

Politics of conversion and inter-faith marriages among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria: An analysis in religious contest and conflict

Nwankwo T. Nwaezeigwe

Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Email: nwankwo.nwaezeigwe@unn.edu.ng

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Received 7th April 2022; Accepted 8th June 2022

ABSTRACT: Nigeria is a country where Christianity and Islam compete for dominance in the political realm. This competition which often degenerates into physical confrontation is rooted in the 1804 jihad tradition of the Fulani-driven Sokoto Caliphate which is founded on the immutable request for the conversion of their non-Muslim neighbours. Unfortunately, this quest found itself frontally confronted by the fledging advance of Christianity and westernization from the south, with both eventually meeting at the Middle Belt region, which is home to non-Hausa-Fulani minority ethnic groups. Although Islam in Yoruba land no doubt predated the Fulani Jihad of 1804, the later advent of Christianity in the 19th century with its superior sophistication, soon overwhelmed Islam there. Thus Islam subsequently found itself in retreat. With this retreat came resistance against the domineering influence of Western civilization which is often associated with Christianity. It consequently elicited a state of conversion and counter-conversion between these two competing religions which often extends to inter-personal relations, one of which is inter-marriage. The present work looks at the subject of this confrontation from the barometer of conversion through inter-marriages between members of both faiths. Focusing on the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria—the mainly Muslim Hausa-Fulani of the North, the mixed Christian-Muslim Yoruba of the West, and the mainly Christian Igbo of the East, it explores their respective trajectories of response to Christian-Muslim marriages within the context of their religious traditions and by extension assesses their respective levels of inter-religious tolerance and accommodation.

Keywords: Christianity, conversion, faith, Islam, marriages, Nigeria, religious.

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that religion is gradually creeping onto the centre-stage of national politics more than ethnicity in Nigeria. Although it has effectively been applied over time as the most potent weapon of political mobilization by the Muslim North against the mainly Christian South and their Middle Belt brethren, it was in recent times that the latter have come to begin to grasp, albeit not wholly, with the realities of religious politics. The major catalyst for this increasing awareness on the part of the Christians, is no doubt the prevalent disturbing trend of increasing

sectarian-borne conflicts expressed through the *Sharia'h* conflict and its now successor *Boko Haram* insurgency.

In fact, the position of the Muslim *Ummain* respect of the character and structure of the Nigerian nation is summed up in the following impression by Sulaiman:

There are two civilizations competing for supremacy in Nigeria today: Islam and European civilization. The latter, reaping the fruits of its colonial enterprise, holds Nigeria in its sway-

superimposing its will on such weighty matters as law, values, morality and world view. That is not all Nigeria is no more and no less than an extension of Western civilization, being the creation of Western imperialism and having been fully absorbed into the Western economic as well as ideological and cultural hegemony (Sulaiman, 1986).

There is no gainsaying the fact that Christianity, right from its inception as a European-borne religion has posed a major threat to Islamic expansionism in the new nation, given its immutable peaceful pattern of conversion. In fact, the reason for the greater ease with which Christianity penetrates the erstwhile highly restricted traditional Muslim areas in Northern Nigeria is invariably rooted in the pristine non-violence pattern of conversion.

Jesus Christ was a spiritual warrior conqueror without the quest for temporal authority; whereas Prophet Muhammad was both a spiritual and political warrior with an immutable quest for temporal authority. Christ never advocated for the abolition of existing laws and traditions as much as he never advocated for the overthrow of existing political authorities in the manner that Prophet Muhammad later did and subsequently directed his followers to do. Thus Islam as a war-monger proselytizing faith is bound to be handicapped under peace-time situations in formal non-violent conversions. For in the matter of preaching for winning of souls among non-Muslim communities, little seems to be known beyond the old methods of forceful conversion through jihad, economic coercion and subtle gifts, as well as intimidating political diplomacy.

On the other hand, Christianity is originally a peaceful religion whose author Jesus Christ abhorred the use of force or violence as a means of conversion to the faith and for that reason developed the ability to meander through all kinds of people and different faiths with convincing reasons for conversion. It is therefore obvious that Christianity as a religion is a framework of faith on which every individual fits in with his distinct garment of culture, social and political systems and language. In Christianity, there is no spiritualization of a particular language as in the case of Arabic in Islam. It is on the basis of this that one hinges on another reason for the easy expansion of Christianity in the northern part of Nigeria.

Colonialism could be said to have brought about increased ethnic consciousness in the North, as it appeared that prior to that the position in the North was that of Islam attempting to superimpose every ethnic nationality with Arab culture and tradition. Since it was clear that Islam was intolerant to other cultures, with the coming of Christianity, it became clear that the only possible means by which the various ethnic minority groups in the North could maintain their ethnic and cultural

independence was to embrace Christianity. To the northern non-Muslim ethnic groups, therefore, Christianity not only provided spiritual succour but equally provided a platform for ethnic nationalism.

Among the Middle Belt Christians of the North, therefore, Christianity is not only the means for eternal salvation but an instrument of ethnic nationalism, socio-political emancipation from the age-long domineering feature of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani and most importantly modern civilization. In fact, under the existing liberal socio-economic framework, given the doctrinal flexibility of the Bible compared to the inherent theological rigidity of the Quran, Christianity became the better alternative religious framework for addressing the engaging intractable socio-economic challenges of modern society.

The result was a dramatic inversion of values and status by the standards of modern social index between the Muslims and the Christians. Thus, the once civilized Muslim Hausa-Fulani society became the uncivilized, while the once uncivilized Middle Belt ethnic minorities became civilized on account of their conversion to Christianity. In effect the penetration of Christianity into the minority areas of the North not only became the limiting force of Islamic conversion in Southern Nigeria but invariably became the gateway of Christianity to the heart of Islam in Nigeria. As Kwasi wrote:

From the onset, attempts by Christian missionaries to penetrate into those areas which have been designated 'Muslim domains' have always been seen as encroachment and have been resisted by the Muslims, despite whatever good the mission might bring for social development, health care, education or even agricultural development for the people. This has led to continuous struggles for domination by Muslims while Christians on their own part, try their best to resist such impositions and inhibitions. It is unchristian to be unhelpful where help is needed and can be provided (Kwasi, 2012).

The presence of Christianity in the North was therefore seen by the Northern Hausa-Fulani Muslim as a challenge to both their immutable Jihad tradition and quest for maximum political control in the modern state of Nigeria. Under such prevailing circumstances, it is not therefore improbable that conversion from one faith to another will more than ever before, constitute a circle of mutual conflicts with strong reverberating political consequences. The Hausa-Fulani however provide the model of this mutual conflict arising from counter-conversions between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. It is from this model of mutual conflict that both the Igbo and Yoruba counter-conversion experiences will be explained. Both the Igbo

and Yoruba in comparison to the Hausa-Fulani present again two mutually contrasting features- the former wearing the garb of extreme opposition to counter-conversion, while the latter wears the garb of mutual counter-conversion.

ISLAM AND THE POLITICAL FACE OF CONVERSION

Conversion from one religion or faith to another has many faces as much as it is guided by many reasons. There is the original face of conversion which is spiritual. People convert because they have the hope of a better life in a future life after death. Yet some people convert because they are confronted with problems which could only be solved by divine intervention, have had such problems solved by divine intervention in the form of miracle or formal healing. Thus, as Tolupe and Nathaniel put it:

People convert to a different religion for various reasons, including: active conversion by free choice due to a change in belief, secondary conversion, deathbed conversion, conversion by convenience and marital conversion, and forced conversion such as conversion by violence (Tolupe and Nathaniel, 2015).

However, more than the form, the character or what is referred to here as the face of conversion determines the degree of public reaction to the issue of conversion. When one talks of the political face of conversion, it refers to the relative effect of such conversion to the political influence of one religion against the other. In other words, it explains how conversion from one faith to the other is manipulated as a political weapon to upset or uphold a given political balance in figures and influence.

In Nigeria conversion through political power and influence has been the tool with which Muslims mostly confront and to some extent rival the threat of ever increasing Christian evangelism. In fact, whenever a Christian of a higher status converts to Islam it is celebrated not just as a political victory against Christianity but as an added political leverage. Describing the political face of the conversion programme of the then Premier of the defunct Northern Region Sir Ahmadu Bello the Northern Nigeria-based *Carefronting* organization wrote:

With State money and donations from Arab countries, the Premier of the Northern Region launched a conversion campaign among the inhabitants of the Middle Belt, first among the pagans and later among Christians too. In the process, he relied on local chiefs and village heads who were answerable to his administration. For example the Chief of Kuta declared that the

inhabitants of his own town had collectively decided to adopt Islam. In order to sever the links to their traditional faith once and for all, he had the old 'idols' buried. The Premier personally attended the conversion ceremony at which 1,357 inhabitants of Kuta embraced Islam. As with other mass conversions, the occasion was organized as a public festival at which the new converts received small gifts or honorary titles from the Premier's hand (Carefronting, 2015).

In the same report the Premier was reported in 1964 to have boasted to the Muslim World League that within the short space of five months, he had converted a total of 60,000 infidels to Islam, stating further in his words: "I hope when we clean Nigeria we will go further afield in Africa" (Carefronting, 2015).

The Premier and scion of the Sokoto Caliphate, was thus able to record the above stated successes in conversion through the combined methods of political patronage and outright intimidation. Notable examples were the father of General Theophilus Danjuma, who immediately re-converted to Christianity soon after the death of Sir Ahmadu Bello. The former *Attah* of Igala, His Majesty, Ali Obaje, was once a Christian but his conversion to Islam was made a pre-condition for him to ascend the throne by the Premier. Ahmadu Bello's trend was to become the framework of political conversion to Islam in Nigeria even up to the present day.

Succeeding Military Heads of State of Northern Muslim extraction also through their respective policies of political patronage and coercion attempted to enforce conversion to Islam on the Christians. For instance, pockets of indigenous Igbo Muslims like Alhaji Sulaiman Onyeama and Alhaji Abdulaziz Udeh were in fact influenced into conversion by their quest for economic gains supposedly through political patronages during the hey-days of military regimes, which were successively headed by Northern Muslim Generals.

The same factor of conversion also applies to the erstwhile Niger Delta Militant leader, *Mujahid* Asari Dokubo, whom the present writer discovered during a visit to Tripoli, Libya in 2010, to have had a strong link with the former Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi. It was obvious that Asari's conversion to Islam was borne out of his need for external support during the Niger Delta struggles, which he evidently achieved through his subsequent friendship with the erstwhile Libyan leader.

What is most striking however about conversion from Christianity to Islam is the often sensational and celebrative manner with which Muslims receive every conversion, which is often accompanied with somewhat political flavor. This is not the case with conversion from Islam to Christianity which is often done with individual spiritual conviction that only ends with individual Church

appreciation. In fact not many people today are aware that quite a number of renowned Pentecostal Pastors in Nigeria were converts from Islam. Among these people are Pastors Tunde Bakare, Matthew Ashimolowo, Yemi Balogun, Paul Jinadu, and Yinka Yusuf among many others. In fact most Christian converts from Islam often end up as effective soldiers of Christian evangelism against their former religion, which in one form adds to the flame of anti-Christianity among the Muslims. But as the American convert from Christianity to Islam Kareem Abdul-Jabber, rightly put it:

For most people, converting from one religion to another is a private matter requiring intense scrutiny of one's conscience. But when you're famous, it becomes a public spectacle for one and all to debate. And when you convert to an unfamiliar or unpopular religion, it invites criticism of one's intelligence, patriotism and sanity. I should know. Even though I became a Muslim more than 40 years ago, I'm still defending that choice (Abdul-Jabber, 2015).

On April 23, 2013, there was a "Breaking News" report by Nigeria's *News Express* titled: "Popular Reverend converts to Islam in Kaduna (Nigeria)", with bold picture of the retired Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kaduna, Most Reverend Peter Jatau boldly on the front page. Ahmed reporting the event in the usual journalistic sensational manner wrote:

There is excitement within the Muslim circles in Kaduna, North-West Nigeria, following news of the conversion to Islam by a popular Christian cleric. There was a palpable tension in the State yesterday following speculations that Arch-Bishop Peter Jatau, the former Bishop of Kaduna has converted to Islam in Zaria. *News Express* can however authoritatively report that it is another Jatau – Rev. Bitrus Jatau – who converted to Islam and not Bishop Peter Jatau. Painting a clear picture of what happened, the deputy Chairman of the *Izzatul Bidi'a Waikamatul Sunnah* Zaria Local Government Branch, Imam Khadir, told *News Express*: 'There was a mix-up in the name whereby some people thought that Rev. Bitrus Jatau was the former Bishop Peter Jatau. What happened at Alhaji Haruna Danja's Mosque on Sunday was supposed to be a meeting with Ulamas and confession to be made by Reverend Bitrus Jatau, but the event was disrupted by people who came to witness the confession. Because of the confusion the name Jatau generated, a lot of people who came from far and wide thought that it was Bishop Peter Jatau that

was to receive the kallamantu-Shahada at the Haruna Danja's Mosque situated at Kongo, Zaria on that Sunday night' (Ahmed, 2013).

Earlier on January 14, 2013, another news media CKN Nigeria online had in a headline "why I converted to Islam...Igbo monarch, reported the conversion of a traditional ruler from Nigeria's Christian heartland to Islam. According to CKN:

Vice Chairman of the Council of Village Heads in Imo State, Chief Sylvester O. Dimunah, has said he accepted Islam due to the truthful nature of the Religion and the steadfastness of Muslims. Speaking during a visit to Abuja yesterday, the traditional ruler whose name is now Musa Dimunah, said he was particularly influenced by the good nature of the former secretary of the council and executive secretary of Justice Maman Nasir Islamic Centre for Peace and Research, Malam Ibrahim Biobo Nlomije. 'I did not accept Islam, I only revert (sic) to the religion that our forefathers practice and the universal religion of humanity. I'm impressed by the good nature of Muslims' love for everybody and hatred for none apart from the way they revere Allah and all the Prophets without discrimination' (CNK Nigeria, 2013).

It is important to note that this singular conversion received wider sensational media coverage in a number of news media. For the Muslims, it was a big success in their Islamic conversion drive for a Traditional ruler in the predominantly Christian Igboland to convert to Islam; just as in the case of Reverend Bitrus Jatau from the predominantly Christian Middle Belt. The same account of success was also expressed when six Nigerian actresses of the popular Nollywood were said to have converted to Islam.

The Nigerian popular online news media *Naijagist.com* reported that six well-known Nollywood actresses – Vivian Metchie aka Fareedah, Liz DaSilva now Aishat, Laide Bakare, Moji Olaiya, Lizzy Anjorin now Aishat and Kemi Korede (*Naijagist.com*, 2015). According to the report the reasons for conversion bordered mainly on the Scarcity of Christian husbands. Thus, in spite of the fact that the reason or reasons for their conversion bordered on personal social matters, yet it became sellable news for the Muslims.

But the most sensational conversion event was that of mass conversion of nineteen young men, mainly Igbo to Islam on 17 June, 2015, initiated by the two Northern State Governors of Sokoto, Aliyu Wamakko, and Bauchi's Isa Yuguda. Paradoxically supported by two highly placed Igbo political leaders of Roman Catholic extraction, Imo

state Governor Rochas Okoocha and former Abia State Governor Orji Uzor Kalu, the two Northern State Governors were said to have doled out the sum of five million naira each to the converts, with their Southern colleagues giving out respectively the sums of two and one million naira.

According to Nigeria's popular news media *Naijanews*:

The new Muslim converts are 17 Igbos, one Yoruba, and a Northern Hausa Christian: Chief Suleiman Nwachukwu, Ibrahim Uchenna Uka, Muhammad Sani Stanley Uzoigwe, Bello Kelvin Nmadu, Habibullah Kosoro Ofolete, Jamilu Osita Agocha, Haruna Chichebem Nwabirika, Abdulazeez Pascal Iroegbulam, Suleiman Ifeanyi Uzoma, Adam Ndukka Nweko, Dawuda Nnaemeka Uzoma, Aliyu Prince Onyekwume, and Musa (Anayo) Adugbaa, all of Imo State. Others are Abdulmalik Bongo Edet (Cross River), Hassan Babalola Shegun (Ondo), Nasir Peter Ndubuisi (Anambra) and Bashir Dulla (Akwa Ibom) (Abdulsalam, 2013).

From the foregoing it becomes clear that inter-faith conversion in Nigeria is built fundamentally on the pedestal of conflict and competition, which to the Muslims in particular cannot be separated from their universal quest for political control.

BASIS OF OPPOSITION TO INTER-FAITH MARRIAGES

By the nature of inter-faith conversion and counter-conversion between Christianity and Islam, it becomes obvious that inter-faith marriages will pose as one of the major points of conflict between the two faiths. Marriage, it is believed, forms one of the effective means of informal conversion to any religion. Inter-faith marriages thus possess the capacity of a breeding ground for mutual inter-religious suspicion and socio-cultural conflict between Christians and Muslims. The irony of this conflict is that Islam permits a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman but forbids a Muslim woman to marry a Christian or Jew. This is clearly stated in *Sura 5:5* of the Quran. This notion clearly defines their rigid policy over the issue of interreligious marriage between a Christian and a Muslim. Thus while the Muslim Hausa-Fulani will discourage any Muslim woman from marrying a Christian, they go on to rely on *Sura 5:5* of the Quran to encourage their men to marry Christian women. According to this *Sura*:

Lawful to you are the free believing woman and the free women from among those who were given the Book before you, provided that you give them their dowries and live in honour with them,

neither committing fornication nor taking them as mistresses (The Quran, 1980).

Although the Quran is silent on whether a Muslim should allow his daughter to be married to a Christian, the fact that the same *Sura* describes the Jews and Christians in verse 51 as enemies clearly implies that a Muslim should not allow his daughter to marry neither a Christian nor a Jew. Permitting such therefore would mean contravening the injunctions of the Qur'an by befriending your enemies, for one's in-law is definitely his friend.

Thus the Quran puts it:

Believers, take neither Jews nor Christians for your friends and protectors. They are friends and protectors of one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship and supports them shall become one of their number (The Quran, 1980).

The reason why the Muslim will encourage the marriage of a Christian woman and goes along to oppose the marriage of his daughter to a Christian is not unconnected with their pattern of family succession, which implies that the religion of the father is the religion of the children who are de facto inheritors of the man. It does not therefore matter if their mother is a Christian or Jew?

However, in recent times, this rigidity in marriage policy is being challenged by most educated Muslim women who feel the transcendence of love over religious boundaries. This has often resulted to various cases of persecution. And since all the Hausa-Fulani States are traditional Muslim States, those who converted to Christianity are not only treated as heretics and consequently ostracized by the *Umma*, they equally cease to enjoy the protection and patronage of their State Governments in the manner accruing to their Muslim kinsmen.

Similarly, most Christians who feel the dare need to resist conversion to Islam oppose with similar ferocity as in Islam the marriage of their daughters to Muslims. This is often more prevalent among the Igbo where even marriage between a Roman Catholic woman and a Protestant is often opposed. The Protestants on the other hand are more liberal than the Roman Catholics in accepting intra-faith marriages as normal. But it is also important to note the reason why a traditional Roman Catholic should go all the way to oppose the marriage of his or her daughter to an Anglican, Methodist or Pentecostal.

It should be noted as with Islam that Roman Catholicism is a recessional religion whose traditional-style forced conversion could no longer stand the test of time in competition with the modern form of Pentecostal evangelism. Thus the Roman Catholics have in recent times witnessed massive loss of adherents to Pentecostalism without concurrent counter-conversion. Most conversions in Roman Catholicism in modern times

are often by the traditional means of family linkages and in some rare circumstances by marriage. However, the patterns of reaction to both interreligious conversion and interreligious marriages differ markedly among the different Nigerian ethno-religious groups. These differing patterns are in effect inextricably bound to the equally differing cultural, historical and religious backgrounds of the people.

Taking the issue in the context of the broader geo-political spectrum of the Nigerian nation, one could clearly identify three major patterns of approach and reaction. These include the dominant Muslim Hausa-Fulani, including the associated groups of the North, the mixed Christian-Yoruba of the West, and the dominant Christian Igbo and associated groups of the East. Each of these three groups provides a unique pattern of reaction which draws its strength from their respective subsisting cultural and historical backgrounds.

The Hausa-Fulani pattern

Historically the Hausa-Fulani and related groups of Northern Nigeria look up to the Arab World for religious, socio-cultural and political inspirations. Much of what could have been considered today as traditional Hausa-Fulani values are subsumed under what are now defined as Arab-Islamic culture. It is therefore not impossible that they should present themselves as the bastion of opposition against the spread of Christianity and Western culture in Nigeria, in line with the prevailing global trend of Islamic reassertion.

In dealing with this global trend of Islamic reassertion, the Hausa-Fulani found their old rigid pattern of conversion, which revolved round outright jihad, commercial linkages, political patronage cum coercion, interreligious marriage, and the *Madrassa (Almajiri)* cell system of education much out of tune with the modern trends of sinter-group relations. Unfortunately, this pattern of conversion to Islam could not be sustained by the prevailing socio-economic and political circumstances of the liberal-borne modern society. The result is that in Nigeria, one witnesses a situation where, while Christianity pushes menacingly into the heart of the traditional socio-cultural setting of the Hausa-Fulani Muslim *Umma*, there is no similar corresponding move with equal magnitude of socio-cultural impact on the part of the latter against the Christian South.

One major reason for this failure, in addition to the inherent rigidity of the Islamic pattern of conversion, which was mentioned earlier, is the inability of the converts to exert the force of their new religion on their traditional Christian communities, as is normally the case with their Christian counterparts converted from Islam. And of course, this could not have been possible for the reason of

their conversion being predicated on material benefits rather than the quest for alternative means of spiritual needs.

There is also the tendency on the part of the traditional Muslims to view their new converts from Christianity with some sort of suppressed disdain, which is clearly expressed by the unannounced policy of shielding them from playing important leadership roles within the *Umma*. For instance, it has remained an unwritten policy among the Hausa-Fulani *Umma* that no convert outside their customary group should be permitted to superintend over them either as an Imam or *Qadi*.

In fact, to most traditional Muslims, their relationship with new converts from Christianity are still guarded by the injunctions of the Quran as stated in *Sura 5:61*, which by its interpretation still regards Muslim converts from Christianity as unreliable members of the Muslim *umma*. As the Quran puts it: "When they came to you they said: 'we are believers', indeed infidels they came and infidels they departed" (The Quran, 1980).

This again contrasts vividly with the experience of those Muslims who converted to Christianity, and who by reason of their circumstantial origins are prone to faster rise in the rudder of Church leadership than the traditional Christians. They also enjoy greater privileges, accommodation and needed assistance from their traditional counterparts. Their conviction to convert to Christianity is more or less inspired by their willing quest for alternative spiritual experience, not really on the need for material benefits.

This further explains why those who converted from Islam to Christianity are more prone to zealotry than their Muslim counterparts, hence their disturbing impact on the *Umma*. This further explains why the leadership of the Hausa-Fulani *Umma* views the increasing Western influence among their people with grave concern, and subsequently views any act of conversion from Islam to Christianity by their members as a treasonable act. In fact, most Hausa-Fulani Muslims still believe that such converts deserve to die and there have been many cases of people being hunted down and subsequently killed because they converted to Christianity, in what many people describe as Honour killing.

An instance in this form of Honour killing as recently reported in the Northern State of Kano by *NigeriaBulletin* where from Youths Gidan Maso Village in Rogo Local Government Area of Kano State razed to the ground the local Baptist Church because of one Yahaya Joshua converted to Christianity from Islam (Nigeria Bulletin, 2015). Reporting on the same incident Ibrahim wrote:

A Muslim mob set fire to a Church in a Christian Village in Nigeria's northern Kano State on April 1. Muslims were searching for a young man in order to kill him, he had renounced Islam and

reconverted to Christianity. The mob with matchets also attacked Christian villagers, torched the home of a Pastor, and killed one of his daughters (Ibrahim, 2015).

The same act of instant judgment is also visited to any Muslim man who decides to marry a Christian. Engineer describes this pathetic act thus:

In several Islamic countries like Pakistan, Egypt and Jordan, honour killings are quite common. A daughter or a sister is killed just because she wants to marry someone of her own choice or she enters into love affair. In Pakistan a woman was shot dead at the instance of her own mother, as she wanted to divorce her husband (Engineer, 2003).

The irony of the Hausa-Fulani experience is that in all the record acts anti-conversion violence against the Christian community in no single was prosecution ordered or carried out by the Government law enforcement agents. To the various Governments of the Hausa-Fulani and related groups, killing in the name of Allah is as much justified by the Qur'an as it is tolerated and carried out with unrestricted impunity.

Among the Hausa-Fulani therefore, while conversion to Islam from Christianity is desired and encouraged, the new Christian converts to Islam still find it difficult to integrate fully into the *Umma* in equal footing with the traditional believers. On the other hand, conversion from Islam to Christianity among the Hausa-Fulani is not only treated as a gross act of heresy, but is viewed as a rebellion against the wider *Umma*. Christian converts there are therefore prone to danger of their lives.

The Yoruba experience

Unlike the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba are a cultural nation. That is having their distinctive traditional value system which could be defined in contra-distinction to both Christianity and Islam. Both Christianity and Islam hold sway among the Yoruba with not much clearly defined ratio. The traditional religious belief system also maintains a strikingly inter-facing presence in both Christianity in Islam.

Thus among the Yoruba, it could be stated with a clearly defined historical conviction that the basic reason for the absence of the kind of bitter rivalry between Christianity and Islam found in the North, was the sublimation of the fundamental values of both rival religions to the domineering constancy of the traditional value system. This also accounted for the rise of such indigenous Churches as Cherubim and Seraphim (*Aladura*), and

Celestial Church of Christ, both of whose liturgies are enriched with traditional rites. Thus, under such a seemingly state of religious discomfiture, it becomes impossible for one religion to impose its will on the people, or instigate a state of vile religions competition. The Yoruba situation is well described in these words by Elaigwu:

It is common to have a Muslim father, a Christian mother, and a Muslim daughter, a son who worships "Ifa" or "Oshun" and a Christian daughter. If anything, among the Yoruba's it seems that the traditional religion provides a common factor. As many objective observers will confirm, it is not unusual for both Christians and Muslims to visit the "babalawo" or the priest of traditional religion (at times referred to as 'Juju' priest) in the end (Elaigwu, 1993).

In fact what the Yoruba live with today was what Mustapha Kemal Ataturk envisioned for the Turkish people when he initiated his programme of structuring the Turkish mind, body and spirit in compliance with the developmental needs of the people in 1924. Ataturk's vision was no doubt climaxed by the 1961 constitutional definition of the relationship between State and religion. As section VI (a) of the 1961 Constitution put it:

No persons shall be allowed to exploit and abuse religion or religious feelings or things considered sacred by religion in any manner whatsoever for the purpose of political or personal benefit, or for gaining power, or for even partially basing the fundamental social, economic, political and legal order of the State on religious dogmas (Ayob, 1981).

Among the Yoruba therefore, it is a matter of national interest first without religious inclination. In other words, religion to the Yoruba is basically attached to social vocation than politics. During the annual traditional festivals such as the *Oshun-Oshogbo*, both Christians and Muslims participate with equal fervor. The same applies to both Christian and Muslim festivals and feasts. Similarly, Muslims attend functions in Churches much as Christians attend functions in Mosques.

The present writer who lived in Hausaland as a kid, and worked in Yorubaland as an adult with close collaboration with the Yoruba militant group, Oodua People's Congress (OPC), clearly understands the depth of the Yoruba situation in contrast to that of the Hausa-Fulani. As a primary school kid in the rural town of Wudil, Kano State in early 1970s, he had the experience of being denied the closer friendship of his Hausa-Fulani classmates for the single reason that he is a *kafir* (unbeliever). This clearly contrasts with the situation where his Yoruba Muslim

friends often invited him to meet them right inside the Mosque, something which cannot be comprehended among the Hausa-Fulani.

However, in spite of this obvious religious connubiality there still exists subtle rivalry arising from interreligious conversions. Like the situation among the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the pendulum of conversion clearly swings more in favour of Christianity. The gain of Christianity against Islam in Yorubaland is best measured by the evangelical impact not only among the Yoruba, but the entire Nigerian nation, of the likes of Pastors David Oyedepo and Tunde Bakare, both of whose family backgrounds were Islamic. Oyedepo is the founder and General Overseer of the *Living Faith Mission*, popularly known as *Winners Chapel*, while Bakare is the founder and General Overseer of the *Latter Rain Ministries*.

This is in addition to the fact that the Yoruba were the earliest Protestant Missionaries to plant Christianity in not just Yorubaland but the entire Nigerian nation. With the high level of intellectual and material sophistication associated with Christianity then, it became obvious that Islam in Yorubaland began to beat a retreat. Against this background, the Yoruba Muslims devised a number of strategies based on the Islamic doctrine of *Taqlid* (strict imitation). What it means is that, to whatever method Christianity attempts to entice the Muslim faithful, a counter method should be adopted. This is evident in the areas of education, social intercourse as well as festivals and worship styles.

The Yoruba Muslim *Umma*, unlike their Hausa-Fulani counterpart had obviously noted and appreciated the domineering sophistication of Christianity and Western civilization against Islam, and instead of towing the path of confrontation in line with the injunctions of the Quran decided to tow the line of accommodation as provided by the Islamic doctrine of *Taqlid*. In pursuit of this objective, they established a number of Islamic missionary organizations, the *Ahmadiyya Movement-in-Islam*, an India-based sect, in 1916, which later became indigenized in 1974 to become the *Anwar-ul Islam Movement of Nigeria*. The second to emerge was the *Ansar Ud Deen*, which came into force in 1923, and lately, the *Nasrul-lahi-I-Fathi Society of Nigeria* popularly known as *Nasfat*.

Although quite a number of other Islamic organizations exist in Nigeria, including among the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba-based organizations are distinctively progressive in orientation, when compared to the Hausa-Fulani-based ones (Imam, 2004). In a website dedicatedly sponsored by the former Governor of Lagos State, *Asiwaju Ahmed Bola Tinubu* on behalf of *Anwar-ul Islam Society of Nigeria*, the organization set forth its basic aim and objective in the following words:

The fear was and is still well grounded that the surest route to forceful conversion to Christianity

is via the so-called 'Western Education'. The young man of the Muslim elites of yester-years founded the *Anwar-ul Islam* – then known as *Ahmadiyya*, saw this danger and sought to remedy it and ameliorate the situation. It was in this context that the movement's pioneering role in Islamic education and the award of scholarship to young Nigerian Muslims can be understood and appreciated (*Anwar-ul-Islam Movement of Nigeria*).

Compare the above aim and objective with that of the main Hausa-Fulani-based *Jama'atu Nasril Islam* (JNI), which in Arabic translates to mean the society for the victory of Islam. Instead of being founded on the basis of the socio-economic needs of the people, which is the path its Yoruba counterparts took, it instead became a vehicle for the institutionalization of outmoded Islamic conservatism and contemporary backwardness.

The *Jama'atu Nasril Islam* was founded in 1962 by the *Sardauna* of Sokoto and late Premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahamdu Bello, following the first Summit of World Islamic Congress held in Saudi Arabia the same year. As earlier pointed out the 1964 Summit of the Congress during which he solicited for fund to advance the cause of Islam in Nigeria, saw the premier summarizing his objective thus "I hope when we clean Nigeria, we will go further afield in Africa" (Nzeribe, 1988).

The above statement when summed up in the context of the *Risala* of 1903, which grew out of the *Hadith of Usman Dan Fodio*, simply translates to Fulani Jihad objectives. The *Risala* according to Sulaiman is "a unique document" which outlines the philosophy of Muslim submission to non-Muslim rule, and which has guided the attitude of the Muslim North to British colonial administration (Sulaiman, 1883).

Shehu Usman Dan Fodio further in his *Hadith* outlined three different types of relationship a Muslim who finds himself in a weak position against the unbeliever should adopt. According to the *Waziri* of Sokoto Caliphate, these include:

The first, namely, befriending them and loving them because they are unbelievers and because of hatred for the religion of Islam and he who brought it, constitutes an outright unbelief (*Kufr*). The second, that is 'befriending unbelievers' as a means of acquiring the wealth in their lands, constitutes direct disobedience towards Allah (*Ma' siyah*). The third, which is 'having relation with unbelievers and befriending them out of fear with the tongue and with the heart', would build up sufficient strength to remove the enemies' dominance (Sulaiman, 1883).

Against this background, among Yoruba who guides the

relationship between the Muslims and non-Muslims is what is called in Islam "*Taqlid*" defined theologically as "strict imitation." Under the framework of *Taqlid* Muslims are permitted to adopt certain practices of other religions which are deemed beneficial to the advancement of the Islamic faith. Thus while, *Taqlid* promotes accommodation and to some extent tolerance, *Risala* on the other hand defines confrontation. Here one can understand the reason for the continual backwardness of the Hausa-Fulani *Umma* in terms of the modernization effects of contemporary society.

It is therefore not surprising to note that, among the Hausa-Fulani *Umma*, there is no functional effort on the part of such Hausa-Fulani Islamic-based organization as the *Jama'atu Nasri 'l Islam* to establish a Western form of educational institution, able to compete with Christian missionary educational institutions. The founding of Crescent University by the Islamic Mission for Africa, and Fountain University by *Nasrul-lahi 'l Fathi* (NASFAT) are examples of the progressivism of Yoruba Islam in contradistinction to Hausa-Fulani conservatism.

On the social sphere the Muslims of Yorubaland similarly keyed into the stream of Western cum Christian flamboyance and sophistication. For instance, it has become a common occurrence for Muslim couples to dress in Christian-style wedding attires and have part of their marriage rites conducted in Mosques in the manner of the Christian Church marriage. In the same fashion, such Muslim festivals as *Id el' Kabir*, *Fitri* and *Maloud* are also tailored in the form of the Christian festivals of Christmas, New Year and Easter.

On form and style of religious worship, one could vividly note a strong Christian current-driven Muslim innovation. To confront what appears as the oddity of the Friday *Jumat*, the *Nasrul lahi'l Fathi* organization introduced a Sunday morning worship in the form of the Christian morning Church service called *Asalatu*. Towing the same line of imitation, the organization further joined the different Christian organizations to scramble for land along the busy Lagos – Ibadan Expressway for camp worship, conducting such programmes as crusades, informal fasting and prayers and night vigils in a manner that virtually defined them as a Christian faith, except in name and subject of worship.

It is therefore evident that, like the Hausa-Fulani situation, Islam in Yorubaland is no doubt threatened by aggressive Christian conversion of the faithful fully backed by the intimidating and irresistible sophistication of Western culture. But unlike the Hausa-Fulani who still rely on the outmoded traditional pattern of frontal confrontation with Christianity, the Yoruba devised a pattern of passive but inclusive resistance clothed in mutual competition, which appears to yield better fruit. With the high degree of religious tolerance and accommodation among the Yoruba Christians and Muslims, it becomes obvious that

interreligious marriage will not be as much tasking as in the case of the Hausa-Fulani. Among the Yoruba therefore, interreligious marriage is widespread and practiced with little or no fundamentally religious-based conflict.

As earlier stated, it is not uncommon to see a multi-religious family living in harmony among the Yoruba. For instance, both *Asiwaju* Bola Tinubu, a former Governor of Lagos State, and Babatunde Fashola, the present Governor of the State, even though practicing Muslims, have Christian wives. On special occasions which required their presence, both men were seen to have attended Church services, an act which is unthinkable among the Hausa-Fulani of their status.

But one unique character of Yoruba marriages which could be broadly divided into four, namely: Customary, Christian, Islamic (*Nikab*) and Common Law is that all are predicated on kin-group participation. And this accounts for the pre-dominant position of customary marriage. In other words, Christian, Muslim and Common Law marriages recognize the importance of bride price as a validating tool of any union of a man and woman in matrimony. It therefore follows that once the customary rites of marriage are performed the marriage automatically becomes legally binding, and couples could decide not to go further to perform either the Christian or Muslim rites, or even the Common Law marriage.

However, in order to have the protection of the State in marriage, a number of couples, even after performing both the Customary and Christian or Muslim rites, as the case may be, still go further to perform the Common Law marriage. The common Law marriage, in addition to providing adequate protection for the woman, is also the major means of contracting interreligious marriage without the option of either forcing any of partners to either the Church or Mosque for religious-based rites.

Be that as it may, a closer look at the pattern of interreligious marriages among the Yoruba reveals a one-sided flow of the stream of tolerance from the Muslim *umma* to the Christian body. In other words, it has been noted that most interreligious marriages among the Yoruba are contracted between a Christian female and a Muslim male, in which the former often maintains her religious independence. On the other hand, interreligious marriages between a Christian male and a Muslim female rarely occur, but when it did happen the woman often converts to Christianity.

In most of such instances, it involves the willing conversion of the woman to Christianity. Opposition against this act of conversion of the Muslim woman often arises but not with dire consequences as with the Hausa-Fulani. Although few years ago there was the case of a Muslim causing the death of his daughter Miss Kausara Isiaka because she converted to Christianity, but unlike the Hausa-Fulani situation, among the Yoruba, such a man is

never spared by the law and promptly arrested by the Police (Ola, 2013).

The Igbo predicament

If the Hausa-Fulani presents an extreme situation in Muslim intolerance to Christianity, and the Yoruba a moderating scenario of tolerance, then the Igbo situation will appear to be the other extreme of intolerance towards conversion to Islam. In other words, among the Igbo, reference to Islam, which is literary known in traditional circles as *Alakuba*— derived from *Alahu Akbar*, is smack of unbelievers, uncircumcised and a violent-prone religion, having little or no regard to life.

Similarly, the Hausa-Fulani perception of the Igbo, known literally in traditional circles as *Iyamiri* which is derived from the Igbo sentence meaning, *nyem mmiri* “give me water”, is equally smack of *Kafir* (unbelievers), unrepentant enemies of Islam and agents of the Jews in Nigeria. The reason for this parallel extreme perception of the other is not far-fetched. The Igbo, more than any group in Nigeria possess the highest propensity to travel outside their home territory in search of better economic opportunities. In fact, the Igbo adage goes thus, *ana adihi adi ma ngwere adiro ya*—“there can be no land without a lizard”, alludes to the belief that there is no town or village in Nigeria without an Igbo presence engaging in one form of business or the other.

Mainly Christians, the Igbo see themselves historically as belonging to one of the lost tribes of Israel. Adventurous in business and having creative instincts like the Jews, they are often seen by their host communities as shrewd businessmen and tireless exploiters of their hosts. All the same, to most Nigerians and elsewhere in Africa, the term “Igbo” depicts a concept of habitual hard-work for socio-economic survival even under extreme harsh and oppressive conditions. It thus becomes fashionable to use the term Igbo as a point of reference for other African peoples that possess similar traits and experiences as the Igbo. Thus, it is not out of place for one to often see the Ijebu sub-culture group of Yoruba being made reference to as the Igbo of Yorubaland, the Bamileke as the Igbo of Cameroon, and the Kikuyu of Kenya as the Igbo of East Africa.

Ottenberg describes the Igbo as the “most receptive to culture change, and most willing to accept Western ways, of any large group in Nigeria” (Bascom and Herskovits, 1959). This characteristic instinct of the Igbo was earlier predicted by the Yoruba-born Church Missionary Society agent, Bishop Ajayi Crowther in the 19th century, when he wrote:

From all I could gather by observation, the Ibos are very emulative: as in other things, so it will be in book-learning. Other towns will not rest satis-

fied until they have also learned the mystery of reading and writing, by which their neighbours may surpass or put them in shame (Ekechi, 1972).

The above observation was evidently confirmed later aptly observed:

The Ibo embraced Western education with great enthusiasm and determination. Christian missions were welcomed, and were encouraged to set up schools in Iboland. Village improvement unions sponsored scholarships, and Ibo students flocked to secondary schools in what is now Western Region (Coleman, 1971).

However, the Igbo problem with Islam does not lie on their being converted to the latter, but rather on their aggressive defence of the Christian faith and, subsequent evangelical activities among the Hausa-Fulani. The Hausa-Fulani detestation of the Igbo unalloyed glue to Christianity could be well understood in the context of their extreme opposition to the question of conversion of the Muslim *Umma* to Christianity.

Most of the edifices that smack of Christianity’s deface of the Muslim character of the Hausa-Fulani society epitomized mainly by Church buildings, are in most instances the singular efforts of the Igbo, which are enough basis to see the Igbo as the number one enemy of Islam in Nigeria. In fact most Igbo today cannot comprehend not going to Church on Sundays or avoid celebrating Christian feasts and festivals wherever they are found.

Thus wherever an Igbo settles, what concerns most after his business is the welfare of his immediate family, followed by his thirst for Church service. Thus in nearly all the Northern States apart from the existing indigenous Churches, most new Churches— ranging from the traditional Roman Catholic and Protestants to modern Pentecostalism and indigenous Churches, the Igbo form a significant population of their membership. It is in this respect that one can definitely explain the virulent religious-borne anti-Igbo attacks in Northern Nigeria. A significant number of the Igbo are also practicing Judaism, which has been one source of the theory that the Igbo originated from one of the lost tribes of Israel. This theory is based essentially on similarities in certain elements of Igbo and Jewish cultures and was first sounded by the late 18th century by the freed Igbo-born abolitionist Equiano when he stated:

We practice circumcision like the Jews and made offerings and feast on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied forbidding at the time of their birth (Eqiano, 1996).

Olauda Equiano's salvo soon became the basis of the existing copious study on the question of Jewish origins of the Igbo like the recent one by Lis (2013). Under such a habitual fragile interfaith situation interreligious conversion between the two peoples thus becomes an extremely difficult venture. Thus, the question of interreligious marriage between the Hausa-Fulani Muslims and the Igbo Christians becomes one of a case of religious apostasy.

This explains why the conversion to Islam of one Charity Uzochima— daughter of an Igbo Pastor and her subsequent attempt to marry a Muslim became so controversial that it attracted national attention on the news media (Mosadoni, 2014). Today the Igbo, whose circumcision rites are akin to those of Jewish traditions still believe that the Hausa-Fulani men are habitually uncircumcised and thus ritually unclean. For this reason conversion of any Igbo to Islam is often viewed with social disdain, even though it is tolerated without the slightest intent to make it a subject of persecution or violence.

Be that as it may, apart from those earlier mentioned, there are still pockets of Igbo Muslims, although, such conversions are most often said to be propelled by financial enticement. But such a view cannot in essence be totally denied. Mention has been made of the recent conversions where some Igbo youths were given millions of Naira, an equivalent of eighty thousand US Dollars for conversion to Islam. In fact most Igbo converts to Islam often seem to be connected with material gains than a better form spiritual elevation. In fact as one of the converts, Ibrahim Ukah rightly put it: "I was attracted to Islam because of the truth it resonated in me, and I saw the charity of the faith which all its adherents find peace and solace in (Ibrahim, 2015)."

All the same there are some emerging Islamic leaders among the native Igbo whose conversions could not readily be associated with financial quest. Sheikh Shehu Uthman Anaga who was originally Sylvanus Anaga before conversion narrated to the how he became a Muslim through a dream intervention, an account only reminiscent of some Pentecostal Evangelists. Quoting *WeeklyTrust* the online *Information Nigeria* wrote:

I was born in Ebonyi State. I became a Muslim in 1972, but left the eastern Region in 1973 in search of education.... I was 13 years old when I converted to Islam. Islam has its way of taking somebody. I am aware that many people converted to Islam after they had listened to preaching, but my own case was different, because I saw it in a dream. At a time when I was sleeping, I heard a loud noise coming from outside my room. When I went out to see what was happening, I saw many people lined up. When those people saw me, they asked me to come. When I joined them, we all bowed in

Sejud(prostration). After some days, I heard the same voice again in a dream. So I went out, but this time around what I saw was white people who told me that I should join then without any waste of time. We made the same *sejud*. On the third occasion, when I went out, I saw some people performing absolution and I joined them. That was where I learnt how to perform absolution, because the people taught me. When I told two very close friends of mine, Ignatius queried whether I want to become a Muslim while Hassan accepted to be Muslim with me because of what I saw in my dream (Information Nigeria, 2012).

Beyond Sheikh Anaga's case, there is equally a notable traditional Muslim Igbo monarch who rules over the town of Umuofor kingdom in Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State, Eze Abdul Fatai Chima Emetumah, *Duru* the 3rd and *Ofor* the 9th of Umuofor autonomous community. The *Leadership* states *ipsofacto* how Eze Emetumah became a Muslim thus:

In 1970, when Eze Abdul Gafar Ihunanze Duru Emetumah, 2nd, father of the incumbent traditional ruler of Umuofor was converted to Islam, his people who believed his kindness and generosity followed him. Although he was yet to preside over Umuofor as their king, but in 1977 he eventually became their ruler then under Awa autonomous community comprising of Akabo, Awa and Ejemekwuru. By the time Eze Abdul Gafar was converted to Islam, his son, the incumbent was just 11 years of age and automatically joined his father with the religion. After inheriting his father's stool after his death, he continued with the religion as he grew from faith to faith and eventually turbaned by the late Emir of Kano, Ado Bayero I November, 1992 (Uzoaru, 2014).

There is therefore no denial of the fact that among the Igbo there are still some notable people whose conversion to Islam may be not on attributed to financial inducement; although one is at lost on what propelled Abdul Gafar in the first instance to convert to Islam just immediately after the Nigeria civil war. All the same Islam among the Igbo still remains what the Igbo would normally describe as a left-handed religion and its adherents are still regarded as not only deviants from the formal and true faith but possible quislings in support of inveterate enemies of their people. As Sheikh Anaga put it, "To some of our brothers, it is an anathema to be an Igbo man/woman and at the same time be a Muslim (Oriyomi, 2013)."

However, although Islam is still seen as unacceptable faith among the Igbo, none of the Igbo converts has made any case of violent attacked or societal ostracism. The

Igbo Muslims remain what they chose to be without any significance evidence of overt opposition as it is the case among the Hausa-Fulani. The fact however remains that because of the discriminatory nature of Islam against other religions, Igbo converts are bound to willingly isolate themselves from their people in most social-cultural and political activities, including intermarriages.

In fact, most inter ethnic marriages between the Igbo and people of Northern Nigeria are confined to the Middle Belt ethnic-Christians and not the Hausa-Fulani Muslims as most people might think. Even among the few Muslim colonies of Nupe and Igala extractions notably found mainly in the Cable-Point suburb of Asaba, and Ibagwa town of Nsukka sub-culture zone, socio-cultural interactions rarely occur between them and their indigenous hosts. To the Igbo and Hausa-Fulani therefore, interreligious conversion between them amounts to a case of extreme religious apostasy and a virulent rebellion against their respective communities.

CONCLUSION

From the Hausa-Fulani perception of their Islam in relation to other religions, particularly Christianity, it is obvious that the question of interreligious conversion will remain a fundamental factor in the form and nature of their coexistence with the Igbo and Yoruba. This is based on the immutable theology of Islam that sees the sin of apostasy as an extreme contravention of the words of the Holy Qur'an. As Reynolds rightly put it:

From the perspectives of Islamic jurisprudence, converts to Christianity are not Christians of Muslim background. They are Muslim apostates, and all the major traditional Islamic schools of law agree that the punishment for apostasy is death (Reynolds, 2011).

And since the degree of one's attachment to the values of his culture and religion definitely shapes his attitude towards people of other religions, and by extension social interactions, the possibility of a mutual interreligious marriage between the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo, and the Yoruba, will remain a hard nut to crack. Igbo situation could also be explained on similar line with the Hausa-Fulani perception. The Igbo extremity in their Christian religion and subsequent sentimental attachment to the Jews, which is borne out of a supposed historical link, definitely presuppose an inveterate opposition to any act of conversion to Islam by any member of their community.

One the other hand, and as earlier observed, the Yoruba position offers a somewhat diluting situation to the two extremities of opposition to religious conversion and interreligious marriages. The Yoruba example of mutual competition for souls and interreligious marriages, which is

predicated on the institutionalized influence of their traditional value system, is evident of the fact that, where traditional African values are respected and appreciated by the people, the virulent competition of Christianity and Islam for the supposed lost souls are watered down. Think of it the Hausa-Fulani cannot speak of an indigenous value system without reference to Islam. Similarly, the Igbo traditional value system is gradually giving way to values dictated by the doctrines of Christianity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that they have no conflict of interests.

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