

## **The Menace of Ethno-Religious Conflict on Economic Development in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** This study examined the menace of ethno-religious conflict on economic development in Nigeria. The purpose was to; examine the nexus between ethnicity and religion and the crises that have engulfed Nigeria in the past three decades, look at the effect of ethno-religious crises on the development of Nigeria as a nation, investigate the role of religious leaders in curtailing the menace and investigate the role of mass media in escalating ethno-religious crisis. The study employed desk research which made use of literature explored to make conclusion on the study. The findings revealed that factors like struggle for land resources, traditional authority, competition for economic and political spaces, clash of values and way of lives, religion and ethnicity and religious manipulations breeds ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. It was also revealed that ethno-religious conflict affects economic development adversely by causing a decline in the level of agricultural investment/yield, decline in income levels of the people of the area, and increased level of social and residential segregation and damages to lives and property. The resultant effects of these are high level of poverty and unemployment, particularly to the people. It was equally shown that ethno-religious conflicts lead to destruction of human and physical capital, disruption of economic transactions, increased cost of conducting such transactions and to distortion of resource allocation by the state. Based on this, it was recommended that all religions in the country should exhibit the attitude of religious tolerance in dealing with people of other religion. This is very necessary for achieving religious peace and harmony in the entire country. Also, the government should involve necessary legal and constitutional provisions to ensure social security and stability across the country. Also, security institutions should be strengthened and equipped to carry out its responsibilities.

**Keywords:** Religious conflicts, communal conflicts, ethno-religious conflict, non- violent conflicts, violent conflicts, national cohesion, economic development.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria is usually characterized as an intensely divided state in which major political concerns are vigorously and or violently challenged along the lines of the complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions in the country (Adebayo, 2010). As a result of its complex political identities and history of protracted and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be rightly labelled as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa. From its foundation as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability and economic transformation (Nwankwo, 2015). The climax of the crisis happened to have been the civil war in the late 1960s, which ensued shortly after independence in 1960. Since Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999, there has been a rapid increase of conflicts in the country.

As a result of these developments, members of the different ethnic nationalities have become conscious of their separate identities. The intense communal and religious conflicts have led to the establishment and

operations of several militia groups prominent among them include, Bakassi Boys, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Oodua People Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) and more recently Boko Haram. These Militia groups have become a territory for the army of jobless youths (Nwankwo, 2015).

Ethno-religious crisis is a common phenomenon in the world history and there is hardly any race that has not at some point in time experienced it. The world religious holy books, the Quran and the Bible, recorded how our fore-fathers in the past went through either ethnic crisis, religions crisis or ethno-religious crises at various point in time. This explains to us that ethno-religious crisis is neither peculiar to Nigeria nor a phenomenon of recent origin (Gberevbie, Shodipo, & Oviasogie, 2013).

Ethnic and religion consciousness, since the Nigerian independence, have continue to threaten the development, continued co-existence, peace and unity of Nigeria as members of one sovereign democratic state. In recent history, there are only few states in Nigeria that have not in one way or another witnessed one form of ethnic or religious crises. However, for a state to experience development, then such a state must be crisis free.

Tijjani, Mohd & Ibrahim (2012) refers to ethnicity as a social formation well known by the communal traits of their boundaries. Such communal traits may be language, culture or both culture and language. This means that an ethnic group will have a specific territory within a geographical location demarcating it from other groups. Example, in Nigeria, one can point to the Yoruba in the western Nigeria, the Hausa in the northern Nigeria, Igbo in the eastern Nigeria as some of the major ethnic groups in the country. The vilification of ethnicity as the scapegoat of all vices associated with the Nigerian body polity has made the subject a dominant theme in the study of Nigerian political economy. Thus, analysts interested in such diverse issues as nationalism, decolonization, national integration, political parties, military intervention, corruption, economic development, structural adjustment, democratization and violent conflict have all considered the 'ethnicity' variable. This was the case even in the 1960s and 1970s when the major intellectual traditions felt ethnicity was of secondary importance as an explanatory variable; at best an epiphenomenon and at worst a mask for class privilege. The result of such interest in ethnicity, which is proportional to the high level of 'ethnic consciousness' in the Nigerian society, is a legion of literature on ethnicity, making critique a herculean task. Bature & Samari (2017) rightly puts it that, the study of ethnic relations in Nigeria have passed through a number of phases replicating changes in the country's political status as well as changes in fashions and trends in the social science research agenda. Consequently, this study will examine the effect of ethno-religious conflicts on economic development in Nigeria.

## **II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The frequent incidences of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country has called for great worry among the patriotic citizens across the nation. These incidences often activate hostilities between Muslims and Christians and thereafter indoctrinate a deep consciousness of religious sentiment which often creates negative effects on their socio-economic development.

The protracted nature of ethno-religious conflicts in northern Nigeria and the destructions of lives and properties that follows cause many questions to be asked on what have been the negative effects of ethno-religious conflicts on the economic, social and political development of the region and Nigeria as a whole. On the other hand, to what degree does the mass media handling of conflict issues affects conflict escalation or de-escalation? How did mass media reportage contribute to the escalation or de-escalation of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria and northern Nigeria in particular in the past three decades? What factors influenced the mass media to be biased or not in the coverage of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria? Does mass media ownership, location, ethnic-religious affiliation of proprietors or editors affect the way the mass media report ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria during the period under study? What can the mass media do to influence positively the process of conflict resolution and national development?

What makes the role of the mass media more problematic in a pluralistic society like Nigeria? What are the differences in covering ethno-religious conflicts and other non-religious based conflicts? How can media practitioners disconnect themselves from being biased because of their religion or ethnic background in the discharge of their duties during ethno-religious conflicts and other types of conflicts? How can the mass media promote religious tolerance and dialogue to enhance co-operation and development of a pluralistic society like Nigeria? It is against this background that this study examines the incidences and prevalence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, and how it affects economic development.

## **III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of the study include:

- i) To examine the nexus between ethnicity and religion and the crises that have engulfed Nigeria in the past three decades.

- ii) To look at the effect of ethno-religious crises on the development of Nigeria as a nation.
- iii) To investigate the role of religious leaders in curtailing the menace.
- iv) To investigate the role of mass media in escalating ethno-religious crisis

#### **IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study anchored on Conflict theory of Karl Marx which lays emphasis on the social, political or material inequality of a social group that critique the broad socio-political system. This research work adopted the assumptions of conflict theory based on the followings: -

- i) Structural inequality: this assumption suggests that imbalances in power and rewards are built into all social structures which leads to scarcity of resources and groups have to compete over these resources.
- ii) Change: this assumption submits that conflict and change are inevitable in the society. It suggests that conflict mostly benefits the rich and powerful and that there is a need for a change of social order that will benefit all members of the society.
- iii) Competition: this assumption asserts that since there is scarcity of resources in all social groups, there is bound to be competitions over scarce resources (money, leisure etc.).
- iv) Interactions: this assumption believes that human interactions result in conflict as a result of differences in perception, interest and scarce resources. As long as two people are together there is bound to be misunderstandings and differences.

Conflict theory emphasizes conflict as the symbol of the society. The theory postulates that the fundamental causes of ethno-religious crisis are the social and economic forces that functions within society. This theory asserts that some groups dominate others and win for themselves an unfair share of the society's political power, which includes wealth and privileges in the society at the expense of the less powerful ones. They also give away the rights of the less powerful while they protect that of the powerful persons which such situations can lead to a violence outcome. Groups and individuals advance their own interests, struggling over the control of societal resources. The powerful ones within the society exercises power over the less powerful with inequality and power struggles being the result. There is great attention paid to class, race, and gender in this perspective because they are seen as the grounds of the most pertinent and enduring struggles in society which often lead to political violence.

##### **4.2.1 Concepts of Religion, Ethnicity, Conflict and Ethno-religious conflicts**

###### **Religion**

The concept of religion is abstract and vague though in Nigeria it is classified into three – Christian, Muslim and Traditional. It is difficult to define with accuracy and impartiality because it is emotion laden; Religion has been variously defined as a body of truths, laws and rites by which a man is subordinated to supreme being. Christian and Muslim identities have been the mainstay of religious differentiation and conflict in Nigeria (Adeola, 2010) while the traditional religion is the least politically active; numbering several hundreds of ethnic groups and subgroups, villages, clans and kin groups; and, involving the worship of different gods and goddesses. To Dele & Mike (2015) religion indicates a set of symbolic forms and actions that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence. Akintoye & Opeyemi (2014) hypothesized religion to be a system of symbols which act to create powerful, pervasive and long-lasting mood and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

To Ntamu, Eneji, Omang & Edinyang (2014) religion is one of the phenomena that is often misinterpreted in the analysis of interpersonal activities, especially violent conflicts in Nigeria. Religious violence most often provides grounds for economic, political, psychological and sociological redress for looting, intimidation and controlling the affairs of co-religionists and non-co-religionist and even that of the hated co-religionists. When people attain advantageous positions politically, they seem to use threats against adherents of another religious sect within the social production process. When this happens, conflicts and violence is triggered. It is usually within that context, that the religious violent become widespread. According to Mellgard (2014) religion was invented as a powerful weapon to control the people politically and economically. Karl Marx strongly argued that religion is an obstacle to growth and that religion is the opium of the masses. From the foregoing, it's appropriate to say that, religion does not have a generally acceptable definition.

###### **Ethnicity**

Akintoye & Opeyemi (2014) defines ethnicity as a social formation well known by the communal traits of their boundaries. Such communal traits may be language, culture or both culture and language. Likewise, Onodugo, Amujiri & Okolie (2015) hypothesized an ethnic group as a "collection of people whose members shares such characteristics as language, core-territory, ancestral myth, culture, religion, and/or political organization". This ethnic identity results from contact with other groups. They argued that ethnic pluralism is essential but an

inadequate condition for ethnicity. Ethnicity therefore is a social phenomenon related with connections among members of different ethnic groups. It arises when the members of an ethnic group become characterized by a common consciousness of their identity in relations to other groups with in-group and out-group differences becoming marked with time. It is a consequence of ethnic group identity mobilization and politicization especially in a competitive ethnically plural environment or context (Dele& Mike, 2015). Such exclusivist, identity- based discrimination undoubtedly results in conflicts over scarce economic resources and socio-political goods.

According to Madu&Goni (2013), ethnicity on its own does not cause conflict because several factors always play a part in every conflict situation. He argued that identity is a fact of human existence, and that it is what people make of it or to what use they deploy it that makes the difference between ethnic cohesion, harmony or conflict. The manner in which group members define the in-group and out-group relationship (the 'us' versus 'them' sentiment) is crucial in conflict dynamics. The more confrontational the definitions – that is, the more 'our' poor situation is a result of their oppression, or the more superior for the worse. Adeola (2010) asserted that ethnicity refers to people of racially distinct groups. Taking a historical view of concept of ethnicity, ethnicity did not come in common usage until the later part of the twentieth century. Onodugo,Amujini&Okolie (2015) insisted that ethnicity is the beginning manifestation of identity while nationalism is politicized shared identity.

### **Conflict**

Conflict could be described as a situation or condition of disharmony in an interactional process. It is an unpleasant fact in any setting as long as people compete for jobs, resources, power, recognition and security (Umana, 2019).It is inevitable among people whenever at least two social elements (i.e., people, gatherings, associations, and countries) interact with each other in accomplishing their purposes, their connections may wind up contradictory or conflicting (Umana, Ogar, &Djobissie, 2019). Anyim, Ufodiama&Olusanya (2013) opined that a situation of conflict is one in which the activity of one is actually or forcibly imposed at unacceptable costs, materials or psychic, upon another. For conflict to occur, factors which include intensity and salience of the issue at stake, the status and legitimacy of the parties and the clustering of interests and coincidence of cleavages within a community plays a role. These factors determine the extent to which conflict can stretch. Anyim, Ufodiama&Olusanya (2013) points out that conflict is not narrowed to any particular level of interaction. In other words, it could occur at any level of human interaction and it often manifests through violent activities.

As noted by Anyebe (2015), the term conflict is used to describe a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual viewpoints entirely just goals. He further argued that sometimes, conflict is as a result of the struggle for power and material gain by leaders and followers alike. Because of such vested interests, the parties at conflict prefer conflict to cooperation and violence over negotiations. To have a thorough grasp of conflict, therefore, one must carefully examine the different actors and factors and their interrelationship in each conflict situation (Anyebe, 2015). The economic viability or material value of the territory is also vital in conflict dynamics. For example, if the territory is rich in natural resources such as oil, gold, diamond, timber or if there are cultural attachments to the territory, there would be more stakes in it.

Similarly, Danjibo (2012) opined that most conflicts in Nigeria are as a result of land space and resource competition; disputed jurisdiction of traditional rulers; creation and location of local government council headquarters; scarce political and economic resources; micro and macro social structures of Nigeria; population growth; and disregard for cultural symbols. Conflict may either be non- violent or violent. Notably, what constitutes violence and non-violence conflicts varies depending on the context or perception of the legitimate use of force or challenge of authority.

### **Ethno-religious conflict**

Ethno-religious clashes have shown to be the most violent instances of inter- group crisis in Nigeria partially because of their tendency to spill over from their initial theatres into other localities, states, or even regions of the federation. They have occurred mainly in the northern parts, perhaps due to its heterogeneity and multi-religious nature. It is often challenging to distinguish between religious and ethnic conflicts as the dividing line is between Muslims and Christians in that region. The major examples of ethno- religious conflicts in Nigeria and the North in particular have included the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises in 1987 and 1999, Jalingo 1991, Wukari, 2013, Zangon-Kataf riots of 1992, Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2000, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000, and the Jos riots of 2001 just to mention a few. These conflicts have each claimed several thousands of lives and generated violent ripple effects beyond the conflict zones, respectively.

#### **4.2.2 Causes of ethno-religious conflicts**

In many ways, it can be postulated that the formation of Nigeria as a country was a consequence of many conflicts and compromises. Nigeria is a pluralistic society; culturally, politically, ethnically, religiously and otherwise. It appears that ethnicity and religion are the most dominant and problematic issues facing Nigeria as a pluralistic state. It has provided the pattern and potential for the protracted violent ethno-religious conflicts this country has experienced in the past three decades. Various factors like struggle for land resources, traditional authority, competition for economic and political spaces, clash of values and way of lives, religion and ethnicity and religious manipulations have been identified as some lead causes of conflicts in Nigeria.

Salawu (2010), examined the ethno-religious and communal conflicts that have occurred in Nigeria since the return to civil rule in 1999. He argued that these violent conflicts are inbuilt in socio-economic and political management of post-colonial Nigeria. Nonetheless, with the reintroduced effort at entrenching democracy, struggle for political and economic spaces has deepened between and among the various ethno-religious and political groups, thus making these conflicts inevitable. He also recognized poverty in the country occasioned by social and economic dislocation, ethnic and religious manipulations by the elite as the brain behind this spate of ethno-religious conflicts. He further argued that pluralism and diversity in Nigeria, abundant human and natural resources have deepened suspicion, hatred and distrust among the people. He further opined that violent conflicts have become a recurrent and incessant feature in the past three decades in Nigeria and that no part of Nigeria is left out in these violent conflicts. The study asserted that religion, ethnicity and the scheming roles of the political elite are mainly accountable for the sequence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. He also identified ignorance, poverty, marginalization, and fear of domination as equally responsible for these conflicts.

To Bartolotta (2011), the nature of the politics, the role of mass media coverage of conflicts situations and the reluctance of the civilian regime to address the national question led to the resurrection of social groups that make demands for incorporation and empowerment. According to him, the dominant argument is that competition for power and the incapacity of government to deliver dividends of democracy have resulted in violent conflicts between ethnic and religious groups. Ntamu, Eneji, Omang & Edinyang (2013) viewed the causes of ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt region as a result of socio-economic factors which include but not limited to poverty, economic crisis, structural adjustment and political manipulation. They further argued that the pluralistic nature of Middle Belt region provides the basis for policies that influence the dynamics of conflicts in the area.

Also, a major cause of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has to do with the allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism and bigotry. This is so because there is no complete agreement on how wealth, power and status are to be shared among individuals and groups. There is also no agreement on how to effect necessary changes and reforms because different groups and individuals have diverse interests in which case, some groups will have their aims met, while others will not. These naturally leads to conflicts when deprived groups and individuals attempt to increase their share of power and wealth or to modify the dominant values, norms, beliefs or ideology (Okolie-Osemene, 2015). The failure of the Nigerian leaders to institute good governments, forge national integration and promote real economic progress through deliberate and articulated policies, has led to mass poverty and unemployment. This has resulted into communal, ethnic, religious and class conflicts that have now characterized the Nigerian nation. Poverty and unemployment have therefore served as breeding ground for many ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria because the country now has a large number of poor people who serves as mercenary fighters.

The collapse of social control mechanisms that characterized the traditional African societies such as: the police, courts, family, education, law, religion and political system that cared for the well-being of all citizens has also contributed to ethno-religious conflicts. Indeed, the malfunctioning of all these important institutions has actually increased ethnic and communal conflicts in Nigeria. For instance, the failure of many homes to make ends meet with the family income tends to increase immorality, broken homes, divorces and drunkenness, leading again to a large reserve of youths who could be engaged for the implementation of ethno-religious conflicts. It is also important to note, that the school system in Nigeria today is in shambles and cannot impact even sound education, discipline and desired type of morality. The religious institution is also failing in its expected roles, while the law enforcement agents indulge in crimes, demand bribes and collect illegal levies from motorists and citizens openly and shamelessly. All the above constitute a wrong signal and encourage social vices in the society thereby laying the foundation for conflicts in general.

#### **4.2.3 Implication of ethno-religious conflicts on development in Nigeria**

Dele & Mike, (2015) asserted that ethno-religious conflict may have a lot of implications on the development of the country such as the following:

i) **Socio-economic implications:** ethno-religious crisis causes the people lots of deprivations due to flaws in the social organizations, social institutions and structural deficiencies in forming enabling environment for the

society and economy to grow and retards all economic and social progress. Charles, Andeshi&Daniel (2014) for example, claimed that, whenever there is a conflict, there will be a waning in the level of agricultural investment/yield, decline in income levels of the people of the area, and increased level of social and residential segregation and damages to lives and property worth millions. The resultant effects of these are high level of poverty and unemployment particularly to the people involved.

**ii) Political implications:** The people are forced to inherit lots of ethnic and religious conflict, socio-structural deformities and disharmonies. This has impacted negatively on the growth and development of the people in the state. The frequent occurrence of conflicts, the weak position of the political class to handle the conflicts and the perpetual struggles for political power have continuously put the people on the disadvantaged position and makes their future to be in jeopardy.

**iii) Educational implications:** the incessant spates of ethno-religious crisis may lead to the shift of the government attention to restore security at the expense of developing a key sector like education. This may lead to crisis on that sector and persistent strikes by the teachers at all levels and will cripple the educational development in the area. Also, in order to reestablish peace in the affected areas of conflict, government may impose curfew and restrict movement to restore normalcy, peace, law and order. The resultant effect of this retrogressive phenomenon, is that people spend less time in school and may lead to some being dropped out of school and perhaps ventures into unproductive activities that can affect their future career development to becoming responsible citizens and future leaders. In deed many of them are now actively involved in the spate of ethnic and religious violent and become available to be used by politicians as their thugs, hired killers and assassins.

#### **4.2.4 Ethno-religious conflict and economic development**

Religion and ethnicity have been a major source of conflict that has threatened the unity of Nigeria right from the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria in 1914. The series of ethno-religious conflicts observed in many parts of Nigeria, especially in the northern axis of the country have not only hindered the nation's socio-economic and political development but also put to question the peaceful co-existence of the two dominant religions in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity). The consequential enormous loss in human and material resources has continued to register its multiplier impacts on all aspects of the nation's socio-political, economic and infrastructural development. These conflicts have had massive negative consequences on the economy, and especially on the poor masses, which are yet to be measured with a view to finding appropriate policies that will improve the situation. Several scholars from different areas of study have at various times expressed the adverse effects of these conflicts on the socio-political development of the various areas engulfed in lingering conflicts and Nigeria as a nation

The costs of prolonged violent conflicts on development in Africa as stated by Adeola (2010), has been so much and because of these incessant violent conflicts in the continent, development and security have been challenging and the effects can be identified from their direct and indirect impact on the society and the economy. Such impacts, according to Awojobi, (2014), range from destruction of human and physical capital, disruption of economic transactions, increased cost of conducting such transactions, to distortion of resource allocation by the state. Writing on the adverse effects of conflict on development, he remarked that peace as opposed to conflict is increasingly perceived necessary for human development. He added further that broad economic development and prosperity are possible only in the presence of positive peace, as opposed to the presence of war.

### **V. CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that factors like lopsided mass media coverage of conflicts, struggle for land resources, traditional authority, competition for economic and political spaces, clash of values and way of lives, religion and ethnicity and religious manipulations breeds ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. It was concluded that ethno-religious conflict affects economic development adversely by causing a decline in the level of agricultural investment/yield, decline in income levels of the people of the area and damages to lives and properties worth millions. The resultant effects of these are high level of poverty and unemployment, particularly to the people. It was equally concluded that ethno-religious conflicts lead to destruction of human and physical capital, disruption of economic transactions, increased cost of conducting such transactions and distortion of resource allocation by the state. The study recommended the following;

- 1) All religions in the country should demonstrate the attitude of religious tolerance in dealing with people of other religion. This is very necessary for realizing religious peace and harmony in the entire country.
- 2) The media should desist from lopsided reportage of issues in the country and should be sensitive in reporting cases.

The government should involve necessary legal and constitutional provisions to ensure that social security and stability reign supreme in the country.

- 3) All ethnic groups should respect the rights of one another and to make use of the time-honored strategies employed in the past by various ethnic groups and communities for resolving conflicts.
- 4) The government should alleviate poverty from the Nigerian populace which is very necessary to reduce tension and ensure violence-free behaviour among the citizens.
- 5) The government and well-to-do individuals should create employment opportunities for the teeming number of school leavers and graduates of tertiary institutions. This will go a long way in reducing frustration and disillusionment which tend to breed tension and social instability among the citizens in the country.

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