Ethnic and Communal Conflicts in Nigeria: Types, Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

Much has been said and written on the debilitating effects of ethnic and communal conflicts in Nigeria. The perceptions and policy formulations towards resolving problems of ethnic and communal conflicts portray a rather poor understanding of this social malaise and can only complicate the problem. This paper argues that ethnic and communal conflicts stem from heterogeneity, limited access to socio-economic and political opportunities and the structural imbalance of the larger Nigerian polity, which has pitched many ethnic groups in positions of perpetual disadvantage and rivalry. The widespread injustice in the polity occasioned by the feeling of alienation, powerlessness and the psychological disorientation stemming from environmental degradation provide a common ground for status/class consciousness which manifest in the form of agitation or rebellion against each other and a system that has fallen short of expectations of the people. The paper further argues that rather than attempting to decipher the meaning of this chaotic condition, the government should address the more fundamental issues of pervasive poverty and how to diversify the economy away from reliance on petroleum oil. The development dilemma is that the country has not been able to create resistant institutional structures to promote economic growth and address the yearnings of the masses for food, water, light, shelter and the bridging of the gulf of inequality between the rich and the poor.

Keywords: Communal, conflict, ethnic, plural societies, natural resources

Introduction

Ethnic groups are categories of people characterized by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value system and normative behavior and whose members are anchored in a particular part of the new state territory. According to Barth (1970: 251), ethnic groups have both a theoretical and an empirical significance in the social science studies of new states. They are "categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people."

To Kottak (2002: 10), an ethnic group is almost synonymous with a culture. As succinctly indicated by Kottak, we use the term "ethnic group" when we are describing a particular culture in a nation or region that contains others. To say that there are different ethnic groups in the same nation is to say there are different cultures or cultural traditions within that society.

The study of ethnic groups, however, has been of a comparatively recent concern for social scientists, particularly sociologists and social anthropologists. Some of the earliest works of scholars, for example, Schapera (1940), Evans-Pritchard (1940), Green (1964) and Forde (1964) were concerned with parts of ethnic groups labelled "tribes". According to Otite (2000) these were the most clearly bounded and the most manageable socio-political entities through which to test grand holistic theories of structural functionalism and of small-scale forms of conflict and instability.

Ethnic pluralism - the mere fact of multi-ethnic group feature of a large society - would be of little significance for the social sciences if not for the relationships generated between groups. According to Otite (2000: 56 - 58), ethnic groups are like human biological units in a society where the relationships between them constitute more vital problems for sociological investigation. In addition, he contended that ethnic groups would be less important in themselves in Nigeria, for instance, if there were no actors who draw attention to and manipulate their differences in the contexts of competition over access to local and national resources. Ethnicity therefore captures the various forms of consensual and conflict relationships between ethnic groups and may thus be defined as the contextual discrimination by members of one group against another on the basis of differentiated system of socio-cultural symbols (Otite 2000: 66; Mordi 2005: 15). It must also be noted that ethnicity involves a manipulation of the consciousness of difference in the socio-cultural symbols as a basis for inter-personal and inter-group relations.

Ethnic groups are thus not only cultural phenomena but also socially distinct. The structure of plural societies such as Nigeria with limited access to socio-politico-economic and other resources provides the premise for inequality, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts. It is within this context, that the phenomenon of ethnic and communal conflicts in Nigeria will be examined in this article.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual clarity is central to the task of explanation and analysis of conflict phenomena, if such construct is not to be hopelessly delimited by spatial-temporal parameters. According to Imobighe et al (2002: 315), some definitions considered generally, have focused on manifest behaviors, while others have placed emphasis on either differences in goals or perception.

Conflicts according to Otite and Albert (2001: 10), arise from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and, or groups in defined social and physical environments. To these scholars, changes in the social environment, such as contestable access to new political positions, or perceptions of new resources arising from development in the physical environment, are fertile grounds for conflicts involving individuals and groups who are interested in using these new resources to achieve their goals.

Simmel (1955: 5) has contended that "conflict arises when there are incompatible or mutually exclusive goals, aims or values espoused by human beings". To Deutsch (1973: 108), conflicts exist "whenever incompatible activities occur; an action that is with other actions prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures or in some ways makes the latter less likely to be effective." Pruit and Rubin (1986: 192) however, asserted that "conflict means conceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved obvious despite

simultaneously". However, compartmentalization of views expressed, these definitional divergences are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As Ross (1983: 139) rightly noted, conflict occurs when parties disagree about the distribution of material or symbolic resources and act because of the incompatibility of goals or a perceived divergence of interests, while Esman (1996: 306-309) averred that ethnic conflicts and grievances may result from an ethnic group's attempt to gain more autonomy or more equitable treatment. He further alluded to the fact that it may also be caused by a dominant group's actions to subordinate, oppress, and eliminate an ethnic group by genocide or ethnocide.

To Miller (2002: 206-208), seen in the above context, it could be argued that any definition that emphasizes any aspect of such a complex phenomenon as conflict to the exclusion of the other is essentially emasculated. Focusing on behaviours alone in conflict situation ignores motivational factors that condition action while, "asking only about perceptions fails to distinguish between situations in which similar perceptions lead to sharply divergent behaviours." Thus, these apparent definitional divergences reinforce the general conclusion of a number of analysts that "conflict is a process, not a static condition, and that an important element involves the change in perception during the course of a dispute"

One of the most quoted traditional definitions of conflict, regard it as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their 'rivals" (Cosers 1956: 10-11). In this sense according to Otite and Albert (2001: 101), conflict may be conceptualized as a way of settling problems originating from opposing interests and from the continuity of society. Thus, Park and Burgess (1921: 3-9) argued that "conflict is designed to resolve divergent dualism (and achieve) some kind of unity even if it be through the annihilation of one of the conflict parties". Conflict may therefore not be regarded only in a negative light of dysfunctional or disjunctive process and a breakdown of communication as some scholars tend to suggest (see, for example, Luudberg (1939), Wilson and Kolb (1949). Conflict is a conscious act involving personal or group contact or communication. Together with, though distinct from competition, struggle and contest etc. conflict is a normal process of interaction particularly in complex societies in which resources are usually scarce.

Conflict can hardly be discussed outside the concept of pluralism. As Smooha (1975: 186) pointed out, both pluralism and conflict are related in complex ways. Though Furnwally (1944), a Dutch economist, was the reputed originator of the pluralism school, Kuper and Smith (1971) and other scholars picked up the idea of pluralism for a systematic and serious analysis for their various contributions. According to Otite and Albert (2001: 10-11), in Nigeria, like in other plural societies, it is necessary to direct the analysis of conflicts to involve various cultures and strategic social institutions in the search for meanings conveyed through different lenses, logic and grammar. In this way, we can comfortably and assuredly assist parties in conflict to identify and eliminate systematic problems in the cause of the resolution, transformation and management of conflicts. Conflict and consensus are thus not polar opposites; rather, competition, co-operation and consensus are parts of the same process of conflict identification and their resolution, transformation and management. Although divergent interests and values may restrict concessions and cooperation among members of different ethnic groups, yet there are generally some political, economic and social ties that unite members of different ethnic groups in a plural society like Nigeria.

The question may still be raised in the minds of readers as to why we study conflicts. It should be noted that whether we view conflict as normal or abnormal, it is a recurring natural or even pathological fact, depending on the perspective of the analyst. It is inherent in all kinds of social, economic or political settings and in business management jobs etc. characterized by ethnic, religious and other forms of pluralism. Otite (1990: 88) however concluded that conflict is the very essence of most formal and informal social organizations and processes. Conflicts have their objective base in society though a dynamic phenomenon.

Causes of Ethnic and Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

By nature, human beings exhibit differences not only biologically or physiologically, but also socially and psychologically. Even identical twins that may be very much alike physically develop different personalities and orientations and perceive assets or development resources as well as socio-economic problems differently. According to Otite (2000: 76-77), differences between individuals and groups are natural but the divergent perceptions and manipulations or exploitations of these differences with reference to access to scarce resources for individual or group advantages, are man-made. This condition to him constitutes a premise for conflict. Conflicts have their objective bases in society. The concept is validated daily over access to a variety of limited resources which are created and distributed, within defined establishment and locations: chairmanship position, power and status, grassland, market, water spots for animals and pasture routes, jurisdiction of chiefs and king, leadership of political parties etc. From the extensive array of general literature on contending explanations of the cause of conflict, Foster (1966: 15-16) contended that conflict is by "its very nature beyond any simple causation". In other words, endemic social and political conflicts in our societies invariably have multiple roots; there is no single cause which is more or less, potent. Indeed, usually, there are multiple causes and important contributing conditions rooted in historical relationships and brought to violence by a variety of catalysts.

Despite the divergent nature of explanatory patterns highlighted above, and their limitations in terms of postulated conditions of parsimony and relevance (accuracy, generality, parsimony and causality), Montagu (1978) and Avrach (1991) in their robust understanding and contributions, stressed two major theoretical tendencies (spanning "spatial", "ideological" and "issue" considerations and integrating both micro and macro factors in conflict analysis). One is psycho-cultural disposition which determines the overall level of conflict in a society in terms of shared assumptions, perceptions and images about "what people in a society value, their definition of friends and foes, and the means by which groups and individuals pursue their goals. The other is the structural conditions (social, structural and conflict theory), which "directs attention to forces which can make a society more or less prone than others to particular levels and forms of conflict and violence".

In the light of the above insights, inter and intra-ethnic conflicts are inevitable in Nigeria because Nigeria's social structure and existential challenges are inherently prone to generate conflict from diverse ethnic cultural interests and goals and from the political and economic necessities of survival as individuals and as identifiable autonomous social groups struggle for advantages.

Several factors are identified as sources of conflict. The first is the land space and the resources available. Different people within and across the boundaries of local government council area

lay claim to land as original settlers or "aboriginals" and therefore, on this basis, fight off those regarded as intruders. There are recurrent conflicts over land and water space and their resources. According to Otite (1990: 89), inter-ethnic and intra-communal clashes have occurred within and across the politico-administrative boundaries of Nigeria's new states particularly since 1996. The problem of land resources as a factor in ethnic conflicts has become exacerbated since the 1970s and especially as from the 1990s when oil companies in the Niger Delta and other oil-producing states intensified oil exploration activities. Communities in Nigeria's Deltaic areas have clashed with one another over claims to territories in which oil exploration companies operate and for which royalty, amenities and development projects are expected.

The second factor is the disputed jurisdiction of certain traditional rulers and chiefs. When a king of one ethnic or sub-ethnic group claims ruler ship over people belonging to another ethnic group, his action often generates conflicts. The town of Warri is an example. Here, the Olu (King) of the Itsekiri ethnic nationality inhabiting a spatial territory also owned and inhabited by members of Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo is labeled Olu or King of the whole of Warri in Delta comprising the Urhobo and Ijo ethnic groups with their Kings of the equivalent of the Olu of Itsekiri respectively (Ekeh 2004).

The imperative of culture-bound occupations is the third factor generating conflicts in Nigeria. Awolowo (1968), Udo (1975) and Otite (2000: 89-90) have shown that owing to the interaction of a group's heritage, ecology, technology, population movements and physical environmental resources, members of certain ethnic groups have learnt to survive on certain occupations in which they have also achieved some preserve and specialty. To that end, there is a pluralism of indigenous economic activity which are sources of both conflicts and complementary living: oil palm production technology of the Urhobo, Isoko and some members of the Igbo ethnic group in the eastern part of Nigeria; the Awka (Igbo) metallurgists, Bini and Ife-Yoruba craft, bronze and iron workers, Tiv farmers, the Ijo experts in fish farming and fish harvesting and the Fulani-Hausa specialists in animal science and animal husbandry in Nigeria's northern states, are all expected theoretically to be essentially complementary occupationally, and thus promote unity. Yet, ethnic conflicts occur when members of different ethnic groups engage in multiple usages of the same valued land or water resources. Thus, ethnic conflicts have arisen from disputed claims over fish ponds, creeks and fishing rights among members of various ethnic groups in the riverine areas of Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

Similarly, pastoralists in need of essential resources in the north-eastern and northern geo-political zones of Nigeria have not only got into conflict with one another over scarce and diminishing pastures and water spots, but have also had serious and devastating conflicts with farmers over crops destroyed or eaten up by animal stock, i.e. the persistent herders'/ farmers' conflicts

The creation of local government councils and the location of their headquarters is another factor of conflict. According to Otite and Albert (2001: 6), the creation of local government councils in their respective areas was the responsibility of the federal government. But conflicts arose, they continued, when sections of the areas opposed such creation or their inclusion in the "wrong" council as evident in the two cases of Ife and Warri. Also,

government's location and shifting of the headquarters from one place to another, following conflicts and oppositions, merely fuelled the conflicts in many parts of the country. Similarly, they concluded, ethnic claims over new headquarters and new markets are sources of conflicts, for example, Zango-Kataf and Tafawa Balewa towns in Kaduna and Bauchi States respectively.

The fifth factor derives from the micro and macro social structures in Nigeria. Nigeria is a segmented society with varieties of conflicting cultural interests, values and preferences. Claims to the control of the commonwealth, and, to national political positions and economic resources as well as the divergent perceptions of co-existence in the same country-setting provide grounds for conflict. The opposing view which ethnic groups have of one another, such as the Jukun have of the Tiv and vice versa also predispose people to conflicts.

The sixth sphere of conflicts is the perception of disregard for cultural symbols and the "pollution" of cultural practices. Where an individual of one neighboring or immigrant group threatens the cultural trait of another group, such an act could easily be interpreted as that of an entire group and consequently, the penalty imposed on the offender, according to the hosts' culture is also often interpreted in terms of inter-group rather than inter-personal relations. For example, the killing and eating of a dog or crocodile etc. within the community that respects or worships it as a totem or symbol, or the destruction of a community's ancestral shrine or statuaries for the gods or deities could flare up emotions and impel men to violent action. The most recent example of these kind of inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria occurred in July 1999 when the Yoruba of Sagamu performed the night rites associated with *Oro* festival, during which time, women are forbidden from coming out of their houses.

Lastly, the incidence of ethnic and individual or sectional competition over access to scarce political and economic resources could be another factor for ethnic conflict. The creation of states and local government councils means the availability of more political and administrative positions in the localities which are often limited. Contestants mobilize members of their ethnic groups for support in the competition to hold such elective or appointive positions. Naturally, divergent interests and inter-ethnic or sub-ethnic and town conflicts occur.

Cases of Ethnic and Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

The illusion of ethnic harmony has become a feature of social-cultural and politico-economic relations in plural societies. It has become an aspect of social change in our contemporary society, both national and international. The concept of neo-ethnicity has been suggested recently by Said and Simmons (1976: 99-101) to capture the various forms and consequences which ethnicity has developed in response to the changing strategies for distributing and controlling economic and political resources within and between states.

Inter and intra-ethnic and community conflicts occur nearly daily in Nigeria. Only few of them are recorded and published in the mass media and elsewhere. The pervasiveness of conflicts in Nigeria (as elsewhere in Africa) has been attributed to a number of factors-psychological, socio-psychological (group dynamics) and sociological factors. These factors have been giving rise to a variety of analytical approaches to conflict in the Nigerian social formation (Falola

and Ihonvbere 1985; Otite 1990: 101). However, these approaches differ in their general assumptions about the crises, nature and resolution of conflicts.

Some of these cases and one or two more recent ones, will be highlighted in this section of the article. These were Ife-Modakeke conflicts which occurred in 1981, 1983 and 1997 and the Jukun-Tiv conflicts which were largely provoked by the issues of the symbolism of traditional ruler ship, political appointments to top positions, the control of the Wukari Local Government Area and Council, land tenure regulation and land use for farming especially by the Tiv-Nupe-Yoruba conflict in Kwara State. Ethnic conflicts in Warri were caused by three main factors the activities of the Action Group political party under Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Chiefs Law of 1959 with regards to the change in the title of Olu of Itsekiri to Olu of Warri; relocation of local government council and its headquarters from the territories of one ethnic group to that of the other and the claims to royalty and compensations by different communities and ethnic groups for the use of land or creeks; the ownership of which is contested especially by the Ijo and the Itsekiri in the coastal areas (Forae 2017:9-10).

Ethnic-occupational conflicts in North-eastern Nigeria-practices associated with ethnic-bound occupations are the main causes of ethnic conflicts in the North-eastern parts of Nigeria. The needs by one group for survival always lead to contested claims by multiple users of the limited natural resources, pasture and water. This is a perennial problem to which many of the communities have had to adjust. For example, many nomads have become semi-sedentary, agro-pastoralists as it became difficult to get water or pasture to maintain livestock and increasing herd size for survival. It is thus expected that the demand for the wetland is a natural cause of conflicts. The Yoruba-Hausa conflicts in Sagamu arose from an alleged disrespect by two Hausa women for Yoruba culture. The Zango-Kataf conflicts in Kaduna State -was first believed to have been caused by religious differences and related matters. But it was however found to have been related to the decision to relocate the market in the area. The conflict spread to Kaduna City and other parts of the state, resulting in the loss of lives and property.

Others include conflicts in Kano which have both and ethnic dimensions such religious as the indigenes/immigrants' conflict in Kano in May 1953, Maitatsine riot of 1980 and Fagge crisis of 1982. Igbo communities of Aguleri and Umuleri in Anambra State conflicts of 1999, the Chamba-Kuteb conflict in Takun Local Government Area of Taraba, the Ngizim-Karaikarai conflict in Yobe State, Evwreni conflict in Delta State, Mangu-Bukkos conflicts on the Jos Plateau etc.

Several other conflicts have occurred and are occurring in Nigeria. As Otite (2000: 59) rightly stated, these conflicts are usually based on disputed land claims, internal colonialism, religious differences and fanaticism; pursuit of occupational activities for self or group survival, royalty claims from oil communities and new political and democratic dividends. He also stressed that community and ethnic conflicts have also been caused by the compulsion of custom or anger to avenge case of murder or ritual killings which degenerate into feuding and counter killings.

Consequences of Ethnic and Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

The effects of ethnic conflicts are multi-dimensional and cut across the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. These conflicts also have both short and long term consequences on the psyche of the nation as well as on individuals.

The most disturbing aspect of these conflicts is the institutional rise in most Nigerian communities of what approximates a standing army which was hitherto completely alien to these communities. The traditional war mobilization effort was conducted on an ad hoc basis, on the spur of the moment, in heated times when sentiments seemed to act in outright defiance of seated reason. That there was a deliberate preparation for war according to Obono (2001: 169-170) taking place at a time of relative peace was a spin-off of a global illogic traceable to Karl Von Clausewitz's often paraphrased dictum to the effect that "if you will have peace, you must prepare for war.

Jike (2002: 18-22) similarly noted that the proliferation of ethnic militias in Nigeria is a recent development. First, ethnic militias are an indictment of the formal apparatus of law enforcement (the police) which is generally perceived to be praetorian, ethnically prejudiced and incapable of securing life and property. Thus, ethnic self-identity has once again acquired a new ferment, meaning and jingoistic characterization which is a marked departure from the pervasive supranational orientation of the years immediately after independence. He however concluded that the major ethnic groups have each got a militia or army outfit waiting in the wings to defend their primordial interests.

The immediate effects are major devastations. Both calculated and mob actions lead to massacres and widespread losses of human capital warriors, community leaders, youths, entrepreneurs, occupational specialists, husband, wives, children etc. There are also devastations of property - houses, farmland and crops, farm equipment, livestock, vehicles, market stalls etc.

Perhaps the most salient effect of these conflicts was the least calculable but the most far-reaching. One refers here to the ruination of trust and its replacement with mutual suspicion and unalloyed hatred. Reciprocal feelings of distrust and anger were largely responsible for the delay that attended the restoration of peace in the Warri area, following the Warri crisis in Delta State.

More latently, the disruption of the educational system through the involvement of students in the war retarded prospective progress. While their counterparts in other towns were intensifying their studies through extra-mural lessons, the basic school programme was destabilized in communities affected by conflicts. Wherever these conflicts occur, very serious refugee problems are created. Thousands of people, most especially the non-indigenes in the warring communities are rendered homeless.

There is also a deployment of government troops, the Nigerian Police, Mobile Police, the Army and the Navy to quell or control some of the conflicts. Besides, commissions of enquiry are usually set up by the government to examine the remote and the immediate causes of the conflicts. All these activities have led to a diversion of scarce resources - human, material and financial to resolve such conflicts.

The long-term effects of conflict may be positive, that is, the positive side of the conflicts, after the short term losses of human and material resources. As Otite (2000: 62) rightly stated, ethnic conflicts serve as "means of identifying the imperfections of a plural society and of suggesting remedies to remove or solve the problems of inequality, marginalization, exploitation, internal colonialism and the misuse of ethnic majority democracy and national development."

Conclusion

The problems of ethnic and communal conflicts must be examined in a broad and all-encompassing perspective. To focus exclusively on ethnic and community conflicts without also looking at the larger system and society which produce these conflicts and people, will not particularly be useful in the long-term. The most reasonable thing to do in all these conflicts should be the reconciliation of the warring communities as well as address their immediate development needs. A non-partisan third party supported by the state and federal government should convene series of peace meeting between leaders of the warring communities. In addition, strategic and responsive monitoring tools should be created to see to the implementation of whatever outcome of conflict resolution is arrived at.

Theoretically, a society or community that survives conflict is expected to be in a better position of equitable development, social justice and social wellbeing. Similarly, it may be assumed that ethnic groups and individuals develop better mutual understanding and accommodation after surviving the shackles of inter-ethnic conflict. Thus, well managed conflicts may therefore be regarded as catalysts for development in multi-ethnic societies such as Nigeria.

In the light of the above, a definition of conflict must reflect both its negative and positive aspects. However, the negative side of conflict has nearly always been the focus of attention and analysis.

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