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Religion and Identity Politics in Nigeria

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Abstract: Genuine national integration in Nigeria has been contentious amidst different religious beliefs, societal configurations (ethnic group and culture) and politics of identity. Religion has been at the center of several burning national questions that transcend state and power, such as the question of secular state, societal integration, ethno-religious mobilization and the identity politics. Since independence, two dominant religions in Nigeria—Islam and Christianity—have been dominant cultures; forces in Nigerian state and power structures through individuals and organizations. Chauvinist politicians, elite and non-elite statesmen have long exploited the power of religion not only to promote their narrow political interests but also to cast a religion-based identity for Nigeria and in turn have damaged its social fabric and prevented a national integration. This article examines the influence of religion on identity of politics of Nigeria and how it impacted its national integration.

Key Words: Africa, Religion, Nigeria, Identity Politics, History, National Integration

Introduction

...I must confess that I share the fears of possibilities of religious and sectarian strife in this country. I believe that tribalism as a fallback position was destroyed by the Nigerian civil war. But I regret to say that religious and sectarian chauvinism is fast replacing tribalism as a vehicle of political cohesion. The use of ethnic and or religious differences as a means of achieving political solidarity is fraudulent enough but it becomes more disturbing when it is used to polarize the people and thereby disturb the peace and stability of the country. I am not aware of any country that has survived two civil wars. I am afraid that our country Nigeria may presently be living between wars. I hope I am wrong but all the ingredients and the sign to the contrary are there for any perceptive analyst to see...my greatest fear are that there may be no Nigeria after our Nigeria after our next strive.¹

The amalgamation of January 1, 1914 conceived the geo-polity entity known as Nigeria today. Nigeria became a colonial creation with little or no contribution and consent of the people living within its amalgamated geographical boundary.² Convincingly, Nigeria was born out by the imperialist ambition for administrative convenience and economic gains. The amalgamation has become a recurring national question, which the present article does not wish to delve into. Before the advent of the Arab merchants and the arrival of European missionaries, African traditional religions were the main religions in the region. Arab merchants introduced Islam to west Africa around the ninth century through North Africa and Middle East. Starting from the fifteenth century, Christianity was introduced as a harbinger of colonialism, and as an agent of monotheism, westernization, and education. Summarily, before its political independence, Nigeria had three distinct religions each with strong influence on people's daily life.³

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with two hundred fifty different ethnic groups. Out of these diverse groups three of them stand as dominant groups namely: Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbo. The granting of independence brought forth the issues and challenges of ethnicity, religion, and the question of identities. Hitherto, religion had fueled the north-south dichotomy, heating up Nigerian politics until today. Religion, mainly Islam and Christianity, is today rooted along societal and ethnic lines. The imperfect distribution of Muslims and Christians is complicated by the ethnic and societal differences which created an opportunity for politicians to play on identity politics. The northern part of Nigeria, with the exception of Central Nigeria, known as the Middle-Belt, is predominantly Muslim, while the southeast of Nigeria is predominantly Christian, and both religions are equally represented in the southwestern Nigeria.⁴

¹Theophilus Y. Danjuma, Speech made at Command and Staff College, Jaji, June 29, 1979.

² See, James Smoot Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958); Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999); Tekena N. Tamuno and J. A. Atanda, Eds. *Nigeria Since Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years, Vol 3: Education* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1989).

³ See Obaro Ikime, *Groundwork of Nigeria History* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980); Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998) 1-49.

⁴ Falola, *Violence in Nigeria*, 1.

Religion and politics in Nigeria have been a complex and controversial discourse. In the pre-colonial period (majorly traditional religion), religion was a means for traditional rulers to legitimize their rule—confirming their acceptance and recognition to the gods as well as their subject after due sacrifice, religious, and traditional customs have been met. Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), the founder of Sokoto Caliphate, turned Islam into a major force in administration and politics in the administration of the loose confederation of Sokoto and Gwandu Caliphates. Christianity entered in the southwest and the southeast portions of Nigeria through colonialism.

The study is motivated by the weaponization of religion within Nigerian societies and political space and the intractability of crisis and violence in Nigeria today. The sub-sections under this study puts forth a great deal of intellectual endeavor to address the religious phenomenon by taking into consideration the influence of religion on the formation of identity politics. The study invariably identified the challenges of such influence on crave for genuine national integration.

Religion

“Religion is a powerful force in societies around the world and in the lives of peoples everywhere.”⁵ The word religion, etymologically, comes from the Latin word ‘re-ligare’ to bind. Broadly speaking, religion includes actions of man with a Supreme Being or divinities in respect to worship and loyalty. “Religion can be understood as a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experiences, beliefs and knowledge are reflected in man’s conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world.”⁶ Religion is a belief in the existence of a God or gods and a systematic worship of a God or gods. It is a strong element influencing the thinking and daily life of its believers. In simple terms, religion refers to the beliefs and practices based on a conception of the sacred.⁷

Politics

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle began his famous work, *Politics*, with the observation that man is by nature a political animal. This by implication means that the essence of social existence is politics and everyday human interaction is itself political. Individuals engage in politics as they try to define their position in society, as they struggle for scarce resources, and try to convince others to accept their points of view.⁸ Politics can also be viewed as the process of making and executing governmental decisions or policies,⁹ the authoritative allocation of values; or who gets what, when and how; the quest for power, order, and justice; the art of influencing, manipulating and controlling others;¹⁰ the process of conflict resolution in society, and a struggle among actors pursuing conflicting desire on public issues.¹¹ Politics is the

⁵ Georgette Bennett, Joyce S. Dubensky, "Preface" pp. xv-xviii, in David Little (ed.): *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) xv.

⁶ Malachy Ikechukwu Okwueze, *Ethics Religion and Society: Biblical, Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives* (Nsukka, Nigeria: Prize Publishers, 2003).

⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

⁸ Ernest Barker (eds.), *The Politics of Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 1.

⁹ Harold Dwight Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1982), 1-5.

¹⁰ Harold Dwight Lasswell, *Politics: Who gets What, When, How* (New York: P. Smith, 1972); Quincy Wright, *The Study of International Relations* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 130.

¹¹ Austin Ranney, *The Governing of Men* (Hinsdale, Ill.; Dryden Press, 1975), 35-38; Vernon Van Dyke, *Political Science: A Philosophical Analysis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 134.

activity (negotiation, argument, discussion, application of force, persuasion, controversy, bargaining, and compromise) by which issues are agitated and settled.¹² Politics can also be seen as a means of striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power among individual and groups within a state.¹³

Identity

According to James D. Fearon, identity has two distinct but intertwined meanings: “social” and “personal” identity.¹⁴ Identity is a social category, created either by others or by the group itself. Furthermore, as pointed out by Fearon, social categories have two distinguishing features: “first, they are defined by implicit or explicit *rules of membership*, according to which individuals are assigned or not to the category. Second, social categories are understood in terms of sets of characteristics—for example, beliefs, desires, moral commitments, or physical attributes—thought typical of members of the category, or behaviors expected or obliged of members in certain situations.”¹⁵

National Integration

The concept of national integration has been espoused by various scholars arising from the ambiguous nature of social science concepts. National integration involves the unification of separate groups with different social and cultural identities for greater public good. Ogunjenite conceived national integration as “building of nation-states out of disparate socio-economic, religious, ethnic, geographical elements by translating diffused or unorganized sentiments of nationalism into the spirit of citizenship...”¹⁶ National integration is an amalgamation of diverse ethnic, religious, and social and economic groups into a nation-state. The essence of national integration cannot be separated from national unity, nation building, national loyalty, patriotism, and cohesion towards a greater public good. Ade Ajayi from a structural perspective described national integration “as a process of holding tightly together the various nationalities or ethnic groups and institutions in a dovetailed manner through the bonds of contrived structures, norms and values”.¹⁷ In sum, Awa’s definition identifies the result of integration when he conceived national integration as “the process by which hitherto distinctive and autonomous peoples and cultures incorporated into a multi-national states can achieve higher levels of mutual trusts, cooperation and independence, shared values, common identity and national consciousness.”¹⁸ Summarily, the concept of national integration brings culturally and socially divergent groups together in a singular territorial unit like the Nigerian

¹² Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle*, 116.

¹³ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Translated and Edited by A. M Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 148-154.

¹⁴ James D. Fearon, “What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” Unpublished Draft, (Stanford, CA: Department of Political Science, Stanford University, November 3, 1999), 13-14. Retrieved from <http://www.web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf> on May 5, 2020.

¹⁵ Fearon, “What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” 13-14.

¹⁶ L.O. Ogunjenite, “Federal Character as an Integrative Mechanism: the Nigeria’s Experiment at Nation Building” in *Alternative Political Factor for Nigeria*, Edited by S. Odugbemi, (Lagos, Nigeria: Nigeria Political Science Association Publication, 1987), 224.

¹⁷ J.F Ade Ajayi, “The Problem of National Integration: A Historian Perspective”, Text Delivered on the 11th, NISER Series Distinguished Lecture, Ministry of Sokoto, Sokoto, Nigeria (December 11, 1984).

¹⁸ E.O. Awa, “National Integration in Nigeria, Problems and Prospect”, Paper delivered at Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria, Distinguished Lecture Series, no. 5 of NISER, 1965.

State. This kind of socio-cultural and political homogeneity should be a logical consequence or function of productive inter-group relations.

The Phenomenon of Identity Politics

In his 1997 Annual Report, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, lamented on the rise of negative forms of identity politics and their immense consequences;

*This particularistic and exclusionary form of identity politics has intensified in recent years within and among nations.... It is responsible for some of the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law and in several instances of elementary standards of humanity.... Negative forms of identity politics are a potent and potentially explosive force. Great care must be taken to recognize, confront and restrain them lest they destroy the potential for peace and progress that the new era holds in store.*¹⁹

Identity politics, in other words, is basically a form of politics that claimed to cater to the needs of a group through state apparatus. It involves the mobilization of identity consciousness in order to create a mass base of support for the ruling class, and the elite generally, in their factional struggles in the accumulation process. In addition, identity politics connotes a relatively high degree of the subjective entering into politics. Identity is not only about individuality and self-awareness, but also and especially about identification with, and commitment to, shared values and beliefs, in a social collectivity into which a person belongs. Identity politics as a political concept refers to the political activity of various ethnic, religious and cultural groupings in demanding greater economic, social, and political rights or self-determination. Identity politics claim to represent and seek to advance the interests of particular groups in society, the members of which often share and unite around common experiences of actual or perceived social and economic injustice, relative to the wider society of which they form part and exist in.²⁰

Religion and Politics

Religion and politics have assumed the center stage of discussion and influenced every state affair and power structure, promoting ethno-religious conflicts and political violence. The basic question remains: why is there a recurring influence of religion on politics in Nigeria? Why has there been a recurring effect of religion as an instrument of violence and national disunity? A cursory examination of religion and politics reveals a double contrasting theme that derives its power from different sources. Religion as a source of power is based in spirituality while material forces and spheres are the basis of political power.²¹ Hence, religion in Nigeria has been made a resource for conflict and national disunity. The logical conclusion then is to try to measure the relationship of the three religions, politics, and state power.

The relationship between politics and religion is intimate because there is always a point of convergence. More so, the relationship is complex because of the intricacies inherent in the

¹⁹ Kofi Annan, *The Guardian* (Nigeria), October 24, 1997; Jega Attahiru, "General Introduction: Identity Transformation and the Politics of Identity under Crisis and Adjustment", pp.11-23, in Attahiru Jega (ed.). *Identity transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria* (Stockholm, Sweden: Elanders Gotab, 2000), 11.

²⁰ Terhemba Nom Ambe-Uva, "Identity Politics and the Jos crisis: Evidence, Lessons and Challenges of Good Governance", *African Journal of History and Culture*, pp.42-52, Vol. 2 (3), 2010.

²¹ Philip Ostien, Jamila Nasir and Franz Kogelmann, *Comparative Perspectives on Shari'ah in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 2005).

politicization of religion. Hank Eso sees religion as a tool of politics and that in a real sense both make strange bedfellows. In his words: “Just as soccer is singularly the sole and most unifying factor in Nigeria, nothing is as divisive as religion-especially when it is used as a tool of politics.”²² Religion holds a strong influence in the politics of the state given its capacity for effective political mobilization. Fox and Sandler gave six major reasons why this is so, these reasons are as follows: (i) religious organizations have strong international links and enjoy global solidarity, (ii) religious organizations have the capability to easily unite differential social groupings in the society;(iii) religious organizations are often strong in weak states;(iv) the restriction of religious activities is often difficult for state regimes;(v) religious organizations often enjoy good patronage in the media and (vi) religious organizations have the ‘ready-made’ platform for political meetings.²³

Identity Politics in Nigeria: Secularism and Sharia

The influence of religion on Nigerian identity politics has become recurring and more dominant. This section seeks to examine the influence of religion through a discussion of secularism and *sharia*, Islamic law, in Nigeria. Discussions about secularism or what can be said to be a secular state has been subject to heated confrontational debates between adherents of Christianity and Islam. Kukah’s comment on secularism is worth noting:

*The debate over the religious status of the Nigeria state remains one of the most passionate and acrimonious. The debate has often been beclouded by bellicosity, zealotry, arrogance and prejudices. In the end, there has always been more heat than light.*²⁴

Secularism has been defined as a system which seeks to interpret and order life on principle taken solely from this world, without recourse to belief in God and a future life. Secularism is accepted to be the separation of religious practices from state affairs. This by implication means the three dominant religions of Nigeria would not interfere in state policies or matters of governance. By keeping religion out of politics, secularism can protect minority religious groups from the members of majority religion. This means if one major religion is dominant in government affairs; it will be unfair to the minor religion. In Nigeria, none of the three dominant religions support secularism and this has threatened Nigerian national integration. Looking at Christianity, Matthew (5:13-14) reads:

*You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven.*²⁵

This by implication means that Christianity cannot be separated from the world, Christianity is to be used to govern the public sphere as it must be adhered to strictly and be the totality of Christian existence.

²²Hank Eso, “Nigeria: Religion as a Tool of Politics”, April 16, 2003, Retrieved from <https://ihuanedo.ning.com/group/religiousskeptism/forum/topics/nigeria-religion-as-a-tool-of>, on February 23, 2020.

²³ Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, “Quantifying Religion: Toward Building More Effective Ways of Measuring Religious Influence on State-Level Behavior”, *Journal of Church and State* 45 (3), Summer 2003, pp.559-588.

²⁴ Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1999), 102.

²⁵ *The Holy Bible*, The Revised Standard Version, China Collins Bible (Harper Collins Publishers, 1971).

The *sharia* debates have proven that secularism is not an option for Islam either. Islamic believers view Islam as a holistic way of life and the readiness to abide by the doctrines to govern the state as a Muslim Ummah despite any form of what can be described as modernity, civilization, or Western governance process. This concept was clearly buttressed below:

*Muslims believe that their religion, Islam, is a complete way of life which has made copious provisions for all facets of life: practices, social involvement, economic undertakings, political participation, technological innovations, legal phenomenon and religious beliefs.*²⁶

The Western democracies largely see religion as a factor regulating the relationship between the visible and the invisible world, while they see politics responsible for regulating the relationship between the society and the state. The Western concept of secularism sees religion as a private affair, something between an individual believer with their God or god(s) and a relation that should not spill over to the public domain.²⁷ This is contrary to Islamic perspectives on politics; religion and politics are often intertwined in Islamic societies. As the above-quoted text pointed out, in Islamic culture there is no clear separation of religion from politics.

Like the currently dominant religions of Islam and Christianity, the traditional or indigenous religions of Nigeria have been woven into the nation's political fabric and it was not restricted to private life in pre-colonial times either. Separating one's spiritual life from his or her public life is a foreign concept in Africa that must be rejected. The indigenous religion, which had been in existence before the advent of the two foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) had a profound system of politics. Indeed, traditional religion was woven into local politics of the kingdoms and empires. Religion was used to fortify benevolence and the trepidation that preserved the family as a unit and the village as distinctive community. In fact, throughout pre-colonial times, all actions and mechanism of governance and endurance were clothed in religion. This condition brings the question about the future of Nigerian state. Which path could lead to a genuine national integration? In a multi religious society, the position of secularism has been hotly debated.

On the issue of secular state, Kukah states the role played by the elite and politicians using such national debates to promote self-agenda and ethnic identity politics.

*The ground was therefore well laid and rather than the politicians seeing themselves being divided only by the contending ideological presentations of their party manifestoes, a lot of useful energy was diverted to building religious lagers. Rather than mobilize Nigeria to their cause as politicians, the new political elite were busy mobilizing religious constituencies for a war against one another.*²⁸

Kukah argued that Nigerian citizens and adherents of religious organizations have perceived secularism from different perspectives. Muslims argue that unless they stand on their grounds, non-Muslims would continue to subjugate and humiliate them in matters of the

²⁶ Ali Mazrui, "Shariacracy and Federal Models in the Era of Globalization: Nigeria in a Comparative Perspective", Paper Presentation at the International Conference on "Restoration of Shariah in Nigeria: Challenges and Benefits", London, April 14, 2001.

²⁷ Ostien, Nasir and Kogelmann, *Comparative Perspectives on Shari'ah in Nigeria*, 305.

²⁸ Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Religion Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum. Books, 1983), 103.

practice of their faith.²⁹ The non-Muslims on the other hand argue that indeed the debate was not about Islam as a religion, it is largely a debate about the articulation and legal protection of the liberty of Nigerians to live under a secular, democratic Nigerian state.³⁰ A group of Marxist oriented scholars espoused a different perspective. To them the entire debate is not only a flagrant distortion of the secular status of Nigerian state, but also part of the strategic game for the control of the Nigerian state across religious and ethnic boundaries. Their argument was anchored on the fact that these selfish elites really have no love for the Nigerian state beyond their personal interests, when the majority of the poor Nigerians had no other place to call home.

The secularism issue has generated various sub-topics, such as Islamization agenda in Nigeria or Christianization of Nigeria. However, we examine these issue, it is unambiguous that the effect on genuine national cohesion has become a problem. At any rate the influence of religion on Nigerian identity politics, either to detach it or use it to forge a unified identity, has been tainted with emotions, passions, prejudice, ignorance, sentiment, fear of domination, and parochialism, which has always replaced rational reasoning.³¹ Secularism has today reinforced national diversity in unity. A hot debate is whether Nigeria is still a secular state despite the introduction of *sharia* in some northern states of Nigeria and Nigeria's membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986, which later snowballed to a series of religious motivated eruptions of violence of cataclysmic proportions across many states in the Northern Nigeria axis.

The Sharia Debate

Nigeria has witnessed a controversial discussion as regards the introduction of *sharia* courts to Nigerian legal system in northern Nigerian states. On January 27, 2000, Ahmed Sani Yerima, the then Governor of Zamfara State, officially announced that *sharia* legislation would be extended for personal law to all aspects of life including criminal cases.³² Nigerian General Abdulkareem Adisa stated that the introduction of the *sharia* legal system in the northern state of Zamfara was the beginning of a religious clash with political authority.³³ The initiative taken by Zamfara spread to eleven other northern states in the next two years. The crisis of the Nigerian state evolved as *sharia* courts began issuing verdicts. Clashes and confrontations broke out immediately between Christians and Muslims in Kaduna between 2000 and 2002, which was one of the worst clashes since the Nigeria Civil Wars.³⁴ Moreover violence broke out in Jos in September 2001, which led to the loss of lives and properties and threatened national integration. How did these events affect the Nigerian political landscape? Can the identity of a state be separated from religion? Section 10 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution was

²⁹ Kukah, *Religion Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 35-38.

³⁰ Yusufu Bala Usman, *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria, 1977-1987* (Kaduna, Nigeria: Vanguard Printers, 1987).

³¹ Hassan Matthew Kukah, "Religion and Civil Society" pp.225-235 in Maduabuchi F. Dukor, (Ed.), *Philosophy and Politics: Discourse on Values and Power in Africa* (Lagos, Nigeria: Obaroh & Ogbinaka Publishers, 1998).

³² Je'adayibe Dogara Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria* (Plateau State Nigeria, African Christian Textbook (Acts) Publishers, 2010), 101.

³³ Abdulkareem Adisa, "Boko Haram: Security Implication in Nigeria" A Paper Presented in Lagos at A Village Square Meeting on Security in Nigeria, 2011.

³⁴ Center for Religious Freedom, "The Talibanization of Nigeria 2000: Sharia Law and Religion Freedom". (Washington: Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, 2002) p. 17.

amended in 2010 but it remains unambiguous. It states that “the government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion.”³⁵

Christians have argued that the extension of *sharia* is a step towards creating a state religion while the Muslims see *sharia* as a component part of the judicial and legal system in northern Nigeria. Yusuf Turaki notes that:

*The new Sharia legal system includes both civil and criminal matters. This raises question of constitutional legality and human religious and cultural right. A greater part of the debate dwells on these issues.*³⁶

Scholars have argued from various perspectives. First, that *sharia* has been employed to muster corrupt politicians. The *sharia* was also said to establish a patriarchal structure of the north against the pressure of democratization. Politicians have adopted the introduction of Islam to create a direct identity to the political landscape of the country. They adopted *sharia* to emphasize the presence of Muslims in the national space. The influence of this religious code has led to deadly confrontations between Muslims and Christians over the years. It is therefore appropriate to argue in line with Sanusi that religious influence on identity politics pre-dates the issue of *sharia*. He succinctly states:

*The construction of a specific popular Islamic or popular Christian identity in contradistinction to the demands for altering this collective pathetic condition has enabled the dominant classes among Muslims and Christian to appropriate large numbers of the deprived as cannon fodder in the competition for political and economic space- with the Nigeria state as the principal arena.*³⁷

With either emphasis on the introduction of *sharia* or shariacracy, the bone of contention is that religion has been enacted by politicians and elites to militate against national cohesion and further the north-south dichotomy. The *sharia* controversy and its polarization of Nigerian political space has shown how dangerous the politicization of religion is and the role it plays in the creation of identity politics in Nigeria.

The Politics of Interpretation and the Conspiracies of Perspectives

As noted above, Section (10) of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) announces that “The Government of the Federation of the state shall not adopt any religion as state religion.”³⁸ However, Section 38 (1) holds that:

Every person shall be entitled to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his [sic] religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate its religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Referring to the demands associated with the struggle over *sharia* in the past, the constitution also acknowledged the rights of Nigerians to *sharia* justice by stating in section 275 (1) that “There shall be for any State that requires it a Sharia Court of Appeal for that

³⁵ The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999.

³⁶ Yusufu Turaki, *The Institutionalization of the Inferior Status and Socio-Political Role of the Non-Muslim Groups in the Colonial Hierarchical Structure of the Northern Region of Nigeria: A Social-Ethical Analysis of the Colonial Legacy* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston: Boston University, 1982).

³⁷ S. Lamido Sanusi, “The Shari’a Debate and the Construction of a “Muslim” Identity in Northern Nigeria: A Critical Perspective” Paper delivered at a seminar on The Sharia debate and the construction of Muslim and Christian identities in Northern Nigeria University of Bayreuth, Germany, 2003.

³⁸ The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999.

State.” Section 260 (1) adds that “And there shall be a Sharia Court of Appeal of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.”

After the implementation of *sharia* in twelve northern Nigerian States between 1999 and 2000, the debates about *sharia* led to religious polarization as well as to intensive debates about the nature of the Nigerian state. Many Muslims interpret the constitutional provisions by focusing on the provision for freedom of religion. If Muslims are free to practice Islam, which includes the practice of *sharia*, then the introduction of *sharia* at the state level is, in their view, an expression of their constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom.

Many Christians, in contrast, focus on the provision that no state religion shall be adopted and feel that the introduction of *sharia* is unconstitutional because it affects their religious freedom to live without *sharia*. Thus, the institution of *sharia* is viewed by many Muslims as an act of religious freedom, while a significant number of Christians and other non-Muslims interpret it as a challenge to the constitution, which is meant to guarantee their religious freedom.

Despite heated debates about *sharia* at the time of its introduction, the boundaries in the struggles by religious groups and organizations over public space and recognition are fluid. Some Christian groups have ‘translated’ the current Muslim debate into the realm of Christianity and demanded the introduction of (Christian) canon law in predominantly Christian states.³⁹ Others have argued that *sharia* constitutes a threat to the secular state model. For the Muslims, the introduction and implementation of *sharia* has been within the scope of the constitution and for the Christians, it is a violation of the state secularism and freedom of Nigeria to feel safe in the practice of their religious rites without any interference. The fact that inter-religious conflict has claimed thousands of lives and properties most dominantly in the northern states of Nigeria, summaries the contemporary saga.

Religion in the Theatre of Nigerian Identity Politics

With religion generating so much passion, the polarization of the nation has found full expression as the country is finally pitched as a battleground between Christians and Muslims. The involvement of the political class therefore makes the situation even more worrisome. The influence of religion on the Nigeria state and the politicization of religion by the state have created an identity for Nigeria politics today. This influence has made religion lose its spiritual authority in the society and become a tool in the hands of unscrupulous individuals to further their interests. Religion has assumed the role of creating an identity for Nigerian politics which facilitates conflict to militate against the corporate existence and stability of the state.

Today, religion has been transformed into a new fundamental political factor. Religious competition between Christians and Muslims is without doubt the single most significant political issue in the country. Religion has influenced the “federal character principle” and dominated the political debates of various ethnic groups. The “federal character principle” was originally devised to guarantee the equal representation of Nigerians from all states of the federation in political and bureaucratic government offices. This principle has assuaged both northern Nigerian fears of a preponderance of the better educated southerners in government and administration, and southern Nigerian fears of northern domination, based on the fact that most governments since independence have been headed by Muslims from northern Nigeria.

³⁹ Cyril Imo, “Evangelicals Muslims and Democracy with Particular Reference to the Declaration of Sharia in northern Nigeria” pp. 37-66 in Terence O. Ranger (Ed.), *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The identity politics played by various groupings is not only to fill political positions with members of their state, but rather with either champions for the cause of Islam or Christianity. These ideas have been further deepened by the pairing a Muslim and a Christian in political positions at federal and state levels, a quota of individuals holding political office has always been allocated along religion lines. The effect of this can be seen in the 2019 Kaduna State governorship primary when an aspirant choice of a Muslim-Muslim ticket triggered a reaction of the Christian Association of Nigeria in what was perceived as a sensitive issue in Kaduna local politics due to the intractability of religious violence in Kaduna.

Recently the conduct of the election and voting system in Nigeria has been overlaid with religion leading to sectarian vote which has further deepened the impossibility of national cohesion. Election is an important parameter for Nigerian democracy and the desire for sustainable democracy. The north-south dichotomy in elections has resulted in Christian-Muslim controversy. This tension intensified when politicians exploit religion to garner support for their cause and for their personal interests. The politicization of religion has a recurring manifestation in Nigeria elections, and this has hindered the conduct of free, fair, and credible elections. The election of credible and competent leaders based on meritocracy has been hampered using religion. Political parties have been rooted along ethnic and religious lines as well as political office appointment and contestants have been the issue of religious affiliation overtime.

Jibrin and Kazah-Toure state that religious brinkmanship has seriously damaged Nigerian politics and today it seems to be more dangerous than previous regional political conflict in Nigeria history.⁴⁰ From this submission, one can infer that the relationship between individual identity, groups and civil societies has been dangerously politicized. The most dominant influence of religious identity politics is in the northern part of Nigeria. It is widely believed that religion has had more political bearing on the political attitude of northern Muslims than the rest of the federation. Christianity as well is enshrining itself in the politics and hence the problem of domination and identity politics overlaid with religion and ethnicity ensued with an intolerance suspicion.

Some democratic utilities of religion include the integration of human societies composed of individuals and social groups with diverse interests and aspirations. Religious bonds may transcend these personal and divisive forces and religion may legitimize the existing social order. According to Suberu, Mala & Aiyegboyin, religion performs six interrelated functions, namely, restraining or criticizing the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norms, articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills.⁴¹

Inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria form part of the dynamics of identity politics. Political elites in Nigeria have always sought to reap advantages from the multidimensional identities, more so during election periods, and this has resulted in conflicts and instability. This politicization of religious identities during contests for political office often lacks any sustaining unifying ideology. Somehow, politics in Nigeria are fashioned on the appeasement

⁴⁰ Ibrahim Jibrin and T. Kazah-Toure, *Ethno-religious Identities in Northern Nigeria* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003), 131.

⁴¹ Rotimi T Suberu, Sam B. Mala and Deji I. Aiyegboyin, pp.33-41, "Religious Organisations" in Oyeleye Oyediran and Adigun A. B. Agbaje (Edt.) *Nigeria: Politics of Transition and Government 1986-1996*. (Dakar, Senegal: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 1999).

of religious motives. As a consequence, religion attains the level of deification that is difficult to challenge or overpower. In their quest to assume power and state resources, the elites constantly modify patterns of political domination. In this perpetually changing pattern of domination, fears and anxieties are bred that motivate an upsurge in struggle and intolerance.⁴²

Religious Civil Societies and Politics in Nigeria

The religious civil society has emerged out of the circumstances viewed as tantamount to the interest of their religious identities.⁴³ As discussed earlier about the federal character system, system of voting, appointment of bureaucratic officials, religious civil societies have become a tool to proselyte religion in Nigerian politics, hereby creating an identity not only for the religion and politics but also for ethnic divisions. Religious associations in Nigeria have frequently and raucously denounced bad governmental policies or actions that contradicted the interests of their religious community, and the welfare of their religious adherents. Needless to argue, Nigerians have demonstrated stronger links or allegiances to their religious organizations than to the politicians. The fact remains that this propensity, rather than stabilizing the politics, reinforces ethnic differences. The ferocious turn of Nigerians about religious matters which will not be replicated when it comes to national interest has weakened the Nigerian state.⁴⁴

Religious associations have endorsed political contestants for political offices to protect their interest. Thus, religious associations have joined independence groups in civil society in criticizing, influencing the identity of politics in Nigeria. Nigeria's religious organizations have played an important role in encouraging and mobilizing their members towards active participation in, and identification with, public affairs and politics. This is done by stimulating a sense of civic identification and participation in their members by urging members to participate in politics, make sure they are affiliated to a political party, and re-orient them, especially Christians, that politics is not a worldly affair as well as dirty game. Politics is now advocated on the basis of one's civil and political right, of the right to vote and be voted for.

Today, the North-South dichotomy is not discussed along ethnic lines but religious lines. However, religious bodies, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jammatu Nasir Islam (JNI) are tools used by their religious leaders to defend their position in the social political order. These religious civil societies directly or indirectly influence politics, direct their followers to vote for whom and what. To a very reasonable extent, these associations have over the years wielded powers to protect and defend their members and reduce divisions within various groups but, while trying to solve centrifugal problems by uniting various ethnic groups under their religion, they created another national problem of religious division which is more sensitive than ethnicity.

The instrumentality of JNI has been used to negotiate its way to retain political power and to propagate Islam. In 1964, the Northern Christian Association had to strengthen its position by changing its name to Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), to include all

⁴² Jibrin and Kazah-Toure, 18.

⁴³ Thomas O. Ebhomienlen and Emmanuel I. Ukpabor, "Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Comparative Study of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Christian Association of Nigeria", *International Journal of Science and Research*, Vol 2/9, (September 2013), pp.166-170; Hakeem Onapajo, "Politics for God: Religion, Politics and Conflict in Democratic Nigeria", *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol 4/9, pp.42-66 (January 2012), 36-46.

⁴⁴ Roseline Morenike Oshewolo and Barok Andrew Maren, "Religion and Politics in Nigeria", *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, Volume VI/6.3, pp.1-12 (Quarter III, 2015), 7.

Christians in Nigeria as a way of providing a platform to advocate common interest, and wield strong bargaining power in influencing national decisions, politics, and power structures. The impact of religion in a secular state seems to have played out negatively in Nigeria, as politics and religion are mixed in the attempt to gain political hold on the population. For a very long time, religion has been used by the Nigerian oligarchy as its main weapon to hold on to power. Religious organizations articulate, aggregate, and represent distinctive societal interests. The Christian representation and mobilization against Nigeria's membership in the OIC represented only one of the many instances of interest representation by the Christian community since 1986. Nigerian political leaders, on both Muslim and Christian sides have invoked the name of God in politics and sought to use religion freely in influencing the policy decisions and swaying national political and economic policies and to that end governance.

Dancing on the Brink of Religion Divides

Religion in itself is neither good nor bad, it is a reality whether one likes it or not, religion is a social fact that rather than being lamented, dismissed, or ignored should be turned to human advantage by considering constructive means for the purposes such as national integration. Religion when well examined can be used as the basis of integrating the country with a genuine national cohesion.

Religion is meant to be the basis of brotherhood and integration among its adherents, but it has become a manipulating tool in the hands of political elite, who occasionally deploy it to undermine what the gospels of Jesus Christ and Mohammed stand for. Boer argues that the fundamental thrust of the *sharia* centers on inbuilt distrust and lack of confidence between Muslims and Christians that have been manifested over the years.⁴⁵ He noted that the result of this lack of genuine trust is the inter-religious relationship that have generated into religious conflict since the 1980s. Dogara argues from the perspective of non-Muslims living under the rule of a *sharia* state and proposes that a long term resolution to *sharia* crisis is to gain an in depth understanding of the Muslim concept of Islamic state and secular state. He raised the question of second-class citizenship status, the rights and privileges of people, the implication of *sharia* in state administrative procedures. A clear example of what religion can cause in such case is the Kaduna crisis, Zamfara state, Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi state and Kebbi state. The religious sphere has become an avenue for seeking political cover and even political networks are determined to some extent by religious affiliation.⁴⁶ This form of religious manipulation and politicization motivated by personal interest or the interest of few elite has been endangering the Nigerian quest for a genuine national integration. Jibrin Ibrahim attributes this scenario to elite manipulation while dealing with the *sharia* in Nigeria.⁴⁷ He however argued that;

*There is no doubt that the difficulties experiences trying to resolve the Sharia issue amicably has been compounded by the way in which politician has (sic) exaggerated genuine religious concerns and fears in order to create their constituencies.*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Jan Boer, "The Nigerian Christian-Muslim Stand-Off: Some Underlying Issues, Parameters for a Solution" *TCNN Research Bulletin*, No 33, pp.4-23, (2000), 5.

⁴⁶ Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*.

⁴⁷ Jibrin Ibrahim, "Religion and Political Turbulence in Nigeria", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol 29/1, pp.115-136 (1991), 116.

⁴⁸ Ibrahim, "Religion and Political Turbulence in Nigeria", 116.

Today, in many part of northern Nigeria, religious polarization has replaced national unity. The Muslim population is mainly the Hausa-Fulani that inhabits the core north while Christians and a significant Muslim population inhabit the North-Central otherwise known as the middle belt. With this great influence of religion, it will be very difficult for national integration to be achieved if appropriate matters are not handled with appropriate mechanisms. Ekwunife pointed out;

*In Nigeria, the government and her citizens are yet to accept fully both in theory and practice the stark realities of pluralism of religious beliefs and practices. The waves of religious crises and violence in recent years seem to confirm this observation.*⁴⁹

Religion may promote democratic values and norms. This is done through the promotion and propagation of such democratic norms and values as tolerance, moderation, willingness to compromise, and respect for truth, justice, and freedom. Religious leaders in Nigeria have at different times demonstrated this commitment to democracy by urging Nigerians not to waver in their support for democratic institutions.⁵⁰ Identity politics can be a stabilizing force in a plural society by creating the much-needed awareness and objective conditions necessary for national integration. National integration presupposes a condition whereby different ethnic groups understand the strength and weakness of other groups and are prepared to tolerate one another in an atmosphere of “mutual benefits”. Therefore, national integration is the ability of all social groups to remain committed to the ideals of unity by guaranteeing equal opportunities and expression of the identities of the various groups.

Conclusion

Religion plays a key role in Nigerian politics. Today, it can be argued that ethnic identity is becoming less prominent while religious identity plays a more active role in influencing national policies. Recent events attest that religious identity politics is becoming more sensitive as every discussion revolves around religion. In fact, religious identity is more pronounced than ethnic identity and only serves to stimulate ethnicity. The politicization of religion has been examined in the sphere of secularism and *sharia* debates. Religion has assumed the center stage and serves as a basis for identity, mobilization, and legitimization in the state. Religious civil society and associations started springing up from Islam and Christianity in Nigeria to further strengthen the unity of faith and to protect the interest of members in the face of imagined or real marginalization. These religious civil societies should advance the principles on which each of the religions is based by constructively condemning inter-religious conflicts and its perpetrators.

⁴⁹ Anthony N. O. Ekwunife, *Politics and Religious Intolerance: The Nigerian Experience* (Enugu, Nigeria: Spiritan Publications, 1992).

⁵⁰ Mahmud Tukur, *Leadership and Governance in Nigeria: The Relevance of Values* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999).

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