



America's prohibition and Nigeria's future

Minabere Ibelema

27 March 2022

One night at the turn of the 20th century, a woman named Carry Nation (real name) entered a pub in a town in Kansas and began to wreak havoc. With a hatchet in one hand and a Bible in the other, the sturdy woman smashed beer bottles, upturned beer kegs and slot machines, cut the dispenser faucet on the refrigerator, and flooded the bar with beer.

The scene was reminiscent of that of Jesus cracking the whip in a Jerusalem temple that he deemed a “den of thieves.” It was that audacious action — not his theology per se — that ultimately led to his crucifixion, some biblical scholars say.

Like Jesus, Carry Nation was also on a mission to rid society of vice. She represented the militant wing of a mostly women-led movement to end a surge of alcoholism and drunkenness. The movement was inspired in part by puritanical religious beliefs, concern for the social order, and the travails of families inflicted by the fermented juice.

In due course, the crusade to bring about a more sober America gave rise to one of the most tumultuous periods in its history, the years of the prohibition. Like Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch-hunt a few decades later, the prohibition caused considerable turmoil because it was, well, quite un-American.

Yet, it wasn't merely statutory law. In December 1917, Congress inserted it as the 18th amendment to the very constitution that granted unprecedented liberties. The amendment, which took effect in 1920 after ratification by the states, had this as its first clause:

“After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.”

From then, what Carry Nation and fellow members of the “temperance movement” did illegally — and were repeatedly jailed for — became the task of law enforcement.

To a significant extent, the prohibition had the intended effect. Before it was implemented, there were up to one drinking establishment for every 200 people, scholars at the Ohio State University estimate. The prohibition put them all out of business. Correspondingly, consumption of alcohol fell by about 70 per cent, the report says. But another study by the CATO institute showed that the sharp decline was short-lived. Consumption rose sharply again once brewers, distillers and distributors devised means of evading the law, the institute states.

Before then, the prohibition sparked much opposition and caused considerable havoc. The closure of breweries, distilleries and bars meant a loss of thousands of jobs and millions of

dollars in tax revenue. Accordingly, the law sparked many protests and demonstrations, including by those who just wanted their watering holes back. A photo of one such protests showed a huge throng of young men carrying placards that read simply, “Bring back beer.”

It soon became evident that the law — which President Woodrow Wilson had vetoed and been overridden — was not worth the trouble. Alcohol production and distribution had essentially gone underground. Bootleggers — the equivalent of Nigeria’s crude oil bunkerers — had taken over the business. And where there was illegal business, the mafia was bound to take over.

Moreover, loopholes in the law were exploited to subvert it. For example, pharmacies were permitted to dispense whiskey for purposes of treating ailments. And so, they proliferated, as did people who needed the whiskey treatment.

And so, after 13 years of erratic enforcement and turmoil, Congress decided to end the prohibition with another constitutional amendment. President Herbert Hoover, who had succeeded Wilson, mourned the prohibition as “the noble experiment.”

This is all in America’s distant past, but it could well foretell Nigeria’s future— perhaps the not-too-distant future. The prohibition comes to mind whenever I read stories of some northern states that are pursuing very similar policies today under the Islamic law of Sharia.

Just last month, the BBC carried an online story that begins: “Religious police in Nigeria have destroyed nearly four million bottles of beer in a crackdown on alcohol. The bottles were crushed into the ground by bulldozers in the northern city of Kano in front of crowds cheering ‘Allahu Akbar’ (God is Great).”

Kano is one of the many northern states that enforce strict Sharia, and that entails everything from seizing and destroying alcohol to executing people for supposed blasphemy. “Kano is a Sharia state and the sale, consumption and possession of alcoholic substances are prohibited,” the BBC quotes Haruna Ibn Sina, the head of the religious police, as saying at the February occasion.

In the larger order of things, this may seem insignificant. Yet, it is another dimension of the North’s unequal yoking with the South, to borrow a biblical phrase. Most Christian denominations also abhor the use of alcohol. But in the South, it is a doctrine of religion rather than of law. Believers comply with or flout it in accordance with their faith and convictions.

Accordingly, breweries, distilleries and bars are free to operate just like other businesses. Northerners in the South who choose to patronise these establishments do so without encumbrance. But southerners in the North are denied such privileges. Thus, the practice is a microcosm of why the co-existence of the two regions remains so tenuous 108 years after their amalgamation.

It may well be the most disintegrative chasm in Nigeria. There is a consensus that religious violence is abhorrent and inimical to unity. But, ostensibly at least, they are illegal and not sanctioned by authorities. But the imposition of Sharia on non-Muslims is sanctioned by law. It is imposition that Muslim leaders at the time of independence saw the wisdom of not undertaking.

Some people may point to the South's ban on open grazing as an instance of constraining Northern Muslims. There is just this huge distinction: open grazing trespasses on and damages public and private properties. And it has precipitated much bloodshed.

In contrast, alcohol consumption is a private matter. Even bars are privately-owned establishments. Sure, they may give rise to drunkenness. In that case, the drunks may be arrested if their behavior constitutes public nuisance or danger.

Also, rather than raiding and shutting down bars, there is the option of zoning. This is practised in many countries to limit certain types of businesses to certain locales. Though the parallel is quite strained, one could liken this to the advocacy of cattle rearing in ranches. A critical aspect of democracy is to find accommodation for divergent interests.

The overriding question is much like one raised by US President Abraham Lincoln in a pre-tenure campaign speech in 1858. Referring to the quest to end slavery, Lincoln asked whether a country can last "half slave and half free." For Nigeria the corresponding question is whether the country can remain together half theocratic and half secular.

It is a question that northern Muslims who tout the indivisibility of Nigeria have to ponder deeply. If the answer remains yes, then another question becomes what to do to rein in the theocratic practices that work against co-existence.