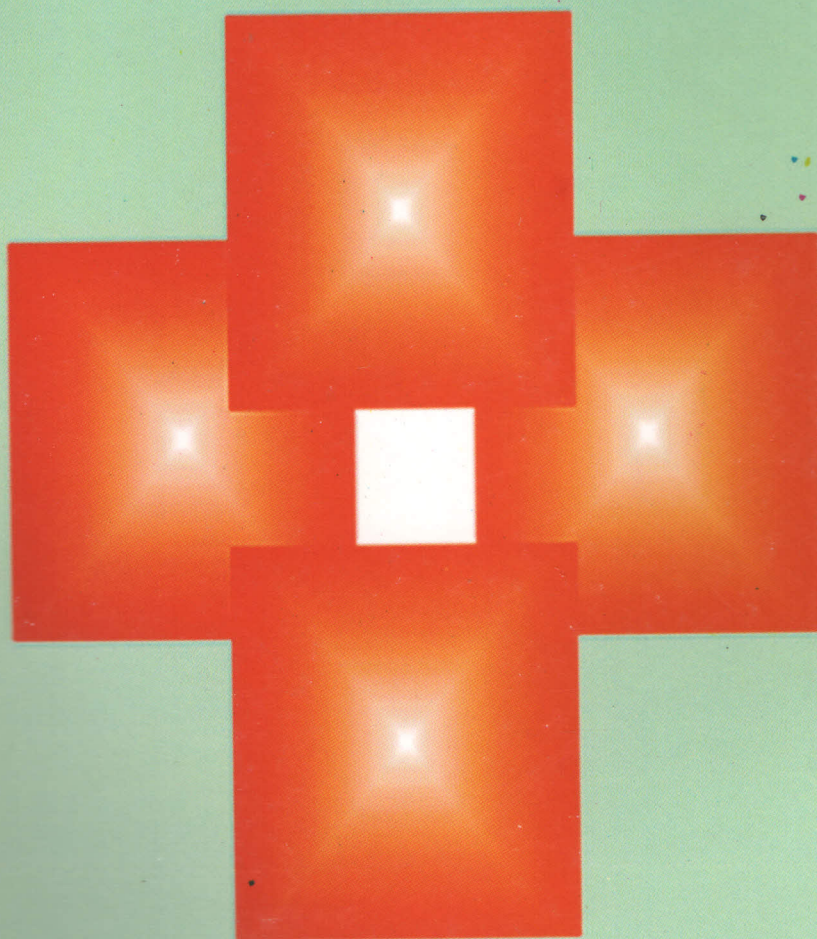


Human Views on God

Variety Not Monotony

(Essays in Honour of Ade P. Dopamu)



Adam K. arap Chepkwony, DPhil
Peter M.J. Hess, PhD

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ethno-Religious Issues and National Integration in Nigeria

Odeh Lemuel E.

Introduction

Nigeria, a forty eight years old multi-religious society, has made several constitutional efforts in its chequered march to nationhood. One of the inspired and calculated efforts at deception was the constitutional conference of 1995 where about four hundred Nigerians gathered to formulate a constitution that could resolve, once and for all, the many problems of ethno-religious and national questions.

Although, the military leadership in Nigeria then did not carry out or effect the constitution, yet the draft of the constitutional conference looked more like a mechanical contraption for ethnic groups rather than a constitution of a nation state with a common destiny and will.¹ The decisions of the conference were not motivated by any philosophy of common identity rather, they were mooted by selfish interest and ethno-religious ambition at the expense of national interest.

In the words of late premier of defunct Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello, "we cannot gloss over facts and expect problems to state themselves."² This remark was in response to that perennial National Question. The critical point he made was that there was the need to respect the peculiar sensibilities of the federating units at the threshold of independence even while conceding the notion of integration. The nation's inability to come to terms with that sagely counsel, partly explained the outcome of January 15, 1966, when coups and counter coups became the order of the day because of ethnic jostling for political relevance.

National interest, according to Rasheed, is an embodiment of objectives to which a nation state commits itself in the context of a competitive global forces and these objectives are further linked to the quest for the following: unity and progress, prosperity and development, justice and equity, creation of a land full of opportunity for, all her citizenry.³ Believing that all these encapsulate national interest, a highly stratified society would be able to attain full integration and solve the national questions if these objectives are judiciously applied to the quest for national integration.

The danger of ethnicity coloured with religious sentiments and its effects on national integration is pungent Nigeria today. This has drawn attention to the disintegration and deterioration of brotherly unity among the major religions practised in the Nigerian state. The significance of national integration and quest for dousing the various tensions have become more urgent than before.

As a matter of fact, where one comes from and the religion one professes today in Nigeria determines one's life chances and position in the social relations and placement in many instances. This situation has encouraged mediocrity to the detriment of meritocracy all in the name of federal character and quota system.

Thus, various measures taken by successive governments might have failed to curtail these problems viz.: federal character system; quota system; state and local government creation and official recognition of particular religion. It then becomes necessary for Nigeria to adopt a different model or measure to counter these problems in order to achieve full integration of the ethno-religious nationality into a national spirit of cohesiveness and brotherly unity. Therefore, the thrust of this chapter is to examine the conceptual meanings of ethnicity, religion, and other national questions. The chapter will conclude by recommending blueprints for the Nigerian State.

Conceptual clarification

Ethnic groups and ethnicity

Various scholars have attempted to define the concept, ethnic groups. According to Cohen, an ethnic group is an informal interest coalition of people whose members are different members of other groups within the same society owing to the fact that they share compulsory institution like kinship, religion, economic system and also have the capacity to fully communicate among themselves.⁵ Cohen further maintained that a common denominator of an ethnic group is the existence of a distinct consciousness of similarity that is normally predicated on some language, common religion and culture.⁶

Similarly, Daniel G. Foster et. al. have jointly defined an ethnic group as a group of people who hold in common a set of traditions that distinguish them from others with whom they are in contact.⁷ Such traditions typically include a sense of historical continuity or a common ancestry, place of origin, religious beliefs and practices, and language.

Ethnicity refers to the nature, content and focus of inter-ethnic relationship existing between different ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society. It exposes the nature of interaction among the competing ethnic groups as informed by ethnic prejudices and identity.⁸ In Nigeria, the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo and Idoma ethnic groups are a few examples of ethnic groups. Relationship among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria is predominantly marked by ethnocentrism, where members of an ethnic group display group pride and indulge in glorifying their culture, to the neglect, disdain and scorn of other groups. It is this display of ethnic sentiments that has led to mutual suspicions, hatred, strife and rancour among the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The genesis of ethnicity in Nigeria

Ethnicity in Nigeria is traceable to the colonial era with British conquest of hitherto independent ethnic groups. This has altered dramatically the nature of inter-group relations among the ethnic groups. Before the arrival of the British, these ethnic groups traded amongst themselves in sustenance of their agricultural and other commercial commodities. The conquest meant that the ethnic groups at least from 1914, following the amalgamation were brought under one political umbrella with capitalist mode of production as its foundation. Our incorporation into global capitalism and its consequent destruction of indigenous production method, which the citizens were hitherto involved in their own definition of development made the system further dangerous for the frail nation state to handle. In addition, the subordination of all economic activities to the colonial authorities further worsened the development of ethnic solidarity. The development of colonial cities as centres of trade, commerce, administration; the monetization of the economy and the introduction of taxation compelled rural dwellers to relocate to the cities in large numbers to eke out a living and be able to pay the white man's tax. To the chagrin of the new rural migrant, rural woes were even better than urban miseries.

By its very organic nature British inspired segregation residential pattern, the colonial cities easily emerged as flower beds of hostility and ethnicity. In order to foster its policy of divide and rule, the British colonial administrators insisted on segregated residential centres culminating in what is known as *Sabon-Gari* (i.e. strangers quarters) in the North, *Ogbe Hausa* in the East.⁹

Odeh, not only saw this segregation on ethnicity aligned with the socio-economic suppressions of the natives whose activities were branded as primitive, inferior and barbaric, and also promulgated a cultural imperialism on the natives.¹⁰ All the aforementioned constrained the natives and natives to co-exist together in a communal struggle against exploitative rule of the British. The new city dwellers saw themselves as competitors in the mad rush to acquire scarce resources (employment, money, power) essential for survival in the cities.

Religion

Religion is such a complex term, that arriving at a uniform and general acceptable definition is quite difficult.¹¹ Taylor defines religion 'as a belief in spiritual beings'.¹² Frazer says, 'Religion is the propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man, which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life. Marx saw religion as the 'opium of the masses'.¹³ Durkheim defined religion as a system of beliefs, rituals and practices or a code of moral

conduct involving the recognition by man of a superhuman power which has control over his destiny and which is entitled to obedience, reverence and worship."¹⁴ *The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines religion as "the belief in the existence of a god or gods and the activities that are connected with the worship of them."¹⁵

It is therefore undeniable that human existence is premised on religion. It wields so much power that it offers total explanation for existence and provides guideline for human pursuits and endeavours. Its effect is total and most people think often of religion than they think about sex and more daily than any other thing.

It is no gainsaying the fact that religion controls man, his value and environment. It is no longer news that some people will die for it while the acceptance of suffering for it is legendary. There are many religions in the world but for this paper it shall restrain itself to the two popular ones in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity.

Religion, so sensitive, powerful, co-extensive with life and as controlling influence in human existence, has been used to mar rather than make our nation, Nigeria. Thus, religious faithfuls commit heinous violent crimes and acts in the name of their "god" by slaughtering innocent souls and destroying property.¹⁶ Religion in this context becomes a product of desperation and is also further sharpened by the living conditions of environments. From the foregoing therefore religion as a symbol of destruction should not be undermined by the very fact that it is being used as an instrument of political mobilisation, fulfilment of parochial and selfish interest and ethno-sectional aspirations.¹⁷

Undeniably therefore, it is glaring that religious violence in Nigeria is a volatile mix of high politics, and arguably therefore, political anarchists use it to inflame passions, fiasco, aspersion and maiming. These negative expressions are well captured by Alamu when he stoutly said: "making religion an arms race and a launch pad for expressing political grievances."¹⁸

Christianity and Islam have, over the years, laid a common claim to theistic origins. However, the question that has over the years begged for an answer is whether the same religion represents the same God in their practice, faith and beliefs. If, the answer is "YES" why, do we have these numerous senseless and violent clashes in defence of some God?

All these senseless killings, social dislocation, arson, bloodletting among other uncouth and anti-religious acts are viewed as antithetical to religious teachings. So, once again, one may be tempted to ask, "when did religion teach destruction of innocent lives,"¹⁹ the violence that today bestrides the Nigerian landscape like a colossus did not just emerge from the blues. It was courted albeit unconsciously or inadvertently, by way of deliberate choices made by individual Nigerians and governments over a period of time. Today's violence has its precedence in history. Today's vicious crimes, callous murders, senseless killings and the new wave of terrorism had their foundations laid in our natural landscape by way of layers of fraud, lies, deceit and mischief that for a while have constituted the character of Nigerian governance.²⁰ Dopamu posits that "the question of personal gain, political, selfish ends, egocentrism, quest for power to dominate, ethnicity and the question of the perversion of an entirely human and reasonable process may enter into the enthusiasm one throws in one's propaganda activity. This is fatal for religion since people will be suspicious of its value and intention."²¹

From this premise, it becomes clear that usually ethno-political violence has always worn religious garb to murder peace. To this end Nigeria's former president Obasanjo remarked "that there are permanent interest groups that have decided to undermine the state, ignore the rule of law and due process and use religion as a cover to perpetuate uncouth and clearly antireligious action...in fact, people now appear to have absolutely no respect for the sanctity of human life."²² In the same vein, Akinseye opined "generally people in high position in the country sponsor most of the religious crimes. It is evident that the elite in the country are most times the brain behind religious crisis..."²³

Theoretical framework

In order to conceptualise the dialectical relationship between ethnicity, religion and national integration, it would be expedient to recall the different theories of ethnicity viz., the structural-functional theories which underline assumptions that groups in society behave according to shared beliefs, system, ideologies and communal norms and values.²⁴

The structural-functional theory explains ethnicity by looking at how these shared values and traditions by some groups which are inherent in them, operate the special features, which inform their differential ranking within a given social formation. Theories of ethnic segregation and stratification are good examples of the structural-functional theory.²⁵

Also, the conflict theory uses the existence of socio-economic, political and psychological resources of persistence of ethnic conflict and strife in multi-religious societies. It is a scarcity of cherished values and differential opportunities or rather, access to acquisition of these resources amongst the competing group in a plural society that intensify the ethnic question.

In societies like Nigeria and other developing countries, there is tendency for ethnic struggles and acrimony to become more acute and pronounced because of the peculiar nature of the state or of the federation where component units with different religious backgrounds depending almost exclusively on subventions or grants from the central government for survival.

The conflict theory, therefore, contends that it is the aforementioned reasons more than anything else that explain the persistence of ethnic struggle.²⁶ On the other hand, the socio-psychological theories under which such middle ranged theories like identity theories, role theories, traits theories, need theories or achievement motivation theories all attempt to explain ethnicity from the preponderance of some personality features and the disposition of individuals.²⁷

Although, in theoretical analysis or exposition, a way of viewing or looking at social reality is a way of not looking at it. Howbeit, some of these theories claim some merits or utility in the analysis of ethnicity. There seems to be a strong correlation between the character of a society's mode of production, the level of group animosity and consequently integration or lack of it. It is a known fact that ethnic rivalries and conflicts arise from desire of one group to dominate another with the dominated seeking independence and self determination of which the dominant is surely disposed not to grant, thereby making conflicts inevitable.

Arguably, the desire of major ethno-religious groups in Nigeria to subordinate the so-called minority groups is what Alabi termed "internal imperialism."²⁸ Nworah²⁹ and Alabi³⁰ argue that the minorities should be given more access to the political space in Nigeria since peripheral powers of the state are limited because of the immense over-concentration of power at the centre stage.

Besides, issues of creation of more states and local governments by successive governments have greatly empowered the minorities. This step is not without its attendant problems. The idea of rotational presidency with strong emphasis on religious affiliation as advocated by critics may seem palliative measures which could create a sort of psychological satisfaction and assurance for the oppressed groups. This interestingly can hardly solve the problem of ethnicity or even the national question if the prudent management of resources for the benefit of every Nigerian, no matter the tribe or creed, is not relentlessly pursued.

Rasheed further posited that to attain national interest in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria, much effort is needed on government's part so as to ensure equal opportunity and access. This is seen in the scheme of things, politically, economically, educationally and socially.³² The citizens, on their own, are obligated to pledge total loyalty to the state supremacy over and above any ethnic and cultural sentiments. In the face of all these, ethnicity or ethnic pride should be sacrificed not on the altar of prejudice or self interest but for the general good and well-being of all and sundry in Nigeria.

In furtherance to this argument, Rasheed posited that a nation desirous of national integration in the face of ethnic differences, should apply herself to the vigorous quest for justice and equity, prosperity, development, unity and greatness. In addition, equal access to resources for all citizens will enhance the commitment of the people towards the state's programmes and foster a greater sense of belonging and acceptance among the people.³³

The contention here is that, since coming together as a nation is not our making or individual choice, and despite our differences and diversities, we have been drawn together to share the same fate; a common destiny, Nigerians, should begin to see themselves as siblings and take a new national identity rather than sectional identity which has often times divided us rather than unite us. This is relevant because religiously humanity has the same God as father.

Rasheed summarises that the media in Nigeria has a major role to play in this, because many conflicts and hostilities were allowed to fester through the process of socialisation. The media should ensure the avoidance of ethnic or religious sentimentality in carrying out their duties so that they can achieve their true potentials of fostering unity among the diverse groups in the country.³⁴ Ibrahim, also has advocated the transformation of social and moral values of Nigerians.³⁵

³¹ This opinion is predicated on the decay in Nigeria's leadership which in turn was precipitated by several factors, i.e. religious intolerance, religious bigotry, prolonged military dictatorship and massive deprivations suffered by the masses.

Colonial rule as a system was fundamentally immoral and based on ruthless military conquest and deceit. It was undemocratic, unaccountable and anti-people. What mattered most was the interest of the British imperialist whose fulfilment meant a colossal deprivation for the indigenous people. Therefore, the British imperialism and its exploitative annexation methods were largely devoid of any positive moral values bequeathed to the succeeding local ruling class and the masses in general.

Ethnicity, religion, and the quest for national integration

According to Elaigwu, national integration is determined by "the degree to which members and groups in a plural society adapt to the demands of national existence while co-existing harmoniously. On the practical note, national integration is a process, not an end in itself and it is usually affected by contending social forces."³⁶ In the quest for national integration, citizens are expected to respect the overriding supremacy of the national government. This entails subordination of institutions and cultural values to the demands of the central authority. Often, intra- and inter-ethnic crisis result in tasking the state's security apparatus. The ability of the state to resolve or regulate the recurring crises and to create an enabling environment where the people's respect and love for their nation is enhanced would definitely affect the tempo of the nation's integration positively.

Religious and ethnic questions

The national question becomes a crucial issue in the Nigerian polity mainly as a result of the role of the state in shaping the human historical processes. Hitherto, the human species had existed in different races, tribes, cultures and language groups and had settled in different territorial area of the earth.³⁷ Basically, the national question arises due to the desire of one ethnic group to permanently dominate the other in one way or the other. This may be religious, economical, political, socio-cultural or otherwise. The issue of the national question in the Nigerian context has to do with the ongoing debate on how to order the relations among the different ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria so that they can have the same rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of the national resources.

In fact, the features of the country's national question are premised upon some of the following reasons.

- a) Ethno-religious conflicts and hostilities exist partly as a result of previous colonial and ethnic manipulation.
- b) The Nigerian federation was not formed voluntarily as a result of which the component states (many of them multi-ethnic) were created by federal government fiat.
- c) The country is dominated by mainly three ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani).
- d) As a result of manipulation, the relationship between these three main groups and the smaller ethnic groups has been held with suspicions and mistrust.

Thus, the issue of national question is one that requires a lasting solution. Meanwhile there cannot be a drastic solution to it and consequently the clamour for resource control, issue of power sharing or political succession, ethno-religious violence, national insecurity, national economic crises, census crises and many others, are some of the problems and challenges thrown up by the persistent issue of the "national question."

The way forward

Ethno-religious issues have plunged Nigeria into a bedlam of problems and challenges which have had dire consequences for the country. These measures include the principles of federal character, state creation, Nigeria's federalism and quota system.

Federal character is the term used to indicate the composition of the federal government or any of its agencies. It ought to shall reflect fair and equitable distribution of privileges and benefits among all ethnic groups in Nigeria so as to foster national unity and stability. In the words of Okwudiba federal character is,

The desire of people of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every Nigerian a sense of belonging to the nation, notwithstanding the diversity of ethnic origin, culture, language or religion which may exist and which is their desire to nourish and harness to the environment of the federal republic of Nigeria.³⁹

The principle of federal character was introduced to ensure unity, national integration and loyalty in the Nigerian state. But rather than fostering national unity; it has heightened mutual suspicions and acrimonies among Nigerians.⁴⁰

Apart from this, the federal character principle was designed in such a manner to curtail the fears of ethno-religious marginalisation or domination.

Conclusion

The various measures designed over the years to maintain Nigeria's fragile "unity in diversity" and to also foster national integration, have failed to achieve the desired objectives of unity and national integration, but rather promoted rivalry and divisiveness due to age-long stereotyped orientation.

In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, conflicts and rivalries are bound to arise and they point out the society's fault lines that require redress. Against this backdrop, we have witnessed incessant inter-ethno-religious or communal conflicts, and wrangling by marginalised minorities or expression of grievances by different ethnic groups because of the denial of certain rights accruing to them.

We need to bear in mind that national interest is the attainment of justice, equity, even distribution of scarce resources and equal opportunities among citizens or ethnic groups. National interest can further be viewed as concerned aims of the effective mobilisation and utilisation of resources in a way that gives room for balanced growth and development. The greater the sense of justice, fairness and equity in a society, the more that society will enjoy stability, harmonious co-existence, sustained growth, loyalty, unity and national integration.

This will invariably reduce to the barest minimum the conflicts, rivalry, controversies and internal wrangling associated with diverse ethnic, religious and cultural elements in Nigeria.

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