

Identity Conflict in Nigeria: An Analytical Deconstruct

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Abstract

With the plurality in Nigeria, the society is laden with diversity which is supposed to be a source of strength but has become an albatross for the nation. When governance in Nigeria is predicated on identity (Political, Ethnic and Religious) the nation suffers tremendously from constant conflict which costs the nations a huge loss in terms of human and material resources. Therefore Ethnic and religious identities have now found expression in politics and same ethnicity and religion are critical factors in Nigerian politics. The Objective of this inquiry is to explain how identity influences conflict in Nigeria. The study leverages on secondary data and adopts Structural Conflict Theory to explain the problematic. The causes of identity conflict (ethno-religious and political identity) in Nigeria are Intolerance, Conflict Entrepreneurs, Stereotypes and ethnic profiling, Ethnic, Religious and Political Supremacists, Resources, Colonial Legacy and State failure while the consequences of identity conflict in Nigeria are Political polarization/Majoritarian rule, Ethno-religious Strives, Mutual Suspicion, Loss of Nationalism, Marginalization, Loss of Lives and Property. The study recommends that Federal Characters Commission should be seen to be transparent, accountable and fair to all, the judiciary must be seen to dispense justice without prejudice, politicizing ethnicity and religion be voided by enabling laws, Government must put strong, workable, institutional and legal framework for diversity management. The study thereafter concludes that value reorientation be part of the hallmarks of governance Nigeria so that all and sundry will have sense of belonging and not exclusion.

Keywords: Identity, Conflict, Ethnic, Religious, Political

Introduction

Nigeria is a plural, highly complex, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religions polity, with a diversity of ethnic groups (Danfulani, 2009; Smyth & Robinson, 2001). Multiplicity of identities in Nigeria finds expression in social relations, politics and governances. These fault-lines have become basis for conflict generation in Nigeria instead of cohesion. Identity is supposed to be a source of strength but has become an albatross in this clime because of intolerance and lack of the sense of common national purpose. According to Thomson (2007, p.59), ethnic and religious mobilization can often be found at the heart of political competition. As with all social cleavages; fault lines within societies form along these identities, creating opposing interests. These differences of interest, in turn, offer themselves to potential or occasionally violent, conflict.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal

Republic of Nigeria(as amended) guarantees freedom of worship and religion, freedom of association, freedom from discrimination- chapter IV, Section 38, 40 and 42 in that sequence. The constitution further spells out the secularity status of Nigeria- chapter II, Section 10. In a large and complex country with a population consisting of more than 250 different ethnic groups, divided between Christians and Muslims, finding common ground and allaying the fears of majority and minority groups is paramount. Knowledge of the history of Nigeria is essential to understanding its culture. It is common knowledge that the creation of most African states along ethnic lines constituted a major national identity crisis. Davis and Azubike (n.d) opine that the colonial legacy of patently artificial borders drawn for the convenience of European conference tables bequeathed to many newly independent African nations a motley mix of people, each with their own

separate ethnic loyalties and traditions.

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled to create a national identity from its smorgasbord of ethnicities. Colonialism thrived on divide and rule by bifurcating the Nigerian society in ethnic and religious cleavages for colonial interests. Also complicating this challenge are “religious conflicts”, that have continued to occur from 1980s. Although Nigeria experienced a thirty-month civil war from 1967 to 1971, religion played a minor role because the chief causes of the conflict were political and ethnic. Being a new nation, Nigerians were full of expectation; they were free from the imperialist's claws and hoped for a better life. The discovery of petroleum in commercial quantities in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State in 1956, further heightened these expectations. However, by the late 1970s, the socio-economic situation unemployment, illiteracy, poverty in the country had begun to frustrate Nigerians such as. As a result dissenting groups such as the Maitatsine movement began to emerge in 1980s.

Ethnicity and religion are critical factors in Nigerian politics. People cast vote along ethnic and religious fault-lines. Nigerians are yet to see themselves as one indivisible entity. Regional creation and state creation are agitated with ethnic and religious considerations. Frerk (2007) says in most cases, conflict is caused by a multiplicity of factors acting together, particular political and socio-economic factors are often mobilized by conflict entrepreneurs through identity politics that serve to arouse feelings of mutual distrust and hate (p.17).

Ethnic and religious conflict is a form of conflict supposedly generated on the basis of real or imagined “difference” rooted in ethnic and religious identities. It is “supposedly” because of the need to avoid the essentialism that characterizes discourses on identity politics, especially the independent power assigned to these identities in shaping political consciousness. Sometimes religious identity becomes part of an ethnic group's identity or vice versa, and presents a volatile social mixture coupled with the power of the ethnic group's myth of common descent (Salomone, 1991). Numerous studies have shown the overlapping boundaries between ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria in the daily struggles of

groups and communities for access to power and resources, or resisting domination (Kastfelt, 1994; Adamu, 1978; Paden, 1973; Miles, 1994).

Nigeria has a compendium of ethnic, religious and political (violence) conflict. Ife / Modakeke, Amuleri / Aguleri, Tiv/Jukun, Fulani and so many ethnic group in North central states. Tijani (2010) some violent conflict include the Tiv-Jukun / Fulani Conflict (2003), the Gwantu crisis (2001), political violence and unrest in Yorubaland in western Nigeria between 1960 and 1966, the Nigerian Civil War, the census crisis, the post presidential election crisis of 2011, the Maitatsine uprising in Kano in the 1980s, and the Yan Tatsine riots in the early 1980s. Other theatres of conflict included, Zango Kataf in Kaduna State in 1992, Zaria Shiites outbreak, Jos Mayhem, Kaduna religious riots, Maiduguri onslaughts, Kano violence of 1953, ethno-religious massacre in Kano, Kaduna and Plateau in the wake of the adoption of a sharia judicial system, Nupe-Yoruba conflict in Kwara, pastoralist-crop farmers conflict and the Boko Haram insurgency.

Development is retarded in the atmosphere of conflict and engenders a lot of damage to lives and property. The unity of the nation is therefore jettisoned. For political office holders allocate resources to their voting population and arbitrarily sack appointees of past government because of non-party affiliation. The electoral umpire constitutionally saddled with responsibility to be fair to all and not entertain interferences with the electoral process most times yields to the influences of the government that appoints it. Worst in the scenario is vendetta on the basis of ethnic, religious and political leanings which is a new normal in Nigeria. Leaders have become sectional where resources are directed to only voting population (those who contributed mass votes for the winner during the polls).

It has become a common place in Nigeria where nothing happens without being attributed to ethno-religious and political identities. The recent End-Sars protest which started as a national out-cry later degenerated to coloration in forms of ethnic, political and religious considerations. Nigeria witnessed a more polarization across these primordial interests. There have been several commissions and

strategies set up to study the causes of violent identity conflicts in Nigeria and to give veritable recommendations and enduring solutions. It is appalling that government responses and reactions to these identity conflict bears no desired and positive outcome. It is either government lacks the political will or act deliberately by turning a blind eye, possibly because of vested interest.

Conceptual Framework

Identity

As a socio-political concept, “identity” has both an individualist and a collective meaning: it is a “process located in the core of the individual and yet in the core of his community culture, a process which established, in fact, the identity of these two identities” (Erickson, 1962). In other words, it can simply be defined as “a person's sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political behaviour” (Erickson, 1968).

Geertz's (1963) famous distinction between primordial ties which are basically ascriptive and based on the “givens” of life (tribe, kinship, and ethnicity among others), and civil ties, which hinge on industrial society-type aggregations like class, political party affiliation, interest group membership, and so on.

Identity is a personified embodiment of characteristics of what some person or group represents and belongs to. The identity is laden with values, interest and needs that direct the pursuit of these factors.

Conflict

According to Coser (1956) conflict is a struggle, between individuals or collectivities, over value or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals'. For every individual, group and nation is the pursuit of particular resources for survival and in the process clash with other pursuing similar resources. Values are embedded in identity either ethnic, racial, religious, gender and political. The differences in values set the groups against one another, so is the claims to status, power and scarce resources.

Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of

goals or values between two or more parties in a Relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other as he case may be (Fisher, 1990). The incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved. Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of human conflict.

Conflict is however, a feud, misunderstanding, confrontation between individuals and groups over access to power, economic goods, and superior status for the attainment of goals and objectives. The elements that the individuals and groups are in pursuit are primordial and parochial.

Methodology

The inquiry subscribes qualitative data thus secondary materials are the source for data. Archival and internet materials, books, journal articles provided the needed data for the study.

Scope of Study

The study covers the period of 1999 to 2023 with political, ethnic and religious identity conflict in Nigeria as referents.

Theoretical Framework

Structural Conflict Theory

The structural theory attempts to explain conflict as a product of the tension that arises when groups compete for scarce resources. The central argument in this sociological theory is that conflict is built into the particular ways societies are structured or organized. It describes the condition of the society and how such condition or environment can create conflict. Structural conflict theory identifies such conditions as social exclusion, deprivation, class inequalities, injustice, political marginalization, gender imbalances, racial segregation, economic exploitation and the likes, all of which often lead to conflict. Structuralists maintain that conflict occurs because of the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies or because of domination of one class by another (Faleti, 2006).

Structural theory emphasizes on how the competing interests of groups tie conflict directly into the social, economic and political

organization of the society as well as the nature and strength of social networks within and between community groups (Faleti, 2006). This theory has two main sub-orientations. The first is the radical structural theory represented by the Marxist dialectical school and the second is the liberal structuralism represented by Ross, 1999, Scarborough, 1998 and Galtung, 1990 on structural violence. The structural conflict theory argues that conflict is built into the ways societies are structured and organized by looking at social problems like political and economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, inequity as sources of conflict.

Ethno-Religious and Political Identities Conflict in Context

According to Kano (1977), late Mallam Aminu Kano, a leading political and social reformer, observed in 1976-7 at a seminar that "Nigeria seems to be a good fertile ground for religious conflict because of its oil resources, big Muslim Population and its Christian elite" (p.7). Ibrahim and Ibrahim(2003) state that few years after this observation, there was the Maitasine intra-religious (Muslim) crisis in Kano in December 1980, and in Kaduuna, Gombe, and Yola in 1982, 1984 and 1985 respectively (p.89). Also, ethnic-regional identities have equally become problematic in Nigeria because they have been associated with perceptions of discrimination and inability of some groups to exercise certain rights and civil liberties. The main issues have been the control of political power in general, and specifically, control of the armed forces, the judiciary and the bureaucracy. There is also the question of the control of economic power and resources (Ibrahim, 2003; Kirk-Greene, 1975).

According to Abdu and Okoro (2015), the combined effects of historical conflicts and contention over land/boundary, chieftaincy tussle and electoral contest between different ethnic and religious groups have generated some of the most protracted violent conflicts in the region particularly the Chamba-Kuteb and Tiv-Jukun conflict. Briefly, ethno-religious hatred is one of the most commonly offered explanations for violent conflict in post-cold war era. The primordial view is that conflict of this nature is unavoidable simply because of deep-seated cultural practices and hatred. What

this indicates is that the behavior of a group as expressed can be understood as an end in itself, a result of a prior affective arousal or emotional need (Seol, 2008).

Adetiba (2012) says that there is nothing inherently conflictual about religious differences and groups' identity in Nigeria before colonialism, rather a relatively neutral organizing principle under certain condition of identity has turned religious and ethnic differences into a powerful tool in Nigeria for mobilizing violence where small arms are freely used (pp.179-189). Ethnicity and religion are critical tool in the hands of politicians for use in elections against contenders. They emphasize the "we versus them" sobriquet and because religion and ethnicity are embodiment of emotions, it creates tension that resort to violence. This is corroborated by Keili (2008) submits that ethnicity and religion have led to tragic consequences not only for socio-political and economic development in the country but for majority of casualties who are losing their lives, their health, their families, homes and their livelihoods(pp. 6-11).

Causes of Ethno-Religious and Political Identities Conflict in Nigeria

Identities express differences which makes the personalities to pursue incompatible objectives and goals. Mulin (1996) notes that conflicts in any social system (society), result from differences in perception, limited resources, role conflicts, inequitable treatment, violation of territory etc.

Intolerance

Appreciating differences has become a difficult attitude to put up in Nigeria. Peoples see enemies in the other rather than collaborator for nation building. Citizens see others as competitors more than partners in Nigeria's statecraft. Christians and Muslims, political party adherents, and ethnic groups have a caustic relationship owing to intolerance. This has done deep devastation in social relation in Nigeria. Unity is built on groups' tolerance of one another. Christian and Muslims in Nigeria will live harmoniously if there is an established tolerance between them. The constant altercation and face-off between adherents of the two religions is primarily on the absence of

tolerance. A lady who came passing by Muslims praying in Congo-Russia area in Jos, Plateau State was turned back but refused. The infinitesimal situation was bolstered into full blown crises that tremendous number of lives and property were lost. This shows the height of intolerance.

Conflict Entrepreneurs

The high rate of unemployment, poverty has allowed the youth to be ready tool for use in violent conflict. Non-state actors constitute themselves as mercenaries and conflict merchants (merchant of death). Desperate politicians mobilize the youth to perpetrate acts that are unwholesome. If they have a strong contender in a contest, they use them to intimidate their opponent and also cause the recruited miscreants to stamp violence which most time results in loss of lives and property. Nigeria on a large scale experience post-elections violence. The 2011 General elections violence where many lost their lives in the electoral process had ethnic, regional, religious and political identities as triggers. Corps members in many states of the federation have been used as scape goats and a lot loss their lives as mere polling officials. Ethnic jingoist/war lords form ethnic militia in readiness to cause mayhem on the other ethnic group. The case of depreddation of rural dweller/native in Nigeria by Fulani militia has gone to prove this as they are never made to face the law.

Stereotypes and Ethnic Profiling

Derogatory statements are made to specific ethnic, religious or political group. These commentaries provoke anger of whom it is referred. People could recount the past by bringing out legends and myths that is associated with a particular ethnic group. Those myths and legends are seen as derogatory, demeaning in present life of the ethnic group which it is attributed to. With incendiary state, it engenders resentment to a level of igniting violent conflict. According (Tukur, 2013), pastoralists are one of the most misunderstood, vulnerable and marginalized occupational groups in Nigeria indeed across Africa. The closed knit family systems, resilience in the face of daunting odds, migratory patterns and a times rare display of courage had made pastoralists to

be greatly misunderstood. Policy makers, sections of the media and other sedentary groups that have not come into contact with them tend to brand them as violent, unruly and butt of jokes that portray them as backward and uncivilized.

Ethnic, Religious and Political Supremacists

We live in nation where supremacy is arrogated to identities. My party, My ethnic group or My religion is superior than yours. In Nigeria, hegemony and power relation have gained traction in ascribing supremacy to some ethnic group who must rule. This outlook breeds friction in inter- ethnic and religious relations. With this phenomenon, the reoccurring ethno-religious strife isn't alien as this is near normative in Nigeria. With a polity that is built around political supremacy, winner takes all and zero-sum game becomes the political culture. It is either you are in the party in power or you are an acute loser. A statement was credited to one time National Chairman All Progressive Congress (APC), Adams Ashiomole, who said 'that if party members of other parties cross carpet to APC, that is when their sins will be forgotten.' What is playing out isn't far from the import of the statement.

Resources

Resource redistribution takes identity into consideration and as a factor. When resources are not distributed equitably, precluding strife, conflict and hatred becomes the major factors that may spring up which may affect a certain society or community as the case may be. The resources in Nigeria which is seen as commonwealth are expected to be deployed to every section of this country with equity as a guiding nation resource distribution doctrine.

Colonial Legacy

Knowledge of the history of Nigeria is essential to understanding its culture. It is common knowledge that the creation of most African states along indiscriminate ethnic lines constituted a major national identity crisis. This was asserted by Thomas Davis and Azubike Kalu-Nwiwu, who opined, "The colonial legacy of patently artificial borders drawn for the convenience of European conference tables bequeathed to many newly independent African

nations a motley mix of people, each with their own separate ethnic loyalties and traditions. According to Nnoli (1980), "the system of indirect rule reinforced ethnic division and has made it difficult for the ethnic groups to come together as a true nation". The style and execution of indirect rule separated Northern and Southern Nigeria; therefore ethnic groups were separated from each other, the power, authority and privileges given to the Emirs and Chief were misused and abused by acquiring ill-gotten wealth, land and establish patronage around them which promoted tribalism and nepotism. Political leaders remained segregated. At each round of political process the atmosphere in Nigeria is charged with reference to region, religion and ethnicity. Politically, choice of candidate is predicated on religion and ethnicity and drew laid down foundational perfidy by the colonial masters (p.113).

State Failure

Failing state lacks capacity to promote the human security of citizens; thereby unable to ensure national cohesion or integration, patriotism and loyalty and therefore citizens may be recruited domestically by disenchanted groups (ethnic, religious, political). Therefore the state cannot be excused from the entrenchment of identity factor in the society. The clamour for restructuring in Nigeria shows discontent within the system.

Adedeji (1999), identified causes conflict generally are;

- i. The struggle for political power
- ii. Lack of visionary leadership and accountability
- iii. Lack of good governance and transparency
- iv. Non adherence to the principle of human rights
- v. Economic
- vi. Poverty
- vii. Inequitable allocation of national wealth and resources
- viii. The negative effect of Bretons Woods Institutions policies in Nigeria Social and Cultural
- ix. Social inequality
- x. System of exclusion and ethnic hatred
- xi. Role of political elites in the manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiment

- xi. Cultural detachment and the search for ethnic identity.

Ethnic groups and identities are not pre-ordained, they are deliberately constructed and constantly changes and people choose to be ethnically identified to meet their needs and expectations. It is also an individual and groups falling back into their ethnic group which provides them with security and psychological weapon to manipulate every happening around them based on ethnic identity (p.331).

Consequences of Identity Conflicts in Nigeria Political Polarization / Majoritarian Rule

Winner takes all, directing development to voting population. Political outcomes at a national level, are used as an argument in a multi-party democracy and heterogeneous society. In the political process, people align most times according to ethnic and religious fault lines. At a local level, victims of violence become easy prey for political manipulation. Conflict fuels "ethnic democracy", with political representation constructed along ethnic lines and political parties used as flags for ethnic sentiments and interests. The increased lack of trust in central government, generated within the context of injustice and violence, makes manipulation by local powers easy (Nyukuri, 1997).

Ethno-Religious Strives

When people uphold their differences so much that it becomes a factor in social relations, strife and discontent will remain a recurrent decimal. The social atmosphere in Nigeria is enveloped by deep seated hatred for the other religion, political party an ethnic group. This situation cannot breed social cohesion and harmony among the underlined fault-lines in Nigeria.

Mutual Suspicion

The danger of mutual suspicion is that it sustains hatred for one another. It does not give a space for tolerance, understanding and reasoning together. There is nothing good or bad that the one will do that it will not elicit grudges and ill thoughts from the other. Religious identity is where adherents have deep seated suspicion. This is owing to the fact that each religious

adherent professes their religion as the truest religion.

Loss of Nationalism

Identity has caused a culture of people directing their loyalty to primordial interest rather than the nation. This is why when a political office holder assumes office, it is concluded that 'it is our time'. That is himself and his immediate interests (ethno-religious and political affiliates). In terms of military Jah(2019) says the military would operate by the strict adherence of the 'rules of engagement' but there are recorded complicity and compromises that question their nationalism, professionalism and neutrality in their intervention activities. Hutchful (1998) maintains that the fracturing of military along ethnic, rank, ideological and generational lines has compromised the objectives of operational, institutional solidarity and stability of the military as an institution(p.601).

Marginalization

Ethnic, religious and political identities make people to discriminate against other not from their stock. Nepotism has permeated the nation in all ramifications while resource distribution is predicated on inequity. This however, creates inequality in the society. Political leaders adopt winners take all and that is why provision of public good is directed to voting population.

Loss of Lives and Property

The preponderance of ethnic, religious and political identities have caused loss of lives and property. The Jos protracted crises, Ife and Modakeke, Umuleri and Aguleri, Jukun and Tiv, Chamba and Kuteb, Fulani and many ethnic groups in Nigeria (These clashes especially one with the Fulani always takes an ethno-religious dimension). The aftermath of 2011 elections saw the death of so many Nigerians killed because of their adherence to particular party of choice.

The State and the Management of Identity Conflict in Nigeria

Regardless of the level of conflict, there are differing approaches to deal with the incompatibilities that exist. Conflict can result in destructive outcomes or creative ones

depending on the approach that is taken. If we can manage conflict creatively, we can often find new solutions that are mutually satisfactory to both parties. The state in a bid to manage and resolve these conflicts sets up Judicial Commissions of Inquiry. Organize multi stake holder meeting, deployment of security agents. White papers from commissions of inquiry are not implemented. These are the usual mechanism for intervention in identity conflict in Nigeria.

Federal Character forming a part in the Nigeria constitution is meant to solve the issue of marginalization emanating from holding onto identity in the polity. The adoption of federalism is to assuage the fear of the minority and creation of state was an addendum. The secularism of Nigeria as enshrined in the constitution is yet deliberate to discount or discountenance identity as a factor for social cohesion and relationship. Power rotation hitherto has become a convention with normative ingrainment in Nigeria's national polity. This has created mutual understanding, regional bonding and social cohesion as control of power takes the approach of taking turns.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, (NIREC) is a voluntary association made up of fifty (50) members, (25 Christians and 25 Muslims) formed by the representatives of the two principal religions – that is, Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, on the 11th day of September, 1999. Supported and encouraged by President Olusegun Obasanjo, who saw the body as a wonderful project emanating from the leadership of both major faiths, NIREC was inaugurated on the 29th day of September, 1999. NIREC is a permanent and an independent body established to provide religious leaders and traditional rulers with a variable forum to promote greater interaction and understanding among the leadership and their followers as well as lay foundations for sustainable peace and religious harmony in Nigeria (Bianchi, 2003).

Currently, NIREC is Co-Chaired by His Eminence Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, the Sultan of Sokoto and President-General of NSCIA, and His Grace Dr. John Onaiyekan, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja and President, CAN. Professor Is-haq Oloyede, the present Vice Chancellor of University of Ilorin, is the

National Coordinator/Executive Secretary of NIREC (Ahmed, 2007).

NIREC has 9 standing committees out of which 2 are dedicated to inter-religious dialogue & public enlightenment and peace building/conflict resolution. NIREC quarterly meetings are rotated within six geo-political zones of the Country with a view to affording the council the opportunity to get direct feel of things in different parts of Nigeria, impact positively among our faithful, enhance and sustain religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence and promote ethical values, and good governance. Also, some states of the federation such as Ekiti, Niger, Ondo, and Lagos have established chapters on NIREC (Akeh, 1996).

Conclusion

In identity conflict especially ethnic and religious are the hardest to settle because they are embedded in beliefs, tradition and culture. It becomes worst when it drives political activities. Where identity consideration is involved in governance, segregation prevails. Nigeria's structural and institutional arrangements require rejigs. Value reorientation be part of the hallmarks of governance in Nigeria so that all and sundry will have sense of belonging and not exclusion.

Recommendations

There following recommendations were made:

- i. Federal Characters Commission should be seen to be transparent, accountable and fair to all.
- ii. Strong judicial system where aggrieved parties and individuals can resort to and seek redress. The judiciary must be seen to dispense justice without prejudice.
- iii. Politicizing ethnicity and religion should be discouraged. Supporting the values of tolerance, multi-religious and ethnic harmony should be upheld. Ending discrimination labelling and stereotype of individuals and groups on the account of their ethnicity and religion be voided by enabling laws.
- iv. Collectively sanction any individual, community or group that deliberately breaches our commitment to conflict resolution.

- v. Government must put strong, workable, institutional and legal framework for diversity management. This will ensure inclusion and equity in the system.

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