

Religious Statistics in Nigeria

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Popular consensus, if not the official census, puts Nigeria's population at some 100 plus million people, almost all of which profess to belong to one of the three major religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). The specific statistics as to number of adherents of each religion is a matter of serious controversy. I doubt that anyone really knows, especially since the question was not included in the most recent census.² Because of uncertainty about more recent developments in religious shifts, scholars tend to depend on outdated statistics.

Bala J. Takaya, for example, depending on J.N. Paden's publication of 1986, can do no better than reproduce 1963 figures in 1992!

Religious Affiliation in Nigeria³

| | Islam % | Christianity % | ATR % |
|------|---------|----------------|-------|
| 1952 | 44.4 | 22.0 | 33.6 |

1 Though written in 1998, this article is finally published in 2015. It was originally meant to be included in the Series, but did not make it. During the intermittent time lag, much of my Muslim studies archives and library have been moved around and finally donated to the Day Missions Collection, Divinity School Library, Yale University. Some of the bibliographical data have gotten lost to me in all these shuffles. Remember: The criteria for these articles are not as strict as are the materials in the Series. However, you are better off with these somewhat imperfect documents than without them! I include this and the other articles in this lineup to give researchers, especially Nigerians, access to these materials, even if it may leave some the impression of sloppy scholarship. **Be aware that reference to "the series" in this document, especially in the footnotes, refers to my (Boer's) *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*. References to "vol." refers to volumes in the series. The entire series is found at the beginning of this Islamica page.**

2 The reason for excluding religion from the census is not clear. In a pamphlet from Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) it is argued that Muslims wanted to have the census return a figure of 52% Muslims. When they realized they would not achieve this goal, they eliminated the question from the census altogether ("Do You Know?"). Others have explained that the question does not belong in the census of a supposedly secular country.

3 Olupona, p. 119.

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 Kritzeck and Lewis affirm the difficulty of getting accurate statistics about Islam in Africa – “and harder still to trust the statistics one gets: in many parts of Africa a census is out of the question, and the motives for falsifying information are many.” However, they also assert in 1969 that at that time “the most trustworthy ... estimates invariably show a substantially larger Moslem population in most Tropical African countries than ... standard source books would lead us to expect.” They describe northern Nigeria as “overwhelmingly Islamic.”⁴ But in the same book, Franz Schildnecht describes Muslim-inspired statistics about Tanganyika as “grossly inaccurate” and “exaggerated.”⁵

Similarly, Makram Samaan and Soheir Sukkary, in their discussion of Egyptian Muslim and Coptic statistics, show a reign of confusion. Government Coptic numbers are said to have reduced drastically without any historical event to account for such a sudden decrease. At the same time, Egyptian Muslims suspect Copts of inflating their numbers “for the purpose of seeking more political representation.”⁶

In a book originally published in 1968 but republished unrevised as late as 1980, J. Spencer Trimingham describes Nigeria as a “Muslim stronghold since its Northern Region is two-thirds Muslim and Islam is widely professed in the Western Region.”⁷ By 1980, the regional structure of Nigeria had long been abandoned. It is noteworthy also that he makes a blanket assertion without specific numbers. That's the Nigerian census situation for you. Scholars generally find themselves groping in darkness using either generalities or long outdated figures.

A notable exception is Dean Gilliland, who is not plagued by the same doubts. He rejects the claims of the Muslim Student Society (MSS) of a Muslim majority of 70% in Nigeria as a misrepresentation based on the assumption of a religiously unified north. Instead, Islam is said to account for 45%, a statistic he expects to remain so until the year 2000. This was up from 25.9% in 1900. While the Christian population in 1945 stood at 20%, by the mid-1980s this had climbed to 49%. By means of a graph, he shows that at the time of his writing Christians and Muslims were equal in number, but the former “will be well ahead” by 2000. I am not sure how 45% and 49% can represent

4 Pp. 3-4.

5 P. 229.

6 Joseph and Pillsbury, p. 131.

7 1980, p. 114.

equality. In a populous nation like Nigeria that spells a difference of some millions. The doubt may not be there, but we are not yet out of the woods of confusion.

The statistical confusion, according to Gilliland, is partially due to the fact that the former Traditionalists of Nigeria's Middle Belt who have turned Christians by the millions, were simply counted with northern Muslims. This practice, he correctly observed, is no longer acceptable to them. Any census taking this new development into consideration, will show a significant shift towards a Christian majority⁸ -- which could be the reason it was eliminated.

Moving from the relatively calm world of scholars to more direct protagonists of Christianity, we move into emotional territory and immediately note the controversial nature of the statistics issue. Sociologist, editor and pastor, Danjuma Byang, expresses himself with great passion. The figures presented by the late Abubakar Gumi and others are declared "fictitious," "ridiculous" and "inflammatory." They are based on unverifiable documents. Furthermore they are inconsistent. While some Muslims present statistics of 60% Muslims, 34% Christians and 6% Traditionalists, the late Sheik Abubakar Gumi, during his life strongly anti-Christian, has proposed 80%, 5% and 15%! Byang finds Gumi's "census" so dangerous and confrontational that he feels Gumi should have been apprehended.⁹ CAN humorously reports that in 1987, Gumi gave figures of 80%, 5% and 15% Muslims, Christians and Traditionalists respectively. A few weeks later he reported in Saudi Arabia a Muslim percentage of 70%. CAN commented, "...within eight weeks, 10% Muslims had disappeared from Nigeria, i.e., about ten million Muslims!"¹⁰

The truth, Byang argues, is that by 1986 Muslims were only 45%, while Christians had moved up to 51%. The change to a Christian majority was due to the conversion of millions of Traditionalists to Christianity, including thousands of Maguzawa, Hausa Traditionalists who are little known to the outside world.¹¹ In Nigeria, S. Salifu, Secretary of CAN (Ten Northern States), declares, Christians are in the majority.¹² The National Youth arm of CAN insists that by 1985, Christians were more than 50% of the population, while Muslims were 40%, the remaining 10% being Traditionalists. This is supported by "all recently published statistics, including *Operation World*. At any rate, it is argued, that even a religious majority does not have the right "to impose their will on

8 Pp. 171-172, 216-217.

9 Byang. Check out the TEKAN reference to Gumi's statistics in Appendix 3, Vol. 3, pp. 246-248. It is not the only time it has been suggested that Gumi's provocative statements are dangerous enough to have him arrested for high treason. See George C. Nwadike in *Citizen*, 15 Jun/92, p. 6.

10 See vol. 3, Appendix 3, p. 248. *Leadership*, p. 25.

11 Pp. 22-25.

12 *TD*, No. 5, 1987, p. 30.

the minority.”¹³ By 1988, CAN Northern Zone put the percentage of Christians at “more than 60%,”¹⁴ but it does not give the source of this information, the same weakness frequently found with Muslim statistics. In a report, written in 1987 by J.P. Mambula of TEKAN, the percentages were given as 45% Christians, 42% Muslims and 13% others, “others referring largely to Traditionalists.”¹⁵

While the above statistical arguments deal with the national situation, CAN also insists that even the north, which is widely thought to have a Muslim majority, is “not predominantly Islam.” Apart from the far northern states bordering on the Sahara, no state has a Muslim majority, not even Bauchi. At best, Niger and Borno states have a proportion of only 50% Muslims.¹⁶ In the Nigerian context, those are provocative statistics, whether true or not, as provocative as those of Gumi!

The most complete Christian statement on the census issue that I have read was published in 1987 by TEKAN in a submission to the Federal Government of Nigeria under the heading “Census and Development.” Because of its representative nature and its comprehensive coverage of the position of Nigeria’s mainline churches, I reproduce almost the complete statement:

It is a fact that no country can effectively plan without accurate data It is generally agreed that at the moment we do not have an acceptable census of our population. Our attempts to achieve one have deteriorated from bad to worse. The 1962 census was rejected. Another attempt in 1963 was accepted only amidst controversy The 1973 census was totally rejected.

It is our view that the taking of a census either now or in the near future will be an exercise in futility. The Nigerian level of honesty is too low for a census. There is no way that we can achieve the necessary level of honesty within the next 25 years. Barring a miraculous spiritual revival instigated by God Himself, Nigerians are bound to continue to inflate ... the numbers and the exercise would become a source of conflict and of serious political instability in the country. We would become a laughing stock in the eyes of the world.

Let us briefly analyze the census of 1963 and that of 1973 ... figures ... to buttress our contention with a few facts. We were given the following results:

13 *The Shari’a*, pp. 16-17.

14 *Leadership*, p. 5.

15 Mambula, “Meeting with ...,” 29 Jun/87. “TEKAN” is the Hausa-language acronym for “The Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria.” It is an umbrella organization of a dozen or so denominations, most of which emerged from the work of the various branches of the Sudan United Mission. See Edgar Smith in Bibliography.

16 *Leadership*, pp. 24-25.

1963 Census --- 55,630,000

1973 Census --- 79,260,000

These figures spell an increase of 23,630,000 in a mere ten years!

When we break the ... figures down by regions, we get the following:

| | 1963 | 1973 | Increase |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| South | 25,840,000 | 27,880,000 | 2,040,000 |
| North | 29,790,000 | 51,380,000 | 21,590,000 |
| Difference | 3,950,000 | 32,500,000 | 19,550,000 |

Moving on to a religious analysis, we get the following:

| | 1963 | 1973 | Change |
|---------------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Muslims | 26,276,496 | 58,820,000 | +33,543,504 |
| Christians & others | 29,393,559 | 19,939,000 | - 9,454,559 |

From these figures it is clear that in 1963, Christians and others outnumbered Muslims by 3,117,063. Surprisingly, according to the 1973 figures taken a mere ten years later, Muslims appear to outnumber Christians and others by as much as 38,881,000. An impossible increase!

Take a good look at the figures in the first table and you will note the following increases respectively:

South increased by 2,040,000

North increased by 21,590,000

These figures would have us believe the North's rate of increase is nine times the rate of increase in the South!¹⁷

Again, according to these figures, the religious changes during that period are as follows: Christians and others decreased by 9,454,559 in ten years, while Muslims increased by 33,543,504 In other words, in a mere ten years Muslims nearly doubled their numbers by internal growth and gained 10 million converts from other faiths. It

17 Non-Nigerians need to know here that, *in the minds of Muslims*, the north is largely associated by southerners with the Muslim Hausa/Fulani establishment, while the south, though containing many Muslims as well, is roughly identified with Christianity.

would appear that Christians and others did not give birth at all for a period of ten years, but lost 9,454,559 of their 1963 membership.

It is because of outright lies and falsification of statistics that we oppose the taking of another census either now or in the near future. Before we proceed with another census we need to raise the level of honesty, truthfulness and integrity and to do away with all the vices that make a valid census impossible in Nigeria¹⁸

Enough said. The incredible maneuvering is all too clear and, for most foreigners at least, almost impossible to believe.

As to the Muslim community, the MSS of Nigeria, in anticipation of the upcoming census, expressed itself skeptically: "More than eleven of the state electoral commissioners¹⁹ are Christian reverends and pastors, thus putting the Muslims in a disadvantageous position, bearing in mind that the Christian loyalty is more to CAN than (to) the government."²⁰

On the whole, the Muslim community has no doubt as to its numerical majority in the country. In an editorial against CAN, the editor of *The Pen* simply assumes that Islam is "professed by a comfortable majority of Nigerians as confirmed by official figures."²¹ Asked whether a non-Muslim could be President of Nigeria, Yakubu Yahaya, a leader of the Islamic Movement, replied, "Of course, the leadership goes to the majority people."²² With that, the matter was naturally settled in favour of Muslims.

A convert from Islam to Christ, Alhaji Aliyu Ibn Mamman Dan-Bauchi, used to be a coordinator for Jama'atul Nasril Islam (JNI). In that capacity, he confessed after his conversion, he and JNI had decided on a scheme to derail the census According to him, "We had a statistic of every individual in the country In Nigeria ... we had the Christians at about 59,820,000, while Muslims were 21,180,000. We altered the figures to suit our ambition. We indicated that Christians were only 21,180,000 and the Muslims were 59,820,000."²³

18 *Right Path*, pp. 38-40.

19 Census takers were ultimately responsible to these officers at state level. The implication is that these commissioners were expected to distort the census figures in favour of Christians.

20 *The Pen*, 2-16 Dec/1988, p. 1. *The Pen* was an aggressively Muslim weekly/bi-weekly. It had a Hausa-language twin, *Alkalami*. Both have long ceased to exist.

21 *The Pen*, 7-21 Apr/1989, p. 3.

22 *TSM*, 27 Sept/1992, p. 19. Vol. 2, p. 151. For a larger depiction of Yahaya see vol. 2, pp. 146-153. "*TSM*" is the actual full name of this weekly magazine. The magazine did not provide the writer's name.

23 CAN, *Leadership*, p. 49.

In case some readers were doubtful about the TEKAN expose, what can one say about this admission of incredible corruption?

The fact of the matter is that the exact truth is simply not available, unless we accept the confession of Alhaji Aliyu. The first census (1961) was not published, apparently because it showed a southern majority. The last and only accepted census of 1963 was as inaccurate as the succeeding two. It ensured northern control, but was claimed by the south to have been rigged.²⁴ I have met census takers from the last three censuses and every one has told me that he was under instruction to manipulate the figures.

A more important truth is that statistics cannot solve the problems of the two religions. The statistical controversies between them are symptoms of deeper problems. One who loves peace will not overly concern himself with statistics. He will seek justice and cooperation between the two religions, no matter what their respective statistical strengths are. At the same time, one cannot avoid statistical issues in a context where some use them for purposes of domination.

²⁴ Gilliland, p. 159.

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