



**A Historical Diagnosis of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria:  
Toward a Model for Peaceful Coexistence**

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### Abstract

Ethno-religious conflicts have remained a permanent feature in the socio-political landscape of Nigeria from colonial times to date. These ethno-religious conflicts have, over time, posed insurmountable national security challenges and have constantly threatened the corporeality of the Nigerian state. This worrisome situation has, no doubt, elicited some fundamental questions in contemporary times. One of such questions is: *What can be done to achieve peaceful coexistence and ethno-religious harmony in contemporary Nigeria?* It is in an attempt to answer this question that this paper undertakes a historical diagnosis of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. This will then enhance an adequate appreciation of the dynamics of ethnic and religious factors that have, more often than not, dimensioned the nature of interactions between the relevant groups in Nigeria. A proper understanding of these dynamics is expected to extenuate ethno-religious disharmony and inspire a workable model for harmonious coexistence among the ethno-religious divides in the country. The methodology is interdisciplinary and analytical. It uses both the primary and secondary sources of data to interrogate the forces that exacerbate the mechanics of ethno-religious factional wrangles in the country. Evidently, colonial factors, resource competition, socio-political dynamics, among other things, are identified as key elements in Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts. It is discovered that various efforts have been made to address ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, and that these efforts have often resulted in quick remedies without tangible and long-lasting effects. In the main, such remedies have usually lacked the basic analytical basis needed for addressing an all-time social phenomenon like ethno-religious conflict. This paper, therefore, recommends that mere palliatives should give way for more practical, realistic and long-lasting remedies – remedies that are scientific and holistic in content and context.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, religion, conflicts, colonialism, resource competition, political dynamics

## Introduction

The search for peace and, by extension, peaceful coexistence has remained one of the main tasks of humanity at all levels since human beings began to commune and coexist. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), the League of Nations (1918-1939) and the emergence of the United Nations from the debris of World War II since 1945 are some of the major historical landmarks that adequately illustrate the elaborate efforts and consciousness of humanity towards the attainment of lasting peace and peaceful coexistence. Despite these concerted efforts, the quest for peace and peaceful coexistence among individuals, groups, states and nations has remained only a potential aspect of human expectations. Several factors that bother on conflict of ideology and contestation over territorialities have served to explain the general lack of sustainable peace at both the continental and global milieus. While this assumption enjoys some level of general applicability in explaining the conflict phenomenon and general disharmony among human societies, it is also important to note that there are environment-specific and context-specific issues that stand out in explaining the inhibition of peace and peaceful coexistence in particular societies. Thus, there are some historical and socio-cultural peculiarities that are prevalent in driving the forces that inhibit peace and peaceful coexistence in distinctively peculiar environments and contexts.

For us in Africa, the stark reality that readily explains the continent's developmental disabilities, abject poverty and lack of harmony among the various ethnic groups that make up the continent derives from colonialism. For instance, in an elaborate disquisition on the multilevel challenge for Africa, W. Maathai (2009, pp. 25-47) describes the complex leadership problematic of the continent as a legacy of woes – the colonial legacy theory. It is from this theoretical perspective that the prevalence of conflicts in post-colonial Africa is placed on the doorsteps of colonialism. While this theoretical assumption subsists in some conversational quarters, the substance of its argument does not sound quite convincing in modern academic discourses, even though it is difficult to divorce the past from the present. But the fact that the demise of colonialism after several decades has not taken Africa to the threshold of peaceful coexistence and sustainable growth and development readily provokes the need for a continuous historical interrogation of the conflict trajectories and peculiarities of the continent. To be able to establish an intellectually manageable domain for the purpose of interrogating Africa's experience in the context of conflict trajectories and the polemics of peaceful coexistence on the continent, the Nigerian experience is deliberately singled out in this discourse as our main unit of analysis.

With an estimated population figure of 185,887,930 (NDP, 2017), Nigeria is, incontestably, the most populous nation in Africa. This population figure is distributed among the nation's 371 ethnic groups (Vanguard, May 10, 2017) with their different languages and cultural affiliations. The differentials in the size, ethnic composition and cultural affiliation of the numerous ethnic groups readily present the fertile grounds for fierce competition over scarce resources and political gains. The resultant effects of this reality constantly manifest conflicts and readily inhibit peaceful coexistence between and among the people of the country.

A number of interlaced factors account for Nigeria's conflict problematic. Factors that derive from politics, economy, chieftaincy matters, resource control, and marginalization, among others, have severally prompted major disagreements between groups in the country that, more often than not, lead to violent clashes. Out of this litany of factors, ethnicity and religion have arguably remained the most potent

triggers and drivers of recurrent conflicts in the country. This is the assumption that has prompted this conversational engagement. The task here is to understand the connection between ethnicity and religion in Nigeria's conflict problematic; to understand the consequences of ethnic and religious conflicts for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria; and to attempt a pontification for peaceful coexistence among the ethnic and religious divides of the country.

### **Ethno-Religious Conflicts: A Conceptual Architecture**

The analytical thrust of this work hinges on the tripartite conceptual architecture of ethnicity, religion and conflicts. To that extent, these three concepts are, first and foremost, given their separate explanations to enable a proper understanding of their distinct conceptual properties. Thus, the task in this section dwells on the definitional and analytical explication of these concepts – ethnicity, religion and conflicts. It is from the separate explanations of the three distinct concepts that the logic of their nexus is convincingly established.

There is always the general tendency for using the concepts of ethnicity and tribalism interchangeably. Yet, there is a thin distinction between the two, which arises from the dynamics of a global social order – the dynamics of social history. For instance, tribalism has been fondly used by Eurocentric scholars with reference to backwardness of sub-groups in African societies (Orngu, 2014, p. 324). Again, it has been argued that the concept of tribalism was popularized by colonial anthropologists who sought to interpret pre-colonial and later colonial African politics (Orngu, 2014, p. 323). Subsequently, as Nnoli (1978, p. 1) suggests, the concept became gradually internalized by Africans themselves to the extent that they began to see the changing nature of their societies as predominantly a function of tribalism. Curiously, tribalism has persistently remained visible in explaining and understanding the divisive nature of modern African societies, especially when it serves as a motivator in the pursuit of separatist agendas among pluralist groups. But, in the main, tribalism can be interpreted as a social phenomenon that functions in similar ways as ethnicity.

Ethnicity derives from the Greek word 'tribe' (Onwuejeogwu, n.d., p. 1). Thus, both the etymological and epistemological interpretations of ethnicity and tribalism clearly suggest a profound conceptual similarity. Arguing further, Onwuejeogwu notes that an

... Ethnic group is defined as a section of population, which by virtue of sharing a common cultural characteristic separate them from others within that population.

In the words of Nnoli (1978, p. 5), ethnicity is described as

... a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture, or both. In Africa, language has been the most crucial variable.

From the above, it is clear that both tribalism and ethnicity are social phenomena that define the communal and cultural boundaries of groups within a defined geopolitical context. We shift our attention to the concept of 'religion' to enable us to establish the nexus in the compound elements of ethno-religion.

Simplistically, a religion is a belief system and practice relating to a designated divine sanction that unites its adherents. The idea of religion is believed to have received its modern shape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from when the concept – religion – was invented in the English language as an abstraction that entails distinct sets of beliefs or doctrines. It was during the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the usage of the concept began following the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Revolution alongside the globalization of the exploration age that facilitated contact with a variety of cultures that were alien to European traditions (Harrison, 1990; Harrison, 2015).

‘Religion’ has continuously engaged the conceptual concern of scholars beyond mere linguistic expressions. This reality throws up the temptation to conclude that the concept has no final definition. However, Antoine Vergotte (1996), a renowned Theologian, provides the vent for a clearer understanding of what religion entails when he emphasizes its cultural reality. Strengthening his argument on the cultural dimension to the understanding of religion, Vergotte (1996) insists that:

Almost every known culture has a depth dimension in cultural experiences ... toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life. When more or less distinct patterns of behavior are built around this depth dimension in culture, this structure constitutes religion in its historically recognizable form. Religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience – varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture.

What comes out clearly from the above is that religion is inextricably related to culture in the same way that ethnicity and culture have a great measure of interlacing relationship. Clearly, therefore, ethnicity and religion are the two sides of culture.

A conflict situation derives from a contestation over values and goals, or a clash of interest. It manifests in many forms and assumes different dimensions depending on a multiplicity of factors, which may include the character of the parties involved and the nature of the contestable values or goals at stake. Put differently, a conflict is a conscious act that involves personal or group contestation over scarce resources with the occurrence of incompatible activities particularly in complex societies (M. Deutsch, 1973, p. 156; O. Otite, 1999, p. 1). The fact that individuals or groups are bound to interact and contest over values in the context of conflicting interests sufficiently explains the inevitability of conflicts in human societies. Ethno-religious conflicts will, therefore, mean the contestation over values or the clash of interest that assumes a combination of both the ethnic and religious elements. In this way, both ethnic and religious elements take a central stage in determining the nature and character of ethno-religious conflict, and the parties involved in the conflict situation. The dimension of an ethno-religious conflict is, therefore, influenced by the manipulation of the ethnic and religious variables and defined by cultural affinity.

### **Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: A Geo-Historical Foundation**

Nigeria’s ethno-religious configuration is defined by the geopolitical composition of the country. In the northern part of the country, where the Hausa/Fulani constitute the dominant population, Islam is the most practiced religion. In the southern part of the country, the population of the Christian faithful arguably outweighs the population of the Muslims. This claim is made with reference to a 2001 report

from the World Factbook by CIA that about 50% of Nigeria's population is Muslim, 40% Christians, while 10% are adherents of African Traditional Religions. Therefore, apart from the adherents of the two orthodox religions, there is a significant population across the country that adheres to several African Traditional Religions. This scenario makes Nigeria a country of complex religious composition.

A geo-historical analysis of the ethno-religious scenario of Nigeria must take cognizance of the fact that the two orthodox religions – Christianity and Islam – penetrated the country from two geographical axes. Islam was introduced into the country through the northern axis during the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Fulani missionaries from Mali. Christianity, on the other hand, was first introduced in the country through the southern axis by the Portuguese Christian missionaries in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This historical reality accounts for the dominance of Islam in the northern part of the country in the same way that Christianity is dominant in the southern part of the country.

The history of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria can be traced back to the pre-colonial period, specifically during the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Usman Dan Fodio campaigned to conquer and forcefully convert all 'pagans' into Islam and to further the expansion of the Sokoto Caliphate. Precisely, in 1804, Usman Dan Fodio, the leader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jihads in northern Nigeria, began the campaign to establish the emirate system over the expansive area that later became known as Nigeria. By 1805, Mallam Yakubu Bauche, a former student of Usman Dan Fodio, had successfully established the Bauchi emirate system in his domain through an elaborate Jihad movement that conquered and brought various villages and ethnic groups under Islam.

Although it was in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that Fulani missionaries from Mali commenced the serious Islamization of the northern part of pre-colonial Nigeria, it was the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jihad movement that firmly established the gigantic Sokoto caliphate. This development soon transformed the larger part of pre-colonial northern Nigeria into a theocratic socio-political system that was governed by Islamic law during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As noted earlier, previous efforts had been made to establish Christianity in pre-colonial Nigeria beginning from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, it may be argued that the Christianization efforts in pre-colonial Nigeria during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century partly assumed the consciousness to counter the influence of Islam in the areas that had been largely Islamized. This notion readily comes to the fore when one considers the following statement by Rotberg (1970) credited to Gerhard Rohlfs, a German explorer to the Benue Plateau in 1886:

May one of the Christian powers, using these advantages offered by nature, take possession of the Bauchi Plateau and colonize it with settlers from Europe under the protection of arms! Here in the territory of Hausa and Bolo Negroes, a great majority of whom are still pagans, and who despise the rule of Mohammedan Fulanis, a strong barrier should be established against the continued spread of Islam. Islam fills its confessors with heartless contempt of the infidel heathen, with fanatical hatred of Christians. It is Islam which causes the outrageous man-hunts among the Negroes; it is Islam which makes it difficult for European travelers to penetrate into the interior. (p. 194)

Perhaps, Ayandele (1980) adds current to the validity of this notion when he states that by wishing the triumph of Christianity over Islam and by wishing for the death of Islam, the European explorers inadvertently prepared the way for Christianity to assume the status of a counter-religion to Islam in

pre-colonial Nigeria (See p. 370). Thus, the Christian Missionaries arrived pre-colonial Nigeria with a pre-conceived mission to entrench Christian values throughout the area including the highly Islamized Sokoto Caliphate; and to dislodge all other forms of African Traditional Religious practices and replace Islam. Between 1842 and 1892, eight Christian missions had established their presence in a sizeable part of pre-colonial southern Nigeria (Ayandele, 1966; Orngu, 2014, p. 75).

The problem of religious dichotomy in Nigeria can be traced back to the nature of colonial policy on religion in the country. For instance, there was an official colonial policy that barred the Christian missionaries from penetrating the emirates in the north (Ubah, 1988, p. 108). Similarly, there was the resistance to the Jihad movement by some sections of the central and southern Nigeria and the outright rejection of Christianity in some parts of the country, especially in some parts of the northern and central regions. This reality clearly indicated some level of religious rivalry, which began to manifest clearly in the nature and character of inter-group relations in the country soon after its creation through the final phase of amalgamation in 1914. Thus, the persistence of religious dichotomy, along with its interlaced variable of ethnicity, has remained central to the fragile unity of Nigeria since its amalgamation as a corporate geopolitical entity. This prevalent scenario plays out most fiercely in the political socialization process with profound implications for the corporeality of modern Nigeria. For instance, the country's political leadership structure has, more often than not, flowed from this ethno-religious factor within the framework of geo-strategic calculation.

***A chronology of leadership succession in Nigeria from 1967 to the Present***

S/N	Duration	Head of State/President	Section of the Country/Religion	Deputy/Vice	Section of the Country/Religion
1.	1967-1975	Yakubu Gowon	North/Christian	David Ejoor	South/Christian
2.	1975-1976	M. Mohammed	North/Muslim	O. Obasanjo	South/Christian
3.	1976-1979	Olusegun Obasanjo	South/Christian	S. Yar'Adua	North/Muslim
4.	1979-1983	Shehu Shagari	North/Muslim	A. Ekwueme	South/Christian
5.	1983-1985	Muhammadu Buhari	North/Muslim	T. Idiagbon	South/Muslim
6.	1985-1993	Ibrahim Babangida	North/Muslim	Ukiwe/Aikhomu	South/Christian
7.	1993-1998	Sani Abacha	North/Muslim	O. Diya	South/Christian
8.	1998-1999	Abdulsalami Abubakar	North/Muslim	M. Akhigbe	South/Christian
9.	1999-2007	Olusegun Obasanjo	South/Christian	Atiku	North/Muslim
10.	2007-2010	U. M. Yar'Adua	North/Muslim	J. Goodluck	South/Christian
11.	2010-2015	Jonathan Goodluck	South/Christian	Sambo	North/Muslim
12.	2015-Date	M. Buhari	North/Muslim	Osinbajo	South/Christian

The above table graphically illustrates the persistence of the ethno-religious factor in the structure of political leadership in Nigeria. Thus, given the centrality of politics in the authoritative allocation of values, it is apparent that ethnicity and religion are the key denominators in the gamut of Nigeria's geopolitics.

## Sources and Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Contemporary Nigeria

Generally, the most conspicuous source and cause of conflict in human societies is injustice. The manifestation of injustice assumes various forms and dimensions and can be readily deciphered in the realms of political marginalization, inequality in resource allocation and the absence of fairness and equity in the dispensation of social justice. However, in the context-specific experience of contemporary Nigeria, factors like colonialism, ethnic nationalism/patriotism, religious intolerance, and the nature of the country's political economy readily account for ethno-religious conflicts. As will be seen in the course of this discussion, ethnicity and religion provide the platform for and serve as instruments of manipulation for the articulation of group interests in the course of fierce contestation over scarce resources and other divergent goals. Let us take a closer look at the factors that cause and exacerbate ethno-religious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria.

The first is the factor of colonialism. Some scholars have argued that colonialism, which thrived on the principle of divide-and-rule, has had lasting implications for inter-group relations in contemporary Nigeria (Afigbo, 1987; Ballard, 1972; Okpeh, Jr., 2006; Olaniyi, 2006; Mamdani, 1996). For instance, as Filaba (2006, p. 425) argues, the British agents were very careful in the selection of groups – the Jihadists and emirate rulers with large network of commerce and trade interest in European good – with whom they collaborated during the period between the 1820s and 1890s. Similarly, during the establishment of colonial rule in the Keffi, Nasarawa and Suleja areas, the British gave preference to Muslims in their interaction with the people (Filaba, 2006, p. 425). Reinforcing the notion of divide-and-rule during colonialism in Nigeria, Olaniyi (2006) insists that British rule was premised on the logic of dualism, stereotyping and conscious fragmentation of the colonized (See p. 387). The emphasis of this dualism was on the ethnic and religious dichotomization of the colonized. Mamdani (1996) gives credence to this line of argument when he notes that the colonial state was an extremely bifurcated institution with a highly decentralized despotism in the context of dual citizenship. This fact was clearly illustrated during the colonial period where Yoruba migrants who had a commercial history in Kano dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, were treated by the British as strangers in the area (Olaniyi, 2006, p. 387). Clearly, as Goshit (2006) further argues, the colonial rulers adopted policies that divided the colonized along racial, ethnic and religious lines (See p. 471). The implication is that the British colonizers were not necessarily committed to inventing conscious measures to integrate the colonized into a united geopolitical entity.

In buttressing the colonial factor as a major source and cause of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, reference can be made to a situation where in the northern parts of Nigeria, separate quarters as well as residential areas were set aside for Muslims and Christians by the colonial administrators. In the 1940s and 1950s, the non-Muslim migrants into the northern parts of the country were denied residency in the main Muslim cities and were provided settlement lands where satellite non-Muslim towns known as Sabongari (stranger towns) were developed. This dichotomized settlement pattern that was premised on ethnic and religious segregation actually created a sense of resentment among the adherents of the two orthodox religions and further gravitated to the indigene/settler phenomenon in the northern part of Nigeria – a phenomenon that has persistently taken different forms and dimensions with cumulative and grievous consequences for the country's unity and internal security.

The second is the factor of ethnic patriotism, which is encouraged by the undisguised allegiance to ethnic loyalty. Ethnic consciousness that arises from the colonial legacy of divide-and-rule has remained



an important variable that characterizes inter-group relations in contemporary Nigeria. Joseph (1999) argues that:

Ethnicity remains a vital social force for several reasons: the borders and cultural content of ethnic groups can be fluid or rigid according to the circumstances; it is an emotionally satisfying mode of self- and group-assertion; and its salience increases rather than being “over-ridden” by division according to social class during the struggle for survival and material advantage in the modern sectors of the [Nigerian] society and economy. (p.48)

Himmelstrand (1969) alludes to the above when he concisely submits that ethnicity in Nigeria is mainly political and that it stems not only from primordial ethnic loyalties but also from politically exploited and reinforced reactions to contemporary African societies (See p. 81). But it is important to understand that the nature of ethnic phenomenon in Nigeria is not merely as a result of the agglomeration of disparate linguistic and cultural groups (Nnoli, 1980, p. 97). During the colonial times, the phenomenon of rural-urban migration created the room for socio-economic competition in the midst of scarcity in colonial urban settings. As a response to this socio-economic competition, ethnicity emerged during the 1920s as a platform for the pursuit of group interests. The resultant effect of this reality began to manifest kinship and communal associations in Nigeria’s urban settings such as Ngwa Clan Union, Owerri Divisional Union, Calabar Improvement League, Ebirra Progressive Union, and Urhobo Renascent Convention, among several others (Nnoli, 1980, p. 97). These platforms were established to serve as bastions of hope for members in the wake of severe scarcity, social inequalities and socio-economic insecurity that was occasioned by the great economic depressions of the 1920s and 1930s. The communal character of these platforms has sustained their relevance over time in prosecuting the narrow interests of their members above the larger goal of pursuing the agenda of national unity and integration in Nigeria. It is the desperation to sustain this ethnic loyalty for the promise that it holds for ethnic loyalists in a pluralistic and multicultural Nigerian state that strengthens the relevance of ethnicity and xenophobic disposition in contemporary Nigeria – the result of which is recurrent ethno-religious conflicts.

The third is the factor of religious intolerance. In most cases, it is feared that religion readily generates the proclivity for inter-group conflicts in human societies (Orngu, 2014, see p. 127). Although Seul (1999) has argued that not all expressions of religious identity can lead to conflict (See p. 553), it is feared that Nigeria’s experience has proved otherwise. This is because, a religious group that is confronted with social and material difficulties is likely to resort to the promotion of group cohesion and the mobilization of members towards improved material conditions. In the course of promoting group cohesion and mobilizing members for self-seeking goals, the possibility of conflicts cannot be easily wished away. This is exactly the picture of religion that the Nigerian situation portrays. So, religion serves, first and foremost, as a source of security and functions as a source of insecurity (Droogers, 2010, p. 148).

The coexistence of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria presents an irreconcilable scenario of dialectical dualism that arises out of the outright rejection of polytheism. Thus, while the campaign of Islam in the country consistently canvasses theocracy, Christianity has continued to advance the advocacy for secularism. This places contemporary Nigeria on a precarious pendulum as the state continues to grapple with the futile efforts of reconciling the contending perspectives and worldviews

of the two orthodox religions – Christianity and Islam. But more worrisome is the fact that the two orthodox religions are split along micro-sectional lines with both Christianity and Islam all constantly trying to create their own agreed political platforms as substitutes for an ever-elusive theology of unity (Ibrahim, 1991). The religious consciousness of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Nigeria in the 1960s, the growing influence of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs on the worldview of Muslims in Nigeria during the period, and the subsequent creation of the Christian Association of Nigeria in 1976 serve to illustrate the extent to which the micro-units of the two orthodox religions came to serve as political platforms and rallying points for the pursuit of sectional goals. But in the main, religion serves as an instrument of manipulation for amplifying and instigating differences in ethno-religious contexts as a wider strategy for political power acquisition and for facilitating the pecuniary benefits of groups engaged in the process of power brokerage in Nigeria (Orngu, 2014, see p. 132). This is exactly the situation that has engendered the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism in Nigeria with its concomitant implications for the corporeality of contemporary Nigeria.

The fourth is the nature of Nigeria's political economy. In this context, political economy concerns are viewed from the perspective of livelihood analysis, which takes into account the totality of the socio-political and economic relationships and processes within a society. This provides a clearer picture for understanding the extent to which political and socio-economic issues affect inter-group relations within Nigeria's heterogeneous milieu and its intertwined conflict phenomenon that readily arises from fierce competition over political gains and scarce resources. Understandably, the dynamics of political and economic relations among groups in a socio-political environment that is marked by profound political problems and economic inequalities tend to gravitate towards conflicts. The centrality of the state in the creation and distribution of national wealth and in the dispensation of political patronage affords a vivid illustration of an overpowering *statism*, which monopolizes the political and economic levers of the state. The inability of the Nigerian state to accommodate the various groups that make up the country on equal terms in the distribution of national wealth and in the dispensation of political patronage has always created resentments and feelings of marginalization among the excluded. This situation is prone to conflict and those groups that feel excluded have always resorted to the manipulation of ethnicity and religion as instruments for confronting what they contextualize as injustice. A closer look at some of the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria such as the age-long ethno-religious conflicts in Kano (particularly the Reinhard Boonke crisis of 1991); Tafawa Balewa Crisis (1995); and the Mango-Bokkos conflicts on the Plateau in the 1990s, among others, reveals the deployment of ethnicity and religion by groups in pursuit of self-determination.

### **Consequences of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Contemporary Nigeria**

Conflicts, in whatever shape and dimension, are ready-made threats to peace and peaceful coexistence. The frequent occurrences of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have had serious consequences that cut across a broad spectrum of the country's socio-political and economic terrains. Threat to national security, destruction of lives and property, negative impact on social cohesion and national integration and disarticulated development agenda are the most conspicuous consequences of ethno-religious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria.

Ethno-religious conflicts are fundamental to the national security problematic of contemporary Nigeria. Their frequency has, over time, threatened the territorial integrity of the Nigerian state. The threat arises from the orchestrated porosity of the country's domestic environment that originates from internal crises – ethno-religious conflicts. The point is that any nation that is confronted with internal crises is potentially vulnerable to the break-down of law and order, which in turn threatens its national security. The Nigerian state has suffered instances of threatened national security arising from ethno-religious conflicts and their concomitant break-down of law and order. The resultant effects of this reality, as experience of the 1991 ethno-religious conflict of Kano has shown, is that local and foreign investment profile of the country is adversely affected.

Another consequence of ethno-religious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria derives from horrendous threats to and destructions of lives and property. This unfortunate reality has constantly heightened tension and dissipated the personal security of citizens of the country, through the imposition of perpetual fear and feeling of insecurity. Those who were affected during the ethno-religious conflicts in Kano abandoned their means of livelihood and relocated to other parts of the country for safety. Okechukwu Madu, who was a trader in Kano prior to the outbreak of the 1991 ethno-religious conflicts, was compelled to abandon his trade and flee to the central part of the country for safety. The Kano crises witnessed a high-profile exodus of domestic diasporas population. Again, several lives and property have been engulfed in ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria with severe manifestations in demographic and infrastructural deficits. Goodluck Okwente, who had lived in Kano for over twenty years, lost two of his family members and property to the Akaluka incident during the 1994 ethno-religious conflicts in Kano. Similarly, Oguta Okefe, a resident of Tafawa Balewa Local Government Area of Bauchi State, experienced severe losses in both human and material terms during the 1995 Tafawa Balewa crisis.

Furthermore, ethno-religious conflicts have aggravated the lack of social cohesion and national integration in contemporary Nigeria. The polarization of the Nigerian citizenry along ethnic and religious sympathies is a function of ethno-religious hostilities in the country. This has inadvertently intensified divisive tendencies that, more often than not, tend to undermine social cohesion, unity of purpose and national integration among a sizeable population of the country.

Again, ethno-religious conflicts have exacerbated Nigeria's social problems such as vulnerability of women and children to social insecurity arising from refugee crises, threat to child education, health crises, and the general lack of access to quality life. This painful reality adequately explains, in part, the apparent frustration of the Nigerian state in its efforts to effectively cater for the educational and health needs of the girl child in the country. Finally, conflicts are generally averse to development. The frequency of ethno-religious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria translates to a rowdy atmosphere that inhibits the country's development efforts.

### **Towards a Model for Peaceful Coexistence**

Undeniably, there are destructive and divisive elements that are hemmed in ethno-religious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria. Given this reality, it is proper to advance some workable remedies that can check the prevalence of ethno-religious conflicts and hopefully diminish their destructive and divisive elements so that peaceful and harmonious coexistence can be tenable in the country. The following tips will, therefore, serve as models for engendering a harmonious and peaceful coexistence among Nigerians.

First and foremost, it is injustice that brings about conflict. Once injustice is checked in the country, there will be no conflicts of such horrendous magnitudes as accentuated by ethno-religious disharmony. The Nigerian state is, therefore, required to strengthen its institutions for speedy dispensation of justice at all times. Once the institutional mechanism for justice administration and dispensation is strengthened and re-oriented in the direction of speedy and unbiased justice delivery, the citizenry will have an undiluted confidence in the system and an assured sense of belongingness and protection within the country.

Again, there is the need for the Nigerian state to practically institutionalize the secularist principle beyond mere theoretical postulations and political sloganeering. The framework of the secularist principle is already in existence in the country; but has always been heatedly contested by the proponents of theocracy who have consistently canvassed the Sharia law system in some parts of the country. This has whittled down the supremacy and superiority of the Nigerian Constitution and the effects of this irreconcilable dualism are antithetical to the quest for peaceful coexistence in contemporary Nigeria. There is, therefore, the need to irrevocably emphasize the absolute adherence to the secularist principle in the country.

Next is the need to emphasize national unity and denounce ethnic patriotism in Nigeria. Since religion is essentially tied to ethnicity in Nigeria, as experience shows, it is possible that the denouncement of ethnic patriotism will evaporate the emotions and passions with which ethno-religious contestations are pursued. The pursuit of national unity will then generate the spirit of nationalistic patriotism and create the atmosphere of solidarity over and above ethno-religious affiliations. This is a sure way to attaining peaceful coexistence in contemporary Nigeria.

Again, economic and political reforms are required to address the nagging issues of political marginalization and fierce competition over scarce resources. This is achievable through transparency and accountability in governance, eradication of nepotism and corruption, development of critical infrastructure and the encouragement of industrialization through the enhancement of the country's rich indigenous knowledge systems.

Finally, and very importantly, there is a need for a continuous inter-religious dialogue and harmony between Christians and Muslims to reconcile their goals through a working relationship between the leaders of the two religions. Equally, a constant dialogue between youths of the two religions will galvanize a proper appreciation of their contending goals, which will ultimately lead to a harmonizing position on critical issues of vital interest at stake.

## Conclusion

Ethno-religious conflicts in contemporary Nigeria are traced to the advent of the two orthodox regions – Christianity and Islam – that penetrated the country from the two geographical axes of north and south. The drive for the expansion of the two religions across the nation and the dialectical dualism that underpin their theological principles have been fundamental to their irreconcilability. Since the adherents of the two religions are distributed according to ethnic and geo-historical configurations, the irreconcilability has almost permanently assumed the dimensions of mutual antagonism that has frequently escalated ethnic and religious related conflicts in the country.

In most cases, the consequences of these ethno-religious motivated conflagrations have always

manifested high-profile destruction in human and material contexts. Nigeria's fragile unity and absence of national integration are some of the consequences of this unfortunate social phenomenon, the persistence of which is fueled by socio-economic and political factors.

Ethnicity and religion have remained a combined binding force that serves to feather the articulation of the socio-economic and political interests of the mutual antagonists in the scenarios of ethno-religious conflagration in the Nigerian state over time. This is the situation that is central to the understanding of the ethno-religious conflict problematic in contemporary Nigeria.

Understanding the history of this problematic, therefore, is a necessary step in the direction of engendering harmonious and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

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