Abstract

In many parts of Africa, Faith Based Organisation (FBOs) constantly and continuously affect and shape socio-political, economic and infrastructural development of the societies. Although there is a strong presence of foreign religion (Islam and Christianity), they co-exist with traditional religions to play an important role in the development of many African societies. Epe in South-western Nigeria is one of ancient littoral towns that still holds on to traditional belief in achieving community development despite the influence of foreign religions. With the aid of interviews and literature, this paper critically explores the co-existence of three different faiths, *Eebi* (the belief and celebration of Epe ancestral gods and heritage), Islam and Christianity which is noticed in the “Omo iya kan na” identity in Epe. The identity and bond among groups and FBOs in Epe also create and strengthened Social Capital in the society. The paper also assesses these religious institutions as a significant component of civil society, to argue that sacrifice and compromise rather than religious politics, play important roles for FBOs to contribute their resources for development in Epe. The paper concludes that despite religious violence in some parts of Nigeria, FBOs are likely to remain a very strong force in socio-political and economic development of African societies for a long time.

Keywords: Development, FBO’s, religious co-existence, “Omo iya kan na”, Social Capital.

Introduction

Examination of religious activities is increasing becoming a concern to academics in many parts of Africa in recent times, with Nigeria becoming a major focus. On the pages of newspapers and local and international satellite television stations, the spate of religious violence and disturbances in many parts of northern Nigeria continue to capture headlines. Religious activities have no doubt continued to affect socio-political and economic development in the different areas of the Nigerian society. For instance, local and
international investors continue to flee from the religious skirmish areas like Maiduguri, Jos and Yobe in the northern region of the country. States like Nasarawa, Kogi and the Nation’s capital, Abuja, also have had their own share of religious crises and violence. The situation also contributed largely to the dispersal of many non-indigenous inhabitants of Northern Nigeria who were born and bred in the North for their original home towns.

The above scenario has affected religious bodies and other faith-based organisations in the crisis-prone areas of Nigeria as they look as though they have done nothing in recent times. However, it may not be the same story in other towns and cities where more than one religion is practised, and where followers of one religion are more than their counterparts. Epe in present Lagos State of South-western Nigeria is a good example to showcase the activities of faith-based organisations and religious tolerance in the development of states in Africa. Thus, to view religious institutions as significant components of civil society, this paper examines the contributions of Islam, Christianity and indigenous traditional religion celebrated and depicted in the Eebi festival in Epe.

In the paper, I discussed Epe as a melting pot of traditional and foreign religions and identified its cultural and religious trajectories. I argued that Epe location, occupation, and political situations contributed to the introduction of the external religions, and subsequently the rise of other FBOs. I also assessed religious institutions in Epe as significant components of civil society, contending that, sacrifice and compromise as result of social cohesion, and ethnic identity (Omo iya kan na) rather than religious politics played significant roles for FBOs to contribute their resources for development in Epe. I concluded that despite religious
violence in some parts of Nigeria, FBOs are likely to remain a very strong force in socio-political and economic development of African societies for a long time.

**Epe: A Melting Pot of Traditional and Foreign Religions**

**Indigenous Religion**

Like every other ancient African society, the Yoruba people of Epe society developed along the line of traditional African worship and belief system. Epe tradition reveals that the people believed in existence and supremacy of *Eledumare* whom they believed resides in heaven. The entire being of the people from the time of birth to the time of death is wired around *Eledumare*. To date, an elaborate system of worship of the *Eledumare* is prevalent in Epe society. As part of the acceptance for this heavenly Supreme Being, were sessional prayers directed to him through libations. The worship of *Eledumare* also cuts across all the Yoruba towns and was believed to be the Yoruba Supreme God and creator of the entire universe.²

Aside the worship of *Eledumare* as the Supreme God, the Yoruba people also worshiped other *Orisa* (lesser gods or spirits) either major or minor ones as they are ranked. These lesser gods also stood as intermediaries between man (the people) and *Eledumare*. In other words, the people find it easier to communicate with *Eledumra* (God) through these *Orisa*. Among the *Orisa* worshiped in Epe are *Alaro, Ogunta, Ekunne, Lo ore*, while others like *Orunmila, Sango, Oya, Obaluaye, Aiyelala* etc. are believed to have been introduced into Epe by other Yoruba groups.³ In addition, Epe’s location near the sea facilitated the

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² See more on the Yoruba History in Samuel Johnson’s *The History Of The Yorubas*, (Lagos, CSS BookShops Ltd., 1921)

³ Muhsin Adekunle Balogun “Syncretic beliefs and practices amongst Muslims in Lagos state Nigeria: with special reference to The Yoruba speaking people of Epe” (PhD. thesis University of Birmingham, 2011.)
development of a traditional belief in gods and goddesses, some of which they believe came as a result of the lagoon and sea. Some writers are of the view that through the busy fish trade with other coastal towns it became possible for them to introduce their form of local worships into the Epe society. For instance A iyelala is said to have been introduced by both the Ijo and Ilaje fishermen who frequented Epe from the waterside of Okitipupa and Makun areas.4

Located along a littoral area of the Lagos lagoon, Epe is at the eastern end of Lagos on both sides of the lagoon. It is bounded on the north by the Ijebu province, east by Ondo province, and west by Ikeja district colony and the municipal area of Lagos.5 With its proximity to the sea, the lagoon, and an advantageous fertile soil and forest, Epe had earlier attracted a great number of people, who were mostly fishermen and hunters from the Ijebu land and other parts of western Nigeria. This natural geographical settings and economic opportunities to other people could also be responsible for the introduction of the worship of other deities and foreign religions. More so, Epe which is of the Ijebu background before the intrusion of Eko Epes (Lagos Epe) especially during the exile of king Kosoko to the town by the middle of 19th century were staunch traditional worshipers. Kosoko’s influence in Epe encouraged the introduction of the Islamic religion in Epe.

**Eebi Celebration in Epe**

In respect for, and continual celebration of indigenous traditional beliefs and culture, Epe people set aside the Eebi festival for these purposes. Eebi festival is where the Epe people come together to mark their common ancestry and celebrate their long lasting heritage. Eebi Epe festival is celebrated by the people of Epe in honour of their gods for guidance and protection over the indigenes of the town. It is also a re-enactment of a key

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4 Ibid.
epoch in the history of the Epe people. The festival is also marks different age groups of the indigenes, and is still celebrated in the present period. It will be apposite to point here that the festival started with the Ijebu Epe who are the aboriginal Epe people. Thus, the festival is widely celebrated among the Ijebu Epes. This is not to say that other inhabitants have not over time, joined in the celebration which has made the Eebi festival the biggest and most popular in Epe. Otunba Agbaje an Epe chief describes the importance of Eebi festival in Epe in these words:

The Eebi Epe festival has been an age-long event in the history of Epe. It is a yearly occasion that brings the sons and daughters of this community together. At this period, everybody wants to come and take the blessings from the royal father and celebrate with the community. The festival has to do with the unity of every household and every member of this community because it is an avenue to bring everybody together and see to the vision of developing this community and it has been helping a lot.\(^6\)

**Islam in Epe**

The coming of Islamic religion to Epe is dated to the period of Kosoko’s arrival.\(^7\) But the certanity of this argument cannot be ascertained as information shows that Muslims were found living in Epe before the Kosoko period.\(^8\) The numbers of Muslims in the town before Kosoko era were very few and many did not preach or teach their religion in the open. This was due to the fact that Epe and Ijebu detest foreign religion, and was always ready to persecute any other religion in the town. However it will be plausible to say that the fast

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\(^6\) Otunba Agbaje in Okorie Uguru’s “Eebi Epe lights up Lagos town” *The Nation Newspaper* of 31/03/2012.
\(^7\) T. O Avoseh, *A Short History of Epe* (Parochial Committee, Saint Michael's Anglican Church, Epe, 1960) Pg.23.
\(^8\) Information got from an oral interview with, Alhaji Abdul Waheed Kuniyan, Age 86 years. 6/08/2012
spread of Islam in Epe was stimulated by Kosoko’s arrival. Kosoko took refuge in Epe with about 1,500 loyalists as a result of the struggle between him and Oba Akintoye for the throne of the king of Lagos. Kosoko and his followers tried to seize Lagos but were repulsed, suffering heavy losses in the process. Subsequently, by 1854, Kosoko was made to rule over Palma and Lekki in order to compensate him and to improve the relations with Lagos. Sources shows that many of Kosoko followers at the time of their arrival were Muslims and they also stood by him during the period of the tussle and hardship.9

Immediately Kosoko and his followers settled in Epe the religious atmosphere changed, as the Muslims came out openly for daily prayers. This was a result of Kosoko’s military strength and his successful piratical attacks along the lagoon. Also Kosoko had become the clandestine ruler in Epe which allowed Islam to be officially established during his reign. With the freedom, Muslims in Epe began to erect mosques and schools in different parts of town, while the central mosque was built at “Oke Balogun”. Muslims continued to enjoy Kosoko’s patronage as he continued his policy of religious freedom and preaching without obstacle. Islam later became the leading religion in Epe with more people accepting the foreign religion. This perhaps accounted for the over sixty per cent of the people living in Epe today being Muslims.

**Christianity in Epe**

There is hardly any claim or evidence to show that Christianity was established in Epe before Islam. However, some sources claim that the origin of Christianity can be dated as far back as the Ijebu expedition of May 1892.10 Theophilus Avoseh in his work *A Short History of Epe* is of the view that the first set of the followers of Christianity from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived at Epe when it sent Reverend Braithwaite from Abeokuta

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9 Ibid.  
10 Avoseh T.O. Pg 24.
to open a mission in Epe. With the support of missionaries anxious to see the CMS establish Christianity, and the acceptance of some members of the Osugbo chiefs that gave land for the purpose, a church was built in Epe sometime in the late 1892. The building of St. Michael’s Anglican Church also marked the effective establishment of Christianity in Epe.

CMS activities in Epe encouraged other Christian denominations like the Roman Catholic missionaries (RCM) to establish a Catholic Church in Epe. Thus, by 1910 and as a result of pressure from the enthusiastic Catholics in Epe on the Reverend Father in charge of Ibonwon to build a church, the St. Theresa Catholic Church was built. Subsequently, other bodies especially the indigenous groups began to establish their own denominations. For instance, the first of indigenous African Church in Epe - the Cherubim and Seraphim was established in March 1930. Some years later, Wilson Kudeinbo founded the Church of Apostle.

Epe from 1900 had by this time experienced the intrusion and the grip of foreign religion on its people. However, Christianity while registering some success did not necessarily lead to large-scale conversion of Epe indigenes. The reason was that Muslims who had established their stay earlier, and with the help of some converted chiefs had frustrated the moves to establish Christian activities.

Like in many other places in West Africa, Muslims directly and openly intimidated Christian converts in a manner that the converts dreaded to profess the religion openly. Some Christians in Epe saw this as a disastrous mission with their lives on line, while some continued to profess the faith and the result is what Christians enjoy till present. Perhaps it also accounts for why the rate at which the people of Epe converted to Islamic belief more than the Christianity. While Christianity may not boast of many followers as Islam in Epe

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11 Chief Batunde Aderonmu Olufowobi, The Ijagun Oba of Epe land, age 83 years, 23/08/2012
12 The Osugbo Council is the highest ruling chieftaincy authority after the Oloja of Epe (The king of Ijebu Epe)
13 Zaccheaus, O.R “The Origin and Development of Western Education in Epe Up to 1983”, B.A. Essay History Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-ife,
presently, their activities in the town have come to be accepted by their Muslim brothers. Further, in spite of the influence of foreign religions in Epe, her indigenous religion did not go into oblivion as traditional worshipers continue to respect and protect their original belief. This has created an atmosphere for these religious bodies to co-exist and contribute to the socio-economic, political and cultural development of Epe town in recent time.

**Religion and Development in Epe**

It will be academically wrong and ahistorical to argue that religious bodies and faith-based organisations have not been a source of social change and development in many parts of the Nigerian society. In Epe, for instance faith-based organisations continue to fulfil critical functions in social service provision in areas of health and education, moral and norms, settling of disputes, in influencing government policies, as well as in advocating on behalf of poor masses and the marginalized. As long as people accept FBOs over the time, they continue to affect the future of a vast majority of people. FBO’s response to the cry of their followers remain an important reason for the people to look up to them. Therefore as the followers of religious bodies are part and parcel of the larger society, it thus calls on them to contribute to the development of that society.

For development to be achieved in any society where there are more than one religious group, it is important for the different religious groups to tolerate one another. This is what Akintunde Akinade in his work titled *The Precarious Agenda: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Nigeria* describes as “The Dialogue of Life”\(^1\) Dialogue of life, can best be portrayed in a society such as Epe where it operates on practical and day-to-day terms. In Epe, religious worshipers, Christians and Muslims live in the same compound, they mingle freely in all aspects of human endeavour. The people, irrespective of religious

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backgrounds, form clubs, youth organisations, and meet in public places including the market place, banks, and football fields, on the streets, in public and private schools, and other institutions.

Like the traditional worshipers, Christian and Muslim organisations contribute to the society not just by building worship places among the people but have also been working together. Perhaps this is why churches and mosques are found on the same street without any disagreement or strife. Religious leaders in Epe continue to preach peace, tolerance and acceptability of the other group in the society.\(^\text{15}\) It thus explains that sacrifice and compromise have come to play out in reducing religious pride and ego, which is destructive to tolerance and acceptability of other religions as noticed in the north. For religious dialogue to be accepted, maintained and to become successful for societal development sacrifices and compromises will play key role. Keeping all religious differences apart is a compromise and a sacrifice lay down by religious groups in Epe in order for development to take place in the town.

Compromise and sacrifice can easily be noticed among people of a common identity which could also strengthen social and religious coherence and subsequently lead to development (see further discussion on *Omo iya kan na* identity in Epe below). This analysis is perhaps one of the arguments in the ‘social capital’, and how this social coherence and network is necessary for development.\(^\text{16}\) Social capital can be considered as an asset that contributes to the development of other forms of community capital—human, financial, physical, political, cultural, and environmental. Some supporter of the theory believes that social capital is the nexus, shared values and understandings in society that enable an

\(^{15}\) Alhaji Abdul Waheed Kuniyan

individuals or groups to trust each other and so work together. Looking at this closely, social capital simply means relationship among humans in a society so as to achieve development or other purposes as the case may be. Hence, the relationship among FBOs in Epe where they identify themselves as one Yoruba people is seen as social capital in action. Social coherence creates a bond among peoples of same identity in spite of their religious differences. From Epe experience therefore, this agrees with Robert Putnam who believe that social capital (networking) comes with its values and the values are positives to the society where people see each other as one.

Compromises and sacrifices could also mean giving respect to, and accepting the culture of the land in spite of different beliefs. In other words, where people identify themselves as one family the culture thrives, fosters good relationship, and encourages development in the community. Culture plays a significant role in many African societies. The deep Yoruba culture is noticed through its tenets, morals, norms and values; one of such is seen in followers respect for voices of leaders and elders of the society. With virtually all members in the society affiliated to one faith or the other, voices of spiritual leaders count in socio-developmental decisions. For instance, duties of religious leaders include teaching and upholding of norms and values of their faith in society. Also many of these religious leaders hold political offices and chieftaincy positions or as senior officers in public and private organisations. In other words, they combine political administration with religious leadership. Over the years, administrators and political office holders have also surrounded themselves with retinue of priests and deities of the land and consult them from time to time. Therefore,

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it is difficult to bypass the religious leaders as they are pivotal and make important contributions in society.

One important period when a lot of Epe leaders come together is the period of *Eebi* festival. Here the leadership from different religious backgrounds meet and discuss developmental issues of the town. People of different faiths including traditionalists, Muslims and Christians celebrate the *Eebi* festival in Epe. These are people who frequent mosques and churches on Friday and Sundays for their prayers and worship. But during the festival time, as a sign of acceptance and celebration of their heritage they come out in total celebration. Perhaps to them *Eebi* festival is celebrated in order to commemorate historical, cultural and religious events that are of great importance and significance to the entire community. The festival reinforces togetherness, friendliness, and understanding among the people of Epe. According to Odunayo:

The functions of festival include *social cohesion and solidarity* (italics mine), giving rhythm to the social, political, religious and everyday life of the town. Festivals are a means of validating the existing order; they also serve the purpose of renewal of covenant, relationships and solidarity.\(^{20}\)

In spite of the existence of different religions in Epe, the celebration and sacrificial offering giving to traditional gods during *Eebi* period is still valued, and regarded as part of a common identity, memory, pride, and achievement among the people of the town. Thus, the co-existence of religions is perhaps a contribution to the understanding of religious syncretism in a particular community, and also, its contribution to societal development. Christians receive Christmas and Easter greeting cards from Muslim friends, neighbours, and

relatives during their celebration. Muslims are invited and attend church festivals, present in churches for friends or a colleague baptism, wedding, or burial ceremonies of friends and relatives. With this form of socio-religious compromise and sacrifice to live as one, religious groups are enriched by each other’s experience and spirituality, and strengthened by certain features of the faith of the other.\textsuperscript{21}

To further explain the positives of social cohesion among religious groups in a community, the United Nations Volunteer Report (2011) shows that peoples of different religious groups living their lives in a context of tolerance and mutual respect, with volunteer action as one characteristic of social harmony, are more likely to avoid being drawn into conflict situations.\textsuperscript{22} Drawing from such point, one can argue that development in Epe is inevitable, as long as conflict is avoided and relegated to the background. It is therefore obvious that social coherence and peaceful relations among different religious groups benefit not only a community but the entire nation. Consequently, social development in Epe is also as a result religious syncretism and togetherness by the understanding of the different faith groups in town.

For different religious bodies to have successfully tolerated and synchronised with one another in Epe, could also be attributed it to what the Yoruba describe as “\textit{Omo iya kan na}” which literally means “children of same mother” (same ancestral background). This belief or identity among the Yoruba people makes religious syncretism to some extent possible. In Epe town where there are two major existing groups, identifying one another as \textit{omo iya kan na} is a major phenomenon holding the town together. This Yoruba identity is also important in understanding the way and manner the people tolerate and accept one another’s religion. The Yoruba Identity also goes a long way to strengthen social capital.

\textsuperscript{21} Akintunde, Akinade. “The Precarious Agenda”
among Epe people; it becomes easy not just for only religious group, but all in the town to co-exist as form of capital for social development. By accepting this identity a Muslim landlord allows a Christian to rent an apartment in his house. For this reasons also, there are social clubs and associations formed out of the identification with members cutting across the different religious background. With this, Epe people continue to feel the impact of oneness in social and other forms of development.

Unfortunately such form of identity noticed among the Epe is presently lacking in many parts of the northern Nigeria where a Muslim sees his fellow Christian as an enemy rather than a brother. Rather than be closely united by their ethnic composition, many parts of Northern Nigeria are firstly tied together by their religion. This has made it impossible for Muslims and Christians to live together as one Hausa (the major tribe in the north of Nigeria) family in some towns of the North where groups now see each other as enemies. Thus, the Omo iya kan na identity found among Yoruba countries may not be possible in many parts of the north, a result of the division caused by the deep rooted religious belief which has already created distrust in that region. In Epe, despite the people’s affiliations to their faith they continue to identify themselves as children of same mother. This is not to say that the north is more ethnically diverse than Epe or other Yoruba states, however the situation in the north points to the fact that they have been drawn along aggressive parallel religious lines. Also, the continuous violent attack by some tribe like the Fulani on other Northern tribes raises a lot of doubts on ethnic unity in the north, and thus could jeopardise the “same mother” identity in that region. One cannot say that the reason for the continued crisis in the north is

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caused by a diverse ethnic identity alone, but could be attributed to some tribes becoming extremely fanatical in their religious beliefs and activities.

In a situation where different religious believers accept one another as brothers, there will be room for other forms of development in the society. In Epe, activities of FBOs on social development are noticeable within most private and public education centres. This situation has been in existence before and during the establishment of formal British colonial rule in 1900. For instance by 1896 the first Muslim school was officially established, and by 1908 Islamic schools in Epe were already in good numbers. Many of these schools were mostly established by the foreign Islamic scholars. The establishment of Muslim schools went a long way in affecting educational development in Epe.

By early 1900s, Christian schools were also established in Epe. These were mission schools that made a great contribution to educational development of the Epe community. The zeal of Christian missionaries to improve the spiritual life of the people of Epe at that time was achieved through the sponsoring of education. The success made by the religious schools also encouraged the Epe Native Council to grant financial aids to missionary schools through the 1903 Education Code of Southern Nigeria. The school expanded by building more classes and enrolling more pupils. In a way of furthering education and perhaps creating synergy among religious bodies in Epe, the Native Authorities made it mandatory for the school to enrol pupils of Islamic background. In response to western education brought by the missionary, parents in Epe were encouraged to enrol their children in the Christian schools. Probably this was due to the awareness that western education rather than Quranic

27 Chief Batunde Aderonmu Olufowobi
29 O.R. Zaccheaus, “The Origin and Development of Western Education in Epe Up to 1983”, B.A. Essay History Dept. Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-ife,
Western education thus became a significant means to social-political and self-improvement in the colonial society.

In subsequent years, private individuals as well as faith based organisations from both Muslim and Christian faiths joined in the promotion of education in Epe. Bale Buraimoh Edu on his own personal will sponsored and financed the building and purchase of books for Muslim schools. Pa Suiliu Majindadi founded a private children school to cater for Muslim children. Surprisingly, the school thought it wise to employ two Christian teachers from the Baptist Training College in Ogbomoso. However, the running of the school was later transferred to Ansar-Ud-Deen society that was more financially buoyant to continue the school. The Roman Catholic Church noticed the success made by the St. Michael School and the Muslim schools and opened the St. Theresa School for the Catholic children in Epe.

Currently, there are close to 20 private schools owned by faith–based groups in Epe, including Baptist Nursery and Primary School, St. Philomena Montessori, Atlantic Hall secondary school and so on. The natural dialogue and sacrifice made by the different religious bodies to accept and co-exist with one another contributed to the opportunity in allowing them to better serve the people. The result of peaceful co-existence among religious bodies is obvious in a good educational background for the people of Epe.

Also, as part of the continued contribution to health care development in the society, some of the faith-based organisations in Epe town established private health centre facilities in order to take care of health issues in the town. Private healthcare facilities sponsored by FBOs are open to everybody and they do not discriminate against any religion. To them, health issue is the most important aspect in the society, it is much more than a business enterprise but contribution to health care development. Aside that, staff of these FBO-owned
health services includes people from across different religious background based on merit. Thus, the establishment of private hospitals by religious organisation does not only take care of health issue but also provides employment in the community.

In recent times, religious organisations have become important avenue for teaching the public on health matters. Churches and mosques leaders are encouraged by both the states and federal governments to enlighten parishioners and followers on deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS, Cancer, Cholera, and also sanitization issues in the community. Health workers and school Teachers are used to carry out periodic immunization of little children in the town and schools. Leaders and workers of Faith based organisations see their contribution to health matters as a service to the society. Therefore, societal health development cannot be achieved by the government alone.

Aside the establishing of schools and healthcare facilities for Epe society, religious bodies formed associations and organisations to cater for, and attend to the yearnings of their members. Over the years, the formation of organisations is much vibrant among the Muslims in Epe. Some of these groups include the Anṣār-ud-Deen Society formed in 1923; the Ahmadiyyah Muslim Mission, 1921; the Zumratul Islamiyyah, 1945; the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria (MSSN), 1980; and the National Council for Muslim Youth Organisation, 1990. Many of these faith-based organisations address community and personal problems of their members. For instance they solve quarrels among members, attend to societal and personal family issues, as well as finance and sponsor members where they can.

Christians may not have formed groups like the Muslims, but the spread of other Christian denominations into Epe has increased. Presently many other Christian bodies set camp in Epe. Some of the churches are the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Redeemed life Bible Church, Deeper Life Church, Living Faith, Christ Embassy, Christ Apostolic
Churches, The Chosen, Four Squares Church, Church of the Mormons, etc. These churches contribute tremendously to the spiritual and mundane uplifting of people of Epe. They have helped in putting in place important infrastructures like good roads around them, maintaining the beauty of the town. Religious bodies also provide scholarships awards to member students and pupils.

In recent times, faith-based groups have stepped up their interest by involving themselves in issues that affects the entire nation. For instance FBOs in Epe supported the nationwide strike organised by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) in Nigeria during the month of January 2012.\(^{30}\) Some religious groups saw nothing wrong in their members’ participation in the rallies during the January 2012 fuel subsidy protests. This illustrates that faith-based groups can openly support citizens in their agitation against unwanted economic policies by state or federal government. It was thus not surprising that one of the main advocates and frontliner against the ending of subsidy rally held in Lagos is a pastor of a popular church in Nigeria.\(^{31}\) The fact that these are religious organisations that preach peace and patience with government did not deter them from speaking against unwanted policies when the need arose. Also, as the saying goes “the voice of the people is the voice of God”, when the religious bodies’ are silent it perhaps means God is not talking. Hence, delivering messages from God can also be done by joining those agitating for the right of the masses.

Besides voicing opinions for, and against unwanted policies, faith-based organisations also express their interest during political activities of their communities and societies. An open acceptance and the endorsement of candidates during elections suggest that faith organisations are involved in who their representatives are in the communities and society at

\(^{30}\) The labour strike and rallies held by January 2012 was for many Nigerians the biggest and the most organised. It brought together people from all works of life and with a unified voice challenged the federal government’s policy on subsidy.

\(^{31}\) Labour union says Strike continues ,The sun newspaper January 4 2012
large. As mentioned earlier, virtually all wealthy political candidates are products of a particular church or mosque, and with their contribution to the development of their religion they become automatic candidates. There is therefore no gain saying that faith-based groups are a major player in the political happening and appointment of their representatives in the political sphere. It also forms the reason a lot of churches organise prayers for the candidate of their choice during elections in Nigeria.

The activities of different religious organisations in keeping together the Nigerian society, has been clouded with politicization of religion, which amplifies religious identity differences. Contemporary Nigeria is viewed as a religious disorganised state with all parts wanting to claim superiority over another. Fingers are therefore pointed at those individuals who disguise under the umbrella of one religious body to destroy a common national identity. Some members of the Nigerian society under religious guise perpetuate individual interest. It is possible also that this interest is born of fact that some groups or persons have resolved in them not to accept a particular government, party, or an individual holding a sensitive position in the society, hence they use religion as a cover up foment crisis in the society. Some members of the elites have also been accused of trying to accomplish their selfish interest and if it does not favour them they create tension by hoodwinking and manipulating youths to stage armed conflicts in the name of religion.32

**Religious Politics: Anti-development**

One thing that has made religious co-existence possible in Epe is the inability of the politicians to hijack religious matters, that is, the non politicization of religion in the town. Rather than use religion to pursue selfish interest or to divide the people of Epe, it is used to pursue social development. It thus explains another benefit of Social capital; mutual

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fellowship among religious bodies rather than politicizing it helps to put the community as a unit. The co-existence of FBOs always goes a long way to guide against the politicization of religion in Nigeria.

Presently, part of the problem that Nigeria faces is the politicization of religion, causing a serious drawback to socio-economic development and religious co-existence in parts the country. It has facilitated the creation of violent religious groups and made some groups’ desires Nigeria’s separation along religious line. Perhaps, some lessons could be learned from the religious affinity in Epe, where there is hardly any record of religious violence since Nigeria’s independence. The recent and continued violent agitation by the Boko Haram sect explains a deep religious problem in the Northern Nigeria, which is gradually spreading to other part of the country. The violent activities of Boko Haram continue to affect the socio-economic strength of the nation and especially the north. The sect which was rated second only to Taliban on the global terror list by the United States of America government is a widely known perpetrator of terrorism in the world. Several times on the pages of Nigeria newspapers and media houses, political office holders have been accused of sponsoring religious attacks.

The idea to impose Islam on Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. For instance shortly after independence the Premier of the Northern region, Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, the then Sardaunna of Sokoto established the Jama’tu Nasril Islam (Society for the Support of Islam) to coordinate the systematic Islamization of Nigeria. Since then, religious politics has kept the Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Nigeria very distant to one another and has caused deep-rooted distrust between them. What binds people or FBOs together in a place like Epe is

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34 See an uploaded video of the boko Haram display of dangerous weapons giving to them by a political office holder in the country, http://www.youtube.com/bokoharamvideo
often over-looked in the North, in favour of the sword and arrow, bomb and bullet which has become the new language of exchange.

Some of the groups involved in such unacceptable acts in these communities want to show how desperate they are to ‘protect’ their religion. The desperate character of violent religious groups have made a lot of children endowed with special gift and ability to grow academically turned into Al Majiris (some poor Muslim children turned street beggars), roaming the street. The Al Majiri system is almost entirely found in the North of Nigeria. Some of these children grow to become haters of other religions and are used to prosecute religious riot. While some in the country are just watching and praying for a time when a rich country like Nigeria will separate along religious lines.

Fanatical characters which have for long existed among religious groups have also increased “Blame Games” between religious bodies especially between Muslims and Christians. Some Muslims leaders are of the opinion that colonial activities which were in support of Christian religion were responsible for Nigeria’s slump into unprecedented depth of vice and religious immorality. On the other hand many Christians view Muslim groups as becoming too extreme in their approach to religious issues. Because of religious politics in the country both Muslims and Christians will not stop pointing accusing fingers on the federal, and some state governments as being biased in favour of the other. Accusing different governments or other religious bodies for throwing the country into religious difference may not solve issues. It is therefore a shame for government and religious leaders to think we can continue to indulge in religious politics and then get it right in the country. Rather than continue in the game of blames which perhaps continues to disunite people along

religious lines and lay foundation for violence, religious leaders must embrace tolerance and see it as one sacrifice for a united nation.

The effect of religious politics on other parts of Nigeria including Epe is the establishment of some particular Muslim organisations. One that captures the interest of the paper is the MSSN. The group began to propagate Islam in all Nigerian higher institutions also spread to secondary schools in South-western Nigeria. However the group did not last long in public secondary schools as it quickly fizzled away. Perhaps, this was because public secondary schools are for both Christians and Muslims where respect for both religions is an important part of the curriculum. More so, it is a place of western learning and not for religious separatism. Total Islamization of the southwest could not have been possible at that time because Christian bodies had also stepped up their programmes of “winning more souls”. Further, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed in 1976 as a body of different Christian denominations aimed at curbing the spread of Islam. The group came out openly to accuse Muslims of violence around the country. The coming together of Christian bodies was taken seriously in southwest. Hence, the Islamization policy in southwest was met with a more western Christian trained educated people, a people who could challenge the Islamization policy.

In addition, the right of an individual to choose his own religion as certified by the law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria could also be a contributing factor to religious tolerance among the people in Western part of Nigeria. This is not to argue that people in the north of Nigeria do not respect or accept the constitution but what is noticed among many Nigerians is that freedom of choice for individual or personal religion in the north could not

38 Precarious agenda
40 See Right to Freedom of Thoughts, Conscience and Religion, Fundamental Human Right, Chapter 4, Article 38 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution. Pg 22
be compared to other parts of Nigeria. In many parts of the north there is hardly free ground for individuals to accept other religion save for Islam, without facing persecution from the family or society. The right to accept a religion as long as it comports to fundamental law of the land gives room for a child to veer from his parents’ religion since it does not kick against societal values. Also the Nigerian law does not frown at a Christian or Muslim father giving out a child to a suitor of the other religion. This is a sign of deep religious understanding among the groups in a civilized Nigerian state.

Despite the deep antagonism between some Christians and Muslims that have informed the politicization of religion in contemporary Nigeria, Epe which is dominated by Muslims, is a quick reminder of a place where there is mutual co-existence of different religions. This is because it is a town rooted in respect and celebration of traditional African culture and religious tolerance. The peaceful co-existence, economic and social development noticed in Epe was as a result of the deep understanding of the African culture and its harmony with other forms of religion.\(^41\) Also, going by the Eebi celebration in Epe society, the purpose is to respect one another’s religion and achieve bringing the people together. Thus to remove all forms of religious sentiments, prejudice, suspicion and accept the religions with the mind that African culture taught us to live side by side as members of the same ancestral background.

Perhaps communal system of living experienced in the traditional African society had great effect on the co-existence of religious groups. In Africa, especially in Yoruba communities during the pre-colonial period, people usually come together to provide helping hands in community and societal development. This could also be seen as the continuation

\(^{41}\) African culture is also part of the reason for development and achieving freedom for many parts of Africa society, irrespective of the diverse religion. See Rev. Mathew Hassan Kukah in his lecture, “Religion, Culture and the Politics of Development” presented at Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization public lecture on February 23rd, 2006. (Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 2007).
and of one of the varieties of social capital, an understanding that exist in a society which enable individuals, ethnic, and religious groups trust each other and so establish a platform to help one another. The desire for community service could be the reason for the coming together of religious group in societal development in Epe. This may have informed Akinade when he said:

Christianity and Islam in Africa are markedly different from other manifestations of these religions around the world because each has been re-interpreted through the idioms and precepts of African cultures and worldviews. ..., it has consistently maintained that the only way forward for African Christians and Muslims is to change their orientation from rivalry and discord to an emphasis on life-in-community.42

The celebration of African culture may look old and archaic to the outside world, it is perhaps a strong reason for Christianity and Islam to co-exist in the same community. More so, the flexibility of African culture and communal celebrations could go a long way to foster an Omo iya kan na identity among religious groups. Thus when religious groups see each other as one family, then the work of their organisations (FBOs) could be noticed in the society. It is therefore impossible to tear off African deep and rich culture from faith-based institutions that is already an integral part of the society.

Conclusion

Development in many parts of Nigeria may not be complete without mentioning the contribution of the faith based institutions. FBOs which have been in existence since the pre-

42 Precarious agenda
colonial era in Nigeria, share in the socio-cultural, economic and political development of the country. Although there are several reports of religious violence organised in recent times by some sects in most part of northern Nigeria, it does not deny the fact that religious bodies are not development propagators. The norms and values of many African societies are also tired with its religion. This paper captures three major faith-based organisations in Epe, Christianity and Islam, and Eebi which is a celebration and belief on traditional religion of worship. It explains how developments in areas like education, economy, health, social togetherness are achieved as a result of peaceful co-existence in Epe.

The paper further shows that in spite of one religion being the most dominant in society the religious bodies can live together. Reason is that the people of Epe community see each other as one big family from the same ancestral background. Hence, the Omo iya Kan na identity noticed among the Epe people can also be imbibed by those in the north and other parts of the world. It means that identity plays important role creating social-religious cohesion and in turn leads to development. However religious politics has caused disunity among the people of Nigeria. Some see Islam as a superior religion to the other, while others like the Christians refuse to accept the assertion and continue to hold on to their faith. While some sects see westernization as a problem to their religious development and detrimental to their people, others see western education as a light and a process to further socio-economic development, and civilization. Finally, if faith-based organisation can shy away from religious jealousy and politics but focus on peace and social well being of the society, the pace of development in Nigeria and other parts of Africa will be faster.

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