

The Portrayal of Islam in Some Early Nigerian Newspapers (1880-1910)

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The history of Islam in part of what is known today as Nigeria dates to about the 10th Century. Christianity dates to the late 18th Century. By the middle of the 19th Century, when Nigerian newspapers began to appear on the streets of Nigeria, both religions had won so many followers and extended to so many places in Nigeria that very few areas were untouched by their influence. The impact of both religions on their adherents not only determined their spiritual life, but influenced their social and political lives as well. It therefore became inevitable that both religions receive coverage from most of the newspapers of the time. How the newspapers as media of information and communication reported issues about the two religions is the theme of this paper.

Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the context in which such early newspapers operated and the factors that dictated their performance. This is because it is assumed that when a society faces external threat to its territory, culture, and independence, all hands (the press inclusive) ought to be on deck to resist the threat with all might. Were newspapers used as verbal artillery and how did they present each religion? It is also assumed that in a multireligious society a true press should be objective and serve as a vanguard in the promotion of the interest of the people in general and not create or foster an atmosphere of religious conflict. The study also aims at finding out whether the papers promoted intellectual honesty and fostered the spirit of unity particularly when the society was faced with the encroachment of the British who posed a threat to their freedom, culture, economy,

and independence. As a result of the interaction between Islam, Christianity, and the Nigerian newspapers, certain questions remain fundamental.

Statement of Problem

1. What are the dominant and significant themes about the two religions that engaged the attention of the newspapers?
2. Does such coverage mirror intellectual honesty and knowledge of facts or does it border on prejudice, sentiments, and emotions?
3. Did the attitude of the newspapers reflect the political atmosphere of the period?
4. Was the attitude of the newspapers dictated by foreign missionary or colonial propaganda?

Methodology

This paper is a synoptic review of the news items: i.e., editorials, news reports, columns, and captions selected from some early Nigerian newspapers. This method necessarily restricts the scope to such newspapers as *The Lagos Standard* (1894-1910), *The Lagos Times* (1880-1891) and *The Lagos Weekly Record* (1894-1920).

Brief Literature Review

Scholars have made concerted efforts to critically appraise the role of early Nigerian newspapers. No one, however, seems to have looked at the role of the press in relation to Islam in particular. For instance, Coker (1952)¹ described how early Nigerian newspapers championed what he called "religious nationalism," by which he meant advocacy for better treatment of African clergymen and Africanization of the Christian Church in Africa. Such an attitude was dictated by the discriminatory attitude of the European missionaries toward the blacks. Ayandele (1966)² observed that early Nigerian newspapers furthered the cause of Christian missionary enterprise

¹Increase Coker, *Seventy Years of Nigerian Press*. (Lagos: Daily Times Publication, 1952).

²E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria: 1842-1914* (London: Longman, 1971).

on their pages. Both scholars, like the newspapers under review, believed that Christianity was the only acceptable religion worth agitating for. They seemed not to see anything wrong in the newspapers' disregard for and neglect of Islam a religion which not only predated Christianity in their very environment, but whose influence was very apparent in their community and beyond. Omu Fred (1978)³ agreed that early Nigerian newspapers proclaimed the superiority of Christianity over heathenism and Islam. But despite his observations, Omu Fred did not explain how the superiority was established: the manner, the method adopted, or the kind of language used. Such an undertaking would have given us an indication of how the newspapers operated and the role they played concerning Islam.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The first Nigerian-owned newspaper, begun in 1880, was named *The Lagos Times*. It appeared every two weeks. Scores of other newspapers followed later.⁴ Although most of these newspapers were based in Lagos, their coverage included almost all of present day Nigeria. The papers, among other things, fought for the social, economic, and political development of the country. They also promoted cultural nationalism,⁵ made political agitations,⁶ and fought racial prejudice and racial discrimination,⁷ which was spreading to government, churches, business circles, and social gatherings.⁸ These newspapers thoroughly articulated the grievances of Nigerians so much so that, on some occasions, the colonial government or the church mission had to readjust some initial decisions. The newspapers did not relent in their effort even when racial prejudice became pronounced in the church and in the mission organization. As a matter of fact, they came out more vigorously in condemnation of prejudice and in condemning those who mortgaged their cultural heritage for alien culture.⁹

The newspapers, therefore, were able to keep their readers informed of happenings at home as well as abroad. Promoting the interest of their people remained the paramount concern of these newspapers; this belief inspired

³I.A. Omu Fred, *Press and Politics in Modern Nigeria, 1880-1937* (London: Longman, 1978).

⁴*Ibid*, p 26.

⁵*The Lagos Times*, July 12, 1882; *The Lagos Weekly Record*, May 16, 1908.

⁶*The Lagos Weekly Record*, April 3, 1897; December 24, 1904, and May 5, 1906. *The Lagos Standard*, October 7, 1903, December 4, 1907, and July 14, 1909.

⁷*The Lagos Times*, May 23, 1883; *The Lagos Standard*, August 18, 1897.

⁸For more details, see Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact*, 247-49.

⁹*The Lagos Weekly Record*, April 25, 1908; May 16, 1908.

their thought and prompted their actions. It would not be out of place, therefore, to assume that such concern for the interest of the people would be extended to the religions practiced in Nigeria.

One significant feature of early Nigerian newspapers was that they devoted much time and energy to reporting information about Christian affairs. The attention was superfluous and so frequent that one wonders whether the papers were essentially established to promote Christianity. The papers gave extensive coverage to affairs affecting Christians, such as the building of churches,¹⁰ celebration of Christian festivals,¹¹ arrival of missionaries, meetings of churches, services, and ordinations.¹² Missionary activities also received much publicity and attracted editorial comment.¹³ The newspapers also propagated the presumption that Christianity was the best, highest, and noblest civilization¹⁴ and that only Christianity could elevate mankind. *The Lagos Times*, in one of its articles said that Christianity was:

. . . a religion by far its (Islam) superior, a greater corrective, a more effective educator, civilizer and elevator, presenting to us, far more rational and suitable method of salvation . . .¹⁵

Despite the good coverage the papers gave to Christianity, they did not fail to register their disapproval of some of the aberrations of overzealous missionaries who engaged in racial discrimination against the Nigerians or those who looked down on Nigerian culture. Such incidents occasionally affected the goodwill between the missionaries and the newspapers and resulted in offensive articles attacking the actions of the missionaries. But such criticism was not extended to the tenets or doctrines of Christianity, nor were the Christians in general castigated or maligned. As a matter of fact, no aspect of Christianity was subjected to scrutiny, most likely because it was accepted as a revealed religion and its message as an axiom. The Bible had to be seen as sacrosanct, a document whose historical accuracy and literal truth was never to be questioned.

The generous attention and publicity given to Christianity apparently was not extended to Islam. For instance, reports or information about Islamic affairs was negligible and infrequent and, where such information was found,

¹⁰*The Lagos Times*, April; July 25, 1883.

¹¹*The Lagos Times*, December 22, 1880; *The Lagos Standard*, December 20, 1899; *The Lagos Weekly Record*, December 24, 1910.

¹²*The Lagos Times*, January 12, 1881.

¹³*The Lagos Times*, January 12, 1881; *The Lagos Weekly Record*, March 26, July 30, and October 29, 1910.

¹⁴*The Lagos Times*, January 12, 1818.

¹⁵*Ibid.* September 14, 1881.

scanty. Issues such as Muslim festivals, pilgrimages, or marriages, Islamic education, or mosque affairs were almost blocked out, whereas such issues on the Christian side received adequate publicity. While Christian festivals were reported with fanfare and pageantry, the Muslim festivals were reported in a way that made the event insignificant. Take for instance the 'Īd al Kabīr was reported in *The Lagos Standard*: "The muslim feast or sacrifice was celebrated here on Friday and at Abeokuta on Saturday."¹⁶ The festival was reported in like manner in the other newspapers.¹⁷

While the papers took particular interest in the progress and welfare of the Christians, they unequivocally opposed improvements for the Muslims. For instance, when the Muslims requested the teaching of Islamic studies in the colonial government schools, one of the newspapers plainly opposed it, saying that it was inconsistent to teach "Muhammedanism" within the walls of a government school.¹⁸ The justification for the opposition was based not on any cogent reason but rather on prejudice. The *Lagos Weekly Record* adopted the same attitude when Lagos Muslims petitioned the colonial administration for permission to establish an Islamic court where the Shari'ah could be applied to Muslims. The paper supported the chief justice of the colonial administration in his obstinate resistance to the Muslims' request and went on to argue, quite apologetically, that one of the reasons why the request should not be granted was that there were "no sufficient Muslims versed in the Qur'an to understand and advise upon its legal aspect."¹⁹ This argument, while first put forward by the colonial administration, was simply a farce. The chief justice's argument vacillated between citing lack of manpower, and claiming that granting such a court would lead to every community's requesting a court of its own. He also expressed his readiness to administer the law himself if he could get anyone to tell him what the law was.²⁰

While these newspapers upheld the sanctity of Christianity they denigrated and debased Islam and degraded and dishonored its members. For instance, Muslims were described as fanatics²¹ and sometimes as thieves.²² The papers also stated that "Islam cannot improve the people nor could it elevate the country."²³ Islam was referred to as barbaric and the Muslims as "Muham-

¹⁶*The Lagos Standard*, February 4, 1903.

¹⁷*The Lagos Times*, October 10, 1883; *The Lagos Weekly Record*, 5 March 1904.

¹⁸*The Lagos Times*, February 28, 1883.

¹⁹*The Lagos Weekly Record*, July 28, 1894.

²⁰*Ibid.* See the text of interview between the governor, the chief justice, and the Muslim deputation.

²¹*The Lagos Times*, December 22, 1880.

²²*Ibid.* October 10, 1883 (miscellaneous).

²³*The Lagos Weekly Record*, March 26, 1910.

medans," possibly to stress the presumption that the Muslims worship Prophet Muhammad (SAAS). The imam was referred to as a "Mohammedan priest."²⁴ The Muslims were regarded as "a sorry delusion and their habits as steeped in superstition."²⁵

Occasionally, some of the papers praised Islam and spoke highly of some of its features, usually to lament certain features of Islam in which Christianity is lacking. In an article titled "Our Islamic Prospects," *The Lagos Weekly Record* had this to say:

. . . while the moslem African develops into a mosque erecting, self reliant propagandist the Christian Africans blossom into "House" builders and apron string saints. Islam has produced munificent Africans, liberal, generous, public spirited men, and that even locally. Christianity so far has produced but money grabbers, close fisted, grovelling, sneaking men, and usurers.²⁶

But before the paper started shedding these crocodile tears it earlier said: . . . we are sorry and are ashamed to be caught singing the praises of Islam.²⁷

This last statement justifies the claim that the papers were biased against Islam.

Sometimes the papers engaged in deliberate misrepresentation of historical facts. *The Lagos Times* in 1881 claimed that Islam was seventy years old in Yoruba land and that Islam was introduced into Yoruba land by the Fulani tribe from northern Nigeria.²⁸ This statement is untrue. It has been proven that Islam in Yoruba land dates back to about the 17th Century, almost a century earlier than the period the paper claimed.²⁹

In addition, it was customary for some of the newspapers to publish articles about Islam that were written by missionaries and often not based on facts. They also often reproduced from foreign newspapers offensive articles written by Europeans against Islam or the Muslims. Part of an article reproduced by *The Lagos Weekly Record* from the *African Mail* reads as follows:

. . . The convert to Islam generally becomes a fanatical propagandist.³⁰

²⁴*The Lagos Times*, September 14, 1881.

²⁵*Ibid.*, February 28, 1883.

²⁶*The Lagos Weekly Record*, August 26, 1893.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*The Lagos Times*, September 14, 1881.

²⁹T.G.O. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam Among the Yorubas, 1841- 1908* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1978), 4-5.

³⁰*The Lagos Weekly Record*, March 26, 1910.

The paper reproduced another article from *The American World's Work*, which includes the following statement:

*. . . if the negro, in measure as he is civilized, goes to Islamism he must become a greater Peril, if he is Christianised his destructive strength is stripped from him.*³¹

From the foregoing discussion it becomes clear that the papers were sympathetic to Christianity and biased against Islam. It is also clear that, while they promoted and patronized Christianity and sang its praises as the best, the highest, the noblest, and the most elevating religion ever known to man, they condemned Islam, cast aspersions on it and subjected its adherents to ridicule. They underscored their presumption that "Mohammedanism was not calculated to substantially improve the people and elevate the country." The papers also championed the struggle to safeguard the Christians and their culture from the encroachment of Islam.³²

While the papers should have concentrated their attention on mobilizing all the citizens against the colonialists, as they did on other issues, they allowed themselves to be used to subvert their people and to divert their attention from their immediate enemy. Apart from the fact that the papers' coverage and analyses of Islam did not reflect intellectual honesty or knowledge of facts, such an attitude was not in tune with the political atmosphere of the period. The colonialists' gradual but systematic encroachment on the peoples' land, economy, and culture were more pressing than the supposed threat of Islam. As a matter of fact, the colonialists' political subjugation and the subsequent economic exploitation of the people did not differentiate between Islam and Christianity. What could have warranted such negative coverage of Islam from the same set of men whose attitude toward national issues can hardly be faulted?

One of the reasons might have been the ill exposure of most of the newspapermen to Islam. Although this reason might sound legitimate, it does not explain all the uncharitable and spiteful arguments raised by the papers, so other explanations must be sought. One factor worth examining is the role of the Christian missionaries, particularly the English speaking Europeans, since they were the pioneers of Christian and Western education in Nigeria. In view of western European contempt for Islam, it is necessary to understand the image of Islam they presented to their audience in Nigeria.

In addition, ever since the Crusades, the Christian attitude toward Islam had not changed. It has been characterized by such hostilities as deliberate

³¹*Ibid.*, February 19 and 26 1910.

³²*The Lagos Standard*, January 22, 1896.

misrepresentation of the teaching of Islam and casting aspersion on the Muslims. Such attitudes metamorphosed into orientalism. Most of the orientalist (i.e., colonial administrators, corps, agents, scholars, and Christian missionaries) became imperialist agents who, through their policies, writings, and attitudes, enhanced and perpetuated colonialism.³³ What even the most eminent missionaries among the orientalist wrote and spread about Islam was that Islam is a false, violent, self-indulgent religion and that Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) was a false prophet and anti-Christ.³⁴

In Nigeria, too, this image of Islam was spread by the missionaries. They propagated the notion that Islam is inhuman, feudalistic, despotic, unjust, and tyrannical.³⁵ They made it known to the Christian Nigerians that they came not only to civilize and educate them, but to liberate them from the conquering armies of Islam.³⁶

In fact, one of the early missionary newspapers established in Nigeria, which was called *Iwe Irohin*, and owned and edited by Rev. Henry Townsend,³⁷ perpetuated such polemics. Rev. Townsend preoccupied himself with waging an incessant campaign of calumny and sacrilege against Islam and the Muslims while at the same time propagating Christianity and singing its praises. He distorted Islam, making the false claim that Islam was spread through the sword. He said: "if their religion is ever extended in the Yoruba country, it will have to be done by other means than the sword."³⁸

The idea that Islam spread through the sword was a standard slander among the Christian polemicists, which they used to undermine the significance of the peaceful spread of Islam as witnessed in Yoruba land.³⁹ Townsend went on to say that Islam could not civilize the Negro race because, despite the fact that the Ilorin people had been Islamized, they were still housebreakers, murderers, thieves, and highway robbers. He claimed:

Housebreaking, murder, stealing from persons in the street and highway were common to an extent we had never seen among the

³³W. Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1980) 223-24.

³⁴*Ibid*, 59; A.L. Tibawi, "English Speaking Orientalists and Their Approach to Islam and the Arabs." *Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, January-March 1979.

³⁵Ayandele, 5, 127, and 135. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam Among the Yorubas*, 141-45.

³⁶Dahiru Yahya, "Nigerian Press and the Doctrine of Social Responsibility," 9. Paper presented at the Communication Conference at Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria, 1984 (unpublished).

³⁷Townsend worked for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) He introduced Christianity into Badagry and Abeokuta in 1842. For more information see J. F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria, 1841-1891*. London: Longman, 1965).

³⁸*Iwe Irohin*, March 5, 1864.

³⁹Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam Among the Yorubas*, 4-13.

heathen. It is certain that Mohammedanism has not civilized Africa, it is equally so that, whilst civilization had advanced with Christianity Mohammedans have declined from the point they once attained.⁴⁰

Such were the kinds of falsehood the European Christian missionaries spread among the adherents of Christianity in Nigeria.⁴¹ It was a grand design of deception, misinformation, and disorientation aimed at creating disillusion, fear, and hatred of Islam in the minds of Nigerian Christians so as to distance them from the Muslims and keep them permanently divided.

What we have been dealing with in the early Nigerian press, therefore, is a case of inherited prejudice enhanced and perpetuated by the newspapers. One can clearly see the glaring similarity between the attitude of the European Christian missionaries and that of some Nigerian Christians as demonstrated by the newspapermen who happened to be Christians. There is also striking similarity between the missionary newspapers and the early Nigerian newspapers in their theme and orientation. One can only conclude, therefore, that the early newspapermen were not only greatly influenced by the missionary attitude but that they were effectively programmed to intimidate the Muslims. As a result, the newspapermen developed an amazing skill for unthinking repetition and blind copying of the European missionaries who set the pace for them and whom they eloquently echoed. This deep seated influence, more than any other factor, explains why early Nigerian newspapers adopted such an antagonistic attitude toward Islam.

Conclusion

The Nigerian Christians inherited a legacy of hatred, animosity, and antagonism against Islam and the Muslims which the newspapers in particular reinforced.

It may not be possible now to say precisely how the Muslims felt at the time, but there is no doubt that such portrayal must have been very offensive and painful because it was inaccurate. It is unfortunate that in spite of the enviable contribution of these newspapers in raising the level of awareness of the people and in being pioneers of journalism, they failed to see through

⁴⁰*Iwe Irohin*, 23 May 1864.

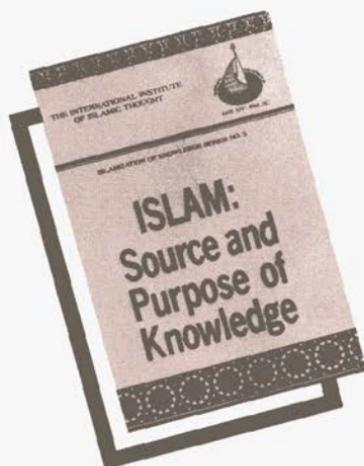
⁴¹On refutation of the kind of arguments raised by Townsend, see S. Yusuf "The Press and Islam in Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal of the Impact of Western Press on some Nigeria Newspaper Media on Issues Relating to Islam and the Muslims." Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria. Unpublished M.A. thesis, June 1987.

the tricks of the colonialists and the overzealousness of the foreign Christian missionaries. They allowed themselves to be used in fostering religious acrimony and to divert the people's attention from their basic problems.

It is more unfortunate that almost a century after the pioneers of the print media in Nigeria published this slander, such antagonistic and yellow journalism is still very much with us. Pages of some Nigerian newspapers are still full of bias and prejudice against Islam. Nigerian journalists should abandon their inherited prejudice against Islam and look at Islam more objectively giving accurate and factual reportage and assessment of it. Unless they do, religious tolerance, harmony, and peaceful coexistence will remain a mirage.

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