

The Nature and Dynamics of Land-Related Communal Conflicts in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Communal conflict has manifested itself as the most pandemic issue next to ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria with ownership, access to and use of land as the driver of the conflict. Communal conflict exists in all the geopolitical zones of the country though the character of the conflicts may differ between these zones. In Northern Nigeria for instance, while the character of the conflict revolves around farmers and herders, indigene-settler issues which occurs either in pure form and sometimes colored with ethnicity, in Southern Nigeria it is a combination of indigene-settler issues; farmer-Fulani herdsmen and political resource allocation. It is observed that most communal conflicts display clearly the paralysis of dialogue between political elites as well as the presence of fundamental socioeconomic and political grievances which divide societal groups. To this end the long term objective of this paper is to take the study of communal conflicts beyond the intractability and frequency of its occurrence to include in the main, an analysis of the underlying social, economic, and political causes of the crises. We adopted an ex-post facto research design, secondary source of data collection including a content analytical tool for analysis. We however found that, the challenge of lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, horizontal inequalities, or inequalities among identity groups and feeling of marginalization by groups has intensified communal conflicts in Nigeria. The State needs to rethink its strategy and embrace conflict transformation strategy which focuses on the relationships between the parties in the midst of or previously engaged in a given conflict.

Keywords: Conflicts, Land Conflicts, Communal Conflicts.

1. Introduction

The economic significance of land in rural African communities (in raising incomes, providing employment, and exporting crops and other extractable resources as well as providing tax revenue for governments) has transformed land into a social security resource that has been responsible for rationalizing conflicts (Mbah, 2014). Livelihood in Africa depends so much on land, especially due to the agrarian nature of the societies where over 70% of its population live in rural areas and engage in peasant agriculture. It is true and should be stressed that the use of land for direct production of livelihoods contributes less of a proportion than in the past due to the occupational changes that occur across the societies of the continent but this change in production has not substantially altered the relevance of land to the people and societies of Africa. The importance of land irrespective of various competing conditions is not proportionately reduced because land still provides a portion of livelihoods that may be the difference between survival or not. Indirectly, land offers the base structure, and sometimes the only basis for social security throughout life among Africans (Obioha 2013: 2). In most sub-Saharan African societies, land by its nature is regarded as the economic and subsistence base of a people. The economic importance of land accounts for its use as the base for agricultural activities in the predominantly agrarian societies in African continent.

The intensification of cash cropping and animal husbandry in most areas of West Africa in the 1930s established a permanent commercial link between land, production, and markets as reflected in a reinvigorated local scramble for its possession and exploitation.

It is from this scarcity-derived scramble induced by global capitalism that we identify the new political economy sources of rural land disputes between individual farmers and groups and ethnic communities on the continent. It is instructive to observe that land appropriations during the colonial era including land reservation for European traders, the development of trading posts, the construction of residential areas, and its perpetuation by the postcolonial state were a response to rapid globalization. But because much of the expropriated land spanned rural boundaries, disputes ensued between communities sharing the borders as is the case in the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict in South East Nigeria where the two communities contested the territory of Otuocha which had been communally exploited by both groups (Ekeh, 1999:360).

Asuni (1999) observe that in many parts of Africa acute land shortages was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the human and cattle population. Over-grazing on the Mambilla Plateau in Nigeria for example has direct effect on rural economies in the region with consequences reflected in 'occupational' boundary disputes. In August, 1987, a violent conflict between the Bachama and the Hausa of Tingno-Waduku in Northern Nigeria resulted. Again, there are numerous clan and communal conflicts, mostly within the borders of single states, but sometimes spilling over across state boundaries. Examples of such conflicts are legion: there is the three-cornered conflict between the Urhobo, Itsekiri, the Ijaw, and the Igbo in Delta State, the conflict between the Tiv and the Idoma in Benue State; the conflict between the Biu of southern Borno State and the Kanuri majority; the confrontation between the eastern and western Kogi State, centered around the Igalas and the Igbiras respectively; the three-pronged fight between the Nupes, Hausas, and the Gwaris in Niger State; the armed confrontation between the Tivs and their allies, and the Jukuns and their allies in Taraba State; the armed conflict between the Ezzas and the Ezillos in Ebonyi State; (Abdul Raufu Mustapha in Nnoli ed. 1998).

Of all these conflicts, communal conflict has manifested itself as the most pandemic issue next to ethno-religious conflict in the democratic era in the country. Onwudiwe (2004) asserted that while democracy has not been economically kind to many Nigerians, the prevalence of communal violence since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule ranks among its most bitter disappointments. Communal conflict exists in all the geopolitical zones of the country though the character of the conflicts may differ between geopolitical zones. In Northern Nigeria for instance, the character of the conflict is religious, though it occurs either in pure form and sometimes colored with ethnicity. It is characterized by reprisal attack. Higazi (2011) stated that religious violence in its contemporary expression became a problem in the north from the 1980s, continuing through the 1990s and after 2000 (Yake 2013, Presler 2011) Indeed communal conflicts are reoccurring decimal to the extent that their occurrences have imposed insecurity in communities where they exist. For instance States such as Plateau, Benue, Nassarawa, Bauchi, Adamawa, Kaduna, and Taraba states are eloquent and pitiable testimonies to this act. The avalanche of conflicts, violence and terror that has rocked Jos Plateau, the uprising over Nigeria's membership of the organization of Islamic countries (OIC) pro and anti-Sharia conflicts in Kano, Bauchi, Kaduna, the Tiv - Jukun, Chamba-Kuteb, Zango-Kataf, the Yandabas in the north, the Yobe Taliban, and most disturbing is the ongoing Boko Haram (Western education is sin) terror in the northern part of the country which not only threaten the nation's security and overall corporate existence as a single indivisible entity but has exposed the fragility of the nation.

The Middle Belt region has also seen its fair share of conflicts. In Tiv areas of Benue State between 1988 and 2004, 29 communal conflicts were recorded by the Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs as having occurred in the state. Within the periods, some of the conflicts reoccurred two to three times. Tiv farmers and nomadic Fulani in Benue and Nasarawa States and the Tiv in Guma and Gwer West are also embroiled in a conflict. Indeed, the Tiv-Jukun in Wukari which has to do with the case of Indigene/settler have become intractable as is with the Chamba-Kuteb Chieftaincy tussles over selection process; the Basa-Egbura in Nassarawa; the Hausa/Fulani-Sawaya in Bauchi; Fulani-Irigwe and Yelwa-Shendam, both in Plateau State. Communal conflicts also exist in Nasarawa State, especially in Askia, Obi and Odoibu communities in Lafia Local Government Area. Even in Abuja, communal conflict between Fulani pastoralists and Gwari farmers in Gwako village in Gwagwalada Area Council pose serious security challenges. There is no part of the country that is spared from its ugly deficiencies. Southern Nigeria is not immune from the experiences of communal conflict. Examples include: Ife-Modakeke, Ogoni and Okrika, Umuleri-Aguleri, Ezza-Ezillo, Ijaw-Ilaje, Ijaw, Urhobo and Itshekiri crisis, Isoko Delta conflict, activities of Odua People's Congress in the west, MASSOB in the South-East, and Niger Delta insurgency in South-South geopolitical zones. It is pertinent to observe that the character of the conflict in Southern Nigeria is a combination of land question, indigene-settler issues and political resource allocation.

It is incontrovertible that economically and spiritually land and religion respectively, means much to Africans. Livelihood in Africa depends so much on land, especially due to the agrarian nature of the societies where over 70% of its population live in rural areas and engage in peasant agriculture. The importance of land irrespective of various competing conditions is not proportionately reduced because land still provides a portion of livelihoods that may be the difference between survival or not. Indirectly, land offers the base structure, and sometimes the only basis for social security throughout life among Africans (Obioha 2013: 2). In most sub-Saharan African societies, land by its nature is regarded as the economic and subsistence base of a people. The economic importance of land accounts for its use as the base for agricultural activities in the predominantly agrarian societies in African continent. It forms the ecological background in which social, political and economic activities of a people are determined (Obioha 1992).

2. The challenge

The political conception of land has made it a point of discord among peoples of African origin. In Africa, land was used as the measure of wealth and political strength of each group, the amount of land acquired by each group depicted its prowess in the past, and even contestable in the present political dispensation. It is widely acknowledged that there is a link between land shortage and many violent conflicts in Africa. However, there are new evidences that suggest that “environmental scarcity is not sufficient, by itself, to cause violence; when it does contribute to violence, research shows it always interacts with other political, economic, and social factors” (Homer-Dixon, 1999, 178). This re-thinking on the causes of violent conflicts no doubt transcends the Malthusian assumptions on the relationship between conflict and resource scarcity (Adetula, 2014). However, it is not very clear to many, including policy makers and scholars who argue that there is no empirical basis to dismiss the claim that the resource wars fought in Africa are mostly profit driven (see Collier 2000; Berdal & Malone 2000; and Klare 2001).

It is not intended in this paper to ignore the economic value of land, or even play down the importance of economic variables in violent conflicts. It would be unwise to do so. However, it must be said that there is still a lot to learn about the social, economic and political contexts underlying land's causal role in inter-communal conflicts in Africa. This perspective is useful for situating many inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria within the context of the interplay of political, economic and social forces in the polity. In addition to its status as a key economic resource, the symbolic ascription to land as the source of originality and ‘indigeneity’ in Africa makes it the defining variable in the struggles and competition over economic opportunities and political power on the continent (Adetula, 2014). The idea of using land in defining belonging is being reenacted today in some African states. In the words of Kuba and Lentz, “Everybody must be able to point to a ‘home land’ or a ‘home village’, if he or she wishes to participate fully and have a say in the local decision-making process or be heard in the national political arena” (2006). In many African societies, it is common for factions of the political elites during intra-elite competition for political power to mobilize ethnic and religious identities in order to exclude some citizens that have settled outside of their place of origin for decades (Adetula, 2014). The latter, usually from the minority groups, would respond with corresponding aggression. The emergent elite, under colonial rule, lacked a strong material base, having been economically marginalized by the discriminatory and oppressive economic policies of the colonial regime. Ake (1981; 1985; 2001) has severally argued that it was usually the case for the elite to parasite on the common wealth and struggle for resources of the community or nation to shore up its weak material base. That is why elite pressure has exacerbated inter-communal conflicts. Onwuzuruigbo (2006) had observed on the Aguleri/Umuleri conflict ‘that on the surface, it would appear that the aggrieved (elite) faction of Aguleri was obsessed with protecting the interest of the generality of Aguleri. In reality, they too were self-seeking and motivated by their desire to appropriate the land and rents. The split and struggle among Aguleri elite thus polarized and exacerbated the conflicts on two fronts. In one front, Aguleri engaged Umuleri in physical combat and legal battle in the court. At another front Aguleri was at war with itself on the land and in court. Elite curiosity in the land grew even beyond Otuocha land with the relocation of European trading companies to other parts of Nigeria and the termination of colonial administration in 1960. Confrontation between elites from both communities ensued as they struggled to acquire and possess the land following the departure of the European trading companies and colonial officials. This culminated to the 1995 clash between Aguleri and Umuleri’. The elite pressure cited above mirrors the situation in other conflict areas in Nigeria.

3. Literature review

Concept of Conflicts

Conflicts are products of contradictions arising from differences in interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations, perceptions and tendencies (Nnoli 1998). These contradictions exist at all levels of society, individual, group, institution and nation, as well as in interpersonal, inter-group, inter-institutional and international relations. Defining conflict, Weber (1971) argues that conflict is any action that is oriented intentionally to carry out actor's own wish against the resistance of the other party or parties. For Coser (1966) social conflict is a struggle over status, power, and scarce resources in which the sole aims of the parties involved are not only to gain the desired value but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals. Generally, conflict entails struggle and rivalry for objects to which individuals and groups attach importance. These objects can either be material or non-material. The material objects may include scarce resources like money, employment, and position including political ones, promotion in both the private and public organizations. The non-material objects include culture, tradition, religion and language (Osaghae, 2001). According to conflict theorists, conflicts, whether political, communal, ethnic or religious are often influenced or motivated by disparity rather than similarity among the people especially unequal ones. Karl Marx wrote in 1937 in the "Communist Manifesto" that "the history of all existing society is the history of class struggle". In other words, be it agrarian, feudal or capitalist society, conflict is constant because of class differences. Arguing from this perspective, one could say that conflict is inherent in human relationships. Although this perspective has gained momentum especially among its adherents, it never suggests that every underlying relationship must be expressed with the same magnitude of hatred and jealousy neither does it suggest that such conflict cannot be minimized (Duverger, 1980).

It is the view of Elaigwu (2005) that conflicts arise due to many factors among which are: i) actions which lead to mutual mistrust, polarization of relations, and/or hostility among groups in apparently competitive interactions; ii) frustrations arising from unsatisfied human needs which may include psychological, economic, physical, social and others forms; iii) explosion of identity as groups begin to ask for greater participation and rights; iv) seemingly cultural incompatibility among groups with different communication styles; and v) perceived inequality and injustice expressed through competitive socio-political, economic and cultural frameworks. A constant fact about conflict is that it is an ever present phenomenon in social relations. It is inevitable in any social gathering, organization and society. The certainty of conflict to occur in every social arena motivated its interpretation in various forms. However, the existing definitions follow a thought pattern that clearly describes conflict as: a state of incompatibility, behavior, and an opposition, an interaction of interdependent parties, a bad omen and positive or constructive outcome. As a state of incompatibility, conflict is described as a situation in which the concerns of two or more individuals operating within the unit appear to be incompatible (Darling & Fogliasso, 1999). Incompatibility breeds conflict because it is a psychological state in which people cannot get along with one another in an organization.

Gray and Starke (1984) considered conflict as the behavior by a person or group intended to inhibit the attainment of goals by another person or group. Conflict will emerge when behavior is laced with emotions, which is expressed in an antagonistic form. As an opposition, Hellriegel and Slocum (1996) posited that conflict is an opposition arising from disagreement about goals, thoughts, or emotions with or among individuals, teams, departments, or organisations. Opposition is all about blocking an individual or a group from achieving set goals, and this will lead to conflict because of the instant overt reaction that will be put up by the party being blocked. Conflict can also be defined as a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interest, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals (Donohue and Kolt (1992). Wilmot and Hocker (2011) described conflict as a felt struggle between two or more independent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness. Conflict occurs when people are nested by some sort of social cords. It does not occur in isolation, people must be relating or be depending on one another. Conflict can be defined in terms of good or bad outcome. When the outcome of a conflict scenario is positive, it is defined as a functional or constructive conflict. Conflicts that end up in negative outcomes are regarded as dysfunctional conflicts. Hoelscher and Robert (2002) viewed conflict as the underlying power that stimulates innovation. Pondy (1967) described conflict as a phenomenon that can produce positive outcomes by introducing different perspectives that produce innovative solution.

Lind low and Scott (1989) defined conflict in negative term, as element that conjures negative connotation, invokes negative feelings and often leads to destruction. It is important to note that the outcome of a conflict situation depends on the perceptions and management approaches of the conflicting parties. The definition of Donohue and Kolt (1992) suggested some fundamental elements that need to be clarified at this point. These are: Conflict occurs where people are interdependent.

People must be connected in one way or the other, either through their views, goals, aspirations etc, before they can be enmeshed in a conflict; (ii) Conflict can be expressed in manifest or latent form. The parties concerned may blow the problem out of proportion for people to know about its existence or they may make people not to be aware of the conflict. Manifest conflicts can be easily managed because they are known by people, but latent conflicts are not open to peoples' awareness, hence, resolving them may be difficult; (iii) Conflict involves needs and interests. Needs are those things that are fundamentally of utmost importance to people, which they must fulfill as soon as the purchasing power is available. Interests on the other hand, are the desires of people. These elements, most especially, needs, have the potential to generate conflict, when people are blocked from pursuing their needs or interests; (iv) Conflict is caused by interference. In a bid to achieve the emerging needs or interest, interference may be experienced among the parties, bringing about the emergence of conflict. Conflict, therefore, is a fate of life, which occurs where the interactions of people are marked with differences in goals, perceptions, attitudes, views, beliefs, values or needs.

Conflicts are inescapable in human affairs. It is inherent in social existence and social progress. Elaigwu (2005) argues that every form of interaction among human beings and groups can generate conflict. Conflict is the spice of every state. It tests the fragility or otherwise of the state and creates the basis of future amelioration or adjustments. However, conflicts beyond certain thresholds are detrimental to the very survival of the state, precisely because they threaten the consensual basis of association. What is problematic about conflict is its explosion into violence. This is the consequence of the inability or failure to accommodate and resolve contradictions in society through arrangements and procedures that eliminate their negative effects and maximize their positive effects. Underlying such failures is the inability of the conflicting units to accept the arrangements and procedures that have been worked to resolve the conflict. In other words, conflict resolution boils down to the creation of conditions that will enable conflicting forces to accept these arrangements and procedures.

4. Theoretical Framework

It is instructive that when we talk of conflicts, two types are evinced, conflicts between states, and conflict within states. Wallenstein and Sollenberg (1997) observe that conflicts since 1989 occurred not between states, but within a state. Of the 101 conflicts in the period 1989-1996, only six conflicts were of the traditional interstate kind; all the others involved civil conflicts or state formation conflicts. Bercovitch (1998) views ethnic, communal, religious or secessionist conflicts as having shaped the new international environment, dictating the need to devise new and more effective strategies of cooperation and conflict management.

The potential escalation of ethnic and communal conflicts and their dire consequences have prompted wide and intense interest among scholars and policy makers in redefining the new peace and security architecture, and devising avenues of dealing with, or better still, think of the occurrence of these extremely complex and serious conflicts. Incidentally, the prevailing approach in international conflict management has always been framed in terms of responding to (or dealing with) a conflict once it has occurred, after the violence and human suffering have begun. Given the intractable and destructive nature of ethnic and communal conflict, new approaches are needed to reduce the likelihood of widespread violence and killing and the fragmentation of societies.

However, scholars have written extensively on the nature, causes and the impact of conflicts. Depending on the school of thought to which they represent, such explanations have tended to place a lot of emphasis on one particular or a set of related theories, while diminishing the importance or explanatory relevance of other competing theories (Best, 2005: 41). It is instructive to note that some of these theories are attempts by scholars to establish frameworks for the understanding of conflict, especially the causes of conflict and the conditions under which conflicts occur. These theories include: Structural conflict theory; Realist Theories; Biological Theories; Physiological Theories; Economic Theories; Psycho-Cultural Conflict Theory; Human Needs Theory; Systemic Theories and Relational Theory. The Structural Conflict theory has two main sub-orientations: the radical structural theory espoused by Marxist Scholars like Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, VI. Lenin, Mao Tse Tung; who argue that the way and manner in which society is structured and organized creates conflict.

Radical Structuralists observe that conflicts occur due to the exploitative and unjust tendencies of the human society, domination of one class by another. It argues that social problems like political and economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, inequity, etc.; breeds conflicts. On the other hand, Liberal Structuralism like Ross (1993), Scarborough (1998) and Johan Galtung (1990) argue that competing interests of groups tie conflict directly into social, economic, and political organization of societies as well as the nature and strength of social networks within and between community groups. Ross (1993: 4) observed that in situations where economic and political discrimination and weak kinship ties are the defining characteristics of a society, the chances that negative forms of conflict will result are higher than in situations where the conditions are the exact opposite. In other words, when social, political, economic and cultural processes are monopolized by a group, it creates the conditions that make people to adopt adversarial approaches to conflict. Scarborough (1998) went further to opine that in situations where existing structures are tilted in favor of one group while putting the other(s) at a disadvantage, where holders of certain powers or privileges are unwilling to acknowledge the rights of others to be different; or where people find it difficult to identify with the political and economic ideas of a political regime, the chances are that conflict will emerge and escalate if nothing is done to correct such anomalies(see Best, 2005:43).

In sum structuralism school are of the view that though economic and social factors are more common, political and institutional factors (the structure of the state, discriminatory political institutions, intergroup politics and elite cohesion or fragmentation); security factors (national security dilemma, regional military relations); as well as ethnic factors (demography and physical geography), are equally as critical (ibid). These factors explain the occurrence and intractability of volatile conflicts.

On the other hand, Realist Theorists like Hans Morgenthau, Morton Deutsch, etc argue that the imperfection in the world, namely conflict, has its roots in forces that are inherent in human nature; that human nature is selfish, individualistic and naturally conflictive; that states will always pursue their national interests defined as power, and that such interest will come into conflict with those of others leading to inevitability of conflict (ibid).

Biological Theories comprise of the Innate Theory and the Frustration-Aggression Theory espoused by scholars like Thomas Hobbes, St. Augustine, Malthus, John Dollard, Leonard Berkowitz and Aubrey Yates respectively. The Innate theory contends that conflict is innate in all social interactions, and among all animals, including human beings. The theory argues that humans are animals, albeit higher species of animals, and would fight naturally over things they cherish. While the Frustration-Aggression theory provides that aggression is the outcome of frustration and that in a situation where legitimate desires of an individual is denied either directly or by the indirect consequence of the way the society is structured, the feeling of disappointment may lead such a person to express his anger through violence that will be directed at those he perceives to be directly and indirectly responsible.

The Psycho-Cultural theory, espoused by scholars like Ross, Crighton, Spinoza, Maclean, Northrup etc, emphasize the role of culturally induced conflict and how enemy images are created from deep-seated attitudes about human actions that are learned from early stages of growth in the explanation of conflict. It contends therefore that even though there are different forms of identities, the one that is based on people's ethnic origin and the culture that is learned on the basis of that ethnic origin is one of the most important ways of explaining violent conflict. Crighton (1991:127) contend that social conflicts that are intractable are identity- driven and grow out of the feelings of powerlessness and memories of past persecution. A history of humiliation, oppression, victimization, feelings of inferiority and other forms of experiences which wear away a person's dignity and self-esteem and lead people to vengeance constitute part of what has been referred to as the pathological dimensions of ethnicity (Rothschild and Groth, 1995). Spinoza (1951) notes that violent conflict result in situations where passion overwhelms reason, while Maclean (1975) argue that under anxiety of threatened attack or actual denial of basic needs, the probability that people will react violently is increased. Thus, identity is an unshakeable sense of self-worth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually safe. Identity operates in this way not only in relation to conflict between people, but also in situations of conflict between groups (see Best, 2005:51). This work adopted a combination of the structural conflict and the Psycho-Cultural conflict theories as our analytical framework because of the dynamic nature of land-related communal conflicts. Indeed, the issues of political and economic exclusion, inequity, culturally induced/ identity crisis or indigene/stranger challenges are not adequately captured by the specific theories and require that we adopt a combination of theories as our analytical framework.

5. Nature and Dynamics of Land –Related Communal Conflicts

Communal conflict is a social conflict that relates to a group or groups in a society. When it occurs within a group, it is known as intra-communal conflict and inter-communal conflict when it occurs between groups. It is worth noting that these groups have common social ties, which may make the competition that may ensue to be fierce. The point is that the misuse or unequal distribution of the available resources that should be jointly enjoyed by a group will produce conflict. The conflict will usually be complex to tackle because of the level of hatred that would probably have been cultivated among the parties in the process. Communal conflict was considered by Azuonwu (2002) as a conflict that occurs between two or more communities. Oboh and Hyande (2006) described communal conflict as involving two or more communities engaging themselves in disagreement or act of violence over issues such as claims for land ownership, religious and political difference leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties. Communal violence (sometimes inter-communal violence) is a situation where violence is perpetuated across ethnic lines, and victims are chosen based upon ethnic group membership (Horowitz, 2000). Dzurgba (2006) was of the opinion that communistic violence is that which occurs between two or more communities over territorial land, farmland and territorial water for fishing. These definitions revealed that communal conflict is more or less community conflict or ethnic conflict. This is not surprising because “communal” by its interpretation as a phenomenon that is common to a particular group characterizes a community or ethnicity.

Onwudiwe (2004) attested to this fact when he said that communal friction is what is usually described as ethnic conflict. More so, for communal contenders to have been described as culturally distinct people, tribes, or clans in heterogeneous societies, who hold or seek a share in state power. (Gurr and Haxton, 1996) help to buttress the point that communal conflict is often interpreted as community conflict or ethnic conflict. While it is not the focus of this thesis to divulge the differences inherent in these variables, if there is any, it is pertinent to stress that the peculiar identity of “communal” in terms of reference to a group, concerning common issues or elements could as well be attributed to other social groups in a society. This implied that several communal groups make up a community and therefore, in terms of involvement or participation, communal conflict is narrower than community conflict. Therefore, communal conflict is a state of incompatibility that emanates from a commonly shared or used property or resource by a group or groups in a society. It occurs within or between groups that are defined by some forms of social ties over resources that are jointly owned or shared in a community.

Communal conflict arises when two distinct groups in a community disagree over jointly shared resources due to the possibility of inequitable distribution or the problem of domination by a group. The development of this kind of conflict in any society has attachment to commonly shared or used resources or elements which can be tangible or intangible. The identity of communal conflict is rather fluid in nature. This is because it occurs in divert forms, which can sometimes be misleading to identify. Albert (2001) posited that this form of conflict “often manifest in terms of host-stranger face-offs in which a section of the community tags itself as the host (owners of the community) and some other groups as strangers (that is, those who migrated into the community at a date later than the coming of the “owners” of the community). Apart from this, communal conflict can also be imbued in religious issues, land, politics, resources, local government, chieftaincy issues, e.t.c. There is scarcely any part of Nigeria without its share of land related major conflicts, either on-going or recently resolved. These conflicts are mostly protracted and intractable, some lasting for several years. In many cases, a few months after conflicts are settled in these countries, they reoccur usually in another form.

A number of factors have been identified by scholars as responsible for communal conflict in Nigeria. But land has been linked with most of the inter-communal conflicts in the country. Yecho (2006) indicated that the causes of communal conflicts are not static but rather dynamic and varied in nature depending on the socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances at the time. Onwudiwe (2004) listed social conditions as population explosion, economic migration, and the anti-poor policies of the government as triggers of communal friction. Horowitz (1990) pinned down communal conflict to revolve around politics, politicians, and their pursuit of group advantage. Albert (2001) identified indigene/settler problem, religious differences, ownership of land and its resources, goals and aspirations of people as some of the factors that can ignite communal conflict in the country. Hembe (2000) indicated that political struggle and colonization, while Lyam (2000) mentioned loss of soil fertility, soil erosion, deforestation, bush burning and flooding as some of the causes of communal conflict.

Yebo (2006) pointed out that the fundamental causes of communal conflict are poor economic conditions, high level of illiteracy, the quest for, and fear of domination by other groups, land disputes, market ownership, chieftaincy tussle and party politics. Varvar (2000) indicated increased demand for land for agriculture, unemployment, rural hunger, poverty, impoverishment as communal conflict triggers. Deprivation, exploitation and domination of minority groups by major ethnic groups and leadership problem were highlighted by Angya and Doki (2006) as factors that can exert communal crisis. Equally, religious differences, competition for livelihood resources and traditional chieftaincy tussles were enumerated by Oboh and Hyande (2006) as potential communal conflict triggers in the country. Competitions for land and chieftaincy tussle are the major causes of communal conflict in the North. For instance, in Nasarawa in 1993, Alago, Hausa and Tiv clashed over land and chieftaincy from 1995-2005, the Egburra and Bassa in Toto clashed over land, chieftaincy and politics. In 1989, 1990 and 1997, intra-communal conflict occurred in Ipav in Gboko based on land problem. In Taraba State, between the Chamba/Jukun and Kuteb over chieftaincy tussle since 1996 when it stated, it is still ongoing; in 2004 in Adamawa State between the Bachama and Hausa/Fulani over land ownership, politics and religious. On March 5, 2005, communal clash between Maruta (Jigawa) and Burmin (Bauchi) occurred over market relocation. On June 2003, Ekepedo and Ogori clashed over land ownership in Kogi/ Edo States. Best (2006) argued that in Benue Valley, the pressure on land from all directions heightens the proliferation of ethnic and communal conflicts in the region, including the political ones, most of them arising from the land question.

6. The Volatility And Intractable Nature Of Communal Conflict.

Another factor in the changing dimension of communal conflict is its volatile and intractable nature. Communal conflicts in this democratic era are highly volatile, involving large scale destruction of human and material resources, and also causing humanitarian problems in the society. ACLED (2013) stated that communal violence has an extremely high human cost, although it is only a small share of overall violence, it is typically extremely fatal. For instance, In May 1992, the communal feud that occurred between the Katafs and the Hausas in Kaduna State claimed lives and caused serious damage to property. Also, in October 1991, the Tiv/Jukun communal crisis claimed 5,000 lives with not less than 12 villages burnt down and over 150, 000 people displaced. The Fulani/Tiv communal conflict outbreak in Benue State in May, 2011, claimed not less than 30 people and left over 5000 people displaced. Ostien (2009) explained that between 1991 and 2007, there were several outbreaks of communal violence in Jos, out of which those of April 1994 and September 2001 stand out for their destructive tendencies. Human Rights Watch, HRW (2001) reported that: from September 7 to 13, 2001, Jos became the scene of mass killing and destruction. Higazi (2011) reported that “the total number of people killed in Plateau State in the decade 2001-2010 certainly runs into thousands. There have been some very wild claims, totally unsubstantiated, stating that tens of thousands of people were killed in the first period of the violence from 2001-2004”. According to Best (2006) the Kuteb and the Chamba/Jukum conflict as early as August 1998, months after it started, led to the loss of 43 villages, 269 deaths and an estimated 3,000 internal population displacements. The volatile nature of communal conflict in the North stems from the illegal use of sophisticated weapons in its prosecution. Sophisticated small arms have been introduced into the prosecution of the conflict, and they are often used abnormally and recklessly to cause havoc on human and material resources in places where they surface. Mac-Leva (2009) and Abbah (2009) attested to the fact that the Jukun-Chamba/Kuteb conflict in Taraba has assumed violent posture overtime and is characterized by excessive usage of sophisticated weapons.

The destructive tendencies of communal conflicts are such that have largely affected the development prospect of the country. The consequences are mistrust, suspicion and large scale destruction of lives and properties. Ekeh (1999) observed that Aguleri-Umuleri communal conflict in Anambra State have for decades lived and farmed side by side but with mutual distrust and enmity. But in September 1995, when the conflict exploded, public property including schools, banks, post offices, town halls and even churches were razed to the ground, further, some 200 private houses were destroyed and countless number of people killed. In the case of Ife-Modakeke communal crisis, Albert (2001) asserted that: every election in the area was characterized by electoral frauds and violence, perpetrated by either the Modakekes or the people of Origbo in the desperate efforts to control the new local government council. He stated further that there were no conflicts in Yoruba history whether in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times, which were as dangerous and destructive as that of Ife-Modakeke people. The conflict claimed several lives and led to complete evacuation of Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba people several times especially in the pre-colonial period. In 1981 and 1983, several houses, vehicles and persons were burnt in both Ife and Modakeke.

As usual, several hundreds of people were shot, slaughtered or lynched; housing estates, fuel stations and shops, especially the popular Oranmiyan Shopping Complex and Sijuwade Estate, were set ablaze by irate youths. Oboh and Hyande (2006) averred that in the communal conflict in Oju L.G.A in Benue State, apart from the normal destruction of lives and property, trees and arable crops, livestock, houses, schools, markets and hospitals were destroyed in the process. They concluded that all these have overwhelming negative influence on food security thereby worsening the already existing food problems with its attendant problems of malnutrition, under nutrition and abject poverty (Oboh and Hyande, 2006). It is clear that communal conflict is highly destructive in nature. Another deficiency of communal conflict is the production of humanitarian problems such as internally displaced persons. Olusola (2004) was of the opinion that the results of numerous natural disasters and human-made violent clashes have produced unmanageable proportion of internally displaced persons estimated recently to be well above 750,000 within Nigeria. IRIN (2005) reported that the number of internally displaced people in Jos crises since 2001 and 2004, were up to 220,000 people, with the Jos crises of 2001 recording over 1000 people on the death list. On December 2012, the conflict between the Gwari and Fulani nomads at Gwagwalada in Abuja produced over 1,500 displaced persons from about 27 settlements. In Nasarawa State, communal crises have continued intermittently, over 11 villages were affected over 4,500 people were displaced. Out of this number, the Governor of the State, Al-Makura was able to move 2,000 displaced people back to their origin, that is, Bassa District and donated five hundred thousand (500,000) naira to each of the 11 communities affected in the crisis. HRW (2010) indicated that more than 13,500 people have been killed in communal violence since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. On May 3, 2005, Buruku/Katsina-Ala in Benue State in a violent clash over ownership of a piece of land, farms and houses were destroyed and women were abducted. The clash between Tzagari and share communities in Kwara State on 8 September 2000 claimed several lives and property. In Nasarawa State, the conflict between the Azara and Tiv led to the killing of Azara traditional leader making the conflict to escalate.

Reinforcing this trigger for violence and terror is the insensitivity and insincerity of political elites to the feelings of the citizens such that the approaches adopted by various agencies, panels, committees etc. assigned to contain the intractable inter-communal conflicts are blurred by political, ethnic, religious and economic sentiments. The result is that issues that throw up such conflicts become blurred and parties begin to identify each other as a problem, positional demands emerge and serve to further deepen the conflict as issues and underlying interests are neglected (Faleti, 2005). When issues and interests in a conflict are not attended to, the conflict will persist. These reinforcing cleavages have been implicated in virtually all the conflict areas due largely to the weakness of the state evident in the “absence of a decisive intervention from the state or its agencies” (Isa, 2001). The bodies delegated to decisively handle such conflicts often contribute to their protracted nature. Sometimes they lack the capacity to demonstrate the required skills and attitudes demanded to arrest the conflict.

7. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Ownership and use of land are at the root of many inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria. The lack of clarity about the constitutional interpretation of ‘indigene’ creates opportunity for its abuse in many parts of the country. In many instances as in the case of Jos there were allegations that ‘indigeneship’ rights were used to disenfranchise the Hausa-Fulani populations, exclude them from political participation and deny them land use rights (Paden, 2012). In the past military government were able to use official violence to suppress ethnic agitations. However, with the return to electoral politics many identity conflicts over land have resurfaced all over the country and the struggles for political power have reflected the ‘insiders’ versus ‘outsiders’ syndrome. The clashes between indigenous ethnic groups and those they perceive as settlers can no longer be treated as local issue in Nigeria today where a week hardly passes without an incident of ethnic, religious or communal conflict (Adetula, 2014). In this regard comprehensive national efforts to address the citizenship question in Nigeria are urgently required. The resolution of the national question requires putting in place appropriate policies to protect all citizens and also guarantee their rights. The agitations by some parts of the country for a sovereign national conference of all nationalities have persisted with focus on such issues as the citizenship question and resource control. Recently the federal government set up a committee to come up with an agenda for a nation-wide political dialogue. Incidentally, citizenship question dominated the dialogue.

When the country returned to civil rule in 1999 there were expectations that the new civilian government would address the land issues in Nigeria. Although there are claims in the official circles that government is embarking on land reform. However, the people are yet to feel the impact of the reform. The land struggle is not only about land distribution. People are also struggling for food and shelter both which are connected with land, and which explain the reference that land struggle is the foundation of many other struggles. The reason is that intra-ethnic conflicts demonstrate the interface and the centrality of material questions in defining citizenship conflicts. Ibeanu and Mbah (2011: 14) explain that indigenes and settlers are contrary to common reasoning, principally economic categories. This is to understand the intricate ways in which economic interest become part of the complex of construction, propagation, primordialization and intensification of contradictory cultural identities, leading to indigene-settler conflicts. While the ownership of the disputed territories is the lasting cause of the conflict, the animosity arising from a lingering sense of deprivation has assured its persistence. It is in the context of this animosity that the land amongst others has become a central basis for contracting, propagating, primordializing and intensifying the differences between the two communities. A land reform program including the review of the Land Use Act (1978) to address all the limitations and challenges of the present legal framework for land use and ownership should be embarked upon. The conflicts in many parts of central Nigeria draw attention to recent population movements in northern Nigeria which was heightened by the influx of refugees initially from the Sharia states and lately from the states experiencing insurgent violence, escalation of long standing conflicts, including increased wave of conflicts between crop farmers and cattle herders due in part to desert encroachment and resource depletion in north-eastern Nigeria. The frequency of conflicts between agriculturalists and pastoralists in villages in central Nigeria over access to land resources need to be attended to urgently through a comprehensive land legislation on access to and control of agricultural and pastoral resources.

Peace requires a new social order including a responsive State with adequate capacity to mediate social conflicts and mitigate the social contradictions in the society so as to create the enabling environment for peace-building efforts. Many of the land-related conflicts in the country are also linked with economic stagnation and decline, inequitable access to public goods and social services, in addition to lack of transparency and accountability in governance. In this regard the pool of unemployed frustrated young men with little or no opportunity for positive engagement in the country constitutes a serious risk factor.

Finally, a broader conflict resolution strategy is recommended which is conflict transformation strategy which focuses on the relationships between the parties in the midst of or previously engaged in a given conflict. Onigu Otite notes that ‘openness to change, flexibility, the ability to peacefully modify approaches and learn from process is what conflict transformation is all about’ (1999: 10). Long-range goals in building peace include reconciliation and psychosocial healing, even when one or several parties have suffered egregiously.

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