

**RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA:
A HISTORICAL SURVEY
FROM 1980 - 2009**

M. Fehintola Akangbe

Introduction

The harrowing, turbulent and traumatic life experiences that we went through in this part of the globe have been associated with the coming and intervention of colonialism, Christianity and other Western influences. The social and administrative dislocations have always been laid at the footsteps of the outsiders. Nothing adverse, it appeared, had been our lot before the advent of these aliens. At present religious crises or ethno-religious crises have plagued us like a cankerworm and malignant cancer. Several policies from the mundane to the sacred have been offered as possible solutions to the issue. But the results have been both meager and negligible. In the present inquiry I should like us to consider what the whole thing meant from the beginning, what it is not and what to do to rid ourselves, possibly of this enigma.

The Beginnings

The intermittent wars that dotted the landscape of our nations' before the advent of the West in our midst is a clear pointer that all was not well with us. The Fulani trader also did not come to meet the land free of any activities. Thus in 1710 there was what the Dutch traders were confronted with in Warri which they described later as "obstinate idolatrous and given to witchcraft and all sorts of abominable vices."² We may not know exactly what the European Dutch means by "vices," but it is certain that

what his eyes saw was not virtue in as much as it does not tally with his own way of life. A system of beliefs and worship was prevalent in the land and administrative system of the people did not mean much to him.

When Ademoyega confidently remarks that the coming of the British to Nigeria in 1861 "met the people of the South totally free," he may not be correct.³ In fact he goes on to add that the people were free to the extent of "observing and regulating their own monarchies and institutions." In other words for Ademoyega religion was not much of a problem but the system of government. While we should not jettison the problem of religion as our Dutch observer had done, perhaps our starting point should be administration in agreement with Ademoyega.

Administratively each of these monarchs would do anything at his disposal to maintain a firm grip on his domain not only to protect his subjects but also the land for farming. Thus Oyo empire was only to stay for a while before the wars in Yoruba nation began. There were series of these wars such the Ijaye war, Kuriji war, Ogedengbe and the Ijesa wars and the like. From about 1825 to 1830, "internecine wars therefore continued to plague the Yoruba throughout the nineteenth century."⁴ The Ifes and Ijebus did not only form an alliance to confront the invading forces of the Fulani armies from Ilorin but also joined forces and "destroyed Egba towns, settling on their land and pushing the Egba people further south still."⁵

Sodeke, the monarch of the Egba then, of course, would not allow the aggression to lie low. With forces pressing closer to him, he in turn involved the Egbados and the Awori people "insisting

that the rulers should be peoples favourable to the Egba, people who would welcome them, give them land to farm and protect their traders on their way to and from the coast."⁶ Thus, we may note a few things at this point. First we may note that the crises among the people was not as a result for a crave for expansion. Rather it was for a firm control of their political and economic sphere. Two, the wars were staged to ensure that the spirit of domination was not allowed in each of the territories. Religion was therefore not the issue. Adherents of different traditional religious systems lived together at peace with each other under the same roof and within the society at large.

Attempt to unseat traditional rulers were common phenomena also in the North of the Niger. Thus before Islam came there were independent states or nations, as observed earlier, existing among the Hausa, Birom, Anga, Nupe, Tiv and the like in the region. We should note, however, that among these independent states, notably Daura, Gobir, Kano, Kastina, Zaria failed to unite ever as Hausa States for their common good. Kastina and Gobir States, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were sharp rivals for the caravan trade of Western Hausa land. Kastina was also known to have engaged in a war against Kano.⁷

The internecine wars were thus similar to those of the Yoruba. But an end came to that with the coming of Usman Dan Fodio and his revolution. He did not only unseat traditional rulers of the people he also imposed members of his own clan Fulani as rulers and styled them Emir. The Northern monarchial systems as those of the Yoruba were demolished and replaced with "Islamic oriented, but feudalistic reulership."⁸ Thus the people were

deprived of their farm lands. A percentage of their food crops, cattle and other products were, as a matter of must, released to the Village Head, District Head and the Emir as political homage. But unlike in the South among the Yoruba, religion was an issue in the North. Ajayi paints the picture more clearly "... with Usman Dan Fodio's jihad in the Hausa states there was a formal attempt to convert Islam from the level of personal beliefs to one of communal law, an attempt to shake off the remnants of traditional customs and to create a theocratic empire where Islamic laws and practices would prevail."⁹ No wonder there were pockets of stiff resistance from the indigenous nation states. They were not ready to part from that gods and goddesses, neither did they want their system of government to be tampered with. These are representations of other parts of the country,

But that was the least the invaders would tolerate. It was a matter of do or die. The struggle then was not to lose the identity of the nation states and preservation of the systems of administration. In this connection, from the intrusion of Usman Dan Fodio in Northern Nigeria to the advent of Christian missionaries in West Africa in 1886 the fall of Nigeria¹⁰ began in earnest. Hence things fell apart. From 1860 when Lagos was annexed to 1914 of Lugard's amalgamation, to the activities of nationalists, the quest for self-determination, independence in 1960, the political crises of 1962, the first and second military coups-de tat, the civil war, the second and third republics, Nigeria has been looking for what it did not have in the first place, i.e National Identity. It may take more years before we come to a point where we as different nations would come to realize that indeed we can retain our individual nation states within a larger nation state and be at peace with one another.¹¹ Meanwhile it does

not appear that our political leaders are ready for that. They are using all means to retain and perpetuate themselves in power employing not only politics now, but also ethnicism (racism?) and religion. Here then is where we found ourselves still struggling for survival.

Religious Crises in Nigeria

Solarin's opinion of religion in the Nigerian nation before the 1980s as a non-issue could not be completely correct. He confesses: "If anybody (had) told me 20 years ago that religion would become an issue in Nigeria, I would have said Nonsense! Muslims and Christians have lived together for years: husbands being Christians, wives being Muslims or the other way round; brothers ... one muslim the other Christian."¹² Solarin's "20 years ago" was when the nation was coming out of a 30 month needless and senseless civil war (May 1967 January 1970). In spite of Gowon's post-war economic and political programmes of Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation¹³ on the administrative canvas, religion was becoming tenuous between Christians and muslims so much so that it was threatening to lead the nation into the brink of bloodshed and collapse.

That the two religious preach peace has become a mere statement devoid of honest meaning and commitment. The earliest adherents of both Christianity and Islam soon discovered that they were not at peace with their own kith and kin.¹⁴ Christians particularly soon discovered that their own people did not only expose them to public ridicule alone but in addition they were persecuted to no end. A few measures and elements of persecution inflicted on the people are recorded as follows by McKenzie: "bans and prohibitions with regard to church and

school attendance, threatening behaviour and demonstrations, arrest, binding and placing in stocks, detention, beating and flogging, fines and imprisonment, sequestration, confiscation and destruction of property, torture, threatened and attempted execution, and lastly, in a few cases, martyrdom.¹⁵ As it was with Christians so it was with Muslims since the two religions are alien to the people just as their imported system of administration.

But as years rolled by and the existence of Christianity and Islam became a reality to reckon with the converts were allowed to practice in as much as their faith would not change that economic, political and religious systems. New systems of education and health care introduced by Christianity particularly made the people to settle with it. After all it has changed their social status and well being.

The new order which we now experience was not helped by some of our first Republic leaders who belong to the two religions. It was recorded that while Chief Obafemi Awolowo, was concerned in the West about the welfare of Muslims who were on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, and thereby established for them the first Pilgrims Welfare Board in Nigeria as a Christian,¹⁶ his counterpart in the North was much more concerned about "evangelism" of his own religion. Sir Abubakar Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of the Northern Region was reported to have stated in the early life of the nation that he would not be at peace until the Qur'an is dipped in the Atlantic Ocean and that "the blood of religion is thicker than the water of ethnicity."¹⁷ Of course Christians reacted and the stage was thus set for actions.

The degree to which that dream came true is a matter for a future inquiry. Nonetheless it is clear that the seed had been firmly planted. Its germination, growth and development of that imaginary tree were left in the hands of later followers either for good or bad. That leads us to the genesis and the birth of the monstrous baby in our hands which we are now nursing. Ilori gives a brief history of how it all began. According to him Nigeria only managed to be free from religious fanaticism for about twenty years after her independence. The menace surfaced in Kano in the early 1980s.

The mastermind of the first disturbance is called Muhammadu Marwa, alias Maitatsine. Maitatsine was Camerounian from the Kotok ethnic group. By the time he established his "kingdom" in Kano the government of the day was either unaware or unmindful of it. "He came to the notice of Nigeria authorities in 1962 when he was arrested."¹⁸ As usual he was tried, convicted and sentenced. He was imprisoned for three months after which he was deported to Cameroon. But he remained undaunted and after Muhammadu Sanusi, the Emir was deported he returned to Nigeria with full force.

He did not this time around become a law to himself alone he had also built a fanatical band of disciples running to about a thousand in 1973. He occupied a whole quarters in the metropolis and converted the schools and markets in the place into his camps. By December 1980 Maitatsine attacked the city of Kano defying a two-week ultimatum of the government of Abubakar Rimi to vacate the place and dismantle his campus. Ilori describes the attack as "grave and savage."¹⁹ When the dust of the attack settled and the cloud clear 177 had died, and whopping sum of N8 million

was paid by the government to the victims of the fanaticism. Maitatsine was killed in the crisis but he left uncountable number of fanatical lieutenants behind.

About two years after the Kano riots, Maitatsine's spirit surfaced again around Maiduguri, Borno State and in Kaduna. That was in 1982 and the nation lost about 400 lives and property worth about N3 million was destroyed. In 1984 the fanatics struck again in Jimeta in then Gongola State. Some 763 people were killed and 5,913 others displaced. In 1983 they struck again in Gombe, then in Bauchi State. Idiagbon, second in command to Muhammadu Buhari was so disturbed that he could not hide his feeling again as he observed: "a new group of Iranian and Lebanese Mullahs fundamentalist and revolutionary doctrines to corrupt Nigeria Islamic culture".²⁰ On April 26, 1985 precisely the fanatics struck again and their operation which lasted about ten hours in Gombe city left about 400 people dead.

It is disturbing to note that in the process the Police that had been invited to go and nib the problem in the bud became a target also. In the end they lost among other few arms and ammunition to the fanatics. These include 11 rifles, 7,231 rounds of ammunition, 68 smoke cartridges, 5 glass grenades and 6 rifles magazines.²¹ It is worth noting that the South couldn't be left out.²² But what would have been the bloodiest of them all was averted in Lagos on April 10, 1985. The men and officers of the 9th Mechanized Brigade, Ikeja were mobilized to confront the fanatics, and after the operation about 6,000 of the rioters had been rounded up in different hiding locations in Apapa, Lagos.

While Kano, Kaduna, and Kastina appear to be worst hit in the

1980-1990s²³ mention must be made of attacks on places of worship in Kano and Zaria where Chapels were burnt down and several churches set ablaze. The Chapel of Resurrection of the University of Ibadan was torched on May 5, 1986, and attempt to bring the cross down was made but failed. At the end of the crises in Kaduna and its environs the following statistical data was recorded:²⁴

Tale of Terror

Persons Killed	- - - -	25
Persons Injured	- - - -	61
Persons Arrested	- - - -	600

Property Damaged

Numbers of Churches Destroyed	- - - -	40
Numbers of Mosques Destroyed	- - - -	3
Numbers of Private Houses Destroyed	- - - -	46
Numbers of Vehicles Destroyed	- - - -	19
Numbers of Hotels Destroyed	- - - -	30
Numbers of Shops, Workshop and Offices Destroyed	- - - -	9
Number of Petrol Stations Destroyed	- - - -	1
Numbers of Cattle Killed	- - - -	9

The Izalas, Shi'ites and other factions of Islam were most involved in the carnage.

In January 1986 the inevitable happened, and that shook the whole nation into its very foundation. That was when Nigeria was admitted formerly into the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Physical arrows, arms and ammunition were not this time

around bought to the battle field. But the war of words and the number of write-ups were legion.²⁵ The fight then were not in doubt of whether it was ethnic in form or religion. It was purely religion and particularly between Christians and Muslims. The most curious aspect of this episode was that the entire process was wrapped in secrecy. The delegation to Fez comprised highly placed government officers and led by Sheik Abubakar M. Gumi.

Moreover every member of the delegation was a Muslim. In addition the way and manner by which the exercise was executed were most blatant and uncharitable. For one the delegation was given a diplomatic coverage, and as such the conference gave them a red carpet reception. The officers who were involved in the planning were selective so much that even the then Minister of Foreign Affairs was kept in the dark. Every Christian Civil Servant who dared speak then at the Federal level was either called to order or was booted out of service. The OIC leading to Sharia debate and several other religions related disputes. It remains unconvincing and untenable how one religion would claim to be peaceful when indeed there was no respect accorded to other religions in the environment. It is one thing to preach peace but another entirely to behave tyrant violent. A religion of peaceful people would not in any way treat other religions shabbily as it is with the case of OIC.

The Boko Haram disturbances that rocked places like Bauchi, Borno, Yobe and the more recent Kalkato in Bauchi are events that cannot be easily forgotten. Lamenting on the issue Kuniyi-Cole remarks that, "it is now Muslims against Muslims; one sect would say, this is the Qiblah (the direction Muslims face when praying), another would say, it is a lie, you don't face that direction; least, the

unbeliever would say, we are worshipping the sun. One sect, comprising young people, the like of which Farouk Mutallab belong, would say, a praying muslim at the point of standing should fold his arms and place them on his navel, while another sect would say 'No', place your arms on the sides of the body where they belong."²⁶ This then amounts to a house divided against itself and cannot stand.²⁷

The Jos crises are not only crucial in the life of the nation at present, but also call for serious concern. It frequent occurrences (2008, 2009, 2010) tend to invoke the spirits of dipping the Qur'an into the Atlantic by Sir Ahamadu Bello and later that of Sheik Abubakar M. Gumi who was claimed to have said that "if Christians do not accept Moslems as their leaders, we have to divide the country."²⁸ The dimension the crises are taking in Jos is like that of real war. Or what does the following connote: "Like the previous ones, not less than twenty people were arrested in military uniforms, posing as security personnel and killing people at random" That is not the end "There was also an obligation that some people were imported into the state to perpetrate the dastardly act."²⁹

When the dust settled it was reported that not few personal houses, business concerns and places of worship such as churches and mosques were set on fire by the rioters who were in military uniforms and sophisticated weapons. One wonders the source of these military outfits readily made available to the youths who were engaged in the carnage and that are the most dangerous aspect of the matter. It is reported that most of the time it is these young boys (almagiri) who are being clothed, like David of the old, and thrown into the forefront of the battle. Then it is difficult

for the security people to engage in fight with the young people considered in law as minor. That their leaders follow them at the rear as commanders exhibits the level of their sinister and cruel motives. It is pertinent to ask the question at present: "Does Islam give anyone the power to snatch children from their parents and train them to become suicide bombers while the suicide doctors are protecting their own children from death?"³⁰

Whatever may have caused these crises, that of Jos notably, two issues beg for answers.³¹ One is that having set up series of committees of inquiry on the crises nationwide, and formed different Council on Religious Matters in the States and at the Federal level, governments have been able to tame the monster. Could that then be true that prominent people in politics and religion were involved in the matter? Or why have there been many arrest and no prosecution, conviction and sanction have ever taken place? The next question relates somehow to the first and it is contained in Nigerian Tribune editorial comment on 14 January, 2010. It's as follows: "The number of lives that had been wasted in the series of religious disturbances that Nigeria has witnessed in the last three decades is considerable. Not on one single occasion has the government brought the perpetrators of the serial mayhem and murder to justice."³² That is a bitter truth and serious food for thought. In the climate then what should we do? I have the following submissions for our consideration.

What To Do

In the first instance a nation of 50 years post independence ought to have come off the clutches of colonialism and foreign subjugation. Unfortunately, we tend to lay the blame at the door step of the colonial master. But he has gone for good although he

left his empire behind. Carson's words here are appropriate: "There is no doubt that Western missionaries and theologians have exercised a disproportionate and sometimes thoughtless influence in 'third world' churches; and a great deal more needs to be done to rectify the errors and wrongs. But one also senses in the current climate that rising theologians in some third world churches; and a great deal more needs to be done to rectify the errors and wrongs. But one also senses in the current climate that rising theologians in some third world situations now wish to turn the tables and make Western Churches a whipping boy."³³ What had been said of Christianity is very much applicable to Islam as well. The time is ripe to shift attention away from the foreigner and concentrate on what we are doing to one another.

Along the same line of thought the amalgamation of 1914 when all these independent nations were brought together should now be seen as a blessing rather than a curse. We can't go back and undo that. Rather we learn on how to tolerate each other now as large nations in terms of religion. It is a reality that politically Nigeria is an entity that can no longer be Balkanized. It is high time that Christians and Muslims in Nigeria see each other as belonging to the same race and learn to live together as such. As Sir Abubakar Ahmadu Bello was reported to have said to Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, it is better we recognize our differences and harmonize them for peaceful co-existence.

When poverty gets a hold of man his reaction is better imagined than experienced. Again the editorial comment as *The Nigerian Tribune* of January 13, 2010 is appropriate here: "Since the 1980s, the condition of living of the average Nigerian has fallen to miserable levels. Over 70 percent of the population lives below

poverty level. This has occurred amidst huge corruption and waste by the ruling elite. The shared feeling of powerlessness had led to the explosion of religious congregations, denominations and sects as people look to the supernatural for succor.³⁴ The government alone cannot do it syndrome should be reconsidered and the wealth in the hands of the few should be spread for equity. Once a small amount is doled out to these youths then they become *esinsin o ko iku*- the fly does not worry about death provided there is something to eat. "The privileged sponsors of religions crises in Nigeria may use the poor as cannon fodder. They do not involve their children. Though the poor and the less privileged may take risks for pecuniary reasons, by participating in religious and sectarian riots, it is unlikely they would do so if they are told and/or know that death is certain. Nigerians love and desire to live."³⁵

Conclusion

The government has set up several panels to unravel the mysteries behind all these religious riots, but the reports have ended up somewhere I the shelves of government libraries. The contents whether acceptable or not are not made public for the people to know. It would even be too much to expect government to implement what the public did not know in the first instance. It would even be too much to expect government to implement what the public did not know for the first instance. It is time for the government to desist from encouraging the riots by turning deaf ears to the cry of the people and clarions ignorance of the reports of their own committees of enquiry. Different committees and council's on Religious Matters nationwide should be encouraged to do more on what they have achieved so far. In the end since it has pleased God to bring us together as a nation of nations there is

8. Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, 2
9. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria*, 1.
10. Recall that these nation states were not called Nigeria at this point in time. In fact Nigeria as a name had to wait until 1914 when the Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated by the acclaimed British expert on colonial administration, Sir Fredrick Lugard (later Lord Lugard). A story has it that Lugard's wife, Lady Lugard was the one who coined the name Niger Area, becoming Nigeria later to describe these different races that had been forced to come together by Lugard's colonial policy. For more on this, see J. D. Fage, *An Introduction to the History of West Africa* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1966) 173-179.
11. Several Eastern Europeans did this even though it only lasted for a while before they also broke apart and dismantled. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a good example. How it could be done here is suggested by Obafemi Awolowo, *Thoughts on Nigeria Constitution* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966), 181-187.
12. Ohi Alegbe, "Before Nigeria Burns", *Africa Concord: Special Edition*, 4 No. 11 (5 February 1990): 31.
13. cf. J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon: The Biography of a Solider Statesman* (Ibadan: West Books Publishers, 1986), 140-152.
14. On the issue of religions speaking the language of peace, see E. Bolaji Idowu, "Religion on Peace," *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 5:2 (December 1971): 83-92.
15. Peter Mckenzie, "The Persecution of Early Nigerian Converts", *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 11:1 (June 1977): 7.
16. Awo: *The Legend, The Verdict* (Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers, 1987), 41.

17. Ohi Alegbe, "Before Nigeria Burns", *African Concord*, 32.
18. Kola Ilori, "The Trail of Blood: Maitatsine's Ghost Not Yet Interred with his Bones," *News Watch* 5 No. 13 (March 30, 1987); 25.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Samuel Olugbenga Olagunju, "The Persecution of Stephen as a Catalyst to The Early Church Growth" (M. Div. Thesis, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995) 48-53 successfully divides Nigeria into three riot zones. They are the hot zone where the religious fanaticism and riots are constant and horrifying places as Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi and Yobe fall into this category. The second zone is around the Middle Belt and he describes that place as mild in religious fanaticism, while the South both East and West are labeled as peaceful.
23. Cf. Yakubu Mohammed, "Now, the 'War': Shiite Muslim leader Defies Orders and riots Engulfed Katsina," *NewsWatch* 13 No. 18 (April 29, 1991), 16-19; Dare Babarinsa, "Fire on Religion," *NewsWatch* 5 No. 13 (March 30, 1987), 8-25.
24. *NewsWatch* 5 No. 13 (March 30, 1987), 20.
25. See Dele Olojede, "The Trip to Fez," *NewsWatch* 3 No. 8 (February 24, 1986): 12-17; Bala Dan Abu, "Politics of Sharia," *NewsWatch* 8 No. 17 (October 24, 1988): 9-16; Bala Dan Abu, "Hammer on Sharia Debate," *NewsWatch* 8 No. 24 (December 12, 1988): 14-20. The issue of this Sharia lasted for some 10 years before it was formally brought in as a state in law in Zamfara in 1999 at the inception of the current political dispensation. For further on this see Adekunbi Ero, "Sharia Akbar1, Sharia Akbomb1" *Tell* No. 46 (November 15, 1999):

- 12-24. In fact, the whole edition was denoted to the issue of Sharia.
26. Kayode Kunuyi- Cole, "The North and Religious Bigotry," *Nigerian Tribune* (15 January 2010): 18.
27. For more of these deviations on Islam, see Yakubu Mohammed, "Many Voices of Islam," *Newswatch* 8 No. 15 (October 10, 1988): 20-25. Christianity is not free either from such differences. Examples can be found in the following: Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM Press, 1972); John Scott, *A personal Plea for Unity* (Leicester: Inter-Versity Press, 1999); David F. Walls and John D. Woodbridge, *The Evangelicals: What they Believe, Who They Are, Why They Are Changing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977); Dele Omotunde, "Sermon of Crises," *Newswatch* 4 No. 2 (July 14, 1986): 13-20; Sunny Blaghere, "Religion for Worries?" *The African Guardian* 5 No. 23 (June 18, 1990): 20-27.
28. Blaghere, "Religion for Worries?" *The African Guardian* 5 No. 25.
29. Issac Shobayo, "Jos: Another Crises Too Many", *Nigeria Tribune* No. 14, 859 (20 January, 2010): 21.
30. Mohammed Zagga, "Religious Extremism: Lathy We Must Speak Up", *Nigerian Tribune* No.14 , 853 (14 January, 2010): 18.
31. For the cause of the latest disturbances in Jos, see Tajudeen Suleiman, "Jos Worsens Nigeria's Security Status, Tell No.4 (February 2010): 32-35, Mikhail Mumini," "Political Sponsored Jos Crises", *The Westerner* 1, No 44 (February 8, 2010): 20-21, an interview with Rev. Gyang Choji, Plateau State Special Adviser to the Governor on Religious Affairs.
32. *Nigerian Tribune*, No. 14, 853 (14 January, 2010): 17.

33. D. A. Carson, "A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Content*, ed. By D.A. Carson (Exeter). The Paternoster Press, 1984, 27. For further dispositions on the West, see Meic Pearse, *Why the Rest Hates the West* (London: SPCK, 2003).
34. "Bauchi: Another Religious Riot," *Nigerian Tribune*, No. 14, 852 (13 January, 2010): 17.
35. "Abdul Mutallab and Terrorism," *Nigerian Tribune* No, 14, 850 (11 January, 2010): 17, editorial comment.