



## Ethnic-Religious Conflicts and the Travails of National Integration in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

### CONFLITS ETHNIQUES ET RELIGIEUX ET LES DIFFICULTÉS DE L'INTÉGRATION NATIONALE DANS LA 4ÈME RÉPUBLIQUE DU NIGERIA

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#### Abstract

Any attempt to understand the development of the Nigerian State cannot escape a study of ethnicity and religion as some of the main challenges to the development of democracy, nation building and national integration. The nature and composition of the State is very important and central to the nature of the relationship that exists within it. If it is an unstable, hegemonic and illegitimate contraption, there is often the tendency of instability and chaos arising from the unhealthy rivalry that will always be built up within it. On the other hand, if it evolved on the platform of consensus and fair play, there is the tendency for it to have a serene domestic politics. The Nigerian situation is such that boycotted the due course of legitimization at formation and this posits serious consequences for its stability at the present moment. This posture is compounded by the intense use of State authority to cover up this malaise, which has in the final analysis impacted on the various segments of society, creating the psychological basis for arbitrariness of citizens and tendency to affront the dignity and rights of fellow citizens. The objective of this paper is to showcase the multi-ethnic and multi-religious complexity and diversity of Nigeria in a bid to establish the possible advantages and the needless domination or contradictory co-existence among groups. This paper therefore focuses on the persistent ethno-religious crises that have become a clog in the attempt at nationhood despite democratization, in a view to demystify its causes and proffer solutions.

**Key words:** Ethnic-religious conflicts; Nigeria; Ethno-religious crises

#### Résumé

L'étude sur l'ethnicité et la religion, une des principaux défis en développement de démocratie, édification d'une nation et intégration nationale, est incontournable dans toute compréhension du développement de l'État nigérien. La nature et la composition de cet État est très important et central par rapport à la nature des relations en son sein. Si on le voit comme quelque chose d'instable, dominateur et illégitime, il y a souvent une tendance d'instabilité et de chaos résultant de la rivalité malsaine qui pourra toujours être développé là-dedans. D'un autre côté, s'il évolue dans une circonstance de consensus et de fair-play, il aura plus de chance d'obtenir une politique domestique sereine. La situation au Nigeria entrave le bon déroulement de la légitimation primitive. Cela pose des conséquences graves pour sa stabilité actuelle. Cette situation est composée de l'emploi abusif de l'autorité de l'État pour camoufler ce malaise. En fin de compte, cela impacte de nombreuses parties de la société en créant, pour les citoyens, le fondement psychologique de l'arbitraire et la tendance à affronter la dignité et les droits. Cet article a pour objectif de mettre en valeur la complexité et la diversité multi-ethnique et multi-religieuse au Nigéria dans le but d'établir les avantages possibles et l'inutilité de domination ou la coexistence contradictoire parmi des groupes. Cet article concentre sur les crises ethno-religieuses tenaces qui empêchent la création d'une nation indépendante malgré la démocratisation. Les efforts sont faits pour démystifier les causes et proposer les solutions.

**Mots clés:** Conflits ethniques et religieux; Nigéria; Crises ethno-religieuses

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## INTRODUCTION

The character of the Nigerian State is responsible for the country's deepening ethno-religious contradictions. This plural nature originates a constant feeling of distrust between the component units and the fear of one ethnic or religious group dominating the other is rife. A pattern of largely discernible ethnic suspicion and intrigues that had existed prior independence in 1960 led to the military coup d'état of 1966, the traumatic civil war between 1967 and 1970, mutual distrusts afterwards, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections and the incessant ethno-religious skirmishes that are presently threatening the very fabric of our nascent democracy and national existence. The elite's have sacrificed opportunities for initiating national integration on the altar of Short-term interest, thus compounding the problem. Consequently, in spite of the creation of several states and Local Governments, a new national anthem and pledge, new constitutions and form of government, the state remained plagued with conflicting interests that poses the threat of being intractable. At the center of discussion is the problem of intolerant ethnic diversities and religious worldview which are continually expressed in the series of violent crises that occurs at quick succession in our body politic.

Even the expectation that the problem will be resolved within a framework of genuine democratic governance and an enlightened and unfettered civil society that is able to cultivate a culture of tolerance within its various components is being defeated. The contention of this study is straight forward; the ethno-religious crises is only symptomatic of the character and politics of the nation-state.

## BACKGROUND ISSUES

Ethnic and religious issues are part of the most recurring issues in Nigeria's body politics. The issue has permeated the landscape since the colonial period and up till the present time, there seems to be no solution in sight to the accompanying conflicts of ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance. The dominant and minority ethnic groups treat each other with suspicion and the different religious worldview clash at the slightest provocation.

Institutional efforts which were made to satiate these tendencies since independence in 1960 has proved inadequate. The long years of military rule increased the gap of distrust as the elites deliberately employed state power to pursue primordial sentiments thereby increasing the gap of intolerance in Nigeria. The current political cum religious battles is fuelled by certain quarters and individuals who benefits at the expense of the state and citizens. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2001), 'numerous actors have a stake in the promotion of ethno-religious conflicts because the associated arithmetic of numbers

underpinning the conflicts translates into jobs, contracts, the creation of local governments and states as well as representation in the National Assembly'.

The introduction of the sharia legal system has introduced another dimension into the whole farce. While the Moslems justifies its introduction as part of the dividends of democracy, the Christians see its introduction as contrary to the spirit of secularism as provided for in section 10 of the 1979 and 1999 constitutions, which states that 'the Government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a State Religion'. The above brings to fore the fact that the real problem in Nigeria is not so much the level of ethnic differences, secularity or religiosity but fears of political domination of one ethnic or religious group by the other.

## CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Conflict could be described as a situation or condition of disharmony in an interactional process. Banks claims 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 (Banks, 1984, p.100). For conflict to occur, Banks puts forward three required factors which are 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. These factors determine the extent to which conflict can stretch. Imobighe (1992, p.32) points out that conflict is not limited to any particular level of interaction. In other words, it could occur at any level of human interaction and it often manifests violent activities.

Violence in Social Science could take several forms: physical, psychological, social, political, economic and even cultural. In criminal law, violent acts are regarded as violent offences; violent offences in turn have been defined as 'crimes characterized by extreme physical force or by the means of a dangerous weapon' (Juan, 1996, p.22). Simply circumscribed, Violence or a violent act involves threat or actual execution of acts which have actual or potential capacity to inflict physical, emotional or psychological injury on a person or a group of persons (Short & Wolfgang, 1972, p.23). Erikson (1985, p.19) felt that violence or violent act may also be collective (perpetrated by a group) or individual (perpetrated by an individual). This categorization does appreciate the importance of the individual, of personality and of subjective factors even in collective behaviors' and their dynamics.

Consequently as Grimshaw (1990, p.15) noted: ...few scholars of the individual oriented disciplines would argue that personality or attitudes alone can serve as an explanation for violence and few sociologists would argue that personality factors are irrelevant. It therefore means that when social or political space is contested

or economic resources are allocated, the potential for conflict is always there. Violence is inevitable when accommodative structures break down. Newton Garver (1991, p.47) opined that violence is best explained relative to its etymology—to violate. According to him, the basic issue about violence is that somebody is been violated, from the above views, the extended definition of violence enables us regard any action that infringes upon the rights of citizens as constituting violence. However, questions have been asked about the extended definition of violence. One fundamental issue raised is that there is the likelihood that such a definition overemphasized the common usage of the term. The issue concerns the idea of moral responsibility. The extension of violence to the realm of Government crops up out of the opinion that a government is culpable when it has the means but fails to prevent such violations of rights like killing, disabling, causing pain, injustice and discrimination. This is to say that citizens of any state are valuable and any government policy should take the ideal ends of the citizens into consideration.

The State therefore has responsibilities to the citizens not only in terms of safeguarding their legal or civil rights but in terms of equally catering for their natural or human rights. The State is an outgrowth of the society and its basic purpose is to socialize political structures. Human beings are always inclined to act egoistically, always wanting what is in their own interest, irrespective of the interest of other individuals or groups. The fundamental function of the State therefore is imposing those constraints that are necessary to protect and promote each person's freedom (Kolawole, 1997, p.79). This is to say that the legal system of the state must constrain both the power of the sovereign and the citizens' wicked and evil desires in order to establish the conditions under which people can live together in peace as a community. The above is the point at which the inadequacy of the Nigerian state gets manifested because no resolute pursuit is given to the preservation and defense of the rights of citizens from infringement by the state, its agencies or even citizens themselves on issues such as ethnicity and religion.

The concept of ethnicity refers to a social identity formation that rests upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. A belief in common origins and a broadly agreed common history provide an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values and hierarchies, and conform social identities of both insiders and outsiders. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves, and culture and identity are closely intertwined (IDEA, 2001, p.91). On the other hand, the Oxford Learners Dictionary explained religion as the belief in a super human controlling power that is entitled to obedience and worship. It goes further to state that it is a particular system of faith and worship that one is entitled to. Religious insecurity can provoke

interminable conflicts that make democratic practice impossible. Precisely because of such dangers, modern states tend to develop secular ideologies that separate the state from particular religious affiliation. Secularism guarantees citizens freedom to believe and practice their faith in whatever location or circumstances; that all religious groups have right to acquire places of worship anywhere in the country; that the government does not give preferential treatment to any particular religion and that within each religious group, no established religious authority is allowed to determine the orthodoxy or belongingness of sects, denominations or brotherhoods (IDEA, 2001. p.87). This is not to say that Nigeria is grossly incapable of devising the means of safeguarding the rights of all and sundry especially within democratic frontiers, it is simply that the political class nay the elite's are more concerned with capturing political power for their own use rather than for advancing the cause of majority of Nigerians.

Generally speaking, democracy is a way of life that involves freedom to make choices about what one does, where he lives, and how he uses his earnings; the operation of institutions—the home, the church, local, state and federal government; the right of justified property ownership; social justice and fairness; absence of social and class barriers, equality of opportunity; and the solution of common problems through the exercise of the free will of the people (Mbachu, 1990, p.187-197). Only democracy therefore provides and allows conflicts in society to be resolved by rational argument and persuasion rather than by violent coercion. In a democracy, government should not only be responsible or acceptable to the 'demos'-people or the masses—but indeed political power itself and its expression should emanate from the popular will.

The political class in Nigeria lacks legitimacy, for it is unable to address the basic problems of national integration. Having failed to bring about genuine development and having also failed to come up with an appropriate integrative outlook for Nigeria, the elite's have resorted to divide and rule politics. The legitimacy of the state is linked to its capacity to present itself as a provider of necessary public good and more importantly, a neutral arbiter that guarantees the security of all sections of the society. Tribalism and manipulation of religious sentiments and regionalism are pushed forward as explanations for unequal development.

When the state is generally perceived as serving the particular interests of one group, it starts losing its legitimacy, and indeed, its authority. As state capacity declines, fear of uncertainty increases to an extent that citizen's resort to other levels of solidarity viz religious, ethnic, regional and so on, with a view of getting guaranteed security. The result therefore is the perennial social tension, political instability and change that have

not been accompanied with progress. Misunderstanding therefore arises as every ethnic group or religious inclination sees the other as rival that must be outstaged by all means. This has greatly hampered national integration in our polity.

Maclver (1996, p.5) alerts us to the fact that national integration may be conceived from either a subjective or objective perspective. Subjectively, it posits the presence of those feelings and attitudes among people that lead them to make their own identification. Oftentimes, this include a psychological sentiment of national consciousness among the citizens of a state; citizen's love for and loyalty to their particular states. On the objective side, it relates to common identities that in reality are not always present, yet does not hinder the spirit of nationalism.

In Nigeria, the concept of integration has disappeared to the concept of segregation as consciousness is patterned in such a way that each group sees the other as rivals in contest rather than partners in progress.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST AS CAUSE OF CRISES

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The causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are embedded in the basic foundations of the Nation-State. These contradictions has proved incurable especially as efforts to obliterate them have always been truncated aggressively by the custodians of power. Thus, the basic causes of crises that arises as a result of persistent conflict of interest will be discussed from two fronts, ethnic and religious dimension.

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## ETHNIC DIVERSITIES AND THE NATION-STATE

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The notion of Nigeria as a mere geographic expression (Awolowo, 1990, p.35) was engendered by the forceful packaging by colonial authoritarian fiat of unwilling communities of diverse origin and culture under the same polity. Consequently, relations and political behavior of the peoples are characterized by mutual suspicion and invidious hatred since they are strange bed-fellows, who were only coerced into the Nation-State via amalgamation. Until 1960, Nigeria was a British colony; like most colonies, it was not constructed for internal coherence, but rather for the administrative convenience of the British (Shively, 1997, p.39). Over 250 different languages and dialects are spoken within its borders, and there is also an important religious split, as the north is primarily Muslim and the south is predominantly Christian.

Attendantly, ethnocentric politics, sectional solidarity and primordial interests became prominent features in the nation's political practice. Sectional and individual

virtues and interest rather than collective virtues and national unity are advanced and exalted. Thus, communal orientation precluded any attachment to the State and the syndrome of the 'son of the soil' took preference over merit and competence in the choice of policies and leaders. Nweke aptly expressed this ethnic problem as follows:

One of the most striking characteristics of Nigeria is its singular ethnic diversity, a demographic tapestry woven of more than 200 different ethnic groups, where except for the effect of migration are often geographically homogenous and often coincide with linguistic, cultural and religious groupings. (Nweke, 1994, p.3) Besides the heterogeneous ethnic composition, about 400 languages are also spoken, thus making Nigeria the linguistic crossroads of Africa. (Tordoff, 1990, p.2) Although as Obasanjo and Mabogunje aptly observed, colonialism provided scaffolding of holding the different communities together, not much change was achieved in altering communal mentality and predilection (Obasanjo and Mabogunje, 1992, p.4). Nonetheless, the persistent military incursion into government and politics did much harm for the body polity as national issues was mostly tribalized and primordial virtues extolled. These regimes had primordial outlook and sub-national mentality under which the Northern part of the country was favoured brazenly, on one hand, and the southern part was deliberately dealt with in terms of appointments, contracts, location of government parastatals, political oppression and repression as well as provision of social services and infrastructures. The persistent ethnic chauvinism exhibited by these regimes had grave effect on the psyche of the various ethnic nationalities to an extent that those groups that even benefited now lay claim to marginalization at every attempt to reverse the status quo. This is nonetheless the cause of the plethora of violent conflicts at the communal level in virtually all the regions of the country, cries of ethnic nationalism and calls for national conference. A new dimension to the issue is the increasing recruitment of ethnic militia with reckless abandon. From the Oodua Peoples Congress in Yorubaland to Arewa Peoples Congress in The North; the Bakassi boys in the East and the Egbesu in the South-South, agitations are rife and it is obvious that the nation state will face dire consequences if cogent steps are not taken to checkmate these contending interests.

Both the colonial powers and the elites that succeeded them have used ethnicity for their own ends. In combination with poverty and shortage of resources this has sharpened ethnic divisions. As a result, ethnic sectarianism has left a trail of destructive violence and even threatened the territorial integrity of Nigeria (IDEA, 2001, p.89). However, ethnic identity can give social and other benefits. The challenge for Nigeria is to boost its positive potentials while minimizing the negative, to

harness the similarities among the various ethnic groups for national unity, to manage their differences so as to ensure harmony and foster co-operation among them in order to accomplish national integration. Although attempts have been made along this frame by past regimes

(as outlined in Table 1 below), such strategies were never put together and executed in the interest of the country but of policy formulators and executors, who often smile to the bank after each moment of discourse on ‘the way forward’.

**Table 1**  
**Efforts at Integrated Statehood**

<b>Regime</b>	<b>Attempt at integrated statehood</b>
Gowon, 1966-75	i. Program for reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, ii. Establishment of unity schools iii. Establishment of National Youth Service Corp. iv. Creation of 12 States.
Murtala/Obasanjo, 1975-79	I .Creation of additional 7 states ii. Ethical revolution.
Shagari, 1979-83	I .Green revolution
Buhari/Idiagbon, 1984-85	I .War Against Indiscipline (WAI)
Babandida, 1985-93	i. Mass Mobilization Program, MAMSER ii .National Directorate for Employment, NDE iii .Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure, DFFRI iv. Better Life Program v. State Creation.
Shonekan,1993	
Abacha, 1993-98	i. War Against Indiscipline and Corruption, WAIC ii, National Reconciliation Committee, NARECOM iii. National Orientation Agency NO A iv. Family Support Program v. State Creation vi. Vision 2010
Abubakar, 1989-99	i. National Reconciliation i. National Rebirth
Obasanjo,1999-	ii. Human Rights Abuse Investigation Committee iii .Poverty Alleviation Program iv. Constitutional Review

It is apposite to state that the current wave of violent crises in Nigeria is a bye product of an accumulated deprivation, destruction, marginalisation, anger and frustration of the past. Thus, there is need for government and extra-governmental efforts to lessen the spate of violent attacks between ethnic groups in Nigeria. As espoused by Ola Makino, the Methodist archbishop of Abuja 'we have offended one another in Nigeria. The Igbo needs to forgive the Hausa and the Yoruba needs to reconcile with the Igbo. The Hausa/Fulani and Kataf, the Ijaw and Itshekiri, Aguleri and Umuleri.....the Modakeke needs the Ife (Makino, 2000, p.12).

The implication of these persistent ethnic conflicts and rivalry is the insecurity of lives and properties which will continue to hinder foreign economic relations to jumpstart the economy. The above position was canvassed by the Vice President Atiku Abubakar at a press conference on Tuesday, November 9,1999 (on the spate of ethnic violence across the polity). He stated among other things that : Our nation is at the thresholdOf rebuilding its image as well As its economic and social foundation. Confidence of both the citizens and the international community is fast returning (Atiku, 1999, p.19). Thus, all hands must be on deck to stop the wave of these ethnic violence.

## **RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND THE NATION STATE**

The religious contradictions that Nigeria faces is daunting . The country is essentially a heterogeneous society, with the two monotheistic religions-Islam and Christianity-enjoying the loyalty of most Nigerians. A sizeable fraction of the population still prides itself as being pure religious traditionalists, meaning adherence to one or the other of the many traditional religions. The origin of the employment of religion as an instrument of politics in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era. Although the British colonialists claimed to have Nigerians on the imperative of secularity in a multi-religious society, available evidence suggests that the colonial administration consciously employed religion as an instrument of pacification.

As Adigun Agbaje has correctly established, the colonial administration ‘underwrote Islam in the Northern part of colonial Nigeria, and used it as the basis of political authority in local administration (Agbaje, 1990, p.288). 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 content. In spite of this early trend, the issue of religion did not come to the front burner as a critical issue dividing Nigerians until 1986. The major event that opened the floodgate of religious antagonism was the decision of the government to secretly upgrade Nigeria's membership in the Organisation of Islamic Countries, OIC, from that of an observer to a substantive one (Mimiko, 1995, p.261). This move was seen by Christians as a ploy to turn Nigeria into an Islamic State against the spirit and the letter of the constitution.

This singular action of the Babangida regime as at that moment marked the epoch of intractable intra (in the case of Islam) and inter-religious violence in Nigeria. This pattern continued even after the Babangida regime due to inability to distinguish categorically the place of politics as the *modus operandi* of the distribution of national wealth and religion as the spiritual aspect of human being guarded by God (Oduola, 2000, p.12). Adigun Agbaje's 1990 optimistic thesis that 'Nigeria under a democratic dispensation would likely witness a lessening of tension over religion and politics' (Agbaje, *op.cit.*) is being negated by the plethora of religious crises erupting across the polity. The nascent democracy is witnessing increasing religion insertion of politics and politicization of religion due to the resolve of some Northern State's governor's to adopt the Islamic legal code—Sharia, as the penal and criminal codes in their states. With Zamfara State blazing the trail, eleven other Northern States have followed suit. The pro-sharia argument is that for many years, Moslems have undergone humiliations of their faith being relegated to the background in public matters whereas antagonists view the Sharia issue as a grand design to undermine the present government and cause confusion. The series of violent confrontation being witnessed at present is a demonstration of the fundamental problem of religion that has created acute insecurity in the land. Generally speaking, communal and religious clashes which now occur at frequent interval in Nigeria, especially during this democratic regime is not novel, it is only that National Integration that was hoped on democracy is being further pushed back. An attempt is made below to showcase these occurrences.

## CONCLUSION

The growing incidence of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria is sufficiently worrisome to assert that the government that statutorily has responsibility for crisis management is not doing enough. Apparently, the government itself is generating crises directly by failing to appreciate the people's aspirations. While some people crave for autonomy, resource control, some want the Sharia legal system while others want (a review of the) revenue derivation principle, and so on. This is not surprising as

the greatest opportunity denied Nigerians by the military and their civilian collaborators was the benefit of true federalism.

After years of democratic government, the present regime falls short of consolidation, and is assailed by centrifugal divisions, religious polarizations, communal violence and debilitating intra-governmental conflicts (Olukotun, 2002, p.200). It is more properly categorized, following Diamond *et al.* (1999, p.2) as a 'low quality democracy' where the regime tends to 'remain shallow and vulnerable to plebiscitarian styles of rule, and incapable of guaranteeing basic civil liberties'. Rather than the government addressing this situations, it often resort to force or pay lip service to burning issues. Even the security forces that are sent to curb skirmishes simply end up coercing disputants to submission, only to regroup at another opportunity.

This is simply because force leaves in its wake disenchantment and disillusionment which sooner than later, manifest in another crisis of greater magnitude. Thus, since peace rather than violence constitutes the basic requirement for growth, development and national integration, the basic responsibility of all Nigerians should be to search for it, by striving to prevent, manage and amicably resolve conflictual situations in Nigeria's fourth republic.

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