

The National Anthem as a Symbol of Religiosity in Nigeria

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Abstract

A quick glance at the second stanza of Nigeria national anthem attests to the fact that religion is valued by Nigeria. The whole stanza is a prayer to God to guide Nigeria into the right path and is sung intermittently with the first stanza which contains an appeal to all citizens to uphold the unity and sanctity of the nation. The second stanza of the national anthem implies that public practice of religion is not a problem as the stanza is publicly sung in both government and private organisations. This paper proceeds on the earlier works of scholars such as Mbiti¹ and Idowu² who assert that Africans are incurably religious. Nigeria national anthem is a pointer to this assertion. The paper adopts both historical and content analysis methods to gather and interpret data. We conclude that despite the fact that religion is held in high esteem in Nigeria, it is hard to see its positive effect on national development.

¹ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Traditional Religion* (Oxford: Heinemann Publisher, 1991) pp. 11-14.

² Bolaji E. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief* (Lagos: Longman, 1996) p.5

Introduction

That the practice of religion in Nigeria is not private but public is evidently shown in the case of Nigerian Army organising prayer seminar to combat terrorists. On Monday 30 September, 2019, Nigerian Army organised a “Spiritual Warfare Seminar” with the theme “Countering Insurgency and Violent Extremism in Nigeria through Spiritual Warfare.” As reflected in the theme, the programme was organised to pray against Boko Haram and other extremists. The programme was held at the Nigerian Army Resource Centre, Asokoro, Abuja. As part of religious pluralism, State governments sponsored pilgrims to Israel and Saudi Arabia every year. They organise prayer retreat every year to pray for national development. Rt. Major General Yakubu Gowon, former military leader, organises “Nigeria Prays” every year to pray for peace and prosperity of the country. There is National Mosque and National Christian Centre in the Federal Capital Territory. Christian Association of Nigeria and the Sultan of Sokoto call for prayers for the nation every time. Official meetings commence and end with prayer. Stickers and ensigns bearing religious messages are placed in public offices.

Indeed, religion is everything in Nigeria and prayer is solution to every national problem. Politicians ask for prayers every time. They say, “Pray for us to succeed.” Footballers, athletes, doctors, nurses, lawyers, students and professors demand prayers. It is not a coincidence some leading religious leaders in Nigeria are learned professionals who forsook their careers for religious commitment. For example, Pastor E.A. Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, was a University lecturer before he became a pastor. He regularly moves around educational institutions in the country for religious programmes some of which are televised on cable television stations. A conservative preacher, Gbile Akanni, was a Physics lecturer in a Polytechnic in Gboko, Benue State and his wife, Sade Akanni, a medical doctor. Both abandoned their professions for the gospel. They also move around tertiary institutions for religious programme. The founder of Mountain of Fires and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Pastor Daniel Olukoya, graduated cum laude from the University of Lagos, proceeded to the United Kingdom for his doctorate degree in Molecular Genetics and graduated in 1982. After practising as a researcher for some years he abandoned science for faith. He conducts “deliverance prayers” regularly to cast out demons from Universities in Nigeria.

As the problems bedevilling the country intensify, so are our prayers to solve them. Nigerians pray for almost everything: the Internet, availability of electricity, payment of salaries and

retirement benefits. Without being emotional about the insurmountable depravities Nigerians suffer and the solution adopted to solve them, that is, prayer, one cannot but ask if there is any hope for the most populous nation in Africa.

Relevant literature on religion in Africa point to one fact: that Africans, living in the continent or outside, cannot do without religion. Religion is a major survival kit for Africans outside the shores of the continent.³ For those in the continent, religion functions in every sphere of life irrespective of whether the African is religious or not. Apart from the personal benefit of religion, it has been used as a political tool.⁴ It has also been used as an economic tool and an instrument of socio-political oppression by the privileged.⁵ Ojo has also examined how Pentecostalism set out to achieve social and political development in Nigeria and ended up corrupting the system worse than it met it.⁶

National anthems are national symbols which depict the pride, history, ideology and aspiration of nations. In Africa and other colonised continents, national anthems are products of nationalism even though they share some characteristics with the anthems of the colonialists.⁷ Other national symbols include flags, emblems, monuments, pledge and colour. In this paper, our focus is neither on the music or literary features of the Nigeria anthem but on its content. Our concern is to examine Nigeria national anthem as a national symbol which depicts “the strongest, clearest statement of national identity.”⁸ We argue that the national identity depicted by Nigerian anthem is a religious identity; that is, Nigeria national anthem is a manifestation of the religiosity of the nation. Commenting on national anthems as symbols, Cerulo explains that they (that is, national anthems) “serve as modern totems (in the Durkheimian sense) – signs that bear a special relationship to the nations they represent, distinguishing them from one another and reaffirming their identity

³ Jacob K. Olupona, “Community of Believers: Exploring African Immigrant Religion in the United States” in Jacob K. Olupona and Regina Gemignani (eds.) *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), pp. 27-31. See also Ebenezer Obadare and Wale Adebani, “The Visa-God: Would-Be Migrants and the Instrumentation of Religion” in Afe Adogame and Jim Spickard (eds.) *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 31-48.

⁴ J.S. Eades, “Religion, Politics and Ideology,” in Jacob K. Olupona and Toyin Falola (eds.) *Religion and Society in Nigeria: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1991), pp. 244-264.

⁵ Nimi Wariboko, “Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa” in Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (eds.) *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 35-62

⁶ M.A. Ojo, *Of Saints and Sinners: Pentecostalism and the Paradox of Social Transformation in Modern Nigeria*, Inaugural Lecture Series 227 (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2010).

⁷ Igor Cusack, “African National Anthems: ‘Beat the Drums, the Red Lion has roared’” in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Dec. 2005), pp. 235-251 (238).

⁸ Karen A. Cerulo, “Symbols and the World System: National Anthems and Flags” in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (June 1993), pp. 243-271 (244).

boundaries.”⁹ Cerulo’s theory of national anthems as a symbol of national identity guides our thoughts in this paper.

Nigeria National Anthem in its Global and Historical Context

Daughtry rightly notes that “national anthems are often thought to embody the ideologies and collective self-image of the nations to which they are attached; anthems are, in the words of one historian, the “collective voice” of nations.” Such a definition of national anthem does not take into cognisance the dynamic and polysemous nature of national anthems. For example, many African nations did not have indigenous national anthems until after their independence. They immediately rejected the colonial anthems which were a reminder of their servitude to the colonialists.

Before the independence, the British anthem was rendered at every official and national event. Some months to the independence, Miss Lillian Jean Williams wrote what we can call the first national anthems and was performed by Miss Frances Benda.¹⁰ The anthem was popular for some years. However, shortly after the civil war, during the military regime of Olusegun Obasanjo, there was a consensus for a replacement of the anthem due to two reasons: the composers were not Nigerians and the emphasis on tribal differences. Nigerians were encouraged to compose lyrics for the new national anthem. Five people who were selected were awarded N1000 each for their ingenuity. They are: B.A. Ogunnaike, Eme Etim Akpan, John A. Ilechukwu, Sota Omoigui and P.O. Aderibigbe. Their compositions were compressed into one by Benedict Odiase, the Head of Music, Nigeria Police Force who added its current tune to it. The anthem was rendered at the National Independence Day celebration on October 1, 1978.¹¹ Today, the national anthem is rendered at every official programme in government parastatals. Both public and private schools sing it in their gatherings.

Generally speaking, national anthem can be considered as a quasi-religion on its own. Writing from a functional perspective, Nigeria national anthem could be considered as an aspect of belief system because it entrenches the emotional faith-based psychology within the nation system. The feature of its civility is a reference to quasi-religious beliefs that link people to society and country. Quasi-religious belief is an identification of civil religion which combine both profane and the sacred together in state politicking. Bellar¹² identifies this as a major supremacy for the state

⁹ Cerulo, p. 244

¹⁰ “History of Nigerian National Anthem,” *Media Nigeria*, April 26, 2018 accessed from <https://medianigeria.com/history-of-nigeria-national-anthem/> on 25/05/2020

¹¹ Nigerian National Anthem: Wordings and History accessed from <https://nigerianfinder.com/nigerian-national-anthem/> on 15/05/2020

¹² Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America” in *Daedalus*, Vol.96, No.1 Religion in America (1967),pp.4-8
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sovereignty and declares it as a system which consider “crimes against the state as crimes against God and crimes against God as crimes against the state”.¹³

National anthem can also be regarded as a civil religion. Civil religion, according to Hackett and Olupona, is a concept first adopted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who stated that:

“There is a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it behoves the sovereign to fix, not with the precision of religious dogmas, but treating them as a body of social sentiments without which no man can either be a good citizen or a faithful subject.”¹⁴

This dictum from the analysis of Hackett and Olupona has its logic on the principle of moral beliefs which a society rests upon as a guide that dictates a political order that emphasises a transcendent philosophy.¹⁵ This, according to them, is a reference to civil faith which coordinates a peaceful coexistence in a pluralised society like Nigeria. These items of civil faith are what we can consider also in the use of word signs in Nigeria national anthem that establish the usage of God-language which indoctrinates the principle of moral beliefs system from the angle of transcendent order.

Nigeria National Anthem as an Index of Religiosity in Nigeria

Arise, O compatriots

Nigeria's call obey

To serve our fatherland

With love and strength and faith

The labour of our heroes past

Shall never be in vain

To serve with heart and might

One nation bound in freedom

Peace and unity.

O God of creation

Direct our noble cause

Guide Thou our leaders right

Help our youth the truth to know

In love and honesty to grow

¹³ Bellah, pp.4-8

¹⁴ Rosalind. I.J. Hackett and Jacob K.Olupona , Civil Religion in J.K.Olupona and T. Falola, *Religion and Society in Nigeria: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*, (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1991).pp. 266.

¹⁵ Hackett and Olupona, p.266

And living just and true
Great lofty heights attained,
To build a nation where peace
And justice shall reign.

As noted by Cerulo, national symbols such as anthems are used to “create bonds, motivate patriotic action, honour the efforts of citizens and legitimate formal authority.”¹⁶ The first stanza contains all the characteristics of anthems highlighted by Cerulo. The first line, “Arise O compatriots” is a reference to a common identity and creation of bonds. All citizens are compatriots. They are bonded together by unity in diversity- different peoples, tribes and languages coming united by the same comradeship. This is a departure from the old anthem which emphasised the nation’s differences. The first line is also an indication of equality of all citizens. They are all compatriots. Nobody is inferior or superior to others.

The rest of the first stanza is a call to patriotism or patriotic actions. Citizens are called upon to respond to the call of the nation for service in line with what the founding fathers laid down. The past leaders were heroes who fought for the independence of the nation. It is an appeal to nationalist agenda. Post-independence citizens must sustain what the heroes had done. “The labour of our heroes past shall never be in vain” is also a call to honour the efforts of the past leaders. Service to the nation is important and must be done with love, faith, strength, heart and might. Total commitment to the cause of the nation is required of all citizens.

All these are impossible without the help of God. Thus, the second stanza is a prayer to God. The first assumption of the stanza is that God is the authority over all. The stanza also assumes that every citizen believes in God and that the country cannot do anything apart from God, the Creator of the nation. He is the nation’s Director, Helper and Guide. The business of the nation and her leaders are committed into his hands. The youths are committed unto his hands. The leaders and the youths together will build the nation with the help of God.

The presence of “God” in the national anthem is a reminiscence of the British influence on Nigeria. “God bless the King/Queen,” says the British anthem. Many African countries, except some French-speaking countries, include God in their anthems.¹⁷ However, the inclusion of God in African nation’s anthems cannot be attributed to colonial influence only. It is an indication that Africans believe strongly in God. The few former French colonies which do not include God in

¹⁶ Karen A. Cerulo, “Symbols and the World System: National Anthems and flags” in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (June 1993), pp. 243-271 (244).

¹⁷ Cusack, “African National Anthems,” p. 249.

their anthems are equally religious like other African countries. That they are influenced by French anthem which reflects the secular state of France cannot also be denied. The reason for this is that France still exercises some influence on such countries.

In the case of Nigerian anthem, the influence of Britain was removed when a new anthem was approved in October, 1978. The anthem is a true reflection of Nigeria's aspiration and outlook. Nigeria is a religious nation. The above analysis of the national anthem has clearly shown that religion means everything to Nigeria. While the first stanza has no religious connotation the second stanza clearly shows that religion is important to Nigeria. If stanza one is a call to citizens, stanza two is a call to God to help the citizens. It is an anthem of total dependence on God.

The singing of this anthem by citizens is an expression to support the loyalty embedded in the anthem¹⁸. The word signs and virtues like truth, peace, honesty and divine stability stressed through the anthem as seen in stanza two help to preserve the unity of the country through transcendent order not minding any religious dogma but with a mind-set that Nigeria is a form of pluralistic nation¹⁹. Repeating this stanza of the anthem, every citizen, regardless of colour, religion and tribe would have been influenced by these virtues. This shows an act of religiosity.

The practice of this religiosity in public workplace in Nigeria can be seen as a model of spirituality which combine the three arms of religious group in Nigeria together whenever there is a national program. In Nigeria public work place, the citizen adherently adhere to national anthem as a model for national prayer instead of pluralised religious prayer that may be considered from the three major religious setting (Islam, Christianity and Indigenous religion) in the country. The recitation of the anthem has a way of solidifying a unified bond among the adherents of different religious background in the country and thus maintain a social stability that keeps the country together.

Evaluation of the Impacts of Religiosity on National Development

Has religion brought any development to Nigeria? Religious role in Nigeria is ambiguous. On the positive note, religious groups are major stakeholders in education, health and socio-economic empowerment. Nigerians look up to religious groups to provide quality education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Churches and Muslim groups have schools which are

¹⁸ Olusegun A. Oladosu, "The Question of National Security and Religion: Negotiating a Mediating Role" in Ayodeji Olukoju, Olutayo Adesina, Abimbola Adesoji and Saheed Amusa (eds.), *Security Challenges and Management in Modern Nigeria* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), p. 521.

¹⁹ Oladosu, p.522

well-funded and affordable to people at the lower cadre of social strata.²⁰ There are some communities without government hospitals and the only hospitals available for them are mission hospitals. Religious groups provide capitals for their members to start up small businesses in order to alleviate poverty. For example, the Jainz Bank or Islamic Bank in Nigeria has provided loans without interest to many Nigerians to alleviate their poverty. In addition, there are religious groups which provide scholarships for indigent but brilliant students.

Religion has also been the bane of the country since independence. Nigeria is more divided along religious line than ethnic lines, hence, the constant religious crisis in the northern part of the nation. Politicians have used religion as a political tool to canvass for votes. There are religious leaders who see religion as a means of economic buoyancy. It is a lucrative business. Religion has also failed to provide the kind of morality expected of it in Nigeria. It has got to point that a mere mentioning of a pastor or imam invites negative reactions from people. Instead of promoting values that can benefit the nation, religious leaders tend to pitch their tents behind corrupt politicians or those who acquire their wealth through unholy means in order to extort money from them. More than 80% of Nigerians are living below poverty level. Yet we have religious leaders who live flamboyantly, fragrantly displaying their wealth in a gangsta manner. It is worthwhile to note that religious leaders in the pre-independent and post-independent period were exemplary and respected in the society. As Ojo rightly observes, Pentecostal and Charismatic leaders set out to be agents of reforms with redemptive agenda for Nigeria. In Ojo's words,

...Pentecostal and Charismatic movements emerged in Nigeria in the early 1970s, on a reformist agenda to champion a new spirituality that is redemptive, prophetic, hopeful and progressive, and which was anchored on the premise that a vibrant religion possessed the capacity of re-ordering the society on a pietistic orientation. However, by the late 1990s, this religion which was originally sectarian, promoting a strict holiness ethos, and on the fringe of the society, with membership numbering a few thousands, had moved to the centre stage, increased its membership to several millions, and has consequently dissipated its pietistic energy.²¹

²⁰ Taye Ademolekun, "A Historical Survey of the Contribution of Nigeria Baptist Convention to the Development of Education in Nigeria (1854-2002)," in R.A. Raji (ed.) *Religion, Governance and Development in the 21st Century* (Ago-Iwoye: NASR, 2006), pp.115-134

²¹ Matthews A. Ojo, The Paradox of Healing and the Redemptive Agenda of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Nigeria, Keynote address at the Second Conference of the Nigerian Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies (NPCRC) held at Divine Love Retreat and Conference Centre (DRACC), Sabo-Lugbe, Abuja, Nigeria, 21-23 May, 2014.

The dissipation is so enormous that there is little or no instruction on piety. Contrarily, religious leaders promote values in wealth and prosperity without caution. The more religious centres increase the more immorality and crimes the society witness.

As indicated in the national anthem, God is needed to solve every problem and teach our youths how to know and speak the truth. Because of this, there is no significant effort and political will to solve problems, be it infrastructural or socio-economic problems. Nigerians have abandoned scientific way of solving problems and have found solace in religion. No wonder the Nigerian Army would organise a prayer retreat to fight against terrorists! The national anthem promotes it. Nigerian leaders are fond of organising prayers every year to tackle technological issues which can only be solved with science and technology. Leaders go on pilgrimages in Israel and Saudi Arabia in order to pray for Nigeria. They go every year with a large entourage.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have been able to prove that the wordings of the national anthem attest to the religiosity of the country. While scholars of religion have attempted to examine the religiosity of Africans by focusing on rituals and practices of religious traditions in Africa, our focus is on the Nigeria's national anthem. Both the contents and elements of the Nigeria national anthem confirm that Nigeria is religious. However, this may change in the future if the country adopts secularism as a way of life. As pointed out above, national anthems as symbols can be dynamic and polysemous. They can change depending on the world view of the nations and their leaders. Due to a defined aim of this paper, we do not examine the impact of national anthem on patriotism of Nigerians, an important part of the significance of national anthems.

