RELIGION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN NATION: X-RAYING THE CONFLICTS AND REMEDIES

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Abstract

Religion and ethnic identity in Nigeria: X-raying the conflicts and remedies is the focus of this research. Religion is man's belief in a supernatural force for protection and reverence. Ethnic identity is an individual's self-categorizing concept in which a person identifies with an ethnic cleavage and its cultural identity, beliefs, values and origins. Religion and ethnicity have caused great harm to the Nigerian state as there is now absence of peace and crisis all over the country. There is lack of peaceful coexistence among religious groups in Nigeria as religious fanatics create tensions on daily basis. This research addressed the historical context of religion in Nigerian society, and look at ethnicity as concept, the connectivity of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria, a critique of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, exploitation of religious and ethnic identities by elites, religious conflicts and socio-political implications, religious identity and manipulation in Nigerian politics and remedies to ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria. This research utilized the analytical method with books, journals and internets sources. It recommends that every citizen of Nigeria should be allowed to practice their religion freely without infringement and discourage ethnicity because they breed discrimination and crisis.

Keywords: Conflicts, Ethnicity, Exploitation, Identity, Religion

Introduction

Nigeria, as a result of ethnic identity and religious affiliation is more polarized and disintegrated today than it was at independence; and the situation is getting unbearable on daily basis. Adamolekun (2000) asserts that religion covers a wide variably of behavior, practices and beliefs. Hence, religion is not in any way a means of promoting conflicts, rather it is a means of encounter with the Supreme Being and interaction with the supernatural order to cope with life crises. Most religions of the world proclaim peace, love, harmony and have served the cause of peace. Contrary to the above assertion, religion has been the causes of many wars in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Findings show that religion is sometimes one of the major causes of

wars and this is borne out of the fact that some of the current international conflicts have religious undertones.

The interplay between religion and ethnicity in Nigeria is a significant factor in the country's socio-political landscape, as both are powerful identities with the ability to unify communities or create deep divides. Nigeria's ethnic diversity and religious pluralism intersect to form complex group identities that political elites have historically exploited for power and control. By leveraging these identities, elites often incite tension and conflict, deflecting from critical issues such as economic inequality, resource allocation, and corruption, (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). This manipulation contributes to cycles of intercommunal violence, particularly in regions where ethnic and religious identities align with access to political and economic resources.

The reality and effects of violence and insecurity in Nigeria and the world are alarming. Nigeria, since independence, has been bedeviled with one form of violence and insecurity or the other: militancy, religious crisis, political crisis, kidnapping, insurgency. This socio-Religious conflicts are part of the recurring issues in Nigeria today (Oko, 2015:287). The effects on the nation and the church cannot be overemphasized, (Olusakin & Sibani, 2023). Nigeria, as a result of ethnic identity and religious affiliation is more polarized and disintegrated today than it was at independence; and the situation is getting unbearable on daily basis. This was re-echoed by Atanang, Ekanem and Oko (2022:201) when they said "due to differences in tribes and religious beliefs, there are numerous incidences of hostilities, resulting in destruction of lives and properties" .Ambrose (2022) says, if the inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims is in nature, it will pave way for a peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. For example, one can quickly observe that, in our schools, neighbourhood, and even extended families, Muslims and Christians are living together. The questions begging for answers are: is

ethnicity the main cause of religious violence? Are religious conflicts in Nigeria political? If Nigeria completely becomes a secular state, will crisis cease? This research will see to the solutions of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Historical Context of Religion in Nigerian Society

Nigeria's religious landscape is one of the most diverse and complex in Africa, deeply shaped by its history, colonial legacy, and varied ethnic composition. The country is home to three major religious traditions: Islam, Christianity, and indigenous African religions. Each of these belief systems has left a profound imprint on Nigeria's social, economic, and political structures, contributing to both its unity and its divisions.

Islam is the oldest of the three major religious traditions in Nigeria. It was introduced to the northern part of the country in the 11th century through trade and contact with the broader Islamic world, especially with North Africa and the Arab world. The Kanem-Bornu Empire and later the Sokoto Caliphate helped establish Islam as the dominant religion across the northern regions, where it remains the majority faith today. The Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Usman dan Fodio in the early 19th century, also contributed to the spread of Islam and shaped the political structure in the north. Islamic leaders in the north exercised both religious and political authority, creating a legacy of theocratic governance that continues to influence the region's culture and political systems (Falola, 2001).

Christianity was introduced later, primarily during the 19th century with the arrival of European missionaries, who initially established schools and medical facilities as a means to evangelize local communities, Ter-Haar, 2009). Christianity spread most rapidly in southern Nigeria, where British colonial administrators also had a greater presence. Unlike Islam, which became embedded in local governance structures, Christianity spread through a decentralized network of

missionary institutions. The faith gained considerable influence among the Yoruba in the southwest and the Igbo in the southeast, contributing to a new social hierarchy and changing traditional practices, (Larrain, 1983). Christian missions often prioritized Western education, which in turn opened up opportunities for employment in the colonial administration, thereby reshaping social structures in the south (Peel, 2000).

Indigenous African religions, though often less visible in contemporary Nigeria, represent the oldest spiritual traditions in the region. These belief systems are typically polytheistic and emphasize a close connection between the spiritual and natural worlds. Indigenous religions vary widely across Nigeria's different ethnic groups, but common features include ancestor worship, belief in multiple deities or spirits, and a strong link between religious practices and local customs. Although Christianity and Islam now dominate religious life in Nigeria, indigenous beliefs continue to influence cultural practices and worldviews, especially in rural areas. Many Nigerians even today incorporate elements of traditional religions into their Christian or Islamic practices, creating unique syncretic forms of worship (Falola, 2001).

A Look at Ethnicity as Concept

Ethnicity is generally considered the most basic and political salient identity in Nigeria. Nigerians define themselves in clear terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity both in competitive and non-competitive spaces. Ethnicity is one of the key markers in Nigeria's pluralistic society. The primordialists see ethnicity as historically rooted and embedded in people's way of life and culture, and enforced by social institutions, collective myths and memories developed from early socialization, and hence have continued over time to heighten the polity of the nation, (Nwaoha, Ogboji & Ugwolebo, 2022).

Ethnic nationalism holds that nations are defined by common ancestry, language, and beliefs (Muller, 2008). According to Erikson's (1968), description of identity as interrelating the group and individual identity; identity can be generally defined as any group attribute that gives recognition, definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group, acting individually and collectively. Ethnic identity connects people with common ancestral bond, languages, cultural affinity. Two major approaches or school of thoughts can classify the nature of Nigeria's identity formation. The first is primordial ties which are basically ascriptive and dependent on the 'givens' of life or natural (tribe, kinship, and ethnicity among others), and civil ties, which is based on industrial-society, such as political party affiliation, interest group membership, class and 'elite' construct.

Uchegbu, Belo & Ojo (2025) holds that identities are intricately linked and mutually reinforcing, because identities co-exist. The most salient identities are main basis for violent conflicts in Nigeria which cut across ethnic, regional, religious and sub-ethnic. The phrases: ethno-religious, ethno-regional and religio-political are ways of expressing the connectivity of identities in a plural state, like Nigeria. In recent times, other 'primordial' identities which have gained wide and strong conceptual relevance in Nigeria are those of 'indigenes', 'non-indigenes', 'migrants' and 'settlers. All these have ethnic, communal, religious and regional affinity, and have emerged from an entrenched system of exclusion and marginalization in which non-indigenes, migrants and settlers are deprived of equal access to resources, rights and privileges in the same nation as citizens. The newest emerged, constructed identity in Nigeria is the 'political-class' identity which has deepened the socio-economic marginalization and promoted the classification of other citizens of the country as the 'poor masses. This exclusionary system has continually promoted social inequality, injustice, and deprivation which has remain the bane of violent conflicts all

over Nigeria, and is deep-rooted in the "national question". Of course, these marginalization and ethnic socio-political inequalities were both entrenched by the colonial lords and post-independence administrations.

Nwaoha, et.al (2022) defines ethnic nationalism as the allegiance of individual members of ethnic group to such group, having shared origins, tradition and having developed high level of consciousness on the factors that binds them together in a given area. There is always a fundamental consciousness of the ethnic group to think and belief that they are distinctive from others, and this ethnic consciousness and allegiance determine the level of co-operation and existence of these ethnic cleavages in a given period.

Ethic nationalism identifies a people of ethnic group of common descent bonded with common culture and distinctive ideology. Ethnic nationalism believes that nations are defined by common ancestry, language and beliefs. It is based on the idea that ethnic groups have the right to self-determination, and this right can lead to a variety of different outcomes from a sovereign state to the establishment of self-governing bodies within the existing state. Ethno-nationalism is a type of nationalism which basic understanding is tied up to ethnic ties and ethnicity as core component of nations. Ethnic nationalism as a concept refers to distinct ethnic groups and identities that are living in a common territorial space or polity, who failed to develop attributes or social capital or integration to accommodate each other, whose deep-rooted boundaries define their distinct cleavages.

Colonial legacies, modernization, forced assimilation; social fragmentation, uneven development and histories of authoritarianism are factors that construct ethnic nationalism. Ethnicity plays a major role in the political development in Nigeria, and has emerged ethnic politics-a detriment to Nigeria's nascent democracy and national development.

The Connectivity of Religion and Ethnicity in Nigeria

The Hausa-Fulani are predominantly Muslim, the Yoruba are religiously diverse with a mix of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions, and the Igbo are primarily Christian. These religious and ethnic identities are not merely cultural markers but have become politicized in ways that shape access to power and resources. As a result, religion and ethnicity often overlap, influencing regional politics, economic policies, and social organization. Considering religious affiliation trend in Nigeria, all is not well as religious crises have almost put the entire country apart as religion is used as a political weapon by selfish politicians. According to (Oluwatoyin & Emmanuel, 2020) Nigeria has three hundred and fifty ethnic groups with diverse religion, history, culture, dialects and languages. The major ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani) compose only fifty-seven percent of Nigeria's population. The remaining forty-three percent are the minority groups. Minority groups according to (Dada, 2016) do not have political voice, nor do they have access to resources or the technology required to develop economically. As a result of this, they often consider themselves being marginalized, neglected, relegated and oppressed in all ramifications. These among other factors usually fuel religious crises in Nigeria as each ethnic groups and religious fundamentalists will usually want to have their ways at all cost.

The political relevance of religion and ethnicity has been especially pronounced since colonial times when the British colonial administration applied "indirect rule." This policy relied on local leaders and aligned with ethnic and religious divisions, especially by empowering northern Muslim leaders and reinforcing a political divide between the north and the south. This divide laid a foundation for later ethnic and religious competition as Nigeria transitioned to independence, with groups vying for influence in the emerging nation-state (Kukah, 1993). Over

the years, these divisions have become deeply entrenched in the political framework, influencing voting patterns, party alliances, and government appointments. Consequently, religion and ethnicity serve as a means of rallying communities, but they also perpetuate the marginalization of certain groups and fuel tensions across regional and religious lines.

A Critique of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

The persistent exploitation of religious and ethnic identities for political gain has profound implications for Nigeria's social and political stability. This manipulation not only fuels division but also hinders development by diverting attention and resources away from crucial issues like poverty reduction, healthcare, and education, (Smith, 2007). The cycles of violence that emerge from such divisions have a devastating effect on communities, leading to economic disruption, displacement, and long-term trauma, (Ibrahim, 2011). Intercommunal violence often results in the destruction of infrastructure and disruption of essential services, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, where access to social services is already limited, (Omeje, 2012).

On a national scale, ethno-religious conflict weakens Nigeria's cohesion and challenges the viability of its federal structure. As local leaders and politicians continue to draw on these identities to build support, the sense of a united Nigerian identity becomes harder to sustain. This fragmentation impedes the formation of effective, inclusive policies, as politicians prioritize the interests of their immediate ethnic or religious constituencies over national unity. Moreover, when communities become polarized along religious and ethnic lines, they are less likely to collaborate in addressing shared challenges, such as poor governance and economic inequality, making it easier for elites to escape accountability (Kukah, 1993).

The intersection of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria has become a critical factor in the country's political and social dynamics, (Lewis, 2007). Political elites exploit these identities to maintain

control, reinforcing divisions that lead to recurring violence and societal fragmentation. By examining case studies such as the Jos crisis and the Boko Haram insurgency, it is evident that many of Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts are not merely cultural clashes but products of deliberate manipulation. Scholars such as Albert (2002) and Kukah (1993) highlight the importance of addressing these root causes by fostering inclusivity, accountability, and unity across Nigeria's diverse communities. Addressing the manipulation of religion and ethnicity in politics is crucial for fostering peace, development, and national cohesion in Nigeria.

Exploitation of Religious and Ethnic Identities by Elites

Several instances of intercommunal violence in Nigeria demonstrate the impact of elite-driven manipulation of religious and ethnic identities. These clashes have led to the loss of thousands of lives and the displacement of many more, illustrating the tragic consequences of politicizing religious and ethnic identities (Albert, 2002). Boko Haram capitalized on religious grievances and perceptions of government neglect, attracting followers who felt marginalized by the state. The group's attacks on Christian communities and government installations have further intensified Nigeria's religious divide. Politicians in the northeastern Nigeria have been accused of leveraging the insurgency to gain control over rival communities or to undermine federal power. The Boko Haram conflict is thus both a symptom of religious and ethnic manipulation and a tool used by some elites to maintain local power, even at the cost of regional stability, (Anderson & Beckerleg, 2007).

Political elites in Nigeria often manipulate religious and ethnic identities to secure loyalty, consolidate power, and marginalize opposition. This exploitation operates on several levels, ranging from subtle messaging to outright incitement of violence. During elections, for example, candidates frequently appeal to ethnic and religious loyalties, presenting themselves as defenders

of their community's interests, (Nnoli, 2008). This approach is especially effective in Nigeria's "first-past-the-post" electoral system, where the winner takes all, making ethnic and religious bloc voting a critical strategy for political survival.

In many cases, elites stoke fear and distrust between religious and ethnic groups to maintain political stability that benefits their own interests. For instance, politicians might emphasize historic grievances or frame social and economic problems as threats posed by another religious or ethnic group, even when the issues stem from broader structural inequalities or governance failures. This tactic allows elites to deflect attention from systemic issues, such as poverty and corruption, by fostering divisions that keep different groups in opposition to one another rather than united in demanding accountability (Albert, 2002). The outcome is often a heightened sense of "us versus them" among communities, which can quickly escalate into conflict.

The selfishness of leaders in government, fraud, and the wide gap between the political class and the masses force the suffering society and the youth to carry arms, Rev. Christian Eze (Personal communication, 12th Feb., 2023). Socio-economic factors in this contest include unemployment, corruption, uneven distribution of wealth and resources, poverty, and environmental crisis. Unemployment breeds poverty. Extreme poverty logically leads to criminality that begets insecurity. A society where more than 90% of the workforce who are youths are unemployed, necessarily will yield more than 90% of insecurity. Nigeria has been called the extreme poverty capital of the world and yet there is no reasonable programme either immediate or remote on ground to lift her out of this messy situation. This situation creates an avenue for the youth to employ themselves in criminal activities that lead to insecurity, (Nwagboso, 2012).

Religious Conflicts and Socio-Political Implications

Religious diversity in Nigeria has been a double-edged sword, providing a source of cultural richness but also contributing to tensions and conflict. Inter-religious conflicts, such as those between Christians and Muslims in the Middle Belt region, have often been fueled by political and economic grievances rather than solely by religious differences. Competition over resources, political representation, and access to land are often reframed along religious lines, intensifying these conflicts (Albert, 2002). Political elites have sometimes exploited these religious divisions to secure their own power, aligning with religious leaders to gain the support of their communities while marginalizing opposition groups.

In recent years, religious identities have become further politicized, with religious organizations becoming more influential in advocating for social and political change, (Meyer, 2004). For instance, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) frequently engage in public debates over national policies, particularly in areas related to religious freedom and governance. These organizations have become major players in Nigeria's political discourse, sometimes challenging government policies and sometimes aligning with them, depending on the interests of their constituencies, (Salamone, 2014).

Nigeria's religious history is deeply intertwined with its socio-political and economic landscape. The introduction of Islam and Christianity, the persistence of indigenous religions, and the colonial legacy have collectively shaped Nigeria's diverse religious environment. Religious identities in Nigeria intersect with regional and ethnic distinctions, creating a complex and sometimes divisive socio-political landscape. This historical context helps explain the ways in which religion continues to influence Nigerian society, not only as a matter of personal belief but also as a significant factor in social, economic, and political power dynamics, (Nolte, Danjibo & Oladeji, 2009). Understanding this context is essential for analyzing the role of religion in

contemporary Nigeria and for exploring how religious identities may be used by political elites to maintain their dominance, a phenomenon that aligns closely with the Marxist perspective on religion as a tool of social control.

Religious Identity and Manipulation in Nigerian Politics

1. Elections and Religious Allegiances: Nigerian elections have often been marked by candidates openly aligning with religious identities to secure votes. For instance, in presidential elections, candidates strategically emphasize their religious affiliations to appeal to either the Christian or Muslim majority. This tactic serves to polarize voters along religious lines, reinforcing divisions that distract from critical issues such as corruption or policy failures. Religious leaders are frequently enlisted to endorse candidates, turning places of worship into platforms for political propaganda. (Van-Stiphout, 2014).

2. Sharia Law and Northern Identity: In the early 2000s, several northern Nigerian states implemented Sharia law, a move supported by Muslim elites who portrayed it as a return to religious and cultural authenticity. This development created significant tensions with Christian populations in the north and with the broader Nigerian Christian community, (Alao, 2010). While Sharia's introduction was presented as a reflection of regional autonomy, it also functioned as a political tool for northern elites to consolidate power, foster regional solidarity, and marginalize Christian minorities, often leading to violent confrontations.

3. State Support for Religious Institutions along Ethnic Lines: Nigerian governments at both State and Federal levels frequently fund religious activities and events, such as sponsoring pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem for citizens. While ostensibly promoting religious freedom, these state-sponsored initiatives also serve to curry favor with religious groups and strengthen the political influence of religious leaders. For example, governors in northern states often use

public funds to subsidize the Hajj pilgrimage, building goodwill among Muslim constituents and reinforcing the elites' legitimacy through religious patronage.

These case studies illustrate how religion is used to foster political loyalties, create a sense of shared identity, and legitimize power, ultimately supporting the elite's control over Nigeria's political landscape. By manipulating religious affiliations and exacerbating sectarian divides, political leaders gain short-term political capital at the expense of long-term social cohesion, perpetuating a system that serves elite interests while marginalizing the broader population, (Mohammed, 2004).

Remedies to Ethno-religious Crisis in Nigeria

In Nigeria, intolerance of the other's ethnic origin and religious belief has been considered as one of the main causes of insecurity. According to Ozoigbo (2019), ethnic bigotry and religious fanaticism have facilitated insecurity in Nigeria to the extent that it is gradually becoming the identity of the Nigerian State. Manguwat (2016) holds that major religious crises in Nigeria have erupted between Christians and Muslims; but also, between Muslims and Muslims. There has not been any intra-religious conflict among Christians that would require the intervention of government and security agents. Therefore, it requires religious tolerance to suppress ethno-religious violence in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a secular state but the identification of Christianity and Islam to the exclusion of other religion further deepens conflicts in Nigeria. The State of origin should be removed and replaced with State of resident in all our national document as this will reduce ethnic identity which is in opposition to nationalism.

As Nigerians witness the harrowing effects of violence and insecurity, various countries, civil society organizations, traditional rulers and religious bodies, lend their voices to call on the federal government to find lasting solution to the issues stemming violence and insecurity in the nation. (Olusakin & Sibani, 2023). There should be a serious security check on religious groups fueling violence in their organization via sermons, teaching, hostility. Religious and traditional leaders should preach unity and peaceful coexistence, discouraging violence. Nigerian citizens and religious groups are supposed to unify people of diverse culture together and not as one who divides members of multi-national state. According to Chidi (2022), religious extremism, poor leadership and marginalization have been identified as the major causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Nigeria religious adherents and leaders, especially the Muslims and Christians have demonstrated intolerance attitude towards each other resulting in religious fanatism, confrontations and conflict of interest between members of this various religious group.

The economic implications of ethno-religious crises, like the social implications, are multi-dimensional. The disruption of economic life due to ethnic and religious conflicts negatively impacts on the national economy. Individuals, corporate organizations and governments have business interests in various parts of the country and the outbreak of such conflicts usually necessitates the closure of business activities, (Chidi, 2022). It is imperative for Nigerians to raise local securities that will protect economic activities in any part of Nigeria.

Conclusion

There are two primary religions in Nigeria- Islam and Christianity, competing with each other for centuries, causing intolerance and socio-political crises. Conflict is a great predicament in any human society. History indicates that conflict is an on-going process in human relations and may

occur within and among groups and communities at any time. The management of ethno-religious crises is essential for the protection of Nigeria's national security and unity. The prevalence of crises in Nigeria is eroding the unity upon which any meaningful development could take place. It has also left adverse effects on the socio-economic polity of the people. Since the effects of ethno-religious crises borders on national security, it is imperative that governments evolve such measures that would protect lives and property of the Nigerian people.

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