Missiological Response to the Vulnerability of
Hausa-Speaking Migrant Christians in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's North-South migration has missiological implications. Hausa-speaking migrant Christians (HSMC) are doubly vulnerable: they suffer persecution in their northern origin, where the majority are Muslims, and stereotype-induced identity crisis in their southern 'place of refuge'. Therefore, this study explores a missiological response to the vulnerability of HSMC in Nigeria. Understanding the phenonmenon associated with HSMC's vulnerability can foster opportunities for a comprehensive—centripetal and centrifugal—missions approach. This descriptive study combines literature, practical observations, and interactions with HSMC in southwest Nigeria to recommend ways of enhancing comprehensive mission mechanisms.

Key Words: Hausa-speaking Christians (HSC), Hausa-speaking migrant Christians (HSM), migration, missiological, Nigeria, vulnerability

Introduction

Though scholars like Ogunewu (2019, p. 171) and Akano (2023a, pp. 115-116) describe Nigeria's insecurity as hydra-headed, they also state generally that the South is more stable than the North. Consequently, there is a phenomenal North-South migration that has implications for missiological engagement. This study examines a missiological response to the vulnerability of Hausa-speaking migrant Christians (HSM) in Nigeria. The relevant issues include the ethnic architecture of Nigeria, the nature of insecurity and internal migration, and the missioloical role of the church in relation to vulnerable individuals.

Ethnic Architecture of Northern Nigeria

Nigeria is a multicultural nation-state. Different kingdoms, such as Kanem, Songhai, Oyo, and Benin, form its background. Like other African states, the boundaries are artificial as most member people or ethnic groups have different shared values (Ajayi, 1986; Gifford, 1998, pp. 3-5). Falola and Aderinto (2010, pp. 240-243) argue that, apart from the differences between the two amalgamated North and South British protectorates, each former protectorate has internal differences and the resulting regionalisation that set the Igbo as the dominant culture in the East, the Yoruba in the West, and the Hausa-Fulani in the North is an untidy situation.

Johnstone's (1993, pp. 424-426) research identifies over 420 people groups and cultural identities across Nigeria's south, middle belt, and north. The north has Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and about 40 smaller groups; the middle belt has over 230 languages with no particular dominant group; Yoruba, Ibo, Urhobo, Edo, Isoko, Efik, Ijaw, Ibibio, and Anang dominate the south, in addition to about 50 other indigenous peoples. Thus, apart from the Hausa, the Fulani, and the Kanuri peoples that form a large majority, Northern Nigerians speak over 270 more languages. Also, while the Hausa language is mostly spoken by people groups in northern Nigeria in public places, each group still retains its distinct language and rich cultural heritage. Thus, contrary to a general misconception, northerners are not all Hausa, Fulani, or Kanuri people.

Insecurity and Migration in Nigeria

Most people would agree with Stott (2006, p. 122) in asserting that terrorism gained global attention starting on September 11, 2001, when terrorists deliberately crashed two passenger jets into the World Trade Centre. That event changed the global security architecture. In Nigeria, the 9/11 attacks compounded the existing ethno-religious and socio-cultural tensions that have manifested as Boko Haram insurgence, socio-economic agitations, kidnappings, boundary disputes, cultism, herdsmen attacks, and banditry (Ozoemena, 2016, pp. 190-191). Furthermore, as the world was breathing a sigh of relief from the trauma resulting from the havock wrecked by the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria woke up with a fresh challenge of an upsurge in cases of these problems with varying operational dimensions (Akano 2023b, p. 71).

While insecurity in Nigeria is hydra-headed, religious undertones often are discernible. Since 2009, the Nigeria's insecurity has been largely due to increased religious activities of Islamic fundamentalist groups like Boko Haram, Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Akano, 2023b, p. 71; Adesote 2017, p. 20). Thus, while there are different forms of insecurity challenges, religious terrorism and banditry rank ahead of others. Further, since both of these challenges are associated with Islamic fundamentalism, it is a little wonder that insecurity is more pronounced in the northern part of Nigeria than in the south. Empirical studies have shown that "Muslims are more concentrated in the northern part of Nigeria and Christians in the southern part" (Pew Research Centre 2011). The South is observably more peaceful than the North.

Therefore, as people seek for survival and protection from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression, they are often forced to move to a more promising location. In addition, insecurity often affects people's physical, mental, and social well-being (Adegbami, 2013, pp. 8-9). Forced migration is the movement of people in escape of unpalatable conditions such as "armed conflicts, human rights violations, natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects . . . persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood" (Adesote, 2017, p. 6). Such conditions obviously constitute the situation in northern Nigeria, and residents are thus more vulnerable physiologically, socially, and psychologically.

Kanu (2019, p. 42) argues that a good percentage of migrations in Africa are rooted in insecurity, causing people to move out of their home lands—internally or internationally. Findings show that between 2009 and 2015, Boko Haram alone caused the movement of about 2.3 million people from their homes. They ended up becoming internally displaced persons, refugees, or asylum seekers (Mukhtar et al., 2018, p. 55). The activities of Boko Haram, which is located in the north, have thus caused a rise in people's health vulnerability due to deprivation of drinking water, food, healthcare, sanitation, land for farming, and housing.

Vulnerability of Hausa-Speaking Christians in Nigeria

Whenever an individual is forced to escape situations of threats to life and property, they are already vulnerable to poverty, ill health, joblessness, economic struggles, and other physical threats. In addition, some of the most critical fall-outs of forced migration occasioned by insecurity often revolve around in-group versus out-group identity challenges that neither the migrants nor their hosts prepared for. One of the critical in-group versus out-group tensions that leads to, or aggravates, other tensions involves stereotypes. A stereotype is a means of describing a group of people and categorising them using some common characteristics for ease of identification. Its disadvantages in an intercultural setting is that people generalise a negative trait found in some members of a group for the whole group. Assigning stereotypes is

common when such negative traits are pronounced in a few members of a group or those that people first encounter (Peterson, 2004, p. 26). Akano (2023b, pp. 74-75) notes that assigning stereotypes can be more serious in contexts of insecurity because of an associated suspicion that suspected people's conflicting cultural ideologies can be infectious. Innocent people in an insecure group can thus be suspected as well.

The vulnerability of the Hausa-Speaking Migrant (HSM) Christians occurs in two phases. The first phase is what they experience while in their northern Nigerian home as a religious minority among the Muslim-dominated people. The second phase has to do with their experience in the south as an ethnic minority among their host communities where they have relocated. Though the second phase is heavily connected with being stereotyped, the first phase also involves a significant element of stereotype.

Hausa-Speaking Christians in Northern Nigeria

Cases of Hausa-speaking Christians being marginalised in their home region include being hindered from acquiring landed properties for building churches. For example, some landed properties used to build churches in some major cities bear names of individuals who turned them over to churches for use, but some national dailies have reported that a church was burnt down for that reason (Egigogo, 2024; Bago condemns 2024). Also, some states do not allow the teaching of Christian Religious Knowledge in their public primary and secondary schools. Another example is the difficulty that Christian organisations face in registering private schools they have established, and the regulating bodies often do not give reasons for not registering the schools.

It is noteworthy that, while insecurity affects everyone in northern Nigeria, the Christians are more vulnerable. There are more attacks on churches than mosques. The insurgents and Islamists focus more on Christian communities, killing, abducting, and destroying properties and farmlands. The abduction of Daphci girls that included Leah Sharibu, which drew global attention, and the beheading of a Christian leader in January 2020 illustrate this reality (Oghuvbu, 2021, pp. 205-206). The cases are associated with stereotype because the fundamentalists have wrongly associated Christianity with the Western culture that they abhor. Whatever represents Western culture is usually associated with Americanism, which they consider opposing the principles of Islam (p. 203). Thus, with insecurity, the Hausa-speaking Christians have become more endangered than their non-Christian counterparts in the north. As a result, their migration rates have increased rapidly in the last couple of years. They hope for a better environment to live and practise their faith.

Hausa-Speaking Migrant Christians in Southern Nigeria

This second phase is more troubling for some Hausa-Speaking Migrant (HSM) Christians. The composition of HSM Christians cuts across ethnic groups across the three geo-political zones in the north. The researcher's personal observation and interaction reveal that HSM Christians are rarely from the Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri ethnicities. A list of ethnic groups who are HSM churches' members in the southern cities of Ogbomoso, Ibadan, Lagos, Benin-City, Osogbo, and Ilorin include Ron (Chala), Gbagyi, C'lela (Zuru), Mwaghavul, Tarok, Mopun, Baju, Jabal, Berom, Maguzawa (Hausa), Gobrawa, Maigi, Michika, Tangale, and Anaguta. Churches in other cities include Eggon, Mada, Koro, Kataf, Chawe, Amawa, Kurama, Tarok, Angas, Bokgom, Glavda, Tula, Numana, Awak, Siyawa, Angas, Kunwur, Lala, Tal, Tiv, Egede, Idoma, Lunguda, Guyuk, Warjawa, Bachama, Kanakuru, Kagomaamong, and other groups.

The list above indicates that only a few of the HSM Christians in southern Nigeria are actually of the Hausa/Fulani stock as often misconstrued. Such a mischaracterisation

compounds the vulnerability of the HSM residing in southern Nigeria by the way that the majority of southerners have stereotyped all northerners in the following three levels:

1. All Hausa-speakers are Hausa/Fulani

This stereotype overgeneralizes that anyone from the north is from 'Hausa/Fulani' ethnic people. The foundation for this ethno-linguistic stereotype is associated with the errorneous belief that there are three tribes in Nigeria—the northern Hausa/Fulani, the eastern Igbo, and the western Yoruba. This mistaken generalisation has earlier been refuted. Further, Falola and Heaton (2008, p. 4) put the Hausa population at 21 percent of Nigeria's population, the Yoruba at 20, and the Igbo at 17. Assuming each of these is a unified group, they only sum up to 58 per cent of Nigeria's population, leaving 42 percent is unaccounted for (Ikime, 2010, p. 170).

2. All 'Hausa/Fulani' are Muslims

This stereotype assumes all northerners, regarded as Hausa/Fulani people, are automatically Muslims. Personal experience as a missionary in northern Nigeria has shown that, apart from the fact that northerners are not all Hausa or Fulani Muslims, there are also Hausa and Fulani that are Christians. Granted that the majority of northerners are Muslims, the reality is that there is "a significant Christian minority and a generous sprinkling of followers of African Traditional Religions" (Mustapha & Bunza, 2014, p. 54). Northern Nigerians are not all Muslims.

3. All Northern Muslims are Fundamentalists

This third myth of overgeneralization is the critical part that create suspicion about the HSM. It is based on the origin of previous religious violence, jihads, and the contemporary insecurity in Nigeria. Thus, some southerners associate all Hausa-speaking northeners with the insurgents. Akano (2023b, p. 75) illustrates that some think all Fulani are AK-47-carrying herdsmen. This perception affects southerners' attitudes towards HSM in general, creating complications in their relationships.

In summary, there is a complicated problem of identity for HSM in southern Nigeria. This problem is rooted in an identity gap, where the avowed identity of the HSM is different from the identity ascribed to them by their hosts. Ethno-linguistically and religiously, their hosts see them differently from the way they see themselves (Ting-Toomey, 2009, p. 494). This gap agrees with Hecht's (2009, pp. 140-141) communication theory of identity that individuals have four layers of interpenetrating identity layers that may manifest differently under different circumstances. How one individual is perceived by others, particularly when that person is from a different cultural background, affects how they communicate or react to that individual. Identity gaps result at any point that others see people differently from the way those people see themselves. Thus, rather than seeing HSM as fellow human beings, and fellow Nigerians, particularly those in challenging situations that need help, southerners see HSM as threats to their holistic security.

Another complication in the identity problem relates to where HSM behaviour falls on the association-dissociation continuum. This matter is well captured by Kim (2009) as follows:

Communicators in inter-ethnic encounters behave associatively when they perceive and respond to others as unique individuals rather than as representatives of an out-group category; …. In contrast, a communication behavior is characterized as dissociative when it is based on a categorical, stereotypical, and depersonalized perception that accentuates differences. Dissociative behaviors also include many forms of divergent verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate psychological distance and emotional

intensity, from subtle expressions to blatantly dehumanizing name-calling, ethnic jokes, and hate speeches. Nonverbally, a communicator acts dissociatively through a range of behaviors, from subtle facial, vocal, and bodily expressions of lack of interest, disrespect, arrogance, and anger to more intense expressions of hatred and aggression, such as rioting and acts of violence (p. 185).

This analysis fits the experience of some HSM living in southern Nigeria, and the implication is that the identity gap problem widens the 'we–they' gulf that worsens the communication situations. Communication in this context includes all verbal and non-verbal expressions, including people's speeches, attitudes, and behaviours. HSM in southern Nigeria are vulnerable to different unpleasant communications before their hosts because of stereotypes. I have witnessed atttitudes, speeches, and behaviours that tended towards the dissociative end of the continuum. Some southerners, including Christians, deal harshly with HSM Christians. The first of several examples of maltreatments from my interactions are how the HSM in cities like Ibadan, Lagos, and Benin-City complain that church officers have often derogatorily and relegatingly reserved dirty jobs like drainage and toilet cleaning for them, treating them as second class citizens in the church. Sometimes they are not even adequately remunerated because they are mere 'malo' (a derogative rendering of the Hausa word 'mallam,' meaning 'teacher,' 'learned or educated man'; the derogative meaning presents them as a nonentity in the society who are to do the dirtiest jobs because they are unimportant).

Second, some southern Christians are also guilty of dissociative attitudes, speech, and behaviour towards the HSM Christians. Sarvimaki et al. (2009) notes that the displaced farmers do not often get enough farmland in their new farming communities, leading to vulnerability to poverty and low standards of living. Different groups of HSM Christians have complained that their hosts, including Christian communities and individuals, have treated them with dissociative interactions. In a village in southwest Nigeria, a group of HSM Christians lamented that they had to relocate twice within one year because of the ways they were treated. As casual workers, they had worked on the farms for some of their hosts, majority members of churches in those villages, who refused to pay them or unnecessarily delayed the agreed wages. Consequently, the HSM refused to work for such people and focused on their small farms on pieces of land given by the host communities. In reaction, the host communities revoked the farm land given them, or reduced it, to force them to have no option other than work for the hosts. Thus, those southerners have compounded the traumatic experience these HSM workers were struggling with due to their experience in the north, by virtue of their insecurity. This situation makes them more vulnerable.

Another common experience of vulnerability for the HSM Christians in rural areas is that some pastors who do not speak Hausa, or do not have capable interpreters of Hausa, would not want the HSM to form a church where they can worship in a language they understand. Apart from the researcher, some other Hausa-speaking pastors have lamented how they have been opposed by the leadership of the local church in the host community. Sometimes the local pastors are only interested in their offerings (monetary and material) to the church with no commeasurate pastoral responsibilities targetting their traumatised situations. Some of the HSM are 'forced' to remain in the church, even though they may not understand what goes on due to the language barrier.

It was also discovered that, due to the origin and prevalence of insurgence in northern Nigeria, and owing to the fact that many criminals associated with insecurity have porpotedly been apprehended as having originated from the north, all HSM, including Christians, are viewed as potential criminals. In other cases, whenever there is a case of misunderstanding

involving a northern HSM person, some southerners are too quick to side their fellow southerner against the northerner, without due consideration of the situation.

Missiological Response to Vulnerability of Hausa-Speaking Christians

A missiological response to the vulnerability of the Hausa-speaking Christians, particularly the migrants in southern Nigeria, must be rooted in *missio Dei* which, as a divine prerogative, is the move of God by the Spirit, and through the Church (Ott et al., 2010, p. 62). The Church must seek how the overall purpose of God may be achieved through the existing challenges of migration and possible suspicions in the world. From the foregoing, I wish to consider five key areas of such a response:

1. Missions As Holistic Diakonia

The holistic nature of missions stipulates that the witness (*matyria*) functions and the service (*diakonia*) functions of the Church are inseparable twins (Stott, 2006, pp. 43-45). While evangelising the unbelieving Hausa-speakers and encouraging the believers among them, the Church must engage more in comforting them and confronting injustices metted on them. The Church should also see its role as ensuring peace and harmony amidst tribal, ethnic, and cultural differences, as in Ephesians 4:1-6:24 (Turaki, 2006, p. 1425). The Church also serves as the example for the larger society that is already ravaged by inter-tribal or inter-ethnic suspicions and tensions. Through these functions, the Church achieves the overall goal of mission of bringing *shalom* to the world (Moreau, Corwin, & McGee, 2004, pp. 86-87; Stott, 2015, p. 18). In addition to the spiritual realm, HSM Christians also need physiological, psychological, and social peace.

2. Missions As Integral Engagement

Mission is not only holistic; it is also integral. Integral mission is about connecting *shalom* to every aspect of Christian lives (Lausanne Movement, 2025; Waweru, 2015). The host believers should not limit their *shalom* functions towards the HSM Christians to 'mission fields' and church gatherings. Instead, they should be agents of *shalom* in every aspect of their daily activities within and outside the church walls. This implies that southern Christians should meet HSM with *shalom* in the local markets where they sell their wares, as well as in towns and villages where they engage in casual farm works and other menial jobs. Christian from the south must intensify marketplace ministry.

3. Missions As Migration

Missions has always involved migration, especially the movement of the heralds. But sometimes, the people who need the gospel message also move towards the location of the faith community, voluntarily or otherwise. Winter (2007, pp. 148-149) identifies four mechanisms of missions, namely, voluntary centripetal, involuntary centripetal, voluntary centrifugal, and involuntary centrifugal mechanisms. While the traditional emphasis in mission has been centrifugal missions where the Church goes to the nations, proclaiming the message of the kingdom, the current situation has created opportunities for centripetal missions in Nigeria. Both dynamics of centripetal and centrifugal are present in the prophetic visions of bringing nations to God to achieve His redemptive purpose (Wright, 2000, p. 707; Akano, 2021, pp. 28-29). Thus, the Greek participle 'going' in Matthew 28:19 is for the Church to locate the unsaved nations wherever they are—immediately around in the diaspora, or afar in their home lands, and engage them accordingly in disciple-making. The Church in the south must intentionally embrace centrifugal dynamics to reach the northerners residing in the north, and centripetal dynamics for northerners who have migrated to the south.

4. Missions As Philoxenia

Philoxenia, a Greek expression combining *phileo*, meaning affection or love of kindred, and *xenos*, meaning 'stranger,' refers to an attitude of hospitality as used in Hebrews 13:2. Often used as the opposite of *xenophobia*, *philoxenia* is the attitude that transforms the identity of a stranger, such as a Hausa speaker in southern Nigeria, to that of a guest. Such an attitude makes the host to allow the 'stranger turned guest' into their space (Smither, 2023). The Church in southern Nigeria must seek to interact with Hausa-speaking migrants 'philoxenially,' eliminating every form of dissociative tendency so these already traumatised people may feel secure and welcome. Achieving this scenario requires a holistic transformation of the southerners' perceptions, attitude, and behaviour from stereotype that leads to xenophobic tendency to missional *philoxenia*. Such integration will enhance equipping the Christians among the Hausa speakers for ministry among their unbelieving 'kindred' in the south and in their home lands, strengthening the centripetal-centrifugal missions of the Church.

5. Missions As Diaspora Leadership Development

An important milestone in Christian missions is the establishment of truly indigenlus church. For a healthy church circle, there must be a phase of leadership development to ensure the continuity of the work (Plueddemann, 2009, p. 48). When the four other areas above have been handled properly, the church will be well positioned to raise indigenous leaders among the dispora faith communities who would carry on the missions among their own people, both in diaspora and at home. An indigenous leader would have overcome some of the barriers associated with migration.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The contemporary Church in Nigeria, especially in the south, must rise up to its missiological task of re-orientating its members to leverage the opportunities brought about by the challenges of north-south migration. Pastors and other church leaders need to educate their members accordingly, and both the host faith community and the diaspora faith community can collaborate to advance the course of the gospel. Through this collaboration, the dividing wall of hostility would be destroyed and both southerners and northerners would be reconciled to God and to each other (Ephesians 2:14-16).

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