

# ISLAM AND THE FORMATION OF CATHOLIC PRIEST IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

The Nigeria society is dynamic and distinct in its pluralistic nature. Multiplicity defines the features and elements that make up the Nigerian State. The choice of becoming a vanguard of religious tradition by an individual in such a nation with plural political, cultural, social and religious belief systems demand rigorous formation processes. This paper examines Islam, one of the religious and cultural traditions most assertive and influential in Nigeria's religio-political space against the training of Catholic priest of the Christian religious belief system. The work employs the historical, analytical and evaluative methods to examine the transformative stages of Islam from its inception and the challenges it poses to the Christian evangelical mission in Nigeria. The work hinges on the Geothe's paradox theoretical framework "he who knows one knows none" adapted by Max Muller (1823-1900) in his comparative study of religion. The findings reveal that Islam which came through commercial activities has become a powerful influence in Nigeria society and the knowledge of its dynamic influences is of essence in the formation of Catholic priest as it enhances the strategies of priestly mission of evangelization and re-construction of a better society for peace and harmony with members of other religious groups. The enforcement the law of freedom of religious participation by political authority of the society is part of the recommendations of the paper which concludes that the commitment to interreligious dialogue and cooperation in a diverse society as Nigeria by the Catholic church will continuously be effective if the elements of knowing the dynamics of Islam are embedded within the context of the training of seminarians who hold the posterity of the Catholic mission.

**Key Words:** Islam, Catholic priest, Formation and Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

The Nigerian society is a complex society. There are multiple and diverse elements in the various systems that make up the entity. The religious space is characterized with several religious traditions three of which are dominantly subscribed namely; the Indigenous Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. The peoples that answer the corporate name called Nigeria share diverse ethnic nationalities numbering no less than 250 ethnic groups with diverse socio-cultural heritages. History has it that each of these ethnic groups of which three are predominant (Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) had and operated different political and legal systems before the 1914 Amalgamation that brought the differing groups together.

Religion as an inevitable phenomenon in human activity has a function of unifying people together and giving meaning to their existence on earth and assurance of what is to come in the afterlife. The diversities in the practices of religion in Nigeria with the presence of multiple religious traditions and the ethnic and cultural variations of the people influence the general administration of the Nigeria State creating numerous issues that threaten collective peace and harmony needed for the nation's optimum growth and development. Islam and Christianity stand as the most influential and assertive religions in Nigeria's religio-political space. The events of struggles, rivalry and competition visible in Nigeria's political engineering more often than not received interpretation along the line of these religions (Islam and Christianity) (Odey, 2014). There are inconsistencies in the population figure of religious affiliation census in Nigeria. Though the 2006 Nigeria population census did not censor religious affiliations but the World Fact Book (2003) cited in Wotogbe (2012) reveals Muslims population in Nigeria to be 50%, Christians 40% while the followers of the Indigenous Traditional Religion 10%. Another source, the Religious Freedom Nation Profile puts it that Christians in Nigeria are approximately 46%, Muslims 44% and members of the African Indigenous Religion 10% (Imaekhai, 2010:56).

The polarization of the society along the two major religious divides has earned the Nation series of religious crises that had resulted in great fatality both human and property. Islam with its political dynamism appears to be more influential and assertive than the Christian counterpart in Nigeria's religio-political space. Many of the religious crises that have occurred in Nigeria have been attributed to Islam (Ukpebor, 2018). This made Islam to be commonly referred as a religion of violence. However, there is more to be known and understood about

the Islamic religion and the Muslims besides the common view about them especially by the members and the upcoming leaders of the counterpart Christian faith.

Denominationalism characterizes the Christian faith in Nigeria. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in Nigeria. It has about 39 million worshippers from the over 140 million population of Nigeria closely followed by the Anglican Church with over 18 million members (Imaekhai, 2010:56). The Catholic Church with this status has represented the Christian voice in the maintenance of peace and harmony through its engagement with other religions in dialogue. The positive results of this engagement by the leading Catholic clerics create the need for its sustenance by the Church's successive ministers. It is on this note that this paper looks into the formation of Catholic priest with the aim of exposing the religious and political dynamics of Islam in Nigeria with the view to arm the intending Catholic priest with a balanced knowledge that would aid the Church effective mission of evangelization in Nigeria society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts the Geothe's paradox: "he who knows one knows none" as the framework that guides the study. The Geothe's paradox was first used by the students of comparative philology in the study of language. Max Muller adopted this paradox "he who knows one knows none" in the new discipline of science of religion otherwise called comparative study of religion which he developed in late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Muller, 1873). The import of the paradox lies in the fact that one has a balanced knowledge, when one has knowledge of more than one religion or religious traditions in the society and the process of achieving this is known as the comparative study of religions. Thus, comparative study of religion in essence is the inquiry into the religious traditions of man. It is a study that takes into account the fact that there are in the world of men various religious traditions each of which makes sense to the adherents or the believers of the faith (Wotogbe, 2005:7). Although, this paradox received criticism when it was first used for the study of comparative language on the premise that learning too many languages may lead to the risk of losing firm grasp of one's own language. But Muller explained that the result in doing comparative study of languages leads to a higher level of order, knowledge and wisdom which in a similar vein extend to the comparative study of religion. He thus concluded that contrary to the position of the critics of comparative languages, inquiries in comparative study of religion besides the benefits of higher order, knowledge and wisdom attainment, lead one to more firm grasp on one's own religious tradition (Muller, 1897). The theory is apposite as it justifies the aim of

this paper which is geared towards exposing the dynamics of Islam, a different religious tradition to the Catholic tradition which would enhance the acquisition of higher and balanced knowledge in the formative processes of priesthood vocation.

### **Conceptualizing Priest and Priesthood**

The word priest is an English word derived from the Greek word *presbyterous* (elder) but in usage and meaning it is the equivalent of the Greek *hiereus*, latin *sacerdos* and Hebrew *kohen* meaning the offerer of sacrifice and revealer of oracles (Tasie and Okinedo, 2005:124). This translate that a priest is a channel of divine communication that makes the wishes of the deity known to men and in turn offers to the deity the worship and sacrifices of men. Priesthood as a terminology is an institution referring to a body of persons who perform religious functions and mediate between men and the Supersensible Being.

In Catholic tradition, priesthood refers to the sacrament of Holy orders through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time (CCC, 1536). The seminary formation is the process the Catholic Church instituted to ensure the continuation of the apostolic ministry. As the priests are to be taken among men to live with other men as brothers (Vatican II no.3), it is expedient to arm them with the dynamic nature of the society especially one with plural features.

### **Defining Islam**

Islam is one of the Semitic and prophetic religious traditions that share an uncompromising monotheism and belief in God's revelation, his prophets, ethical responsibility and accountability, and the Day of Judgment (Esposito, 2005:1). The word Islam is from the Arabic root "SILM" which means peace and submission. It is a term use in Arabic language to designate surrender when one wants to submits to his opponent in a battle field during the pre Islamic days. It was adopted to describe the religion brought by Prophet Muhammad and that is why in religious context the word (Islam) came to mean submission to the will of Allah and obedience to His law. Kilani describes it as a noun formed from the infinitive of a verb *asalama* meaning "to accept", "to submit", "to commit oneself" which invariably means to submit or surrender to Allah (18). The Qur'an in chapter 3 verse 85 jealously distinguishes Islam when it says, "if anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)". By implication this means that it is through submission to the Will of Allah and by obedience to His law can one achieves true peace

and enjoys lasting purity. A Muslim from this understanding becomes one who submits to the will of Allah.

### **Islamic Incursion in Nigeria**

Islam entered the territory now known as Nigeria from two directions; the north and south. In both directions, the opening of trans-Saharan trade facilitated the penetration of the religion in the area. Raiding, a legitimate and legal act in Arabia before the revelation that gave birth to Islam came to Muhammad was still been carried out by the Arabs that had converted to Islam. One of such Arabs was Uqba ibn-Nafi whose raiding venture in 667 AD into the central Sahara opened the route to Kanem and Borno in Northern Nigeria and it lasted till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kenny, 2001). In each of the towns Uqba raided, he imposed a tribute of 360 slaves and that made the central African trade route to be known and specialized in slaves taken from the hinterland of Borno. The business was later extended to Western Sudan where gold was discovered. This precious commodity attracted the interest of the Umayyad governor who sought for ways to enhance the continuous supply of the commodity from West Africa (Kilani & Ukpebor, 2016). The trans-Saharan trade routes were then developed to serve a secure and efficient link with the Western Sahara. The settlement established by the Arab Muslims' merchant along the trade routes which made them stayed with their indigenous customers to the extent of contracting marriage with them provided the stimulus for the Islamization of West Africa in general (Kilani, 2008). The free mixing of Muslim merchants with West African people created the avenue to organize African trading agents and associates which the Muslims traders needed to facilitate their trade. This led to the emergence of a community of African Muslims around the Arab Muslim merchants. Thus, the trans-Saharan trade stimulated the beginning of the formation of "State in Islam" in sub-Saharan African.

African Kings welcomed the presence of Muslim traders in their communities as they saw the economic benefits the long-distance trade had to offered and which stood higher if they (the kings) embraced Islam. Their compliance would also provide them the status of citizenship in the larger Muslim *umma* (community) with equality and brotherhood with the far away Arab Muslims in Saudi Arabia. As Islam gained ground, large scale marketing and transportation became Muslim monopoly and this put pressure on traders to join Islam to become part of the club.

The presence of Muslim scholars who provided the written communication in Arabic, a vital element in the infrastructure of long-distance trade also appealed to the people of West Africa. It is interesting

to note that the Arabic language was the only international language of West Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese on the coast in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and French and English in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kenny, 2001:3). Muslims clerics that were present during the trans-Saharan trade had several religions medicine to offer which somewhat stood superior in its efficacy to that of the Indigenous traditional religion. The medication is in form of specific prescriptions for every conceivable disease and any other issue of life and the dosage is taken by drinking the ink washed from a slate with Quranic writing. There is talisman to be put on and prayers to be said. The Islamic rites of worship in its entirety were of high attraction as it were commonly performed in an opened environment, dramatic and with all seriousness of minds.

The spirit of brotherhood brought by Islam to those who accept it provided a sense of security to them as it gave them legal immunity from attack by other Muslims. This became another strong motivation for the African King to become a Muslim as it served a pre-emptory defense against attack (Kenny, 2001). The Kings therefore found Islam a convenient support to their imperial authority as it was a unifying ideology bridging many tribes and presenting to them a wider brotherhood, citizenship and nationality. This was how the phenomenon of “State Islam” emerged. The religion from its inception in West Africa was controlled and used to promote the interest of the rulers.

### **Islamic Reformation and the Spread of Islam in Nigeria**

Another prominent factor in the spread of Islam in Nigeria is the military factor. Beginning from the long-distance trade, Islam spread peacefully through Muslim clerics and traders until the reformation carried out by Usman dan Fodio in early 19<sup>th</sup> century among the Hausa/Fulani nation. Reformation as a concept is derived from the Arabic word *Tajdid* meaning to reform or revive. It is an ideology derived from the prophetic tradition which states that “the Muslims community will be assisted by those who will renew its faith for it”. The objective is to recreate or recapture the ideal sunni Islamic society by mobilizing the people along the paradigms of the Quran and prophetic tradition (Ukpebor, 2018:42). It is popularly referred as the Jihad of the sword.

Thus, the Jihad of Fodio was conceived to revive and purify Islam in Hausa land, to eliminate all syncretistic beliefs and rituals, jettison all innovations that are contrary to the Quran and Sharia, and bring the Muslims backsliders back to orthodox and pure Islam (Umejesi, 1992:87). However, the religious motive turned out to be a political revolution. All the Hausa dynasties were overthrown and the Fulani were installed as Emirs with Sokoto chosen as the Caliphal centre. Islamic caliphate system replaced the traditional political system and

Islam thereafter became firmly established in places where it had not had a stronghold before in northern Nigeria. The all-inclusiveness of Islam is justified by this holistic revolution. Islam does not separate the political from the religious and this makes Muslims expect that the establishment of Islam in the society will bring a better and more prosperous society as well as a greater enjoyment of the goods of this life and that of the hereafter. This is the notion of State in Islam. It is contrary to the Christian teaching to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In Islam, Caesar and what he owns belong to God, the One (Al-Qaradawi, 1998:3).

### **Colonial Phase Islam**

The violent intolerance tendency of Islam that stares at the non-Muslims especially the Christians and their evangelical mission today was stimulated during colonial rule in Nigeria. Although, the militant tendency of the Jihadists stopped before the colonial era, the spread of Islam continues during the colonial period but in a peaceful mode of dissemination like as it was during the trans-Saharan trade. If the British had swept away the Caliphal system of Islam they met as their French counterpart did in their territory the tale of Nigeria would have been different. But the British propped and increased their authority through what Umejesi (1992) refers to as "a symbiotic arrangement" otherwise known as the "principle of Indirect Rule".

In addition, the British introduced the *Pax Britannica* which permitted Muslims and everyone to move freely throughout the country in pursuit of trade or livelihood (Kenny, 2001:8). This enable Muslims to build Mosque and interact with local people throughout the country while the Christian though were still free to move around the country as well but restricted in building churches in Muslims areas and their priests were forbidden to evangelize the Muslims. This was enunciated by the British who feared that the policy of indirect rule might not succeed if the trapping of Islam was not preserved. Takaya (1987) quoted in Umejesi (1992) averred:

Lugard assured them that their religion and customs would not be interfered with and that all structures would remain except that power was now effectively in the hands of the British. On their part, the Muslim leaders, nay the Jihadists, promised to put an end to the Jihad of the sword and stop slave raiding, human mutilation and other acts antithetical to the interests of the British economy as pursued through the lugardian philosophy of dual mandate in Africa (Umejesi, 1992:89).

This confessional neutrality adopted by the British in the north gave way to partiality as the latent import was the recognition of Islam as the State religion and the entire north regarded as Muslim land while the south considered a Christian area. This impression was far from the reality.

However, the Lugardian partiality and politicized view of religion were attributed to various reasons: respect for Islam, fear of a general Muslim uprising against the government and a strict cum conservative interpretation of the indirect rule system. The Christian missionaries themselves equally added to the negative attitude that stared at them from the northern/Islamic leaders. The negative attitude resulted from the missionary strategy of acting as liberators of the oppressed Hausa from the perceived Fulani hegemony and it imperiled the attempt to penetrate the Muslim stronghold. This cardinal mistake as Anyanwu and Nwanaju (2014: viii) put it, hardened the attitude of the rulers and their loyalists against the missionaries whose activities were seen as subversive to the established system and order.

### **Islam in Independent Nigeria**

At independence in 1960s, Islam became a reckoning force in Nigeria politics. The British colonizers not only promoted Islam during the colonial period but equally set the stage for the supremacy of Muslims and Islam in the infrastructural elements of Nigeria's government. They did this through the schools they established to train young members of the ruling stratum in the skills necessary for native administration under the indirect rule system (Umejesi, 1992). Katsina Teacher's Training College was one of such schools that produced Ahmadu Bello, the erstwhile Sardauna of Sokoto. The college was an exclusive training ground that produced most of the Nigerian Muslim political leaders of the north. In addition, the British ensured as a form of compensation to the north for their cooperation and compliance that the heirs of the Sokoto caliphate controlled the northern region (Kenny, 2001).

Consequently the First Republic was headed by Tafawa Balewa, a Northern Muslim. But the real power rested on Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of the Northern Region. The political party, Northern People's Congress (NPC) that brought them to power overtly and covertly bears the touch of Islam. Scholars describe the features of this political party in various ways. Duddley (1968:143) affirmed that the NPC represented the consensus of the Muslim Society- the *Ijma* and that any iota of its rejection by any member of the society signified a sinful Islamic act. Falola (1998) described it according to the meaning given to symbols in the logo of the party. He reported that the 'one raised finger' in the logo of the party represents the Unity

of God of the Islamic monotheistic faith which in the same way passed a message to its people that the 'two fingered V' for victory symbol of its opponent in the south portrays polytheism which Islam prohibits out rightly.

In the bid to gain upper hand, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna embarked on the policy of northernization informing the people in his campaign tours that the north was in danger of coastal colonization when the British left. He made this assertion because many skilled southerners had occupied some of the best position in the north. As such to avert this tragedy, the north should come together under one umbrella against the south. Besides, this northernization policy, Ahmadu bello second agenda was to completely Islamized the entire north. He was fully committed to this as the great-grandson of Usman dan Fodio. He wanted to perfect the work of his ancestors and he dip the Quran into the sea with the intent of total Islamization of Nigeria. The Sardauna's assassination in the coup of 1966 successfully brought to an end his Islamization agenda of the north and by extension the entire Nigeria.

Leadership is a vital substance in Islam and Muslims are under obligation to participate in the societal business of leadership. For the fortunes of Islam to continue especially as it is believed that Islam is a complete way of life, there is need to perpetually hold on to power so that any perceived anomaly could easily be addressed at any point in time. Thus, northern Muslims have continued to struggle to hold on to power in the reign of government in Nigeria. Coup after coup continues to feature in post independent Nigeria with prominent Islamic figures.

The 1970s saw the promulgation of the Public Education Edict by the military administrators announcing the takeover of primary and secondary schools run by voluntary agencies. The Catholic Church was most hit by that edict as she had invested much in those institutions. Initially, the policy was not seen as an attempt to foster any religious affiliation but with key positions in the National Education planning been held by Muslims, it became clear that the education policies were designed to protect and foster Muslims' interests. The words of a Muslim scholar Doi (1978) is an attestation:

The policy has given freedom to Islam to foster its cause, and in a way it has imposed restrictions on Christianity, which had so far dominated the educational and social scene of the country. Some of the Muslim organizations laid down in their constitution that their aim was to remove the educational imbalance between Muslims and Christians (Doi, 1978:342-343).

The political well-being of the Muslim community is a matter of supreme importance (Amstrong, 2000:xi). This assertion was demonstrated in the 1970s and 1980s as Muslim intellectuals that had

developed in Nigeria began to seek a new identity for Islam in order to give Islam a better and beneficial status in the Muslim world, and to balance the perceived religious imbalance in Nigeria's religio-political space.

Thus, there emerged the Shariah debates with the advancement by the protagonists that the Islamic law (Shariah) be incorporated in the constitution. They hinged their argument on the notion that of the three laws in Nigeria: (the Islamic law, English law and the Native law), the Shariah has not been given due consideration in the constitution (Ebhomienlen and Ukpobor, 2013: 168). The provisions of Sharia on the draft constitution were:

1. There shall be a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal which shall be an intermediate Court of Appeal between the States' Sharia Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria.
2. The Court shall be composed of the Grand Mufti and such a member of Muftis (not less than three) as the National Assembly may prescribe.
3. In each State of the Federation that so desires, there shall be a Sharia Court of Appeal to be established by the Constitution of the State (Kukah, 2011:118).

The background of these political events was the fundamentalist tendency of reverting to pristine Islam taught and practice by the Prophet enunciated by Abubakar Gumi, the influential spiritual heir of the Sardauna. He mentored the Izala Society group (*Jama'a Izala al-bida wa-iqama as-sunna* meaning, movement for the removal of innovations in Islam and a return to Prophetic tradition). They espoused the Saudi Wahhabism and spread intolerant views and actions which were principally against the traditional Muslims who belong to the Sufi brotherhood, the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya (Kenny, 2001), but their actions later extended to the non-Muslims especially the Christians. They were for the full establishment of Sharia not as enacted by a Nigeria government but as the supreme and only law of the Islamic *umma* which they considered as their authentic nationality. Subsequent Islamic groups later emerged with full impacts in Nigeria religio-political space such as the Shiite movement, the Maitatsine and the Boko Haram with a host of others.

The perfection of Nigeria's Islamic status was carried out by the later military dictatorships of General Ibrahim Babagida and General Sani Abacha with total disregard to the secularity of the Nigeria State. Babagida in 1986 registered Nigeria as a full member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) while Abacha signed a secret pact that smuggled Nigeria into another Islamic group made up of eight developing countries known as the D-8 in 1997.

## Evaluation and Conclusion

The discussion so far has shown the dynamic nature of Islam, a religious tradition in the social, economic and political settings of Nigeria. Beginning from the trans-Saharan trade through which Islam penetrated Nigeria, its influence has revolutionized commerce and trade. Its military transformed the traditional socio-political organization of the north and south west to Emirate system and paved way for the triumph of Muslims' hegemonic control of power. The colonial masters did nothing but promoted Islam with their policies which consolidated the political well-being of the Muslims over the non-Muslims in the geographical entity of plurality they formed as Nigeria State. Finally, Nigeria's independence opened the chapter of perpetual struggle for supremacy between Muslims and non-Muslims in the direction of leadership and general administration of the country with attendant rivalry between the adherence of the two religious divides (Islam and Christianity). The relevance of this analysis to the formative processes of the Catholic clerics is the need for understanding of Islam physical processes on Muslims in Nigeria by the seminarians and the logical background behind the complex numerous issues which confront the peoples of the contemporary Nigeria society they are to serve. This is important as the way out is not to continue in the suprematic struggle but to engage in dialogue no matter the cost so that the mission of the Church's evangelization will continue to flourish in the society.

It is the recommendation of this paper that the non-violent attitude of Christ during his redemptive mission on earth be the guiding principle of Christians especially the would-be Catholic priest as the Catholic Church to a great extent represents the Christian faith in Nigeria. Also, the Government authorities should be engaged in modalities that promote freedom and impartiality in service delivery to the people including the provision of effective strategy that will ensure safety and security of lives and property for all citizens.

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