



Impact Assessment of Ethno – Religious Conflicts on National Integration in Nigeria since Independence

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(Received: May-2020; Accepted: August-2020; Published: December-2020)



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ABSTRACT

This study on “Impact Assessment of Ethno-Religious Conflicts on National Integration in Nigeria: From 1960 to date” examined Nigeria’s two major collective glitches of ethnic/ethnicity and religious conflicts since independence and their implications on national integration and socio-economic development. It x-rayed both the immediate and remote factors typically responsible for the frequent resurgences of ethnic and religious conflicts that have bedevilled the country. The objective is to highlight the fact that resurgences of ethno–religious conflicts in the country have negatively affected the nation’s integration and developmental process. The historical methodology adopted for this research involved the use of only secondary sources which involved both published and unpublished works on ethnic/ethnicity and religious conflicts in Nigeria. In fact, evidence continues to show that Nigeria’s experiment with freedom of worship, association and federalism as enshrined in the constitution has compromised national unity, political stability and development. The study submits that ethnicity and religion in Nigeria can be effectively utilized to promote harmony and a peaceful co-existence. To this end, the research recommends national policy of inclusion, equity, tolerance and justice for all.

Keywords: Nigeria; Ethno – Religious Conflicts; National Integration; Independence.

INTRODUCTION

There is strong historical evidence according to Yahaya Aliyu (2006) that from pre-colonial period to date, there have been varying dimensions and manifestations of recurring socio-political conflicts in Nigeria which are shorthand expressions of the general happenings across African continent in recent years (Aliyu 2006). Nigeria being a heterogeneous or plural and secular state that is defined by cultural – institutional diversities of ethnic groups of various populations (Otite 1999) has over

four hundred ethnic groups and several religious groups and sects that practice majorly Christianity, mainly in the South and Middle Belt; Islam, in the North, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) in every part of the country as the most predominant religious faiths (Otite 1999; Uji 2006; Emeng 2014; Odey 2018; Emeng 218). Admittedly, Nigeria is a very complex country with the behaviour and relationships of individuals and groups determined by the imperatives of cultural symbols and strategic social institutions (Otite 1999).

The two most popular religions in Nigeria today-Christianity and Islam are alien to the country (Anene 1999). "They were both imported into the country at various points and dates in history" (Uji 2006, p. 28). They both had their birth in the Middle East, Christianity in Palestine and Islam in Arabia (Anene 1999). Although for more than one thousand years according to J. C. Anene (1999), the two monotheistic religions have been rivals yet they have many things in common. He further states that, the two religions possess each a book which their votaries regard as holy and guide of all mankind, a revelation from God, unity of God, the immortality of the soul and a revelation of God and time. These two alien faiths largely succeeded in displacing traditional African religion.

One recurring decimal in Nigeria's national life since political independence on 1st October, 1960 has been the incidence of socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts which have not only negatively impacted upon the nation's integration and nation building processes, but have eroded the country's resources, fractured her economy, becloud the peoples vision, benumbed their confidence and constitutes a serious threat to national security (Imbua 2006). Resurgences of either ethnic, religious or ethno-religious conflicts especially from 1999 when Nigeria changed from military to democratic government have assumed frightening dimensions with high toll on life and property (Aliyu 2006) that manifest in "mass killings, dislocation of people and loss of property" (Gwamna 2006, p. 34). That, not only are the resurgences of either ethnic/ethnicity, religious or ethno-religious conflicts fought by those who had hitherto lived peacefully, they are rather becoming increasingly violent by the day, soiling inter-group relations and national integration with penchant for attracting reprisal actions outside the immediate environment (Aliyu 2006).

Further elucidating on the nature of these conflicts reoccurrences, Yahaya Aliyu (2006) again observed that, scholars and public commentators of western liberal persuasion have often presented them as ethnic, religious or ethno-religious conflicts which are the inevitable outcome of the "clash of civilizations" or ethnic groups or both, stemming from the complexities and high level of concentration of such groups as found in Nigeria. This also according to A. Muhammad Abdulrasheed (2006) implies the inevitability of interaction among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. That, the trend and dimensions of interactions have consequently raised religion and ethnicity to the forefront of governance, as both have become potent forces in social, political and economic administration of the country with their attendant implication that, ethnicity and religion have become one of the conflicts generating cleavages Nigeria has to contend with.

Generally, throughout history, there is hardly any country, sovereign state or society the world over that is completely devoid of ethnic, religious, ethno-religious or other forms of social conflicts. Contemporary Nigeria since independence is not an exception as the years 1861 and 1960 would forever be remembered in the country's historiography for two reasons: - the declaration of Lagos as "Crown Colony in 1861, which signalled the beginning of alien rule in Nigeria" (Okoro and Omeje 2016, p. 3), and the lowering down of the British flag- Union Jack in 1960 that granted political independence to Nigeria. Since then, according to Apex Apeh (2006), the problem of

national integration and nation building has remained a major challenge because both the various ethnic and religious groups found in Nigeria have been at war with each other as to who gets the upper hand in the state and national matters. They have been living uneasily together as demonstrated in the serial outbreaks of ethnic and religious violence in the past (Echa 2006).

According to experts in conflict studies, most ethnic and religious conflicts or rivalries in Nigeria stem from the structural imbalance of the larger Nigerian polity, which has pitched many ethnic and religious groups in positions of perpetual disadvantage (Akpomovie and Forae 2006; Odey 2008a; Odey 2008b; Odey & Young 2008; Nwagbara 2009). They further state that, 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 as a system that has fallen short of expectations of the people.

NIGERIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

Nigeria since independence is synonymous in principle to postcolonial Nigeria which “is an amalgam of several peoples, cultures, kingdoms, empires, clans, village – groups of pre-colonial states and past civilizations” (Erim 2000, pp. 1-2), “that were in various stages of development” (Barkindo 1993, p. xi). In fact, post-colonial Nigeria was one of the African countries that, from the 1940s, embarked on a serious campaign for self-determination, decolonisation and independence that was later achieved on 1st October 1960, nearly after a hundred years of British colonial rule (Ejitu 2018). The country came into existence in 1914, following the amalgamation of the two British protectorates of the North and South by Sir Frederick Lugard, the first Governor-General of Nigeria (Crowder 11). Although the name Nigeria was coined after River Niger by Flora Shaw in *London Times* of 8 January, 1897 by suggesting that “the several British protectorates in the Niger be known collectively as Nigeria”, it did not have British government official approval until July, 1899 (Otite 1999).

Post-colonial Nigeria is located between latitude 4° 20^l and 14° 30 East, (Otite 1999). It is bordered on the north by Sahara Desert, south by Gulf of Guinea, an arm of the Atlantic Ocean, (Udo 1980). It has a geographical space of 923,768 square kilometres, a coastline of over 700 kilometres with a distance of 1,040 kilometres straight from the coast to the northern limits which consist of great diversities of vegetation, ecologies, economies and occupations (Otite 1999). The swampy mangrove on the coastal areas changes to evergreen rain equatorial forest and thins off into savannah grassland, desert-like conditions at the northern limits. Outside the Niger Delta and the coastal swamps and creeks, the post-colonial Nigerian landmass consists essentially of a low plateau of about 600 meters (2,000 feet) above sea level (Udo 1980). Except in the rugged range of hills along the Nigerian – Cameroun borders, where there is no major physical barrier to the easy movement of people (Udo 1980). According to the 2006 Population Census, Nigeria’s population was about one hundred and sixty million (160, 000,000) people (2006 Population Census).

BACKGROUND TO NIGERIA’S CREATION AS A SOVEREIGN STATE

Until the 19th century when the British began to make their political in-roads to this part of the world, the geographical expanse today called Nigeria consisted of different kingdoms, empires, nationalities and states, (both mini and mega) with well organised political systems, identities and symbols existing independently (Eteng 2012; Okoi 2012; Okoi 2018a; Okoi 2018a). The ‘mega’ states consisted of extensive

empires and kingdoms established by Hausa and Kanuri speaking people of Northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate that ruled Northern Savannah, the kingdoms of Ife and Benin with the most recognised and accomplished art in the world, the Yoruba Empire of Oyo with well organised system of checks and balances; and the city states of Niger Delta grown partly in response to European demands for slaves and later palm oil (Eteng 2012).

The mini-states, on the other hand, consisted of the largely politically decentralised Igbo speaking peoples of the south-east that provided the famous Igbo – Ukwu bronze and terracotta, the small ethnic groups of Plateau and the descendants of those that created the famous Nok terracotta (Crowder 11). The states both mini and mega were, however, relatively stable with sound socio-political settings till the amalgamation on January 1914 to create Nigeria (Eteng 2012). The idea of amalgamating the different ethnic groups under one political administrative unit (Nigeria), dates back to the Niger or Selborne Committee's decision of 1898 (Erim 1981), which recommended that, the Colony of Lagos with its Yoruba hinterland under the Colonial Office should by 1900 formally become the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos. Secondly, that, the Niger Coast Protectorate comprising the Bights of Benin and Biafra with their hinterland under the foreign office should by 1900 become the protectorate of Southern Nigeria and thirdly, that what later became Northern Nigeria under the Royal Niger Company should become a protectorate also by 1900.

Meanwhile, the Royal Niger Company, empowered by the British Crown had made their debut in 1886 to the ethnic nations of Nigeria. Their major mission was to trade in all the territories of the Niger basin (Ozumba 2012). Other reasons which informed the British expansionist adventure included mere curiosity search for markets and raw materials as well as the mission to civilise and Christianise the people. The coming of the Royal Niger Company with their explorations and trading paved way for the British control of the hitherto disparate nations that now makes up Nigeria. With Sir Frederick Lugard's coming as first British High Commissioner for the Northern Protectorate in 1900, the British took control of the Niger Basin area. While the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria administered by Ralph Moore with its headquarters in Calabar (Unya 2019) was originally enacted in 1893 as Niger Coast Protectorate. It became amalgamated with Lagos Colony in 1906, administered by Sir Walter Egerton under the title, "Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria" (Ozumba 2012, p. 97). Thus, the historical journey of Nigeria as a single geo-political entity began in 1914 with the amalgamation of the North and Southern Protectorates by Frederick Lord Lugard (Oтите 1999).

CAUSAL FACTORS OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Much has been said and written on the debilitating causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigerian Society (Akpomovie and Forae 2006). First, according to Wilfred Terlumun Uji (2006), manipulation of religion by the nation's political elites, religious intolerance and fundamentalism, extreme doctrinal interpretation given to certain issues in religion have made religion a dangerous weapon for national integration, instability and social crisis. He further states that, religious extremism has been the actual bane of the social crisis the Nigerian nation has witnessed. That extremism manifests itself in fanatical and dogmatic beliefs as to what is sacred and profane. Bigotry and intolerance take ascendancy over rational and logical thinking as well as the need for peaceful co-existence and interruption, qualities and attributes which are supposed to be the true hallmarks of every religion. To M. S. Audu (2006),

ethno-religious conflicts are caused in Nigeria from the interactions of individuals who have partly incompatible ends.

For Akpomuvie and Forae (2006), ethnic and religious conflicts are stem from the structural imbalance of the larger Nigerian polity, which has pitched many ethnic and religious groups in positions of perpetual disadvantage. Widespread injustice in the polity occasioned by the feeling of alienation, powerlessness and the psychological disorientation stemming from environmental degradation which provide a common ground for status and class consciousness, manifest in the form of agitation or rebellion against each other causes ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Joint task force of the police, army and the navy patrolling the waterways or inland ways, outright attack on communities with sophisticated weapons and the declaration of a state of emergency in affected areas always cause ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

MANIFESTATIONS OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

Like other societies where the phenomenon of conflicts is endemic, ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria have been a handmaid of the process of state formation and consolidation. The incorporation and subsequent consolidation of Nigeria as a colonial state marked the beginning of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts (Okoro and Omeje 2016). According to Oyeneye, Onyenwenu and Olosunde (2001) ethno-religious conflicts or rivalries among the various ethnic and religious groups of Nigeria evolved from the unevenness in social, economic and political development of the component units of the federation (Naseri 2017a; Naseri 2017b). That, the early contact of the Yoruba with European missionaries and traders put them in an advantageous position in Nigerian commerce, politics and senior positions in the federal civil service. The southern Igbo and Yoruba were also advanced in western education unlike the northern Hausa – Fulani, which made the northerners also fear domination by the southerners.

The large size of the Northern Region with Islam as their main religion and its unity as a single force also threatens the southern elites that even the first political parties that were formed were largely dominated by one group or another. For instance, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG) and the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC). The nationalists from the three regions who became the avant-garde of the struggle against imperial rule took the issue of territory, religion and regional locations as given. One major problem from the structure was how to seam an integrated national entity out of the disparate groupings whose leaders saw ethnic-religious groups and other divisions as an advantage to themselves.

This however opened or exposed the ethno-religious politics of Nigeria and began to take the character of a tussle between three giants – the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo with each considering itself a state within a state. Thus, the neo-colonial elitist tussle rested upon three dominant political parties – NPC, AG and NCNC and many others formed in the wake of minority ethnic chauvinism. Corroborating this fact, Sa'ad Abubakar observed that, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1961) and the NCNC in 1951 was so strong in Lagos and the entire Western region where he won a seat in the Western House of Assembly and had a working majority to form government. But, because the NCNC leader, Nnamdi Azikiwe was Igbo, the newly formed Action Group, a predominantly Yoruba party scuttle that possibility by enticing some Yoruba NCNC members to defect to AG. Eventually, AG formed the

first regional government in the West with a Yoruba, Obafemi Awolowo, as premier. This episode historically marked a regrettable turning point in the history of ethno-religious conflicts and parliamentary democracy in Nigeria.

According to Lloyd (1974), this however started in pre-independence era as ethnic, religious and cultural groupings to further protect the interest of major ethnic groups. The challenge radiated by politics amongst these groups galvanised the minorities into party formulation and organisation. These parties, however, did not transcend their original purposes of the existence of satisfying parochial ethnic whims and caprices. At independence, the parties continued not as instruments of national unity and integration, but as platforms upon which ethnic conflicts, rivalries and competition for political power and national resources were vigorously pursued (Nnoli 1978). Thus, Sklar (1967) contends that the political leaders used ethnicity and ethnic sentiments as tools for advancing their personal and political ambition while leading their people to believe that they were fighting for their ethnic cause. While Adekanye (1993) is of the opinion that the elites are a group of privileged people competing among themselves for more than ethnic interests but who would not mind invoking the loyalty of their groups.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS ON NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Religion according to A. O. Odigie (2016) is supposed to be a unifying factor as well as providing a viable context for national integration. This feat has not been achieved in Nigeria since independence as religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims have paralysed many societies and communities in Nigeria, resulting in the displacement of citizens who, in some cases, seek refuge away from their communities (Nzuanke and Ogbadu, 2018, pp. 35-36). He further states that the conflicts have been carried to schools, mostly higher institutions. This wave of religious disturbance arising from disagreement between adherents of the two religions is an indication that religious conflicts are ill-wind that blows no one any good, while according to Nnoli (1978) ethnicity or sectionalism is expressed in the provision of social infrastructure and amenities. In other words, he referred to the way and manner in which the Northern oligarchy had exploited their position of power to allocate a disproportionate amount of resources and infrastructure to the North in flagrant disregard for the aspirations of the Southerners. It does not allow the development of committed and united bureaucracy in Nigeria, which is a *sin qua non* for national integration (Nwabughuogu 2009).

Ethno-religious skirmishes or contentions in the Nigerian state promote resourcefulness. It averts chauvinism among groups (Nwabughuogu 2009). Ethno-religious conflicts or rivalries promote the problem of integration which had been how to link the central government with the component states government to achieve a value-consensus that will propel the developmental effort of the states. The January 1966 putsch was an anticipated outburst of impregnated situation with unprecedented disaffection. Events even on the eve of the putsch reveal the Nigeria Federation as a state beclouded in pandemonium, disarray and perpetually at war with itself (Nwabughuogu 2009)

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Nigeria since independence has perceived series of ethnic and religious conflicts. Some of these conflicts according to scholars were/are as a result of the way and manner the colonial state was created and the two great religions imported into the country. The paper however observed that, the existence of different ethnic and

religious groups in the country does not and should not necessarily lead to ethno-religious conflicts, but rather, the incompatibility of the people's social, political values and traditions that makes it difficult for those groups to arrive at mutually acceptable mechanisms of resolving disagreements.

The paper recommends by way of settlement that, the Nigerian government should address the more fundamental issues of pervasive poverty and diversify the economy away from reliance on petroleum oil. Secondly, according to David Lishilinimle Imbua (2006), Nigerians must emulate the Japanese who do not consider themselves a religious people but put a high premium on social harmony. Like Japan, David Imbua (2006), further states that, Nigerians must de-emphasize religious antagonism that the experience of the "Asian Tiger" - Japan could be a guide post to the hills where religious conflicts and declining moral values will give way to national integration and rapid development. It concludes that contemporary Nigerian administrations should as a matter of urgency discard administrative policies that encourage hatred, ethnic and religious intolerance and disunity amongst Nigerians.

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