

EVOLUTIONARY TREND OF RELIGION INSPIRED CONFLICTS AND VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: THE ISLAMIC IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

A cursory look into the history of religious conflicts and violence in Nigeria easily identifies the influence of Islamic faith and its adherents in all these. All over the world, the resurgence of Islamic violence is making negative impact. The september 9/11 terrorist attack in U.S.A. by Islamists (Alqaeda) changed the character and magnitude of Islamic terrorism and drew the attention of the world to the evil inherent in extremism. Since then violence traceable to Islamic religion has been recurring and spreading like wild fire. In Nigeria, the people have had a good dose of this Islamic motivated conflicts and violence even before september 9/11 in the U.S.A. In the case of Nigeria, it seems the religion has been so much manipulated by those perpetrating this evil probably to serve their own personal and group aggrandizement. The fact that Islamic violence seem to be skewed towards the Muslim northern part of the country provokes some thoughts and permutations on the raison d'tre of this cankerworm. This paper is set out to critically examine the evolutionary trend of religion inspired conflicts and violence in Nigeria, with special focus on the impact of Islamic faith.

INTRODUCTION

In the present day, among the numerous challenges of nation-building facing Nigeria, no one is more threatening and disturbing than the recurrent faith inspired conflicts and violence that undermine the very fabric of our national stability and solidarity.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the problem of violent conflicts with religious undertone has become cyclical with its concentration in the predominantly Muslim majority states of northern Nigeria with occasional but not too frequent spiral effects on the other parts of the country with less concentration of Muslims.

From time to time, blood bath, killing, rape, maiming, arson, destruction of lives and property have become the order of the day in most parts of Nigeria, consequent upon the misinterpretation, misapplication and misunderstanding of religious principles and ideology. The radicalization of Islamic faith in Nigeria in the recent decades has sowed the seed of fatal fate on the socio-political and economic development of the nation. The behavior of Islamic radicals in Nigeria since the 1980s abhors tolerance, pluralism, dialogue, free speech, secularism, common sense and peaceful co-existence.

Islam is fundamentally a religion of peace as we understand, but in the last century and present twenty first century, the world has witnessed violent Islamic reactions globally, which manifestly links and associates the religion with terrorism because of the manner ordinary and common social and political issues are given religious colouration and mis-interpretation, thereby painting the picture of Islam as a religion of the sword.

In other parts of the world, from Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mali, Niger, Chad, Saudi Arabia, Syria including Nigeria, it is the story of disturbing and unending conflicts, violence and acts of terrorism. Even in Europe and United States of America, the spiral effect of this terrorism has been recurrent irrespective of the fact that these areas have little of no Islamic influence and civilization.

The actions of this minority radicals and fundamentalists hibernating within the Islamic faith have made the religion the most vilified, criticized, condemned, misconceived and misperceived of all revealed religions in the world. In Nigeria and among majority of Nigerians, the perception and story remain the same, thereby provoking the debate on the reasons, causes and origin of this cankerworm.

Resurgence of Islamic Induced Violence and Conflicts In Nigeria

If one may ask, why is there resurgence of violence and conflicts in Nigeria linked to Islam? Is Nigeria the only country in Africa with significant Muslim population? Why is Islamic violence more pronounced in Nigeria than even in Islamic theocratic states of the world? Is it possible to have a Nigeria without religious violence? Can Muslims co-exist and tolerate other faiths and not resort to violence even amidst provocation like in other religions? In answering the above questions it is appropriate to expose those factors responsible for predisposing Muslims to incessant violence and conflicts.

Explanation of the reasons for religious conflicts and violence in Nigeria cannot be divorced from some of the popularly identified factors which give rise to conflicts. However, in the case of religion induced conflicts, many factors such as religious dogmatism, bigotry, obsession, charlatanism, compulsion, intolerance, forceful imposition of faith or conversion, holier-than-thou attitude, superiority claim, ignorance among others combine as motivators of this cankerworm.

According to Ngare (2012),

Anyone who begins to see his religion as a special gift to creation and therefore the centre of human history, soon slips into religious dictatorship when he wants everyone to think like him, speak like him, live like him, sleep like him and so on.

Such stereotyped belief system which downgrade or degrades other religions while applauding one's own as truth, divine and sacrosanct serve as tonic to conflicts. Intolerance of other peoples faith is one of the most pronounced problems inherent in many Muslims. Muslims do not tolerate any form of criticism of their faith even when they are wrong. Some people are often killed or have fatwa imposed on them for renouncing their faith in Islam and joining another faith. It is easier for a male Muslim to marry a female Christian than a Christian male to marry a female Muslim. Those who have been involved in the later are most times threatened or killed. Many people have been killed for insulting Islam, but, Muslims can insult or ridicule other religions without being killed by anyone. The imposition of Sharia legal code in some states of the north which are not one hundred percent Muslims contrary to the secularity of Nigeria as provided in the 1999 constitution as amended is a clear example of intolerance of other people's rights.

Some religions do not separate or distinguish between state and religious matters. Islamic societies up to this twenty first century still abhors secularization of society. This is the origin of many Islamic theocratic states in the World such as Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Brunei etc. Even among those who permit little tolerance and pluralism such as Egypt, Libya, U.A.E., Yemen, Iraq, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Malaysia, Indonesia etc, the application of Sharia law is supreme.

The same mind-set is responsible for the several attempts in countries with significant Islamic adherents like ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Taliban in Afghanistan, Alqaeda in Arabian Peninsula, Islamic Magreb in North Africa and Boko Haram in Nigeria to carve out political caliphates/kingdoms for themselves or try to impose their own faith on those living within their areas of influence. As Hassan (2009) puts it, *Islamic radicals also believe that Islam is not simply an ideological alternative for Muslim societies, but a theological and political imperative. Because it is Allah's command, implementation must be immediate, not gradual, and the obligation to implement is incumbent on all true Muslims. Therefore, who hesitates, remain apolitical, or resist-individuals and governments are – no longer to be regarded as Muslims. They are atheists or unbelievers, enemies of Allah, against who all true Muslims must wage holy war in the form of Jihad.*

In Nigeria also, the radicalization of Islam, conflicts and violence are traceable to ethno-political and social factors, as well as ignorance. Ignorance and misinterpretation of the prescription of Islamic religion constitute the greatest problem facing Nigerian Muslims. This, perhaps, is more pronounced in northern part of the country which for too long remained volatile and the hot-bed of conflicts. The fact that such conflicts and violence hardly occur in Yoruba land where there are more educated and informed Muslims gives credence to this assertion. The rare cases of Islamic violence in Yoruba land such as the one that occurred in Shagamu in 1999 is linked to the misguided actions of northern Muslims living in their midst. The predominantly Muslim part of northern Nigeria is the least educated area of Nigeria with illiteracy rate of more than 75%. Mohammed Yusuf, the late leader of Boko-Haram could not communicate in English Language or Pidgin English. How then could such a person understand the prescriptions of the faith he was propagating?

From the ethnic perspective, a reflection on the history of this problem shows that the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and other Muslim majority groups in northern Nigeria see themselves as the only true Muslims in Nigeria and rarely recognize the Yoruba and other Western Nigerian Muslims who are more knowledgeable and better educated in Islamic theology as true Muslims. From the political perspective, it

is clear that from the pre-independence period of Nigeria’s political history, northern Nigerian Muslims have never controlled their unquenchable appetite for political power. Because Islam is seen as a way of life, most Muslims have taken this to mean political influence and domination of others. For instance, Nigeria independence was delayed because the north (dominated by northern Muslims) was not prepared in 1956. In the recent years, Sokoto State which claims to be the seat of the caliphate had its motto and slogan as “born-to-rule”. This is not only provocative but logically deficient. Such mind-set and predisposition can create atmosphere of arrogance and domination by one group over the other which may be resisted with violence. Worse still, there are even some Muslims who do not believe that non-Muslims can lead them politically. This is found in the Muslim majority parts of Nigeria, but unknown in the western Nigeria, another enclave for a good number of Muslims.

The social aspect of this problem though linked to ignorance earlier highlighted is traceable to the grossly low level of education among the Muslims of northern Nigeria. Up till today, many Muslims in the north value Islamic education more than western education. In many areas, modernity and westernization are anathema and detested. A case in point is the current Boko Haram insurgency which not only wants to establish an Islamic State in northern Nigeria, but believes that both western education and westernization are evil. It may be surprising to know that even in this 21st century, a particular Local Government (Kaga) in Borno State can only boast of one secondary school in its territory at Benesheik, the headquarters. This is through of many local governments in the Northern Nigeria

Chronicle of Islamic Influenced Crisis in Nigeria

Since Nigeria’s political evolutionary process, there have been litany of violence and outbursts in the country, mainly in northern Nigeria. These incidences whether politically, socially or ethnically induced have always had religious infiltration. A proof of this is the fact that when any disturbance or violence is taking place in the Muslim north, there is often a resonating shouts of “Alahu Akbba”, a common Arabic phrase in Islam which means “God is great”.

For this reason, Islam has often been associated with violence. Calling or beckoning on God while killing a fellow human being is ironical. According to Ego (2012), in Nigeria, and many other places, religious violence has been hugely associated with Islam. Islam in northern Nigeria in general has gone through episodes of radicalization or violent outburst (Ezeani and Chilaka, 2013).

From 1980 till date there have been so many uprisings in the country especially in the north rooted in Islamic fundamentalism. This has become a source of worry to many observers. Among these uprisings include those tabulated below:

S/N	NAME/NATURE/TYPE	THEATRE/PLACE OF EVENT	DATE
1.	Maitasine	Maiduguri, Yola, Jimeta, Gombe, Bulunkuta etc.	1980s
2.	Destruction of Christian properties because of church construction in Kano Muslim Heartland.	Kano	1982
3.	Religious Riots	Kafunchan, Zaria, Kaduna	1987
4.	Religious Riots	Kano	1990
5.	Religious Riots	Bauchi	1991
6.	Religious Riots	Kano, Katsina	1982
7.	Religious Riots	Kaduna	1999
8.	Religious Riots	Zangon Kataf	1992
9.	Tafawa-Balewa Clashes	Tafawa Balewa	1991, 1995
10.	Religious Violence in Jos	Jos	2001
11.	Religious Violence	Abuja, Bauchi, Kaduna	2002
12.	Religious Violence	Warri, Jos, Kaduna	2003
13.	Religious Violence	Wase Plateau State	2004
14.	Religious Violence	Yelwa, Sokoto	2005
15.	Religious Violence	Maiduguri, Bauchi, Abuja, Jos, Katsina, Onitsha, Enugu, Dutse	2006
16.	Boko Haram Fundamentalism/ Terrorism	Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Kano, Niger, Abuja, Taraba, Sokoto, Katsina, Kogi	2009 - Date

According to Isaacs (2003) an estimated 10,000 lives were lost in religious violence in Nigeria between 1999 and 2003. Again, it is estimated that between September 2001 and 2004, the sectarian violence between the Muslim and Christian groups in Plateau State took the lives of about 53,787 people (Onuoha, 2011:7).

The statistics presented here is by no means exhaustive as there are numerous outbursts, revolts and violence which occur spontaneously in many parts of northern Nigeria which are sometimes undocumented but attracted public outcry.

The above notwithstanding, there are more disturbing threats of religious extremism which have manifested in the Islamic enclave of northern Nigeria. These groups have continued to flourish and have ultimate objective of imposing or establishing Islamic state or caliphate in Nigeria. Among them are the Islamic movement of Nigeria led by Sheik Ibrahim El-Zakzakky; Boko Haram founded by Mohammed Yusuf; Kala-Kato led by Malam Badamasi; Ahamadiya led by Al-Gulan; Darul Islam led by Aminu Bashir Abdulahi; Darika Shi'a Salafiya led by late Abubakar Gunmi; Khadiriya led by Nasir Kabara; Tijianiya led by Isiaku Rabi; Tariqqa Group led by Dahiru Bauchi etc.

In all these, none has shaken the fabric and sovereignty of Nigeria like the phenomenal Boko Haram which declared an Islamic Caliphate in parts of north-east Nigeria with the imposition of strict Sharia law in their areas of control. Since 2009, the Boko Haram violence has killed more than 20,000 Nigerians. At first, they concentrated their attacks on Christians and Churches, but later turned their swords on any person or object, Christian, Muslim, Churches, Mosques, animals, property and state institutions. Boko Haram and ISIS rank as the two most dangerous Islamic terrorist groups in the world.

Boko Haram Terrorism

Boko Haram terrorism (insurgency) deserves a special attention in any discussion of religious violence and conflict in Nigeria. Indeed, there have been numerous religious violence with Islamic undertone, but the case of Boko Haram strikes as an extraordinary one in Nigeria because of their operational tactics, strategy, targets, destruction, fanaticism and world view. As stated earlier, Boko Haram competes with ISIS for first position as the most dangerous and deadliest Islamic extremists in the world.

The real name of Boko Haram is the **Group of Al-Sunna for preaching and Jihad** (Ezeani and Chilaka, 2013). This is the English translation of **Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad**. Because the group by its operational tactics is opposed to western civilization, it was nicknamed Boko Haram by the people of Borno State where its activities started. Boko Haram means, "Western Education is forbidden" and the group is tacitly against western education. To them western education is sin.

According to them, they are a people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and Jihad (Jama'atu Ahlisunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad). Boko Haram is committed to the destruction of constitutional laws, democracy and other institutions of the state of Nigeria, hence their mission is to clean the Nigerian system polluted by Western education and uphold Sharia all over the country. Since 2009, when Boko Haram violent operation started, tens of thousands of people have been killed, millions of people displaced while the group declared caliphate in their areas of control in Borno State.

However, the task here is not to expose the structure, operation, content and character of Boko Haram, but to show how Islamic fundamentalism and turbulence has inflicted unquantifiable damage to the fabric of Nigeria. The violent activities of Muslims of northern Nigeria have somehow become theatrical and entrenched that every socio-economic and political activity and engagement is viewed from the negative interpretation of Islam. Today, political violence, cultural clashes, social disagreements, dissenting views and public policies have been given Islamic colouration, leading to recurrent violent conflicts in the north. The death toll of the post-election violence in northern Nigeria in 2011 was infiltrated and influenced by Islamic extremism. More than one thousand people died as a result of the violence.

During President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration the World Beauty Contest which was billed to take place in Nigeria was cancelled because of the threat of violence by Muslims of dire consequence if the competition was staged on Nigerian soil. Some Nigerians have been crudely beheaded by irate Muslims on flimsy accusation of insulting Islam. This despicable act has taken place in Sokoto with the beheading of one **Gideon Akaluka** and severally in Kano with the latest being the beheading of a 74 year old woman, **Mrs. Bridget Agbahime** from Imo State.

Salmon Rushdie wrote a book titled, **Satanic Verses**. He was neither a Nigerian nor wrote about Nigeria in his book, yet, when the Iranian government imposed **Fatwa** on him, the Muslims in Kano reacted by unleashing Mayhem on non-Muslims, killing and maiming them. One cannot establish any link between

what happened in far away United Kingdom where Salmon Rushdie is taking refuge and Nigeria, and the reason for killing innocent Nigerians.

Nigeria is not a predominantly Muslim nation. In fact, less than 50% of Nigerians are Muslims. The frequency of Islamic religious violence is so much that most known Islamic nations are more peaceful and restrained than Nigerian Muslims as the harbinger of insurgency, violence and terrorism linked to Islamic faith.

In African continent, Muslim population predominate in some countries and quite significant in others, yet, one rarely can hear of religious violence in these countries. Beyond Africa, one may be surprised to observe that violent uprising in the name of Islam is more frequent in Nigeria than the Arab Middle-East nations where the religion originated and civilized.

Recently, the killing of more than 300 members of Shiite sect in Kaduna although condemnable, nearly set Nigeria and Iran on diplomatic face-off. The fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran values members of Shiite who are affiliated to their sect (brand) of Islam more than the security of Nigeria is a source of worry. This group has been carrying its activities in northern Nigeria, sometimes to the contempt of the laws of the Nigerian State. It was even claimed that their members attacked the convoy of the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff which led to the Army reprisal attack that took the lives of many Shiites.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The degree of violent extremism all over the world today is alarming. Some of these are political, social, economic, ethnic, cultural and religious. However, of all types of extremism, none has more devastating effects than religious extremism. The most dangerous societies in the world today are those under the siege of violent religious extremism. The condition of life in the ISIS controlled enclaves in Syria and Iraq and the Boko Haram in Nigeria are perhaps the most horrendous in the world. The terror, horror, destruction and obscurity in these areas cannot compare with any other in the modern world. The same is applicable to the Taliban controlled parts of Afghanistan or the Al-shabaab dominated areas of Somali. All these are the results of activities of the misguided Islamic extremists.

Nigeria has for too long been tormented and traumatized by the resurgent religious violence perpetrated mainly by those who give perverted interpretation of Islam to achieve their own motives. Some analysts have blamed this extremism on the clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996), but the question is, why is such absent in some plural civilizations and present in others? Again, is Nigeria the only nation in Africa with different religions.

While Huntingtons observation may contain some elements of truth, in the case of Nigeria it goes beyond that. To arrest the recurrent Islamic violence in Nigeria, some fundamental problems must be tackled expeditiously. These include: eradication or reduction of extreme poverty, massive compulsory education in the north, upholding the secularity of Nigeria, criminalization of all forms of religious intolerance, stoppage of government sponsorship of religious pilgrimages, separation of politics and religion and execution of anyone who kills in the name of any religion.

Religious preachers who preach and foment violence and extremism in their places of worship should be arrested and prosecuted. In fact sermons given in the mosques and churches or elsewhere should be recorded by security operatives and those who deviate from the scriptural prescriptions, legal and societal norms reprimanded.

In addition, Muslims from northern Nigeria should undergo a study of their counterparts in Yoruba land of western Nigeria to ascertain why they have co-existed with non-Muslims for centuries without outbursts or conflicts. They have to emulate the western faithful disposition to peace, tolerance and moderation.

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