ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN TARABA STATE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTHS

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Abstract  
With over 80 ethnic groups, distributed among the two major religions (Islam and Christianity). There is a consensus of opinion among researchers and observers that Taraba state provides one of the best examples or case studies of ethno-religious conflicts. This is because, since the creation of the State; from the defunct Gongola in 1991 it has become a permanent flashpoint of one form of ethno-religious conflict or the other. These were characterized by genocidal attacks, maiming and killings of several persons, loss of business investments, and properties worth several billions of Naira. Within the space of twenty three years of its existence, several violent, political ethno-religious conflicts have been reported in the State and all effort to restore peace has not achieved the desired end. This paper examines the manifestations of ethno-religious conflicts in the state, their implications on the socio-economic, political and educational development of youths; who are considered pivotal and bedrock of future development of any society and provides some recommendations and strategies for the control of this social menace, which is fast becoming a permanent feature of identifying the state with.

Key words: Ethno-religious, Conflict, Development, Implications and Youths

Introduction  
Taraba state is composed of over eighty (80) ethnic groups, belonging to several religious sects, the state since creation has remained the most highly multi-ethnic above all the states in Nigeria, this makes it volatile and has been grappling and trying to cope with the problem of ethnicity on the one hand, and the problem of ethno-religious conflicts on the other. This is because over the years the phenomena of ethnicity and religious intolerance have led to incessant recurrence of ethno-religious conflicts, which polarised the state along that line. While it is true that it is not possible to know the exact number of Ethno-religious conflicts due to lack of adequate statistical data on this issue, it is interesting to note that about fourteen (14) different forms of ethno-religious based conflicts are recorded by this paper.

The fact that there is a recent increase in the number of ethno-religious conflicts in the country makes this paper apt and relevant issue of analysis in the contemporary Nigeria and perhaps lesson for other states in the nation that are multi-ethnic and multi-religious in their composition. Also because of the violent nature
of ethno-religious conflicts, which often take the form of riots, sabotage, maiming, guerrilla warfare, killings and destruction of property in the state, they no doubt have implications for political, economic and educational development of the state and thus making it an important issue for discussion. It is against this background that this paper examines the manifestations of ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba state with a view to unveil some of its implications particularly on youths.

**Conceptual Issues: Ethnicity, Religion, Conflict and Ethno-religious Conflicts**

**Ethnicity**

Nnoli (1978) defines ethnic groups as ‘social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries’. To him, the crucial communal factors may be language, culture or both. Similarly, Suberu (1996) conceptualizes an ethnic group as a “social collectivity whose members not only shares such objectives characteristics as language, core-territory, ancestral myth, culture, religion, and/or political organization, but also has some subjective consciousness or perception of common descent or identity”. This ethnic identity results from contact with other groups. But he argues that ethnic pluralism is necessary but an insufficient condition for ethnicity. Ethnicity therefore is a ‘social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups’ (Nnoli, 1978). It emerges when the members of an ethnic group become characterized by a common consciousness of their identity in relations to other groups with in-group and out-group differences becoming marked with time. Such exclusivist, identity-based discrimination undeniably results in conflicts over scarce economic resources and socio-political goods. However, ethnicity hardly exists in pure forms. It is a consequence of ethnic group identity mobilization and Politicization especially in a competitive ethnically plural environment or context (Suberu 1996; Nnoli 1978).

Wolff (2006) observes that ethnicity on its own does not cause conflict as several factors are always at play in each conflict situation, arguing that identity is a fact of human existence, and that it is what people make of it or to what use they deploy it that makes the difference between ethnic cohesion, harmony or conflict. The manner in which activists define the in-group and out-group relationship (the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ sentiment) is crucial in conflict dynamics: “The more confrontational the definitions – that is, the more ‘our’ poor situation is a result of ‘their’ oppression, or the more superior ‘for the worse’” (Wolff 2006).

**Religion**

Religion is an elusive and imprecise concept. Religion is ranked next to ethnicity in Nigeria and is usually classified into three – Christian, Muslim and Traditional. Of the three, traditional religions is the least politically active; numbering several hundreds of ethnic groups and subgroups, villages, clans and kin groups; and, involving the worship of different gods and goddesses. In effect, Christian and Muslim identities have been the mainstay of religious differentiation and conflict, in Nigeria... (Lewis and Bratton 2000).

It is difficult to define with precision and objectivity because it is emotion laden (Egwu 2011, Agarwal et.al 1994); Religion has been variously defined as a body of truths, laws and rites by which a man is subordinated to transcendent being (Adeniyi 1993). To Bellah (1970) religion denotes a set of symbolic forms and actions that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence. Drawing similar concern, Peter (1988) conceptualized religion as system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting mood and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. Ogban-iyam, (2005) maintained that religion is one of the phenomena that is often misunderstood in the analysis of interpersonal activities, especially violent conflicts in Nigeria. In many instances, religious riots provide grounds for economic, political, psychological and sociological redress for looting, intimidation and controlling the affairs of co-religionists and non-co-religionist and even that of the hated co-religionists. Threats are purportedly to be issued to one religious sect when adherents of another religious sect occupy the advantageous position within the social production process. When this happened conflicts and violence is endangered. It is usually within that context, that the religious violent become rampant.

**Conflict** could be described as a situation or condition of disharmony in an interactional process. Banks (1984) 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. 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) 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.

As noted by Wolff (2006), the term ‘conflict’ is used to describe “a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual perspectives entirely just, goals”. He further argues that sometimes, conflict is as a result of the struggle for power and material gain by leaders and followers alike. Because of such vested interests, the conflict entrepreneurs prefer conflict to cooperation and privilege violence over negotiations. To have a thorough grasp of conflict, therefore, one must cautiously examine the various actors and factors and their interrelationship in each conflict situation (Wolff, 2006). The material value or economic viability of the territory is also vital in conflict dynamics. For example, if the territory is rich in natural resources such as oil, gold, diamond, timber or if there are cultural attachments to the territory, there would be more stakes in it.

Similarly, 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. Conflict may either be non-violent or violent. Notably, what constitutes violence and non-violence varies depending on the context or perception of the legitimate use of force or challenge of authority.

**Ethno-Religious Conflict**

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

**Brief Highlights, Profile and Manifestations of Ethno-religious Conflict in Taraba State.**

Taraba State experienced series of conflicts with different manifestations and magnitudes since creation in 1991 some of the highlights of these conflicts can be shown and expressed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of crisis</th>
<th>Place/LGA</th>
<th>Nature of the crisis</th>
<th>Parties involved in the crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 1991</td>
<td>Jalingo</td>
<td>religious crisis</td>
<td>Christians vs. Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 1991</td>
<td>Wukari</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Tiv vs. Jukun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 1991</td>
<td>Takum</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Jukun vs. Kuteb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 1996</td>
<td>K/Lamido</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Karimjo vs. Fulani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 1999</td>
<td>K/Lamido</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Wurkun vs. Fulani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 2000</td>
<td>Wukari</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Tiv vs. Fulani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 2002</td>
<td>Sardauna</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Mambila/Fulani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. 1993</td>
<td>Takum</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Jukun/Chamba vs. Kuteb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. 2006</td>
<td>Lau</td>
<td>religious crisis</td>
<td>Christians vs. Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. 2008</td>
<td>K/Lamido</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Bandawa vs. Fulani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. 2012</td>
<td>Ibbi</td>
<td>religious crisis</td>
<td>Christians vs. Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. 2012</td>
<td>Takum</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Kuteb vs. Tiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. 2012</td>
<td>Takum</td>
<td>ethnic crisis</td>
<td>Fulani vs. Tiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. 2013</td>
<td>Wukari</td>
<td>religious crisis</td>
<td>Christians vs. Muslims</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled by the authors, July, 2013.*

The above shows that, the state had suffered from one form of ethno-religious conflict to another right from creation. This indicates that, the ethno-religious conflicts are evils that are always around the people
of the state and must be put to a stop. This poses a serious challenge to government and particularly the youths who are regarded as leaders of tomorrow; otherwise their future is in jeopardy and uncertain.

**Brief Overview on the General Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria**

A major cause of what we now see as ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria has to do with the accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization, nepotism and bigotry. In every nation, there is no complete agreement on how wealth, power and status are to be shared among individuals and groups. There is also no agreement on how to effect necessary changes and reforms. This is because, different groups and individuals have diverse interests in which case, some groups will have their aims met, while others will not. What this means is that conflict (ethno religious ones inclusive) usually occur when deprived groups and individuals attempt to increase their share of power and wealth or to modify the dominant values, norms, beliefs or ideology. Thus, in Nigeria and going by the various examples of ethno-religious conflicts cited earlier in this paper, there seems to be a divisive interplay of politics, ethnicism and religions, which has consequently led to the rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic and religious movements. It is interesting to note that the overall consequence of this is the escalation of various ethno-religious conflicts that are witnessed all over the country today which are meant to correct any perceived form of marginalization, oppression or domination.

It is important to note here too that the failure of the Nigerian leaders to establish good governments, forge national integration and promote what can be called real economic progress, through deliberate and articulated policies, has led to mass poverty and unemployment. This has resulted into communal, ethnic, religious and class conflicts that have now characterized the Nigerian nation. Poverty and unemployment have therefore served as nursery bed for many ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria because the country now has a reservoir of poor people who warmongers as mercenaries fighters.

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

**Implications of Ethno-religious Conflicts on Youths in Taraba State**

Ethno-religious conflict may have a lot of implications on youths, but the following are considered more important particularly to youths, who are considered the prospective leaders of tomorrow:

**Socio-economic implications:** ethno-religious crisis causes the youths with lots of deprivation due to weaknesses in social organization, social institutions and structural deficiencies in creating enabling environment for the society and economy to grow and retards all economic and social progress. Ali, (2008) for example, established that, “Throughout the crisis years in Takum/Ussa, there was a decline in the level of agricultural investment/yield, decline in income levels of the people of the area, and increased level of social and residential segregation and damages to lives and property worth millions”. The resultant effects of these are high level of poverty and unemployment, particularly to youths.

**Political implications:** the youths are forced to contents with the state’s inherited lots of ethnic and religious conflict, socio-structural deformities and disharmonies. This has impacted negatively on the growth and development of the youths in the state. The incessant crisis experienced in the state right from inception and the weak position of political class and its perpetual struggles for political power to accumulate wealth have continuously put the youths on the disadvantage position and makes their future in jeopardy and in sorry situation.

**Educational implications:** the incessant spates of ethno-religious crisis in the state may leads to the shift of emphasis on government strides to restore security at the expense of developing the key sectors like education etc. This may lead to crisis on that sector and persistent strikes by the teachers at all levels and
will cripple the educational development in the state. Also, in order to restore peace in the affected areas on conflict, government may imposes curfew and restrict movement to restore normalcy, peace, law and order. The resultant effect of this retrogressive phenomenon, is that youths spend less time in school and may led to some been dropped out of school and perhaps ventures into unproductive activities that can affect their future career development to becoming responsible citizens and future leaders. In most cases, many are being forced to take to the street as hawkers and are no longer attracted or motivated to pursue their educational career. In deed many of them are now actively involved in the spate of ethnic and religious violent and become cheap to be used by politicians as their thugs, high-killers and assassins etc

**Conclusion**

Thus far the paper has attempted discussing salient issues on ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria with particular focus on Taraba state. It shows that ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in Taraba state are many and continue to increase in number. The frequency of these ethno-religious conflicts and their impacts on the socio-economic, educational and political life of the Nigerian people have always challenged the government and other major stakeholders and communities for urgent strategy to put them under control. Therefore, deliberate attempt must be made to put a stop on all these ugly menace, otherwise, the clamour for unity and development will remain a myth.

**Recommendations**

In view of the aforementioned facts, the following are proffered for peaceful co-existence, in Taraba state particular and Nigeria in general:

1. Government effort should move from conflict resolution to the stage of conflict prevention. To effectively succeed in this process, the government should be more committed to the provision of adequate and effective security in each of the conflict prone zones, throughout the state that should be able to respond promptly to any insurge of ethno-religious crisis anywhere at any time. Adequate modern security facilities and training shall be provided to enhance their quick response to ethno religious conflicts.

2. Government must encourage, throughout the communities, effective and functional platforms for ethno-religious leaders so that through them it would be possible to establish a network for conflict prevention and management. This proposal is necessary because the various political, religious, traditional and ethnic leaders in most areas of conflict hardly sit together to discuss the causes of ethno-religious violence and how to prevent future conflicts.

3. Deliberate attempt must be made to empower people, particularly youths economically, socially and educationally to lift them from the shackles of deprivations and poverty. As it is observed that, poverty and poor empowerment strategies drives youth out of school, thereby making them vulnerable to violent.

4. There should also be a deliberate programme of political and social reorientation of the entire citizenry, particularly the youths to understand the different cultural value system and religious teachings of the people in order to accommodates and tolerates one another. Such political and social orientation will go a long way in changing the negative stereotypes and negative values that have characterized the Nigerian peoples.

5. There should be need for government to be pluralistic, representative, and just in their treatment of the citizens. All forms of discrimination, neglect and marginalization in dealing with development and religious issues should be discouraged.
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