

TOLERANCE IN NIGERIA AND NATIONAL UNITY

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a heterogonous society with a conglomeration of multi-ethnic groups and religious affiliations. There are three major religious groups and over two hundred and fifty ethnic confederations in the country. In its ethnoreligious plurality, there appears to be confluence among these religions and ethnic nationalities through some form of cooperation in the socio-economic activities that the citizens of the country engage in daily. As in many other societies in Africa, this confluence comes with misunderstanding, suspicion and constant bickering between ethnic groups and adherents of religions due to ethnic and religious differences. This study examines the relationship between adherents of Christianity, Islam and African religions in Nigeria. The study takes an analytic survey from recent news to examine the level of tolerance between adherents of the three major religions as well as some ethnic groups within the scope of the study. Ethno-religious rivalry and peaceful co-existence are analyzed and cross-examined with the opinions of some scholars to determine if national unity is possible in Nigeria. The study adopted sociological and historical methods. The paper submits that national unity is possible in Nigeria if basic measures are put in place, and policies bordering on religious tolerance and national unity are implemented. The study recommends that Nigerian citizens should focus on the similarities among different cultures and religions in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, Nigerians, National Unity, Religion and Tolerance

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Introduction

Tolerance is a major issue in a plural society like Nigeria. Tolerance is needed in Nigeria for unity and national security. Tolerance from a religious perspective means accepting other people's opinions and "worldviews" without fighting. Tolerance means the ability to respect the feelings and opinions of others on specific issues despite having different views and conflicting opinions. Tolerance plays an indispensable role in promoting unity at local, state and national levels. Tolerance is a moral virtue. It is a virtue within the moral domain and it relates to social justice, equality, respect and empathy. Tolerance is a concept that has unique implications for unity, national security and social policy. In Nigeria, where people of different backgrounds, cultures and religious worldviews are living together, the concept of tolerance has become very crucial for national unity and peaceful co-existence.

Issues and Trends on Tolerance in Nigeria

Nigerians recognized three main religions namely: Christianity, Islam and the indigenous religion.¹ these religions have differences and similarities. The differences have led to religious violence as the tolerance level in Nigeria nose dives to a point of polarity. The violence has inevitably, inexorably led to national insecurity in the country. The Northern part of the country is populated by Muslims.² while the Southern part is predominantly a Christian milieu.³ This Muslim North and Christian South cleavage enhances religious differences in the country. A lot of northern states have begun the implementation of Sharia law and this has further deepened the

differences between the Muslim north and the Christian south⁴. In Kwara State, a place in the north central of the country, formerly referred to as the “Middle-Belt region,” violence erupted at different Christian missionary schools where the schools refused to allow Muslim students to wear hijab into classes. Tensions have been building in Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State since February 2021, when the state government closed down ten (10) Christian missionary schools after a staff of Surulere Baptist Secondary School refused to admit a female student who came to school wearing a hijab. The refusal to allow the female student into the school snowballed into violent clashes between Christians and Muslims for days in Ilorin. Kwarans are deeply divided over the use of the veil (hijab) by Muslim female students in Christian missionary schools.

In addition to their differences in the use of the veil by Muslim female students, Christians and Muslims in Ilorin, and Kwara State as a whole, are also divided over other key issues in the state. Christians’ and Muslims’ confidence in the state government’s ability to perform creditably usually differs. Christians and Muslims in Kwara State are split by religion on their perception of election honesty. This situation reflects what goes on in the country as a whole. Nigerian Christians and Muslims are also divided over the honesty and sincerity of the Independent National Electoral Commission, the main body in charge of elections in Nigeria.

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Trust in the honesty of elections jumped among both groups in 2015, with 53% of Muslims and 38% of Christians expressing confidence. But while confidence continued to climb among Muslims... before falling precipitously in 2018 ... it has dropped and plateaued among the Christian population. Despite the shared decline among Muslims, there is still a substantial gap between them and Christians in perceptions that Nigeria's elections are honest. Forty-six per cent of Nigerian Muslims and 25% of the country's Christians currently have faith in the honesty of elections.⁵

It can be deduced from what has been discussed above that religious polarization is a real challenge in Nigeria. It inhibits tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the country.

Religion, ethnicity and politics are major issues that breed intolerance in Nigeria. While religion, politics and ethnicity promote violence as a result of differences, sport on the other hand has promoted peaceful co-existence among Nigerians.

Sport is a powerful tool that promotes peace, tolerance and togetherness among Nigerians. The power of sports as a tool for conflict prevention and peace-building is reflected in a range of international agreements, strategies and instruments. In 1993, the United Nations restored the ancient tradition of the Olympic Truce, under which athletes from warring nations are granted safe passage to participate in the Olympic Games. The truce begins seven days before the start of each Olympics/Paralympics Games and continues until seven days after the closing ceremony, reminding the world that sports offer an opportunity to bridge even the bitterest socio-cultural divides.⁶

In Nigeria, football is “passion”, “love” and “religion.” However, the statement made by FIFA President suggests that football is far more than “passion”, “love” and religion in Nigeria. Gianni Infantino, FIFA President, had said in February 2018 during a visit to Lagos that in Nigeria, “football is life.”⁷

Jaiyesimi *et al* citing Aibueku, remark that sport in Nigeria has grown from a humble beginning as an entertainment and recreational pastime to a prominent phenomenon whose influence is felt in all facets of the lives of the citizenry.⁸

Nigerians are sport-loving people with a very high appetite for winning. Success at competitions creates an emphatic atmosphere with an injection of vibrancy and pride in the citizens. Sport is therefore as important to Nigerians as the necessities of life like food, clothing and shelter. Consequently, the sport has become an important aspect of Nigerian culture due to its popularity amongst the citizenry (Ajisafe, 1079). The Nigerian state recognized the power of sport and used it to pursue its foreign policy and diplomatic agenda as well as foster national unity and socio-cultural integration (Shebu, 1995). With the recognition of the role of sport in bringing about national reconciliation after the bitter Nigerian civil war experience, governments at all levels started investing huge sums in the organization of sports festivals, and schools sport, increased funding for international sporting events as well as engagement in capital intensive construction of sports facilities like a stadium, gymnasium, swimming pools, courts for the various ball and racket games (Aibueku, 2002).⁹

It is evident from the above illustrations that sport is a common ground for national identification in Nigeria. Nigeria can reach

a realm of national unification through a sport where tribalism, religious intolerance and segregation are no longer apparent.

Challenges to National Unity in Nigeria

Unity is very important in the stability and development of any nation. A united nation enjoys peace, security, good governance, a good economy, constant public enlightenment and observance of the rule of law among other benefits. Nigeria is a country with people from different races, ethnic groups and religions, *et .cetera*. To enjoy sustained development as a nation, unity must be one of the virtues to imbibe. The motto on the Nigerian coat of arms that reads ‘unity and faith, peace and progress’, shows the connection between unity and progress. The importance of unity cannot be over-emphasized when discussing development and progress in any society. Sadly, Nigeria is not as united as it should be.

Nigeria faces challenges that inhibit national unity. Atiku in Eme-Uche and Okonkwo state that unity is a scarce virtue among Nigerians due to the manner the country was created by the British colonial authorities and the failure of Nigerian elites to champion a true and viable nation amidst diversities.¹⁰ The creation of Nigeria by the British through the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates led to the creation of a country where every ethnic group competes for space and attempts to co-exist as a united nation despite differences. That being said, unity can be achieved in Nigeria if some issues are addressed. These issues include corruption, nepotism and

intolerance among others. These “issues” are the challenges to national unity in Nigeria.

The greatest challenge to the unity of Nigeria is corruption. Corruption has been a menace in the country since its inception. According to Osoba, corruption is an anti-social behaviour conferring improper benefits contrary to legal and moral norms which undermine the capacity of leaders, especially political leaders to secure the welfare of all citizens.¹¹ In Nigeria, there are cases of embezzlement of funds, and bribery given and taken to secure promotion, employment or transfer in government and some private organizations. Government officials were reported to have been arrested by law enforcement agents over embezzlement of funds. Some law enforcement agents are known to take bribes from citizens, and workers in public offices to favour some key individuals over others. Corruption is a challenge to a growing nation because it damages the progress of a country in the sense that, projects that are meant to be executed for the benefit of the people and development of the nation, when not executed as expected and discovered by the masses, can cause an uproar which will lead to chaos and destruction.

Nepotism and tribalism have become factors that lead to disunity in Nigeria. Efrem Nkam Ubi¹² quoted Michael Maduagwu in his blog that the nationalist leaders regionalized their political vision, while their successors personalized them. This statement can be confirmed when careful observation is made of how developmental projects are awarded in the country. Development contracts are awarded to associates close to the people in government and assigned to strategic

areas. One of the authors of this paper engaged in conversations with residents within the state capital of Ogun State and attests to the fact that the common Nigerian possesses a notion that development only affects areas where the government official of the day originates from. True or not, this kind of notion can lead to disunity when people start feeling neglected by the government.

The current trend in Nigeria according to people in the market place is, *'person wey know person, na im get mouth'*. This shows that the system which is meant to be fair and just allows injustice to become a part of it. The Hausa-Fulani who are seen as the ruling class for now because of the ethnicity of the presidency is viewed by other tribes as the only tribe that enjoys most of the nation's resources, job opportunities, public appointments, *et. cetera*. It is reported in an article by an anonymous author on infoguidenigeria.com that government officials use the power of their various offices to oppress their ethnic rivals and grant unfair opportunities to their relatives and tribesmen, creating an atmosphere of distrust and mutual hatred among the citizens. This has caused unrest in many parts of the country to the point that news about riots, genocides, abductions and killings is reported almost daily. Groups like the Ibo people of the Republic of Biafra and the Yoruba people of Oduduwa Republic are beginning to protest against the Nigerian state and seek separation from the nation.¹³

The ethno-religious crisis poses another challenge to national unity in Nigeria. The fact that Nigeria is a religiously and ethnically diversified nation makes it vulnerable to

manipulation by individuals and groups that desire to use it as an advantage to aid their selfish political and economic interests. Religious or ethnic militia groups have been formed to rain down terror on the innocent. The emergence and rapid growth of terrorist groups like the Jihadist sect known as Boko Haram who swear allegiance to other international terrorist groups, the Islamic State's West African Province, Fulani herdsmen, and the Niger Delta Avengers, are few among other examples of these groups.¹⁴

There are reported cases of ethnoreligious violence daily which seem to have escalated since 2015.¹⁵ The Baga massacre in 2015 claimed the lives of almost 2000 people, the killing of Biafran protesters between 2015 till date, the Zaria massacre which claimed over 1000 lives, the Lekki massacre in 2020, Abuja massacre in 2020, several records of inter-tribal fights between the Yoruba and Fulani in Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Lagos and Ekiti states, Tiv and Jukun in Benue State, Fulani and Berom in Jos, have shown that Nigeria is still struggling with peace and national unity.

Quoting a United Nation's report on Nigeria's common country analysis, an anonymous writer in infoguidenigeria.com writes,

Nigeria is a deeply divided society considering the plurality of ethnic, religious and regional identities that define her political existence. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled to sustain national integration. For decades, different segments of Nigeria's population had, at different times, expressed feelings of marginalization, of being short-changed,

dominated, oppressed, threatened, or even targeted for elimination¹⁶.

This statement has summarized the challenges that show that Nigeria is yet to be truly united.

Tolerance as a Factor that Can Promote National Unity in Nigeria

Every individual is unique in belief, behaviour and philosophy. There are diverse ways in which people view the world and interpret events that occur to them. Conflicts arise when people with specific views attempt to force their views on others. In a heterogeneous society, it is noticed that differences in ideology, religion, political affiliation, philosophy and ethnicity can spark up unnecessary tension among people. In some cases, man's egocentric nature and the quest for power and control of both human and natural resources cause him to become violent, thereby causing some form of razzmatazz, hullabaloo and brouhaha that inevitably leads to social disorder, banditry, insurgency, and terrorist activities that destroy the social structure and hinder development in society.

Nigeria is complicated in its composition; it is a nation of people with diverse origins, religions, history and cultures; Ibrahim Baba and Chaminda Aeyshinghe describe it as a place of differences.¹⁷ Nigeria, being a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation, suffers ethnoreligious conflicts due to intolerance of people who belong to different socio-political affiliations and socio-cultural settings. Paraphrasing the words of Balogun in an article by Raji *et.al*, intolerance entails hostility towards other religions and ethnic groups, as well as

the inability of citizens to harmonize between the theories and the practical aspects of their religion and ethnic society.¹⁸ this intolerance may exist because of how the country was formed.

Nigeria is a product of the British colonial rule. The British rulers formed two colonies, the Northern and Southern protectorates, merging tribes of different origins and characteristics. In 1914, Sir Fredrick Lugard, the governor-general of the two protectorates, decided to merge these two protectorates to form a single colony through a process known as amalgamation. This amalgamation of the two protectorates with diverse attributes forced together, which is described by Owede *et.al* as a marriage of inconvenience, has searched for unity in Nigeria a continuous process.¹⁹ As far as historical backgrounds go, Baba and Aeysinghe opine that

the architect who designed Nigeria to be a single nation did not seek the consent of the federated unions on whether they would like to be members of a single nation and central government before amalgamating them under a single national union-development that has shortly after independence threatened the unity of the country till date.²⁰

Nigeria, since its independence in 1960 has been experiencing conflicts. Many believe that what is known as one Nigeria today, may one day become a divided nation.²¹ Some sections of the country believe they are tired and do not want to belong to a united nation, while others think that the union must be sustained at all costs.²² Baba and Aeysinghe suggest that the cause of conflict and disunity in Nigeria is the anger of the masses who struggle daily for food and necessary amenities

that are meant to be enjoyed by their rights as citizens of Nigeria.

The masses believe that there is no reason for the existence of the nation as a single sovereign country because achieving unity appears not to make a positive impact on their lives. Most of them agitate for what can simply be described as the disintegration of the political structure which is the restructuring of the democratic structure from a central to the regional system of governance. The agitation is largely driven by the perceived dishonesty and corruption of the elite class in the country. The elite rather propose dialogue and are opposed to the restructuring of the political structure. On this note, Akinterinwa criticizes the demand for restructuring the political structure of the country by stating that, the calls for and opposition to a return to the regional system of government and negotiation on the terms of national unity are dishonesty-driven by both the elite and the masses. He believes that dishonesty informs the agitation for and opposition to the restructuring of the country, but, more on the side of the elite because it would fetch a good fortune for themselves and their immediate families, but the ordinary people would not enjoy such because they do not have access to the wealth of the nation.²³

This paper observes the level of intolerance between the elite and the masses over decisions on the system of governance and distribution of resources which creates a wide gap between the two parties. This intolerance is borne from the fact that the nation's wealth is being enjoyed by a few elites leaving the

poor masses to struggle for scraps daily. The formation of Boko Haram which has become a major security issue in the country would not have occurred if the youth in the northern part of the country had access to resources that are enjoyed by other regions in the country. Kidnapping, banditry, and other unfortunate security issues would not have started if the youth were employed. Also, the Niger Delta militants would not be damaging pipelines if the perceived passiveness or neglect by the government to that area where the nation extracts mineral resources that are being utilized by the whole country daily was looked into.²⁴

Tolerance is very important for the attainment of peace and development of any society. It is one of the qualities that form the bedrock of a flourishing society. In this modern age, societies are heterogeneous, which means that they are made up of people with different backgrounds, cultures, ideologies and faith. Tolerance requires equality and fairness from opposing parties in a dispute. National unity can be achieved if every party, class, religion, ethnic group, race and tribe in Nigeria can enjoy equal rights and privileges. The common man has the right to enjoy necessities like adequate water supply, power supply, good roads, good health care, education, *et. cetera*. The absence, unavailability or inadequacy of these basic amenities in some areas has caused marginalization which in turn triggers some ugly reactions when constituents in these abandoned areas realize that constituents of other areas enjoy these more than them.

Tolerance is regarded as the willingness to accept beliefs and behaviour from people even when they contradict that of the

individual. It comes from the ability to cope with divergent opinions without having to take up grievances, up to the extent of taking arms or engaging in conflict. It means being able to accommodate others²⁵. It is respect for diversity that promotes peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, civic integration and balance that requires consensual action on both sides. Baba and Aeysinghe suggest that Nigeria can achieve the supposed age-long national unity established in 1914 if parties involved in the ethnoreligious conflict can sincerely accept the fact that they can hardly do without one another to survive.²⁶

In Nigeria, tolerance can be used as a means of achieving national unity through dialogue. The dialogue will help opposing parties understand each other and meet at a common ground to accommodate each other. Baba and Aeysinghe propose that the masses can be mobilized to play a crucial role to strengthen the democratic process and equally play a major role in promoting a culture of non-violence and mutual co-existence.²⁷

Ojie in the article by Raji *et.al* suggests that a concerted effort to bring about cross-cultural awareness among the citizenry of Nigeria should be advocated. Education plays a key role in this suggestion. He recommends that the study of the people in Nigeria, the culture and religion be made compulsory in all educational institutions. He believes that this will enhance greater interaction between the various ethnoreligious groups in Nigeria.²⁸

Conclusion

The concept of tolerance and national unity is the focus of this paper. This is not the first time this issue would be discussed. The study concludes that without tolerance, there cannot be meaningful development and lasting peace and unity in Nigeria. The study recommends that Nigeria should take advantage of the International Day for Tolerance to promote public awareness of the dangers of intolerance at local, state and national levels. Nigerians should learn to accept or tolerate opinions or behaviour they may not agree with as long as such opinions and behaviour are not against the constitution of the country.

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