



CONFRONTING RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE: THE POETRY OF KOLA EKE

Esther Iria Jamgbadi  
Edafe Mukoro

**Abstract**

The study focuses on Kola Eke's poetic confrontation of religious violence. A close reading of his collection of Poems: October 1960 and Other Poems (2018), June 12 and Other Poems (2018), and May 29 and Other Poems (2019) reveal his moralistic position on religious violence. In this connection, the moral theory of literary criticism forms the base of our analyses. In reading the poems, one notices that Eke weaves images of religious tension together with striking poetic solutions to the phenomenon. Yet it is the manner in which these issues are presented that is most interesting. In this light, we make bold to say that if there is anything that separates Eke from his contemporaries in Modern Nigerian Poetry, it is his prescription of religious tolerance among religious groups. This insight forms the core of our findings in the paper.

**Keywords:** religion, violence, solution, morality, Christians, Muslims.

---

Esther Iria Jamgbadi is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin. She teaches courses in Language and Literature.

Edafe Mukoro is a PhD candidate, Department of English and Literature, University of Benin. His area of concentration is Modern African Poetry.

## Introduction

The essay examines the poetic manner in which Eke confronts religious violence. A careful reading of his collections of poems *October 1960 and Other Poems*, *June 12 and Other Poems* and *May 29 and Other Poems* reveals Eke's moralistic attitudes towards religious violence. One fundamental attribute that seems to occur again and again in his poems is his skilful art of interweaving religious conflict and his bold call for peace among the various groups. In other words, there is a subtle injection of solution oriented images in the poems even in the midst of horrific religious tensions and sentiments.

This essay adopts the moral theory of literary criticism. A critical reading of the theory reveals its place as one of the foremost critical approaches in the field of literary studies. Its practical application is traceable to literary figures such as Plato, Horace, Sir. Philip Sidney, Samuel Johnson, Percy Shelley, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis. The insightful definition of the theory in its modern form by Raman Selden is very instructive:

Moral criticism ... is the most 'natural' of critical practices and the least theoretically self-conscious or explicit,... its concepts and its values must be 'felt' as connected with human 'experience' and not treated as abstractions or provisional theories...[It] draws upon the terms of general moral discourse: 'maturity', 'seriousness', 'wholeness', 'authenticity', 'sincerity', 'life', 'sanity' (19).

The position of Selden in the above excerpt elevates the discourse of moral theory beyond any other critical "practices". This unique position is by virtue of its practical application to human culture and "life" in general. To the critic, the connection of the moral theory with human behavioural processes, character development and the reliance on the reasoning faculty underscores its "natural" value. In this connection, it is considered as a potent tool for practical expression of human ideas, ideals and experiences. Conversely, its practical importance to literary discourse relegates the theoretical relevance of its value in literary criticism. This important point, again, separates it from other critical approaches.

Similarly, it is the idea of Selden that the moral critic must be able to identify precepts and ideas with valuable moral insight from texts to illuminate the "values" of the theory. By this, it is understood that one of the defining characteristics of moral criticism is the evocation of norms and virtues that are associated with human sensibilities. By so doing, its connection with the cultural value of humanity strengthens its position as a unique literary approach without "abstractions or provisional theories". The thought that springs forth from Selden's idea is that moral criticism is an effective medium for the expression of "human expression" in literary discourse that is free from intellectualised expressions.

Fundamentally, it is the wise application of the theory in "general moral" analysis that is most striking. In this regard, one is not unaware of Selden's release of certain terminologies that illuminate the qualities of "moral discourse". Consequently, it is not without difficulty to identify the "universal import... timeless and unquestionable" qualities of moral criticism. In fact, it is the critic's suggestion of these terminologies that reveals the "moral rules and behaviour" that pervades the theory (20). Yet again, these moralistic qualities serve as "foundation of untouchable and

intuitive values which are in turn grounded in social commitments". An in-depth study of the poetry of Eke, henceforth *October*, *June*, and *May*, reveals his moralistic place in the poetic demonstration of religious conflicts and tensions. From poem to poem he confronts the issue of religious violence through vivid images that evoke high moral standards and virtues in order to infuse universal values of peace and love in human and religious relationships.

The poetry of Eke has received critical reviews. Romanus Egudu examines the "positive and negative non-erotic images" in Eke's poetry (37-43); Clement Odia considers Eke as "a poetic legislator" (166-173) and "a social reformist" with a sharp sense for female liberation (52-61); while his poetry is said to be characterised by historical qualities that reveal the "corrupt atmosphere" in the society (*May* Blurb).

From the above, it is clear that critics have not examined how Eke deals with religious violence in his poems. In this connection, this essay espouses how the poet uses imaginative language to confront religious crisis by injecting poetic solutions to the moral menace.

## II.

One of the beautiful qualities of Eke's poetry is that he starts his verse by evoking vivid pictures of religious violence; then, there is the infusion of dramatic images of moral solutions to the unpleasant phenomenon. This idea is seen in one of his poems entitled "Kafanchan." It begins this way:

Kafanchan  
Contaminated by  
Religious Virus  
Devoured by ethnic earthquake (*May* 84)

To appreciate this poem better, one must be abreast with the devastating religious violence that engulfed the City of "Kafanchan", Kaduna State between March 5 - 8, 1987. The brutal event is said to have been triggered by religious sentiments between Muslim and Christian students in the Kafanchan Advanced Teachers College. With this background information, the reader of the above quoted poem notes the speaker's astute use of biological imagery in the introductory lines. Undoubtedly, the image elucidates the dangers of religious conflict to human survival. From the speaker's choice of words, religious fundamentalism is captured as a "virus". In this connection, it is said to spread its infectious disease in "Kafanchan". One of the most interesting ideas that is skilfully infused into this poem is that religious violence is triggered by minute issues. The fact that the "virus" is a microscopic organism is not in doubt. Yet, in the context of the poem, one is thrilled with the manner in which its vicious capacity is demonstrated. Besides, the scale of its viral power to institute a religious epidemic with devastating consequences elevates the quality of the poem.

Moreover, the speaker's use of seismic imagery in the last line underscores the dangerous role of "ethnic" polarization in religious issues. In the context of the poem, "ethnic" rivalry is the additional fuel that stokes the sudden and violent display of religious bigotry in "Kafanchan". It must be emphasised here that the use of the word "devoured" further strengthens the scale of destruction that accompanies the religious crisis in the area.

Eke's use of imagery to underscore religious fundamentalism gains momentum as the poem progresses. Hear him:

At the egg  
Stage  
Laid by disagreement between  
Muslim and Christian students

At the larvae  
Stage  
Crisis consumed ninety  
Five vehicles  
At the pupa  
Stage  
Crisis consumed two  
Hundred churches and five mosques

At the Imago  
Stage  
Crisis swallowed up  
Human lives

With a stroke of imaginative brilliance, our attention is arrested with arthropoda morphology. In simple terms, the speaker uses insect images to emphasise the different stages of religious crisis. To understand the idea here, one has to be conversant with the metamorphosis of an insect. In the same manner "the Kafanchan" crisis is said to metamorphose from one level of violence to a much higher level. As the "Crisis" develops, it changes to "the larvae/stage" with devastating consequence on "ninety/five vehicles". Moreover, the "crisis" is said to transform into "the pupa/stage" as the fundamentalists torched over "two hundred" worship centres in the area. By the time it reaches the "imago stage" the sanctity of "human lives" is abused with the brazen and wanton slaughter of human beings. Toyin Falola considers the "Kafanchan" religious violence as "the first most brutal confrontation between Christians and Muslims ... and the sixth most serious case of religious violence in the 1980s" (179).

In the concluding stanzas of the poem, the speaker bursts forth with solutions to confront religious violence:

Violent mating and laying  
Of ethnic- religious eggs  
Must be discouraged  
Avoidance of stagnant water

Violent mating and laying  
of ethnic- religious eggs  
could attract  
jail sentences. (*May 85*)

The use of sexual and reproductive images of arthropoda to espouse solution to confront religious violence is most impressive. To understand the idea of the speaker, the reader must have a good knowledge of the "violent" sexual behaviour of

some insects. In this connection, Eke is proposing that we discourage those environmental factors that promote violence in our communal relationship. The speaker wants us to shun ethnic inequality and religious bigotry. To him these are “stagnant water” that should be avoided in the confrontation of religious violence. Moreover, the fact that there is the use of repetition in the quoted passage emphasises the speaker’s discontent for religious conflict. Little wonder then that the concluding couplet of the poem underscores his legislative solution to the problem.

### III.

In another poem entitled “School Girls II”, Eke poetically confronts religious violence with brilliant imaginative expression. As usual, the poem starts off with vivid pictures of religious crisis. The lines read thus:

Thirty-one days after  
Abductors bounce back  
With one hundred and  
Four abductees

In a ferocious manner  
Warning Dapchi people  
About the dangers of  
Western education (*June 61*).

To understand this poem, the reader must have a foreknowledge of the abduction of 105 girls by Boko Haram (an Islamic terrorists group that is fiercely anti-Christian). These girls were kidnapped from the Government Girls’ Science and Technical College (GGSTC), Dapchi, in Yobe State, the north-eastern part of Nigeria, on 19 February, 2018. With this background information, one is fascinated with the manner in which the speaker starts the poem. The linguistic choices are laced with violent confrontation. Moreover, the abductors are said to reappear on the scene “with one hundred and/ four abductees” after a month. A careful reader of the poem would notice the difference in the number of the returned abductees. Although not explicitly stated in the poem, there are reports that the Islamic group refused to release Leah Sharibu – one of the abductees because she is a Christian. Incidentally, Eke has treated the same issue in another poem entitled “Waiting for Godot” (*June57*).

The spate of religious violence is further painted in the successive stanza of the poem. The aggressive and vicious disposition of the Islamic group is captured with apt diction. In the poem, the use of words such as “ferocious”, “warning” and “dangers” are instructive in grasping the violence of the terrorist group. The words invest in the poem the brute, savage and violent images of religious crisis. By now, the reader must be aware that Boko Haram considers Christianity as a product of “western education”. It is not surprising, therefore, that the pulse of religious hatred dominates the poem’s atmosphere.

The aggression of the religious fundamentalists continues in the succeeding stanzas:

In a ferocious manner  
Encouraging Dapchi people  
On the need to give their

Daughters out in marriage

In a ferocious manner  
 Preaching to Dapchi people  
 On the need to embrace  
 Islam

The skilful injection of repetition here is striking. It is used for two reasons: First, in the context of the poem it emphasises the violent manner in which the “Dapchi people” are persuaded to imbibe the teachings of “Islam”. Second, it stresses the unbridled passion associated with religious fanaticism. Yet, one is not unaware that the speaker’s use of language stretches the metaphorical qualities of his thematic preoccupation. By extension, the observant reader of the poem could picture the socio-religious consequences that religious violence has on the affected community.

As a consequence, the speaker confronts the situation with moralistic solutions interspersed with poetic images:

Christians and Muslims  
 Everybody must learn to live  
 Like herbivorous animals  
 And cellulose digesting bacteria

The use of animal imagery in the above passage is very instructive. It is interesting to note that the solution to religious violence could be derived from the world of herbivores. The reader of the poem must slip into the world of “herbivorous animals” imaginatively to understand the idea of the speaker. In a way, Eke is using the lifestyle of herbivores and “cellulose-digesting bacteria” to teach us the value of living in mutual peace. In the animal kingdom, herbivores are said to contain “cellulose-digesting bacteria.” This relationship is said to be long-term, mutualistic and beneficial to both species. The micro-organism lives in the intestine of the herbivore, while at the same time producing enzymes to help its host digest vegetable tissue. It is this idea of mutualism in animal relationship that Eke uses as analogy to proffer solutions to confront religious violence.

#### IV.

In another poem entitled “Violence”, Eke confronts religious crisis with poetic sophistication. The poem starts with pictures of violence and destruction by religious fundamentalists in Nigeria:

Fourteen Churches burnt  
 Down by  
 Muslim fundamentalists  
 In Kwara  
 Religious Pandemonium  
 In Kaduna  
 Over Sharia (*October* 114).

The first thing that attracts one’s attention in the reading of the poem is the title. Little wonder then that the opening lines of the poem demonstrate the vicious impact of religious fundamentalism. The poem’s speaker arrests our attention by taking us to

different states in Nigeria to visualise catastrophic images of religious fanaticism. Our first port of call is “Kwara” in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Here the scale of arson on Christian worship centres by “Muslim fundamentalists” is quite disturbing. The lines paint a graphic picture of religious hate and bigotry. Moreover, there is a further evocation of scenes of anger and confusion in “Kaduna” based on religious sentiments. The chaotic atmosphere is said to be engineered by disagreement over the Islamic legal code.

In another stanza, we are taken to the North-East region of Nigeria to capture scenes of religious carnage:

In Maiduguri  
Attacks on Christians  
Over Danish cartoon  
Of Prophet Mohammed  
Thirty churches  
Fifty houses  
Hundred cars  
Destroyed  
Fifty persons  
Killed

What is not arguable from the above lines is that the violent “attacks on Christians’ in “Maiduguri’ is triggered by satirical images of “Prophet Mohammed” by a Danish Cartoonist. To have a proper understanding of the speaker’s idea here, one would need to revisit the religious crisis that trailed the publication of comic images of “Prophet Mohammed” by a Danish Newspaper *Jyllands - Posten* on 30 September, 2005. Suffice it to say that the artistic depiction of the Holy Prophet is considered blasphemous by the Muslims. As a result, there was a global protest by Muslims against the publication; and in the process some degenerated into outright religious violence. In this connection, the destruction of “thirty churches” elucidates the dangers in religious controversy.

As the poem progresses, the images of destruction of valuable properties is presented in simple diction. The atmosphere is suffused with aggressive and criminal actions. The severe societal implications of these actions are better imagined. Moreover, the fatal dimension of religious violence is further captured in the closing couplet of the poem. The picture of carnage underscores the brutal consequences of religious fundamentalism.

The violence continues with graphic pictures in another part of the poem:

In Kaduna  
Pandemonium over Miss World  
Competition  
Attacks on Christians  
Attacks on Churches  
Hundreds of people killed

It is instructive to note that the religious conflict in “Kaduna” originated from the controversy surrounding the Miss World Beauty Pageant in 2002. The pageant was supposed to be held in Nigeria but was moved to London after a controversial article in a Nigerian News Paper - *This Day* - sparked bloody religious clashes in “Kaduna”. The first three lines of the poem capture vivid images of the chaotic atmosphere in the

City. As the poem develops in the successive lines, the scale of “attacks’ by religious groups assumes a frightening dimension. The repetition of the word “attacks” espouses the intensity of the violent atmosphere. In a way, one could picture the series of religiously co-ordinated attacks unleashed on religious persons and worship centres. Yet, it is the last line of the quoted passage that emphasises the brutal carnage associated with the rift. The image is an unpleasant representation of the violent slaughter of “hundreds of people” in the City of “Kaduna”. Undoubtedly, these pictures illustrate the atrocities of religious extremism and fanaticism in today’s world.

In the concluding lines of the poem, Eke confronts the volatile issue of religious violence with striking poetic solutions. Hear him:

Let us see ourselves  
Muslims and Christians  
As two hemispheres

The speaker’s use of geographical imagery to stress how we could deal with religious violence enriches the quality of the poem. In geography, the word “hemispheres” refers to an imaginary division of the earth into two halves – the latitudinal and longitudinal geographic divide. The beautiful thing about this idea is that it stresses how the earth functions as a coordinated or unified system. In this connection, the speaker uses this geographical analogy to admonish “Muslims and Christians” to unite in love and adopt a coordinated strategy to tame religious bigotry. In the speaker’s view, this hemispheric alliance would refine our religious sentiments and make us function as a unified system of human sophistication.

## V. Conclusion

Our focus in this essay has been on how Eke confronts religious violence through graphic poetic images. One thing that is not scarce in his poems is the evocation of bleak pictures of destruction and carnage by religious fundamentalists. Again, it is noticed that the poet weaves his poetic solutions to the issue together with the demonstration of religious extremism. In this regard, it is very difficult not to recognise his moral disposition through the shrewd analytical and poetic interpretation of the poems.

Another striking thought that enriches the reading of the poems is that Eke uses images from historical religious crisis to convey his message. In a way, the poet leads us by the hand through his poems to derive rich moral lessons from religious violence of the past. Moreover, one is not ignorant that the dominant religious crisis seems to be between the Christians and Muslims. This thought foregrounds the poetic insight of this study and reveals the scale of bigotry that permeates the conscience of some members of both religions.

Finally, one must acknowledge the poet’s use of beautiful figurative expressions. An observant reader of the poems would recognise the elevated quality of the images through the apt use of language. The manner in which the poet confronts religious violence with solutions laced with poetic images testifies to the strength of his poetry. Little wonder then, that the poems of Eke will continue to attract attention in the exposition of religious violence in Modern Nigerian Poetry.

**Works Cited**

- Eke, Kola .*October 1960 and Other Poems*.Kraft, 2018.
- . *June 12 and Other Poems*.Kraft, 2018.
- . *May 29 and Other Poems*.Kraft, 2019.
- Egudu, Romanus. "Images of Women in Some Nigerian Poetry in English".*Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria*, Issue 10, 2018, pp. 37-43.
- Falola, Toyin. *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*.U of Rochester P, 1998.
- Odia, Clement. "Poetry and the Burden of Social Change: The Legislative Poems of Kola Eke." *Obitun: Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 9, 2018, pp.166-173.
- . "Historiography of Women Oppression in New Nigerian Poetry in English: AkachiAdimora-Ezeigbo and Kola Eke". *Ikenga: International Journal of Institute of African Studies*, vol. 20, no.1, 2019, pp.52-61.
- Selden, Raman. *Practising Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.