Behind the Curtains of State Power: Religious Groups and the Struggle for Ascendancy in Nigerian Public Institutions: A Critical Appraisal

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Introduction

The Nigerian public sphere is a highly contested terrain, a contestation that involves several groups struggling for ascendancy and hegemonic control of this sphere in order not only to propagate and perpetuate their interest(s) but have it consolidated and protected against other opposing interest(s) seeking to take control of the power the control of this sphere offers. This contestation has always showcased ethnic conflicts as the major contestations even when some of these conflicts are tainted with religious colorations. This assumption is predicated on the fact that in Nigeria ethnic cleavages tend to coincide with religious cleavages. Many Northerners are Moslems while majority of the Southerners are Christians. An attack against Christians in the North easily translates into an attack against the Southerners especially the Igbo ethnic group which do not subscribe to the Islamic religion. Consequently the influence of religion in the politics of Nigeria tends to be overshadowed by ethnic factors. This is not to say that religious considerations do not play significant role in the nation’s power play. In fact at a particular point in the nation’s history, politics became so religionized that it divided the citizens into two worlds; the Moslems and the Christians. Thus the debate over the constitutionalization of Sharia courts, furore made over Nigeria’s membership of the organization of Islamic countries (OIC), the 1993 June 12 election, the promulgation of Sharia laws by some Northern states in Nigeria, all attests to the occasional ascendancy of religion in the body politics of Nigeria. Running under the garb of a secular state, the Nigerian state and its hegemonic ruling class has always tried to downplay religion in the open but rather smuggle it in through the back door in their struggle for the control of state power. However while a lot of attention has been paid to the Christian/Moslem dichotomy or contestations in Nigerian politics, not much attention has been given to a similar trend among diverse denominations of the two religions. For instance the contest between Roman Catholic Christians and their protestant rival, between the orthodox Christians and their Pentecostal/Evangelical rivals. This contest has gone beyond the struggle for converts and enlargement of membership, to the struggle for control of state power and other apparatuses of the state. In effect religion which in the past played a covert role in the contest for state power and other public positions is fast assuming an overt role in this regard. Today churches are more overtly involved in political campaigns and the power play involved in the distribution of public offices. Aspirants to political offices now seek endorsement of the top clergies of the various churches to ensure victory at the polls, governorship aspirants pick running mates from rival Christian denomination(s) to ensure not only balance of the various denominations in the ticket but also in order to assuage voters from the rival denomination(s)
as that can become a reason for loss of votes at the polls. In the civil service and parastatals the quest for ascendancy by the various religious groups or denominations is also becoming pronounced. Religious divisions and religious favouritism is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception. Sometimes public offices are turned into mini churches during office hours in a display of piety that arises more from a showmanship of power than love for God; as many subordinates are compelled to attend this ‘fellowship’ (as these gatherings are called) against their will or in order not to offend their boss(es). Against this backdrop, this paper examines the emergent overt role of religion in the quest for and consolidation of state power and public positions in Nigerian public institutions. It traces the dynamics of this trend amongst the Christian denominations in the eastern states of Nigeria. It argues that religion just like ethnicity serves as an instrument for acquisition of state power and control of public positions and resources in an increasingly “allocative state” of Nigeria. In so doing the paper shall be divided into four parts. Section I deals with conceptual issues surrounding the instrumentalization of religion for purposes of control of state power. Section II is devoted to a brief history of religion and the struggle for state power in Nigeria. Section III is a critical analysis of the contestation amongst the various Christian denominations in the struggle for state power and public offices against the theoretical backdrop of a rentier state, with special focus on the Eastern states where the Christian denomination is dominant. Section IV is summary and conclusion.

**Religion as instrument of State Power - Conceptual Issues.**

One of the intriguing aspects of Nigerian politics is the ease with which the political class capitalise on any form of identity to capture state power or public office. At one time ethnicity is used, where the ethnic card is not catching on, the religious card is flown. Ethnicity in this sense also includes other forms of local identities that have come to be known in Nigeria as the indigene factor. In other words the history of Nigerian politics is one in which one form of identity or the other has always played a role. In Nigeria the ethnic consideration has always come out tops. Somehow religious consideration has always accompanied or trailed very closely behind ethnicity. However identity as a construct for the analysis of Nigerian politics has not been the core of intellectual engagement of issues in Nigerian politics, due to what Mustapha (in Jega,2003:12) identified as the phobia amongst certain category of scholars of African politics not to undertake any intellectual work capable of undermining the national integration project and also partly as result of pre-occupation of most radical scholars with class determinism as an explanation of African politics.(Jega 2003:12). Although the identity
thesis is gaining prominence in the analysis of African politics as argued by Bangura (1994 in Jega 2003:12) it still does not detract from the fact it has always been politicized by the political class for selfish reasons. Identity works because it is anchored in psychological and social roles, like emotional tie to a group, as well as obligations and responsibilities relating to membership to a group to which a person identifies. It is perhaps this emotional tie which underlie identity relations that politicians manipulate in a rather interesting manner to oust opponents in the struggle for public office. In addition the dynamic character and fluidity of these identities picked and dropped as situation demands portray identity as not the underlying basis of social and political action. In fact Pye (1962 in Jega 2003) notes that those who share an interest share an identity, thus the interest of each requires the collaboration of all. It is this shared interest that determine or (in the case of communal groups) enhances identity consciousness. Jega (2003:15) thus notes that the question of which sort of identity has the most significant impact or bearing on a person’s behaviour is a critical issue and a subject of intellectual speculation. He argues that while identities are more or less fixed, identity consciousness is dynamic. Hence, mobilization, provocation, and agitation are central to the formation of a requisite identity consciousness which in turn is critical to identity based politics. In Nigeria the mobilization and manipulation of identity groups in the quest for political power is a known phenomenon. This manipulation has always succeeded because of the indifference of the state, colonial and post-colonial to the feelings and welfare of the people. (Nnoli, 1978, Ake 1996, Jega 2003) Identity politics thrives because many of the identity groups in Nigeria, whether ethnic or religious has always acted as buffers against excruciating economic hardship of the state. In this vein Jega (2003:15) notes that in competition or struggles over societal resources, especially in situations of scarcity, collective demands tend to be predicated and organized on shared interests which in turn tend to be hinged on either psychological “givens” or on shared socio-cultural identities. Thus, identity politics becomes nothing more than the mutually reinforcing interplay between identities and the pursuit of material benefits within the arena of competitive politics. Thus identity politics whether ethnic or religious or both thrive in Nigerian politics and tend to emasculate class interests because it is beneficial both to the political ruling class that use it and the mass base of these identity groups. For the politicians it provides them with ready political base for ascent into political power positions of their dream, and on the part of the mass it creates an easy access to state power and state resources when a member of the in-group is in charge. (Nnoli 1978, Ake 1996, Obianyo 2001, Jega 2003) Thus it is not uncommon to find these identity groups organizing some form of party or “welcome reception for a
member who has just been catapulted into the exalted position of state power with a catalogues of demands of what is expected of him/her as contribution to the in-group while in office. What Richard Joseph,(1999:67) termed prebendalism. He defined Prebendalism as one in which the offices of the state are allocated and then exploited as benefices by the office holders, but also as one where such a practice is legitimated by a set of political norms according to which the appropriation of such offices is not just an act of individual greed or ambition but concurrently the satisfaction of the short term objectives of a subset of the general population”

Richard Sandbroke (in Joseph 1999) identified insecurity –physical and material as the major reason individuals seek attachment to big men” capable of providing protection and advancement. Thus the use of public office for personal aggrandizement or to sustain private loyalties has led to another debate as to the relationship between the public and the private in Africa, and the nature of the state in Africa.

Writing on this, Chabal and Daloz (1999:1-13) argue that the persistence of pre colonial norms and values along side colonial norms and values in the post colonial state shows that the post colonial state of Africa is a mere shadow of the original. (The original is the state in the west). They argue that in the post colonial state of Africa political legitimacy derives from a creatively imprecise interaction between the ‘ancestral norms and the logic of the ‘modern’ state. The modern state depends above all on the gradual emancipation of established political structures from society. It is the outcome of a process by which the realm of politics is gradually emancipated from society and constituted into increasingly autonomous political institutions. The post colonial state, in their view has failed to become differentiated from society over which it rules and therefore cannot acquire the neutral political status which would allow its legitimation and proper institutionalization. “The edifice conforms to the western template, while the workings derive from patrimonial dynamics. In a way it is a counterfeit of the western model meriting the adjectival phrases used in describing it- “the non-emancipated state” or the “undifferentiated state.” This lack of differentiation is what has contributed to the blurring distinction between what is public and what is private sphere in African politics. Thus ‘state service is resolutely particularistic and personalised, far removed from bureaucratic norms’. Consequently ‘public employment is exploited as private resource. (Chabal and Daloz 1999, Anders 2002) The colonial state was blamed for this non-consolidation of the institutional superlatives of the modern state before independence was
granted to the colonies; Chabal and Daloz failed to identify the specificities of the colonial state that made consolidation impossible. They also failed to recognize the contribution of the colonial state and its ruling class to the articulation of modes of production and corresponding social relations emanating there from that characterized the post colonial state. In other words the persistence of the pre-colonial modes of production along side the capitalist mode introduced by the colonial state is attributable to the exploitative and divisive policies and politics of the colonial state. (Nnoli 1978, Nnoli 1989, Ake 1996, Obianyo 2001, Ekeh in Osaghae 2003.)

Peter Ekeh (in Osaghae 2003) provided an excellent explanation on the overlapping of the public and private sphere in Africa in his theory of the two publics. According to Ekeh, under colonialism, the public realm unlike that of western society developed as two publics rather than one. On the one hand is the primordial public which is closely identified with primordial groupings, sentiments and activities which nevertheless impinge on public interest to the extent the groupings, ties, and sentiments influence and determine the individual's public behaviour. This public, whose constituents are ethnic, communal and home town associations, owed its existence to the alienating nature of the colonial state and its failure to provide the basic welfare and development needs of the masses of ordinary peoples. This public provided the public goods like schools credit facilities, scholarship, health care centres which the state failed to provide its citizen subject. Two significant elements of this public are:

(i) The strong sense of ownership by members of its constituents who fiercely resist state intrusions other than those that are of immediate benefit.

(ii) The primordial public is moral and operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm. In this public social exchanges are based on mutual reciprocity between rights and duties part of which is a moral responsibility on the part of individuals in positions of influence to ensure the collective and individual well-being of members of the group.

In contradistinction to the primordial public is the civic public which is historically associated with the colonial administration and which has become identified with popular politics associated with Africa. Though the civic public may not be coterminous with the state it is no doubt associated with the various public apparatuses of the colonial state like the police, the civil service etc. (Osaghae 2003).

The civic public is marked by the two significant features, namely:
(I) It suffers from endemic crisis of ownership, the people do not claim or identify with it as they do the primordial public. It is marked by an us versus they relationship, where the us is the primordial public whose ownership, autonomy and sustenance is jealously guarded.

(iii) The civic public is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public. Thus, the individual feels no moral urge to reciprocate the benefits he receives from it and the behaviour that would be regarded as morally reprehensible in the primordial public, such as embezzlement of public funds is permissible here in so far as the larger group directly or indirectly benefits from the loot.

The contradictory pulls and demands of simultaneous membership of the two publics is what underlie the pervasive problems of ethnicity, religious politics and state corruption that it engenders. (Osaghae 2003) Osaghae notes that if the post colonial state civic public suffers the fate of the colonial state, it implies that it has the sane attributes as the colonial state.

What is not easily discerned from the theory of the two publics is why the state has continued to be an object of plunder and abuse by those who should protect it. What is the distinctive character of the post-colonial state that makes it easily susceptible to the plunder of public officers put in charge as its custodian? Without trying to regurgitate what is already a familiar argument in social science circles, the post colonial state inherited all the attributes of its progenitor- the colonial state. However, one important attribute of this state is its rentier character. The use of the state apparatus for rent collection started with the colonial state. This trend continued with the post colonial state not just because of the weak economic base of the political class that inherited it but also as a result of the lack of bonding or feeling of ownership between the civic public as represented by the state and its apparatuses and native population that took over after independence. The post colonial state became more statist and allocative given the ideological imperative that propelled it to power- the ideology of welfarism and development. In the bid for a more secure material base, coupled with the high hopes for a better life promised to the people at independence the state assumed a larger than life role in the economy. All the commanding heights of the economy were under the control of the state. This phenomenon raised the stakes attached to
state power. The post–colonial state became the major dispenser and allocator of rewards and benefits in the society. Thus material security became synonymous with state power. This intensified the struggle for state power and its control. In addition the huge rent accruing from oil revenue in Nigeria became additional impetus for the warfare that characterized the struggle for state power. As Ake (1996:7) puts it:

The winners in the competition for power win everything, the losers lose everything. Nothing can be more than losing, nothing, better than winning. Thus everyone seeks power by every means, legal or otherwise and those who already control state power try to keep it by every means. What emerges from this is a politics which does not know legitimacy or legality, only expediency…

Reiterating on the absence of public space he notes:

Our politics is not a lawful competition to select those to manage our common concerns but a fight to capture and privatize an enormous power resource. There is no public realm, strictly speaking no state. There is only a contested terrain, where interest groups and communities go to fight for appropriation.

The point we are making is that the rentier character of the state is partly responsible for the plunder of the state and the instrumentality of identity whether of ethnicity or religion in the struggle for state power. A rentier state and rentier economy is the product of a post colonial state with very weak productive base and externally controlled economy dependent on revenue from sale of primary commodities for survival. It is also characterised by a dependent ruling class with weak economic base who also depend on external rent accruing to the state for private accumulation. Thus a rentier economy relies on substantial external rent while its government is the main recipient of this wealth. One of its major features is that production efficiency is relegated to the background and, there is at best a tenuous link between individual income and activity. Getting access to the rent circuit is greater preoccupation than attaining production efficiency. (Beblawi and Luciani 1987 in Ibrahim 2003). The importance of access in a rentier economy leads to a rentier mentality, which embodies a break in the work–reward causation. Reward–income or wealth is not related to work and risk bearing, rather to chance or situation. For a rentier, a reward becomes a windfall gain, an isolated fact, situational or accidental as against the conventional outlook where reward is integrated into a process of the end result of a long, systematic and organized production circuit (Beblawi 1987 in Ibrahim 2003). There is thus a glaring contradiction between rentier
and production ethics. The rentier state is oriented away from the conventional role of providing public goods that have been extracted from the people through taxation; it is a provider of private favours. Thus becoming what Luciani (1987 in Ibrahim 2003) termed an allocation (as distinct from a production) state. In other words a rentier state is anchored on the privatization of the public sphere made easier and acceptable by the persistence of the primordial production relations based on kinship and communal ties. This sense of community was also exhibited by adherents of the new Christian religion in engaging opponents of their faith during the colonial period. It is also not uncommon to find Christian religious groups or even products of their educational institutions form groups along communal lines in the cities and towns. Writing about Malawi, Anders (2002) notes that, “in an urban and modern environment other networks based on residence, social status and church membership is very important”. Thus, urbanized and ‘modern’ civil servants maintain diverse social relationships with neighbours, colleagues, old schoolmates and fellow members of the church congregation. In other words primordial ties also characterized the emergent civic publics that developed from the colonial state. The neo-capitalist system run by the colonial state embedded as it were in alienatory and exploitative policies neither allowed for the disappearance of the communal production relations nor atomisation of society that inheres from capitalist production system. The communal production relations penetrated and harmonized with the post colonial ‘modern’ state based on capitalist production relations in a rather peculiar way that has rendered the state dysfunctional to public concerns. Chabal and Daloz (1991:16) thus conclude that in most African countries, the state is no more than a décor, a pseudo-western façade masking the realities of deeply personalized political relations.

It is within the purview of the rentier state thesis that we can begin to discern the instrumentality of religion in the struggle for state power in Nigeria.

Religion and Politics of State Power in Nigeria: Historical Antecedents.
The state in Nigeria has been both in complimentary and dialectical relationship with religious groups in Nigeria. It has been a relationship of harmony and conflict. Suffice it to state that the modern state in Nigeria has been a partner of Christian religious groups that not only preceded it but complimented its role, its ‘civilising mission’ in Africa. Thus, the British trading companies, the Christian missions and the colonial state all penetrated Nigeria at about the same time. According to Coleman (1986) as early as 1826 twelve British companies
were already in the Bonny River. The discovery in 1830 that the Niger entered the bight of Biafra served as an invitation for many traders to penetrate the hinterlands. At about the same time (1846) the first Christian missionary of the Presbyterian denomination arrived from Scotland to the Duke Town of Old Calabar. By 1875, another mission known as the Christian Missionary Society,(C.M.S.) of the Anglican Church arrived Onitsha. This was followed by the Roman Catholic Mission(R.C.M) arrival at Onitsha in 1885. (Amucheazi, 1986) After Berlin Conference of 1885, Britain gave the Royal Niger Company power to “administer, make treatises, levy customs and trade in all territories in the basin of the Niger and its effluents”. This power gave the company monopoly control of trade in the Region. By 1900 the British Government took over control over from the royal Niger Company. Lord Lugard was appointed the high commissioner of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. 1904 saw to the amalgamation of the Southern Protectorate with the Lagos colony, while in 1906, the Protectorate and Colony of Southern Nigeria was merged with the Northern Protectorate giving birth to the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Thus, commerce, Christian Missions and the colonial apparatus appeared on the Nigerian scene at about the same time and also maintained a close tie. For instance the missionaries sought the help of the colonial state in destroying shrines and supposed ‘fetish idolatry worship’ of the native population, while they at the same time engage in training of local personnel through missionary education for administration of the state, at a time when the colonial state was in acute shortage of staff.(Amucheazi 1986, Obianyo 2001) As Amucheazi (1986) observed the triumvirate alliance was of fundamental importance to the success of Christian missions in Eastern Nigeria. The instrumentality of the Christian missions in the consolidation of colonial values and colonial rule in Nigeria lied in their involvement in the provision of vital public goods which the state should have undertaken, namely, education, health services and other social services. Although their involvement in these services were for evangelical purposes and the quest for membership, it nevertheless fulfilled a real economic function for both the natives seeking enhancement in their material position in the changing political economic and social situation, as well as for the colonial state which felt relieved of a burden that would have eaten into its already lean purse for administration. Amucheazi also observed that through the provision of these services, the missions were able to raise funds, win more converts which also translates to more funds for the church. The material relevance of these services was to account for the bitter struggle between the C.M.S. and the Roman Catholic Mission on the one hand and the state and the Roman Catholic Mission on the other. Obviously because of the C.M.S. higher education policy it was able to produce high skilled manpower that were
...later to dominate the emerging state apparatuses, thus attack on state policies of quasi independent regions translated into attacks between adherents of the two denominations. For instance when the NCC led government in Eastern region embarked on a comprehensive education policy which was aimed at producing useful self confident and competent citizens, with loyalty to the state, but which was likely to take away education from the control of the missions. The Roman Catholic Mission not only criticized and decried the policy but also used abusive language against its authors who were mainly of the protestant order. The Protestants saw this as an attack on its members. The R.C.M. even went as far employing overt political action of calling on its adherents to shun nationalist movements. It even went as far as fielding candidates for election against all candidates of non Roman Catholic faith nominated by the NCNC. (Amucheazi 1986:87) In the ensuing quest for hegemony in the dictation of policy objectives of the state and engage politics to protect their interests, the rival churches embarked on the formation of special laity councils, namely the Eastern Nigeria Catholic Council (ENCC) and the Convention of Protestant Citizens (CPC). The later was a response to the aggressive political activities of the former. The two bodies were to socialise the laity for political participation on behalf of the church. (Amucheazi 1986:104-109) In our conceptual discussion, we noted that the civic realm also operated social relations based on primordial ties. Thus in their structural arrangement, the church persistently followed the boundary mapping of the state. Sometimes priests were sent to their local communities for pastoral work. The aim was to create an identity of interests between the minister and the community. Amucheazi (1986:81) notes that indigenization of denominational staff received active encouragement from all the churches. Thus when the Anglican Diocese of Aba was created after the war and Rt. Rev Afonya from Rivers state was appointed its Bishop, it was resented by the indigenes of the Diocese. This goes to show the extent primordial ties infiltrated other civic groups. The position of a Bishop is a high material rewarding venture that many communal groups jostle for as they do other positions of power. These conflicts laid the foundation for the clash of interests between members of these denominations in the post colonial state.

In the Northern part of the country, the state engages religion and religious groups in a different way. First, the colonial state debarred the Christian Missions from evangelizing the Moslem dominated north. This decision was attributed to the need to keep intact the rich culture and administrative structure which the colonial state met in the North and which facilitated colonial state administrative policy of indirect rule.
This policy was to have its own negative implications in the integration of the Northern and Southern parts of the country. While the south became advanced in western education—the gateway into the colonial state apparatuses, the North lagged far behind as the state engaged in literacy programme very late. The disparity in culture and values generated by this was later to induce the feeling of suspicion and fear of domination between adherents of the two dominant religions. Thus in a situation where ethnic and religious boundaries coincide, one conflict easily translates to the other. Thus fear of Northern domination of state power was at the same time fear of Moslem domination over Christians and vice versa. This was to play out in the quest for control of state power/public offices and distribution of patronages and resources. A representative view was that of Alhaji Isa Kaita (in Kukah 2003):

> When politics came, in view of what was happening in the whole country, we did not have the choice, we were all conscripted into politics to fight for the North and to defend her interests against southern domination.

Kukah (2003) also observed that religion being the basis of the foundation of the caliphate, its importance in political competition remains unrivalled. The realisation of its potency led the ruling elite to cast political opponents in religious terms. For instance when Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) went into alliance with the NCNC, a southern party, they were projected as a people who has sold out on their religion. The 1966 Nzeogwu led coup in which many Northern politicians were killed, triggered a crises that was as political as it was religious. The result was the reprisal attacks against the Igbos in the North and the ensuing three and a half years civil war. Nigeria was to witness another politics of religion during the (in)famous Sharia controversy of 1977-8 Constituent Assembly debate. The core of the controversy revolves around the inclusion of the constitution provisions for the establishment of a federal Sharia Court of Appeal to deal with cases brought before it by Muslims. The underlying reasons for this demand is that the Muslims believe that the common law used in Nigeria is essentially Christian and even the spirit of the constitution is Christian in orientation. The Muslims have to struggle to get a well deserved position in the constitution. (Mu’azzam & Ibrahim 2003:71) A representative view was that of Dr. M.T.A. Liman who advised that “a Muslim vigilante group should be formed at the national level to alert the nation whenever they feel that Islamic interest in any place, at any level is being violated or sacrificed” (Liman, 1977 in Mu’azzam & Ibrahim 2003). For the Christians introducing Sharia or a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal amounts to giving undue preference to
Muslim in a state and constitution which is secular. Rev Wilson S. Saboya (1979 in Mu’azzam&Ibrahim 2003) thus asserts that “to entrench Sharia in the constitution is to legalise the inferiority of non Muslims and the superiority of Muslims…” Another strong opposition came from Paul Unongo a foremost Nigerian politician from the Middle Belt region and a member of the constitutional Drafting Committee(CDC) He argues that, “…There is no basis at all to even discuss the probability of providing a court structure or system which by definition is a religious court and use federal funds to maintain such a religious court in a secular state”… Sharia system in his view runs counter to the political objectives and social order on which we seek to build a nation. The Assembly resolved the matter not by submitting to the desires of the Sharia court protagonists but by finding a middle ground solution in which it was resolved that cases of Sharia on Appeal shall be heard by a federal court of Appeal in which three judges learned in Islamic law shall constitute the court. (Kukah 2003:125) Similar argument dotted the nation’s political landscape during the Babangida government’s constituted Constituent Assembly of 1987-88. (Mu’azzam&Ibrahim 2003). The Sharia controversy reared its ugly head once more when Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. Some political leaders in the north tried to secure political legitimacy and hero status by advocating for Sharia state. This group of states were led by Zamfara. The attempt by Kaduna state to follow the Zamfara example led to a serious riot which claimed casualties on both sides. The Sharia controversy of the fourth republic was believed to be a reaction to the Christian led government of Rtd Gen Obasanjo, (who announced himself as a ‘born again’ Christian on assumption of office) and perceived political marginalization of some Northern Muslim politicians. The whole essence was to undermine the Obasanjo administration and make the country fragile and ungovernable for him. It was also used as a platform to bring together once more an already factionalized northern political class. The Sharia crisis of the fourth republic led Korieh (2005) to conclude that religion has superseded ethnicity as the major driving force of political legitimacy. It also suggests among other things the increased use of religion by stakeholders to push political agenda.

Another heated religious issue in Nigeria’s national politics revolved around Nigerian membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC ) in 1986. The Christians perceived this move as a move by the Moslems to turn the country into an Islamic state. The Babangida led government justified the membership on the grounds that it was a forum for co-operation in economic, technical and cultural matters. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) responded by series of wake up calls and publication aimed at raising the
consciousness of the Christians and make them more active in the struggle for hegemonic control of state power between the two religious groups in Nigeria. CAN for instance published a book titled Leadership in Nigeria in which it sought to tabulate the Christian/Muslim ratio in the powerful decision making positions of the Nigerian state. Though the publication centred on the Babangida regime, the facts contained therein favoured the Christian group as being dominant in the decision making positions of the state, 204 Christians as against 138 Muslims who have participated in the Armed forces Ruling Council(AFRC, Council of Ministers, as well as Council of States. (Bari 1990 in Mu’azzam & Jibril 2003) The retirement of some prominent Christian minority elements from the North like Gen, Domkat Bali also spawned controversy leading to inciting publications by CAN. The problem was compounded by the botched Orkar led coup of April 22, 1990 in which some Northern Muslim dominated states were excised from Nigeria. Inciting political statements bordering on religion did not help matters. Chief Arthur Nzeribe was quoted to have said in an interview with a Christian newspaper-the Leader that “Christianity and Islam will be the underlying factors in the 1990 elections…time has come for the Christians to be political…” Some Muslims expressed similar feelings. A representative view was that of Fakki, “It is incompatible with Islam, therefore to pledge support to any political party of a non Islamic platform or to yield to a non-Islamic government of alien origin and aims…” (Mu’azzam& Ibrahim 2003) These statements have been made against the background of the two party systems of the Babangida transition politics which nullified ethnicity as a platform for political campaigns. In a similar vein the presidential aspirant of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) was credited with statements inciting Moslems not to vote for a Christian candidate in the 2003 election. Though he debunked the allegation, it however earned him the dislike of the Southern Christians. Apart from these overt religious controversy spanning the nations political landscape, there has always been covert attempts by the ruling class(es) to ameliorate the fear of religious domination by balancing the various political positions with members of the two dominant religions. At all times the chief executive and his second in command has always been drawn from the two religious groups- Islam and Christianity. In the first republic, the president in the person of Chief Hon Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was a Christian while the Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Balewa was a Muslim. The Ironsi administration that succeeded it had Babafemi Ogundipe as Vice, The Gowon administration was a balancing of ethnicity than religion. But military consideration held sway. Being a Christian from the North, his second in Command was first, Joe R.I. Akahan, followed by Iliya B. Bisalla, Hassan Usman Katsina, David Akpode Ejoor, and then J.E.A. Wey. The
administration that toppled him led by late Gen Murtala Mohammed was a Muslim but his second in command, Rtd Gen Olusegun Obasanjo is a Christian from the South West. When Mohammed was murdered in the failed coup of 1975, Obasanjo took over but his second in command was a Muslim Northerner, Late Gen Shehu Musa Yar’Adua. The civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari - a Muslim which followed had Chief Alex Ekwueme as his Vice. The Gen Buhari administration that ousted the Shagari regime did not think much about balancing of religion in the most powerful positions of he state as his second Late Major Gen Tunde Idiagbon was also a Muslim. The administration’s primary aim of fighting corruption/indiscipline in the system did not leave much room for politicking, as many members of the political class at this period populated the prisons in Nigeria over allegations of corrupt enrichment. The Babangida regime that succeeded Buhari had as the second in command Air Commader Ebitu Ukiwe, a Christian who was later replaced by another Christian Admiral Augutus Aikhomu. When Babangida stepped aside after the imbroglio surrounding the cancellation of the June 12 election in which a Southern Muslim was said to have won, the interim administration that succeeded him was led by a Christian, Chief Ernest Shonekan, assisted by late Gen Abacha who later ousted him in a palace coup to take over the reins of government. Gen Abacha was assisted by Major Gen Oladipo Diya a Christian from the South West. Following disagreements between the two he was replaced by Gen Jeremiah Useni, another Christian from the Middle Belt. The transition government of Gen Abdusalami was assisted by Michael Akhigbe, a Christian. Under the regime of Obasanjo, his vice was Alhaji Atiku Abubakar a Muslim from the north, Under the present regime of Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar’Adua the vice president is a Christian from the minority South-South geo-political zone- Dr Jonathan Ebele Goodluck. Much as the ethnic consideration hold sway in these appointments, it nevertheless balances up the religious divisions as ethnic and religious divide in Nigeria tend to coincide.

**Christian Religious Groups and the Contest for State Power/Public Offices in the South East of Nigeria: A critical Analysis**

Amucheazi (1986) observed the effort made by the various Christian denominations in Eastern region especially the C.M.S and the R.CM to structure their organization along lines of political boundaries –provincial or divisional. The practise he argues seemed to have been to group together wherever possible people of the same or near common affinity within one Diocese. The practice has not seized today. The implication of this exercise is that in political homogenous communities religious divide played greater role in choice of candidates for
election than ethnic or communal consideration. Hence since the creation of states in 1991 that brought into existence Enugu state and Anambra state, ethnicity or the indigene factor seized to be a serious platform in the contest for public office. In the absence of the hegemonic politics of powerful interests groups, like business men/contractors, religion has become the next powerful political factor in the contest for political and public offices in the various states particularly Anambra state. It is a known fact that the hardship occasioned by the structural adjustment policy and the peasantization and proletarianization of the middle class led to the explosion of Christian religious groups known as Pentecostal churches. These emergent groups offered not only spiritual alleviation of the peoples suffering but material alleviation as well. They promised their congregation faith, wealth and healing attracting them the label of ‘prosperity churches’ by the orthodox denominations. They also challenged the orthodoxy of the traditional denominations of the Roman Catholic and Anglican order. Professing themselves to be ‘born again’ in keeping with the admonition of Christ to His followers that only those reborn in spirit shall inherit the kingdom of God. They attracted large followers that frightened the orthodox denominations to allow similar worship style and groups to emerge within their fold. The emergence of Gen Obasanjo a self styled born again as president energised the Pentecostal belief of redemption and miraculous uplift of God’s children.

In Anambra state a Pentecostal Anglican became the governor of the state in 1999 in the person of Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju. According to Chief Emeka Offor his sponsor, it was the way the man spoke about God and Christ that convinced him to support his candidacy as the Peoples Democratic Party candidate in the state. Governor Mbadinuju promoted Pentecostalism as official government policy, as every Monday morning was carved out for praise worship reminiscent of the Pentecostal order. All civil servants in the state bureaucracy were expected to be in attendance, while the state radio broadcast the service for those in other parts of the state who cannot attend physically. Sometimes the worship was organized at the Onitsha main Market putting business transactions on hold until the exercise was over. Because the people clamoured for material and spiritual redemption from God the exercise was welcomed until the obvious misadministration of the state leading to infrastructural decay, non payment of worker’s salary, state orchestrated political violence, which portrayed the governor in a negative light. During the 2003 electoral campaigns, religion once again came to the fore as the Roman Catholic Church openly endorsed the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) gubernatorial candidate – Mr Peter Obi as the candidate of the church. Peter Obi was
the favourite of the Catholic church not only because of his strong catholic affiliation with a brother as a Reverend father in the Catholic church, but he was in a party perceived by the Igbo as representing the Igbo interest. At this time the people were not only disenchanted with the PDP party in the state but also with the PDP Federal government led by Obasanjo believed by Igbo to be on a mission to destroy the material wellbeing of the Igbo. At the inception of his administration, President Obasanjo embarked on a policy of banning the importation of several foreign goods, foremost of which were used cars above 8years. The Igbo many of whom are merchant traders saw this as a deliberate policy to deny them material progress. This led to the resurgence of the Biafra consciousness. Suffice it to add that many of these traders and artisans formed the core of the Movement for the Actualization of Biafra(MASSOB) membership. MASSOB also attracted radical priests of the Roman Catholic Church, as the church became one of the media for communicating to the people about the agenda of the organization. For instance the seat at home order to all Igbo of South East Nigeria was announced during church service in many of the catholic churches east of the Niger. (Obianyo 2007) Thus, the APGA candidate Mr. Peter Obi became the favourite of the Roman Catholics but also lovers of Biafra who saw APGA headed by the erstwhile Biafran leader Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu as another opportunity for the Igbo to reclaim their political birth right in Nigeria. In addition, following the bitter politics between Governor Mbadinuju and his estranged godfather, Chief Emeka Offor, Anambarians vowed not to support candidates’ sponsored by political godfathers who end up emptying the coffers of the state in their bid to reclaim their election expenses. There were other candidates who sought the blessings of the various religious leaders in the state, like Dr Chris Ngige, but never received the endorsement of any major denomination. Dr Chris Ngige is a Catholic who campaigned on a subject very dear to the Catholic Church – that is return of schools to the missions or churches, yet the church never endorsed him. At the end of the 2003 election, Dr Ngige was declared the winner in a widely contested result. It is important to point out that all the gubernatorial candidates had their ticket balanced religiously. Mr Peter Obi had as his running mate, Mrs Virgy Etiaba, whom it was alleged was the candidate of the Anglican Archbishop of the Ecclesiastical Province of the Niger. Dr Chris Ngige had as his running mate Dr Okey Ude an Anglican but a relation of his political godfather Chief Chris Uba. Dr. Chris Ngige was later ousted as governor of Anambra state after the Appeal Court judgement that restored Mr Peter Obi as the winner of the election in March 15 2006. It is important to point out that during the administration of both Dr. Ngige and Mr Peter Obi religious consideration also influenced the various appointments in the state. In keeping with his policy
to return school to the mission Dr. Ngige appointed a Roman Catholic Knight as commissioner of education in the person of Prof L.N. Muoghalu. Not long after, Dr Ngige was knighted by the Catholic Church. It was also gathered that the head of the various denominations also made input in the cabinet appointments of the incumbent governor Mr Peter Obi. The balancing measures are respected in appointments into other public institutions in the state. In Enugu state, the ex-governor of the state Dr Chimaroke Nnamani faced unrelenting attacks from a charismatic Catholic priest –Rev father Mbaka. Rev. Mbaka accused the governor of all kinds of crime and misdemeanour, including attempt at his life. These attacks go on during his weekly prayer meetings at Enugu in which many Roman Catholic faithfuls were in attendance. Dr. Chimaroke an Anglican by orientation found solace in the comfort of the support extended to him by his own Bishop and congregation. He also tried to counter the catholic misgivings about him by endorsing a Catholic as his successor to the high office of the governor, although other political considerations also held sway in his choice of the candidate. During the 2007 election, Catholic Churches openly influenced their congregation’s electoral choice by reading out to them in preferential order, candidates they can support for the gubernatorial election. All the names read out were persons of Roman Catholic belief.

Religious affiliation was also employed by other contestants of public office whether federal or state. In one of the federal Universities in the South East, specifically, religion at a time polarised the University. The incumbent Vice Chancellor at the time was a Roman Catholic, but each time he fell out with the academia over salary and welfare package of staff, he demonized the opposing denomination(s) as being behind the effort to undermine his administration. Even when the leadership of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in the University was led by Catholics, he accused them of allowing themselves to be manipulated by members of the other major denomination, notably the Anglican Church. Note that in the contest of state power, the Roman Catholics always find themselves in opposition to the other denominations which it believed have a lot in common in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church. The matter degenerated when the new incumbent of the office of the Vice Chancellor was not a Catholic faithful endorsed by the outgoing Vice Chancellor. The Out going VC refused to handover to the new incumbent while at the same time mounting pressure on the then minister of education a Catholic, to deny the appointee a letter of appointment and have a catholic replace him. When eventually the effort failed and the appointment of the new VC was confirmed through other power brokers at the centre, the
University experienced a lot of politicking bordering on religion. Appointments to key positions in the University were scrutinized to know which religious group benefited most. Matters came to a climax when the Vice Chancellor had to publish all the academic and administrative appointments in the University and the religious affiliation of the occupants to allay the fears by the various religious community of marginalisation. (Unizik Comet 2003) Pulpits were employed by some Catholic priests to criticise the administrative policy of the University, just because the incumbent was not a member of their fold. Just recently effort by the Vice Chancellor to hand over to one of his deputy Vice Chancellors after completing his five years tenure, was engulfed in religious controversy, as it was alleged that the minister who is a Pentecostal favour a hand over to a Pentecostal in an acting capacity pending the inauguration of a new University Council that will oversee the appointment of a new Vice chancellor. Though the out going VC eventually handed over to one of his deputies, who incidentally is a Catholic, this did not go down well with the Protestant and Pentecostal community in the University. One may reason that the struggle for hegemony amongst the various religious denominations in public sponsored universities would have diminished in the face of the proliferation of private Universities established by the various Christian denominations. But that has not happened. Just like other public offices with enormous resource base and power, the post of a Vice Chancellor carry immense material benefits and patronage powers. An occupant of such position can develop a large network of clientele through provision of employment, contracts, admissions, promotions and donations to causes. More importantly, those who can establish other forms of affinity with him – religious or ethnic are assured quicker access to the occupant of such a position and the likelihood of having their request granted. Such occupant is also expected to make huge donations to the group’s projects from public funds under his control. This underscores our earlier position as to why the use of religion just like ethnicity works as an instrument of exclusion in the contest for state power and other public positions in Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

One recurring decimal in the history and dynamics of religious conflict in Nigeria whether inter or intra is that it borders on the accumulation of rewards and benefits which the offices bestow on the occupant and his supporters. The controversies never centre on the production of resources. This can only be attributed to the character of the state as a dispenser of benefits and rewards. In the face of state failure occasioned by long years of abuse of public offices, the political space is further constricted making it more difficult for all members of the ruling
class to be accommodated in office at any given time. This thus intensifies the struggle for these positions. Every arsenal is employed to oust opponents, namely, ethnicity, religion, profession or whatever works. Jega (2003:27) explained it this way:

Under conditions of economic crisis, and subsequently structural adjustment, there has been a swift decline in the ability of the Nigerian state to provide for the basic socio-economic needs of the people. Similarly, there has been increased exclusion of a segment of the elite and the bourgeoisie in the distribution of the spoils of office, and an acute marginalisation of the majority of the population from the benefits of development projects and social provisioning. All these have led to an increased crisis of legitimacy of the state. As the state experiences a process of decomposition and recomposition ...and disengages from critical social provisioning, only the constituencies and clients of those who control state power actually continue to have access to state resources and patronage. Thus under these conditions groups have tended to rely on identity based politics to struggle for access to the state and the resources that it controls, in order to protest exclusion and oppression as well as to demand basic rights and socio-economic provisioning.

The solution lies in reorienting the state away from distribution and towards production. There is also the need to reduce the material rewards accruing to occupants of public offices in Nigeria, and discourage the use of public offices for private favours and personal purposes. Breach of regulations in that direction should be severely punished as deterrents. All this can be realised if we have purposeful committed leadership ready to lead by example and committed to the progress and development of the people.

References
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