



# MULTICULTURALISM CONTESTED: FREEDOM OF RELIGION, HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CHANGING NARRATIVES OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

The article interrogate and problematise the concept of religion, freedom and human rights in Nigeria's public education sector which is marked by religious diversity. The paper raises the question of whether multiculturalism can serve as the appropriate means to deal with diversity in a culturally divided federal State like Nigeria with public schools. Through survey and secondary data, the paper examines the different ethno-religious issues that have reinvigorated freedom of religion, human rights and public schools in Nigeria. Through this examination, the paper shows how religious freedoms and rights are enmeshed in a crisis of claims and have affected the expression of human rights, especially on religious symbols and modes of dressing. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the fights over the place of religion in public schools are changing the perception of public education in Nigeria, with a lesson for other African countries with similar religious and ethnic diversity.

**KEYWORDS:** Multiculturalism, Religion, Human Rights, Public Education

## INTRODUCTION

The mosque killing in New Zealand, an unfortunate incident, has again raised and reinvigorated questions about religion, freedom and culture. It reflects how controversial, highly sensitive, relative and subjective the issues about diversity are handled. This is especially so as all human society tends to be fragmented with individuals and groups susceptible to biases (Child, 2019; Carol, 2019).

It is indisputable that throughout the history of human civilization, diversity has been a factor that has torn the fabrics of nations apart. It has accounted for reasons that have precipitated violence, civil unrest, death and destruction. For instance, while diversity could be linked to ethnicity, the superiority–inferiority claims of the Nazi Aryan race orchestrated one of the evils recorded in history (SAHO, 2011).

Likewise, owing to religious differences, the Arabs conquered and Islamized Constantinople (Fleming, 2003). Even in Africa, several conflicts emanating from the rubric of religious and ethnic fragmentation have ensued. Civil wars, religious gridlock and ethnic tussles had resulted in loss of lives and destruction of properties in Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa and Nigeria to mention a few. These conflicts have had religious or ethnic undertone at one point or the other. Suffice it to say, that contestations about diversity are ubiquitous.

In light of these arguments, multiculturalism has emerged as a potential solution to the issues of cultural, ethnic, and religious polarization. Multiculturalism presupposes the idea of equality and the coexistence of diverse cultures resulting from the unavoidable differences in humans.

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The ideas of globalization, cross-cultural diffusion, democracy, federalism, liberalism, human rights and freedom have further bolstered the spread of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, this paper contends that multiculturalism has in its peculiar way engendered further fragmentation and does not address it. Bayat corroborates this claim by asserting that though multiculturalism 'calls for equal coexistence of different cultures within a national society', the politics of multiculturalism is paradoxically also steeped in 'the language of separation and antagonism [as well as] cultural superiority and ethnocentrism' (Bayat, 2009:186). For the subject of our inquiry and analysis, Nigeria can be referred to as a melting pot of culture because of its plural nature as it is composed of over 450 ethnic groups and over 400 languages (Chineke, 2016). Nigeria's historical antecedence reflects her as a 'seemingly impossible project' because of the undiluted level of diversity that had enveloped her through her many ethnic groups, religious plurality, multi-culturality, and conflicting ideological outlooks. Incidence of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity culminating into violent conflicts have played out in several obtainable cases; the Biafran civil war, the Boko Haram crises and the Herdsmen – Farmers clashes/crises. Even in political appointments and elections, these issues are obtainable in the form of tribalism, nepotism, godfatherism and favouritism. Typically, Politicians have been found stealing funds to cater for members of their clan (Afolabi, 2019, Afolabi and Agunyai, 2017). There also exist issues of mutual suspicion among political elites and masses alike on issues of ethnicity and religion, as elites are seen as representative of their ethnic group and religious clan. Coalition building, power-sharing arrangements and public offices are justified based on religion and ethnicity. However, with the level of parochial alignment and outlook, the idea of political consensus becomes problematic and, in the process, development is stalled. Given this background, diversity has inhibited the chances of cohesiveness and the good functioning of public education which is instrumental to fostering development. The call to restructure the Nigeria federal structure is an indication that public education needs to be addressed given its challenges.

Education, particularly public education in Nigeria with a population of over 200 million, is fraught with many challenges. Challenges of funding, increasing number of out-of-school children, ballooning population, state fragility, and insurgency are most common with public education in Nigeria. However, added to this is the emerging problem of religion and ethnicity. Yet, with many of the citizens poor, education is seen as quintessential to national development. Its role in revamping societies cannot be overemphasized as it serves as a conduit for knowledge acquisition which engenders growth and development (Economic Confidential, 2018). Therefore, education has been conceived as a solution to diversity; hence, this underscores the adoption of multiculturalism into Nigeria's educational system. Multiculturalism argument concerning public education is that; when students become conscious of their inherent diversities, they would better learn to coexist, integrate and work together cohesively. This paper refutes this claim; through selected cases; as it contends that rather than foster cohesiveness, public schools/education has further deepened hatred and promoted diversity among students. Religious intolerance has stoked diversity with resultant negative implications for students' rights while placing questions marks about the usefulness of public education. In the light of above, this paper attempts to explore the contentions woven around multiculturalism as it relates to the issue of public education in Nigeria. The preoccupation of this paper would be to examine the issues of multiculturalism from the prism of religion, freedom and human rights and how this has impacted the changing narratives on the Nigerian public education system. Section one introduces the issues that the study addresses, while section two conceptualizes the key terms used in the study. Section three appraised the constitutional backdrop to multiculturalism and religion in Nigeria, and section four examined selected cases in Nigeria to highlight how public schools have become a battleground between human rights and religious diversity. This, especially is important to show how these crises arose and how they are resolved. The conclusion, which is the last section, summarises the main arguments of the paper.

### **Conceptualizing Multiculturalism, Religion, Public Education, Freedom and Right**

The paper conceptualizes key terms for a proper understanding of the issues germane to this study. The following terms; multiculturalism, religion, ethnicity, freedom and public education are therefore conceptualized for a thorough understanding of the issues and discussion.

#### **Multiculturalism**

A noticeable claim in earlier literature that is incongruent with modern realities is that multiculturalism is a Western phenomenon (see Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007; Parek, 2002). This faulty conclusion draws from the conception of multiculturalism from the purview of economic, social and political responses to issues revolving around heightened immigration from the third world (see Taylor, 1992; Moddod, 2007) or minority challenges in terms of race and gender only (Philip, 2007). Consequently, in the African context, only South Africa (because of apartheid) attracted scholastic attention as it seemed to be the only country that fit what had been described as a multicultural state (Souldien, 1994; Horowitz, 1991; Bekker & Leide, 2003). Adebaniwi debunks this claim that multiculturalism is a Western idea. He states that

...the Nigerian case – as evident in several other African countries, including Kenya, South Sudan, South Africa, Cameroon, Uganda, the democratic republic of Congo, Mauritania, Central African Republic, etc. – shows that the struggle for multicultural diversity in Africa preceded this period, even if the specific language of multiculturalism was not used at this point... (Adebaniwi 2018: 41)

Owing to this, Kymlicka (2012) points out that the conception of multiculturalism had existed in a state of flux. Its use and application vary over time and could be seen at work in several societies that strive to have a semblance of authority and order in societies marked by diversity and differences. While culture has been defined as “a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world they organize their individual and collective lives around” (Parekh, 2000:2-3); multiculturalism has been conceived as culturally embedded differences or cultural diversity. To define the term appropriately, Gutmann (1993:171) asserts that multiculturalism is “the state of a society or the world containing many cultures that interact in

some significant way with each other.” Nevertheless, while in pluralistic societies, multiculturalism is a positive principle potentially, in praxis, it might not be effective in addressing the problem of diversity, especially in public education as it might create more problems than it can solve as would be shown in selected cases in this study. Corroborating this, Adebaniwi asserted that as the African experience has shown, while multiculturalism is potentially a positive principle in multi-ethnic societies and states, its practices may not necessarily produce beneficial consequences. The uses to which dominant groups, systems or parties put multiculturalism may in fact portend danger for the democratic principles inherent in the idea of multiculturalism (Adebaniwi, 2018: 42). As would be shown in the selected cases, multiculturalism has further divided Nigerian society as different groups found space in the public schools to advocate their religious brands, symbols and apparel without taking cognisance of the rights and feelings of other religious adherents. The laxity for such lies in the contradiction between religious freedom and religious responsibility which was not properly and adequately addressed in the Nigerian constitution.

#### **RELIGION**

Like most terms, religion has no precise definition and is subject to different meanings and interpretations with agreement as to what it means (Greil 2009: 136). Indeed, religion has always been an emotive subject. It entails beliefs and practices, including sacred objects and symbols that individuals subscribe to. Emily Durkheim in his book, the “Elementary Form of Religious Life” gives a clear definition of the concept of religion. According to him, religion is “A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim, 1915: 47). Reflective from the above is the fact that religion is centred on the bifurcation of practices and belief which is embodied in sacred objects or supernatural figures. Also, Rao (1990: 446) defines religion as “a belief in a power superior to man, which is believed to direct and control the course and nature of human life.” In practice, religion is tied closely with culture.

Therefore, religion inspires sacred events or shapes culture reflecting ideals of those who are adherents of a particular religion. As such, it is expected that it corrects anomalies obtainable in human co-existence and is supposed to guide adherents. However, recent evidence has shown that the reverse has been the case as religion has in itself served as an object of disintegration owing to its plurality of multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries (Bergunder, 2014).

### **Freedom and Right**

The era of democracy has informed the issues of freedom and rights. Freedom has been conceived as a natural right man possesses (Kant, 1970). The concept of rights presupposes that all humans are free and equal; hence, deserve equal treatment regardless of race, status, gender and position. According to the United Nations (2016), rights are inherent to human beings, irrespective of sex, race, nationality, language, ethnicity and religion. Human rights also comprise of the right to life, freedom, liberty, freedom from torture and slavery, freedom of expression and opinion, right to education and work which everyone is entitled to without any form of discrimination. Hence, freedom presupposes the ability to decide for oneself and take actions that express individual choice.

### **Public Education**

Education is regarded as the process through which value is acquired. According to Murray (2019: 1), education can be defined as a “discipline that is concerned with methods of teaching and learning in schools or school-like environments as opposed to various non-formal and informal means of socialization (e.g., rural development projects and education through parent-child relationships).” The role education plays in facilitating national development cannot be overemphasized.

Public education on the other hand has a lot of definitions. Basically, it might refer to education sponsored by the government. According to Eric Sheninger it is

the honourable duty of schools to provide all students with the knowledge, tools, and skills to succeed in a globally-connected world. It relies on subject-certified teachers who provide students with opportunities to apply what they have learned to demonstrate conceptual mastery.

Public education is the catalytic force essential to economic prosperity and sustaining a country known for innovative thinking and entrepreneurs (Sheninger, as cited in Dewitt, 2013:6)

As seen above, public education is aimed at societal development through a sophisticated process of learning. However, in practice, public education has come to be perceived as the formal and informal arena or space where government shoulders the burden and cost of providing teaching and learning to its citizens at little or no cost. Having conceptualised the terms, we now turn to the constitutional backdrop of multiculturalism and religion in Nigeria.

### **Multiculturalism and religion: Constitutional backdrop**

From its composition, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state. Comprising over 450 tribes, with a multiplicity of religions, with Christianity and Islam being dominant, it is assumed that multiculturalism would work, especially through the public education platform. Thus, looking at the stipulation of the Nigerian constitution, one would have a concrete grasp of its multicultural outlook. Section (article) 38 (subsection one to three) of the Nigerian constitution makes provision for issues that border on religion, freedom and human rights. The article states thus that;

- i. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
- ii. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian.
- iii. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instructions for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

(Adapted from the Nigerian 1999 constitution)  
 From the constitutional perspective, it is crystal that no restriction whatsoever is placed on individual liberty to education. The right to education is guaranteed for every citizen and a clear-cut line of separation is drawn between religion and education so that it does not affect the process of education. However, this reality had only existed in theory; in praxis, religion has had a profound effect on education and its perception. The public schools in Nigeria are appendages of those in power and teachers who are mostly left unsupervised. It should be noted that as a matter of historical fact, more than 80% of schools in Nigeria are founded by religious groups and institutions, mainly by Christian missionaries. With this in mind, public education has become a space for the enforcement of religious rights and counter actions thereby, inspiring violence that “shatters the social harmony among people of different religious affiliations’ (Chineke, 2016:205). A culmination of the breakdown of public education is the emergence of Boko Haram which believes Western education is ‘evil’ and corrupts its adherents. Boko Haram has since engaged in insurgent activities against public education and the government in Nigeria. It is believed that the lack of a proper definition of the role and place of religion in education gave birth to the Boko Haram insurgency and its ascendancy as most of those recruited are school dropouts; especially those who are ignorant and ideologically persuaded on false claims of religious paradise (Afolabi, 2019).

#### **Religion and Education in Nigeria: Selected Cases**

Education is supposed to be an instrument of national cohesion and development. It is the central hub upon which every other sector of society is positively driven and enhanced. Ironically, in the Nigerian context, heightened controversies had always revolved around education; as issues surrounding religious diversity and intolerance had heavily impacted it overtime (Chineke, 2016). It should be noted that there is a general deterioration in the educational standards of the Nigerian educational system with the prevalence of examination malpractices, indiscriminate award of economic honours, certificate forgery, and plagiarism to mention a few. However, the reasons for this deterioration cannot be simply blamed on the poor state of these countries, the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions demand for

budgetary cuts to public education alone (poor funding) in exchange for loans. The deterioration has critically been exacerbated by religious intolerance and clashes over rights which had culminated in communal tension at various points (for example the Osun, Oyo and Lagos States Hijab issue) and violent upheaval at some other points (the case of ISWAP and the Boko Haram insurgent group).

#### **METHODOLOGY**

As mentioned earlier, this paper adopts survey and secondary data to examine the different ethno-religious issues that have attended freedom of religion and public schools in Nigeria. Boko Haram insurgency and Osun Hijab freedom/human rights controversies as fallout of religion and public education incompatibility will be examined to give credence to the contentions on religious freedom and public education.

#### **Examining Multiculturalism and Public Education: Boko Haram Crises and Osun Hijab Controversy**

When examining the extent to which religion has impacted education in Nigeria, a prominent case that comes to mind is the Boko Haram insurgency which has presented itself as an extreme case of the failure of multiculturalism. It is noteworthy that controversies on Hijab and Boko Haram are not present in private schools. Boko Haram, an Islamic militant group is renowned for wreaking havoc in the North Eastern region of Nigeria through its violent activities of bombing, kidnapping and guerrilla attacks on vulnerable groups, including public schools. Evidently, it has established its cause as a non-conformist to the Western education ideology (Chineke, 2016). It is pertinent to point out that the Boko Haram uprising in the north is a repulsive attack on religion and a setback for education in the Northern region of the country. Most often, public schools, especially public primary and secondary schools are its target, to maim, kidnap and kill. The case of the kidnap of several Chibok school girls is a graphic example of such targeting of public education. This served as a major eye-opener to the fact that multiculturalism exists as a fable in the Nigerian clime. Even outside the Boko Haram attack on public education, the more intimate fight between the adherents of the two major religions; Christianity and Islam, has resulted in what should be the appropriate mode of dressing for the boys and the girls.

For instance, in the Northeast, citizens are predominantly Muslims with large groups of people that are Christians. Yet, the fight in public schools has always been the imposition of the Hijab covering for all female pupils, irrespective of religious codes, injunctions and preferences (Zenn, 2019). This is in addition to the fight over curriculum, extent of religious studies and religious symbols. For example, clashes have been reported about the teaching of the Qur'an to Christian students and the teaching of Bible studies to Muslim students. To date, the controversies have not been resolved and the emergence of Boko Haram has added to the failure of multiculturalism and public education. As of now, no one is sure of the direction and future of public schools in Nigeria's Northeast particularly in Borno State which is the epicentre of Boko Haram insurgency (Botha & Abdile, 2019).

Another prominent case study where religion had impacted public education, stirring up societal upheaval was the Hijab controversy across Southwest Nigeria, particularly in Osun State. With the insistence by Muslim female students to adorn the Hijab on school uniforms, other religious adherents became agitated and followed suit by wearing choir robes, traditional herbalist gowns and all manners of religious apparel. Public schools became rowdy and most public schools became disorderly. The confusion and rowdiness were accentuated by support from different public religious groups that wanted dominance of its religious norms and rights. It was essentially a clash of rights. The ambiguity in the constitution over the specific role and limitations of religion in public schools in many cases, and private schools to a lesser extent, added to the confusion of the bounds of religion and provided fertile ground for religious ideological contestations. The battle for religious freedoms and rights was mainly between Christians and Muslims. The fights, accusations and counter-accusations later prompted court cases and counter-suits. Following a judicial order, female Muslim students were empowered to wear the hijab to school without fear of sanctioning in Christian schools (Olarinoye, 2016). The judicial outcome was precipitated by a lawsuit filed against a Christian school that had prohibited the use of the religious veil (Hijab) by its students. The aggrieved group, the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria and the Osun State Muslim Community had resorted to a judicial action to address the issue considered to be an affront to their religious

freedom, belief and fundamental human rights. The opposing faction, the Christian Community, considered the judgement inappropriate and then went ahead to instruct Christian students to appear in school in their religious robes. This generated a lot of heated debates and impaired academic activities for the time the crises lasted (Olarinoye, 2016). To date, the issues of religious symbols, apparel and teaching have not been fully resolved. The political and religious battle over who and what to teach (Christian religious study versus Islamic religious study) is also another sore point in claims and counterclaims over religious freedoms and rights in Nigerian schools, especially the public ones. The fight over curriculum is ongoing in Nigerian courts.

For the selected cases, most schools are founded by religious groups and institutions and as such, feel affronted that their rights to impose its rules is being challenged by others' rights to self-action on what to wear, learn and receive in the form of knowledge impartation. As earlier mentioned, faith-based schools had been a creation of the early European missionaries who had brought education into Nigeria, though there are sprinklings of Muslim schools, all under the banner of public schools. For one of the interested parties to the conflicts, public education has served as a "disguise to the operation of discriminatory policies, where religious affiliations protect existing cultural and ethnic divisions" (AMSS, 2004: 30). Yet, for those accused, their right to beliefs and actions that align with Christian religious values are sacrosanct and enshrined as the right to religious freedom. Hence, a clash between religious freedom and human rights. While it cannot be discarded that most Christian faith-based schools have engendered socio-cohesion through the inclusion of other faiths (i.e. are open to non-Christians), the majority of Islamic faith-based institutions are notable for social exclusion as they are exclusively meant to be attended by members of similar Muslim faith. However, a critical angle exists when looking at the inclusion in Christian faith-based schools, where arguments suggest that such inclusion is motivated by ulterior motives to convert non-Christian children to Christianity. However, the AMSS report (2004: 30) points out that "separate schooling does not necessarily imply divisiveness in society. To argue that social division lies entirely at the door of faith schools is a tenuous assertion".

Therefore, the issues of religious freedom and human rights in public schools have centred on contending rights and freedoms which have to be carefully managed so that it does not disrupt and condemn public schools to perpetual crisis thereby lowering the standard of education to the point where it becomes synonymous with crises.

### **CONCLUSION**

The paper has looked at the different angles of multiculturalism in a divided ethnic, multi-religious state like Nigeria. The contestation about religious freedom and human rights in the curriculum, the extent of religious freedom and the use of symbols, especially Hijab by female students have caused unending crises and raised the spectre of religious intolerance. It is clear from the cases discussed in the paper that unclear constitutional provisions and religious intolerance are the main factors hindering the development of public education in Nigeria. The emergence of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's Northeast, principally against public western education, compulsory Hijab wearing by all Muslim adherents and contest over the curriculum has defined public education imbroglio in the country. Furthermore, following a similar trend, the controversies over Hijab use in Missionary but now government-owned public schools, particularly in Osun State, Southwest Nigeria, has further raised concerns over religious freedom and rights. Like in Northeast Nigeria, disputes over the curriculum and the type of religious studies taught have come to define the crises and debates in public education. These debates and arguments are replicated in all public schools to more or less the same degree across the Nigerian public education space.

Therefore, the paper contends that religious attachments and sentiments are being emphasized while educational values are de-emphasized in Nigerian society. This is negatively affecting the perception of public education in Nigeria as a site of crisis and contestation. What this portends to the future of the nation is somewhat scary, as education which is a key to national development, is assailed by religious intolerance, incompatibility and contesting claims to freedoms and rights.

Of course, what multiculturalism represents is germane to fostering cohesion, however, as established in the paper, efforts for multiple groups to cohabitate have only led to further fragmentation and suspicion. Hence, the paper suggests that ideas and practical steps that would ensure peaceful co-existence should be embarked upon through mass re-orientation and citizenship education. In addition, what needs to be emphasized in Nigeria should be freedom and the right to education, both formal and informal, particularly for the girl child. Also, every element that relates to national and individual identity must be strengthened and the rule of law guaranteed. Religious freedom and human rights that impinge on others' freedom and rights must not only be minimized but eradicated. Constitutional amendments that are unambiguous and delineate the bounds of religion in public education must be enacted. The constitution amendments that strive to foster mutual harmonious relationships between religious adherents, especially Christians and Muslims, should be enacted. An Educational curriculum that places citizen education at the heart of every pupil or student must be designed to foster a sense of patriotism. There is a need for government public policy that prioritizes adequate oversight, proper funding and a sense of belonging among different religious adherents. This will ensure nothing impedes the progress of education in Nigeria; not even her inherent ethnic and religious diversity. Lessons derived from the study can then be used to better the relationship between religion and public education in other African countries with similar multi-ethnic and religious groups such that the narratives from the continent can change for the better.

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