ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA, 1999 – 2021: AN EXPOSITORY ANALYSIS OF YOUTHS' INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

Conflicts have remained very important and recurring aspects of inter-group relations all over the world. Nigeria, as a country, is both multi-ethnic and multi-religious; a development that has become a fault line. In as much as the two variables are considered centripetal they are, on the other hand, centrifugal forces propelling Nigeria's disintegration. This study is an attempt at x-raying the nexus between ethnicity and religion, and the prevalent violent conflicts that have dotted Nigeria's geo-political space in recent times. The trios are not only antithetical to democratic ethos but also a threat to fragile strings of Nigerian federalism. All these have made Nigeria one of the difficult and complex countries where sectional interests have been upheld and defended at the detriment of national cohesion. The attendant protests and conflicts, undeniably, have been perpetuated by youths mobilized, as it were, by some political and religious leaders. This aspect of inter-group relations among Nigerians does not seem to enjoy robust scholarly investigations, thereby leaving a lacuna in our

comprehensive knowledge of Nigerian history. It is, therefore, worthwhile to establish siamese interconnectedness between conflicts and ethno-religious diversity in this age of insurrection and insurgency. The study argues that the pluralism and diversity of ethnicity and religion have to be harnessed so as to create a level playing ground for all to contribute to nation-building efforts. The study adopted multidisciplinary approach to historiography together with lived-experience to update the account.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Youths, Conflicts, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria as a geo-political entity is a home to about 500 ethnic nationalities that are further divided along three main religious lines such as African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity. Each of the ethnic nationalities was (still is) identified with one or two of the religious faiths thereby creating room for religious antagonism. Put in other words, 'differences in religion, education, customs, and history were made into rigid means of separation rather than the natural process of human life' (Salamone 1997, 303-333). Added to this scenario has been the disparate ethnic groupings' struggle for forms of government that guarantee a greater degree of control of their internal affairs (Vickers 2010, 9). However, it stands to reason to argue that the persisting and unresolved ethnic demands that threaten the current fragile nature of Nigeria's government and political institutions (Vickers 2010, 9) can hardly be attributed to ethnicity or religion separately but collectively.

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed waves of devastating religious conflicts tinged with ethnic chauvinism. These waves of ethno-religious conflicts appear to have been encouraged by the nascent democracy after many decades of military rule. The emergent political class, on assumption of office, has brought groupthink identities to bear on governance. Consequently, 'ethno-religious animosities (or identities) have led to the phenomenon of armed militias (made up of youths) in virtually all parts of the country' (Ebo 2005, 1-35). Since the restoration of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed a series of self-made terrorism and self-made wars all in defence of ethnic nationality or religion. In other words, ethnic diversity and religious pluralism have contributed fundamentally to the atmosphere of hostility and mutual suspicion that have characterized Nigeria's socio-political life.

The collapse and disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic- USSR- in 1991 came soon after the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) into Nigeria as a result of which 'job creation became limited or almost absent' (Usman 2012, 32-50). The two events had enormous effects on youth crises in Nigeria because while the first made small arms and light weapons available, the second threw up jobless youths who readily took up these SALW to defend what ordinarily would been a none-issue. In fact, it has been observed that Nigeria has led in arms smuggling and that 350 million of the 500 million illegal arms circulating in West Africa are found in the country (Ikhatalor 2021, 15). The political elite, religious extremists and other merchants of violence took advantage of illicit instruments of violence to fuel ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. This has made it possible for 'all of Nigeria's six geo-political zones to have witnessed violent ethnic conflicts revolving essentially around…religion' (Ebo 2005, 1-35).

The Nigerian state structure itself, its failures and deficiencies (Adamo 2020, 1-21) have thrown up leaders who derive their legitimacy from politics of identity. The introduction of Sharia law in 12 states of the North soon after the return of democracy in 1999, gave rise to 'new wars' without boundary fought mainly by non-state actors such as militias, terrorists and so forth (See Adamo 2020, 1-21). It can further be said that democracy appears to have provided fertile grounds for civil disturbances and contestation for the broader issues of identity (ethnic and religion), participation and citizenship' (Alubo 2005, 10). All told, the youths have been the vanguards of all ethno-religious conflicts because of the wide spread frustration occasioned by joblessness being experienced by Nigerian youths. For instance, out of a population of 80 million youths, 64 million of them are unemployed while 16 million are underemployed (Usman 2012, 33-50). All these ethno-religious conflicts have been the bane of nation-building efforts of Nigerians.

Ethnic and Religious Conflicts: The Nuances
Ethnic conflict is described as a disagreement, misunderstanding, violent and non-violent between various ethnic groups. Ethnic conflict is also seen as a situation where the relationship between members of one ethnic nationality and another of such group in a multi-ethnic society is characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion, fear and a tendency towards violent confrontation. (Ali and Yahaya 2019:7). Ethnic conflict is a type of group conflict in which the group participating in the conflict interprets the conflict, its causes and consequences along ethnic lines. In this type of conflict, it is organized around ethnic identity. Ethnic sentiments have made it difficult for these conflicts to abate or be resolved easily. Ethnicity encourages segregation, discrimination and polarization of the society characterized by "we" or "them".

On the religious aspect, conflict arises when each of the two different religious persons in the same religious space claim monopoly of religious truth or idea. The two of them cannot hold the same truth at the same time, hence the occurrence of opposition, friction, incompatibility, antagonism, hostility, clash, dispute, fight, quarrel and war between them (Ayantoya 19, 2005).

Religious conflicts comes in different dimensions, in discussing ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria, we need to give a brief insight into the pre-colonial and colonial history of Nigeria as this will enable us have a clearer understanding of ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria. The amalgamation of Nigeria could be seen as the beginning of ethnic rivalry and religious conflicts and other conflicts in Nigeria. By 1914, Britain had succeeded in making herself the new paramount ruler over most ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Before 1914, there was no country called Nigeria but different ethnic nationalities existed within the Nigerian geographical space. Nigeria as a political and social entity has, therefore main histories, the history of the different peoples who make up the country and the history of Nigeria as one political entity. (Emefiena Ezeani 2012:17). Historically, indigenous societies ante-dates Nigerian and the later history of Nigeria is quite recent, the political state or entity known today as Nigeria was born in 1914.

Numerous pre-existing African nations, states or ethno-political communities or units, with hundreds of different languages came to be recreated by Britain as one single state, ignoring

the wider and deeper historical and sociological divergences between them. Schwarz as cited by Emefiena**,** posits that "the arid, predominantly Muslim North and the tropical, predominantly Christian South are different countries". (Water in Ezeani 2012:18.) These differences as pointed out by Schwarz remained even after the amalgamation. The interest of the British was paramount in the amalgamation of 1914. Some political analysts are of the view that the British government had joined these nationalities of mutually incompatible peoples together to create a nation in its own image and likeness. (Crowder 1966: 19)

In assessing the incident of 1914, Okpeh (2006) asserts that "there is no contradicting the fact that Nigeria has a problematic existence". This problematic foundation has created room for ethnic and religious conflicts and the ethnic division we experience today in Nigeria can be traced to this faulty beginning. Over the years, the underlying forces for this problem have been left to eat too deep into the caprice of the nation. Unfortunately this has seriously affected and is still affecting the process of nation building. Okpeh is in support of the view that the structural composition of the country provides the basis for conflict. The way and manner this structure has been managed over the years by the ruling class worsened the situation. The cumulus of contradictions this structure has generated calls to order the essence, nature and character of the nation.

Obafemi Awolowo in 1947 said this about Nigeria:

> Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", Welsh, or French. The word "Nigerian" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not (Awolowo, 1947).

Tafawa Balewa in 1948 described the amalgamation of Nigeria thus:

> Since 1914 the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any signs of willingness to unite… Nigerian unity is only a British invention (Balewa, 1948).

Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1964 called for a peaceful dissolution of the amalgamated Nigeria:

> It is better for us and many admirers abroad that we should disintegrate in peace and not in pieces. Should the politicians fail to heed this warning, then I will venture the prediction that the experience of the Democratic Republic of the Congo will be a child's play if it ever comes to our turn to play such a tragic role (Azikiwe, 1964).

These feelings have permeated the minds of Nigerians even after so many years of coexistence as a country. In Nigeria today people prefer to be identified with the name of their ethnic nationality than with the name of the country Nigeria and this has not helped in fostering the unity and love required for nation building.

Nnoli (1980, 98) believes that the contemporary ethnic phenomenon of Nigeria is not the mere agglomeration of disparate linguistic and cultural groups. The social boundaries of the

various language groups drastically changed from its pre-colonial character to its colonial form. People who did not share a common ethnic identity during the former period began to do so during the latter. Nnoli traced the gestation period of ethnic identity and the birth period of contemporary ethnic politics in Nigeria to the colonial period.

In order to foster ethnic unity, in the 1920's, kinship and communal unions became visible in main urban centers of Nigeria. They were known by various names such as *Naze* Family Meeting, *Ngwa* Clan Union, *Owerri* Divisional Union, *Calabar* Improvement League, *Igbirra* Progressive Union, *Urhobo* Renascent Convention etc. These unions were established in several urban centers in the South and North. In 1918, the *Egba* Society was formed in Lagos to promote the interest of Egba land. Throughout the interwar years, similar associations were formed first in Lagos and then in other urban centers in Yoruba land and elsewhere. These groups included the Union of *Ijebu* Young men formed in 1923, the Yoruba Union established in 1924, the *Egbado* Union, the *Ekiti* National Union, the Ife Union, the *Ijaye* National Society, the *Owo* Progressive Union and the Oyo progressive Union. In the late 1930s these associations formed federations. In 1942 the Yoruba Language Society was formed. This development of Yoruba associations paralleled a similar development among the Igbo. (Nnoli 1980:98). The formation of these associations which focused on the interest of these nationalities affected the foundation and unity of the country and encouraged ethnic/communal sentiment among these groups.

The British colonial administration encouraged communal sentiments among Nigerians. It seized every available opportunity to spread the myth and propaganda that they were "separated from one another by great distance, by differences of history and tradition and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers" (See Nnoli 1980: 113). These differences the British colonial administration did not consider before bringing the people together but were emphasized sometimes for their own benefit. In fact, in 1920, Sir Hugh Clifford, the colonial Governor of the country at the time, made it abundantly clear that his administration would seek to secure "to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality, its chosen form of government and the peculiar political and social institutions which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and accumulated experiences of generations of its forbearers" (Coleman in Nnoli: 113.)

This was reflected structurally by the administrative system of indirect rule and regionalization. Indirect rule started out as an instrument for overcoming the pervasive financial, personnel and communications problems of the colonial administration in Northern Nigeria and ended up as a means for reinforcing communal identity and providing a new symbolic and ethnocentric focus for the urban population. In the view of James Coleman as highlighted by O. Nnoli, "the overwhelming emphasis has been upon greater tribal integration… there can be little doubt that it has complicated the task of welding diverse elements into a Nigerian nation. Indirect rule widened the social distance among the communal groups in Nigeria, thereby reinforcing the ethnocentric factor in the emergence of ethnicity (Nnoli: 113). It is evident that the British did not make conscientious effort to unite the Nigerian people at least politically.

During the colonial period, Lugard believed that for him to succeed, Islamic religion/belief should not be tampered with and in his negotiations with the leaders of the defunct Caliphate, he assured them that their religion and customs would not be interfered with and all the structures would remain except that effective power was now effectively in the hands of the British. The implication of this was that the feudal class participated with the British in the oppression and exploitation of the people in return for a guarantee of their positions and privileges. This laid the foundation of the present Muslim versus Christian socio-economic and political distrust and conflicts in the North (Mejida 2012: 405-406). As it has been pointed out, the favourable disposition of the British towards the Muslims affected peaceful co-existence between the Muslims and non-Muslims who suffered oppression in the hands of the Muslims. This attitude of the British increased hatred and division among these groups.

Nigerians belong to one religion or the other and religion plays an important role in the Nigerian society and most times religion is expressed in national issues. In Nigeria the two dominant religions have been associated with certain regions. For example Islam is associated with the north while Christianity is associated with the south. Ethno-religious conflicts are complex and common in Nigeria.

Some of these conflicts occur in the Middle-Belt and along the cultural borderline states of the predominantly Muslim North, and also take place between Hausa-Fulani groups and non-Muslim ethnic nationalities in the South (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:19). Sometimes these conflicts spread beyond the area where they started. Most of these conflicts are deadly. In conflicts of this nature occurring along the confluence of ethnic and religious lines, it is often very difficult to tell the differences between religious and ethnic crises because the dividing line between them is very slim.

Examples of such ethnic and religious conflicts include the July 1999 conflict among the Oro cult group in Sagamu of Ogun State who alleged that some Hausa women came outside when these traditional worshippers were observing their traditional ceremony. This resulted to serious argument which later degenerated into a full-scale crisis. Many Yorubas and Hausas were killed before a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on the small town of Sagamu. Reprisal attacks occurred in Kano, leading to deaths and destruction of property worth billions of Naira (Kura 2010:33-34). The Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000, the Jos riots of 2001 (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:19), several hundreds of lives were lost during these crises. The effect of these crises was felt beyond the scenes of these incidents.

Before 1990, one religious conflict of note was the Maitatsine revolt of 1980. Maitatsine's original name was Mohammed Marwa, he was a religious preacher willing to impose his *sui-generis* religious ideology on the people. His militants called 'Yan Tatsine', attacked other religious groups in 1980. And later the Nigerian army was involved in the dispute and throughout the fights approximately 5,000 people were killed. Maitatsine also lost his life in the revolt (Human Rights Watch: 2001).

Again the Idi-Araba/Oko-Oba ethnic conflict in October 2000, led to the death of both Yorubas and Hausas in Lagos and later spread to Kano. (Enukora 2005:633; Kura 2010:34). In

September 2001, ethnic conflict occurred between the Tivs and the Junkuns in Benue state as result of what was regarded as 'mistaken identity'. In this case some Tiv indigenes mistakenly saw some nineteen soldiers as Junkuns in fake army uniform. These Tiv youths captured them and killed all the nineteen soldiers (Kura 2010:34-35). The Nigerian army thereafter embarked on a devastating reprisal attacks in Saki-Biam, Benue state. According to report at least a hundred people died during the reprisal (Human Rights Watch: 2001).

Another ethno-religious conflict that left a remarkable mark in Nigeria was the Kaduna/Enugu riots. The major cause of these riots was the introduction of the Islamic legal code (Sharia) by some northern governors. For example Governor Ahmed Yerima of Zamfara State was the first to introduce the Islamic legal code in October 1999. This did not go down well with the people mostly Christians. However, the fire of this religious adventure was ignited when Governor Mohammed Makarfi of Kaduna state attempted in February 2000 to introduce sharia in Kaduna. Because of the already established hatred between the Muslims and Christians in Kaduna State, coupled with the fact that both are almost at par in population, this resulted to a serious conflict that led to the death of many people. (Salawu).

Ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria are common in all parts of the country. However the structure of the country has inadvertently influenced these crises. Since independence, the leaders of the country have made little effort to remove the dividing agents but have further created more division among the people. Major drivers of ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria are suspicion, marginalization, neglect, oppression, nepotism, domination, exploitation, illiteracy, victimization, discrimination, religious bigotry and unemployment. Politics, ethnicism and religion are connected in these conflicts and youths are always used as instruments to facilitate the conflicts. However, conflicts are more visible in the Northern region of the country. The incessant outbreak of ethnic and religious conflicts in the North has been attributed to their unflinching attachment to religion, dogged ethnic sentiments, clash of culture and clash of religious ideas.

Frequent and persistent ethnic and religious clashes between the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity), present the country with a major security challenge. In all parts of Nigeria, there exist ethnic and religious conflict and these have emerged as a result of new and particularistic form of political consciousness and identity often structured around ethno-religious identities. Usman (1987:2) believes that ethnic conflict has its origin from the past due to suspicion, unemployment, selfishness, poverty, envy, ignorance and mistrust between ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Religious, ethnic altercations and differences in value system such as inherited modes of behavior or belief systems pose a lot of challenge to the nation. However, Egwu (2004) believes that "ethnic conflict is difficult to understand when it is believed that the state has taken side or the conflict is serving the interest of the powerful or influential group while claiming to represent the interest of all the groups. Ethnic and religious conflicts are persistent in Nigeria because of the fact that ethnic and religious loyalty serve as the ember of these conflicts. In other words, there is so much attachment to ethnic and religious ideals than national values. People support their ethnic nationality and their religion even when the goals of their struggle are faulty.

According to Ali and Yahaya (2019:7), ethnic conflict is very sensitive, complex and difficult to resolve because the affected persons experience loss of lives and property which if not properly managed, may lead to grudges, revenge, hatred, counter attack and the reemergence of such conflicts. He further averred that the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian population has influenced ethnic conflict.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Nation-Building in Nigeria
Nation-building drive in the Nigeria's post military era has faced many challenges. These challenges appear to suggest that the emergent political class was ill-equipped for the demands of democratic governance hence its members drew their legitimacy from ethno-religious identity and sentiments. In other words, the prebendal politics of the political elite has used ethnic and religious considerations to browbeat the citizens into line as found in some states in Northern Nigeria. The culture of 'we' and 'they' in a country like Nigeria is as preposterous as it is unconscionable towards genuine efforts at nation-building.

Nation-building has become increasingly more difficult in the present democratic era than under the military because of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. It is in the view of some analysts that the pervasive violent conflicts in the country are the result of the freedom associated with democracy which Nigerians are unequipped to manage effectively (Dansonka and Yiolokun 2016, 3). The use, misuse and abuse of identities had always been allowed to play out with the resultant paroxysm of clashes and conflicts between various interest groups to the detriment of a common nationhood. There are evidences in Nigeria of where people were excluded from active participation in the political process of a state or a place on account of their ethnic or religious identities. The purpose is essentially to safeguard a group interest against the intense competition for who controls what position and the economic benefits thereof (Ozoeze 2005, 9).

Because of the intermittent ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt, George Akume has described the zone as a 'triangle of crises'; a development that 'threatens the tangible and intangible threads that hold a political entity together and give it a sense of purpose' Gambari 2008, 2). Put differently, the ethno-religious conflicts prosecuted by some misguided youths not only erected barriers between Nigerian citizens but also stunted the nation-building efforts. The type of political and religious leaders needed in Nigeria should be able to inculcate 'a better understanding of ourselves and of our interconnections and intergroup relations (which) is bound to make us …less parochial, less insular in our thinking as well as advance our group nationalism into the nationalism of the integrated whole or nation (Igbafe 2006, 14).

As it is today, ethno-religious identities have tended to shift loyalty from Nigerian nation-state to ethnic nationality or individual religion or both. But for the politicization of religion in Nigeria, it would have addressed 'the problem of holding together growing numbers of people once the immediate ties of family and clan had ceased to be adequate' (Ranger 1972, 9). It is therefore plausible to argue that religion which should have been an indispensable tool for nation-building by bringing out the best in individuals in a multi-ethno-religious society like Nigeria has become a factor of division and irredentism (Eze, Adihikon and Chinweuba 2015, 71-82). Nigerian leaders should be able to harness the positive potentials of

religion for nation-building rather than 'us' and 'them' phenomenon which created a 'divided-self' among Nigerians.

The ethnic diversity of Nigeria which ordinarily should have been a source of strength and pride in the committee of nations has generated prejudice, tension and rivalry in the country. It is clear that national leaders have not been able to inculcate in the youths sufficient sense of Nigerian project over and above the sharp edges of ethnicity and religious pluralism (Eze 2014, 1-12). Undoubtedly, ethno-religious conflicts are not only a threat to the fragile political unity of Nigeria but also mortgage the future of its young citizens. Great nations such as Great Britain and the United States of America which are also amalgams of many people have attained grandeur and common nationhood devoid of primordial sentiments and attachment. There is strength in diversity.

Democracy and New Wave of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria
Democracy is essentially a direct and active participation of the citizens of a country in the decision of their own affairs. It also entails meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups especially political parties, either directly or indirectly for the major position to governmental power (Haruna, 2010; Ikyase et. al, 2014). Democracy is rooted in several key values or norms and give its institutions and procedures their normative purpose which include freedom, equity, inclusion, welfare, respect for human life, negotiation and compromise, and rule of law (Frank et. al, 2012:288). Democracy, Sartori (1987:34) notes, exists when relations between the governed and government abides by the principal that the state is at the service of the citizens and not the citizens at the services of the state.

Against this backdrop, Nigeria's democracy is characterized by great deal of anti democratic practices as the process is replete with ethnicity, tribalism, nepotism, regionalism, and ethnic conflicts. Since Nigeria independence in 1960, democratic structure of the first republic was ethnically-based with lots of sentiments which became highly politicized. Each ethnic group was administered by political party organized along ethnic lines that vowed to protect the people's interest (Ikyase et.al, 2014:35). Democracy, since the inception of Fourth Republic in 1999 has become a political death trap because elections conducted in Nigeria since then, always ended in protest and gruesome killings of perceived enemies and innocent citizens for lack of free and fair elections and manipulations of votes in favour of the power-that-be or the cash and carry politicians. This democratic dispensation has manifested trait of poor ethno religious mechanism based on conflicts and mutual suspicion that exist not only between the north and south but also within the religious realm. Countries with such diverse ethnic nationalities like USA have taken the advantage to become great nations but it has become an up-hill task in Nigeria and continued to threaten the unity of country and thus make the future of the country bleak (Adetoye and Omilusi, 2015:51).

New Wave of Ethno-Religious Conflicts
The return of civil rule in 1999 has opened up the space for interrogating political and social phenomena in Nigeria. The perceived imbalance and unanswered questions within Nigeria federal political system contributed fundamentally to the atmosphere of hostility and ethno-religious conflict. However, in the absence of a systematic attempt to resolve most of these fundamental contradictions or differences facing the country's political structure, the newly

enlarged political space is fast becoming filled with ethnic or other primordial identities and sentiments. The net effect of these strong feelings arising from the ethnic groups entrenched an atmosphere of hostility and antagonism, with each group alleging political and economic marginalization in the hands of others.

Since 1999, there have also been waves of ethno-religious conflicts and sharia instigated riots as well as the emergence of the Boko Haram Jihadist. The frequency of conflicts in Nigeria stimulated the proliferation of ethno-religious movements with pronounced political agenda. These associations were formed largely for the interests of ethnic and religious groups. Such associations include the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ijaw National Council, Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Odu'a People's Congress (OPC), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Middle Belt Forum (BLF), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Boko Haram Jihadists. These organizations make claims that have far-reaching implications on the state. Their claims and demands include those for more equitable distribution and sharing of power and economic resources, Islamization of the country, and demand for reconfiguration of the state or self-determination.

The wave of ethno-religious conflicts not only resulted in the loss of human and material resources that cannot be quantified in monetary terms but breed state of anarchy and emergence of parallel government both in the north and the south and threatens the unity and corporate existence of Nigeria. Statistics on religious conflicts across the country reveals that at least 95% of religious violence took place in northern Nigeria and out of the 178 conflict outbreaks between 1990 and 2004, 104 had religious undertones while the rest of the conflicts probably might be ethnic (Agbiboa, 2014:50). The local conflicts that arose primarily out of ethnic differences in Jos between Hausa settlers and the indigenes of Afizere, Berom, Anaguta resulted in the decimation of 3,000 people and 25,000 people displaced in 2008 because of election manipulations in Jos North LGA (Ojie and Ewhrudjakpor, 2009:8).

In fact, it is sad to mention that the authorities have not yet prosecuted security officers both police and army for the unlawful killings of more than 130 people during the 2008 sectarian violence in Jos, Plateau state nor had the federal government brought to book the soldiers who massacred 200 people in Benue since 2001 (Agbiboa, 2014:50). The failure of Nigeria government to address the widespread social ills as well as the police and army longstanding impunity for the range of crime not only showed government's complicity but have created fertile ground for ethnic violence and pseudo-government.

The plethora of ethno-religious conflicts abound especially between the Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba people in Shagamu; Hausa/Fulani and Igbo in Aba (2019, 2020); Herdsmen and Igbo people in Enugu State (2018, 2019); Kano and Lagos Crisis and the Sharia Crisis. In Shagamu crisis, the police officers deployed to quell the gruesome massacre turned out to be Hausa/Fulani security men who, instead of arresting the situation employed their tribal ego to assist the minority Hausa/Fulani indigenes resident in Shagamu to overpower the Yoruba side (Isiaka, 2006:195). The whole of Shagamu became a gory sight as human remains littered in the streets with so many dead bodies hidden in burnt houses. More than 40 people lost their lives in the mayhem while 1,000 people were rendered homeless. The Shagamu crisis provoked a retaliatory attack in Kano of which the Hausa-Fulani avenged the killings of their

kith and kin. The unfortunate incident resulted in another bloodbath between the two dominant ethnic nationalities in Nigeria where more than 160 Yoruba in the North were burnt or hacked to death (Isiaka 2006:195).

Furthermore, the attempt to launch the Biafran State in Aba town in South East Nigeria resulted in bloody clash between the police and MASSOB members leading to the arrest of the militia leader, Ralph Uwazuruike. Frequent clashes between the group and law enforcement agencies always led to the death of MASSOB members. Despite the arrest, incarceration and death of its members, the association has continued with its separatist zeal and agitation. Since 2017, the activities of ethnic-oriented militia movement, IPOB, had assumed a higher dimension. The federal government as a result of the agitation of this group, announced its proscription, the leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu is currently facing alleged terrorism charges at the Federal High Court, Abuja. Since then, federal government has declared full scale war on IPOB and the police and army engages in secret and routine extra-judicial execution of IPOB members for their peaceful request of self-rule (Falana, 2021:17).

With the zeal for primitive accumulation of wealth, the political stakeholders made or turned election process into Obasanjo's "do-or-die affair" where every contestant tries at all cost to undo his perceived political rival. The process of election in Nigeria, rather than serving as means of exercising legitimate political rights, has turned out to be serious political liability that encouraged and generate crisis. From 2003–2019, general elections in Nigeria were marked with conflicts just as their processes and end-products encountered credibility and legitimacy crisis (Obialor and Ozuzu, 2019:126). The political elite in their desperate need for power use the instrumentality of force such as thugs, political bandits, and government security forces to rig elections in favour of a particular candidate.

In 2011, the build-up tension that followed general elections degenerated into violent explosion and protests mainly in northern Nigeria states of Kaduna, Bauchi, Katsina, Kano, Adamawa, Gombe, Taraba, Niger, and Plateau States. The crisis not only led to the burning of Christian worship centres, public buildings, and houses of politicians of the ruling PDP party and religious leaders suspected to be related to the party but the gruesome murder of NYSC members who served as ad hoc INEC staff in Bauchi (The Nation, 2011:35). The violence that followed the 2011 presidential elections in the country led to the death of over 800 people and massive loss of property worth billions of naira coupled with the Boko Haram insurgency (Ugbudian, et. al, 2012:2452).

The divisive campaign that preceded the 2011 election in the office of the president further polarized the country along ethnic, religious and regional lines (Albert, 2012; Ugbudian, 2015). The dimensions the electioneering campaign of President Goodluck Jonathan and General M. Buhari witnessed mass killings of southerners in the north and the subsequent rejection of 6696 batch B, NYSC members from serving in some states in the Northern part of the country (Daily Trust, 2012). The violent attacks led the President's declaration of State of Emergency on July 2013 in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (Agbiboa, 2014:48).

Though Boko Haram became noticed in 2009 but the rising profile of its foot soldiers (Fulani Herdsmen) and criminal atrocities gained greater momentum during the administration of

Buhari. Across the length and breadth of Nigeria, criminal attacks on communities have rendered villages empty, property destroyed while farm lands have been abandoned (Eke, 2017:29). Government inability to halt their criminal atrocities appeared to have provided the fulcrum for their increased impunity and wanton destruction of lives and property. The activities of Fulani Herdsmen were evident in all the 36 states including Abuja between 2016 and 2020. Enugu and Benue were worst hit. The spate of attacks against churches, communities nationwide since 2011, suggest a strategy of provocation through which the groups seek to spark a large scale of ethno-religious conflict that will destabilize the country.

Conclusion

Ethnic and religious conflicts have remained visible in Nigeria; a development that has become a fault line. Ethnic demands that threaten the current fragile nature of Nigeria's government and political institutions can hardly be attributed to ethnicity or religion separately but collectively. In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed waves of devastating religious conflicts tinged with ethnic chauvinism. Frequent and persistent ethnic and religious clashes between the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity), present the country with a major security challenge. In all parts of Nigeria, there exist ethnic and religious conflict and these have emerged as a result of political and ethnic consciousness and identity often structured around ethno-religious identities. Since 1999, there have been waves of ethno-religious conflicts. The frequency of conflicts in Nigeria has stimulated the proliferation of ethno-religious movements with pronounced political agenda.

Nation-building has become increasingly more difficult in the present democratic dispensation because of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. It is in the view of some analysts that the pervasive violent conflicts in the country are the result of the freedom associated with democracy which Nigerians are unequipped to manage effectively. Government's inability to halt the activities of criminal groups appears to have provided fulcrum for increased impunity and wanton destruction of lives and property. However, majority of the participants in these conflicts are youths who are manipulated by the religious, community and political leaders. These youths are available instruments in the hand of these leaders because of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. In ethnic and religious conflicts young people are commonly perceived as either perpetrators or victims of violence. Therefore, the government should make conscious effort to educate, empower, engage, dialogue, deradicalize and create job opportunities for the youths. This will help in reducing the spate of violence in Nigeria.

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