



## Nigerian nation-building and religious education

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### Abstract

Following the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, the federal government took over schools established by religious organizations since it was believed that education was now a significant government undertaking and no longer a private business. Prior to this, missionaries provided free education to Nigerian leaders, and this provided the foundation for their country's nationalism and independence. The majority of people feel that the abrupt government control of the educational system—which had previously been regarded as having high standards for morality and learning—was what caused it to fail. Pressure organizations began to frequently advocate for the restoration of mission schools as a result. In contrast, stakeholders have expressed different opinions in the wake of some federated states bringing back their mission schools, noting issues such as denominational feelings, tribal prejudices, and unhealthy citizen competitiveness as obstacles to national cohesion and growth. The goal of this article is to examine the opposing points of view in the context of religious education's (RE) contribution to racial harmony and integration.

**Keywords:** religious education, mission schools, Nigeria, nation-building, nation-integration

### Introduction

The issue of "Religious education and nation-building in Nigeria" is covered in this article. According to some, the Nigerian federal government assumed control of mission schools after the Nigerian Civil War ended in 1970 in an effort to tackle the issue of tribalism (Fagunmi 2015:1-7; Efobi 2011:6) <sup>[13, 9]</sup>. However, education was seen as a massive government initiative and no longer a private business, which is why the government intervened (Imam 2012:187-189) <sup>[17]</sup>. Since the nineteenth century, mission schools—which were established by foreign missionaries—have pushed Western education, which is typically provided for free or at a significant discount. The free education provided by the missionaries, which served as the cornerstone of Nigerian nationalism and independence, benefited many of the country's current leaders. Most people feel that the government's abrupt control of schools led to the collapse of morality and character development as well as education in previously renowned institutions of higher learning (The Guardian 2013:15) <sup>[33]</sup>.

During this time, there was a simultaneous rise in the number of persons seeking education and a corresponding lack of infrastructure. Teaching staff members who were experiencing financial trouble engaged in more non-academic commercial activities in an effort to lessen their pain. The absence of books and resources, the lack of incentives for writing and research, the usage of out-of-date notes and materials, and the lack of new laboratory equipment all contributed to these challenges. Evidently, the state governments, who felt overburdened, saw the demand for the handover of schools as a convenient means of evading their legal obligation to provide for the schools. Thus, they had less work to do on the education front by turning over hundreds of schools to their proprietors. They believed that this would be the answer, but it only led to further issues. Private university establishment was given legal support in 1999. There were 41 private universities as

of December 31, 2010, with the majority being controlled by Christian and Muslim religious institutions. One of them belonged to an ethnic group, and the remaining five were held by private individuals (Okafor 2011:389). The high tuition rates paid by private universities effectively made it a private institution for the wealthy only, excluding the poor and those from less privileged backgrounds; this was due to financial issues, it was said. In contrast, stakeholders have expressed different opinions in the wake of some federated states bringing back their mission schools, noting issues such as denominational feelings, tribal prejudices, and unhealthy citizen competitiveness as obstacles to national cohesion and growth.

In order to evaluate the opposing viewpoints in the context of the contribution of religious education (RE) to national integration and development, the following examples will be used:

- a. The evolution of Nigeria's many educational traditions.
- b. Justifications for government control of missionary schools.
- c. Differing opinions on the government's decision to reinstate mission schools.
- d. An Evaluation of the Conflicting Opinions
- e. A path forward for Nigerian religious education.

Different definitions have been given to the phrase "Religious Education." On the one hand, it is regarded as the dissemination of a certain religion and its many facets, including its teachings, rites, practices, and personal roles. Encyclopaedia of Education Research (1979:1123) <sup>[10]</sup> defined religious education as those religious endeavors that aim to indoctrinate each new generation into the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a particular religion, thereby perpetuating the religion and simultaneously giving rise to the personal unifying center for the individual's life. It implies that religious education is the method used by any religious organization to indoctrinate and instruct its

members, particularly the young ones, in its ideas and practices. On the other hand, Ulrich Hermel's concept of religious education views it from the various theoretical and practical facets of religiosity (Adam, Rothgangel & Lachmann 2014:15-20) <sup>[2]</sup>. This model's definition of religious education was as follows:

- a. Religious sensitivity: An important aspect of religiosity is its affective component. Similar to how Schleiermacher defined religion as a "sense of absolute dependency," this describes religion. It also includes the study of religious perception.
- b. Religious content: For instance, the credo or having a basic understanding of biblical texts and church historical events provide evidence of the cognitive part of religiosity.
- c. Religious behavior: For instance, rituals and prayers, as well as community and humanitarian efforts, show the pragmatic side of religiosity.
- d. Religious communication: A religious vocabulary and a religious grammar serve as the foundation for this communicative component, allowing one to express, for instance, their religious feelings and attitudes. This includes engaging in religious discussion with people of various worldviews, religions, and denominations.
- e. A lifestyle driven by religion: This is a unique aspect of religiosity that includes all other aspects as well. By no means does a differentiated evolution of the other dimensions imply motivation or a willingness to manage one's life accordingly.

Religion is a powerful instrument for instilling moral principles. Orebanjo was correct to say that only the formal, informal, or non-formal teaching of religions may achieve moral standards, which is why religious education is an integral aspect of all religious rituals (Orebanjo 2014:434) <sup>[28]</sup>. How moral values could be ingrained in the culture would be seriously questioned if religion were excluded from school.

### History of Nigeria's various educational traditions

In Nigeria, three distinct educational traditions—indigenous, Islamic, and Western—have coexisted. Indigenous education was the first form of education, provided in the pre-literate age by members of the community who had specialized knowledge or talents in a range of human endeavors. Here, boys were taught numerous trades and manners such as farming, trading, craftwork, fishing, raising cattle, making wine, traditional medicine, black-smiting, etc. by their dads or other masters. While girls were supposed to stay at home and learn domestic and other tasks from their moms, such as cooking, cleaning, cultivating the farmlands, weaving hair, decorating the body, and the like (Mkpa 2013:1-4) <sup>[21]</sup>. In Africa, this educational tradition is also known as precolonial, informal, tribal, or community-based education.

Before the introduction of the Western style of education in the 19th century, Islamic learning had already become a prominent educational tradition in Nigeria (Fafunwa 2014:53) <sup>[12]</sup>. Islam was introduced into Hausa country in the early 14th century by traders and academics who traveled from Wangarawa to Kano during the rule of Ali Yaji (1349 – 1385). The majority of what would later become Northern Nigeria was quickly Islamized. Arabic was taught as part of Islamic education since it is the language of the Quran,

which was thought to have significant spiritual significance. In primary schools, Arabic and Islam were taught side by side. Many kings used Islamic scholars as administrators due to the political and social authority that Islam and Quranic knowledge bestowed upon those who possessed it (Mkpa 2013:1-4) <sup>[21]</sup>. Uthman Dan Fodio's activities contributed to the revival, dissemination, and consolidation of Islamic studies as well as the expansion of women's access to education. Following this, Islamic studies spread to Nigeria's western regions as well.

The third educational system that was introduced to Nigeria by Christian missionaries in the middle of the nineteenth century was education in the Western style. Nigeria's adoption of this western-style schooling came before the country's formal unification in 1914 and eventual independence in 1960. Wesleyan Methodist missionaries initially arrived in 1842, founding a mission and a school. In 1878, they opened Lagos' first boys' school; a girls' school followed in 1895. Between 1846 and 1949, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) founded schools in Abeokuta, Badagry, Lagos, and Ibadan. At the years 1886–1892, the Holy Ghost Fathers (The Catholic Mission) establish convent schools in Abeokuta and schools at Onitsha, to the east of the Niger.

They prioritized evangelism and used science and medicine to advance the gospel. The various Christian missions utilized school as a vehicle for religious instruction, character development, skill acquisition, and introduction to the three fundamental components of reading, writing, and math. The development of mission hospitals and leprosy settlements, agriculture and farm settlements, and offering valuable training and employment for Africans in Nigeria were among the missionary enterprise's other significant functions. White missionaries, a doctor, an ordained educator, and a horticulturist made up the missionary team (African Missions 2010:15) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Arguments in favor of government control of mission schools

Here are some of the factors that led to the Nigerian federal government's 1970 nationalization of all schools that had previously been owned by missions. In 1942, 97% of Nigerian pupils attended Christian mission schools, and mission schools continued to teach the vast majority of children in the predominantly Christian Igbo (Southeast) and Yoruba (Southwest) regions of the country up until the mid-1960s. The initial round of school nationalizations was motivated by a desire to promote a shared Nigerian identity in the years following independence. However, after the Biafra Civil War (1967–1970), when state governments started nationalizing church-owned institutions and hospitals in an effort to eliminate tribalism, the pace picked up quickly (Efobi 2011:6) <sup>[9]</sup>. Additionally, education was no longer seen as a private business but rather as a massive government undertaking (Imam 2012: 187-189) <sup>[17]</sup>.

The National Curriculum Conference, which was held in 1969, examined the educational system and its objectives and came up with new national goals for Nigeria that would decide the course and destiny of the nation's educational system. The conference represented the nation's initial effort to transform the colonial orientation of Nigeria's educational system and advance national consciousness and self-reliance through the educational process (Imam 2012:187-190) <sup>[17]</sup>. The Federal Government established a seminar of eminent

specialists to discuss a truly Nigerian national educational policy in 1973 to build on the successes of the curriculum conference. The members of this group represented a wide spectrum of interests, including Nigerian Muslim and Christian organizations. The draft National Policy on Education was given as the report of the seminar's conclusions after being carefully considered by the States of the Federation and other interest organizations (FRN 2021:17).

### **Disparate opinions on the government's return of mission schools**

Lagos State was the first state to reinstate mission schools in 2001. The state took these actions in an effort to raise educational standards. Imo, Ogun, Plateau, Anambra, and Abia were a few of the states that gave back control of their schools to their original owners. It was reported that neighboring Delta handed over 40 schools while the southern state of Anambra returned 1,040 primary schools to their original church owners. Some of these schools were reopened without the laws authorizing the government takeover of schools being repealed or changed. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the state government and the owners of the mission schools, for instance, allowed the administration of Otunba Gbenga Daniel (Ogun State) to return 23 public secondary schools. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) cannot replace or amend a valid law because it is not a law. The entire exercise was criticized in this regard, with the argument that the current trend of mission schools returning is based on shaky ground that an ambitious regime could easily overturn at any time.

The restoration of mission schools is also being argued to have had a dangerously detrimental effect on the educational system and significantly decreased enrollment. For instance, in the Abeokuta South Local Government, six schools reportedly handed over by the government to their original owners had a combined student body of 12 663 in 2008. However, by 2010, following the handover, student enrollment had severely decreased to 401 for the straightforward reason that school costs were exorbitant. As a result, 12 262 kids were denied admission to secondary schools. Enrollment in Ijebu Ode decreased from 8 729 in 2008 to 876 by 2010. (Kalu 2011:5)<sup>[18]</sup>.

The views of those who argue against giving schools back to their original owners, on the other hand, have been refuted by several religious organizations. They contend that mission schools are more technologically advanced than public schools and that their kids surpass those of the latter in academic assessments. That someone must pay if they want to keep providing top-notch education and be innovative. Early mission schools were supported by foreign missionary organizations; therefore, they were either free or heavily subsidized (Christianity Today 2012:1-2)<sup>[7]</sup>.

### **Onaiyekan**

A few state governors voiced support for giving mission schools back to their owners. Examples include Theodore Orji, the governor of Abia State, who gave over 19 schools and promised to return additional forcibly obtained ones to their rightful owners in due time. He also indicated that the procedure wasn't just for secondary schools and that it will eventually include primary schools. He bemoaned the decline in morality, discipline, and educational standards

that had occurred since the government had taken control of schools in the 1970s (Onyekwere 2012:11)<sup>[27]</sup>. In a similar vein, former Anambra State Governor Peter Obi stated: The state's failure to provide adequate education is directly related to the 1970 seizure of schools run by missionaries, churches, and nonprofit organizations. That one lesson served as a warning that morals and character development had left our educational system. This cannot be tolerated any longer.

### **Uzodinma (2013)<sup>[35]</sup>**

Additionally, former Governor Peter Obi kept his word by giving N733 million to the Catholic and Anglican churches to operate the schools that were returned to them (Uzodinma 2013:2)<sup>[33]</sup>. An editorial in the Lagos-based This Day Newspaper praised the revival of mission schools. According to the report, "concerns about national cohesion" were what led to the government's "summary assumption of proprietary rights over private schools" in the 1970s. However, the government's "failure to compensate the original proprietors of the schools, or treat them with respect during the takeover process" cost it "any goodwill" it had hoped to gain from seizing the institutions. The "collapse of values of discipline and staff integrity" and the "precipitous fall of academic standards" were also brought on by nationalization. In order to stop the collapse, This Day supported "the restoration of schools to their original owners," but asked the government to stay involved in education and called for a consistent system of school inspections to guarantee quality education for all Nigerians (This Day 2012:3)<sup>[33]</sup>.

### **A road ahead for Nigerian religious education**

It is impossible to overstate the importance of religious education for a nation's development. Even though the Christian missionaries' primary goals in founding schools were to spread Christianity, Ozigi and Ocho (2021:33–35)<sup>[30]</sup> had emphasized that their biggest contributions to education and the writing down of indigenous languages were their educational labor. They provided the following summary of the contributions made by western missionaries to religious education:

- a. The preservation of important Nigerian languages, such as Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Nupe, and Hausa, through translation and writing, leading to linguistic homogeneity. For instance, the Bible was translated into "The union Ibo," a synthesis of three important yet similar dialects. The third-largest tribe in West Africa got together because of this.
- b. The establishment of law and order in areas where there were inter-tribal conflicts and disorder, ensuring the repression of heinous crimes against Christian morals. For instance, Mary Slessor fought for the South Eastern region of Nigeria to outlaw the killing of twins.
- c. Preventing insecurity by guaranteeing traveler safety without the chance of being hurt or subjected to slavery, as was the case in Yorubaland or Iboland prior to the arrival of the missionaries.
- d. Making a positive contribution to the moral and social regeneration of society through churches, schools, and health care facilities, as well as preventing social demoralization. For converts, character development was prioritized alongside spiritual growth beginning with their primary schooling since they believed that

higher education would help them find secular employment and raise their social status.

### Recommendation

This article suggests the following for religious education to flourish as a tool of national growth and fusion in modern Nigeria:

1. In order to prevent future subversion of the current MOUs with the government on the return of mission schools by an ambitious regime, the law on takeover of such schools should be repealed or amended in accordance with the new policy of the federal government. This will ensure that justice is done in the return of mission schools to their original owners.
2. Religious organizations and individuals should understand that the government cannot adequately fund and coordinate education on its own in order to safeguard the equal rights of all students gaining access to education and to prevent the low enrollment issue. They ought to follow the example of the first mission schools and refrain from making education into a for-profit business.
3. All religious instruction in Nigeria should acknowledge the rich and diverse religious heritage of the nation and adopt a cooperative model that accepts the rich heritage and the potential for innovative interaction between schools and faith, safeguarding the youth from religious prejudice or coercion. Religious teaching and religious upbringing offered by the home, family, and religious community should differ from what is taught about religion in these schools.
4. The adoption of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) option of literacy and empowerment, which may be more flexible and less expensive; the current traditional face-to-face method of education delivery is very expensive, highly restrictive, and discriminatory, can be used to extend religious education to the teeming population or adherents of different religions.

### Conclusion

This article explored the various points of view regarding the Nigerian government's takeover and subsequent return of mission schools, as well as the function of religious education (RE) in fostering national unity. While the majority of people claim that the government's abrupt takeover of the schools caused the collapse of education, which had previously been regarded as having high standards for learning and morality, others (especially teachers and parents) argue against the schools being returned to voluntary agencies, citing problems that could prevent national integration such as outrageous school fees, denominational sentiments, tribal prejudices, and unhealthy competition among citizens. The article concludes that in order to safeguard the equal rights of all learners gaining access to education and to head off the issue of low enrolments, religious bodies should be involved in educational institutions.

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