a foundational point of departure. Gurr (1970) argued that collective violence is more likely when perceived discrepancies between expectations and attainable outcomes generate frustration and resentment. In many African contexts, uneven development, youth unemployment, corruption, and elite capture have produced systemic patterns of exclusion (Bayart, 2009; World Bank, 2020). Marginalised communities may interpret persistent underdevelopment not as accidental but as evidence of structural injustice.

Sub-Saharan Africa's demographic profile intensifies these pressures. With a large youth population and limited formal employment opportunities, blocked pathways to social mobility can heighten perceptions of status frustration (World Bank, 2020). However, deprivation alone does not explain insurgency. It becomes politically salient when framed as institutional neglect or discrimination.

State fragility further compounds structural vulnerability. Mann (1986) distinguishes between despotic power and infrastructural power—the latter referring to the state's capacity to penetrate society and implement decisions. In fragile states, infrastructural power is often limited, undermining rule of law and service provision. Where institutions fail to deliver justice, security, or welfare, alternative actors may occupy governance vacuums (Rotberg, 2004). In Somalia, for example, Al-Shabaab has provided dispute resolution mechanisms and taxation systems that some communities perceive as more predictable than state institutions (Hansen, 2013).

From this perspective, religious violence emerges within structural contexts characterised by inequality, institutional weakness, and contested legitimacy. Religion becomes socially resonant where the state fails to command moral and organisational authority.

3.2 Identity, Boundary-Making, and Social Closure

Structural inequality must be interpreted through collective identities. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive self-understanding and self-esteem from group membership, particularly under conditions of threat or competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In societies where religious affiliation overlaps with ethnicity, region, or class, identity boundaries become politically charged.

Weber's (1978) concept of social closure deepens this analysis. Closure occurs when groups monopolise access to resources and opportunities by excluding others based on status markers. In contexts where political office, land, or economic benefits are perceived to align with religious or ethnic affiliation, exclusion becomes institutionalised. Religious identity thereby shifts from private belief to public boundary marker.

Violence reinforces these boundaries. As Tilly (2003) observed, collective violence often hardens categorical distinctions, transforming fluid differences into antagonistic identities. Religious narratives can sacralise these divisions, framing political conflict as existential struggle. In such contexts, religion

operates as a political resource mobilised by elites and internalised by communities as a marker of collective survival (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

Identity is therefore not merely psychological attachment; it is socially constructed, institutionally embedded, and materially consequential.

3.3 Significance, Recognition, and Moral Order

While structural and identity-based analyses illuminate macro-conditions, mobilisation depends on processes of recognition and moral framing. Significance Quest Theory posits that individuals who experience humiliation, loss of status, or social exclusion may seek restored meaning through affiliation with ideologically charged movements (Kruglanski et al., 2014). In structurally marginalised environments, such experiences are often collectively shared rather than purely individual.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital clarifies how religious authority confers legitimacy and distinction. Movements that claim divine mandate position themselves as morally superior alternatives to corrupt or ineffective regimes. In contexts where institutional legitimacy is weak, symbolic capital may carry substantial political weight.

The translation of grievance into violence also depends on moral disengagement. Bandura (1999) demonstrated how mechanisms such as dehumanisation, moral justification, and diffusion of responsibility allow individuals to participate in harmful acts without self-condemnation. Sociologically, these mechanisms are socially transmitted through sermons, peer networks, and community discourse. Violence becomes morally intelligible within a community that frames it as righteous defence or sacred obligation.

3.4 Digital Mediation and Networked Radicalisation

The contemporary dynamics of religious violence in Africa cannot be fully understood without accounting for the rapid expansion of digital communication infrastructures. Over the past decade, mobile connectivity and social media penetration have grown significantly across the continent, reshaping political discourse, identity formation, and patterns of mobilisation (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2020). Digital spaces function not merely as tools of dissemination but as environments in which grievances are reframed, identities consolidated, and collective emotions amplified.

From a sociological perspective, digital mediation operates at the intersection of structure and meaning. Structural marginalisation—such as unemployment, regional exclusion, or state abuse—generates grievance. Digital platforms provide arenas in which these grievances are narrated, moralised, and collectivised. Algorithmic amplification tends to prioritise emotionally charged and polarising content, increasing exposure to ideologically extreme narratives (Conway et al., 2019). In such environments, narratives of humiliation, injustice, and existential threat are reiterated and intensified, reinforcing identity boundaries.

Uncertainty-Identity Theory helps explain why digital echo chambers can be particularly powerful in fragile contexts (Hogg, 2021). In situations characterised by political instability or institutional mistrust, individuals may gravitate toward tightly bounded online communities offering moral clarity and authoritative leadership. Digital networks thereby accelerate processes of cognitive closure and group polarisation.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria and the Sahel suggests that extremist organisations increasingly utilise encrypted messaging platforms and social media to circulate propaganda, recruit members, and

coordinate activity (UNDP, 2023). In Cabo Delgado, transnational jihadist narratives were disseminated online, linking local grievances over resource extraction to global Islamist discourses (Morier-Genoud, 2020). Digital mediation thus embeds local structural conflicts within broader ideological circuits, strengthening the perceived legitimacy of mobilisation.

Importantly, digital platforms do not create grievance ex nihilo. Rather, they intensify and accelerate the interaction between structural inequality and psychological mediation. Where institutional trust is low and economic prospects limited, online narratives that moralise exclusion resonate more deeply. The digital sphere therefore functions as a multiplier within the Structural–Psychological Interaction Model: it shortens the distance between grievance formation, identity consolidation, and organisational embedding.

In this sense, radicalisation in contemporary Africa is increasingly networked rather than purely territorial. Digital infrastructures expand the scale and speed of mobilisation while simultaneously reinforcing in-group solidarity and out-group hostility. Understanding religious violence today requires recognising how online environments reshape the social production of meaning, authority, and belonging.

The foregoing framework establishes that religious violence emerges through the interaction between structural vulnerability and socially embedded processes of meaning-making. The empirical cases that follow are therefore not presented as isolated national narratives, but as analytically structured illustrations of how specific configurations of structural inequality and psychological mediation generate distinct pathways to mobilisation. Each case highlights a different dimension of the Structural–Psychological Interaction Model, demonstrating how similar underlying mechanisms produce contextually varied outcomes.

4. Empirical Case Analyses: Structure, Meaning, and Mobilisation in Context

The preceding theoretical framework posited that religious violence emerges from the interaction between structural inequality and socially embedded psychological processes. The following case analyses apply this model comparatively across five African contexts. Rather than treating religion as a primary driver, the cases illustrate how material marginalisation, governance deficits, and elite contestation generate grievances that are subsequently interpreted and mobilised through identity-based and moral frameworks. Each case demonstrates a distinct configuration of structural vulnerability and psychological mediation.

4.1 Nigeria: Structural Neglect and the Moralisation of Exclusion

The Nigerian case illustrates how structural marginalisation interacts with moral framing and identity-based interpretation to transform perceived exclusion into religiously legitimised mobilisation. The rise of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria cannot be understood apart from longstanding regional inequality and governance failure. Northern Nigeria has historically lagged behind the southern regions in educational attainment, infrastructure, and economic investment, patterns rooted in colonial administrative bifurcation and reinforced through post-independence patronage politics (Thurston, 2017). Youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high in the north, contributing to social frustration and weakened prospects for upward mobility (World Bank, 2020).

While poverty alone does not cause insurgency, the perception of systematic exclusion matters. UNDP's (2017)

interviews with former Boko Haram members reveal that state abuse, corruption, and perceived injustice often constituted tipping points for recruitment. Relative deprivation—rather than absolute deprivation—shaped mobilisation dynamics (Gurr, 1970). Economic marginalisation became reframed as moral decay and political betrayal.

Boko Haram's early rhetoric portrayed the Nigerian state as corrupt, Westernised, and spiritually illegitimate. In this narrative, structural exclusion was interpreted as evidence of moral disorder. The group offered not merely material incentives but a morally ordered alternative community grounded in strict religious authority (Thurston, 2017). Identity threat and status frustration were channelled into a redemptive framework in which violence was justified as purification and resistance. The Nigerian case therefore illustrates how structural neglect creates grievance, but mobilisation occurs only when those grievances are sacralised and embedded within a narrative of moral restoration. Religion functioned less as doctrinal fanaticism than as a symbolic language through which inequality was interpreted and contested.

4.2 Somalia: State Collapse and Governance Substitution

The Somali case highlights how extreme institutional fragility and governance absence generate conditions in which ideological movements provide cognitive closure and substitute systems of authority. Somalia presents a different structural configuration: prolonged state collapse rather than uneven development within a functioning polity. Since the early 1990s, Somalia has experienced fragmented authority, weak institutional penetration, and reliance on clan-based governance (Menkhaus, 2014). In Mann's (1986) terms, the Somali state has lacked infrastructural power — the capacity to regulate and coordinate social life effectively.

Al-Shabaab capitalised on this institutional vacuum by constructing parallel governance structures, including courts, taxation systems, and dispute resolution mechanisms (Hansen, 2013). While externally portrayed as purely ideological, the organisation's local legitimacy often derived from its relative predictability and enforcement capacity compared to corrupt or ineffective state actors (Marchal, 2011). The psychological mediation here differs subtly from Nigeria. In contexts of institutional absence, uncertainty and insecurity become pervasive. Uncertainty-Identity Theory suggests that individuals gravitate towards groups offering clear norms and authoritative leadership under such conditions (Hogg, 2021). Al-Shabaab's rigid doctrinal framework provided cognitive closure and moral clarity in an environment marked by fragmentation.

Thus, in Somalia, religion did not merely exploit poverty; it substituted governance. Structural collapse generated demand for order, while ideological rigidity supplied legitimacy and identity coherence. Violence became intertwined with institutional reconstruction rather than solely with protest.

4.3 Mali and the Central Sahel: Marginalisation, Ecology, and Identity Fusion

The Sahelian case demonstrates how ecological stress and political marginalisation are reframed through identity fusion and transnational religious narratives, producing locally embedded but ideologically expansive mobilisation. In Mali and the wider Sahel, armed Islamist movements have expanded within a landscape shaped by historical marginalisation, ecological stress, and intercommunal competition. Northern Mali has long experienced political and economic exclusion relative to the

southern capital, producing periodic Tuareg rebellions (International Crisis Group, 2020).

More recently, jihadist groups have embedded themselves within local conflicts involving Fulani pastoralists and other communities. Competition over land, grazing routes, and water resources—intensified by climate variability—has heightened tensions (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Yet resource competition alone does not explain jihadist expansion.

What distinguishes the Sahelian case is the reframing of localised grievances within transnational Islamist discourse. Structural marginalisation and ecological stress become interpreted as evidence of systemic injustice requiring moral and religious redress. Identity fusion occurs when ethnic and religious identities merge within a shared narrative of victimhood and defence.

Security force abuses further reinforce mobilisation. UNDP (2023) notes that state violence often acts as a catalyst for recruitment in the Sahel, intensifying perceptions of existential threat. Moral disengagement mechanisms transform retaliation into legitimate defence.

Here, structural vulnerability (peripheral neglect, climate stress, abusive security practices) intersects with identity boundary-making. Religion provides an overarching ideological frame that binds diverse grievances into a coherent moral project.

4.4 Mozambique (Cabo Delgado): Extraction, Dispossession, and Transnational Narratives

The Cabo Delgado case shows how resource-based inequality and perceived dispossession interact with symbolic narratives of injustice to generate significance-seeking forms of radicalisation. The insurgency in Cabo Delgado reveals the political economy of radicalisation in resource-rich peripheries. The discovery of vast offshore natural gas reserves attracted substantial foreign investment, yet local communities experienced limited employment benefits and, in some cases, displacement from land (International Crisis Group, 2021).

This extractive development model deepened perceptions of inequality and elite capture. Young men in particular faced limited economic mobility despite visible resource wealth. Morier-Genoud (2020) argues that early mobilisation in Cabo Delgado reflected local grievances against corruption and exclusion before aligning more explicitly with transnational jihadist networks.

The psychological dimension is crucial. Perceived dispossession fosters humiliation and status loss, central elements in Significance Quest Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Transnational jihadist narratives supplied a moral vocabulary linking local injustice to global struggle. Digital communication networks facilitated this connection, embedding local discontent within wider ideological circuits (UNDP, 2023).

In Cabo Delgado, then, economic exclusion alone did not produce insurgency; rather, exclusion combined with symbolic reframing and organisational embedding produced radicalisation.

4.5 Central African Republic: Elite Contestation and the Politicisation of Religious Cleavages

The CAR case illustrates how elite instrumentalisation of identity within a context of state fragility transforms political competition into sacralised communal conflict. The conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) is frequently portrayed as a Muslim–Christian confrontation. Closer analysis, however, shows that violence escalated within a context of state collapse, patrimonial governance, and armed competition over state power following the Seleka coalition’s seizure of power in 2013

(Lombard, 2016; Mehler, 2011). Religious identification became politically salient as elites and militia entrepreneurs used confessional language to organise constituencies and legitimise retaliation.

Field-based studies indicate that religious polarisation hardened through cycles of insecurity and reprisal rather than through pre-existing doctrinal hostility (International Crisis Group, 2014). Anti-Balaka mobilisation drew on Christian identity as a unifying symbol against perceived Muslim domination, but the underlying conflict centred on sovereignty, territorial control, and access to state resources. In this setting, religious affiliation became a marker of security alignment and political belonging as much as of spiritual commitment.

As violence intensified, community narratives increasingly framed the conflict in existential terms. These narratives strengthened processes of social closure, dehumanisation, and moral disengagement, making reciprocal atrocities appear defensible within local moral worlds. Religion thus operated as a mobilising frame embedded in broader struggles over authority and survival rather than as an independent theological cause.

The CAR case therefore demonstrates how elite instrumentalisation of identity in a structurally fragile state can transform political contestation into sacralised communal conflict. It is a particularly clear example of the article's central claim that violence emerges when weak institutions, resource competition, and identity-based moralisation become mutually reinforcing.

Comparative Synthesis

Across these cases, religious violence does not emerge from doctrine in isolation. Instead, three recurring structural conditions are evident:

1. Marginalisation and uneven development
2. Weak or absent institutional authority
3. Political instrumentalization of identity

Yet structural grievance alone is insufficient. Mobilisation requires psychological mediation—identity threat, humiliation, moral framing, and cognitive closure. Religion supplies symbolic capital and moral legitimacy, transforming grievance into a collective project.

These cases therefore substantiate the central claim of this article: religious violence in Africa is best understood as the co-production of structural inequality and socially embedded processes of meaning-making. The empirical evidence does not support theological determinism. Rather, it reveals patterned interactions between material exclusion, institutional fragility, and identity-based moralisation. These cases collectively demonstrate that variation in religious violence does not stem from differences in doctrine, but from differences in how structural conditions interact with identity processes and moral framing. The Structural–Psychological Interaction Model thus provides a unifying analytical lens capable of explaining both convergence and divergence across contexts.

4.6 Gender, Masculinity, and Radicalisation

Religious violence in Africa is frequently analysed through male-dominated mobilisation structures; however, gendered dynamics play a critical role in both recruitment and organisational resilience. Scholarship on insurgent movements increasingly demonstrates that constructions of masculinity—particularly in contexts of unemployment, marginalisation, and blocked social mobility—shape pathways into extremist groups (Ní Aoláin, 2016; Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017).

In many affected regions, young men experience economic exclusion alongside expectations of social authority and provider status. When these expectations

are frustrated, armed mobilisation can function as an alternative pathway to recognition, dignity, and symbolic power. Significance Quest Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2014) is particularly resonant here, as status restoration is often framed in gendered terms of honour, protection, and moral guardianship.

At the same time, women are not merely passive victims of radicalisation. Empirical studies across Nigeria and Somalia indicate that women have participated as recruiters, informants, logistical facilitators, and, in some cases, combatants (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017). Their participation often reflects complex intersections of coercion, ideological commitment, community pressure, and survival strategies.

Gender also shapes reintegration processes. Stigmatisation of former female affiliates may differ from that of male ex-combatants, affecting community acceptance and long-term disengagement outcomes. A structurally informed model of religious violence must therefore incorporate gendered dimensions of identity formation, recognition, and social reintegration.

Understanding radicalisation as embedded within gendered social expectations enriches the Structural–Psychological Interaction Model by highlighting how identity, dignity, and recognition operate through socially patterned norms of masculinity and femininity.

5. The Structural–Psychological Interaction Model

This article advances a Structural–Psychological Interaction Model to explain how religious violence in contemporary Africa emerges through the recursive interplay between macro-structural inequalities and socially embedded processes of meaning-making. Rather than treating structural and psychological explanations as competing paradigms, the model conceptualises them as mutually constitutive domains operating across different levels of social organisation. Violence is neither the automatic product of deprivation nor the inevitable consequence of extremist ideology; it is the outcome of structurally generated grievance that becomes moralised, cognitively framed, and organisationally embedded.

The model contains four analytically distinct but interdependent components: (1) structural preconditions, (2) psychological mediation, (3) mobilisation pathways, and (4) the conflict feedback loop. Together, these components form a processual framework that explains how religious violence becomes socially intelligible and institutionally sustained.

Figure 1. Structural–Psychological Interaction Model of Religious Violence in Africa

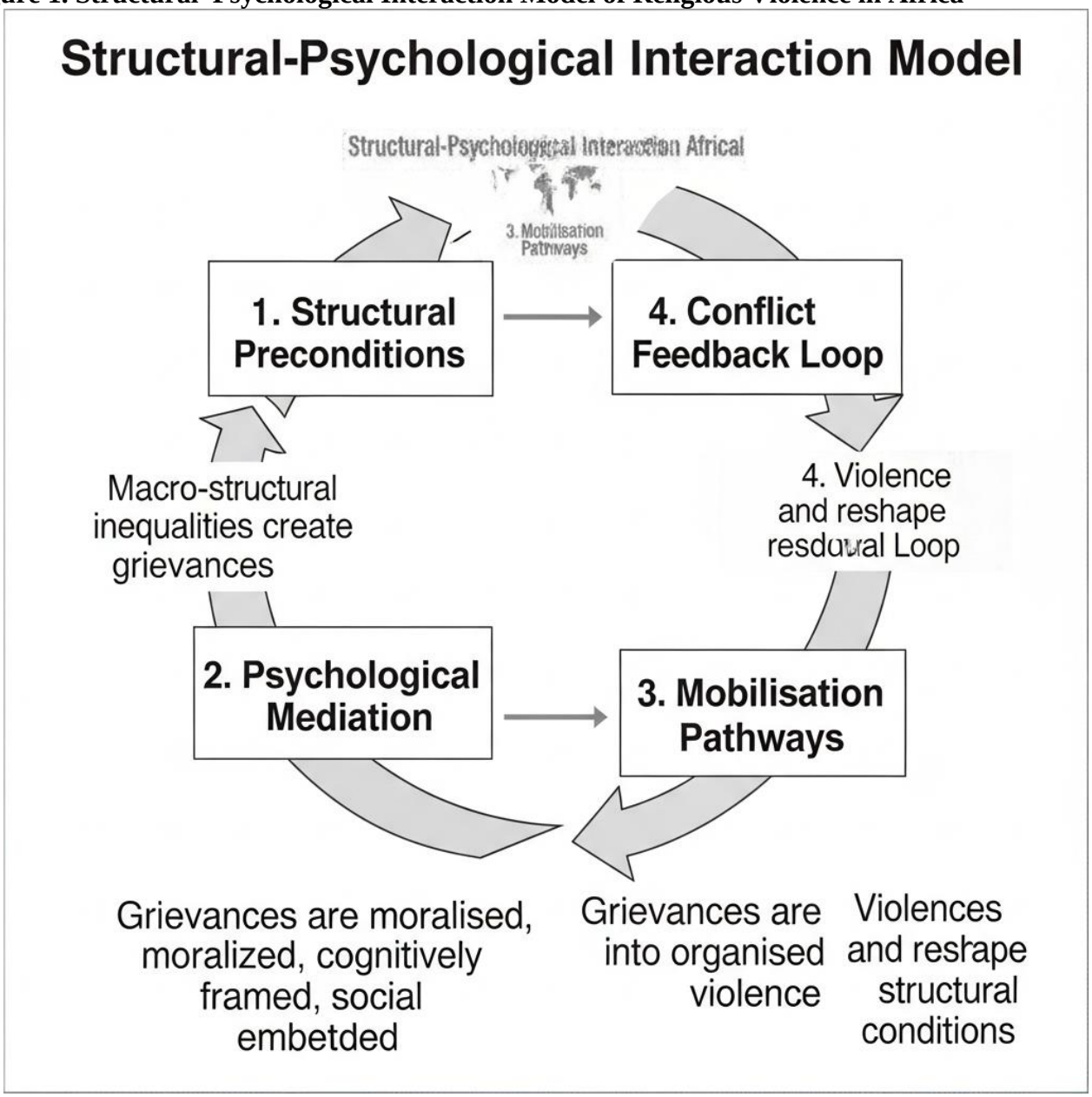

Figure 1 visually represents the recursive architecture of the Structural–Psychological Interaction Model. Rather than depicting violence as a linear outcome, the model conceptualises mobilisation as a cyclical process in which structural exclusion generates grievance, grievance is interpreted through socially embedded identity processes, and organised violence subsequently reproduces the structural conditions that enabled it. The feedback loop underscores the dynamic relationship between inequality, meaning-making, and institutional fragility.

5.1 Structural Preconditions

Structural preconditions refer to patterned political–economic and institutional arrangements that generate durable forms of exclusion. These include uneven development, youth unemployment, corruption, weak rule of law, regional marginalisation, and fragile state capacity. Such conditions do not automatically produce violence, but they create environments in which collective

grievance becomes socially widespread and politically salient.

Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970) emphasises that perceived injustice—rather than absolute poverty—is central to collective mobilisation. In many African contexts, stark regional disparities in infrastructure, education, and employment opportunities generate perceptions of systemic neglect (World Bank, 2020). Where elites monopolise state resources through patronage networks, exclusion may be interpreted not as misfortune but as deliberate injustice (Bayart, 2009).

State fragility further intensifies vulnerability. Mann's (1986) concept of infrastructural power highlights the importance of institutional capacity in regulating social life. Where states fail to deliver security or justice, alternative actors can occupy governance vacuums. Empirical studies of Somalia demonstrate how Al-Shabaab consolidated authority by providing courts and dispute resolution mechanisms in areas where formal institutions were absent (Hansen, 2013). Such substitution enhances the perceived legitimacy of non-state actors.

Structural preconditions therefore create a context of grievance and institutional distrust. However, they do not explain why grievance becomes sacralised or violent. That transformation occurs through psychological mediation.

5.2 Psychological Mediation

Psychological mediation refers to socially embedded processes through which structural grievances are interpreted, moralised, and internalised. Crucially, these are not isolated cognitive traits but collective processes shaped by discourse, identity networks, and institutional experience.

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive meaning and self-esteem from group membership, particularly under conditions of intergroup comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In contexts marked by economic exclusion or political marginalisation, religious identity may become a salient boundary marker. Uncertainty-Identity Theory further suggests that periods of instability increase attraction to tightly structured groups offering clear norms and authoritative leadership (Hogg, 2021). In fragile states, where governance is inconsistent, religious movements can provide the certainty and coherence that institutions fail to supply.

Significance Quest Theory deepens this analysis by arguing that experiences of humiliation or status loss generate a desire for restored dignity (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Structural marginalisation—such as chronic unemployment or political exclusion—can produce collective forms of status frustration. Extremist organisations respond by offering moral elevation, symbolic honour, and belonging.

Moral disengagement mechanisms facilitate the translation of grievance into violence. Bandura (1999) demonstrated how dehumanisation, moral justification, and displacement of responsibility enable participation in harm without self-condemnation. In religiously framed conflicts, violence may be reinterpreted as divine obligation or defensive necessity. These processes are socially transmitted through sermons, peer networks, and increasingly, digital media.

Psychological mediation thus transforms structural frustration into morally meaningful commitment. Without this interpretive layer, grievance remains latent; with it, grievance becomes actionable.

5.3 Mobilisation Pathways

Mobilisation pathways refer to the organisational and discursive mechanisms that convert morally framed grievance into collective action. At this stage, ideology, networks, and institutional alternatives converge.

Narrative mobilisation embeds structural inequality within sacred or civilisational narratives. Juergensmeyer (2017) argues that religious violence often frames political struggle as cosmic war, transforming local conflict into moral confrontation. Such framing elevates grievances beyond material claims and situates them within transcendent moral orders.

Organisational embedding further stabilises mobilisation. Tilly (2003) emphasised that collective violence depends on coordinated action within networks. Extremist groups cultivate recruitment structures, economic incentives, and governance mechanisms that sustain participation. In contexts such as northern Mali or north-eastern Nigeria, armed groups provide protection, taxation systems, and employment, thereby institutionalising grievance (International Crisis Group, 2020; UNDP, 2017).

Digital infrastructures operate as accelerators within mobilisation pathways. By amplifying grievance narratives and facilitating transnational ideological circulation, online platforms compress the temporal and spatial boundaries of recruitment. Where structural marginalisation already exists, digital echo chambers intensify identity salience and moral polarisation, lowering psychological thresholds for participation. Thus, digital mediation does not replace structural drivers; it amplifies their interpretive and organisational consequences (Conway et al., 2019; UNDP, 2023).

Violence emerges at the intersection of structural grievance, moral framing, and organisational opportunity. It is not spontaneous; it is socially produced through networks and institutions.

5.4 The Conflict Feedback Loop

A central innovation of the model is its emphasis on recursive feedback. Religious violence is not a linear outcome but a self-reinforcing process. Once conflict erupts, it reshapes structural and psychological conditions in ways that increase the likelihood of future mobilisation.

First, violence erodes state capacity. Prolonged insecurity weakens institutional legitimacy and reduces infrastructural power (Rotberg, 2004). Second, conflict deepens economic inequality by disrupting livelihoods, education, and investment. Third, violence reinforces identity boundaries through collective memory and victimhood narratives, hardening in-group/out-group distinctions (Tilly, 2003). These outcomes regenerate structural grievance and intensify psychological mediation, thereby restarting the cycle. The model therefore conceptualises religious violence as a recursive system in which inequality, identity, and institutional fragility mutually reinforce one another.

Analytical Implication

Violence emerges when structural grievance becomes moralised and organisationally embedded within networks capable of sustaining mobilisation. Conversely, conflict reproduces structural fragility, deepens inequality, and intensifies identity polarisation. The Structural–Psychological Interaction Model thus provides a systemic explanation of religious violence that integrates political economy, identity theory, and institutional analysis.

By foregrounding co-production rather than mono-causality, the model advances a sociologically grounded account of extremist mobilisation—one that recognises the interplay between power, inequality, and meaning in shaping contemporary African conflict.

6. Implications for Sociology and Policy

The Structural–Psychological Interaction Model developed in this article carries important implications for both sociological theory and practical intervention. By conceptualising religious violence as the co-production of structural inequality and socially embedded

processes of meaning-making, the model challenges reductionist accounts and provides a framework for more systematic analysis and policy design.

6.1 Rethinking Religion as Socially Embedded Power

A central implication of this study is the need to move beyond theological determinism. Public discourse often treats religion as an autonomous causal force, attributing violence to doctrinal extremism or irrational belief. However, sociological analysis demonstrates that religion operates as a socially embedded symbolic resource—capable of legitimising authority, sacralising grievance, and structuring collective identity (Fox, 2018; Juergensmeyer, 2017).

Religious narratives acquire mobilising power not in isolation but within specific structural contexts marked by inequality, institutional fragility, and contested legitimacy. Treating religion as an independent variable obscures the patterned socio-economic and political conditions that render extremist interpretations persuasive. A sociologically informed approach therefore situates religion within broader fields of power, inequality, and symbolic competition. This reframing reduces the risk of essentialising particular faith traditions and instead emphasises contingent processes of politicisation.

6.2 Advancing Conflict Sociology: Integrating Structure and Meaning

For conflict sociology, the model underscores the importance of bridging macro-structural political economy with micro-to-meso processes of identity construction and moral boundary-making. Classical accounts of collective violence emphasise political opportunity structures, state capacity, and inequality (Tilly, 2003; Mann, 1986). Meanwhile, political psychology highlights identity threat and significance-seeking as drivers of radicalisation (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

The present framework demonstrates that these perspectives are analytically incomplete when treated separately. Structural marginalisation generates grievance, but grievance becomes politically consequential only when interpreted through socially embedded identity processes. Violence emerges where inequality, institutional erosion, and moral framing converge.

This process-oriented synthesis contributes to sociological debates on state legitimacy and social order. Where states lack infrastructural power (Mann, 1986), alternative authorities—frequently religious movements—can establish competing systems of governance (Hansen, 2013). Conflict sociology must therefore account not only for rebellion against the state but also for the emergence of rival moral–institutional orders that challenge state sovereignty.

6.3 Rethinking Deradicalisation: Beyond Ideological Correction

The integrated model also has significant implications for deradicalisation strategies. Approaches focused narrowly on ideological re-education or coercive security responses risk overlooking the structural conditions that sustain extremist appeal. Evidence suggests that heavy-handed counterterrorism measures may inadvertently reinforce perceptions of injustice, thereby intensifying radical narratives (Silke, 2020; UNDP, 2017).

Effective deradicalisation must operate across multiple levels. At the psychological level, programmes should address identity threat, trauma, and moral disengagement through counselling, dialogue, and community-based reintegration (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). At the social level, reintegration efforts must mitigate stigma and exclusion, particularly in communities deeply affected by violence. Without social acceptance and economic opportunity, disengagement remains fragile.

At the same time, a realistic policy analysis must recognise the tension between security-focused counterterrorism and development-oriented structural prevention. Governments facing acute attacks are often pressured to deliver immediate results through military and policing responses, even when such responses may deepen grievance if they are abusive, indiscriminate, or weakly accountable. The policy challenge is therefore not to choose simplistically between security and development, but to align short-term protection measures with longer-term reforms in governance, justice, and inclusion.

However, individual-level interventions cannot succeed sustainably without structural reform. Where governance deficits, unemployment, and corruption persist, the grievances that fuel mobilisation remain intact. Deradicalisation must therefore be embedded within broader development and institutional reform strategies rather than treated as a discrete security problem.

At the structural level, prevention requires strengthening institutional legitimacy and addressing patterned inequality. Research consistently demonstrates that weak governance, corruption, and exclusion erode trust in public institutions and create openings for extremist actors (Rotberg, 2004; World Bank, 2020). Structural prevention is therefore not merely developmental but stabilising.

Inclusive governance—through equitable political representation and decentralised participation—reduces perceptions of marginalisation. Youth employment initiatives and regional development programmes can mitigate the socio-economic frustrations that contribute to mobilisation, particularly in demographically youthful societies (World Bank, 2020). Reform of security institutions is equally critical, as abuses by state forces frequently serve as recruitment catalysts (UNDP, 2017).

Finally, given the accelerating role of digital mediation, governance reform must extend to the informational sphere. While censorship alone is neither feasible nor desirable, partnerships between governments, civil society, and digital platforms can support counter-narratives and digital literacy initiatives that reduce the appeal of polarising content (Conway et al., 2019).

Any intervention strategy should also incorporate monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive learning. Because mobilisation pathways and local grievances change over time, prevention and reintegration programmes require feedback mechanisms, independent assessment, and clearly defined indicators—such as changes in community trust, recidivism, recruitment patterns, perceptions of security-force legitimacy, and access to livelihoods—to determine whether interventions are reducing rather than reproducing vulnerability.

Taken together, these implications reinforce a central insight: religious violence is not solely a problem of belief but of structural fragility and contested legitimacy. Sustainable peace requires addressing both the material inequalities that generate grievance and the identity-based processes that moralise it.

Religious violence in contemporary Africa cannot be adequately explained through theological determinism or economic deprivation in isolation. While extremist movements frequently invoke sacred texts and divine authority, their mobilisation capacity is rooted in patterned structural inequalities and institutional fragility. This article has argued that religious violence emerges through the co-production of structural marginalisation and socially embedded psychological processes. Economic exclusion, uneven development, governance deficits, and political

manipulation generate collective grievances; identity threat, moral framing, cognitive closure, and the quest for recognition interpret and elevate those grievances; and organisational networks embed them into sustained mobilisation. Violence, once initiated, further erodes institutional legitimacy and deepens inequality, thereby reproducing the very conditions that enabled its emergence.

By advancing a Structural–Psychological Interaction Model, this study contributes to sociology by bridging macro-structural political economy with collective meaning-making. Rather than treating structural and psychological explanations as competing paradigms, it demonstrates that they operate relationally and recursively. Religious extremism is thus not an aberration of belief nor a mechanical product of poverty, but a socially intelligible response formed at the intersection of inequality, contested authority, and identity construction.

The broader implication is that religious violence must be analysed as a process rather than an event. It unfolds through interactions among institutions, narratives, and social networks over time. Recognising this relational and processual character allows scholars to move beyond mono-causal explanations and encourages interdisciplinary synthesis within conflict sociology and political sociology.

Future research should extend this framework through longitudinal studies tracing how structural inequality and identity narratives evolve across conflict cycles. Comparative work across African regions would clarify how variations in state capacity and political settlement shape mobilisation pathways. Greater attention is also needed to gendered dimensions of radicalisation and reintegration, the role of digital infrastructures in reshaping recruitment, and the development of monitoring and evaluation frameworks capable of assessing whether peacebuilding interventions actually reduce grievance, exclusion, and recidivism over time.

Understanding religious violence as structurally produced and psychologically mediated does not diminish the importance of belief. Rather, it situates belief within broader social systems of power and inequality. Such an approach enables more nuanced scholarship and more effective policy design, grounded not in securitised reaction but in systemic reform. Sustainable peace in Africa will depend on addressing both the material conditions that generate grievance and the collective meanings that transform grievance into violence.

References

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3*(3), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3

Bayart, J.-F. (2009). *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Benjaminsen, T. A., & Ba, B. (2019). Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation. *The Journal of Peasant Studies, 46*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457

Blattman, C., & Miguel, E. (2010). Civil war. *Journal of Economic Literature, 48*(1), 3–57. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.48.1.3

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.

Conway, M., Scrivens, R., & Macnair, L. (2019). Right-wing extremists' persistent online presence: History and contemporary trends. *International Centre for Counter-*

Terrorism – The Hague, *10*(2), 1–19.

Dixon-Woods, M., Cavers, D., Agarwal, S., Annandale, E., Arthur, A., Harvey, J., & Sutton, A. J. (2006). Conducting a critical interpretive synthesis of the literature on access to healthcare by vulnerable groups. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *6*, 35. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-6-35

Fox, J. (2018). *Political secularism, religion, and the state*. Cambridge University Press.

Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why men rebel*. Princeton University Press.

Hansen, S. J. (2013). *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The history and ideology of a militant Islamist group, 2005–2012*. Oxford University Press.

Hogg, M. A. (2021). *Uncertainty-identity theory*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66578-2

Horgan, J., & Braddock, K. (2010). Rehabilitating the terrorists? Challenges in assessing the effectiveness of deradicalisation programs. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *22*(2), 267–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546551003594748

International Crisis Group. (2020). *The central Sahel: Scene of new climate wars?* (Africa Report No. 284). International Crisis Group.

International Crisis Group. (2021). *Stemming the insurgency in Cabo Delgado* (Africa Report No. 303). International Crisis Group.

International Crisis Group. (2023). *Africa's jihadist threat: Current trends and future risks*. International Crisis Group.

Juergensmeyer, M. (2017). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence* (4th ed.). University of California Press.

Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hettiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The psychology of radicalisation and deradicalisation: How significance quest impacts violent extremism. *Political Psychology*, *35*(S1), 69–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163

Lombard, L. (2016). *State of rebellion: Violence and intervention in the Central African Republic*. Zed Books.

Mann, M. (1986). *The sources of social power: Volume I*. Cambridge University Press.

Marchal, R. (2011). The rise of a jihadi movement in a country at war: Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahidin in Somalia. Sciences Po/CERI.

Mehler, A. (2011). Rebels and parties: The impact of armed insurgency on representation in the Central African Republic. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *49*(1), 115–139. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X10000690

Menkhaus, K. (2014). State failure, state-building, and prospects for a functional failed state in Somalia. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *656*(1), 154–172. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716214547002

Morier-Genoud, E. (2020). The jihadi insurgency in Mozambique: Origins, nature and beginning. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *14*(3), 396–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1789271

Ní Aoláin, F. (2016). The 'war on terror' and extremism: Assessing the

relevance of a gender perspective. *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law, 24*(2), 275–297.

Pearson, E., & Winterbotham, E. (2017). Women, gender and Daesh radicalisation: A militancy-based approach. *RUSI Journal, 162*(3), 60–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2017.1338062

Rotberg, R. I. (2004). *When states fail: Causes and consequences*. Princeton University Press.

Silke, A. (2020). *Terrorism and counterterrorism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.

Thurston, A. (2017). *Boko Haram: The history of an African jihadist movement*. Princeton University Press.

Tilly, C. (2003). *The politics of collective violence*. Cambridge University Press.

Toft, M. D., Philpott, D., & Shah, T. S. (2011). *God's century: Resurgent religion and global politics*. W. W. Norton.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to extremism in Africa: Drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*. UNDP.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). *Journey to extremism in Africa: Pathways to recruitment and disengagement*. UNDP.

World Bank. (2020). *Africa's pulse* (Vol. 22). World Bank.