

Review

Place of religion in nation building and security in Nigeria: A historical survey of Aro expedition of 1901

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National security is a *sine qua non* for political stability and socio-economic development of any nation. Religion is one of the recognized factors that can enhance or destabilize the security of any nation at any given period of history. Religious value systems play very significant role in collective self-awareness and identity, which draw together individuals, families and regions, and pull them towards greater self-consciousness needed to build and animate a nation from within. Religion can be manipulated as an instrument of destruction and disintegration, which threatens the peace, stability and security of a nation. It is in recognition of this double-edge function of religion that this paper sets out to study the place of religion in the socio-political structure of Nigeria and its role in national security. The analysis begins with an examination of the pretensions of the colonial administration, which enable it to demonize and destroy local shrines of peoples, south of the Niger-Benue, in the early years of the formation of Nigeria as a nation. The paper notes that the privileged position enjoyed by the Christian and Islamic religions, during the colonial era, did not necessarily lead to greater integration towards common self-consciousness as a nation of multi-religions. Hence the independent era has witnessed an unprecedented level of religious violence, which is threatening the peace, stability and economy of Nigeria. This paper posits that peace and security in the country will be enhanced if an end is put to the manipulation of religion for parochial reasons.

Key words: Security, nation building, Aro expedition.

INTRODUCTION

By operational definition, Oxford Dictionary (1990) defines religion as the human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience. Security in principles connotes several meaning depending on the circumstance it is being used either as asset security, mortgage security, and many others. However we are concerned with a state of being free from danger or injury. Furthermore Nation building as it applies here discusses the effort of the various African groups since the end of colonial rule to build their respective nations and the Eastern Nigerian example is discussed here.

This paper is a historical study of the place of religion in the socio-political structure of Nigeria, as well as its role in national security. The analysis is based mainly on data

from the British National Archives: Public Record Office, London, and the Nigerian National Archives at Enugu. The study begins with an examination of the British colonial attitude towards local shrines encountered at the onset of colonial occupation. It unravels the pretensions of the colonial administration for military action against local shrines and the people. The analysis further studies the place of religion in the colonial and the post-colonial era. It notes with regret that the Christian and Islamic religions failed to use their privileged positions to work towards greater integration and common self-consciousness as a nation of multi-religions. This is one of the root causes of religious violence and social conflict, which is threatening the peace and security of the Nigerian nation. In conclusion, the paper recommends education, inter-religious dialogue and respect for the secular nature of the Nigerian state.

This would ensure the positive use of religion for nation building and security.

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COLONIAL PRETENSIONS AND MILITARY ACTION AGAINST LOCAL SHRINES (JUJU)

The history of the political formation of Nigeria into a single nation cannot be completed without due attention given to the significant role played by religion in this turbulent history. Indeed from the beginning of the British colonial occupation of Southern Nigeria, the colonial masters met oppositions from the peoples connected with reputed local shrines. This dogged resistance forced the British administrators to devise logical strategy designed to win the support of the Colonial Office in London for military action against their opponents. The strategy consisted in demonizing the reputed local shrines and their adherents, and resolutely misrepresenting them as opposed to justice, peace and security. Such ideological representation of the reputed local shrines, south of the rivers Niger-Benue, prompted London Colonial Office to back-up military campaign to destroy the shrines and destabilize the local population.

Although the local shrines were primarily places of religious worship, often associated with mysterious powers, they also served other multi-purpose functions for the community and their adherents. The local shrine of a given population provided the political unit for the people. It served as the parliament for crucial decisions affecting the life of the community. The spirit of the shrine was presumed to be part and parcel of the decision-making and to empower the actions that followed. The colonial masters perceived this political function of the local shrine as a serious threat to the establishment of colonial government in Southern Nigeria. Besides, the local shrines served as the judicial organ of the people for settling disputes. The more reputed the mysterious power of a shrine was, the more the influx of people who come from distant lands to consult it for arbitration. In the process of such arbitration, cases of injustice and corruption were not uncommon. The local shrines were also known as the guardian of commerce, a function that lent itself to great abuse and corrupt practices in the wave of the transatlantic slave trade and its eventual abolition in the 19th century. During the long history of the Euro-American demand for African slave labour, some of the local shrines became medium for slave-raid and slave trade. After the abolition of slave trade and the subsequent decline in exportation, the religious practice of animal sacrifice degenerated into increasing demand for human sacrifice following the proliferation of slaves in the domestic market. The above situation formed the backdrop that fed the colonial ideological strategy of demonizing the local shrines to attain its political and economic goals.

The commercial ambition was indeed a strong one because Britain wanted to sell its newfound doctrine of legitimate trade directly to the local population without the intervention of middlemen as had functioned in the slave trade era. This was one of the reasons why a political

occupation and administration was deemed necessary to ensure increase in commercial output. In the early years of the 1900s, the British High Commissioner, Raph Moor, sought to occupy the territories on the east of the Niger. He perceived the renowned Arochukwu shrine, located in the Igbo-speaking area of the region, as a threat. In a memorandum dated 12th November 1901, the High Commissioner, Raph Moor, detailed the objects of the expedition against the Aros as follows:

- (a) To put a stop to slave-raiding and slave trade generally with the view to the slave dealing proclamation no. 5 of 1901 being enforced throughout the entire territories as from Jan. next.
- (b) To abolish the Juju hierarchy of the Aro tribe which by superstition and fraud causes much injustice among the coastal tribes generally and opposed to the establishment of the government. The power of the priesthood is also employed in obtaining natives as slaves and it is essential to break it.
- (c) To open up the country of the entire Aro tribe to civilization.
- (d) To induce the natives to engage in legitimate trade.
- (e) To introduce a currency in lieu of slaves, brass rods and other forms of native currency and facilitate trade transaction.
- (f) To eventually establish a labour market as a substitute for the present system of slavery ((CO 520/10, dispatch no. 381, 1901).

He therefore planned a military expedition against the shrine and its local inhabitants. The planned expedition failed to work out in 1900 for logistical reasons. It was rescheduled for 1901 and Raph Moor decided to make serious preparations for its successful operation. To this effect, he doubled the propaganda against the Aros by sending to the Colonial Office dispatches bearing reports on the Aro people's involvement in slave trade and human sacrifice. In the dispatch of 6th July 1901, Mr. Anthrobus of the Colonial Office minuted thus:

I understand from R. Moor that the Aro raids reported in this dispatch may be regarded as the technical justification for the expedition against the Aros which has already been decided to be necessary on more general grounds (CO 520/8, dispatch no 200, 1901).

(g) Mr Anthrobus' remark exposes the reality of the pretensions of the colonial administration. It needed to project the Aro slave raid as the technical justification for military action, which was already decided upon for greater political and economic reasons.

The six reasons listed above for military action against Aro people expose further the pretensions of the colonial administration. Only one out of the six deals exclusively with the problem of slavery. The second reason given

above seeks to destroy the Aro juju and its priesthood, not just because of its link with unjust practices, but more importantly, because it poses a serious political threat to the establishment of colonial government. Nos d, e, f, point to economic gain as a strong force behind the expedition. Further in the same document, R. Moor, re-emphasized the object of the military action as follows:

The main point to be borne in mind during the whole operation is that the objects are to be attained with as little blood-shed as possible, at the same time, the natives must be made to fully understand that the government is their master and is determined to establish and control their country (CO 520/10, dispatch no. 381, 1901).

The soldiers were instructed to raze to the ground juju houses in all hostile towns. They were however to avoid setting the villages on fire as these would be required for occupation by the troops. The colonial aversion for the local shrines is clearly seen in its persistent effort to destroy them. On 24th December 1901, Colonel A.F. Montaro reported jubilantly his victory over Arochukwu shrine in the following words:

I have this day occupied Arochukwu with no. IV column, driving the enemy before me. (...) My troops are burning and destroying Aro-Chuku, which is a mass of filthy huts unfit for habitation and occupies an area of about five square miles (CO 520/10, dispatch no. 381, 1901).

Colonel A. F. Montaro took six local chiefs captives and killed many others. The operation was deemed a success. In April 1902, Raph Moor, submitted a 35 page report to the Colonial Office detailing reasons for the actions, the success and the expected results. The report singled out the Aros as the most intelligent, fearless and nomadic people of Igbo land. It attributed the source of the people's power to their link with the local shrine called "Arochukwu or Long Juju". We read thus:

The third and no doubt the strongest cause of their power is that they were the representatives and priests of the Long Juju to which in the past not only the coast tribes from the German colony of Cameroons, on the East to the Niger on the West and slightly beyond, made their final appeal in cases of difficulty requiring a ruling which the local Jujus were not equal to give (CO 520/14, dispatch no. 207, 1902).

Raph Moor compared the power and influence of the Arochukwu shrine to that of the Benin City Juju, which the colonial masters destroyed in 1897. He noted that attempts to conquer Igbo land, to establish government control and to open up commerce with the local population had proved abortive and remained so until the overthrow of the Aro people and their local shrine. He

reiterated that Arochukwu was a centre for slave raid and human sacrifice. He presented his government as the custodian of 136 refugees who were part of 800 people reportedly set out to consult the Long Juju for judicial arbitration. Commenting on the fate of the supposed 800 people, R. Moor's report noted:

From time to time, 10 - 20 were taken to the temple of this fetish, condemned there, and subsequently sold as slaves. In this way the 800 dwindled gradually to 136 who were the miserable residuum of the party unfit for sale as slaves or human sacrifice or cannibalism. These refugees on their return to their country exposed to all their tribe the fraud of the Long Juju, which materially damaged the business. They also gave it out that it was the intention of the government to break up the Long Juju and this no doubt led the Aros to take active measures to show that the power of their Juju still existed in spite of the government and they consequently put a juju of barrenness on women in the Niger direction who should attempt to engage in the industry of palm nut cracking for selling the kernels to European (CO 520/14, dispatch no. 207, 1902).

It is worth noting that the essence of the colonial government propaganda against Long Juju boils down to a denunciation of its empowerment of Aro people to stand opposed to colonial control, as well as the consequences on the economy through the blockage of palm kernel business. Indeed colonial advance and economic growth were emphasized as the key expected results of the concluded and successful military action against Arochukwu and its people. One could see that the religious propaganda was only a pretext for the government political and economic ambitions.

The Colonial Office was very pleased with the success of the military action reported by R. Moor. Mr. Anthobus minuted the satisfaction of the Office in the following words:

You may consider this paper the proper occasion for addressing to R. Moor a dispatch (or telegram) saying that the Secretary of State has read with great satisfaction the reports which have been received announcing the completion of military operations to Aro territories, and the prospects that the inhabitants of this important district, hitherto given over to superstition and slave trade, will soon realize the advantages of legitimate commerce and efficient government control. Say that W. Chamberlain highly appreciates the forethought and sagacity shown.

by the H.C. in initiating and carrying out the policy which seems likely to confer great benefits to the Protectorate, and requests that all who took part in the expedition

(both military and civil) or who by their cooperation contributed to its success may be congratulated in his name on the satisfactory conclusion of the operations (CO 520/14, dispatch no. 207, 1902).

London Colonial Office had therefore given its full backing to military action against Arochukwu shrine and its local inhabitants. The successful execution of the operation was considered worth the award of State recognition to the military and civilian participants, together with their collaborators. With such an unalloyed support from London, R. Moor considered himself in a better position to carry further military actions against other reputed local shrines in the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria. He gave the campaign a legal backing by enacting an "Ordeal, Witchcraft and Juju Proclamation" in 1903. Article 7 of the proclamation reads thus:

The High Commissioner may from time to time by order, prohibit the worship or invocation of any juju which may appear to him to involve or tend towards the commission of any crime or breach of peace (CO 591/2, no. 13, 1903).

Further on, article 10 of the same proclamation goes to say:

Any house, grove or place in which it has been customary to hold any trial by ordeal which is prohibited by this proclamation or the worship or invocation of any juju which has been prohibited by any Order made by this proclamation, may together with all articles found therein be destroyed or erased upon the Order of any court by such persons as the court may direct (CO 591/2, no. 13, 1903).

The 1903 proclamation provided the legal warrant for military operations against feared shrines in the districts of Bende, Eket, Ikot-Ekpene, Ogoja, Obudu, Afikpo, Abakiliki, Okigwe, Aba, Owerri, Oguta, Orlu, Onitsha, Awka, Udi and Nsukka. By 1911, the colonial military campaign against the local population and their places of worship had gone a long way in destabilizing the entire region east of the Niger and paved the way for establishing government control over the territories and their inhabitants. (conf.E.136/1912-13 CALPROF 5/42 1912-1913 and PC 10/1911-6 UMPROF 1/2 1911)

RELIGION AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL ERA

The monotheistic religions of Islam and Christianity enjoyed special government protection during the colonial era. Each, however, claimed superiority over the other and sought to outdo each other in the unfolding competition in the number of converts and influence of national policies. Both religions also experienced internal squabbles between adherents of various denominations or

sects. Religious tensions have sometimes led to serious social crisis and disruption of public order, which threaten the peace, stability and security of an entire region and its inhabitants in the country. Nigerian/Biafran civil war of 1967 - 1970 had strong ethno-religious overtones. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria is yet to develop a political structure, which would enable its citizens imbibe the spirit of patriotism and national consciousness. In the absence of strong political leadership and good governance, the nation has drifted towards particularistic forms of political consciousness and identity with religion and ethnicity as its stronghold. The post independence era portrays a situation where the Nigerian nation and its leaders have failed to provide the citizens not only with the basic necessities of life, but also to develop a political structure which promotes unity in diversity. CFCR (2002) has rightly observed that in the face of such political and social malaise, have become enclaves of political identity, economic progress and social solidarity.

In recent times, ethno-religious violence and conflicts have reached an alarming proportion in various parts of Nigeria. Places like Lagos, Onitsha, Kano, Kaduna, Jos, Taraba, to mention but a few, have witnessed the recurring ethno-religious conflict, which resulted in wanton destruction of lives and property, the breach of peace and security. The introduction of religious system of penal law in some northern states in Nigeria has aggravated the already volatile situation. CFCR (2002) has also pointed out that this introduction of sharia penal system in some parts of northern Nigeria raises critical questions with regards to the security of the Nigeria State, the position of citizenship in the federation and the rights of individuals of the minority religious group. Some unscrupulous politicians who are losing power have resorted to the use of religion to create a crisis situation and distract the public from the fundamental problem of their inability to deliver politically, socially and economically. Some leaders of the nation who fight zealously "the religious cause" merely use religion as a camouflage for projecting their political objective. In this manner, they behave no better the colonial masters who resorted to ideological method of demonizing and destruction of local shrines to destabilize the population, create insecurity, demoralize the people and take control.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, religion has been used and is still being used to induce violence, to create conflict situation and threaten the security of the nation and its citizens. By way of conclusion, this paper proposes three recommendations that would help promote the positive use of religion for nation building and security. First, there must be a positive campaign for education as a means of combating ignorance of other people's religious belief system. Nigeria is a nation of multi-religions. The Nigerian constitution recognizes this and guarantees religious freedom

for its citizens. A peaceful cohabitation of the adherents of different religions demands proper education concerning the religious beliefs of the other. This would reduce mistrust and the fear of the other that often lead to tensions, intolerance and violence. Secondly, inter-religious dialogue and cooperation is a sine qua non for promoting peace, justice and national security. Religious fundamentalism is however an aberrant representation of orthodox Christianity and Islamic religion. While fanatic fundamentalism is known to be doggedly intolerant and opposed to dialogue, inter-religious dialogue enhances respect for the other and engenders peaceful cooperation towards nation building and security. Thirdly the secular nature of the Nigeria State, guaranteed in the constitution, must be respected and upheld. To this effect, politicians and leaders of the nation must resist the temptation to use religion as a pretext for their covert political ambitions. Political stability and economic advancement are necessary antidotes to the extreme forms of religiosity which has gripped a large section of Nigerians. Religion when properly understood and practised, educates the mind positively, guarantees cooperation and promotes stability and security in nation building.(Perry, 1991).

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