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The Socio-Political Factor in the Christian-Muslim Conflict in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT *This study identifies ethno-political factors as the major contributor to the Christian-Muslim conflict in Nigeria, while indicating the secondary role of socio-economic considerations and religious fundamentalism, as exemplified in the Zangon Kataf riot of 1992 and the Tafawa Balewa and Bauchi disturbances of 1991 and 1995 respectively. The study reveals that the tension that erupted from these episodes merely ignited the bomb of ethno-political rivalry between the minority and majority ethnic groups. The eruption of violence on each occasion was the manifestation of the collective anger of minorities that had been incubating over a long period against the domination of the Hausa/Fulani hegemony. Religious and socio-economic considerations were only incidental factors. It is stressed that, even though the disturbances started as ethnic conflicts, they spread rapidly to other towns in the wake of rumours of their religious connotations. The Christian-Muslim conflict, which is traced back to the 1979 Shari'a controversy, is believed to have done serious damage to the unity of Nigerian society. The article sees the practical solution to this problem as lying more in the use of the school system in inculcating the spirit of mutual acceptance and harmonious co-existence, than in the creation of chiefdoms which tend to cause separation and division.*

During the past one and a half decades, Christian-Muslim conflicts resulting in violent riots have intermittently disrupted the socio-political life of Nigeria, sometimes threatening the stability of the nation as a corporate entity. Prior to that period, Nigerian citizens were able to live together peacefully and in an atmosphere of mutual religious respect. Nigeria started to experience deadly religious revolts from 1980 with the onslaught of the Maitatsine sect in different parts of the country. They struck in Kano in 1980 leaving more than 4000 innocent people dead, they revolted in Maiduguri, Borno State, in 1982 with several casualties, and in Jemeta-Yola a similar insurrection took place in 1984. The Maitatsine disturbance was one of the most devastating social uprisings Nigeria has experienced in recent times. The movement was organized by Muhammad Marwa to challenge the social injustice in society.

The Maitatsine uprising, being intra-religious, falls outside the scope of this study. The concern of this paper is with the inter-religious riots involving Muslims and Christians who constitute the major religious groups in the country. They include the Kafanchan riot of 1987, the Kano riot of 1991, the Zangon Kataf riot of 1992 and the Tafawa Balewa and Bauchi riots of 1991 and 1995.

The genesis of the Christian-Muslim conflicts in this country is traceable to the 1979 controversy over the introduction of the Shari'a in the Appeal Court. Since then the relationship between the two groups has been characterized by mutual suspicion, rivalry, acrimony, rancour, discord and hostility. This was the mood that ushered in the 1986 debate over the desirability of Nigerian participation in the Organization of the

Islamic Conference (OIC) which further aggravated the strained Christian-Muslim relations.

There is the general tendency to see religious fanaticism or over-zealousness as a *de facto* root cause of the riots. This is why in *Tell's* editorial opinion of 28 October 1991 a call is made for the demolition of all mosques, churches, synagogues and sanctuaries and for every religious practitioner to practise his religion in his heart as a means of achieving peace.¹ The bias against Islam is not even concealed as the writer asserts 'any religion that clings to an obnoxious reactionary doctrine that proclaims death as rebirth will always breed fanatics who will always look for the slightest opportunity to play the martyr.'²

In this quotation, Q. 3:169 is misinterpreted as encouraging fanaticism in Muslims. The doctrine enshrined in the passage is even seen as obnoxious and reactionary.

This study aims at exploring the cause of the Christian-Muslim conflicts in Nigeria beyond 'religious fundamentalism'. This does not, however, mean that attempts should be made to down play the role of religious enthusiasm in the crisis. The thrust of the paper will be to make a distinction between the causes as to what is religious, what is ethno-political and what is socio-economic.

The Ethno-Political Factor

The Zangon Kataf³ riot of 1992 in Kaduna State and the Tafawa Balewa⁴ riots of 1991 and 1995 in Bauchi State of the federation have proved to be the most devastating of the civil disturbances that have resulted in breach of public peace in recent times. With the loss of thousands of lives (including those of members of the law enforcement agencies) and destruction of property worth millions of Naira in each episode, the riots have brought to the forefront the insecurity and the fragile nature of the nation's acclaimed 'unity in diversity'.

The immediate cause of the Tafawa Balewa riot on 20 April 1991, was the dispute over the sale of *suya* (roasted meat) purported to be pork *suya* by a hawker of *suya* (a Christian Sayawa) to a Fulani Muslim buyer.

The dispute attracted the attention of passers-by and resulted in a free-for-all fight leading to arson, killing and maiming, etc. The riot, which could not be quelled for a week, spread like wildfire to the other parts of the states including Bauchi town, the seat of the state government. This incident occurred at a time when the authorities of Tafawa Balewa Local Government had not found any solution to the problem arising from the use of joint abattoir facilities by the Muslim (Hausa/Fulani) butchers and the Christian (Sayawa) butchers. According to the Commission of Inquiry set up by the federal government under the chairmanship of Justice Bala Babalakin, the Hausa/Fulani had been slaughtering their animals for public consumption on a rock side for more than a century. The Christian butchers in the recent past had started to slaughter their animals on church premises because of their growing animosity towards the Muslims. With the construction of a new abattoir by the local government, unlicensed Christian butchers wanted an equal allocation of space within the abattoir with the licensed Muslim butchers. The *suya* episode only compounded a problem that already required a solution.

Even though the riot was quelled, it was an uneasy calm. The Commission made far-reaching recommendations to bring a lasting solution to the problem in the area, one of which is the recommendation to create a chiefdom for the Sayawa. Despite this, another riot erupted in July 1995. This time it was sparked off by the Cabinet reshuffle

by the Bauchi state government in which a Christian Sayawa was dropped and replaced with a Muslim Hausa/Fulani. The Sayawa saw this as confirmation of the alleged discrimination policy of the Bauchi state government against their tribe. The ensuing riot was as devastating as that of 1991.

The immediate cause of the February 1992 Zangon Kataf riot was the decision of the Zangon Kataf local government chairman, a Kataf Christian, to move the Zango weekly market from its old site in the heart of Zango town to a new site without complying with the necessary constitutional requirements.⁶ The discontent of the Katafs with the old market is due to the fact that most of the stalls there are owned by the Hausa/Fulani with no room for expansion.⁷ The Zango people, who are predominantly Hausa settlers, were strongly opposed to relocation because the new site was unfavourable to them. The ensuing disturbances rocked the whole of Kaduna State.

A peripheral assessment of the causes of these riots would tend to suggest religious motifs for their eruption. But this would be misleading. The abattoir and the pork *suya* episodes, as well as the cabinet reshuffle exercise, with all their religious colouring should not be seen as the root causes of the 1991 and 1995 Bauchi State disturbances. The tension which developed from these episodes merely ignited the bomb of ethno-political rivalry which had been smouldering in Tafawa Balewa town since 1945. The eruption of violence in 1991 and 1995 was an outward manifestation of a long period of incubation of the collective anger of the Sayawa against the hegemonic hold which the Bauchi Emirate Council had on administrative power in Tafawa Balewa, particularly political influence through the appointment of District Heads.⁸ Their anger found expression in their uprisings of 1945 and 1959, as well as the murder of their District Head in 1977.⁹

Religion was only an incidental factor in the crisis, as most Sayawas are Christians and the Hausa/Fulani and Jarawa are Muslims. The Sayawa, being Christians, solicited and won sympathy for their cause from the Christian community around them. The Muslims only rose to meet the onslaught.

The continuous refusal of the Sayawa to accept the authority of the Hausa/Fulani District Heads constitutes the kernel of the administrative dilemma in their local government area. The Sayawa's resentment of Hausa/Fulani authority and the feudal system of governance imposed by the Emirate Council is due to several factors viz:

- (i) their claim to ownership of Tafawa Balewa town by reason of being the earliest settlers there
- (ii) their majority status among the several tribes living in the area
- (iii) the imposition of the Shari'a legal system which is alien to their custom and religion
- (iv) the discriminatory policy of the government in appointments to public office.

The incessant uprisings of the Sayawa in this region are meant to serve one purpose, i.e. to call the attention of the authorities to their pressing and long-standing demand to be removed from the feudal domination of the Hausa/Fulani. Their quest is for complete political and administrative autonomy from Bauchi Emirate Council leading to the establishment of their own independent chiefdom. The genesis of the Zango riot is also ethno-political. The market relocation was nothing but a smoke screen. The real problem has to do with the bitterness of the Katafs towards the Zaria Emirate system which had been the system of governance over the Kataf since the advent of the colonialists. The bone of contention of the Katafs against this system is that they have a distinct culture different from that of their rulers under the emirate system. They do

not feel happy having anything to do with the emirate system in Zaria which they regard as exploitative and oppressive. Their demand, like that of the Sayawa, is for complete political and administrative autonomy leading to the establishment of their own chiefdom.¹⁰

It thus becomes clear that both the Sayawa in Bauchi State and the Kataf in Kaduna State are fighting in a common cause. A common feature in their struggle is their aggressive stance. The extremity of their violence against persons and properties extended to massacre aimed at the possible elimination of their Hausa/Fulani overlords. The most disturbing aspect of the crisis is the complicity of the law enforcement agencies. As recorded in the findings of the commissions of inquiry, rather than discharge their primary duties of preserving law and order, protecting life and property, preventing and detecting crime, they teamed up with Kataf and Sayawa tribesmen to unleash their fury on the Hausa/Fulani.¹¹ This connivance was made possible by the unsatisfactory arrangement of posting junior police officers to their local government areas of origin.

The Religious Undertone

We have just noted in the discussion of the Tafawa Balewa and Zangen Kataf riots that religion is only an incidental factor as the problem is basically ethno-political. The fact that the Sayawa in Bauchi State set out to solicit and win the sympathy of their Christian counterparts makes it difficult to detach religion from the crisis. It should be noted that even though the disturbances started as ethnic conflicts, they spread to other towns in the wake of rumours of their religious connotation. The rumour of this religious aspect was fuelled by the fact that the Sayawa camouflaged their ethnic cause under a cloak of Christianity as they were aware that the religions of the conflicting groups would attract public attention and sympathy.¹² The same was true of the Katafs in Kaduna State. The disturbance started as communal riots in Zango and spread to other towns, viz. Kaduna, Zaria, Kafanchan, in the wake of rumours of religious motivations.

It must however be admitted that some of the riots were actually ignited by religious intolerance and government's inconsistent religious policy, as will be shown in the examination of the Kafanchan riot of 1987 and the Kano riot of 1991.

The Kafanchan riot in Kaduna State, described as one of the most destructive, started on the campus of the College of Education, Kafanchan on 6 March 1987. According to the Denli Commission of Inquiry, the crisis erupted as a result of the Reverend Abubakar Bako's provocation of the Muslim students by his offensive interpretation of the Qur'an and the misrepresentation of the prophethood of Muhammad in the course of his preaching.¹³ When the Muslim students protested, they were overrun by the Christian assembly and their mosque was immediately burnt. Twelve Muslims named in the Donli Commission report were murdered in Kafanchan. The news of the massacre resulted in public disorder throughout the state and the situation was so chaotic that it took combined teams of soldiers and anti-riot police several days to bring it under control.¹⁴

The 1991 Kano riot¹⁵ was sparked off as a consequence of the permission granted by the Federal Government to the famous German Christian revivalist Reinhard Bonnke to evangelize in the country. Bonnke, well known for his fiery preaching, came to the country at the invitation of the Kano state branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). The arrival of the world proselytizer in Kano would naturally

be a surprise to the people of the city, who are homogeneously Muslim, because early in the year the government had refused permission for the veteran Islamic preacher Ahmad Deedat from South Africa to preach in Kano. The aggrieved Muslims of the city naturally wondered why the same treatment had not been applied to both preachers. This singular action of the government was enough to confirm suspicions that the Ibrahim Babangida régime was hostile to Muslim interests in the country.

The protesters, numbering about 8000 Muslim youths, were unresponsive to the passionate appeals of the Emir of Kano and members of his Emirate Council to shun violence. The promise by the Council to intervene in the crisis came too late. The protesters withdrew from the Emir's palace to the Central Mosque. Before long, what started as a peaceful demonstration became a mob action descending on the city suddenly like a violent thunderstorm. By this time the demonstration had been taken over by the vagabonds, juveniles, touts, and other jobless elements in the city. The riot, which took the lives of several innocent citizens, made ex-President Babangida call off his trip to Harare, Zimbabwe, where he was attending the Commonwealth Summit, to take charge of the situation.

The 1991 Kano riot was similar to that of 1982 in the same city. In that year the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, was invited by the Christian Association of Nigeria to lay the foundation stone of an Anglican Church. The church was sited very close to a mosque, so the Muslims registered their protest and pressed for a change of location to avoid possible friction. The ensuing riot claimed several lives before the police were able to quell it.

The Socio-Economic Context

The report of Justice Aniogolu's Commission of Inquiry into the 1980 Maitatsine riot identifies socio-economic problems as a strong factor aiding the outbreak of civil disorder in Nigeria.¹⁶ According to the report, a lack of employment opportunities for young men in rural areas encourages a drift to the cities, especially after the period of harvest. On getting to the cities, they invariably remain unemployed. They eventually constitute a reservoir of human potential to be exploited and used by anybody for any purpose. Members of the society, whether individuals or groups, who have an axe to grind use this reservoir to settle old scores. These people, mostly vagabonds, juveniles and touts having been brought up in extreme poverty, generally nurse a grudge against the privileged, whose luxurious and ostentatious way of life they detest. Because of the wide gap between the rich and the poor, they are ever prepared to rise against society and perpetrate insurrection at the slightest opportunity.

The *almajiri* menace constitutes another source of recruitment of rioters in civil disturbances. The *almajiris* (corruption of Arabic *al-muhājir*, meaning the immigrant) are a roaming band of deprived children who take to begging in the course of their pursuit of qur'anic learning. They actually do more begging than learning. They return their alms and food remnants to their *mallams* (masters) whose duty it is to train and care for them with whatever help they can get from either their parents or the public. They go about in tattered clothes like beggars to do menial jobs. They criss-cross between towns and villages begging for alms after their morning religious training session. Their resorts are public places like car parks, railway stations, markets, etc. where they become exposed to crime. Any outbreak or riot is an opportunity for this group of people to loot and cause arson. The rapidity with which the riots discussed

above spread to the neighbouring towns and villages can only be explained within the context of this socio-economic problem. The vulnerability of our society to the breach of public peace will for a long time depend on the extent to which our system caters for the elements in the society that are easily mobilized to cause disorder.

Conclusion

This study makes it crystal clear that Islamic fundamentalism in all the facets of its interpretations is not responsible for the Christian-Muslim conflict in Nigeria. The problem of the Sayawa and the Kataf, as we have seen, is basically ethnic. The Kafanchan riot was caused by the action of Reverend Bako, while the 1991 Kano riot could have been averted if members of the State Security Services had advised the Government against the invitation of the German revivalist by the Christian Association of Nigeria. The panacea for acrimonious Christian-Muslim relations, especially where they belong to diverse cultural traditions, lies more in the readiness of the different groups to tolerate one another and to accept one another as partners in progress, than in the creation of Chiefdoms as actualized by the Kaduna State Governor, Colonel Ja'far Isa, in May 1996 for the Katafs. The reason for this is not difficult to see. In Nigeria today the traditional rulers, including the best of them, are mere ceremonial heads of their communities with no political power. They remain in office at the whim of Heads of Government, who can enthrone or dethrone them at will as happened recently in the case of Sultan Ibrahim Dasuki. One should bear in mind that creating a Chiefdom does not mean that the people of the Chiefdom would live in isolation from the rest of society. They must necessarily interact. Here lies the need for people of diverse cultures to accept one another. This is one lesson which should have been learnt from the Nigerian civil war.

This spirit of mutual acceptability and tolerance is latent in the Nigerian constitutional provision which allows any Nigerian who has resided in an area for five years to stand for election there. Ironically, this principle is hardly applied and it is not surprising in view of the Nigerians' attachment to their indigenous root. Nevertheless, inherent in this principle are values and attitudes worthy of inculcation in the younger generation and this can be achieved through integration into the school curriculum, especially in the area of social studies and religious education.

By the same token, the traditional rulers should rule all their subjects benevolently, irrespective of their religious persuasion or ethnic affiliation, to eliminate fear of domination and exploitation. They should be able to settle conflicts without compromising the principle of justice. The government has the most important role to play in dealing with riots between the different religious groups when it must be ensured that equal treatment is rendered to all without compromising the principle of meeting the needs and requirements of each group's tradition. These in our considered view would to a large extent reduce the Christian-Muslim furore in multi-faith Nigeria.

NOTES

1. *Tell*, No. 29, 29 October 1991; 3.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Zango town, a mainly Hausa/Fulani settlement is centrally located in Kataf land. In 1914, the year the Southern and Northern Nigeria protectorates were amalgamated by Lord Frederick Lugard, Zango Kataf District was created. The Fulani are the ruling class as they produce the District Head by tradition

4. Tafawa Balewa is the town of the first Nigerian Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. The town, which is about 80 kilometres from Bauchi, is inhabited by different tribal groups including the Hausa/Fulani, Sayawa and Jarawa. The Fulani constitute the ruling class as they produce District Heads.
5. Justice Bola Babalakin's Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the 1991 Bauchi Disturbances (Government Press, 1991), 20.
6. Justice R. H. Codjoe's Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the 1992 Zangon Kataf (Market) Riot (Kaduna State Government Press, Kaduna, 1992), 10.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. Babalakin report, 11–12.
9. *Ibid.*, 15.
10. Codjoe report, 14.
11. Babalakin and Codjoe reports, 33 and 36 respectively.
12. Babalakin report, 29–30.
13. Justice Donli Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the 1987 Kafanchan Riot (Government Press, 1987), 58.
14. M. O. Opeloye, Religious factor in Nigerian politics—applications for Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1989, 354.
15. Kano is an old Islamic city, a famous entrepôt of the trans-Saharan trade with North Africa for many centuries. It was the richest of the Hausa city states and its ruling Habe dynasty, the most powerful in the Savannah region. After its overthrow by the Fulani Jihadists it maintained its unique character.
16. Justice Anjogolu Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the 1980 Maitatsine Riots (Government Press, 1981), 105.