

THE ECONOMIC UNDERPINNING OF INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

There have been a series of inter-ethnic crises in Nigeria beginning specifically from the decolonization and post colonial periods, but seem to be more pronounced in the country's Fourth Republic. These crises range from Shagamu's Oro festival riot (1999), the Kano fashion of Oro riot (1999), Kaduna's Sharia riot (2000), Jukun and Tiv crisis (2001), OPC's "outings" at various times, (1999-2002), Mambilla and Fulani crisis (2002), Jos riot (2002, 2003) among others. Following this development, various reasons have been alluded to have been the cause/s among which are political, religious, economic and social. Therefore, this paper intends to unravel the economic factor as the main if not the only cause of inter-ethnic crises witnessed in Nigeria. Thus, those crises merely take political, social, ethnic or religious garb, but underneath is the economic factor. The paper then proffers suggestions in order to avert such occurrences.

Introduction

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria by the Babangida regime created a serious ethnic conflict that nearly led to the disintegration of the country. Despite the reduction in the conflict, its effects have continued to be felt because the country has not yet returned to socio-political normalcy. Even the power shift/rotational presidency adopted in 1999 to usher in the country's Fourth Republic and to serve as a means of solving the problem could not solve it. This is because the Yoruba and Hausa, the Tiv and Jukun, the Hausa and Kataf, Mambilla and Hausa, Bachama and Hausa, Fulani and Birom, Ogoni and Andoni, Umuleri and Aguleri among others continued their bloody encounters.

Based on this premise, the focus of this paper is not a means of apportioning blame for the facets of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, but to explain those conflicts in order to resolving them. Surely, a country in the throes of rapid change is bound to experience conflicts. This could best be seen in the rapid socio-cultural political and economic changes the country has been going through which is imposed on it from outside the country over the past years in form of colonialism and its twin sister imperialism. This development affected the totality of the life of the people of the country in that different pre-colonial Nigerian societies were brought together and live under one political administration with an exploitative economic system.

Colonialism led to massive shifts of populations across the country, new public and private institutions, new ethos for behaviour in these institutions and new notion of citizenship. It fundamentally and radically transformed the economy, including the structures of economic opportunities and external economic relations. At the political level, the people were compelled to come to terms with foreign ideas and forms of political organization such as nationalism, democracy, federalism, secularism, separation of powers and socialism. These foreign imports shaped the perceptions, goals and methods of political actors and their victims (Nnoli, 1998:4).

Thus, with the socio-economic condition upheaval unleashed on the country by colonialism and imperialism as well as the ensuing confusion, resistance, adaptation and adjustment, conflict is inevitable. Surely, conflict is an integral part of human society, social existence, social change and social advancement. This conflict arises mainly as a result of contradiction in the differences in interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations, perceptions and tendencies. These contradictions exist at all levels of society, individual, group, institution and national as well as in interpersonal, inter-group, inter-institutional and international relations. Indeed, conflict is unavoidable in human society to the extent that it has been regarded as a basic means of understanding social existence.

This resulting conflict in social relations has been taken ethnic lines in plural societies like Nigeria. This could be because ethnic groups work out their interests in the changing social situation and how best they could pursue those interests; And since there is no clear cut means and acceptable rules for pursuing their interests, ethnic groups began to come into conflict with one another.

Unfortunately, ethnic identity has a symbolic dimension, which makes conflict arising from it more intense than otherwise. Like religion, ethnicity has the symbolic capability of defining for the individual the totality of his existence including embodying his hopes, fears and sense of the future.

While symbolism in religion explains the hereafter, in ethnicity it explains the here and now. It is for this reason that individuals are very sensitive to matters of ethnic and religious symbolism (Nnoli, 1998:5)

Based on this submission, it could be understood why the reactions to perceived injury to an ethnic group on the part of its members go to the extent of extreme violence. It is in the same vein that an aggressive and murderous ethnic militia man believes that his existence is threatened by the perceived injury to his ethnic group and resort to lay down his life or take others' lives in defence of his ethnic group. This tendency also goes for members of an ethnic group who identify with the fortunes of their co-ethnics whereby a poor villager believes that a cabinet minister from his village is the representation of his own share of the national cake despite the fact that he may never receive any personal material reward from such an appointment.

Though conflict is inherent in social existence and social progress and unavoidable in human relations but it is unacceptable when it leads to violence. This violent ethnic conflict could be as a result of inability or failure to accommodate and resolve the contradictions in human society through procedures that could eliminate their negative effects but minimize their positive gains. Such failures could also be as a result of the inability of the various conflicting groups to accept the laid down procedures for resolving such conflict.

The Primacy of Economic Factor

The justification for giving economic conditions a primacy status is based on the fact that economic need is man's most fundamental need. Unless man is able to meet this need he cannot exist in the first place. Man must eat before he can do anything else such as worship, pursue ethnicity or become an ethnist. Thus, when an individual achieves a level of economic well being such that he can take the basic economic necessities particularly the daily food for granted, the urgency of economic need loses its edge. Nevertheless, the primacy of economic condition remains because the fact that one is not constantly pre-occupied with and motivated by economic needs shows that the needs are being met but not that they are not of primary importance (Ake, 1981).

Furthermore, as economic need is the primary need of man, so also economic activity is his primary activity. That is, the primacy of work in terms of economic productivity is the corollary of the primacy of economic need. This is because it is by man's productive activity that he is able to obtain the economic means, which he needs to sustain life. In other words, man must eat to live but he must work in order to eat. Though it is true that man does not live by bread alone, it is also a fundamental truth that man cannot live without bread.

The implication of these postulations for this paper is that the economic structure of the Nigerian society is the fundamental factor among other factors in explaining the incessant and even violent inter-ethnic crises in the country particularly in the country's Fourth Republic. This is because the material assets and constraints of Nigeria, the methods of production of goods to meet the material needs of her people and the methods of distribution of goods and services as well as the type of social relations that arose from the organization of production are fundamental in explaining inter-ethnic crisis in the country. The economic approach to social development was initially propounded by Karl Marx. He submits that the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and even spiritual process of life. That in any analysis an analyst should take cognisance of the mode of production which refers not only to the state of technique but also to the way in which the means of production were owned and the social relations between men which resulted from their connections with process of production (Aina, 1986).

The Economic Underpinning of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts In Nigeria

Economic Factors in Ethnic Conflicts

Control over production is critical in explaining inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. This is because such individuals, groups, classes and nation who control the means of production could impose on the rest of a given society their values, expectations, ideas, ideologies, institutions and procedures for the management of their economic life and by extension all their endeavours.

In the pre-colonial Nigeria those who controlled the production system in every setting took active measures to encourage immigrants from various ethnic groups to participate actively in the production system. They were also integrated into the production system and its accompanying value system. But in the post colonial Nigeria, the absence of a single ethnic group that controls the production system made it difficult to impose any particular arrangement and procedures for production which invariably led to incessant conflict which has been taken ethnic colouration.

It should be noted that the important feature of pre-colonial Nigeria was massive migration of populations. Sometimes it is done individually but most of the time collectively. Those movements were anchored on a number of reasons among which are; avoidance of epidemic or other natural scourge, fleeing from war or waging war on neighbours, abandoning sterile land and search for more fertile one, on the recommendation of oracles or simply love for adventure among others.

Initially, relation between the migrant and emigrant members of such community was of the international relation and may involve warfare. However, after the resolution of the initial conflict, the inter ethnic relations in the new polity become co-operative which lead to integration and even in some cases assimilation. Indeed, the situation was always amorphous, fluid and complex. The reason for the relative peaceful state of inter ethnic relations in the pre-colonial times could be due to absence of the impact of commodity production on social relations (Richard, 1987).

In the colonial and post-colonial era's commercialization of production and exchange destroys the dominance of kinship ties in the production and exchange system. In its place impersonal relationships based on complex roles in the production process were created. At the same time, it led to divisive competition for the commodity market and the consequent emergence of new forms of kinship ties. The super-ordination subordination of pre-capitalist ethnic relations gave way not only to individualism but also to equality and competition in the commodity market.

Therefore, in order to overcome the insecurity generated by stiff competition in the commodity market individual participants had to join solidarity groups of shared language and culture. And the internal intricacies of these groups do not give room for their merging with one another but rather encourage them to retain their group identities. In this manner, ethnic groups emerged and continue to emerge in accordance with changes in the competition for commodity markets (Nnoli, 1998).

To worsen the situation, an uncreative and unproductive class, which the Nigerian petty bourgeoisie are, took over the mantle of leadership from the colonial masters without confidence and discipline that come with creativity in production. Therefore, few of the members of this petty bourgeoisie were confident of their ability to survive the hardship of economic life, while most of them preferred the security of at least being able to rely on exploiting ethnic differences whenever and where ever this was possible. On the part of the masses, they succumb to the manipulation on ethnic basis because they see ethnic solidarity as one of the few power resources if not the main source available to them in their struggle to overcome increasingly hostile economic conditions in which they found themselves.

Therefore, as ethnic and sub-ethnic consciousness increase in scope and intensity, the socioeconomic and political atmosphere becomes charged with tension. Ethnic conflict thus spreads from urban to the rural areas. Indeed ethnic hostility, loyalty and identifications are passed from one generation to the other through the family, the press, private and public conversations. Under this situation, hostile inter-ethnic exchanges increase and ethnic consideration assumes a self-fulfilling and self-sustaining phenomenon of its own which consequently opens the possibility of inter-ethnic violence.

To Mustapha (1998), the break up of Nigeria into states (36 presently), the oil boom and the entire state that Nigeria assumes as a result of oil revenues, the centralization of state power and the competition to monopolize that power, the scope and depth of corruption (personal and official), primitive accumulation, massive changes in the agrarian sector and the process of class formation and

consolidation are some factors that form the socio-political context for the evolution of new ethnic identities and the re-definition of old ones. The scholar observes further that:

The economic crisis facing the country since early 1980s and subsequent adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986 intensified sectarianism in the competition for dwindling resources. This is because projects embarked upon during the hey days of oil boom such as communication, transportation, education, industrial development and health could not be sustained more or less of extending it (Mustapha, 1998:43).

This economic crisis has increased the level of socio-economic insecurity and subsequently interethnic competition. This has been the trend in Nigeria since the 1980s. And the response of the State to the crisis through SAP has neither reduced debt both internally and externally nor the level of inflation and unemployment which led to the withdrawal of the state from social welfare programmes and in turn imposed severe hardships on the masses with increase in misery and created the atmosphere for inter ethnic struggle and subsequently inter-ethnic conflicts (Jega, 2000).

Indeed, the effects of the economic crisis on interethnic crisis is enormous. The crisis had destroyed the ability of Nigerians to build and maintain integrative projects, assuming that their leaders have the necessary will to do so. It has even led to the growth of divisive competition for the ever decreasing natural resources through the intense manipulation by factions of the leadership as they mobilize support for their competition for power and wealth.

Conclusion

This paper identifies that ethnic conflicts in Nigeria dated back to the colonial era due to production system of the colonialists and since then it has been increasing. This production system centres on monetization of commodity as an aspect of capitalism. This gave way to unguided competition for material resources which takes ethnic form. And since the competition was so severe it led to confrontation among the various ethnic groups and consequently bloody conflicts particularly in periods when the economy faced crunch when there was not enough to be shared by the competing interests.

Therefore, for ethnic conflicts to be reduced if not erased in Nigeria there would be the need for the economy to pick up, which is remote. This is because Nigeria is a mono-economic state which rely solely on petroleum products with over 80% of her revenue coming from it. And since rent and royalties from oil came in form of bonus without much investment or trouble in its realization, it looks impossible if the country's leaders would think of diversifying the source of the country's resources. Thus, the struggle and competition would continue, if not in ethnic posture it could be religious.

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