

Law, Religion and Reconciliation in Africa



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5 THE NIGERIA INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL (NIREC) AND ITS ROLES IN RECONCILING RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a very religious country, and its citizens are particularly enthusiastic about their religion. The African theologian, J.S. Mbiti's description of Africans as "notoriously religious",² accurately reflects the religiosity of Nigerians. Religious affiliations influence politics and governance as well as socio-economic and developmental issues. The country has very large number of Christians and Muslims, and each religion claims to have the highest numerical strengths. Fr. Mathew Hassan Kukah, the current Catholic Bishop of Sokoto, accurately quoted the Nigerian historian, Toyin Falola, who opines that pretention to be religious is one of the prerequisites for aspiration to political office in Nigeria.³ Religious functionaries aggravate religious tensions in the country either by agitating for support on enthronement of their religious member or crying foul over victimisation of adherents of their religions. The 2023 general elections, for instance, were characterised by heated debates and criticism of the political party that nominated members of the same faith as candidates for the offices of president and vice president. The Christians, on the other hand, used the pulpit to condemn such practices and encouraged Christians to vote for a leading Christian candidate. This shows how religion has continuously polarised the Nigerian society.

In 2008, John N. Paden, a political scientist and expert on Nigeria, argued that Nigeria had the highest cases of religious related conflicts.⁴ Nigerian scholars also attest to the fact that religion has become a divisive issue which often constitutes a flashpoint of violent conflict.⁵ It is also important to note that the violent religious conflicts in Nigeria also have ethno-political undertones in many cases.⁶ J.D. Gwamna, a Christian theologian, quotes a political scientist, Sam Egwu, who wrote in 2001, "Nigeria has demonstrated a very high propensity for ethnic and religious violence in the past three decades."⁷

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2 Mbiti JS. 1969. *African Religion and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1.

3 Kukah MH. 1993. *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum, 228.

4 Gwamna JD. 2014. "Reflections towards Religious Peace in Nigeria", in Shittu H et al (eds). *Axiology of Religions and Peace in the Contemporary Nigeria*. Oshogbo: Jemilah Publishers, 57.

5 Gwamna JD. 2010. *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*. Bukuru: Africa Christian Textbooks (ACTS).

6 Opeloye M. 2001. *Building Bridges of Understanding between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria*. LASU Inaugural Lectures Series, 18.

7 Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*, 2.

Gwamna excellently identifies causes of religion crises and impediments to peace in Nigeria, including religious corruption through patronage, bribery and inducement of religious bodies by politicians and deliberate abuse of religion and its misuse by adherents for fraudulent gains. A further issue is the manipulation of religion through politicisation. There are many instances where political issues have turned into violent religious crises in Nigeria. Poverty is yet another factor which aggravates religious tension and frustrations in Nigeria. The poverty rate is rising in the country; thus, people manipulate religions to take advantage of believers, leading them into conflicts through capitalizing on their sentiments and recruiting them into violence. Lack of knowledge and illiteracy are additional factors that contribute to indoctrination and brainwashing youths and mobilizing them into violent clashes in the name of religion.

Other factors that raise religious tensions include government bias and religious partisanship, and many political leaders have been accused of biased patronage of their own religious body to the detriment of others, sponsoring projects and using the government apparatus to promote particular religious causes. This often causes acrimony, bitterness and apprehension among adherents of Islam and Christianity. Government inability to bring development and socio-economic amenities to the citizens must also be counted as a factor hindering religious harmony in Nigeria.

Insincerity of both the leaders and followers of religions is also a major factor in the aggravation of religious related crises in Nigeria. Gwamna calls it religious hypocrisy, stating that it “arises from failure of its members to live according to the tenants of their religions and what they profess externally”.⁸ Some religious leaders, therefore, act in contravention of the peace messages they preach publicly and instead privately incite people to violence.

This chapter focuses on the efforts to bring about reconciliation in various communities that have had religiously related conflicts in Nigeria. “Religiously related” conflicts are conflicts rooted in factors ancillary to religion, such as socioeconomic issues, which have often been tinged with religion. The chapter focuses particularly on activities of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and its activities to ensure peace and harmony in the religiously polarised Nigeria. The successes and challenges of NIREC are discussed in the chapter, along with NIREC’s advocacy for human rights, freedom and campaigns against gender-based violence. The chapter examines whether NIREC has been successful in ensuring peace and reconciliation among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

RECONCILIATION IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

Reconciliation means the end of conflict and the beginning of good interactions and peaceful relationships. It is a set of procedures that move possible opposing ideas, thoughts and realities to coexist without disagreeing with each other.⁹ Peace

8 Gwamna, “Reflections towards Religious Peace in Nigeria”, 63.

9 Oxford University Press. 2002. “Reconciliation”, *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary*. Sixth Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 977.

Building Initiatives, a programme of Human Policy and Conflict Research (HPCR) at Harvard University, posits that despite the frequency of its usage in the practice and literature of peacebuilding, the term reconciliation is largely unconceptualised. The organisation also maintains that reconciliation does not have a standard definition, as there is no agreement on what it explicitly signifies, such that reconciliation exists mostly along a spectrum rather than having a united definition.¹⁰ The United Nations Security Council organised an open deliberation concerning “post-conflict reconciliation” on 26 January 2004. The more than forty speakers at the event did not define the term reconciliation; in fact, they had different conceptions of the phenomenon.¹¹ Nonetheless, one expert on social conflict studies, Louis Kriesberg, describes reconciliation as a “multidimensional phenomenon” that entails the procedures of directing efforts to fix broken relationships and conflicting situations. These procedure and activities constitute reconciliation. Kriesberg observes that “reconciliation can refer to actions that sometimes help transform a destructive conflict or relationship, the process by which that transformation occurs, or the outcome of such processes”.¹²

Peace development expert Nicole A. Hofmann argues that the concept is primarily a spiritual one and specifically related to Christianity, since forgiveness of sins and reconciliation of a sinner with God is a major characteristic of Christianity.¹³ The concepts of forgiveness of sins, justification and reconciliation are counted as the same, and the state of reconciliation is considered as the stage of restoration of a better relationship with God. However, Hofmann criticises this conception of reconciliation as limiting the process of reconciliation to only religious persons who perceive themselves guilty of sin and undertake confession after breaching moral law. Susan Dwyer, a moral psychologist, looks at reconciliation from a realist viewpoint, stepping out of the socio-moral domain, which she counts as modest conceptualisation for contemporary societies. She distinguishes between reconciliation and forgiveness, though not totally excluding their combination. Dwyer counts reconciliation as a process that aims at lessening the pains by making sense of the wounds, new beliefs and behavioural patterns in context of personal and national life.¹⁴

The command for forgiveness and reconciliation after conflict is foregrounded in both Christianity and Islam. It has been alluded to above that scholars ascribe the term reconciliation to Christianity, as a significant phenomenon

10 Peacebuilding Initiative. 2007-2008. “Reconciliation: Definitions & Conceptual Issues” Cambridge, MA: Program for Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, TH Chan School of Public Health.

11 Peacebuilding Initiative, “Reconciliation”.

12 Peacebuilding Initiative, “Reconciliation”.

13 Hofmann NA. 2010. “Reconciliation in the Transformation of Conflict: an analysis of the South African Experience and Implications for its Application in International Conflict Resolution from a Peace Theoretical Perspective”, CCS Working Paper. Marburg: Zentrum für Konfliktforschung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, 11:8.

14 Dwyer S. 1999. “Reconciliation for Realists”, *Ethics and International Affairs* 13:96.

in a sinner's relationship with God. According to Ed Jarrett, a biblical scholar, reconciliation consists of and goes beyond forgiveness, since it restores broken relationships. Forgiveness can be done individually, while reconciliation must involve all the parties in conflict who are willing to participate. Though the word "reconciliation" is less commonly mentioned in the Bible than "forgiveness", there are many passages that implore reconciliation after conflict and just as many enjoin forgiveness. Romans 12:12 gives an explicit command of reconciliation. Matthew 5:23-24 tells how broken relationships with humans can impede the relationship with God. That is why Jesus said that the person offering a gift at the altar should go and mend his relationship first, and then return to the altar to offer the gift to God.¹⁵ In Islam, the place of reconciliation is vital, conciliators are counted as the best of humans who have best rewards from the creator (Quran 4:114). The Quran categorically tells believers to fear God and keep straight the relations between themselves (Quran 8:1). Experts in Islamic law explain the purpose of as bringing people together by removing quarrels and hatred. Reconciliation restores rights to its owners with the consent of both parties, so that love and friendship will prevail and the cause of injustice and revenge will end.¹⁶

HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

In what would become the nation of Nigeria, Islam was able to win converts and establish itself in Borno in the eleventh century. Humme Jilmi, who was the ruler of the kingdom between 1085 and 1097 CE, made Islam the religion of the state.¹⁷ Islam became the established religion in Hausa land in the fourteenth century and in Yoruba land in the seventeenth century.¹⁸ Organised Christianity came to Nigeria in the second half of the nineteenth century, despite earlier efforts by the missions of the Catholic Church to spread Christianity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Warri and Benin in southern Nigeria.¹⁹ These earlier attempts were not successful, Nigerian historian J.F. Ade-Ajayi notes, because the evangelists separated spiritual life from the mundane and because other factors included language barriers, transportation, health challenges and lack of sufficient missionaries to work in the field.²⁰ Emmanuel Ayandele, a Nigerian Church historian, finds references in the Vatican archives to the Kororofa Kingdom of northern Nigeria, with 10 000

15 Jarrett E. 2022. "What Are Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Bible? Are They Different?", Christianity.com, March 29.

16 Amir MYA. 2013. "Ahammiyyat al-Sulh fi al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyya" [The Importance of Reconciliation in Islamic Sharia]. DarulUloomDeoband.com, October-November, no. 12.

17 Doi AI. 1984. *Islam in Nigeria*. Zaria: Gaskiya Cooperation, 57.

18 Doi, *Islam in Nigeria*, 19.

19 Sanneh L. 1983. *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. New York: Orbis Books, 36-38; Ade-Ajayi JF. 1965. *Christian Mission in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of New Elites*. London: Longman, 3-4.

20 Ade-Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria*, 3-4; Cf. Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 36-38.

Christian adherent and a hospital built by a Catholic priest in 1708.²¹ Historians also note an abortive effort under Father Carlo da Genova to begin a mission in Borno in 1708.²² Da Genova travelled overland from Tripoli in 1710 and 1711, but he died at Katsina before the effort got started.

The beginning of successful evangelism in Nigeria was really in the nineteenth century. The anti-slavery movement played an effective role, as the resettling of the ex-slaves in Africa aided the evangelisation of parts of Nigeria. The evangelicals strongly involved themselves in the anti-slavery movement. Liberated people who had formerly been enslaved served as agents of Christianity and invited missionaries to areas where they resettled in Yoruba land, include places such as Ijebu, Ife, Ibadan and other areas.²³

This beginning of evangelism also brought about interaction between Muslims, Christians and practitioners of African traditional religions in Nigeria, though there had been contact between Muslim and Christian recaptives in Sierra Leone, where the resettlement started in 1787.²⁴ The Muslim recaptives also moved to places in Nigeria.²⁵ This contact and zeal to win converts can be said to be the beginning of disagreement, though not violent conflict. The missionaries had the aim of winning over the Muslims to Christianity and had dedicated evangelism for Muslims, since Islam had been practised in the region for centuries before the coming of the missionaries. In Yoruba land, some evangelists moved into the Muslim communities to debate religious themes. Western education was used by the missionaries for the spread of Christianity, and it initially led to antipathy against it by some Muslims; however, they benefitted from learning Christianity and the Bible in the mission schools, as it availed them with the ability to use of the Christian scripture for dialectics and debates on the veracity of various religious themes.²⁶ These did not lead to violent clashes.

In the north, the Church Missionary Society's Sudan Party,²⁷ under Graham Wilmot Brook, made much effort to evangelise the Muslim northern Nigeria in April 1890.

21 Ayandele EA. 1966. "The Missionary Factor in Northern Nigeria, 1870-1914", *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*. III(3):503.

22 Ayandele, "The Missionary Factor in Northern Nigeria", 503; Crampton EPT. 2004. *Christianity in Northern Nigeria*. Updated by Gaiya MAB. Bukuru: ACTS, TCNN. 13; Clarke PB. 1980. "The Method of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria", in Kalu OU (ed). *The History of Christianity in West Africa*. England: Longman, 42.

23 Shitu MH. 2014. "Interaction between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria and its Role in Shaping the Practice of Religion", in Shittu H et al (eds). *Axiology of Religions and Peace*, 97-8.

24 Recaptives are African slaves that were emancipated and resettled in Sierra Leone by the British Royal Navy. See Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 55-6.

25 Gbadamosi TGO and Ade-Ajayi JF. 1980. "Islam and Christianity in Nigeria", in Ikime O (ed). *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Education Books, 347-8.

26 Shitu, "Interactions between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria", 100.

27 The whole region was known as Bilad al-Sudan (land of the blacks) and was used to document history by the Arabs before the coming of the missionaries. See Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria*, 2.

The effort did not however, yield any positive outcomes.²⁸ The people did not accept the missionaries in their midst; thus, the missionaries turned toward the non-Muslim tribes of northern Nigeria, where they made significant conversions. Different evangelical missions established strongholds in the non-Muslim parts of the North. In the early twentieth century, some of them specifically mentioned that they rushed there to prevent Islam from taking over.²⁹ These regions of northern Nigeria formed the parts that have often been characterised by religion-related crises in contemporary Nigeria, including Taraba, Southern Kaduna, Plateau and some parts of Bauchi State. J.D. Gwamna concurs with Karl Maier, an American journalist, who opines that the reason for the frequencies of clashes between Muslims and Christians in the region called the “Middle Belt” is the efforts of Christian ethnic groups to free themselves from the Hausa-Fulani Muslim hegemony.³⁰ Apart from these regions of northern Nigeria Christian ethnic minorities, there had been interreligious clashes in other Muslim regions of the North, though not as frequent as in the aforementioned region.

In more recent times, it is pertinent to note that many writers have traced the rise of tensions between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria to the late 1970s and early 1980s.³¹ But even before that, the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 also had a religious colouration. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the head of Biafra, claimed that the war was a *jihad* of Muslims to invade Christian Biafra. The Pope, as the head of the Catholic Church, was dragged into the support of the Biafran State as a Christian state.³² Biafra used propaganda efficiently to portray to the Western world that the war was a religious conflict between Christianity and Islam. An example was the 1 January 1968 heading in the *Biafran Sun*: “Islam main cause of war”.³³ In contrast to this, Catholic priests in the north identified with the Nigerian State.³⁴ Even the head of the Nigeria federation at that time was a Christian.

By the late 1970s, religious controversies became more prevalent at national level. Christians demanded equal treatment when the Nigerian Pilgrims Commission was established in 1975 by the Federal Military Government, even though it was solely established to take care of *hajj* (pilgrimage) and *umrah* (lesser pilgrimage); but the Nigeria Pilgrim Commission Act was later amended in 1986 to cover Christian

28 Ayandele, “The Missionary Factor”, 503; Gbadamosi and Ade-Ajayi, “Islam and Christianity in Nigeria”, 351.

29 Dali S. 2005. “Mission Activities”, in Hopkins M and Gaiya M (eds). *Churches in Fellowship: The Story of TEKAN*. Bukuru: ACTS, 42.

30 Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*, 7.

31 Opeloye, *Building Bridges of Understanding*, 18; Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 216; 245.

32 Clarke PB and Linden I. 1984. *Islam in Nigeria*. Mainz: Grunewald/Munich: Kaisler, 129.

33 Clarke and Linden, *Islam in Nigeria*, 129.

34 Kenny J. 1979. “Christian-Muslim Relation in Nigeria”, *Islam-Christianity* 5:181-86; Clarke and Linden, *Islam in Nigeria*, 129-130.

pilgrimage also, due to the controversies it generated.³⁵ The status of *sharia* in the Nigerian constitution and the Muslim quest for the establishment Federal Sharia Court of Appeal was also opposed by Christians in the constitution drafting committee of 1976, and the issue generated heated debates in the press up to 1978.³⁶

The Nigerian government's efforts to join the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986 also generated controversy in the Nigerian polity. The country graduated from its observer status to a full member country. The whole activity was done in secrecy by the Federal Military Government. The Christian Association of Nigeria and Archbishop Okojie of Lagos resisted Nigeria's membership in the OIC and sought unconditional withdrawal.³⁷ Gwamna wrote that the way Nigeria sought and achieved full membership of OIC left Christians with fear, anger and suspicion of the intentions.³⁸ Muhib Opeloye, an expert on Muslim-Christian relations, opined that the act "further aggravated the strained relationship" between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria and that from 1986 forward, inter-religious conflict continued to reoccur.³⁹ In fact, the nature of the conflicts has become so violent and bloody that many were injured and thousands of lives and properties have been lost in religiously related conflicts up to the present moment in Nigeria.

Some of the most violent religious crises that engulfed Nigeria include the Kafanchan riot of 1987, which started between Muslim and Christian students in the College of Education Kafanchan and escalated into the town and to other towns in Kaduna, Katsina and Kano States. Properties worth millions of naira were destroyed, including churches and mosques.⁴⁰ Fr. Kukah noted that before order was restored in Kafanchan, 12 persons had been killed.⁴¹ The Kano riot of 1992 was in protest of the visit by the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. The crisis led to the death of more than 200 persons, according to Canadian missionary Jan Harm Boer.⁴² The disturbances in the Tafawa Balewa area of Bauchi State were very deadly, and they reoccurred in 1995, 2000 and beyond. The 1991 crisis was caused by a mere disagreement over purchase of meat by a Muslim from a Christian, and this later led to the killing of many people and destruction of properties. Boer quotes a journalist who claimed that about 500 lives were lost.⁴³ Inter-religious crises continued to reoccur subsequently in the regions due to factors of ethnicity and the quest for political and economic gains.

35 Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 216.

36 Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 118.

37 Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 231.

38 Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*, 51.

39 Opeloye. *Building Bridges of Understanding*, 18.

40 Cf. Boer JH. 2003. *Nigeria's Decades of Blood 1980-2002*. Ontario: Essence Publishing, 50.

41 Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 189.

42 Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 42.

43 Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 82.

The 1992 Zangon Kataf crisis was also very devastating. Like many other crises, it had ethnic, economic and political factors as its primary causes. The attempt by the council chairman, a Kataf, a Christian, to relocate a market which was dominated by Hausa traders, predominantly Muslims, to a new site to give advantage to the Kataf, who are predominantly Christians led to the violent clash.⁴⁴ Boer wrote that 95 people were killed in the crisis.⁴⁵

The Jos-Plateau ethno-religious crises have been the most violent and devastating in the history of Nigeria. The 1994 crisis was over the appointment of a Hausa Muslim, considered to be non-indigenous by the Christian community, as the administrator of Jos North Local Government.⁴⁶ The degeneration of Jos crises became more glaring and frequent from 7 September 2001 onward, and the root causes of the crises can also be traced to ethnicity, politics and economic factors. There had been a long resentment over the ownership of Jos by the Afizere, Anaguta and Birom tribes who are predominantly Christians, on one side, and Hausa-Fulani Muslims on the other. A Hausa-Fulani was appointed to be the Jos North co-ordinator of National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), but he was considered as a settler by the indigenous Christians and his appointment was resisted.⁴⁷ The violence that erupted afterward led to damning consequences in the destruction of lives and properties. The renewal of the violence at slightest disagreement shows how deeply rooted the tensions are in the hearts of the warring parties. The Jos crisis led to reprisals in other parts of Nigeria. It is worrying that innocent travellers and people passing by Jos are often attacked and killed just for being of the same tribe or religions with those being considered as internal adversaries. The killing of more than 22 Muslim travellers on 13 August 2021 is an example.⁴⁸ This led to subsequent days of violence throughout the city.

The return of democracy in 1999 paved the way for some Muslims to make efforts at introducing the *sharia* system in some northern states in Nigeria. Zamfara State was the first to announce. Other states followed after. The attempt to introduce *sharia* in Kaduna State led to a stiff resistance from the Christians and devastating violence in the year 2000 after the Christian protest of February 21 in Kaduna under the auspices of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).⁴⁹ The Kaduna hostilities led to destruction of thousands of lives and properties worth millions of naira.

⁴⁴ Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 55ff.

⁴⁵ Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 58.

⁴⁶ Settler-indigene issue have continuously caused crises over control of land, politics and resources in the Christian dominated provinces of northern Nigeria. This often carries religious colourations as those often counted as settlers are Muslims. See Boer, *Nigeria's Decades*, 95.

⁴⁷ Cf. Gwamna, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria*, 84ff; Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 95.

⁴⁸ See Yusuf K. 2021. "How 22 travellers were killed in Plateau – Police", *Premium Times*, 14 August.

⁴⁹ Gwamna, *Religion in Nigeria*, 54-5; Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood*, 63ff.

The Boko Haram insurgency, which led to the displacement of almost two million people in the North East Nigeria and the killing of thousands further aggravated the religious tensions in Nigeria and created a situation of mutual suspicion between Muslims and Christians in the country. The incessant occurrence of religiously related violence in Nigeria and the genuine need for reconciliation and peace preached by adherents of Islam and Christianity led to the formation of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) which is the subject of the present research.

RELIGIOUS PEACE AND RECONCILIATORY EFFORTS BEFORE NIREC

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Nigerian Catholic priest and Islamicist, Victor Chukwulozie, convened dialogical meetings with Muslims in early 1960s, in his effort to domesticate the Catholic Church's call to dialogue in Nigeria. The first meeting was held in Kano in October 1962. Chukwulozie formed an inter-religious dialogue committee to convene further meetings, and he convened another meeting for the undergraduates of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in March 1963. At the initiation of Chukwulozie, other meetings were held in 1974 at Pastoral Institute Ibadan on 20 November and in December 1978 at Jos. Chukwulozie afterward launched a journal, the *Nigeria Dialogue*, to promote his dialogical efforts.⁵⁰

After the aforesaid controversy over Nigeria's full membership of OIC and the subsequent debates that it produced on 21 March 1986, the Federal Military Government set up a committee to douse the tension in the polity. The head of state made the body a permanent one, and it was named Advisory Council on Religious Affairs (ACRA). It was formally opened on 29 June 1987. ACRA, however, was soon engulfed in crisis, as it could not elect its own leadership, resolving only to elect co-chairmen and secretaries from the Christian and Muslim divides. This deadlock prompted the military government to promulgate the Advisory Council on Religious Affairs Decree of 1987, making it the responsibility of the government to appoint the secretary of the council. ACRA could not achieve any reasonable feat or responsibility with which it was saddled, other than what Mathew Kukah calls "piled up hotel bills at the posh Noga/Hilton Hotel, Abuja, the venue of its meetings."⁵¹ What was unfortunate about ACRA was the inability of the assembled religious functionaries, whose primary purpose was to create national unity and cohesion, to unite among themselves. Some Christian members of ACRA eventually resigned, and they seem to have lost confidence in the council.⁵² The same accusations have been made concerning NIREC, the subject of this chapter, by some of its critics.

50 Shitu MH. 2020. "An Appraisal of 'Dialogue of the Truth' and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Nigeria: A Muslim View-Point", *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture AJRPC* 1(1):22-23.

51 Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 235.

52 Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, 235.

When the late professor of philosophy, Campbell Shittu Momoh, organised a seminar on religious tolerance in 1987, scholars from different parts of Nigeria were present at the event, which took place at the National Arts Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos. He used the opportunity to launch an organisation he called National Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO). The 107 papers that were presented by people of diverse religious persuasions were published in four volumes with the title *Nigeria Studies in Religious Tolerance*.⁵³ The volumes were co-edited by Momoh, Muhammad Sani Zaharadeen, a leading Islamic Studies scholar, who is currently the chief Imam of Kano, and a prominent biblical scholar, the late Samuel O. Abogunrin. No significant successes were achieved by NARETO, apart from the above-mentioned seminar and the publication that emanated from it. In an “opinion” he published in *Vanguard Newspaper* of 23 September 2001, Momoh describes Muslim and Christian leaders as an “embodiments of fanaticism and intolerance”, further describing the northern zone of CAN and the Jama’atu Nasril Islam (JNI) as two major vehicles of religious bigotry and intolerance in Nigeria.⁵⁴ Momoh’s position was cause for concern, because these two bodies prominently form the composition of NIREC, whose primary objectives include assurance of religious unity, peace and reconciliation. When these constitutive bodies of NIREC are being accused of the opposite of what is required of them, it makes the whole exercise to look theatrical rather than practicable.

The Interfaith Mediation Centre Kaduna is another important organisation that engages in interreligious conflict resolutions and reconciliation – the organisation is known as “the imam and the pastor”. The organisation was co-founded by Imam Muhammad N. Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye. The two men were initially sworn enemies, and both of them were part of the 1992 Zango Kataf crisis mentioned earlier. Pastor Wuyep lost his arm, while Ashafa lost his two brothers and a teacher. They came to relate with each other reluctantly in the beginning, but afterwards they became friends and founded IMC in 1995. The organisation has successfully mediated crises among communities in Nigeria and beyond, and it trains youth in how to peacefully resolve conflicts and to be peace advocates.⁵⁵ The organisation is less controversial, due to harmonious relationship between its members, unlike NIREC, which despite having government support, often displays a lack of unity among its members.

53 Shitu, “An Appraisal of ‘Dialogue of the Truth’ and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Nigeria”, 23-24.

54 Momoh CS. 2001. “Nigeria: Vehicles of Religious and Ethnic Intolerance”, *Vanguard*, 23 September.

55 The founders of the organisation give these accounts and more in the FLT Films 2008 documentary known as “the Imam and the Pastor”. See Journeyman Pictures, “The Nigerian Reconciliation that Offers a Roadmap from Extremism”, YouTube, posted 5 January 2012. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFh85K4NFv0&t=631s> [Accessed 27 February 2024].

PEACE, RECONCILIATION AND THE HISTORY OF NIREC

After the return of Nigeria to democracy in 1999, following a long period of military rule and the incessant ethno-religious crises that continued to engulf Nigeria, leaders of the principal religions, Islam and Christianity, came together on 11 September 1999 to form an association.⁵⁶ The then-chaplain of the presidential villa, Yusuf A. Obaje, suggested to the then-President Olusegun Obasanjo that a body of interreligious leaders be established to address the continuous religious unrest in Nigeria. Thus, a delegation under the auspices of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) under Rev. Sunday Mbang, a Methodist prelate, visited the Sultan of Sokoto Muhammadu Maccido on 11 September 1999.⁵⁷ It was at this meeting that the idea was sold to the sultan of the need for such an organisation, comprising leaders from the both religious divides to address the frequent religious clashes and institute dialogue religious peace and harmony in the nation.⁵⁸

NIREC is not a government entity. It is autonomous, but it gets continuous support from the office at the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) in undertaking its activities. Archbishop John Onayekan noted that in forming NIREC, the circumstances in which the government formed ACRA in 1986/87 and how it failed. Thus, it was resolved that the formation of NIREC at the initiation of leaders of the two major faiths would make the organisation more effective and the CAN delegation met with the Muslim leadership. The government provided the logistic for the meeting, and it was Rev. Obaje who named the organisation NIREC.⁵⁹

The president of Nigeria supported the idea agreed upon by the leadership of the two major faiths, and the association was inaugurated on 29 September 1999 at Abuja, with a total of fifty members, 25 being nominated by CAN and 25 by the Nigeria Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) under the Sultan of Sokoto, and with the council to be co-chaired by the Sultan and the CAN President.⁶⁰ The first national co-ordinator and executive secretary was Rev. Obaje, the Aso Villa chaplain. After Rev. Mbang, Archbishop Jasper Akinola became the co-chairperson and the president of CAN. After the demise of Sultan Maccido, Sultan Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar became the Sultan of Sokoto and therefore, became the co-chairperson of NIREC in 2006. NIREC was co-chaired by Archbishop Onayekan as the CAN President from 2007 and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor from 2011 to 2016. Is-haq Oloyede, a professor of Islamic law, was the executive secretary and national coordinator after Rev. Obaje. Rev. Samson O.A. Ayankunle became the president of CAN and

56 Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). 2020. Constitution of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) 2020, 3.

57 Ugorie UM. "Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria: The Role of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)", Academia.edu, 2-3.

58 Ugorie, "Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria".

59 Alamu AG. 2012. "Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Nigerian State", *Orita* XLIV(2):179-80.

60 See NIREC. "About NIREC Who We Are". Online at: <http://www.nirec.org.ng/about.php>

replaced Pastor Oritsejafor as the co-chair of NIREC.⁶¹ The holder of the office of national coordinator and executive secretary was split, and Rev. Fr. Cornelius Afebu Omonokhua is the current executive secretary.⁶²

A significant issue about NIREC membership is that it is voluntary, and the membership was increased in the 2020 NIREC Constitution from 50 to 60 – 30 members representing Christians to be appointed by CAN and 30 representing Muslims and to be appointed by the NSCIA.⁶³ The 2020 NIREC Constitution describes the council's objectives and functions as including, first of all, dialogue on theological exchange to share true and honest information about the teachings of Christianity and Islam and to promote understanding the two religions each other's viewpoints, including areas of difference and habitual behaviour of adherents, objectives that that should be actualized through dialogues, seminars, workshops and other means.⁶⁴ Second, promotion of religious harmony, mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among Muslims and Christian in Nigeria by creating a permanent avenue of interaction and communication.⁶⁵ This can be equated with the dialogue of life which is in accord with the classification of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue.⁶⁶ Third, the NIREC Constitution enumerates as a further goal the promotion and inculcation of "moral, ethical, social and cultural values" of Christianity and Islam in the citizens and Nigeria, for the building of a better society.⁶⁷ This can also be equated with the Pontifical Council document's recommendation of "dialogue of religious experience" in which the teachings of Christianity and Islam are jointly promoted. The fourth and final objective of the council according to its 2020 NIREC Constitution is the provision for mutual co-operation and promotion of welfare of all Nigeria citizens.⁶⁸ This is also in tandem with the Pontifical Council document's concept of "dialogue of action" in which Muslims and Christian collaborate to struggle for common good of the society, such as peace, welfare, justice and equality.

The current 2020 NIREC Constitution seems to have been carefully designed to reflect the four goals of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, its objectives and functions in dialogue. It is noteworthy that 11 objectives, including the aforesaid four objectives and functions of the council, were mentioned in the 2001 Constitution of NIREC. The functions that are related to reconciliation include

61 NIREC. "About NIREC Who We Are".

62 NIREC, Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) Members Directory as of 24 January 2019. Online at: <http://www.nirec.org.ng/directory.php>

63 NIREC, Constitution 2020, art 2(1).

64 NIREC, Constitution 2020, art 3(1).

65 NIREC, Constitution 2020, art 3(2).

66 See Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. 1991. *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. Rome: Vatican, 19 May.

67 NIREC, Constitution 2020, art 3(3).

68 NIREC, Constitution 2020, art 3(4).

assurance of cordial relationships among religious groups and peaceful resolution of frictions and misunderstandings that may arise among adherents of the two major faiths, among others.⁶⁹ Akiti Glory Alamu, a sociologist and scholar of comparative religions, quoted Mathew Kukah, who specifically describes NIREC as “a force for change and reconciliation in Nigeria”.⁷⁰

NIREC has standing committees that are tasked with addressing issues of concern to Christians, Muslims and the nation. They include education committee and the public issue committee, which help NIREC to arrive at positions concerning burning national issues. Other committees include the research and planning committee, the finance committee, the dialogue and peacebuilding committee and the international education committee. It is the dialogue and peacebuilding committee that is saddled with the responsibility of nipping in the bud any conflict, so as to build peace and resolve conflict.⁷¹ Under its reconstituted leadership after the change of leadership of CAN and specifically under the current leadership of Archbishop Daniel Okoh and Sultan Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar, NIREC has inaugurated a youth forum. The forum issued a press statement after the 2023 general election and the tensions the resulted.⁷² NIREC also has structures at states and local government levels across Nigeria, although some are more functional than others.

SOME RECONCILIATORY AND OTHER ACTIVITIES OF NIREC

NIREC is a non-governmental organisation, and it serves as an advisory body to the government, to religious organisations and to individuals. It does not have powers to enforce laws. The main thing it does is advocacy for peace, freedom and respect for human rights. NIREC also tries to mediate in situations of ethno-religious conflicts in different parts of Nigeria. For example, NIREC intervened in the religious crises of Jos and sought dialogue with the parties involved. NIREC was also involved in mediating other crises such as those in Kaduna and Abuja.⁷³

The role of the NIREC Lagos State Chapter is noteworthy in the prevention and resolution of communal and interpersonal conflicts between Christians and Muslims. M.O. Raji, an Islamic studies scholar, gives the account of how the Lagos State Chapter intervened in a case which entailed possible incitement and provocation to religious violence, as contained in a 2010 video production. Another case of alleged desecration of the Quran by a lady evangelist in Badagry, was successfully resolved by NIREC.⁷⁴ Raji also mentioned the intervention of NIREC

69 NIREC, Constitution of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) 2001, art 3(1-11).

70 Alamu, “Nigeria Inter-Religious Council”, 181.

71 NIREC, Constitution, 2020, art 7; Cf. NIREC, Constitution 2001, art 7.

72 See NIREC Youth Forum. 2023. “Nigeria is all that Matters” (press statement), 9 March.

73 Alamu, “Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Nigerian State”, 182.

74 Raji MO. 2015. “Towards the Sustenance of Religious Tolerance and Harmony in Lagos State: The Role of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), Lagos State Chapter” *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition* 7:48ff.

in some two land disputes between some churches and Muslim communities. The first involved Christ Apostolic Church and the Muslim community in Apapa. An agreement was at the end prepared by NIREC and was signed by the warring parties. The second is an alleged encroachment into Wonders of God Church by a member of the Osapa Muslim community for use in Muslim Eid prayers. NIREC successfully mediated between the parties and counselled them on harmonious living and good neighbourliness.⁷⁵

Morufudeen A. Shittu, a Nigerian Arabist, appraised the reconciliatory role of NIREC Lagos State Chapter in the dispute between members of Redeemed Christian Church known as Agape and the people of MKO Garden Housing Estate, Alausa, Ikeja, Lagos State. He also noted NIREC role in the reconciliation between the Chief Imam of Iberoko in Badagry and the king of the area.⁷⁶ In a NIREC 2020 documentary, Rev. Stephen T. Adegbite corroborated the roles being played by NIREC in Lagos State in stabilizing religious conflicts in the state. Lagos State has a well-grounded NIREC at grassroots levels of Local Government Areas (LGAs), this makes its impacts meaningful in the State. Adegbite recommends the replication of what NIREC is doing in Lagos State at its national level.⁷⁷

Bauchi State has had bitter experience of interreligious crises. The state government encouraged the formation of state chapter of NIREC and encouraged a tour of the entire local government area of the state by religious leaders. An antagonist of the whole notion of interfaith dialogue, the Bauchi Salafi scholar, Idris Abdulaziz, gave an account of how Muslim and Christian leaders toured the whole state, an act which he saw as not being in conformity with the teachings of Islam. He saw it as taking Christianity to places where there are no Christians.⁷⁸

At the national levels, under Professor Is-haq Oloyede, NIREC instituted the rotation of the quarterly meetings of the organisation amongst the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. NIREC often holds interactive sessions with religious leaders in the states and zones, encourages them to establish state chapters and guides them on how to promptly intervene in crisis that may erupt in their regions.⁷⁹ This rotation of meetings is symbolic, including in areas where there are violent clashes. In these meetings, warring parties see their religious leaders together, working harmoniously and advocating for peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. It is also the

⁷⁵ Raji, "Towards the Sustenance", 51.

⁷⁶ Shittu MA. 2020. "Dawr al- 'Ulamā' al-Muslimīn fi Taḥqīq al-Amn fi Najjiriya" [The Role of Muslim Scholars in Ensuring Peace in Nigeria], in Imam YO et al (eds). *Religion, Peace-Building and National Integration: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Muibi Omolayo Opeleye*. Ile-Ife: Department of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, 318.

⁷⁷ NIREC. 2020. "NIREC Documentary" YouTube. Posted 11 December 2020. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=kScaNQa2yLo>

⁷⁸ AbdulAziz I. "Akidar Inter-Faith, Raddi ga Prof. Mansur Sokoto akan kuskurantar Albani Zaria" [The doctrine of inter-faith (dialogue): a rejoinder to Prof. Mansur Sokoto concerning his ascription of error to Albani of Zaria], YouTube. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctrqngRHGY> [Accessed 17 April 2023].

⁷⁹ Ugorie, "Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria", 4-5.

practice of NIREC after each quarterly meeting to issue communiqués in which it states its position on national issues, peace and reconciliation.⁸⁰

In the 2020 documentary, NIREC Executive Secretary Cornelius Afebu Omonokhua, listed three major religious conflicts in which NIREC has successfully intervened under his leadership.⁸¹ First, there was the alleged demolition of the Rainbow Town Central Mosque, which is situated at Trans-Amadi area in Port Harcourt, River State.⁸² The situation generated considerable political controversy, and NIREC setup a peace committee to resolve the conflict. Second, there was the alleged plan to demolish St. George Anglican Church, Zaria, which has been in existence for more than a century.⁸³ NIREC also intervened in the matter, and it was resolved amicably. Third, there were interventions in the Jos crisis in Plateau State. NIREC leaders visited Jos to promote peace and reconciliation and to engage Muslims and Christians against reprisals. The governor of Plateau State also cooperated and supported NIREC to meet with relevant stakeholders. Apart from what is seen in the media, the Sultan also privately engages the Fulanis and the Muslims to embrace peace in the State. The CAN president also did so to Christians to also maintain harmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians in the State.⁸⁴

It is the characteristic of NIREC to advocate for the rights of the vulnerable and sundry in the society regardless of the religious affinity of those involved. It is a norm for NIREC in its communiqués to advocate for justice and observance of the rule of law. In the 2020 communiqués, for instance, at the wake of the END SARS protest, NIREC issued calls against police brutality, which was the main factor for the youth unrest.⁸⁵ In the communiqué of the Ibadan meeting of 2011, NIREC called for eradication of female genital mutilation and other harmful practices against women.⁸⁶ NIREC often issues statements against hate speeches and preaching as well as ethnic profiling and discrimination against particular individual groups.⁸⁷

⁸⁰ See NIREC. "About NIREC Who We Are".

⁸¹ NIREC, "NIREC Documentary".

⁸² See Edozie V. 2019. "Muslim Community Condemns Demolition of P/Harcourt Mosque", *Daily Trust*, 26 August; Cf. Ukponso C. 2019. "Special Report: The Truth about Mosque 'Demolition' by Rivers Government", *Premium Times*, 5 September.

⁸³ See Isenyo G. 2019. "CAN Hails El-Rufai's Decision to Save 110-Year Kaduna Church from Demolition", *Punch*, 21 September.

⁸⁴ NIREC, "NIREC Documentary"; Daniel A. 2023. "Terrorists Want Nigeria to Erupt in Religious War – NIREC Executive Secretary", *The Insight.com*, 5 May.

⁸⁵ NIREC. 2020. "Communiqué of the 4th Quarter Meeting of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) held from 25-27 November 2020 at Ritz Continental Hotel, Abuja", 2.

⁸⁶ NIREC. 2011. "Communiqué of the 2011 First Quarterly Meeting of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) held from 24-26 January 2011 at Premier Hotel, Ibadan Oyo State".

⁸⁷ NIREC. 2013. "Communiqué of the 2013-First Quarterly Meeting of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) held at the Le Meridien Ibom Hotel and Golf Resort, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State from 11-13 February, 2013".

NIREC also founded an NGO for the control and eradication of malaria and other diseases. It is called Nigeria Inter-Faith Action Association (NIFAA).⁸⁸ NIREC collaborates with other organisations on issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and anti-corruption, as well as the Nigerian Ministry of Health to fight disease.⁸⁹

SOME CHALLENGES OF NIREC

John Paden has criticised NIREC for engaging in work that is elitist and does not translate into “effective action at the state or local levels and sometimes produces headlines that are counter proactive”.⁹⁰ In his assessment, the work is not fruitful and does not have influence in northern Nigeria.⁹¹ This assertion is true to an extent, as the activities of the organisation lack impact at the grassroots level, and there are campaigns against the philosophy of interfaith dialogue which NIREC presents among some Muslim groups in northern Nigeria. The whole interfaith relations initiative being promoted by the Sultan has been condemned by some clerics at local levels, who claim that it is just a money-making venture for the elites and a scheme that leads to disloyalty to one’s faith. This impedes the effective contribution of NIREC to peace and harmony in some communities of Northern Nigeria.

Sometimes, the elements of disunity among the leadership of NIREC becomes glaring. For instance, the NIREC website carried a story of CAN, under Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, threatening to pull out from NIREC over the claim of the Sultan of Sokoto was disrespecting CAN.⁹² After the killing of a Christian girl in Sokoto in 2022, the northern wing of CAN advised its members to withdraw from NIREC.⁹³ This was in protest of the fact that despite the existence of NIREC, there was a mob action against the girl. It is also worth noting that the palace of the Sultan of Sokoto, the co-chair of NIREC, was also attacked by the mob for condemning the killing of the girl and seeking justice for her.⁹⁴ This shows how ineffective and powerless NIREC often finds itself in situations of crisis.

88 NIREC. “About NIREC”; Cf. NIREC. 2009. “The Communiqué of the Fourth Quarterly Meeting of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) Held at the Transcorp Hilton, Abuja from 8-10 December 2009”.

89 Ugorie, “Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria”, 4-5.

90 Paden JN. 2005. *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 197.

91 Paden, *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution*, 277-8, n10.

92 NIREC. 2015. “CAN Threatens to Dump NIREC”, nirec.org.ng; Enietan-Matthews T. 2015. “CAN Threatens to Dump NIREC”, *Daily Post*, 27 February.

93 “Deborah: CAN demand members withdrawal from NIREC”, *The Sun Nigeria*, 15 May 2022. <https://sunnewsonline.com/deborah-can-demand-members-withdrawal-from-nirec/>

94 “Deborah: Sultan’s Palace under Siege as protesting youths as for Release of Suspects” *Vanguard*, 14 May 2022.

Uchenna Ugorie, a scholar of religion, has noted mutual suspicion and mistrust among the component bodies of NIREC and that both parties often display suspicion over whatever moves being made by the other, no matter how honest it is.⁹⁵ CAN often makes divisive statements and sides with Christians in situations of crises, and this has made people view the whole body as ineffective. The reason why CAN finds it easy to make fiery and divisive statements is because it is composed of denominational blocs, and its leaders are firstly loyal to the church and are her workers. By contrast, NSCIA members are to a large extent public servants, and their activities are regulated by public service codes, therefore, they must be careful in their utterances. The Sultan of Sokoto, who is the co-chairperson of NIREC, is a traditional ruler, and so are other members representing NSCIA from both the North and the South. NSCIA largely consists of public servants, because traditional rulers in the Muslim north are the official custodians of Islam and in most cases responsible for the appointment of the official functionaries.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria has had its share of devastating religiously related conflicts from independence to date, and experts such as John Paden and Sam Ugwu hold that Nigeria has witnessed the largest number of such incidences in the world. The cause can be traced, firstly, to the fact that most Nigerians are enthusiastically religious and are exclusivist in their religion; thus, many find it difficult to tolerate people of other religious groups. Religious sentiment, coupled with ethnicity, has continuously lit the spark of ethno-religious conflict whose remote causes are ancillary to religion, involving political and economic matters. Such conflict becomes religious when members of same faith rally around their brethren to fight members of the other faith.

This chapter has reviewed the concept of reconciliation from different angles, particularly how it entails the process of putting an end to conflict and shoring up a good rapport and peaceful relationships. The term “reconciliation” has distinctive Christian implications, since the essence of Christianity is forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. Reconciliation is equally significant in the teaching of Islam, such that the Quran describes conciliators as the best of humankind. The significance of reconciliation and peacebuilding in Christianity and Islam, has led to various efforts over the years by the Nigerian religious communities to create avenues for dialogue and religious peace. The efforts that were privately done without government interference have tended to be more successful. The organisers of NIREC, the subject of this chapter, tend to agree, and they learned from earlier failure in the 1980s of ACRA, which was formed by government. NIREC is supported by the government and is clearly influenced by government policies and objectives. However, NIREC’s effort has not been very effective in most parts of Nigeria, especially at the grassroots level. It has been characterised as elitist in

⁹⁵ Ugorie, “Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria”, 6.

function, and its advocacy does not reach people involved in conflicts. Nonetheless, there are identifiable successes in its activities despite the disunity that some of its membership often display. In particular, the Lagos State Chapter of NIREC is a model of excellence in the positive impact of NIREC in conflict resolution and reconciliation at grassroots level, and it is worthy of emulation by both the main NIREC body and by other states of Nigeria.