

## RELIGION AND CONFLICT IN NIGERIA SINCE THE AMALGAMATION

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### Abstract

*The religious conflicts that have constituted a re-current phenomenon in contemporary Nigeria is worrisome. The climax of religious conflicts is represented by the emergence of the Boko Haram radical group whose movement, fought under the banner of religion, seeks the deconstruction of western institutions, values and influences in the country with a view to establishing a Theocratic State. In 2014, analysts were of the view that the security situation in the country had gone out of control consequent on the Boko Haram repeated insurgency. Indeed, this necessitated the Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's administration to attempt a re-consideration of its foreign policy in respect to overseas peace keeping missions by the military due to the need to salvage especially some areas in the Northeastern part of the country from the grip of the sect. It is against this back-drop that the paper, adopting the content analysis of secondary sources as its methodology, evaluates religion and conflicts in Nigeria since 1914 with a view to unraveling the factors responsible for it and the implication for the nation hence the need to tame the tides. It contends that distrust and suspicion amongst the Nigerian peoples were implanted by colonialism and its policies forming the background of religious conflicts in the nation. With regards to causation, the findings indicated that the heterogeneous nature of the society, the OIC question, radical utterances by religious leaders, the influence of globalization on Christian-Muslim relationship world-wide, illiteracy amongst some youths have ignited incidences of religious conflicts in Post-Colonial Nigeria. It argues that religious conflicts have been tainted with ethnicity, poverty, manipulation of religion by greedy elite class such that sectarian, political and resource based conflicts are often tagged religious conflicts by the parties involved to source allies and support. Yet, they are representations of diverse interests and claims fought for under the platform of religion. It indicated the consequences of such violent conflicts for the nation to include displacement of people/homelessness, mal-nutrition, destruction of social and economic infrastructure, discouragement of foreign investors and so on. The paper recommends that the teaching of peace and conflict studies in all educational institutions; massive sensitization and enlightenment of citizenry through the media on the prevention of manipulation of religion; and the cultivation of the habit of religious tolerance among the members of the public as tools in minimizing the wave of religious crisis in contemporary Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Conflict, Amalgamation, Manipulation, Globalization, Implication, Way Forward.

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### Introduction

All over the world and throughout history, no society can assert absolute freedom from conflict. Indeed, it is considered as part of the developmental processes of nations. The diverse political, social and economic inter-actions continuously engaged in, by individuals/groups in the society, sometimes create a conflict scenario hinged on some basic disagreements. However, violent conflict is the extreme expression of such. For, it is dangerous and has adverse consequences for the parties involved (Best, 2011:24). The

evidence available indicated that African nations and regions have experienced different levels of conflicts from Angola, Burundi, Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Central African Republic to Cote d'Ivoire. However, relative peace has been restored in some of these areas (Adetula, 2009:390-391). Nigeria is also confronted with internal contradictions compounded by religious conflict which is the pre-occupation of this paper.

To meaningfully reconstruct the history of religion and conflict in Nigeria since the amalgamation, the work has been compartmentalized into six sections viz: introduction, conceptual clarification, factors propelling religious violence and their implications for the nation, conclusion and recommendations. In terms of *methodology*, the work is anchored on the analysis and interpretation of the information in a wide variety of secondary sources of history.

### **Religion**

Mangwvat (2011:50) viewed religion as "the belief in the unseen." A phenomenon that held sway through-out history and human civilization driven by the quest to explain the wonders of creation and its destiny. Commenting on religion, Karl Marx, in a rather critical fashion asserted that, "Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world and the soul of the soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people" (Quoted from John William, 1980:92). In other words, the Marxists viewed it as an instrument of perpetuating the domination and exploitation of the people by the Bourgeois class/owners of the means of production in a capitalist formation. Yet, the masses constituted the group who produced much of the societal wealth. And although genuine religious men often adjoins obedience to constituted authority, the Marxists advocated continuous class struggle by the masses against inequality in the distribution of state resources, social injustice, exploitation and all sorts of man-made socio-political and economic deprivations. Accordingly, the Marxists maintained, this holds the key to progress and development in human societies (Musa, 2008:148). Marxism therefore became an instrument in the hand of those searching for social justice.

In a pole apart, Robert King Merton is of the view that religion has manifest and latent functions in human societies. The manifest function is the obvious performance, expression and representation of what religious institutions are established for, which involved worship, the dissemination of religious doctrines/teachings to followers/participants, ritual practices. Thus, recognized and applauded by the society. The latent function, he argued, is the unintended, unrecognized and unseen functions of religious institutions which may consist of provision of recreational activities and platform for courtship opportunities for the youths. He maintained however, that the difference between the manifest and latent functions in a given social system is not absolute but relative as what constitutes manifest function to some may be viewed as latent by others. Both the manifest and latent functions of religion could be beneficial or impact positively on the society. (See, Robert Merton's Latent and Manifest Functions, [www.sociologyguide.com](http://www.sociologyguide.com)) But, the dy-functions of religion, which are also manifest and latent in nature, could affect the society adversely by causing social dis-organization and disunity.

Relating the preceding to our discourse, all religions preach peace from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism to Buddhism. It can therefore be argued that religious conflicts is the unfolding of the dyfunctions of religion in the society as it is not the original intent for the evolution of these religions and often leaves behind a devastating consequences for the society.

### **Conflict**

Studies on conflict and peace are not conventionally limited to a single discipline. Scholars in history, political science, geography, anthropology, religious studies, law, sociology, economics and international relations are attracted to it. Indeed, even traditional rulers, international organizations such as the United Nations and so on. This is in view of the fact that for a meaningful resolution of conflict and peace-building process to be achieved, the multi-faceted dimensions of the factors propelling outbreak of conflict scenario must be unraveled and addressed. What then is conflict? The 6<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, defines it as, "a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument." Again, Schmidt and Kochan conceptualized conflict as a situation whereby one party considers the action of the other "as blocking the opportunity for the attainment of a goal." And, the conditions for the eruption of conflict include "perceived goal incompatibility and perceived opportunity for interference or blocking" (Cited in Ojiji, 2009:117). To expatiate on the preceding, such situations could even deteriorate to violent conflict when arms and ammunition, machetes, swords, bombs are used to unleash destruction. It is undoubtedly true, that religious conflicts in Nigeria especially in contemporary times, have witnessed the increasing utilization of such weaponry.

### **Amalgamation**

To amalgamate means to merge or fuse into one entity. A grand amalgamation exercise was conducted in 1914 by the British colonialists. This culminated in the fusion of the Southern and Northern British territories to constitute a single administrative and political entity referred to as Nigeria; a nomenclature suggested by Lord Lugard's wife, Flora Shaw. Various reasons such as administrative convenience/efficacy, fiscal consideration and others were advanced as necessitating the action. (Tamuno, 1980 and Anjorin, 1966) However, crave for the systematic and efficient exploitation of the human and material resources of Colonial Nigeria to meet the interest of international capitalism was the prime mover. Indeed, this has been established in the literature (See Usman, 1994:39).

### **Relationship Between Religion and Conflict**

Available evidence has indicated that there exist a connection between religion and conflict in human societies. This position as highlighted by Best (2011:24) includes the following:

- i. Religion provides a cherished belief system and serves as the guiding principle for the formation of adherents' behavioural patterns within its standards.
- ii. It is a means of organizing the faithful within its institutional framework.
- iii. It is a platform for separation between groups represented in the context of 'us' versus 'them'.
- iv. Religion mobilizes the faithful around competing identities.
- v. It is a spring-board for legitimating the activities of followers including violence.

To expatiate on this, the link between religion and conflicts is especially obvious when there are corresponding, in this case, violent re-actions to indices that threatens the collective interest of a religious group. Thus, religion has the capacity to ignite persecution, conflicts and the worst scenario is terrorist onslaughts.

### **A Brief Historical Background of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria From 1914 to 1960**

Religious conflicts in Nigeria had its root in the colonial era with the introduction of the Indirect Rule System adopted in the administration of the region. Again, as a matter of deliberate policy, the colonialists segregated the people through settlement patterns in which case, the Sabon Garis were constituted for migrants/strangers who were employees of the colonial administration, European trading companies and local merchants (Abubakar, 2009:8) mostly from the southern part of the country and predominantly Christians but domiciled in the North.

This was meant to preserve the unique religion, culture and traditions of the mainly Muslim North. A similar scenario was observed in the South where separate settlement patterns held sway for migrants and employees from the North e.g Sabo Ibadan and so on.

Furthermore, there were restrictions on missionary activities in the North and differential educational policies for the North and South. (See, Abubakar, 1980:475) As a result of the preceding, prior to decolonization in 1960, there was already the gradual development of mistrust and suspicion amongst the diverse peoples. In other words, the vibrant relatively peaceful inter-group relations which pre-dated colonialism was halted by these policies and herein lies the time bomb of religious conflicts observed in post-independence Nigeria.

This, however, is not to suggest the absence of religious tensions in colonial Nigeria. In Southern Nigeria for instance, the advent of colonialism was equally accompanied by missionary activities to convert the “Pagan Africans” to Christianity. Yet, these missionaries met the logical existence of organized indigenous religious institutions in the area whose dynamic influence could be gleaned from some African traditional practices such as puberty rites, marriage rituals, funeral ceremonies, divination, traditional medicine, priesthood, chieftaincy and so on (Gbenda, 2012:494). Despite this, African religion was not spared from being described as “paganism, fetishism, animism, totemism, polytheism, the high gods, the withdrawn gods, idolatry, heathenism, juju, primitive and ancestral worship”(Gbenda, 2012:488) Thus, from 1900 to 1910, there were clashes between the custodians of African traditional religion and the missionaries. Again, they were resisted by the Obgunorie Cult in Ezumoha, Mbano, Ekpe Society e.t.c (Gbenda, 2012:490).

There was also a religious movement in Northern Nigeria referred to as Mahdism but it was targeted at effective resistance to alien rule. Colonialism was regarded as the period of hardship for the people and only the advent of the Mahdi (Messiah) can ensure their emancipation, political freedom and cultural identity. Consequently, the British came into conflicts with Mahdism in Burmi in Gombe Emirate (1903), Satiru (1906) and at Bunbulwa, Fika Emirate (1920s). The colonialists dreaded the movement as it posed a threat to the imperial structure and colonial interest. The swift re-action of the British to this was the re-enforcement of frontier patrols and the development of a new strategy in the administration of the Muslims in the Northern part of the country (See Abubakar, 1980:476 – 478; Al-Hajj, 1970:205; Adeleye, 1977:107) even in the area of education and Christian missionary activities as indicated earlier.

### **Causes of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria Since Independence**

Mazrui and Mazrui (1998:39) described Nigeria as “a regionally dual society divided between a more Islamized North and a Christian-led South.” In addition to this, they argued that the country is ethnically plural in which case the two regions are culturally/ethnically diverse within themselves. Thus, existed tensions in the South-South between the Igbos and Yorubas, the North-North divide between the Hausas and Kanuris and at another level, the ethnic Majority-Minority divide. They concluded however that, the divide between the North and the South had been more prominent generating tensions and conflicts. Indeed, this is not far-fetched as the North-South divide had already been established under the platform of colonialism.

With the attainment of independence, religious conflicts have been sub-meshed with ethnic coloration such that it goes by the nomenclature- ethno-religious conflict. Indeed, such was the determinant factor for the interpretation of the two pioneer coups that hit the newly politically emancipated polity from British imperialism. While the January 15th, 1966 coup led by Major Uzeogwu Kaduna was tagged Southern/Christian conspiracy against the predominantly

Muslim North, given the nature of the casualties who were mostly top politicians, civilians and military officers of Northern extraction and Muslims too, on the other hand, the counter-coup of 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1966 was viewed as an onslaught by the latter against the former as those affected were personalities from the predominantly Christian South. The promulgation of the Unification Decree No. 34 of 1966 by the Ironsi led government which was meant to dissolve the federation in preference for unitary system beginning from 24<sup>th</sup> of May, 1966, compounded the problem. Indeed, it was the intensification of suspicion and mistrust amongst others that culminated in the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 -1970 (Oluleye, 1995:223 & 227).

The issue of the incorporation of Nigeria into the Organization of Islamic countries stimulated debates that tensed the body polity. The Christian population was critical of the move towards such trend in a constitutionally secularized nation like Nigeria (Sylvester, 2007:120).

Apart from the foregoing, is the fact that since year 2000, there was the re-surface of the insistence on the application of the Sharia Law in some Northern States of the Federation. Zamfara State championed it. Kaduna State also attempted to implement it but this culminated in violent resistance from the Christians who questioned the justification for the adoption of the Sharia Legal Code in a secular state. Despite the arguments advanced by Muslims that it was exclusively applicable to them, the implication of the re-introduction of the Sharia Law was dreaded by non-Muslims domiciled in the North. Consequently, the crisis that ensued caused colossal loss of lives and properties especially in Kaduna State ( Je'adayibe, 2007:139).

Again, utterances and/or radical statements by religious leaders amongst the Christians and Muslims have in no small measure played its part in the up-surge of religious conflicts in the country. Yet, when subjected to critical assessment, the statements were often the attempt to achieve their personal interest. It is worrisome to note that, most adherents stick tenaciously to such statements. (Sylvester, 2007:121)

Globalization plays a role in the changing tides of religious violence in various nations of the world including Nigeria and influences Muslim-Christian relations on a global scale. In a study conducted by Je'adayibe, (p.143) it was indicated that the Muslim world regarded Western globalization as the drive towards the super-imposition of Western values on others. Again, the Muslims were displeased by the U.S.A's role in the Middle East such as its handling of the conflicts between the Arabs and the Jews, the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the non-recognition of the Sharia, all of which play significant role in stimulating conflicts. Indeed, apart from the Muslims' condemnation of the West Conspiracy Theory in the Arab world, there is the issue of power and disempowerment in which the Capitalist West is considered the most powerful and wealthiest in the world while the poorest nations including approximately 70% of world refugees are Muslims. This, he contends, explains the radicalization of Islamic groups on a global scale viz: the Taliban, Al-Qa'iada Network, Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Organization, National Salvation Party, Masjuwi Party, Islamic Salvation Front, Mujahidm Hizballah, Islamic Jihads and others as re-actions against the West.

Indeed, the Boko Haram insurgency in contemporary Nigeria cannot be dis-associated with the war of resistance against westernization the world over. Boko Haram is an Islamic fundamentalist group whose movement since 2009 was directed against western civilization, science, education and secularization which according to the sect, are having corrupting influences on the religion hence the need for the demolition of western education, political institutions including its associated security agencies. The sect insisted on the uncompromising implementation of the Sharia Code in the country and endorses only Islamic education with a view of establishing an Islamic State anchored on Islamic core values and doctrine (Lengmang,

2011:94-95). Indeed, the concept of the earth being spherical, Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution including the thesis that rain evolves "from water evaporated by the sun" were all challenged by the then sect's leader, Yusuf as being contrary to Islamic doctrine (Eseduwa, p.215).

Operating like the Maitatsine Islamic Sect of the 1980s which impacted on Kano, Yola, Maiduguri and some Northern parts of the country, the Boko Haram radical group had unleashed a lot of terror in the Northeastern States of Yobe, Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, some parts of the North West and North Central States of Nigeria. Bombardments of places of worship, government establishments (e.g police stations), kidnapping including the Chibok girls saga and the killing of innocent unarmed civilians had been its major pre-occupation. Indeed, since 2009 an estimated 20,000 lives have been lost to Boko Haram's activities.

Again, the group has been critiqued that its self acclaimed dislike for western values /products is untenable as evidence abound indicating their utilization of products of western science and technology- cars, cell phones, the internet, motor-bikes, firearms and ammunitions. A number of these items were recovered from the groups by law enforcement agencies (Eseduwa, p.215).

In addition to the preceding, the manipulation of religion for personal and/or sectarian interest of access to political offices and power has constituted a bane in the attempt to achieve peaceful co-existence amongst the diverse nationalities in the country. Given the scenario whereby the control of political power has metamorphosed into the medium for private capital accumulation and personal aggrandizement, the fermentation of religious crisis and political thuggery to ensure that elections are won at all cost by die-hard politicians for the super-imposition of non-visionary individuals on the masses as leaders have tended to question the true essence of democracy since people stick to power for economic benefits not principally anchored on the philosophy of serving the electorates (Odey, 2007:.250).

Closely associated to the preceding is the role of poverty in making the youths gullible to religion manipulations by power mongers. The historicity of soaring poverty rate in Nigeria is traceable to the Babangida Administration's inauguration of the IMF/World Bank induced Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986 in order to address the challenges faced by the Nigerian economy consequent on dwindling oil revenue. Indeed, the oil boom of the 1970s was followed by a recession in the 1980s given the falling prices of the petroleum products in world trade. The economic retrogression witnessed the proliferation of abandoned projects in the public sector, the winding up of factories, retrenchments, scarcity of basic commodities and inflation (See Ayuba, 2012:108). These developments culminated in a significant percentage of the masses living below the poverty line. A research conducted by Odey (2007:250 – 251) has indicated that over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Nigerians are in abject poverty while the national wealth is controlled by a few elite class. And, the preponderance of income inequality, food insecurity culminating in malnutrition and under-nutrition, unemployment, restiveness, armed robbery, militia, incessant industrial actions by labour unions are some of the worrisome indices of poverty. He further contended that poverty subjects individuals to ridicule, risk, low access to economic services and income generation opportunities thus stimulating frustration, envy, lost of confidence and conflicts. It was thus, among other things, the Structural Adjustment Programme that escalated religiosity, religious fundamentalism and groups amongst Christians and Muslims alike in the country.

The result of the manipulation of religious sentiments pitting Christians against Muslims is the recurrent phenomenon of bad governance, corruption, varied categories of conflicts that had hit the polity since independence. This is in view of the fact that, core religious teachings such

as love, peace, neighbourliness and respect for the human person/life have been ignored (Owojaiye, 22 March, 2010).

Illiteracy amongst some of the youths is a contributing factor to the rising tides of religious conflicts in the country. Indeed, illiteracy breeds ignorance and this partly explains why the youths in this category are easy tools for religious manipulators. The country has a young growing population with 63% below the age of 24 of the over 160 million people (Clark and Ausukaya, 2013, July 1). Undoubtedly, 100% school enrolment/accessibility to western education is not yet attained.

Cases of religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria since independence as chronicled by Mangwat (2011:58) include amongst others, that of Kasuwan Magani in Kaduna State, 1980; Numan and environs (Adamawa State) between 1986 to 1988 and those of Kafanchan, Kaduna and Zaria all in Kaduna State in 1987; Tafawa Balewa and some parts of Bauchi State in 1991, 2000 -2001; Zangon Kataf and some areas in Kaduna State in 1992; over seven waves of conflicts in Jos Metropolis and environs (Plateau State) between 1991 -2010. There is also, as earlier indicated in this discourse, the Boko Haram phenomenon between 2009 to 2015. It is instructive to note that most of these crises also stimulated reprisal attacks in the Southern part of the country. This suggests the increasing rate of the manipulation of religion in contemporary times to achieve political and other interests. But why should we allow religion to set us apart when our genes have even indicated that we are related. The remarkable similarity of the genetic markers of most Nigeria's population has been established by Isichie (Cited in Kwanashie et al (eds), 2014:199 -200). This was achieved on the premise that "the incidence of any particular gene in any population remains (constant) for many centuries." And that it is a pointer to the fact that the Nigerian peoples have emerged from the same ancestral stock especially small Stone Age Populations settling within the contemporary Nigerian boundaries. It was concluded that the slight difference in the genetic pattern in Nigeria is the product of bombardments by external genes.

The preceding has, in a systematic way, challenged the Hamitic hypothesis that claimed migration of the Nigerian people from the Middle East, North Africa and other remote external sources: a perspective which attracted scholarly support and popularized by colonial historiography.

### **Implications**

Conflicts, whatever nomenclature ascribed to them- religious, ethnic, political or economic, have similar trend of consequences. The aftermath of religious conflicts on the nation include displacement of people/homelessness, malnutrition especially amongst children and school drop outs. Between 2009 – 2015, about 2.1 million Nigerians are internally displaced and are being taken care of in the various Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) Camps in the country.

Again, there is the loss of lives, destruction of infrastructure, boosting of illegal trade in small arms for private use, generation of the atmosphere of insecurity, economic retardation coupled with the discouragement of prospective foreign investors. It also includes the diversion of government's attention from productive ventures to conflict management. (See Papoola and Aloa, 2012:133-135). Indeed, the Boko Haram phenomenon stands out clearly. The past administration had sunk several millions of naira in the procurement of modern weapons in the fight against insurgency in the Northeast. Although there have been allegations that some of the monies meant for this were siphoned/misappropriated thus found their way into private pockets. This underscores the political economy of war-fare in motion as some view conflict scenario as an avenue for private capital accumulation.

National development can only thrive meaningfully on the platform of tolerance, brotherliness, and peaceful co-existence of diverse ethno-religious groups inhabiting the country. Commenting on the moral state of the nation, Turaki (2014:403) stated that the legitimacy of a religion or culture goes beyond its professed “beliefs, dogmas, ethics, morality, religious practices of rituals” as these could be corrupted by humans through greed, pride, lust or anxiety. The exhibition of the true holy, eternal and moral attribute of God by adherents is the hallmark of a true religion. These moral characteristics, he contended, include “truth, justice, love, faithfulness, kindness, mercy, humility, righteousness, integrity, honesty and transparency” which cut across “any religion, culture or people” as they form the basis for a peaceful and beneficial co-existence of the various ethnic and religious entities in a given polity. He averred that these virtues are lacking in the nation given the re-current incidence of ethno-religious conflicts in the country culminating in the destruction of lives and indeed, other valuables.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The paper has examined the worrisome nature of the spread and increasing sophistication of religious conflicts in Nigeria. The historicity of religious conflicts was located in the colonial era consequent upon the nature of British policies in the administration of the country. It concludes that most of the conflicts fought under the ideology of religion, especially since independence, have deep rooted causes beyond religion: poverty, unemployment, politics, ethnicity, ignorance on the part of the gullible youths and so on are at the heart of them. And, they are executed for the attainment of a given agenda depending on the particular interest sought for as at the time of its fermentation. Therefore, recent discoveries are challenging old ideas and historiographical discourses on religion and conflict are taking new interpretations. This, infact, has revolutionalized scholarship. The following recommendations can assist tremendously in taming the spate of such conflicts in the country:

- i) Sustained religious tolerance amongst the citizenry and continuous dialogue by leaders of the different religions in the country are significant steps toward minimizing the wave of such conflicts in Nigeria.
- ii) All across the Nigerian educational system (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary), a subject/course on Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution should be incorporated and taught to broaden students’ understanding as future leaders, on the necessity for peaceful co-existence as the basis for national unity and development. Again, the spirit of patriotism and/or nationalism to the national course should be inculcated in the students.
- iii) The need for mass education of the citizenry through the print and electronic media to guard against the manipulation of religion by the political elite for private interest cannot be over-stressed.
- iv) Poverty eradication through the holistic implementation of anti-poverty measures and the re-dress of inequalities by the government can yield tremendous result in the reduction of religious crisis in the country.
- v) The government should make adequate compensation to victims of religious conflicts to relief the pains of the various losses they had encountered and forestall cases of reprisal attacks arising from frustration.
- vi) Lastly, an important move is required to de-radicalize the youths and instill the *Philosophy of the Middle Path* (moderation) in them as extremity in everything, even in religion, is undesirable.

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