

ISSN 1117-9481



ILORIN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY

Volume 5, No 1 December, 2013.

**Published by the
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, NIGERIA**

ILORIN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY
VOLUME 5, NUMBER 1, DECEMBER, 2013

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RELIGIOUS BALANCING AS THE ROOT OF ACRIMONY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society comprising different ethnic and religious groups. However in spite of the existence of many religious groups in the country, Islam and Christianity have assumed dominant character to such an extent that necessitates state's intervention in the relationship between the two dominant groups in order to stem a potential source of conflict. Through a study of events in the country, this paper establishes that the Nigerian state's attempt to maintain a balanced relation between the two dominant religious groups usually reinforces tension and antagonisms between them. The bottomline is that the state must clearly redefine its role in religious matters in order to escape the destructive potentials of inter-religious acrimony.

Keywords: Religion, Nigeria, Plurality, Acrimony, Balancing

Introduction

Attainment of peaceful and stable polity is a quintessential aspiration of countries all over the world because peaceful coexistence of various groups within the state is a prerequisite for the attainment of the multifarious goals of the state. For this reason, strategies are devised to attenuate the worst effects of various competing identities within the state. Such identities usually manifest in the existence of different ethnic groups, religious groups, cultural groups or some other basis of ascription. Indeed, the 20th century witnessed the emergence of several modern states as heterogeneous entities defined by one or a combination of these identities. Within this ambit are many African states, including Nigeria. For sure, modern Nigeria was a product of European ambition and rivalry in Africa and only emerged as an independent country after prolonged years of colonial rule formally established in the early 20th Century. With a land area of about 923,708 square miles, it is composed of multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups engendered by her colonial past. The existence of multiplicity of religious

groups consequently places the burden of creating a peaceful atmosphere and co-existence on the government which is the agency responsible for maintaining peace and stability in the country.

Interestingly, Nigeria has an interwoven of its ethnic and religious character such that the North is predominantly Muslim and comprises mostly Hausa/Fulani ethnic group; the Western Yoruba are partly Christians and partly Muslims while the Eastern Ibo including the southern minority groups are predominantly Christians. This is not to suggest that there are no other religious groups in existence, but the duo of Islam and Christianity have assumed a dominant status over other forms of religion such as the African Traditional Religion (ATR) or to use another term, AFREL (African Religion)¹ and other foreign inspired religious groups like Harekrishner and Ekanker, among others. Cognizant of the potent consequences which an unbalanced relation could engender, the Nigerian state put up some balancing mechanisms aimed at ensuring a harmonious relation between the two dominant groups. In this context, how has the state maintained balance between the two dominant religions and how has the state's balancing techniques impacted on Muslim-Christian relation? What implication(s) does this have for the Nigerian State? Examining these issues form the crux of this paper.

Conceptual perspective: Religion and Religious Balancing

Religion according to scholars (Adegbesan, 1987, 96, Kenny OP, undated) is a system relating man to an ultimate value epitomized in 'God' or 'the Supreme Being' and embodying a creed, code and, a mode of worship and communication. It is an expression of man's belief in a divine or super ordinate being which requires not only succumbing to the tenets of the belief system but equally, a total acceptance of its dictates and doctrines. Several perspectives exist in the literature on the concept of religion. These have been aptly documented by scholars such as Gofwen (2004) and Ogunji (2004). The dominant perspectives however include the evolutionary perspectives which see animism as the first form of religion; the functional perspective which reflects in the writings of scholars such as Durkheim, Parsons among others and which beliefs religion has a functional role it plays in the society and; radical perspective championed by Karl Max and his adherents. This perspective sees religion as an instrument of subjugation.

In spite of divergence of perspectives however, it is generally believed that there is an interaction between religion and society within which it functions (Gofwen, 2004). This aspect constitutes the basis for inter-religious relations in the society and shows the necessity of maintaining a balance between them. The concept of religious balancing, therefore, implies a process of ensuring equilibrium in relationships between the state and its various religious groups on the one hand and, on the other hand, between and among the various religious groups themselves. Consequently, religious balancing involves putting appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure that inter religious relations within a state occur in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence and that potentials of religious groups impact positively on the entire societal process. In Nigeria, these mechanisms include both constitutional and extra constitutional means. But before elaborating on them, it is expedient to look at character of the Nigerian state.

Evolution and Character of the Nigerian State

As noted earlier, the entity now known as Nigeria was a product of European ambition and rivalry in Africa. Located within latitude 4⁰n and 14⁰n and longitude 3⁰e and 15⁰e, and with a massive population currently estimated at over a hundred and forty million (According to 2006 Population exercise), it is the most populous country in Africa and among the five most populous in the tropics (Adalemo and Baba, 1993). Indeed as Gulrez (2002) notes, it is the 10th most populous country in the world. Equally, it has a land area of about 923, 768 square kilometres roughly equivalent to France, Italy, Belgium and Holland rolled together (Jovre, quoted in Ojo, 1998).

Scholars (Osaghae, 1998; Akinwunmi, 2004) agreed that evolution of a modern Nigerian state can be traced to the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 where territories of Africa were partitioned among the European powers. At the conference, British's right over the territory now known as Nigeria was recognized by other powers. Consequently, the British chartered the Royal Niger Company to trade in and administer the area. By 1900, the British formally took over its administration after revoking the charter of the Royal Niger Company thereby establishing formal colonial rule. Much of the country's colonial and post colonial political and economic developments have been well documented by scholars (see, Oyovbaire, 1985; Akinola, 1988; Osaghae, 1998; Williams, 1999 and Elaigwu, 2005). It must be stated however that the Nigerian state as presently constituted represents a plural

society *par excellence*. This derived from its multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups. But while emphasis in the literature on Nigeria's plurality has often been on its ethnic character, little has been done to espouse its religious concomitant.

At best, religious plurality is viewed from the angle of Islam and Christianity while other belief systems are subsumed under the label of African Traditional Religion (ATR). These include *Ogun* (God of iron), *Sango* or *Amadioha* (God of thunder) and several others². The reality however is that all the groups subsumed under the ATR are not in themselves of the same content as they often assert their differences to the extent that an individual is not expected to be adherent of more than one belief system. But this is not to say that adherents of the ATR do not participate in the celebration each of the other festivals - at least, in showing solidarity with fellow members of the community.

More importantly, most of the ATR predates Islam and Christianity though these two have come to be domineering especially in the post colonial era. Some factors, perhaps, serve to explain this. First, at one level, the imperialist character of the colonial state imposed its own civilization on other cultures. Other religions are thus classified as barbaric while the imported ones are portrayed as a saving grace. This is true of Christianity which came along with colonialism. At another level, each of the imported religions has an inherent tendency to dominate and in the case of Islam, it sought to bring people out of their *Jahiliyah* state into one of enlightenment based on teachings of the *Quran* and *Hadith*. Second, in the post-colonial era, government, following the established practices during the colonial era, is more disposed to the two religions, Islam and Christianity, than any other religion in existence. Third, there is also the tendency, as Davies (1995) argues, for people irrespective of their ethnic or professional background to show themselves more as either Muslim or Christian outwardly whereas they are sentimentally attached to the ATR. These factors encouraged the preponderance of Islam and Christianity above other beliefs.

Apart from the existence of multiplicity of ATR groups along with Islam and Christianity, there are also other imported religious beliefs. These include Harri Krishna from India, Eckankar movement, among others. Again, these groups have not been influential enough to assert their presence beyond the domineering character of Islam and Christianity.

In terms of establishment, religious plurality in Nigeria occurred at three different epochs in history. First there are those already established before colonialism and which are autochthonous to Africa. These are those categorized under ATR. Second there are those formally established during colonial period and which enjoyed support of the colonial state, they are Islam and Christianity. Commenting on their arrival in Nigeria, Kurian (1979) notes that, Christianity came through the Southern coast with the arrival of Europeans in Southern Nigerian. With the establishment of formal colonial rule, Christianity became firmly rooted in the South (South east) and spreading towards Western Nigeria but met Islam there. Islam on the other hand came through Northern Nigeria via trade contact with Arabs of North Africa and through activities of Islamic *Jihadists*. It became firmly established in Northern Nigeria and was spreading southwards but met with Christianity in the West. Thus: ... the resulting religious composition closely follows geographic and ethnic lines; the Southern Ibo are predominantly Christians, while the Northern Hausa are... Muslims, and the Western Yoruba are partly Christian and partly Muslim (1979)

Note worthy is that, their different origins coupled with their being rooted within separate geographical localities as well as differential pace of socio-political and economic developments between the localities typified by the North and South divide during colonial era are what sowed the seed for a discordant relationship between them after the country's independence. But this was aggravated by state's involvement in religious affairs.

Finally at the third level of establishment of Nigeria's religious plurality there are those beliefs that registered their presence in Nigeria after independence, though with few followers. These are the Hare Krishna, Eckanker and so on. All the above arguments notwithstanding, all the various groups have come to stay and co-exist within the Nigerian State. What is to be noted is that multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups has now become institutionalized diversity within the Nigerian state. It is within these historical facts therefore that we can locate the reasons behind the pre-emptive relation that exists between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria and the role carved out by the state for itself.

Religious Balancing Mechanisms in Nigeria

To say the least, Christian - Muslim relations in Nigeria has been more of strange bed fellows. Both religions preach peace and peaceful co-existence

but have been involved, perpetually, in a race of ascendancy in manners that threaten peace especially in post independent Nigeria. Noteworthy is that, the marriage of convenience between them dates back to the pre-independent period when the British colonialists had to embark on a policy of protecting the Muslim North from the 'destructive influences of the Christian South' yet, went ahead to amalgamate the two into one political entity (Osaghae, 1998). Suffice to say therefore that the present antagonism between the two groups was partly the fruit of the discordant seed sown at that period. It is the desire to bring about order out of the disorder therefore that led to some balancing mechanisms inspired by the state.

As noted earlier, religious balancing in Nigeria is predicated on both constitutional and extra constitutional means. These are with intent to avert possible religious controversy and guarantee equal rights of citizens to profess their faith. Thus, Nigerian governments since independence have often proclaimed that religion is confined to private practice and individual preference. The state will not adopt any religion as official one neither will it give overt or covert recognition and assistance to any group. However, this is far from what obtains in reality as the state has not completely dissociated itself from religious activities. Perhaps a more plausible line of argument is to view Nigeria as a multi religious state. This is buttressed by the letters of the 1999 Constitution which clearly states that "the government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion" (FRN, 1999, Section 10). This provision is further complimented by Section 38(1) which guarantees individual's "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (FRN, 1999, Section 38)³. Suffice to say therefore, that these constitutional provisions, though recognized the existence of religious diversities in the country, have in the strictest sense confined religious practices to the private realm.

With regards to the extra constitutional mechanisms, it involves the state's pragmatic support to religious groups within it. This is anchored on its belief that 'every religion has a positive and soul redeeming message which ought to be propagated formally and informally in order to promote a culture of religious tolerance in a multi-religious society' (Momoh, 1992). Obviously, this idea of propagating formally such religious messages was directed towards the Christian and Islamic faiths. Lending credence to this argument, the government during a seminar organized by the National Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO) in 1992 declared that, 'the

need now is very urgent not only to propagate Islam and Christianity but also to propagate tolerance and peaceful co-existence in all its religious and ethnic dimensions' (The Guardian, August 14, 1992). As will become obvious soon, this idea is partly responsible for the stiff contest for public space between Islam and Christianity in the country. In its pragmatic involvement in Christian and Muslim religious activities, some days are declared by the Nigerian state as public holidays for the celebration of Muslim and Christian festivals. Both enjoy five days annually as public holidays commemorating one event or the other. In addition, the government does send goodwill messages to them on such occasions through the print and electronic media. Apart from this, huge amounts are usually paid from government coffers as allowances to some categories of state officials for the celebration of one or the other of either Muslim or Christian festivals to the extent that a Senator was once alleged by a probe panel to have received up to the tune of 16 million Naira of tax payers money as *Sallah* gift (The Punch, August 2, 2006 p 6). This is in addition to billions of naira of tax payers' money that is spent on Christian and Muslim pilgrimages. Indeed, it was reported that in the 2012 Budget, the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria got a total allocation of N765.65 million, while the Nigeria Christian Pilgrim Commission received N576 million. Put together, the Federal Government must have spent N1.34 billion on pilgrimages for the year (The Punch Editorial, November 6, 2013). In fact, the Punch editorial noted further that for the 2012 Christian and Muslim pilgrimage, the President and the Central Bank of Nigeria approved a concessionary rate of N144 to \$1 when the prevailing market rate has been an average of N158 to \$1 for the most part of the year. It was also alleged that Nigeria wasted N6.5 billion on pilgrims-related issues between 2007 and 2011 while the government also expended over N4 billion on the emoluments of the Christian and Muslim welfare agencies' employees between 2009 and 2011 (The Punch, November 6, 2013).

Another area of involvement in religious affair by the Nigerian state is in terms of financial and material assistance to religious groups. In addition to donating expansive plots of land in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, the Shagari administration (1979-1983) for instance gave 10 million naira each to both the Muslim and Christian groups to build their places of worship in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (see Kukah, 1993). These have come to be known as National Mosque and National Ecumenical Centre, respectively and placed directly under the Presidency. In addition, these

places of worship are kept and rehabilitated from government coffers. For instance during the regime of President Obasanjo (1999 - 2007) a rehabilitation committee for the National Mosque was constituted with the President as chairman and Vice President as his vice as well (*Thisday*, July 24, 2004, p2). Additionally, mosques and churches were allowed to be built in premises of some government establishments in order to cater for the religious and spiritual need of their adherents. Not too long ago for instance, President Olusegun Obasanjo, commissioned a church built by his regime within the Aso Rock premises. This, according to him, was done with a view to correcting previous situation whereby Muslims can always move out of their offices to observe their prayers in the mosque already built by the past administration – an opportunity which their Christian counterparts do not have (see *The Punch*, April 24, 2000; International IDEA, 2000). Other areas of government direct involvement in religious affairs include its external fraternization with religious organizations or religious inclined bodies and official support of Muslim and Christian pilgrimages, among others. How all these impacted on Muslim-Christian relations and its implication for the state is our focus in the next section.

Implications and Consequences

There is no denying the fact that post colonial Nigerian state has been a hotbed of religious antagonisms and acrimony between Islam and Christianity. Both have become competitors for public space. At one level, it is rivalry for greater number of converts and at another level, it is competition for vantage position in power matrix. In spite of government's endeavour to balance relations between the two, mutual suspicion and antagonism has remained a common occurrence. Although the country may not have experienced a full-blown religious war, but series of inter religious conflicts occurring in the past (see Elaigwu, 1993; Gofwen, 2004; Akinwunmi, 2004; Elaigwu, 2005 & Muhammad, 2008) is a pointer to the fact that the country is not outrightly immune from such.

What seem to be a major and direct antagonism between Christians and Muslims in post independent Nigeria first started in the controversy that trailed the *Sharia* debate in the 1977-78 Constituent Assembly (CA). Before then, religion was never at the forefront in inter-group relations and plays little or no part in national politics. Elaigwu (1993:3) was thus right to observe that amidst the many sins of the First Republic (1960-1966),

religious bigotry of groups ranked lowest. However with the controversies generated in 1977-78 Constituent Assembly on whether to include provisions on *Sharia* court or not in the impending Nigerian Constitution of 1979, the issue of religion began to assume a vociferous dimension in Nigerian government and politics. This situation was made worse by the joint termination of religious and ethnic boundaries in the country. Consequently as events unfold under different administrations, the various religious balancing mechanisms employed by the state to manage its religious plurality especially the relation between Christians and Muslims not only became sterile but often, counter productive. Consequently, each religious group becomes more and more suspicious of each other and/or the state while most policies and actions are seen through the lens of religion. Osaghae (1998) notes that, the lens also extends to issues of dressing, food and the balance of religious propagation in educational institutions, allocation of air time on radio and television and religious composition of the armed forces, among others. In effect, Islam and Christianity in Nigeria have become interlocked in the rivalry for public space and national politics. Even in the arena of inter-state relations, both Islam and Christianity have showed themselves as born-rivals. This is evident in the controversies that trailed Nigeria's restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel and the Vatican; membership of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986 and, the D8 (group of eight developing countries) during General Sanni Abacha regime, among others. For the veracity and dimensions of religion in Nigeria's external relations, (see Birai 1996, Omoruyi 2001, & Suleiman, 2004). The point of emphasis here is that, the Nigerian state's attempt to maintain positive balance of relation between Islam and Christianity has been characterized by large scale counter productiveness with excruciating consequences for Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria as well as the state as a political entity.

In other words, since the state is the centre of activity, power and authority in a multi religious society as Nigeria, it becomes attractive and serves as a point of contest for various groups seeking to dominate and influence each other. This coupled with the fact that, religion is one of the diversities highly susceptible to manipulation by politicians places Muslims and Christians on their toes in moments of appointments and political contests. What logically derives in this context is that the amount of public space enjoyed by a particular religious group will be largely determined by religious affiliation of who controls the political power. That is, there is a

tendency that whoever controls political power will be more disposed to his/her own religious group as against the other. This trend has always manifested in complaint by either group against the government, depending on the religious belief of the Head of State. For instance, in an undated article circulated by the National Council of Muslim Youth Organizations (NACOMYO) in Nigeria, it alleged the religious lop-sidedness against the interest of Islam in the political appointments made by President Olusegun Obasanjo. According to the piece, out of 42 ministers 26 were Christians while 16 were Muslims. Also, of the 60 special advisers and aides, 47 and 13 were Christians and Muslims, respectively. The conclusion of this group therefore is that Muslims in Nigeria have become endangered species that may eventually be consumed under a Christianization agenda (NACOMYO, undated). Similar allegations have been leveled in the past by Christians against Muslim head of governments. Little wonder therefore that even issues of party politics and electioneering in the country have been characterized by a 'high sense of political ecumenism' to use Kukah's (1993, pp150) phrase. In fact, what could be gleaned from the writings of various scholars is that there is no election in post independent Nigeria that is not characterized by either politicians manoeuvring the religion cleavage or religious groups attempting to manipulate the political process (see, Birai, 1996; Kukah, 1993; Akinyele, 2002; Suleiman & Muhammad 2005).

It must be noted that, it is the government's recognition and support for some religious groups that is responsible for the unbridled antagonism between the groups (Christianity and Islam). Indeed, Nigeria has witnessed destructive religious crises in the past, but there is nothing to suggest that more of such will not occur given the extent to which religion has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian government and politics except the government threads with care. The government must realize that religious conflicts are usually wider in scope and destructive than ethnic or political crises. First, religions especially Islam and Christianity have a wider transnational existence than ethnic and political affiliations. As such, happenings in other parts of the globe can trigger violence in Nigeria. An instance was when the government in 2001 made a pronouncement that it was in support of U.S. offensive against Osama Bin Laden. Religious violence instantly erupted in Kano and some other parts of the country. While this represents purely an international issue and a foreign policy statement from the Nigerian government, it was understood by some Muslims as an attempt by the

Nigerian government to join forces with the U.S. government against the Muslims (see; *Thisday*, October 13, 2001). Secondly, unlike ethnicity which creates several fronts of divide depending on the number of ethnic groups, religion creates fewer divides. In the case of Nigeria, the predominance of Christianity and Islam usually makes it result in two divides. Hence, most Nigerians in the moments of religious crises usually fall into either divide irrespective of ethnic and or political affiliation. The implication of this is that, unlike ethnic conflict which may be restricted to areas inhabited by members of the groups in conflict, the whole country would serve as constituency for any major religious violence. Little wonder therefore that a spark of religious violence in Lagos or Owerri instantly replicate itself in Kano or Kaduna whereas ethnic conflict of long year standing as between the Ijaw and the Itshekiri in Delta State or Ife and Modakeke in Osun State Umuieri and Aguleri in Imo State, among others, have not transcended their abode.

Of equal importance is the fact that, state's romance with Islam and Christianity amount to a violation of the fundamental rights of the other religious groups. One may then query: what happens if the other groups are able to muster enough strength and support to begin to exert pressure on the state for equal treatment. This may occur as a result of constant conflict between the two dominant groups of Islam and Christianity in which non members of the groups are affected. This has a tendency to inspire other groups into forming some form of resistance against the domineering character of Islam and Christianity and state's support for them. The implication of this is that the country may likely be rent by more serious strife that would threaten its very foundation.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis revealed Nigeria's heterogeneous character evidence in the diversity of its ethnic and religious groups. These diversities have often constituted a source of conflict within the entity. Perhaps cognizant of the fact that religion represents a political force capable of pushing in different direction (Ball & Dagger, 1995, pp253), the Nigerian state adopted the principle of secularity. Thus, it was given a constitutional backing hoping that it would help avoid a potent source of unbridled antagonism. This is in addition to other extra-constitutional mechanisms. However, through an assessment of some practices by the Nigerian state, it is observed that the

notion of Nigerian secularity exists only in principle and not in practice. This is because the state has displayed so much affection for religious practices to the extent that religion's consideration with bias for especially Christianity and Islam underlie some of its activities. The reality is that, this inability to maintain absolute neutrality in religious affairs has serious implications for the Nigerian state and where care is not taken, religion for Nigeria, may be a time bomb patently waiting to explode and shatter its very basis of existence. It is therefore suggested that the Nigerian state should reexamine its level of romance with religious groups and make necessary adjustments in its relation with them in order for it to effectively contain the destructive potentials of inter religious antagonisms.

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