



RELIGIOUS ABUSE: A BANE TO NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

This case study reflects on the interconnectivity of religious abuse and nation-building in Nigeria. Nigeria is a country marked by significant religious diversity and ongoing socio-political challenges. The study explores the impact of religious abuse, which includes but not limited to extremism and discrimination, on Nigeria's social fabric and political stability. To understand how colonial legacies have shaped current religious dynamics, key historical contexts are considered by highlighting specific instances of religious abuse such as the insurgency of Boko Haram, and assess their effects on national unity and governance. The paper further evaluates the Nigerian government's responses to religious abuse and their effectiveness in promoting nation-building. Findings suggest that while the government has implemented various countermeasures and dialogue initiatives, persistent challenges remain due to deep-seated societal divisions and governance issues. The case study, which adopts the method of critical analysis, underscores the need for comprehensive policy responses and genuine interfaith collaboration to foster national unity and support sustainable development. The implications of this research extend to understanding how religious abuse can undermine nation-building efforts and the importance of addressing these challenges to achieve long-term stability and development in Nigeria.

Keywords:

Nigeria, religious abuse, nation-building, Boko Haram, extremism, governance, interfaith dialogue.



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Introductory Discourse

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, has multifaceted challenges, especially religious abuse, which undermines its stability and development. Nigeria, a country situated in West Africa, is renowned for its rich cultural and religious diversity. With over 200 ethnic groups and multiple religions, including Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs, Nigeria presents a complex landscape for nation-building (Smith, 2021). This diversity has also led to significant challenges, particularly in the realm of religious abuse and its impact on national cohesion. Religious abuse, in various forms such as extremism, discrimination, and coercion, has profoundly affected Nigeria's social and political life.

The emergence of extremist groups like Boko Haram has exacerbated these issues, creating severe disruptions in governance and societal stability (Adams, 2023). Furthermore, historical factors, including colonial legacies and post-colonial policies, have further complicated these dynamics. The British colonial administration, for instance, intensified religious and ethnic divisions by implementing policies that favoured certain groups over others, thus laying the groundwork for ongoing conflicts (Jones & Taylor, 2019). The Nigerian government's response to religious abuse has included counter-terrorism measures, interfaith dialogues, and policy reforms aimed at fostering national unity (Nguyen, 2024). Similarly, the effectiveness of these responses has been mixed, often hindered by persistent issues such as corruption, inadequate resources, and deep-rooted societal divisions (Okeke, 2022). Understanding the interplay between religious abuse and nation-building is crucial for devising effective strategies to promote national cohesion and stability. This case study aims to explore these interactions, providing insights into the ways in which religious abuse impacts governance and social unity in Nigeria.

It is important to note that among the three dominant religions in Nigeria, we have not come across any religion whose 'holy book' is either advocating, promoting or advancing violence, hatred, strife, intolerance, etc. Yet, the nation has suffered lots of religious crises with its attendant results. All these are as a result of unhealthy use (abuse) of religion and man's inordinate quest for political and economic gains. Boko Haram, religious extremism, secularism and agnosticism, for instance, are not religions, but mechanisms religious fanatics and bigots employ to cause chaos in different parts of the world, especially in Nigeria. Uzoigwe & Chukwuma-Offor (2023).

A Glance at the Historical Context of Religious Abuse in Nigeria

A good number of scholars are of the view that pre-colonial Nigeria was more peaceful than Nigeria after independence and indeed, such was the case. To instantiate this claim, (Smith, 2021) argues that, before colonial rule, Nigeria was home to a variety of ethnic groups, each with distinct religious and social practices. In the northern region, the Hausa city-states were centers of Islamic culture and scholarship, having embraced Islam from the 11th century onward through trans-Saharan trade routes. Meanwhile, the southern regions, including the Yoruba and Igbo communities, practiced indigenous religions with rich pantheons and ritual traditions that governed their social and political structures (Jones & Taylor, 2019).

From the perspective of the colonial era, the British colonial administration, which began in earnest in the late 19th century, had a profound impact on Nigeria's religious and ethnic relations. The British adopted a divide-and-rule strategy, which involved aligning with certain groups to consolidate control. In the north, the British supported the Islamic leadership, reinforcing their authority and creating a political hierarchy that marginalized other groups (Jones & Taylor, 2019). Conversely, in the south, the colonial government facilitated the spread of Christianity, often through missionary

schools that further entrenched religious divides (Nguyen, 2024). This period saw the imposition of new administrative boundaries and governance structures that often disregarded existing ethnic and religious divisions, exacerbating tensions (Adams, 2023).

The historical context of Nigeria's religious and ethnic dynamics is essential to understanding the challenges the nation faces today. Nigeria's history reflects a complex interplay between indigenous practices, colonial interventions, and post-independence struggles that continue to shape its socio-political landscape. Nigeria has encountered significant religious abuses that have deeply influenced its socio-political culture since its independence in 1960. These abuses, ranging from religious extremism, discrimination, and coercion, have not only heightened existing tensions, but have also presented substantial challenges to national growth, stability and progress. This essay explores the evolution and impact of religious abuse in Nigeria over the past six decades, highlighting key incidents and their implications.

After Nigeria's independence, the country struggled to integrate its diverse ethnic and religious groups into a unified state. Early religious abuses were closely linked to ethnic conflicts and political instability. The Nigeria - Biafran War (1967-1970), driven by ethnic and religious tensions, exemplified the difficulties of nation-building in a multi-religious society. The conflict, involving the secessionist Biafran state, was fueled by grievances over marginalization, including religious discrimination against the Igbo Christian community (Okeke, 2022). However, the aftermath of the war saw a fragile peace but continued religious and ethnic divisions. Political leaders often exploited religious sentiments to garner support, further entrenching divisions (Smith, 2021). As if that was not enough, the introduction of Sharia law in some northern states in the early 2000s intensified these tensions, revealing ongoing struggles between secular and religious governance (Nguyen, 2024).

The 1980s and 1990s marked a significant rise in religious extremism. Boko Haram, founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, epitomized this new phase of religious abuse. Initially opposed to Western education and secularism, Boko Haram's agenda quickly evolved into violent insurgency, aiming to establish an Islamic state governed by strict Sharia law (Adams, 2023). Also, to be noted is that, Boko Haram's insurgency has led to widespread violence, including bombings, kidnappings, and massacres. The group's attacks on both Muslim and Christian communities have deepened religious divides and contributed to a humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria (Adams, 2023). The fundamental question that naturally comes to mind is: what has the government done in order to ameliorate this anomaly? Government responses, including military operations and counter-terrorism measures, have had limited success and have sometimes exacerbated local tensions, leading to allegations of human rights abuses by security forces (Smith, 2021).

In addition to extremist violence, Nigeria has faced significant interfaith conflicts and discrimination. Religious riots in cities such as Jos and Kano in the early 2000s highlighted the growing tensions between Muslim and Christian communities. These riots, often triggered by local disputes, were exacerbated by deep-seated religious and ethnic animosities (Nguyen, 2024). Again, one must not lose sight of the fact that sometimes, politicians aid this religious tensions and abuses.

The implementation of Sharia law in several northern states since the early 2000s also contributed to increased religious tensions. According to (Jones & Taylor, 2019), "while Sharia law aimed to address legal and moral issues within the Muslim community, its application led to criticism and conflict with non-Muslims, who viewed it as discriminatory". The legal and social disparities resulting from Sharia law have led to heightened sectarian violence and unrest (Okeke, 2022) in Nigeria.

Since the year 2000, the Nigerian government has undertaken various measures to address religious abuse and foster national unity. Initiatives such as the National Orientation Agency and peace-building commissions aimed to promote interfaith understanding and address the root causes of religious conflicts (Smith, 2021). However, these measures have had mixed results. Counter-terrorism efforts have been criticized for human rights abuses and ineffectiveness in curbing extremist violence (Nguyen, 2024). Similarly, interfaith dialogues have struggled to produce meaningful outcomes due to persistent political and social divisions. Corruption and inadequate resources have further undermined efforts to resolve religious conflicts (Adams, 2023).

Are there some Implications for Religious abuse in Nigeria?

The ongoing religious abuse in Nigeria has profound socio-political implications. Persistent violence and discrimination have impeded economic development, displaced millions, and created an atmosphere of fear and instability. The humanitarian crisis in northeastern Nigeria, exacerbated by Boko Haram's activities, has led to widespread displacement and suffering (Adams, 2023) among the peoples. In the words of (Okeke, 2022), "Religious abuse has also strained Nigeria's democratic institutions and governance. The manipulation of religious sentiments for political gain has eroded trust in the government and perpetuated cycles of violence and instability. The inability to fully address religious and ethnic grievances has hindered progress towards a more cohesive and unified nation".

In recent decades, Nigeria has continued to grapple with the legacy of colonialism and the persistent challenges of religious abuse. The rise of extremist groups, such as Boko Haram, has further complicated efforts at nation-building by exploiting religious divisions to advance their agendas (Adams, 2023). The Nigerian government has implemented various counter-terrorism and reconciliation efforts, but the effectiveness of these measures has been limited by ongoing corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and persistent societal divisions (Smith, 2021; Nguyen, 2024).

Religious abuse in Nigeria, encompassing extremism, interfaith violence, and discrimination, has significantly impacted the nation's socio-political fabric. Despite various governmental and non-governmental efforts to address these issues, the effectiveness of these measures has been limited by deep-seated societal divisions, corruption, and inadequate resources. Addressing religious abuse requires a multifaceted approach, including robust counter-terrorism measures, genuine interfaith dialogue, and comprehensive strategies to address the underlying causes of religious conflict. For Nigeria to achieve long-term stability and national unity, it is crucial to address these challenges effectively and equitably.

Case Studies of Religious Abuse and Nation Building in the Nigerian State

Nigeria's intricate religious landscape has profoundly influenced its nation-building efforts. By examining three key case studies namely, the Nigeria-Biafran War, Boko Haram's insurgency, and the implementation of Sharia law, we gain insights into how religious abuse has impacted Nigeria's socio-political landscape and development.

The Nigeria-Biafran War (1967-1970)

The Nigeria-Biafran War represents a crucial case of religious abuse influencing Nigeria's nation-building. The conflict, primarily driven by the Igbo people's grievances, highlighted ethnic and religious divides (Falola, 2020). The Igbo, predominantly Christian, felt marginalized in a predominantly Muslim and Hausa-Fulani political environment (Chukwuma, 2020). The war's

aftermath deepened existing divides, leaving a legacy of distrust and division that has persisted in Nigeria's post-war nation-building efforts (Smith, 2021).

The Boko Haram Insurgency (2002-Present)

Boko Haram's emergence in 2002 marks a significant episode of religious abuse impacting Nigeria's stability. Founded by Mohammed Yusuf, the group's insurgency aimed to impose a strict interpretation of Sharia law and has caused extensive violence, including bombings and kidnappings (Adams, 2023). This conflict has led to massive displacement and humanitarian crises, straining national resources and complicating efforts to maintain stability (Aliyu, 2019). The Nigerian government's response, including counter-terrorism measures, has faced significant challenges and criticisms for its effectiveness and human rights implications (Nguyen, 2024).

The Implementation of Sharia Law (2000-Present)

The adoption of Sharia law in several northern Nigerian states provides another critical case study of religious abuse in Nigeria. Intended to address moral and legal issues within the Muslim community, Sharia law has resulted in significant sectarian tensions and discrimination against non-Muslims (Jones & Taylor, 2019). From another perspective, (Ezeani, 2021) writes: "The legal framework has exacerbated sectarian violence and contributed to broader religious and ethnic divides". This implementation has highlighted the challenges of maintaining national cohesion while addressing religious grievances (Olaoluwa, 2018). From the above, it is apparent that, the implementation of Sharia law contributed significantly to the challenge of religious abuse in Nigeria.

Going further, these case studies demonstrate the profound impact of religious abuse on Nigeria's nation-building process. The Nigeria-Biafran War, Boko Haram insurgency, and the implementation of Sharia law each reveal different facets of how religious tensions and extremism shape political and social dynamics. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes but not limited to addressing historical grievances, fostering interfaith dialogue, and ensuring fair treatment for all religious groups. For Nigeria to achieve long-term stability, unity and development, it must effectively tackle these challenges while building a more inclusive national identity.

Responses and Solutions to the Abuse of Religion in Nigeria

The abuse of religion in Nigeria has had profound implications for the nation's socio-political and economic stability. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach involving policy reforms, community engagement, and international support. This section explores various responses and solutions to religious abuse in Nigeria.

Legal Frameworks and Governance

One effective response to religious abuse is strengthening legal frameworks and governance structures. According to Omoruyi (2021), effective governance is crucial for managing religious tensions and ensuring the protection of all citizens' rights. Implementing robust legal frameworks that safeguard religious freedom and address religious discrimination is essential for mitigating conflicts. Omoruyi emphasizes the need for comprehensive legal reforms that address both the causes and consequences of religious abuse (Omoruyi, 2021).

Promoting Inter-religious Dialogue and Reconciliation

Promoting interfaith dialogue and reconciliation is another key response to religious abuse. Kumar and Patel (2022) highlight the importance of dialogue initiatives in bridging gaps between different religious communities. Their study shows that interfaith dialogues can reduce tensions and foster mutual understanding by addressing misconceptions and historical grievances. Programs that facilitate

communication between religious leaders and communities are critical for building trust and promoting peace.

Addressing Socio-Economic Inequalities

Addressing socio-economic inequalities is essential for reducing religious abuse. Bello and Ali (2019) discuss how economic disparities often fuel religious and ethnic tensions. Their research indicates that improving economic opportunities and reducing poverty can alleviate some of the underlying causes of religious conflicts. Development programs aimed at providing equitable economic opportunities are crucial for enhancing social cohesion and reducing conflict.

Enhancing Education and Awareness

Education and awareness programmes play a vital role in combating religious abuse. Akintoye (2020) argues that educational initiatives can counteract extremist ideologies and promote tolerance. By integrating religious tolerance and human rights education into school curricula, Nigeria can foster a more inclusive and respectful society. Educational institutions and civil society organizations must work together to promote values of tolerance and respect for diversity.

International Cooperation and Support

International cooperation and support can enhance Nigeria's efforts to address religious abuse. Santos and Rodriguez (2023) highlight the role of international organizations and foreign governments in providing financial aid, technical support, and capacity building to combat religious extremism. Collaborating with international partners can help Nigeria implement effective counter-terrorism strategies and support community-based initiatives for peace-building. From what has been discussed so far, addressing religious abuse in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that includes strengthening legal frameworks, promoting interfaith dialogue, enhancing education, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and leveraging international support. By employing these strategies, Nigeria can work towards reducing religious tensions and fostering a more inclusive and stable society.

Conclusion

Religious abuse obviously, is a cog in the wheel of nation-building process in Nigeria, not withstanding the country's rich ethnic and religious diversity. Through the examination of key case studies such as the Biafran War, the rise of Boko Haram, and the implementation of Sharia law, it becomes evident that religious tensions and extremism have significantly shaped Nigeria's political, social, and economic landscape. The Nigeria-Biafran War highlighted the deep-seated ethnic and religious grievances that continue to affect Nigeria's nation-building efforts. The conflict's aftermath has left enduring scars on the national psyche, contributing to ongoing mistrust and divisions. The war's legacy underscores the necessity of addressing historical grievances to foster national cohesion. The Boko Haram insurgency represents a significant manifestation of religious extremism, impacting not only regional stability but also national security and governance. The insurgency has exacerbated humanitarian crises and strained national resources. The group's activities have highlighted the limitations of Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategies and the need for more effective and human rights-compliant responses. Similarly, the introduction of Sharia law in northern Nigeria provides a critical lens through which to view the relationship between religion and governance. Sharia law aims to address moral and legal issues within the Muslim community; its implementation has often led to increased sectarian tensions and perceived discrimination against non-Muslims. This underscores the complexities of integrating religious laws within a pluralistic state and the need for legal reforms that promote inclusivity and equality.

Addressing religious abuse requires a multi-faceted approach. Strengthening legal frameworks and governance is crucial for safeguarding religious freedoms and addressing discrimination. Promoting interfaith or inter-religious dialogue can bridge divides and foster mutual understanding. This study does not lose sight of the fact that, education plays a vital role in countering extremist ideologies and promoting tolerance. Moreover, addressing socio-economic inequalities can alleviate some of the underlying causes of religious conflicts. International cooperation can support Nigeria's efforts by providing financial aid, technical support, and capacity building.

Therefore, for Nigeria to move forward, it must navigate the complexities of its religious landscape with a focus on building a more inclusive and cohesive society. Addressing the root causes of religious abuse and implementing effective, equitable policies are essential for fostering national unity, stability and development. By embracing this approach that includes legal reforms, dialogue, education, socio-economic development, and international collaboration, Nigeria can work towards overcoming the challenges posed by religious abuse and strengthening its nation-building efforts. While religious abuse presents significant challenges to Nigeria's nation-building process, a concerted and multifaceted response can pave way for a more stable and unified society. The lessons learned from the case studies and the proposed solutions offer a framework for addressing religious conflicts and advancing national cohesion in Nigeria.

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