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Religious persecution and freedom of religion in Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria

A historical perspective

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Abstract

Freedom of religion in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, is under sustained strain with communal violence, restrictions on worship and dress, and structural barriers facing minorities. Using a qualitative historical method and a socio-legal reading of religious freedom, informed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and USCIRF reporting, this paper traces these tensions to the 19th century jihad of Othman Dan. Fodio and Ilorin's incorporation into the Sokoto Caliphate, then examines four flashpoints: the 1986 Palm Sunday disturbance, the 2004 Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction, the 2021 hijab controversy, and the 2023 Ìsèse suppression, closing with recommendations for coexistence.

Keywords:

Nigeria, Ilorin, Kwara State, freedom of religion, religious persecution, structural violence, peaceful coexistence.

1. Introduction

Freedom of religion has deteriorated across several West African states, and Nigeria is frequently cited among them. Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, is a useful lens on religious freedom trends precisely because it sits at the geopolitical seam between Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north and its predominantly Christian south (Chandler 2024). Before analysing specific episodes, it is necessary to say plainly what "persecution" means in this paper, since the term is often used loosely. Following John Sinclair's general definition, persecution is the sustained, cruel and unfair treatment of a person or group because of their political or religious

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beliefs (Sinclair 1992). Global Christian Relief narrows this for the Christian case to hostility, discrimination, imprisonment, displacement or violence experienced because of identification with Jesus Christ (Global Christian Relief 2026). For the purpose of this paper, however, a broader, internationally recognised standard is more useful: Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which protects the right to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, and the analytical distinction (used by bodies such as United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)) between *direct* persecution (violence, imprisonment, killing) and *structural* or *institutionalised* discrimination (unequal access to land, schooling, or public office on religious grounds). This distinction matters because, as will become clear, not every incident of inter-religious friction discussed below rises to the level of persecution in the strict sense; some are better described as communal violence, and others as structural discrimination. Distinguishing between them, rather than collapsing them into a single narrative, is itself part of the contribution of this paper.

Florin's friction is not the overt, military-grade violence associated with the Boko Haram insurgency further north; it is, instead, structural and institutionalized, expressed through disputes over schooling, dress, land, and public ritual. The central argument advanced here is that these modern tensions are not random or inevitable but are historically tethered to the administrative structures established during the 19th-century Islamic reform movements associated with Othman Dan Fodio and consolidated by subsequent indirect colonial rule. The paper draws on a qualitative historical method combining secondary historiography, newspaper archives, and a small number of anonymised interviews conducted with affected individuals. It should be acknowledged at the outset that some of the episodes discussed (particularly the 1986 Palm Sunday disturbance and the 2004 Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction) rest on a limited range of contemporaneous press sources; this is a genuine constraint on the paper's evidentiary base, and further corroboration from court records, police reports, and additional newspaper archives would strengthen the case-study analysis in future revisions of this research.

2. Theoretical framework: Conceptualising persecution and freedom of religion

A recurring weakness in scholarship on religious conflict in Nigeria is the absence of a clear conceptual framework distinguishing persecution from the broader category of inter-religious tension. This paper adopts three complementary lenses.

First, a socio-legal lens treats persecution and religious freedom as matters of rights and their violation rather than of theology. Article 18 of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, together with Section 38 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999), guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to manifest religion in worship, teaching, practice and observance. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) country reporting on Nigeria repeatedly distinguishes between direct violent persecution, most acute in the north-east and parts of the Middle Belt, and structural or institutionalised discrimination (for instance in access to land for worship, or in the administration of formerly mission-founded schools), which is the pattern more visible in Ilorin (USCIRF, various years).

Second, a sociological conflict lens draws on Karl Marx's account of religion as a potential source of social division as much as cohesion; Marx's often-cited view of religion as an instrument that reconciles subordinate groups to their position is relevant here not as an endorsement but as a reminder that religious identity can be mobilised by elites for non-religious ends (Wienclaw 2019). This is complemented by the concept of *structural violence*, harm produced by social arrangements and institutions rather than by direct physical force (Galtung 1969), which better captures phenomena such as restrictions on land acquisition for church buildings or asymmetries in local civil-service representation than does the language of "persecution" alone.

Third, an identity-politics lens is needed because, in Nigeria's Middle Belt and its southern fringe (of which Ilorin is arguably a part), religious and ethnic identity overlap substantially. To be Yorùbá in Ilorin is not automatically to be Muslim or Christian, but the Fulani-led emirate structure has historically been read as both an ethnic and a religious hierarchy, which sharpens minority grievance along both axes at once (Falola 1998; Kukah 2016).

Taken together, these three lenses provide the paper with a working test: an episode is treated as persecution proper where it involves sustained, targeted harm on account of religious identity; as communal violence where it involves reciprocal hostilities without one-sided targeting; and as structural discrimination where it involves unequal institutional treatment without physical violence. The case studies in Section 5 are classified accordingly rather than treated as a single undifferentiated category.

3. Historical foundations: The Sokoto Caliphate and Ilorin Emirate

3.1. Othman Dan Fodio and the 19th-century jihad

Othman Dan Fodio (rendered variously in the literature as Usman dan Fodiyo (Hausa) or Uthman Ibn Fudi (Arabic transliteration) – this paper uses "Othman Dan Fodio" throughout for consistency) was born in 1754 in Maratta, in the Hausa kingdom of Gobir, in what is now north-western Nigeria (Kukah 2016 cf. Quick

1995, who situates his active career as 1774-1804). He was a Fulani Islamic scholar and reformer who, between 1804 and 1808, led a jihad against the Hausa ruling elites of Gobir and neighbouring kingdoms (Hodgkin 2024). Ogbu Kalu (Kalu 1978) argues that the immediate trigger was a dispute between Othman Dan Fodio and the non-Muslim ruler of Gobir in 1802, though the movement's motives combined genuine religious reform with material and political grievance. It is important to be precise about what the jihad was directed against – it targeted what its leaders regarded as syncretic and un-Islamic practice among nominally Muslim Hausa rulers, not Christianity, which had not yet reached the interior of what is now northern and central Nigeria (Last 1967; Usman 1979). Reading the jihad as a campaign against Christianity is, therefore, an anachronism this paper corrects; its immediate religio-political target was the Hausa aristocracy, and its long-term effect was the consolidation of an Islamic administrative order (the Sokoto Caliphate) over both Muslim and non-Muslim (including African Traditional Religion-practising) populations (Adamu 1978; Paden 2007).

The Hausa are among West Africa's largest ethnic groups, historically settled across present-day Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, with Hausa-speaking communities as far afield as Dahomey (Benin), Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, reflecting both migration and the language's adoption by non-Hausa populations through trade (Ojelabi 1970). Before the jihad, Hausa land comprised independent, often rival, kingdoms bound together loosely by trade and periodic warfare. From around the 15th-century, pastoral Fulani migrants entered these kingdoms from the Futa Toro region of Senegal (Onuh 2024). Othman Dan Fodio began preaching from Degel in Gobir at around the age of 20, drawing encouragement from earlier successful jihad movements among Fulani communities in Futa Jallon (Onuh 2024). The Sokoto Caliphate was proclaimed in 1804, with Othman Dan Fodio acclaimed *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). Under his leadership and that of his successors, the Caliphate's authority extended across much of what is now northern Nigeria, southern Niger, northern Cameroon and parts of present-day Burkina Faso (Onuh 2024; Last 1967).

3.2. The incorporation of Ilorin

Ilorin was a Yorùbá settlement, founded in the late 18th century, and served as a provincial military outpost of the Òyó Empire until 1817. In that year, the Yorùbá military commander (*Àre Ònà Kakànfò*) Àfònjá rebelled against the Aláàfin of Òyó, enlisting the support of Shehu Alimi, an itinerant Fulani Muslim teacher (Britannica "Ilorin" 2025). Àfònjá's invitation brought Muslim (Hausa and Fulani) fighters into what had previously been a Yorùbá polity with an established, if smaller, Muslim presence dating from before Othman Dan Fodio's jihad. Abdullahi Smith (1987)

emphasised this point in his account of Yorùbá-Fulani contact around the fall of Old Òyó, and it complicates any simple binary between an indigenous "Yorùbá" identity and an incoming "Muslim" one. The Aláàfin, defeated, is reported in Yorùbá oral and written tradition to have died by suicide after pronouncing a curse on the Yorùbá people (Kalu 1978); this event precipitated the broader collapse of Òyó's unity (Ikime 1977). Àfònjá retained his independence from Òyó only with the continued support of Alimi's Hausa and Fulani forces (Kalu 1978), though Samuel Johnson's account describes Alimi somewhat differently, as a priest invited into Àfònjá's service rather than an independent powerbroker (Johnson 2009).

The alliance broke down over Àfònjá's promise to make Alimi overseer of Ilorin; Alimi's son, Abd al-Salam, became Ilorin's first Fulani ruler after Àfònjá's death, and pledged Ilorin's allegiance to the Sokoto Caliphate in 1823 (Akinwumi 1992). Àfònjá himself was killed by the Muslim forces he had once commanded, and Ilorin, rather than continuing to look south toward Òyó, reoriented its political allegiance northward, toward Sokoto (Ikime 1977). Samuel Johnson, writing from a Yorùbá Christian vantage point, characterised the incoming Fulani administration as more adept at statecraft than the weakened Òyó leadership it displaced, playing rival Yorùbá chiefs against one another while offering conciliatory terms to defeated rivals (Johnson 2009). This is one interpretation among several, and later Fulani- and northern-authored historiography (e.g., Usman 1979; Paden 2007) offers a different emphasis, framing the same events as the extension of an already-established Islamic administrative and legal order rather than as opportunistic conquest. Abd al-Salam's subsequent southward jihad was checked by the forces of Ìbàdàn at Òshogbo in 1840 (Akintoye 2014), fixing Ilorin's frontier and, with it, the Muslim-Yorùbá emirate identity that persists today.

3.3. Colonial consolidation

British indirect rule, formalised in the early 20th-century, entrenched rather than dismantled the emirate structure it inherited. Lord Lugard's administration adopted a policy of religious non-interference that, in practice, protected Islamic administrative and legal authority in the emirates while restricting Christian missionary activity: missions were discouraged from operating in the Muslim-administered north and were, in some cases, encouraged to redirect their personnel to non-Muslim districts further south (Turaki 2017). This colonial policy is a second, and in some respects more direct, historical root of the structural friction discussed later in this paper, because it fixed (under the imprimatur of a modern colonial state) many of the administrative boundaries between "Muslim" and "non-Muslim" jurisdictions that mission-founded institutions in Ilorin would later have to navigate.

4. The arrival of Christianity and the growth of mission education

African Traditional Religion (ATR) (the indigenous belief systems of the Yorùbá and other peoples of the area) predates both Islam and Christianity in Ilorin and continued to be practised by the general population well after the Sokoto Caliphate's consolidation (Awolalu 1976). Christian missionary contact with Ilorin began later still: Adolphus Mann, a Church Missionary Society (CMS) agent, visited in 1855 (Ayandele 1979), followed by Henry Townsend in 1858 and, separately, by Thomas Jefferson Bowen of the Southern Baptist Convention (Ayandele 1979 Ajayi 1965). In each case, the ruling Emir received the missionaries with courtesy but declined to permit a mission station. This pattern persisted through the visits of W. H. Clarke and Bishop Ajayi Crowther in 1871 (Yahaya 2001), and it was not until David Caldwell Babcock's Seventh-Day Adventist mission arrived in 1915 that missionary work gained a foothold, and even then only in Shao, a satellite community outside Ilorin proper, rather than in the city itself (Babcock 1915).

Two points follow from this chronology, and both correct a historiographical error common to earlier work on this subject, including earlier drafts of this paper. First, Ilorin's incorporation into the Sokoto Caliphate (1817-1823) predates any sustained Christian presence by several decades. The 19th-century jihad cannot, therefore, be read as a campaign against Christianity, which had not yet arrived. Second, the consolidation of Sokoto's authority over Ilorin was substantially complete well before 1903 (commonly, if imprecisely, cited as the year of the Caliphate's formal end under colonial conquest), which is itself close to the period in which Christian missions were only beginning to press inland in any numbers. The two processes were therefore near-contemporaneous at best, not sequential in the way that a "persecution of Christians by the jihad" narrative would require. What can more defensibly be argued is that the administrative and legal architecture the jihad and its Caliphate produced later became the framework within which 20th-century Christian missions, and the schools they founded, had to operate, and it is in that later, structural sense, rather than as direct 19th-century persecution, that the historical connection to the present matters.

Missionary educational expansion nonetheless proceeded steadily through the colonial and early independence periods, and it is this educational infrastructure, rather than the jihad itself, that produced the institutional flashpoints of the present day. Across Nigeria, including in Kwara State, the governments of the 1970s took over the administration of grant-aided missionary schools as part of broader public-education reforms (see generally Fafunwa 1974, on the history of Nigerian education policy). Mission bodies typically retained nominal proprietorship (their names remain on school gates and letterheads to this day) while day-to-day administration passed to the state. This ambiguous division of

authority, between historical (Christian) founders and the present (secular, state) administrator, is the direct institutional precondition for the hijab controversy examined in Section 5.3. It is precisely because schools such as Baptist School, Surulere, are simultaneously "Christian" by founding identity and "public" by current administration that a dispute over religious dress could not be resolved simply by appeal to either the mission's or the state's authority alone.

5. Contemporary manifestations of religious friction in Ilorin

Applying the classification proposed in Section 2, the episodes below are grouped by type (communal violence, structural / institutional discrimination, and individual -level social sanction) rather than presented as a single undifferentiated narrative of persecution.

5.1. Communal violence: The 1986 Palm Sunday disturbance

On 23 March 1986, a Christian Palm Sunday procession through parts of central Ilorin was confronted by a group of local Muslim residents who objected to the procession passing through what they regarded as a predominantly Muslim area. The resulting clash left eight people injured, including a police officer, and led to 11 arrests (Ogunupdate 1986). The single contemporaneous source available for this episode is a report in the *Herald* newspaper, which itself situates the incident against a backdrop of broader economic and social unrest in Nigeria at the time, including the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme and student protests, rather than treating it as an isolated act of religious targeting. Read narrowly, and on the basis of this one source, the episode is better classified as reciprocal communal violence arising from a dispute over public space than as one-sided persecution. A fuller assessment would require the additional court, police and press records that this paper has not been able to access, and this remains a limitation of the case study rather than a settled conclusion.

5.2. Communal violence: The 2004 Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction

In August 2004, the Kwara State government curtailed a planned five-day evangelistic crusade by Reinhard Bonnke to two days, citing threats of sectarian violence from Muslim youth groups opposed to the crusade being held near Ilorin's Muslim-majority core. The decision provoked a Christian youth protest march that security forces intercepted before it reached the Government House, while a preceding demonstration by the Kwara Muslim Youth group had also been dispersed (Oyeleke 2021, reporting contemporaneous Compass Direct coverage of the episode). As with the Palm Sunday case, the available account draws on a single retrospective press source. The episode illustrates the state's willingness to restrict religious assembly pre-emptively

in the name of public order, which is itself a legitimate subject of FoRB analysis, but the evidentiary base for characterising it as persecution rather than as a state security response to a bilateral threat of violence is, again, thin, and further primary sourcing is recommended before stronger claims are made.

5.3. Structural discrimination: The 2021 hijab controversy

In February 2021, the Kwara State government closed 10 schools (mostly Christian-mission-founded but state-administered) following disputes over the wearing of the hijab by Muslim pupils. The schools were reopened on 17 March 2021 under a state policy permitting willing Muslim schoolgirls to wear the hijab, a decision that the state's Permanent Secretary for Education framed as intended to secure sustainable peace and communal harmony (Oyeleke 2021). The reopening triggered confrontations at several schools, including Baptist School, Surulere, and Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) College, Sabo Oke, where Christian protesters attempted to bar hijab-wearing pupils from entry and displayed placards asserting the schools' Christian founding identity (Oyeleke 2021). The state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) opposed the policy and pursued the matter through the courts, arguing that permitting the hijab in mission-founded schools compromised those schools' religious character (Oyeleke 2021). Understood through the framework developed in Section 2, this dispute is a textbook case of *structural* religious friction: it arises not from a single act of violence but from the unresolved, decades-old ambiguity over whether authority in these schools rests with their historical Christian founders or their present state administrators, an ambiguity created by the 1970s schools takeover discussed above. Framed this way, resolving the dispute is less a matter of assigning blame between Muslims and Christians than of clarifying institutional governance, a point taken up in the conclusion below.

5.4. Direct threat: The 2023 Ìsèse Festival suppression

In June 2023, Yeye Ajesikemi Olokun Omolara Olatunji, a priestess of the Òsun tradition, was warned by a Muslim group said to be acting with the knowledge of the Emirate authorities, to cancel a planned Ìsèse (Yorùbá traditional religion) festival in Ilorin. Following the threats, which she said included death threats received after the event was publicised online, she canceled the festival and reported being ostracised by neighbours (Shotayo 2024). This episode is significant for two reasons this paper wishes to emphasise. First, it demonstrates that religious friction in Ilorin is not reducible to a Muslim-Christian binary: adherents of African Traditional Religion, the region's oldest religious tradition, face comparable structural pressure to abandon public religious practice. Second, because

the threat here was direct and personal rather than institutional, it sits closer to the "direct persecution" end of the spectrum proposed in Section 2 than the hijab case does, even though both involve the same broad category of religious-majority assertion of public space.

5.5. Individual-level social sanction: Family and community response to conversion

At a more intimate scale, two anonymised interviews conducted for this study illustrate the social cost of religious conversion within families. One respondent, whose parents held prominent roles within the local Muslim community, reported that her conversion to Christianity in her teenage years led her parents to withdraw parental and educational support and to disengage from her marital affairs entirely (Interview, 5 September 2026). A second respondent reported sustained social ostracism, including an incident of physical harassment arranged by extended family members, following her marriage to a Christian (Interview, 14 September 2026). These accounts, while limited to two respondents and therefore not generalisable, are consistent with a pattern noted in the wider literature on inter-religious family relations in Nigeria and point to a form of persecution that operates below the level of the state or organised religious bodies (through family and kinship sanction) and that existing FoRB frameworks, which are oriented primarily toward state action, do not fully capture.

6. Discussion: Connecting the historical narrative to present-day concerns

The historical evidence in Sections 3 and 4 can now be considered alongside the case studies in Section 5. The 19th-century jihad and the Sokoto Caliphate it produced did not, on the evidence available, target Christianity, which arrived later. Rather, they established a durable Islamic administrative and legal order in Ilorin, one that British indirect rule then formalised and protected rather than dismantled. This institutional framework shaped the conditions under which Christian missions were allowed to operate from the mid-19th century onward and influenced the unresolved questions of ownership that emerged when the Nigerian state assumed control of mission schools in the 1970s. It is this later, 20th-century layer of institutional history, rather than the 19th-century jihad itself, that best explains the hijab dispute. Comparable ambiguities of institutional identity likely explain other unresolved frictions, such as restrictions on land allocation for new church buildings in parts of the metropolis. This paper flags this issue for further empirical study rather than claiming to document exhaustively here.

It is important, following Toyin Falola's broader argument about the roots of religiously coded conflict in Nigeria, to resist the idea that this friction is a fixed, inevita-

ble consequence of 19th-century history (Falola 1998). Falola locates the sharpening of religious conflict in the colonial and postcolonial period specifically in the growing political salience of religious elites from the 1930s onward, and in choices made by the colonial and postcolonial state, not in an unbroken line of causation running back to 1804. The same caution applies to Ilorin: the Kwara State government's alternating accommodation of and resistance to emirate authority, its handling of the hijab dispute, and its response (or lack of one) to threats against the Ìsèse festival, are all matters of contemporary policy choice, open to reform, rather than the unfolding of an unchangeable historical script. Existing scholarship, specifically on Nigeria's religious freedom landscape, including USCIRF's country reporting and Joseph and Rothfuss's (2012) analysis of the broader Nigerian scenario, situates Ilorin-type structural friction as one point on a spectrum whose more violent pole is the north-east insurgency, a comparison this paper endorses as a corrective to treating Ilorin's tensions in isolation (USCIRF, various years; Joseph and Rothfuss 2012).

7. Conclusion

Religious tension in Ilorin has deep historical roots, but this paper has argued that those roots lie less in the 19th-century jihad itself (which targeted the Hausa ruling elite and predates any significant Christian presence in the area) than in the administrative and institutional order the jihad and subsequent colonial rule produced, and in 20th-century policy choices, particularly the ambiguous 1970s nationalisation of mission-founded schools, built on top of that order. Applying a clearer conceptual distinction between direct persecution, communal violence, and structural discrimination, as proposed in Section 2, the paper has shown that Ilorin's contemporary flashpoints (the Palm Sunday disturbance, the Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction, the hijab controversy, and the suppression of the Ìsèse festival) do not form a single narrative of one-sided persecution. Rather, it reveals a more varied picture in which Christians, Muslims, and adherents of African Traditional Religion have each, at different points, experienced restrictions on the public exercise of their faith.

8. Recommendations

In order to reduce religious conflict, religious leaders could take part in a standing inter-religious committee, with recognised representation from Muslim, Christian, and African Traditional Religion bodies to air grievances before they escalate. Such a committee would build on the existing patterns of everyday socio-religious exchange (gift-giving and mutual attendance at naming, wedding, and funeral ceremonies) that already characterise much of Ilorin's social life across religious lines (Adewale 1989).

In order to fulfil its constitutional obligations, the Kwara State government would be advised to apply the protections of Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution even handedly to Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional Religion practice alike. Its apparent inaction in the face of threats against the 2023 Ìsèse festival is a specific instance meriting review. The government, together with mission bodies, would also be advised to establish a joint framework (potentially a collaborative school-governance model) clarifying decision-making authority over religious dress, symbols, and observance in formerly mission-founded, now state-administered schools, so that future disputes are resolved through agreed governance rather than street confrontation. State or traditional authorities are also well placed to convene the standing inter-religious committee described above.

In order to sustain coexistence at the everyday level, civil society and voluntary associations, together with families (the settings in which most Ilorin residents actually encounter religious difference day to day), could continue to emphasise mutual respect, active listening, and tolerance of difference, without requiring any party to abandon their own conviction. This remains the most immediate and achievable path to coexistence, even where structural and institutional reform proceeds slowly.

Religious plurality has been a feature of Ilorin's social fabric since long before the jihad of Othman Dan Fodio, and it will remain one regardless of how the institutional questions raised in this paper are eventually resolved. The task facing Ilorin's religious and political leadership is not to erase that plurality's frictions by fiat, but to manage them through governance structures equal to the historical complexity this paper has tried to set out.

Further research is needed in the documentary record of religious conflict in Ilorin and in the allocation of land for new places of worship. As acknowledged in Sections 1 and 5, several of the historical episodes discussed here rest on limited press sourcing; future research on religious conflict in Ilorin would benefit from systematic archival and court-record research, and from oral-history interviews conducted at a larger scale than was possible here.

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