# GOOD GOVERNANCE AND EFFECTIVE HUMAN RELATIONS: PATHWAYS TO FOSTERING ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*Nigeria as the most populous African state is uniquely described as the country with the largest number of Muslims and Christians living together in the world. With over two hundred and fifty distinctively divergence lingual groupings, Nigeria has more ethnic groups than any other nation state. With this diversity, Nigeria has much to offer to humanity, especially its rich culture and historical experience as a former colonial state. However, one of the major challenges facing Nigeria is the need to overcome ethnic and religious prejudices that have impeded its development and stunted its growth, thereby retarding its progress and making it one of the poorest countries instead of one of the richest. Therefore, the thrust of this paper is to consider how best we could overcome this daunting challenge and foster ethno-religious harmony in the country. The paper is based on the conviction that good governance and effective human relations are requisite pathways necessary to foster a harmonious co-existence between different religions and various ethnic groups endowed this country by providence. This is particularly so because there can be no peace when credible leaders are lacking, and harmony exist only when good relationship between various components of the society is established.*

**Keywords:** Good, Governance, Human Relations, Ethno-Religious, Harmony, Nigeria

**Introduction**

Nigeria is the most populous country in the African continent with 250 linguistic and ethnic groups. Apart from the ethnic and linguistic divides, there is also the religious divide mainly between Muslims and Christians. The basic structure of Nigeria since colonial time has been shaped by division into a northern region, which is heavily influenced by Islam, and a southern region, where Christianity is more influential. According to Essein (2010), since independence, this division has become somewhat more important as religion has become obvious in Nigeria and her politics. These tensions have been intensified by the serious economic difficulties that the country has been facing since the 1980s. Thousands of young and most often, uneducated and unemployed men have fallen easy prey to religious bigotry and ethnic rivalries. Since independence, to say the least, the elite from different ethnic groups and religious affiliations schemed to attract as many federal resources to their regions as possible, using religion as a rallying factor. Thus, what is most worrisome is the religious dimension of ethnic competition for power and the spate of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

The dynamic nature of ethno-religious conflicts, especially in this democratic dispensation is highly worrisome and pathetic. Ethnic and religious issues are part of the most recurring issues in Nigeria's body politic. The issue has permeated the landscape since the colonial period and up till the present time, there seems to be no solution. In recent times, the activities of some elements within the affected regions have taken another dimension resulting in kidnapping suicide bombing or the disruption of well order, peace and good governance. Many have spoken out expressing deed concern while others pay lip service to ameliorating the violence. But the question is how did we get to this warped junction? We did because our leaders have been mostly ambivalent. The management strategies of government over the years have failed to resolve this reoccurring decimal. Indeed, the spiral of violent conflict generated by ethnicity and religion, despite democratic rule is alarming. Has Nigeria become such a tribally focused, congenitally and religiously divided country that only dictators and those who exploit religious divisive difference can aspire to rule? This question has necessitated an examination of the trend of conflicts as well as the mechanism of government over the years. This reoccurring decimal of ethno-religious conflicts points to one thing. That the governments over the years have

not applied adequate mechanism to the problem or rather, it is a reflection of failure on the part of the government, and therefore calls for an adequate attention of the government which only good governance can guarantee.

Furthermore, hitherto, many religious leaders and scholars have been advocating for religious tolerance in Nigeria. This is most welcome since by it, people are willing to allow others to hold opinions or follow customs different from one's own. But this, in the main, has not yielded much positive results because the party that is tolerating the other still sees the other as its opponent if not enemy, that it has to leave alone for the purpose of peace.  Of course, they do not always leave themselves alone as we have seen in the various crises. It is against this backdrop that the present researchers believe strongly that we should go beyond religious tolerance and graduate into ethno-religious harmony where each of the religious and ethnic groups must be allowed to exist. Ethno-religious harmony is not meant to fuse the religious and / or ethnic groups together or to combine all as a single whole. Rather, it is an agreement of feeling, interests, view or opinions. There is no doubt that there are many areas of agreement in our religions and these should encourage us to live in harmony. In spite of our ethnic and religious differences, ethno-religious harmony will make us free from quarreling, ill-feeling, hatred, contempt, and intolerance. We should indeed, build everywhere in Nigeria what can be described as harmonious family or neighbours. This again is what only effective human relations can guarantee.

**Clarification of Concepts**

Terms such as good governance, human relations, ethnic groups, ethnicity, religion, ethnic conflict, religious conflict and ethno-religious conflict are conceptually clarified to bring about their understanding.

Good governance according to Shekarau (2011) is such that ensures development which is ascertained by improvement in living conditions, both materials and spiritual (having inner peace and tranquility). Good governance ensures a peaceful, equitable, harmonious and just society where every citizen has a strong sense of national identity and belonging. Akinwale (2010) sees good governance as such that would ensure good legislation, respect and enforce good laws, and use such laws for the

harmonization of diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups in Nigeria. It is therefore imperative that Nigeria have a leadership that will maintain clear national vision that will emancipate the majority of the citizens from these inter-ethnic and religious prejudices that reduces the majority of the populace to abject poverty and ardent want.

Effective human relations is all about positioning people emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually so as to maintain and restore relationships at all levels of human interaction, to create safe environments that nurture each individual. Man, by nature, is religious. He is a homo- religious. In addition to being a religious being, he recognizes that he is a being in relation. This peculiar quality makes man want to be in relation not only to other beings of his own species, but to divinities and to God. According to Erivwo (1988) "The potentialities of the self are better realized when the self is related to other Selves" (P 1). Just as man is by nature religious, so is he by nature a social being. Consequently man expresses his religion in society. Hence Obiefuna (2008) maintained that human relations is an extension of religion. Those who share common beliefs and have similar aspirations, fears, and problems belong together and often attempt to find solutions to their common problems. It is for this that effective human relations helps man to develop qualities, aptitudes and abilities which enables the individual to acquire critical understanding of problem of the society, to understand and explain facts, opinions and ideas, to work in groups, to accept and participate in free discussions and to have value judgments and decision on a national analysis of relevant facts and factors.

An ethnic group has been described as a group of people linked by a common bond of kinship and communal relationship. In some cases, it has identifiable language, social, economic, and cultural traits as well as a distinct territory (Elaigwu, 2008:57). Meanwhile, Suberu (2003) says that ethnic group is regarded generally as a social collectivity whose members not only share such objective characteristics as language, core-territory, ancestral myths, culture, religion and/or political organization, but also to common descent in identity.

Ethnicity on the other hand is the contextual discrimination by members of one group against others on the basis of differentiated system of socio-cultural symbols. Ethnicity as a concept connotes struggle. It implies either an overt or covert competition between two or more ethnic groups. The trigger of the competition might be political, economic, socio-cultural or religious. Hence Hullington (1971) refers to ethnic conflict as a type of

social competition that typically involves large amount of violence and often particularly vicious forms of violence. The point is that ethnicity can give rise to ethnic conflict and ethnicity does not exist in a pure form. It is always closely associated with political, juridical, religious and other social views. Therefore, in most cases, ethnicity engenders religious conflicts.

Religion itself has to do with man's relationship with the supernatural. Religion is also primordial and easily used in the same manner with ethnicity to mobilize members of the same religion or sect. A dominant feature of religions is symbolism. Thus, symbols arise in the sub-conscious and are part or the basis of the other mental processes such as imagination, memory and even perception. In a situation where religious symbols are wrongly interpreted, conceived and perceived, conflict will surface. Hence, Ayantayo (cited in Chinyere, 2010) defines inter-religious conflict as a state of disagreement between two religious persons regarding who is or who is not holding absolute religious truth; it occurs when members of different religions are engaged in argument which often goes with bickering, controversy, demonstration, debate or squabble over religious beliefs and practices.

Sometimes religious identity becomes part of an ethnic identity, and of course when coupled with the power of the ethnic group's myth of common descent, it presents a volatile social mixture indeed. Ethno-religious conflict, therefore arise where ethnic identity and religious, loyalty overlap. In Nigeria, the northern part of the country is mostly Muslims while the southern part is predominantly Christians, and amidst these groups, there exist different ethnic groups. Many scholars and statesmen have argued that these two sources of identity are the main causes of Nigeria's under development, and have been used by some political leaders for selfish ends.

**Historical Trace of the Trend and Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria**

According to Essein (2010):

> The origin of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria dates back to the colonial government that forced the ethnic groups of the northern and southern provinces to become an entity called Nigeria in 1914. Since the various ethnic groups living in those provinces

were not consulted regarding the merger, this British colonial policy was autocratic and undemocratic, and thus led to conflict. (p. 153).

Moreso, the introduction of indirect rule in Nigeria not only reinforced ethnic divisions, it also complicated the task of welding diverse elements into a Nigeria nation (Nnoli, 1980). This strategy of governance distanced ethnic groups from each other. Prejudices and hatred became rife in the provinces as different ethnic groups started looking at one another suspiciously in all spheres of contact.

Bolarinwa (2010) further surmised that "indeed, Nigeria's multi-religious and multi ethnic character) was engendered by her colonial existence; colonialism resulted in the coming together of desperate entities under a single national authority" (p. 65). The implication is that different ethno-cultural and religious groups have to co-exist and compete within the same geopolitical entity. Akinwale (2010) added that "the arbitrary partition of Africa by European colonial powers at the Berlin Conference of November 1884, to February 1885 created states without securing the consent of peoples of diverse linguistic affinities and cultural affiliations which make them up" (p. 7). The consequence has been the creation of states held together at gun point instead of nations. This problem was compounded with the importation of Islam and Christianity, the two world religions that had been traditional enemies to one another. However, the sowing of seed of antagonism between Christianity and Islam in Nigerian dates back to pre-independence period when the British colonialists embarked on the policy of protecting the Muslim North from the "destructive influence" of the Christian south but went ahead to amalgamate the two into one political entity. But the antagonism has remained more latent until the 1977/78 Sharia controversies at the Constituent Assembly when it came to the fore (Bolarinwa, 2010). Thus, riots based (at least ostensibly) on religious affiliation and religious policies which later took up ethnic dimensions ensued. Since then, religious and so called ethnic crises have together claimed several lives and property.

However, looking at ethnic and religious conflicts purely from British colonial policies can be misleading. It is pertinent to note that governance is the fundamental root of these ethno- religious hostilities in Nigeria. Our political leaders, on both sides Muslims and Christians, have invoked the name of God in politics, and sought to use religion freely in influencing

the polity, decision and swaying national political and economic policies and to that end governance. We can hardly pretend that we do not have in our midst those who hide behind political frankness to peddle religious incitement, hate, or demagoguery. Ojo (1988) opines that "the reaction bourgeoisie has concerned itself with the fomenting of religious strife, in order thereby to divert the attention of the masses from the really important and fundamental economic and political problem" (p. 133). Shakarau (2011) further noted that the dichotomy between ethnic indigenship and civic citizenship has been the cause of many conflicts since access to services and resources depends on which category one belongs to. The present researchers therefore agree with Essein (2010) that there is an increase relationship between the rise in secular violence and the fall in the economic indices and general well-being of the people. The Nigerian economy, as a result of mis governance, has been in a state of collapse since the late 1970s through 1980s to the present. Nigeria's main source of income comes from the sale of crude oil, the real price of which often fluctuates, and the accrued revenue of which largely flies into private coffers in the guise of fuel subsidy. This underlines the material basis for the escalation of inter-ethic and inter-religious clashes and hostilities. Similarly, in Nigeria, there is the ever-increasing level of poverty typified in joblessness, deteriorating infrastructures, and so on. The widespread poverty in the country has given rise to the scramble for limited resources. There are no good roads, proper medical facilities, social infrastructures, and no good schools. Environments such as these generate fear, distrust, hatred, frustration, anger, and so on. Under such circumstances, it is easy to believe that the central government is biased in favour of one ethnic or religious group to the detriment of others. Recognizing this the ruling class consciously exploits the venom of ethnicism and religious fanaticism as means of keeping the people permanently divided and diverting their attention away from the real problems confronting them. These conscious manipulations of ethnic and religious differences under-terrible socio-economic conditions give rise to periodic explosions.

**The Way Forward**

It is clear that the dangers posed by ethno-religious crises in Nigeria are manifest, except that our leaders are ambivalent about addressing them. To them, the wielding of political power is the most lucrative occupation in Nigeria, and its attainment by any means far outweighs the risk posed

to the national interest by the means. Our present state of play is that efforts by Nigerian politicians to gain ascendency and power has led to situations in which politics has swept away any of the sacred precepts of religion, and in the process contaminated the hearts of people with bitterness and enmity for the religion of others. Thus, we are witnessing the hitherto unthinkable.

In any case, there is no doubt that major cases of ethnic and religious conflicts have attracted government's response. However, the extent of the effectiveness of government's response to these conflicts has always been a matter of controversy and therefore calls for proper examination and review towards more enduring approaches. For instance, it is observed that government has over the years placed more emphasis on the use of government's security agents to manage violent conflicts to the exclusion of other social welfare oriented approaches. The use of coercive arm of government to contain violent conflicts and restore order is mere voting for un-easy calm. Such calm is often a negative one which itself is a source of tension merely waiting for explosion under any slightest provocation. Again government is often seen as not being forth coming in punishing the perpetrators of these conflicts there by resulting in lack of trust for the government. To this, Essein (2010) believes that the way forward lies in uprooting the system that is creating the conditions that promote such hostilities, ethnicity, religion, poverty, and corrupt ruling elites overshadow life in Nigeria. This can only be achieved through good governance. An analysis of the governance situation and people's perception of governance shows that all levels of government need to do a lot of restore their credibility.

## Good Governance and the Fostering of Ethno-Religious Harmony in Nigeria

The preservation of ethnic and inter-religious peace (or its breakdown) is dependent upon the respective government's policy choices and decision. Hence the role of good political leadership cannot be over emphasized. Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have continued because Nigerian elite are corrupt and split along the lines of religion and ethnicity. Therefore, without a bold and articulate leadership, conflict management and prevention will continue to be a mirage. Nigeria needs a leadership that can challenge the actions of ethnic and religious leaders who have used violent ethno-religious conflicts for personal gain. Akinwale (2010)

surmised that good governance is a basic prerequisite for a stable Nigeria polity as there can be no harmony where credible leadership is lacking. Bolarinwa (2010) also noted that the existence of multiplicity of religious groups consequently places the burden of creating a peaceful atmosphere and co-existence on the government which is the agency responsible for maintaining peace and stability in the country. This belief is based on the ideology that good government and democratic principles are capable of mitigating social conflicts and distributing scarce resources in an equitable manner in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

The government should endeavour to pursue economic growth and development that would transform the economy. This will help to ameliorate the hardship plaguing the people and reduce ethno-religious clashes. The government should articulate programmes that will positively influence attitudes on ethnicity and religion, equitability, human and minority rights, tolerance towards divergent opinions and norms, non-violence, and the reality of multi-culturalism. Good governance, especially accountability, transparency and equity, would restore legitimacy to government, promote inter-ethnic and religious harmony and ensure democratic consideration. There is also the need for a robust economy that will take care of the basic needs of the people so as to ensure that ethnic and religious identity are harnessed positively as a uniting force rather than divisive factor.

Again, since most of the religious conflicts are products of misconceptions emanating from deep rooted stereotypes, there is therefore the need for the government to create an enabling environment that facilitates cross fertilization of ideas among the different faiths. This on one hand will bring about greater understanding of each faith and reduce stereotype and, on the other hand, it will greatly reduce the tendency of political actors to manipulate religious cleavages in the country.

Nigerian leaders must endeavour to emphasis the historical and cultural basis of our national unity by including a declaration of harmony and unity along with the National Anthem at relevant events. And more importantly, we must endeavour to elect righteous leaders who have the fear of God in them and not based on religious or ethnic sentiments. A righteous leader is one who can walk freely on the streets to see for himself how the masses are living and how they are coping with their daily activities. A nation cannot move forward if the leaders do not have

good relationship with the masses.

Since policy makers across the country belong to one religious group or the other, these leaders, should allow the strength of the teachings of their religions to bear in the course of events in their various positions of leadership. When our leaders and others in positions of authority begin to implement the above given advice there would be peace, order and harmony in our country.

## The Dynamics of Effective Human Relations and Ethno-Religious Harmony in Nigeria

Effective human relations is proposed here alongside good governance because, although it is yet to be fully exploited in managing social problems confronting the country, it is a holistic relation that harnesses the moral teachings of every religion to moderate unwanted behaviour in a society. It is based on the ideology of none violence, honesty, justice, equity, tolerance, correlation, accountability, compassion and respect for differences and people. In practical terms it is the philosophy of live-and let-live. Ethno-religious conflicts are basically caused by selfishness, greed, intolerance, injustice, corruption, discrimination, inequality, and so on. These negative vices are challenges which effective human relations can tackle. Effective human relations has the tendency to moderate the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual potentials of people within the context of their cultural, socio-political and religious Milieus for peaceful and harmonious living. It is an essential mechanisms needed for the promotion of attitudes necessary for the society to prevent conflicts and violence, both overt and structural, to resolve conflict peacefully and to create the conditions conducive for harmonious coexistence, whether inter-personal, inter-group, inter-religious or inter-ethnic. This is essentially to encourage unity in diversity in the country.

Effective human relations enables for inter-ethnic and inter-religious contact which makes people more tolerant and open minded of the other side. It also makes people more responsive and inclined toward cooperation in joint projects with the other side. Human relations rely upon multi-culturalism and awareness about the suffering of various groups involved in the conflict to promote empathy for the suffering of others and reduce hostilies. Based on this, empathy, tolerance, cooperation, open-minded and justice are the essential ingredients that are required to foster ethno-religious harmony. These values can be

gardened through effective human relations.

The steps to using effective human relations for the task of ethno-religious harmony include the formation of informal 'harmony groups' that can formulate strategies and initiatives to promote greater knowledge and understanding among different ethnic groups and religions in Nigeria. This seeks to foster friendship and build trust during peace time so that challenges and strains on social cohesion can be contained whenever they arise (Eleigwu, 2005). The group will be challenged to recruit ethnic and religious leaders and build informal ties with cultural groups. This will encourage leaders of various religious organizations as well as ethnic and community associations to participate in the programmes of the harmony groups.

> Akpuru–Aja (2007) states that effective human relationship is helping people appreciate how appealing cooperation or peaceful co-existence is, how to analyze conflicts and its dynamics, how to make, resolve and manage conflicts situations; the relationship between all the processes involves in promoting peace and harmony. From the above analysis, one can conclude that the objective of effective human relations is to foster a culture of harmony in the society; hence it is a factor in fostering ethno-religious harmony in Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

While it could be argued that Nigeria remains a state held together at gun point, and not yet a nation, the present researchers are of the view that to continue to bemoan colonialism, the Berlin conference of 1884/85, and the amalgamation of the northern and southern Nigeria in 1914 is tantamount to intellectual haziness. It is a case of wrong diagnosis that will lead to deadly and disastrous medication. Every nation has had their own share of history and how they came into existence as nations, whether by consent or by gun point. But what has made the difference between nations is governance. In his ingenuity, Obafemi Awolowo evoked the myth of Oodua as common ancestor of the Yoruba in the formation and naming of a union-Egbe Omo Oodua. To this myth he added good governance in the dogged implementation of welferist policies (Akinwale, 2010). It follow therefore, that good governance is inevitable in the implementation of welfarist policies in Nigeria and the provision of people's basic need which is a sure way of cutting down the tide, if not

eliminating the incidence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. This is in line with the logic that people who live in prosperity do not go to war with each other.

The British recognized the political and economic advantages of a diverse and immense Nigeria; hence they colonized such a vast expanse of land. Nigerian can do the same if we have a purposeful and reliable leadership who will possess the political will to integrate while maintaining diversity. Such leaders must work for a sound education that will not only form the intellectual but also the characters and hands of the citizen. When education forms the intellect, character and hands of the citizen that is when the citizen works for the common good. Akinwale (2010) noted that "leadership is noble when it is credible, and it is credible only when it is at the service of the common good" (p. 15).

Nigerians have shown themselves to be resilient and resourceful, intelligent and energetic. Harmonize them and you have a peaceful, prosperous and powerful nation that will uplift Africa. The need for harmony is the need to do away with ethno-religious hostilities in all its forms. That is where effective human relations is mostly needful.

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