

## **Religious Tolerance in the Gambia, 1965-2016: Lessons for Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*The Gambia christened the “smiling coast of Africa” is home of hospitality and religious tolerance. Arising from decades of peace its ethnic and religious elements enjoyed the country has continued to attract foreigners as tourist state. The concern of this paper is not so much with aquatic status of The Gambia as a tourist state, but how its’ Christian and Muslim groups has been able to maintain peace. The emphasis of the paper is on Christianity and Islam, because African Traditional Religion poses no serious threat to national peace and security due to its non-missionary focus. The question is what has The Gambia done differently from Nigeria? This is the core problematic of the paper. The choice of Nigeria arises from its religious volatility, contrary to The Gambia which has a residual history of religious tolerance. The question of differences in geographical size in terms of land mass and population is inconsequential to the argument of the paper as both are countries accepted and recognized by the United Nations, African Union, Economic Community of West African States, among other international organizations. More so, both countries played crucial role in the trans-Saharan trade, Islamic Jihad reforms in West Africa and were both former colonies of Britain with similar foreign policy and linkages with States in the sub- region. The study notes that though 95 per cent of The Gambian populations are Muslims and about 10 per cent or so are Christians, since political independence in 1965, its successive leaders and the people have deliberately maintained peace across religious divides. The paper concludes that Nigeria with gory experience of religious violence should learn from The Gambia that has never experienced ethno-religious violence in its known history as it navigates through the bumpy road of religious extremism and insecurity in the twenty-first century.*

**Keywords:** Religion; Tolerance; Christianity; Islam; African Traditional Religion.

### **Introduction**

If civilizations are destroyed today, it may not be because of pestilences, hunger and effects of weapons of mass destruction, but due to inability to cope with religious differences particularly between Christianity and Islam. Traditional African religion is exonerated in this context due to its non-missionary focus compared to the above-mentioned religions. How the adherents of Christianity and Islam relate with one another would go a very way in the survival of nations, current civilisations and maintenance of global peace. This paper is an attempt to contribute to global peace using religious tolerance in Nigeria and The Gambia of the West African sub-region as test cases. For comprehensive discourse the paper is structured into the following; the introduction which is ongoing, conceptual clarifications, geographical and historical consideration of Nigeria and The Gambia, general overview of Christian-Muslim theological fault- lines, background to Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria and The Gambia, Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria and The Gambia, Christians-Muslim relations in The Gambia, lessons for Nigeria and finally, the conclusion.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Two concepts plead for conceptual consideration; religion and tolerance as they underlined the discourse of the paper. Inability of scholars to offer a generally accepted definition to religion made them to tie it to several meaning. Thus, few would be taken. According to E B. Taylor cited in Munir, Bhutto and Odeh, (2015) religion is a belief in spiritual beings; it excludes rituals and ceremonies which characterised religions like Judaism and Buddhism (Munir, Bhutto and Odeh 2015). This may be criticized as worship, rituals and ceremonies are exercises that transcend the physical realm in the process of human or societal attempt to interrelate with super the natural being. Besides, Judaism and Buddhism claimed to be religion. James Frazer, cited in Sylvester I. Ugbegili (2006), conceptualises religion as propitiation or conciliation of power superior to man, which is believed to direct and control the cause of nature and human life. This means religion is part of the fundamental properties in the process of historical development of man. Watch Tower, cited in Arinse Agbanusi (2009), seems to buttress James Frazer’s view of religion thus:

During the thousand's years of mankind's history, man's search for God has led down to many pathways. The result has been the enormous diversity of religious expressions found worldwide, from the endless variety of Hinduism to the monotheism of Judaism, Islam and Christendom and to the original philosophies of Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. In the other vast regions, mankind has turned to animism, magic and spiritism.

On this conceptualisation lied the root of magic, science and religion as products of man's curious attempt to consult the supernatural in solving personal and societal problem. However, as the trio progresses, magic and science remain bastard brothers of religion. This is because when magic and science fail, man turn to his creator or God and even gods for succor. To Karl Marx and his disciples, religion is the opium of the masses (Munir *etal* 2015) i.e. an instrument used by the ruling elite or cabal to exploit the people. This perception does not see religion as active spiritual engagement or exercise. The manipulative role religion plays underlined most of the violent ethno-religious conflicts in African states particularly Nigeria. However, the paper sees religion as a way of life through which man invites the supernatural into his affairs, which ceremonies, ritual and worship are fundamental ingredients. The crucial aspect of religion that fall in favour with the current of the argument of the paper is the idea of social good and neighbourliness as man interact with his fellow man and the supernatural. Herein comes into sharp focus the significance of love and peace in human relations.

The concept of tolerance in the context of religion has two dimensions; intra- and inter-level. As a pluralistic term it suggests equal rights, acceptance, accommodation; a kind of let both of us live stuff despite the competitive forces of doctrines for the superlative. Since the phenomenon lacked single definition too, few would be taken. According to Gustav Mensching cited Benson O. Igboin ([www.ajol.info](http://www.ajol.info) >article), tolerance connotes religious freedom granted to individual to choose and practice as he wishes. Tolerance in this context implies conscious creation of legitimate environment for one to profess his belief without any form of attack or interference either by opposite religion or state. Articles 2 and 18 of the 1948 United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights appears to be in the direction of secularity of state (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <https://www.un.org>). However, ethno-religious conflicts have been the greatest havoc done to states so far particularly the Nigerian state. Nigerian state or Government has not meted out such havoc to adherents of religious elements found in it. The greatest enemy of religion therefore, appears to be religion itself particularly the opposite ones. Tolerance as conceptualised in the paper is idea of good neighbourliness as taught and preached by Jesus Christ. A template of this is contained in the Holy Bible. In Luke (10:36-37), it reads:

Which now of these three thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

The above is part of the parable of Good Samaritan. Jesus used that parable to teach love, care and good neighbourliness, and the teaching is crucial to understanding of the concept of tolerance. From the story we discover a priest and a Levite failed the test of love and tolerance. The narrative of the parable agrees with Tim Down's perception of the concept of tolerance cited in Igboin ([www.ajol.info](http://www.ajol.info) >article.), to mean "sympathy, and indulgence for belief or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own". Tolerance and love therefore, are semblance of siamese twins. How adherents of various religions relate with one another in the areas under survey remains the focus of the paper.

### **Geographical and Historical overview of Nigeria and The Gambia**

The name Nigeria was crafted in 1898 by Flora Shaw, later known as Lady Lugard to describe the British sphere of influence in the "Oil Rivers"(Odeh 2015). Nigeria is a federation made up of 36 states aside the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja and has 774 Local Government Area Councils (Odeh 2015). It occupies a geo-political space of about 923,768.64 square kilometers; situated east of the Republic of Benin,

North of the Republics of Chad and Niger, West of the Republic of Cameroun and South by the Gulf of Guinea, an arm of the Atlantic Ocean (Odeh 2015). It should be point up that the geographical space of Nigeria at the moment may be less than the orthodox 923,768.64 square kilometers due to the ceding of Bakassi peninsula to the republic of Cameroun in the year 2008. However, its territorial coverage is still about eighty-four times the size of The Gambia and its population of well over 170 million people (made up of about 250 ethnic nationalities and 500 languages) made it over eighty-five times the population of The Gambia. The ethnic and linguistic composition made it the most populous and culturally diverse country in Africa and in the sub-region (Udo 1980). The major ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa/Fulani, the Igbo and the Yoruba. The entire Nigeria fell under full colonial conquest by 1903, and came into modern existence in 1914 following the famous amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates (Momah 2013). It got her political independence status in October 1, 1960 and became a republic in 1963. Since her political extrication from the British, it has continued to claim and maintain the position of the leadership of African states. The country acclaimed leadership position has continued to sharpen her foreign policy thrust fifty-eight years after political liberation.

The Gambia on the other hands is named after River Gambia. The first written account of The Gambia is in the work of the Carthaginian, Hanno, in his writing about his voyage to West Africa in 474 BCE ([www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com)). The country is surrounded on all sides by the River Gambia and the Casamance province of Senegal. It is a state made up of six administrative regions, eight local government area councils and forty-three districts. The capital city of The Gambia is Banjul, formerly Bathurst. The Gambia occupies an approximate land area of about 11,000 square kilometers (Udo 1978) and has a population of a little bit above two million people as at 2019 (*Gambia Population*, <https://countrymeters.info>). There are eight main ethnic groups in the Gambia namely: the Mandinka (Mandigos), Wolofs, Aku (Creoles), Jola (Kujamat), Fulani (Polfuta), Serahule, Serer and the Tukolor ethnic group. Of these groups, the most numerous is the Mandinka, followed by the Fulani found almost everywhere in the entire West Africa sub-region ([www.accessgambia.com/information/pecountrymeters/info/em/gambia](http://www.accessgambia.com/information/pecountrymeters/info/em/gambia)). The Gambia was the smallest and the first of Britain's colony in the sub-region to be administered by the Royal African Company that was granted a Royal Charter in 1678 (Chikendu 2004).

Following the dissolution of the Royal African Company in 1821, Britain was reluctance to administered The Gambia as separate entity against the backdrop of its small size and perceived economic non-viability. The affinities of its ethnic inhabitants with the Sierra-Leone and the Casamance region of Senegal made The Gambia to have several times gone into loose union (confederation) with bordering and neighbouring states. For instance, between 1763 and 1783, The Gambia was administered together with Senegal and in 1821; The Gambia was merged with Sierra-Leone and de-merged in 1843. In 1866, it was remerged with Sierra-Leone and finally separated in 1888. In 1889, the French and the British Governments agreed on the modalities to have its boundaries with the Senegal and Casamance province demarcated (Odeh 2018, Adigwe 2011). Arising from the British perception of the Gambia, its independence was delayed to February 18, 1965, and by 1970, it became a republic. Since 1965, The Gambia has continued to have international intercourse with member states of Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union (AU) and some countries of Asia, Europe and the Americas.

### **Fault-lines in Christian-Muslim Relations**

Relations and tolerance are practicable between Christians and Muslims, but there are certain theological fault lines that appear antagonistic and permanently irreconcilable in the two faiths. Most of the grey areas is the import of the gospel centering on the personality of Jesus; His virgin birth, Son ship, Redemptive work, Resurrection and Coming King (Mathew 1:18, John 3:16, Act 4:12, Luke 1:11, Mathew 28:6, Act 1:10,11). Issues of defamation, misconception of who a Christian and a Muslim is, among others are fault lines too. That Jesus is a Son of God and is of a virgin birth is thought incredible to Muslims, because Allah is believed not to have begotten nor does he beget (Igboin). That Jesus is the only Saviour and the way to the father run counter to the Muslim's believe that "there is no God, but Allah and that Mohammed is His prophet" (*la llah*

*illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah*) Rao (2003). The story of the resurrection, which distinguishes Christianity from other religion of the world, to some religions, is seen as a cooked story and false claim by the apostles (Ogwu 2019). Another area of serious challenge is the misconception of the personality of a Christian. The challenge has been that once a non-Muslims perhaps, someone bearing name found in the Bible or English names (like John, Jude, Dorcas, Mary etc,) did something wrong the Muslims quickly refer to such a one as Christian because of name and even affiliation to a church denomination. The same applied to a man bearing Muslim or Arabic name and is affiliated to a Mosque. This understanding is wrong and may account for some of the conflicts between Christian and Muslim in Nigeria. To the Muslims, the west is seen as a Christian world, while to the Christians, the Arab world is seen as a Muslims world. This is in due disregard to whether these so-called worlds are still holding to the basic teachings of the professed religion. Christianity essentially is the assembly of the called-out ones (*ecclesia*). Those that have accepted the sacrifice of Jesus, repented of their sins and are living the life of Jesus only qualifies to be called Christians i.e. followers of the life of Jesus (Acts 11:26). A true Muslim too is the one who believes and practice the true teachings of the Qu'ran and the sayings of the Prophet (*Haddith*). A true Muslim therefore should not be engaged in act of violence and insurgency as carried out by Boko Haram and deadly religious conflicts experienced in Nigeria (Anonymous, c.50 years, civil servant; interview). It may be lack of this understanding that made Muslims and Christians in Nigeria to fight each other because of cartoon of Prophet Mohammed drawn elsewhere in America or Europe. Related to this is the problem of defamation. Terms like unbelievers and infidel contained in the Qur'an and Holy Bible and used by adherents of the two religions is a source of danger (Igboin). The modern usage of the terms appears derogatory. For social habits and relations, terms like brother and sisters for those in opposite religion may be better, after all, all human being originated from Adam and Eve. Therefore, among many reasons, tolerance is necessary because of our singular origin.

### **Background to Christian- Muslim Relations in Nigeria and The Gambia**

By 1900 adherents of Christianity and Islam were the minority in sub-Saharan Africa, while Traditional African Religion topped the list. In short by 1900 number of Christian and Muslims put together was still less than practitioners of African Traditional Religion (<https://www.pewforum.org>). However, in less than two century or so, the religious landscape of the region fundamentally changed. Between 1900 and 2010, the number of Muslims in the region increased by 20-fold from estimated 11 million people as at 1900 to 234 million in 2010. In the same period number of Christians increased 70-fold, from about 7 million to 470 million. Thus, making sub Saharan Africa a home to 1/5 of the world Christians accounting for 21 per cent of the world Christians and hosting more than 1/7 of the world's Muslims accounting for 15 per cent of the world's Muslims (<https://www.pewforum.org>). Sub Saharan Africa therefore, has twice the number of Christians and Muslims in the continent of Africa.

The distribution of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion in Nigeria and The Gambia is that, while about 95 per cent of The Gambian populations are Muslims, 9 per cent are Christians and 1 per cent adherents of traditional beliefs and perhaps those with no religion at all ([www.accessgambia.com/information/religion.html/23/12/2016](http://www.accessgambia.com/information/religion.html/23/12/2016)). In Nigeria, it is estimated that, while 50 per cent of the people are Muslims, 40 per cent Christians, 10 per cent are adherents of African Traditional Religion or those with no religion at all ([www.nationsencyclopedia.com/africa/nigeria-religions.html.26/12/2016](http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/africa/nigeria-religions.html.26/12/2016)). While this may be true or otherwise, it is documented that Islam never had majority in Nigeria particularly, because of mass movement in the Middle Belt (Boer 2003). The concern of the paper is not to establish the religion which has the highest adherents in the two countries under review, but to demonstrate the degree of the people's relations across religious divides.

The geo-continental spread of the two monotheistic creeds understudy is such that the northern region of the continent is strongly dominated by Muslims and the southern region by Christians. The danger zone or area of contest is the middle region covering about 4000 miles of the savanna from Somalia in the east to the Senegambia in the west, stretching to Nigerian area (<https://www.pewforum.org>). This is a volatile area as seen in the *Al-Qaeda* first attack and the bombing of US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the

ongoing ravaging of Somalia by *Al-Shabab* and the Boko Haram and herdsmen bloodshed in Nigeria accounting for lost of lives of many Christians and Muslims. One may wonder how religion becomes the source of conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa where religious leaders and organisations are purveyors and key players in civil societies and provider of relief materials to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the needy in the stark reality of failing and collapsing governments and states. Do the conflicts arise from the marketing of religions by religious leaders or caused by politicization of religion and ethnicity by the ruling class? Answers to these questions remain crucial to the core problematic of the paper. It is against this background the subsequent sections of the paper considered Christians –Muslims relations in Nigeria and The Gambia.

### **Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria**

Though the history of Christians-Muslims relations in Nigeria may be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islam came to northern Nigeria around 14<sup>th</sup> century through the activities of the North African traders (Enyioma 2013). Its first place of contact was Kanem Bornu probably around 7<sup>th</sup> century through the Berbers of North Africa that plied West African routes for trading activities. By 1810, the Sokoto caliphate has been established as a result of the Jihad of 1804 carried out in Hausa land by Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Sokoto Caliphate was documented be the greatest slaving society in the world (Boer 2003). Falola, cited in Boer (2003), notes that the Middle Belt, the former theatre of slave raids of the era was “a virtual of slave farm” as its inhabitants who are in all areas non-Muslims were subjected to frequently organized raids. Though the impact of the jihad was felt in the present south west, the entire Yoruba land was never converted into Islam. The history of Islam in Nigeria and in the caliphate and Bornu shows that prior to the British conquest of 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1903, Islamic government held sway in the north (Akubor and Akinwale 2014, Abubakar, 2008).

Christianity on the other hands made its first contact around 15<sup>th</sup> century through the Portuguese, but without any serious impact. It returned with the activities of the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though scholars view the motives of the British from diverse perspectives, it was through their efforts Christianity became established in modern Nigeria. Hogan cited in Akubor and Akinwale (2014) buttresses this that:

The starting point for any survey of Christianity’s encounter with Nigeria in the modern era must be those efforts by the British commercial, political, humanitarian and religious interests to open up the Niger River to trade, “civilization and Christianity in the 1840’s”. There were, of course, some earlier signs of interests, in the decades before the pivotal Niger River expedition s, occurring within the wider West African region. Protestant missionaries’ societies were the first in the field, spurred on the exciting reports of ‘explorers’ and ‘Christians’ standards to these ‘newly-discovered’ people, including freedom from slavery. Leading the field were the Baptist Missionary Society (1795), The Church Missionary Society (1799) and the Methodist Missionary Society (1813).

Though the mission of early explorers and missions were not essentially religious, they endeavored to pacify the people through preaching and spreading of the gospel of Christ.

The foregoing is the history of the two monotheistic creeds in Nigeria. Since their historical stay Christian-Muslims relations in Nigeria has been that of antagonism and suspicion; antagonism and suspicion on the basis of fear of domination by religion itself, ethnicity, region, education, politics and sharing of state resources. The first and usually acknowledged Nigeria’s religious experience is that when one mentions Islam people think of the northern part of the country, while mentioning of Christianity on the other hand draw attention to the southern part. These, notwithstanding, adherents of both religions are found across the geo-political zones of Nigeria even as indigenous elements. The nature of Christian-Muslims relations may be understood in the context of Sharia question, registration of Nigeria in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), ethno-religious riots, marriages, prayers, among others.

The first is the Sharia question. It is noted that prior to the British conquest of 1903, Sharia legal system was in full operation, but was tampered with following the imposition of colonial rule. Given that modern Nigeria is a multi-religious state it would amount to uprising if any religion attempts to impose itself as state religion. Thus, the big debate arose when the Sharia Law question was tabled at the Constituent Assembly in 1978. The Constitution Drafting Committee set up by Murtala/Obasanjo regime cited in Okoye (1991) notes that:

The only really divisive issue in the debate over the constitution concerned the attempt to set up a parallel set of Sharia (Muslim) courts sides by sides with the Federal Courts.

Why Sharia court could conveniently operate in Muslim communities, the pluralistic nature of Nigeria shows that it cannot be elevated to the status in which it would be independent of Supreme Court of Nigeria to handle cases related to non-Muslim as demanded by adherents of Islam. With the return to civil rule in 1999, Governor Ahmed Bakura Yerima of Zamfara state in October 1999 and Governor Ahmed Makarfi of Kaduna state in February 2000 introduced Sharia code amidst heavy protests coupled with deep seated hatred between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna and Nigeria at large (Eyeruroma and Allison 2013). H O Davies cited in Okoye (1991) cautioned along the line of having two parallel laws thus:

Any demand for Supreme Sharia Court presupposes two different rules of law which can be dangerous for this country. We have to realize that Nigeria is composed of heterogeneous conglomerations of tribes, tongues and religions and so on. It would be wholly unsafe to make laws separately for each unit and expect the country to remain one people, one nation, one destiny. Let all those who are pressing for polarization of our judiciary realized that they are sowing seeds of discord and eventual disruption of the Federation of Nigeria.

Though one may propose to have parallel laws, the above stands to be the outcome of any proposal to introduce Sharia in Nigeria showing that implementation of it is bound to do more harm than God.

The second heat in Christian –Muslim relation was generated by the so-called registration of Nigeria as member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986. Memberships of this organization are thought to be largely Arabs counties, which appear to be theocratic states. The development in view of many non –Muslims Nigerians is an attempt or part of the agenda to Islamized the country, which have a long history dating to the Jihad of Usmanu Danfodiyo of 1804. Boer, substantiate this argument of Islamisation of Nigeria that: “Nigerian Christians often interpret current Muslim attacks and policies as mere continuation of earlier forms of jihads, slavery and Muslim hegemonies” (Boer 2003). The recent renewed frequent herdsmen attack in the north central states that spreads to other parts of Nigeria was attributed to Islamisation agenda too. Earlier in 1969, in a meeting leading to the formation of OIC, Abubakar Gumi led the delegate of Nigerian Muslims. To douse the likely tension that might follow given the pluralistic nature of the country, General Yakubu Gowon sent delegates to King Hassan of Morocco informing him that Gumi and his groups were not representing Nigeria as a corporate body (Okoye, 1991). Thus, their attendance does not raise serious religious dust, because it became considered as private affairs of global Muslims. However, the point remains that Nigeria joining such organization means it has accepted to further the interest of the Islamic world which is incontrovertibly the sole aim of OIC. The balance sheet of the argument is that both Christian and Muslim have no right to drag Nigerians into membership of any international religious organization.

Thirdly is ethno-religious friction. The conflict has been basically between Christians and Muslims. Ali Mazrui, cited in Munir (2015 *et al.*), exonerates African Traditional Religion in the area of religious conflicts that:

These Traditional African creeds did not have ambition to convert the world. They are religions of particularly ethnic group, fundamentally important for those groups,

but definitely not intended for export. Christianity and Islam, on the hand, have been commodities for export from the first century of their existence. It is their competition in the market place of creeds which has generated the crusade syndrome over the centuries.

Though laudable, the above may not be entirely true as some conflicts in Africa and in other parts of the world are occasioned by claims to shrine sites and ethnic schisms, but given religious interpretations. After all, shrine itself is a religious symbol. However, it is glaring that the non-missionary focus of the African Traditional Religion made it un-confrontational as it does not accept strangers.

Be that as it may most of the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are associated with Christianity and Islam. Between 1953 and 1975 over 17 key religious conflicts took place between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria (Adejo 2004). Between 1999 and 2011, Nigeria witnessed over 200 ethno-religious conflicts and political violence (Kankara 2017). The country had a gory experience of religious conflicts between 2011 and 2016 as evidenced in Boko Haram insurgency, herdsman clashes and its reprisals, among others (Enyioma, 2013, Fwatshak, 2007, Boer 2003, Sampson). It may be recalled that the January 15, 1966 coup and series of counter coup that consummated in the Nigerian civil war were reprisals in ethnic and religious divided military circle (Nyako 2014 in Odeh 2018). The destructive impact of ethno-religious violence is captured by the editorial of the Human Rights Monitor, cited in Gadaku (2007), thus:

Children have lost their fathers and mothers as a result of conflicts arising from ethnic, religious and political issues. Women have lost their husbands in conflict, husband and wives have lost their children as a result of conflicts; entire villages and communities have been internally displaced and communities rendered desolate as a result of ethnic and religious strife.

Statistical evidence on religious tensions across Nigeria reveals that not less than 95 per cent of the conflicts took place in the north (Kankara 2017). These shows how religious intolerable and volatile the northern portion of Nigeria has been. The southern Muslims particularly the Yoruba seems not to be as hostile as some parts of the north appear to be

It should be boldly stated at this juncture that politicians sometimes fan the ember of religious conflicts for their self interest. Religion conceived in some quarters as the opium of the masses indicates the possibility of its malleability and manipulation by politicians. This line of argument is supported by Mathew Hassan Kuka in Akubor (2014 *et al.*), in his observation that:

...today, some members of the political elites pose far greater problems for the relations between Christians and Muslims in the northern states. They were the ones who have made capital out of the so-called Sharia issues, or refusing to grant permission for building of churches.

While in the south and part of north central, non-Muslims politicians have over the years-built mosques for Muslims, the northern Muslims politicians has over the years remain aloof in building of churches or cathedral or anything of that nature to their Christian fellow. The way and manner religion is being brought into electioneering campaign gives another tonic to its manipulation gist, but that would not be consider here for want of time and space.

Fourthly which is final, but not limited to, is the pattern of relation showcased in the areas of marriage, prayer, conversion, etc. The kind of Islam practiced in some part of Nigeria seems different from the understanding of Islam in Africa and beyond. While in other parts, people intermarry freely, the situation is different in the northern Nigeria. Though in Christianity too, some church denominations are cautious of where its member

marries from or get married to, but it is not as rigid and outright forbiddance as showcased by some Nigeria Muslims. According to Kuka in Akubor *et al.* (2014), the idea that Christian men cannot marry Muslim women is “a strange and twist logic”. While because marriage itself is one of the ways Muslims used in converting Christians. In Yoruba land or in the south a man may be a Christian and the wife may be a Muslim or a wife being a Christian and the husband, a Muslim. Children in the south followed religion of their choice different from that of the parents and still remain under the same roof, but in the north that dare not happen. According to Kukah, it is occasionally proud to announce that a Christian has become a Muslim, but it is unwilling to contemplate the notion of a Muslim becoming a Christian (Akubor *et al.* 2014). In the area of prayer, the idea of a Muslim or Christian leading opening prayer and the other offering closing prayer at official functions and meetings is a sign of intolerance and division among adherents of Christianity and Islam. Prayer is prayer, what is important is that prayer is offered, not which religion offers it. If God is one, then a prayer from a side is enough. Why are adherents of African Traditional Religion not given chance to lead opening or closing prayers at official functions or gathering if prayer is meant to be shared among religions present? This division manifests in ethnic dimension among Muslims. The northern Muslim sees southern Muslims as not been fit or religiously qualified to lead prayers among them. This may underline the idea of NAFSAT Mosques among the Yoruba and non – Hausa/Fulani Muslims elements in the north. Oliver Onyekwere Chizaram Uche (2009), notes this that:

...a Muslim from northern Nigeria will not allow a fellow Muslim from the south to lead prayer in the mosque. The feeling that a non-Hausa is not qualified to lead prayer explains segregation in the mosque or they resolve to pray alone. This attitude reflects mutual distrust in ethnic differences in Nigeria.

The big question is if Muslims treats and relates with fellow Muslims like this how would the relations between Christians and Muslims look like? The simple answer is intolerance manifesting in the areas discussed above.

From the foregoing analysis, it may be safely concludes that though there are some element of tolerance in the area of sharing of office, residential apartments, sending of season greetings during Christmas and Sallah, which some don't even do, the degree of religious tolerance on a general scale is very poor given frequent friction across religious divides in Nigeria compared to Christian –Muslim relations elsewhere in the sub-region and in other parts of the world.

### **Christian-Muslim Relations in The Gambia**

The history of Islam too in The Gambia dates to the 7<sup>th</sup> century following the activities of North Africa Berbers that plied West Africa for economic enterprise. However, most of the ethnic groups in The Gambia by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of the Jola, Serere and Aku, had come to embrace Islam as a religion. This was as a result of the Islamic revolutions in West Africa at the time. Quinn cited in Mboge (1998) captures this development in the following words:

By the middle of the nineteenth century Muslim clerics had established themselves in nearly all the Mandingo States of The Gambia. There were communities of practicing Muslims of every ethnic background except Jola, and Serere, who generally retained their traditional religion... By 1850, Mandingo inhabitants of the trading communities in the river States, as well as Torodo living in Niani, Baddibu, and Jokadu, and Fula pressing into the South banks from Futa Jallon, called themselves Marabouts.

The above shows the ethnic coverage of Islam at the time. While The Gambia is overwhelmingly Islamic with 95 per cent of its population being Muslims, other religious too has their place and history. In 1800, the majority of the people living along the River Gambia were animists. Islam came into the river side about 14<sup>th</sup> century. Small Muslim communities in the area suffered serious discrimination in the hands of the animists as they were prohibited from owning land and holding highest offices of the state (Hughes and Perfect 2006). However, in 1861, the animists majorly Soninke were defeated in a jihad carried out by the Marabout (stricter



Muslims) in the Kingdom of Baddibu. Consequent upon the defeat of the Soninke, since the mid 1870s, Islam became famous in the area that was to become a protectorate in 1894 and Muslims account for four out of five persons in The Gambia.

Christianity on the other hand, recorded few persons in the protectorate. Its history dates to the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the Portuguese activities in the area. It made its return with the arrival of the Wesleyan Methodist missionary, John Morgan, in February 1821 (Hughes *et al.* 2006). Prior to 1821, in 1820 the Anglican chaplain attempted to introduce Christianity in The Gambia, but failed. The Catholic started at St. Mary's Island in 1823, but was abandoned. The activities of the missions were largely concentrated at Bathurst. These three dominated Christian's missions in The Gambia. In 1860s the population of Christians began to increase due to collaborative activities of the missions. This foundation was what the presentation generation of Christian churches came to build on.

Discussion on Christian-Muslims relations in The Gambia must consider issue of Sharia Law, intermarriages, festivities, bearing of names, among others. First is the case of Sharia Law. The fundamental departure of The Gambia from many Islamic nations is absence of strict adherence to Sharia Law, while its Muslim population devotedly followed the basic tenets of Islam (<https://www.gambia.co.uk>). Since the return of Christianity to the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a close and peaceful interaction between the two faiths. The Gambia therefore, is traditionally tolerant of all religious creeds and beliefs and prides itself on broad acceptance of faiths. It has been a country that remains dedicated to its faith, but wears it religion lightly. Lack of strict Sharia Law and the peaceful co-existence among its religious and ethnic elements lead to the slogan "The Gambia; no problem" (Osho, 2018). It is also argued that if any don't know peace in their country, such should come to The Gambia to see how peace looks like (Osho, 2018). The peaceful co-existence in the state shows the culture of the people as peace loving people and the extent with which the provisions of The Gambian constitution which guarantee religious freedom are obeyed to the letter by Muslims and Christians citizens and communities.

Secondly is issue of interfaith marriage. Marriage across religious divide remains acceptable in The Gambia. Unlike most countries where Muslims absolutely forbid interfaith marriage, in The Gambia it is allowed. Interfaith marriage in The Gambia is not deployed as means of converting individual to another religion and conversion do occurred on a normal ground without religious rumpus. Emmanuel David Mendy (2018) notes this that:

Relationship between Muslims and Christians in The Gambia is unique because both celebrate each other's religious ceremonies. There are inter-marriages, we eat together and conversions do happen in both religions with no problem...

In The Gambia therefore, a man could marry a woman of his love and, a woman marry a man of her love. Love is the rule of engagement in the game of marriage as religious experience and practice in The Gambia would have us believed. Thus, Muslims and Christians are found in the same family. This may underscore why in The Gambia a Muslim man bears names likes Mathew, Jude and a Muslim woman bearing Rose and Elizabeth. If one dare asks why such names the response would be like, "is just name and not me" (Nnoacha, 2017). Christians bearing Muslims names have never been an issue in many parts of the world. However, in some Muslims communities it is very difficult to bear Christian name directly i.e. without local language or Arabic interpretation of it as in Musa for Moses, Yohana for John, Pitrus for Peter, Ibrahim for Abraham etc.

Thirdly which is the last, but not limited to and related to the above is exchange of goodwill messages during ceremonies and festivals. During ceremonies like Christmas and *Tobaski* (*Eld Kabir*- Big Sallah i.e *Baban Sallah* in Hausa language, Christians and Muslims celebrates together. In 2003, the leader of the mainline churches in The Gambia received a letter from Imam Ratib of Banjul, noting that Jesus is recognized as important Prophet in Islam and that the world would have been a better place if more people had accept and

acted upon the teachings of the Prophet, Jesus (*Religion in the Gambia*, [www.accessgambia.com](http://www.accessgambia.com)). On the other hands, during *Tobaski*, the heads of Christian mission in The Gambia reciprocated with a letter noting that both religions recognized Abraham as an important man of God (*Religion in the Gambia*, [www.accessgambia.com](http://www.accessgambia.com)). Entering each other's places of worship in The Gambia is not prohibited as observed in some countries of the world. Thus, Muslims and Christians relationship in The Gambia to some is described as "perfect" (Njie, 2018).

From the foregoing discourse, it is clear that the relationship between Christians and Muslims in The Gambia has been largely cordial. In short, historical evidence at our disposal is completely silence on any kind of conflict between Christians and Muslims in the Gambia from 1816 up to 1996, and even thereafter (Hughes *et al.*, 2006). Cajatean Nnocha (2019), buttresses absence of religious violence in the country up to 2016, thus: "from known history there has never been a single religious violence in The Gambia; the people do not see religion as an issue". In the same tone, Fafa Njie (2018) averred that: "In Gambia, we have never witnessed religious conflicts". Harmony among ethnic and religious groups in The Gambia is a general rule to the point that the country may be described as a melting pot of West African ethnic groups.

Be that as it may, two major developments that would have troubled the history of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence in The Gambia occurred in 2013 and 2015. The first was the changing of working days to four days (Mondays to Thursdays) in 2013 by Yahya Jammeh, in his argument that Friday is an important day to be reserved for Islamic prayer (Sanneh, 2016). This should have generated religious tensions from opposite religions, but it did not. The understanding may be that from the colonial times to the time of the proclamation, Islamic Calendar or holiday too has been relegated to background paving way for Julian calendar, since Saturdays and Sundays are Judaic and Christian holy days. At no time have Muslims in The Gambia rioted or vehemently pressed for the recognition of their calendar and the making of Friday a work free day, though Islam is the dominant religion in the country.

The second is the December 2015 "Brufut Declaration" of The Gambia as Islamic state during a political rally in Kombo North town of Brufut by Yayha Jammeh. The news of the declaration came in rude shock to Muslims, Christians and adherents of other religion in The Gambia. This proclamation run counter to the culture of peaceful co-existence of the people and also contravened the constitution of the country which provides respect for religious belief of the citizens. The challenge with the declaration is not so much with its impact on religious tolerance among the bonafide Gambians, but on its negative exploitation by external constituents to foment trouble in The Gambia. Philip Saine, cited in Pierre Gomez (*The Point*, [the.point.gm](http://the.point.gm)), notes this that:

Our fear is not our Muslims brothers and sisters with whom Christians have amicably lived, worked, inter-married and socialized since the living memory; it is the fear of the alien fringe elements, even from outside the country, who will consider the declaration as a window of opportunity to propagate intolerance.

The degree of confidence on tolerance portrayed in the above observation show how religious leniency has sunk deep into the fabric of The Gambian society. This level of tolerance and peaceful co-existence is commendable and should be emulated by multi-ethnic and religious state like Nigeria.

### **Lessons for Nigeria**

The question is, given the gory story of religious intolerance in Nigeria, what lessons are there for her religious elements to learn from the history of the Gambian religious tolerance? The following may be useful lessons: first is the need to de-emphasize strict Islamic law in form of Sharia. The Muslims in The Gambia followed the fundamental Islamic principles such as not eating of pork, drinking of alcohol and religious affiliation in dressing or behaviour. They upheld the supremacy of the constitution of The Gambia which provides for tolerance without unnecessary quest for Sharia. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria also

provides for freedom of religion. The occasional pressure to undermine it and introduce Sharia has been part of the problems in Christian- Muslim relation in Nigeria.

Secondly, interfaith marriage and conversion should be taken in the spirit of tolerance. In the game of marriage love should be adopted as the rule of engagement and not religious ticket. The idea of northern Nigeria male Muslims marrying women with Christian background with the aim of converting them and, a Christian man not being allowed to marry Muslim women is religiously bias, lopsided and unjust. This is one of the things The Gambia Muslims did differently. Also, conversion across religious bar which is incomprehensible in the north is strange to The Gambia Muslims. Though the constitution of both countries provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which is the legal basis of conversion across religious divides, in northern Nigeria conversion from Islam is met with the most vehement threat.

Thirdly, religious leaders should come out to champion the course of tolerance as done in The Gambia by Imam and heads of church missions. Sensitive and provocative statements should be discouraged among leaders and laity. Areas of similarities instead of differences in the two religions should be explored for the sake of tolerance in a way that would not overthrow or undermine the basic faith of a believer of a religion. On this note open letters hitting on tolerance should be encouraged as done in The Gambia during Christmas and *Tobaski* by Imam and pastor/Reverend.

Fourthly, religion should be divorce from politics. Nigerian has a rich history of politicizing everything including religion. This is what Gambians do differently. As noted earlier, the Gambians remain committed to their faith and wears religion lightly without using it for political gain. As soon as politicians and the ruling elite stops using religion and ethnicity for their selfish interest, Nigeria's problem would be about 70 per cent solve.

Fifthly, The Gambian knows no religion operate without opposites. Thus, it is not difficult for Muslims and Christians to tolerate each other. Globalization points to a kind of relations and unity in every area of human endeavour including religion. Against this background it is not strange for opposite phenomena to relate. Nwanaju cited in Eyeruroma *et al.* (2013) observes that:

Religions do not exist in isolation but over against each other. There would be no Hindu consciousness were it not for the fact of having to distinguish it from Muslims and Christian consciousness. In a word, the relation between religious is neither of the type of *exclusivism* (only mine), or *inclusivism* (the mine embraces all the others), or parallelism (we are running independently towards the same goal), but one of a *sui generis periochosis* or *circumincessio*, that is, of natural interpenetration without the proper peculiarities of each religiousness.

The Gambians are aware of religious opposites and were prepared to engage various ethno-religious element within the society even as crafted in the constitution of The Gambia. The fact remains no religion exist alone. Therefore, Nigeria Christians and Muslims should tolerate one another.

Six, the Gambian are conscious of their historical heritage and guarded it jealously. The country made its marks by having a history that is free of religious conflicts. Whatever attempts to trouble its historical heritage of tolerance is usually handled using instrument of history that have hitherto held the ethnic and religious elements together. This is one of the ways Nigeria have missed it over the years due to decidedly disregards to our national history. Ifemisia, cited in Adejo (2004), notes this that:

If a culture group knew enough about the background and antecedents of their neighbours, inter-group relations would be advanced, for that would enable one to

know the merits and defects of other and so they can tolerate one another and interact with minimum friction and conflicts.

Adequate history of how our ancestors relate with one another prior to the coming of Christianity and Islam and how they even relate in peaceful manner in the formative years of the religions would go a long way in doing away with stereotype and intolerant.

Finally, there is relative neutrality of The Gambia on issues of international Islamic organization. Going by the percentage of four Muslims out of every five persons in The Gambia, it should be reputed as one of the frontiers Islamic country in the sub-region and in the continent. This should have qualified her to be a vociferous member of a lot international Islamic organization such as OIC which has created a lot of tension between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. From the country's composure on international religious matter, we see modesty and caution in religious engagements. Nigeria and Nigerians should emulate this and stop thinking of dragging the country into international religious affairs thereby undermining the plurality and secularity of the state.

### **Conclusions**

The paper has examined the nature of the relations between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and The Gambia. About three periods are discernible in the history of religious interactions in the countries namely the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras. Throughout these epochs it appears the relationships between Muslims and Christians (particularly adherents of other religion as the latter became prominent from the colonial times) in Nigeria appears hostile. In other words, the history of Christians- Muslims relations in Nigeria is marred by bloody ethno-religious conflicts. The Gambian case is antithesis of Nigerian experience as it has never recorded religious violence in its known past. It is the finding of the paper that the two major developments that would have marred the untainted history of the country's religious tolerance in 2013 and 2015 were managed by deployment of instrument of history. Against the background of the tracked record of The Gambian religious tolerance the paper charged Nigeria and its ethno-religious elements to learn lessons from the Gambia history.

On the whole, the paper has taken care of conceptual issues that concern it. The geography and foundational history of The Gambia has been explored. It has considered general fault lines in Christians-Muslims intercourse, background to Nigeria and The Gambia Christians –Muslims relations, Christians-Muslims relations in Nigeria, Christians-Muslims relations in The Gambia and drawn lessons for Nigeria. The paper further notes that though The Gambia have the highest number of Muslim populations in the Sub-region, which should have qualified her to be the most powerful Islamic empire in west Africa, its inhabitants remained tolerant and committed to their faiths and wears religion lightly. The paper concludes that the exceedingly marred history of Nigerian religious experience would be re-written in the twenty first-century if Nigeria imbibes the lessons of The Gambian historical heritage of religious lenience.

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