THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study investigated the challenges of religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria. Albeit religion and ethnic identity give people a sense of belonging, but there are factors that impede their progress in Nigeria. These factors were identified through secondary source of data collections and simple observation. The findings show that ethno-religious conflict and acculturation were among the factors that threaten religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria. In view of these findings, the researcher recommends that the government should introduce ethnic identity day and inter-religious quiz on moral education to enhance ethno-religious harmony in Nigeria.

Introduction

There are over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria with three main religious groups namely: African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity. Oduwobi and Iwuagwu (cited by Obiajulu, 2003) identified 131 ethnic groups and their states of origin in their ethno-historical survey of Nigerian states. The populations, religious and political influences of these groups broadly divide the groups into majority and minority groups. The majority groups are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Other ethnic groups which are classified as minority groups are Tiv. Nupe, Efik, Fulani among others. In a pluralistic society members do not share the same culture. Therefore Nigeria unequivocally is a pluralistic society with diverse ethnic groups, linguistics, cultures and religions.

Culture is the people's way of life and their identity. It includes the way they dress, the type of houses they build, the food they eat, and their language and belief system. Therefore religion as an aspect of culture is the people's identity. This suggests that religion and culture are salient factors for ethnic identity in any society. Religion and culture are so interwoven or connected that it is difficult for a society to have culture without religion or religion without culture just as it is difficult for a society to exist without a form of family. Uche (2007) observed that "religion promotes cultural identity by giving sacred blessings to cultural norms values and practices in the society" (p. 160). Ethnic identities which include religion, race, and language among others enhance nation building. Religion and ethnic identity promote diverse cultural practices in Nigeria and give people a sense of belonging.

In spite of the positive roles of religion and ethnic identity in a society; it is imperative to note that there are factors which pose a threat to their progress and survival in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria. These factors taint Nigerian's image. Therefore the thrust of this paper is to unravel the challenges of religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria. The researcher also proffers solutions to the best approach to ameliorate the problems. Method of data collections are secondary source and simple observation. In attempt to articulate the objectives of the paper the researcher would also glance at the relationship between religion, culture and ethnic identity in Nigeria.

Clarification of Concepts

Religion
According to Madu (2003), religion means "man's recognition of the existence of a power or powers beyond himself, who as it were, created the universe, sustains preserves and provides for this universe" (p.46). Religion elucidates the relationship between God and man who is the creator and the controller of the universe. No wonder why Ugwu (2002) defined it as "faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred" (p.2). Igwemmar (1989) confirmed that it is "the sum total of truths and duties by which man's relation to God is established" (p.127). To put it in a nutshell, religion is man's awareness of the existence of a supernatural being(s) that is greater than man and whom man expresses his total dependent on him through worship, ritual and sacrifice as experienced in various religious groups in Nigeria.

Ethnic
According to Igbo and Anugwom (2002), the word ethnic "refers to a human group that has racial, religious, linguistic and other traits in common" (p.123). Therefore it could be a group of people from a particular geographical location who share similar culture and religion.

Identity
Identity for Haralambos and Holborn (2008) is both internal and external. Internal identity deals with what we think our own identity is while external means how others see us. They went further to say that identities are not just concerned with our own impression of ourselves, but also with our impressions of others, and others' impressions of us. Therefore identity is the sense somebody has about who he is, what something is and the impressions people have about others, someone or something. Thus identity has both individualistic and collective meaning. It could be personal or collective identity.

Ethnic identity
Nmah (2008) said that ethnic identity is "a form of collective identity, which in turn support and strengthens personal identity" (p.42). Ethnic identity is peculiar to human beings, groups, nations, race or tribe. Ethnic identity is not ephemeral and it distinguishes a group from the other. In ethnic identity, members share the same culture. Hence it gives people a sense of belonging and it may be based on religion, language, national origin among others.

Nigerian Peoples: Sketching Ethnography
According to Ojiakor (2003), Nigeria "came into being in 1914 when Lord Lugard amalgamated the northern and southern protectorates into one entity" (p. 3). She got her independence on first October 1960 and became a sovereign state in 1963. Nigeria is a blessed country with the abundant of both human and material resources. Luke (cited by Ogoloma, 2012) observed that "Nigeria as a nation of many nationalities and sub nationalities covers an estimated area of about 373,00sq miles and is bound on the South by a dense coastal swampy reaches of the Sahara desert" (p.64). For Luke, the present population of Nigeria is about 150 million. Nigeria is a pluralistic society with three main religions viz. Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion and over 250 ethnic groups of distinct customs, traditions and linguistics. Nigerians are highly religious that is why there is an element of religion in everything they do. The largest and the most religious and politically influenced ethnic groups are Yoruba, the Igbo and Hausa -Fulani while other groups are Tiv, Ibibio, and Kanuri among others. These ethnic groups have different cultural practices which are peculiar to them.

The Yoruba occupy the Southwestern zone of Nigeria. Yoruba people are mostly found in Lagos State, Oyo State, Ondo State, and Kwara State. They are mostly Christians while few are Muslims. Okodo (2003) observed that "Yoruba men dress in the flowing gown called *agbada* or set of jumper (a top) and *sokoto* (trousers)" (p.54). Yoruba people prostrate or kneel down when greeting elderly people. They also shake their buttocks as they dance. According to Okonkwo and Achunine (1991), Yoruba people are fond of expensive dresses and their female are particularly fond of costly ornaments. They dress mainly in *buba*, *iro*, pale, *iboru* and *dashiki*.

The Igbo people are located in Southeast of Nigeria. They inhabit the following States; Abia State, Imo State, Anambra State, Enugu State, Ebonyi State and Delta State. Igbo women tie wrapper with blouse and headscarf. The Niger Delta people are known for *egwu amala* which they dance with white handkerchief while other Igbo communities or states like Anambra are known for *atiliogwu* and metal gong music (egwu ogene). Igbo people are hardworking, friendly and mostly business men and women.

Hausa-fulani people on the other hand occupy the Northern part of Nigeria especially the Maiduguri, Katsina, Kano, Sokoto Niger, Bauchi and so. Hausa people are easy-going people. They are tall and slender and ebony dark in complexion. Hausa people are mostly shoe repairers although majority of Nigeria's political and military elites are from their state. Okonkwo and Achunine (1991) said that they "are not ambitious and the cattle-Fulani are proud of their occupation which is not associated with sedentary life and sweat-labour like agriculture" (p.49). Nigeria is therefore a heterogeneous society with people from different ethnic groups and cultural practices. The culture of the people is their way of life and identity.

Relationship Between Religion and Culture
Taylor (cited by Nmah, 2012a) defined culture "as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief art, moral, law, customs and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of a society" (p.176). Okodo (2003) affirmed that "the culture of a people is a very important aspect of their life by which they are identified. It is their way of life, which they started to practice from the very first time they started to exist" (p.92). In addition to the above stipulations, culture can be seen as the way of life of people and their identity which is accepted by the people and are transmitted socially not biologically through formal and informal education. This is because a child is introduced into the culture of his people through socialization which could be formal or informal. Culture is learned and also socially shared because every cultural practice must receive societal approval before it could be accepted as the people's way of life and identity. Igbo and Anugwom (2002) said that:

> Culture consists of the material and non-material. The material cultures are those tangible aspects of a people's way of life that can be seen and touched. These include their technology, tools, building and other artefacts. Non-material culture on the other hand refers to the non tangible aspects such as attitudes beliefs, values, language, morals, and customs and so on. (p.16).

In exploring the above, one can see that religion is an aspect of culture. Most of the religious values, norms and practices are derived from the culture of the people. For instance December 25th was formerly known as the day Romans celebrate the feast of their sun-god; but when Christianity became a state religion, the feast was replaced with Christmas celebration. Hence religion and culture are inseparable. They are factors for ethnic identity since in ethnic identity members share common culture and religion; besides culture includes language, the things people do, their belief system and norms. Therefore to achieve the objectives of this paper, it is imperative to glance at the relationship between religion and ethnic identity since religion is one of the factors for ethnic identity.

Religion and Ethnic Identity in Nigeria
According to Igwemmar (1989), religion acts "as cement holding our societies together and provides the necessary support and stability for our societies" (p.230). It is the hub through which the society exists. Religion binds people together since adherents of every religious group share the same religious values, beliefs and participate in the same religious rituals thereby becoming a group. Religion gives its member both self identity and corporate identity. For instance a member of a church has self identity as a member while corporate identity is for all Christians. Ethnic identity on the other hand gives people a sense of belonging. It is what distinguishes an ethnic group from the other. All ethnic groups can be easily identified by their religious practices. For instance in Nigeria, Hausa people are mostly Muslims while Igbo people are members of Christian religion and African traditional religion. Just as the name a persons bears depicts the ethnic groups he belongs to, the religion one belongs also portrays his ethnic group. Therefore, it is difficult to separate religion from ethnic identity. Both religion and ethnic identity promote various cultural practices in Nigeria. Having examined the relationship between religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria, the subsequent sections shall specifically deal with the challenges of religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria.

The Challenges of Religion and Ethnic Identity in Nigeria
The importance of religion and ethnic identity cannot be over emphasized in Nigeria. A thorough examination of these two phenomena disclosed that they are essential elements in promoting the diverse cultural practices in a heterogeneous society; but there are factors that impede their positive roles in Nigeria. These factors are discussed under the following sub-headings:

Ethno-Religious Conflicts
In Nigeria, religion which has been proved to unite people together has also thrown this country to series of conflicts which have both religious and ethnic undertone. Ethnic and religious conflicts are inseparable in Nigeria. This is because Muslims for instance have no distinction between religious and ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflicts for them always metamorphose into religious conflicts. Best (2001) observed that "Islam stresses the primacy of religion above other forms of identity" (66). And that is why most of ethno-religious conflicts experienced in this country are mostly from Muslims dominated areas. Udoidem (cited by Igbo and Anugwom, 2002) said that:

> Islamic philosophy divides the world into two camps 'believers' and 'infidels'. Believers are the Muslim faithful who believe that there is only one God with Mohammed as his only true prophet. Infidels, on the other hand, consist of non-Muslims, particularly Christians, who are regarded as blasphemers' because of their belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God. (p.125).

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Christians on the other hand believe that it is only through Jesus Christ that one can go to heaven. For Udoidem, it seems that Christians and Muslims have contradictory beliefs and religious practices which tend to fuel the embers of conflicts. That is why most of the ethno-religious conflicts experienced in this country are between Christians and Muslims. Nele (cited by Okeke, 2009) observed that "African traditional religion is quite tolerant, undogmatic and very non-militant" (p.10). This does not prove that African traditional religion is not a party to religious conflicts experienced in this country. In some part of Igboland there is still conflict between members of African traditional religion and Christians on the issues of obnoxious widowhood practices and *Osu* caste system.

However several religious conflicts have been recorded in the Northern part of this country over the years. Notably among the conflicts are Reinnhard Bonke riot in October 1991 at Kano, Jos crisis of September 2001, Gideon Akaluka conflict of December 1994 at Kano city, the Boko haram crisis of 2009 till date. Best (2001) confirmed that Akaluka was "accused by the Muslim protesters of using a page of the Koran as toilet paper and as result a death sentence was passed on him by Muslim fundamentalist" (p.69). Therefore it is plausible that the major causes of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria are religious intolerance and fanaticism, the problem of cultural integration, economic and political marginalization of minority group as experienced in Niger Delta crisis. Hence ethno-religious crisis is a serious challenge to religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria because they have the capacity to endanger and undermine national unity and the vision of one Nigeria as stipulated in the national anthem and pledge.

Acculturation
According to Peter (1991) "acculturation as used by anthropologist and social scientist refers to contact or encounter between two culture and the changes that result" (p.22). For Okodo (2003) "it is the emulation of the objects of one culture by another culture" (p.93). Acculturation is a serious challenge to religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria because it enhances religious change and cultural neglegence. According to Igbo and Anugwom (2002) "no society is completely closed to outside influences and ideas, society generally diffuse and borrow new ideas, new techniques and new devices to and from one another" (52). This suggests that no society or culture can be completely free from acculturation probably because of the dynamic nature of culture. But the problem is that many Nigerians are very good in emulating other people's culture at the expense of their own. Acculturation leads to full assimilation especially when an individual or the people become integrated socially and culturally. This is exactly what happens to some Igbo people who are living in Northern Nigeria. Some have acculturated and assimilated Hausa culture so as to feel belonged and accepted by Hausa people.

A lot of changes have taken place in the church today. Women are wearing trousers to church which is against Nigerians culture and identity. Despite the fact that Language is one of the factors for ethnic identity in Nigeria; many Nigerians find it difficult to speak their mother tongue. This is very common to Igbo people; they find it difficult to speak Igbo language and to dress in traditional attire. The most annoying part of this is where preachers preach the gospel in the church or along the street without interpreting it in the people's language. Nnonyelu (2009) elucidated that:

> The glorification of the Whiteman's culture went hand–in-land with the negation of our lifestyles and values. Indeed before and even after Nigeria independence, there came the mad rush for every Nigerian to be anglicised in terms of the acquisition of the English etiquette. Today some Nigerians are more British than the British themselves. (p.16).

The funniest thing about acculturation is that Nigerians have failed to understand that acculturation without significant social assimilation and acceptance is a problem. This is because they have acculturated Whiteman's values and attitudes, mode of dressing even their religion yet they are unaccepted by the white men. That is why Nigerians must rethink and begin to accept and cherish their culture.

Modernity

Madu (2003) said that "modernity with its secular spirit has pushed God and religion out of the way and what we have now is religion-less society, a society in which man holds his own destiny in his hands and can therefore do as he likes" (p.22). Modernity and its secular spirit is a big challenge to religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria. Modernity leads to secularization. It makes man to believe that he can achieve anything he wants on earth without the help of God. The advancement in science and technology cum genetic engineering has made man to question the existence of God.

Modernity leads to cultural extinction. To many Nigerians, their cultural practice which is their identity has become obsolete and therefore should be replaced with modern ways of life. Today childless couples can have a child through adoption which is contrary to African means for childless couples to have a child. Other modern means of having children are artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood. Most Christians today prefer reading the Bible from their mobile phone to Holy Bible. All these modern practices enhance secularization and lack of religiosity. The most painful part of it according to Nmah (2012a) "some protestant churches and many of their pastors and a good number of laity have opposed the attempt to introduce African music in church even drums to supplement the organ" (p.154). Hence the traditional musical instruments that were formerly used in the church have been replaced with modern instrument.

Religious Endogamy

Nigeria is a pluralistic society with people from different ethnic groups and cultural practices. And that is what prompted the composers of the national anthem and pledge to encourage Nigerians to serve Nigeria as one nation and not their ethnic groups. The establishment of federal institutions, the NYSC programme and the National Policy on Education which aimed at giving Nigerians equal educational opportunities are among the measures mapped out by the government to achieve the vision of one Nigeria. But unfortunately religion and diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria have created the atmosphere of discrimination by encouraging religious endogamy instead of exogamy and this is a big challenge to religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria. Umeanolue (2011) rightly observed that "in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, religion has been an obstacle to marriage contracts. So many marriage engagements have been thwarted as a result of religious beliefs" (p.152). To this one may wonder whether religion still performs integrative functions in Nigeria. Madu (2003) said that "humanity is one but of different nationalities; God is one but perceived and understood in different ways; religion qua religion is one but has many systems" (45).

If the above assertion is true in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, why the religious endogamy? Why should various ethnic groups in Nigeria encourage endogamy? Only few Muslims and Christians have married themselves in this country. Christians on the other hand encourage religious endogamy. That is why some Christian groups encouraged their members to marry each other. According to Chiegboka (cited by Nmah, 2012b) "where catholic parents give out their daughter in to non-catholic, they incur the penalty of suspension from the sacraments unless they show non-cooperation by not taking dowry and accepting wine" (p.80). This is why ecumenism and Christian unity is difficult to achieve in Nigeria despite the effort of Christian Association of Nigerian (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN).

Cultural Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentric deals with the use of ideas and beliefs of one particular culture to judge others. Summer (cited by Nnonyelu, 2009) described ethnocentric phenomenon as "one in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled rated with reference to it" (p.17). Ethnocentrism makes people to believe that their own way of life is the best while other people's own are unimportant. The predominant ethnic groups also known as the majority groups believe they are the right people to build this nation. They believe that they are the best brain for political and religious issues in Nigeria this is why President Goodluck's victory in the last election made some members of these popular ethnic groups to run mad.

Also the Boko Haram crisis is not only a religious crisis but a typical example of cultural ethnocentrism. Nmah (2012a) said that:

> In Hausa language, the word "Boko" is an equivocal term which means either "western" or foreign; while the "haram" is an Arabic derivative meaning

"forbidden". Piecing the two words together "boko haram" means to forbid everything western and western education. The intent is to replace modern state formation with the traditional Islamic state, because western values run contrary to Islamic values. (p.277).

Boko Haram sect is one of the Islamic sects in Nigeria. The sect believes that corruption, poverty unemployment and mismanagement of public funds is as a result of western education and everything western which Nigerian government has embraced. They want to replace the modern government with the traditional Islamic government which is against everything western. Boko haram sect wants Nigeria states to adopt Islamic culture as the culture of Nigeria. That is why government establishments and properties became their target of destruction. Besides Saturday and Sunday which are work free day in Nigeria and the use of Gregorian calendar which has Christian origin, Muslims are seriously agitating in Lagos state that the Easter holiday should be weekend holiday or the way they have it during their religious festivals.

However it is pertinent to acknowledge the efforts of Nigerian government and religious organizations in prompting religion and ethnic identity cum integration in Nigeria. No doubt the federal government has introduced so many measures like encouraging freedom of religious worships in Nigeria, National youth's services corps programme, establishment of Federal Universities and Federal Government Colleges to enhance integration in Nigeria. Religious organizations always make use of inter-religious dialogue to address the problem of ethno-religious conflicts experienced in this country. The church has also established CAN and PFN; technological advancement and ethnic identities that are not contrary to religious teachings have been adopted to promote religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria.

Recommendations
Having examined the challenges of religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria, and the efforts made so far by the government and religious groups to promote religion and ethnic identity in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, this paper makes the following recommendations:
1. The government should introduce ethnic identity day and inter-religious quiz on moral education to enhance ethno-religious harmony.
2. Nigerian languages should form part of general studies in tertiary institutions and universities. This is to enable students learn how to speak other languages except their mother tongue.

Conclusion
God is the creator of the universe. He is aware of all the religious and ethnic groups in Nigeria. Besides, Religion and ethnic identity bind people together in the society. Therefore Nigerians should join hands in addressing the challenges of religion and ethnic in this country.

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