The role of Islamic scholars in curbing ethno-religious violence in Nigeria

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**Abstract**

Nigeria is one of the most populous countries in Africa with a multiplicity of ethnic groups, religions and cultures. Islam and Christianity are the most dominant religions with the North and part of the south west being dominated by the Muslims, while the south-east and the south south being largely dominated by the Christians. After the country’s independence from Britain in 1960 the country witnessed series of ethno religious tensions which claimed thousands of lives and colossal loss of properties the recent and current of which is the Boko Haram mayhem. Various tools and approaches have been employed by experts, scholars and governments in analyzing these unfortunate phenomena with a view to proffering solution to it. This paper therefore aims at examining the nature and causes of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria and how religious scholar’s especially Islamic scholars can play a role in curbing it. The paper employed both historical and primary and secondary data in analysing these catastrophes. The paper among other things recommends that based on the nature and patterns of the ethno religious crisis in Nigeria, Islamic scholars can serve as an effective weapon in curving these menaces.

**Introduction**

It is an undeniable fact that Nigeria is a pluralistic multicultural multiethnic society and the most crowded African country this can be seen from the multiplicity of ethnic groups, religions and cultures in the country. with a population of about 182 million by 2015 (World Population Prospects 2015:21) and about 391 different ethnic groups with divergent socio political, economic, cultural and religious background. Islam and Christianity are the most dominant religions However, there is uncertainty about the exact percentages, and hence various sources give different figures. Whatever the exact percentages are, it is clear that the North and part of the south west is being dominated by the Muslims, while the south-east and the south- south is being largely dominated by the Christians.

With these divergent socio political economic and cultural background the country was termed by some researcher’s as a melting pot where social conflicts and especially of ethnic nature are bound to occur. The country’s ethnic and religious issues form part of the most recurring phenomena in its body politics. Since its independence, the country has been driven hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional or state illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at democratisation, stability, economic transformation and national cohesion. A peak of the crisis appears to have occurred during the civil war of the 1960s, which began shortly after independence (Okpanachi 2010). There seems to be no solution in sight to the accompanying conflicts of ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance. The dominant and minority ethnic groups treat each other with suspicion and the different religious world view clash at the slightest provocation.

Religion with its moral principles and values are expected to direct societies and the lives of its adherents. But amazingly the violence associated with those who have used the two faiths Islam and Christianity to propagate violence. From the 1966 military coup and counter coup and its aftermath, the 1981 Maitatsine Religious disturbances, the 1981 Kaduna polytechnic skirmishes, the Cross versus the Cresent conflict at the University of Ibadan, the 1984 Jimeta-Yola religious disturbances, the Zangon Kataf Crises in Kaduna state, the 1987 Kafachan College of education Muslim Christian riots; 1996 Muslim Christian clash during Easter procession in Ilorin and the July1999 crisis in Sagamu between Oro cultists and Hausa people living in the area (Akinseye;2011), the 2009 and 2010 ethnoreligious crisis in Bauchi, the October 2000 crisis between the Hausa’s and Yoruba in Idi-Araba, Lagos State, the 2001 ethno religious crisis in Jos, Plateau state and many more have been violence associated with ethnic or religious connotation that is almost bringing government to her knees, while peace and security remain elusive.

**The genesis and origin of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria**

Some researchers have traced the present day relationship of suspicion fear and mistrust among the divergent ethnic groups to the colonial period with the colonial system of dividing what is today called Nigeria into three administrative units of Lagos colony, Southern protectorate and Northern protectorate. In the arrangement the North was excluded from the central administration an act that becomes a serious blunder on the relationship between the people of the North and those of the south (East and West). The implication becomes more manifest when the tree administrative units were amalgamated in 1914 an action that was marked by mutual suspicion with rival ethnic groups pitching against one other in a relentless bloody ethnic fight for power and resources. That is why many Nigerians called the amalgamation as the mistake of “1914” and has been blamed as the bedrock of the ethno-religious conflicts that has been bedeviling Nigeria. (Okpanachi; 2010).

Perhaps sensing the danger of having one ethnic group dominating another, the British colonial master began constitutional changes which culminated in the adoption of Richards Constitution which was designed “to promote the unity of Nigeria and to provide adequately within that unity for the diverse elements which make up the country.” With this in mind the Richard Constitution allowed the splitting of the country into regions each with its autonomous power. However, this arrangement failed to attain or achieved the desired goals as Nigerians found it difficult to work harmoniously together without conflict. Each tribe works only for the interest of its people and not the nation. Thus in the blind competition of one tribe trying to dominate the other, conflict of ethical nature frequently occurred. This become glaringly conspicuous during the formation of political parties were they were formed on regional alignment thus; Northern people congress (N.P.C.) was for the North, Action congress (A.G.) was for the West while N.C.N.C was for the East (Igbo) (Cohen 1968).

Equally the major parties of the second republic where alleged to be a replica of those of the first republic. N.P.N. for instance reflected the N.P.C. U.P.N. was the A.G. incarnate while the N.P.P. replicate the N.CN,C, each of them worked tirelessly to protect the interest of its geopolitical zone and in so doing conflict occur. Even the coup and counter coup of 1966 was said to have come about as a result of the headless pride, greed, selfishness and shortcomings of the politicians of the three regions. (Edoh 2001:87)

**A chronicle of Ethno-religious Crisis in Nigeria**

Like in any society, in Nigeria, religion plays a very critical role. It is considered as a potent force in the geopolitical development of the country. According to (Haldun and [Opeyemi 2016)](https://accord.org.za/people/opeyemi-adedoyin-odukoya/), ethno-religious conflicts have gained notoriety as the most violent crises in Nigeria. Most of these conflicts occur in the middle-belt and along the culturally borderline states of the predominantly Muslim North, and also take place between Hausa-Fulani groups and non-Muslim ethnic groups in the South (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:19). It is sometimes very difficult to mention the differences between religious and ethnic crises because the dividing line between them is slimmer than thin. Examples of such ethno-religious conflicts are the Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, the Kaduna Shari’ah riots of 2000 and the Jos riots of 2001 (Haldun and [Opeyemi 2016)](https://accord.org.za/people/opeyemi-adedoyin-odukoya/). Several hundred lives were lost during the Kaduna crisis of 2000 and the Jos insurrection of 2001. The crises caused violent ripple effects that spread beyond Kaduna and Jos (Haldun and [Opeyemi 2016)](https://accord.org.za/people/opeyemi-adedoyin-odukoya/).

Other recent ethno-religious conflicts include the July 1999 conflict among the Oro cultists in Sagamu in Ogun state who claimed that the Hausa women had come outside when the cultists were outside with their gnome. The results were arguments that finally turned into a full-scale crisis. Many Yoruba and Hausa people were killed before a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on the Sagamu town. Even as the infamy was being put under check in Sagamu, reprisal attacks continued in Kano, in Hausa city, leading to deaths and destruction of property worth billions of Naira (Haldun and [Opeyemi 2016)](https://accord.org.za/people/opeyemi-adedoyin-odukoya/).

Another ethno-religious conflict that had far reaching impacts on the people of Nigeria was the October 2000 Lagos-Kano (Idi-Araba/Oko-Oba) conflict which was caused by a misperception between the Hausa inhabitants and the Yoruba living in Lagos over the use of a convenience by a man from Hausa. The mayhem resulted in the death of many Yoruba. As a consequence, the Odua People Congress (a Yoruba militia) was formed and worsened the situation as the violence later spread southwards to Kano (Haldun and [Opeyemi 2016)](https://accord.org.za/people/opeyemi-adedoyin-odukoya/).

Similarly, in September 2001, ethnic friction between the Tivs and the Jukuns in the Plateau state reached fever pitch following what came to be referred to as ‘mistaken identity’. ‘What this means is that some Tivs took some nineteen soldiers to be Jukuns in fake army uniform. The Tiv youths captured them and slaughtered them one by one’ (Kura 2010:34-35). And then the Nigerian army embarked on devastating reprisal attacks in Zaki-Biam. According to some controversial numbers at least a hundred people died in the army attacks (Human Rights Watch 2001). Violence spread to Jos plateau especially after a Christian was appointed as a Local Council Chairman. By the time the menace was brought to a standstill, over 160 lives had been lost (Haldun and [Opeyemi 2016)](https://accord.org.za/people/opeyemi-adedoyin-odukoya/).

**Causes of Ethno-religious Crisis in Nigeria**

As discuss earlier, the germ of ethno religious crisis in Nigeria was sown during the colonial days due to some of their policies. However, other factors responsible for the escalation of ethnoreligious crisis in Nigeria include;

**Ethnicity:** According to Quadri (2013) Ethnicity is one of the factors responsible for some of the so-called religious crisis in Nigeria. Ethnicity is generally regarded as the most potent and politically salient identity in Nigeria. This claim may be said to have been substantiated by the fact that both in competitive and non-competitive settings Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity.(Eghosa E. Osaghae and Rotimi T. Suberu, 2000)

The desire to harness and utilize the God given economic potentials distributed in all parts of the country made the movement and permanent settlement of different tribes in different regions of the region inevitable. The socio political and economic relations that followed lead to crisis of leadership between many tribes. In 2002 for instance there was a serious conflict between the Yoruba’s and the Hausa’s over the between leadership of a cattle market in Bodija Ibadan.

The establishment of associations for purely tribal interest is also another factor that precipitates ethno- religious crisis. After 58 years of so called independence and despite several call for national unity, association of purely tribal interest are still flourishing in the country. In the west there is Oduwa people congress (OPC) for purely Yoruba people, in the east there is the Ohaneze (Ndi-igbo) purely for Igbo people while in the North there is Arewa consultative forum (A.C.F) for the northern people. It is noteworthy that all these associations have been established to directly and unambiguously protect the interest of their respective people and were their interest clashes it results to conflict. Many ethnic crisis in Nigeria are as a result of the activities these associations.

.other important developments in the realm of ethnic polities in Nigeria include the creation of more states and local government areas, which usually led to an expansion in the sphere of communal identities and conflicts, which ultimately manifested into violent conflict between ”indigenes” and non-indigenes, ‘ sons of the soil’ and ‘migrant’ or ‘settlers’. This xenophobic tendency is largely responsible for the current ethno– political climate in plateau state. The incessant ethnic tension between the Hausa-Fulani settlers and the indigenous groups, often result into violent communal clashes, which left thousands dead and thousands more displaced.

**Ignorance, poverty and unemployment**

It has been observed that most of those who partake and engage in ethno-religious upheavals in Nigeria are largely ignorant of the basic tenents of their religion, because the two major religions Islam and Christianity do not encourage violence and savagery. In the same vein the rate of poverty and unemployment especially among youth in Nigeria especially in the Northern part made them a pool for violence who participates in the incessant ethno-religious riots in the country over the years. It is even alleged by some researchers that some greedy and unpatriotic politicians used to instigate and sponsor some of these youths to cause commotion and mayhem the May 16th 2011 post-election violence in the northern Nigeria is a case study. Properties worth millions of naira were looted and razed and innocent people where maimed under the pretext of election misconduct.

According (Dike 2005, Nwankwo 2015) the high level of corruption and the looting of state resources is another serious and ‘pandemic’ problem that precipitate ethnic and religious crisis in Nigeria. The country is ‘richly endowed with natural resources and high quality human capital’ but corruption is one of the main reasons that affect the development of the country in a negative way. The appropriation of state resources by certain hands makes poverty and bitter anger inevitable aspects of daily socio-economic and political routine. In this sense, though corruption is not peculiar to Nigeria, many sources call it the ‘bane of the country’ (Dike 2005; Ogbeidi 2012:21). Poverty and injustice caused by corruption weaken any sense of mutual tolerance, social solidarity or coexistence, while reawakening social hatred, radicalism and violence.

**Environmental Degradation:**

It has been observed that the scourge of deforestation and desert encroachment that plagued the extreme northern frontiers of Nigeria has over the years pushed the Fulani herds’ men to migrate to the central and further south, in search of a greener pasture for their cattle. The failure on the part of the government to provide adequate grazing areas for the Fulani herdsmen along the plateau, has over the years been responsible for the incessant conflicts between the Fulani herdsmen and the indigenous farming communities along the central region.

**Sentimental and exaggerated media coverage:**

The unethical, subjective as well as sentimental and exaggerated predisposition exhibited by some media houses in their coverage also form the background for ethno religious crisis in Nigeria. For instance *Al-mizan* a Hausa language newspaper of 16th *Zulkida*, 1420 reported that over 2000 Hausa’s were killed by the Igbo’s of in the eastern Nigeria to avenge the killings of Igbo’s in Kaduna. The Igbo’s took that action perhaps due to the erroneous information carried by ‘Today’ Newspaper of 21st February, a situation that lead to the escalation of the crisis in other major towns of Northern Nigeria. In the same vein the article carried by This Day Newspaper in 2002 which was considered sacrilegious by the Muslims because of its flagrant disrespect for the Prophet Muhammad (S.AW.), lead to a series of violent riots in Abuja, Kaduna and other major cities in which hundreds of lives and properties worth millions of naira were lost.(Quadri;2013)

**Intolerance**

Intolerance has been described by the oxford Dictionary of Current English (2001) as unwillingness to accommodate ideas and or behavior that is different from one’s own. It is also a situation where religious faithful are unwilling to accommodate the perceived lapses or excesses of others. Intolerance has been identified as one of the teething factors fueling the flame of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. During the Shagari administration for example Muslims where accused by some Christians of receiving a grant of ten thousand Naira from the federal government to build a central mosque in Abuja. It was only the intervention of late Dr. Chuba Okadigbo the then special presidential assistant on political affairs to president Shehu Shagari who clear the matter that “both the (Muslims and Christians where given ten thousand naira each by the federal government” but the prompt commencement of the mosque project by the Muslims as against a prolonged delay on the part of the Christians gave rise to speculation and allegation of favoritism. Christians were also accused by some Muslims of placing Christian symbols such as Red Cross on the public properties like hospitals and ambulances. Such issues are just examples of issues that are being used by some un-godly and unfaithful followers in triggering crisis.

**The role of Islamic scholars in curbing ethno-religious crisis**

One distinguishing feature between Islam and other religious is the prominence attached to law in its practice. There is virtually nothing done in the religion or by a Muslim that there is no law supporting it. In order to ascertain the position of Islam regarding anything, Muslims are enjoined to refer to the Qur’an and Sunnah (Practice of the Prophet Pbuh), while respecting the methodology and principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*Usul-al-fiqh*) and the higher objectives of Shari’ah (*Maqasid-ash-Shari’ah*) Islamic scholars are the guardians and transmitters of Islamic principles (*Shari’ah*). This entrust them with the responsibility of keeping the correct narrative of Islamic doctrines and its interpretation as well as its transmission to successive generations without compromising its narration.

Islamic literature is laden with instructions and exhortations of enjoining the good and forbidding the bad. In addition to belief in Allah (*Iman*), the whole spiritual virtue and prestige of the Muslim Ummah which distinguish them from other communities are a resultant of the distinct quality of commanding the good and forbidding the bad (Q 3: 110). Muslims are called upon to ensure that there is a group of people (i.e. the Ulama’) who shall work towards sanitizing the Ummah through calling others to good and pious deeds and preventing and forbidding them from evil (Q 3: 104). Contrastively, as a way of reminding them to imbibe lessons, Muslims are informed about the woes, wretchedness and destructions that consequently befell those who allowed evil to get grounds in their midst, without adequately putting forth measures to stop it. It was on that basis that some past communities were cursed (Q 5: 78-79). Advocacy of evil and discouraging from righteousness are regarded among the traits and qualities of the hypocrites (*Munafiqun)* (Q 9: 67). The overall tone of the Qur’an is that, people’s success lies in their efforts towards ridding their societies from evils as well as promoting and advocating the good (Q 3: 110).

Moreover, in a Hadith narrated by Abu Sa’id al-Khudri, the Prophet (SAW) described three stages of correcting evil which are; (i) correcting it with hand (ii) correcting it with tongue, and (iii) correcting it by heart. Correcting evil with hand largely imbues the duty and responsibility of leadership. The second stage; correcting evil with tongue largely refers to collective responsibility of scholars and other individuals with relative expertise.

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad (saw) have shown in theory and practice the right of neighbor’s both Muslims and non-Muslims. A study of the day- to-day relationship of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions with their non-Muslim relatives and neighbor’s revels that Islam encourages normative peaceful relations between Muslims and people of other faith (Christians and Jews) in particular. Such activities include greeting and eating the food of and with one another, exchanging gifts and visits, charity, trade, establishing peace treaties for mutual safety and security etc. in fact the prophet (S.A.W) was reported to have said “ Whoever truly believes in Allah and the day of judgement should honor his neighbor”(Bukhari; 1673)

In fact, Islam has guaranteed freedom of worship for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.The Qur’an says let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands clear from error (Qur’an 2:256). Also Says the truth has now come from your sustainer, let then he who will .believe in it and let he who will, reject it (Qur’an 18: 29) Islam respect the right of people of other faith to practice their own religious beliefs (Qur’an 5:48-49). Jews and Christians, for example, are respected as people of scripture (Ahlul Kiab), and their right to their places of worship must be respected.

In pragmatic terms, Islam prepares Muslims for interaction and co-existence with non-Muslims especially the Christians in a way that will make two groups accept and accommodates instead of merely tolerate each other. For instance on the issue of friendship with Christians the Qur’an says thus:

You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity towards the believers (to be) the Jews and those who associate others with Allah, and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers, those who say “we are Christians”. That is because among them are Priest and monks and because they are not arrogant. And when they hear what has been revealed to the messenger, you see their eyes over plowing with tears because of what they have recognized of the truth. They say,” our lord, we have believe, so register us among the witnesses” And why should we not believe in Allah and what has come to us of the truth? And we aspire that our lord will admit us to paradise with the righteous people. So, Allah rewarded them for what they said with paradise beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally. And that is the reward of doers of good. (Qur’an 5:82-85)

The holy Qur’an also directs for courtesy in the use of language and exchange of food with Christians thus;

They are not all the same: among the people of the scripture is a community standing in obedience, reciting the verses of Allah during periods of the night and prostrating in prayers. They believe in Allah and at the last day, they enjoin what is right and forbid what Is wrong and hasten to good deeds. And those are among the righteous and whatever good they do- never will it be denied them. And Allah knows of the righteous (Qur’an 3: 113-5)

And indeed among the people of scriptures are those who believe in Allah and what was revealed to you and what was revealed to them……(Qur’an 3:199)

………..And the food of those who were given the scripture is lawful for you and tour food is lawful for them (Qur’an 5:5)

On the invitation to dialogue with the Christians and its modus-operandi the Qur’an directed thus;

Say O people of the scripture, come to a word that is equitable between and you that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with him and not take one another as lord instead of Allah. But if they turn away then say, bear witness that we are Muslims (Qur’an 3:64)

The Qur’an has also mention the name of Isa (Jesus) in several places in a polite and gracious manner thus;

And he has made me blessed where ever I am and he has enjoined upon me prayer and zakat as long as I remained alive. And made me dutiful to my mother and he has not made me a wretched tyrant (Qur’an 19: 32)

The above references are explicit and self-explanatory about how Muslims are prepared psychologically for the meeting and co-existence with non-Muslim especially Christians, the references suffice to let Christians see in Muslim friends instead of sworn enemies.

It further shows great respect for Houses of Worship, and thus it is totally innocent from all these terrorist actions falsely attributed to its teaching

The Qur’an prohibits any one from destroying monasteries, churches, synagogues or mosque. Qur’an chapter22:39-40 says “permission is given to those who fight because they have been oppressed…for had it not been for God repelling some men by means of others, {all) Monasteries, churches synagogues and Mosques wherein the name of Allah is often mentioned would certainly have been destroyed…”

Based on this verse of the Qur’an great scholars such as ibn Hazm hold that Muslims are even required if necessary, to depend those non-Muslims places of worship from being destroyed. (Da’awa institute of Nigeria; 2018). Therefore, aggression against Houses of Worships and killing worshippers therein are totally prohibited in Islam. In other words, they have nothing at all to do either with Islam or with his teachings.

**Conclusion & Recommendation**

The paper traces the genesis and causes of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. The paper trace the genesis of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria to the colonial period with the colonial system of dividing what is today called Nigeria into three administrative units. The implication becomes more manifest when the tree administrative units were amalgamated in 1914 an action that was marked by mutual suspicion with rival ethnic groups pitching against one other in a relentless bloody ethnic fight for power and resources after the colonialist left the country. The causes of the ethno-religious crisis have been traced to intolerance among the followers of the two major religions in the country, ethnicity, ignorance, poverty and unemployment, among other factors.

The paper highlighted the teachings of Islam with regards to interaction and co-existence with followers of other religions. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad (saw) have shown in theory and practice the right of neighbor’s both Muslims and non-Muslims. A study of the day- to-day relationship of Prophet Muhammad and his Companions with other non-Muslim relatives and neighbor’s revels that Islam encourages normative peaceful relations between Muslims and people of other faith (Christians and Jews) in particular. Therefore, the Islamic scholars as guardians and transmitters of Islamic principles (*Shari’ah*) and who are the hears of Prophet Muhammad are entrusted with the responsibility of keeping the correct narrative of Islamic doctrines and its interpretation as well as its transmission to successive generations without compromising its narration, this in our opinion will go a long way in halting the scourge of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria.

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