

A Crisis Like no Other

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It was after class period and we were in the Chapel for afternoon prayers when the Rector of my school, St Joseph's Minor Seminary (or SJS as we called it) Zaria, stormed in like he had lost his way; his face furrowed with fear. It was ominous seeing such a gigantic figure running in that manner in his white soutane, with the flaps flaring in the air like feathers. His announcements were often made during morning assemblies, and what was he doing at this time of the day in the Chapel? The last time I remembered seeing him barged into the Chapel in that fashion was when he came to announce that our Bank—Savannah Bank—had gone bankrupt and we had to apply austerity measures, especially on our German Rice rationing.

This second coming throbbed with its own foreboding. He leaned on the pulpit and looked across our curious faces and said: "There is trouble in the land, pray for your family." I was transfixed. The whole memories of Zangon Kataf and other violent incidents in Kaduna came flooding through my mind. We left the Chapel that afternoon terrified, reflective, and fearing the worse for ourselves and family members. We might have been young, but some of us from Kaduna were not unfamiliar with the vagaries of ethno-religious violence that became a common feature of our lives in the state.

I grew up in Kaduna North Local Government Area, which is predominantly Muslim but with a considerable Christian population. I have been curious about the ethno-religious configuration of Kaduna since I was a kid. From the books and newspapers Baba brought from work every day, I read that the Christian and Muslim population in Kaduna were almost evenly split. The state had had some brutal episodes of religious and political violence since the late 1970s. There was the 1987 Kafanchan crisis, which spilled over into Kaduna metropolis. I gathered that the crisis was the

outcome of an alleged religious blasphemy by a pastor, an Islamic convert, who was holding a seminar at the College of Education in Kafanchan and made utterances that one of the Muslim students found blasphemous, while also declaring the campus a citadel of Christ. The bedlam that developed from it left over a hundred people dead. It was in the context of this Kafanchan crisis in 1987 that my school, St Joseph's Minor Seminary (SJS), Zaria, was burnt down—aside from the staff and priests' residence. The Church was burnt down as well, and it became our place of refuge as juniors. The students took cover at a nearby military barracks in Bassawa as the crisis raged on.

Then came the 1992 Zangon Kataf crisis which I experienced as a seven-year-old. The crisis was fought mainly by the Hausa-Muslim population and the majority Christian Atyap group in Zango, Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna state. The riot erupted after attempts were made by the LGA council, asking all marketers to relocate their stalls from the main market to what was considered a less strategic, but neutral, position in Magamiya Road in the outskirts of the city. The Hausas reneged on this injunction as they considered it a ploy by the majority Atyap people to dispossess them of their established economic leverage in the area. Their resistance irked the Atyap population, and the rivalry between the two groups escalated into a crisis that engulfed other parts of Kaduna in February and May 1992. It was during that time I first understood the animosity between the different religious groups and the religious fundamentalism campaign pervading Nigeria. That year, we fled our home, which was located in a largely Muslim suburb in Kaduna city to the First Division Nigerian Army Barracks, Kawo—Dalet Barracks—for refuge at a relative's place for about a month. Hundreds perished in that saga.

The 1992 crisis was a breaking point in several ways, not least because it crippled the relationship between the different religious groups in the state, most of whom became highly paranoid about the "other". This fear was compounded by the 2000 Sharia crisis. Before then, the Sharia debate had been a vexing issue in Nigeria given the country's ethno-religious diversity. Although independence from the British in 1960 ensured some kind of secularity to grant freedom and liberty to all citizens, the return to a democratic government in 1999 opened the lid on all sorts of agitations for the recognition of rights and liberties by excluded minorities and dominant religions like Christianity and Islam. Shortly after Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, Ahmed Yerima Bakura, the then Governor of Zamfara state, tabled a motion for the re-introduction of the Sharia Islamic law in his state to ensure what he considered justice, protection of lives, and the sanctity of his people. The law was eventually enacted, on the pretence that it pertained to issues of theft, alcohol consumption, gambling, and sexual immorality.

It was the plan to implement the same law in Kaduna—a multi-ethnic, multireligious state—that led to the crisis of 2000. But I didn't know much about this then. A few years after the crisis, I was in a car heading to see a friend in Zaria and sat beside a boy cradling a bunch of newspapers among other documents which I asked for and he obliged. The first document stated the Muslim Ummah (community) claimed that the application of the law wouldn't jeopardize the personal and religious freedoms of the Christian community, and that the dictates of the law would only be applicable to the Muslims. In the second document, it was reported that in a context of a renewed democracy in the country, where all groups were keen on safeguarding their religious and ethnic emancipation, the Christian groups felt their religious activities and freedom would be contained by the law. Under the directives of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), they staged a protest against the application of the Sharia law and marched into the Government House to express their disapproval of it. This protest led to altercation with some members of the Muslim Ummah, which spiraled into a bloodbath.

The haze of this Sharia crisis was still in the air and when the Rector barged into the Chapel that fateful afternoon to intimate us of the troubles outside our school compound, it was unsurprising. As the crisis brewed, I thought of my parents and loved ones and I was trepid about the imminent

danger we might find ourselves in. I was greatly troubled for Mama and Abadok, my younger brother, and wondered what they might be going through and where they were. I was hoping they had escaped to the military barracks I took solace in during the Zangon Kataf crisis. I thought of my friends in day schools in Kaduna where the mayhem was happening. At that point, I wished I was together with my family members at home. Some of our strongest seniors were summoned by the authorities to join the security men to keep guard around the school fence during the day and at night. They went with their sticks and cutlasses. We were worried we could be targeted, given that we represented one side of the religious divide in the state. Churches and Mosques were burnt outside, and I could see smoke rising from a distance. Sleep was a luxury we couldn't afford!

The first episode of the Sharia crisis was from 21st- 25th February, and the second was from 21st - 23rd May 2000. There were intermittent killings in-between. There was no means of calling home as we had no phones, and letters wouldn't cut it because the postal service was ineffectual. Our ears were itching to receive news from home, and our eyes fixed firmly on the SJS gate for the Visiting Day of that February. It might have been the only visiting day that united us as a school, juniors and seniors alike. We steeled ourselves as we eagerly waited for our parents and loved ones. Ezzy, my immediate older brother who was home at the time of the crisis, came to visit Johnny, my oldest brother, and I at SJS. I thought it was strange and feared the worst. I feared something horrendous might have befallen our parents. It didn't also help my fears that Ezzy came in Baba's brown Kaftan with his cap to match. That was too fast, I thought. It felt to me that he had already inherited Baba's clothes, a foreboding that something tragic had happened to my parents. I was hardly interested in the food and the supple Saba bread he brought, which was unlike me. I was eager to hear news about my parents and Abadok. A lot of students whose parents and loved ones couldn't make it, congregated around Ezzy for any news they could get on the goings-on at home.

Ezzy narrated the ordeal they went through at home. They were standing in front of our house in Kaduna and saw thick smog spiraling from a distance accompanied by cacophony of screams, yells and expletives from a mob wielding machetes, cutlasses, and sticks. As soon as Mama saw them approaching, she locked up the house, took Abadok with her and headed to the main road leading to Dalet Barracks. Baba only ran when he saw an older man macheted and left for dead in front of him. It was then, Ezzy told us, that he climbed up the fence and escaped to our neighbours' house where he hid and observed the fracas from a mango tree.

Climbing trees was a skill we perfected while in primary school. We climbed almost every standing tree in our neighbourhoods. We lived in a block of four houses that were joined together and separated by a conjoined fence. We climbed that fence and ran all over the roofs of those four buildings, constituting serious nuisances to our parents and neighbours. Once when we were on expedition on the roof plucking guavas from our neighbour's house, we heard a cracking sound and Ezzy immediately jumped to the fence, while I got drawn into the roof with my friend and collapsed into the falling rafters of his house, destroying the ceiling of the verandah in the process. My friend's dad came dragging him to our house in the evening of that day to make an inquest into the matter. I was in the room, knowing what was to come when Baba shouted "Benjamin!" My parents usually called me Benja. Whenever they referred to me as Benjamin, I knew I was either in trouble or about to be in one. As soon as I came forward, Baba asked me to kneel down and gave me a few strokes of the cane and promised my neighbour he would proffer further punishments and made sure I never went close to the fence again. But it was this skill of climbing roofs and trees that saved Ezzy and my friend that day.

At the time of the 2000 Sharia crisis, Baba was with the Bureau for Land, Survey, and Country Planning. He was in the office on the 21st of February when the crisis erupted. He and his co-workers were trapped and couldn't leave for home, out of fear of the mob that had gathered outside his office

compound. He got a glimpse of the hoodlums filing their machetes on the tarred road through his window on the second floor where his office was.. He was crestfallen and startled. He had witnessed several cases of religious upheavals in his lifetime and hadn't seen anything quite as bleak as the gory scene materializing before him. He also saw the security man—former military personnel—at the main entrance to the office premises controlling the influx of people trooping inside to find refuge.

Baba was grateful to the security man who showed tremendous courage and tact at the gate by using his military reconnaissance skills to fend off marauders from venturing into the office compound. His instinct was to make a phone call to his friend and neighbour—the man whose roof we destroyed—who was the Personal Assistant (PA) to the Deputy Governor of the state, Mr Stephen Rijo Shekari. The Governor, Alhaji Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi, had been away from the country during this stage of the crisis. Baba put a call through to his friend to tell him of the situation with the raging mob outside his office. His office was situated at the centre of the mayhem in Ungwan Sarki, a busy market area, which also had one of the biggest Mosques in the state. That was also where the Kaduna Residences of the Emirs of Ilorin, Adamawa and Zazzau (Zaria) were located right opposite Baba's office. He implored his friend to plead with his superiors to send in security personnel to cordon off the area before a spree of bloodbaths ensued.

Time was running short. The situation was rapidly changing outside. People were being slaughtered on the streets. In a last-ditch effort and with his hands trembling, he put another call through to his friend and said it might be the last he would hear from him as he couldn't guarantee he would have the privilege to make further calls if nothing was done. He even asked to speak with the Deputy Governor directly and was lucky to get a hold of him. The Deputy Governor assured Baba he was going to do something about the melee in front of his office. We were fortunate to have had the luxury of the landline telephone service at home through which Baba called Mama and Ezzy to assure them he was better off staying at the office than returning home and risking decapitation by the mob brandishing glistering machetes, stick and other dangerous weapons they could handle. In any case, the streets had become deserted and there were no buses, so if he decided to return, he would have to walk the long 3-kilometres distance alone before he would get home.

At this time, Mama was at her place of work at the Kaduna Ministry of Justice. She left office soon as she heard the commotion outside with one of their top officials who promised to drop her off where she could pick Abadok from his nanny, a family relation who helped Mama to nurse him while she was at work. They were still a long way from her destination when this official dropped her off and said she should complete the rest of the way on foot. She was enraged! She confessed it would have been better if he went with her to his destination, wherever that might be. Then it occurred to her she had to get to her little boy on time. Without thinking much about it, she disembarked from the car and started the long walk to rescue her boy who was only a year and four months old. She meandered her way, got to him, strapped him on her back and set off the 2-kilometres trip home in complete perturbation. She came to a bridge, where we played as kids. I had jumped from that bridge into the water after watching Power Rangers. It was on that bridge she overheard a conversation between two young men saying: "*Za ayi Buranuba a Zaria*" meaning "There will be some serious violence in Zaria". Oh Lord! Mama wept knowing that SJS was situated there.

Meanwhile, the Deputy Governor eventually sent out the long-awaited security personnel who arrived in front of Baba's office in Ungwan Sarki. They came and sounded their loud sirens to disperse the mob, without really apprehending anyone. The theatrics brought a semblance of stability to the area for a while, but not enough for Baba and the other refugees in his office to return home. They spent the night in the office space, scrambling on the little biscuits and tea Baba had left over from his tea break. He still called home every five minutes to assure Mama and Ezzy he was doing fine. But no one was sure what the next minute would bring as mayhem remained the

order of the day. He sounded petrified, and his voice was shaky and breaking while he spoke to them on the phone, knowing it could well be his last.

Most of the people who took refuge in his office were set to leave in the morning. They were also worried about their families and had to go and see how they were: whether they survived the ordeal of the previous day. It seemed to them that calm had been restored. The majority that left headed southward which was mainly Christian dominated while the north had a Muslim majority, with a considerable Christian population living therein. The north was the flashpoint of the crisis, where many Christians and Muslims cohabited both in amity and tension. It was our dwelling place. Baba also headed home, despite warnings from the southward bound. He was alone, feeling paralyzed and looking in every direction for signs of the irate mob.

On his way home, the streets were strewn with relics, and trails of blood and smoky air were an evidence of anarchy the land had descended into. When he got home, he found that many people in the government quarters where we lived, including Mama and Ezzy had come out of their houses, wondering whether to stay or flee to the State House or Military Barracks. Both locations were only a kilometre away. Baba instructed Mama to flee with Abadok while he remained with Ezzy to gauge the situation as men would. In no time, the dissident religious fanatics came charging towards them with their machetes, local guns, sticks, and cutlasses. An elderly man standing with them was pleading with the mob to spare their lives. He was instantly butchered to death, despite his plea, or because of it. It was then that Baba knew—man or woman—he had to run. There was no negotiating with a person holding a machete to one's throat. He set off at once.

That was when Ezzy climbed on our fence and made it to the mango tree in our neighbour's house. From that vantage point, he saw one of our neighbours, who had earlier on fractured his leg in a car accident, slashed to death while he was dragging his feet in an attempt to run. Baba ran as fast as his own wobbly legs could carry him. As he was running, he heard Ezzy shouting from the top of the mango tree and pleading with him to come inside the house where they had hidden on the tree. Baba refused, thinking he might risk Ezzy's life if he entered the house. He kept running and felt he was being chased by the mob but couldn't turn back to look. It might have been a figment of his imagination, but it was one of those moments in his life when he thought looking back could have cost him dearly. He ran until he approached a coterie of military men and then stopped to look from whence he came. The road was deserted and desolated like a ghost town.

After weeks of dark clouds, a breeze of peace returned. Baba was part of the committee selected by the State Government to make an inquest into the sources of the conflicts and offer some intervention. At one of the sittings of this committee in May 2000, someone wandered off into the meeting, fleeing another clash outside. He was bemused to see people sipping tea around a table, having what seemed like a sensible discussion and oblivious of a second wave of bloodbath outside. That was the May episode. They fled the meeting, but this phase of the crisis was quickly squashed by the State Government.

The 2000 Sharia crisis was the most devastating of the ethno-religious fracas in Kaduna, both in terms of its human casualties and the dislocation of the longstanding amity between the two major religious groups in the state. The crisis deepened the wedge between these groups—who are also ethnically divided—so much so that there began an accelerated call to split the state in two geographic territories: Zazzau and Gurara. Most of the Christians relocated to the south while the north became the sanctuary of the Muslims. Other people from southern Nigeria felt compelled to return to their states of origin, having lost their businesses and family members to the imbroglio.

It was even more painful and devastating at SJS to those who lost parents, siblings, and properties. The economic life of the people changed. Many students were forced out of SJS because their

parents couldn't afford school fees. And a few colleagues lost their homes. The crisis led to a mammoth exodus on different fronts at SJS, and throughout Kaduna. We were separated from our neighbours, Church members, and family friends. Our Eid's—Muslim festivities—, and Christian feasts—Christmas and Easter—were never the same again. They were bereft of the usual food sharing and exchanges of warmth and cheerful pleasantries. As kids, we looked forward to the food that our Muslim and Christian neighbours brought to our homes on such festivities. We hardly cooked meals on those days. I once contested with my brothers over what houses to deliver food on Christmas and Easter, knowing there were some houses that gifted more money than others. Kaduna has never recovered from the massacres of the 2000 Sharia crisis, and the subsequent episodes of religious and ethnic chauvinism, hydra-headedness and bigotry are still tectonic tensions till date, evident in the insecurity in the region.

When Ezzy had finished recounting this story to us, there was a grave silence and our lives seemed negotiated with violence outside the school's walls. It was almost time for evening prayer, and it was getting dark and time for him to go back home, if we could still call it that. I had no appetite to devour the bread he brought. No one seemed interested in asking for a portion of it either. He took his cap from the floor—the one he borrowed from Baba—and dusted it with his hands. He then placed it firmly on his head and got up to leave. As he turned his back from us, I stood there gazing until he got to the gate.

Before he finally disappeared into the outside world, he turned slightly, and our eyes met. We raised our hands in a gesture of goodbye and, as I did so, I hoped it wouldn't be the last time.

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