

Research Article

Ethno-Religious Crisis in Nigeria: Causes and Remedy from Islamic Perspectives

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Abstract: *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*

This paper is intended to examine the causes of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria and its remedy from Islamic perspectives. It needs no emphasis to state that since independence in 1960, Nigerians have suffered diverse incidences of communal crises in almost all parts of the country. The contemporary situation is even worse over that which prevailed two decades ago. The origin of these crises lie in the fact that the non-Muslims on one hand, justify the rise of ethnicity among their people and see it as an instrument not only of expressing group identity, but also of pursuing common interest and power in a plural society such as Nigeria. The Muslims on the other hand are being criticized for reviving Shari'ah and representing Islam as the basis of political unity and social justice among the different Muslim communities and indeed the country at large. Several violent demonstrations were organized by the non-Muslims against Shari'ah since 1999 when it was formally revived by Zamfara State Government. The establishment of ethnic associations such as 'Afenifere', 'Ohaneze' and 'Arewa Consultative Forum' also contributed in severing the peaceful co-existence of the diverse ethnic and religious groups. Other factors that cause ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria include lack of just and equitable economic and political systems, general Islamic awareness, lack of religious tolerance and the idea of separation of religion from state by the Federal Government. It is indeed very difficult to estimate the amount of lives and property destroyed as a result of this ongoing crisis. Thus, this paper tends to examine the need for reappraisal of the foundation on which the whole concept of ethnicity and religious differences among Nigerians rests, with a view to providing possible solutions. As Nigeria is a country of diverse ethnic groups and religions, it is high time for all its citizens to study, acknowledge and tolerate their differences in order to remedy their on-going crisis.

Keywords: Islam, Nigeria, Federal Government.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria dates back to the pre-independence period. The crisis was influenced by a number of factors which include issues of ethnicity contained in the MacPherson constitution of 1954¹ and the elements of regionalism that manifested in the pre-Independence elections conducted in 1959.² Six years after independence, two military coups occurred in January and July 1966 respectively. These bloody coups opened the gates of regional hatred especially between the Northern and the Eastern regions and that paved way to the civil war that took place between 1967 and 1970.³

As for religious crisis, the Maitatsine episodes during Alh. Shehu Shagari's political administration in 1980, is as close to us as the head is to the neck. Many lives and property were lost. The fifteen years of military regime after Shagari also recorded a multiple number of ethno-religious conflicts. The Maitatsine uprisings in Jimeta-Yola, Bulunkutu

¹ Panel on Nigeria since independence History project: Nigeria since independence the first 25yrs, Vol. VI, the civil war years, edited by T N. Tamuno and S. C Ukpabi, 1st published 1989, p133.

² Ibid

³ Ibid, p135

and Gombe, the Zangon- Kataf Carnage, the Kafanchan, Kano, Kaduna, Zaria and Zuru⁴ disturbances are still fresh in our memory. This problem continued throughout the military era.

The period of the present democratic regime is the period which "the generality of Nigerians have the impression that violent eruptions have been accepted as a way of life in Nigeria and could happen anytime, anywhere without any one getting sanctioned."⁵

In the last twenty years of this political era, Nigeria has witnessed series of ethno-religious crises which threatened the corporate existence of Nigeria. The Ife-Modakeke war, the Aguleri-Umuleri war, the Ijaw-Itsekiri war, the Yoruba-Hausa war, at Shagamu. Tiv-Jukun war in Taraba, the Jukun-Kuteb war in Taraba, Hausa-Igbo war in Kano, Igbo-Hausa war in Umuahia and Aba, Hausa-Tarok war in Plateau, Bachama-Hausa/Fulani in Numan, Adamawa State, Fulani-Yungur war in Dumne, Adamawa State and other recurring prejudiced squabbles.⁶

Application of Shari'ah in some of the Northern States of the federation during Obasanjo administration also met violent reactions from the non-Muslims. Many lives and property were destroyed in Kaduna (2000) and Bauchi (2001) States. The issues of Boko haram in the North east, farmers-herdsmen conflicts, cattle rustling and banditry in the entire North are all problems that put this country at a serious dilemma. Other issues responsible for ethno-religious hostilities include land and boundary disputes, the problem of indigenization, domination and marginalization.

From the above, it becomes obvious that the unity of Nigeria is under a serious threat. It is in the light of this that this paper intends to find the causes of these crises and later suggests possible solutions from Islamic perspectives.

CAUSES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS IN NIGERIA

Based on the issues raised in the introduction, this sub-topic shall be treated under the following six headings:

1. The Operation of Regional Self-Rule
2. Ethno-Political Power Struggle
3. Religious Fanaticism and Intolerance
4. Violent Demonstrations against The Application of Shari 'ah By Non-Muslims.
5. The Phenomenon of "Indigenes' Versus "Settlers".
6. Inability of the Government to Use Effective and Adequate Measures to Prevent the Crisis.

It is however important to note that these six headings are only meant to serve as examples. Nigeria is a large country of diverse ethnic and religious groups. To cover all crises within the context of this paper is very difficult.

1.1 The Operation of Regional Self-Rule

Before the operation of the MacPherson constitution, Nigerians lived and worked anywhere in the country as Nigerians and national co-equals without any sense or feeling of official discrimination. Their respective languages and cultures were known and respected, and everyone mutually recognized each other as Nigerians. It was after the changes culminated in the Federal Constitution of 1954 that things started to change.⁷

During the constitutional conference, there was disagreement between Northern delegates and their southern counterparts over the controversial issue of regional self- rule. The Northern delegates were booed in the streets of Lagos. This resulted in a reprisal attacks against southern settlers in the ancient City of Kano.⁸ That marked the sowing of the seed of civil strife anchored around ethno-religious and primordial considerations in Nigeria.⁹

2.1 Ethno-Political Power Struggle

Leadership tussle between Northern, Western and Eastern regions had vividly started to show from the pre-independence elections of 1959. In other words, all candidates who won the elections were elected on regional grounds.¹⁰

⁴ Adebisi A: 'Zuru clash has political undertone", see *New Nigerian*, No.6889, Monday, May 23, 1988, last page.

⁵ Shola O., "Last Chance for Two Governors ", see *Tell magazine*, No. 22, May 31,2004, p18

⁶ I A. Song (Hon.), *Ethnoreligious Crises and National dialogue*-see *New Nigerian Weekly*, No. 2866. set. 10 July, 2004, P6

⁷ Panel on Nigeria since independence History project, op. cit.

⁸ I A. Song (Hon.), *Ethnoreligious Crises*, op. cit.

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Panel on Nigeria since independence History project, op. cit. p135

The Nigerian military was also drawn to the regional politics. Considerations of appointments and enrolment into the military service were made based on ethnicity.¹¹

As for the Middle Belt, about eighty incidences of communal crises were recorded by some researchers between 1982 and 1997.¹² The crises centre on disputes over land, 'political authority differences, fears over domination and marginalization.¹³ The most destructive conflicts in the Middle Belt are between the Jukun and the Tiv. While the latter was accused for not recognizing the legitimacy of the Aku (traditional ruler), and also for trying to put Taraba and Benue under their sovereignty, the former was criticized for considering themselves as the indigenes of Wukari Local Government and the areas around, and for regarding the latter as settlers, strangers and squatters.¹⁴ This problem over political administration, land and boundary dispute between the Jukun and the Tiv have always resulted into communal clashes leaving in its wake wanton destruction of lives and property.

Another place of concern as regards conflicts over political authority is Plateau state. This conflict is usually made manifest during elections and political appointments. For instance, during the aborted Third Republic, the Hausa-Fulani candidate won the chairmanship of the Jos North Local Government Council. The chairman later appointed one of his kinsmen as Education Secretary. The local tribes saw the appointment as having been done in bad faith. He (the Education Secretary) later contested the chairmanship election of the council and won. His election was however nullified on the grounds of age falsification and that paved way for his opponent to be declared winner. The bad blood generated by the election however, continued to brew. The relationship between the two groups became so sour when the Federal Government appointed the nullified candidate as Chairman of the Poverty Eradication Programme in Jos North Local Government. This situation degenerated into open protests and threats against the appointment. Consequently, tension continued to mount which finally resulted in mindless killings of innocent people and setting houses, mosques and churches ablaze.¹⁵

3.1 Religious Fanaticism and Intolerance

Religious fanaticism and intolerance are two major problems that usually cause violence among various religious groups in Nigeria. The ancient city of Kano was once a victim of a fundamentalist sect founded by Muhammad Marwa 'Maitatsine'. The government's resistance to his extremist views and constant breach of law and order led to an unprecedented savage and ferocious unleashing of mayhem on Kano and its people in 1980.¹⁶ In January 1992, Funtua, a commercial town on the Southern tip of Katsina State also witnessed a religious riot occasioned by extremism from a branch of Maitatsine's sect popularly known as "Kalakato". The group regarded every non-Maitatsine as an unbeliever.¹⁷ The riot was caused by a mere quarrel between two students belonging to two different "Mallams". One of the Mallams (a Maitatsine), used that slightest opportunity to turn Funtua to a hell. Lifeless bodies littered the streets; vehicles, shops and houses were burnt.¹⁸

Another incidence of religious intolerance was the Kafanchan episode of 1987. The disturbance broke during the fellowship of Christian students of Kafanchan College of Education, "Mission 87" in which the invited speaker by name Rev. Abubakar Bako misinterpreted the Glorious Qur'an and called Prophet Muhammad (SAW) bad name.¹⁹ The conflict ultimately spread into many parts of the country as there were threats from the leaders of both Islam and Christianity.^{20, 21}

Elements of religious intolerance could also be manifested in what led to the dethronement of Eze Boniface Nwauwa, the Paramount Chief of Izombe in Imo State. Though a Christian, the Eze was accused by the catholic religion for encouraging his junior cousin, Alh. Ibrahim Nwauwa to spread Islam in the community. An Islamic vocational

¹¹ Ibid, p135

¹² *Alljihad*, "The Journal of Islamization of Knowledge and Contemporary Issues", published by MT, Nigeria office, vol. 2, No.1, January, 2001, p79

¹³ Adebola A. "The Making of a Bitter Conflict, see TELL Magazine, No. 46, Nov. 12, 2001, p24

¹⁴ Tor Tiv, "The Conflict Is Political," see Citizen Magazine, vol.3, March 2-8, 1992, p14

¹⁵ Stepp, O. And Major A., "Bloodbath on the Plateau" see TELL Magazine, No.39, September 24, 2001, p256

¹⁶ Dayo A, "An ugly metamorphosis", see TELL magazine, No.44, October 29, 2001, p34

¹⁷ Abiodun A., "The Funtua Mayhem" see African Concord Magazine, Vol. 7, No. 38, February 8, 1993, p14

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Abdulkareem L., "Muslim-Christian Relations: A case study of Zuru Emirate", (Unpublished) B.A. (Isl. Studies), Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 1989, p90.

²⁰ New Nigerian, Thursday, June 18, 1987, p11

²¹ Kaduna Religious Riot '87', A catalogue of events, written by CAN publicity committee, p48

college was built at Izombe by Alh. Ibrahim. It was later followed by a Mosque following an appeal fund launched in the town on 12 February, 1986. The coming of Islam into the area alarmed the Christian leaders. Consequently, they allegedly instructed Eze Boniface to order his cousin, Ibrahim, to demolish the Islamic vocational school and jettison the idea of building a Mosque, else, the ruler would be dethroned.²² As a result of his refusal to carry out the order on the grounds that the constitution of the country guarantees freedom of religious choice, a campaign of calumny was allegedly mounted against him, and the Church mounted a call for his dethronement. They used different forms of strategies including breach of peace and series of petitions. For example, on Tuesday 19 January, 1993, a band of hoodlums and anarchists called "Ghana Boys" allegedly employed, trained and sponsored by a group in the town of Izombe opposed to the continued ruler ship of the Eze. They attacked the chief, his family and suspected sympathizers. No less than 50 houses including the old and new palaces of Eze Boniface at Ndiuloukwu Village were razed down completely.²³ This and other similar incidences urged the Imo state government to set an administrative panel to probe the Eze. He was finally dethroned.

4.1 Violent Demonstrations against the Application of Shari'ah by Non-Muslims

Reviving Shari'ah in some parts of the Northern States during this civilian administration invited strong opposition from the non-Muslims since it was first launched in 1999 by Zamfara State Government. They organized several demonstrations which mostly resulted in wanton destruction of lives and property especially in Kaduna and Bauchi States.

In the year 2001 for example, Tafawa Balewa and Borogo Local Government Councils of Bauchi State exploded in violent clashes over the issue of Shari'ah. The chairman, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was even quoted warning the Shari'ah government of Ahmad Adamu Mu'azu:

*It will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for Shari'ah to operate in Borogo and Tafawa Balewa Local councils.*²⁴

Lives and property were destroyed in such clashes.

5.1 The Phenomenon of "Indigenes" Versus "Settlers"

The Phenomenon of 'Indigenes' versus 'Settlers' is indeed one of the most disheartening problems that always threaten the peaceful co-existence of the diverse ethnic groups of this country. A lot of innocent people's lives have been lost in pursuit of 'indigene versus' settler' conflicts which serve only the purposes of elite power struggle.²⁵

In Zangon Kataf, the Hausa Fulani community who settled there for more than 300 years ago are still regarded as strangers by the Katafs. They wanted to force the Hausa-Fulani out by all means. Their murderous attack on Zango started first on February 6 1992, and then on May, 15 the same year. Two days later it spilled into Kaduna.²⁶ The conflict which started as an 'indigene' versus 'settler' problem however, deteriorated into a religious war. Sophisticated weapons and other advanced weaponry were used by the Katafs. The scale of destruction in Zango was beyond description. No one knew the total number of those killed and maimed in both Zango and Kaduna.²⁷

The case of Plateau is similar to that of Zango. According to Victor Dung Pam, the Gbong Gwon Jos,

*'Even if the Hausa Fulani have spent 1000 years in Plateau that still does not confer indigene ship on them.'*²⁸

This is one of the reasons why constant clashes occur between the Hausa-Fulani and the local tribes of Berom, Anaguta, Afizere, Tarok, etc. The latest being the Yelwa-Shendam hostilities which claimed thousands of lives. The crisis had spilled over to neighboring states of Bauchi Kano and Nassarawa. The sordid situation forced the Federal Government to declare state of emergency in Plateau State.²⁹

²² African Concord Magazine, op. cit., p19

²³ Ibid, pp19-20

²⁴ Yemi O. "Anarchists Threaten Nation's Unity", see TELL magazine, No. 44, October 29, 2001, p34

²⁵ The statement was made by Ibrahim Saminu Turaki, Jigawa State Governor, see New Nigerian, No.12, 793, Monday, July 5, 2004.

²⁶ Citizen Magazine, vol. 3, No.22, June 1-7, p11

²⁷ Ibid, p12

²⁸ He made the statement during an interview with TELL Magazine, No. 22, May 31, 2004, p 22

²⁹ TELL magazine, Ibid, p 24

In Delta state, the Itsekiri claimed they own all the lands. As such, they regarded the Ijaws as settlers and that was the reason why they refused to allow them have their separate Local Government because if you do that, according to them, you are inviting instability.³⁰ The Orhobos and Ijaws on the other hand, maintain that the homeland of the Itsekiris is in the villages. Therefore, they should forget the dream of using government to create homeland for them in Warri metropolis and other areas of 'their neighbors'.³¹ The problem of who owns the land put the three ethnic groups in constant warfare.

The Middle Belt also, is another battleground for 'indigene' versus 'settler' problem. The Jukun claimed to have owned the lands being the indigenes of the Kwararafa Kingdom. Therefore, the Jukun perspective of the Tiv, was that of immigrants.³² The Tiv on the other hand, claimed that they first occupied that place in the 16th century. They further explained that the Jukun having had the advantage of running the whole place through the colonial masters, considered themselves as the indigenes. While the Tiv people had been regarded as settlers.³³ This is a crisis that started between two ethnic groups. Then it degenerated to three and what do we have now? Mindless killings of innocent people, passersby, traders going to the south; and from the south to the north.³⁴ Nigerians in general and the military in particular could hardly forget the barbaric killing of 19 soldiers (who went there for a peace keeping mission) by the Tivs in Zaki-Biam on Thursday October 11, 2001.³⁵

6.1 Inability of the Government to use Effective and Adequate Measures to Prevent the Crisis

Federal, States and Local Governments are also to blame for their inability to use effective measures to prevent the on-going ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. They normally treat violence with kid gloves. In the bloody Maitatsine riots of Kano in 1980 for example, no fewer than 4,177 peoples including policemen perished. However, nobody was brought to justice.³⁶ Even when panel of enquiry are set up, their reports merely gather dust on the bookshelves. Therefore, since nobody is tried and jailed, nobody is deterred from joining the bandwagon.³⁷

The tree of crisis is sometimes watered by those in authorities. For instance, explaining why the state of emergency had to be enforced in Plateau State, President Obasanjo had this to say:

*The carnage in Plateau was deliberate, systematic, consistent and total... the suspended governor was even abroad for two weeks while his state burned.*³⁸

The Boko haram insurgency in the North-East, ethno-religious crisis in the North-Central, Farmers-Herdsmen conflicts in Taraba, Benue and Plateau States, cattle rustling, banditry, kidnapping and armed robbery in almost all parts of the country are other major security challenges currently facing Buhari administration.

Remedy to the Ethno-Religious crisis in Nigeria

To see an end to incessant blooded, reprisal killings and destruction of property, this paper suggests the following solutions:

1. Both Muslims and Christians Should Adhere Strictly to the Teaching of Their Texts

Truthfulness, justice, mutual respect and religious tolerance are among the righteous deeds enjoined in all the revealed books of Allah (SWT). Violence in religion is a great transgression against the Almighty Allah. Therefore, both Muslims and Christians should adhere strictly to the teaching of their texts. The Glorious Qur'an says:

وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

*And dispute ye not with the people of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation)*³⁹

³⁰ The statement was made by Johnson Ayonike, an Itsekiri leader, see *The Week Magazine* vol. 6, No. 18, May 5, 1997

³¹ Spokesman of the Urhobos in Warri made the statement during an interview with the *Week Magazine*, *Ibid*, p. 15

³² The making of a bitter conflict", *op. cit.* p24

³³ *Tor Tiv*, *op. cit.* p14

³⁴ Alh Abdul-Azeez Tonku, Member of the House of Reps.- speaking on the Benue Massacre- see *TELL Magazine*, No. 45, November 5, 2001, p24

³⁵ *Ibid*, p37

³⁶ Anarchists threaten nation's unity, *op. cit.*, p36

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ The statement was covered by *TELL Magazine*, No. 22, May 31, 2004

³⁹ Qur'an, 29:46

لَا يَنْهَاكُمْ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
الْمُقْسِطِينَ

*Allah forbids you not with regards to those who fight you not for your faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them. For, Allah loves those who are just.*⁴⁰

The Bible on the other hand says:

*Behold, I sent you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves".*⁴¹

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God"*⁴²

2. A Workable Reconciliatory Action Plan Should Be Genuinely Fashioned Out by the Leaders of All Ethnic Nationalities

The Emirs, Obas, Imams, Pastors, other religious teachers and preachers must be fully involved in the suggested initiative. Under this; all disputes should be resolved through dialogue. For dialogue removes elements of ignorance and enables members of the society appreciate each other's positions and actions. Is it not for example, ignorance for people who have coexisted for centuries, intermarrying and assimilating aspects of each other's culture, to resort to arms rather than dialogue just because they have been put in the 'wrong' local government area, or because of religious and or ethnic differences? supporting dialogue in order to settle disputes, the Glorious Qur'an says:

لَا خَيْرَ فِي كَثِيرٍ مِنْ نَجْوَاهُمْ إِلَّا مَنْ أَمَرَ بِصَدَقَةٍ أَوْ مَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ إِصْلَاحٍ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ
اللَّهِ فَسَوْفَ نُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

There is no good in most of their secret talks except (in) him who orders Sadaqah (charity in Allâh's Cause), or Ma'rûf (Islâmic Monotheism and all the good and righteous deeds which Allâh has ordained), or conciliation between mankind; and he who does this, seeking the good Pleasure of Allâh, We shall give him a great reward.⁴³

3. Derogatory Terms Should Be Avoided

All derogatory terms that have ethnic connotation should be frowned at by all and sundry in such a way that it will become unfashionable. Similarly, should militant youth wings exist at all, they should limit themselves to advocacy and vigilante services and should henceforth stop operating as killer gangs, or else, be proscribed by appropriate authorities.

4. Just and Fairness from the Governments

The Governments on their part should be just and fair in dealing with all crises. They should always follow the positive suggestions given by panels of enquiry whenever set up. Masterminds of these crises should be brought to book whenever caught. The governments should also fight against the phenomenon of 'indigenes' versus 'settlers' in Nigerian politics.

5. The Gruesome Past Should Be Buried by All Conflicting Ethnic and Religious Groups.

All ethnic and religious groups that are at logger heads should bury their differences and cooperate with one another. They should all sheath their swords and choose the path of peace and dialogue for the resolution of their differences.

CONCLUSION

From the foregone analysis, it becomes obvious that ethnic and religious crisis have been the cause of almost all the problems that threaten the corporate existence of the Nigerian citizens. Therefore, this paper concludes by reminding all religious and ethnic nationalities that the unity of Nigeria is not yet negotiable and a breakup is certainly going to lead to more grievous problems than anyone can imagine. An end must be put to all the bloody ethnic and religious crisis in all parts of the country. It is high time for all and sundry to silence the music of hatred and the guns of war. Undoubtedly, if the above-mentioned suggestions are adhered to, these on-going crises will maximally be solved.

⁴⁰ Qur'an, 60:8

⁴¹ Mathew, 5:5

⁴² Mathew, 5:9

⁴³ Qur'an, 4:114

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