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## ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND THE STATE

### Towards overcoming the challenge of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria<sup>2</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

Ethno-religious clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of intergroup crises in Nigeria. This article reflects on the challenge posed by ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria and the many ways in which it manifests itself. Two dangerous catalysts of ethno-religious conflicts are identified, namely a capitalist mindset aimed at participating in or controlling the distribution of material wealth or the nation's natural resources, as well as the desire for political control or the desire to use political power for selfish or sectarian interests. Finally, suggestions are made as to possible steps that may be taken by the Nigerian government, at all levels, in order to curb and ultimately to prevent the recurrence of ethno-religious conflict.

#### INTRODUCTION

A short summary of the circumstances that brought into being the entity we call "Nigeria" will provide a clear introductory path to the perplexing issue of ethnicity, religion and the Nigerian state. The Nigeria we know today did not exist prior to 1914. What did exist were two protectorates. The north used to be a protectorate where the predominant religion was Islam. This same Islam was used to unite – either by force or voluntarily – the various ethnic groups in that region. The southern replica of the northern protectorate included within its borders even more ethnic groups, with a variety of religious orientations. The eastern axis of this (southern) protectorate was predominantly Christian, while the western axis included Christians as well as Moslems, with no clear distinctions along family lines. On the latter axis, the juxtaposition of both Christianity and Islam tended to result, albeit unintentionally, in a greater sense of compromise between adherents of both these religions.

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The administration of Lord Lugard joined together these protectorates to form Nigeria. However, this was done without any definite programme to neutralise the possible dangerous consequences that forcing the various ethnic groups and religions into one nation might have. The effect of this hasty arrangement resulted in ethnic and religious conflicts that have claimed many lives in Nigeria. Consequently, any meaningful discourse aimed at overcoming the challenges of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria must first synthesise the fundamental principles that govern the attachment of Nigerians to religion and ethnicity as a means to gain material wealth or access to power. Such a functional approach will first require clear a conceptualisation of the terms “ethnicity”, “religion” and “state”.

### Ethnicity

Ethnicity concerns the identification of any group of people with a particular cultural or traditional affiliation. Such people share a common identity or origin that often manifests in the ability to speak the same language, the tendency to dress alike, or partake in similar social activities and in a similar manner. More than 300 different ethnic identities are found in Nigeria. However, the Hausas, Ibos and Fulani constitute about 70% of the country’s population; the Kanuri, Tiv and Ibibio (each with more than one million members) 10% percent, and the remaining 20% of Nigeria’s population is from about 300 different ethnic groups.

These ethnic groups are spread across the country, but tend more to be concentrated on the south-south axis of the country and, to a lesser extent, in the north-central zone. The south-east, south-west, north-west, and north-east are comparatively homogeneous with regard to language. Ethnic communities tend to realign, in line with the evolving political trends, within the above-mentioned six geo-political zones. Such realignment focuses more on ethnic groupings as a function of geographical location rather than linguistic affiliation. Hence, this paper will reflect on ethnicity as it affects the relationship between and within these zones.

### Religion

Religion refers to an individual’s or an aggregation of people’s strongly held beliefs, values, and attitudes that serve as a guide to behaviour and a way of life. Religion also refers to a practice, an activity, or an object that an individual, or group of individuals, tenaciously holds on to. Some individuals may be prepared to die in support of any such religious activity or cause. Religion also serves as a source of identity. Adherents of a religion are expected to believe, accept, and defend certain fundamental principles that constitute the religion’s core values or tenets. It is a sacred engagement that attempts to link the abstract with the real.

The predominant religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion. Within the Christian fold, variations ranging from Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Celestial churches are found. Amongst Muslims, variations also exist, including radical sects as found among the adherents of the traditional religions who worship different deities. The desire to spread a particular religion or to convert other believers often underlies the violence that characterises religious conflicts in Nigeria.

## The state

A state consists, among other things, of a group of people who inhabit a specific geographic area and guided by a common legal authority. The entity that serves to bind the group together in this case is the regulating or governing body, and it presupposes that the group members have accepted to live together under agreed terms and conditions of coexistence.

In this essay, “the state” refers to Nigeria. Prior to the existence of Nigeria, the religious beliefs of the different ethnic groups were mainly rooted in their respective cultures. External forces introduced Christianity and Islam, with the eventual amalgamation of these religions into one state called Nigeria.

## THE CHALLENGE OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

The presence of traditional religion and *either* Christianity *or* Islam in any particular region in Nigeria seldom results in the kind of terrible destruction witnessed in regions where both Islam *and* Christianity coexist. Most often, conflicts that start out as religious disturbances result in ethnic cleansing and vice versa. These conflicts pose a challenge to the government of Nigeria on all three of its levels: local, regional (i.e. challenges faced by the respective federal states that make up Nigeria), and national (i.e. conflicts that cut across different geopolitical zones). While challenges with regard to ethnicity permeate all three levels in all parts of the country, those connected to religion are more pronounced at the level of state and national level. This may be largely due to the fact that the more than 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria and religious affiliation tend to follow a north-south ethnic divide.

*Religious* clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of intergroup crises in Nigeria because of their tendency to spread – even across state or regional borders in the Nigerian federation. A religious conflict in Lagos, in the extreme south-western end of Nigeria, may reverberate in Sokoto, on the extreme north-western axis of the country. Thus far, most religious conflicts have occurred in the so-called “Middle-Belt” of Nigeria and in borderline states of the Muslim north, where Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups have been pitted against non-Muslim ethnic groups in

... [a] dangerous convergence of religious and ethnic fears and animosities ... [in which it] is often difficult to differentiate between religious and ethnic conflicts as the dividing line between the two is very thin (International IDEA 2000:296).

Among the primary examples of violent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises of 1987 and 1999; the Zangon-Kataf riots of 1992; the Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2001; the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000; and the Jos riots of 2001 and 2008. Although the exact number of casualties are not available, these riots claimed several hundreds of lives and had violent ripple effects far beyond the areas where they originated. The most ridiculous yet destructive riot was the *religiously*-induced Miss World riot of 2002.

*Ethnic* clashes have also taken their toll on human lives and property in Nigeria. Major cases of Nigerian inter-ethnic violence since the late 1980s include the Tiv-Jukun conflicts in

Taraba and Benue State; the three-sided Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri clashes in Warri, Delta State; the recurrent clashes between Hausa-Fulani and Igbo groups in Kano State; the Ife-Modakeke settler conflict; and conflicts that acquired an ethno-religious colour since they were between the Hausa-Fulani, who are Muslims, and the Igbos who are mainly Christians. While the Tiv-Jukun, Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri, and Hausa/Fulani-Igbo clashes are long-running conflicts that have erupted occasionally in the early 1980s, others, such as the Hausa/Fulani-Yoruba clashes, took place mainly in 1999/2000 in the wake of the transition from military to civilian administration.

As the above examples show, both religion and ethnicity pose challenges to Nigeria. These challenges manifest themselves in the struggle for appointments, threats to the unity of Nigeria (suspicion, disaffection), impediments to the entrenchment of democracy (the struggle for votes during elections via rigging), and the destruction of lives and property. Others manifestations of these challenges are constitutional flaws, and corruption through weak social structures.

### **The struggle for political appointments**

Ethno-religious conflicts jeopardise the appointment of credible and qualified persons to head key positions in government. This occurs at all three levels of Nigerian government. On the level of local government, family heads, community leaders, and opinion leaders promote the appointment of their children or wards in lucrative positions. Whenever they do not succeed, they will try to incite their followers by citing ethnic or religious marginalisation as reasons for this. The Jos religious crisis in 2008 was a product of such a local ethno-religious crisis.

This struggle also extends to the level of federal states, especially in the appointment of commissioners, chairpersons of boards, etc. – where communities and individuals often play the ethnic or religious card. An unsuccessful applicant will suddenly remember that the governor is a member of tribe A, as is the successful candidate, even though the candidate was better qualified for the position. As a result, tribal and religious sentiments may restrict the objective appointment of qualified personnel to public offices.

Similarly, people compete for appointments on national level, and use ethnic and religious sentiments in the process. A football coach, for example, who decides to select a team based on the players' football skills, may soon be accused of marginalising some potential players due to ethnic or religious bias. However, when such a coach decides to select his team to include players from across the board (which most often is the case), his team may end up performing poorly and thus the whole nation loses due to ethno-religious considerations.

### **The threat to unity in Nigeria**

Ethno-religious conflicts threaten the unity of Nigeria at local, state and national levels as well. Ethnic conflicts have led to the struggle for small portions of land among otherwise

peaceful communities at local level. The Ife-Modakeke conflict had its origin in such a struggle for land. Similarly, minor land squabbles have escalated into national calamities. All these (avoidable) skirmishes, occurring along ethnic lines, promote disunity among the people. Furthermore, this leads to suspicion and disaffection among them.

At federal state level, ethnic conflicts manifest in the struggle for the control of state power. Communities and local governments within the same state are suspicious of each other and some people may try to discredit the government or to distract its attention by engaging in subversive behaviour because of ethno-religious affiliations.

The same tendencies are found when geo-political regions within the country as a whole cast suspicion upon each other. A citizen who, for example, loses property or children in a conflict in one region and moves away, will not be willing to return to that region. He or she might expect that another upheaval could occur without notice which will then again be to the detriment of his life investment. Groups also go to extremes, including the destruction of the belongings of those from other regions as a result of distrust or of feelings of being oppressed during ethno-religious crises.

### **Entrenchment of democracy**

Ethno-religious tendencies sometimes lead to ballot rigging and other election malpractices. Such behaviour negatively affects the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria. People condone electoral malpractices when they are to the benefit of candidates from their own ethnic or religious group, and tend to react violently when the opposite happens. The reasons behind the first and second Nigerian coups and their subsequent civil wars can be traced back to ethnic struggles for power.

Only during the aborted Abiola-Kingibe presidential campaign did both presidential and vice-presidential candidates come from the same religion. Thereafter – and never again in the history of Nigeria – has religious one-sided candidacy for president and vice-president been allowed. All of the above tendencies challenge the entrenchment of a true democratic culture in Nigeria and all can be traced back to ethnic and religious chauvinism.

### **The destruction of lives and property**

Many Nigerians have lost property, children and relatives in ethno-religious crises. Most were not compensated but were rather left to cope with their misfortunes by themselves. At the local level, towns have been sacked, peoples' houses burnt and their belongings looted. A case in point is the Ebom-Abijakara land crisis in the Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State. At the state level, too, communities have lost their wards in avoidable clashes due to ethnic tendencies. One example is the Warri crisis that erupted due to the establishment of a local government area and the situating of its headquarters amidst a minority group which the majority Ijaw disapproved of. As a result, several lives were lost and property worth millions of naira was destroyed.

### Constitutional flaws

Attempts to review Nigeria's Constitution have always been greeted with hostility due to the ethno-religious inclinations of its citizens. Representatives from some communities have walked out of Constitution review sessions out of protest because their ethnic or religious views were not upheld.

Furthermore, despite the provision of so-called indigeneship for Nigerians who have lived in any part of the country for ten years, people are not allowed to apply for jobs or compete for elective positions unless they return to their places of birth. And added to this, the Constitution appears to be silent on the punishment to be meted out to defaulters of this provision.

### Corruption through weak social structures

Ethno-religious undercurrents also promote corrupt practices. People cut corners, refuse to implement rules, or punish offenders because of religious or ethnic affiliations. They also cheat and get away with it by playing on peoples' ethnic and religious sentiments. Worse still, people take advantage of their positions to recruit or employ others based on religious or ethnic considerations. Such practices are, once again, found at the level of local government, at state, and at national levels.

## OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Since the end of the Nigerian civil war, a series of conflict management strategies have been introduced in Nigeria to control the divisive tendencies of ethno-religious affiliation. These strategies have helped to some extent in preventing the country from disintegrating completely. However, these measures have not been able to prevent the sporadic outbursts of negative emotions whenever ethnic or religious friction occurs.

In attempting to overcome the challenges of ethnicity and religion, one must look at the two dangerous catalysts for ethno-religious conflicts whenever they occur. The first is the mindset aimed at controlling or participating in the distribution of material wealth or the nation's natural resources. The second is political control or the desire to use political power for selfish or sectarian interests.

### Capitalist tendency

The need exists for fine-tuning approaches to the distribution of wealth among the entities that make up Nigeria. The promotion of some form of distributive justice through the redistribution of resources to multiple sub-federal jurisdictions, as well the representation of diverse sub-federal elites in national government institutions, will enhance Nigeria's revenue-sharing and "federal character" policies.

Government should make a conscious effort to compensate unfortunate victims of conflict, while at the same time ensuring that culpable individuals are brought to book. Strong and enduring financial structures and procedures should be devised, and these should be

entrenched in the Constitution so as to discourage greedy politicians whose only goal is to use ethno-religious sentiments to amass personal wealth. Furthermore, the negative use of the indigenisation policy should be reviewed. Nigerians should be recognised as citizens on the basis of where they reside rather than where their parents come from. This will reduce the tendency to see some Nigerians as settlers and others as bona fide indigenes. Regarding this issue, Government should formulate a policy where Nigerians can obtain local government certificates of origin from places they have resided in for ten years or more, as provided for in the Constitution. These certificates can then be used in seeking employment opportunities within the community where applicants reside with all the rights and privileges afforded to the majority of other members of that community. In other words, Nigerians should not be given the impression that their economic survival or existence depends upon the respective ethnic groups they belong to.

All religious groups that have engineered or promoted conflict should be penalised accordingly – for example, by withdrawing their certificates of business incorporation in commercial activities in Nigeria. Government should also go beyond the establishment of non-functional inter-religious bodies, and should expressly encourage inter-religious seminars and conferences at the local level. Such collaborative inter-religious interactions can be developed at both state and national levels as well. The obligatory cultural interchange of secondary school children from different states should be extended even to nursery school level.

### **Political control**

The partial decentralisation of conflicts in separate, multiple, sub-federal arenas can reduce the capacity of ethno-religious conflicts to polarise or destabilise the Nigerian federation as a whole. Early warning measures should be concentrated at the local level rather than in a few large regional centres. This should also be followed by the fragmentation and relegation of each of the three major ethnic groups into several states, none of which will individually threaten the stability or continuity of the federation as a whole. Renewed calls for the establishment of additional states in Nigeria are an expression of this proposal. Heterogeneous ethnic minority-dominated states that will be created in this way will promote the political accommodation and empowerment of communities that were previously disenfranchised under the growing Nigerian geo-political structure.

Intergovernmental political alignments, especially via appointments, may not be helpful and should be discouraged. Political control should start by reviewing political processes with particular attention to the role of the electoral umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), at both federal and state levels to assert its independence. The will of the people should not only be reflected in the outcome of elections, but should also be reflected by the allocation of appointments across ethnic fault-lines. Constituent states that are not exactly isomorphic with ethnic boundaries need not fight or compete along functional lines of interest – including issues of states' rights and constitutionalism. National interests should be promoted above individual or group interests.

## CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the concepts of ethnicity, religion and the state. In doing so, it considered the development, diversity, and trajectories of identities and its associated conflicts in Nigeria. These identities are mainly ethnic and religious and have been shaped to an immense degree by colonial experiences, which created a culturally artificial and divided Nigerian state and did very little to nurture a unified Nigerian nation. The hasty unification of the northern and southern protectorates by the colonial regionalist federal legacy fuelled big-tribe hegemonic ethnocentrism, ethnic minority insecurity, democratic instability, ethno-military infighting and secessionist warfare. All of these tendencies manifest at the local, state, and national levels.

Among the resultant challenges of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are the struggle for appointments; threats to the unity of the country; obstacles to the entrenchment of democracy; the destruction of lives and property; constitutional flaws; and corruption. One of the most remarkable features of Nigeria's post-colonial political development has been the transformation of the dysfunctional colonial federal legacy into relatively more accommodative multi-state federalism. The relative success of this multi-state structure in sustaining Nigeria's unity amid diversity is underscored by recent surveys suggesting that an overwhelming majority (75% or more) of Nigerians (which includes a clear majority of the population in the former secessionist Igbo states) profess firm commitments to both national and sub-national ethnic identity, and will not contemplate any dismemberment of the country (Lewis & Bratton 2000; 2001). As earlier stated, this tilts the scales more favourably towards renewed calls for the creation of more states. Despite the many structural pathologies and violent conflicts that plague Nigeria as a multi-ethnic polity, the federation's achievement in accommodating multiple identities should not be trivialised. Finally, one of the two key approaches advanced to overcome ethno-religious conflicts proposed in this paper has been the reduction of capitalist tendencies to control or participate in the distribution of material wealth or the nation's natural resources. The second has been mediated political control or the elimination of the desire to use political power for selfish or sectional interest.

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**KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE**

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