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Articles

Communal and Ethno-Religious Crises and their Implications for National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article is a discourse on the origins, causes, and consequences of communal and ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. The researcher takes a critical reflection on the history of communal, ethnic and religious crises in Nigeria during a three decade period covering 1987 to 2006 and reveals among other things the causes and consequences of such crises. The researcher analyses among other things, the contributions of religious bigotry, underdevelopment at the grassroots, and youth unemployment to the incidence of communal, ethnic and religious crises over the period under examination. The researcher concludes by advancing suggestions on how a new pathway to peace may be charted in the Nigeria State; fostering religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence among the various ethnic groups, grass root development and youth empowerment through viable and productive labour.

Keywords: Religious Crises; Ethnic Crises; Communal Conflicts; Nigeria; Ethno-Religious Crises

1. Introduction

Communal and ethno-religions crises have its roots deep in the history of Nigeria. As a state, Nigeria came into being in 1914 as the creation of Lord Lugard. Before that time, the different ethnic nationalities like the Hausa/Fulani, the Igbo and Yoruba existed independently. There were no socio-cultural, linguistic and political ties among them.

Therefore, when Lord Lugard in 1914 through executive/administrative fiat amalgamated the northern and southern protectorates into one and proclaimed it as a country, it was one that was lacking in socio-cultural, political and economic bonding of any kind.

There was no "we" feeling or consciousness of kind. Nigeria was not seen as "ours" but as "theirs". The ordinary man saw himself, first as an Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba and only secondarily as a Nigerian. This situation was further compounded with the introduction of regions which made the northern region disproportionately bigger than the East and the West put together. The colonialists further perfected their plan of divide and rule by deliberating pursuing different educational policies in the north and south. Though the North was more population than the South and West, the British pitched the regions against themselves by pursuing different educational policies for them.

In the East and West, conventional education was pursued. But in the North, Islamic education was pursued in the name of preserving traditional institutions. All of these stresses and strains were built into the fabric of the Nigerian state by the colonial masters to ensure disunity. It was for this reason that, in 1953 when a motion for independence for Nigeria in 1956, was moved, the north claimed that they were not ready thereby delaying Nigeria's independence till 1960. Thus, upon the attainment of political independence, Nigeria was a state already fragmented along ethnic, religious, linguistic and political lines. Therefore, when after only six years of independence a civil war broke out, it was germination of the seed of acrimony and intolerance that was planted in 1914.

2. Origin of the Crises

The issue of religious and ethno communal crises gained ascendancy and became aggravated in Nigeria a little above three decades ago. What was ordinarily thought to be a dispute between Moslems and their Christian brothers as the Maitatsine religious uprising in northern Nigeria has grown into regular occurrences with very serious and far reaching negative consequences. It must be stressed that, ethno-religious crises came to a head in 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo became the democratically elected President of Nigeria. According to Olaniyi (2005:11) between 1999 and 2004, there were over 1000 cases of communal clashes in Nigeria in which 50,000 lives were lost. Over one million people were internally displaced, and billions of naira lost. Because it has continued, scholarly interrogation becomes very necessary. This paper is not just about religious crises alone, it also has to do with communal clashes, and its effects on national growth and development.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction, the second part focuses on causes of ethno-religious and communal crises and conflicts. While the third part addresses the consequences, the fourth and final part is the conclusion. Elaigwu and Muhammed give a more comprehensive picture of communal and ethno-religious crises in Table 1.

Table 1: Communal and Ethno-religious Crises in Nigeria

Date	Location	Description/Principal Actors
March 1987	Kafachan (Kaduna State)	Clashes between Muslims and Christians at the College of Education Kafachan... loss of some lives and the burning of some mosques by Christians and native Ilajes.
	B) Katsina, Funtua, Zaria, Gusau and Kaduna (Kaduna State)	Wave of religious riots in which Muslims burnt down numerous church buildings, and damage property belonging to Christians. Many lives were lost.
February 1988	Kaduna, Kaduna Polytechnic	Religious riots, ostensibly among students, destroyed the foundation of walls of the Christian Chapel.
April 1991	Katsina (Katsina State	Religious violence spearheaded by Mallam Yahaya Yakubu, leader of the foundamentalist Shi'ite sect in Kaduna. It was a protest over a blasphemous publication in fun-times. Several lives were lost and property destroyed.
	Tafawa Balewa (Bauchi State)	Started as a quarrel between a Fulani man and a Sayawa meat seller in Tafawa Balewa. Escalated into a full blown violence and later took the coloring of a religious war in Bauchi. Several lives were lost and property valued over hundreds of millions of Naira was destroyed.
June 1991	Benue Sate Polytechnic Ugbokolo (Benue Sate)	Started as a quarrel between a Tiv student and an idoma lady at a stream close to the school. Later it escalated into a full blown ethnic free for all between idoma student/indigenes and Tiv Students. Lots of people were injured and properties destroyed and burnt.
October 1991	Kano (Kano State)	A peaceful procession initiated by the Izala sect to halt Rev. Reinhard Bonnke from having a crusade in Kano, later degenerated into a very bloody religious violence: Thousands of lives were lost and property valued at millions of Naira was destroyed.
May 1992	Zangon Kataf, Zaria, Kaduna, Ikara (Kaduna State)	A communal feud between the Katafs and the Hausa later took the dimension of inter-religious war between Muslims and Christians in other major cities of Kaduna State. Several lives and property were destroyed.
February 28, 2000	Kaduna (Kaduna State)	Kaduna city exploded in violence as Muslim and Christian extremists and other hoodlums clashed over the proposal to introduce Sharia.
February 29, 2000	Aba, (Abia State)	The riot which began in Aba as a reprisal to that of Kaduna which later spread to other Eastern States.
September 8, 2000	Katungo (Gombe State)	A religious violence that was sparked off by the presence of the state Sharia implementation committee.
December 2, 2000	Hadejia (Jigawa State)	A sectarian disturbance that was caused by a debate between Muslims and there was Wanton destruction of worship places.
September 7, 2001	Jos (Plateau State)	A violent ethnic/religious crisis between Muslim/Hausa-Fulani and Christian indigenes.
January 2004	Yobe State	Militant Islamic group operating under the name of Muhajirun launched a Taliban like attack on police; men of the Nigerian Army killed five and arrested several others.
April 3, 2004	Makafi (Kaduna State)	Religious protest in Makafi town over alleged discretion of the Quran by a Christian teenager.

Date	Location	Description/Principal Actors
April 26, 2004	Bakin Chiyawa (Plateau State)	Renewed hostilities launched by suspected displaced Fulani herdsmen. Conflict was believed to be a spill over of the ethno-religious crisis that has bedeviled southern Plateau Local Governments of Lagtan South and North, Wase Kannan and Shendam.
May 1, 2004	Yelwa Sheldam (Plateau State)	An ethno-religious mayhem that claimed over 500 lives and many women and children were abducted by suspected Taroh Militia. This was a revenge killing.
May 12, 2004	Kano (Kano State)	Kano Mayhem following the Yelwa Shendam ethno-religious crisis in Plateau. Non-Muslims were attacked in reprisal of the Plateau crisis over 200 people feared dead.
June 8 2004	Numan (Adamawa State)	Ethno-religious crisis in Numan over the construction of a mosque Isminaret over the Haman Bachama's palace. Over 50 people were killed and the traditional ruler of the area deposed.
September 27, 2004	Linkaru (Borno State)	A self-style Taliban group hiding on the Goza hill and mandara mountains on the north-eastern boarder with Cameroon raided police stations killing officers and stealing ammunitions.
January 16, 2004	Ipakodo (Lagos State)	A religious Mayhem between OPC and Muslim over the erection of Ogun Shine in a Muslim praying ground. Over 50 lives were feared lost.
August 20, 2005	Isale – Eko (Lagos State)	No fewer than 30 Muslims youths feared dead when cultists and members of the outlawed Odua People Congress (OPC) attack Muslims on the Lagos Island.
February 2006	Kaduna, Kano Bauchi	The "cartoon caricature" conflict that broke out in parts of the north over the "cartoons caricature" of the holy Prophet Muhammad.

Source: Elaigwu, J.I. *The Politics of Federalism in Nigeria, Jos, Aha publishing House.* 2005: 215-217.

In this paper, communal and ethno-religious crises refer to clashes which result into violent uprising between, two different ethnic groups, sometimes, it is between people of the same ethnic group in a community. Another dimension of it, refers to crisis between the adherents of two different religions who may or may not be inhabiting the same community. A few words on national development will be appropriate. In this paper, we shall take a very simple view of national development. Thus, we shall not be concerned with the various contending schools of thought on national development. Development has so many facets. It could be political, economic, socio-cultural or technological and many more. All of these are geared towards one goal, the improvement of the quality of life of the citizenry.

Development is concerned with, how to conquer, dominate and leave the world a better place than we met it. In this context, development is a process not an end. The development process attempts to answer such question as, how can we do today in a better way, the things we did yesterday? The same question can be couched differently, how can the things of today be an improvement on the things of yesterday in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and overall quality of life? In one sense, how can life be more fulfilling, satisfying and enjoyable for the generality of the people?

3. Causes of Religious and Communal Crises

Though this paper is not primarily about the causes of communal and ethno-religious crises, a digression into it will give this presentation a proper focus. There are a number of reasons why differences in ethnicity and religion will sometimes result into violent crisis with far reaching and profound consequences on national development. One of such reasons is religious intolerance arising out of the belief that one religion is superior to the other. It could come in the form of attempting to impose one religion on another (Bagaji: 2012). The Boko Haram and others are good cases in point. Beyond this is the question of the violation of the tenets of the beliefs of one religion by the adherents of the other. The Bauchi religious uprising of the nineties resulted because it was alleged that some Christians in Bauchi slaughtered pigs in a market in Bauchi. Recall that pork (pig meat) is strictly forbidden by Moslems.

On the other hand, communal clashes occur either due to historical reasons, the struggle for supremacy, border clashes, land disputes such as between Umuleri-Aguleri and Ife/Modakeke (Nwaolise 2005, Albert 1999). I have argued elsewhere that religious crises are essentially problems caused by the elites. The same is applicable

to ethnic and religious crises. When one considers the level of organization, the sophistication of the weaponry used, one cannot but conclude that only knowledgeable people who have the mental ability, intellectual exposure, and material resources could plan, finance and execute such levels of violent crises.

In addition to the above, is the issue of xenophobia or more appropriately the hatred and intolerance for strangers. Though this assertion has not been subjected to critical interrogation, yet the frequency of the occurrence of crises might tempt any objective mind to reason along the line that xenophobia could in some instances account for communal and ethnic crises. In some quarters, it is believed that some of the crises have to do with the deep rooted contradictions and crises of the Nigerian society. Nigeria is a richly endowed country, yet, the wealth is in the hands of only of few rich persons. The result is that poverty is pervasive and unemployment is high especially among the youths. The allusion to poverty and youth unemployment has been made because it is the poor and unemployed youths that are mostly used in communal, ethnic and religious conflicts, (Duro Oni, 2011, D. Orwa, 1984). Sadly enough, it is the same youths, women and children who are the worst casualties and victims of crises. It has been argued that, beyond religion and beyond communal and ethnic considerations some of the crises have political undertones (Ezeibe, C: 2012, Kukah, 1993, Soyinka, 1992).

4. Consequences of Crises and Conflicts

At present, Nigeria is on the precipice. It is a country torn apart by the twin forces of religion and ethnicity and worrisomely, there seem to be no solution in sight. The current Boko Haram crisis which has so far claimed innumerable lives and damaged unquantifiable properties is fast becoming an issue for which every Nigerian should be concerned. From all conceivable indications, its alleged links with the notorious Al Qaeda terrorist group makes it seemingly difficult and intractable. The painful issue is, beyond the immediate effects, it also has some far reaching implications for the development of Nigeria. The effects of religious crises would be best appreciated if we focus a little bit more on Boko Haran. According to information posted by the world press on the internet, from July 2009 till date about 900 lives have been lost in roughly 160 different attacks. The same report stated that, since the beginning of 2012 up to the time the report was posted on the internet, 200 people have so far lost their lives (www.worldpress.com). When the sect attacked the United Nations building in Abuja on the 26th August 2011, 23 died and about 800 wounded. In another report, it was stated that the Federal Government of Nigeria spent a whopping sum of N3.2billion to enable the United Nation rent an alternative accommodation and reconstruct its damaged building. While N2.6 billion was spent on reconstruction of the building, N.6 billion would be used to rent another accommodation (www.dailytrust.com.ng). Subjected to deeper analysis, it could be seen that, for one single attack, the nation lost such huge sum which would otherwise have been channeled into other development projects.

In economic terms, it damages resources and facilities which took time to acquire. More seriously, the time of crisis, be it ethnic or religious is a time when direct foreign investment is discouraged. No foreign investor will like to invest funds in a country that is divided by communal and ethno religious conflicts (Ayinla: 2003). There are fears at two levels. Firstly, the basic aim of foreign investment is to make profit which is not possible in an environment of crisis. Secondly, the resources invested already will definitely go down the drains. Foreigners will not want to live in a country where there is no guarantee of lives and property (Esezebor, 2011 unpublished M.A. thesis).

A corollary to the above is that it portrays Nigeria in a very bad light internationally. It depicts our leaders, at all levels and in different facets of life as weak, naïve, selfish and self centered. In an environment of strong, dedicated and selfless leadership, the diversity and complexity of the Nigerian society would have been harnessed and channeled into national development efforts. Nigeria estimatedly has about 450 languages and ethnic groups (Onwuejeogwu 1984). Geographically and by implication climatically, she is also diverse with the result that resources which are not available in one area are more than abundant in the other. With an abundance of human and material resources, with religious and cultural diversity, Nigeria only needed the right kind of leadership to propel it to greatness and into the league of developed nations of the world. Rather than being a source of strength, diversity has been subverted by the Nigerian elite into source of conflict and disunity. In ordinary terms, Nigeria would have been a tourist haven, but the frequent occurrence of conflicts and crises in different parts of the country at different points in time will definitely discourage foreign tourists (Onwumah: 2010). The effect of it is that, foreign exchange needed to drive development, that could have been brought in by foreigners is lost.

Though Nigeria is richly endowed in terms of tourism and resources, it is said that, by African standards, her performance is an abysmal failure. Places like Kenya, Ghana, Egypt and others have more people coming into their countries than Nigeria. The reason for this is not farfetched. Nigeria is perceived as unsafe and indeed not conducive in terms of security caused mainly by communal and ethno-religious crises.

From the Nigerian experience, crises and conflicts appear to have a multiplier effects. Instances abound where crisis in one part of the country provoked similar crisis in another part of the country. For example, when Igbos were attacked in Kano in 1986, it provoked reprisal attacks against Hausa/Fulanis in the East. In 1999,

when Yoruba and Hausa clashed in Shagamu during an Oro festival, it triggered off similar clashes between Hausa and Yoruba in Kano. (Esezebor Lucky 2011:7). Similarly, in 2000, religious and ethnic uprisings in Kaduna, triggered off retaliatory attacks targeted at Hausa/Fulani in places like Enugu. Therefore, crises and conflicts aggravate disunity, weakens patriotism, and national development cannot occur in such an environment of disunity.

A time of crisis and conflict is a time that brings out the worst instincts and impulses in man. It is a time when social relationship is at its worst. No one would want to relate happily to a group of people, who have or perceived to have killed or maimed one's relations. It is difficult, if not impossible to associate and be at home with persons who are hostile to you or people from your ethnic group. Beyond these are the socio-cultural consequences. It is also a time when the promotion of culture cannot take place. At such times, cultural activities such as festivals, folktales, moonlight games, and others cannot take place. Even cultural industries such as pottery, ceramics, blacksmithing, tie and dye will all come to a halt for as long as the crises last.

The psychological consequences of conflicts are no less severe and unsalutory. In one of the preceeding paragraphs, we have already alluded to the fact that it brings out the worst instincts in man. It also breeds fear, hatred, acrimony and suspicion. A psychologically depressed, fearful, and suspicious person or group of persons cannot contribute meaningfully to the national development drive.

So far, we have shown that crises and conflicts are antithetical to peace and development. Because it is easier to destroy than to build, this writer is of the view that one month of destruction and decay caused by crises will take more than a year of sustained effort to rebuild. Generally, conflicts and crises, be it religious, ethnic or communal is an ill wind that blows no one any good. It disrupts the educational system, restricts the movement of people, occasioning the loss of man hours. Nigeria's former President, Olusegun Obasanjo presented a graphic picture of the consequence of crises in the following statement:

"Violence has reached unprecedented levels and 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; businesses lost billions of naira and property worth much more destroyed (Obasanjo, 2004)".

5. Charting a Pathway to Peace

As such, in the search for peace and security all hands must be on deck. We require a comprehensive mobilization and awareness programme to educate the masses of Nigerians on the damaging effects of crises. It does not matter whether such crises are communal or ethno-religious. The ordinary people should know that in the long run, it is the nation that will loose from communal crises. In addition, it is desirable to have an orientation programme on the damaging effects of religious uprising. Such an orientation programme should aim at letting the people understand that there is no religion that is superior to the other. More importantly, none of the two main religions in Nigeria preaches violence. It therefore becomes inexplicable that violence, crises and intolerance are recurrent occurrences between Christians and Moslems in Nigeria.

Beyond all of these, is the need to address youth unemployment. Youths are the engine room of any society. If their unutilized energy are allowed to remain dormant for too long, it could have very disastrous consequences. Because youths are very active, adventurous, and daring. A time of unemployment is a time when they could engage in crimes, violence and other forms of anti-social activities that are inimical to growth and development.

Finally, it has been stated that communal and ethno-religious crises, more often than not, have political undertones. This has to do with the nature of Nigerian politics. In Nigeria, politics is a winner takes all affairs, which should not be. Indeed it has been said time without number that politics is the quickest way to wealth and affluence. If it is possible to have a nation where politics is seen as service and not business, Nigeria will be better for it. If we can devolve power to the grassroots, make more resources available to them at that level, then most of our problems relating to communal and ethno religious crises would be solved.

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