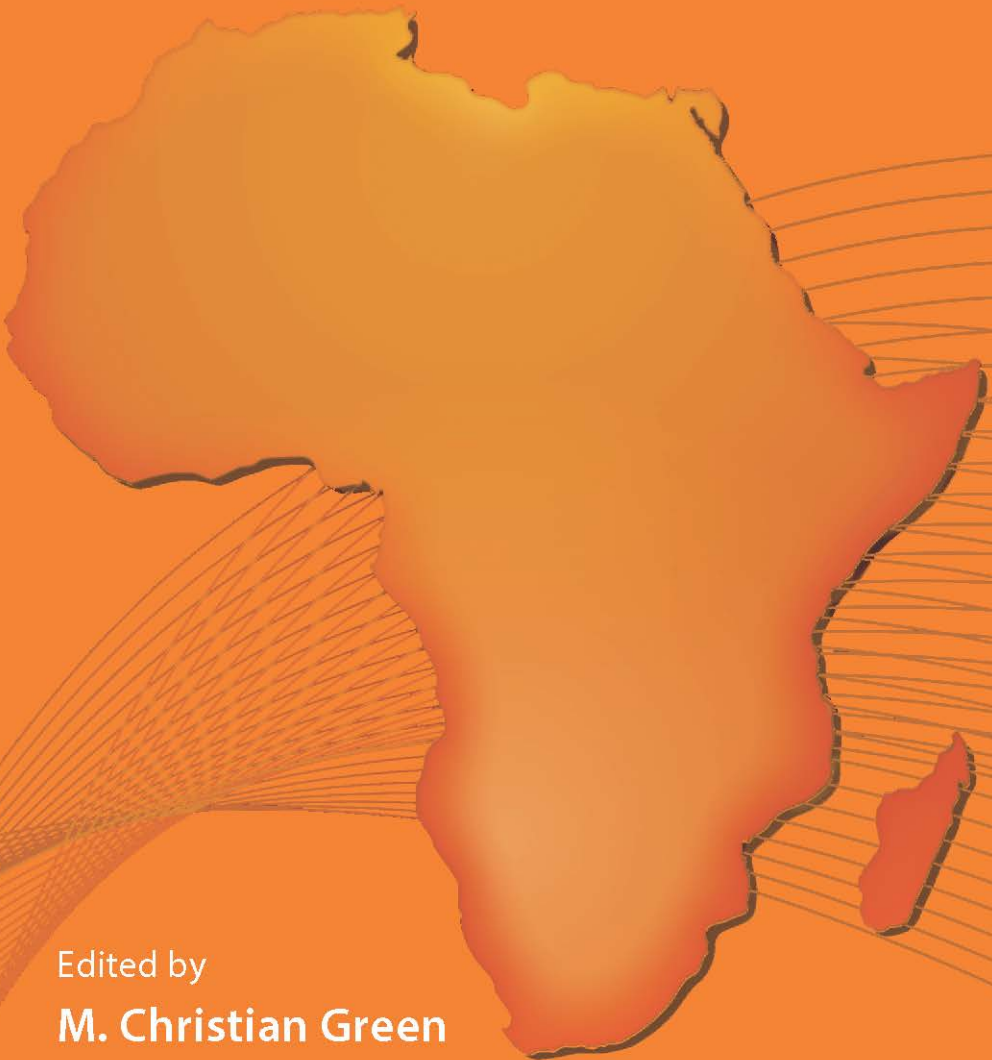


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11 CONFLICT, RELIGION AND MEDIATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: A CASE OF CONFLICT BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND TRADITIONALISTS IN EPE, LAGOS STATE

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict, as an intrinsic facet of human existence, arises from the coexistence of diverse interests, opportunities, cultures, religions and orientations within our pluralistic, societal framework. The principal objective of the research underlying this chapter is to undertake a comprehensive and meticulous examination of the deficiencies inherent in religious mechanisms deployed for the purpose of conflict management and mediation. To accomplish this, we shall adopt noted American sociologist J. Milton Yinger's theory on counterculture, as a guiding framework for our investigation.³ Yinger was not only a sociologist, but a sociologist of religion, who studied the roles of race, ethnicity and religion in struggles for social and political power, making his framework especially apt for inquiries into law, religion and reconciliation in the wake of conflict. Yinger's theoretical framework posits that in instances where institutionalized religion proves inadequate in resolving conflicts and the dynamics of spirituality and civility assume significant roles in shaping social and political outcomes.

Nigeria, a country characterized by its multi-religious nature, serves as a fitting exemplar of such an environment, notwithstanding its designation as a secular nation, as stipulated in Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The specific case under scrutiny in this chapter involves interactions between Muslims and adherents of an African traditional religion known as Awo-Opa, or the "Iji-Nla fraternity". The Awo-Opa are a group of traditionalists who worship a deity called Olowaoko. The group is registered by the Nigerian Corporate Affairs Commission as a socio-religious group with adequate structure. The dispute

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3 Asiwaju AI. 1991. "Awo-Opa: The Awakening of a Religious Movement in Epe, Nigeria," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24(3):465-484.

was over restrictions for non-initiates that were place on a traditional, annual Agan festival in the region in 2003.⁴

During the festival, a Muslim cleric, who we shall call Alfa D, challenged the Awo-Opa group by breaking the law of restriction placed on non-initiates coming to the shrine, leading to a confrontation that allegedly culminated in his untimely demise in what was deemed to be an act of murder.⁵ It is generally believed that the conflict started earlier when Alfa D was accused of desecrating a shrine in Epe. This sparked outrage among the Awo-Opa community, who saw it as a violation of their beliefs and practices. Some accounts suggest that the tensions came to a head when Alfa D was attacked and allegedly killed by members of the Awo-Opa sect. But again, it is important to note that the details of what happened are not entirely clear. There were a number of events leading up to the intervention of the king and prominent indigenes, among the people living at Epe. Alfa D came to be considered an intruder into the traditional religious landscape of Epe. The first incident that resulted from this was the desecration of the shrine, which sparked a wave of anger and protests from the Awo-Opa community. Then, there was a series of clashes between members of the two communities, which escalated over time.

To mitigate the conflict and facilitate reconciliation, the local authorities, along with prominent figures from Epe, endeavoured to deploy conflict resolution mechanisms intrinsic to Islam and African traditional religion.⁶ The conflict between Muslims and traditionalists in Epe was based on religious differences and concerns about the spread of Islam in the town. The traditionalists saw the spread of Islam as a threat to their way of life and cultural identity, and there were incidents of violence and tension between the two groups. It is, therefore, significant that in the aftermath of the conflict and subsequent civil action in the court, peaceful coexistence between the Awo-Opa members and the Muslims was restored.⁷ Regrettably, their endeavours failed to engender reconciliation between the parties involved, leading them to resort to the civil judicial process as an alternative means of dispute resolution. Consequently, four members of the Awo-Opa group found to have murdered Alfa D were subjected to the severe sentence of death.

To execute the present study, we employed critical and analytical methodologies, incorporating ethnographic data sourced from the streets of Epe and the official proceedings of the Lagos High Court. Through a rigorous and exhaustive analysis of this data, our research endeavours to explore the contemporary ramifications

4 Lawal BA. 2007. *God Has Not Died in Africa: A Socio-Economic History of the Awo-Opa Religion of Nigeria*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 78.

5 The term "Alfa", in Nigerian usage refers to Muslim scholar. The Alfa's name, as well. the names of those interviewed for the study are all rendered as initials for purposes of confidentiality.

6 Falola T. 2000. *The Awo-Opa Affair: Religious Pluralism and Politics in Yorubaland*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 34.

7 Falola, *The Awo-Opa Affair*, 34.

of employing traditional conflict management mechanisms in our ever-evolving society.⁸ In order to delve deeper into the subject matter, it is essential to establish a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in the field of conflict management and mediation. By critically examining the failures of religious mechanisms in addressing conflicts, we can shed light on the limitations of these approaches and explore alternative pathways towards resolution.⁹

When traditional conflict resolution mechanisms rooted in African traditional religion and Islam failed to bring about reconciliation between the parties involved, the recourse to civil judicial processes became necessary.¹⁰ This shift towards the legal system to resolve the dispute over the Agan festival indicates the limitations of religious mechanisms in resolving conflicts of this nature, emphasizing the need for alternative approaches. Nigeria is a federal republic with a constitution that guarantees the separation of church and state.¹¹ However, Lagos State is one of the most diverse states in the country, and there are many different legal traditions and systems that coexist alongside the formal legal system. For example, there are customary courts that apply customary law and sharia courts that apply Islamic law. There are also various forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR), such as mediation and arbitration, that are widely used in Lagos State.¹² In terms of the Awo-Opa conflict, it is possible that some form of ADR could be used to resolve the conflict. However, given the complexity and sensitivity of the situation, it is likely that any solution would need to be approved by the state government. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the events and their implications, a combination of critical and analytical methodologies has been employed.¹³ Ethnographic data collected from the streets of Epe, along with detailed examination of the proceedings of the Lagos High Court, form the basis for a rigorous analysis. Through meticulous examination and interpretation of this data, we aim to uncover insights into the contemporary effectiveness and consequences of employing traditional conflict management mechanisms.¹⁴

Preliminary findings have already provided intriguing insights into the aftermath of the conflict in Epe. Despite the violence and tensions that occurred, a noteworthy development has been observed – peaceful coexistence between the Awo-Opa

8 Odumosu A. 2015. *Conflict Management in Lagos State*. Lagos: C.S.S. Bookshop, 43.

9 Adegbulu F. 2014. *Religion, Conflict and Conflict Management in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Snaap Press, 49.

10 Ali B. 2016. *Traditional Dispute Resolution Mechanisms in Lagos State*. Kaduna: Baraka Press, 22.

11 Ali, *Traditional Dispute Resolution*, 22.

12 Durojaiye J. 2011. *The Role of Civil Society in Conflict Management in Lagos State*. Lagos: C.S.S. Bookshop, 56.

13 Durojaiye, *The Role of Civil Society*, 56.

14 Odumosu, *Conflict Management in Lagos State*, 43.

members and the Muslim community.¹⁵ This observation raises important questions about the underlying factors that have facilitated reconciliation and peaceful relations, suggesting the potential for deeper exploration and analysis. This research endeavours to critically assess the limitations of religious mechanisms for conflict management and mediation, using J. Milton Yinger's theory on counterculture as a guiding framework. By examining the specific case in Epe, Nigeria, we aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary implications of traditional conflict management mechanisms. Through analysis of ethnographic data and court proceedings, we can shed light on the complexities of managing religious conflicts in diverse societies. These insights will contribute to the broader discourse on effective conflict resolution strategies in pluralistic environments.

UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Religious conflict may develop out of intolerance of other religions and discrimination against members of other religions, religious war, intellectual conflict and conflict between religious organisations and the state.¹⁶ Such conflicts are harmful to the overall credibility of religion and may cause religious apathy or disintegration. It may arise in the attempt to religiously convert ethnic society and may result in ethnic disintegration and loss of cultural heritage.¹⁷

Religious conflict thus arises from differences in religious beliefs or practices. This can be anything from small-scale conflicts within a community to large-scale wars between nations. Religious conflict can be caused by a few factors, including religious intolerance, competition for resources and political or economic factors. It can also be fuelled by factors like poverty, unemployment and lack of access to education. It is important to remember that religious conflict is not always about religion itself but can be about power, resources and social status.¹⁸ One of the things that make religious conflict so difficult to resolve is that it often involves deeply held beliefs and values. People may be willing to die or kill for their beliefs, and it can be very difficult to find common ground. It is also important to consider the role of religious leaders in resolving conflict.¹⁹ In some cases, religious leaders have been

15 Vaughan O. 2002. *Sacred Complexity: A History of the Awo-Opa Religion in Lagos*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 67.

16 Alechenu J. 2008. "Ethno-Religious Conflict and Civil Society: The Case of Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Sociology* 14(1):131-145.

17 Adejuwon TF. 2004. "The Impact of Religion on Conflict Resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Security Review* 13(3):85-102.

18 Maupeu H. 2001. "Religious Conflicts and the Management of Diverse Identities in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31(1):36-55.

19 Oyediran O and Young MC. 1998. "Nigeria: Religion, Politics and Violence," *African Affairs* 97(387):79-99.

able to use their influence to help bring about peace. In other cases, religious leaders have contributed to conflict by inflaming tensions and promoting violence.²⁰

Religious intolerance and discrimination exist on a worldwide scale. Conflict between church and state or other conflict occurs in the Middle East and in Northern Ireland and Cyprus.²¹ Competition and rivalry between religions also accounts for conflict. Islam and Christianity are competing for converts in parts of black Africa. Christian missionaries have made inroads into indigenous cultures, particularly in Latin America where native populations have been reduced to a state of poverty and dependency and in many cases are dying out.²² On the Indian subcontinent, where the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims are involved in fratricidal bloodshed, the governments have not been able to take steps to protect religious groups and beliefs from attack or harm, also work to prevent conflict by promoting understanding and dialogue between different religious groups. Though, the effort is not working in religious conflict in India but partially. In Southeast Asia and the Pacific tensions of greater or lesser religious nature are increasing in New Caledonia, Fiji, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Australia and New Zealand.²³ It was obvious that the conflict between the two parties, Alfa D and Awo-Opa, would have spread to become a religious crisis and further pose a threat to the community if not for the intervention of the government.

ACHIEVING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

B.O.S. Udezo, a New Testament scholar, has expressed the view that conflict resolution involves adopting various perspectives aimed at effectively resolving conflicts through constructive problem-solving, distinguishing it from conflict management or transformation.²⁴ Conflict management is about finding a way to live with and manage conflict in a way that minimizes harm and allows for peaceful coexistence. It is an amicable resolution of differences between parties, seeking to address the areas of conflict between them.²⁵ In the context of religious conflict, conflict management involves things like dialogue, negotiation and mediation. It's important to remember that conflict management is not the same as conflict resolution, which is the process of completely resolving a conflict.²⁶

20 Ojo E and Ekpo F. 2009. *Religion, Ethnicity and Violent Conflict in Nigeria*. Oxford: University of Oxford, 77.

21 Bidmos MA. 2006. *Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Nigerian Experience*. Port-Harcourt: Panaf Publishing Incorporation, 45.

22 Bidmos, *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, 45.

23 Bidmos, *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, 45.

24 Udezo BOS. "Concepts and Methods of Conflict Resolution and Peace building: Imperatives for Religious Leaders in Nigeria," *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 1(2):146.

25 Osaghae E. 2006. *Peace and Conflict Studies in Nigeria: Theories, Processes and Institutions*. London: Malthouse Press, 59.

26 Herbst J and Mills G. 2004. *Conflict and Peace building in Africa*. London: Zed Books.

A conflict cannot be considered resolved if the underlying causes are not adequately addressed.²⁷ Therefore, resolution is a comprehensive approach to eliminating conflict to prevent its recurrence in the future.²⁸ According to Udezo, conflict resolution entails addressing the deep-rooted sources of conflict by promoting effective communication, resolution and a change in behavior and attitudes, ultimately altering the structure of the conflict.²⁹ Conflict resolution is based on principles that aim to encourage conflicting parties to seek peace, which can be achieved by meeting the basic needs of the parties involved.³⁰

Moses Onyendu Okai, a sociologist, has argued that conflict management involves accepting the inevitability of conflict and recognizing that no effort can completely eliminate it.³¹ Instead, the parties involved must regulate and manage the conflict. Resolving conflicts through resolution is a futile endeavour, considering that conflict is an inevitable part of human relationships and an essential aspect of society, affecting personal, interpersonal and inter-group relations.³² Therefore, mediation, dialogue, reconciliation and peacemaking are recommended mechanisms for managing conflict in any society. In the case of the conflict between Alfa D and Awo-Opa, it was noted that the government called for Muslims to gather in Alausa Ikeja, the Lagos State Capital, to settle the case amicably. It was a commendable move by the government, although the case had to be sent to the Lagos High Court because it was an incident involving murder, irrespective of the religious origin, that had to be handled by the civil courts.

J. MILTON YINGER'S THEORY OF COUNTERCULTURE

Milton Yinger defined "counterculture" as a set of norms and values held by a group that strongly oppose the dominant norms and values of the society to which the group belongs.³³ Similar terms have been mentioned in the literature before. In his notable book, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, American political scientist and communications theorist Harold Lasswell referred to "countermores" as cultural patterns that mainly appeal to ideology, specifically referring to the ideological aspects of a subculture.³⁴ American sociologist Talcott Parsons wrote that in cases

27 Bercovitch J et al. 2009. *Conflict Resolution: Theory, Research and Practice*. London: Sage Publications, 213.

28 Adedeji A and Ihonvbere JO. 2001. *Religion and the Resolution of Conflict in Africa*. Abuja: International Peace Academy (IPA).

29 Udezo, "Concepts and Methods of Conflict Resolution", 146-147.

30 Elom PO. 2008. "Religion and Conflict Resolution in Africa," *FLASH Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 2(1):36.

31 Okai MO. 2008. *Religion and Social Conflict Management*. Enugu: Cal Integrated Resources Limited, 51.

32 Elom, "Religion and Conflict Resolution in Africa," 36.

33 Yinger JM. 1982. *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down*. Philadelphia: Free Press, 172.

34 Lasswell H. 1935. *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*. London: Elsevier Press, 73.

where there is an open break with the value system and ideology of the wider society; one can speak of a “counter-ideology”.³⁵ If the culture of a deviant group, such as a delinquent gang, remains a “counter-culture”, it becomes difficult for that culture to gain influence over wider circles.³⁶

Although these references were brief, they influenced Yinger’s systematic development of the concept of “counterculture”. Social theorists have developed four partially competing theories of social order. Social order is seen as a result of reciprocity and exchange, where behavior is driven by anticipated rewards from others.³⁷ It is also viewed as a consequence of power dynamics, where social order is seen as a consequence of power dynamics and where individuals or groups with greater power impose their norms and values on others. Another perspective is that social order emerges through shared cultural values and consensus among members of society. A third viewpoint suggests that social order is maintained through social control mechanisms, such as laws, regulations and formal institutions. Lastly, there is the perspective that social order is a result of social integration and solidarity among individuals.³⁸

In the context of counterculture, Yinger proposed that it emerges as a response to dissatisfaction with the dominant social order.³⁹ Countercultural groups develop their own norms, values and practices that challenge or oppose the mainstream culture. They often reject societal norms, beliefs and institutions and seek alternative ways of living and organising their communities. Countercultural movements have occurred throughout history and have been associated with various social, political and cultural transformations. For example, the counterculture of the 1960s in the United States was characterized by anti-establishment sentiments, opposition to the Vietnam War, advocacy for civil rights and experimentation with alternative lifestyles. It encompassed diverse groups such as the hippie movement, anti-war activists, feminists and environmentalists.

Yinger argued that countercultures serve important functions within society. They provide individuals with a sense of identity, belonging and empowerment.⁴⁰ Countercultural movements often challenge the status quo and stimulate social change by promoting new ideas, values and practices. However, they can also face resistance and conflict from mainstream society, as their values and actions may be perceived as subversive or disruptive. Lastly, counterculture refers to a set of norms and values held by a group that opposes the dominant norms and values of society. It emerges as a response to dissatisfaction with the existing social order and seeks to challenge or change it. Countercultural movements play a significant

35 Parsons T (ed). 1968. *Knowledge and Society: American Sociology*. Chicago: Basic Books, 115.

36 Parsons T (ed). 1968. *Knowledge and Society: American Sociology*, 115.

37 Parsons, *Knowledge and Society*, 115.

38 Parsons, *Knowledge and Society*, 115.

39 Yinger, *Countercultures*, 172.

40 Yinger, *Countercultures*, 172.

role in shaping societal norms, promoting social change and providing individuals with alternative identities and communities.⁴¹ The concept of “counterculture” is especially helpful in understanding the Awo-Opa case.

THE AWO-OPA CASE: MUSLIM AND TRADITIONALIST CONFLICT IN EPE

Epe is a multi-religious community. The three dominant religions – African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity – are well represented. Before the Awo-Opa incident in 2003, whenever there was a conflict among the three religions, they managed it using the mechanisms for conflict management that were internal to the religions. It is interesting to note that no case of religious conflict has been taken to court for civil or judicial adjudication. But in this case, the Muslim cleric Alfa D was said to have knowledge of African traditional religion – specifically, of Awo-Opa – because he came from the traditional home. There were even insinuations that he was an initiate of the Awo-Opa.

When religious conflict happens in Nigeria, especially, interreligious crisis or conflict, conflicting parties have always gone for internal conflict management processes before appropriating adjudication through the judiciary. Internal conflict management is a mix of both a state-sanctioned and an informal approach in Lagos State.⁴² On the one hand, there are some state-sanctioned mechanisms for managing internal conflict, like the Lagos State Peace Commission, which was established in 2016 to promote peaceful coexistence and dialogue.⁴³ On the other hand, there are also many informal conflict management practices that take place at the community level, such as traditional dispute resolution mechanisms and religious conflict resolution councils.⁴⁴ In addition to these mechanisms, there are also a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups that work on conflict management in Lagos State.⁴⁵ These groups often focus on specific issues or communities, and they use a variety of methods, including training, advocacy and networking, to address conflict.⁴⁶

But in the Awo-Opa case, diverse interpretations of what had transpired hindered management of the conflict. In his comments to us in an interview about the case, Mr. R described the case as pitting Muslims against practitioners of the Awo-Opa traditional religion, or “Iji-Nla fraternity”, in Epe, Lagos State.⁴⁷ In the event that led to the conflict, a curfew was imposed on the Awo-Opa’s annual Agan festival and

41 Yinger, *Countercultures*, 173.

42 Odumosu, *Conflict Management in Lagos State*, 47.

43 Durojaiye, *The Role of Civil Society*, 56.

44 Ali, *Traditional Dispute Resolution*, 22.

45 Adegbulu, *Religion, Conflict and Conflict*, 49.

46 Lagos State Safety Commission, 2016. *The Lagos State Safety Commission: Conflict Prevention and Resolution*. Ikeja: Lagos State Safety Commission, 24.

47 Interview with Mr. R, and Awo-Opa member, by D Oguntola-Laguda. Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria, 21 January 2023.

non-initiates were asked to stay indoors. According to Mr. R, a particular Muslim cleric, Alfa D who broke the law of restriction of non-initiates decided to confront the Awo-Opa practitioners on the night of their festival. There was a confrontation, and it was alleged that Alfa D was killed and buried overnight.

During the field work for the present study, we heard other accounts about how Alfa D was killed. From Mr. A, it was gathered that the traditionalists laid siege to Alfa D and slaughtered him in his house overnight.⁴⁸ They murdered him because of his frequent confrontation with members of Iji-Nla fraternity, he knew their secrets, and was thought to be revealing their secrets to his congregation, since he had a member of the fraternity in the past. When Alfa D became a Muslim preacher, one of his key sermons was thought to have been dedicated to revealing the secrets of the Iji-Nla fraternity, and this angered the traditionalists, who attacked and massacred him.⁴⁹ On the day of his death, Alfa D was alleged to have removed the mask of one prominent masquerader. The Awo-Opa group mobilised to confront him. He was apprehended, and the deed was done.

According to another account by Mr. Z, Alfa D was a betrayer of the group and its secrets. The Awo-Opa described him as an archenemy, because he came to learn from them in order to know their secrets and decided to leave their fraternity. After a while, D became an Islamic cleric and started relaying their secrets, which triggered anger in the camp of the Awo-Opa; they laid in wait for Alfa D and decided to kill him overnight. They cut his body into pieces and threw the body pieces into the river for the fishes to feed on. To this day, the body of Alfa D has not been found.⁵⁰

The actual story of Alfa D's alleged murder is quite complex. Eventually, the situation became so tense that the king and other influential members of the community had to step in and try to restore peace. Epe, being both a town and a traditional area, is in Lagos State with a population of around 250 000 people. However, it is also considered a traditional area, as it is the ancestral home of the Ekoi people and has a long history of traditional governance and authority. The traditional ruler of Epe is known as the Oloja of Epe.⁵¹ The Oloja of Epe is the paramount ruler of Epe, but the town is also divided into several smaller divisions, each with its own Oba or king. The divisions are known as Onisiwo, Igbogbo, Ibeju, Lekki and Mosafejo. Each Oba has authority over their division, but the Oloja of Epe is the overall ruler of the town. So, Epe has both one overall king and several smaller kings who have authority over different parts of the town.⁵² The king and

48 Interview with Mr. A, an Awo-Opa member, by D Oguntola-Laguda. Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria 11 November 2022.

49 Interview with Mr. O, a Muslim and Arabic lecturer, by JM Talabi. Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria. 14 February 2023.

50 Interview with Mr. Z, a Muslim and Arabic lecturer, by JM Talabi. Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria. 13 January 2023.

51 Falola T. 2002. *Sacred Spaces and Religious Traditions in the Nigerian City: Ibadan and the Yoruba Experience*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 36.

52 Mbiti JS. 2010. *The Yoruba Pantheon*. New York: Routledge Press, 63.

other prominent figures played a key role in bringing the two sides together and working towards a resolution. They used their influence to calm tensions and encourage dialogue between the communities. The king and prominent indigenes of Epe intervened using the mechanism of African traditional religion and Islam for conflict resolution and management, but they could not resolve the matter.⁵³

The Awo-Opa incident occurred in the Onisiwo division of Epe, near the entrance to the town. The shrine that was allegedly desecrated by Alfa D was in this division. It is a very busy area of Epe, as it is the main gateway into the town. So, the incident drew a lot of attention and caused a lot of tensions within the community. Prominent indigenes of Epe, including the two kings (the Oloja of Epe and the Onisiwo of Onisiwo) could not bring the situation under control.⁵⁴ The Muslim youth and family members were obviously very upset and angry about what had happened. There was a lot of tension and emotion around the situation. The Muslims were poised for retaliation against the traditionalists. It was gathered during field work, that Muslims and Islamic groups from neighbouring communities were mobilized by the Epe Muslims to fight against the Awo-Opa members.⁵⁵ The Lagos State Government invited the Muslims to a meeting for the purpose of maintaining peace in Epe. It is interesting to note that the traditionalists were not invited to the meeting. This was maybe due to the fact that they are rated as third among religious sects in Nigeria and thus behind Islam and Christianity in their numbers. The failure of these mechanisms led to the appropriation of civil judicial process. The police immediately intervened, arrested some members of Awo-Opa and charged them to court. Members of the Iji-Nla fraternity ran away from Epe, but on their return to Epe, they were arrested and processed for court.⁵⁶

Nigeria is officially a secular state, which means that the state does not have an official religion and is separate from any religious institutions.⁵⁷ However, in practice, Nigeria is a very religious country, with the majority of the population identifying as either Muslim or Christian. In the case of the Awo-Opa incident, there were tensions between the Nigerian state and the traditional authorities of Epe. Some people felt that the state was not doing enough to protect the traditional values of Epe, while others felt that the state was intervening too much in the affairs of the town.

Chapter 1, Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that, "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion." This means that the Nigerian state must remain neutral in matters

53 Peel J. 2000. *Yoruba Christians and Islam: The Transformation of a Culture*. New York: Routledge Press, 172.

54 Mack BB. 2003. *Lagos, City of the Mosques: A Portrait of the Yoruba Muslim Community*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 89.

55 Interview with Mr. A.

56 Interview with Mr. Z.

57 Jegede MA. 1981. "The Awo-Opa of Lagos: Traditional African Religion and Islam", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11(3):136-156.

of religion.⁵⁸ The Nigerian Constitution also guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In the case of the Awo-Opa incident, this means that the state had to tread carefully and not take sides in the conflict. The Constitution of Lagos State, Section 10, also provides for the secular nature of the state. The Lagos State Government also has the Lagos State Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board and the Lagos State Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board, which are government agencies responsible for managing religious affairs in the state.⁵⁹ On one hand, the Lagos State Government has a duty to protect the rights of all residents, regardless of their religion or beliefs. On the other hand, the government also has a duty to protect and preserve the traditional culture and heritage of the state.⁶⁰ This was incorporated to the means of conflict resolution in the case of Awo-Opa incident. Therefore, four members of the “Iji-Nla Fraternity” were sentenced to death. This was later commuted to life imprisonment, and one of them eventually died while in custody, while the other three regained freedom due to a state pardon in 2019.

There are several ways in which religious actors and institutions failed to address the Epe conflict and its aftermath. First, many religious leaders were slow to respond to the initial violence and did not do enough to condemn the violence and call for calm. Second, the religious mechanisms that were in place were not able to resolve the conflict or its aftermath in a way that satisfied all parties involved. Third, there was a lack of communication and understanding between different religious groups, which prevented a peaceful resolution. A key issue is the lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes justice and reconciliation.⁶¹ Different religious groups have different perspectives on these concepts, and without a shared understanding it is difficult to find a resolution that is acceptable to all parties. This is further complicated by the fact that many people see justice as only being achieved through punishment, rather than through reconciliation and healing.⁶²

Thus, the shortcomings observed in religious mechanisms employed for conflict management and mediation suggest that the religious mechanisms currently used for conflict management and mediation in Nigeria are not effective.⁶³ The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) has not been able to effectively prevent or resolve religious conflicts, due to favouritism, ethnicity and nepotism. In the case under review, (NIREC) was not effective for the aforementioned reasons. The religious mechanisms in place are not properly supported by the government and do not have

58 Amanam J. 1994. “Conflicts between Christianity and Indigenous Religion in Africa”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24(3):271-289.

59 Olukanni BO. 1975. “The Yoruba Religious System and Christianity”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 5(1):26-37.

60 Osundare N. 1979. “The History of the ‘Awo-Opa’ Movement”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*.

61 Coleman JL. 1999. *Competing Modernities: State and Religious Traditions in Yorubaland and Senegal, 1870-1960*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 149.

62 Coleman, *Competing Modernities*, 149.

63 Adesoji A. 2011. *The Indigenous Traditional Religious System, Islam and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria*. Lagos: African Sociological Review, 43.

the necessary resources or authority to be truly effective.⁶⁴ Religious mechanisms for conflict management and mediation are often used to promote the interests of religious leaders rather than to resolve conflicts. This can lead to the manipulation of religious sentiment for political gain and can further divide communities rather than uniting them. The religious mechanisms in place are often based on the principles of one religion, rather than being truly inclusive of all religions and belief systems.⁶⁵ The exclusion of a religious group from conflict management and mediation can have serious consequences, as it can lead to a sense of marginalisation and resentment. It is pertinent to consider how these mechanisms are funded and supported by the government. If they are not given the necessary resources, they will not be able to effectively resolve conflicts. Hence, there is need for government to intervene, so as to improve the effectiveness of religious mechanisms for conflict management and mediation.⁶⁶

Eventually, the case was transferred to the Lagos State High Court. It was transferred for several reasons. First, there was a concern that the Epe Magistrate Court, where the case was initially heard, did not have the necessary expertise to handle such a complex and sensitive issue. Second, the case was becoming increasingly politicized, and it was felt that the High Court would be better able to handle the case in an impartial manner. Third, the Lagos State Government wanted to take a more active role in resolving the conflict, and transferring the case to the high court was seen to achieve this and most importantly, the incidence involved murder case which spiked the interest of Lagos State Government and Court of Law. However, this move was not without controversy. Some argued that the High Court was not the right forum to resolve a religious conflict, and that it would only further entrench divisions between the different groups involved. Others felt that the High Court was the only way to ensure a fair and impartial resolution.

It should be noted that, the transfer of the Awo-Opa issue to the High Court was only one step in a longer process of conflict resolution. There were many other steps involved, including community meetings, interfaith dialogue and educational initiatives. Although, the conflict was not fully resolved by these measures, and tensions and violence have continued in the area. However, it is worth considering the positive impacts of these measures, as community meetings and educational initiatives helped to improve understanding and trust between different groups.

CONCLUSION

The resolution of religious conflicts in Nigeria has been a matter of significant concern among well-intentioned Nigerians. Despite efforts made to address the ongoing religious conflicts in the country, there has been limited success thus far.

64 Adesoji, *The Indigenous Traditional*, 43.

65 Anike B. 2010. *Muslims and Indigenous Religious Conflicts in Epe, Lagos*. Akure: Afe Babalola University Press, 67.

66 Anike, *Muslims and Indigenous Religious Conflicts*, 67.

In Lagos State, several cases of religious conflicts remain unresolved but are being managed. Disturbingly, these conflicts have resulted in the loss of numerous lives and damage to property.

Findings indicate that the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) has not effectively fulfilled its role in promoting awareness among the populace regarding the importance of religious tolerance, harmonious relationships, peaceful coexistence and unity. The impact of this council, especially at the grassroots level, is noticeably absent. Furthermore, the initiatives undertaken by government agencies, such as the National Orientation Agency and the Lagos State Agency for Religious Tolerance, as well as law enforcement agencies, to safeguard human lives and property, are inadequate.

Preliminary findings in the specific case of the Epe conflict and subsequent judicial processes demonstrate that peaceful coexistence has been achieved between the Awo-Opá practitioners of African traditional Religion and their Muslim neighbours in the Epe area of Lagos State. It is important to note that some members of Awo-Opá are also involved in certain Islamic rituals. Consequently, Epe serves as a hub for multiple religious traditions, resulting in syncretic practices and frequent crises among followers of the three dominant religions in the community. These findings prompt several recommendations.

First, parties involved should demonstrate respect for the beliefs and practices of other religions and refrain from ridiculing or mocking the weaknesses of other faiths. The government should intensify efforts to improve the harmonious relationship among people of different faiths in Lagos State. This can be achieved by restructuring the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and ensuring its visible presence at the federal, state and local government levels. Adequate funding should be allocated to enable the council to effectively carry out its vital role of sensitizing, enlightening and educating people, especially at the grassroots, about the paramount importance of peaceful coexistence, unity, tolerance and harmonious relationships.

Second, urgent action should be taken by the government to establish a National Religious Activities Regulatory Board (NRARB) in a manner that respects individual members' rights to practice their religion. This board will help curb the excesses of religious extremists who incite trouble in the name of religion. Comparative religious literacy education, as is the case in some jurisdictions such as Ghana, is essential to prevent conflict and should be introduced at the basic level for the plight of good majority of the youth who do not or might not have tertiary education but whom, in most cases, are the main participants in such conflicts. Also, further efforts should be made to reintroduce a mandatory course on the study of all three major religions in Nigeria's tertiary institutions, regardless of the programme or discipline the student is pursuing. This course would serve as one of the general studies requirements for all students, facilitating the exchange of ideas. Such exposure would help counter parochialism, narrow-mindedness, misperceptions and misinterpretations among the youth. The government must fulfil its responsibility by enhancing the security

of lives and property and addressing security challenges proactively before they escalate into violence.

Third, parties engaged in dialogue should address potential causes of religious conflicts at their early stages to prevent their recurrence. Seminars, workshops and refresher courses should be organised for mosque and church leaders, enabling them to gain deeper insights into their areas of divergence. Traditional religious leaders should also teach their adherents why unity is much of almost important. This platform would foster sustainable dialogue among individuals of different faiths, contributing to a harmonious future.