Religion and Conflict
Case Study Series

Nigeria:
Rivalries Split Along Ethnoreligious Lines

August 2013
Abstract

This case study explores the recurring violence in Nigeria between ethnic and religious partisans of the Muslim-majority North and Christian-majority South, particularly as witnessed in Plateau State, centrally located between these two regions. The nature of this conflict is delved into via four main questions: What are the historical origins of difference and conflict within Nigeria? How are domestic religious forces and identities involved? How do issues of sharia, indigeneity, and the census intersect with religion? Are international influences important in exacerbating or resolving tension? The case study includes a core text along with a timeline of key events and a list of recommended further readings for additional information on the situation in Nigeria.

About this Case Study

This case study was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

This case study was made possible through the support of the Henry Luce Foundation and the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs.
Contents

Introduction 4
Historical Background 5
Domestic Factors 6
Socioeconomic Factors 7
International Factors 11
Conclusion 12

Resources

Key Events 13
Further Reading 14
Discussion Questions 15
Nigeria, Africa’s most populous state, has been the site of enduring violence. Often the violence relates to political and economic grievances split across ethnoreligious allegiance: Christians (Igbo, Yoruba, and others) and Muslims (Hausa, Fulani, and others). This divide is apparent in conflicts over political candidates and representation, government allocation of resources, indigeneity (the status of being indigenous), and sharia. This case study will focus primarily on the recurring violence in Plateau State to demonstrate how religion has permeated the violence across the country. Near the center of country, Plateau State is geographically and symbolically in the middle of Nigeria’s domestic turbulence: on the dividing line between Nigeria’s mostly Muslim North and largely Christian South. An example of this was the adoption or extension of sharia to criminal matters between 2000 and 2001 in 12 of Nigeria’s northern states, two of which share a border with Plateau State. Internal migration also exacerbates the divide as Hausas and Fulanis have increasingly settled in Plateau State much to the dismay of the indigenous citizenry—Christians and Muslims alike. Elections and redistricting, which are the basis for patronage, led to fierce fighting that went on for months in 2002 and again in 2004, leaving over 1,000 Muslims and Christians dead. Sectarian violence flared again in the aftermath of presidential elections in April 2011. In short, Plateau State provides a window into the regional and national issues plaguing Nigeria as a whole, with conflict over economic and political spoils often defined in terms of religious identity and communal interests.
The area that is today Nigeria has a rich history and is abundant in resources. Nigeria boasts Africa's largest population—about 150 million people—in an area roughly twice the size of California. Although over 250 ethnic groups are present, the major tribes are the Hausa and Fulani, who are predominantly Muslim and dominate the North, and the Yoruba and Igbo (or Ibo), who are largely Christian and predominate in the West and East, respectively. In the 1800s, British explorers mapped the river routes of Nigeria linking the interior waterways, setting the stage for significant trade. A single Islamic state, Sokoto, was founded in the Northwest in 1809. By 1886, the British had seized control of the entire region and, by 1914, it was labeled the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Nigeria was granted increasing autonomy following World War Two, culminating in Nigeria's independence in 1960.1

Since Nigerian censuses do not note religion or ethnicity, it is difficult to determine the numbers of the Muslim and Christian population. It is estimated that Nigeria is 50 percent Muslim, 40 percent Christian, and the remaining 10 percent have indigenous beliefs. The most politically influential groups are the Hausa and Fulani, who compose 29 percent of the population, Yoruba, 21 percent, Igbo, 18 percent, Ijaw, 10 percent, and Kanuri with four percent.2

The Biafra War from 1967 to 1970 is a case in point. A northern-led coup in July 1966 put a Christian at the head of the federal military government. This did not stop Igbo, largely Christian, from being attacked in the North, leading to counter-massacres throughout the country. To ease the tensions and bring stability, Nigeria was divided into 12 states in May 1967. That solution was far from satisfying to the Igbo because the division cut off one of their states from access to the Atlantic coast. A civil war broke out that month when the Igbo declared the eastern region was seceding from the North and forming an independent nation, the Republic of Biafra. This intense, bitter war involved various international players and caused the deaths of an estimated one to three million people due to violence, disease, and starvation.3 Just as Vietnam shaped the mentality of many current senior US leaders for decades, the chaos and destruction of the Biafra War is indelible in the minds of the current Nigerian leadership. They remain hawkish but are hesitant to do things that will make the prospect of a protracted deadly conflict likely.

Nigeria was ruled under various military governments until the 1999 election of Olusegun Obasanjo, a former general and dictator as well as a Christian. After serving two terms, Obasanjo relinquished the presidency to Umar Musa Ya’Adua, a Muslim and family associate. Ya’Adua suffered from significant health problems and died in office; his vice-president, Goodluck Jonathan (a Christian), ascended to the presidency under some controversy and ultimately won the 2011 presidential election outright. In the run-up to the election and in the weeks following Jonathan's victory, riots and violence broke out across the predominantly Muslim North following local allegations of vote-rigging.

Historical Background
The domestic religious factors that exacerbate communal tension and violence are interrelated with issues of the census, ethnicity, and indigeneity discussed in the socioeconomic factors section (below). It is important to note, however, that Nigeria has a population that is roughly divided between Christians and Muslims. Historic competition between various ethnic and regional groups over land, patronage, and services has combined with religious and partisan difference to create a particularly deadly mix.

The issue of sharia is a particularly contentious flashpoint for Nigeria. As there is a Muslim majority across the North and Northeast, governors in these areas extended sharia law from civil matters to criminal offenses in 12 northern states between 2000 and 2001.4 Immediately, the constitutionality of the act was questioned. Section 10 of the Nigerian Constitution serves to eliminate any religious preference: “The government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.” Proponents of the implementation of sharia counter that the Constitution recognizes sharia courts when it comes to civil affairs.5 Not all of the 12 states that adopted sharia did so to satisfy a large majority of Muslim inhabitants; some states did so regardless of their large Christian population, angering Christians despite the fact that sharia is technically only intended to apply to Muslims (unless requested by a Christian). The expansion of sharia contributed to tensions because it was seen by many Christians as a move on the part of the Muslims to achieve religious and regional hegemony.

An example of violence that immediately followed the implementation of sharia occurred in Kaduna City, Kaduna State. Kaduna State’s population is fairly evenly split between Christians and Muslims, and events there were keenly watched in neighboring Plateau State and across Nigeria. On February 21, 2000, what started as a Christian protest against the implementation of sharia resulted in thousands left dead and injured, non-indigenous Christians fleeing to the South and thousands of houses and businesses burned and destroyed. This violence triggered revenge killings across the entire country, and exacerbated tensions in nearby Plateau State.6
Socioeconomic Factors

To fully understand the ethnoreligious tension in Nigeria, it is important to assess factors that relate to politics and economics. Two of those critical issues are the census and the notion of indigeneity. First-time observers of Nigeria are often perplexed that the idea of a national census raises such ire among Nigerians. Before Nigeria was granted independence, the British colonists conducted a census in 1952 and 1953. It was used to determine political constituencies and the allocation of resources. The North was found to have a larger share of the population, which resulted in that region receiving the lion’s share of appointments, revenues, and services. Ten years later, the ongoing charges of corruption and widespread inflation of figures of the 1952 census led to its results being officially revoked. In 1963, a second census was conducted which was accepted only after a year of hostile wrangling and allegations of data manipulation. Neither the South nor the North wanted to be named the minority population because the basis of federal revenue allocation is population and land area. Thus, when the South was found to be outnumbered by residents in the North, there was considerable protest particularly because the validity of the results was highly questionable. Ultimately, the results were accepted but the fallout of the 1963 census directly contributed to the tensions that sparked the Biafra War. Another census done in 1973 led to the same claims and counter-claims of manipulating the population figures to gain political advantage. In 1991 and 2006, censuses were organized that omitted religion and ethnicity from the categories to be counted and were regarded as somewhat successful.

With regard to indigeneity, it is one of the principal causes of conflict in Plateau State and is intertwined with, though distinct from, religion. Differences between tribes as to who are indigenes, or original habitants, and who are settlers are seen in disputes over land issues, political representation and economic privileges. The rift between indigenes and settlers has taken on a religious aspect because those claiming themselves as indigenes are Christian while those labeled as settlers are typically Muslims. It is not just a title sought for clarification purposes; being an indigene of the land is a legal category that provides an individual with certain rights not guaranteed to settlers. These include access to government employment, scholarships for state schools, lower school costs, and political positions. A certificate is issued from local authorities verifying a person’s indigeneity, which they would need to present in order to be able to access those privileges.

This preferential treatment is an established practice, but also one that may violate Nigeria’s commitment to the rights of individuals. Moreover, tribal groups do not necessarily accept being labeled as settlers because, in some cases, their families have been there for several generations; in other cases, different tribes put forth contesting claims of indigeneity for the same territory. Such is the case with Yelwa and Jos. Both cities made international headlines due to violence rooted in indigenous-settler, tribal, and religious differences in September 2001. Muslims and Christians rioted over a political rivalry that left around 1,000 dead in six days. The violence originated in the Plateau State capital, Jos, but spread out across the state from there. Moreover, with the 2011 Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States occurring the following week, some Muslims took to the streets applauding the attack on “Christian America”. In scores of retaliatory attacks by both sides over the next several years, thousands more would lose their lives.
Violence in 2001
Plateau State has an official population of 2,959,588 made up of various ethnic groups with a Christian majority. A political appointment in the state capital, Jos, inflamed tensions between Muslims and Christians. In September 2001 a Hausa Muslim was appointed coordinator of poverty eradication. As government officials have the power to disperse funds, those positions are highly coveted. The appointment of a Hausa—a non-indigene and a Muslim in the eyes of Christian indigenes—was seen as unwarranted and disturbing. The government refused to award the position to someone else and a conflict that could initially be viewed as non-indigenes versus indigenes was split along ethnic and corresponding religious lines, deepening and broadening the controversy. The conflict was brought to a head when fighting began on September 7, 2001. The two groups rioted in Jos for a week until the federal government was able to get a handle on the violence. By that time, the fighting had spread to other urban areas and rural towns as well.

After several days of violence followed by a lull on September 10, the situation flared up again, due in part to the public celebration of the September 11 Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States by a group of Muslim extremists. In all, about 1000 lives were lost during the violence and many more were displaced. This political rivalry, in the context of talk about an upcoming census and neighboring states implementing sharia, set the stage for deadly reprisal attacks across the state that would take place less than a year later.

Violence in 2002
Political rivalry was exacerbated in the spring of 2002 when another government position was sought by candidates belonging to parties split by indigeneity, ethnicity, and religion. In May, southern senatorial zones were redistricted such that a majority-Muslim town was placed within a Catholic district. The Muslims of Yelwa had sought their own district so that they could establish a new local government area (LGA). Such a development would afford the local elite financial and patronage opportunities otherwise unavailable as they were considered non-indigenous. The incorporation of Yelwa into a Catholic-majority district also meant that the new chief of Yelwa, most likely a Muslim, would not be selected from his peers but from the leader of the Catholic territory. One month later, the groups came to blows over who should become councilor in the Yelwa-Nshar ward. Muslims wanted the existing councilor to stay in office and Christians felt the position should be rotated to them. People lined up to vote for their preferred candidate but fighting broke out, ending the election. In the end, the candidate from the Fulani tribe (Muslim) was given the chairmanship since Muslims formed a majority.

As the 2002 political rivalry in Plateau State intensified, Christians forbade their women from having relationships with Muslim men. In the early morning of June 26, 2002, a night watchman of a mosque was stabbed in a Christian neighborhood in Yelwa and, later that night, a Christian was allegedly killed over the dating ban. During that confused night, witnesses later claimed that they saw and heard Tarok (a Christian tribe) masqueraders approaching the town and that following them was another group of armed Christians. The latter group allegedly taunted Muslims as they went by, challenging them to come out. The Muslims did come out to face the Christian group and violence ensued, lasting until the early morning of June 27, when soldiers came to Yelwa to restore peace. Human Rights Watch could not confirm the number of dead but reported that one man who helped bury the Muslim bodies said as many as 150 Muslims were killed. Reprisal attacks took place in nearby Wase between July 4 and July 6, 2002, killing two dozen Tarok Christians and over 30 Muslim villagers. Homes, churches, and mosques
were also targeted and burned down during these incidents. Many people fled the area, including Fulani and Tarok.

Violence in 2004
Revenge attacks in Yelwa claimed over one thousand lives and displaced tens of thousands of Plateau State citizens between February and May of 2004. Some people felt the state government was actually supporting the attacks in an attempt to drive out the non-indigenous Muslim tribes. Other residents believe the governor was simply made a scapegoat over the violence that reduced a town of 32,000 people to 1,000 as a result of deaths and people fleeing the area.

After 19 months of relative calm, violence near Yelwa resumed in late February 2004. Fulani tribespeople responded to the theft of their cattle by killing some of the Christians involved with the theft and burning their property. Other Christians then went to another village, where they killed about eight Muslims and burned their property. On February 24, 2004, Yelwa erupted in violence. Each side claimed it was the other group who initiated the violence, but it is clear that the majority of the victims were Christians. Shortly after 7:00 a.m., armed men, some of them wearing military uniforms, surrounded a church known as COCIN number 1. The Christian worshippers who were outside were ordered to go back in. Some Christians who had initially fled from the church were convinced by the men in military uniform that they were not going to be harmed and so returned. At that point, witnesses said that they heard the men yell “Allahu Akbar” and “let’s fight those ama (infidels).” A wave of fighters, most of whom were dressed in civilian clothes, went into the church and attacked the Christians inside with machetes and axes. Armed men outside shot the people who tried to escape. Witnesses placed anywhere from 50 to 350 Muslim men at the scene and said they ranged in age from 12 to 40. The violence continued through the afternoon until the military intervened.

Over 70 Christians were killed that day, at least 48 of whom died in the church siege. Officials from other areas claimed the number of Christians slain was much higher—closer to 400 in two nearby villages. Several other churches were also destroyed in the violence.

About two months later, Christians from Yelwa and surrounding LGAs retaliated. On the morning of May 2, wit-
nesses claim that a group of 1000 Christians surrounded Yelwa. They blocked the major access roads and began their attack on Muslims. The onslaughts were coordinated in that, as one wave of fighters retreated, another would advance from a different access road. The fighting on May 2 lasted for about 10 to 11 hours. The violence continued on May 3 and was said by witnesses to be even worse. During the second day of fighting, Christians cornered Muslims into several compounds and attacked them from all sides. They lit fire to structures outside of the compound to ensure that no Muslim fleeing would be able to hide in them. Numerous houses, shops, mosques, and other buildings were thus destroyed.

One targeted compound was a clinic providing care to Muslims who had been injured in the previous day's violence. Christians entered the Al-Amin clinic and ordered the women and children out. This was consistent in their targeting mainly Muslim men throughout their attacks. The armed men torched the clinic and killed the injured inside. In all, about 32 men were killed. Some were cut with machetes and cutlasses while others were shot. The attack started around 7:00 a.m. and continued until the attackers heard military vehicles approaching around 12:30 p.m.

Muslim residents estimate that about 660 Muslim men lost their lives in the attack. Human Rights Watch believes the actual number may actually be closer to 700. An additional several hundred Muslims were abducted—mainly women and children. Many women reported being sexually attacked and traded as “wives” between their captors. Women were also force-fed pork and alcohol—both of which are forbidden in Islam. Some of the abductees were rescued by soldiers and policemen while others were released by their captors in the days and weeks following the fighting.

Retaliatory attacks occurred in Plateau as well as other states, like Kano, in the days between May 2 and the declaration of a state of emergency on May 18 by President Olusegun Obasanjo. The Plateau State government pursued several initiatives to promote reconciliation under the state of emergency such as the Plateau Peace Program, a six-month program promoting dialogical conflict resolution—bringing religious, ethnic, and community leaders together to discuss and commit to peace in Plateau State. On July 2, 2004, representatives from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI), an umbrella organization for Muslims, submitted a declaration of peace to the Plateau State government. The peace agreement outlined their collective commitment to cooperating in the peacebuilding process and condemnation of religion being used to facilitate the past horrific acts of violence.

President Obasanjo attempted to create a national truth and reconciliation commission to investigate the violence that occurred between June 2000 and May 2004. The proposal—the Plateau State Unity and Reconciliation Law, 2004 and Establishment of a Reconciliation Commission—was submitted to the National Assembly in October 2004 but was never enacted. Similarly, only a handful of the participants and organizers of the violence were ever successfully indicted, tried, and punished.

More recently, local elections in Plateau State in November 2008 ended in terrible violence. The fighting started as supporters from each candidate’s side competed prior to the election. When election results were not publicly posted in a timely fashion on November 28, 2008, a rumor spread that the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), largely supported by the Christian population, had rigged the elections. Groups of young men from both the Muslim and Christian communities fought each other to protect their groups’ property and destroy that of the others. Homes, businesses, churches, and mosques were all targeted. At least 700 died in the two days of clashes. And in early 2010, violence erupted once again along ethnoreligious lines in Jos, with over 500 reported killed.
Does the ethnoreligious violence in Nigeria portend a regional conflict between Christians and Muslims? Furthermore, have outside actors been effective at exacerbating violence or contributing to peace? Although transnational actors, from Al-Qaeda to religiously-inspired peacemaking NGOs, have shown interest in the conflict, this is largely a local affair. The issues at hand tend to incorporate enduring ethnic difference (often associated with religion) with competition for vital resources and patronage rather than deep ideological rifts. Moreover, it is unclear that outside actors have played roles in inducing further conflict or making significant inroads for peace.
Religion infuses Nigerian society and politics. This case study has attempted to show three ways that religious factors have intersected with political questions, including: should religious law (sharia) become state law, at least for Muslims, and what is the basis for citizenship, patronage, and identity? The violence and controversy in Plateau State is emblematic of the issues Nigeria faces, particularly in its “middle belt” between the predominately Muslim North and mainly Christian South. Many agree with Imam Muhammad Ashafa, famous for his depiction in the film *The Imam and the Pastor*, who said the following in the wake of sectarian violence following the 2011 presidential election: “Religion is a tool used by those politician, particularly if they are losing, in order to win favor by harnessing the passion of religion so deeply felt in our society.” At this writing, violence continues following that election, including threats against those who supported “the other side,” such as the Sultan of Sokoto—who explicitly backed Goodluck Jonathan and now is the target of death threats. Nevertheless, experts suggest that it is unlikely that Nigeria will devolve into wide-scale civil war on the order of Sudan or Congo. However, unless recurring issues of governance, patronage, legal rights, and law are dealt with, Nigerians are likely to rely on sectarian and ethnic categories to define their friends and their foes.

Church in Abuja
Key Events


September 2001 Riots in Jos over political appointments—the divide also fell along religious and ethnic lines.

May 2002 Redistricting hurts political and social ambitions of Muslims. 1,000 killed.

June 2002 Fighting over councilor appointment in Yelwa—again, the split echoes religious and ethnic divides. The division creates in fighting between vigilantes.

June 26, 2002 A night watchman at a mosque in Yelwa is stabbed in the early morning raising tension as word of the incident spreads. A Tarok masquerade that night is followed by an armed Christian group who taunt the Muslims, leading to fighting that lasts into the next morning. People are murdered on both sides though the exact toll is not known. Mosques and property are burned.

February 2004 Fulani tribespeople retaliate with violence after some of their cattle are stolen. Four policemen and several villagers are murdered.

February 24, 2004 Hundreds of Christians are murdered by Muslims in Yelwa with the most devastating attack taking place at a church. Military intervention ended the attack later in the day.

May 2-3, 2004 Hundreds, if not thousands, of Christians organize a revenge attack on Muslims in Yelwa. The attackers come in waves, are well armed and organized. Approximately 700 Muslims are killed and the antagonists retreat only when the military arrives in the afternoon of May 3.

May 18, 2004 Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo declares a state of emergency.

November 28-29, 2008 Clashes between Muslims and Christians and the excessive use of force by security forces left at least 700 dead following disputed local government election in Jos.

January 17-19, 2010 Several hundred, mostly Muslims, killed in and around Jos, including at least 150 Muslims killed in the town of Kuru Karama on January 19.

March 7, 2010 At least 200 Christians killed in an attack on and around the village of Dogo Nahawa.
Further Readings


Discussion Questions

1. What are the historical origins of difference and conflict within Nigeria?

2. How were domestic religious forces and identities involved?

3. How do issues of sharia, indigeneity, and the census intersect with religion?

4. Are international influences important in exacerbating or resolving tension?

---

1 For additional information please see https://cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html and http://historyworld.net/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ad41
4 For more information about Plateau State please see http://onlinenigeria.com/links/Plateauadv.asp?blurb=462
8 Ibid.
To read the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights see http://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20999/volume-999-I-14668-English.pdf


Notably, the police had been absent during the eight- to nine-hour attack.

People who had indigenous faiths were said to have also participated in the attack.

Again, the police were absent.


