

# Culture and Society in Nigeria

Popular Culture, Language  
and Intergroup Relations

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## Chapter 17

### Rethinking Religion and the National Question in Nigeria

\* Tony Onwumah

#### Introduction

IN 1914, Lord Lugard, then Governor-General, amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria. This brought together about two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and more than double that number of language groups as a geographical expression called Nigeria. Hitherto, the different ethnic and language groups had their different systems of governance, identities, cultures and languages. They were, to a large extent, independent of each other. Therefore, the action of Lord Lugard was a multiple marriage of strange bedfellows. It was a forcible grouping of people, who had little or nothing in common, into a political arrangement that was supposed to be a nation state.

Ordinarily, a nation presupposes some commonalities in the areas of culture, descent, territoriality, and shared experiences and values. The essence of these is that within a nation the component parts do not have identity crisis. The 'we' feeling and consciousness of kind tends to predominate. It follows that within a nation, internal cohesion is easy and external threats are seen as a common challenge. With this, the major challenge which faced the immediate post-amalgamated country was how to forge a nationality out of the different sub-nationalities which were arbitrarily brought together by Lugard.

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Interestingly, the British colonial administration deliberately pursued policies which ensured that the northern and southern parts of Nigeria were kept perpetually against themselves. For the avoidance of doubt, it needs be stressed that the colonial government encouraged the promotion of Western education in the south but failed to do the same in the north. Rather, in the name of preserving traditional institutions, Islamic education was encouraged in the north. This was to ensure the political domination by the less-educated north of the more educationally advanced south. In summary, Nigeria is a child of circumstance, one that must serve the interests, whims and caprices of the colonial overlords. It could also be argued that Nigeria at inception did not meet the minimum conditions to be described as a nation. Therefore, the first challenge which faced the immediate post-independence leaders was that of nation building.

Unfortunately, the inherent and fundamental differences within the country were such that the founding fathers of Nigeria could not cope with. For instance, to ensure adequate representation, while the first indigenous Governor-General was a Christian from the south, it was ensured that the Prime Minister was a Moslem from the north. The same arrangement of ethnic and religious balancing permeated all the facets of Nigeria. The effect was that emphasis was placed on the adequacy of representation and not on the quality of service to be rendered. Inevitably, in many instances, the less qualified ruled over the more qualified.

Another factor which is closely related to the above and which points to Nigeria's abbreviated nationhood include representative bureaucracy, or what is generally referred to as quota system. This arrangement ensures that in appointments to key positions, in admissions into government-owned institutions (secondary and tertiary

selection is based more on quota and not exclusively on merit. For example, while a child from Edo State who scores two hundred and eighty in the National Common Entrance Examination may not be offered admission, another child from, say, Borno State, with a score of two hundred, may very conveniently gain admission into a federal government college in a country which is supposedly one.

Quota system compromises the spirit of nationhood in Nigeria. In many parts of Nigeria, persons whose parents were not born in a state are considered non-indigenes irrespective of how long they have lived in that area. Put more clearly, an Igbo man in Sokoto State is considered a non-indigene, even if his grandparents were born and bred in Sokoto. The reverse is also true. This finds expression in discriminatory practices in terms of admission policy, the fees charged, and the right to vote and be voted for. In many instances, it is far easier for non-Nigerians to gain employment at the expense of Nigerians who do not come from the state in question. This is done in spite of the constitutional provision stating that someone could be considered as an indigene of a place if he has lived there continuously for ten or more years. The sum total of all of these is that Nigeria is a state in search of nationhood.

Since the thrust of this chapter is to critically interrogate religion as a phenomenon and its role in the fostering or otherwise of national cohesion, a few words on religion would be appropriate at this juncture. Different scholars have defined religion differently. Thus, there is no consensus on the exact meaning of religion. However, it is agreed that religion has to do with the relationship between man and an ultimate power or authority which has an overwhelming influence or control over him. Religion has to do with some transcendental powers or forces over which man has no control but rather which has control over the affairs of man.



In this section of the chapter, the intention is to make the reader understand the role which religion has played towards the evolution of true nationhood in Nigeria. It may however be desirable to state clearly that religion in this context refers mainly to Christianity and Islam. These are, without controversy, the two dominant religions in Nigeria. Surprisingly, these are secondary religions. The other, and indeed the primary religion, which is the traditional African religion, has been relegated to the background. The reason for this is that, unlike Christianity and Islam, it is not as organized and systematized in its creed, practice and followership. More importantly, both Islam and Christianity have colonial origins. Since the religion of the master (P.N. Simoko) must also be the religion of the servant, the prevalence of the two religions becomes easily understandable especially if cognizance is taken of that colonial heritage.

During the colonial period, the interaction between Christianity and Islam was basically cordial. There are no historical accounts of clashes and skirmishes between Christians and Moslems. The phenomenon of religious tolerance of the colonial era was also transferred to the immediate post-colonial era. The story changed, however, in 1978. The military government of the day had put in place a constitution drafting committee to usher in a new government. Problem started when the Moslem members of the committee wanted a constitutional provision for a Sharia Court of Appeal. This was stoutly resisted by the non-Moslems on the committee. The arguments and debates which followed almost tore the nation apart. It was argued that as a multi-religious country, it was not necessary for a special provision for a sharia court in the constitution. It took the intervention of the then military government to douse the tension which enveloped the nation. Yet, the sharia court event marked the first attempt by religion to divide the nation politically.

The Maitatsine religious crises which started in 1980 is, without doubt, the expression of the worst form of religious intolerance. Essentially a northern phenomenon, it entailed the large-scale killing of non-Moslems, particularly Christians, by Moslems. As action will always provoke a reaction, there were always retaliatory attacks by the Christians against the Moslems. In a number of instances, the killing of Christians in the north also provoked the counter-killing of Moslems in the south, particularly in such places as Onitsha and Enugu in the east. So much has been written and said that the so-called religious crises have political undertones. However, very little attention has been paid to the costs, socially, economically, and culturally, of religious intolerance. In the first place, the period of religious crises is a time when man rises up against his fellow man. It brings out the worst instincts in man and entails intense agony and engenders disunity. No one will feel at home in an environment where his mother, father, brother or sister has been killed in the name of religion.

Secondly, religious crisis takes attention away from the pursuit of cultural advancement because involvement in arts, crafts, festivals, and what have you, would be reduced if not completely obliterated for as long as the crisis lasts.

Thirdly, is the economic implication of religious crisis. For the duration of the crisis, all forms of economic activity grind to a halt. This further aggravates the misery which goes with the crisis. The need to tread very cautiously with religious crisis is underscored by events in other parts of the world. In this respect, the situations in Sudan and the Middle East readily come to mind. The crises in these areas appear to be intractable because of their religious undertones. The endless wars in these areas have endured for so long because religion is based on faith and emotion and not on reason or rationality. Therefore, Nigeria needs to brace up to face the challenges of religious intolerance.



With all these, the question must then be asked: Is religion inherently bad if, in some instances, it has turned out to be such a destructive weapon? A critical and dispassionate examination of both Islam and Christianity reveals that both religions stand for peace and harmonious coexistence. Yet, it is very disturbing that in spite of the emphasis on care and tolerance, in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam are always at daggers drawn. The conclusion could be drawn that religion is not inherently bad but the problem is with the politicization of religion. If careful considerations are taken of the various religious riots in Nigeria, the level of organization, the sophisticated weapons that were used, the dispassionate conclusion that could be reached is that the so-called religious crises are elite manipulations for selfish gains. For instance, at the end of each crisis, consultations would be made and some concessions granted. Those who benefit from all these are essentially the leaders of the various groups. To put issues in clearer perspective, relief materials and other financial assistance are normally granted to the victims of the religious riots. But it is known that the leaders of the different sects and groups benefit far more than their followers from the concessions that are granted.

Apart from the riots and skirmishes referred to above, other instances of the politicization of religion include the 1986 'smuggling' of Nigeria into the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The argument then was that Nigeria's membership of the OIC compromised the multi-religious status of the country. This is because the OIC was basically for Islamic countries. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) kicked against it. The protest which it engendered made even the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida to revert to Nigeria's observer status in the OIC. But the event is a very unpleasant pointer to how volatile it could be when religion is mixed with politics. It was also during the same administration that Babangida appointed

only Moslems as service chiefs. This was also condemned by the media and the Christian community in Nigeria. In the same vein, Aso Rock, Nigeria's seat of government, was constructed by the same Babangida administration; but, quite surprisingly, while mosques were provided, no chapel or church was built. The above examples lead to an examination of the politics of religion under the military, and the conclusion which could be drawn is that the protracted incursion of the military into politics further aggravated the politicization of religion. This is understandable because five out of Nigeria's eight military leaders were Moslems from the north.

Another glaring case of the politicization of religion was the introduction of the Sharia law in most of the northern states during the Fourth Republic. It was an arrangement by which both Moslems and non-Moslems in the affected states were brought under the same Islamic laws. Indeed, some governorship aspirants made the introduction of Sharia a campaign issue. Zamfara State Government actually blazed the trail when it introduced Sharia in 1999.

An observation has been made however that since most Sharia governors were re-elected, the whole issue of Sharia seems to have lost steam. This is a clear pointer to the fact that, in spite of the seeming campaign for Sharia, the real consideration was more political than religious.

Reverend Father Hassan Kukah has drawn attention to the fact that, in the discussion of religion and politics, the issues of citizenship, crime and punishment must not be glossed over. For instance, it has not been recorded that the perpetrators of the arson and mayhem which attended past religious crises have ever been duly punished. Because murder was committed during religious crises does not make it anything else but still murder. The point to note is that crime must not be covered using religion as a subterfuge. The above scenario points to the fact that citizenship in many



instances has been subordinated to religion. It is also an indication of the failure of the post-colonial Nigerian state to live up to expectation in the area of protection of the lives and properties of its citizenry.

### Summary and Conclusion

It has been found that religion is not inherently bad but the politicization of religion is the root cause of religious intolerance. There is the need for religious leaders to adhere strictly to the tenets of their religion with tolerance. It is equally desirable to have more non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the promotion of religious tolerance. It is therefore important to resuscitate the National Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO). Similarly, crime should be punished irrespective of when it was committed, be it during religious crises or not. Nigeria is also in dire need of a vigorous and sustained policy of mass education.

The uneducated is ignorant, gullible and easily manipulated for political ends under the guise of religion. The perception of politics as a zero-sum game should be discouraged. A new era which sees politics more as service than business should be encouraged. In this respect, non-governmental organizations also have critical roles to play. Finally, religion should not have any place in employment and admission matters. It is very possible to have religious harmony in Nigeria but the political leadership must show true and genuine commitment to it.

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