Contestations and Ambivalence: Religion, Nationalism, and the Politics of Belonging in Nigeria

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Abstract

The nationalist agitations that characterize the modern Nigerian state, many would argue are far from the anti-colonial struggle that resulted in the country's independence from European colonizers. The state of "nationalisms" in Nigeria currently reflects the deep polarization along religious, ethnic and regional lines and has often been accompanied with violence. This paper explores the ambivalent relationship between religion, nationalism and the politics of belonging in Nigeria, arguing that the current 'strands' of nationalism are historically layered and politically constructed phenomena shaped by religion, class, and elite power. Tracing the religio-political foundations of the Nigeria from the nineteenth-century to the postcolonial state, the paper demonstrates how elite actors have instrumentalized religious and ethnic identities to construct competing visions of national belonging. Drawing on postcolonial theory, African political thought, and a wide range of historical sources, the study reveals how these structures continue to fuel inter-group suspicion, exclusion, and violence, including in contemporary crises such as Boko Haram's insurgency, the farmer-herder conflict, and regional secessionist movements. To

address these enduring tensions, the paper proposes a “hermeneutics of citizenship and belonging,” which draws on the ethical thought of Paul Ricouer and Atalia Omer’s multiperspectival approach. This framework calls for a reimagining of Nigerian nationhood as a pluralistic, relational, and justice-oriented project, capable of transforming exclusionary narratives into inclusive solidarities.

Keywords: Nationalism, Religion, Violence, Belonging, Contestations

Introduction

The nationalist agitations that characterize the modern state in Nigeria, many would argue, are far from the image of Nigerian nationalism and nationalists in the early twentieth century, who contributed to the achievement of independence from colonial imperialism in 1960. Not too long after independence, the Nigerian state began to shift dramatically from the ‘unifying’ national narrative that had helped achieve independence. With the seeds sown during colonial rule, these tensions in the name of nationalist interest groups partly erupted due to the narratives of control and resistance to it perpetrated by various regional, religious, and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, these fragmented nationalisms, what Clifford Geertz describes as “nationalisms within nationalisms” (Geertz, 1973), have continued to contribute to the fragility of the state, sometimes producing violence, with various deadly stints.

Nationalism is a consciousness of belonging to a nation or a nationality, and a desire to secure or maintain its welfare, prosperity, and integrity and to maximize its political autonomy (Coleman, 1960). However, the actions taken by those who feel this strong sentiment come into question when other people’s identities are suppressed through political and economic oppression, and violence of any form. This paper focuses on these nationalisms, and their

contestations in Nigeria. It explores the ambivalent relationship between religion, nationalism, and the politics of belonging, particularly arguing that religion that is, Islam and Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries precolonial and colonial formation, played key roles in the making of ethnic, regional, and national identities in Nigeria and has continued to shape contestations of belonging and national identity, sustaining inter-group suspicion, distrust and violence in the postcolonial state.

This paper shows that in Nigeria, nationalism is not merely a product of anti-colonial struggle or popular will. Rather, it is shaped by 1) the imposition of religio-political structures in precolonial and colonial eras; 2) the consolidation of these structures through elite manipulation and 3) the persistent deployment of these structures to negotiate power in the postcolonial state.

Scholars have argued that several challenges confronting the modern Nigerian state, especially the lack of national cohesion, political and legal tensions, and religious and ethnic conflicts, have their roots in the 'artificial' colonial formation of Nigeria (Coleman, 1960). Expanding this argument, Professor of History and Black Studies, Olufemi Vaughan, argues that Muslim and Christian structures made up the foundation on which the Nigerian Colonial state was grafted into the twentieth century. He notes that Islam and Christianity fundamentally shaped and have been shaped by local religious, social, and political structures since the transformative nineteenth century, thereby complicating Nigeria's tapestry of identities, especially ethnic and regional forms of identification (Vaughan, 2016). Thus, furthering Vaughan's argument, this paper argues that nationalism is shaped by religion and its intersection with other power relations, especially social class, and elite manipulation.

Also drawing on Elie Kedourie's critique of nationalism as elite manipulation (Kedourie, 1971), this paper shows how religious and political elites in Nigeria have instrumentalized

religion to construct competing visions of national belonging. These historical intersections of religion, nationalism and elite power have left legacies that continue to shape today's conflict narratives and causes, from Boko Haram's insurgency and Sharia expansion to farmer-herder crises and regional secessionist movements. For example, the privileging of Islamic structures in Northern Nigeria and at times, secular-Christian structures under colonial indirect rule, laid the groundwork for ongoing religious and ethnic hierarchies, while elite manipulation of religion and ethnicity continues to fuel suspicion and contestations of belonging. This is evident in the Boko Haram insurgency, which draws from historical grievances about secular and Western influence as well as the farmer-herders violence, which reveals enduring disputes over land rooted in colonial land-use policies and perceived ethnic-religious dominance; and secessionist movements which reflect longstanding feelings of exclusion in political representation. By tracing how nationalism was built on colonial religio-political foundations and later entrenched by elites, this paper argues that today's violent conflicts are not isolated but rooted in deep historical processes. Hence, addressing contemporary tensions requires rethinking national identity, citizenship and belonging to through a pluralistic, more inclusive, and interpretive framework.

This paper proposes a hermeneutics of citizenship and belonging, an interpretive framework that critically reexamines how national identity, inclusion, and solidarity are imagined and enacted in Nigeria. Moving beyond legal or territorial definitions, this hermeneutics suggests a relational, inclusive, pluralistic, and just understanding of belonging and peace, attentive to Nigeria's historical complexities. It aims to disrupt elite-driven, exclusionary narratives of nationalism and foster a more inclusive national re-imagination grounded in mutual recognition and moral co-creation.

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, using a qualitative analysis of African postcolonial critiques, political theory, social sciences, political theology and religious history. Secondary historical sources from historians, newspaper articles and social media sites are also used as examples and case studies.

Nationalism in Nigeria: A Conceptual Framework

Nationalism has been a ground for conceptual debate among political and social scientists. The concept is embedded with moral, ideological, political, religious, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic emotional undercurrents. Nationalism has been the focus of philosophical debates among scholars for over three decades ago partly in consequence of troubling nationalist clashes in the form of anticolonial and ethnic struggles (Miscevic, 2023). According to Nenad, surges of nationalism tend to present a morally ambiguous picture because they connotate different meanings in various contexts, usually in opposing directions (Miscevic, 2023). Olasupo notes that it could be described as a double-edged sword representing two ideological divides – domination and struggle for freedom (Olasupo et.al, 2017). As this paper will show later, these opposing divides have produced ambivalences in Nigeria's history and continue to shape the postcolonial state. In any case, constructing a conceptual framework for the subject of nationalism in Nigeria would be a challenge because, like other African societies, the context is unique (Coleman, 1960). Coleman adds that the indiscriminate use of traditional concepts in political science in the analysis of nationalism would create a distorted picture of African realities.

Nationalism, especially in Africa and Asia, has been used to describe two phenomena: the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and the

actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination. These opposing ideologies are present because they emerge in the historical context of colonialism. Thus, this paper presupposes that nationalism is a modern phenomenon.

Any definition of nationalism deals with the relationship between a group of people and a nation. These definitions, therefore, raise critical questions about the definition of a nation and national identity. That is, who or what constitutes a nation? Who belongs to a nation? How is identity in the nation determined, and who determines it? These questions remain the focus of the theorists of nationalism (Smith, 2003).

As J. S. Coleman notes, nationalism is broadly a consciousness of belonging to a nation (existent or in the realm of aspiration) or a nationality, and a desire, manifested in sentiment and activity, to secure or maintain its welfare, prosperity, and integrity and to maximize its political autonomy (Coleman, 1960). However, Miscevic notes that since nationalism is particularly prominent with groups that do not yet have a state, one cannot start by defining nation and nationalism purely in terms of belonging to a state (Miscevic, 2023). This is particularly true as seen in the strands of nationalism among ethnic and ethno-religious groups. Thus, Coleman's definition of nation and nationality concurs with Nenad's submission. He defines a nation as a large group of people who feel that they form a single and exclusive community destined to be an independent state. In his seminal work, he notes that there are three criteria of nationhood: largeness in scale, the existence of an in-group sentiment, and the assumption of a national destiny of independent statehood in the modern world. He, however, adds that a common culture and historical tradition and a common language are usually attributes of a concrete nation. It is not surprising that Coleman concludes that "Nigeria is not a nation, nor is any one of the three regions of Nigeria a nation" (Coleman, 1960). This is because at the time of drafting his book,

Nigeria had not achieved state independence. In any case, the third point reveals Coleman's bias about an independent statehood, which still connotes a Western idea, making it unapplicable in the Nigerian context.

A more accurate idea that fits the picture of nationalism in Nigeria up to the postcolonial state is also Coleman's idea of the reference group for nationalism. He notes: "If the reference group is an existing nationality, nationalism refers to sentiment and activity directed toward maximizing its political autonomy either as a separate state or as a constituent member of a multinational state." This is accurate for the Nigerian state's multinationalism and plurality of groups. However, it does not paint the full picture because some nationalist groups do not actively seek political autonomy; rather, they seek recognition in the broader multinational state (Coleman, 1960). Furthering his thought, Coleman sees Nigerians as displaying multiple nationalisms at once – Pan-African, Nigerian, Regional, Group, and Cultural. However, this does not depict the full picture, especially because first, it is silent about the religio-political structures that produced these multiple nationalisms, and secondly, it does not assess how religion is implicated in the nationalisms or emerges as a distinct one. In fairness to Coleman, however, he notes that cultural nationalism must be distinguished from the predominantly political nationalism which the other categories describe. To fully understand why these nationalisms, persist and produce tensions, we must examine how the idea of national belonging is constructed, enforced, and contested.

Nationalism presents an idea of belonging to a 'nation' which either includes or excludes, and in many cases, these belongings are imagined. Therefore, it is important to briefly clarify the concept of belonging. This is important to this discourse because in Nigeria and other African countries, there is a growing obsession with belonging, along with new questions concerning

conventional assumptions about nationality and citizenship (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Yuval-Davis notes that an analytical differentiation between belonging and the politics of belonging is crucial for any critical political discourse on nationalism and racism. This is because for her, belonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Distinguishing between belonging and the politics of belonging, she views the politics of belonging as comprising specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to "particular collectivities" that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This idea is crucial to Nigeria, especially because of the emergence of two 'foreign' religions and the political project of colonial secularism that are responsible for shaping and reconstructing belonging in various collectivities.

However, human history and particularly Nigerian history have shown that boundaries are not static as some have imagined. In the introduction, one could see how boundaries were shifted and articulated when they seemed threatened. Belonging, as Yuval-Davies notes, even in its most stable 'primordial' forms, is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Clifford Geertz, who concurs with this, notes that the general strength of such primordial bonds and the types of them that are important differ from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time. He further notes that attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural affinity than from social interaction. That is, one naturally tends to develop greater attachment to people of the same language, religion, or ethnicity. As Geertz rightly notes, the lifting of such ties to the level of political supremacy has more and more come to be deplored as

pathological (Geertz, 1973). The question here, therefore, is why and how it gets moved to the level of political supremacy if it deals more with natural affinity.

Political Projects, Nationalism, and Belonging

The lifting of these ties does not happen on its own, especially in a 'civil state.' They are a result of political projects, by political and social actors, who either construct new political belongings or threaten the belonging and representation of a group within the modern state. This, therefore, suggests the obvious – the idea of power relations in the construction of belonging. Yuval-Davies identifies three major analytical levels on which belonging is constructed; however, for the sake of this paper, the one that concerns "social location" will be used here (Yuval-Davies 2006). This is because social location is important in the construction of belonging and boundaries in Nigeria.

Belonging to a particular gender, race, religion, class, nation, age-group, kinship group, or a certain profession deals with social and economic locations that have implications vis-a`-vis the grids of power relations in society. As shown in this paper, it is these power relations that are often responsible for reifying and fixing identities and belonging (yet it continues to be contested). Yuval notes that positionalities, however, tend to be different in different historical contexts and are often fluid and contested by those not in the same class, race, or gender who seek recognition in the political imaginary (Yuval-Davis, 2006). For example, the Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani race or identity is often contested depending on various reasons or contexts. Sometimes, groups from Benin and Warri in the South-South region of Nigeria identify with the Yoruba, yet sometimes, they reject this conflation of identities. It is also not uncommon to see the challenge by the lower class against elite political and economic dominance.

Indeed, Benedict Anderson's assertion that every human community is imagined is right because it presupposes the fluid nature of identities (Anderson, 1991). For him, a nation exists only in the consciousness of its members. He also views the complex processes entailed in the conception, invention, and assimilation of collective identities as the foundations for the creation of nationalism. On the other hand, this business of boundary maintenance that underlies the politics of belonging is about potentially meeting other people and deciding whether they belong inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation or other communities of belonging, whether they are ‘us’ or ‘them' (Yuval-Davies, 2006). This implies that nations are usually invented and imagined. These inventions are a continual process subject to various power relations.

Thus, the politics of belonging, Yuval Davis rightly notes, involves not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents (Yuval-Davies, 2006). As I analyze, these hegemonic political powers are themselves, not static. Indeed, this is true for Nigeria in three ways. First, it relates to the role of hegemonic religious and political powers and elites in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Nigeria, who have had considerable influence on reifying differences and boundaries. Secondly, there was considerable challenge by local agents – African elites – to colonial powers, eventually resulting in the emancipation of Nigeria from colonial rule. However, colonial politics was not only characterized by contestations with colonial powers but was also characterized by internal contestations among ‘nations’ who, through colonial secularism, have been reified and fixed. Thirdly, power contestations produced by religious and political structures continue to maintain

and reproduce boundaries that are sometimes helpful, yet disturbing due to competing imaginations of national identity and belonging, which sometimes escalate into violence.

Synthesizing and contesting theories and submissions by scholars explored in this session, I argue that in Nigeria, nationalism and belonging are a historically layered and politically constructed phenomenon, where religion, class, and ethnicity intersect to define who belongs to the nation and who is excluded. This allows us to trace how national identity in Nigeria has been shaped not only by anti-colonial resistance but also by precolonial and colonial reification of identities and elite manipulation of these categories.

Transformation of Precolonial and Colonial Nigeria.

The emergence of competing Christian and Islamic religio-political structures have played crucial roles in restructuring Indigenous culture, politics, society, and the idea of belonging in Nigeria. While these religious structures formed the crux of the famous nationalist ideologies for self-determination against colonial imperialism in the twentieth century, there have been contestations and competitions that continue to shape nationalism and the idea of belonging along regions, religion, or ethnicity. The nineteenth century was a transformative period that provided essential structural and ideological frameworks for the rationalization of colonial society throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Vaughan, 2016). This analysis is based on the colonial institutionalization of the northern and southern regional categories.

Northern Nigeria

The analysis begins with the emergence of the widely known Islamic reformist movement that established the Sokoto Caliphate in the Hausa region of Northern Nigeria. In today's northern Nigeria (one of the regions where religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities are mostly contested), there is a majority population of the Hausa-Fulani people whose

identities are usually defined along ethno-religious lines. This identity, however, blurs the long history of transformation that has occurred in this region. Moses Ochonu notes that Hausa, Hausawa, and Kasar Hausa, which defines contemporary Hausa ethno-religious consciousness in modern Nigerian society, is a concept that gained momentum with the monumental political and social transformations unleashed since the Sokoto Jihad of the early nineteenth century (Ochonu, 2008). Preceding the Sokoto Caliphate were Hausa city states like Kano, Katsina, Zaria, Gobir, Biram, Rano, and Daura that had evolved into political states since 1000 A.D. In these city states, the Fulani were migrants from various areas who were allowed to live in these areas. There was strong identification with the city-state, which defined the essence of a formidable political and social system in the Hausa region before the imposition of the Sokoto Jihad in the early nineteenth century. Hence, people were regarded by the city state from which they came rather than 'Hausa.' For example, someone from Kano was called Kanawa (Vaughan, 2016). In terms of power relation, each Hausa city-state was rigidly divided between the aristocratic class, the *Sarauta*, and the masses of commoners, known as the *talakawa. Sarautas* were aristocratic title holders who advised the Sarki, the paramount ruler, on political and social matters (Vaughan, 2016).

Although Islamic influence started in Hausa city states in the fourteenth century, it did not become revolutionary until the eighteenth century. It was gradual, first through Sudanese Muslims who migrated southward, facilitating the conversion of local Hausa rulers to Islam. As a result, Muslim administrative and judicial institutions gradually became prominent in many Hausa city-states. An important indicator of this was the rise of the Ulama, majorly Fulani, to the courts of the Hausa Sarki administration by the early eighteenth century. While some of the Ulamas restricted themselves to clerical activities, some were directly involved in state affairs,

serving as judges, ministers, and scribes to Hausa rulers (Vaughan, 2016). The influence increased that by the fifteenth century, Sharia was already state law in Kano, one of the city-states.

Ulamas increasingly based Islamic thought on the sovereignty of Allah, asserting that Hausa Sarkis can only exercise legitimate political authority when they comply with the strict dictates of Islamic law. It was in this context that Dan Fodio's Jihad emerged. The reformist teaching of Usman Dan Fodio led to the Sokoto Jihad in the early nineteenth century, proving to be the most important manifestation of this growing trend by the end of the eighteenth century. Fodio's victory, Vaughan notes, announced the Sokoto Jihad, which transformed what became Northern Nigeria in the nineteenth century (Vaughan, 2016). Dan Fodio not only authorized Jihads against Hausa rulers (including the Muslim rulers of Kanem-Bornu), but also against the non-Muslim communities in the region. This Jihad, which resulted in the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate, ensured the imposition of Muslim theocracies in the Hausa city-states, as Fodio called to eradicate 'un-Islamic' practices common in the courts of Hausa Sarkis, notably, the lack of consultation with Ulamas in state affairs, the prevalence of exploitative taxes, and oppressive laws on Talakawa commoners (Vaughan, 2016). This rule, however, also subjected the non-Muslim communities to the payment of *Jangali* taxes. The Jihad remains a ground for debate among scholars due to its religious nature, yet it's overarching political form. However, my aim here is to show how this act transformed religious, political, and ethnic identities in the Hausa city-states by centralizing an Islamic political structure. One must note the moral appeal on which the Islamic empire was built, especially those that Fodio had advocated. Vaughan notes that for Dan Fodio, insistence on an ummah premised on justice for all resonated with the Hausa *talakawa* and disaffected Fulani masses, who by the eighteenth century had become a major

demographic group in the region. Social justice through a rule by Islamic law seemed to be a major part of Dan Fodio's vision for the empire (Vaughan, 2016).

Beyond the moral reforms that Dan Fodio had sought, the Fulani Islamic jihad, Moses Ochonu notes, superimposed a central political and religious authority on the fragmented Hausa states of present-day Northwestern Nigeria and, through conquest and discourse, disciplined them into one politico-linguistic unit (Ochonu, 2008). The effect of this was a homogenization and construction of a politically useful narrative of Hausa identity – a narrative underwritten by religious and cultural associations. According to Ochonu, the Islamization of Hausa identity is probably best underscored by the fact that post-Jihad Hausa identity became synonymous with assimilation into an Islamic consciousness that was packaged, consecrated, and policed by the Jihad leaders and the inheritors of their authority (Ochonu, 2008). By the mid-nineteenth century, a constructed Hausa-Fulani ethnic identity deeply intertwined with Islam had dominated the North, reshaping the idea of belonging. This would set the stage for the political appeal a century later to "One North, One People" – the notion of a unified Islamic region with Arab influence and ties (McCauley, 2017).[1] Thus, to be a non-Muslim would mean that one was a pagan and non-Hausa. This is seen in the post-Jihad treatment of Hausa traditionalists known as Maguzawa, who Ochonu notes were excluded from the narrative of Hausa identity (Ochonu, 2008).

On the other hand, the intertwinement made the Hausa identification more fluid. This is because the Islamic caliphate had reinforced the power of the Hausa language and Islam as the supreme indicators of belonging, thus blurring the idea of Indigenous claims to the land. This meant that anyone, regardless of origin, may be entitled to this indicator of belonging if they

[1] See Also, Ajayi, Ade J., "Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian Nationalism," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, December 1961, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1961): 197 and Gellner, Ernest*, Nations, and Nationalism*, (Cornell University Press: New York), 80

acquired the Hausa language and converted to Islam. It was clear that the influence of the Sokoto caliphate had redefined belonging and national identity in the Northern region, including central Nigeria and some Yoruba regions to which Islam had spread. Central to this was a complex movement between various power relations, including religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic class. While evidence suggests it made identity more fluid, its centralization of Islam and Hausa language provided the structure for the colonial political imaginary from the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Thus, Olufemi Vaughan rightly notes that by 1900, when the British declared their colonial control over the Sokoto Caliphate, the consequence of Usman dan Fodio's Jihad was glaring (Vaughan, 2016).

Southern Nigeria

While Islam was transforming the identity of the North, something different was happening in the South. This different thing was Christianity and its contact with people in the south in the mid-nineteenth century. It was not the first time Christianity had contacted any communities in the South, as it had been introduced to the Benin and Warri kingdoms through the fifteenth-century Portuguese explorations. However, it was not as successful as what would come in the nineteenth century. As McCauley notes, it was only in 1842, in the aftermath of the Jihad and spread of Islam in the North, that Christianity began to establish foundations of any sort in Nigeria (McCauley, 2017). However, Christianity's emergence in the south had an interesting historical context, and I will briefly explore the Yoruba communities who developed a formidable identity that transformed southern Nigeria.

Vaughan notes that much of the Christian missionary work that set the foundation of the transformation of the Nigerian region is intrinsically linked to the history of the Christian Missionary Society mission in West Africa, whose success is founded on favorable internal and

external factors (Vaughan, 2016). The work of the CMS was primarily encouraged by notable figures who had a mix of humanitarian and economic interests in Africa and India. One of these figures included William Wilberforce, who campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade. These British men, therefore, established the CMS, expressing hope in the positive development of Africa through the promotion of legitimate commerce and the abolition of slavery, both overseas and internally (Ajayi, 1961).

The aim of missionary societies, as Ajayi notes, was only to initiate a revolution, raising Churches and training local men who would themselves build the new nations. Thus, they sought the partnership of European governments and traders in intercepting slave trade and returning slaves to the West Africa. There was emphasis on education, and on raising a local staff, a local body of educated Africans, raising a new social class! This is demonstrated in the CMS General Secretary, Henry Venn's letter in 1857:

> "We hope that by God's blessing on our plans, a large body of such Native Growers of cotton and traders may spring up who may form an intelligent and influential class of society and be- come founders of a kingdom which shall render incalculable benefits to Africa and hold a position amongst the states of Europe" (Ajayi, 1961).

The missionaries' vision was to ultimately create in the West African region, one or more states in the image of Europe, and the ideal of European nations they presented to them had some essential characteristics, including but not limited to the idea that European nations were Christian and that they were civilized in the technological sense of the Industrial Revolution that had taken over Europe.

As the success of British antislavery efforts against the slave trade grew, evangelizing efforts by the CMS, Wesleyan Methodists, and Baptists expanded in the coastal city of Lagos and

Abeokuta, providing new opportunities for Christian missions and European commercial interests in the Yoruba hinterland. Although missionary activities increased, the missionaries soon began to observe Yoruba religious practices, which revealed a mixture of Indigenous practices, Islam, and Christianity. On the other hand, Yoruba slave returnees who had settled in Sierra Leone developed a monotheistic Christian cosmology and constructed Christianity as a religion of peace that Vaughan notes resonated among war-weary Yoruba communities (Vaughan, 2016).

The nineteenth century Wars – internally, between Yoruba subgroups and externally with Fulani jihadists, internal slave trade, and the collapse of the Oyo empire – provided some of the context for the coming of Christianity missions and the British to the Atlantic coast. Vaughan refers to the experience as a traumatic one for the Yoruba communities. Hence, Christian missions were offering something different to these communities. Accepting Christianity was also a means for some of these communities to seek the support of the British for defense against warring communities. The Yoruba Slave returnees from Sierra Leone (*saro*), many educated by the British, would be influential in the vision of the Christian missionaries (Ajayi, 1961).

By the late nineteenth century, conversion to Christianity had gained momentum in Yoruba cities and towns, thanks to the strategy of the CMS in using the Yoruba returnees from the Americas. Therefore, Ajayi referred to these missionaries and traders as the first generation of Nigerian nationalists, whose nationalism consisted in their vision of a new social, economic, and political order, such as would make their country "rank among the civilized nations of the earth. One could conclude that they understood secularization that came along with European Christianity wherever it went, which had a modernizing and universalizing effect (Ajayi, 1961).

Thus, Christianity was also shaping a new Yoruba identity, which was previously not fixed or centralized. Hence, Vaughan notes:

> "An ethno-national discourse of shared Yoruba culture predicated on the powerful myths of common origin were incubated during this transformative moment of Yoruba history: the influential traditions centered on Ile-Ife as the cradle of Yoruba civilization and Oduduwa as the progenitor of the Yoruba people; a common pantheon of Yoruba gods and spirits; interconnected political experiences; and universal belief in the common ancestry of Yoruba dynastic traditions" (Vaughan, 2016)

As seen in this section, Islam and Christianity emerged, intersecting with various power relations to reshape the ideas of belonging and national identity. In a sense, one could call them revolutionary. However, these foundations that were set and 'probably organized' were what colonial structures built on, making new elites and social classes, and reimagining national identity alongside language, shared regional, and geo-spatial identity.

Colonialism, Secularism and Continuations in the Postcolonial State

When the British government abolished slave trade in 1807, Europeans involved in this act were forced to look for other means to maintain their economic and industrial growth. As noted earlier, missions and trade had accompanied each other, with European traders increasing their trade and presence in the region. British administration in Nigeria did not formally commence until 1861, when Lagos was annexed and made a crown colony. However, the 1885 Berlin conference changed the narrative, giving the Royal Niger company through the British government the power to administer, make treaties, levy customs and trade in all territories in the coast of the Niger and its affluents (Coleman, 1960). However, in 1900, the British took over from the Royal Niger company and changed the name of the Niger coast protectorate to the

protectorate of Southern Nigeria. In the same year, Frederick Lugard was made the high commissioner of the protectorate of Northern Nigeria, which included the Sokoto caliphate, the Kanem Bornu empire, and other non-Muslim communities under its rule, eventually leading to the fall of the Caliphate in 1903.

In the Northern protectorate and most southern provinces, British administration of local communities was sustained by the indirect rule system, which was imposed by Frederick Lugard, who eventually merged the two protectorates and became the governor general of Nigeria. This indirect rule involved the co-opting of the native administration (local rulers) in the governance of the empire on behalf of the British government. While it did not gain much success in the Southern protectorate because of the absence of a centralized administration, it accounted for much success in Northern Nigeria.

In Northern Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani emirate structures, established many years prior, were transformed into a more centralized administrative system under the indirect rule. This system, Vaughan argues, established the Northern Protectorate as a distinct political unit in which Muslim and non-Muslim communities were brought under the control of Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers within clearly defined administrative jurisdictions (Vaughan, 2016). This move not only transformed the emirate system but also elevated and extended it to ethnic minorities who had resisted its imposition in the nineteenth century. Also, with the new colonial system, Islamic law became a legal system throughout the Northern Protectorate. Vaughan also notes that to control the diverse people of the newly established Northern Protectorate, British authorities did not simply embrace the existing political structures under the leadership of the rulers of the Sokoto Caliphate; they strengthened Fulani conquerors and imposed their political hegemony on the subject peoples of the region (Vaughan, 2016).

One of the effects of the adoption of Hausa-Fulani Muslim rule, therefore, was the reification of the ethnic and religious practices that the Fulani had established after the conquest of the Hausa city-states. British colonial reforms enhanced the status of Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers as gatekeepers of the indirect rule system and cemented the marginalization of non-Hausa-Fulani local communities – a move that would have serious implications for relationships in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. The system hierarchized identities by dividing the Northern Nigerian population across Muslim and non-Muslim identities. Thus, non-Muslims were identified as Pagans. Worthy of note is also the religious differentiation policy that the colonial rule engaged in its governance of the empire, related to the principle of liberal secularism – the assertion of religious freedom and of separation, which the colonial government operated with (Akande, 2023).

It is important to note that the Christian missionaries who were evangelizing the Niger area were not interested in establishing a colony (Ajayi, 1961). For them, European trade and missions were crucial to their work in the area, and it was earlier supported by the British government. That alliance would therefore change to hostility between the colonial government and missionaries when formal empire commenced in Northern Nigeria at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus, Rabiat Akande notes:

> "In founding colonial governance on indirect rule through Islamic institutions, the British administration separated itself from the missionary enterprise, asserting that this policy was necessitated by its secular approach to governance" (Akande, 2023).

Missionaries were restricted from evangelizing Muslim areas but were allowed to gain access to the 'pagan' areas, thus causing tensions between the two entities. The principle of secularism – religious freedom and the separation of religion from the state – generated ambivalences that also

continue to shape belonging and nationalism in the postcolonial state. While religion is supposed to be separated from the state, Islam was what the indirect rule system was built on in Northern Nigeria, which raises the question of whether the state was separate from religion. The principle of religious freedom, on the other hand, also generated tensions as both missionaries and Northern elites argued for their aims.

Down in the south, industrialization and western education were being embraced. However, beginning from the late nineteenth century, educated Africans, who had become elites, began expressing their disdain for the imposition of Western ideals and colonial government in general. Their expressions resulted in a few resistances to Christian missions, hence the establishment of churches controlled by Africans for Africans. This resistance, which emerged in the broader context of African and Black nationalism being expressed in the West, is considered the origin of Nigeria's nationalism as a desire for self-government.

The colonial system produced uneven results in the empire. While the effects of Christianity, along with the European imaginary of modernization, were transforming the south, the restrictions of this westernizing force from Northern Nigeria were glaring. One thing is clear: the indirect rule imposed by Lugard restructured Nigeria, first by institutionalizing Islamic rule over non-Islamic areas in Northern Nigeria, setting the stage for the contestations of ethnic and regional identities, posing one as Christian, peaceful, progressive, or secular, and the other as Islamic, and sometimes violent. But even in Northern Nigeria, Christian missionaries were already challenging the Islamic system and leveraging the principle of religious freedom to reach out to the non-Muslims, particularly among ethnic minorities in the current Northeast and Middle Belt, making them describe British colonial rule under Lugard as tantamount to "Muslim sub-imperialism" (Akande, 2023) This reveals how the ethnic minorities use their new religion to

negotiate their identities in the region, resisting Islamic rule and marginalization. Also, Northern Nigerian political and religious elites, *Masu Sarauta*, leveraged the same principle to defend the reformed Islamic system in the region.

Years later, Donald Cameron, governor general in the 1930s, who was not a fan of the Islamic caliphate, sought to reform the indirect rule system. Thus, Rabiat Akande notes:

> "Cameron and his enthusiasts...argued that "neutrality" ought to be the highest principle rather than the Lugardian emphasis on religious liberty of the *Masu Sarauta*. In favoring a more direct variant of indirect rule, Cameron departed from the ultra-indirect rule trajectory of earlier colonial years and sought to de-emphasize the role of Islamic institutions, and thus elevated state-religion separation" (Akande, 2023)

By emphasizing an anti-Lugardian sentiment, Cameron's approach, inspired by the view that the best African was Christian, grew his commitment to easing restrictions on Christian missions and granting them religious liberty. This period also coincided with the influx of Christian missionaries and mass conversion in the Igbo areas.

This would, however, be challenged because of how much the previous system had taken root. However, it was clear that Donald Cameron's system had challenged and introduced a new consciousness of religious, cultural, and political belonging internally and externally. Vaughan echoes this:

> "With Cameron's reform came a formalization of the native administrative structures in the Northern Provinces and further sedimentation of emirate societies. Naturally, the growing influence of Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers, precipitated by Cameron's policy, was resisted by non-Muslim communities. In response, Muslim rulers attempted to fold such dissent into the political hierarchy, reasserting their hegemony as natural rulers of the region's diverse peoples. While divisions were also evident in intra-Muslim relations in the region, the fault

lines between Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers and groups, British authorities considered "pagan tribes," widened following the implementation of Cameron's reform policy" (Vaughan, 2016).

The introduction of liberal secularism and indirect rule generated tensions in the Nigerian state. The colonial system sowed seeds of discord, cultivating uneven developments and fractured identities that continue to haunt Nigeria's national imagination. Sakande notes that these contestations most prominently featured Christian missionaries and the Masu Sarauta. However, in post-independence Nigeria, these contestations have taken on new forms but retained the "red line" – negotiations over belonging and nationalism. The emergence of various religious groups such as the Christian Association of Nigeria in the 1970s, Pentecostal churches also in the 1970s, the Muslim Rights Concern in the 1990s, and so-called socio-cultural groups such as the Yoruba group, Afenifere, the Hausa group, AREWA consultative forum, the Igbo group, Ohaneze, and the Middle Belt group have continued to shape belonging and contentions for imagination of national identities in the postcolonial state alongside narratives on dangerously evolving violent conflicts.[2]

Continuations

In March 2016, reacting to the Farmer-herders crisis, the prelate of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, Dr Samuel Uche, said: "We are aware there is a game plan to Islamize Nigeria, and they are using the Fulani herdsmen to initiate it (International Crisis group, 2017). In a similar move, Biafra separatist groups in the southeast described have described herders attack on farmers as part of a northern plot to overwhelm the peoples of the south and forcefully convert

[2] For example, see Akande Rabiat's Entangled Domains. She identifies how the Christian Association of Nigeria has inherited the missionaries' battle of secularism in the postcolonial state.

them to Islam (International Crisis Group, 2017). Also, in January 2025, the Yoruba nation youths at home and in the diaspora issued a statement, opposing what they described as an attempt by the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) to impose Sharia law in the South-West, warning that it could destabilize the region (Vanguard Newspapers, 2025). These narratives and many more reveal the contestations of identities and the suspicions that accompany them in postcolonial Nigeria. These contests of identities are, however, sometimes accompanied by violence.

Nigeria has been known since the second half of the twentieth century to harbor ethnic and religious conflicts, usually over nationalist claims in the form of Biafran agitation, religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria, and other group agitations. Analysts have sometimes claimed that some of these tensions are not religious, but they often fail to trace how religious structures have directly and indirectly contributed to the formation of these tensions, thus explaining why current tensions, such as the ones in the North central region, easily take on narratives of religious tensions.

Two events continue to feature prominently in the memory of the lived experiences of citizens: the Nigerian Civil War and the emergence of Boko Haram. However, the recent crises; the Farmer-herders crisis and sharia expansion from the North to the south continues to engender rhetorics of suspicion, fear, and tensions in Nigeria's North, especially among ethnic minorities and non-Muslim population. These tensions have revealed that the religious and political structures that formed the precolonial and colonial Nigeria are very much present in the postcolonial politics, and they continue to fuel interfaith and interethnic suspicion and lack of trust in government's impartiality (International Crisis Group, 2017). For example, the privileging of Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers under colonial indirect rule entrenched structures that

today fuel grievances among Middle Belt ethnic minorities, visible in violent farmer-herder clashes. The colonial arrangements which precede the twenty first century have also had implications for land-use and land contestations which constitutes one of the major root causes in these clashes (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Political discourses on the crisis also reveal the complex interplay of these structures. While ethnic minorities are attacked frequently, the government's response has been deficient in apprehending the perpetrators, who have often been reported by victims to be among the dominant Fulani group or solving other root problems associated with this conflict (International Crisis Group, 2017). Surprisingly, the narrative by some in government is that the attackers are not Nigerians (Punch Newspapers, 2025)[3] which may be interpreted as a strategic move for political power at the expense of ethnic minorities.

Similarly, the religious differentiation policies of colonial secularism shaped Christian-Muslim relations in ways that continue to drive polarization and conflicts. These conflicts are not merely religious or ethnic; they are rooted in the enduring power arrangements of precolonial and colonial Nigeria, and in the elite manipulation of these identities for political consolidation. I must acknowledge that fundamentalist nationalism has been seen from various spectrum of social classes in Nigeria, and these sentiments need to be explored. However, one must also note that economic grievances make the masses susceptible to exploitation by this class.

[3] For example, see Punch Newspapers, 2025: **Benue killings: Attackers are Malians speaking Fulani not Nigerians – Gov Alia**

Conclusion: *Reimagining the Nation, A Hermeneutics of Citizenship and Belonging*[4]

This paper has shown that nationalism in Nigeria is not merely a product of anti-colonial struggle or grassroots identity, but a historically layered and politically constructed phenomenon deeply intertwined with religion, elite interests, and contested forms of belonging. However, if these historical legacies, structures, and the elite-driven manipulation of identity continue unchecked, Nigeria risks deepening its cycle of violence and eventual disintegration as insecurity already continues to worsen.

To address this, I suggest that concerned Nigerians, religious and traditional leaders, scholars, analysts, and peacebuilding organizations must engage in a hermeneutical discourse on citizenship and belonging. Such a hermeneutics is vital if Nigeria is to move beyond the inherited colonial structures and elite manipulation that fuel today's violent contestations of belonging. Thus, I contend that this hermeneutics is an imaginative way to deviate from the current state of a deeply divided society to a collective and pluralistic understanding of a diverse future of just peace.

The hermeneutics of citizenship and belonging draws primarily from Paul Ricouer's hermeneutics of selfhood through which I suggest that analysts and peacebuilding organizations must engage in a process of imagination and re-imagination. In his work, *Oneself as Another*, he presents his "little ethics" through what he calls its ethical intention: "aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions" (Ricouer, 1992). At the level of relations between a self and nearby or intimate others, such as one's ethnic or religious group, the ideal of reciprocity entailed here is best expressed as solicitude that enables both self-esteem and self-respect on the

[4] This idea is inspired by Professor Atalia Omer in a discussion with her and interaction with her work on religious Nationalism.

parts of those involved. However, at the level of the distant "other" or "others," the question of respect arises alongside new notions of respect and of institutions such as the rule of law that establish and help maintain or restore a just distance between those involved in them (Ellauer and Bernard, 2025). Thus, this analysis introduces an idea of a self that is not defined solely by an individual or one's group but in association with others, mediated by love, mutual respect and the rule of law.

Therefore, to effectively address identity-based and historically layered conflicts in Nigeria, hermeneutics of citizenship and belonging engages what Professor of Religion, Conflict and peace describes as a multiperspectival approach (Omer, 2010). This approach, aiming to counter elite manipulation, acknowledges the complexity of the issues rather than framing it as only religious or ethnic. To effectively address these issues of violent conflicts, a proper diagnosis is needed for a proper strategy which should involve multiple perspectives, ranging from historical, cultural, theological, socio-economic, and legal. Therefore, religious groups, civil societies and ethnic nationalist groups must resist the urge to oversimplify the narratives in any conflicts. Peacebuilding organizations must also recognize this starting point of complexity and the need to adopt a multiperspectival approach.

We must therefore move beyond the framework of "tolerance" to interrogating structures of power in politics, religion, and culture. We must interrogate aspects of culture and government policies that justifies violence, cause harm or further marginalizes any group (Galtung 1979). Peacebuilding organizations and peace educators must also develop strategies to help participants in their programs or students understand underlying assumptions and structures that influence public policy, legislation and critical informal and formal education that contributes to their

knowledge of self or the other as well as their interpretations of who constitutes the Nigerian nation.

Lastly, a hermeneutics of citizenship and belonging which aims to counter elite manipulation would focus on uplifting stories that counter the dominant voices of exclusion and dehumanization of other groups. As Omer notes, on the level of practice, a hermeneutical approach translates into the articulation of subaltern perceptions, counter-narratives and grievances as a space both for critiquing claims of identity and national historiography but also as a space for creative rethinking of the parameters of belonging and justice (Omer, 2010). Thus, as a grassroots and informal initiative, religious and traditional leaders, social media influencers and educators must highlight relationships between groups that seek to counter the narrative of hatred, exclusion, and violence. Such is the work, for example, of a social media influencer, Polyglot Adedeji Odulesi who uses his social media page to uncover unconventional stories of various Nigerians who live in other regions while speaking the local languages of their host communities. For example, a video on the influencer's YouTube platform shows an interview with the *Sarkin Hausawa* who lives in Enugu southeastern region of Nigeria, speaks Igbo fluently and lives in good relationship with the host community. Many other videos of everyday Nigerians who defy the dominant narratives of religion, and ethnicity are showcased by this influencer's platform. These stories challenge dominant narratives of fear and exclusion. They illustrate that on the margins, far from political elites, ordinary Nigerians are already reimagining belonging in ways that affirm mutual dignity, cultural fluidity, and civic solidarity.

These lived examples demonstrate the very hermeneutics of citizenship and belonging I propose, one rooted in relational identity, respect, and the refusal to reduce national identity to fixed, exclusionary categories. Such examples invite us to reimagine the nation not as a closed

identity based on origin or religion, but as an open and ethical project grounded in “living with and for others in just institutions.” Thus, to move forward, scholars, civil society, educators, social media influencers, religious, and traditional leaders must amplify these counter-narratives and create spaces where new forms of collective belonging can flourish.

Hence, I suggest that this critical interpretation of our belonging and identity is the starting point for a re-imagined future where primordial attachments are intact, but our boundaries are fluid and not raised above the dignity and peace of others.

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