

## **Ethnic Conflicts in Contemporary Africa: The Nigerian Experience**

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**ABSTRACT** Most developing countries are ethnically diverse. Ethnic diversity may lead to increased civil strife. This perception is tottered both by some graphic individual scenes of inter ethnic violence, and by an aggregate correlation: Africa has not only the highest ethnic diversity, but also the highest incidence of civil war. Potentially, this might account for the detrimental economic effect of diversity. In countries of traditional stability, ethnic conflict is becoming an increasing factor. Ethnic conflicts have become the serious challenge of our times, which perhaps explains why ethnicity is seen as the reigning concept in African studies at present. In Nigeria, the colonial masters provided urban setting, which constitutes the cradle of contemporary ethnicity. The colonialist while pretending to carry out a mission of uniting the warring ethnic groups, consciously and systematically separated the various Nigerian people thereby creating a suitable atmosphere for conflict. With the heterogeneous nature of the country, the tendency of the various nationals is towards parochial consciousness at the expense of national consciousness. This study, therefore, relies on content analysis as its methodology to examine ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. It also examines the effects of ethnic conflicts on the country's search for unity and identifies the possible issues for resolution. The study also proffered suggestions on how to curb ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most developing countries are ethnically diverse. For many years, social sciences preferred to ignore the brute fact of ethnic identity. More recently, evidence is accumulating that is detrimental to economic performance. Journalistic accounts of wars in Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and several other countries of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s have raised concern that ethnic cleavages and overlapping affiliations of religion and race may undermine prospects for economic and political development in much of Africa.

Ethnic diversity may lead to increased civil strife. This perception is fostered both by some graphic individual scenes of inter ethnic violence, and by an aggregate correlation: Africa has not only the highest ethnic diversity, but also the highest incidence of civil war. Potentially, this might account for the detrimental economic effects of diversity. In countries of traditional stability, ethnic conflict is becoming an increasing factor. In Kenya, ethnic tensions related to multi-party elections resulted in the deaths of 1,500 people between late 1991 and late 1993. Additional

deaths have occurred in relation to the election in 1997, including post election recriminations against non-government voting areas in early January 1998. South Africa lost 14,000 citizens due to the racial and ethnic violence, which was part of transition to majority rule between 1990 and 1994.

Several other conflicts, which have affected Africans, are prominent in Sudan; a civil conflict stretching back four decades has pitted the Arab-Moslem North against the non-Arab Christian and animist south. The most current phase, which began in 1993, has resulted in the deaths of about one million people due either directly to the war or starvation caused by the war. Often in such conflicts food deprivation is used as an instrument of war. Because of government control of the media and the drawn out nature of the conflict, it is mostly forgotten by Western society. More dramatic events recently has focused on Rwanda where Hutus staged a slaughter of Tutsis resulting in an estimated 300,000 deaths in the first half of 1994 and an additional 20,000 in the refugee camps of neighboring countries, where a total of 1.7 million people had fled. Tension between the same ethnic

groups in neighboring Burundi have been high for much of the independence period, are costing 100,000 lives in 1972 and another 20,000 in 1988. In Somalia, the fall of Said Barre in early 1991 led to an expanded conflict in which 300,000 people died of starvation due to war and instability despite the efforts of Western governments, NGOs and the United Nations.

Ethnic conflicts have become the serious challenge of our times, which perhaps explains why ethnicity is seen as the reigning concept in African studies at present. Deeper reflection shows, however, that although ethnicity is powerful, it is neither absolute nor immutable, nor is it inherently destructive. Ethnic identities are not pre-ordained: they are deliberately constructed and constantly modified. People choose to be ethnically inclined when this meets their needs and expectations. Ethnicity is what remains after all else is lost – that is a deprivation of the determinants that make individual socially, economically and politically. Ethnicity is an individual falling back onto an identity, which provides him with a psychological safety net. It is a weapon of manipulation by the state, particularly where what obtains is not the national state, but the nation state.

In Nigeria, the colonial masters provided urban setting, which constitutes the cradle of contemporary ethnicity. The British colonialist while pretending to carry out a mission of uniting the warring ethnic groups consciously and systematically separated the various Nigerian people thereby creating a suitable atmosphere for conflict. With the heterogeneous nature of the country, the tendency of the various nationals is towards parochial consciousness at the expense of national consciousness. A far reaching and in-depth survey of Nigeria public opinion carried out by the International Foundation for Elections Systems-IFES on behalf of United States Agency for International Development-USAID in 2000 found out that ethnicity is the strongest type of identity among Nigerians. Almost half of all Nigerians (48.2%) choose to tag themselves with an “ethnic” identity.

Ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and Africa in general arise as result of scarcity of political resources, multi-culturalism, religion, militarisation of ethnicity among others. These conflicts cannot be ignored. It is therefore patently clear that realistic measures to solve

these problems are needed. This study, therefore, relies on content analysis as its methodology to examine ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. It also examines the effects of ethnic conflicts on the country’s search for unity and identifies the possible issues for resolution.

The rest of this study is divided into three sections. Section two reviews the literature. Section three contains the ethnic conflicts situation in Nigeria, while section four concludes the study.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

At the present time, there is plethora of views on the nature and cases of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and Africa in general. In Africa, the spread of mighty wave of tensions and conflicts, and indeed civil wars, is already threatening the survival of some states. Several complex crises are currently manifesting themselves in ethnic forms. The ethnic conflicts threatening the stability of numerous countries today are not just a reflection of traditional sentiments that stubbornly refuse to die. They stem in part from the success of modernization, which have equipped ethnic communities with new political resources and aspirations. This literature review looks at some writers’ opinions concerning the ethnic conflict issue.

#### Ethnicity and Colonization

Nwosu (1999) says the colonization of Africa and several other third world states ensured that peoples of diverse culture were brought together under one country. To him, because of the mission of colonialism, most of these peoples were not well integrated into the new states. Instead, some of the imperial powers cashed in on the cultural divergence of these countries to ensure the examination of their objectives. He further said, “it is thus not surprising that years after colonialism, these states remained lowly integrated. This low level of integration has precipitated crises in many of the countries. The African continent, for instance, has witnessed many conflict situations leading to shooting wars, political and economic instability as well as social disequilibrium.”

To Vandenberg (1998), the problem of ethnic conflict was mooted under colonialism because Africans had no control over the central power and often were kept divided into administrative districts by Europeans.

Welsh (1996) see violent and intractable internal conflicts in recent years in Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Sudan as the failure of states in sub-Saharan Africa to cope with ethnicity. He examines the association of ethnic identities with the colonial period and the 'instrumentalist' contention that ethnicity was invented for political purposes. He notes both that the imperial powers in Africa did little to prepare the colonies for independence and also that, given the imperatives of the colonial system; it was unrealistic to expect them to do more.

Osaghae (1986) believes that because most African States as we know today are 'artificial' colonial creation, the major problems they have all faced since attaining independence have arisen from the deep cleavages which exist between the diverse people who make up these states. To him, these cleavages are often marked by strong sectional loyalties that compete with much desired loyalty to the nation or nation-to-be. Consequently, the major problem in most Africa states, he argued, has to do with creating overarching loyalties to the nation over and above the primordial and sub-national loyalties. Once these sub-national loyalties are eradicated, it is usually claimed, national integration and, with it, political stability is assured. Furthermore, he sees ethnicity as basically a product of competition for scarce resources between groups in multiethnic societies. Ethnicity is generally regarded as a 'dying force', which has resulted in a resurgence of ethnically inspired conflicts. For example he asserted that Nigeria has had a fair share of such conflicts, including a civil war (1967 – 1979), and the problem has continuously been how to ensure the adequate accommodation of diversities in the polity.

#### **Ethnic Conflict and Economic Reforms**

In relating ethnic conflicts and economic reforms in Africa, Ogachi (1999) believes that violent ethnic conflicts have increased in Africa, especially from the mid 1970s, and have picked up on a large scale from the 1980s. To him, this was a period during which most African countries entered a state of economic austerity. At the same time, pressure was put on these countries from the international community to initiate programmes of political and economic liberalization. As a result of this, by 1980, most Africa countries had entered into agreements

with international financial institutions on specific areas of economic reform without much insistence on political reforms.

Furthermore to him, from this statement, three observations can be made to help build a holistic theory of studying conflicts in Africa. The first has to do with manner in which the reforms (both political and economic) were introduced and implemented. While the donors have insisted that democratic political systems are crucial for the success of the economic reforms, they have always not put into place. The second observation in his view relates to the nature of the current state of ethnic conflicts in Africa. The level of violence and organization makes them slightly different from those that were experienced during the colonial period and may therefore not adequately capture the internal dynamics of these conflicts-cause and effects. To him, new theoretical postulations have to be sought. Thirdly, the point that has already been made about the occurrence of the present conflicts in Africa, concurrently with the economic and political reforms policies, to him persuades one to seek a framework with which locates the converging points of ethnicity, economic austerity and adjustment regimes in Africa. In his submission, ethnicity should not always be seen as a colonial invention in Africa or just a continuation of the pre-colonial manifestation of sheer tribal emotions as postulated by the modernization school (Ogachi, 1999).

Magubane (1962) argued convincingly that a focus on ethnicity impedes a serious effort to understand Africa societies because it ignores the ownership of the primary productive forces, the material basis of societies, and nature of the social system.

Similarly, Richard Sklar (1963) views the focus on ethnicity as obscuring the fact that in Africa, ethnic movements may be created and instigated to action by the new men of power in furtherance of their own special interest which at time and again are constitutive of interest of emerging social classes. In this way, ethnicity becomes a mask for class privileges.

#### **Ethnicity and Nationalism**

Ottawa (1999) said some shift has been witnessed now. He declared that for after a long time of being treated as some kind of pariahs'

ethnic identities and ethnic nationalism have gained strength and even a degree of legitimacy in recent years. To him, alongside the interpretation of ethnic passions, ethnic hatred, ethnic cleansing and genocide, ethnic dynamics could also be viewed as struggles by the dominated and oppressed groups for greater autonomy and for the protection of their rights.

Wallerstein (1979) asserts that ethnic consciousness and conflict occur when groups feel threatened with loss of previously acquired privilege, or conversely feel that it is an opportune moment politically to overcome a longstanding denial of privilege. He said, the mechanisms and machinations through which these groups advance their aims is what cause ethnic tensions and conflicts. To him, the present manifestation of ethnicity in Africa is an elite and class phenomenon where one community's elites feel excluded by another from control of economic and political power. They then indoctrinate members of their ethnicity to believe that this is a conspiracy by a whole community against another, which should be violently resisted.

Nnoli (1995) asserts that ethnicity hold individual together, gives them internal cohesion, encourages them to provide natural security for each other and promotes their sense of identity and direction. To him, ethnicity offers a personal solution to the problems of exploitation, oppressions, deprivation and alienation. Furthermore, he notes, in the context of an interventionist state, the ruling class use the state to build up their business enterprises. The struggle of the ethnic factions of these classes for state patronage in the process of embourgeoisement generates and promotes ethnicity.

Ibrahim (1995) said a major contributory factor to ethnic conflicts is the undemocratic nature of governance. He says many African regimes and rulers have repressed sections of the people, and by implication, ignored their aspirations. Some have employed divide-and-rule method in governance, and created more ethno-religious divisions than the colonialist ever did. To him, once degenerated regimes find their legitimacy put in question, because they no longer care for the majority of the people, or protect the public good, and fail to protect or defend the people's rights, they tend to identify the process of repression. He believes when governance decays, the people retreat into sectarian enclaves, which are seen as providing security.

Diamond (1988) attributes crises and conflict in post-colonial politics in Nigeria to the emergence of a modern state with vast economic resources. To him, the legacy that colonial rule left was the development of a modern state that dwarfed all other organized elements of economy and society. He agree that the state in the post-colonial era was a capitalists type because the dominant few usually controlled it and translated political power into the mean of accumulating for themselves the wealth and resources of the states.

Synder (1993) believes the state has been designated as a principal actor in the source of conflicts in Nigeria. But to him, those who hold that view have failed to consider the failed state phenomenon in the Third World, which revives or sustain the spirit of ethnic nationalism. According to him, ethnic nationalism predominates when institutions collapse, when existing institutions are not fulfilling people's basic needs and when satisfactory alternative structures are not readily available, that is, when there is lack of effective statehood. To him, options emerged from a failed state phenomenon: political society revels in anarchy and there follows the process of carving out mini states – around dominant ethnic groups. It can be argued that the process of state making was constructed along the line of alienation and exclusion of ethnic societies from political participation and exercise of power. This keeps on generating a confliction process, which eventually returns the state failure experience.

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) stated in 1995 that ethnicity is a resilient paradigm used in explaining the nature of conflict in Nigeria. In UNRISD Report, it is held that Nigeria as a political society comprises many ethnic groups, which rub shoulders with each other, so there is bound to be conflict. The central assumption of this viewpoint is that ethnicity has the potential to transcend other loyalties and obligations and become the sole basis of identity. This may lead to conflict when peoples' multiple identities are narrowed down to a single focus, and social division become deeper and more rigid. The submission of the UNRISD Report is that, ethnicity is a deeply emotional basis of mobilization that not merely distinguishes one group from the other, but also dehumanizes the other group.

### **Ethnicity and National Unity**

To Kazah-Toure (2000), the spread of a mighty wave of ethnic tensions and conflicts threatens national unity and harmonious inter-ethnic relations. Even though more complex factors have been at the base, conflicts and struggles in Nigeria are increasingly manifesting in ethnic forms. He stated further that elsewhere on the African continent, violent and bloody conflicts are more often assuming inter-ethnic and inter-ethno/religious proportions. He believes that on the attainment of independence from European colonial domination, mostly from the 1950s – many African leaders and regimes kept on with the tempo of denouncing the threat posed to the new states by ethnicity and regionalism. Beyond the appearance of this position of protecting the indivisibility of the nation state (from the deadly virus of ethnicity) was the politics of providing justification for one party systems and stifling pluralism. He asserts that a paradox of the position was the reality that many of the proclaimed anti-ethnicist and anti-regionalist leaders were themselves using ethnicity and regionalism as weapons to exclude, to hold onto power, marginalize and repress those in the oppositions-as well as to forces perceived either as rivals or enemies.

Nwaezeigwe (1998) is of the view that “Ethnicity is an instrument of groups’ consciousness which serves to elevate one’s pride and sense of being. It serves as the crime fond of one’s belongingness the essence of his Nigerianess. Every Nigerian is so by the fact of his identity with a particular ethnic group geographically situated in the present political Nigeria. Thus ethnicity in its fundamental sense is an exhibition of common ethnic identity in difference to the members of other cultural groups within a definable geo-political setting”.

Agbese (1985) said, “Many have come to see that Nigeria’s problem were partly man-made and partly, tailored, it imperfectly by nature itself. Man-made problems relates mainly to the manner of the country’s colonization, while problems created by nature concern its geography and ethnic composition. The balkanization of the country into three regions of unreasonably unequal sizes was a grievous error of political judgment on the part of the British. It was a perfect recipe for an unhealthy national diet.”

Obiatuegwu (1985) argued that the most

serious threat to harmony, progress and integral nationhood of Nigeria over the years, has been the over-sharpened ethnic sensitivities of its peoples. He asserts that ethnic loyalties have become so infused into the psyche of the nation, that not only have more elegant phrases emerged, but such decadantants-nationalistic obsessions have form the basis for much of the national policies. For him, the nations inadvertently have been promoting circumstances that not only sensitize, but also politize the ethnic differences in the country.

Nnoli (1978) in another book expressed sentiment in an atmosphere of extreme socio-economic competition and political scarcity prevailing in Nigeria. To him, few members of the privileged class are confident enough of their ability to survive. Most prefer the security of being able to rely on exploiting ethnic preferences if possible. He further argues that the ubiquitous malaise of ethnicity had infected all facets of communication. In the process of socialization, ethnicity has become internalized and increased. Consequently, the ethnic factor assumed a self-fulfilling and sustaining dynamics of its own which daily reinforced the individuals internalized ethnic sentiments. The persistence and growth of ethnicity in Nigeria had become inevitable.

Akinyemi and Ofonagoro (2000) noted that the need for the principle of equity to be applied in the administration of the emerging nation dated back to the colonial period. The fear of domination, which developed in the minds of minority groups, coupled with inter-ethnic suspicions among the majority group help to prove the fact that Britain and even Nigerians recognized the fact that they are not one people.

Omuabor (2000) believes that suppression of ethnic conflicts by force is never a lasting solution. It is like capping a seething volcano. Sooner than later, it erupts. He gave the instance when Nigeria’s former self-styled military president, Ibrahim Babangida, annulled the results of the June 12, 1993 presidential election; violent protest took over the streets of most cities in Western Nigeria. To him, the feeling in that part of the country was that it had been robbed of a golden chance to produce a civilian president. The undeclared winner of that election, Moshood Abiola was Yoruba, the predominant ethnic group in that region. Furthermore, he asserts that the events of that period are generally believed to have given birth to the Oodua People’s Congress

(OPC), an unusually militant Yoruba group that uses violence to redress perceived injustice against the Yoruba. He stated that the birth of the OPC symbolizes the new spirit among the Yoruba to 'square up' to any ethnic group that works against in interest. This development to him led to the formation of Arewa People's Congress (APC), an unusually militant Hausa group, to counter the activities of the OPC. OPC and APC aside, a group of militant Ijaw Youths called Egbesu Boys also evolved out of recent Ijaw wars with the Itsekiri and Ilaje ethnic nationalities in the oil-rich Niger-Delta. His submission is that, but for the absence of uniforms, these groups are ethnic armies who have sworn to defend and fight for the interest of their ethnic groups.

#### **Ethnicity and Political Power**

Commenting on the Africa level Omuabor (2000), further believes the quest by ethnic groups to wield political power is not a new phenomenon. To him, the history of Africa could easily be described as a running tale of ethnic struggles. The colonial experience reinforce ethnic rivalry especially where colonist entrenched ethnic minority elite, as in Rwanda and Burundi, or even created them, as in Liberia, Sierra-Leone and Angola where freed slaves became rulers, or European settlers intermarried to form a crole elite.

Osaghae (2000) says that since its colonial beginnings the Africa state has centralized the production and distribution of resources, patronage and privileges, and this has made it the object of political competition. He also makes a case for economic deregulation as a recipe for conflict management.

Maitama-Sule (2000) traces the quest for power and the resultant ethnic conflicts to ambition and greed. These negative instincts of man have continued to sour human relations and fortunes, with the result that incidents of population displacement are on the increase on a large scale, and the misery associated with such displacement is getting more and more acute.

Oyekanmi (2000), though, reckons deprivation; a scene of alienation and a determination by ethnic groups to be part of the control of resources are the primary factors that cause ethnic conflicts in Africa. She adds that these groups resort to violence when they are not assured of other ways of seeking redress

and getting justice.

Agbu (2000) believes poverty alone can provide inducement for such conflicts. He says, we all know the economic conditions of most people in Africa. We have seen whole groups impoverished. Unless such groups are empowered deliberately, strife may never end on the continent.

From our point of view, Ethnic situation in Africa acknowledge the heterogeneity of ethnic groups in terms of culture and languages that are endemic in diverse origin and history. Ethnic conflicts erupt when the claims of one party to land and territory become incompatible with the desire of others to satisfy their own basic interest and needs within the same physical territory. The consequences of the ethnic conflicts, whether in Africa or elsewhere, could be nation destroying. No country can afford the luxury of allowing ethnic conflict free rein or ignoring it. Every multi-ethnic state has tried to devise ways of coping with conflicts, several universal prescription and formulas that have been popularized. Failure to resolve conflicts over access to commonly valued scare resources, and over divergent perceptions of socio-political situations, has the high potential of degenerating into genocide or fratricide as it occurred among the Ife and Modakeke (Yorubas) in Southwestern Nigeria, Zongon-Kataf (Hausas) crisis in Northern Nigeria, Aguleri and Umuleri (Ibos) in Eastern Nigeria, and the Tiv – Jukun of Middle-Belt, Nigeria, and the Hutu – Tutsi of Burundi and Rwanda in East Africa.

The problem of land resources-territorial inhabitation-as a factor in ethnicity/ethnic conflicts in Nigeria for instance has become exacerbated since the 1970s and especially as from the 1990s when oil companies in the Niger-Delta and other oil producing states, identified oil exploration activities. Fiercely contested claims, based on descent or genealogy and kinship symbols have made over territories in respect of which compensation and royalties are demanded and paid. This factor has been an open invitation not only to conflicts between communities or ethnic groups, but also between the ethnic groups or communities and oil companies and government. This kind of conflicts has become a daily occurrence in the oil producing areas of the South-South and South-Eastern geo-political zones with ripples and consequences for the rest of Nigeria.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for our analysis in this study is the Conflict Theory.

Ethnic conflict may take several forms, which can be classified, as violent and non-violent. Violent ethnic conflicts usually erupt in places where the government is an instrument of group domination and where the channel for articulating demands is closed. These form ranges from riot to secession and civil wars (which have been experienced in most part of the continent of Africa notably Congo, Nigeria, Liberia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Cameroon). While Non-violent conflict includes articulation of changes of discrimination, neglect or domination, demands for redress through the press, ethnic leaders, political parties, law courts, and other civil methods of articulating demand (Osaghae, 1992).

Ethnic conflict entails a clash of cultures. It pits against each other people whose values are in conflict, who want different things, and who do not understand each other. Ethnic conflict is brought about by modernization. Modernization makes people want the same things, not different things, and this sets up a great scramble for resources. Ethnic conflict is the result of economic competition between ethnically differentiated segments of the working class or ethnically differentiated traders and customers. Elite competition and the actions of ethnic entrepreneurs drive ethnic conflict. Elites manipulate ethnic identities in their quest for power, and they construct ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflict is produced by the insecurity that emerges when an actor is unsure of the intentions of another actor and the two are already mutually hostile (Horowitz, 1998).

Portions of the phenomenon of ethnic conflict have been discovered or rediscovered and then asserted to be characteristic of the whole phenomenon. If there are powerful emotions, or if ethnic group loyalty supersedes to other groups, all ethnic conflict must be primordial. If politician benefit from calculative behaviour, or if group struggle over resources, ethnic conflict must be instrumental. Clearly, what is needed is a theory that can embrace the disparate manifestations of ethnic conflict behaviour (Horowitz, 1998).

Several schools of thought advance conflicting theories of ethnic conflicts, in various permutations and combinations, the issues on which they differ are several, but the difference

can be reduced to hard views of ethnic conflicts versus soft view, where hard and soft refer to the nature of group affiliations and the end of conflict behaviours. The hard views of ethnic conflicts sees ethnic groups as ascriptive, firmly bounded entities based on a strong sense of commonality, producing considerable loyalty, persisting over time, providing large affective rewards to group members, inclined to ethnocentrism and to hostility to and a desire to dominate outsiders, liable to conflict behaviour based on passion, and engendering a great willingness on the part of group members to sacrifice for collective welfare (Horowitz, 1998).

In the case of the soft position, ethnic groups are entities whose boundaries are problematic and malleable, whose solidarity is based on the material rewards they provide for their members rather than on diffuse affection, whose behaviour, based on the interest of their member, is vulnerable to strategic manipulation, whose apparent affect can often be reduced to calculation, and whose severe conflicts with others often result less irreconcilable objectives than from strategic dilemmas. These are hard and soft positions in the sense that the first sees ethnic affiliations as made of stone, while the second sees them as made of putty (Horowitz, 1998).

The opportunities for disaggregated analysis are enormous. Everywhere the issue of the birth and death of ethnic groups present itself for explanation. In some states, ethnic conflicts pre-empt conflict along other cleavage lines; in others, it coexists with them; elsewhere, ethnic conflicts is restrained. In some states, interethnic attitudes remain unremittingly hostile; in others, they have undergone changes, whether benign or malign. In some states, seemingly manageable conflicts have become unmanageable; in others, the reverse is true.

Nigeria with a large number of ethnic groups, inequalities among them is size, resource endowment, education and access to state power and resources, are highly developed and fractionalized indigenous bourgeoisie, make her ethnic situation perhaps the most complicated in Africa (Osaghae, 1994). Before the country's democratic government, was inaugurated in May 1999, ethnic conflicts were not so pronounced, although feelings were being voiced. The exception was the Niger-Delta, where the Ijaw and Itsekiri were locked in a protracted and grueling war over the location of headquarters

of the Warri South local government council. There was also the struggle by the Ogonis for the control of their oil wealth, which was tragically, crushed by government troops on the orders of late head of state, Sani Abacha. Quite often, groups have also resorted to violence, fighting brief wars to settle primordial scores like the case of Zangon – Kataf crisis and Ife – Modakeke crisis.

Today, the scenario is totally different. Whole ethnic armies such as Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Arewa Peoples Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Movement, (IYW), among others have evolved in some parts of the country, although the government prefers to call them criminals. The activities of these militant groups have pushed Nigeria closer to the precipice and revived ethnic awareness in many people. The Nigerian situation is so much like what is happening in other trouble spots on the continent.

#### **THE ETHNIC CONFLICTS SITUATION IN NIGERIA SO FAR**

Nigeria could almost be compared to a biological cell, which sub-divides and sub-divides again, creating more and more replicas of itself. Nigeria was first formed in 1914 by the amalgamation of North and South. Before independence, the British colonial administration encouraged communal sentiments among different ethnic groups. It seized every available opportunity to spread the myth and propaganda that they were separated from one another by great distance, by difference of history and tradition, and by ethnic tribal, religious and political barriers. The various ethnic groups in the country became exclusive and inbred with a serious level of tribal selfishness, animosity and hostility against one another. That is, in Nigeria, ethnic group in itself has been transformed to ethnic group for itself through the colonial contact situation. The basis for the emergence of a common consciousness among ethnic groups has been inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources resulting in ethnic conflicts.

The three regions in which Nigeria was divided at independence were each dominated by a majority tribe or ethnic group constituting about two thirds of the regional population: the Hausa–Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Ibo in the Eastern Region. The

remainder of the population in each region consisted of a number of minority tribes with their own separate culture and languages. The most important of these were the Edo people, the Ijaw, the Ibo, the Itshekiri and the Ishan peoples in the Mid-Western part of the Western Region, the Ogoja, Calabar, Ibibio, and Rivers people in the Eastern Region and the Kanuri, Tiv, Idoma, Jukun, Nupe, Bachama, Biron Angas, and other Middle-Belt peoples in the Northern Region. Despite the fragmentation of the country into thirty-six states today by successive government with the aim of easing ethnic tension and promoting development cultivating in unity in diversity, inter-ethnic rivalry still persist.

A trend of violent ethnic conflicts spreading through Nigeria in recent years has intensified in the past months, leaving hundreds of people dead and thousands displaced. From Warri in the South to Zango–Kataf and Kafanchan in the North and from Aguleri–Umuleri in the East to Ife–Modakeke in the West, neighboring communities have pounced on each other with destructive fury justified by longstanding rivalries. Despite the ethnic lines often dividing belligerents, some of the most intense fighting has been between people of the same ethnic group, such as the ethnic Igbo communities of Aguleri and Umuleri in Eastern Nigeria and the Yoruba of Ife and Modakeke. In most cases the ethnic conflicts rooted in age-old disputes.

The fear of domination, which developed in the minds of minority groups, coupled with inter ethnic suspicion among the majority group helped to prove the fact that Britain our colonial masters and even Nigerians recognized the fact they are not people. This assertion is illustrated by the fact that Sir Arthur Richard (1948) said, “It is only by accident of British suzerainty which has made Nigeria one country socially and politically, and there are deep differences between the major tribal groups”. In similar vein, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1967) said, “Nigeria is not a nation, it is a mere geographical expression. There are no ‘Nigerian’ in the same sense as there are ‘English’ or ‘Welsh’ or ‘French’, the word Nigeria is only a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not”.

#### **Zangon – Kataf Crisis**

Zango-Kataf is a community in the

Southeastern part of Kaduna State, Nigeria about two hundred and thirty kilometers away from the state capital Kaduna. The community is situated between Latitude 9°N and Longitude 8°S, and made up of about fifty autonomous village (Akinteye et al., 1999).

The Southern Kaduna zone in which the Zangon-Kataf community lies has occupied a volatile position in the twentieth century history of inter-group conflicts and tension in Northern Nigeria. It has experienced complex conflicts, occasionally violent, and mostly assuming an ethnic form. Linked with these have been questions of social equality, citizenship, community rights, and social democracy. All this has taken place in a rural zone, which is a miniature Nigeria, with about forty ethnic groups. Until the 1990s, most of their now predominantly Christian populations also a component of what is referred to, as Northern minorities were followers of traditional African religion(s). There is a Muslim population, mostly Hausa and Fulani, which is in a minority in the area, although part of the majority at the regional and traditional levels (Kazah-Toure, 1999).

When Nigeria got her independence from the British in 1960, the various contradictions and points of inter-ethnic conflict had not been resolved. The post-colonial order was founded on the same socio-economic and political structures, which were already in existence. The institutions and mechanisms for generating conflicts remained intact. Thus ethnic conflicts were to remain part of the history process (Kazah-Toure, 1999). Thus the history of Southern Kaduna is essentially a history of residence and struggle by the various ethnic groups to the emirate system, which was imposed on the area by the British colonial indirect rule system. These struggles have continued in various forms resulting into very bloody clashes in Zango-Kataf in 1992. The dispute between the Zango Hausa and the Kataf people goes beyond the quarrel over the site of their market. Between them, there has been a protracted misunderstanding over land ownership. The Kataf claimed the land on which Hausa live was theirs; and that the Hausa were only settlers. Easily, they recount their oral tradition dating back to 1967 when Mele an itinerant Hausa trader from Niger was given a plot of land in the heart of the town to settle after many years of trade relations with them. Soon according to them, Mele was joined by his

Kinsmen. Hence, the name Zango-Kataf (which means transit camp in Kataf). But the Hausa community said the claim by the Kataf was humbug; that is their claim is false. The Kataf people to them met them there. The Hausas claimed that the real name of Zango-Kataf was Zango-Katabiri. That the Katafs came, gradually surrounded them, and eventually changed the name.

The vexed issue of land ownership is rooted in the emirate system that is in practice there. Under this system, the predominantly Christian communities and chiefdoms in Southern part of Kaduna state remain under the control of the Emir of Zaria. At present, apart from Jama'a Kagoro, Jabba and Marwa, the over eighteen chiefdoms in the Southern part of Kaduna have their loyalty to the Emir. The district heads pay homage to their emir Islamic festivals like ed-el-kabir, ed-el fitri and ed-el Maulud. "The system is very bad," (Dent, 1995) complained a Kataf saying that the traditional system of land ownership in the area favoured the Hausas, and has been the root cause of the crisis between the Zango Hausa and Kataf people. The Kataf people complain of domination by the Hausas.

### **Ife – Modakeke Crisis**

Ife is widely recognized as the oldest dynamic state formed by the Yoruba. Ile-Ife, the capital city, has the reputation of being one of the longest continuously inhabited centers south of the Rivers Niger and 4°55'E (Adediran, 1992). Ife lies between latitude 7°N and 7°35'N, longitudes 4°20'E, covering an area of 1846km<sup>2</sup> (Jeje, 1992).

The Ife-Modakeke crisis is one oldest intra-ethnic conflict in Nigeria; it has been going on for more than a century and is still claiming lives (Albert, 1999). Following the collapse of the Oyo Empire towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and subsequent Muslim invasion of the northern fringes of the Yoruba country in the opening decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century, an influx of refugees fled southwards looking for secure abodes and dependable means of subsistence. Many of these refugees from old Oyo settled in towns and village on the outskirts of Ile-Ife, tremendously swelling the populations of such communities like Ipetumodu, Moro, Yakoyo, Edunabou and others. With time and as a result of further disruptive civil strife, many moved into Ile-Ife itself living in the different wards of the ancient city (Olaniyan, 1992).

Finding a lasting solution to the Ife-Modakeke intra-ethnic conflicts has, indeed, been an onerous task. Infact, the crisis has defied all peace agreements in the last one hundred years. Consequently, thousands of lives and property have been lost over the years (Akpan-Ekong, 2000). Various reasons have been responsible for the Ife – Modakeke renewed crisis. Among them are land ownership, rent over land and the question of local government for Modakeke. For instance, the August 1997 violence was sparked off by the location and relocation of headquarters of the Ife – East local government council.

The ultimate objective of the separatist sentiments has always been the creation of a separate local government for Modakeke. Indeed, the issue of a separate local government has been central to Ife – Modakeke relations and was certainly prominent among the concerns in the civil disturbances of 1981. It was both a cause and a suggested solution at the same time. The political parties exploited the issue, the local propaganda fed on it, oral and written evidence at the inquiry into the disturbance harped on it. When a separate local government was not created for them, the Modakeke felt profoundly betrayed and cheated. The Ife opposed the creation of a separate local government for Modakeke with determined vehemence, fearing loss of their land; they would rather have the Modakekes evacuated. Other issue that becomes part of the history of the relations between the two communities also became important (Olaniyan, 1992; Akpan-Ekong, 2000).

From the foregoing, in our own view, Nigeria is not yet a United Country. There is inter-ethnic distrust and destructive rivalry. Claude Ake (1992) said, “if not addressed soon, when there is still a chance, that unity can be salvage, we will all be losers, prevailing illusions notwithstanding, Nigeria can only be held together by negotiated consensus not force”.

### CONCLUSION

The state in Africa is neither neutral nor an arbitrator: “it is itself a focal point of competition, an actor in the conflict”. This way “great ethnic conflict has usually been caused by the capture, or apparent near capture, by one group of control over the centralized state, and the dangers of dominance this has foretold” (Osaghae, 1994).

In Nigeria, peace hangs by a thread. Democratization appears to have woken long-suppressed feelings among the hundreds of ethnic nationalities in the country. Now rivalry between groups is usually intense. Some are pushing for greater participation in the running of the affairs of the Nigeria state, while others clamour for greater autonomy. Quite often, groups have resorted to violence, fighting brief wars to settle primordial scores (Omuabor, 2000). For instance, the Ife – Modakeke crisis and the Zango-Kataf crisis that are used as case studies in this study fits the assertion of fighting brief wars to settle primordial scores among other causes.

The problem of building a nation from a collection of ethnic groups is one, which most nations of Africa face today. Nigeria is a plural society, defined by cultural– institutional diversities of the ethnic groups of various populations, and with people practicing three main religions (Christianity mainly in the South and Middle Belt, Islam mainly in the North, and traditional religion in every part of the country). There have been various statements about the extent of Nigeria’s ethnic pluralism, from the two hundred and fifty mentioned by colonialist, and even half that number by superficial observers, to the figure of three hundred and seventy four ethnic groups. Admittedly, Nigeria is a very complex country with the behaviour and relationships of individual and groups determined by imperatives of cultural symbols and strategic social institutions. Different people are predisposed to conceptualize political and economic resources and the access to them in divergent ways through their own coded lenses (Otite, 1999).

Ethnic conflicts are means of identifying the imperfections of a plural society, and of suggesting remedies to remove or solve the problem of inequality, marginalisation, exploitation, internal colonialism, and the misuse of majoritarian democracy and national government (Otite, 2000). Owing to the fact that the roots of ethnic conflicts are not being tackled, cosmetic solutions, such as the creation of more local government councils and chiefdoms, lead to the emergency of new minorities and more agitations. Even within the same ethnic group there are class contradictions, and their primordial political game deepens conflicts along clan lines. In the case of Ile-Ife in Osun state, the

Modakeke claims to the ownership of their settlement and farmland have been strongly resisted by the Ooni (Royal king of Ile-Ife) and the people of Ife. Also, ethnic claim over new local government council headquarters and new markets are a source of conflicts, for example, Zangon–Kataf and Tafawa Balewa towns in Kaduna and Bauchi states respectively. There is also the Warri crisis involving ethnic Ijaws and Urhobos versus Itsekiris, Tiv–Jukun crisis, Aguleri–Umuleri crisis, and Hausas and Yorubas of Sagamu in Ogun state among others.

At 44, Nigeria has come a long way. Its ability to survive as one political entity is the best evidence of its resilience, if not total national unity. Few emerging nations could not have taken the knockings Nigeria had taken these past forty-one years and still be a country. In actual fact, the post-independence political history of Nigeria is more or less how Nigeria has since tried to grapple with the problem of how best to accommodate the competing socio-political and ethno-cultural problems of its people. In a recent lecture, Anyaoku (2000), former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth said “There was a time when some of us were idealistic enough to think it is possible to wish away essential differences between the component ethnic groups of our country (Nigeria) and mould a truly united Nigeria out of it without taking account of its plurality. But experience in this and many other countries show that this is neither possible nor indeed desirable. It shows further that for national unity to become truly nurtured beyond the limits of rhetoric and realized in a way that generates genuine patriotism among the citizens, there has to be minimum of openness and accountability in the governance system. And an accountable government should mean a democratic government freely and fairly elected by the voters. It should also mean a democratic government that recognizes the importance of reaching units of a pluralistic society”. Since Nigeria has now democratized, solving inter- or intra-ethnic conflicts in the country are now left for the present government and Nigerians in general to address.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In Nigeria, ethnic ties seen stronger than national consciousness. The resurgence of ethnic and youth military in Niger–Delta and Southern areas of the country is a case point.

Religious militancy ravages the Northern part of the country while series of communal blood-bath threatens the foundation of Eastern part of Nigeria. Some of the ethnic and religious militants have constituted themselves into private armies thereby creating serious ethnic conflicts. However, the issues of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria could be addressed if the government adopts certain policies and programmes. The following recommendations are therefore made.

There should be convocation of a Sovereign National Conference open to all groups and sections in the country to table and discuss what they needed and how Nigeria should be administered. Although, the National Assembly would have readily performed this historic assignment, but all indications so far, have shown that they are not the true representatives of the people, other delegates should be elected for this purpose.

There should be introduction of effective unemployment reduction-cum job creation agenda policies and laws that would boost food production, provision of social amenities, good and affordable housing, assurance of equity, fairness and justice in all spheres of our national life should be pursued and enacted. The recovery and return to the state coffers of all ill-gotten wealth for investment and punishment of the culprit (dead or alive) should also not be treated with levity if the people’s anxiety is to be assuaged.

There should be proportional representation, which allows all the minorities in the country to be represented at local, state and national levels.

There is a need for a serious and practical commitment to sharing the burdens and rewards of citizenship with equity. We have to beat the habit of preying on others and consuming without producing. This habit underlines our fanatical zeal for political power, and our political fragmentation.

Nigerian should be restructured with more emphasis on decentralization to enable the ethnic groups within the federation to exercise meaningful control over economic and social development in their respective areas. In this regard, the states in Nigeria should have control over the police to enable them function effectively, particularly in crime control and security of lives and properties.

There should be fair and equitable

development, recognition and acceptance of the fact that each group is entitled to a minimum level of self determination within the national framework, a national policy which ensures that no group, however small is denied its just rights and entitlements, as such denial leads to frustration and inability to identify with the nation state.

The government should continue to build a political culture and political fora, which support dialogue and accommodation between groups. This is, no doubt, a long and difficult process in any society, but it should be encouraged.

The ethnic conflicts issue could also be addressed within the spectrum of a consociational Democracy. In a consociation Democracy, the centrifugal tendencies inherent in a plural society are counteracted by the cooperative attitudes and behaviour of the leader's of different segments of the populations. Elite co-operation is the primary distinguishing features of consociational democracy. It is defined in terms of both the segmented cleavages typical of a plural society and the political co-operation of segmental elites.

There is a need to establish a committee of community leaders, which from time to time should among other things, be charged with the task of reviewing the relationship between the warring parties. Only equity, equality, and a true democratic order could provide a bed-rock of unity and peaceful co-existence, which could soften ethnic conflicts.

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