COMMUNITY CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: CAUSES, MANIFESTATIONS AND REMEDIES

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Abstract
The intractability of several community conflicts across the different geo-political zones of Nigeria have significantly hampered peace and overall social development within affected communities and the nation as a whole. Although conflicts have become part of our social existence that we must live with, nevertheless some of these conflicts which predate our amalgamation in 1914 still emerge with flames that seem uncontrollable. Giving the vitality of having strong communities as a way of emerging with a more stable and virile society of our dream, 

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INTRODUCTION
Community conflicts have in no little way affected the social development of many communities across the nation. More so it has often threatened the cooperate existence of the National Structure. As a social phenomenon community conflicts essentially involve community or communities with members having opposing pursuits of limited resources and privileges within the given space. These struggles are usually multi-faceted and complex in nature. Although it is important to state that due to the diversities of human origins and ideologies, conflict have become part of our existence and as such inevitable, nevertheless the approaches and methods by which conflicting parties handle conflict have great implications for social and communal co-existence.
In this paper, the author x-rays the causes and manifestation of community conflicts in Nigeria. As a way of capturing the severe consequences that community conflict poses to our collective development, this paper, using secondary data analysis method shall discuss some significant community conflicts as they have occurred in different communities in Nigeria and the violence that have erupted from them. Thus the need to proffer holistic approaches to addressing community conflicts as a way of remedying their negative consequences become very important.

In Nigeria, community conflicts more often than not have degenerated to violence and severe damages to the societal structure. Community Conflicts in Nigeria usually present themselves in different circumstances, their causes multi-facial and turn out to have dynamic consequences. A religious issue for example, may turn out to have a political side and then an ethnic or traditional side, and if neglected progress from a communal issue to a state issue and even to a national issue. The factors that cause conflict in Nigeria are diversely remote and immediate and they could differ from one sphere of our national life to another (Idebe, Oluyemi-Kusa et. al, Otite, and Azikiwe). An examination of some of these causes and manifestations will help in giving a broader scope on the impact which community conflict poses to the growth of local communities and the nation at large.

Causes and Manifestations of Community Conflicts in Nigeria:
In examining the causes and manifestation of conflicts in Nigeria, I shall focus on the major factors which have affected different communities over the years and how these factors have erupted in different forms of violent conflicts in some Nigerian communities. Otite (19-22) highlights seven main factors. They include:

i. Territorial Disputes
ii. Location of Local Government Councils and their Headquarters
iii. Jurisdictional Disputes by Traditional Rulers
iv. Ethnic and Sectional Competition
v. Population Growth and Expansionist Tendencies
vi. Disregard for Cultural Symbols
vii. The Micro and Macro Social Structures in Nigeria

**Territorial Disputes:**
Different people within and across the boundaries of local government councils lay claim to land resource as original settlers or “aboriginals”, and therefore on this basis fight off those they consider intruders. The former may voluntarily or involuntarily allow strangers to settle as tenants with or without some periodic symbolic payment as recognition and re-enactment of tenancy. Fishermen and Pond owners, foresters and timber loggers etc, have clashed in many communities in Nigeria over controversial uses or exploitation of land and water resources. For example since independence and particularly from the 1990’s, communities in the Niger-Delta areas have clashed with one another over claims in territories in which royalty, amenities and development projects are expected. However it is important to state here that the fight over resource control in the Delta areas have taken a different dimension in the recent past. As a result of the resource control dilemma, militant groups arouse to perpetuate hazardous activities which include crimes of kidnapping, oil bunkering, hostage taking and the bombing of oil pipes.

**Jurisdictional Disputes by Traditional Rulers:**
The second factor which Otite discusses is the disputed jurisdiction of certain traditional rulers and chiefs. When a king of one ethnic or sub-ethnic group claims power over another ethnic or sub-ethnic group, his action often generates conflicts. The town of Warri is an example of this fact. Here the Olu (king) of the Istekiri Ethnic group is referred to as Olu(king) of the whole of Warri in Delta State, occupied by three major tribes of Urhobo, Ijaw and Istekiri ethnic groups. The leadership of Olu of Warri has been seriously resisted and challenged by both the Urhobos and Ijaws at different times. The conflict which has emerged from the imbroglio has claimed a lot of lives and properties on several occasion when either the Ijaws or the Urhobos feel some kind of injustice been done to them in their relationship with the Itsekiris.

In another similar crisis, which has to do with the Ife-Modakeke people of Osun state, the Modakeke’s claim to the ownership of the settlements in Ile-Ife have been strongly resisted by the Oni (king) and people of Ife. Recounting the crises, Albert reveals that:
The Ife-Modakeke crisis is one of the oldest intra-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria; it has been going on for more than a century and is still claiming lives. The impact of the conflict has been very devastating for both the Ife’s and Modakeke’s. Since the pre-colonial period up to the end of field work, the conflict claimed several lives... The conflict led to complete evacuation of Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba people several times especially in the pre-colonial period. The late dimensions of the conflict were as devastating as the pre-colonial and colonial phases (142).

The magnitude of the Ife – Modakeke crisis as described by Albert gives a clear picture of how catastrophic land or territorial conflict has been not only in Nigeria but across many other places in Africa and the world at large.

**Location of Local Government Councils and their Headquarters:**

The creation of local government councils and locations of their headquarters is another factor generating conflict in many Nigerian Communities. Conflicts usually spring up when sections of the area oppose such creation or their inclusion in the “wrong” council. Also government location and shifting of the headquarters from one place to another, following conflicts and opposition merely escalated the conflicts in many communities of the country including Ife and Warri referred to above. Another place where local government council location has torn the people apart is Jos, Plateau state. Giving a synopsis of Jos crisis, Nkanga on his on-line page reveals that:

Amidst the arguments, the creation of the Jos-North and Jos-South local government areas by the military ruler, Ibrahim Babangida in 1991 aggravated ill-felling amongst the different communities. While majority of Berom, Anaguta and Afizere found themselves in Jos-South, the Hausa-Fulani community had numerical advantage in Jos-north, where Jos metropolis is located. This further heightened tension as the recognized paramount ruler in Jos, the Gbong Gwom was isolated in the midst of the Hausa-Fulani.

Years of built up animosity eventually degenerated into open confrontation on April 12, 1994. This crisis led to numerous losses of lives and property. The government’s failure to learn from 1994 crisis escalated into the 2001 Jos crisis which claimed over 1000 lives, left many more displaced and properties destroyed.
Although one of the reasons for the formation of local government areas in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is to reduce the problems and challenges of divergent interests of cultures being together that seem incompatible. This has not really brought the desired solution, rather it has even escalated the problem in areas that are affected by ethnic or religious conflicts. This is quite evident in the Ife and Modakeke crisis already mentioned, as well as in the Jos-North and South LGAs.

**Ethnic and Sectional Competition:**
The creation of States and Local Government Councils means the availability of more political and administrative position in the localities. These positions are limited. Contestants mobilize members of their ethnic or sectional groups for support in the competition to hold such positions through elections or appointments. This struggle becomes tense amidst divergent interests from ethnic or religious groups, and this usually leads to severe conflict situations. This is due to the fact that it is assumed that under such circumstances, the winner in any competition will want to represent and promote the interest of his people. He is expected to bring political goods home and promote the interests of his people in matters of conflicts and contested local development agenda.

This scenario has continuously manifested itself in different parts of the country and sometimes to severe violence. The crises that erupted in some parts of the nation in the elections that held in April, 2011; gives us a vivid picture on how competition and struggle for political offices by different ethnic, religious and regional affiliations in Nigerian communities can result in serious violent conflict. For example in some communities in the northern parts of Nigeria, the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in April 2011 elections – a Christian from the southern parts of Nigeria, did not go well with some Muslims in the north. Thus, they violently protested by destroying some Christians places of worship. This action consequently led to some violent clashes between the Christians and Muslims in some of these areas that led to the loss of lives and properties.

**Population Growth and Expansionist Tendencies**
This factor seems to play itself in the different ethnic and sub-ethnic conflicts that have taken place in Nigeria. The tendency by one group of people to expand and take dominance of land and commerce in a land that
is not theirs by inheritance has always been a source of conflict in Nigeria. The Zango-Kataf crises of 1991 in Kaduna is a citable case in this regard. The Atyap people in Zango-Kataf Local Government who are the original natives entered into a serious violent clash with the Hausa/Fulani settlers of the town. The violence which erupted, was as a result of the decision by the then Local Government Chairman (An Atyap Indigene) to move the location of the old market to a new site. The move was seriously resisted by the Hausa/Fulani settlers who preferred the old site where they had greater population strength. Apart from the market problem, it is important to state that the conflict between the two tribes could be traced back to a long history of animosity. Enwerem (125) reveals that ever since 1902 when the British imposed Hausa-Fulani district heads over the Zango-kataf people, there has been bitter relationship between the two contending communities. By way of the violence conflict– something akin to previous ones in 1902, 1904, 1905 – 1907, 1964 and 1953 – 1958; the native- Zango-kataf Christians and settlers- Hausa – Fulani Muslims communities expressed their dislike and hate for each other.

In another example, Best et. al (82-118) give an in depth account of the Tiv-Junkun conflict in Wukari Local Government of Taraba State, Nigeria to show how expansionist tendencies can lead to an inbuilt conflict and hate between tribes. While commenting on the Tiv and Junkun conflict, Best et.al reveal that:

The Migration of the Tiv who are well known farmers has been a source of conflict in the territories of their neighbours, for example the Junkun in Wukari area. In these circumstances, mythology and migratory histories as well as descent and inheritance claims are manipulated to assert new ownerships in foreign territories and in the process create condition of conflicts and bloody clashes and violence (21).

Apart from looking at expansionist tendencies in the Tiv – Junkun conflict, they also show the type of stereotypes that can be found among conflict prone communities in Nigeria. This is captured in an interview, granted to both a Junkun and Tiv indigene. It reveal as follows:

You see, these Junkun people are people who loved trouble since from the day that God created them. They will never live in peace with anybody. How can you make peace with a Junkun man (A Tiv interviewee at Wukari, 6.08.97).

The Tiv people have a unique problem, different from others. They don't consider anybody of fame, except criminals who cause trouble. They
prefer such people to lead them to prison. The Tiv have no structure of authority. If for example you bring their elders to talk about peace, they may agree but the youths will reject it, and it stands. The elders will remain helpless (A Jukun interviewee at Wukari, 28:07:97).

This sort of position given above of the Junkun and Tiv people show the type of sensitive and trouble-sparking statements which occur between conflicting parties that lead them into uncontrollable violence and makes it further difficult to handle their different claims and agitations.

**Disregard for Cultural Symbols**

The sixth sphere of conflict which is addressed is the perception of disregard for cultural symbols and the “pollution” of cultural practices. Where an individual of one neighboring or immigrant group threatens the cultural traits of another group, such an act could very easily be interpreted as that of an entire group and consequently the penalty imposed on them according to the hosts culture is also often interpreted in terms of inter-group, rather than that of inter-personal relations. For example, the killing and eating of a dog or crocodile etc. within a community that respects or reverences it as a totem or symbol or the destruction of a community’s shrine, could flare up emotions and impel men to violent action. Such central aspects of a people’s cosmology or symbolism manifested in their relationship with certain deified animals or spiritualized house are surrounded with powerful charges which quickly incite people to violent revengeful action. Violent religious and ethnic conflicts have occurred in different communities in Nigeria as a result of this.

Otite (22) gives a good example of this kind of cause of conflicts in Nigeria. It was between the Yoruba’s of Sagamu and the Hausa’s in July 1999. The Yoruba’s of Sagamu performed the night rites associated with Oro festivals, during which time, women were forbidden from coming out of their houses. However, when two Hausa women violated this ancient cultural practice, they were immediately apprehended. One of them was killed and the other that managed to escape reported the incident to the Hausa immigrant community. A violent and bloody conflict ensued, resulting in the loss of several lives and property on both sides. This event was later reported in Kano and other Hausa cities in the northern part of Nigeria by fleeing Hausa people. This sparked off retaliatory attack on the
Yoruba’s in Kano, resulting in the loss of many more lives and properties in spite of the efforts of the police and temporary closure of Kano market.

The Micro and Macro Social Structures in Nigeria

In discussing this point Otite addresses the problem of variety of conflicting cultural and religious interests, values and preferences. As already pointed out in some of the factors discussed, religious and ethnic affiliations have over the years heated the polity of the nation and have become a cause for the violent explosion of many conflicts and crises in communities across the nation. Uwazie in line with this fact reveals that:

The role of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria is real and intractable in the country's politics and people's social experiences, both have been used by the leaders to unit their respective members for defensive and offensive purposes overtime. Such ethno-religious misconceptions become paramount and reinforced from one generation to the other, even in the face of contrary regular personal and many positive inter-group experiences. Ethnicity and Religion have been carefully nurtured and portrayed as too different, with few or no similarities (2).

With regards to issues of ethnic and religious conflicts, three states in Nigeria stand out – Kano, Plateau and Kaduna States. These states have continuously experience fierce and bloody religious and ethnic crises that have claimed several lives and properties. Even at present, the situation of conflict in these states continues to be a matter of national concern.

Beyond these factors which Otite captures as those major factors that lead to conflicts in Nigerian communities, it will be quite relevant for us to further address a most problematic factor. This is about the state of political leadership in Nigeria. Although it seems to play itself all through the other factors just discussed. A focused and distinct examination of the state of leadership in the country would enable us to understand the large scale implication which the state of political leadership in Nigeria has affected communal peace, stability and development. More so, it vehemently points to the fact that if the situation of leadership in the country remains the same, there may be a total breakdown of law and order that will spark up an uncontrollable violence which may eventually lead to the disintegration of the entire nation.

The Challenge of Political Leadership in Nigeria

As a nation, Nigeria since its independence has increasingly suffered the challenge of leadership. This has made one of Nigeria’s most outstanding scholars, Chinua Achebe to conclude that the bane of Nigeria is bad
leadership. Leadership to a large extent has severally crumbled the peaceful co-existence and development of many Nigerian communities and the nation as a whole. It may not be out of place to say that most of the lingering problems which threatens peace and stability in many Nigerian communities, directly or indirectly especially as discussed in this paper can be blamed on the bad state of leadership in Nigeria. Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, one time governor of Anambra state says that “the greatest threat to democracy in Nigeria is the political class who under the guise of being in the learning process, are unlearning whatever they have learnt” (Azikiwe, 50). Unguarded, inflammatory and trouble sparking statements, which are capable of precipitating conflict, have become quite identifiable with a number of our leaders.

Furthermore, evidences of corruption are also obvious in the looting of public funds meant for community and public development. Unjust and biased method of governance and administration, employment of youths and “vulnerable” Nigerians to cause mayhem, falsification, manipulation and rigging of elections as well as inciting one’s ethnic or religious group against the other in order to further inject disparage and divided interest between them are among the atrocities that pervades Nigerian leadership structure. This has consequently placed the nation in a very unstable and deplorable state. Describing how some Nigerian leaders exploit people’s ethnic and religious sensitivities, Albert remarks that:

Nigerian Political leaders when they want to divert the attention of the people away from the main issues of national development as a pre-condition for achieving their own selfish objectives, accuse one group of working against the interest of the other, and as the “poorly educated” Nigerian masses kill one another, political leaders execute their own “patriotic” missions: embezzlement of public funds, manipulation of elections and election results, repression of the opposition and grievous human rights violation (22).

This situation of bad governance in Nigeria has brought about rebellious protests, agitations and heightened rate of insecurity and terror that has further deepened the conflict situation in many local communities.

While addressing the problem of leadership as a key possible reason for acts of violent conflicts and insecurity in the nation, Uwazie rightly remarks that the issue has even become more complicated as politicians have seen it as a means of playing dirty and nefarious political games:
Politicians often refuse to accept defeats, they frustrate, thwart or even eliminate contemporaries or opponents to enable them to gain political influence or assume power. In this context, the politicians are said to lack the spirit of contest and tolerance in a democratization process. Thus virtually holding to power through legal and non-legal means (that mutes legitimate opposition), seeds the ground for use of violence or terror to influence the political structure by creating massive fear and instability. Corruption, factionalism, social discontent and economic frustration provide the basic socio-economic reasons for the acts of terrorism. The corrupt practices of Nigerian politicians are significant in this context. Many Nigerian politicians see political offices as sources of wealth and self-enrichment and will go to any extent to secure such offices (116-117).

The deplorable state of Nigerian leadership as described by Uwazie years back is not any different from its present situation. It may not be out of place to say that things have become more complicated. The future of a strong and virile nation where unity, peace, mutual understanding and rapid socio-economic transformation abounds continues to be barricaded by the incessant and nagging problem of bad leadership. Lamenting the situation of leadership in Nigeria, Albert describing an observer’s metaphorical but gory position in the *Nigerian Standard* issue of November 2, 1983 states that:

To talk about the present political situation in Nigeria is comparable to opening a stinking public mortuary into which amorphous putrefaction of human victims in a ghastly road accident have been crammed. It is impossible to identify one’s own relatives from the decomposing bulk of human beings. Eventually, the common victims will be transferred from their common mortuary into a common grave. And their relatives will go home with the hope that they will be able to identify them on the Day of Judgment either in heaven or hell (86).

This writer was reacting against the massive rigging of the 1983 Nigerian election by the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN). His remarks seem to be more reflective of the present state of Nigerian leadership.

**Conclusion:**
The need to take concerted action to address the myriads of communal conflict that continues to hamper peace and development across communities cannot be over emphasized. This paper by way conclusion proffers some key actions which must be given commitment to by stakeholders within governmental and non-governmental sectors.

Firstly, there should be frantic effort to engage secondary and tertiary institutions domiciled in communities to advocate for peace and community
development through strategic development of their studentship. This should therefore spur Government to ensure that they see the importance of investing in quality and purpose-driven education. Investment in education becomes a very useful medium of empowerment that allows students within communities to appreciate the values of peaceful co-existence, healthy understanding of socio-cultural traits/histories as well as respecting their unique complexities. In line with the above, educational institutions in conflict prone communities and areas should be made to undertake subjects and courses as it pertains to addressing conflicts affecting their local terrains.

Secondly, communities should be encouraged to explore activities and pathways that can aid their respective communities to foster unity and progress. For example, friendly sport exercises that are not strictly competition based, dance carnivals, drama and other culturally acceptable forms of entertainment that will bring people together and create an aura of togetherness and friendship. These programmes if frequently executed can go a long way to impress in the minds of community dwellers the need to create an environment of peace and harmonious living.

Thirdly, Research Institutions, Non-Governmental and Community based organizations who are committed to exploring along with communities, pathways for conflict resolution and transformation should be well supported to execute projects and programmes that can aid local communities dose of the severe nature of conflicts. These organization well trained in different conflict resolution models can go a long way to positively impact on local communities.

Fourthly, the government must always be ready to play their role of equitably distributing the dividends of governance across communities. Political, health, educational, infrastructural and economic resources should be fairly distributed. The loop sided nature that some political leaders allot resources have always brought about very unhealthy rivalry and dislikes across different people within close terrains.

Fifthly, government and non-governmental organizations should establish inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-community lines of communication and dialogue with relevant leaders and stakeholders. Such connections and contact will bring about a constant conversation on betters ways of conflict prevention, management and transformation.

Although the above mentioned are not exhaustive nevertheless they provide to a large extent positive action pathways that make tackling the issues of conflicts in communities effective and result-oriented. Furthermore, from the above suggestions, it is noticed that community members participation and
involvement are quite key to addressing the challenges of conflicts. Efforts must therefore be made to enable community members and leaders with the right processes of empowerment that help them turn their energies and resources to building a better and peaceful society in their respective communities.

References:


