

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA: THE IMPLICATION FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstract

Societies are considered plural or polarized when there is a diversity of languages, culture, and religions and when the nationalistic spirit is supplanted by tribal and sectional loyalties. Almost on a daily basis, Nigeria experiences ethnic or religious crises in one state or the other and shows that the question of national integration remains a problem. The article examined why after forty-four years of independence as a nation, Nigeria is still far from achieving national integration. Ethnic crisis and religious intolerance/conflicts are identified as factors threatening national integration in Nigeria. Historical review of some past ethnic and religious crises in Nigeria were highlighted. Finally, the article suggested ways of preventing ethnic and religious crises in Nigeria that have been retarding integration.

Introduction

Ethnic and religious rivalry are topmost issues that hamper national integration in Nigeria. The multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Nigeria is the source of disunity as characterized by the numerous ethnic and religious crises especially since 1970.

In terms of size, Nigeria occupies a land area of 923,722 square kilometres. The current population of the country is estimated at one hundred and twenty million people - a figure that ranks her as the most populous country in Africa. According to Ajaegbu, (1985) in Nwaigwe, (2002), Nigeria is one of the ten most populous countries of the world.

The amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates under British rule by Lord Lugard in 1914 made Nigeria a country with people of diverse cultures from the North and South. As a result of this, Nigeria has about 416 ethnic nationalities - each having its own distinct culture and Language. Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions and each has a sizable number of followers.

At present, there are thirty-six states and Abuja (the Federal Capital Territory) and about 774 recognized Local Governments in the country. The above account presents Nigeria as a very large country with a very large population with concomitant immense cultural diversity. These, no doubt, have always made the task of building to turn the country into an integrated Nigeria a difficult task, since independence, forty-four years ago.

The cleavage along which the boundary lines to hostility are drawn among age long cohabitants, has remained dynamically drawn along tribal, ethnic, religious, political and economic lines depending on the interest in view. Manifestations of these circumstances can be found in the senseless violent clashes across the country such as the religious - ethnic Jos crisis, the religious - ethnic Southern Kaduna crisis, ethnic Tiv-Jukun clashes, Yoruba - Hausa ethnic clashes of Lagos. Ilausa/Igbo ethnic clashes in Onitsha, Ijmueri -- Aguleri Communal clash, Itsekiri - Okere-Urhobo Warri ethnic clash, to mention but just a few. These sad events undermine the quest for national integration which appears to have set the hand of the clock in an anticlockwise motion. This is why every area of our national life is seemingly in deficit, the investment in violence is reaping bounteous dividends.

The article is divided into four sections. Section one is the introduction. It makes preliminary remarks on ethnic and religiousness as the top most issues that hamper national integration in Nigeria due to cultural diversity. Section two gives concern to conceptual classification of keywords and underpins their importance to the study. Section three discusses ethnic and religious crises as they affect national integration. It underscores the nation's forty-four years of independence without unity to the effect of these crises. Section four contains the conclusion and suggestions.

Conceptual Clarification

Three basic concepts here require some elucidation. They include: Ethnic, Religion and National Integration. On ethnic. Young (1993) observed that the defining attributes of ethnic community may include: language, territory, political unit or common cultural values or symbols.

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English defines ethnic as “of involving a nation, race or tribe that has a common cultural tradition. The term, ethnic group is derived from a Greek Word "Ethnos - meaning “a people”. According to Azide (2000) in Udeiya, (2002:52), ethnic group denotes an organized group or related people in a national population that has distinct identity, cultural heritage, common language and social traits. Ethnicity also has to do with the way in which people think of themselves and others and make sense of the World around them (Vanguard, 2001:75). Also ethnicity refers to a set of social relations within which social groupings such as men, women, poor, rich, young, old and so on related to each other. It equally refers to specific power relations. At the same time, it refers to cultural relations.

In Nigeria, language and religion are the main defining characteristics of cultural amalgam. Out of this amalgam have emerged two categories of ethnic categorizations: the major ethnic groups namely - Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo and the minority ethnic groups made of the numerous groupings who easily find cohesion in the assumed threat of marginalization by the major groups. It is the reticence of these groups whose voraciousness is relative to their perception of their disadvantaged position in the distribution of the “national cake” that has given spontaneity and consistency to the sporadic ethnic crises across the country.

It is also pertinent to note that even the majority ethnic groups are today beating the drums of marginalization with each major group placing its plight on the doorstep of the other. It has become a bargaining tool for economic and political patronage.

On religion, the concept is broad, complex and dynamic in terms of the ideal in the society. Thus, William (1999:31) defined religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider divine”. It is also important to recognize that the beliefs and practices that are identified as religious are so varied that they do not easily lend themselves to any simple characterization (Chiney, 1961:351).

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines Religion as “the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them”. However, some basic conceptions are found in every religion. They are inter alia, belief in a supernatural power, which instances take many forms e.g. of varying numbers and characters: ghosts and spirits or some abstract impersonal force.

Religion connotes the service and worship of unknown spirit beings, which have had influence over the activities of man. This in fact has been derived from the knowledge that man himself is a spirit being. In other words, man in one way, or the other expresses his spirituality in one direction or the other. In whichever way this is done or in whatever direction it takes, to satisfy this spiritual curiosity, it is known as religion. To Okorodudu, (1996:224)” The contact with God by man after creation and how to relate with him in the invisible world is known as religion”.

However, there are many types of religion in the world since the time of creation and the fall of man. Today various people profess one form of religion or the other. Hence we have all over the world religions such as: Buddhism. Voodooism, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam. Christianity e.t.c. Each of them claim association in their mode of worship with the Almighty creator. But this may not be true.

In Nigeria, the Islamic religion, Christian religion and African Traditional Religion (ATR) etc. have been commonly practiced. In an ideal situation, there should be freedom in religious worship. And if every man who purports to worship God through whatever way he considers to be ideal were to be genuine; then Religion should have been able to assist man in having a disciplined society.

Unfortunately, this has not been realized because of very many hypocritical worship systems common in the entire process of expressing spirituality in Nigeria. In other words, instead of a disciplined society, religious intolerance has been promoted. There is therefore, religious disharmony in Nigeria, which is in itself an index of indiscipline society. Such disharmony can not help to integrate society.

Religious tolerance allows every man to express his spiritual beliefs and practices anywhere at anytime. It equally allows him to propagate it without molestation. Therefore, a society in which religions tolerance is a value should be able to promote individual's desire to equally change his or her religious belief at any time and propagate same without molestation.

Therefore, the frequent religious conflicts experienced often in Jos-Plateau State, Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto Katsina etc in Northern Nigeria between Moslems and Christians are uncalled for: they can not help to achieve national integration that Nigeria has been searching for since independence.

It is this operational aspect of religion in Nigeria that is of interest to this article.

On national integration, Adung and Ike (2002) observed that national integration means national unity. It means unifying all the forces in the country so as to give the idea of one nation. Hall (1978:4) defines national integration as "the process of developing a psychology of nationhood from internal heterogeneous elements". Agbese (1985) sees it as "a process integrating the various ethnic groups into the new nation state that they will willingly strive towards its national unity and aspirations as well as support her rapid economic development". In the context of this article, integration can be defined as peaceful co-existence and interdependence among people either from the same or different ethnic groups or religions.

National integration has since independence eluded Nigeria due to certain factors, such as religion, illiteracy, ethnicity and the attitudes of our political leaders among others. In this article, emphasis is more on ethnicity and religion as they threaten national integration in Nigeria.

Ethnic and Religious Crises as Impediments to National Integration

The major impediments towards achieving national integration in Nigeria are ethnic and religious crises.

The character of crises in Nigeria include ethno-cultural and religious among others. Most violence revolve round issues effecting creed or religion as witnessed in the past in most northern parts of Nigeria. Such crises bring people of opposing faith in sharp conflicts with a view to influencing one another. Other manifestations of crises between ethnic units include clashes from dispute over land ownership as exemplified by the Itsekiri, ijaw and Urhobo people within the Warri area of the Niger - Delta. The Modakeke and Ife raging rivalry in Osun State is also similar to that of Itsekiri/Urhobo.

The effect of the artificial creation of Nigerian ethnic units has also brought about rivalry match between the 'settlers' and natives. The issue had occasion violence in Nigeria. In Yelwa, Shendam Local Council of Plateau-State the ethno/religious crises that led to the proclamation of emergency rule in the entire state by President Olusegun Obasanjo on 18th May, 2004 is a case in point. Also in Kaduna, Benue and Kano States, the issue is very pronounced and it states, neighboring areas and the nation at large (Oti, 2002).

in times of conflicts, all kinds of dangerous weapons such as bottles, guns, bows and arrows are used indiscriminately (Akanni 1998 in Oti, 2002:83). The police have also been found incapable of managing these conflict situations, hence the involvement of the army. This trend is not ideal as it could predispose the sinister motives that may jeopardize the security and stability of the nation.

In the view of Akinseye (1998:41), the spate of religious crises in Nigeria may have been induced by post colonial policy and indeed fully blown up under military administration, particular!} since 1985 when it appeared that the military administration showed favour to one particular religious belief at the expense of the others. Acknowledging the social and religious sensibilities of ethnic groups is vital as part of fundamental human rights. Denial or infringement of it in anyway would naturally trigger off negative reactions that may tamper with the integration of a country.

It is generally observed that there is rise of violence, which has particularly become very high since the inception of the present democratic experiment. These crises are being sponsored by powerful elites made up of politicians, bureaucrats and military personnel who secretly prosecute these crises through the use of ethnic militia groups as their battle - axes. The grouse of these elites max include loss of political patronage, influence as well as ethnic and religious factors. It should also be noted that these elites are not adequately punished for their crime-hence, the recurring phenomenon of violence (Oti, 2002:8.3).

Promotion and defence of ethnic agenda and nationalism by component units in Nigeria is a serious, predisposing factor for violence. The use of such ethnic militia groups as Odua Peoples Congress (OPC) for (Yoruba interest) Arewa Progressive Campaign (APC), (Northern interest). Tgbesu Boys (Ijaw interest), Bakasi Boys (Pastern interest) is a clear demonstration of the depth of ethnic solidarity and allegiance by these groups. The implication of such solidarity for Nigeria is a possible disintegration, if left unchecked by government.

In the view of Salesman (2000), lack of trust among the three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and the improper integration of the political structure of the three regions before independence - are largely responsible for the current spate of violence.

Reprisal attacks from perceived affected groups is capable of increasing the incidence of violence. Of crises involving Yoruba/Hausa in the South-West or Igbo/Hausa — Fulani in the North, there are attendant repercussions and consequences. Often times, what starts as a little skirmish snowballs into major ethno-religious violence resulting in loss of lives and property.

Some aggrieved people who deliberately set out to forment trouble on the pretext that they are marginalized and therefore play politics with selfishness, further influence violence, in post democratic Nigeria. In Nigeria, there are some major religious crises from 1986 to 1989 that are so vital that need to be reviewed. They are:

- (a) The Organisation of Islamic Conference Crises - (January, 1986).
- (b) The Ilorin Disturbances (March, 1986).
- (c) LJsman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto Religious Crisis (May 3, 1986).
- (d) University of Ibadan Religions Crisis (May 3, 1986).
- (e) The Kaduna Religious Crisis - (March 5, 1987).
- (f) Ahmadu Bello University Religious Crisis - (June, 1988).
- (g) Baucii Riot-(19-92)
- (h) Kano Riot - (October II, 1991).
- (i) Baucii Riot - (1992)
- (j) Zango - Kataf Uprising (May, 1992).

Again, since the return to civil rule in May 29, 1999, the nation has been embroiled in ethnic and religious crises. Below is a diary of religions, ethnic and communal crises that have bedeviled Nigeria from May 1999 to 2002.

A Diary of Crises Since 1999

1.	Delta (Warri)	May 30 - June 1999 (A traditional ruler was beheaded and over 200 other people killed)
	Ogun (Shagamu)	July 18 (1999 (Mayhem between members of Odua Peoples Congress and Hausa traders)
3.	Ogun (Imosa)	November 9 1999 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Oro Cult
4.	Delta	Oyo Cult Members)
5.	Lagos	November 11 1999 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims traders Vs OPC in Mile 2)
6.	Lagos	November 27 1999 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Yoruba)
7.	Kwara	December 19, 1999) (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Christians)
8.	Oyo	January 5 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Yoruba)
9.	Edo	January 30, 2000 (About 16 People killed, four them beheaded in a bloody cash between Ifeku and Anegbette communities in Etsako Central Local Government)
10.	Kaduna	February 21, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Others as a result of Sharia law, hundreds were killed and maimed).
11.	Kaduna	February 21,2000 (Religious riots in Kacin and Walingo).
12.	Abia	February 28, 2000 (Religious riots, reprisal killings from Kaduna Mayhem).
13.	Rivers	March 18, 2000 (Eleme Vs Okirika - 19 people killed).
14.	Borno	March 28,2000 (Religious riots in Dambo town - hundreds

		killed).
15.	Kaduna	April 22, 2000 (Ikulu Vs Bajju).
16.	Oyo (Saki)	April 24, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Christians)
17.	Oyo (Saki)	May 28, 2000- (12 killed in Saki, in a clash between Yoruba and Fulani Cattle rearers).
18.	Abia (Aba)	May 19, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Igbo)
19.	Kaduna	May 20, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Others)
20.	Kaduna	May 23, 2000 (Renewed religious war in Kaduna, death toll 300 after 254 hours)
21.	Ogun (Shagamu)	July 18, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Yoruba)
22.	Kano	July 12, 2000 (Nupe, Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Yoruba)
23.	Lagos	October 15, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Yoruba)
24.	Oyo (Ibadan)	October 15, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Yoruba)
25.	Lagos (Alaba Rago)	October 16, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Igbo)
26.	Lagos	October 17, 2000 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Oodua Peoples Congress)
27.	Kvvara	June 18, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Yoruba)
28.	Niger (Minna)	June 18, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Musliems Vs Yoruba)
29.	Kaduna (Zango Kataf)	April 22, 2001 (Kalu Vs Bajju)
30.	Bauch (Tafawa Balewa)	June 18, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Others)
31.	Gombe	June 18, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Others)
32.	Nassaravva	June 25, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Others)
33.	Delta	July 2, 2001 (Odimodu Vs Ogulagha - Nine People killed)
34.	Nassaravva	July 12, 2001-2000 killed, Musa Ibrahim, traditional ruler of Azara Chiefdom, beheaded.
35.	Jigawa	June 18, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Others)
36.	Birnin Gwari	August 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Others)
37.	Plateau (Jos)	September 7, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Berom and Others)
38.	Taraba	September 5, 2001 (Fulani Jukun Vs Tiv) at least over 500 people were killed).
39.	Zamfara (Gusau)	October 10, 2001 (Itsekiri Vs Urhobo)
40.	Delta	October 10, 2001 (Itsekiri Vs Urhobo)
41.	Kano	October 12, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Christians)
42.	Benue	October 12, 2001 (Jukun Vs Tiv) over 1,000 people killed including 16 Nigerian soldiers
43.	Osun (Oshogbo)	December 29, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Anaguta/Iviwe)
44.	Jos	December 29, 2001 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs
45.	Delta	January 15, 2002 (Itsekiri Vs Urhobo)
46.	Lagos (Idiaraba)	January 2002 (Hausa/Fulani Vs Oodua Peoples Congress)
47.	Lagos	February 2, 2002 (Hausa/Fulani Muslims Vs Yoruba)

Sources: The Tell Magazine, September 24, 2001, Tell Magazine, February 18, 2002.

These crises brought about loss of lives and property worth millions of Naira. They consequently heightened bitterness and disunity among Nigerians. This, in no small way is affecting national integration. When love, peace and unity is not in place in a nation, such a country cannot possess national integration. Because of hatred created by religion and ethnicity, very few citizens of Nigeria are committed to the integration of the country. In Nigeria the recurring trend of crises has also brought in poor economic well-being of the ordinary citizens, harsh disincentive climate and general loss of the spirit of nationalism.

One major effect of ethno-religious crises is the state of insecurity in Nigeria in basin of blood spot areas such as the South-West, Middle-Belt (e.g Plateau State) and Niger-Delta where citizens are overwhelmed with fear because of the volatile nature of their environment.

Utility of Nigeria as a state is also often threatened and compromised particularly as

many non-indigenes settling in other parts of Nigeria are forced to flee to their ancestral homes for fear of persecution (Oti. 2002:85). The recent fall out of ethno-religious crisis in Yelwa, Shendam Local Council in Plateau State that spread to Kano and Kaduna saw people moving out in droves which suggests the palpable fear among the people. As long as there is mutual suspicion among the different ethnic and religious groups, unity of Nigeria would become difficult. This position is further made complex by the deep-seated rivalry between the minority and majority ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Conclusion

So far in this article, I have discussed ethnic and religious crises as the topmost issues that hamper national integration in Nigeria due to cultural diversity. The article noted that as long as there is mutual suspicion among the different ethnic and religious groups, unity of Nigeria would become difficult. Consequently, I discussed in the article that some aggrieved people deliberately foment trouble on the pretext that they are marginalized through ethnicity or religious. The article reviewed in detail historical past ethnic and religious crises and underscores their impediment toward the achievement of national integration even after forty-four years of independence. I observed in the article that the realization and sustainability of ethnic and religion harmony requires the positive contribution and participation of all Nigerians.

Suggestions

In view of the severe consequences of crises and their overall implications for the corporate survival of Nigeria, the following suggestions are put forward.

The ethnic groups or nationalities in Nigeria should be integrated into one nation regardless of their sharp dissimilarities.

enlightenment campaigns should be encouraged and extended to both religious bodies and various ethnic groups in Nigerian on the need for peace at all times and why the rule of law must be observed in dealing with certain issues.

All Nigerian citizens through their representatives should sit together and fashion out a country where there can be common citizenship, and a shared value in the context. Concerted efforts towards this objective should be evolved and encouraged through the emergence of new nationalism, radical civic education and reorientation of the entire system.

Existence of stability is also necessary as managing ethnic crises in Nigeria. Government must show sense of responsibility via transparent and purposeful leadership. This is to inspire collective participation from the citizens. Political apathy should also be looked into.

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