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THE DYNAMICS OF COMMUNAL CONFLICTS AND CRIMINALITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Communal conflicts have arisen out of the context of mutual fear and suspicion over unequal distribution of socio-political and economic goods and lack of cordiality. Since most of the perpetrators and mercenaries who execute the conflicts are usually in possession of arms and ammunitions, it becomes very easy for them to perpetuate various criminal acts. This paper therefore examined the dynamics of communal conflicts and criminality in Nigeria. This paper demonstrated that communal conflicts engendered criminality in Nigeria; however, little or nothing is known about the criminality angle/dimension of the incessant communal conflicts in Nigeria. The paper therefore recommended among others that, there is urgent needs for structural reforms to address the issues of poverty, social inequality, injustice and oppression so as to avoid situations that create communal conflicts. Governments should endeavour at all levels to work with the various communities to promote harmonious relationship among the various ethnic affiliations through the building of inter-ethnic civil networks at the community level which can be targeted for skills and capacity building/development programmes as a strategy for conflict management.

Keywords: Communal conflicts; Social relations; Conflict management; Criminality

Introduction

Human history is the history of conflicts of values expressed in various inter and intra religious, ethnic, regional or class conflicts and contradictions. This idea was aptly expressed by Marx and Engels (1968) in Akanji (2012), when they argued that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Documentary records revealed that incidences of conflicts particularly communal conflicts predate Nigeria even as a colonial state. These are evidenced in the 19th century internecine warfare among the Yoruba people to the southwest, the war of attrition by communities in the deltaic areas over land and claim to resources, and the numerous wars of expansion in the Middle Belt

area especially among the Tiv, between the Tiv and the Jukun, the Nupe and the Yoruba to the North, and also the religious wars that followed the Sokoto Jihad of 1804 and which altered the socio-political and religious topography of present day northern Nigeria and its neighbours (Akanji, 2012; Okafor, 2007b). Incidentally, these conflicts continued with renewed zeal during the period of colonial rule due to the nature of the colonial political and economic policies which neglected the specific histories of the various groups in the country. Thus, the history of the country since independence like the pre-colonial and colonial days, according to Akanji (2012) is replete with political, religious and communal conflicts among others to such an extent that a culture of violence has been created or what has been succinctly referred to as "...zones of violent confrontations.

The historical antecedent of the post-colonial Africa is tinted with the menaces of violent conflicts (Alimba, 2014). Alien rules and regulations guiding social relations of individuals, communities and groups were introduced by British colonialists who were also architects and principal initiators of these processes of change. New political structures and ethos were crafted and forcefully imposed on the local people by the missionaries and colonialists for the purpose of managing and administering the affairs of the communities and their peoples (Onwuzuruigbo, 2009).

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a series of communal conflicts. People who saw their parents, peers and friends shot, burnt or beheaded; were themselves shot at or physically attacked and/or injured; saw their houses and properties burnt or were exposed to the grotesque (for example to mutilated and/ or decaying corpses) as happened during the Ile-Ife/Modakeke crisis of march 2000 will bear some negative effects of such events (Idehen, Olasupo and Adebusuyi, 2013). Among effects of such communal conflicts are psychological disturbances of various types and severity. Some stressors, however, are so catastrophic and horrifying that they can cause serious psychological harm to those who experience them. Both the survivors and witnesses to traumatic stressors are expected to be greatly distressed as part of their normal response. For some victims, the trauma continues long after the event itself has ended. The horrifying experience leads to general increases in anxiety and arousal, avoidance of emotionally charged situations and the frequent relieving of the traumatic event.

While conflict is part of every human community, its nature and management severally determine its effects on the society (Gyong and Ogabdoyi, 2013). Apart from the loss of lives and property, investible resources are often diverted to security issues and conflict management. Yet, its psychological impact through depression is agonizingly too traumatic.

Worldwide, the current efforts geared towards building peaceful relations between warring communities have largely drawn from a repertoire of conflict resolution approaches conceived and designed by western nations, international organizations and even private agencies based in Europe and America (Zartman, 2000). As plausible as these strategies could have been, no doubt, is based on the assumption of the philosophy of the retributive justice. Consequently, conflicts involving communal groups have often been managed through court litigations, deployment of state security forces and constitution of panel of inquiry/investigative commissions (Ukiwo, 2003; Albert, 2001). Critics berate the often fire-brigade measures of managing communal

conflicts in Nigeria, as constituting the problem itself (Ukiwo, 2003); recommendations of investigative commissions are never implemented and security personnel charged with the responsibility of managing conflicts as well as government-adjudged to be impartial - often take sides with the feuding communities thus becoming interested parties in the recurrent communal conflicts in the country. This is not unconnected to the emerging perspectives in conflict management that support a renewed emphasis on traditional or indigenous approaches to conflict management.

In Nigeria, conflict is often the result of the interaction of political, economic and social instability frequently stemming from bad governance, failed economic policies and inappropriate development programs stemming from exacerbated differences in society. As observed by Onwuzuruigbo (2009), at every level of interaction, different genre of conflict threatens peaceful inter-group relations and strives to dismember the Nigerian state. A constant fact about conflict is that it is an ever present phenomenon in social relations.

Communal conflicts that have afflicted Nigeria since independence have usually been interpreted as typical ethnic/tribal and or religious/cultural conflicts. While these categorizations may have served as plausible descriptions of earlier conflicts, and may still have some bearing on how current conflicts are being conducted and perceived, the reality is that conflict causes tend to change and diversify. Changes in the economic, political, social and ecological background do gradually, if imperceptibly, influence the nature of conflicts.

Several factors have been adduced for conflicts generation; these factors vary with the nature and location of conflicts namely; poverty, land ownership, ethnicity, marginalization e.t.c (Okafor, 2007b; Okunola and Ikunmolu, 2012). But most conflicts in Nigeria have almost the same causes or sources due to several small tribes who want to identify with their cultures, protect their political interest, religion and ethnicity. It is difficult to isolate which conflict is primarily engendered by economic, ethnic, religious and political competitions (Alemika, 2002).

The regular conflicts and criminality in Nigeria over the years have led to the destruction of lives, property worth billions of naira and destruction of basic infrastructural facilities in place thereby worsening the already bad condition of the inhabitants, hence, negating their abilities to relate functionally with their counterparts in other developing countries inspite of her resource endowment. This great loss cannot be without having negative effect on agricultural products, income levels and a rise in poverty level of the people, consequently stimulating movement of displaced persons to neighbouring countries like Niger, Chad, Cameroon, among others. In Nigeria, apart from arson during communal conflicts, house breaking and other forms of criminality also become visible during and after communal conflicts. Since most of the jobless youths and mercenaries who execute the conflicts are usually in possession of arms and ammunitions, it becomes very easy for them to break into homes and make away with people's property.

In Nigeria, armed youths are emerging outside the general political class whose options in the face of emerging poverty hide under the confusion of communal conflicts to engage in other forms of criminality such as rape, burglary, arson and so on. Several studies have been done on the prevalence of conflicts in Nigeria (Okunola and Ikunmola,

2012; Alubo, 2008; Best, 2008; Otite and Albert, 2001). These works are plausible in their own merits. Yet, little or not much has been done on the criminality angle/dimension of these series of communal conflicts. It is along this identified gap that this paper provided a more nuance approach to examine the dynamics of communal conflict and criminality in Nigeria.

Predisposing Factors of Communal Conflicts and Criminality in Nigeria

It is common knowledge that since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been confronted more with internal security challenges than external threats. These internal security problems have been engendered by perennial and intractable communal conflicts which create persistent political instability and obstruct national consensus and development. The important point to note is that conflicts constitute inevitable aspects of human interaction, and are unavoidable concomitants of choices and decisions. In theory, human activities can take two polar forms: pure anarchy and/or normlessness, and rule following (Simpson in Croft, 1996). The relations between groups, communities and even States traditionally have been regarded as operating more at the anarchic (conflict) end of this spectrum than through conformity to rules of behaviour (Gyong and Ogbadoyi, 2013). Okoye (2006) observes that, no man is an island unto himself. Individuals interact at the social, psychological and mental levels of existence in real life. This social interaction usually results in meeting the needs of members as well as creating situations of disagreements, quarrels, clashes and sorrow, which invariably lead to conflict. Socio-political interactions involve two contradictory but inexorable tendencies: which are conflict and cooperation. As human beings interact with each other in a social setting, and seek to promote their material well being and survival in the midst of scarce resources, they either cooperate for the purpose of mutual benefit, or disagree over the usage of factors of production and processes of production (Dunmoye, 2012; Okunola, 2013). Conflicts are often multi-dimensional in causation (Elaigwu, 2007). Conflicts may be caused by actions which lead to mutual distrust, polarization of relations and hostility among groups in competitive interaction within a country. Conflicts may also emanate from human needs which may be social, economic, physical or psychological. Perceived or real sense of marginalization by a group within a country may also create conflict situation.

Communal conflicts in Nigeria have long trace of pre-colonial and post-colonial historical antecedents. In pre-colonialism, the country called Nigeria did not exist. In its place was a hugely diverse scattering of tribes and communities, some of whom had territory which overlaps the borders of present day Nigeria. These varied groups with different languages, cultures and political practices were all brought together under British rule to form an entirely artificial nation. The arbitrary drawing of borders which was so common to Africa in colonial times paid little attention to the natural ethnic lines of the tribes. Whilst the Western world regarded them all as Nigerians, they considered themselves as primarily members of whichever tribe from which they originated. According to Akinwumi (2004);

In pre-colonial Nigeria each of the groups that colonialism forcefully brought together under one administration had had their own unique political and administrative structures that best suited their society.

Colonialism, however, altered and disarticulated the progress of these "states." Beginning with the indirect rule system through the "mistake of 1914" (amalgamation), and several constitutional bargains to independence in 1960, the British failed in all ways to lay a solid foundation for the building of nationhood out of the disparate amalgam called Nigeria. This was evidenced by the divide and rule tactics, regionalism, and perverted federal framework bequeathed to the country. (pp. 27-50)

Nwosu (1999) cited in Mojeed and Joseph (2012) posits that the colonization of Africa and several other Third World states ensured that peoples of diverse culture were brought together under one country. To him, because of the mission of colonialism, most of these peoples were not well integrated into the new states. Instead, some of the imperial powers cashed in on the cultural divergence of these countries to ensure the examination of their objectives. He further said, it is thus not surprising those years after colonialism, these states remained lowly integrated. This low level of integration has precipitated communal conflicts in many of the states in Nigeria and still serves as good breeding ground for the continuum of communal conflicts today. To Vandenberg (1998), the problem of communal conflict was mooted under colonialism because Africans had no control over the central power and often were kept divided into administrative districts by Europeans.

Most communal conflicts always occur along ethnic and religious fault lines. Sometimes, there is a convergence of ethnicity and religion (Human Rights Report, 2007). In the paper of inter-ethnic conflicts among the Tiv and Jukun in Taraba State, Egwu (1998) noted that ethnic consciousness was very glaring among the two ethnic groups. To him this resulted in hostility between the two ethnic groups. When individuals are too conscious of their ethnic groups, they claim supremacy of their own group over the others. This is further passed to successive generations through the process of socialization. This encourages the growth of inter-ethnic animosity, which is extended to various areas of human endeavours such as economic and political interests. The prejudices that develop are transmitted to the upcoming generations of members that will perpetuate hostility. Zuberu (1999) asserted that too strong loyalty to an ethnic group promotes keen competition for land ownership, political domination and economic supremacy. He attributed the outbreak of the crisis between the Tivs and Jukuns to claims for land ownership in Taraba State. He further maintained that ethnic consciousness is usually manipulated by individuals and groups to achieve goals.

Alubo (2003) argues that the struggles for identity take on material expression such as the control over resources and access to decision making and political control. These claims were the result of the violent conflict between the Bassa and Egbura groups in Nasarawa West and Eggon and Alago in the Southern zone in which the two groups struggle for supremacy over each other to indigeneship, rulership and control of resources. Consequently, the proliferation of communal conflicts in Nigeria is necessitated on one hand by cultural, communal and religious differences and on the other hand by fear of domination nursed by the minority groups. Contrary to the reality of the Nigerian situation, the Federal Government report (2002) cited in Adebayo (2012)

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noted that communal conflict in Nigeria is closely linked to resource competition and contest for political power. In competing for political positions, ethnic differences are sometimes used for selfish interest, leading to heavy casualties among the masses that are not necessarily the beneficiaries of the economic gains of the coveted office. Some of these conflicts emanate from governmental policies, which do not seem to carry the populace along, but are tied to the interest of the elite, particularly the political class, self-centred leadership, poor implementation of government policies, the glaring gap between the rich and the poor, and the arrogant display of stolen public fund by government officials etc as the underlying causes of public anger and frustration that needed religious and ethnic disagreements to erupt into communal conflict'. Thus, there is general agreement among scholars that a monolithic explanation of communal conflicts in Nigeria is inadequate.

Otite (1999) argues that most conflicts in Nigeria are premised on 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.

Politics and struggle for power has been recognized as another cause of crisis in Nigeria (Best, 2008). The indigenes often see the control of traditional and modern machinery of governance as their exclusive rights while the settlers as they increase in population aspire to participate in governance and this has always caused friction. An example that suffices here is the conflict between the Egbura and the Bassa in Toto as a result of the Egbura demand for the replacement of their late chief. The Bassa saw this as a challenge on their traditional superiority since they lay claim to the area as their ancestral land. Also, accusations and counter accusations of lopsidedness in the appointment and recruitment into public service by one tribe over another is also part of the issue causing crisis in the area.

The point, however is that, several studies attribute Nigeria's communal conflicts to the failure of its political elite to accept democratic principles of accountability, equity, justice and the rule of law (Akinwale, 2011). Also, most communal conflicts in Nigeria have been traced to contested bases of citizenship rights, greed, predatory rule, autocracy, and unresolved grievances. Different forces such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, dictatorship, alienation, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, infrastructural decay, ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance constitute the root causes of Nigeria's communal conflicts (Akinwale, 2011). Although, cultural diversity and ethnicity are seldom roots or direct causes of conflict, their easy use for the mobilisation of support often makes them an integral part of the dynamics of conflicts, and they can easily become the main motivators for sustaining communal conflict and become obstacles to peace (UNDP 2004). The merger of ethnicity and religion has played out communal conflicts, which cannot be divorced from the political economy of contemporary Nigeria.

Besides the aforementioned, poverty has become a major root cause of Nigeria's violent conflicts given the emerging flows from the economy of violence in the country. In different areas of Nigeria, the unemployed and underemployed youths have embarked on a range of violent activities in search for livelihoods. This situation has produced heroes in the context of political thuggery, assassination, militancy, and ethnic

massacre. There is general agreement among scholars that a monolithic explanation of violent conflicts in Nigeria is inadequate (Onwuzuruigbo, 2009; Ibeanu, 2006; Falola 1998).

Communal Conflicts and Criminality in Nigeria

There is a pervasive perception in Nigeria that crime is on the increase, which has heightened the feeling of insecurity among the general populace. Nevertheless, official data provided by the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) suggests that the crime rate in the country has successively reduced from 1996 to 2001 in the four composite criminal acts by about 16% (offences against persons, against property, against lawful authority, and against local acts). These statistics, however, appear to be at variance with newspaper incidence reports on violent crimes in the country, and have not created a feeling of enhanced security among the civil society (Salay, 2004). On the contrary, most Nigerians agree that crime rates and insecurity in the country are very high and that over the last years the country has experienced a steep rise in crime. Organized and non-organized crime and attendant vices such as smuggling of contrabands, especially firearms, counterfeiting, money-laundering, armed robberies, kidnapping, car hijacking, and human trafficking have become sources of worry for the Nigerian government (Salay, 2004). Likewise, incidents of high profile crime and politically motivated killings have lately compounded the complexity of the crime situation in the country. The seeming discrepancy between the officially reported drop in crime and public perception can be due to either under-reporting, taking into consideration the inefficiency or weak record-keeping methods of the Nigeria Police Force (and also other law enforcement agencies such as Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Customs Service, NDLEA, etc.).

The most rampant phenomenon ever witnessed in virtually every part of Nigeria today is crime; it is escalating grossly in a higher proportion. Crime rate in Nigeria has assumed a worrisome dimension (Aleyomi, 2013). Although, crime is as old as human society itself, it can be traced to the primitive pastoral and horticultural societies or from small hunting and gathering bands characterized by primitive social organization, through a more advance communal social life, to the modern industrial and globalized societies (Okunola, 2013). Criminal behaviour is a common phenomenon in every society, but certain societies have recorded higher percentages of criminal activities than others. Olujimi (2004) observed that criminality is part and parcel of human nature and society. That is 'why no society can claim to be completely free of crimes. But the types of criminal behaviour tend to follow the pattern of social and economic development of a given society. It is therefore not unexpected that a society at a low level of development tends to experience an upsurge in the rate of violent crimes such as armed robbery, politically motivated killings, the use of illegal weapons, ethnic and religious clashes and the like (Olujimi, 2004).

Crime is a social event that does not exist or take place in a vacuum. Crime takes place in a social environment which is replete with other forms of anomalies such as unemployment, poverty, socio-economic and political inequalities. Crime occurs in the context of social interaction where individuals have fundamental responsibility to choose either criminal behaviour or law-abiding behaviour. A crime is interpreted in the context of a criminal event based on the situation in which it occurred. Every criminal event is

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unique and may be subject to different interpretations because every crime has a set of primary and secondary causes and consequences.

Crime is more likely to be committed in the circumstance where there is the absence of visual cues of control, because the risk is minimally observable and the chances of success are great. Therefore, every crime event has motives, purposes and benefits to the criminal offender. Crimes differ from one another and, therefore, the factors weighed by criminal offenders in terms of influencing the decision to commit any criminal act differ according to its nature, and choices made. Criminal event is a reflection of the social environment. People commit crime because they have needs and desires and beliefs about how they can fulfill their aspirational needs and desires. In this sense, criminal behaviour has a purposive character (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2013). It is a rational, and deliberate choice that satisfies and benefits the criminal offender.

Crime events take place when there are favourable and conducive situational factors (especially during communal conflicts) that encourage action, and promote success. Situational factors that promote criminal activities are criminogenic. The immediate environment can precipitate criminal responses, because there are several situational cues that prompt individuals to take vital decisions and act effectively. For example, prompts such as the availability of guns or weapons may precipitate an individual to engage in robbery, though may have been provided for such purpose but for the execution of communal conflicts. Also, the pressure from the frustration of unemployment and poverty can trigger and push an individual to commit crime. Environmental signs may entice a criminal to commit crime. For example, the confusion during communal conflicts where people run for their dear lives may alert a criminal that it is an appropriate time or a free invitation to commit crime.

Criminological studies have revealed that there is no group of persons prone to crime. However, different individuals, or persons, have the propensity to commit crime based on different circumstances or situations they face in social life. Statistical evidence has shown that anyone could become a criminal, or act criminally. Regardless of whether they are employed, unemployed or rich, people commit crimes. However, studies have shown that the unemployed have the tendency to commit crime more than the employed do (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2006). Studies have also found that young adults commit more violent crimes than older adults and men commit more crimes than women. Studies have shown that indicators of criminality is often revealed when unemployment, poverty, age, sex, frustration are associated or correlated with crime (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2013). Alemika (2004), asserts that when the period of unemployment is prolonged, the effect of being unemployed becomes more devastating, and individuals are more likely to commit crime. Unemployment leads to poverty, hunger, frustration and threatens livelihood. Therefore, unemployment creates the condition which triggers an individual to develop criminal tendency thereby hiding under the guise of confusion during and after communal conflicts to perpetuate criminality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined the dynamics of communal conflicts and criminality in Nigeria. The paper demonstrated that there have been cases of multi-ethnic vices such as allegiance to ethnic-group, intra-cultural and inter-ethnic antagonism.

hostility, aggression, bitterness and hatred among the different groups in the country. Different groups have become slaves to their ethnic origin to which their allegiance is largely focused at the detriment of the county's interest. Conflict in this respect varies in scope, intensity and nature, and has taken immeasurable toll on human lives, living many dead, maimed and numerous others displaced. The nature, scale and dimension of conflicts vary according to the issues involved in relation to the cultures concerned. That is to say, conflicts take different forms depending on their specific contexts. This is central to many cases of conflicts in Nigeria. The paper further revealed that, conflict creates platforms for crime to fester - as hoodlums and vagrants hide under the guise to perpetuate different forms of criminality.

The conclusion of this paper therefore is that, the frequency of communal conflicts and criminality is driven by the general lack of socio-economic and political opportunities. Consequently, conflicts will continue to occur, and those who acquired arms to prosecute conflicts would never stop as long as that sense of alienation, injustice, deprivation and oppression continue unabated. Thus, to combat criminality associated with communal conflicts without restructuring the socio-economic and political structures will be an exercise in futility. This is so because, arms and ammunitions in themselves do not cause communal conflicts, rather it is the injustices perpetrated in the system that give birth to incessant conflicts and consequently the need for hoodlums to hide under the guise for the perpetuation of all kinds of criminality. This is because; government economic policies have not sufficiently addressed poverty, under-development and unemployment, which serve as breeding ground for grievances.

Conflict is generally perceived as unwholesome because of its destructive manifestations in terms of killings, maiming and wanton destruction of property as well as its attendant criminality. On this note, the following policy recommendations are suggested:

Governments should endeavour at all levels to work with the various communities to promote harmonious relationship among the various ethnic affiliations through the building of inter ethnic civil networks at the community level which can be targeted for skills and capacity building programmes in conflict management.

The security agencies and communities should be trained and given the right orientation to respond promptly and appropriately to early warning/sign of tension. In this regard, the security should be adequately trained and equipped to prevent and address early warning tension geared towards curtailing the eruption of conflict in the first instance.

Government should address the issues of poverty, social inequality, injustice, oppression and lopsided development among social, ethnic and religious groups to avoid situations that create communal conflicts that precipitate the acquisition, accumulation and use of illegal small arms.

This study aligns with Soyombo (2007) that the Nigerian society should adopt the 'principles of social welfare' and 'social responsibility' to control crime. This implies improved range of social services (such as potable water, quality education and health care; motorable roads, decent accommodation, and electricity), provided by the government to resolve anomalies or social problems suffered by individuals, groups and communities, in order to enhance societal well-being. Although, these may not be

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provided free, they could be 'heavily' subsidized by the government to make them affordable and accessible to the people.

There should be complement to the services of the conventional security agencies; states should sponsor community-based vigilantes to address the reactive rather than proactive nature of Nigerian security agencies in conflict and criminality control.

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