



EFFECT OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AMONG YOUTH IN NASARAWA SATATE OF NIGERIA

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Abstract:

Nasarawa State is one of the country's most ethnically and religiously heterogeneous entity. Since the advent of democratic rule in 1999, the heterogeneous nature of the Nasarawa State in terms of religion and ethnicity has created a major challenge of diversity management as evident in the prolonged inter-communal, religious, and ethnic related conflicts that plagued the zone with grave humanitarian consequences. Deaths associated with these conflicts are unevenly distributed in terms of their frequency and intensity. Key drivers of these conflicts have been contestations over access to land control of political and economic power, as well as disputes over indigeneship, which reflects a conceptual difference enshrined in Nigeria's constitution. As the problem of ethno-religious conflict among the youths in Nasarawa State comes to limelight, this study intends to make an indepth investigation into the effect of ethno-religious conflict among the youth in Nasarawa State. The Paper focused on ethno-religious conflict in Nasarawa State of Nigeria.

1.0 Introduction:

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Societies accommodate various tendencies, interests, and identities, which often result to conflict. Conflict as a global phenomenon, is not peculiar to Nigeria. Nigeria, a sovereign state with multi-ethnic groups was amalgamated in 1914 by Fredrick Lugard, the then Governor-General of the Federation. Prior to this period, each ethnic group were administered by traditional rulers with basic provision for the existence of effective organ of government in formulation and execution of government policies which the people freely embraced. According to Anifowoshe, the pre-colonial rules in Nigeria promoted strong government that prevented ethnicity and identity crisis among different ethnic groups that made up the amalgamated State. The 1914 amalgamation however signaled eventual introduction of indirect rule system of administration which to some extent promoted unity and national integration among the nationalists of different ethnic groups of the amalgamated protectorates (8).

Nigeria is usually characterized as a deeply divided state in which major political and communal conflict issues are vigorously and violently contested along the lines of the complex political, religious, and regional divisions in the country (Smyth and Robinson, 2001). By virtue of its complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa (Osaghae & Suberu 29). From its inception as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability and economic transformation.



A survey by International Institute for Democracy and Election Assistance (International IDEA, 1999) revealed that there were about 102 simmering conflicts in different parts of the country. These conflicts are mostly local ones, fueled by disagreement over sharing of resources. They often have religious or ethnic coloration. The seasonal clash between farmers and cattle rearers, border skirmishes over land, protest over Kingship and perceived marginalization of some groups in power sharing was obvious.

These conflicts resulted in loss of lives, property and means of livelihood, thus creating humanitarian emergencies with the internally displaced population trooping to rehabilitation centers. The trauma to which people in conflict prone areas are subjected to, and the huge costs of post-conflict reconstruction of the society take a heavy toll on the resources that would otherwise have been invested in development projects.

Moreover, conflicts have consequential effects especially on local governments. This is because whenever and wherever there are violent conflicts there will be senseless destruction of lives and properties, arson, looting and vandalization of public buildings, structures and properties hence retarding development and other government programmes.

Nasarawa State is one of the thirty six (36) States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The State was created in 1996 during the Military Regime of Late General Muhammad Sani Abacha (Nasarawa State... 10).



Nasarawa State is made of Muslims, Christians and Traditional believers with several numbers of ethnic groups which include Alago, Jukun, Eggon, Mada, Migili, Tiv, Kanuri, Afo, Hausa, Fulani, Gwandara, Gade, Yaskwa, Gbagyi, Kantana, Rindre, Ibura. This has made the state heterogenous in nature. Since the creation of the state, Nasarawa state has witnessed considerable numbers of ethno-religious conflict.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Since the inception of democratic political dispensation in 1999, the state has witnessed one form of communal conflict or the other resulting in loss of lives and properties. These violent conflicts have taken a new dimension in terms of its frequency, number of deaths and resultant humanitarian crisis. While some of the conflicts had their roots in the past historical circumstances of the concerned communities, some others were manufactured by the elites seeking to have a hold on the state power. This has caused the state one of the major threat of sending away settlers and impose fear in the minds of those who may intended to invest in the state.

Although, successful administrations battled with implementation of various programmes to resolve the associated issues fuelling ethnicity and religious crisis that has been treating unity and national integration since independence, the programmes were to no avail in realization of the programme objectives. However, the unrelenting agitations eventually led to the formation of various ethno-religious militias which are majorly youths by contending groups and their activities exacerbated ethnic and religious crises that hindered the actualization of needed unity in the state.

Based on the foregoing, this study intends to expose the effects of ethno-religious conflicts in Nasarawa State.

3.0 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is rooted on the fact that similar research and studies have been undertaken with different aims and specialty. However, this is not an exception. It is, but to add more to the existing research. Moreover, the study is set to examine both the negative and positive aspects of such conflicts as they affect development at the local government level. For some time, conflicts including ethnic and religious, conflict have been given considerable attention by the media, academics, and policy makers. In this study, the focus is on how ethnic and religious conflicts especially in Nasarawa State have some effects on the politics and development of local governments. This is because life (both human and livestock) was wasted, properties, infrastructural facilities like public buildings, and markets, schools, and motor parks were attacked and destroyed. Social co-existence and cohesion is destabilized with resultant consequences of relocation and resettlement along ethnic and religious divide.

4.0 Definition of Terms

Concepts used in this study are operationally defined as follows

4.1 Conflict: Conflict denotes clash, contention, confrontation, battle, struggle, controversies, or quarrel. Conflict may either be violent or non-violent. Conflict often manifests in violent

form. Violence denotes employment of illegal methods of physical coercion for personal or group ends.

4.2 Ethno -Religious Conflict: Ethno-religious conflict is operationally defined as the violent conflicts that ensued among and between the various ethnic and religious groups in Nasarawa State that often leads to the destruction of lives (both human and animals), properties and basic infrastructural facilities and places of worship.

5.0 Conflicts

At the mention of conflict, the picture that appears to most people's mind is that of war, fighting, argument, misunderstanding and the like. All these are negative tendencies, which are undesirable, however, conflict has positive impact in the society as it can increase clarity about existing problems, and eventually lead to innovative break-through or new approaches to solving social problems.

Conflict involves struggle over values, claims, power, and resources in which the aim of the opponents are to neutralize or engage in outright elimination of rivals. The condition of objective incompatibility between values or goals as the behaviour of deliberately interfering with another goals achievement emotionally in terms of hostility. In this case, conflict is perceived as divergence of interest or belief that common objective cannot be actualized, hence clashing of values, views and interest.

Akande (66) is of the view that "there is no society without conflict; it is inherent to societal relation and management". The ability to manage conflict makes a good society or state, because conflict cannot be eradicated." It can be noted that conflict varies and is of different dimension. In most cases, they are confrontational, violent and sometimes may lead to a state of anarchy. For instance, it can be social conflict like the topic under investigation i.e. ethnic and religious. It can

be economic like the struggle on resource control, establishment of markets and the location of some viable economic organizations like banks, industries, etc. Likewise, conflict can be political like the aftermath of the January 1966 military coup d'état, the political impasse after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria, and of recent the 2011 post election political violence and killing of innocent people and bombardment of security outlet by a group allegedly known as Boko Haram.

Consequently, conflicts arise out of mistrust, hostility and polarization of relations among groups at times in a competitive setting. One fact is that there are many causes of conflict. As stated earlier, conflicts know no bound as it happens in most countries of the world. Moreover, such conflicts cut across both developed and the developing countries. However, the nature and dynamics of the conflicts depends on the conflict management techniques that are put in place to take care of the situation. Osaghae (25) observed that;

There is a tendency to assume that these conflicts are more rampant and devastating in African countries where alternative action-bases like class, activity organizations and party identities have not become deep rooted enough to challenge the primacy of ethnicity. However, they have been no less destructive in advanced industrialized states where alternative action-bases and management strategies are arguably better developed. Examples are Scottish and Irish separatism in the United Kingdom, the Flemish and Walloons in Belgium, the Quebec question in Canada and diverse ethnic problems in the USA.

Therefore, conflicts abound in both industrialized and non-industrialized countries.

5.1 Effect of Ethnic Conflict

Nigeria is a pluralist society with multitude of ethnic groups that abound in the country. According to Elaigwu (66), Nigeria has about 300 ethnic groups and over 400 lingo-cultural groups, He further stressed that, “an ethnic-group is a group of people linked by common bonds of kinship and communal relationship. In some cases, it has identifiable language, social, economic and

cultural traits as well as a distinct territory”. On the other hand, he observed that, “ethnicity is ethnic consciousness transformed into a weapon of offence or defense in a competitive process in relation with other groups over desired scarce resources. Ethnicity often creates problems of integration, especially in a multinational state”. Ethnic conflicts in the modern setting are not unlike pre-colonial struggles and wars of subordination, rebellion and hegemony.

They tend to be centered in struggle for autonomy and freedom from exploitation by small groups from larger groups or by large groups under the thumb of powerful minorities.

Ethnic consciousness is a factor that propels ethnic conflict. Ethnic consciousness implies the loyalty or attachment to an ethnic group as either a social, political and economic entity, or a cultural community. So it is based on the promotion of one’s ethnic group interest as opposed to other groups. Although ethnic consciousness cannot be said to oppose the process of nation building but it is an instrument through which an individual need for his own identity.

Moreover, ethnic conflict and ethnic consciousness existed in both the precolonial era and the colonial period, though the colonialist promotes it to suit their interest. For instance, in northern Nigeria, the colonialist pursued an active policy of segregating northerners from southerners. Initially, the indigenous residents of a town in the North got along very well with migrants from the other parts of the North and from the south. This was an embarrassment to the colonialist who later invented the policy of Sabongari. Migrants were forced to live apart from the indigenous populations in areas designated as Sabon-Gari or “strangers” quarters”. It is in this regard that Nnoli (58) observed that, “contrary to Euro-American propaganda, contemporary ethnicity in Nigeria is not the result of some primitive mystique of the African causing one linguistic group to fight another, but the result of the need for the local population to adapt to the colonial and neocolonial society”. Ethnic conflict is a conflict that is inspired by ethnic factors. Onigu and Isaac (55) have identified seven main factors as sources of conflict. These are:

- a. The land space and the resources available which consequently degenerate into the question of “settlers” and indigenes”.
- b. Secondly, is the jurisdiction of certain traditional rulers and chiefs. E.g. when a king of one ethnic group or sub-ethnic group claims ruler ship over people belonging to another ethnic group, his action often generates conflict.
- c. The creation of local government councils and the location of their headquarters is the third factor generating conflicts.
- d. The fourth factor is the competition over access to scarce political and economic resources for instance. The creation of states and local government councils means the availability of more political and administrative positions in the localities. Contestants mobilize members of their ethnic and religious group for support in the competition to hold such positions.
- e. The fifth factor derives from the micro and macro-social structures in Nigeria as can be seen in the conflicting cultural interest, values and preferences. Therefore, the exploited coexistence of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences amongst people in the same polity is itself inherently conflictual.
- f. The sixth factor is the population growth and expansion tendencies to sustain ethnic bound occupations. This occupation has to do with land band other available resources. A resource in this sense may be seen as an opportunity in the environment that has been identified and appraised by a population of potential users.
- g. The seventh sphere of conflict is the perception of disregard for cultural symbols and the “pollution” of cultural practices which if goes unchecked will lead to violent conflict. It is noteworthy that, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country.



Fundamentally, the colonial economic policies led to the formation of ethnic associations while the period of depression of 1928-1934 corresponding to the period of the government's most extensive withdrawal from social welfare services, witnessed the unrivaled growth in the number and membership of these associations. In order to emancipate their members from this socio-economic and the adverse effects of the system of inequality imposed by the colonial order, the various ethnic groups engaged in vicious competition with one another, which severely strained the social fabric of the nation.

Consequently, the inter-ethnic suspicion and subsequent feud that accompanied the formation and activities of the political class resulted in the various crises such as the Kano riot of 1953 which was ethnic conflict in nature between the Hausa and the Igbo, Census of 1962, the Action group crises in the West in 1962, the 1964 Federal election crisis and the Western Nigerian election crisis of 1965. All these prompted the military intervention into the nation's body politics.

The military coup of January 1966 had ethnic colouration as majority of those that were killed were the leaders of the Northern and Western regions. Based on this, Nnoli (58) observed that, the coup was an attempt to limit ethnic competition through the use of pre-emptive violence. Six of the seven majors and eighteen out of the other twenty-three who actively participated in plotting and executing the coup came from the same ethnic group.

Consequently, Usman (33) further observed that, "there were of course, many other cases of violent communal conflicts which did not get prominent treatment in the media or, by the government and opinion leaders and politicians". In this regard, one can observe that ethnic conflicts are no longer confined to urban centers, which was earlier identified as the cradle site of antagonistic ethnicity, where prompt attention is given to any violent eruption by both the press and the government. Thus, we have the ruralization of ethnic conflicts as different ethnic groups that have shared centuries and decades of more or less peaceful co-existence have been pitched against one another as mortal enemies. In essence, this means that ethnic conflict not only take



place in urban centers but also in rural areas. Also, from the various expositions made, it is understood that ethnic conflicts does not only happen between the major ethnic groups in the country, i.e. Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo but also in-between them, e.g. between the Hausas and Fulani over farm and grazing land, between the Yorubas like the Ife and Modakeke conflicts, etc. likewise there is intraminority ethnic conflict like the Tiv-Jukun, Jukun-Kuteb, Bajju-Ikulu, etc.

Consequently, violent conflicts lead to lost of lives, properties and distrust among the conflicting group. It is in this view that Usman (23) observed that one of the widespread attitudes towards these violent communal conflicts especially in the immediate aftermath of bloodshed, the arson and other devastations, is that they are just the result of madness by those involved. The perpetrators of this violence, on both sides and even the actual planners do not appear to gain anything tangible beyond the satisfaction of eliminating an Enemy.

Meanwhile, it is due to the persistent ethnic conflicts which in most cases are violent in nature that the principle of Federal Character and other national policies such as the National Youth Service Corp Scheme, unity schools, intermarriages, etc. were introduced in order to allay the fear of minorities, promotes unity in diversity and as well enhances even development. In addition, the Federal Character principle that is enshrined as part of our national laws was meant to ensure the adoption of the quota system and equity in appointments, provision of social amenities and infrastructures, etc. across all ethnic groups in the country. Despite this, ethnic groups are alleging bias in favour of the other making allegations and counter allegations against each other.

Meanwhile, Sako (2) concludes, “at this age, ethnic conflict should not be a factor that would take us back into the dark ages”.

5.2 Effect of Religious Conflict

Many religious belief systems and practices thrive in Nigeria. They include ancient eastern religions such as Buddhism and newer philosophical beliefs such as the Grail Movement. Most



religious space is however, covered by numerous Islamic and Christian sects and movements. The fact that the two main religions have sacred texts that are accepted by virtually all sects and groups has not prevented the growth of serious conflicts caused by different theological interpretations. Nonetheless, factional and sectarian differences and struggles linked to ideological, political and leadership variables seem to play a more important role than theological differences.

Gofwen (66) observed that religious intolerance has been identified as the major source of religious conflict in all societies existing as long as the history of humanity and permeating all forms of human civilizations with attendant destructive tendencies. He further stressed that no system could be found to be impervious to it wherever it existed, because deeper cleavages are created in society by it more than any other factors. Meanwhile, Balogun (11 -16) defines religious intolerance as “hostility towards other religious as well as the inability of religious adherents, to harmonize between the theories and the practical aspect of religion”.

From this definition, one can understand that religious conflict is not only common between different religions but as well between and among the same religious. It is in this regard that Yau (16) classified religious conflict into three categories. These are “intra-religious conflicts, inter-religious and state versus religious groups’ conflicts”. One thing to note here is that a particular conflict could degenerate to another conflict or from one type to another. An example is a state versus religious groups conflict can degenerate into an inter-religious conflict or vice versa.

Inter-religious conflicts: The inter-religious conflict began as socio-ethnic conflicts but articulated and fought out under the idiom of inter-religious conflicts. Examples are the Bauchi riots of 1991 and the Obi riots of May 1995 (Metuh 45). While explaining this spate of religious conflict in Nigeria, Usman (66) established that religious and ethnic conflicts are part of the inevitable competition for scarce resources by modernizing ethnic elites. He further stated that the real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to observe from the people of Nigeria



a fundamental aspect of our reality. That is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed.

Moreover , this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguise in order to further entrench division among people, slow down their awakening (Usman 66).

Also commenting on the influence of the political economy on religious conflicts in Nigeria, Yau (18) opined that; With the collapse of the living conditions of the majority of the citizens due to worsening economic crises engendered by the Structural Adjustment Programmed (SAP), living became a precarious endeavour for the majority..., this created communal tension across neighbouring communities, which exploded in religious conflicts where the communities were divided both ethnically and religiously. This was the case with the Obi, Alago Chieftancy, Tiv-Alago, and Alago Ombatse conflicts which although were sparked-off by religious misunderstanding, they centered on the questions of land ownership, means of the economic sustenance and local traditional institution. In these cases, the “indigenous” Muslim people believed that the Tiv Muslims “Settlers” have usurped their land in addition, to a deep-seated resentment against the Tiv traditional rule in their domains.

The state-versus religious group conflicts is when security forces and law enforcement agencies are pitted against religious groups, which seem to either reject the authority of the state or contest it legitimacy. For example, the Nasarawa 1996 conflict was because of the demonstration staged by the Shiites demanding the release of their leaders in spite of the banned on demonstrations as imposed by the State Governor. This resulted in confrontation, which spread to Zaria town where the Shiites beat a retreat.

Other issues that prompt religious conflict were perceived hidden agenda between the adherents of both Islam and Christianity. For instance, Muslim activists continuously express concern and fears over what they consider to be the dominance of Christians in Nigeria such as having Saturday



and Sunday as work-free days while the Islamic Holy day, Friday is a normal working day, the use of the Gregorian Christian calendar for official business, Christian melody in the national anthem, the curriculum in most of Nigeria's educational institutions which they claim reflect and/or draw inspiration from Christian belief and the Christian cross as the symbol for health institution. On the other hand, Christian activists are concerned mainly with what they regard as the threat of the Islamization of the country and the imposition of the Sharia on Non-Muslims.

The use of state resources to subsidize Islamic activities, in particular the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and the government take-over of missionary schools. Linked to these concerns is the tradition of Muslim political hegemony in the country and in the army. Christians worry that most regimes in the country's post-independence history have been dominated and led by northern Muslim politicians Or military officers, (International IDEA, 2000). In addition, Elaigwu (58) have outlined the series of violent religious incidents in the country. (See appendix ii) The aforementioned chain of violent religious events in the country have much hampered social integration, economic and political development and above all nation building. Moreover, the local governments which is the grassroots level and where most of these violent crises do emanate and then transcend to the urban centers are mostly affected devastatingly as all ingredients needed for socio-economic and political development are dampened and vandalized, while confidence and mutual trust among people is eroded.

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