

Language and Religion: Veritable Tools for National Peace in Nigeria

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Abstract

No nation can develop in an atmosphere devoid of peace for it is the basis for every meaningful development. This is why national peace is the primary target of every nation, especially the developing countries. To achieve this goal effectively, the collaborative effort of every citizen is required. It is obvious that Nigeria is a country with diversity of tribe with different cultures, languages and different religious affiliations. The peculiarities of different languages and religious ideologies as unique as they appear, if properly harnessed and harmonised could foster national peace. Observations in some studies have shown that misuse of religion and inappropriate use of language are banes that confront Nigeria national peace. It is therefore, the interest of this paper to bridge "Language and Religion as Veritable Tools for National Peace in Nigeria". The introduction provides the background information on the key concepts of the topic. This was followed by conceptual definitions of language and religion, language choice in conflict resolution and the role of religion and language as veritable tools for national peace. The paper concludes that to achieve national peace, tolerance and unity should take priority over ethnic and religious bigotry. It was therefore, recommended that

tolerance and unity must be taught by all the stakeholders and live by example for peace to reign in the country.

Keywords: Language, Religion, Veritable Tools, National Peace.

Introduction

Since independence, Nigeria has its fair share of conflicts and war. These are clear indications that peace is lacking. This is why matters of national peace have become topical issues of concern in Nigeria today. And most of the causes of these challenges to national peace stem from misuse of religion and inappropriate use of language. In order to achieve national peace, there is the need to understand that human race rely on language as a powerful tool in the society to generate meanings for communication. Religion in itself is not evil but men all in the names of God and religion, have killed themselves during inter-religious crises. By inter-religious crises, we mean tension, fighting or conflict between adherents of one religion and another. Crises of this type are many and common in Nigeria.

Achunike (2008) opined that the wrong perception of other people's religion, wrong religious orientation, low literacy level of religious adherents, selfishness on the part of religious personalities, pervasive poverty, government involvement in religious matters, among others, are responsible for religious crises in Nigeria.

Language is a peculiar characteristic of the human fold. With its phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic elements, it distinguishes the homo sapiens completely from the lower animals (Oladosu, 2012). According to Osisanwo (2012), language is the "human vocal noise or arbitrary graphic representation of this noise used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for purposes of communication". It can be inferred from the above definitions of language, that it serves a very important role in the human community. Language is primarily a system of phonetic symbols for the expression of communicable thought and feeling (Oyeleye, 2004). As rightly stated by Barber (1999), one basic function of language which encompasses other functions is the facilitation of human co-operation. In his words:

... Language enables us to influence one another's behaviours and to influence it in great detail, and thereby makes human co-operation possible. Human co-operation is more detailed and more

diversified than that found elsewhere in the animal kingdom and no non-human animal society has a division of labour or a system of production at all comparable to those of human societies (Barber, 1999:27).

It could be deduced from Barber assertions that unity, tolerance and peaceful co-existence among human societies can manifest through the influence of language. Where unity, tolerance and peaceful co-existence are denied, human societies are faced with resistance, violence, riot, terrorism among other vices. The role of language as a veritable tool for national peace cannot be over emphasized. This is because it is the basis for every meaningful development. The implication is that the child requires full and sustainable language development before entering the formal school system. These reform and propel his mind in the acquisition of knowledge and values.

Religion on the other hand has always been seen as a veritable tool for national peace. Iruonagbe (2009) stated that religion refers to “man’s attempt to find and maintain peaceful relations with the supernatural and his fellow human being. In his opinion, religion is expressed as agent of peace. James (2007) cited in Sulaimon and Ojo (2012) stated that an important dimension to the definition of religion, which is essential for the search of peace, is the often forgotten fact that religious relationship does not only refer to the relationship between man and God, but also the relationship between man and the society. Therefore, religious education can be seen as a process through which a person learns something which his society believed is related to God. No religion preaches violence or conflict. Every religion advocates and preaches peace and peaceful co-existence for all citizens. As such, religion is the very foundation for national peace because God is peaceful, He loves peace and He wants man to project peace in dealing with others. The major religions in Nigeria have been classified into three; these are Islam, Christianity and Traditional religion. Christianity and Islam are the country’s major religions, with some others like pagans, atheist, and free thinkers (Oladosu, 2012).

Conceptual Definitions of Religion and Language

It could not be denied that religion has the power to make or mar any given society, community or even a nation. The experiences of man over the ages have undoubtedly demonstrated this fact. Balogun (1987) cited in Jekayinfa (2007) opined that wherever and whenever the power of religion had been correctly used, it is often led to coherence, happiness and progress among the people. He further stated that where religion had been wrongly used, it has always led to misery, untold hardship and widespread destruction. Religion is a fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a group of people concerning the obedience and worship of the divine (Lawal, 2017). Abdulsalam (2002) posited that there are basically two types of religions namely; scriptural and non-scriptural. The scriptural religion includes those that claim to have revealed books or possess sacred books. Such religion and their scriptures according to Abdulsalam (2002) are: Islam – Glorious Qur'an, Christianity – Holy Bible, just to mention few. The adherents of these religions claim that the scriptures are revealed to them either directly by God or divinely inspired. These scriptures are considered to be sacred, immutable and inviolable.

Non-scriptural religions have no revealed books. The traditional religion has hardly any written scriptures (Kilani, 1998) but nevertheless contends that it is written in all aspects of African life that the sources of its, are: myths, folktales, proverbs, liturgy and songs. In African Traditional Religion, God is believed to be one, who is "High" but can be reached through intermediaries. In other words, there is a belief in Supreme Deity and worship of lesser deities that serve as agents of the Supreme Deity. It could be deduced from the categories of religion posited by Abdulsalam (2002) that men recognise God differently and each adherents of these religions look at their faith to salvation. This longing of God and belief is demonstrated by individuals in accordance with his/her conviction of the belief he holds tenaciously to. Particularly, Islam and Christianity have some belief systems in common. Also, their point of departure cannot be denied. But, what becomes germane is the fact that, their common ground are sufficient enough to enhance peaceful co-existence among the adherents of both religions. For example, the bible affirms that:

The Earth is the Lord's and everything therein (Psalm 24:1).

Confirming this Biblical injunction, the Glorious Qur'an says

To Allah belong the dominion of the heavens and the earth and God has power over all other things (Qur'an 3:189).

Language on the other hand as stated by Adeyanju (2004). It is incontrovertibly central to all human activities as it is crucial to either peaceful co-existence or disunity among members. Nigeria is a multilingual nation endowed with many languages that scatter all over the surface of the country. According to Bamgbose (1991), there are about 513 languages in Nigeria. Given the multiplicity of languages, the National Policy on Education (NPE) specified the roles and status of each language in education and in our polity. The languages policy statement with regards to the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages as L₂ states that:

as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that a child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (p.13)

The above statement emphasised the need to use indigenous languages as a means of fostering unity, peace and preserving the culture of the country. Besides, it will minimise ethnic antagonism, hostility and conflict which over the years have been the bane of the country's unity and peace. In the contemporary Nigeria life, it is unfortunate that war and atrocities have been committed because of language differences.

Language Choice in Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a negative phenomenon that brings disharmony and undesirable effects in the relationship between one party and another. While many factors are put forward as causes of conflict, the misinterpretation of a message, thought, idea, belief, culture or emotion (using language) is one issue that runs through all discussions on conflict (Tobalase, 2017). For conflict to be resolved amicably, Nigerian languages must play a prominent role. The languages should be used to preach for the peaceful co-existence amongst the citizenry, so that resolution of conflict will not be seen as a hard nut to crack. The effects of misuse of language far outweighs the use of soft words that appeals to emotion. Our language

use must be accommodating, cooperating, and promoting peaceful co-existence, whether formal or informal. So also is this in our homes, environments, offices, nation and anywhere we find ourselves.

Undoubtedly, appropriate use of language could serve as the best solution to conflicts resolution. The Yoruba adage that says: “*Òrò ní í yò obì lápò, òrò náà ní í yò ofà lápò*” meaning, It is the word that draws kola-nut from the pockets, while words can also draw arrows from the quiver, seems to capture the role and effect of language on human actions. The expression clearly demonstrates that as words can provoke hospitality, it can also provoke hostility. What is said and how it is said goes a long way to determine what reactions attend to such utterances. For example, Oyo State was almost turned into a theatre of war over Senator Isiaq Abiola Ajimobi’s utterances during his tenure as the State Governor. While addressing the protesting students of the Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso over the closure of their institution for almost eight months, made some unremarkable statements thus “*Ẹ́ n sọ pé léyìn oṣù méjọ tí wọn tí ti sùkúú yín. Sé èmi ni mọ tí sùkúú yín ní? Tí ẹ bá fẹ́ sọ ọ́ di jagídíjagan, a dúró deyin. Ọ́n kọ́ ni wọn tí n’ ti Sùkúú nàà*” meaning that “You complain your school is shut since eight months. Am I the person who closed your school? If you want to be troublesome, I dare you and ready for you, this is not the first time schools are getting shut. Also, his infamous “Constituted Authority’s” handling of the communicative encounter almost, literally set the State on fire.

Jija (2012) stated that language should be carefully, responsibly and politely used so as to advance individual and group co-operation in social affair. He maintained that effective communication skills are necessary pre-requisite in suppressing conflicts. He opined that terms which are considered as being linguistically segregate and divisible should be substituted with the more accommodating and unity enhancing terms. He also stated that inflammatory language or wrong and misconceived words should be avoided when referring to our relationship. He was of the opinion that the best instrument for achieving peace and resolving conflict is the use of languages that honour and respect human dignity, tolerance, truth and national integration.

National Peace and development only anchor in an environment where people’s right and freedom are respected. They rest solidly in an environment devoid of acrimony and hatred which are usually expressed

with words. Osam and Ekpo (2009) also remarked that culture of peace is built from values, attitude, behaviours and ways of life based on non-violence, respect for life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, appreciation of cultural diversity and respect for others.

Role of Language and Religion as Veritable Tools for National Peace

As the saying goes, “where there is no peace, security of lives and properties would be eluded”. According to UNESCO (2002), peace is the absence of conflict, presence of states of mind and of society such as harmony, security and understanding. The peaceful atmosphere derived from various relationships between African and Non-African; husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, employers and employees as a result of influence of language and religion cannot be quantified. Language and Religion perform various roles in societies and the relevance of the two concepts cannot be ignored. Language is a necessary means of communication; an important tool in bringing people together without which a combined social action is not possible. Human beings tend to make both rational and irrational decisions out of informed knowledge which often originates from an external source. This further asserts on the important role of language as a tool to influence the behaviour of an individual.

Intra-religious training is deeply anchored on the religions of its participant. In other words, training to tolerate and understand other peoples’ religion is done by the religious leaders through the teachings of their scriptures. The religion of Islam itself means peace and absolute submission to the will of God. In almost every part of the Glorious Qur’an, the understanding that peace is the will of Allah is clearly stated. For instance, the Qur’an enjoined man to live in harmony and peace with fellow human being as contained in Qur’an 3:200. Allah says:

O you who believe! Endure and be more patient.

The believers are commanded to be patient in Islam and are not allowed to abandon it in times of comfort or hardship, ease or calamity. They are also commanded to endure against their enemies, those who hid the truth about their religion. In the Holy Bible, it is stated that all Christians should love both their neighbours and enemies and should live in peace with everyone.

Religion, no doubt is a force to reckon with in the lives of individuals and the nation at large because it is a tool that provides inspiration to Nigerians to unite and fight social upheavals, moral decadence, political stability and promote economic development. Also, religion prepares both the individual and the society for a good life. Religion regulates the conduct and behaviour of people in the society and preaches vital virtues needed in the nation. The religions sermons that are preached in the nooks and crannies of the nation with specific reference to citations from the Holy Bible and Glorious Qur'an are all efforts geared towards modifying the behavior of the people positively in the society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, religious and language competitions have been the bane of our society in the recent past. Nigeria have witnessed several religious riots all in the name of God by bad leaders and gullible followers, resulting in killing of innocent citizens, disruption of national peace and destruction of lives and properties. We have attempted to bridge the gap that language and religion are veritable tools for national peace. To achieve this gap, tolerance and unity should take priority over ethnic and religious bigotry and languages should be used to preach for peaceful co-existence amongst the citizenry, so that resolution of conflict will not be seen as a hard nut to crack.

Way Forward

In the light of the conclusions reached above, the following recommendations are made:

1. tolerance and unity must be taught by all the stakeholders and live by example for peace to reign in the country.
2. good governance by political, religious, community leaders is another way in which language and religious differences could be minimized. There is need for these leaders to show accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equity and justice.
3. seminars, conferences and workshops should be established from time to time for the citizenry especially the youths where the virtues of love, peace and unity in juxtaposition with the evil effects of hatred, conflict and war will be effectively taught.

4. there should be no favouritism from the government towards any religion and language. Every religion and language should be given equal treatment and opportunity. This is because Nigeria is a multi-religious and multi-lingual nation.
5. all religions leaders should teach, practice and enjoin their adherents to honestly practice the tenets of their religion. No true religion teaches wickedness, hostility and hooliganism.
6. the teachings of the two dominant religions in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity) should be made compulsory in the general course in Nigeria Colleges and Universities because they have been taught as a school subject at primary and post-primary level of the Nigerian educational system.

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