

The Influence of Media Coverage of Religious Crises in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Mohammed Cartoon Riots.

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Abstract

Cases of religious crises abound globally. The influence of religious crises have been enormous the world over. To say that media reports of religious crises cause serious religious tension around the world is an under-statement. The case of Nigeria is not different. That religion in Nigeria has not only become sensitive in nature, but that it has resulted to violent crises leading to huge destruction of lives and properties is not in doubt. This is seen in the series of religious crises that engulf the country in the past three decades. This paper explores the role of media in covering religious conflict in the country. The paper focuses on the Mohammed Cartoon Riots in Nigeria. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>). It also explores peoples opinion on media reports of religious conflict in Nigeria. The question is what role the media coverage of religious crises plays in calming or igniting religious tension in Nigeria. What are people's attitudes on hearing reports of religious restiveness over the media? How has the media helped in curbing religious tension in the country? To achieve this, the author makes use of materials published from different media houses like the radio, television, national dailies, and publication from other authors who have written on similar issues. The outcome of the findings will be disseminated to the public for the benefit of the media institutions,(both government and privately owned media houses), journalists, the government and individuals.

Introduction

Cases of religious conflict abound globally. In recent times there has been cases of religious crises the world over. This was reiterated by Juengensmeyer when he stated, "religious conflicts have destroyed infrastructures like houses, churches, mosques and factories as well as peoples' lives" (Juengensmeter, 2000). More to this also, is the damage on non material things like lack of community cohesion, trust and confidence. It is significant to note that religious conflict perpetrators have both motivation and justification to do what they do. This probably explain why religious conflicts occurred with much frequency. In Nigeria the act of violence has been dimensional, as it has economic, social, and political dimensions. Of all these the ethno-religious conflict seem to be more frequent and devastating in nature. This has resulted in serious religious intolerance among the Nigerian populace. Most if not all conflicts in Nigeria that have political, social, and economic origin end in religious conflicts. Religion has become so sensitive that it has polarize the pattern of living in Nigeria and has laid hold on every sphere of life in the country.

Religious intolerance can be seen as the narrow minded perception of other peoples' beliefs and practices by one who is naive. It can be conceived as a prejudiced view that

causes one to be unwilling to accept the beliefs and practices of other religion other than his or her own s religion (Iwe, 2000). This situation can lead to persecution of some religions. In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, there is need to unilaterally accept and recognize peoples beliefs and practices to enhance peaceful coexistence. In the absence of religious tolerance, what seem to rear its ugly head is religious fanaticism--- a position of strong belief in ones religion and its practice, disregarding others beliefs and practices and sometimes to a point of attacking others way of life and worship. (Kreutzner, 2006).

Throughout history, religion has played a significant role in human history, his culture and civilization across the globe. More so, recent study shows that there is a significant relationship between religion and the various spheres of human endeavors economically, politically and socially. Some scholars have argued that religion is the root of all evils and process of the world's outstanding problems and issues. This can be exemplified by the several attacks lunched by the religious groups on each other, more often between the Christian and Muslims. For example the Muslims' attack on the West and the Wests' attack on the Middle East. Such attacks were often spurred by the beliefs that they were under God's command in carrying out his plan. These practices are criminal and against humanity (Human Rights, Article 18), which states that " Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change, his religion or belief and freedom either alone or incommunity with others or public or private to manifest his religion or beliefs in teaching, practice, worship and observance". This is reiterated by Gary "Religion is an increasing dominant force in global affairs and conflict, ignoring this force is to offer an incorrect, narrow picture of the world" (Gary, 2007). The case of Nigeria is not different.

That Nigeria has not only the largest network of communications in Africa, but also the most developed is not in doubt. This paper explores the influence of media coverage of religious conflict in the country. It also explores peoples opinion on media reports of religious conflict in Nigeria. The paper seeks also to highlight on the relationship between the media and religious development in Nigeria. The question is what role the media coverage of religious crises plays in calming or igniting religious tension in Nigeria , what are peoples attitude on hearing reports of religious restiveness over the media. How has the media help in curbing religious tension in the country. These and several other issues would be discussed in the study. Before then, a brief historical background of the relationship between the main religions of Nigeria is provided below. This will go a long way in providing the reader the understanding of the heightened nature of religion in Nigeria.

Historical Background Of Religions In Nigeria

Like any other country that faces the problems of ethnic and cultural diversity, Nigerias' recent history has been that of civil unrest, riots, violence and conflicts in the process of finding an answer to the national question of unity in diversity. Over twenty of these riots are religious in nature.(Enwerem,1995). The question here is, to what extend is religion significant in shaping the way Nigerians understand each other's religion by helping to shape their outlook. This I say because religion as man's benefactor should be a factor in the way Nigerians should understand themselves.

Historically, Nigeria has three religions: African Traditional Religion, Christianity and

Islam. There is no accurate percentage to determine the exact population of the adherents of each of the religions. The available figures are that of the 1931 census which are not reliable as these figures have changed over the years. These figures gave 50% for pagan worshippers, 47% for Muslims and 34% for Christians. Nnyombi gives a total figure of 20% of the total population of Africans as pagans giving a total of 760 million people. He further said that this figure is on the decline despite the revival in African Traditional Religion in recent years (Nnyombi, 2008). More still, apart from these religions, Nigeria has experienced the influx of new religions which are of Eastern type like Eckankar, Rosicrucian, Grail Message, Guru Maharagi, Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star and Aestherius societies among many others (<http://wek.utk.edu/rhackett>, accessed March, 2008). Few other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jehova's Witness, Bahias, and Rastafarians have practitioners. Other categories of religions which are indigenous and fast spreading also exist. These include, Olumba olumba and the Aladura churches. Others are Bori Cult, Igbe Cult, Ijov and many other anti witchcraft movements. (Danfulani, 1999).

Islam and Christianity are foreign religions, but the most dynamic in spread, Islam emerged in the 7th century and became well established in Nigeria in the 15th and 16th centuries. Islam received a boost during the reformist jihad that was declared by Shehu Uthman bin Fodiye (Sheikh Usman Danfodio), that was launched in North Western Nigeria from 1804. In the North East, the Mais (rulers) of Borno were converted to Islam a little bit ahead of the Habe (Hausa) rulers. By the 1805, the El-Kanemi had made Borno the most Islamized area in Nigeria. By the middle of the 19th century, Islam had virtually swept the Hausa and Fulani settlements in the extreme parts of northern Nigeria. This explains why the north was exaggeratedly tagged a "Muslim block" (Anene, 1967). Not every part of the north was influenced by Islam, as the ethnic groups within the central part of Nigeria defended themselves against the intrusion of Islam and remain traditionalist. This later opened up the way for Christianity to flourish in the area. This exemplified why the religious practices of Islam in the northern part of Nigeria differ significantly from that of the southern area. While Muslims in the north are more strict on some Islamic religious practices and could easily be aggressive, those in the south (particularly those in the western part of Nigeria where Islam had held as a result of the 1804 jihad), are more liberal. Since the founding of Islam in the seventh century and its attendant Islamic beliefs and practices, it has had far reaching effects on the development of Nigeria. This is seen in the developmental programs it has for its members and non members alike.

Christianity came into Nigeria in the 15th Century, but failed and received a boost in the 19th Century when the ex-slaves from Sierra-Leone reestablished Christianity in the Coastal areas (Lere, 2001). These early missionaries included the Church Missionary Society, Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and several other missionary societies. They initiated many aspects of what we now can consider as development, as they involved themselves in mass education, health care, and initiated movements that brought about social transformation to the socially and physically disadvantaged and the development of Nigerian nationalism. Thus, the elite produced in their numerous schools became self-conscious and they began to nurse the ambition for self-expression claiming some ability not just to express themselves but to manage their resources towards self-actualization (Ajayi, 1965). This later led to the independence of the country in 1960.

African traditional religions are the various indigenous religions of Nigerian ethnic groups. The beliefs and practices of the traditionalists are based on the faith of their forefathers which were handed down to them from generation to generation. (Mbiti, 1968). The society under the traditional religion was respectful, tolerant and peaceful. Infact, these indigenous religions provided the needed condition for the growth of both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. They were free of religious conflict, prosytilisation and competition for members as obtain in the foreign religions-Christianity and Islam, It is significant to note here that the cold war between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria deteriorated and became an illusion. This situation continued in increasing measure especially from the early 80's, such that the two dominant religions faced each other in violent combats leading to huge destruction of lives and properties. These religions that have contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria, also contributed to its near down fall and destructions when huge number of lives and properties were destroyed. Unfortunately this trend which became endemic in the 1980's has continued unabated into the 1st decade of the 21st century (Best, 2002). However, this aspect would be discussed latter in more detail.

Despite their destructive tendencies, the two religions in Nigeria are still contributing to the wellbeing of the Nigerian citizenry during and after such mishap, making them indispensable. This is seen in their provision of asylum and succor to displaced victims of religious crises. Such persons were kept even in places of worship like mosques and churches where short term relief materials like food, financial aid, clothing, and health care were provided them (Clarke, 2005). This seems to be the nature of religions globally.

Media And Its Role In curbing Or Igniting Religious crises

Media is simply communication. It is a powerful medium through which information are disseminated to the society or public in fairness and objective manner. It keeps the public inform and current on local, national and international issues .however there are both the good and bad sight of it. The benefits include information dissemination, when it is free from manipulation by groups, organisations and individuals. The media in focus for the purpose of this study include the radio, television, national dailies, and books published by others on the issue.

The world of media in transmitting religious matter is fast changing. For example, the television has witness an unprecedented number of television series which directly or indirectly transmit religious programmes showing them internally on its programme. Apart from the regular programmes that are being run officially on the media particularly radio and television, these media placed religious jingles announcements and songs in between scheduled programmes. A scholar reiterated, "Therefore, religion either explicit or implicit was much more the feature of media" thus, media has become a significant means of transmitting religious programs. On the significance of media to the development of religion, one will admit that media has greatly help in the development of religion.

At times of religious crises it is significant to note that the electronic media is used for programs that can help in curbing tension and promoting religious tolerance. Sometimes, it can start by a barn on open air preaching, religious broadcasting, and the use of religious cassettes. Other measures include broadcast from religious leaders, governors of those

states concern or the president of the country.(However the government has often been accused for not being prompt to provide security to the citizens of Nigeria at crises periods). For example, during the escalated Kaduna riot of 1987, the Emir Ka no made a radio announcement appealing to people to stop the wanton destruction of lives and properties and to embrace dialogue. The Kano state governor in the same vein, quoted both the Quran and the Bible appealing to both sides to lay down their arms and embrace peace.

On the other hand the print media can better publish debatable issues that might not be discussed on the television, yet they are likely to print provocative issues. For example, there has been series of publications from both Christians and Muslims authors which are sometimes bias or even provocative. For example one Anani Seraki cited an article in the Sunday Standard of February 28th 1998, where Prophet Mohammed was described as an epileptic prophet and said that the Katsina riot of 1991 was caused by that. In another development, one Yahya Yakubu was said to have led thousands of supporters to burn down a Daily Times office on ground that the prophet Mohammed had an affair with a woman of easy value and latter married her. Though the newspaper latter apologized, some harm have been made.

There have been cases of inaccurate reports by the media houses too. These also have led to serious confusion and near violence in the country. There was a press report from the allege government subvention of about ten million naira given to the Muslims to build the central mosque in the federal capital Abuja of which the same amount was given to the Christians. (Bidmos, 1993). Some of the crises were not correctly reported as to how they started and who the starters of these crises were. (Kukah, 1993). Others still are religious publications that are provocative or bias or both, from both sides. There are also cases of Christians being denied accesses to electronic media in the northern part of Nigeria the comment of the former Ambassador Jolly Tanko Yusuf;

Christians have been denied accesses to electronic media in 16 northern states, while Islam monopolizes 24 hours for its broadcast in the same area. Agents compound themisery by using the media to heap insults on Christians. Every hour the muslims broadcaste provocative statements on chritianity. It means nothing , they proclaimthat people go to church on Sundays only to dance and to listen to songs . authorities merely wink (Yusuf, 1995)

Although the Muslims were reluctant in using the electronic media at the initial stage for fear of western influence, they latter saw the need for mediating the religion. Sheik Abubakar Gumi was one of the first Nigerian Muslim to recognize the potency of mass media. the print media has been manipulated by both sides. One is bound to accept the fact that both Christians and Muslims have produced sensitive materials over the years. The hot debate on OIC, and plans for Nigeria to join the Islamic Economic Group tagged the D-8 in the newspapers, (Danmole, 1999).

Some Opinions On Media Reports of Religious Crises

On the role of media reports of religious crises there are divergent opinions from both Christians and Muslims. Some of such opinions are sampled. The author for purposes of security deliberately could not use names of respondents in this study as it was the popular opinion of the informants.

One of the informants was of the opinion that covering religious crises on television

and radio can create other problems similar to the one on ground, and can lead to igniting crises in other parts of the country and sometimes beyond. An informant was of the view that reporting religious crises are important because it helps members of the religions to know what happens to their members in other parts of the country and beyond. Another informant felt that reporting religious crises is of no use as it often creates more problems to the people particularly innocent people. Another informant was of the view that people find it a way of causing destruction by killing and looting properties. An informant had this to say, without information we shall be in the dark, and ignorant of what is happening in other places like America, Britain and so on. We need to be discipline in everything. There is nothing like religious crises. Neither Christianity nor Islam encourages destruction of any sort. Those who are selfish, and to some extent the poor always want to cause commotion in order to loot properties for their use. They are easily manipulated by politicians who want to fight their opponents. The government is the problem. She has often been involve herself in religious affair and sometimes take sides. This view has been corroborated by Boer(Boer, 2004).

Religion

Religion provides people with the sense of identity. Religion is as old as man. Religion, and though a benefactor to man, it has caused great damage to man. This happens when each religious organisation tries to enforce her on the other religions or each of the religions does same. This began with the Christian crusades by the westerners in the middle East, and the jihads by the Muslim jihadists and such other religious wars perpetrated by religionists. Religion on the other hand was initially considered by sociologists as a private and personal affair and so has nothing to do with any human endeavors(Clark, 2007). However, the story of religion became something else as religion was discovered to have a grip on human endeavors. It is on record that since the time of slavery and slave trade, when lives and properties were destroyed and wasted, was considered less devastating compared to the losses incurred from the ethno-religious conflicts so far recorded. In Nigeria, religion as earlier stated, has become so sensitive that it has resulted in crises situations creating fear, distrust and suspicion among the two dominant religions –Christianity and Islam. As a pluralistic society, Nigeria's religious crises began as cold war, which busted in 1980 to 2004. below is the list of the several religious crises experienced in the country. Although the study is focused on the Mohammed Riots of 2005, there is need to briefly highlight on other similar cases of the escalation of religious crises in Nigeria.

A Catalogue of Some Religious Crises and Media Reports.

Religion out rightly became sensitive in Nigeria since the early 80's and seem to be uncontrollable even by the government. Some Nigerians have blamed the colonial administration for the present predicament, yet they could not help in curtailing the present situation (Imo, 1995). Between the 1940 and 1960's religious relationship in Nigeria was at the mutual respect, as it was kept at the level of cold war, but it's outburst came in the 80's, a phenomenon that has drawn the country miles backward.

1. 1986 there was a nationwide agitation over the registration of Nigeria as a member of the controversial OIC among the Nigerian populace.
2. 1986, in Ilorin Christians on procession were attacked by Muslims.
3. 1986 in Ibadan, Oyo state agitation over the location of a cross mounted in an open place since 1954.
4. 1988, there was another nationwide debate on sharia court.
5. The Maitasine riots in Kano in 1980, 1982 and 1991.
6. 1982, 1988 and 1992 religious violence broke up in Kaduna. It was believed to be an escalation of the Maitasine crises of
7. 1992, it took place in Maiduguri.
8. 1984, it occurred in Jameta Yola.
9. 1991 religious violence erupted in Bauchi.
10. It was in Zaria in 1992.
11. In Zangon Kataf in 1987, 1992.
12. In Funtua in 1983.
13. In Potiskum in 1994.

All this while, Jos the capital of Plateau state tagged “the home of peace and tourism” remained a succor to the non Muslim who had to run for their dear lives. But on September 7th 2001 she had her own share of the crises. In all these thousands of people were displaced, lives were lost and property worth millions of naira were destroyed.

Considering the series of the eruptions and the intense nature of these crises, one is forced to say and rightly too that most of these crises were share escalation due largely to media information. A typical example was the Funtua and the Zangon Kataf both in Kaduna state There were instances where these crises were not within the same state, but they were still escalating from state to state. The case of Shagamu in the south escalated to Kano. In Sokoto state, the government had to close down a nursing school for fear that people may take the law into their hands. This was when a student described Mohammed as a terrorist. This provoked the muslim community and they staged a peaceful demonstration. In another report in Jos, a christian magazine the Tough, a publication of the Stafano’s Foundation reported the killing of a female christian teacher in Gombe state who was on exam supervision and caught a Muslim student in exam malpractice. In 2002, a Miss World Beauty Contest could not hold, as a female journalist Miss Isioma Daniel wrote in her column that the prophet would have picked a wife among the beautiful girls on parade. she also had a death threat. There was also in Yelwa in Plateau state the escalation of religious crises to Kano. These are few out of the several cases in the country.

The Mohammed Cartoon Riots In Nigeria

The Dutch cartoon is one of the cases that showed the power of religion in man. Therefore, looking at religion as having nothing to do with man’s affair, or as a private matter no longer holds. Allowing religion on its own can be devastating. This was seen in the global reaction to the portrayal of the Prophet Mohammed among the Muslim Umma. The Mohammed Cartoon Riots outside Nigeria, in a far away Denmark, was echoed in the country due largely to the sensitive nature of religion. It is significant to note that this phenomenon attracted global reaction as well. On 30th September, some twelve cartoons

on Prophet Mohammed were published in the Danish national daily called *Jyllands-Posten* portraying the prophet in a number of ways. This was provocative to the Muslims faithful. This began with the Muslim community in Denmark amongst the Dutch people. (<http://www.jyllandspos.com.editorial>) The Muslim community in Denmark mobilized themselves to stage a peaceful demonstration. This was followed by the ambassadors of Muslims from different countries. They made efforts to see the prime minister to register their unhappiness and to request the authority to take action on the newspaper. As they were refused audience with the prime minister they angrily closed down several embassies signaling more danger. One is forced to ask the question “why would prophet Mohammed be so portrayed in different shape” It is on record that the Danes have a traditional edifies of portraying different religions and their prophets in different mood and posture, and so the case of Islam was not different. As such, the portraits of Mohammed were not against the practice of the Danish people. However, an apology was tendered to the Muslims. (<http://www.jyllandsposten.com.editorial>) The Danish Prime Minister in a television broadcast apologized to the Muslim community, but still felt that there should be room for freedom of speech. As if this was not enough several other papers published the cartoon on ground that they were defending freedom of speech.

In January 2006, there was other nations like Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and several others published the cartoons this really appeared as a deliberate attempt to provoke the Muslims. The reaction in Denmark was that, the Muslim community took the newspaper to court, but the judge dismissed the case on ground that the Danish “Blasphemy law” does not recognize that. In the Middle East, the Muslim community condemns the act in its totality. In their mosques they reminded themselves on their duty to defend their image and integrity of the prophet as well as their religion. This finally led to their moving into the street for a peaceful demonstration and called on Muslims to protect their religion. The reactions kept enlarging and the issue became a global one. Other measures Muslims took included the boycott of Danish products, in Nigeria this has become a legacy. This boycott of Danish products by the Muslim umma, still persist in Nigeria. Termination of bilateral relationship with Denmark. Issuing death threats by promising to pay a huge sum of money to any person that could kill the cartoonists. Publication of a poster depicting the virgin Mary with an open breast. Organisation of public lecture to condemn the action.

In Nigeria the case was not different. Ironically, the Nigerian Muslims reacted even where most of them had not seen the publications, this was so, because no Nigerian news paper published the cartoon, but they saw the reactions on radio and the television broadcast of the cartoon and the reactions from other places. They therefore took to the street to show their solidarity. This reaction was more in the northern part of the country. Cites like Maiduguri, Katsina, Bauchi, Kano and Gombe were worst heat. As lives were loss and properties destroyed. Below is the account of what took place in two of the northern states of Nigeria.

Katsina

In Katsina state, the Muslims organized themselves for an open air preaching at the Headquarters of the Jama’atuNasril Islam (JNI), at Kofar Soro. They protested on the Danish cartoons. At the end of the program, some were of the opinion that a protest letter be sent to the Governor who then was the present Head of States President Umar Yaradua. At

this point they were divided as some faction could not see any reason for that, particularly that the Grand Khadi was in attendance. This developed into a hot argument, during which some youths matched to the Government House, but they were stopped by the law enforcement agents. As this act enfeebled the group, they resort to rampage. Innocent souls were attacked, properties looted and lives were lost. (New Nigeria, 2004).

Borno

In Maiduguri town, a similar thing happened. This was reported by a Jos based Hausa language Muslim news paper call AT-TAJDID published on 24th February, 2006 under the title, “*Nigeria Ta Kama Wuta*” literally meaning, “Nigeria is on fire” they too like the Muslim in Katsina organized an open air preaching to condemn the Danish news paper cartoons of Prophet Mohammed at the Ramat Square. The paper reported that at the venue some Muslim youths suspected someone they felt was not a Muslim among them. They challenged him and beat him up. He was rescued by the policemen who were there to keep peace. This latter broke out into a riot. Those who left amidst the confusion from the lecture square carried the violence to parts of Maiduguri town. Soon the whole of Maiduguri was on fire as the paper indicated. Several people lost their lives. The New Nigeria News Paper reported that fifty six people died. One Rev Father Michael was reported killed in the crises.

Recommendations

That the government should endeavor to provide security to its citizens at periods of crises. That the government should do everything within its powers to curtail and stop religious crises. That government should verify sources of information before taking action on issues to do with reports on religious crises. That government must check the publications of private medias and to check the proliferation of quark media houses. That government should give free hands to its media houses, yet checking them to exhibit the ethics of their profession. That the excesses of hoodlums be curtail by the government. Government should provide employment opportunities to the youths and other jobless persons who could easily be lured into acts of vandalism. Government should provide succor to displaced persons Philanthropic organisations should help both the government and the society organizing workshops, seminars to consensitise and educate the public on religious matters. That the two warring religions should emulate the tolerant feature of the African traditional religion which provided them the opportunity to thrive. That the two religions should respect each other’s beliefs and practices. That the two religions should be sincere with each other at the dialogue tables. The adherents of the two religions should desist from provocative actions and avoid taking the law into their hands. Members of the two religions should verify facts of issues around them and stop pedaling false rumors. Media houses must restrain themselves from publishing and broadcasting false hood. Media houses must publish credible books and pamphlets.

Conclusion

It is significant to note that the episode threw the country into panic. Those from the southern states living in the north were moving to the south for fear of any religious crises. The case was the same with those who were northerners staying in the south. The findings

show that religious adherents are sensitive to reports on religious crises. Some religious reports over the media could heighten religious crises in Nigeria. It is significant to note that almost everything is given religious interpretation in Nigeria. There is need for both parties Christians and Muslims to come together and “sincerely” dialogue with each other since both parties suffer the consequences of the riots. Both should exhibit sincerity (Christians and Muslims), as they dialogue with each other, if not Nigeria would continue to be fragile.

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