



UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN
ILORIN, NIGERIA

GENERAL STUDIES IN THE HUMANITIES: TOPICAL ISSUES

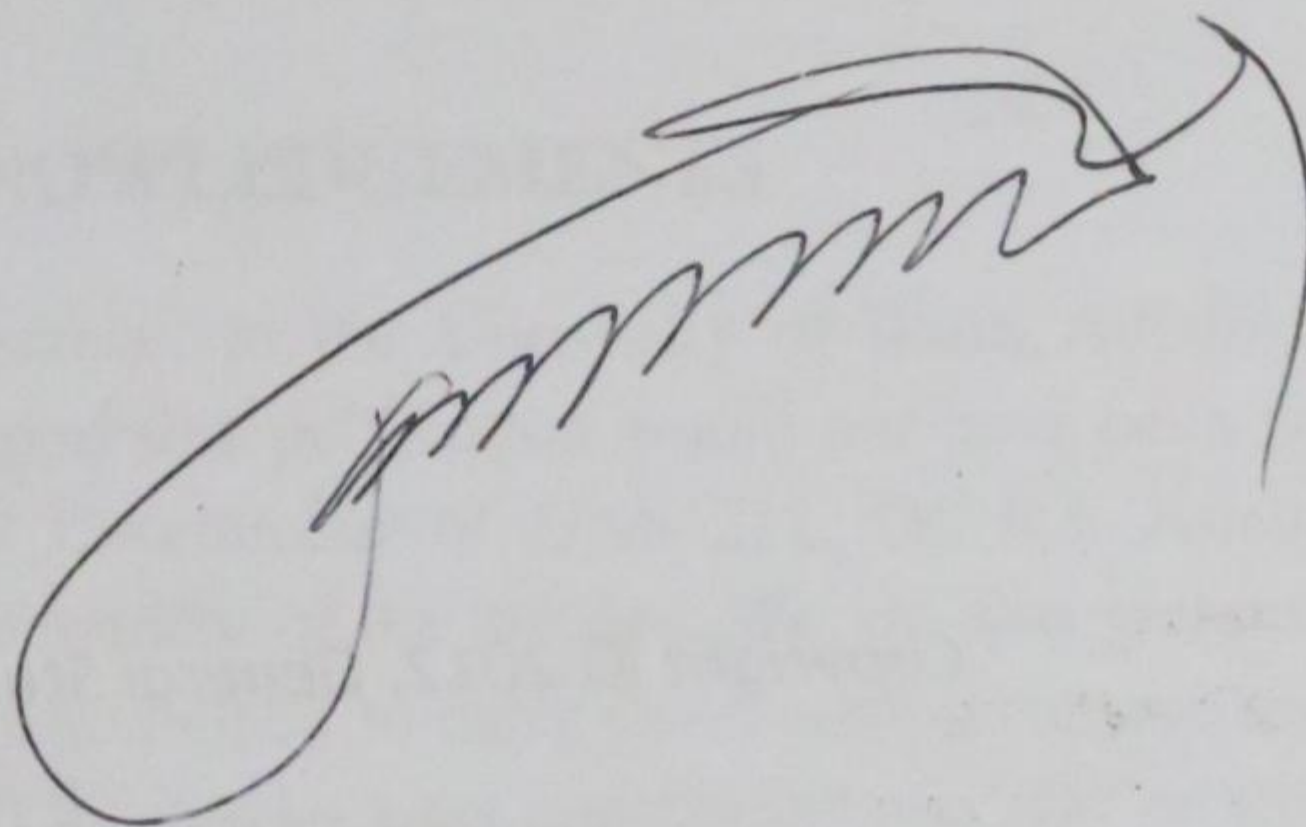
EDITED BY:
PROF. F. A. ADEKOLA
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Professor F. A. Adekola
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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLITICS AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL APPROACH

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Introduction

The term ethno-religious conflict has received adequate attention from scholars since political independence of Nigeria in 1960. They all unmistakably saw ethno-religiosity as a factor bedeviling Nigeria democracy, thereby referring to it as ethno-religious problem, violence, crisis, conflict, or strife. However, most scholars have discussed it as a concept and not a historical phenomenon. Thus, they failed to give the historical transformation of this important political factor in the political history of Nigeria. It has often been seen and discussed like a virus that suddenly attacked the political membrane of Nigeria, whereas it has been part of man and his political processes. However, the argument presented in this chapter is that ethno-religious factor is part and parcel of politics right from the onset and it has played and continues to play a significant role in Africa politics depending on its use by the political class. According to Okene (2005: 825):

Ethnic and religions are not in themselves negative and obstructionary. All societies of the world are knitted either in their emergence or in their consolidation, in multi-ethnic and multi-religious functionalities. And they continue to undergo series of mutations as determined by historical and political exigencies and processes Both identities are tools of socio-economic development and national integration.

This chapter therefore bridges the gaps existing in current literature by providing the historical transformation of the term ethno-religious factors from political builder and sustainer to political destroyer or from being an important ingredient in political development to political underdevelopment of Nigeria. It will show the different stages of the transformation from the pre-colonial era to colonial and independent eras. To attain this objective, this chapter is divided into sections in the following order: The first is the introduction, the conceptual analysis, the practice of ethno-religious politics in the pre-colonial, colonial and independent Nigeria and then the conclusion.

Conceptual Analysis

For better understanding of the issues at hand in this discourse, there is need for the description of some concepts which will aid our understanding of the view points of the author. These concepts are ethnicity, religion, politics and political development. Each of these concepts has been seen from different angles by scholars, thus, attempt is made to present highlights of the differing views. According to Osaghae, (1992, 375) ethnicity refers to;

... a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. A belief in a common historical evolution provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values and hierarchies and confirms the social identities for separating both insiders and outsiders. (*Thus*), ... ethnicity as a social construct can be regarded as the employment of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict and co-operation' (Osaghae 1995), a situation presented by the Nigerian political system in the sharing of national resources (Nnoli 1978)

While ethno-religious politics is directed at creating platforms to make life better for all a sundry within its fold by transforming "the symbolic and institutional frameworks of collective life," (Adekeye 2005 quoting Ekwu 2001 who quoted Lawuyi), ethno-religious crisis or conflict struggles for recognition of ethnic or religious identity for wealth and power. It is a conflict directed against the state for its inability to provide or distribute evenly social and economic power among its constituent parts. Since independence in 1960, the issue of sharing the dwindling national resources had been so serious, hence, "the sectionalization of politics and the politicization of sectionalism". Thus, for this reason, some scholars led by Akpata, (2000, x) came to the conclusion that ethnicity is a "struggle for undue share of modern goods and services."

Religion is a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being (Adeniyi 1993). It is man's intuition of the sacred and ultimate reality and his expression of that awareness in concrete life (Ejizu 1993). It is a means of approaching, worshipping and appeasing God in order to escape His wrath and earn His favour. Adherents of monotheistic religions of the world – Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion- count on God for safety of lives and property, security of territories, victory at wars and peaceful co-existence in the society (Ilegu 2001). On the other hand, politics has to do with seeking and exercising of power (Tansey 1995).

Political development in this context refers to the level of the gradual attainment and performance at the different stages of political processes and procedures in comparison with the world best political practice. Thus this discourse centres on the use and misuse of ethno-religious politics in Nigeria from pre-colonial to the present time.

The Practice of Ethno-Religious Politics in the Pre-Colonial Era

Ethno-religious factor is an important ingredient in state formation in Africa. Most of the early states in Africa such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai in West Africa, Zimbabwe and Luba-Lunda in Central Africa, Pharaonic Egypt in North Africa etc., owed their emergence to this factor (Falola 1989, 39). A state emerged as a result of the existence of a nation. A state is a people organized for law within a definite territory. It is a body of people politically organized under one government with sovereignty, while a state cannot exist without a government; it is a people who possesses, uses and responds to government (Americana 2004, 25: 507). Thus, a state is a product of a nation (people) who are into races, tribes, ethnic and religious groups.

Religion is another centrifugal factor in the life of man. Besides the nationhood, religion was/is, in order of priority, the next factor for state formation in Africa and indeed in Nigeria. Consequently, the early states in Nigeria areas in the pre-colonial era were guided by ethnic and religious considerations. The old Oyo Empire, the Benin Kingdom, the Kanem-Borno Empire, the Hausa Kingdoms and later the Sokoto caliphate, etc were all products of ethno-religious factor. The states were established and administered on ethno-religious platform.

In the pre-colonial era when power was based on military might, nations organized themselves into military class and embarked on military adventures in order to create a state of their own. Once such a state was created, appointments into political offices were based on ethno-religious affiliations and all hands were on deck for the development of the new state until the power became weak and the state disintegrated or until a stronger nation came to over-run it.

Religion played a prominent role in the running of the day-to-day activities of the states. Priests were held in high esteem and gave advice to the political head on the affairs of the state. The priests also in conjunction with others, served as checks on the political authority of the state. Thus, the states were firmly held on ethno-religious basis.

The formation of the Hausa Kingdoms was spearheaded by the Gobirawa who were the dominant ethnic group in the area. Others who were outside of the ethnic group were incorporated in the governance of the kingdoms through traditional worship with which all and sundry were kept together and were made responsible to the state. The Gobirawa government was replaced by that of the Fulanis headed by the Shehu Usman Danfodiyo who through the use of Islamic religion established and nurtured to maturity the Sokoto caliphate.

In Kanem Kingdom, the Zaghawa dominated the Kanuri, Teda and others to form a government which lasted a thousand year (c.700-1900 AD) through the instrumentality of religion and other elements of culture. The importance of Islamic religion to Shehu El-Kanemi in taking over power from the Mais cannot be over emphasized in this regard.

Among the Yoruba, the Old Oyo Empire is a good example of centralized government based on ethno-religious factor. The government was formed by the integration of different interest groups. The Oyo Mesi was composed of the seven principal ethnic groups who were represented by their councilors in the Oyomesi Council of Elders. The whole activities of Oyo Empire were built around ancestral worship. Nothing was done without consultation with God through the ancestors.

The Benin kingdom was formed by the Edos who were the dominant ethnic group in the area. Other ethnic groups were the Esan, the Kukuruku, the Orra, Akoko, Isoko and the Urhobo. The various groups were integrated through religion and the government was powered by the spirit of religion.

In a somewhat like manner, the Jukun, the Nupe, the Ijo, Efik, the Itshekiri, the Igbo Kingdoms were formed and ran on ethno-religious consideration. This was made possible because the political demands of man are ensured by religions through their tenets emphasizing unity, justice, fair-play, honesty, trustworthiness, and decried all acts of oppressions. Okene is of the opinion that;

... since in most cases the political demands of ethnic movements and religious groupings borders on liberty, justice and fairness and the expression of resentment against oppression of their members by others and nepotic distribution of public service jobs and sitting of infrastructure facilities, they (ethnic and religions) contributed to democratic practice by their emphasis on fairness and justice in socio-political terrain (2005, 829).

From the foregoing, even though the pre-colonial period was characterized by wars among the various ethnic groups for power, one can see that ethno-religious factor was an important factor in the political development of the Nigeria areas before colonialism. They also provided a strong platform for all the early kingdoms in Nigeria areas to resist the political intrusion of the British colonial master in Nigeria. The Hausa/Fulani in the north, the Bini in the Benin Kingdom among others are a few examples. The fact that they were able to resist the British, however feeble and short lived; one would appreciate the opportunity of cohesion provided by ethno-religious platform.

The Practice of Ethno-Religious Politics in the Colonial Era

By 1900, all the pre-colonial existing states in Nigeria areas had been attacked and subjugated by the British agents. Thus, power shifted from the traditional rulers to the British representatives. Although Indirect Rule was adopted in Nigeria, the British were indeed the overall controller.

During colonial conquests, the British became aware of the power of ethnic and religious factors in governance, thus, caution was taken on how to deal with people in

relation to these factors. In the north, the Fulanis were one and were integrated with other tribes by Islam through which the British who were regarded as infidels were resisted. They were conquered by the British among other reasons due to the use of superior military weapons. The following words best describe the effectiveness of the ethno-religious politics of the Sokoto Caliphate against British colonial intrusion in the twentieth century:

... the band of Islam which had held the caliphate together and which the Sultan represented was emphasized in a most dramatic manner, perhaps even more than at any other point in the history of the caliphate, during the hijra of Caliph Attairu and the battle of Burmi. The spontaneity with which his subjects joined from various emirates does not suggest that his power was on the decline (Eluwa et al. 1996, 28).

In Benin, the acting consul-general J.R. Philips visited Benin in 1897 during the Igwe festival when the Oba and people of Benin would not welcome visitors. He was attacked and killed together with his soldiers. Although the British retaliated by sending Ralph Moore who sacked Benin (Omolewa 1986, 63), they learnt their lesson on the power of religious beliefs among Nigerians. Thus, ethno-religious consideration was a priority in their administration of Nigerians. For instance, in most places where Emirs, Obas and chiefs were dethroned, consideration was given to persons of their ethno-religious affiliations. Furthermore, the northern Emirs, while taking oath of office as a British appointee, Lord Lugard promised not to interfere in the religious activities of the northerners. The British also carefully prevented at the initial stage the Christian Missionary activities in the north, partly to keep the promise of non-interference and to deny them access to colonial or Christian/western education which was feared might change their attitude from enduring foreign rule.

However, be that as it may, ethno-religious politics started to take negative trend during colonialism as the colonialists used it in different ways to achieve the colonial aims and objectives. The British colonial government used ethno-religious factor to play most effectively the tactics of "divide and rule" among Nigerians. Among several examples, the Jukun and the Tiv were played against each other for effective colonial administration. The British colonial government in Nigeria also used ethno-religious politics as an escape route to explain Nigerians' resistances against bad colonial policies. For instance, the Okeiho rising of 1916 and the Aba Women Riots of 1929 as well as the Ilorin Tax Riots of 1936 (Omolewa 1986, 73, Jimoh 1994) which were all riots against unpopular Colonial Financial Policy were deliberately explained as ethno-religious crises among Nigerians to cover up their mal-administration. This was about the first time ethno-religious factor was used to mean crisis, conflict, and problem, to defend colonial administration as it is being used today to achieve selfish aims.

During the decolonization process in Nigeria, ethno-religious factor played a prominent role in the formation of the groups and associations which later transformed

into political parties that ushered in independence in Nigeria in 1960. The groups and associations were first formed along ethno-religious lines and they were later transformed from local groups to national by attracting members of other ethno-religious groups. The Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) of 1923, the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM) and later Nigeria Youth Movement (NYM) of 1934 and 1937 respectively passed through the stages before becoming a power to reckon with. The Nigerian National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) of 1944, the Action Group (AG) of 1951, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) of 1949, Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) of 1947 were all ethnically, religiously and regionally based and dependent before their general acceptance by Nigerians. However, they were later infected by the British tactics of divide and rule through the use of ethnicity, regionalism and other factors in order to allow for effective colonial administration and possibly extend the period of colonial rule. Chief Bola Ige, a prominent politician who was assassinated in active service as the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Nigeria aptly explains how the seed of discord was sowed when he writes:

The five years following the debacle of the NCNC delegation and Zik's final blowing of his chance for acceptable national leadership were the most pregnant of the most portentous years in Nigeria political history. Zik, of course blamed the NCNC failure on the Machinations of the colonial government and the underhand activities of his imagined political opponents. The colonial office and the British rulers here enjoined a good laugh and allowed Zik's erstwhile opponents to have a good bash at him, old wounds about the Zikist movement, the railway strike and his "tergiversations" were opened, and his opponents began to push him to the ethnic wall. He began to be called "The oracle of Onitsha". His relationship with Nwafor Orizu and Kingsley Ozuomba Mbadiwe was seen in purely Igbo terms and for Igbo interests. Zik, as was to be expected, lashed back, and vigorously too. Where he did not describe someone by his prominent facial tribal marks, he would insinuate unmentionable things about some, opponents who always happened to be Yoruba (1995, 27).

The Practice of Ethno-Religious Politics in the Independent Era

The First Republic started on a good note as the major ethnic groups; Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba who were either Christian or Muslim were represented in the government. The leaders recognized and respected their areas of differences until anarchy set in due to greed among the leaders and consequently bad governance. The crises that followed ushered in military rule in Nigeria. The military rule by nature and form was also autocratic, despotic and exploitative like the colonial government. The military promulgated Decrees that were oppressive to Nigerians. The most disturbing was the Unitary Decree popularly called Decree 34 of 1966 which sought to set aside ethno-religious considerations in governance in order to solve,

... the problems of imbalance of power between the federal centre and the regions and among the defunct four regions; among individuals of different communal groups across the country competing for positions of power, status and wealth; and between northern possession of predominant bureaucratic and technological power (Oyevbaire 1989, 389 quoting Dubley 1966).

Successive military rule in Nigeria was not in any way better but worst as it reduced through Decrees 'the importance of tribal and religious associations as political vehicles for power ... freed the horizons and generational context of people' (Oyovbaire 1989, 89).

Since the return to civil rule in 1999, the country is characterized by bad leadership engendered by "political authoritarianism, endemic corruption and economic exclusivity". Thus as the political office holders employ ethno-religious politics to perpetuate themselves in power so also the ruled employ the same to destabilize their government. Consequently, the potent tool for political development of Nigeria became a tool for political underdevelopment of Nigeria.

Conclusion

This chapter through historical survey and analysis, has shown that in the pre colonial period and even to a certain extent in the colonial era ethno-religious politics; ... afforded the entire citizenry active participation in politics through, their lineages, age-sets and titled societies. They indirectly influenced policies and directly helped in implementing such policies..., their views and feelings directly or indirectly mattered very much in the process by which the acknowledged rulers were designated, maintained or removed (Atanda, 1985, 88).

The system had helped to prevent to a large extent, autocracy. It therefore became a political problem both in the modern and post modern eras. Ethno-religious conflicts are caused by "the undemocratic style of governance that claims democratic credentials. More often, the nation's ruling class transcends their democratic calling to perpetuate injustice and oppression in the polity" and "perpetuate identity cleavages in order to maintain their hold on power" (Okene 2005, 829, 824). The manipulation of ethnic and religion for selfish political and material supremacy has become a great obstacle to the advancement of democracy in Africa (indeed Nigeria) and major cause of the backwardness of the continent (country, Nigeria) (Okene 2005, 818).

Ethno-religious crises "should be seen and interpreted not only as a response to the deepening economic crisis and or a product of the rising tide of religious fundamentalism but also a demonstration of the failure of both the Nigerian state and the Nigerian regionists" (Wakili, 2005, 484). Thus, to adequately manage ethno-religious conflicts the different religious and ethnic organs should learn to tolerate one another and

preach the same to their members. The political organs are also to be alive to their responsibilities of providing windows of opportunities for the citizenry to meet their daily needs as well as the religious and political needs through lawful means. If the political leaders shun corruption, tribal sentiments and economic wastages, the country will regain its lost glory and probably provide the expected leadership for Africans.

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