

Religious Identity and Elite Manipulation in Abdul-Rasheed Na'allah's *Seriya*

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Abstract

Religion constitutes a fundamental aspect of human existence, permeating social structures and individual identities worldwide. It serves as a lens through which individuals interpret their surroundings and define their sense of self within broader societal frameworks. This universal phenomenon manifests uniquely across cultures, encompassing diverse practices and beliefs that shape traditions and norms. This article explores the intersection of religious identity and elite hypocrisy, particularly how they function as tools of political patronage in Nigeria. It argues that religious identity plays a pivotal role in political negotiations within the Nigerian context, contributing to the dichotomy between “us” and “them”. Drawing on Freudian concepts of Selective Perception, which posits that individuals tend to perceive and interpret information in ways that align with their pre-existing beliefs and identities, the analysis of religious consciousness in Abdul-Rasheed Na Allah's *Seriya* becomes crucial. Characters within the narrative exemplify how religious identity influences their decisions and actions, reflecting broader societal trends where religious affiliations shape political allegiances and agendas. The study exposes a socio-political climate marked by hypocrisy, manipulation, deceit, and exclusion. Ultimately, the article posits that characters' consciousness reflects their religious identities, influencing their socio-political engagements.

Keywords: Religious Identity, Elite Manipulation, Nigerian Drama, Political Hypocrisy and *Seriya*



Introduction

For the Africans, “To live is to be caught up in a religious drama and to exist is to be religious in a religious universe” (Mbiti 1).

To effectively frame the argument of this study, it is crucial to clarify the key concepts of religion, religious identity and elite manipulation. Religion is a fundamental force that intertwines these concepts, as illustrated by the opening quote. It encompasses a broad range of beliefs, practices, rituals, and doctrines that guide individuals and communities in their spiritual and moral lives. Beyond being a system of faith, religion acts as a cultural and social institution that shapes worldviews, moral values, and communal identities. It provides individuals with a sense of purpose, belonging, and moral guidance, influencing their ethical decisions and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, religion often intersects with other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic status, contributing to multifaceted and complex identities.

Religious identity, in particular, refers to the set of characteristics, beliefs, values, and affiliations that define an individual or group within a societal context. It includes both personal identity (traits unique to an individual) and social identity (membership in larger groups or categories). Specifically, religious identity pertains to how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others in relation to their religious beliefs and practices. It shapes self-concept, moral frameworks, and social interactions, playing a pivotal role in social cohesion and collective behaviour. On an individual level, religious identity encompasses personal beliefs and values that are deeply held and often central to one’s self-concept. It includes personal convictions about the nature of existence, the divine, and the moral principles that guide behavior. These personal aspects of religious identity shape how individuals view themselves and their place in the world. They influence daily decisions, ethical judgments, and responses to life’s challenges.

Elite manipulation, on the other hand, involves the strategic use of power and influence by privileged groups to maintain or expand their control over resources and institutions. Elites may leverage economic, political, and cultural power to shape public opinion, influence policy outcomes, and consolidate their authority. In the context of religion, the elites exploit religious affiliations and sentiments to mobilize support, legitimize their authority, or deflect criticism, thereby reinforcing their dominance. It is important to acknowledge that one key aspect of elite manipulation is economic power. This is so because the elites often control significant financial resources and economic assets, which they can use to influence public opinion and policy. Political power is another crucial tool for elite manipulation. They leverage their positions within government or political organizations to shape legislation, policy decisions, and governance structures. By positioning themselves as key players in the political arena, elites can guide policy in ways that preserve or enhance their power and control.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for appreciating the complex relationship between religious identity and elite behavior, revealing both the potential for societal cohesion and the



risks of manipulation and conflict. Recent scholarly discourse highlights the complexities of religion's impact on society, cautioning against simplistic interpretations. As Agbigi and Swart suggest, "African ideological philosophies often integrate profound religiosity, influencing societal norms and values" (2). Similarly, Kalu underscores how elites use religious symbols and narratives for mobilization and, regrettably, "as instruments of political conflict" (37).

Apparently, defining these concepts is vital for analyzing the intricate interplay between religion, identity, and elite manipulation. This framework sets the stage for examining how these factors intersect and influence socio-political dynamics, particularly in contexts where religious identity significantly shapes power structures and governance. In Abdul-Rasheed Na Allah's play *Seriya*, characters use their religious consciousness to reflect their realities and navigate socio-political landscapes, demonstrating how deeply ingrained religious identity can affect individual behavior and societal dynamics, especially in politically significant contexts.

Towards the Meaning of Religion

Religion is a "set of actions organized around the sacred that is a non-empirical source of power, transcendence, mystery and awe" (McGee 336). It determines the behavioural pattern of people in many ways. Mala and Aiyegbogun (33-34) believe that religion performs six interrelated functions, namely: restraining or criticizing the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norm, articulating, and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills. Tylor sees it as a unified system of belief and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church (or a mosque) all of those who adhere to them (62, emphasis, mine). Other important definitions useful to this study see religion as a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolutely, simple or dependent God (Eyo 20).

To Omoregbe, religion is essentially a relationship, "a link established between two persons, namely, the human person and the divine person to exist" (15). It is "a faith and practice involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred" (Ugwu 22); and it denotes the whole group of rites performed in the honour of the divine being" (Carpenter 19). In fact, some scholars in the field of religion, for example, Deng 143; Nkom 75; Kunhiyop 226, have all argued that in many African societies, religion constitute the main fabric which is intertwined with their general existence. This is so because it has in its common denominators and cultural signifiers that underscore shared identity. Other scholars argue that ritual, prayers and feelings of awe must be ordained and sanctioned by authority or tradition (Edet 2; Asagun 18). From the foregoing, it is pertinent to underscore that the characteristic features of any religion include the belief in supernatural being to whom obedience, service and honour are due. This is to Merriam, "the feeling or expression of human love, fear, or awe of some superhuman or overruling power, whether by profession or belief, by observance or rites and by ceremonies or conduct of life" (250).

Religious Identity and Consciousness of Religion in Nigeria



Perhaps, putting religious (an adjective) to qualify identity (a noun) is instructive. Grammar aside, it insinuates a restricted but pragmatic way of viewing what identity represents. In fact, recent literature on religious identity has often emphasized the positive role of religion in the socialization process in the society (Alan and Smith 58; Laura 326; Thomas 257; Jin and Kim 115; and Michael 478). Religious identity is, therefore, a specific type of identity formation which centres on the collective consciousness on which the peoples' lives sprout, grow and flourish. Put in another sense, it constitutes how a person or group thinks of themselves as belonging to and representing the values of a particular religion or set. It, nonetheless, has rules about conduct that guide life within a faced group, and it is often organized and practiced in a community (Agbiji and Swart 2).

In the African worldview, religious identity is an ontological phenomenon: It is not only a set of practices and ritual that are related to the sacred, to God, to the mystical or to the supernatural (Harold Koenig 284), but is also of integral importance because it concerns the deepest root of human existence that integrates human life into a coherent whole (Schuurman 273-274, Mbiti 15; Loening 283). For Mu'azzam and Ibrahim, religion provides the ground for all decisions, actions and ultimate expectations in social, political and economic life, giving meaning to human life and action (69). It is, therefore, a strong element in the traditional backgrounds and exerts the greatest influence upon the thinking and feeling of the people concerned (Mbiti 1999 cited in Ilesanmi 2014).

Nigerians are the ninth most religious people in the world (Onapajo 112). The most populous Black Nation with a population above 200 million, Nigeria is projected to grow to 375 million to become the third largest in the world by 2050 (World Population Prospects 2022). The country's religious identities are usually classified into three: Traditional, Christian and Muslim. Many people have jokingly added a fourth strand to the list; "*Tradochislam*" which is a blend of the three. Of these three, (or four, if you like), Islam and Christianity are nearly equally represented, while the traditional religion is the least politically active even though several ethnic groups or sub-groups, villages, clans or kins groups, are involved in the worship of different gods or goddesses. According to Greene Eleanu, "Religion is one of the vexations and contentious issues across the globe" (2). For a country like Nigeria, it plays out in many ways informing not only the people's philosophical understanding of their customs and tradition; belief system and morals; it encompasses their actions and social relationships.

Relating religion to identity is also contentious for many. Indeed, it can be argued that the development of an identity is what leads to organized religion. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* affirms that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, these rights include freedom to change his religion, or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (*Article 18*, UN-UDHRS₅).



This declaration supports the respect for individual choice of religion and the government's expectation to protect same. Nigeria, as many other African countries, has adopted this Declaration in the *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (as amended). For the sake of emphasis, it is presented below:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance (*Chapter IV, 1-3*).

Despite the provisions, religious activities in Nigeria are now closely linked with power politics. This is because members of the Nigerian political class have continued to deploy religious activities or its symbols to gain or retain their political dominance. Politicians, therefore, exploit these religious activities as a determining factor to pursue their agenda knowing that religious factor remain one of the deepest and strongest rallying point of influence in Nigeria. It is worthy of note that the infiltration of religion into the electoral process in Nigeria is commemorated with all manner of thanksgiving and prayer sessions by politicians in churches and mosques.

Consequently, it is not surprising to observe that during election periods, candidates from various political parties frequently visit major church gatherings and religious events. These include large-scale conventions such as those held at the Redemption Camp by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Power Must Change Hands programme at Prayer City by the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, Shiloh, the annual event organized by the Winners' Chapel (also known as the Living Faith Bible Church led by Bishop David Oyedepo), and the Adoration Ministry led by Reverend Father Mbaka, among others. These visits are strategic efforts to connect with the religious sentiments of the electorate. Similarly, Islamic leaders and events also play a significant role in reflecting the shared social experiences of the people during these election periods. Across the country Muslims and Christians have co-existed peacefully for decades.

In the southwest where identity is mainly shaped by regional culture and values, they even intermarry (Hoffman 5). Nigeria is a secular state. That is separation of Church and State, and that no religion should be adopted as a state religion or that no religion is superior to the other. In clear terms, the Nigerian Constitution frowns at the superimposition of any religion on the people as contained in *Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (as amended). What this means is that any attempt by anyone or any group to foist a religion on the nation or state would be rejected to avoid any conflict that may ensue as a result. Although this constitutional provision bars a State religion by adoption, it has, however, not deter many office seekers, or political jobbers to hover around the so-called men of God (MOGs) during campaigns. No wonder, Majek Fashek, the Nigeria reggae musician of blessed memory in one of his songs said, "Religion na politics and lots of people know all the tricks." In other words, religious identity is a formidable aspect of identity politics in Nigeria.



Perhaps, it is for this reason that many scholars such as Olutayo and Makanjuola 25; Ojo, 82; Adesina and Ganiyu, 35 and Ibrahim 12 maintain that religion has become a tool in the hands of politicians, policy makers and religious leaders, or people who seek public offices. These authors in their postulations offer a contemporary perspective on the relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria, drawing from the latest academic and journalistic research. Their work provides modern insights into how religion intersects with politics, highlighting recent developments and case studies. They analyse the newest trends in how political figures and religious leaders leverage religion to shape public opinion and policy and assess the ongoing influence of religious institutions on political power dynamics, with particular attention to recent elections and policy shifts.

The Politics of the Elites

Elites who are politically conscious are ambitious individuals who seek political office for personal recognition, career advancement, and power (Guy 46; Hans-Dieter 79). Holding key positions in society, they can be seen as pillars upholding the political culture (Babafemi 76).. They also pose a significant threat to the political survival of society and often exploit religious, ethnic, or other primordial identity symbols to gain political advantages over their rivals (Babafemi 102). To explain elite hypocrisy, therefore, Pareto argues that elites maintain power through a veneer of respectability while pursuing self-interest (Pareto 183). Similarly, Mosca highlights how political elites manipulate ideological rhetoric to conceal their true motives (Mosca 65). Robert Michels adds that even democratic organisations [such as Nigeria] inevitably develop a controlling elite that prioritises its own interests under the guise of serving the public (Michels 82, emphasis, mine). These theories collectively demonstrate how elites frequently engage in hypocrisy by presenting themselves as public servants while pursuing personal agendas.

In a way, this elite hypocrisy is evident in their sanctimonious posturing while seizing every opportunity to consolidate their powers. To achieve this, they leverage their legitimacy from various religious identity-based affiliations. The uncontrollable situation described above has led many Nigerians to use their religious identity as a criterion for accessing political opportunities. Sadly, in many parts of Nigeria, access to good governance, employment in government institutions, and overall government performance are often sacrificed due to considerations of religious identity. It is not uncommon to find individuals aligning with a particular religious group supporting only candidates of their own religious affiliation. For many Nigerians, their religious identity often defines them more prominently than any other aspect of their identity. Politicians exploit this identity as bait to secure electoral support, leading to an increase in religious conflicts exacerbated by elite hypocrisy, resulting in economic, social, and political manipulation and crises nationwide (Adekanye 45; Kaplan 132).

Despite the Nigerian Constitution prohibiting the formation of political parties along religious lines, political elites and groups continue to exploit religion across all geopolitical zones, where Christianity and Islam compete for influence and political dominance. This competition fosters regional support based on religious persuasion for candidates from each region. The diversity of regional solidarity in Nigeria is largely shaped by the manipulation of religious identities by elite



groups seeking power and socio-economic influence. Religious influence over politics becomes pronounced when political elites invoke religious rhetoric before, during, and after elections. These elites wield decision-making powers over state institutions, which they control to maintain authority and legitimacy. As Cordelli argues, elites are driven by the ability to mobilize resources and coercive tools, shaping both domestic and international arenas to extend and legitimize their rule, thereby ensuring acceptance among non-elite groups (91). They serve as arbiters of societal values and a unifying force without which the community risks fragmentation.

The Religion Question in Na' Allah's *Seriya*

African writers have always used their creative works as “art in the service of man” as Achebe puts it. Through these works, they can reflect on the diverse aspects of the peoples’ religious identities, experiences and realities. Although Klinken has argued that the study of religion and literature is an emerging field (1), many creative works in Africa have touched on the issues of religion, nonetheless. To be sure, the beliefs in supernatural beings, such as gods, spirits and divinities, have been captured in many epic texts such as Djibril Tamsir Niane’s *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*; and Mazisi Kunene’s *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* and many others. Within Nigerian Literature, creative works such as *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, by Daniel Fagunwa, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe; Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*; *The Strong Breed*; *The Lion and The Jewel*; *Kongi’s Harvest* and *The Road* are works that reveal the social malaise in the form of corruption, leadership failure, political violence, military dictatorship, social inequity and systemic failure at every level of governance bedevilling the nation at every point in history. Majority of these works set in a cosmological environment which explore the various aspects or themes of the peoples’ religion: ancestral curses running through generations, traditions of myth and rituals, secular social vision, or even demonstrate the ongoing relevance of indigenous worldviews in a contemporary Nigerian society.

In recent times, however, some of Nigeria’s 21st century writers have used their works to present a situation in which various groups use language to construct their individual and collective identities and ideologies, legitimise their actions and justify their acts against others. Thus, Nigerian literature in various forms – poetry, drama, and the novel, as well as the critical discourse on them, have now been preoccupied with not just the combined impact of colonialism but also focused on the impact of the *new* religion on the people and their society. What is more? The creative writers such as Femi Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun, Festus Iyayi, Ben Okri, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Oyeh Otu and Abdul Rasheed Na’ Allah and many others have continued to use their works as avenues of engaging with issues in the society thereby receiving due attention.

The play *Seriya* is another valuable contribution of Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah to Nigerian literature. In *Seriya*, Na’Allah explores the aesthetics of religion in the lives of his characters in whom he presents the various cultural and political orientation of the Nigerian society. The playwright exposes the ills and conflicts that characterized the peoples’ attitude to their religion and the interpretation they give to their realities. Of course, this is usually coloured by the



religious beliefs and the outcome of their socialization process. Set in Ilorin for obvious reasons,¹ the play reflects the complex nature of the city's socio-cultural milieu in moulding the behaviour of those who live in it. That aside, the geographical architecture of the city space, i.e., its dynamic connection, is for the author "a mixture of rural and urban modernity." (*Prelude* 12). Clearly, readers are made to envisage a complex network of city life in mosaic of diversity and messy contradictions. The playwright, who believes that there is a connection between the city, space and literary creativity in the dramatic sense has this to say about the setting of *Seriya*:

African and Islamic cultural and artistic symbols and images abound... a few British-style housing structure [announcing the marriage of two cultures] all [are seen] at the city's outskirts. Mainly traditional Yoruba and Hausa structures with corrugated iron sheets in downtown areas. Calls to Muslim prayers are heard five times daily from all directions, far and near, and soon sounds of Quranic recitations came through from ongoing *salats*, Muslim prayers. And as they subside, words, sentences, discussions, even laughter came from all directions, [Sic] mainly in Yoruba, but also in Hausa, Fulani, Nupe, Baruba and Kemberi ancestries [*Prelude* 12].

This opening action is a signifier to the cultural architecture embedded in the multifarious practices of the communities that inhabit the space. Not only is the ritualistic aspect of the city's metropolis affirmed by the playwright, the dynamics between space and its subversive connection with the human quest for fulfillment signals the opening action in Act 1. What would people say of her predicament begins the action as she talks to herself in a dramatic monologue:

Mariama: ...or are you tired of me, oh Allah? The world will say she's finished... she's an *adelebo*— clearly a grown-up woman, twenty years old, has refused to marry... They will perhaps say she has a curse on her head... She will be a terrible role model in the community..." (*Seriya*, 13-14).

Mariama's dejection is borne out of a societal expectation. A woman of her age and status, beautiful and a successful teacher is expected not only to have been married but also with children of her own. Her inability to fulfil this desire at and when due is the cause of her outburst to Allah "Or are you tired of me, oh Allah? Oh, I am already one, am I not, Allah? (*Seriya* 13, 14). *Sakariyawu*, Mariama's father was quick to remind her that it is Allah alone who oversees the affairs of men. The consciousness with which daughter and father had their conversation

¹Abdul-Rasheed Na' Allah was born in Ilorin, a multicultural city and capital of Kwara State. He attended his Quranic, elementary and university earning B.A. (Hons.) in Education and English; and his M.A. in English from the University of Ilorin. He has spent almost all his youth and adult life in Ilorin the unique multiethnic city, which is home to the Yoruba, Hausa and Nupe people and many others.



betrays their religious temperament on certain fundamental moral principles on which aspects of their culture or religion are built. This is how she explains it to her father:

Mariama:

God's *Seriya*, yet, is the severest. The principal has no child of his own. He has taken his third wife, and after two years, even that wife hasn't born him a child... God is the Almighty that measures out appropriate *Seriya* to the deafest human being who won't hear His admonitions and would not listen to His words. And sometimes Allah does what is good and human beings think He's done a bad thing (*Seriya*18).

Religious consciousness directly relates to how people conceive of their faith. It bespeaks of "the way their religion manifest itself in the thought and feelings and activities of individuals" (Pratt 13). In the Nigerian society generally, people's faith may be affected in specific ways by the social cultural climate that surrounds them. Thus, their religious consciousness provides a guide to the totality of their being especially in their submission to the will of Allah on earth. In the case of Islam, Moten argues:

"It [a peoples' religious belief] is not [just] a set of metaphysical doctrines nor a body of rituals but a complete, comprehensive way of life embracing all spheres of human thought and action whether spiritual or mundane (218. Emphasis added).

As a result, to an absolute reliance of the will of Allah is required by every human who are only pencils in the hands of their maker. In this sense Islam is perceived to be holistic in nature as it guides the entire life and conduct of the people. This is what Mariama meant when she says:

Who knows, the head-teacher might have even hated his own children if Allah had given him some and perhaps he might have starved them to death! He's become a laughing stock in the community and people say he is a sheep who calls himself a he-goat! (*Seriya*18).

Given the above, it is clear how a person or group think of themselves as belonging to and represented by the value of their religion. Also, by her position on the inability of her Headteacher to have children of his own despite marrying many women, readers are made to see the strong association of the characters in the play to their religious beliefs. Obviously, their religion becomes the consciousness upon which they derive their essence, define their existence or negotiated their communal interactions. No wonder all *Sakariyawu* could say following Mariama's wailing about her age and successes as a teacher but failure to attract a suitor or "the right man to take [her] to the most honourable house of motherhood" was a call for prayers to the Almighty God. Of course, prayer is a key component of the Islamic religion. It is the first pillar of Islam. Others are the Profession of Faith, Zakat, Fasting and Hajj. For the Muslim, prayer is obligatory upon the prophet Muhammad during his ascension to heaven. It is believed among



Muslims that no matter what actions one performs in his life, the most important aspect is one's relationship to God, that is, one's faith (*imaan*), God-consciousness (*taqwa*), sincerity (*ikhlas*) and worship of God (*ibaadah*). (*IslamHouse.com*, "The Importance of Prayer", 3).

Apart from its spiritual benefits, prayer is a very important exercise which imposes the physical and mental health benefit for those who perform them. Madwi argues that:

It generates within the subliminal self of man such spiritual power; light of faith and awareness of God as can enable him to strive successfully against all kinds of evils and temptations and remain steadfast at times of trial and adversity and protect himself against the weakness of the flesh and the mischief of immoderate appetites (24).

No wonder *Sakariyawu*, a devote Muslim settle for it: "My daughter, let me pray for you" [*Putting his right hand on her head*].

Mariama: [*Kneeling*] Thank you my father, I know your prayers and those of my mother have never ceased to keep me company... (*Seriya19*).

Both father and daughter, therefore, unite their faith to the God whom they believe has the power to change whatever situation is to be changed. For the two, religion becomes an eminently social practice which focuses less on the physical but more on the supernatural who can only be accessed through the collective consciousness of prayer sessions. Of course, this is also a requirement in Islam where man's relationship with God is both demonstrated and put into practice by prayer. It is believed that if prayers are sound and proper, the rest of man's deeds will be sound and proper: "Verily, the prayer keeps one from the great sins and evil deeds" (Quran 29:45). Another passage has it that "Verily, man was created impatient, irritable when evil touches him and ungenerous when good touches him. Except for those devoted to prayer those who remain constant in their prayers..." (Quran 70:19-23). This is the reason graduating from the Quranic School is a thing of celebration for the family. On such occasions, guests and friends of the family must colour the event by making cash donating or presenting gifts of various kinds to the graduates. For the elites, it is not just an opportunity to display their love for the community and its people, but also a time to betray their hypocrisy. This brings us to the second part of this essay.

Elite Manipulation

Manipulation is the usage of emotional influence over a person or situation to gain a positive result. It is "essentially controlling the action of a person or group without that person or group knowing the goals, purpose and method of that control and without even being aware that a form of control is being exercised on them at all" (Usman87). Through the character of *Sakariyawu*, Na' Allah x-rays the attitude of a typical Nigerian elite who sees religion as the fastest means of getting into the hearts of the people. The dialogue between him and *Lamidi*, the Local Government Chairman of *Ile-Eni* reveals a lot about Nigerian political elites and their physical and emotional reaction to situations around them. *Lamidi* had come to inform *Sakariyawu* that he



would be physically present at his sons *Wolima* (Quranic school graduation ceremony). However, *Sakariyawu* sees the gestures as a political appearance and a systematic attempt to canvass for votes in the forthcoming election. He hits him hard in the following conversation:

Sakariyawu:

Oh, the chairman... We do not see your masquerade outside of his den... For what have we earned the visit of the lion of the forest? (*Seriya* 24-25).

Since politics is seen as survival of the fittest where the strongest animal wills of supremacy, only the lion is, for sure, seen as the leader of the forest to which other animals must bow. A very clever politician who understands the implication *Sakariyawu's* statement moves into self-defense:

Lamidi: My brother, you know, I will always come see you. What is *Okuku* doing that it will not come towards the weaver? What is the nail doing that it would refuse to keep the finger company? What is tongue doing that it will not pay a visit to the teeth? ...Who am I without the good will of my Lords and benefactors? (25).

In Nigeria, religious manipulation is deeply rooted in the poor living socio-economic conditions of the people. This is a quality many Nigerian politicians must have to succeed in the act of public speaking to keep convincing their electorates of the need to vote for them at every election. To achieve victory over their opponent, politicians must strive to use words in rhetorical embellishment. In fact, words from their mouths can be seen as the “sounds of fury signifying nothing,” apologies to Shakespeare. Unfortunately for him, *Sakariyawu* is not a novice to their attitude. Quickly, he retorted: “Eh eh, Chairman, the Chairman! I am not surprised. Today’s politicians’ mouths are like the White man’s salt” (25). Apparently, language has the facilities which its users employ frequently to actualize their intentions (Opeibi 31). Thus, whether used as a mode of persuasion, while describing humans as political beings, or as a facility to facilitate interactions among humans, “the nature of language is said to be closely related to the demands people made of it, and the function it must serve” (Halliday 70). For the politicians, language is deployed to do a lot before, during and after electioneering process.

Right from the classical time, for example, in both the Greek *polis* and the Roman Empire, the use of words or the rhetorical tradition played a significant role in the verbal behaviour of politicians, creative writers and seers. The same is true even in the Nigerian society. Evidently, the metaphor of the *Whiteman's salt* is also very instructive. It carries upon it the peculiarity and effect of words on the audience: a means by which the ignorant are influenced, the noble is praised and the weak seduced, or subdued. It is not just “a mere stringing of words” as Ngugi (11) has also suggested. More than that, it captures the African essence [in] definition of their



reality (Akwen 196). Undoubtedly, words or language can be instrument of oppression by which a person or group of people are subjugated. No wonder Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike warn:

A necessity for linguistic experimentation lies in the fact that Africans do not use English the way the English do, and in the fact that the rhetorical devices of each African language and community are peculiar to it and are a legacy of its cultural inheritance (262).

The sweetness of the words in the politicians' mouth does not only convey their normative ethos but are also produce the easiest means to manipulate people. A master of his craft, *Lamidi* was quick to deny *Sakariyawu*'s allegation. To him, his words are coming out from "the truth mouth of [a] brother... the original local mouth" (*Seriya* 25). Here, *Lamidi* frowns at any reference to any form of colonial influence. Hence, to make the politician see how there exist a gulf between the two, *Sakariyawu* resulted to the description of the physical appearances of a corrupt Nigerian politician:

Sakariyawu:

Come on, Chairman! I don't know we're still brothers. It is true we grew up together but you're a big man now... Look at your cloth, the material is imported from London, not our local *Ile-Eni* weave or the type bought from Jankara Market in Lagos. Your shoes are like the ones my daughter told me were called Italian shine. Your skin itself is changing colour or have you also imported skin lately? I also heard that you and your family have moved to your new duplex in the Government Reservation Area [*gazes at the stomach*]. You have also become pregnant, the rich man's pregnancy (26).

The politician could not take the truth anymore. He starts to sweat profusely. Sadly, *Sakariyawu* did not spear him as he continues to unleashed one 'bitter word after another. He makes *Lamidi* to understand that his antics and hypocrisy are noticeable since he only comes around during campaigns or at religious gathering just to show off or to gain the support of timid electorates. Realizing that he could not match words for words with *Zakariyawu*, he quickly turns to Silifatu, *Zakariyawu*'s wife for reassurance and patronage:

Lamidi: [*Receiving the water*] ...My wife thank you so much... Actually, the reason I came was that I heard your son Fatayi would be celebrating *wolimat* tomorrow. Some of my councilors and I would like to celebrate with you. We know how important this is to you. He is your one and only son and we would like to be there for you. After all, what are we doing in the office that is more than sharing in the good and its other side with our people? (27)



It is surprising to hear Lamidi who once said to Zakariyawu that “it’s being so tight at the office” changed his mind almost immediately just to gain the confidence of *Silifatu*. Clearly, hypocrisy manifests in situations where he must show that he cares about them. Unfortunately, it was quite easier for the woman to fall for his linguistic trap since all she wants at this time is the best for her only son by making his graduation day a memorable one for him. Lamidi was true to his words. On the appointed day, he came with his co-politicians as he had promised. He ceased the day and made huge cash donations to the pleasures of everyone, especially *Aafa Layisis*, the Quaranic teacher who is also presented as a corrupt religious leader who takes to patronizing politicians because of what he would gain from them.

Aafa Layisi: The best of the human beings is he who is grateful to Allah for Allah’s bounties to us (32).

To be ‘grateful’ to the cleric is to give big offerings or make huge donations to Allah. It is clear that his sermon is tailored towards financial prosperity which is his own mode of exploiting his congregation. He could not hide his taste for money as he introduces his supposedly invited guests as *gbajumo*. For him, the celebration day is a period to display financial superiority between the two groups: the businessmen and the politicians. According to him, “Today, politicians meet business tycoons. Today, we will know the other names money is called. Are we ready” (*Seriya*34). One by one, the Chairman and his Counsellor made significant donations to the admiration of all present. The Cleric continues his stock in trade: “It is by your spending today that you will show your love for them” (*Seriya* 37). At this point, people begin to wonder if money or wealth is synonymous with the love of God. The flagrant display of the Clerics’ opportunistic behaviour is without caution as some of the attendees had to make jests of them:

Voice: These *Aafas* with love for money!

True to this, the cleric continues to ignore such comment as the one above while he goes on:

Aafa Layisi: You buy your children *alubarika*, this is the day, parents/when each child is called to the stage to read, we’ll see those who love their children most, the people who want the greatest *alubarika* for their children. God’s blessings have to be earned! Now.

Everyone listen to both the *Aafa* and the Chairman who is called to make his speech. The politicians did not mince words in announcing his other colleagues a special team within the National Party. He did what was typical of the Nigerian politicians who connive with their religious counterpart for score political points against their opponents.

Lamidi: We’re ready to spend money here today for these students’ *alubarika*. I have asked my councilors to arrange for food and soft drinks and some will be brought to the Friday Prayers today. We will be back here after *Jumaa Salat* [Friday prayer] and as for what we will spend here, you haven’t seen anything yet. (39).



The most decadence and the use of manipulate words to arrest the ‘timid victim’ is justified by some of those present. Here is how a parent puts it:

Parent: I do not blame *Aafa* for asking for *alubarika*, *alubarika*. No one pays them salary, yet they teach our children and depend only on Thursday alms, which most parents don’t pay ... It is from one’s work that one’s eats, so our people say! (40)

While the parent seems to justify the action of the cleric, he comes down heavily on the politicians:

And our politicians... “Oh, we love our people, we love our people.” They build personal mansions the fortnight after they get elected and claim they love the people. Our children have become *almajiri* (beggars) on the street as their teacher have become *alubara* (beggars). No, they can neglect the Quaranic schools, refuse to recognize their teachers. They can neglect our values and turn our children to hooligans roaming the streets. Shame! (40)

The parent blames everything on the politicians while exonerating the clerics. While everything was going Mariama becomes the voice of reason. The playwright uses her character to question the public morality of the people:

Mariama: Mama, I really don’t like this a bit... He [politician] is wing my brother’s *wolima* to campaign for his reelection. Filth, stinking filth! Vultures consume only filth. This is not the place for him. I was ashamed how he stood up after the *salat* to announce my brother’s *wolima* to the faithful. In what ways is hawk related to guinea fowl, eh? (45)

Mariama thus represents the conscience of the people. Her perception entails how she sees the politicians and the religious leaders alike. Mariama screens out the uncomfortable behaviour of the two through the process of stereotyping. The playwright should be commended for giving the female character such a precarious role in a male dominated society. Apart from that, Islam, too, has restricted the duties of the woman to what can be referred to as ‘stateless functions.’ Consequently, Mariama’s words and her ability to question the status quo is the reality check for a disorganized system. Like Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, who recruited the women of both Sparta and Athens to devise a clever plan to end the ongoing war between the two cities, Mariama has also initiated a similar movement to counter corrupt politicians and religious leaders who exploit religion for political gain. Through the power of her thoughts and reasoning, she is presented as a woman who desired equal opportunity and positive change for all in the society. Her selective perception aligns with Freud’s idea which is a form of defense that explicate on the human inclination to consider issues from a given perspective, according to personal need, or to cope with parallel information existing in one’s environment.

Conclusion



This article discusses religious identity, elite hypocrisy, and manipulation in Nigerian drama. It shows how Nigeria's political and economic elite use religion to gain power and appeal to voters, as illustrated by characters like Lamidi and his associates. The analysis reveals that characters in the text represent individuals and groups who interact based on their religious identities, and that such interactions often lead to social and political manipulation. It highlights that national cohesion is unattainable in an environment of religious hypocrisy and manipulation, emphasising the ideologically mediated use of language in religious contexts. This research offers valuable insights into how religion shapes Nigerian literature and the role of literary writing in understanding social and cultural realities, providing a basis for further scholarship on the intersection of religion and politics in Nigerian society.

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