

The Activities and Challenges of Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) in Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) is arguably the country's largest Islamic organization, in terms of numbers. The mother body for all Muslim students at all levels of education in Nigeria; it has the largest membership base in the country. Established in 1954, to serve as a common front for Muslim students, MSSN is unaffiliated in terms of ideology as it draws membership from all sects, ideologies and movements associated with Islam in Nigeria. At the top of the society's hierarchical echelon is the National Secretariat. Directly working under it are the 'A Zone' comprising northern states, and the 'B Zone' which oversees the states in the south. Each State of the Federation has an Area Unit but not all Local Government Areas has an Area Council. The district division is represented by central branches under which there are branches in secondary and tertiary institutions of learning. This article attempts to unveil the activities and challenges of the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria, Nasarawa Area Unit.*

Keywords: *Activities, Challenge, Muslim, Organization, Students, Society,*

I. Introduction

On Sunday, 30th May, 1954, a group of secondary school students in Lagos met and laid a foundation of what has today become a mass student organization unequal in Nigerian history. It took place at Ansar-ud Deen primary school, Alakoko in Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria (National Retreat, MSSN 2012).

The pioneer members include the President of the Society Late Dr. Lateef Adegbite, (CON), the then Secretary General, Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and Baba Addini of Egbaland, Justice A. R. A Sahid (rtd.) and Alhaji Tajudeen Aromashodun of bless memory. With branches in virtually all post primary and tertiary institutions, Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) has today become a fertile ground in Nigeria from which germinate seeds of unity of Muslim Students and Islamic Message (National Retreat, MSSN 2012).

The society was given birth in the era of repression and oppression of Muslims wishing to access Western Education brought into Nigeria by Christian missionaries. To go to school, most Muslim pupils had to enroll in a catechism class and get Baptized. Of course, they were also required to drop their Muslim names; since Muslim schools were too negligible to cater for the number of children willing to go to school. The situation predominated for decades before some measure of liberation imposed by the multiplier effects of the Second World War, where Nigerian soldiers experienced, the truth and the fact that the Whiteman is in no way superior to the blackman because of the color of his skin. They also experienced the universal principles of fundamental human right to freedom of speech, freedom of society and freedom to receive and disseminate information, and above all, freedom of religion (National Retreat, MSSN 2012).

The gradual changes pervading the political landscape had awakened the consciousness of Muslim students to come together for self preservation and common resolve to hold on to their faith and practice their religion unhindered by the Government or any group under whatever guise. Before then, Muslim students were obliged to go to school during Muslim festivals of *Eid-Fitri*, *Eid-Adha*, or get severely punished for staying away from school during the celebrations. There were no holidays for Muslim festivals. Indeed some examinations were fixed on those days to compel Muslim Students to attend school. It was equally impossible for Muslims to go for *Juma'ah* service on Fridays and Muslim sisters were not allowed to wear the Islamic *Hijab* in Schools as they were forced to appear half naked (National Retreat, MSSN 2012).

The advent of the MSSN in 1954, before Nigeria's independence was therefore the beginning of a revolution, a new consciousness and reawakening of the Muslim minds to the truth and fact of Islam and one of the greatest thing happened to mankind in this part of the world (National Retreat, MSSN 2012).

The MSSN according to its by-law has among others the following aims and objectives:

- Bring all Muslim in closer union and inculcate in them the true Islamic spirit of brotherhood and absolute faith in Allah as the only basis for the achievement of peace among mankind.
- Establish an Islamic *Ummah* govern by the principles and rules of the Shari'ah.

- Encouraging the study of the Glorious Qur'an as a final revelation and Arabic language as the lingua franca of the Islamic World.
- Promote the general welfare of Muslims and safeguard their fundamental rights in any community.
- Constitute a strong force for the propagation and strengthening of Islam in Nigeria and throughout the world.
- Champion the course of the oppressed in any community.
- Encourage and promote acquiring sound and qualitative education by all Muslims especially the youth.
- Perform or undertake any other function(s) that is ancillary or incidental to the aforementioned aims (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013).

Today MSSN is the greatest mass movement of Muslim youth nationwide. It is doubtful in Nigeria, if any students organization, religious or secular is bigger than MSSN. It has provided example for others to follow. MSSN has contributed immensely to the spiritual growth and development of Nigeria youths. Through its rich, balanced and enlightenment programmes on the virtues of discipline and moral life, the society has to date remained strongly opposed to all forms of vices, indiscipline and cultism on campus. In the realm of the wide society, the MSSN records have also been impressive. In every sphere of life, education, economy, social, political, professionals, public service etc., MSSN has produced outstanding leaders and eminent personalities like the former Minister of Finance, Alhaji Adamu Ciroma, Alhaji Shehu Musa, who was the MSSN former National Secretary General, and Professor Nurudden Alao, the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos who was as well former National Secretary General of the society, professor Ishaq Oloyede, former Vice-Chancellor, University of Ilorin, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, a string of governors and numerous MSSN Alumni in the National Assembly and the various State Assemblies with many of them holding key legislative and political positions. MSSN also have number of Ministers, commissioners and other Government functionaries (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013). The judiciary is not left out as well as professions like Medicine, Law, Engineering and ICT. Perhaps, it is in the education industry, that MSSN has excelled most.

Many MSSN Alumni have held Vice Chancellors position in Nigeria's Universities. In commerce and industry be it in the Banking sector, military and police force, MSS members are outstanding (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013). The annual Islamic vacation course which is almost as old as the society itself provides a forum for interaction and promotion of understanding of Islamic culture and ethics among members.

MSSN also foster the spirit of selflessness, compassion and discipline through periodic visits and show of generosity to the sick in the hospitals, the aged and the less privileged members of the society. Most importantly, MSSN has promoted national unity and harmony more than any organization in Nigeria history. It was the first society to provide the platform for cross-fertilization of ideas between the north and the south (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013). When it was a taboo for politicians of the three divides in Nigeria to mix freely and promote common ground for interaction, MSSN was building a structure that has later been exploited to national advantage by politicians. Divergent political opinions were never a threat to MSSN. Its main feat is bringing under its Islamic umbrella, youth from the diverse groups that make up the country (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013). It is on record that the zoning formula now adopted by political parties in Nigeria was the age long tradition of MSSN which made succession from one National leadership to another easy, smooth and pleasant. Leadership rotates from the north to the south. On election year, leadership are also groomed and tested before they take up their offices. Situation where money bags are elected or chosen irrespective of the source as leaders was never allowed in MSSN. In MSSN, leadership is service and the creed is selflessness in service. In MSSN, leadership is a function of contributing to the society, social work and commitment to declared goals and objectives, demonstrated capacity to lead with appreciable level of transparency and accountability. The ability to be subjected to the scrutiny of the law, honor, humility in power and responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the people at all times are the essence of leadership in MSSN (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013).

The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria still forging ahead has made a bold impression on the international scene. Having regard to its enormous Area Councils and Branch network, the society has become prominent in the Islamic world. It therefore attracted many invitations for international conference, seminars and workshops. It was through the influence of the MSSN that the International Islamic Federation of Student Organization (IIFSO) with headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the International Institute of Islamic thought (IIIT) with headquarters in United States of America, the Muslim Students of Canada and America were given birth to. Beneath these achievements are the silent but monumental support and contributions of Muslim Leaders, scholars and philanthropists who made the dream and aspiration of MSSN come true (Bye-Law MSSN, 2013).

II. Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria Nasarawa Area Unit

Nasarawa State was one of the six States that were created in October 1, 1996 by the late General Sani Abacha's administration (Nasarawa State Ministry of Information nd). The society MSSN is as old as the state. Islam being the dominant religion of the people of Nasarawa State implies that there is predominance of Muslim students in schools. Although there is no study to show the population distribution of religious beliefs but it is believed as it can be observed that Muslims constitutes the higher percentage of religious adherents in the State (Aminu 2010). The society has branches in virtually all post primary and tertiary institutions in the State.

2.2 Organizational Structure of MSSN Nasarawa Area Unit

The Society, in accordance with its Constitution, is organized at four (4) levels-

- i. Area Unit
- ii. Zonal constituency
- iii. Area Councils
- iv. Branches

The Area Unit comprises the whole State as stipulated in the MSSN National Constitution. It is made up of all the Area Councils in the State and it is administered by the constituted State Executive Council.

The zones/Area Unit comprises of the three senatorial constituencies of the State, namely: Zone 'A' (Nasarawa South) Lafia, Awe, Keana, Doma and Obi, Zone 'B' (Nasarawa Central) Akwanga, Nasarawa-Eggon and Wamba and Zone 'C' (Nasarawa West: Keffi, Kokona, Nasarawa, Karu and Toto) respectively.

The Area councils comprises of some local Government Areas in each of the Zones as it is not the typical political councils of the State in the country. An area council is large as it comprises post primary schools and higher institutions that are found within its geographical region. The Branches include persons at the institutions/schools at any level of education- be it University, Polytechnic, Colleges of Education, Secondary and Primary Schools. They are usually administered by the branch/school Exco (Minutes of meeting of MSSN).

2.3 Programs and Activities of MSSN Nasarawa Area Unit

The Nasarawa Area unit has five (5) major annual programs. These are Annual Sisters' Conference (ASC); Islamic Vacation Course (IVC); Leadership Training Course (LTC); Quiz & Essay Competitions (QEC) and Hijab Week Program (HWP). The programs were planned and executed annually (www.mssnigeria.org/home/node/).

2.3.1 Islamic Vacation Course (IVC)

It is a week-long program which usually comes in the month of December of every year. The program attracts students from primary up to university levels. The main activities in the camps among others include: lectures, *ta'alimat*, classroom instructions, *Da'awah* outreach, visitations, interactive forum, skills acquisitions as well as issuance of communiqué. The programme is aim at improving the Muslim skill acquisition, create interaction between Muslim youth and provide platform wherein Muslim youths will have access to participate in *Da'wah* activities and receive classroom instructions from different Muslim scholars all over the country (www.mssnigeria.org/home/node/).

2.3.2 Quiz & Essay Competitions (QEC)

It is a program designed for our promising young Muslim students at post-primary institutions of learning so as to stimulate their academic activities for challenges ahead. The program is meant for SS I and II students of post-primary schools to develop them academically based on the NECO / WAEC syllabi and to train them as resourced students for the Muslim *Ummah*. The program is organize termly where the winners were rewarded handsomely and those that emerged winner at their branches (schools) represent them at the Area Council level so also at the state level (www.mssnigeria.org/home/node/).

2.3.3 Annual Sister's Conference

This was initiated and served as a forum for Muslim sisters. It is designed to cater for their need in the growing trend for liberation of women in disguise by the western civilization of deceit. It was a program created for our sisters with the evolution of multifarious and multifaceted challenges facing Muslim *Ummah*.

2.3.4 Leadership training Course (LTC)

To demonstrate its commitment to the development of quality leadership both at its own internal need and the society at large, the society at the State level use to organize Annual Leadership Course for its members across the State. It was designed to assemble leaders drawn from the various level of the society to receive training on how best to run the affairs of the society. This has tremendously help to bring up generation of

leaders who after student lives have continue to provide good leadership qualities in different spheres of national life.

2.3.5 Hijab Week Programme (HWP)

This programme is designed to sensitize Muslim sisters on the need to be wearing *Hijab* within and outside campuses/schools as their fundamental right (Bye-law of the MSSN Nasarawa Area Unit 2013).

III. Challenges facing MSSN in Nasarawa Area Unit

Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria Nasarawa area unit is facing a lot of challenges. These challenges can be categorized as follow.

3.1.1 Educational Challenges

The society is unable to have a statistical data of their branches (schools). The society does not have a list of schools within the Area councils and Units. Despite the approval of wearing *Hijab* by the Government, many secondary school students are finding it difficult to wear the *Hijab* and some principals both in Government and private schools do not allow the students to wear *Hijab*. There is also problem of lack of Islamic Studies teachers in many secondary schools in the State (oral interview with Malam Adamu Ibrahim).

3.2.2 Economic Challenges

The society has an economic problem that affects the proper coordination and planning of activities of the Area Unit. MSSN depend on charity, Zakat, voluntary donation, assistance and contribution from Area councils to carry out their activities. In fact economic constraint is the major challenge of the society (Aliyu 2011).

3.2.3 Religious challenges

The society serves as the mother of all Islamic organizations and is interacting with all, with the exception of Shi'at group led by Mal. Ibrahim Yakubu El-Zakzaki of Zaria (naijamayor.com/mssn). MSSN is today facing problems such as controversy surrounding the conduct of *wazifa* by Darika group in some schools. The society as the mother of all other Islamic organizations is with the opinion that anybody that want to practice *wazifa* can do that outside the campus (Aliyu 2011).

3.2.4 Political challenges

Despite the fact that the society is not a political organization, the society is unable to sponsor a political candidate that will bring some development to the society. Members are allowed to acquaint themselves with any political party in order not to be left out. In 2003, the society was engaged in election monitoring under NGO umbrella. In 2007, MSSN participated in election monitoring under Muslim link for accountability (Report of *Da'wah* committee on MSSN conflict 2008).

3.2.5 Social challenges

The major social problem which in most cases is peculiar with secondary schools is that of final year graduation ceremony (*walimah*) whereby students after collecting terminal contributions from both their class mates and junior ones will spend the revenue of the society during this ceremony. In some cases they will spend the money in buying new clothes, food stuff and other items to be used during the *walimah*. There are cases of lavishing the account of the society in organizing this social send off programme with the support of the leaders and the patrons of the Society.

In addition to this social challenge, members went on seeking for money charity in the streets, markets places, mosques, parks etc for the purpose of *walimah*. Some of the executive use huge amount of money from the society account to print a calendar and snapping of picture (male and female) together during the *walimah* without given proper attention to the spiritual aspects of the programme (Adamu 2002).

In summary, other challenges facing the Society (MSSN) includes:

- Poor reading and writing culture among Muslim students
- Inadequate planning, continuity and accountability
- Poor commitment and dedication of some leaders
- Gross shortage of fund
- Absence of secretariat at the Area councils and the Area Unit
- Dishonesty of some members of the society in stealing of books, financial mismanagement and other materials
- Lack of technical knowledge on documentation and records keeping (Oral Interview with Malam Salisu Musa).

IV. The Way forward

Many works have preceded this which aimed at providing guidelines for sanitizing Islamic organisations in the country and saving them from the dangers of laxity on the one hand and of extremism on the other. From the above analysis of the challenges faced by the Islamic organisations, this paper suggests the following measures to curtail the problems and address the challenges facing Islamic organisations in Nigeria.

Specifically, the seeking of charity on the streets, market places, motor parks and in any other gathering should be stopped, because this is a disgrace to the MSSN. This is more or less reducing MSSN to a begging society which is not permitted in Islam. Printing of calendar and snapping of group pictures by male and female should be stopped immediately, due to the huge amount of money involve and its contradiction to the teachings of Islam. The society should restore the position of patrons, matrons and trustees of the society at all levels. This will greatly assist the society and restore the lost glory of the society for better and future leaders. The society should create an atmosphere of understanding and cordial working relationship with everybody for free interactions, with government and other stakeholder at all levels. The society should device a means of sponsoring programmers' without necessarily depending on begging. Fund raising committee should be constituted so that the society can be self reliant. State secretariat should be made functional which is an essential pillar of having an area unit as required by the zone. Activities of the society should be posted to internet for all members to view or have access to it. This when archived will enable the society to go online with other organizations (national and international) and the society will have records of all administrative activities. The society should cultivate and encourage the Development of reading and writing skills among Muslim Students. Organization of walimah and send off of outgoing students should be kept under serious control and be managed with serious decency and decorum.

Generally, On religious matters, enough and adequate training should be provided to whoever is to be saddled with the responsibility of preaching and teaching according to the demands of the environments to which they preach or guide. Training should be adequate both in its academic and moral content.

MSSN should collaborate with other sister Islamic associations. They all should understand and accept that truth and correctness is not confined to or the exclusive preserve of any one group but all are partners in progress. They should assist and collaborate with one another in areas of agreement and tolerate one another in areas of disparity in the realms where difference is accepted and accommodated in Islam (Aliyu 2010).

On matters of education, serious attention should be given to the better learning of Arabic as well as English as the official language of Islam and that of the country respectively. MSSN should be structured to accommodate Islamic and modern disciplines and meet the standard and challenges of modern times. Diversification of educational qualification and training should be highly encouraged. Many more students should be sponsored to acquire higher education in all disciplines inside Nigeria and abroad. Efforts should be geared towards graduating civilized Muslim scholars not ordinary employees and degree holders.

On the methods of Da'awah, the Qur'anic teaching on clarity and scientific thinking based on reasons and evidence, wisdom, healthy debates and dialogues, good admonition, patience, planning, forgiveness and pardon should be adequately taught and strictly adhered to by all members of MSSN.

On matters of socio-economic challenges, independent means of generating funds should be created by the MSSN and only lawful (*halal*) means should be adopted and encouraged. The routine means that are *halal* and not enimical to the development of Da'wah should also be continued with (Aliyu 2010). All social segments of the society should be carried along in the activities of the MSSN; the men, the women, the children, the youth, the elites, the educated, the illiterate in modern education, the secularists, politicians, human right groups, social groups, economic and health organisations. Programmes should be designed to address each at their levels and in their professional languages

V. Conclusion

The paper has briefly traced the historical development of the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria as the outcome of the Nigerian Muslim youth's systematic resistance of educational persecution, with special reference to the first three decades of its emergence. The paper gave specific details of the activities of the Society in Nasarawa Area Unit and highlighted the challenges faced by the Society in the State. The paper also highlighted how the Society encouraged and promoted the learning of the Glorious Qur'an, Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) and Arabic Language among its members. The paper concludes that despite the challenges faced by the Society, the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria still maintain the unity of its members in the State and hope that the leadership of the Society will work tirelessly towards overcoming the challenges faced by the Society.

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