

Religion and National Integration in Nigeria

By

Muhammad Nasiru Adeoye

School of Arts/Social Sciences

Kwara State College of Education Oro

08051219488

Email: muhammadnasadeoye@yahoo.co.uk

A paper presented at the **2017 Conference on Islam in Nigeria (COIN)**, organized by Islamic Welfare Foundation in collaboration with the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, held at University of Ibadan, between 20-23 November, 2017.

Abstract

Nigeria is a multi-religious nation, with Islam and Christianity dominating the religious climate. In fact, these two dominant religious beliefs have served as unifying factors in national integration. However, the rise in the level of religious misunderstanding had resulted into numerous cases of intra and inter and religious crises. Religious crises have become veracious and alarming during the past two decades. It is within this context that this paper examines the connection between religion and national integration in Nigeria. It identified some of the hindrances affecting religion in promoting national integration. After the analysis of these challenges, the paper concludes with suggestions towards sustainable national integration through religion.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country characterized by religious polarization and conflicts. Nigeria has all it takes to make itself a truly great country in every aspect, given its arsenals of material and human resources. The focus on development in relation to integration among the various religious groups in the country is designed in the main to emphasize the necessity of the existence of national unity as a springboard for sustainable peace.

In most plural societies, the promotion of national integration is often a conscious agenda of the state. Usually, policies are pursued that will encourage individual and group allegiance to the state and its institutions as opposed to sub-national ethnic, religious or other group loyalties. The object usually is to create patriotic citizens out of disparate, often antagonistic groups (Adejoh, 2005). In post-colonial Nigeria state, national integration embodies a strategy of forging unity in diversity, and connotes a striving to be a unified people in a modern, colonially created, nation-state (Jega, 2004).

Because there is now a multiplicity of religions in the country, some of which according to Davies (1995) do not even fit into the three dominant religions, it has become necessary to exploit the opportunity of these religions for the task of national integration.

Conceptualizing National Integration

Integration, which literally means assembling parts into a whole, has been defined variously (Adebayo, 1995). The one employed depends on the observer's perception of what constitutes national integration and the strategy for achieving social stability and social progress. National integration refers to the process of bringing diverse cultural and social groups into a single territorial unit and the establishment of a national unity (Adejoh, 2005). The term presumes the existence of an ethnically plural society in which each group is characterized by its own language, or other self-conscious cultural qualities, which generate the problem of creating a sense of territorial nationality, which overshadows or eliminates subordinate parochial loyalties. Adebayo (1995) defined integration as a progressive removal of antagonisms and reduction of cultural and regional decisions and differences in the process of creating a homogenous political unit.

From the foregoing, national integration refers to the process of building a just social units which confers on every inhabitants within it a sense of belonging, a satisfactory level of participation in decision-making

and development and a change to share from the resources of the society commensurate with decent and acceptable living.

Ethnic and Religious Location of Nigeria

Nigeria is an archetypal plural society characterized by divergent languages, cultures and ethnic groups. The realization that a society as diverse as Nigeria may be difficult to manage administratively partly informed the decision to adopt the Lyttelton Constitution of 1954 which formally inaugurated the practice of federalism in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the Nigerian federal structure so inaugurated was and still is an unbalanced and lopsided one in which the northern region emerged as a bigger entity than a combination of the entire populations of the eastern and western regions. The struggle for power sharing was reduced to a struggle for hegemony among the three main ethnic groups namely, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. In the course of this struggle, those who fall outside the three major groups were regarded as minorities who were marginalised not only in the allocation of power but of resources as well. Of the three major ethnic groups already mentioned, the Hausa-Fulani faction became the dominant faction, which controlled the federal power structure for three decades. Consequently, the two other major contenders have had cause to complain of marginalisation too. Indeed, such feelings of marginalisation partly accounted for the civil war that nearly dismembered the country between 1967 and 1970 (Babawale, 2001).

There is a strong correlation between religious differences and ethnic and regional diversity. The north, dominated by the large Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, is predominantly Muslim with significant numbers of Christians. Both Muslims and Christians are found in large numbers in the Middle Belt. In the southwest, where the large Yoruba ethnic group is the majority, there is no dominant religion. Most Yorubas practice either Christianity or Islam, while others continue to practice the traditional Yoruba religion, which includes a belief in a supreme deity and the worship of lesser deities that serve as the supreme deity's agents in aspects of daily life. In the east, where the large Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists are the majority, although many Igbos continue to observe traditional rites and ceremonies in tandem with Christianity. Religious differences often mirror regional and ethnic differences. For example, persons in the North and in parts of the Middle Belt are overwhelmingly Muslim and from the large Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups that tend to dominate these areas. Many southern ethnic groups are predominantly Christian. In many areas of the Middle Belt, Muslim Fulani tend to be pastoralists, while the Muslim Hausa and most Christian ethnic groups tend to be farmers or work in urban areas. Consequently ethnic, regional, economic, and land use competition often coincide with religious differences between the competing groups (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

At the same time, these ethnic crises have carried along the issue of religions. This can easily be seen from the fact that these ethnic groups have dominant religion that goes a long way helping their identities. Before the emergence of the two major modern religions, that is, Christianity and Islam into the country, there existed Africa traditional religion but was supplemented by these two religious beliefs. These arose religious fanaticism, which are responsible for generating tension, conflicts and acrimony in the country. This is so because each of these two religions had successfully secured exclusive territorial sphere of influence, which is also identifiable with two of the major groups in Nigeria. For instance in the north, we have Islam, in the east we have Christianity, while in west and middle belt, there exist mixture of both religions, hence it is not easy to define a dominant religion. However, religious crises have caused a number of intolerance and have aggravated lot of crises in Nigeria in the recent time. They arose from fanaticism, fear of domination and lack of sense of accommodation.

Religion and National Integration

The question of national integration in Nigeria arises as a result of the multi-ethnic and pluralist religious nature of the country. In fact, religion has served as a means of unifying the different ethnic and political groups in the country. Nigerian governments have promoted national integration which reflects and encourages multiplicity of religion. Instance of these are evident in a number of constitutional provisions, which guarantee against religious

discrimination and marginalisation. (Ayinla 2003) noted that Nigerian Constitution has so far attempted to forge unity through the diversity of religion.

To a large extent, state machineries have been used and public funds have been expended to strengthen religions and forge national integration. Examples abound. The observance of religious holidays like Eid Fitr, Eid Kabir, Easter and Christmas among others is a unifying factor for different ethnic groups. Public oath based on the Qur'an and Bible as well as official requests by the Government that Muslims and Christians should offer prayers on certain occasions (Oloso, 2004) also testify to the use of religion as a unifying factor.

It is also fashionable that during festive periods, Muslim and Christian leaders cum political leaders exchange greetings (Ige, 2006). In addition, the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity) in Nigeria play significant role in the life of their adherents and the nation at large through the various welfare programmes. The case of St Mathew Catholic Health Project and FOMWAN readily comes to mind here. Some other religious groups have similar projects.

At another level, religion has also served as a unifying factor during the periods of national crises, especially the civil war. Onyiaji and Adeoye (2005) examined the role, which the different Christian denominations played before and during the civil war. The same can be said of some Muslim

organizations and Mosques across the country. These are some of the ways by which the various religious groups in the country contribute to national integration.

Some Challenges

Ige (2006) observed that deliberate local and state government policies to discriminate against religious groups opposed to their own persuasion, and the prejudices individuals and group harbour against one another as well as the many false witnesses the adherents of religions bear against their neighbour will continue to pose obstacles to peaceful co-existence, national unity and progress.

The issue of secularity of Nigerian state as opined by some commentators will also continue to pose important challenge to the cause of national integration. While it is the opinion of some commentators that the country is secular in spite of government legitimization of religion in political affairs, others continue to oppose such secular nature status of the state. In his contribution, Davies (1995) noted that Nigeria is de jure secular state but however observed that with the state policies, practices and some official pronouncements; it then appears that Nigerian government is a patron of Christianity and Islam, two of the religions to most Nigerians. Having selected these two religions for recognition, Davies then pointed out that it becomes impossible for the state to be neutral in matters relating to religion

but becomes imperative for the government to treat the religions equally or at least to appear to do so.

At the international level, the Middle East conflict and the US-led war on global terrorism will continue to pose important challenges to the interaction between Nigerian Muslims and Christians. In the case of Middle East crisis, Ejalonibu (2005) pointed out that Christian religious zealots are always sympathetic towards Israeli's course no matter what negative impact this might have on the Palestinian people. Therefore, the issue of the Israeli state and Palestinian autonomy is always a contentious one, which often generates heated acrimony among adherents of both religions. Such suspicion and hostility cannot augur well for the cause of national integration.

A more fundamental challenge to national integration manifests in poverty. Diamond (1992) argues that mass poverty is a breeding ground for extremism - religious, ethnic, and class-consciousness. It is a fact that the current depression in the Nigerian economy has rendered many citizens, especially youths idle and almost hopeless, hence they have become instruments of manipulation by the elites for religious uprisings in the country.

Concluding Remarks

It has been observed in this paper that religion has played important role in promoting national integration in Nigeria. Emerging from the foregoing discourse is a picture of a Nigerian state that is structured by design

to make religions attractive and necessary. It is necessary that government should promote conscious agenda that will create patriotic citizens out of disparate, often antagonistic religious groups. Besides, it is imperative for the government to treat all religions equally or at least to appear to do so. Nigerians must also develop a culture of religious tolerance. When this happens, there will likely be mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence.

It is hereby envisaged that the acceptance and implementation of the suggested programme of action will see Nigeria emerge really as a free, plural democratic society, a society where respect for the worth and dignity of the individual is accorded to all, irrespective of religious inclination.

References

- Adejoh, P. E (2005) "Ethnicity, Marginalisation, Integration and Development in Nigeria" in Oyekanmi, F.D. (ed.) *Development Crisis and Social Change*. Lagos: Department of Sociology, University of Lagos.
- Ayinla, S. A. (2003) *An Introduction to Comparative Religion in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Ahnour International.
- Ayinla, S. A. (2004) "Managing Religious Intolerance and Violence in Nigeria: Problems and Solutions" A Paper presented at the National Conference on Social Problems, Development and the Challenges of Globalisation, organised by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile Ife 16th-17th June.
- Davies, A.E. (1995) "Secularity and State Practices in Nigeria" in Danmole, H.O.; Davies, A.E and Taiwo, I.O. (eds.) *Contemporary Issues in Nigerian Affairs*. Ibadan: SUNAD Publishers Ltd.
- Ejalonibu, L. E. (2005) "Religion as a Counterpoise to Politics of Ethnic Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis of American and Nigerian System" A Paper presented at the National Conference on Democracy and Development, organised by Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin 5th-7th April.
- Ige, S. A. (2006) "Religious Pluralism and the Concept of Peace: Lessons from the Old Testament" in Akinwunmi, O., Okpeli, O.O. and Gwannna, J.D. (eds.) *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Makurdi Aboki Publishers.
- Jega, A. (ed.) (2004) *Identify Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*. Kano: Nordiska Afrika Institute and Centre for Research Documentation.
- Onyiaji, B.C. and Adeoye, M. N. (2005) "The Role of the Church in the Prevention and Management of Political Violence in Nigeria: A Historical Overview" in Ayinla, S.A. (ed.) *Issues in Political Violence in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Hamson Communications.