

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ETHNICITY AND UNITY IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF KONTAGORA , NIGER STATE.

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Abstract

Man is a social animal who interact beyond ethnic, clan lineage and family levels. Some of the major factors for their inter relationship include commerce, politics and religion. This paper therefore examined ethnicity and unity as major indices for promoting national unity with particular reference to inter-relationship and interaction between the minority communities and their host (hausa) within the Kontagora environment. The paper discusses the threat to unity of Nigeria as well as the challenges of ethnicity in Kontagora town. This paper therefore recommends among others the need for periodic sensitization of different ethnic groups on the importance of cordial relationship among the people and the need for various religious groups and organization to preach peace and morality for the good of present generation and posterity.

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.

(Kamla-Ra, 2006) In some certain view, the annulment of the democratic transition programed by the military in 1993 at the conclusion of the presidential polls, is believed to have been motivated by ethnic sentiments. On a similar note, the 30-month senseless killing occasioned by the Nigeria Civil War from 1967-1970 was anchored on ethnic rivalry. This was due to the efforts on the part of the predominantly Igbo peoples in the South-eastern region to carve out an independence nation for themselves. 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. Nigeria is synonymous with deep divisions which cause major political issues to be vigorously and violently contested along the lines of intricate ethnic, religious and regional divisions. Issues that raise the most dust are those regarded essential for the existence and the validity of the state. Opposing and contending assemblages have a tendency to assume an exclusionary winner-take-all approach. These issues include the control of state power, allocation of resources and citizenship. As a result, states with such divisions are disposed to be delicate and unstable because almost by definition, they have very little in common with regard to convergence and harmony which are necessary to reduce the centrifugal forces that rip them apart (Osaghae and Suberu2005).

Therefore, breakdown, breakaway, civil strife, civil war, minority nervousness, and violent clashes, all of which would typically be regarded unusual in normal states are common forces or actual occurrences in divided states (Osaghae and Suberu 2005). Because of a complicated network of politically silent identities, coupled with a history of protracted and seemingly stubborn wars and instability, Nigeria is high on the list as one of the most unstable states in Africa. Since its independence, Nigeria has been driven hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional or state illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at democratization, stability, economic transformation and national cohesion. A peak of the crisis appears to have occurred during the civil war of the 1960s, which began shortly after independence (Okpanachi 2010). Since 1999 when Nigeria transited into civilian rule, the country has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of conflicts. The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between religion, ethnicity and those conflicts in the country. It looks at the notion of Identity in an attempt to explain the crisis of development and the complexities of modern Nigeria.

A high level of corruption and the looting of state resources is another serious and 'pandemic' (Dike 2005) problem that makes all forms of conflict and trouble worse in Nigeria. The country is 'richly endowed with natural resources and high quality human capital' (Ogbeidi 2012), but corruption is one of the main reasons that affect the development of the country in a negative way. The appropriation of state resources by certain hands makes poverty and bitter anger inevitable aspects of daily socio-economic life.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME WORK

Ethnicity:

The main elements of ethnicity according to Nnoli (1978) include “exclusiveness manifested in inter-group competition, conflict in relation to stiff competition, and the consciousness of being one in relation to others.” A liberal scholar, Mair who is an anthropologist sees an ethnic group as a people sharing the same historical experience, having the same culture, speaking the same language and sharing the belief about the future together (Mair, 1962). Other liberal theorists (Zolberg, 1968), Oyovbaire (1974), Mitchell (1974), Young (1976), Stavenhagen (1997), see ethnicity as an inevitable consequence of modernization, economic development and political development, especially in Africa. The liberal theorists believe that an ethnic group has as its members, people who share a conviction that they have common interests and fate, and they tend to propound a cultural symbolism expressing their cohesiveness. Ethnic groups differ from other groups in their composition because they include persons from every stage of life and social class. It is suggested that the insignia of ethnicity is inescapable. Kasfir (1976) suggests four ways of recognizing ethnic groups. These are (i) culture; (ii) language; (iii) traditional political organization; and (iv) territoriality. Succinctly, members of an ethnic group must share a common culture, language and custom and occupy the same territory. According to Okwudibia Nnoli (2007) “In reality, ethnicity is a very complex phenomenon.... It is always closely associated with political, economic, social, religious and other social views and interactions. Hence ethnicity finds expression in political domination, economic exploitation, psychological oppression and class manipulation.” Perhaps the commonest explanation of what an ethnic group means is that which says that it comprises people with a common ancestry. In other words, this refers to people who can trace their pedigrees to one ancestor. Apparently, most definitions and explanations on the term, by social scientists, seem to draw from this perspective. Max Weber (1968) for instance, described the ethnic group as “those human groups that entertain a subjective their r descent.” Ethnicity has to do with taking cognizance that some one in every community belongs to a different race or ethnic group living in a particular area (Ayantayo 2004). According to Osaghae (1982) ethnicity refers to a social formation rest upon cultural specific practices and unique set of symbols and cosmology. A belief in common historical evolution provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values and hierarchies and confirms the social identities for separating both insiders and outsiders. Ethnic cultures are one of the important ways people conceive of themselves and culture and ideality are closely intertwined. Ifeoma (2001) identified ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups. Ethnicity has also been understood with in its historical context how individuals are called on to adopt ethnic identity in this ways; the subject integrates his or her consciousness into conceptions of self-identity or world view. (Osaghae 1995). Ethnicity also goes with ethnic stratification. This represents institutionalized inequality in the distribution of social rewards and burdens within the context of existing ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are identified chiefly on cultural grounds, languages, religion, folk practices, dress, gestures, mannerism etc.

Ethnic Crises and the threat national to unity

The Nigerian federation that was bequeathed to the citizenry by the Lyttelton constitution of 1954 according to Babawale [2001] was, and still is, an unbalanced and lopsided one in which the Northern Region emerged as a bigger entity than a combination of the entire populations of the Western and Eastern regions. This alone has triggered untold struggle and persistent mistrust among the peoples of Nigeria. Ethnic crises in Nigeria emerged at different times and for different purposes, this is not to deny the fact that there exists a

common denominator in their emergence, particularly the struggle against tyranny and oppression with the purported involvement of the state brinkmanship, involving threats and counter-threats of breakdown of rule-induced and system-supporting behavior in contexts etched by the tendency of the political elite to prefer fission to fusion, coming apart rather than sticking together, at moments of great national crises, provided the background to the emergence of contemporary forms of ethnic crises in Nigeria [Agbaje, 2003]. Banwo [2003] also argues that it was the undemocratic nature of the Abacha led military administration in Nigeria that aggravated ethnic tension within the polity.

In discussing the interaction between the major and minor ethnic groups, we may need to go into history. In the past, the dichotomy between the groups was seen to some extent as a source of unity, co-operation and progress, especially in the pre-independence period. There was relative harmony between the two groups after independence until 1966 when Nigeria recorded its first military coup, which later led to a civil war. However, history has it that there were not less than eight attempts at secession which threatened national unity between 1914 and 1977 (Dudley, 1982). Since then, Nigeria's unity has been consistently under siege. The reason for this development is not far-fetched. One, the minority groups were on several occasions cheated by the majority in the scheme of things. They were denied access to political power and the good things of life, which the majority groups constantly, enjoy (Noali, 1978).

In other words, the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria constantly experience discrimination, oppression or persecution from the dominant groups. Ironically, the minority groups lack the power to change their situation for they usually do not have a political voice, nor do they have access resources or technology needed to develop them economically and politically. (Ayantayo 2004) even within the minority groups on the other hand, there are complaints about discrimination. Today, what one finds on the lips of every Nigerians is the story of "marginalization". Every group accuses the nation of marginalizing it in the scheme of things. Apparently, this seems to be true, for the present political structure does not practically address the nation in diversity. Obviously, Nigerians have been alienated from one another on the basis of sex, ethnic group, political leaning, and economic and educational opportunities (ehusani, 2002). All these produce negative effects on individual Nigerians and the nation in general. Today, there is a wide gap between the rich and the poor and between the majority and minority ethnic groups, hence, the rise of ethnic mistrust. As a matter of fact, every Nigerian depending on ethnic background, political affiliation, economic standpoint, social status, cultural affinity and religious identification is aggrieved. Ethnic crises in Nigeria emerged at different times and for different purposes, this is not to deny the fact that there exists a common denominator in their emergence, particularly the struggle against tyranny and oppression with the purported involvement of the state in the assassination of notable Nigerians [Agbu, 2004].

The rise and resilience of the tradition of political brinkmanship, involving threats and counter-threats of breakdown of rule-induced and system-supporting behavior in contexts etched by the tendency of the political elite to prefer fission to fusion, coming apart rather than sticking together, at moments of great national crises, provided the background to the emergence of contemporary forms of ethnic crises in Nigeria [Agbaje, 2003]. Banwo [2003]

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Ethno religious crisis in Kontagora

Communal and societal conflicts according to Ibrahim and Igbuzor (2002) have emerged as a result of new and particularistic forms of political consciousness and identify often structured around ethno-religious identities. In all parts of Nigeria, ethno-religious conflicts have assumed alarming rates. It has occurred in places like Shagamu (Ogun state), Lagos, Abia, Kano, Bauchi, Nassarawa, Jos, Taraba, Ebonyi, and Enugu state respectively.

Groups and communities who had over the years lived together in peace and harmony now take up arms against each other in gruesome “war”. The claim over scarce resources, power, land, chieftaincy, local government, councils control of markets, “Osu cast system” and sharia among other trivial issues have resulted in large scale killings and violence evolved in many communities in Nigeria. There is the classification of the “settler” and “indigene”, “Christian” and “moslem”, and “osu” (slave) and “Nwadiala” (free born) these ethno-religious identities have become disintegrative social elements threatening the peace, stability and security in Nigeria. Ethnic and religious issues are most reoccurring issues in Kontagora politics. These have permeated the landscape since the 1999 election. Thus the dominant ethnic groups and minorities are always in suspicious of each other.

In view of the above, one can posit that Kontagora in recent times has witnessed an unprecedented level of crisis. Ethno-religious-violence, armed robbery, electoral violence. (Abdullahi 2016) there were instances when political violence has transformed into ethnic crisis in Kontagora. For instance, on the 14th January 2004, local government election was held in Kontagora, results were collated and a particular party was declared the winner, this did not go down with the opposition part as there were allegations of malpractices. However, the incident prompted the masses into mob actions, due to injustice on their part so they claimed. But instead the youths turned the whole episode into ethnic riot and took the advantage to unleash terror acts on the so called minorities. They wounded people and looted their properties. The hostility nature of this period in Kontagora claimed so many lives, some people fled the town for safety of their lives and properties and so many people resulted to seeking asylum inside the army barracks

Consequences of ethnic crisis in Kontagora Metropolis

According to Ali (2013), the fear of ethnic crisis and insecurity in Nigeria is on the increase and this has been compounded by the rising waves of terrorism. Since the country returned to democratic rule in 1999, violent crimes in Nigeria specifically in Kontagora metropolis were alleged to have been caused by ethnic intolerance, and also by politicians who seized the advantage of disunity in the town to unleash terrorist acts on their opponents irrespective of their tribe or religion. Consequent upon that, the impact of ethnic crisis could be summarized as follows: security factor, due to the fear of unknown crisis which has led to the migration of people from the area to other more safer states like Kwara thereby creating economic depression in such an area.

As a result, especially during this period, most commercial activities were affected and to some extent, inflation was high in Kontagora. Food stuff, wearing materials, car spare parts and many more were not only in limited supply during this period but also costlier. Social activities in Kontagora during this period are also very poor due to fear of when another crisis will engulf. The situation is not limited to only Igbos but also to other non-indigenes in the town. Some people, politicians and others also took the advantage of the crisis situation to either harass, intimidate or even kill the political opponents or enemy under disguise of ethnic crisis.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore made based on the findings of the study to assist in addressing issues of ethnic crisis and unrest in Kontagora town and its environs.

- Family as the basic unit of ethnic society must provide knowledge and information about ethnic harmony to their children at the early part of their life
- There should be incorporation of subjects and courses on ethnic studies into school curriculum from the primary to tertiary level
- There is need for political socialization about the evil of ethnic crisis and the benefit of ethnic harmony
- The people need to develop trust among themselves and work together to avert ethnic clashes
- The community leaders, religious and traditional leaders must preach the gospel of unity of purpose, so that society will learn how to live peacefully with one another
- Government should inbuilt all those problems that breed crisis in Kontagora and Niger state in particular. For example job opportunities should be created for the people especially the youths

Conclusion:

It can be assumed from the above that the root causes of persistent ethnic crises hinged on the socio-cultural, political and economic differences of the peoples. Although most of the crisis in Kontagora could not be traced to ethnic causes but they are either violence that resulted from politics or better still religious crisis

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¹ Anis Ibrahim, *Al-Mu'jamu al-Wassit*, Cairo 1972, p. 471.

¹ Qur'an 8:1.

¹ Qur'an 49:10.

¹ Qur'an 49:11.

¹ Qur'an 49:12.

¹ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Abridged) Abridged A group of scholars under the supervision of Shaykh Safiur-rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, Al-Haramain, Islamic Foundations, First Edition, 2000, p.370

¹ Qur'an 49:10

¹ Saheeh al-Bukhari and Saheeh Muslim

¹ Qur'an 49:13.

- ¹ Al-Bayhaqi, S. H., *Shu'abu al-Iman*, Maktabatu al-Rushd, Riyadh, 2003, vol. 11: 8574
- ¹ Qur'an 9:71.
- ¹ Quran 49:13
- ¹ Qur'an 8:63
- ¹ See more Doc. Islamic Banking and Finance-wikipedia_files/societal cohesion in Islam (part one of 3) Bond of faith- The Religion of Islam.htm on 15/11/2017
- ¹ Qur'an 3:103
- ¹ Qur'an 60:8.
- ¹ Qur'an 16:125.
- ¹ Qur'an 29:46.
- ¹ Qur'an 39:17-18.
- ¹ Qur'an 2:256.
- ¹ Qur'an 10:99.
- ¹ Qur'an 21:22.
- ¹ Qur'an 21:2.
- ¹ Read this definition in *Al-mujaamu al-wassit* of Ibrahim Anis, Cairo 1972, p. 471.
- ¹ See for Instance Qur'an 49:10, Qur'an 8:1, 49:13.
- ¹ Read Qur'an 2:219, Qur'an 4:149, Qur'an 5:95.
- ¹ See the meaning of "Afw" in *Mu'jamu al-Wassit* by Ibrahim Anis, Cairo 1972, pp. 642-643.
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- ¹ See more explanations in Musnad Ahmad, Bukhari and Muslim. Also read some details in Maududi 'sTafhim al-Qur'a n (Urdu), Delhi, 1975, pp. 433-434.
- ¹ Qur'an 29:46.
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- ¹ Mussnaad Al Bazaar An Abi Hurairah.
- ¹ Read for instance: The first prize winner Book: The sealed Nectar (Ar-Raheeql-Makhtum). The Biography of the Noble Prophet (SAW), written by Safiur – Rahman al-Mubarak puri, Maktabaatu Al—al-Sheik, Darbu al-At raak – Khalfa al-Jamia al-Azhar, Cairo, 1st ed. 1436 H/2015 AD, p. 398, 400-406.
- ¹ Qur'an 67:10.
- ¹ Qur'an 3:103.