

The Impact of Religious Oppressions on the Politics of the Nigerian State

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Abstract: The origins, causes and effects of religious oppressions on the Nigerian politics is the focus of this study. It argues that Nigeria would have been more united if Christianity and Islam—the two universal religions were not introduced into the country. If Nigerians were allowed to continue to practice the traditional religion which also had in it the politics of the people, the Nigerian nation would have been united religiously and politically irrespective of numerous tribes and tongues. The study which drew heavily from secondary sources of data is historically descriptive in method. In its findings, the study discovered that the chaotic, unstable, poverty stricken nature of Nigeria is as a result of the incursions of these two great religions which dominated the various ethnic groups, and further divided Nigeria along political lines leading to discriminations and divisions along ethnic lines. The study then recommend among others that religion should be put far apart from politics since the two have different focus entirely. Good leadership can produce a petrifugal effect since religion has a centrifugal effect.

Key words: Religion, Political, Oppression

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Pre-colonial Africa, the entity called Nigeria was not in existence. Nigeria was made up of a number of distinct empires and Kingdoms each of which enjoyed its own sovereignty. These empires were in control and in charge of their internal and external affairs. Each of them had her own unique system of social, economic and political organizations with a well-defined territory, legal and judicial systems.

These different ethnic groups believed in the African Traditional Religion and worshipped various gods and the spirits of their fore fathers, for instance, the Ali goddess among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State, the Sango gods among the Yorubas, the Amadioha among the Igbos to mention but a few. The traditional Africans worshipped smaller gods that could be seen, touched and heard which served as medium to the Almighty God whom they believed was too great to be mentioned or approached. These gods differed from one community to the other and worshipped variously in the various cultures and traditions, represented by various symbols, but none of these gods were held or revered more than the other gods in the other communities. This was partly because all members of the African communities were collectively bound by existing communal belief system, unlike latter developments in the colonial/post-colonial eras that presented them with options of religious beliefs from which they could choose (Metuh, 1992:1-10). The belief systems, though peculiar, were not sufficiently different enough to have instigated feelings of difference among the diverse segments of the society. This account for the reasons why religious motivated violence was not recorded during the pre-colonial era.

The Nigerian traditional society though fought some inter-tribal wars, was tranquil with little or no oppression, no segregation and hatred of each other because, the ethnic groups were independent in all ramifications.

By the 15th century and the 17th century when the foreign religions began to penetrate the shores of the country, with Islam penetrating from the North of Africa into Nigeria through Sokoto where it found its seat, and the Portuguese came from across the Atlantic Ocean with Christianity. These two religions had to press further from their bases each trying to overtake the other. As a matter of fact, Islam tried to push her way further south while Christianity also tried to push further north, each of these religions wanted the whole of Nigeria for themselves. But when they could not, each had to stop to agree on the boundary. As a country, Nigeria became a religiously diverse society. Christianity, Islam and the African traditional religions became the three major religions practiced in Africa's most populous nation. Demographics show that Nigeria is sharply divided along religious lines with a Muslim dominated north and a Christian dominated south (Olulana, 2018).

The above peaceful co-existence began to alter gradually following the amalgamation in 1914 of the southern and northern protectorates. At this time, the two world religions had become so entrenched in the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. Samuel et al (2018:308) evinced that “throughout the period of the colonial rule, this religious divide never appeared to pose any major threat because neither the Muslims nor the Christians in Nigeria had any political authority over one another. It was at the end of colonial rule that people began to sense that a Muslim dominated leadership could initiate and implement policies that are favourable to Muslims at the detriment of Christians and vice versa”. Thus, the common fight against imperialism began to degenerate while tribal and ethnic politics waxed stronger and then Nigerian State that was amalgamated became a no man’s problem, and no one group aimed at unifying Nigeria as a Nation. Ethnic and religious identities do not in themselves cause conflict, it is in the politicization of these identities that threaten the peace, security and development of the nation. These identities become problematic when access to opportunities in relation to power and resources are dependent on loyalty to or membership of a particular ethnic nationality, as well as when the state is relatively weak in terms of its capacity to protect its citizens and provide for their basic needs (Kwaja, 2009 cited on Oloruntoba and Gumede, 2018:260).

Kukah, (1993:18-25), also affirmed that the main bone of contention between the followers of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria revolve around their control of political power and/or greater influence over specified geographical areas, rather than purely doctrinal issues. The struggle over greater control of political power is hinged on the fear of domination and vigor by either of the two religions that may have greater controls of political power.

It is against this backdrop that the study argued that the religious oppressions that ravage the politics of the nation can be curtailed by electing into office a good national leader who is supposed and meant to bring a synergy/unity between the two factors to bring a strong united nation that will be able to move the nation away from the foot prints of colonialism since religion and ethnicity have a centrifugal effects on the nation, the leadership should produce a petrifugal effect. Hence, this study is set to trace the origin, the causes/reasons and effects of Religious oppressions on politics in Nigeria and proffer solutions.

Conceptual Clarification

Oppression has been variously defined by various scholars. According to Scruton, 2007:496) oppression is the use of coercion, force or violence by some holders of power, in order to constrain another’s freedom or deny his rights. For the Webster Dictionary, oppression is defined as the unjust or cruel exercise of power or authority. Davenport, (2007) saw oppression as the act of a state entity controlling her citizens by force for the purpose of restricting or preventing their ability to take part in the political life of a society, thus reducing their political rights among their fellow citizens.

Oppression may be overt as in the occupation of a country by an invader not acting in a just cause, or covert as in the oppression exerted by organized criminals through a system of protection. Oppression exist where there is inequality.

Kittri, (1995) averred that political oppression can manifest themselves through violent policies such as human rights violations, surveillance abuse, police brutality, imprisonments, stripping of citizen’s rights, forced disappearances and extra judicial punishments of political activists etc.

Political oppressions that are organized by the state may constitute state terrorism, genocide and crimes against humanity. General and violent political repression is a typical feature of dictatorship, totalitarian states and similar regimes (Serge, 1979), and acts of political oppression may be carried out by secret police forces, army, paramilitary groups or death squads. In some countries, oppression can be an official term used in legislation or the names of government institutions, for instance, the defunct Soviet Union had a legal policy of repression of political opposition defined in the penal code and Cuba under Fulgencio Batista had a secret police agency officially named the Bureau for the Repression of Communist Activities.

Religion is defined as the response of man to an onward experience which he considers to be a direct approach of the divine, seeking to reveal to him the meaning of his experience and his guide to eternal destiny (Ajetunmobi et al, 2009: 277). Religious/Political oppression on the other hand refer to the use of force or coercion by some religious groups or political authorities to constrain others of their freedom or deny them their rights in any part of Nigeria.

As a country, Nigeria is replete with religious and ethnic diversities, a country divided in everything. For instance, Nigeria has many languages, cultures, three major religions, diverse ways of dressing, and diverse foods without any uniting influence. In all the parts of Nigeria, one finds a dominating ethnic group, language, religion and what have you, and this portend the tendency that those dominating groups would have to shove those in minority aside to be able to deny them their legal rights.

According to Davidson etal (1965), religion and politics were inseparably bound together in traditional civilizations. Like the Europeans of the middle ages, Africans lived in an age of faith. They believed that political authority did not come from men but from God and the spirits. Those who exercised authority could do

so if they were accepted as speaking and acting with the good will of the departed ancestors who in turn were men's protectors and helpers in the world of the spirits. Rulers could rule if only they were spiritually appointed to do so, and their subjects obeyed them not simply from respect for the courts of law, or for the kings' power, but also for the reasons of religion. Buttressing this further, Scruton (2007:589) aver that religion and politics can never be separated in the minds either of behavior or of those who seek to govern them, and religious conceptions have influenced almost all of the concepts and institutions of modern western government: the law through the canon law and natural laws; sovereignty through the doctrines of international jurisdiction; property through the doctrine of the just price and usury; social welfare and education through the command of charity and the concept of religion; social justice political obligation through the command of piety. Religion has re-entered politics in a substantial way since the rise of Islamism, which is motivated by the desire to establish forms of government authorized by God, and failing to do that, to destroy the alternatives along with those who live by them.

Religion for some scholars is the single most powerful motive in Human history, for others, a mere device whereby the injustice of the existing social order is made tolerable to those who suffer it, and due to decline with the eventual mastery over nature and tearing away of the veil of ideology. Others still see religion in the manner of Durkheim as the fundamental expression of our social nature and the true record of our dependence on a community that is greater than the sum of its members (Scruton, 2007:589). However, personal Christianity and Islam may claim to be as religious, they more easily become political issues than traditional religions, it is the important imported religions that often assume high political sensitivity, and entail the risk of causing political offense (Mazrui, 1977:254-259).

As Ajetunmobi et al (2009) aver, the destructive nature of religious fanaticism can be seen in the alleged discrimination against one another in admission policies, school fees, employment as well as the refusal of many states and governments to grant land to build churches and mosques in the northern and southern parts of Nigeria.

The many forms of oppression include but not limited to sexism, racism, heterosexism, homophobia, ageism, classism, sizeism, nativism and colonialism. Oppression can be executed by institutional groups or by individuals, for instance, a country passing a law supporting segregation is a group oppression on another group while inter personal oppression exist between two people or more like bullying or name calling. But for this study, we are looking at the group oppressions which most of the times are engineered by individuals.

II. ORIGIN OF POLITICAL PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria has been described variously by various scholars; for instance, Obafemi Awolowo described Nigeria as a patch work of a nation; Nigeria's pioneer Prime Minister, Abubakir Tafawa Belewa also described Nigeria as "a nation existing only on paper". The Sardauna of Sokoto referred to the amalgamation as "the mistake of 1914" while others refer to it as the creation of the white man etc. This is as a result of the composition of the Nigerian state. As a patch work, Nigeria has failed to wield her numerous component parts together to form a united nation and as a mistake of 1914, the amalgamation still exist only on the paper the colonial authorities used to draw the map. The various tribes and ethnic groups parched together by Lord Lugard in 1914 have no one singular thread weaving them together as one. Giving the reason why it was difficult for the Nigerian nation to unit as a one, Onyeoziri, (2002:10) posits that:

Before the Nigerian nation in 1914, the Nigerian state was virtually non-existent, but the different nationalities had already consolidated. In this sense, the nationalities took on a life of their own before the Nigerian state was established. The result of this was that the Nigerian state started off weaker than its constituent nationality groups.

In order to start up the new country that has been put together for their convenience, Lugard divided the country into three regions alongside the ethnic groups: Igbos, the Hausas-Fulanis and the Yorubas. However, the three quarter of the land was given to one ethnic group, the Hausa-Fulanis living in the north, ensuring that the larger population was allocated to the Hausa-Fulani (Nwugo, 2011; 187).

With the rise of party politics and the efforts by the politicians to build political bases, the various ethnic and cultural unions initially formed were absorbed by parties thereby forming ethnically/ tribal based parties. Hence, these ethnic organizations competed for political power/dominance, which exacerbated ethnic rivalries and blunted the sharpness of nationalist movements in parts of Africa during the de-colonization period.

In effect therefore, it would be argued that while colonialism brought various ethnic groups for new purposes, it also created differences and intensified rivalries as part of their divide and rule policy geared towards impeding emergence of strong nationalists that could eject the colonial overlords. It is noteworthy that ethnicity rather than class distinction has been the important factor in the politics of the African states. Indeed, that situation played into the hands of the colonial masters who manipulated the system in such a way that the chosen ethnic groups, who were generally the more conservative groups inherited political powers, and ensured

that neo-colonialism thrived in the post-colonial states while the other regions were put away from political activities (Oguagha, 1994:18). Buttressing the above, Emezi, 1997:221 opines

Politicization of ethnicity in Nigerian Politics had its genesis in British colonial policies, which through the obnoxious “divide and rule policy”, encouraged the use of different applications of colonial policies on traditional institutions and structures of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria.... The result of this unequal impact of colonial policies have been the distrust, rivalry and lack of cooperation that have characterized the relationship between the three dominate groups in Nigeria.

In this era, religious and ethnic differences became prominent factors in establishing and putting into effect the socio-economic policies and applications. Therefore, the differentiating outcomes of colonialism became the forerunner of the socio-economic disequilibrium among the different regions, and then this became an important factor in the stimulation of identity awareness so as to efficiently ‘divide and rule’ (Fearon and Laitin 2003:82; Okpanachi 2010). Hence, the dominant groups tend to oppress the dominated group and this vicious circle continues in every facet of the country.

III. CAUSES OF POLITICAL/RELIGIOUS OPPRESSIONS IN NIGERIA

During the period of constitutional negotiations of the early 1950s (The Macpherson constitution of 1951), the notion of ethnic minorities came into Nigerian political discourse when the three regional governments were created. In the regional dispensation, the dominant parties represented the three major ethnic interests which also were dominant in their respective regions. Hence, those outside these ethnic blocks, but fall within the regional governments would be at a serious political and economic disadvantage. The smaller ethnic groups in the various regions tended to see themselves as confronting a situation peculiar to the majoritarian dictatorship in which majority interests held sway, and the minorities had no say (Willink Commission, 1958). Ethnic minority identity developed, not necessarily as a question of numbers or cultural differences, but as recognition of their powerlessness in the face of ethnicized electoral politics (Abdul Raufu, 2000:95). In the constitutional/political dispensation that unfolded from 1951, numbers corresponded directly to political powers. The minority ethnic groups that were so defined in post 1951 are therefore, largely political minorities because the unfolding electoral and regional politics, small numbers in one’s constituency translated into powerlessness. In most but not all cases, issues of culture, history or socio-political development played no part in the characterization.

In Nigeria, ethno-regional conflicts tend to emerge at moments when groups perceive that they are being excluded from access to what they consider to be their right, be they linguistics, political, economic, administrative, commercial, religious etc. Violent ethno-regional conflicts therefore are usually linked to perceptions of group domination in the absence of channels for expressing demands (Osaghae, 1972:219-220). The control of political power and its instruments such as armed forces and the judiciary and the control of economic power and resources quickly become broad issues when ethno-regional domination emerge as a political issue. These two issues become powerful instruments that are used to influence the authoritative allocation of resources to groups or individuals, and when democratic transition and its manipulations entered the agenda, the question of number becomes part of the game. Political forces try to assemble the largest coalitions that could assure them access to power and apart from ideology and interest articulation, primitive issues such as ethnicity, regionalism and religion become major instruments for political mobilization. The largest groups become central forces that are either used to open the gate way of power or are excluded or marginalized from power in one way or the other (Jibril Ibrahim, 2000). Hence, political oppressions manifest itself in the following ways:

- (a) **The structure of Nigeria:** Nigeria is composed of three major ethnic groups who are divided in everything, and which naturally divide the country into unequal three regions. The north having the larger land mass and housing a population that is bigger than the west and eastern part put together. This larger land mass and the population strength of the north has become a weapon for oppression. It has enabled the north to dominate in every election in Nigeria, more especially the presidential elections. For instance, from the 1960s, the north has dominated the presidential seat of the Nigerian State. They have produced more Leaders than the Western and the eastern Parts put together. The north has produced ten presidents counting from 1960 till date, while the southern and the western Nigeria has produced five leaders. It is obvious that the leaders are the decision makers and the distributors of the resources in the country. The land mass and number has been used for keeping the southern part of Nigeria away from leadership positions.

These various ethnic groups that were brought together mused suspicion against each other from the very beginning and nursed fears of domination by the other ethnic groups, hence the struggle for power to enable them oppress the other ethnic group. The easiest and simplest way to retain power was to appeal to tribal sentiments, so they conspicuously exploited it in the 1950s and 60s (Samuel, et al 2018 & Achebe, 2012).

- (b) **Formation of political Parties:** The Macpherson constitution did not make room for national parties. The new parties formed became regional parties and thus the new constitution with its regional emphasis brought into active play the forces of ethnic nationalism and regional division in Nigerian politics (Ikimi, 1980:565). “Once it became clear that the principle of political independence would be approved, attacks against colonial authorities were replaced by a struggle for succession by the leading politicians/nationalists. The unity of the nationalist front was gradually destabilized as Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani leaders maneuvered for dominant positions within the organization. Eventually rivalry between the ethnic blocks in the south was partially submerged by more profound clash of southern interest with those of the emergent north” (Chick, 1971). In the present dispensation, Nigerian political parties have followed the same ethnic pattern laid down during the Macpherson constitution.
- (c) **Elections:** the first incidences of oppression arose during the first British conducted election in Nigeria which ushered in the first Nigeria’s indigenous government in 1959. This first election was marred by the British colonial overlords who used their powers to announce the results of election before the counting of votes were concluded. By their rigged results of the election, Alhaji Abubakir Tafawa Belewa, the leader of the NPC emerged the winner and he was appointed the Prime Minister of Nigeria by the colonial authority, as against the predictions that the NCNC under Azikiwe would become the winner had the votes been appropriately counted (Nwugo, 2011:179). Thus, the colonial authority thought that the Hausa-Fulanis with Muslim backgrounds and Muslim leadership approach were more amenable to control. They could therefore be used for their colonial administration. On the other hand, the Igbos were reputed for their independent thinking, individual leadership, republican approach to public affairs etc (Nwugo, 2011:188). According to Achebe, (2012) buttressing the above assertion, explains that:

The British, in order to achieve their goal redeployed Sir James Robertson from Sudan to take over the reins in Nigeria. Sir Robertson also selected Harold Smith, a junior English Officer to oversee the rigging of Nigeria’s first election so that its compliant friend (Northern Nigeria) would win power, dominate the country, and serve the British interest after independence.

Beginning from this first election to the present, elections had never felt better. The political elites stuck to this game of ganging up, exclusionary politics and rigging to make sure that some areas of the country are perpetually in power while some other areas are excluded from politics.

Population size: Nwugo, (2011) posits that, “It was for instability and chaos that they broke the land of Nigeria into three major ethnic groups- the Igbos, the Hausas and the Yorubas. However, the colonial overlords gave three quarters (about 72%) of the land to one ethnic group, the Hausa-Fulanis occupying the north. The north feared that they might be dominated by the southerners as a result of their earlier advantage of western education which became vital under the Macpherson constitution, the northerners insisted on using their predominance in numbers to achieve power (Ikimi, 1980:565). They showed the importance of population to politics and created confusion by ensuring that the larger land area was allocated to the Hausa-Fulani. The population problem showed itself in the 1962 and 1963 censuses which brought the population of the north to 29, 758, 875; the eastern numbered 12,394, 462; the west numbered 10,265,846; the mid-west 2,535,839 while Lagos got 665, 247. This disproportionate population made the Hausa-Fulani to quickly key into the arithmetic from 1962-1963 censuses to allocate census figures to the regions rather than doing the actual counting. Hence, it became difficult for Nigeria to have a realistic development plan because planning had to be done on imaginary facts (without true census figures) (Nwugo, 2011). Similarly, as Jega, (2000:17) posits, the differential impact of colonial economic policies ensured that the southern region, especially Lagos seaport area, was relatively more advanced economically than the northern region, while southern cities became the hub of the country’s commercial and industrial activities, the differential political impact came about as a result of the deliberate colonial political policy, which used population as a criterion for representation to give the northern region a greater chance to controlling political power nationally as a countervailing factor to southern economic and educational dominance. The end-result was that the political elite in the northern region capitalized on fears of domination by the southerners, in view of their region’s economic and educational disadvantages, to mobilize a northern identity and ensure control of politics with which they hoped to checkmate the passive threat of southern domination, and the southern elite detested the use of numbers for perpetual control of political power by the northern elite.

1. Religious Oppressions in Nigeria

As Ali Mazrui, (1997) had to argue “the traditional indigenous religions are usually restricted in their devotion to members of particular tribal communities, the universal religions-Christianity and Islam are committed to evangelization and general conversion. It is sometimes suggested that it is the traditional religions which are very collectivist; the individuals are submerged beneath the concept of tribal identity and ancestors.

From the amalgamation, Religion became one of the dividing lines and instrument of oppression by one religious group and the other because that was the very first time the north and south came together under one administrative unit. By 1970s, Religious consciousness rose sharply in Nigeria and became a major factor in presidential elections of the 1979 that produced President Shehu Shagari. It was during this regime that Islamic groups came up with the idea of Islamizing Nigeria using the Maitasine activities in the early 1980s (Adesoji, 2011:98-119). By 2002, the Islamic terrorists group, Boko Haram in the north felt dominated by the Christians and wanted Sharia legal systems to be established across the length and breadth of Nigeria. This is confirmed by the utterances of the sect's spokesman, Abu Qada:

The reason for our insurgency is because we Muslims communities in the north of Nigeria where Boko Haram operates, see ourselves as increasingly threatened by the strident Christianity that dominate the north

The Kano riot of December 1980 was caused by the Maitatsine Movement of fanatic Islamic group, an anti-authority group led by Mohammed Marwa attacked the beliefs of the established religious and social order in order to sanitize Islam in Kano. The attack affected Christians and non-indigenes and about 200-500 persons lost their lives including properties (Nigerian Tribune, 29th December, 1980). From the 1980s that saw the Maiduguri, Kaduna riots and Kano crises, through to the 2000s of the Kano city riots caused by independent Hisba under the guise of Sharia against Christians, to the Yandaba Islamic youth fundamentalists who targeted Christians and Muslims in a protest to avenge the US bombardment of Afghanistan over Asylum granted Osama Bin Laden in 2001. In the 2004s, at Yelwa, Shendam LGA of Plateau state witnessed the physical confrontations by the unidentified Muslims rampaging men and Christians and Al Qaeda Islamic terrorists targeted Hausa-Fulanis and Christians which led to loss of lives and properties (News Watch magazine, 6th march, 1991; the Guardian newspaper of 4 May, 2004 and Tell Magazine of 15th march, 2004). These religious crises had their rippling effects all over the country more especially the 2004 Kano crisis, the other states of the federation, had to attack the Muslims in their own states in retaliation for the Christians killed in those various religious crisis in the North. From the 1979 till date, Nigeria has known no Peace, many other terrorist groups have come up in many other regions with various names like the OPC, The MEND, the Bakassi Boys in the east, the Fulani Herds men etc causing havoc in the name defense or vigilante groups have made the country to know no peace.

Other causes include: the weak character of the Nigerian state, Elitist greed, absence of a strong national institutions, misplaced priorities by the leadership, the wide gap of inequalities created between the poor and the rich have all combined to increase the occurrences of political and religious oppressions in Nigeria.

2. Effects

The general effects of oppression as can be read from this study are numerous, but we will itemize these few:

- Disunity and hatred; these occurrences divide the country more instead of building bridges. Nigeria is not in any way maturing, the situation of the country is worsening, as we can see killing on daily basis. Boko Haram killing Christians, Muslims killing non indigenes and herds men killing farmers all over the country etc.
- Poverty- the numerous problems that arise as a result of oppression lead to destruction of properties, thereby robbing people of their hard earned wealth.
- Bad Leadership, the quality of our leaders has not helped the situation, leaders who get into office through tribal tendencies also choose their cabinet through tribal tendencies and then produce tribalism, ethnicism and divisionism as their output.
- Loss of lives and properties. This cannot be overemphasized. In all the religious crisis, lots of lives and properties of the Nigerian citizens were recorded in almost all over the country

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion therefore, this study has traced the origin, causes and effects of religious oppressions in Nigeria and its impact on the political development of Nigeria. The study discovered that the problems of Nigeria has been the lumping together of the various ethnic groups by the white man and the seeds of division sewed by the colonial authorities that has made the north to see the southerners not as their brothers and vice versa. The study also found that it is ethnicity and religion that have separated Nigeria as a Nation State. That it is only Good leadership that can produce a petrifugal effect that can lead to unity and oneness in Nigeria. A good leader can harness our differences to bring a synergy between the two factors to produce a strong united Nigerian State that will be able to move away from the problems caused by colonialism.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The lines of divisions into three ethnic regions should be abolished since we have come of age. Everybody born in Nigeria should claim citizenship of the region irrespective of the region he came from.

2. The Nigerian Populace should be educated through a mass literacy campaign on the essence of choosing good leaders and not tribal leaders
3. Tribal politics, if down played on can help remove discrimination of all sorts
4. Merit and educational qualification should be a yardstick for choosing leaders and not on majority tribal tendencies.
5. Religion should be put far apart from the politics of the land by not appealing to the consciences of the political tugs who may go out of their way to cause havoc.

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