

Study Session 6

ISLAM AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN NIGERIA



6.0 Introduction

In this session we are going to examine the emergence of the Islamic religion and how it affected political culture in Nigeria. You must note that religion has been an important aspect of Nigeria's life. It has over the years, exerted a strong influence on the nation's political culture. This session covers the establishment of Islam in Nigeria, the impact of Islam on Nigeria, causes of the Sharia imbroglio in the Fourth Republic, and the emergence of the Boko Haram sect.



Learning Outcomes for Study Session 6

After you have studied this session, you should be able to understand the following:

- 6.1 The various stages of the establishment of Islam in Nigeria (SAQ 6.1)
- 6.2 The impact of Islam on Nigeria (SAQ 6.2)
- 6.3 Causes of the Sharia imbroglio in the Fourth Republic (SAQ 6.3)
- 6.4 The emergence of the Boko Haram sect. (SAQ 6.4)

6.1 Stages of the Establishment of Islam in Nigeria

For a proper understanding of the Islamic influence on the development of Nigeria, we will start the discussion by looking at the various stages of its establishment in various parts of Nigeria. The most prominent areas where Islamic influence was high included Kanem-Borno, Hausa land and Yoruba land. Incidentally, these are the same areas where Islamic culture has had its longest history in the country.

Kanem-Borno

You will observe that from the beginning there has been a considerable amount of interaction between the Kanuri speaking people of Kanem-Borno and the Berber merchants of North Africa. Accordingly, the earliest indication of the presence of Islam in Nigeria was in Borno, which emerged out of the ancient Kanem-Borno Empire. Situated at the terminus of the trans-Saharan trade route which ran from Tripoli through Fezzan and Bilma, the area had enjoyed considerable trading relations with merchants coming from North Africa. The real process of Islamization began in the 11th century, when Kanem produced the first Muslim ruler Umme

Jilme (1075-85) of the Seifawa dynasty. With the conversion of the ruler, members of the royal household embraced Islam. By the 13th century, Kanem-Borno rulers exchanged emissaries with the countries of the Maghreb just as they established diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire. So deep-rooted was Islam in the area that Jilme performed the Holy pilgrimage to Makkah twice, but died during the third attempt. The islamization of Borno reached its peak during the reign of Mai Idris Alooma (1570-1602), who was widely acknowledged as the *Amirul Mumineen* (leader of the faithful). This title showed the degree to which Islam had become fully integrated in the empire during the last quarter of the 16th century. His tenure was widely documented by his biographer Ahmad bin Fartuwa.

Hausaland

You will note that like Borno, Hausa land experienced the wave of Islamization during the reign of Sarki Yaji of Kano ((1349-1385). A more significant milestone was achieved during the reign of Sarki Rumfa (1463-1499), when he requested the famous Algerian scholar, *Abdul Karim Al-Maghilli* to prepare a treatise for him to facilitate his administration. It would be recalled that *al-Maghilli* arrived in Kano in 1492, while on a journey that took him to Gao and Katsina among other places. The Arabic document was titled 'Tajud-din fii ma yajib alalMuslim', freely translated as the 'Obligation of the Princes' by scholars.

You will observe that another significant stage in the spread of Islam in Hausa land was the 19th century Jihad launched by the Fulani emigrants against the syncretic practices of the Habe rulers. This reform movement was led by Shehu Usman dan Fodio. In one of his works, Dan Fodio wrote on some of the abhorrent religious beliefs and practices which were widespread in Hausa land. He mentioned and condemned as polytheistic, the practice of venerating trees and rocks on which libations were poured. These and other aspects of life in Hausa land provide us with an insight into the doctrinal basis of the Fulani Jihad. By the year 1812, the long established political system had been replaced by the Sokoto Caliphate which controlled the entire Hausa land and extended to the northern frontier of Yoruba land. An immediate consequence of the Fulani Jihad was that it united the Hausa states under one political system governed by the Sharia law. Under the new political dispensation, new political offices were introduced such as the Emir which replaced the Sarki, the Waziri, the Galadima, the Amirul Jaysh among others. However, the Sokoto Caliphate came to an end in 1903 with the advent of British colonial rule. It is note-worthy that many aspects of the Caliphate structure was transferred into the new political structure under the Indirect Rule system.

We must emphasise that two features of Islam are essential for us to understand the influence of the religion on the Hausa community. The first was the degree to which Islam permeates other institutions in the society. As an important factor in the Emirate socio-political structure, Islam reflected in the daily routine of the social life through the five daily prayers, so also was the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and the Sharia legal system. As a matter of policy, every community has at least a small piece of land set aside for the daily prayers.

Secondly, the wide scope of Islamic beliefs and practices provided a level ground that caused an individual to feel that he belongs to a cultural tradition that affects not only the family-life, but also his dress-code and provide opportunities that linked him not only to his local community but also the wider Islamic world.

Yorubaland

You will observe that the spread of Islam in Yoruba land has its unique features; even though it cannot be fully isolated from events happening in Kanem-Borno and Hausa land. Although there was evidence of some Islamic presence in the area during the pre-jihad era, the socio-political status of the Muslim community was generally low. Two factors combined to boost the status of the Muslims during the 19th century. First was the influx of the liberated slaves to Lagos and Badagry and a few other places. Most of these returnees were skilled and talented artisans. Some of them had become relatively wealthy and influential. Some of them were instrumental in the diffusion of European ideas and Western education among their fellow Muslims.

Secondly, you will note that the wars that ravaged Yoruba land during the 19th century and the emergence of Ilorin as a frontier emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate contributed to the rapid spread and growth of Islam. For much of the second half of the century, Ilorin was in the vanguard of the spread of Islam to different parts of Yoruba land. The modus operandi was open-air services, establishment of Quranic schools as well as the construction of mosques in the rural and urban centers. Although there were scholars from Kanem-Borno empire and Hausa land, the bulk of the teachers and preachers were from Ilorin and its environs. Eventually, Islamic culture became manifest in their mode of dressing, language and architecture.

6.2 Religious Impact on Nigeria

We must emphasise that Islam recorded a direct impact on the Nigerian society through its active involvement in the process of urbanization. For example, under the stimulation of the Sokoto Caliphate, many villages were converted to towns and new towns were established as

centers of commerce and industry. Largely through the efforts of some Emirs and their officials, some towns were founded outside Hausa land. Such towns included Adamawa, Yola, Bauchi, Bida and Kontagora, among others. During the early period of Islam in Borno, the study of the Quran and other Islamic texts was usually associated with the emergent Muslim community that cultivated the culture of reading and writing to enable them fulfill religious and societal obligations. Products of this type of education eventually served as clerics, scribes and judges during the later period. The royal patronage which was given to Islam together with the encouragement that was provided to Islamic learning led to the emergence of a new generation of young Muslim scholars and religious activists. The unlimited access to books and literature from North Africa further encouraged Islamic learning during the period.

Religious Violence in Nigeria

You would have observed that religious violence has general currency in national socio-political discourse because of the numerous incidents in our recent past. Although religion is presumed to be a personal affair, it has become a major problem threatening the stability and survival of the nation. Since independence and the period of military incursion into governance, the country has witnessed series of religiously induced crises which had negative effects on the corporate existence of the country. Despite the high expectations that a return to democratic rule would facilitate a resolution of the incessant sectarian conflicts in Nigeria, the country has continued to witness several cases of religious conflicts. Between 1980 and 2004, the Northern part of the country recorded several cases of religiously-induced crises which claimed several lives and valuable properties. Ironically, religious crisis in Nigeria could be intra-Muslim, ethno-religious and Muslim-Christian in nature. The Fulani Jihad could be seen as a form of intra-Muslim crisis. You will recall that Islam had been established and practiced in Hausa land before the influx of the Fulani from the Sene-Gambia region. It was the spectacle of synergetic practices among the Hausa leaders that prompted the sharp reaction of the jihadists to embark on a mission to revive the religion and bring it back to its original form. To them, the jihad was prompted by the burning desire to turn the wheel of Islam off the path of decline and of intra-Muslim crisis. The Maitatsine riots of Kano in 1980 were another classical case of intra-Muslim crisis. The major demand of the group was a total rejection of the idea of secularism and an absolute loyalty to their leader Muhammad Marwa. Since the outbreak of the Maitatsine riots, cases of religious fundamentalism have become a recurring event with ugly consequences. The following towns had witnessed one form of religious violence or another in Nigeria:

- 1- Kano - December 1980, 1991, 1994 and 1995.

- 2- Kafanchan - 1981, 1987, 1996.
- 3- Maiduguri - 1982, 2009, 2010.
- 4- Jimeta - 1984.
- 5- Ilorin- 1986.
- 6- Kaduna- 1987, 2000, 2002.

You should note that because of the absence of reliable statistics on this violence, it has been difficult to ascertain the actual number of casualties in each event. Press reports about the crisis are not absolutely adequate. From the above, it is clear that religious violence has taken place in Northern Nigeria more than any other part of the federation. Hence, it has become imperative to ask why the culture of carnage persists in the North?

Causes of Religious Violence

We must emphasise that religion was not a serious source of conflict in Nigeria until the late 1970s. It was during the deliberations of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) in 1976/1977 that the Sharia issue opened up the sectarian discourse. Since then, religion has become a strong influencing factor in the nation's political scene. While religion has contributed quite positively to the process of national integration, the manipulation of religion by the political class has had a negative impact on the growth of the country. It is this misuse of religion that has exposed the country to series of religious violence on many occasions. It has also been established that one of the major causes of religious violence was that practitioners of the major religions do not have sufficient information on the core message of the other religion. There is limited opportunity for the exchange of information between the adherents of Islam and Christianity.

You will note that the cultural and ethnic diversities of Nigeria have had a direct impact on its political scene. Each of the ethnic and religious groups has peculiar beliefs and values which could trigger off violent conflict at the slightest provocation. For example, the Hausa/Fulani are very aggressive when the religion they profess or the personality of the prophet of Islam is placed in a state of ridicule or disrepute. A classical example was their reaction to a Danish newspaper cartoon on the Prophet of Islam which was considered highly offensive. Such religious sensitivities of the people are often exploited by the political class when they want to cover up their ineptitude and corruption. It is this sentimental attachment of Nigerians to religion that makes it a politically active instrument in the nation's socio-political affairs.

Activity



Suggest ways that you think we can prevent religious violence in Nigeria.

6.3 The Sharia Imbroglio in the Fourth Republic

You will observe that the Sharia debate at the 1988 Constituent Assembly degenerated to a level where some distinguished members of the Assembly demanded that Sharia must be totally expunged from the Constitution. Muslim members of the Assembly on the other hand, saw this as a deliberate attempt to deny them a sense of belonging and the right of religious freedom. The Sharia issue went beyond the confines of the Assembly and the country was on fire. The military government which was in power had to ban further debate on the issue. The hostilities were carried over to the National Debate on the Draft Constitution. Because of the controversy that emerged as a result of the inclusion of the Sharia clause in the Nigerian Constitution, a sort of compromise was reached with the Muslims having Section 275 which recognizes a Sharia Court of Appeal and the Christians having Section 10 which states that ‘the government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as a State religion.’ Consequently, successive governments have been striving to strike a balance between these contradictions.

You will note that while there had been calls for the introduction of Sharia laws since the Second Republic, the first major and decisive step was taken in 1999, when the then Executive Governor of Zamfara State, Ahmed Sanni Yerima, introduced the Sharia Penal Code. This introduction was to have a spiral effect on many states in Northern Nigeria. To date, twelve Northern States have adopted the Sharia legal system. The states are as follows: Zamfara, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, and Yobe.

We should emphasise that non-Muslims who live and work in such states become victims of a legal system which is not compatible with their religious culture. They become minorities in their own country and anytime there is a religious violence, they become the major target. The same can be said of Muslim faithful living in the Christian dominated states of the South East. They also become targets of reprisal attack anytime there is an outbreak of violence in the far-North.

You will note that the Northern political class used the Sharia issue as a smokescreen to divert attention from their weakness and ineptitude. This is because Sharia is not all about courts and

punishments. It is primarily about giving the electorates the true dividends of democracy, elimination of *al-Majiris* and empowerment of the people. The frequency of the violence that emanated from the Sharia and its ugly impact on the socio-economic life of the nation have always challenged the government at all levels.

6.4 Boko Haram

You will observe that Nigerians woke up to a major religious revolt in July 2009, when a sect known as Boko Haram went on rampage in Bauchi. The riot later spread to some neighboring states resulting in the death of hundreds of people. The group was believed to have been established in 2002 by one Muhammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State. What makes the groups protest unique was its doctrinal nature. The main objective of the group can be derived from its name. 'Boko Haram' in Hausa language simply means 'Western education is forbidden.' Their opposition against Western education was probably because, according to them, it teaches heresy. Like the Maitatsine before it, the Boko Haram group has informal link with some key politicians in Nigeria.



Summary of Study Session 6

After going through this session, you have learned the following:

- (i) The various stages of the establishment of Islam in Nigeria.
- (ii) The impact of Islam on Nigeria.
- (iii) Causes of the Sharia imbroglio in the Fourth Republic.
- (iv) The emergence of the Boko Haram sect.

Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) for Session 6

Now that you have completed this study session, you should assess how much you have learnt by attempting the following questions. You can write your answers in a note book so as to be able to discuss extensively on it with your tutor at the next interactive session.

1. Highlight the different stages of the establishment of Islam in Nigeria.
2. Enumerate the impact of Islam on Nigerian society.
3. What do you think caused the Sharia imbroglio in the Fourth Republic in Nigeria?
4. What can you say about the emergence of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria?

References/ Suggestions for further reading

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