

EDUCATION AND RELIGION IN NIGERIAN MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY AS FACTORS FOR NATIONAL UNITY AND INTEGRATION

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Abstract

Education is bedrock for national unity and integration. In schools, through interaction with peers and mates from different ethnic, religious and socio-economic background, children become socialized, integrated and united for they have one goal to achieve. This paper, examines education and religion in Nigerian multi-ethnic society as factors for national unity and integration. The conceptual clarification of education, religion and ethnicity were made. Religious and ethnic problems in Nigerian schools were highlighted and discussed. Based on the points raised, the paper recommended among others that, religious and ethnic tolerance should be incorporated in the curriculum of both primary and secondary schools. This could be in great help in solving the religious and ethnic problems in Nigeria.

Key words: Education, Multi-ethnic society, Religion, National Unity

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation that is blessed with about 150 million populations, over 250 ethnic groups and different religious practices. In Nigerian society, religion often coincides with ethnic group in some cases. Basically, the Northern part of the country which is dominated by Hausa and Fulani are believed to be Muslims. While most of the Igbo's of the south east and some Yoruba from southwest are Christians. Both Islam and Christianity were widely accepted by Nigerians.

The Government of the Federation, abstract from ethnic and religious differences as solution for discrimination, injustice and favoritism. All are equal in the side of government. These made it to be secular in nature. But for easy governance; three most popular and dominant tribes and two most practical religion were recognized by government for social principles.

Education is concerned with socialization and preservation of people cultural heritage. Therefore it has a great concern over ethnicity and religion of every society, for both are social forces and potential trouble points which education would have great concern for and proffer ways of handling it. Schools remain the most formidable agent of social unity, national integration as well as promoting peaceful co-existence among people in the society. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) posit that integration of the individual into the community is one of the bases of Nigerian philosophy of Education.

Conceptual clarifications

Education: Education can be defined as an experience, skills and values transmitted from one generation to another. In another word, education is an act of systematic intellectual training of an individual into various skills, values and knowledge also education can be referred as any act or experience that has a formative effect on others mind, charter, or physical ability on an individual. In a more technical sense, education is the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge skills, and values from one generation to another. All the above definitions

of education covered all forms of education, whether informal non formal and formal system of education. But generally whenever the term education is mentioned peoples mind went to formal setting of education, whereas it is not the only form of education.

• **Religion;** Many people have their personal and at time favourite meaning of the term 'religion' and the way they see it. Generally there is no any single acceptable definition of religion. Religion can be referred as a belief and practices commonly shared among a group that believed to have offered to a Supreme Being. But to Yinger, it is a system of belief and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. Yinger, in Hralambos & Holborn (2008). To sociologists like Durkheim, define religion as a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred all encompassing and super natural. (Giddens, 2006 p. 534).

Sociologists see religion as an important social role for different people and societies. More so, the study of religion is very important for understanding the nature and direction of today's global social change

Ethnicity: the issue of ethnicity is a social in nature since it deals with cultural setting and practices belong to one ethnic group or the other and they identify themselves with their ethnic community. Giddens (2006) define ethnicity as the cultural practice and outlooks of a given community. The term race and ethnicity are interchangeable, mistakenly race often used in place of ethnicity. But they are two different things the basis for racial categorization is somehow biological which deals with skin, colour of different human beings, while, the characteristic, distinguishing various ethnic group are social, such as ancestry a sense of history, language, religion and forms of dress. Ethnic differences are not inherited, they are learned. (www.cliffsnote.com/studyguide/raceand.ethnicity).

Theoretical framework

The issue of religion to sociologist is an important issue especially for its role in organizing and promoting societal culture. Sociologists are not concern with whether religious beliefs are true or false. They perceive it as socially constructed by human beings rather than being directed by the God. Their main concern is the organization of the religion, the beliefs and values and how it relates to larger society.

The sociological theories of religion are influenced by the ideas of Durkheim, Marx and Waver. Though, none of them is religious. What they are interested in is the power and influence that religion holds over people and societies (Giddens, 2006). Durkheim (1961), one of the functionalists, spent much of his time studying religions, especially those of small societies. He found that people end to separate religions symbols, objects and rituals which are sacred, or the daily symbols, objects and routine of existence referred to as the profane. Sacred object are often believed to have divine properties that separate them from profane objects. Durkheim also argued that religion never concerns only belief, but also encompasses regular rituals and ceremonies on the part of the group of believers who then develop and strengthen a sense of group solidarity. Rituals are necessary to bind together the members of a religious group, and they allow individual to escape from the mundane aspects of daily life into higher realms of experience.

Durkheim's theory of religion exemplifies how functionalist a lists examine sociological phenomena. According to him people see religion as contributing to the health and continuation of society in general. Thus, religious functions to bind society members by promoting them to affirm their common values and beliefs on a regular basis.

On the other hand, Marxists, especially Karl Marx describe religion as 'opium of the people'. He viewed religion as teaching people to accept their current lot of life, no matter how bad, while postponing rewards and happiness to some afterlife. Religion, then prohibits, social change by teaching non resistance to oppression, diverting peoples attention away from worldly injustices, justifying inequalities of power and wealth for the privileged, and emphasizing reward yet to come. (www.cliffs.com/study/gaide/topicarticled26957).

Education and religion in Nigeria

The Nigerian system of Education gives room for religious studies in formal schools. The Christian religious knowledge and the Islamic studies serve as religious subjects for Christians and Muslims students respectively. Issue of religion is a very emotive and one has to be very careful in handling it. The syllabus of religious studies has a lot to do in promoting harmony tolerance and peaceful co-existence among followers of different religions in our schools. It is well known that Nigerian has experienced periodic religious and ethnic riots and crisis which led to lost of properties and even lives. For long, Nigerian Muslims and Christians are quite used to living side by side as neighbours in peace and cooperation as long as they do not insult or throw scorn on one another's sanctities.

Attempt had been made in the mid 1980s by some agnostic humanist in some of the southern universities to substitute religious studies with "moral education" detached from religion so that both Muslims and Christians could be taught in the same class. Muslim and Christian organizations protested against it on the ground that, religion is the source and ultimate moral values in this world and in the life after. (Lemu 2002).

The main problem of Nigerian society is tolerance. The country as secular one, grants freedom of religion to all. Therefore, Nigerians should have religious tolerance which means acceptance of others in so far as they are different. It is a principle of "live and let live" of non interference and abstention from coercion with regard to the belief of others. Religious freedom on the other hand is based on social equality of all parties concerned. It says nothing about the correctness of religious belief but merely assures the civil right of people to choose the religion they wish to follow.

The syllabus for religious studies in Nigerian schools does not have a section where it teaches religious tolerance. It mainly covers the doctrines, moral teachings observance of prayers and rituals, as well as the early coming of the religions (Lemu, 2002).

Another problem which also instigates religious friction is struggle for getting more converts. This problem exists even in government schools of mixed Muslims and Christians where some teachers of secular subjects take time during their lessons to preach their religion to all students of both religions. In some schools especially boarding schools, students targeted and exert pressure on other fellow students from other religion to covert. This leads to a lot of ill feeling and occasionally to riots

which could at times even spread to the outside community. According to Nigerian education law; it is not permitted for a school child to change religion without permission from his parent (Kenny 2002).

Education and Ethnicity

The concept of ethnic group has been defined by various scholars, Rose in Sanda (1976) in her own way ethnic group referred as those whose members share unique social and cultural heritage passed from generation to the other. According to her, ethnic groups are frequently identified by distinctive patterns of family life, language, recreation, religion and other customs which cause them to be differentiated from others. In Nigeria, ethnicity involves the identification of Nigerians with the dominant or subordinate majority or minority ethnic groups, of all which co exist within the same society.

Conflict between various ethnic groups is important aspect of ethnicity. It is inevitable under conditions of inter ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources particularly in societies where in equality is accepted as natural and wealth is greatly esteemed. The fear of being confined to the bottom of the interethnic ladder of inequality generates divisible and destructive socio economic competition which has anti social effects. Demonstration rioting and various forms of violent agitations become instrument in interethnic relations.

In Nigerian schools, the element of ethnicity is used where various languages of immediate environment is adopt as medium of instruction particularly in junior primary schools. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). But the main language of communication and instruction is a foreign language of colonial masters. This has connection with the pluralistic nature of the country. It seems not to be easy and acceptable, if one language is chosen as official language of instruction in schools.

Attempt to replace English language with an indigenous language as official language of the state creates a lot of controversies and misunderstanding. For instance during the first republic, a member of national house from Adamawa north-west constituency suggested that the house should encourage the government to introduce the teaching of Hausa Igbo and Yoruba languages into the institutions of learning throughout the country. This is to enable one of the languages to emerge as indigenous official languages in future (Lawal 1989). The move was not accepted due to the divergent opinion on which language should be the indigenous official language.

Another problem is that, in Nigeria people living outside their home areas are regarded as "strangers" and not citizens of that group. Whereas, one has the right of living wherever he wishes and in any side of the country. This also promote in equality in educational chances of certain groups.

Conclusion

The issue of religion and culture especially in a multiethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria is sensitive and important. Education had been a strong factor for bridging social inequalities among groups. However at times due to cultural and religious misunderstanding, these inequalities are promoted via education. It is not possible in a nation like Nigeria for government and authorities to choose a single religion or ethnic group as the only recognized by the authority. All religious and

ethnic groups should be agents of peace and social understanding among citizens. Educational institutions should continue toward the direction of socializing, integrating and bringing unity among students and general society.

Recommendations

In view of the points raised in this paper the followings are recommended;

1. Teaching tolerance and mutual co-existence should be incorporated into the syllabus of religious studies and social studies in our schools. This will promote unity and ones of the nation.
2. Our cultural and moral values that urged people to shows love and affection to there fellow citizens have to be encourage and be fully imbibe
3. Since the life in African societies is based on the philosophy of live and let others live, then people should be allow to practice their religion and appreciate their cultural and ethnic values.
4. Mobilization campaign through media by the government and private organization would help in reducing religious and ethnic clashes
5. People should not regard their fellow citizens from other community as strangers, rather people should be their brothers keeper.

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