

CATHOLIC CHURCH DIPLOMACY: THE CHALLENGE OF FULANI HERDSMEN TERRORISM IN CENTRAL NIGERIA

UJI, WILFRED TERLUMUN (PhD)

**Department of History
Federal University, Lafia.
Email: ujiter@gmail.com**

Abstract

In recent years, there has been an upsurge of Fulani Herdsmen attack on the Christian population of central Nigeria, who are predominantly Catholics of the Roman Catholic persuasion. These attacks have resulted to the decimation of lives and property on a large scale. From Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba and Benue state, the Fulani herdsmen, employing the tactics of other terrorist groups like Alshaabab, Boko-haram and the Taliban, have succeeded in wiping out population and destroying economic of rural population. This paper, explores this rising phenomenon on herdsmen terrorism and the fears that it creates in the minds of Christian population who views these attacks as systematic plans to Islamize the central Nigerian people. The paper also calls upon the Catholic Church through the Papacy to adopt diplomatic measures to curb militants Islamic expansionism in central Nigeria similar to the Islamic militant (ISIS) in the west. Using primary and secondary sources this paper looks at the conflict as well as the way forward.

Keywords: church diplomacy, Fulani herdsmen terrorism, central Nigeria

Introduction

In recent times, a catholic priest became a victim of Islamic terror, killed in France by the Islamic state terrorist groups (ISIS). The killing of the priest attracted world wide condemnation and brought to the fore the issue and challenge of Islamic militancy against catholic and Christian interest across the world. The insurrection of Islamic militancy recaptures the words of Pope Benedict the (XVI) which said:

“The only legacy and heritage of Islam is world history
is the sword”.

The Islamic Militants, the killer of the priest, according to eye witness’ account broadcasted on the British Broadcasting Corporation said:

We are killing you because you are Christians. The
mission of the ISIS is to destroy the Christian church
through the Jihad.

The ISIS have demonstrated again and again, in the recent killings of Christians in Libya, Syria and Iraq that Christians have been the target, often at times, the Coptic Christians and the Catholic Christians in North Africa and the Middle East. There is no

doubt, there is a war between militant Islam and the Christian church in the recent escalation of terrorism across the globe.

The responses of the Christian church, based on the Christian doctrine of peace and reconciliation, has always emphasized that the church forgive the Islamic militant of their deeds as God in heaven, one day, will judge the sins of men. It is important to note that while it is good to forgive, the church also needed a concerted efforts as to how best to combat this Islamic terrorism

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

As far back as the Dark Ages in Europe, the Catholic Church through the Papacy played an important role in providing diplomatic relations between the church and nations. The church was both a political and religious institution that engaged in diplomatic relations in resolving conflicts between states in Europe and even in the New World society as from the 15th century up to the 18th century. According to Ekpebu: 1999:19

“The supranational Roman Empire was not only a religious system but also a political/military establishment. On religious matters the Pope reigned supreme. He was regarded by the church as the only intermediary between men and God... Papa visit to various parts of the world are greeted with twenty-one gun salutes and the display of the Vatican flag as befitting a head of state of a sovereign nation, for in fact, the Pope is the head of state of the Vatican with majority of the nations of the world continue to maintain diplomatic relations.”

The Catholic Church through the Papacy is a nation that engages in diplomacy with other nations of the world. The basic instruments of Papal diplomacy is factored in the Cardinals, the Bishops, the Priest as well as the laity. Every catholic community is the citizenship of the Vatican and therefore an attack on a Catholic community is an aggression against the Vatican state.

In Nigeria, the Catholic Church has the structures and instruments of diplomacy vested in the conference of Bishops and Cardinals that often meet at least once a year. The conference is responsible to the Vatican state on all matters of the Catholic Church in terms of doctrine as well as political issues. It is within this context or framework that Papal diplomacy can be effective in resolving the herdsman challenge in Nigeria.

Long before the rise of Islam on the Arabian peninsula, the Catholic Church had existed with a strong political foundation in North Africa, the Middle-East, Europe and Asia before the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. It is on record that Coptic Christians had taken the Christian gospel to the Arabian Peninsula through monks who may have come in contact with Mohammed, during his life time. As a matter of fact, the Catholic Church is the oldest religious institution next to Buddhism, Judaism and Confucianism. It is against this background that Islam originated on the Arabian Peninsula as an anti-thesis of the Christian faith.

Since the rise of Islam on the Arabian peninsula as from the 6th century AD, the expansionism of Islam across the world has adopted three basic strategies namely: peaceful conversion, expansion of trade and commerce, politics and military approach. Islam in the process of expansion, uses both politics and military force to win converts to the faith.

The expansion of Islam to North Africa, recruited local Arab population who embarked on warfare in the capture of North African states like Egypt and the Maghreb. In Egypt for instance, the Islamic capture destroyed one of the best centres of learning in the Ancient world, the library at Alexandria. In the Arab world, two dynasties of Arab empire, the Abbassid and the Omani used military force in establishing these Islamic empires. The use of military force was critical and central to the expansion as well as consolidation of these early Islamic empires in North Africa and the Middle East. It is in the same way that the ottoman turks, an Islamic empire succeeded in the capture and destruction of the Byzantine empire, the Eastern half of the Roman Catholic Church with its headquarters at Constantinople. The fall of Constantine marked the end of the Eastern half of the Roman empire which had flourish for over one thousand years.

In Eastern Europe, the Ottoman Empire made incursion into the Balkan states, coming short of taking over Spain and Austria in the fourteen century. O'tserakera and Uji pointed out that

For over one thousand years, Islam has battled western civilization with the aim of Islamizing the entire world. The battle between Islam and Christianity dates back to the time of the Ottoman empire, it could also be liken to a clash of civilization.

Andrew Gamble, stated that, "to the Islamic world, western civilization is the same as Christian civilization. This is a wrong conceptualization of western civilization to which, although to some extent, adopted Christian values, but yet radically different from Christianity. To Islamic militant, an attack on the Christian church is attack against western civilization.

The conflict between herdsmen and rural farmers dates back to the biblical times as demonstrated by several stories in the Old Testament. Some of these stories are the conflict between Cain and Abel which resulted to the killing of Abel by Cain. Cain was a farmer while Abel was a pastoralist. From the biblical story, it appears that God favoured the pastoralist and bless them, giving them dominion over rural farmers. In another story, the relationship between Esau and Jacob rotates around the contest between herdsmen and farmers. In the story, the divine blessing of God came upon the herdsmen while the farmers were relegated to servitude and slavery. The philosophical interpretation of these stories show that, God has ordained herdsmen as masters over farmers and thus the conflict between the two. The hamitic hypothesis suggest that, the origins of slavery originates in this context whereby, the fairer skin races were ordained as master of the darker skin races. This is again seen in the story of Noah and his three children where the children of the Canaanites were cursed to be the servant of their junior brothers.

In world history, the origin of modern terrorism dates back to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. At first, the Jewish population, through the Zionist movement employed terrorism against British targets in Palestine as a strategy of gaining independence and self determination. Britain gave in to Zionist terror and granted the state of Israel in 1948. In Ireland also, the protestants employed terrorism against British domination of Ireland. This also produce results where by in Northern Ireland, Britain allowed relative autonomy for the independence of the Irish republic.

In the Middle East, the emergence of terrorist organizations like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hezbollah, Hamas and several others dates back to the period after the First World War of 1914-18, which witnessed European imperialism

designed to control and exploit the oil resources of the Middle East. The conflict between Arab nations and Western Europe reached a climax with the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948. Some of these terrorist groups, which initially were nationalist groups, adopted military tactics such as suicide bombings in destroying western targets as a way of protest. This militant struggle where also aimed at the liquidation of the state of Israel. At the end of the second world war of 1945, the United States of America became the major imperial force that gave legitimacy to the state of Israel and as well as the major exploiter of oil resources in the Middle East. The United States played a divide and rule tactics pitching one Arab state against the other.

The United States divide and rule imperialism resulted into the conflict between Iran and Iraq. In 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini launched a revolution from France which toppled the shah of Iran. The revolution based on the principle of the Mahdi, enthroned the Islamic state based on the principles of the Sharia. These mark the beginning of the ISIS or Islamic states in modern Islamic history. The Islamic revolution became an inspiration for several Islamic nations including Afghanistan. In a similar way, the Taliban, a militant Islamic group, invented by the Central Intelligence of America, was employed to defeat soviet imperialism in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the CIA recruited, trained and equipped Osman Bin Laden as a covert officer to destroy Afghanistan and other target in the Middle East. The backlash of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Bin Laden escalated into the emergence of several terrorist groups in recent history like the Alqdaa. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 with the attending consequences of the collapse of states like Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq has contributed immensely to the proliferation of several terrorist groups in West Africa and especially the Boko Haram.

Herdsmen Terrorism in central Nigeria

The origin and the spread of Islam to Nigeria predates the colonial era going back to as far back the eleventh century AD when Islam from the North African states expanded into the Western Sudan, in states such as the Hausa states in Kenem Bornu. For the Christian faith, it was during the colonial era, beginning with the era of the Trans Atlantic slave trade that Christianity began to spread to the coastal seas of the Niger Delta. In Central Nigeria, among ethnic groups like the Tiv, Idoma, Birom, Egon, Alago, etc it was during the colonial period that Christianity made inroads into this area. It is important to note, that before British colonialism by the 20th century, these Central Nigerian people were not Islamic states nor converted to Islam. Rather, the declaration of the Northern Protectorate, brought all these central Nigerian people under the Sokoto caliphate. These marked the beginning of the designs of the caliphate to Islamize the Central Nigerian people.

As far back as the 1960s, after the independence of Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello made an important declaration that has far reaching implications on the expansionism of Islam in Central Nigeria and even the southern parts of Nigeria.

The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Uthman Dan Fodio, we must ruthlessly prevent a change in power, we use the minorities in the north as willing tools and the south as conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over their

future” Ahmadu Bello (The Parrot October, 12, 1960,
The Tribune, November 13th, 2003.

What ever this statement means, one thing is certain, that the Fulani Islamic class of the north had an imperial interest in the spread of Islam and re-colonization of the central people of Nigeria. This imperial ambition marked the beginning of the process of the spread of conflict between herdsmen and rural farmers in central Nigeria. Perhaps, the Sir Ahmadu Bello statement was an accident of the tongue but this archival source reveals something about herdsmen imperialism in central Nigeria;

The Hausa/Fulani has no ideals, no ambitions save such as sensual in character. He is a fatalist, spend thrift and a gambler. He is a gravely immoral and is seriously diseased that he is a menace to any community to which he seeks to attach seeks to attach himself. (Lord Lugard to Walter H. Lang 25/9/1918).

This archival source reveals the nature and character of the Fulani in terms of relations with local communities where they settled side by side with locals. From the beginning of the herdsmen expansionism, local communities that received herdsmen became the object of terror and violence. To some extent, what is happening in central Nigeria today validates this archival source which is as old as one hundred years. In other words, Lord Lugard saw the communal conflicts in central Nigeria involving the imperialism of Fulani herdsmen as back as one hundred years ago.

In 1989, General Ibrahim Babagida forcefully conscripted Nigeria into the organization of Islamic countries (OIC). In the Abuja conference that was held of Islamic nations, the following declaration was reached:

1. To eliminate and eradicate all non Muslim population in Nigeria.
2. To ensure that all strategic position in public and private sector are occupied by Muslim only.
3. To ensured that Christianity is eradicated in Nigeria.

Further more, the Federal Constitution of 1999 recognizes Islam as the official religion of Nigeria. This is because, the constitution admits Sharia, the Muslim law, as the fundamental law of the state. The Sharia comes along with structures such as; the Sharia courts, police, as well as the grand khadis. This is conflicting since it makes Nigeria adopt a dual ideology. This conflict is often seem in the implementation of political and religious policies in Nigeria. It is the bases upon which Islam has achieved the political expansionism in Nigeria.

The clashes or violent conflict between herdsmen of Fulani extraction and rural communities in central Nigeria dates back to the era of General Ibrahim Babagida who forced Nigeria into the organization of Islamic countries in 1989. Since then, herdsmen terrorism against rural communities began in the central states of Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue and Kogi states. In all these states, the rural communities came under the invasion and destructive force of herdsmen who adopted the tactics and mercenaries of terrorist organizations like the Boko Haram to destroy lives and properties in central Nigeria. According to statistics, the total number of lives lost in this conflict from 1990 to 2015 rises up to a million people. The destruction of lives, goods and services within the same period is put at over ten billion naira. The objective of this attacks of the herdsmen is to destroy the economic backbone of the central Nigerian people thereby dislocating them, reducing them into a servile class subservient to the control and domination of the Fulani

ruling class from the north. The attending consequences of the economic destruction has been a severe food crisis that has emerged in central Nigeria since the 1990s.

Another structure that has been used to further the expansion of herdsmen into central Nigeria is the policy of grazing reserves. This policy, as far back as the 1960s ensured that land was taken from the rural communities by the federal government and given to herdsmen to occupy. This was and has been a deliberate political policy aimed at facilitating the expansion of Islam in central Nigeria. This policy together with the Abuja declaration are clear designs of the intent to ensure that Nigerian becomes an Islamic state.

The impact of the herdsmen Fulani terrorism on central Nigeria communities is clear. The following statistics shows that over three hundred parishes of the Catholic faith had been involved over time, some have suffered destruction with members ended up in displacement camps. This is certainly an agenda to check the growth of Christianity or to destroy as well as create a food security crisis in central Nigeria. This will result to a situation whereby vast population will live on begging like the Almajerries of the north where begging has been institutionalized. The Islamic agenda is that of total political control whereby they will preside over the destiny and future of non Muslim population of central Nigeria. According to an Islamic Militant, Ishaku Abdul'rahaman Mohammed converted to the Christian faith:

Dear Nigerian Christians, if you saw my first letter you would have known that I used to be a Muslim but now a Christian. I have been in hiding because, anyone born a Muslim and convert to Christianity has a death sentence on his head. It is even worse now that they know I have decided to reveal their hidden agenda to the Nigerian Christians... By 1914, the Ottomans of Turkey began a propaganda that presented the Armenian Christians as a security threat. So what did they do? In 1915 they retried all Christians from the Turkish army. Once they disarmed they started killing the Christians. This is how Turkey became almost one hundred percent Muslim country. For those who do not know. Remember the seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation 1 – 3? All those churches were located in today's Turkey. Islam has wiped out Christianity from Turkey. This was the exact model that Hitler used in Germany to wipe out six million Jews. This was Yar'Adua's plan when he gave the militants amnesty. Had he lived longer the amnesty would have been stopped. Buhari actually thought that that militants had fully disarmed hence he stopped the amnesty. I guess Jonathan, by the leading of the Lord empowered them even more militarily before he left.

The summary of the letter by Ishaku is that the strategy of Islamic expansionism is often subtle using both political and military might. What they often use and exploit is the old adage that "war is deception". And that when you say "peace, then a sudden destruction and conquest"

The Challenge of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church headed by the Pope in the Vatican has come under the increasing attack of the ISIS or Islamic state in recent years. The responses of the Catholic Church in combating terrorism in all its ramification has been diverse, a lesson from which the church can adopt in combating the herdsmen terrorism in Nigeria.

The Pope adopted the tools of diplomacy, what is known as “PAPAL” diplomacy in engaging states and presidents across the world as to how best to combat the rising horrors of Islamic terrorism. To achieve this goal, the Pope has traveled widely to several countries of the world, especially the United States and her European allies as to how to make the world a better place and safe for everyone to live in. The church is conscious of oppressed groups, displaced population and less privilege groups, often marginalized in different conflict across the world. The Pope is more concern about minority groups and rights which this minority groups are often denied by the greater majority groups. From Syria, to Libya and even Pakistan, the Pope has called out for the protection of the minority rights of smaller groups in the political and religious expression. Papal diplomacy is often combined with propaganda in the international press or media organizations to bring out to the fore the challenge ethnic minorities or religious minorities faces in the hands of oppressive regimes. The Catholic Church in Nigeria can adopt the same Papal diplomacy, step it down to the cardinals, bishops, and priests across the dioceses and parishes to ensure that political leaders at national and state levels are engaged in a dialogue to resolve or combat herdsmen terrorism. In Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Pan umbrella of all Christian faith provides a good platform for such dialogue to exist between the state and the church. If this can be utilized, it will go a long way in combating the terrors of Fulani violence in the rural areas.

The pope adopts humanitarian approach through agencies at the United Nations in extending Aids to victims of social and environmental disaster. The duty of the church is to provide charity services in terms of humanitarian Aids to victims of disasters. The church also can provide the refuge and protective shield in the protection of victims. The humanitarian agencies have a duty of reconciliation, rehabilitation and construction of victims of social and environment disasters. The Catholic Church can cue into these policies of reconciliation and rehabilitation to resuscitate the victims of crisis.

The Catholic Church has a reputation of being militant in very strenuous situations where the life of the church comes under threat of extinction. The crusades of the eleventh and thirteen centuries is one good example. The protestant- catholic wars in Ireland is another good example where the church can take up arms in self defence. Although, we do not suggest this for Nigeria, but where lives comes under threat without the protection of the state, individual have no options but to take up arms in self defence. The Catholic Church can also encourage members to be faithful unto death or to avoid disputes that can lead to religious violence or matter of doctrine and faith.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations as to the way forward in resolving the conflict of herdsmen and that of the church in central Nigeria.

1. The Catholic Church through the organs of the Cardinals, Bishops and Priest can use these organs as instruments of diplomacy in engaging dialogue with the state in Nigeria. This will promote inter-religious harmony and peaceful coexistence. At the state and local government levels, interreligious dialogue should be

provided to reconcile differences between nomadic Fulani's and Indigenous Christian population.

2. The church in Nigeria under the umbrella of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) can also provide a direct contact with the President of Nigeria as well as the National Assembly as to the need for the President to defend and protect Christians from Islamic Militant Aggression.
3. The Catholic Church should also be actively involved in providing humanitarian services to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Internally Displaced Camps across central Nigeria. The church should also participate in the process of reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstructions of displaced persons. The church can queue into these programmes together with the United Nations and other international humanitarian agencies.
4. The President of Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari, should condemn the herdsmen terrorism and as well as deploy military action against the Fulani terrorist like the Boko-haram and the Niger Delta militants
5. President Muhammadu Buhari should distance himself as the patron of Myetti Allah, an umbrella networking with the herdsmen terrorists. In Zamfara, President Buhari appeared in military uniform to condemn cattle rustling in the state. He needs to go further than that to appear in the same military uniform to wage a war against Fulani herdsmen terrorist.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church is the most powerful religious institution in the world that predates the rise of Islam and expansionism. There are allegations, though not properly substantiated, that Islam was the creation of the Catholic Church, the idea that Mohammed initially was taught by a catholic monk. In the past, the catholic church ruled over all nations of Europe and America until the 18th century when the French revolution gave independence to states in Europe thereby ending the direct Papal control over states in Europe. Despite the separation between church and state, the papacy in the Vatican still exercises tremendous influence over world leaders. The Catholic Church can use her tremendous influence and strategic position in combating terrorism in the world including that of the Fulani herdsmen terrorism in central Nigeria.

References

Pope Benedic XVI Public Declaration from the Vatican on the Rise of Islamic Militants in Europe

The British Broadcasting Corporation Documentary, August, 2016

The Parrot Newspaper 1960 Ahmadu Bello (The Parrot October, 12, 1960, The

Tribune, November 13th, 2003.

NAK/lang/ (Lord Lugard to Walter H. Lang 25/9/1918).

The Abuja Declaration of 1989

Uji and O'Tserakaa, The International Connections of Islamic Fundamentalism in Nigeria in the Twenty First Century, Global Journal of Humanities Vol. 14 Issue 4 2014

Ishaku Abdul'rahaman Mohammed, Open Letter to Nigerian Christians Part I

Uji, Wilfred, Forced Migration: Displacement of Tiv Population of Central Nigeria "International Journal of Arts and Humanities Vol. 5(2) April, 2016

Uji, Wilfred "Religious Fundamentalism Movements and Social Conflicts in Nigeria" Kaduna Journal of Historical Studies December, 2011.

Houghton, S.M "Sketches from Church History: An Illustration Account of 20 Centuries of Christ Power" BPC Consumer Books 1980

Alekpebu, Lawrence "Africa and the International Political System" Sam Bookman Publishing Ibadan 1999

Cummins, Joseph "The World's Bloodiest History: Massacre, Genocide and the scars they left on Civilizations" Quay Side Publishing Company USA 2010

Guinness Book of the 20th Century