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**RELIGION AND POLITY AMONG PEOPLE IN YORUBA  
LAND/NIGERIA/AFRICA**

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**Abstract**

*The impact of religion can never be over-emphasized all in human endeavours because there are many religions in the world with different beliefs and practices. Religion is intertwined with socio-cultural, political and economic lives of every society. This paper focused on the impact of religion on politics (and vice versa) in Yorubaland and Nigeria/Africa. The objective of this essay is to investigate the relationship between religion and polity among the Yoruba people in Nigeria and Africa. Relevant concepts and the major religions among the Yoruba people were examined. Instances in which religion interferes with polity were across the various parts of the country were cited. On a final note, the impact of religion on leadership and political behaviours of the Yoruba people was explicitly discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Religion and Polity in Yoruba Land/Nigeria/ Africa*

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**Introduction**

There is obviously an incontestable relationship between religion and politics. While the actual role that religion plays in politics remains controversially debatable, the nexus between the two concepts has been established for long (both in practice and experience) (Falana, 2010). Religion does not make people good or bad. On the contrary, it is being used as an instrument of oppression and deceit in Nigeria. Many studies have proven that Nigerians are amongst the most religious people in the world. A 2015 Global Attitudes Survey by the Pew

Research Center revealed that Nigerians are the ninth most religious peoples in the world, with 88% positive responses from them that 'religion plays a very important role in their lives (Theodorou 2015).

### **Concept of Religion**

According to Dow (2014), Religion is a human activity that can be easily accepted only within the framework of reality that it creates for itself. If you accept the existence of whatever myth, god, spirit, or supernatural force that a religion proposes, then you can see the logic of all that follows. However, most of the entities, gods or whatever, that are the basis of religious thought and action cannot have their existence validated by direct observation. How do non-believers understand religion? Simply saying that the believers are crazy or living in a different world will not suffice. The believers are also normal human beings. They are no crazier than anyone else.

Religion is a collection of behaviour that is only unified in our Western conception of it. There is no reason to assume, and good reason not to assume, that this behavior evolved together at the same time in response to a single shift in the environment. For example, Atran (2002) and Boyer (2001) see religion as a great potpourri of ideas and behavior with many independent evolutionary origins outside of religion itself.

### **Concept of Polity (Politics)**

Politics is about the acquisition of power and the use of such power. The *Oxford Dictionary of Words* defines politics as matters concerned with acquiring or exercising power, within a group or an organisation. Onyekpe (1998) defined the term politics as: The struggle for power which itself is the authority to determine or formulate and execute decisions and policies, which must be accepted by the society. It is the struggle for power of governance, especially executive authority (Onyekpe 1998). Onyekpe however gives a caveat to the first part of his definition. According to him, the struggle for or the acquisition of power and the reaction of the society to it, depend greatly on the level of political development of the country. In an undemocratic society, it does not really matter whether the decisions and policies are accepted by the society. Thus the value of political power or politics leaves little or no room for the people to have input, except where democracy has already been entrenched. In a plutocratic system of government, like we have in Nigeria in recent past,

political actions entrenched in, policies and social values attached to them, are function of the value system and the political orientation of the ruling stratum. Presently, the Nigeria society is in the process of demilitarization and it is not surprising that elements of plutocracy is still visible.

Oguntola-Luguda (2008) observed that politics is all about struggle for power as it relates to use and control of such power in governance. Thus politics involve stage governance and how the political leaders acquire their mandate. It should be stated however, that we are here interested in the relationship between religion and politics in a pluralistic society, like Nigeria. Even though we might go into state governance in an attempt to articulate the objectives of this paper, our discussion will be limited to the relationship between religion and politics.

### **The major religions among the Yorubas**

Prior to the advent of Islam and Christianity, the religion of Yoruba people was animism. Animism is indigenous to them, they believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. They use names such as {*Olorun, Olodumare, Adaniwaye* among others to refer to the Supreme Being. Yorubas believe that *Ol9d6mar4* is holy and too remote from the physical world. In reverence of the Supreme Being, Yorubas resolve to worship God through minor deities. Notable ancestors are deified to function as intermediaries between the living and the dead ancestors. The three major religions among the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Africa are Christianity, Islam and the traditional African religion (the Orisa religion). These religions have implications on the lives, polity, social and economic lives of the Yoruba people.

According to Fafunwa (1974 cited in Oladiti, 2014), Islamic literacy in Yoruba land has contributed to the growth and development of Islam in Nigeria. He posit that Islamic education had established firm roots long before the arrival of western education popularized by the Christian missionaries from the 1840s (Ajayi: 1965 cited in Oladiti, 2014). Among the Egba, Ijebu, Oyo, Ijesa, Ife, Ekiti, Igbomina Yoruba speaking communities in Nigeria. Five have a considerable influence of Islam on Yoruba culture historically. This is evident in the point that a significant percentage of the population found in Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Lagos, Kwara are predominantly Muslims unlike in Ondo and Ekiti state (Gbadamosi, 1978 cited in Oladiti, 2014). Indeed, Islam as a religion has played a major role in shaping Yoruba culture and education in West Africa.

Christianity in Nigeria is often erroneously traced to the 18th century evangelical activities of the protestant missionaries from Europe and America. The truth is that Christianity in Africa dates back to the Apostolic era, that is; first century AD. Fatokun (2011) argued that Christianity in Africa is not a recent phenomenon. He pointed out that North Africa region classified today as essentially Muslim nations was the earliest roots of Christianity in Africa. Fatokun reiterated that Christianity penetrated into Africa from Asia shortly after the founding of the Christian Church at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Hilderbrandt (1981) put the date of the founding of the Christian Church to be 6th day of Silvan, A.D. 30. Although New Testament does not have record of the contact or planting of Christianity in Africa, there are however indications of contact with Africa due to easy accessibility of Africa from Palestine. The book of Acts recorded the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch that converted to Christianity through Philip (Acts 8:26-40).

Others do not see any reason to identify with gods (like Szng9 and )g5n) who could be so destructive and merciless when irritated. More so, it is believed that when the spirits of these gods (mounts) come upon their worshippers (during the festivals) they could also be as violent and destructive as the gods. For instance, the “C11g6n Szng9” the person “invaded” or possessed by the spirit of Szng9 usually loses consciousness and does things which he would not have been capable of doing under normal circumstances such as passing sharp-edged knife through his tongue. He becomes wild and uncontrollable in some cases.

### **The influence of Religion on Polity in Yorubaland/Nigeria/Africa**

Yoruba people, Nigerians and by extension other African countries are very religious, they tend to abide by the whims and caprices of their religious leaders. By implications, religion tends to significantly have far-reaching impacts on polity and politics among Africans.

Religion is the focal point of Yoruba culture as pointed out by Idowu (1970), “the keynote of their life is their religion. In all things they are religious, religion forms the foundation and the all governing principle of life for them”. Religious festivals usually serve as a package containing many aspects of the Yoruba culture, such as their beliefs, family life, dress, language, music and dance. The religious ethics, myths and ideas are clearly expressed through the songs the adherents sing during the festivals. Oyetade (2003) asserts that Yoruba religious festivals have welfare objectives, during a festival the divinity is appeased to in order that the adherents and the entire community may enjoy another year of

safety, plenty and happiness. Every member of the society is therefore expected to show support for the occasion by joining the crowd or by partaking of the rituals. The annual Yoruba religions festivals, such as Ifq festival in Abeokuta, Szng9 festival in Oyo, )g5n festival in Ondo and Ijesa land, Agcm[ festival in Ijebu land, G2l2d1 festival in Yewa land, Oro festival, Eg5ng5n festival and so on among various groups in Yoruba land, are very important events. They are occasions for reunion of the people with their gods and for renewal of religious and social values.

In Nigeria people who aspire to be leaders seem to be religious only at the point of trying to mobilise the electorate and while canvassing the unsuspecting masses for votes. After the election(s), and in the process of the struggle for power, the teachings, ethics and doctrines of religion are neglected. It is my conviction that if indeed guided by the principles of their religion(s), Nigerian political leaders would be considerate and see religious ethics as a matrix upon which leadership could be built.

The 2011 general election in Nigeria is a veritable example of process, purpose and methods often adopted by politicians seeking political power (struggle for power). In the build-up to the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria, there were cases of political assassination, mudslinging and calumny among the political echelons. During elections proper, a lot of fraudulent actions were reported by local and international observer groups.1Even when the election results were declared, the Nigerian polity was brought to crisis point with calls for violence by General Muhammad Buhari. Buhari was one of the electoral losers who called for mass action against the ruling party at the expense of the legal and judicial process already put in place by the Electoral Acts.

Abogunrin, in his paper titled “Towards a Unifying Political Ideology and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria: A Christian View”, opines that religion and politics are two inseparable institutions in the human social psyche and structure. He equally asserts that earthly governments are mere agents of God’s theocratic governance of the physical and the spiritual world (Abogunrin, 1984:118). R.D. Abubakre, writing from an Islamic perspective, suggests that Islam is a way of life, which dictates, the political ideology and practice in any Islamic society. He, however, points out that the ideals of Islam is a good guide to political conducts, but the practices of such ideals are usually influenced by the socio-cultural institutions in the society, including politics (Abubakre 1984:129).

On the contrary, arguments abound that there should not be a direct relationship between politics and religion especially, since, according to proponents of this positions, both phenomena belong to different realms of existence – sacred and profane. Those in this group are mostly Christians. In the opinion of Balogun ( Islam does not discriminate between religious and secular matters. On the

contrary, Christians always base their argument on the statement of Jesus Christ that “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:17-22). This phrase has often been used to exclude clergymen, who want to venture into politics.

Festival periods are luminal periods when people come together as a group, renew their relationships and strengthen their cohesion. They are sort of sacred times when people are free from the social constraints of normal life in an intense form of social communion and solidarity. In fact, Mbiti (1991:143) contends that without festivals and rituals, African life would be dull, “rituals and festivals are religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of society”. Among the Yoruba, festivals may accompany birth, initiation, marriages and funerals. There are also harvest festivals, coronation festivals and so on, but the major religious festivals are those done in honor of some gods as mark of loyalty and to solicit blessings from the deity.

Akinwale (2014) reported and submitted that what we have in Nigeria is a deadly mixture of corrupt politics and corrupt religion, and the toxic fumes issuing from this deadly mixture is suffocating the polity. For this reason, blame not religion. Blame rather those who misconceive and misuse religion, those who engage in religious malpractice. In the same way, blame not politics. Blame instead those who misconceive and misuse politics, those who engage in political malpractice. Blame the corruption of religion for which many preachers across the divide of Christianity and Islam are responsible.

And blame the bipartisan corruption of politics found in post-colonial Nigeria. Our problem is not multiplicity of political and religious affiliations but multiplicity of monstrous misconceptions. Nigeria’s post-colonial political and religious tensions and conflicts, which hinder national integration and authentic development, are traceable to multiple monstrous misconceptions and misuse of religion and politics, no doubt, but, ultimately, to the misconception of the human person itself. Our problem is not our differences but our unwillingness to manage our differences with civility, or rather, our willful mismanagement of our differences. The solution is an intellectual and moral conversion in the form of multiple rectification of conceptions. Such rectification will lead us to move from a land governed by an illegitimate constitution to a land where common life is regulated by a constitution that facilitates the emergence and administration of vital institutions. Such constitutionally provided for and regulated institutions must be capable of protecting citizens as they seek to actualize their individual potentials, and fulfill their individual aspirations by working for the actualization of our collective potentials and the fulfillment of our collective aspirations. For after all said and done, every human person seeks the good. But the good of the individual will remain a mirage if the individual fails to work for the common good.

When the nation Nigeria was born, there existed different regions dominated by ethnic groups following a different religion of a type. In its simplest form, while the Northern Nigerians are predominately Hausa/Fulani and Muslims, the Southern Nigerians are largely Yoruba/Ibos and Christian. Nigerian colonial master sowed seeds of discord between Christianity and Islam-the two major religious bodies that held sway in the socio-political scene of her national life. Kalu (2000) painted a true picture of the scenario created by British imperialism which laid the foundation to suspicion and rivalry among the ethnic nationalities and religious groups in Nigeria when he posited: meanwhile a contrary wind blew in the north as the root of Islamic fundamentalism was sowed. This veritable religions and political challenge to Christianity was nursed in the early days of independence. The conflict between Christianity and Islam was at first an aspect of regional rivalry and development.

This ethno-religious plurality has not been for the best interests of Nigeria as it has been the basis for many conflicts, Nigeria as a nation-state has “witnessed the most perturbing and unprecedented upsurge of ...religious disturbance...” (Anugwom and Oji: 2003:143). Religious riot has remained a constant threat to peace in Nigeria and has continued to threaten the continued coexistence and habitation of the different ethnic nationalities that make up the country.

Another adverse effect religion politics has had on the country’s integration is the promotion of culture of corruption. Virtually every aspect of society is corrupt and religion that should have been a tool of correction has failed in this regard. Majority of the Pastors and Imams have aided and abetted corruption in that their followers have been tasked to look for money at all cost ‘to help God’. Whereas, the Holy books (both the Bible and Quaran) have not taught them that. The effect of the foregoing is that religious ideals is expected to regulate the political activities. However, majority of political office holders who would have impacted positively on the national integration given the genuine teachings by their religious leaders have failed to do so because the truth has not been preached. Religion politics has nevertheless precipitated various religious conflicts. Notably among them are the Maitatsine riot of 1980 in Kano and Skirmishes between the Izala and Tijjanyya in Gombe in 1987 (Larkin, 2009:126). Also, the Bulumkutu riot of October 1982, the various Kaduna riot of 1987, 1988, Jigawa riot 2001 and Lagos – Idi-Araba, 2002. As though these were not enough, another riot erupted on 22nd November, 20002 about 200 people were reportedly killed, and property worth million of naira were destroyed. This was believed to have been caused due to “blasphemous publication” against the Islamic sect. This happened on the day when “Miss World Beauty Contest” was scheduled to hold in Abuja. Tribune, 26th November, 2002. All these and many other issues make religion a centre of

violence in Nigeria. It should be noted however that the occurrence of religious-inducing violence.

### Conclusion

In Yoruba land, there is no sharp division among the three major religions – African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam -. As a matter fact, many families among the Yoruba people do have members who are practitioners of all the major religions in Nigeria. Religion has little are arguably perhaps the most sophisticated tribes in Nigeria with respect to religious tolerance. It should be noted, however, that religion has implications and influence on the polity and politics of the Yoruba people. Majority of Nigerians have strong faith in the integrity and efficacy of their religious leaders.

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