

CONFLICTS IN AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN NIGERIA AND SUDAN

Lambert Uyi Edigin (Ph.D) and Aiguosatile Otoghile Ph.D

Abstract

Colonialism ended in Sudan and Nigeria but the departing British left no nation in both cases on the ground. Instead of founding enduring nations, it was a patchwork of ethnic nations forced into unions and the British called them Sudan and Nigeria. The intractable problem of founding the nations post colonialism has thrown up ethnic and religious cleavages that are tugging at the survival of both nations that were British founded and are multi-racial, multi-religious and whose North are diametrically opposed in temperament to their South. The study has utilized data gathered from numerous secondary sources and analyzed them critically to come to the conclusion that only an analytical, objective method of conflicts resolution by the African Union (AU), European Union (EU) and America can smoothen the way for peace such that the needs of all parties and individuals are met and that no ethnic group is favoured beyond the other, if the ethno-religious conflicts of decades in both countries can be brought to an end.

The picture of Africa today is an unflattering image of a continent in permanent instability over four decades when the ramparts of colonialism began to be lowered and forty years since Organization of African Unity (OAU) came into existence and some five years since the AU with its peer review mechanism was put in place to manage the conflicts and induce good governance.

We must look beyond the gloss of sovereignty and examine what seem to be the underlying causes of the perennial conflict in the body politics of African nations. Sudan stands as a sore thumb as not only are its crisis never ending, despite a ceasefire declared between the Animist and Negroid South and the Muslim fair-skinned Arab north. Nigeria which should serve as a model of peace and orderliness is wrecked by frequent surfacing ethnic conflicts at the slightest provocation and the flashpoints occur mostly in the northern part of the country. Much more than these observations of conflict episodes, there are some slight similarities in both countries. Both were former British colonies and their ethnic nationalities were huddled together forcibly. Both countries have religious polarities similarly located. This study seeks to examine the impact of colonialism and how independence was forced through as a major underlying reason for the constant conflicts that occur or if it is some other reasons that are responsible. Could the forcible amalgamation in both countries occasioning other unintended consequences be the major factor that is producing the conflicts in both nations?

It is important to state that from studies worldwide, conflicts, which ostensibly are religious and ethnically coloured, are more often than not political power struggles. They are either a search for political domination or are searches for political freedom and ethnic domination. At other times they are economic emancipation struggles and the need for freedom from poverty and hunger.

As recent as October 2008, Nigeria's elder statesman has suggested in a newspaper interview that Nigeria has not made progress as the country has not decided to breakaway from how the British forged the nation but instead has allowed the incongruous status-quo to persist. His political pressure group PRONACO has suggested in its manifesto and constitution that Nigeria should be re-structured along ethnic nationalities. In the interview reported from *This Day* newspaper, the late Chief Anthony Enahoro, the last of the nation's founding fathers said

"Our basis was that Nigeria should continue to exist, but that the components should be the ethnic groups. So we were expecting things like a Yoruba state, Ibo state and so on. Not just lumping people together... The British conquered us, and that was why Nigeria came into being. Given what has happened all these years, I'm hoping and praying that change will come about without violence. But with the situation as it is now, I can't see us going peacefully ahead" (Enahoro, 2008:59-60).

Theoretical Analysis

Origin of Sudan/Nigeria Conflicts

The two countries in conflict comparison, Nigeria and Sudan, are two countries where ethnicity and religion have contributed a great deal to their internal conflict situations. Britain was the colonizing power in both countries amalgamating (he noil hern with the southern parts in order to forge their colonial interests, !! is this forced union that underlie the bickering and dissensions over the years and now exacerbated by their current contradictions, politically and in their efforts at development. In Nigeria, the ethnic nationalities lived their own existence without any immediate dreams of fusions (Chikendu, 2003:7).

The northern and southern protectorates in Nigeria in 1914 forced all the various earlier colonial boundaries to fuse into a nation called Nigeria under Sir Lord Lugard, the Governor General. Until today, one unceasing issue in the body politics has always been ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance. Various formats have been evolved to address the twin issues, like making all political and public appointments to have a federal character and to have Christian and Moslem holidays observed in number and durations to accommodate all faiths. Despite such token and symbolic constitutional and administrative efforts, distrust still exists among all the tribes whether within states or zones within the federation.

While it has been adduced that the long years of military rule, long dominated by Northerners in Nigeria, has been faulted for the lack of balance in ethnic harmony, it is true that in the past military era, government policies tended to slant towards the ethnic nationality and zone where the Head of Federal Government comes from.

The introduction of the SHARIA legal system into the 1979 and 1999 Nigeria Constitution introduced a new cause for misperception. To the Muslims, it is a way to acknowledge the superiority of their faith in matter of religious and secular inclinations. To the Christians whether in the North or South, the Sharia contradicts section 10 of the secular grundnorm of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution which is "The Government of the Federal or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion" (Constitution of Nigeria, 1999). When riots and massacres occur, whether in the North (where it happens far more often) or in the West or East (where it is more of a rarity) upon judicial and administrative enquires, the root causes were found to be not for secularity or religious reasons, but of fears of ethnic and political dominations by one ethnic or religious group. That was the reason in the wake of the religious riots in the North in 2001, the then Head of State, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo described the agitation in the North for upholding the Sharia law as the demand for the implementation of "political sharia". Chief Obasanjo's antidote only brought about palliative peace, but the ethnic and religious gale and storm remain.

In the case of Sudan, in order to prevent a French territorial expansion, into the Nile Valley, an Anglo-Egyptian force occupied the Sudanese territory and overthrew the Mahdist States in 1898. The condominium agreement signed as a treaty by both the English and Egyptian government provided for a joint rule over Sudan. Though joint, it was the British that had the upper hand and made the controlling decisions. Thus the south was lumped with the north which was Muslim by religion and Arab by stock. This union which was a forced amalgamation is at the root of a crisis which even till this day 2008 has been at the root of political and ethnic instability in the country. Even after the late John Garang, the leader of Sudan People's Liberation Army, a southern based organization signed a peace treaty, the ethnic violence still rages. Today, it has culminated in the tribal war in which the Khartoum based government has backed the famous illegal rag tag Janjaweed to commit genocide in the Darfur region. It is for that genocide that the International Court in Geneva has ordered that the Sudanese President General Omar Bashir be arrested and tried for genocide and crime against humanity.

Issues at Stake

It is in view of the persistence of these long years of internal war in Sudan and the lack of ethnic harmony in Nigeria that we seek to find out:

- (a) What influences did colonialism have on the conflicts?
- (b) How much role would ethnic rivalries, religion and race (in the case of Sudan and to some extent Nigeria) have played in fermenting the conflicts?
- (c) Whether the international community has played or can play a role in minimizing the conflicts.
- (d) Whether the African Union, European Union, the United States of America can bring to bear their conflict resolution experiences and mechanisms in mediating the conflicts as third party conciliators.
- (e) Whether the conflicts have arisen by the government's acts of omissions and

- commissions which may have produced injustices at one time or another.
- (f) Whether in the understanding of these conflicts, permanent resolution of the crises can be found.

Historical and Theoretical Perspective of the Sudan/Nigeria Conflicts

Africa is strewn with many crises. Some of them are very fundamental to the corporate existence of the countries. A study such as this might provide some clues as to how best to settle these crises and also provide clues to the development agenda, in not only Sudan and Nigeria but for similar ethnicity induced conflicts in Kenya, Zimbabwe and in parts of the Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS). From the following analysis, some of the factors that led to ensuring conflicts in both countries would be made bare.

Sudan

In 1883, a Sudanese religious and political leader, Muhammed Ahmad, better known as HAHD1, arose to lead a rebellion against the British which resulted in a great massacre of British and Egyptian forces. Charles Gordon was killed in 1885 and therefore the state was in anarchy until the Mahdi proclaimed his rulership. He was later succeeded by Caliph Abdallah at Taaisha.

The Caliph was to wage incessant wars against the Nilotes or what is now Southern Sudan and even attempted to conquer Egypt which by now was in the grip of Britain. A combined British/Egyptian force, led by General Horatio Herbert Kitchener routed the Mahdist Caliph's forces thus bringing to an end the Mahdist movement. By January 19th 1899, the British and Egyptian governments concluded arrangement that provided joint sovereignty in Sudan.

Sudan and Independence Moves

The sovereignty issue became a contentious issue as the Egyptians sought to have the British withdraw from Sudan. Rather than concede, the British sought to promulgate reforms that would create self-rule. In December 1950, the legislative assembly dominated by groups favouring Sudanese independence adopted a resolution requesting for self-government in Sudan in 1951. This could only come about with the pressure from Egypt for self-determination for Sudan within a three year transitional period.

In line with these provisions, the first Sudanese parliamentary elections held in late 1952 which was won by the largely Pro-Egyptian Nationalist Party. The first Sudanese government came into force on January 9, 1954, the so-called Appointed Day. It also marked the Sudanisation programme when all-important governmental and military posts were to be held by Sudanese.

Dissatisfied with the programme implementation, a mutiny broke out amongst the Southern Sudanese stock in the army. This then caused a call for a plebiscite. The call was disregarded by the Sudanese state on January 1, 1956. Two years into the Republic, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Ibrahim Adboud staged a coup against the Umma Party led government. General Adboud was an advocate of closer relationship with Egypt while he ruled as a prime minister. However, due to internal dissensions, Prime Minister Adboud resigned and was replaced by a Supreme Council of State in November 1964. The Council was openly pro-Arab foreign policy oriented and more so when the Arab-Israeli war broke out in 1967. This pro-Arab inclination which had taken shape under General Adboud caused southern Sudan to agitate against the Arab domination of the North. The outcome was a civil war that lasted in the first instance until 1972. Gafar al-Nimeiry was elected President in 1971. He ended the civil war but failed in his economic

transformation efforts. He was soon ousted in a coup in 1975 after his re-election to a third term in April 1983.

The south in the meantime goes more vocal in its opposition to its Muslim Arab governments and opted for a Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This was the main defining effort at confronting the North which has basically remained so till this day. Given the instability in the polity after the great grandson of Sadiq-al-Mahdi was elected prime minister in the first free election in 18 years, the current Head of State, the then Brigadier Oma al-Bashir toppled the Mahdi government in June 1989. He instituted the 15 member Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation. Conditions deteriorated in the early 1990s and the Bashir regime suppressed all political oppositions and went ahead on against the non-Muslim "rebels" in the south. Hasan al-Turabi of the Sudan's National Islamic Front helped the regime to shape the country's fundamentalist Islamic State, for which he was rewarded with

the Speaker of the National Assembly.

The South largely held its own from the mid-1990s when the military resistance force of the SPLA led by John Garang, a former officer of the Sudanese Army, even though the Khartoum based national government controlled Juba, a large city in the far south and several other towns along the Nile and major roads, while a few would have nothing less than total independence for Southern Sudan.

In mid 1998 some peace talks were held and an internationally supervised vote on self-determination for the South was agreed. No date was fixed and no ceasefire held consequently. What remained intractable in the peace talks were government's unwillingness to separate state sovereignty and religion and what line should demarcate the North and South. Those were not the only dividing issues in the country. By December 1999, Bashir and Turabi were locked in a power struggle. This culminated in Bashir dismissing Turabi, a declaration of a state of emergency, the dissolution of the National Assembly and the suspension of parts of (the constitution).

Descent into chaos

It is evident that since decolonization begun in 1955 in Sudan until the 90s and beyond, civil war has always raged in the country. The prime cause was that the British went to integrate completely disparate regions, a predominantly Arab and Islamic North and a Christian and African Traditionalist South. The South always wanted autonomy and self-rule. Painfully, an Addis Ababa mediated agreement on autonomy for the South was abrogated when Jafaar el-Nimeiri announced the application of Islamic law (Sharia) in the South.

While there seems to be north/south divide, there are deep disagreement in the North between the Islamic government and opposition parties (the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party) over the role of Islam in Sudan and the prosecution of the war against the South. Down south, there is, after John Garang died, factionalism within the SPLA. There is now the SPL A/Main stream and SPLA/United faction (the Torit faction). The Sudan issues are far more complex than a simplistic analysis of a North-South split.

Thus, when the Darfour conflict is factored in, we have a mind-boggling snow ball. A number of ethnic groups previously neutral are now positioning themselves along the Arab/African divide, aligning and co-operating with either the rebel movements or the government and its allied militants, the "Janjaweed". The Janjaweed supported by the Khartoum government has wrecked unspeakable harm and caused genocide on the Darfour population, causing a widespread dispersal of the Darfurians into Chad and other neighbouring countries since 2003. It is estimated that over 2 million people have been displaced.

Nigeria

The course of European mercantilism determined what largely ended up as Nigeria. First, what began as slave trade ended up in palm oil and ivory commodity trade. There were many trading companies at different posts in Nigeria, at the end of the slave trade in 1861. Sir George Goldie amalgamated all the rival trading companies in the Niger Basin to form the Royal Niger Company (RNC) which then was chartered by the British Government in 1886. The RNC was also empowered to administer the areas of its influence and thus began the protectorate system. The protectorate system covered disparate areas covered by peace and order treaties. These were harmonized under the Niger Coast Protectorate.

Lagos area was on its own as a colony, while the North had treaties and became Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. In 1900, the British Government decided to take direct control of Nigeria. Thus all the protectorates had to be amalgamated inclusive of Lagos and on January 1, 1914, Nigeria was created under its first Governor-General, Sir Lord Lugard.

The final amalgamation was concluded but it merely papered the fissures which Mack described as the "Rivalry between North and South, marked by contempt among Northern administrators for the commercialism of the south and division among southerners for the ossified feudalism of the North (Mack, 1971:58). From 1900 to 1903, the south subsidized the north to the tune of £33,000 and it doubled in 1906. In addition, the imperial government had to provide grant-aid to the tune of £83,000 in 1900 which rose to £405,000 in 1904. It was this subsidization issue that led to the early amalgamation in 1914 (Mack, 1971:74).

Thus, the unification was more economic with scant regard for socio-political and religious differences. This fact set the collision course for years to come, such that even as far back as 2008 in a simple exercise as a constitution review, the North always has its own agenda and makes it all extremely cantankerous and political. No wonder back in 1953 when Chief Anthony Enahoro was to move the self-government motion, Sir Ahmadu Bello viewed it as the mistake of the 1914 amalgamation. Britain took its narrow self-interest in 1914 and never aimed at building a nation, least a united nation. The albatross still remains.

The forceful union of unwilling communities of diverse origins and cultures seem to have laid the foundations for the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Consequently, relations and political behaviour of all the ethnic nations have been constructed for the administrative convenience of the British who had merged 250 linguistic groups with the north primarily Muslim and the South predominantly Christian. Sadly none of the linguistic groups was consulted. Sometimes the lid bursts in seemingly religious massacres and riots (Shiverly, 1997:39). What is always on display has always been ethnocentric politics, sectional and primordial divides in the nation's politics. While Obasanjo and Mobogunye have rightly observed that colonialism provided an excellent scaffold for hanging of all the disparate communities (Obasanjo and Mobogunye, 1992:4) the challenge of the heterogeneous "ethnic composition, makes Nigeria the linguistic crossroad of Africa" (Tardoff, 1990:2).

The efforts over the years may have through dialogues and interactions been fruitful, but the military incursion into Nigerian politics aggravated the task of nation building. The military was largely dominated by the North for 37 years and they extolled tribal politics, primordial virtues and drove for a Northern hegemony. They did grievous harm to the ethnic psyche of Nigerians that the fall-out have been ethnic protecting bodies like Odua for the Yoruba, Arewa for Northerners, Ohaneze for the Igbo and Egbesu and militants for the Ijaw and -some southern minorities.

Crisis of Faith

Another destabilizing block in the Nigerian nation state is religious and its corrosive effect on national politics.

Agbaje did correctly state that

"The colonial administration underwrote Islam in the Northern part of colonial Nigeria and used it as the basis of political authority in local administration. It not only kept Christian missionaries from the north, so as to preserve the assumed Islamic homogeneity of the region, it also adopted the emirate system of political administration with its strong religious contents" (Agbaje, 1990:288).

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This strong framework of balkanization has been the basis of the strong divides in Nigeria and it has further exacerbated the ethnic antagonisms in Nigeria. Matters of faith are emotional and fundamental to behaviour and hence all issues in Nigeria tend to be viewed from a religious political prism. The cleavages therefore make building national bridges almost impossible and makes all issues contentious and acrimonious. There hardly can be consensus on any issue. Compromises are only temporary as the fissure at the seams soon comes apart.

Matters of religion and its effect on politics may have been simmering but for critical issues in 1986 when "The floodgate of religious antagonism opened when the military government of Babangida decided to secretly upgrade Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Islamic Countries (QIC) from that of an observer status to a substantive one" (Mimiko, 1995:261).

Indeed, that became the dividing line between unspoken angst amongst a largely multicultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual Nigerian society. There has not been peace ever since, with "riots" sporadically occurring in the Northern part of Nigeria. And to justify the position that the riots are politically and economically motivated and not religious, every commission of inquiry post riots have concluded that there is nothing religious about the riots, even if they start on Fridays after the Islamic Jummat services and the targets are largely the wealthy Ibo traders. The riots end with pillage, arson and wide scale looting. The hope by Agbaje (1990:288) that Nigeria under a democratic dispensation would likely witness a lessening of tension over religious and politics, has not happened rather, with Nigeria in the OIC, and a vague interpretation of the words from the constitution by the Islamic North that "this Nation under God" means that theocracy is permissible as some Northern states, notably Zamfara has gone ahead and "amended" the law in order to implement the penal and criminal codes of the Sharia.

The deeper arguments from the North are that for many years, Moslems have undergone humiliations for their faith by being relegated to the background in public matters. The contrary view from the South is that such Sharia implementations are meant to destabilize any Head of State from the South. Thus what we are witnessing is increasing religionization of our politics and politicization of religion. At a larger level, it is suspected that the North is acting out a script to identify with the Arab Moslem world against Israel and the West. Either way, religion and politics have mixed dangerously in Nigeria that at any time divisive issues occur, conflict and antagonistic views are certain to occur.

Theoretical Analysis

The question that is often raised is whether these conflicts can be understood, contained and minimized. We must then resort to answer the question through some theoretical analyses.

Social Learning Theory

Aggression according to the hypothesis of social learning theory is neither innate nor instinctual but learnt through socialization. This is the main contention of Albert Bandura and his Seville statement. Aggressive behaviour is thus learnt at home, in school or through interaction in the environment. When we look at the ethno-national, sectarian and religious conflicts in Sudan, we can see the detrimental effects of children growing up who have seen their mothers raped and fathers murdered. They grow up joining gangs to seek revenge. And in the case of Nigeria, children who grow up watching their parents victimized and discriminated upon because of their ethnic and religious background, develop deep-seated animosities against haters of their ethnic group. This was so evident in the July 1966 pogrom by the North on the Ibos and in the post civil war years till even the present day in Nigeria.

Human Need Theory

Professor John Burton's generic or holistic theory of human behaviour developed in the 70s and 80s hypothesizes that humans have basic need that have to be met in order to have stable societies. As humans strive to overcome those daily universal and primordial needs it is necessary to ensure that those needs are satisfied (Burton, 1991:112-119).

The struggle for primordial needs is closely related to the Frustration Aggression theory which is based on the stimulus response hypothesis. The frustration of not satisfying those needs,

leads to aggression and subsequently, conflict. Unless identity needs are met in a multi-ethnic society, unless there is distributive justice, a sense of control, and prospects for the pursuit of other societal developmental needs, instability and conflict are inevitable. This has clearly been at the root of the militancy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and its long years of conflicts. The significance of this Human Needs in Sudan and Nigeria is that it recognizes the needs of the different ethnic groups including that of the Christians and Muslims. The needs of both ethnic and religious communities must therefore be met. Therefore, the AU as well as other international partners including the EU must recognize that both parties have needs which must be met.

Conclusion

The search for a permanent solution is what then recommends itself to all conflicts mediators for and in both countries. The genocide, the displacement and instability in Sudan has gone on for too long. Nigeria has been slowed in its march to progress because of permanent opposing views on all issues. This paper recommends a sovereign national conference and a peoples' constitution are proposals long overdue for implementation in line with permanent conflict resolution theory. Africa could therefore do with PEACE AND PROGRESS more so, Nigeria and Sudan.

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