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The Rise of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria: Critical Analysis and Proposal for New Resolution Strategies

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Abstract: The outbreak of conflict in social settings is an intrinsic part of human history. As experienced throughout history, conflict has been a persistent social phenomenon. Though a global phenomenon, conflict in Africa has assumed a painful reoccurring dimension. In the contemporary era, over 25 percent of Africans live in conflict endemic and afflicted countries. In Nigeria, incessant conflicts reinforced by pervasive socioeconomic inequality, political domination, religious fanaticism, ethnic rivalry, and class struggle between the haves and have-nots, particularly in the north are underpinned by the structural configuration that is inherent in the Nigerian society. Drawing on Structural Conflict and Structural Violence theories by Karl Marx and Johan Galtung (with additional theoretical perspectives from the works of Azar, Burton, and Dahrendorf), we interrogate the constant outbreak of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria, especially in the Northern part of the country, its intractable nature, leading to the failure of present resolution strategies. The study reveals that structural violence, that manifests as a result of struggles over political interest, resources, fear of religious domination, external religious occurrence, or even allegations of blasphemy and a host of inequalities are the major triggers of ethno-religious conflicts in the country. The study concludes that structural reform that engenders an inclusive political system, equal distribution of resources, social equality, and justice, greater roles for religious and traditional leaders, religious tolerance, and bridging of the gap between the rich and the poor will undoubtedly decrease if not completely eradicate the constant outbreak of ethno-religious violence in parts of the country.

Key words: Africa, Ethno-Religious Conflict, Northern Nigeria, Critical Analysis, Resolution of Conflicts

Introduction

Social interaction and disagreement, leading to violent conflict and destruction have been dominant features of human history. From the earliest period, the clash of interests and mutual in-exclusive needs has masterminded the descent into chaos of societies for which empires, kingdoms, and even nation-states became infamously notorious. Conflict has indeed become an inevitable part of human history. Remarkably, the end of the Cold War intensified the frequent outbreak of crises particularly in developing countries, where struggles over political interests, resources allocation, and religious rights and interests amongst others became a stubborn tradition. According to scholars such as Tandon, (1999); Bassey & Oshita, (2007), these factors have been at the root of the widespread nature of violent conflicts in Africa since the 1970s. Prominent examples of conflict-prone countries include Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Niger Republic, Libya, Central African Republic, Somali, Burkina Faso, Mali, etc. While this has been a prevailing tradition in most African states, the situation in Nigeria, where inter-ethnic and inter-religious disagreements and rivalries are endemic, is most complex. While some of these conflicts are new, others are longstanding and reoccurring.

In recent times, as in most parts of Africa characterized

by diverse forms of conflicts, ethno-religious crises have become even more prevalent, particularly in the northern part of Nigeria. Since the country returned to civil rule in 1999 after decades of military rule, crises of ethnic and religious dimensions became a regular and constant feature of social interaction. This disturbing trend is traceable to fierce competition for resources (land, water, mineral), the political interest of some leaders, religious intolerance, sectarian violence, and several other trigger factors (Oтите and Albert, 1999:86). According to Gyong & Ogbadoyi, (2013), there is not a year that goes by without a significant violent conflict erupting in parts of the country. Buoyed by illegal arms smuggled across the Sahel, particularly since the destabilization of Libya following Arab Spring and the death of Gaddafi, conflict in this area has varied in breadth, intensity, and form, and has taken an incalculable toll on human lives, leaving many dead, injured, and homeless (Gyong & Ogbadoyi, 2013).

Citing the recurring Arab-Israeli conflict, the Balkans question which played a huge part in the eventual break-up of Yugoslavia, as well as the unfolding events in the former Soviet Union, Bassey and Oshita, (2007:57), described Ethno-religion crises and disagreements as highly emotive phenomena which generate most intractable and pervasive conflict for which resolution are not usually durable. In Nigeria,

religious and ethno-communal crises first became widespread in the early 1980s following the maitatsine unrest in Northern Nigeria. Ever since incidences of ethno-religious conflicts have become a constant episode in Nigeria's national life often with far-reaching destructive consequences. According to NISER, cited in Akanbi & Ladi-Ladosu, (2022), about 1000 incidences of ethno-religious communal clashes crises that claimed over 50, 000 lives, took place between 1999 and 2004. Scholars have attributed the incessant outbreaks of conflicts of ethno-religions nature to a mixture of factors bordering on religion and ethnic nationalism, struggle over resources, political marginalization, etc (Akanbi & Ladi-Ladosu, 2022), (Bagaji, 2012). The various clashes also led to the displacement of millions of people and the destruction of properties across the country.

Over the years, despite efforts in several quarters, attempts at resolving ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have produced little success, thus its recurring nature. For instance, despite concerted resolution efforts (through the deployment of the military, setting up of Judicial Panels of Inquiries, and interface dialogue between religious leaders), religious and ethnic conflicts have continued to reoccur in Kaduna State since 1981 when Adara, Kachia land dispute between settlers and natives resulted in first major violent clashes in the state. An examination of

communal conflicts in the state shows a dangerous persistent trend. This is replicated across several other states, particularly in northern Nigeria where cultural and religious differences have pitched indigenes against settlers, Christians against Muslims, and rival political camps against one another.

As a result, scholars have expressed frustration at the lack of effective solutions to ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. The failure of the present resolution approach to effectively solve issues surrounding religious extremism, indigene-settler struggle, and persistent land disputes around the north and Middle Belt, in particular, illustrate this trend. For instance, Sampson, (2012) argued that the government's uncoordinated attitude to ethno-religious conflicts, as well as the lack of a long-term and effective strategy for managing them, are to be blamed for its recurring nature.

To this end, it has become important to critically analyse the problem which has constituted a grave underbelly to the nation's political landscape and national unity, evaluate the present resolution strategies, and propose effective and efficient ones. Therefore, this study seeks to examine not only the reasons behind the widespread outbreak of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria, especially in the Northern part of Nigeria, but also its intractable nature, leading to the failure of resolution efforts. Beyond understanding why such crises seem difficult to be

resolved, the study also explores their major consequences and suggests new measures to solve ethno-religious conflicts in the country.

Theoretical Framework

Theories are a major component of research. It helps in the explanation of scientific and social phenomena. This study is anchored on two theories. It draws on the Marxist Structural Conflict and Cultural Violence Theory which were first propounded by Karl Marx and by Johan Galtung in 1848 and 1990 respectively. In this study, the theories are used to explain the conundrum of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in the north.

First, Karl Marx, widely regarded as the father of classical social constructs, whose works have continued to influence successive social theorists, propounded the structural theory of conflict. One fundamental belief on which Marx anchored his works is that the existence of human on earth is characterized by endless class struggle. His major view was therefore that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Dahrendorf, 1959a: 198). In the same line of thought, Marx and Engels (1848: 8) further highlighted how the struggle between exploited people and those who exploit them has underlined the histories of successive human societies. Indeed, one fundamental finding of theorists such as Marx is the connection between class

formation and conflict. Thus the Marxist Structural Conflict theory holds that human society is structured in a way that supports oppression, inequality, and domination of one class over the other. The theory further explains that the struggle over limited resources, power, and influence, and the quest to sustain dominance over the disadvantaged and powerless in society is at the root of conflict within human societies. In other words, it examines how groups within a society compete for scarce resources (Marx, 1970, cited in Eze, 2021). Consequently, according to Coser, (1957), angry and unsatisfied groups seek to expand their share of power, influence, and status in the prevailing system. Theorists of the Marxist school of thought have also highlighted the inherent likelihood for states and their institutions to perpetrate violence against their own people (Bell, & Cleaver, 2002).

Therefore, in line with Marx’s structural conflict theory, most conflicts in Nigeria have been traced to the roots of structural issues that have manifested through struggles for resources, power, resistance to religious domination, or protection of religious belief. This is because these factors confer advantages in Nigeria’s socio-economic and political spheres characterised by competition and class struggle. Struggles over these issues, especially in Nigeria made up of over 250 ethnic groups, have often manifested in

conflicts of ethnic and religious nature. So, the emergence of such groups as Boko Haram, Niger Delta Militants (MEND), Independent People of Biafra (IPOB), and bandits are ripple effects of the competition over power, resources, influence and to assert religious influence. Salawu, (2010) noted that the accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, dominance, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism, and bigotry that result from structural framing that induces exploited groups against each other are key sources of what we currently see as ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

In addition, the fact that Nigeria's political environment is susceptible to ethnic and religious influence has made inciting one group (ethnic or religious) against another for political objective a potent weapon in the hands of the political class. Consequently, often time, in the quest to take or retain political power, political leaders leverage on ethnic and religious linings to further their political interests. This often results in ethnic or religious conflict with their attendant damage to properties and the loss of human life. This resonates with the view of Banton when he noted that "a shared ethnic origin may be a basis on which individuals are mobilised for collective action" including violence (Banton, 2000: 481).

According to Marx, domineering and oppressive

forms of human relations which he christened 'class struggle' is at the root of structural conflicts (Marx, 1848). Also, oftentimes, these patterns of conflicts are propelled by forces other than the conflictants. Besides structural issues, most conflictants have no grounds to be in conflict in the first instance. Marx's writings suggest that structural conflicts can only be solved if structural issues underlying them are addressed. Thus, oppressors need to identify ways of conceding to the demands of the oppressed as sustaining the status quo can perpetuate structural conflict. In the case of Nigeria, structural issues at the root of incessant conflicts of ethnic and religious backgrounds are embedded in the fundamental political and economic structure of the country which has given rise to poverty, suffering, misrule, exploitation, mutual distrust, frustration, and aggression. Addressing these issues is therefore vital to solving protracted conflicts in the country.

Other theorists whose works have further developed the theoretical focus of conflict theory include Dahrendorf, Burton, Azar, and Galtung. For Dahrendorf whose works were greatly influenced by Marx's sociological foundation, "in every conflict, one party attacks and another defends. The defending party wants to retain and secure its position, while the attacking party has to fight it in order to improve its own condition" (Dahrendorf, 1959a: 126).

On his part, Burton notes that human conduct is driven by the search for protection, recognition, identity, and personal development. The failure of modern states, such as Nigeria to meet these needs, therefore, triggers conflicts of varied forms. According to Burton, the structural explanation for social conflicts is underscored by a state's inability to meet the fundamental needs of the people (cited in Rubenstein, 2001; Ramsbotham, et al, 2005, 68 – 77). For instance, the absence of security for lives and properties can ultimately lead to the emergence of non-state actors who are either determined to provide the security themselves or exploit the situation for selfish gains. This indeed explains the situation in Nigeria where the emergence of groups such as OPC, Bakassi Boys, IPOB, and several others are products of self-preservation in the face of mounting insecurity in the country. According to Ho-Won Jeong, the inability of a state to meet and preserve the 'identity needs' of a group can metamorphose into identity-based armed conflict (Ho-Won Jeong, 2010). Ho-Won Jeong's perspective, therefore, explains the emergence of diverse forms of ethnic nationalities groups such as IPOB, OPC, MEND, MASSOB, etc.

For Azar, Grievances emanating from a place of deprivation, denial of basic and crucial human needs as well as state's failure to redress those lead to sustained social conflicts (Azar, & Farah, 1981; Azar,

1990; Azar, 1991). Azar also blamed "structural inequality" normalized in political and economic realms as majorly responsible for the perpetuation of social conflicts. Loadenthal posits that viewing human nature as one that is underlined by need and self-actualization is inextricably vital to the understanding of conflicts from a structural perspective (Loadenthal, 2019). This is because oppression, marginalization, and socio-political and economic systems that are shaped by deprivation and denial of basic human needs lead to protracted conflicts.

Furthermore, Cultural Violence Theory theorized by Galtung emphasized "those aspects of culture...exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art...that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung, 1990: 291). Galtung further posited that the existence of 'power imbalances' and structure 'normalized' and sustained by the state give rise to conflicts of ethnic and religious nature (Althusser, 1970). In addition, Galtung draws attention to the nature of structural conflict, stating that:

There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances. Resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily

skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on. Above all the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed (Galtung, 1969:171).

For Galtung, the solution to structural violence will require constant spotlight and scrutiny of violent causing structures which will inextricably lead to the transformation of “structures pregnant with violence into less violent ones” (Galtung, 1985: 146). Galtung further argues that attaining a state of peace and tranquility in a state characterized by protracted conflict requires going beyond the mere cessation of hostilities (negative peace) to addressing the root causes of the violence (positive peace) (Galtung, 1988).

In line with Galtung’s submission above, it is therefore arguable that the existence of ‘power imbalances,’ state ‘normalized’ inequalities, and aspects of religion (fanatism) give rise to ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. The failure to address the structural issues has led to the perpetuation of the conflicts which have thus defied all efforts at resolving them.

Literature Review

Generally, the nature of conflict and its implication for social interaction has been explored by scholars of diverse backgrounds. In specific terms, the topic of

ethno-religious crises, causative factors, and consequences has also featured prominently in the lenses of scholars. With this in mind, this section will examine definitions of ethno-religious conflict, and conceptualize ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

For Holsti 1983:350, cited in Aremu, (2010: 550), conflict represents a “particular relationship between...rival factions within a state which implies subjective hostilities or tension manifested in subjective economic or military hostilities.” Relatedly, Coser (1998, as cited in Aremu, 2010: 550) sees conflict “as a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are to injure or eliminate their rivals.” On the other hand, according to Yakubu, (2005:19), ethno-religious conflict is said to occur when a conflict’s ultimate purpose is ethnic or religious in origin. Put differently, this is a situation where the relationship between and among adherents and members of one religion or ethnic group and other similar groups is characterized by mutual distrust, antagonism, and lack of cordiality. This is even more complex in countries with diverse ethnic and religious leanings (Salawu, 2010). Conflicts emanating from this origin are frequently linked to ethnic or religious sentiments arising from the quest to protect and advance the course and interest of one’s ethnicity or religion. It’s worth noting that ethnic and religious

prejudice is a common practice in Nigeria's social relations. All of this can lead to some forms of relative discrimination between members of different ethnic or religious groups based on different systems of socio-cultural and religious practices. As a result, relationships between people of different religions and ethnicity tend to be shaped by contextual discrimination, a lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion, and fear, as the history of intergroup relations among Nigeria's ethnic and religious groups has illustrated. Judging from the above, Salawu, (2010); Kadayifci-Orella, (2009) see ethno-religious conflicts as the clash of interests that involve members of different religions and ethnic groups that are characterized by disagreement, competition, violent clashes, and incompatible posturing by the groups involved.

The foregoing explains why, since 1980, 'ethno-religious' crises have remained a prominent feature in Nigeria's national life. It's thus clear that conflict perpetuates a state of rivalry and competition between groups whose interests intersect.

Scholars have linked the outbreak of ethno-religious crises to several factors. For instance, Anafi, (2004); Conversi, (1999); Idahosa & Akov, (2013), situate the outbreak of ethno-religious conflicts at the doorstep of bad governance, the elevation of certain religious or ethnic groups over others by the political system as well as the quest to attain dominant status by religious

and ethnic groups. Also, from the perspective of Ibrahim (2000:69), the struggle for political dominance and against exclusion, especially among the largest ethnic groups is at the root of ethno-religious and communal conflicts in Nigeria. Another strand of scholars who link ethno-religious conflicts to the failure of governmental institutions in Africa includes Obasanjo (1991), Anyang' Nyong'o (1991) & Msabaha (1991). To them, incessant conflicts stem from the inability of crucial institutions of national governance to effectively mediate conflict.

On the other hand, Machava, (2008); Duala-M'Bedy (1984); Fonkem (2013); Okoyo (1977); Cohen (1995); Ake (1985) conversely, linked ethno-religious crises to the disruption and disunity that characterised European colonial experiment in Africa. To them, the 'divide and rule' strategy of the British colonial administration created longstanding distrust and rivalry among diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria which has now snowballed into ethnic conflicts of unquantifiable proportion. In the words of Fonkem (2013), multifaceted conflicts bedeviling African countries are by-products of "Africa's past and, specifically, in the colonization and de-colonization processes." In the same vein, Cohen, (1995: 11) submitted that modern African states are products of colonial creation that came to be without regard for "regional diversities" thus culminating in

marginalization by the dominant powers. Consequently, the challenges created by colonialism and the flawed de-colonisation process were handed down to African states that emerged after independence. In effect, being an African country with a history of flawed colonial and decolonization processes, Nigeria therefore inherited and has been manifesting these consequences resulting in all shades of interethnic and communal conflicts. Indeed, the British colonial administration in Nigeria, which prioritized its economic interest over foisting equitable and sustainable political structure that will accommodate the interests and peculiarity of various groups did little to encourage cordial intergroup relations in postcolonial Nigeria.

Regrettably, each outbreak of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria usually comes at a huge cost. According to Babangida (2002:11), cited in Idahosa & Akov, (2013), the regular occurrence of conflicts linked to ethnic and religious backgrounds has given rise to “waste of enormous human and material resources in ethnically and religiously inspired violent encounter, clashes and even battles, threats to the security of life and properties, the heightening of the fragility of the economy and political process.” Condemning the incessant outbreak of ethno-religious conflicts in Plateau State in the early 2000s, Obasanjo lists the consequences to include: the destruction of lives and

properties, breakdown of law and order, displacement of citizens, and loss of foreign investments. He posited that:

“...hundreds have been killed with much more wounded or displaced from their homes on account of their ethnic or religious identification. Schooling for children has been disrupted and interrupted; business lost billions of naira and property worth much more destroyed...visitors and inventors have fled or are fleeing Plateau State and the neighbouring states have had their economies and social life disrupted and dislocated by the influx of internally displaced persons (Obasanjo, 2004 cited in Fawole & Bello 2011: 216).

According to Musa, Adamu, & Hasley, (2021), over 2000 lives were wasted during the February-May 2000 Sharia riot in Kaduna State alone. The onset of the 2000s in Nigeria witnessed the eruption of ethno-religious violence over the introduction of Sharia law (Islamic legal system) by most state governments in the north. Fears over its application to Christians in the affected states led to religious conflicts across several states.

In the same vein, Onwumah (2014), cited in Eze, (2021) identifies other consequences linked to the incessant outbreak of violence in Nigeria. He highlighted the damage done to critical national infrastructures, discourages foreign investors (which reduces Nigeria’s share of FDI), portray Nigeria in bad

light internationally, rapid reduction in productivity in agriculture and related sectors, and the displacement of thousands of citizens from their homes amongst others. As regards displacement of people, a recent Punch Newspaper's report indicated that over 2 million people were displaced in the North East (Punch 2018).

Ethno-Religious Conflict in Northern Nigeria: A Historical Background

The works of scholars across different fields have established that Nigeria is a hotbed of ethnic and religious conflicts (Abdulkadir, 2011; Sampson, 2012; Bagaji, 2012; Gyong & Ogbadoyi, 2013). However, the situation in Northern Nigeria in particular, with a reputation as a breeding ground for ethno-religious conflict in the country is most complex. From a historical perspective, the origin of crises of ethno-religious nature has been traced to Lord Lugard's amalgamation of 1914 which merged the Northern and Southern protectorates to form a single entity (Essien 2009: 153). Before this period, the two protectorates, with opposing characteristics and people, and different levels of development, were administered separately and would have potentially formed different countries. There is a general feeling that the 1914 unification resulted in the creation of a union of unequal, incompatible, and diverse ethnic groups with different traditional, cultural and religious histories. The

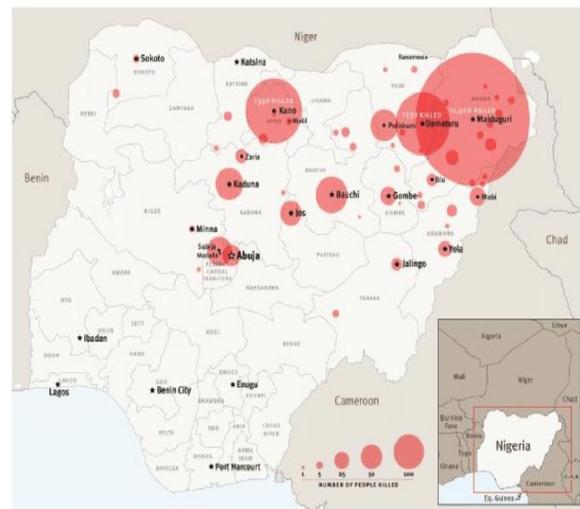
“unholy alliance,” says Bradat (1979), cited in Umaru, & Isaac, (2019) has resulted in unspoken competition embedded in intergroup relations in contemporary Nigeria society (Nnoli 1980). This pattern, according to Nnoli, is a product of unequal treatment of ethnic groups at the height of British colonialism with the north seen in several quarters as having been favoured by the British despite its backwardness in education, economic potentials and political awareness in comparison to the south. The political structure established by the British during the amalgamation aggravated the disconnect and set in motion conditions for endless contestations between the north and south. Hence, following independence, fierce competition, violent clashes, ethno-religious conflicts, and bloodshed have become a regular occurrence. Describing British colonial agenda, Harold Smith, who served as a colonial administrator in Nigeria affirmed that:

...Nigeria was my duty post, when we assessed Nigeria...we found in the Southern region: strength, intelligence, determination to succeed, well-established history, complex but focused life style, great hope, and aspirations...the East was good in business and technology, the West was good in administration and commerce, law and medicine but it was a pity we planned our agenda to give power at all cost to the Northerners (Okon, 2008, p.2).

Accordingly, Fearon & Laitin, (2003); Ojo, 2007; Ostien, 2009); Akpanika 2017, p. 69) submitted that ‘divide and rule,’ instituted by British colonial policies are behind the political crises, intergroup grievances, resentment, socio-economic disequilibrium and ethno-religious conflicts that have characterized post-independent Nigeria. With regard to intractable ethno-religious conflict in northern Nigeria, as Bahir succinctly puts it, the once accommodating and caring nature of the region has been transformed into an aggressive hotbed of “violence and uncontrollable destruction of lives and property” (Bahir 2005, cited in Umaru, & Isaac, 2019: 139). The emergence of terror groups in the mode of Boko Haram and bandits has created a vast array of ungoverned spaces which have made the north, unsafe, dangerous, and unstable.

Scholars have identified various factors responsible for the incessant outbreak of ethnic and religious crises in northern Nigeria (Ostien, 2009). First, a school of thought heaps the blame on fear of domination and mutual suspicion among members of various ethnic and religious groups in the north. In this connection, inter-group conflict pitching indigenes against settlers is widespread across the North. For instance, from Plateau (Jos) and Taraba to Benue and Kaduna States, clashes between indigenes and settlers have continued to trigger violent conflicts resulting in destruction, killings, and displacement. The influx of pastoralist

from the core north to Middle Belt states have created a situation in which indigenous people (mostly Christians) are locked in an endless battle with settlers (majorly Muslims) over land (for grazing and farming), water, political rights, and religious freedom.



Nigeria map showing ethno-religious conflict endemic areas. Source: Human Right Watch

Regarding the historical and ongoing ethnic and religious tension in Kaduna State, Michael; Egwemi; Boniface, (2021) links it to the growing fears of political dominance and religious freedom in the state. There is an existence of mutual distrust and anxiety between Muslim faithful and Christian adherents over what they see as potential Christian/Muslim domination. Though no up-to-date statistic on religious composition in the area, the north is dominated by Muslims, however, Middle Belt states

such as Plateau, Taraba, Benue, and to a lesser extent Kaduna are mostly Christians (Pierri, and Barkindo, 2016).

Muslim fundamentalists have also expressed fears over westernization. On his part, Falaki (1988) cited in Michael et al, (2022) posits that rivalry between the two groups also manifests in the political sphere. Consequently, Muslims are not known to give their votes to a non-Muslim candidate for fear of a government alien to the norms, values, and aims of Islam. On the other hand, Christian fundamentalists and activists also express fear over what they term the Islamization agenda of the Muslims located in a possible extension of Sharia law on non-Muslims. Chabal, (2009) in the same vein, link ethno-religious crises in Kaduna State to land-related disagreement between southern Kaduna Christian indigenes and their settlers' Muslim Fulani counterparts. This is also the situation in neighbouring Plateau State and other parts of Northern Nigeria where ethno-religious-related crises occur regularly.

According to Kwaja, (2011), the constant outbreak of ethno-religious conflicts in the state, pitching mainly the Anaguta, Afiere, and Berom (Christian-dominated ethnic groups), against the mostly Hausa and Fulani Muslims are attributable to the struggle over land, fear of religious domination and political power. In the view of Usman, (1987), the exploitation of ethnic and

religious fault-lines for personal interest by the political class and elites has added a dangerous dimension to the fragile ethno-religious identity of the north. According to Nwagwu, (2016), the fundamental factors in indigenous and settlers' struggles are located in the uneven redistribution of societal advantages and unhealthy competition for scarce economic resources, cultural heritage syndrome, fear of religious dominance, and distrust.

Similarly, the weaponisation of poverty and deliberate impoverishment of the people so as to perpetuate political and economic status quo in addition to low investment in education, high birth rate, social exclusion, and feudal tradition that is prevalent across the north have continued to produce the social forces that have sustained the trend of violence of ethnic, religious and communal background.

Research has shown that dangerous ethno-religious conflicts began to dominate the north from the late 1970s and early 1980s. With the passage of time, it has, unfortunately, become a rather constant threat and sad norm. Examples of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in the northern part of Nigeria abound. For instance, the December 18, 1980, Maitasine religious riot in Kano which witnessed the death of 4,000 people (including the founder, Marwa) and massive destruction of properties was the first major religious crisis in Nigeria (Adesoji, 2011);

Okwueze: 2003:143). Masterminded by Muhammadu Marwa, a Cameroonian resident in Kano, Maitasine, spread anti-government and secular messages and unleashed religiously motivated violence that would go on to plant faith-based discord between Christians and Muslims in the region. Seen by his followers (mostly young, uneducated, and poor) as an Islamic reformer (*mujaddid*), Marwa condemned western education, technological innovation, and culture and referred to those who take part in them as “infidel” (Adesoji, 2011; Isichei, 1987). Maitasine’s core ideology and *modus Operandi* has portrayed it as a precursor of contemporary Boko Haram.

Immediately following Maitasine were disturbing and destructive ethno-religious crises that erupted in Jimeta Yola, Gombe, Ilorin, Bauchi town, Kano, and Zango-Kataf (Kaduna State) in 1984, 1985, 1986, 1991, 1991, and 1992 respectively (all in Northern Nigeria). The return to democratic rule in 1999, following decades of military dictatorship, against popular expectation, resulted in the eruption of even more damaging ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria particularly. The introduction of civilian leadership was said to have awoken passive agitations, intergroup resentment, and revolt against socioeconomic exploitation that favoured the political class. The existence of ethnic and religious distrust further gave voice to these conditions.

The introduction of Sharia, the Islamic legal system, which among other things, permit the prosecution of offenders under Islamic laws, rather than the conventional courts, first in Zamfara State, and subsequently in several other states in the north, kick-started a new but dangerous episode of ethno-religious crises in the north Eze, (2021). The circle of violence that followed sharia has been described by many as the most single destructive violence in Nigeria since the civil war, 1967 – 1970. Sharia-related crises (known locally as sharia riots) broke out in several northern states including Kano, Zamfara, Kaduna, and Plateau between 2000 and 2005. One remarkable feature of the Sharia riots was the fact that for the first time in Nigeria’s history of ethno-religious violence, there were reprisal attacks in other parts of the country where victims killed in the north hailed from. In Abia State (South East), the return of corpses of Igbos Killed in the north triggered reprisal attacks on northerners in the state where many were reported killed with survival seeking refuge in military installations. Meanwhile, the Governor of Abia State at the time, Orji Uzor-Kalu warned that Islamic fundamentalists and extremists in the north should desist from further killing Igbos residing in the north at the slightest provocation, even when Igbos were not directly linked or responsible for violence and carnage. Speaking as the governor of Abia State

whose citizens residing in the north were victims of the riots, Kalu threatened that “Nobody should kill an Igbo man again in the name of religion...there will be retaliation” (The New Humanitarian, 2000).

Meanwhile, the greatest form of ethno-religious violence in northern Nigeria crept into the national consciousness in 2009, having been incubated for over a decade. The outbreak of Boko Haram insurgency in some northern states (simultaneous attacks on police stations in Bauchi, Borno, Yobe states) in 2009 signposted the start of Nigeria’s long history with sectarian violence, suicide bombing, terrorism, abduction, attacks on religious places, and the disruption of productive activities in the northeast. According to the BBC, Boko Haram preaches an interpretation of Islam that renders participation in any political or social action connected with Western civilization un-Islamic or “haram.” Voting in elections, wearing shirts and other forms of western clothing, and having a secular education (BBC, 2016) were all considered to be “haram” and against the will of Allah. Its Arabic and official name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*, translates to “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad” (BBC, 2016). The escalation of violence has seen Boko Haram and its splinter groups attack or bomb the UN building in Abuja, Police Headquarters in Abuja, Military and police barracks,

schools, churches, farmlands, and several others. According to UNDP, attacks and violence linked to Boko Haram have killed over 350, 000 people and displaced millions (Reuters 2021), especially in the northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. In recent times, it has extended attacks to neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Niger Republic, and Chad in the Chad Basin region.

Furthermore, ethno-religious crises in Nigeria may also occur as a reaction to external events or over comments deemed blasphemous towards Allah. Examples include the 2002 Miss World Beauty Pageant and the Danish Cartoon. More than 100 lives were lost in 2002 over Miss World beauty held in Kaduna in northern Nigeria (Agbo, 2018). In 2006, protests by Muslims in northern Nigeria over the Danish cartoon which depicted Prophet Muhammad, and retaliation over the killing of southerners in the north during the crises left dozens dead (New York Times, 2006). Another example of an external event triggering ethno-religious conflict in northern Nigeria took place in 2001 following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States of America. Muslims across some northern cities (Kaduna, Kano, Gusau, and Bauchi) attacked and destroyed churches and homes of Christians while matching in solidarity with Osama Bin Laden who became a cult hero of some sort Bodi,

Abbare & Leawat, (2021). The crisis that followed claimed lives in the region.

The Case for New Resolution Strategies

Ethno-religious violence in northern Nigeria has been a major hindrance to the region's development, with the insecurity of lives and property continuing to be the norm. The repeated outbreak of these ethno-religious conflicts, as well as their effects on the lives of Nigerians and the socio-economic sphere of the country, has always posed massive problems to the government. The government has thus developed one form of management technique or another to bring them under control (Salawu, 2010). Unfortunately, these techniques have not solved the problem, hence, their intractable nature.

However, scholars have identified numerous channels of intervention and resolution commonly deployed by the Nigerian state to solve ethno-religious conflicts. First, the deployment of security agencies, comprising the military and the police to "restore peace" seems to be the most commonly used strategy. Scholars such as Omorogbe & Omohan (2005), Oromareghake & Akpator (2005), and Salawu, (2010) have restated this fact. This has been the case in Jos, Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi, Maiduguri, Shagamu, and other flashpoints of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria where the deployment of a combined teams of military and police (often code-named Joint Security Task Force)

to quell conflicts is often ineffective and counterproductive. The coercive or military approach, however, is often accompanied by allegations of rape, extrajudicial killing, human rights abuses, and other related vices associated with military operations in Nigeria (Omorogbe and Omohan, 2005; 556). The security forces (riot police and the military) are often removed once a semblance of peace (negative peace) seems to have been achieved only to be returned when the next crisis happens. This approach corroborates Galtung's 'negative peace' framing of conflict cessation pattern without corresponding effort to address its root cause(s) (Galtung, 1988). The shortcoming of this approach could be seen in the fact that despite an extensive military operation that quelled Marwa's maitatsine religious riot in the early 1980s, it did not stop the underlying ideology and the emergence of similar groups such as the contemporary Boko Haram in the region. Reaffirming the inefficiency in this approach, Oromareghake and Akpator (2005) noted that:

...the problem with the deployment of security forces that are not backed by intensive mediation effort is that it unnecessarily prolongs the stay of such security forces deployed in different parts of Nigeria. This is because the units of mobile police or armies frequently deployed to quell disturbances in Nigeria have neither the mandate nor the training to act as conflict

resolution facilitator (p. 601).

Secondly, governments at both federal and state levels are known to set judicial panels of inquiry to probe the causes, identify perpetrators and make recommendations immediately following each conflict. However, even when reports are turned in, the government hardly acts on them. Major examples include the Kafanchan riot of 1987 and several Jos riots whose white papers, though submitted to the government, have neither been implemented nor made public. On the failure of these approaches, Omohan (2005) observed that:

...the main reasons for the poor performance of the often-used conflict management mechanisms are poor logistics, delay in deployment of troops to the crises areas, lack of cooperation by parties to the conflicts, non-implementation of whitepaper or recommendations submitted to the government by the panel of inquiry, etc (P.577).

Commenting further, Kwaja, (2011) noted at least 16 public commissions of enquiries have been launched by various governments to look into the incessant outbreak of ethno-religious in Jos (Plateau State). But findings are never made public nor are identified perpetrators brought to book. To make matters worse,

Federal and state governments as well as independent groups have frequently worked at cross-purposes (Kwaja, 2011: 2).

Owing to the failure of all current government intervention models to resolve the diverse crises in Nigeria, there is the need to formulate competent conflict resolution strategies capable of addressing several of the country's troubling and persistent crises. One fundamental flaw of conflict resolution strategies in Nigeria is that they are all reactive instead of being proactive. To stem the tide of incessant conflicts, governments at various levels must lay emphasis on prevention rather than reacting after outbreaks. Thus having adequate security around crucial flashpoints, rather than waiting for an ethno-religious crisis before deploying them will go a long way to prevent the outbreak of conflicts. This is because the presence of the military in an area for instance has proven to deter would-be trouble makers.

Secondly, Nigeria is a deeply religious country. Religious leaders should work together with their members to douse tension and imbibe tolerance, peace, and love of neighbours which their religions preach. The best way of achieving this is to expand the activities of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which has so far underperformed. Leaders of ethnic groups who are often at the centre of ethno-religious crises should be included in NIREC dialogue

and peacebuilding activities. This is against the backdrop of the fact that being deeply religious people, Nigerians are known to respect, trust and obey their religious leaders who they see as the representative of the Supreme Being rather than the government. Years of broken promises, corruption and exploitation have engineered a massive distrust and suspicion of the government and its policies.

Third, according to Azar, “security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation” Azar, (1991: 93) are integral to solving structural social problems. Thus, the provision of basic human needs and equal access to political and economic resources to all Nigerians, particularly the downtrodden will go a long way in solving the problem of incessant ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in Northern Nigeria where it is a regular occurrence.

Fourth, resolution strategies currently applied to ethno-religious conflicts in the country reinforce ‘negative peace.’ Those strategies – deployment of police and the military, setting up committees to investigate the causes of conflicts, etc –have often prioritised ending hostilities without addressing the root cause of conflicts which is structural. It is therefore necessary to apply Galtung’s principle of ‘positive peace’ which goes beyond the immediate causes of conflicts to develop new resolution models

for ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria (Galtung, 1988).

The government must be proactive in using an early warning system to check the potential outbreak of conflict before they erupt into major ethno-religious violence. In addition, the government must embark on a campaign of reorientation of citizens, especially in rural areas on the importance of peace and coexistence. Agencies such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and National Orientation Agency (NOA) should be charged with this responsibility.

Moreso, in line with Dahrendorf, (1959a) finding that conflicts always pitch the attacking party, (fighting to improve its condition) against the defending party (bent on securing the existing condition of things), thus, identified oppressors in Nigeria needs to start yielding to the demands of the oppressed as sustaining the status quo will only perpetuate structural conflicts. This aligns with Marx’s position on class struggle (Marx, 1848).

Another crucial factor to the development of new conflict resolution strategy is the need for the Nigerian state to revamp its security apparatus and its ability to protect vulnerable citizens beyond what has been the norm. Burton and Ho-Won Jeong had identified the failure of the modern states, such as Nigeria to play its ‘protective’ role and preserve the ‘identity needs’ of

oppressed groups as the trigger of conflicts of varied forms (cited in Rubenstein, 2001; Ramsbotham, et al, 2005, 68 – 77; Ho-Won Jeong's, 2010). Consequently, Nigeria must further develop its capacity to guarantee safety, right to existence, and personal development which is some of the most fundamental needs of all people. As a way of example, improving Nigeria's capacity to meet the security needs of its citizens and address structural imbalances in socio-economic and political spheres would address the core reasons behind the agitations by IPOB, OPC, MEND, MASSOB, and several other such groups. This is because the conduct of these groups are driven by their search for fundamental needs – security, equality, and justice.

It is a given that the Nigerian state is one characterized by structural inequality, normalized group deprivation, and domination of the poor by the super-rich and political class. In line with Galtung, Azar, and Loadenthal models, the structural conflict this anomaly has caused can only be addressed through inclusivity, equal political rights, religious tolerance, education, equal distribution of resources, provision of medical services, employment, and security (Galtung, 1969; Azar, 1990, 1991; Loadenthal, 2019).

Closely related is the need to address all structural issues at the root of diverse inequality in Nigeria. According to Loadenthal, (2019), structural inequality

fosters structural violence and a resultant reactionary force from those seeking a remedy. As a result, the Nigerian government should embark on reforms that will change the political structure by ensuring that elections are free and fair. The current situation where leaders emerge from a flawed electoral process alienates the people from genuinely playing a role in determining who their leaders would be. Also, inclusive political representation is vital in this regard. The Igbo ethnic group for example has been crying political marginalization over its inability to produce a Nigerian president since 1966. This perhaps is behind the loud agitation for secession in the southeast. Nigeria must engender an inclusive political culture where every citizen and ethnic group will feel belonged, safe, and valued. This will reduce unnecessary agitations and bad blood that give rise to violence.

In addition, the gap between the rich and poor is on a humongous scale. A study compiled by Brookings Institute in 2018, following a projection by the World Poverty Clock revealed that in spite of its huge resources and wealth, Nigeria is the poverty capital of the world, with an estimated 87 million of its population (out of 643 million people globally) living in extreme poverty (on less than \$1.90 a day) (CNN, 2018). This situation is akin to Marx's 'class struggle' between the have and have not. This situation is even

more pronounced in the north where poverty, hunger and insecurity reign supremely. The government therefore should work on wealth redistribution by creating employment, business friendly environments for investors, fighting corruption, taxing the rich appropriately and effective social welfare schemes for the downtrodden.

It is also important for leaders of ethnic groups to meet regularly to build bridges of trust, friendship, and understanding. Such programmes and intergroup dialogue should be made to include high-ranking traditional rulers (who have the trust of their people). More importantly, there is a need for a constitutional amendment that will grant Nigerians from any part of the country citizenship of any state or local government where they have resided over some years. Such a move will make settlers stakeholders in their places of residence. The current provision section 147 that stipulates that one must be an indigene of a given state to be appointed a minister to represent such state in the Federal Executive Council elevates conflicts over indigeneship and settler debate.

Crucially, a good sense of the history of a recurring conflict is a major requirement for effective peacebuilding. According to Njemanze, it is “through the appropriate application of history that peacemakers can achieve justice, pacification, and reconciliation,” Njemanze, (2000: 12), in line with

this, peacemakers and conflict resolution experts usually charged with the resolution of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria must understand the historical context underpinning of such conflicts. In other words, experts appointed to be members of judicial panels of inquiries must be well-schooled in the history of the conflicts over which they adjudicate or mediate.

There should be educational reform across all states, especially in the north. In that regard emphasis on peace and unity should be a part of the focus of education from a tender age. This is indeed imperative given that Nigeria currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world (10 million). Unfortunately, most of these children are found in the north where they enrolled in the Alma Jiri system.

Also, the government at all levels should de-emphasize the use of coercive force in resolving conflicts. Thus non-violent techniques should be taught and recognized.

Nigeria has huge diaspora citizens including experts in some of the most rewarding and celebrated fields of human endeavours. Using their exposure and experience, they should work together with the government and bring innovations from other countries that can help douse tension and clashes.

In the end, good governance, inclusive political space, and protection of minority rights are crucial to peacebuilding in a religious and ethnic diverse nation

like Nigeria. Government at all levels, Civil Society Organisations, and Non-Governmental organisations (NGO) must strive to ensure the effective resolution of ethno-religious conflicts that will lead to the enthronement of positive peace across Nigeria.

Fake news that creates panic, leading to violence should be checked and culprits severely punished. It is also important to use top-level technologies in the fight against insurgency, banditry, and outbreak of violence. There should be constitutional reform that will ensure inclusion and religious circularity in all states.

Conclusion

This study has examined the prevalence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria with a particular focus on the northern part of the country. The task of building a united nation out of a highly diverse country like Nigeria is no doubt daunting. Welding the over 250 ethnic groups into a united and formidable nation has proved challenging since independence in 1960. Of particularly challenging has been the intractable ethno-religious conflict, especially in the north.

Using Structural Conflict and Structural Violence theories by Karl Marx and Johan Galtung (with additional theoretical perspectives from the works of Azar, Burton, and Dahrendorf), the paper revealed that structural violence, that manifests through struggle over political interest, resources, fear of religious

domination, external religious occurrence (as in the cases of Danish cartoon and protest over US invasion of Afghanistan), or even allegations of blasphemy and a host of inequalities are the major triggers of ethno-religious conflicts in the country.

Beginning with the history of ethno-religious violence and arriving at its causes, consequences, and the failure of current resolution strategies, the reader is treated to a host of analytical framings that characterise structural violence in Nigeria. In all, new conflict resolution strategies proposed in this study reflect the product of findings that could be central to the resolution of ethno-religious and insurrectionary conflicts in Nigeria.

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