THE POLITICS OF RELIGION AND CONFLICT GENERATION IN NIGERIA 1960 - 2007

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Abstract
History tells us that most human relationships, either at individual or governmental levels are usually anchored on egocentric attitudes than altruistic behaviours. The manifestations of such attitudes and behaviours in areas like, politics and religious activities invariably lead to clash of interest. In the contemporary Nigerian society with diverse political and religious affiliations and interest contesting for available political power, economic domination and religious supremacy, conflicts become inevitable. However, the clash of interest is not the main issue, but the realization that such contention can be managed to the benefit of all the stakeholders. This can be harnessed and possibly sustained as recourse is made to historical facts and truths in the area of human relations and developments. Such historical facts do suggest that the way of achieving peace and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria is on the basis of respect for the dignity of all people irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. This article thus, opines that the search for peace in Nigeria, is a multi-dimensional process requiring the co-operation and sincerity of all the stakeholders to look beyond their immediate interest and gain; to be liberal and accommodating towards others’ interests, without jeopardizing the societal core values.

Introduction
The formation of the political entity, Nigeria, by the 1914 amalgamation of Lord Fredrick Lugard, the British colonial officer in charge of the southern and northern protectorates, either by design or ‘mistake’ (as some authors and commentators like Awolowo, 1947; Bello 1962; and others (Ayoade: 1998:101) claimed, without the opinions of the people (Tamuno, 1990:393) had remained an enigma in political permutations. Apart from the early stabilizing role played by the subsisting British colonial power in welding together her numerous units (ethnic groups, which are more than 250 in number), no other strong cleavages have emerged among the cultural groups (with exception to the military), since independence to act a stabilizing role. On the contrary, with the actualization of independence following the lowering of the union – jack (flag) and the raising up of the green-white – green flag, heralded by euphoria and high expectations in October 1, 1960; what later emerged in the political terrain were cleavages based on primordial ties of ethnicity, religion, geography, language and so on. The scenario was of course not surprising going by the colonial politics that tried to harp and stress more on the nation’s differences than on her similarities. In recognition of the challenge and in the bid to build national cohesion, the various regimes that held sway in the governance of the country, made attempts to bridge the cultural gaps. Starting from the administration of General Yakubu Gowon, at the end of the civil war in 1970, such programmes like National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), the Federal Character Commission (Quota System), Federal Schools and institutions and so on were embarked upon by the government. These were geared towards addressing the problem of national unity and peaceful co-existence; without the fear of domination or being irrelevant in the political space.

However, with recent reoccurring political/social eruptions based on either ethnic or religious sentiments, the issue of conflict resolution and management takes a centre stage in the country once more. Fundamentally, these eruptions and the issues arising therein have raised questions on the palpable effects of all the efforts of governments in trying to address the issues of harmony and
peaceful co-existence. Instances of ethnic/religious conflicts usually based on perceived political, religious and economic contests abound in Nigeria today, leading to colossal loss of lives and properties worth billions of naira. These, therefore, form the nucleus of the problem, which this paper attempts at addressing, using historical analysis as its frame work.

Colonial Antecedents to Religious Clashes in Nigeria

In an attempt to locate the root of ethno-religious conflicts in Africa and Nigeria in particular, our colonial experience remains a reference point. With the exception of Ethiopia (Abyssinia) that narrowly escaped colonial rule and conquest (though Italy belligerently invaded the country in 1938), the rest of the countries of what is known today, (the African continent), were at one time or the other in their history under the weight of colonial tutelage. This lasted for approximately more than six (6) decades. For all its intents and purposes, the colonial history of Africa was to say the least a period of (to borrow from the words Walter Rodney) “naked imperialism” of exploitation of natural economic resources of Africans (Rodney, 1972:223). Much has been said by authors and historians like Growder, 1968; Coleman, 1986; and others about the place of colonial rule in the history of Africans that we do not need to further stress on this paper. But in an effort to trace the root of the continued eruption of either religious or ethnic clashes in Nigeria, for instance, our colonial heritage cannot be overlooked. One could recall that the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by Lugard and other constitutional questions that came up along the line created opportunity for the laying of a foundation for a strong and a virile polity based on equity and understanding. But the idea of a lopsided division with clear evidence of political advantage to the north over the east and west combined was purely a colonial design which aimed at favouritism, disunity and division. Part of the reason for this, apart from the neo-colonial paradigm, was perhaps the erroneous view of the colonial rulers that groups with “well-developed system of government and also an established religion” are more attuned to civilization, with well-developed culture of obedience to constituted authority, than those they regarded as still at the low level of human development “without culture” and anything worthy of preservation. Perham (1946) quoted in Coleman, (1986:3), stressing on the low level of development found in tropical Africa posits that:

The dealings between tropical Africa and the west must be different. Here in place of large unities of Asia was the multicellular tissue of tribalism; instead of an ancient civilization, the largest area of primitive poverty enduring into the modern age...

Based on the European scale of measuring ‘development and civilization’, where they found a trace of elements depicting ‘civilization’ in Africa such as in northern Nigeria, they tend to prefer such group compared to those they termed to be at the very lowest level of development. Such groups without centralized authority were thus made to come under the rule of the former, even when they had never had such experience in their past history. In Nigeria, for instance, most of such groups found in the north later embraced the Christian faith. But, Christianity and Islamic religion, with some irreconcilable doctrines and strong belief in proselytization, are historically strange bedfellows. This was also compounded by the delineation of religious differences even within the north on ethnic/cultural differences. The belief in inseparability of faith and politics by Islam did not help matters, as attempts had subsequently been made on some instances to use their political control to win others and where it failed, led to victimization. The declaration of Sharia law in 2000, starting
from Zamfara state in the north, gives a picture of the dire consequences of such acts to non Muslim adherents.

On the wider political terrain in Nigeria, apart from what had been said in the area of socio-religious relationships, part of the problem historically, stems from the near failure by the colonial power to bridge the gap in political and social engineering especially among the elite. Though the colonial challenge (rule) did act as a bridge to some gaps with the formation of some national parties like Nigeria Nation Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1922 by Herbert Macaulay and later National Council of Nigerian Citizen (NCNC), which later became associated with the East; the remaining parties, Action Group (A.G) and Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) were mainly regional parties and by implication had both religion and ethnicity as their strong base. Thus, consequent upon the type of government (regionalism and indirect rule system) that did not give room for broad political participation among the elite but rather excluded them, the elements of cohesion at the national level were practically absent. On the other hand, what came to be were cleavages based on ethnicity, geography and religion. The façade of unity built as a result of the presence of the colonial power (their common enemy) seems to have galvanized the elite into unity during the agitation for independence. However, this quickly disappeared with the achievement of independence giving rise to political, social and religious upheavals after the botched coup d’etat of Jan. 15 1966. This event later snowballed into 30 months of civil conflagration that claimed more than a million souls (Ogu, 2001:vii). Nevertheless, despite the subsequent introduction of Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation programmes (the three R’s) (Adejo, 2008:xi) at the end of the civil war, the problem of ethnic religious conflicts have not diminished. In fact, it seems to have been emboldened in its manifestations and activities. Part of this has continued to bring to bear the question and essence of national unity built on fairness and the continual clamour for the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference, where it is believed that the terms of our continued existence and unity would be deliberated upon.

**Contextualizing Politics in Relation to Conflict:**

**Politics**

Appadorai posits that,

…it is a lesson of history that people who are denied a share in political power are also denied a share in the benefits of power; hence the conclusion of Politics that democracy with all its defects is the safest form of government. (1968:7)

The above assertion may not be far from the truth going by the experiences of political and national challenges facing Nigeria at present. The brief history of politics in Nigeria has evidence of exclusive and opportunistic politics that thrives on corruption, ineptitude, strife, deprivation and exploitation of the generality of the populace by a privileged few. Hence, the felt neglect and exclusion by the privileged minority over the majority on the gains of politics often led to apathy, indifference and in some extreme cases to violence. The neglect being experienced by the majority often expresses itself through ethnic or religious riots. In most cases, it is ‘the common man’ that may have progressed economically, that rioters vent their spleen on, because to them, these are part of the group that helped to pauperize them and the neglect they found themselves in. This is simply because the privileged few in government have failed woefully to live up to their avowed responsibility to the masses.
According to Osaghae, politics...

...has to do with power relations and how individuals and groups organize to pursue their divergent and often conflicting interest, why the state is crucial to this process, how and why domestic and external economic, social, cultural and other forces shape or influence this process, what major issues ensue from power relations and how conflicts are managed and resolved. (1998:13)

The above definition of politics by Osaghae forms the framework of which political relation in Nigeria would be assessed and understood. He further opines that given the complexity of Nigerian politics where explanation rests heavily on a core variable, cognizance has to be taken of how that variable relates to other relevant and recurring variables (Osaghae 1998:16). Hence, inter-ethnic and religious variables are at the core of political equation in Nigeria politics, given their outstanding roles. Olurode in Momoh for instance opines that,

In contemporary Nigeria, the fact that religious differences in a way coincide with the spatial configuration of Nigeria makes religion one central element for the constitution of social differentiation and power relations. (Olurode 1989:352),

Apart from religion, the same application can also be postulated in relation to ethnic relation based on the geographical and religious lines. The nature and the difficulty involved in isolating one determinate variable among the lot, constitute an uphill task in conflict management and resolution when and if other variables fail to be fully taken into consideration.

**Religion**

Religion, seen as the natural quest of man to relate with the spiritual or supernatural has been as old as man. The innate tendency of the mortal–man in relating with the supernatural comes under the realm of religious activities, which manifest in both internal and external fulfillment. Naturally, due to its transcendental involvement, the issue of religion is very complex to comprehend and also a knotty topic for discussion. Moreover, there are many religious beliefs and practices, as there are varied culture groups in the globe professing one variant/form of religion or another. Religion is also generally seen as a way of life. African Traditional Religion (A.T.R.), Islam, and Christianity are among the prominent ones in the globe at present. The history and the emergence of Christianity and Islam in particular have helped to shape the progress and development of a number of countries in the world. For instance, during the medieval period and the subsequent “Enlightenment period”, the history of Western Europe and development were closely knit together by the two religions, “Islam and Christianity”. Even in the contemporary period, religion has remained a deciding factor in determining the course of politics in most nations. In Nigeria for example, as earlier mentioned, the near institutionalization of religion on both ethnic and geographical lines of the divide, had made religion a deciding factor in both the political and social formation in the land. Thus, no serious policy would be made in the land without considering its religious implications among others.

Apart from the recognized roles of religion generally in Nigeria, the differences in beliefs and practices of the two prominent ones, Christianity and Islam, seem to have heated the polity. Fundamentally, there are marked differences as to their beliefs and practices and what should be the role of the state to religion; though constitutionally Nigeria claims to be a secular or a multi-religious state. For instance, the Christian faith stands on the separation between the secular and the sacred,
while Islam is opposed to that, claiming that there is no separation between the two. In some instances, government is seen as a means of achieving religious goals.

Though religion has defied one acceptable definition like philosophy based on its nature and beliefs, “it has some components which help to elucidate on the nature of religion”. Generally agreed upon is that it is more of “a collective name than a single principle”. (Pailin, 1986:12). Among these components on which religion can be gleaned are the general acceptance of the ‘ultimate Being’, the importance of faith and ‘man’s moral obligations’ among others. These components of religion no doubt have contributed a lot to the development of man within the formation of nation-states as it pertains to political, economic, social and psychological development.

Mbiti in his work did recognize the overwhelming influence of religion to an African in his political, social and economic behaviours. He thus, opines that “religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned” (Mbiti, 1997:1). Drawing inference from Mbiti’s assessment of religious influence on an African ontologically, could such influence be seen in their ‘new found religions’? If on the positive, what could that suggest as the palpable effect to political and social harmony, considering their fundamental differences?

Indices of Religion in Politics and Its Implications
Nigeria as a self governing political entity emerged with the granting of her independence in 1960 from the colonial rule. The Constitution of the land, which is the body of rules on which the country is governed, recognizes the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of her citizens. As such it stipulates freedom of worship and association based on religious association and so on. The Nigerian Constitution being an off-shoot of our colonial heritage is derived from Judeo-Christian tradition. Naturally, it elicits the envy and opposition of Islamic faithful, who see it as being favourable to the Christian adherents. Moreover, the belief in non-separation between religion and politics by Islamic doctrine fundamentally clashes with the Constitution that recognizes the secular nature of the polity. How to resolve this fundamental differences and the reaction emanating from this stand, seems to be at the core of religious upheaval in Nigeria. For instance, immediately after the attainment of independence with the Regional governments still intact, the government of the Northern Nigeria did not hide their religious inclination to politics. Thus, several moves were made using political power to achieve religious conversions (Paden, 1986:39). On the other hand, acceptance of the ruling religion paves way for political acceptance.

With the end of the civil war in 1970, following the defeat and surrender of the Biafrans, the agitation shifted from the regions to the central authority. This should also be understood following the dissolution of the regions with the creation of states, which in effect seems to have whittled the powers of the regions. And since the central authority control everything, capturing or influencing it to ones belief would automatically mean religious hegemony. But the fundamental question is how feasible it would be to use political hegemony to achieve religious supremacy in a country with strong multi-religious leanings without serious political and social dislocations in the polity.

Some instances of government involvement in certain issues that are seen in the light of being religiously motivated will suffice. The government take over of Mission Schools immediately after the civil war, though it took place during the regime of Yakubu Gowon, a Christian, had been seen in some quarters as attempt by some groups using political power to stifle what they saw as a threat, thereby curtailing the influence of the mission schools in such areas of operation.
The political squabble that erupted during the 1978 Constituent Assembly debates on sharia is another important case of religious-politics in Nigeria. The manner and the nature of the issues over the agitation for the inclusion of the sharia to the level of Appeal court would have rocked the emergent Second Republic, if not the fact that government intervened to bring the debate to a stop, though not conclusively resolved. (Kukah 1993:126). The issues that ranged during the sharia debate centred primarily on the feasibility of having two parallel laws within a country. This scenario emanated perhaps based on the belief by Muslims that the Constitution which is a derivation of our colonial rule (Judeo-Christian heritage) have cheated them from having their own religious law ‘sharia’. Thus, the agitation in a way was seen by this group as a move to right the wrong. But the big question remains the feasibility of operating a parallel law within a polity that claims to be one?

Another issue of religion in politics that shook and aroused the emotions and sensibilities of Nigerians happened during the regime of Ibrahim Babangida, when he surreptitiously brought the country into the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) without the prior knowledge of even the second in command in the administration, Ebitu Ukiwe (a commodore) and, without discussion in the Army Forces Ruling Council. The question that arose from the decision of the government was the motive behind such action of the state being directly involved in such organization, which implied that the country is an Islamic country.

With the emergence of the Third Republic, after the 1999 election, Obasanjo emerged for the second time as the head of Nigeria government. What happened from 2000, that led to the declaration of “sharia” in most northern states and the implications have been interpreted as a manipulation of religions to achieve political goals. But beyond that, the actions of these northern governments heated up the polity as states from oil producing areas equally demanded for autonomy to control what they have; arguing that they are only obligated to pay royalty and taxes to government, since in a federal set up all the units have certain rights vested on them.

On the other hand, economic contest has been advanced by some scholars like Madukwe C.I and others, as a variant indicator in understanding ethnic/religious violence in Nigeria. The manifestation of such could be found both in the upper and lower echelon of the society. Instances of politicians on the assumption of being marginalized from the corridor of power and its patronage, have been advanced. The politicization of religion – the case of 2000 sharia controversy that trailed most of the northern part of Nigeria readily comes to mind. Though it may be argued on the other hand, that since Nigeria is operating a federal system of government, certain rights in the constitution accrue to the states and also the fact that the constitution seems to be ambiguous on the issue. However, the timing and the manner in which the introduction of sharia law was pursued among the northern states then, clearly indicated that it was a political landmine set against the administration of the former president Obasanjo. Thus, using religious garb, on account of some drastic policies he instituted in Nigeria, which did not go down well with his former northern patrons to destabilize the polity. There have also been instances of targeted attacks on people from the southern part of Nigeria by northerners purely on account of economic reasons (stirred up by envy, jealousy and hatred) as a result of the economic progress they have achieved, during their so-called religious riots. For instance, during the 2006 “religious riots” over cartoons of Mahammed by a Danish writer Kare Bluigen, the Tell Magazine reported of the incidence in the following terms:

For Nigerians who are conversant with religious riots in the North, … the latest violent protests goes beyond the Mohammed cartoons. First, it coincided with the time the Constitution Review Committee was to hold a public hearing for the amendment of the 1999 Constitution…; it is common knowledge that
majority of the elite in the North are not in support of the Constitutional review and also against another term for the President. (2006:22-23.)

The paper further explained that “more than 20 churches were torched…” “More than 400 shops and 12 houses belonging to Igbo people in the former Chelwarams area, Baga Road, Gidan Dambe and Babben Line were looted and razed” in Borno state alone. (2006:23)

The argument is that in the contest for available economic, political and even religious space in Nigeria, instances of felt “marginalization” have always been manipulated by politicians and their foot soldiers to cause mayhem in Nigeria. This is especially conspicuous in the northern part of Nigeria, where on account of higher level of illiteracy, mass poverty and their high sensitivity to the issues of religion had made them more liable to manipulation by the educated ones. Ironically, it is their so-called ‘leaders’ that are primarily responsible for the mass poverty in the area. Yet, it is these ‘leaders’ that would incite them against their innocent neighbours from the south as the cause of their problem. Thus, it follows that one of the fundamental steps to be taken in stemming the constant religious conflict in Nigeria, is mass literacy. This would go a long way in stemming the persistent tide, since an enlightened citizen would be a well-informed person, able to reason rationally and equally make rational judgment without being easily manipulated.

The need to tackle the problem of poverty and unemployment cannot also be overemphasized at this juncture. When and where the youths are engaged in profitable ventures (majority of who are not, cannot easily fall into the hand of religious bigot), the incidences of religious conflicts would be minimized. This is hinged on the fact that they would be properly engaged with their time; they would be economically empowered, thus rendering any insinuation that their next door neighbor is the cause of their poverty baseless.

Conclusion
The issue of religious conflicts in Nigeria has indeed assumed a national dimension considering the colossal waste in terms of human lives; material resources, psychological trauma, and the strain it had created on inter-group relations. The solution to this national malaise which has contributed to the retrogression of the Nigeria nation lies with all. Everybody who has a stake in the Nigerian project must be concerned. There can never be progress under such circumstances as we constantly find ourselves in relation to religious riots. Apart from the issues of addressing economic downturn, enlightening the citizens through education, the romantic idea of trying to re-enact the former ideals of religious supremacy must not be overlooked. This is because some of the causes of constant religious eruptions have been traced to such beliefs. Government as the custodian of power and authority, with its sworn declaration to defend the constitution and the preservation of lives and property must live up to the expectations of such declaration and citizens’ expectations. It goes without saying that justice must be done and seen to be done, by ensuring that both the instigators and perpetrators under whatever guise do not go scot free, but face the full wrath of the law.

References


