

CAUSES AND CHALLENGES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA AND ITS RESOLUTION FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES

By

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Abstract

The paper looks at the rising incidence of ethno-religious conflicts in North Central Nigeria from the standpoint of Islam. It also investigates the causes and the challenges of the conflicts for peace and stability in the zone. The prospect for combating this conflict is equally examined. The method of approach is purely observation, oral interview and written sources. The problem addressed by this paper is ethnic and religious conflicts in North Central Nigeria and their implications in the society. Findings reveal that the root and remote causes of the ethno-religious conflicts are tied to the ethnic and religious intolerance, indigene/settler syndrome, unemployment, poverty, unguided utterances of religious and political leaders and absence of good governance among others. Therefore, efforts should be made to achieve spiritual, social, economic and political distributive justice for all people as enshrined in Islamic teachings, because justice is the bedrock of peace, for where there is justice there will be peace and where there is peace, there will be no ethno-religious conflicts.

Keywords: *Islam, Ethno-Religious, Conflicts resolution, causes and Challenges.*

1.0 Introduction

Ethno-Religious conflict is the clash, contention, confrontation, battle, rivalry, controversy or quarrel among ethnic or religious groups generated on the basis of real or imagined "difference" rooted in ethnic and religious identities (Igbuzor 11). The combination of ethnic and religious sentiments to produce clashes among different groups of people is that which is called 'ethno-religious conflicts'.

Geo-politically, Nigeria is made up of six geopolitical zones with the North Central having six states which include: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau states

(Ibrahim & Chaminda 3). Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory Abuja is also located in the zone. The zone which is the case study of this research work lies completely in the central portion of Nigeria. National Population Commission 2006 revealed the population figures as follows: Kwara state 1,150,508, Kogi state 1,586,750, Niger state 1,917,524, Benue state 2,055,186, Nasarawa state 917,719, Plateau state 1,585,679 and FCT Abuja 664,712, given a total of 9,878,078 (NPC 5). However, the population includes Muslims, Christians and Traditionalists. This is because the 1965, 1991 and 2006 census did not make provision for religious differences in the records.



2.0 Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in North Central, Nigeria

Conflicts arise from the pursuit of divergent goals and aspirations by individuals or groups. Changes in the ethnic, socio-political and religious environments provide fertile ground for conflicts involving individuals and groups probably interested in fuelling such conflicts to achieve communal or non-communal goals. Thus every pluralistic society is bound to experience one form of conflict or the other. Today, North Central is laced with some of the most obstinate conflicts, most of them constructed from differences in religious and ethnic identities. These identities have led to conflicts about control of the states' power, unequal allocation of resources, citizenship issues, economic decline and ethno-religious clashes. As a result, the zone is being pushed hither and thither by recurrent crises (Osaghae and Suberu 4).

North Central Nigeria is synonymous with deep divisions which cause major political and ethno-religious tensions to be vigorously and violently contested along the lines of intricate ethnic and religious divisions. As a result, states with such divisions are disposed to be delicate and unstable because almost by definition, they have very little in common with regard to convergence and harmony which are necessary to reduce the centrifugal forces that rip them apart (Osaghae & Suberu 4). Regular violence emerged in the past decade because the population is growing rapidly and groups are trying to dominate another. The governments have exacerbated the sectarian conflict

by not holding perpetrators accountable, which prompts groups to seek revenge instead of justice. Only a small minority of attackers have been prosecuted. Across the country, people are classified as "indigenous" or "settlers," regardless of how long their families have lived in that particular part of the country. "Settlers" are people who have moved away from the traditional home of their ethnic group. They often do not enjoy privileges like scholarships, government jobs or representation in local governments and this problem is worst in North Central zone, particularly Benue, Kogi and Plateau states.

Furthermore, the various ethno-religious conflicts in the country should be blamed on tribal sentiments and religious bigotry. Mati, in an interview blamed the conflicts on the unguided utterances of religious leaders. According to him, it has been observed quite often on how the preaching and selfishness of some religious leaders incite their followers against the practitioners of other religions. He therefore, called on all religious leaders to fear God and educate their followers on the actual lessons of their religions without deviating for selfish gain. He also asserted that there is enough evidence to show that quite a number of ethno-religious conflicts are caused by politicians in the zone. Some of these politicians have no constituencies from which to demonstrate their relevance except through their narrow ethnic and religious groups. They pollute the minds of youths with their bigotry and copiously exhibit ethno-centric arrogance. Many of the

conflicts are generated or exacerbated by these groups. Since no commission of inquiry ever punish them, they hide behind their ethno-religious curtains as untouchable-constantly brewing and dispensing new forms of violence. Genuine religious people respect the ways of life of others.

Poor security can lead to disastrous results of conflict for a society. Many people try to avoid conflict at all costs. Conflict is a normal part of life and there are many issues that could cause conflicts to arise within community organisations which poor security network is one of them (Along 101). In potential conflict situations, security agencies may be useful in creating a sense of safety and security among groups. The partisanship of security agencies usually tips the balance, resulting in lack of confidence in the security agencies. Thus instead of preventing violent conflict or effectively controlling conflicts, the perception of the security agencies as neutral arbiters are known for, there have been allegations of partnership of security agencies which have helped to escalate rather than dampen conflicts (Along 102).

An action that breaks any part of the constitution could range from minor to major and is considered constitutional violation and can cause conflict.

Constitutional violation is one of the grey areas that have continued to promote ethno-religious conflicts. Government at all levels should try to address all forms of marginalization of any ethnic and religious group. It

should also discourage any tendencies towards secession and integrate groups that feel alienated into full political and economic life. Failure by government in the implementation of conflicts board of inquiry reports encourages the incessant conflicts because most of the attacks witnessed in the geo-political zone like other places in the country are also accompanied with the formation of committee of men by the government to among other objectives investigate the cause, effect and give recommendations on prevention such as Sheikh Lemu and Late Solomon Lar committees among others.

3.0 Challenges Emanating from the Conflicts

The ethno-religious conflicts in the North Central have resulted in the irreparable loss of properties and human resources that could have been used for developmental purposes. The sad elimination of the breadwinners of such families led to increase in begging, prostitution and unemployment. Sadly still, where both parents were eliminated, the children were forced to assume parental roles at tender ages which also have its negative social implication. In most cases, the wounds left in the psyche of these people are obvious. The effects are often said to be mentally, psychologically and emotionally far reaching. These children may grow up with their minds fixed on hatred and set for revenge. Most of the conflicts in North Central Nigeria have their causal factors in the struggle for political and economic control among various ethnic and religious groups. This struggle is further exacerbated by the restoration of democracy and party

politics in 1999. This is in addition to the general frustrations among the populace due to rising poverty and youth unemployment with the youths being in the vanguard of the various violent conflicts.

Socially, the conflicts in the zone succeeded in limiting social interactions and harmony between different ethnic and religious groups. These have also resulted into major ethnic and religious restructuring of settlements or towns with people congregating in areas where their ethnic or religious faiths have majority of inhabitants. The crises have also resulted in the sharp increase in the number of widows and orphans leading to prostitution, illiteracy, begging, unemployment, etc.

Economically, the economy is weakened particularly through the cost of investment by the conflicts in the affected places in the zone. The crises have also discouraged economic growth in the sense of industrialization and modernization as both local and foreign investors shy away from investing in the areas that are continually suffering from the conflicts.

Politically, the zone is always divided along ethnic and religious lines especially during elections because of such crises. These have affected the voting and campaign patterns, democratic value and norms. In particular, factors such as poverty, socio-economic marginalization and lack of good governance were all implicated in the conflicts and have contributed in large measure to the

politicization of ethnic, religious and citizenship identities, thereby leading to their political salience. Such identities tend to become problematic when access to opportunities in the political system in terms of power and resources are dependent on membership of a particular ethnic or religious group as well as when the state or local government is weak in terms of its capacity to protect all its citizens and provide for their welfare.

4.0 Islamic Teachings on Conflict and Peace Resolution

In life, many things can be ignored, but not conflict. This is because it can lead to the breakdown of the society if not well handled. The ethno-religious conflict has been the bane of North Central Nigeria because it is a plural, highly complex, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious society with a diversity of ethnic and religious groups (Osaghae & Suberu 4). Allah does not love those who create trouble, evil and tyranny in the Earth, He (SWT) says:

Verily, Allah orders justice and kindness, and giving (help) to the relatives, and He forbids immoral sins, and evil and tyranny. He admonishes you, so that perhaps you may take heed. (Qur'an 16:90)

Throughout history, religion has been abused and misunderstood. Some people use it as a means of exploitation and persecution as a pretext for prejudice and persecution. Some other people use it as a source of power and domination over the elite and the masses alike. In the name of religion, unjustifiable laws have been launched, freedom of thought and conscience have been oppressed,

the right of the individual to maturity has been denied and man's dignity and honour have been flagrantly debased. And in the name of religion, injustice has been inflicted upon humanity with the result that religion itself has suffered many losses (Hammudah 46).

Whether in Islam or Christianity, what is common to the both sides is that adherents of both faiths are human beings and fate also binds them together as Nigerians. Adherents of both religions are supposed to love their country. It is noteworthy to mention that Islam right from onset in an unequivocal language honours, respects and holds sacrosanct human life. Allah (SWT) says:

...We ordained for the Children of Israel that he who slays a soul unless it be (in punishment) for murder or spreading mischief on earth shall be as if he had slain all mankind; and he who saves a life shall be as if he had given life to all mankind. And indeed, there came to them Our Messengers with *Al-Bayyinah*, even then after that many of them continued to exceed the limits in the land! (Qur'an 5:32).

Islam offers dialogue as the just and sure way of resolving conflicts. To begin with, Islam is a faith of dialogue and its Scripture, the Noble Qur'an, is also a book of dialogue. A cursory look through the pages of the Book, reveals the highest form of objective, constructive and beautiful dialogue between all manner of people and at all levels of human relationship. Islam has laid down guidelines for dialogue especially between people of different faiths and culture. It insists that all talks aimed at convincing the other

must have the best of intentions and be conducted in a good manner. In calling people to the faith, Islam directs:

Invite (mankind) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and argue with them with that which is best. Truly, your Lord best knows who has strayed from His path, and He best knows those who are guided. (Qur'an, 16:125).

Justice is another indispensable element in any successful dialogue (Labdo 10). Therefore, Islam urges its followers to be just and fair to all, irrespective of whether they are friends or foes. Justice is a value to be sought for its own sake and it must be applied and seen to be applied in every given situation especially when it involves people of different faiths, culture or nationality. Allah, the most High says:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah; even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a better Protector to both. So follow not the lusts, lest you may avoid justice; and if you distort (your testimony) or refuse (to give) it, then indeed, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do. (Qur'an, 4:135).

El-Jazaery (170) affirms that all human beings are the creation of the Almighty Allah right from Adam (AS) to the present and future generations. The differences in our colours, geographical locations, languages, religions and culture among others are the manifestations



of the dynamics of human race as mentioned in the Qur'an thus:

...Of His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors. Indeed there are Signs in this for the wise. (Qur'an, 30:22)

The *Fitrah* (original disposition or innate nature of man) emphasizes the value of human life and stresses that all life deserves to be protected regardless of gender, ethnicity and religion. In the Qur'an the fallen nature of man is a deviation from his or her good nature (Abu-Nimer & Mohamed-Saleem 2). The virtue of *Sabr* or patience can be used to discuss ripeness and timing when seeking to use a mediated dialogue process. *Al-afw* or *al-Musahamah* are Qur'anic principles that remind Muslims to forgive each other and work to repair broken relationships by repenting and acknowledging wrongdoings. This is illustrated by Prophet Muhammad (SAW), who sought out a peaceful settlement and eventually forgave those of his own Quraysh tribe who had persecuted him and the nascent Muslim community in Makkah (Raheemson 53-54).

Peace in Islam is not a passive concept but requires individuals and communities to take action. Peace is a collective responsibility that requires concrete involvement of all (Abu-Nimer & Mohamed-Saleem 3). It encourages people to actively change the evil that they see and change their own conditions by doing good. These are all tenets that can be drawn from to teach on the co-creation by disputants of peace agreements that promote social responsibility towards

one another as parties seek to move forward (Abbas 7). In conclusion, there is not a single country in the world which is homogenous and without diversity. Diversity is one of the laws of nature; it is not something human beings can claim is man-made, rather the Glorious Qur'an states that diversity is created by God for us to benefit from:

If Allah willed, He would have made you one nation, but that (He) may test you in what He has given you; so compete in good deeds. The return of you (all) is to Allah; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ. (Qur'an, 5:48)

Thus, diversity is Allah's Will and it is a test for us to live in peace and harmony with each other despite our differences. Also, Allah wants us not to assert superiority over any particular group, but to instead vie one with another in good deeds (Qur'an 49:13). Diversity is a natural phenomenon created by Allah and we are bound by the laws of nature to this diversified world, where religions and cultures exist next to each other in the same lands and countries. Since diversity is divinely created, we all need to understand and accept the beauty of creation. Allah assures us that we can live together in peace and harmony with people of other faiths. The diversity of cultures is like a garden where different types of flowers grow on the same soil. Allah says of the diversity of human beings:

O people, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In Allah's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most

mindful of Him: Allah is All Knowing, All Aware (Qur'an, 49:13).

Islam teaches the same principle that Muslims have to respect every ideology, culture, community and religion. The purpose of diversity is for the purpose of knowing one another. Allah did not make us one community because he wanted to test us and all will be answerable to Him on the Day of Judgment. It should also be clearly highlighted that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was the true reflection of the Glorious Qur'an in real life; he always supported peace and dialogue. For example, it was on the day of the conquest of Makkah when he declared that everybody was free and safe to enter into the house of Abu Sufiyan, the leader of the Quraysh; this included many people who were enemies of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: "*La tathriba alaikum al-yaum*" which means "you are free today". The peace process and dialogue requires tolerance and mercy, and these two qualities were visibly present in the Prophet (SAW). The teaching of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is a message not only for Muslims, but for every human being to be at peace with their fellow human beings (Hilal 646). Given this scenario, no civilization can thrive in isolation, closing its doors to global knowledge. If there is any civilization wishing to opt for seclusion, it should make sure it is entirely self-dependent in all aspects of life; which would be extremely difficult and next to impossible to achieve and sustain.

4.1 Islamic Perspectives on *Assabiyyah* (Tribalism)

The term 'ethnicity' refers to a social group bound together by a more or less shared sense of historical and sometimes geographical originals which may be based upon language, culture or even religion. It is therefore, to be distinguished from 'race', 'kinship', mainly because there is some degree of flexibility in ethnic identification, according to context or circumstances (Ladan 2).

The '*asabiyyah* (tribalism) which Islam condemns refers to the feeling that one's tribe or any other social solidarity or grouping: the clan, nation, region, ethnicity, race, etc. is superior to another or to all others. It is often accompanied by having disdain for and looking down on people from other tribes; and it often leads to discouraging association with people from the other tribes deemed inferior either through work, marriage, friendship, etc. A number of factors may lead to a feeling of superiority over people of other tribes, one of which is history. Many have a perceived superiority of their ethnic lineage as a result of the conquests or achievements of their forebears. Others become sentimental because of their geographical proximity to natural resources and power, using this to their advantage. Other reasons include materialism and ignorance of religious teachings. Thus, the fuel for '*asabiyyah*' is the feeling of being better than others. This corrupted form of thinking is seen in *Iblis* (Satan). It caused him to disobey Allah's commandment to bow for Adam (AS) saying:

(Allah) said: "What prevented you (O Iblis) that you did not prostrate, when I commanded you" Iblis said: "I am better than him. You created me from fire and You created him from clay. (Qur'an, 7:12).

Therefore, Islam categorically forbids all forms of racial, national, tribal or ethnic feeling of superiority, both in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Allah says in the Glorious Qur'an:

O people, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In Allah's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: Allah is All Knowing, All Aware (Qur'an, 49:13).

This verse proves that the distinction in colour, language, ethnicity, nationality and race of man is just for the purpose of identification, not to prove superiority of one over another; thus, while we should be grateful to Allah and proud of what race, nation, tribe or clan He might have chosen for each one of us, we should never allow that gift and opportunity to be a criteria for right and wrong, good or bad, superiority or inferiority. To Allah, human superiority is only on the basis of *taqwah* (piety and God-consciousness), which cannot be determined or measured by any other than Allah. Allah (SWT) also says:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a better Protector to both. So follow not the lusts, lest you may avoid justice; and if you distort (your testimony) or refuse (to give) it,

then indeed, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do. (Qur'an, 4:135).

Therefore, it is necessary to be fair and just in dealing with everyone, irrespective of creed, tribe, region or race. All these show that partisanship, ethnic egocentrism or tribalism has no place in Islam. Tribalists, by contrast, reject universal standards of justice. They divide the world into the privileged in-group and the demonized out-groups, holding to the slogan, "My people (or nation) right or wrong". Their love of their own people and hatred of others causes them to rationalize and justify the unjustifiable. Love for one's people is normal and healthy, if it leads to good deeds. But such love that comes at the expense of justice is not praiseworthy love at all. Wathila Ibn Al-Asqa' (RA) reported:

I said: "O Messenger of Allah is it part of tribalism that a man loves his people?" The Prophet (SAW) said: No, rather it is tribalism that he supports his people in wrongdoing. (Ibn Mājah, vol, 5, Book 36, Hadith 3949).

Tribalism by this definition has been rejected by Islam in the harshest terms. Tribalism is a form of "blind following" whose adherents live in "ignorance", an allusion to the pre-Islamic worship of idols. Jundab Ibn Abdullah (RA) reported: The Messenger of Allah (SAW) says:

Whoever is killed under the banner of blind following, who calls to tribalism or supports tribalism, then he has died upon *Jahiliyyah* (ignorance). (Muslim, Vol. 5, Book of Government, Hadith 4561)

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) disowned anyone who lives by the ideology of ethnicity or supports it in any way. Tribalists might be outwardly Muslims, but in reality Allah will not count them among the true believers. Jubair Ibn Mut'im (RA) reported: The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (SAW) said:

He is not one of us who calls to tribalism. He is not one of us who fights for the sake of tribalism. He is not one of us who dies following the way of tribalism. (Abu Dāwūd, Vol. 5, Book 43, Hadith 5121).

Hence, tribalism is the ideological core of all militant terrorists, regardless of whether they support state terrorism or vigilante terrorism. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) renounced anyone who fights for tribalistic reasons and eschews the principle of non-combatant immunity in war. Abu Hurairah (RA) reported: Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said:

Whoever fights under the banner of one who is blind, raging for the sake of tribalism, or calling to tribalism, or supporting tribalism, and is killed in this state will have died upon *Jahiliyyah* ignorance. Whoever rebels against my nation, striking the righteous and wicked alike and sparing not even the believers and he does not fulfil the pledge of security, then he has nothing to do with me and I have nothing to do with him. (Muslim, Vol. 5, Book of Government, Hadith Book 20, Hadith 4557)

Religion is a divine law that enables people with intelligence to attain goodness and happiness in this world and the next with their own desire. Religion itself can be misused to

construct and justify an ideology of tribalism. If religion is used to justify violating the human rights of others or to rationalize injustice against out-groups, it has become nothing more than *religious racism*. Rather, the religion of Islam teaches Muslims to uphold the rights of all human beings, to walk with humility and to leave the divine judgment to Allah alone. Even our enemies deserve their basic human rights.

The method of tribalism is to issue 'blanket indictments' of an entire race, culture, religion or group of people. They will condemn an entire group for the crimes of a few or misrepresent an entire group by only examining its worst elements. As such, the purveyors of Islamophobia claim all Muslims are terrorists, the purveyors of anti-Semitism claim all Jews are supremacists and the purveyors of racism claim people with different skin colours are naturally inferior to themselves (Ladan 3). In every case, the tribalists construct a false caricature of their victims to be the straw man for their vicious attacks. Islam teaches Muslims to reject such blanket indictments and false generalizations. Some of Prophet Muhammad (SAW)'s companions began to have bad thoughts about all of the Jews and Christians, but verses were revealed making clear distinctions the righteous and unrighteous among them. Allāh (SWT) says:

They are not all the same. Among the people of the Book (Jews and Christians) is a community standing in obedience, reciting the verses of Allāh during the night and prostrating in prayer. They

believe in Allāh and the Last Day, and they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and hasten to do good deeds. Those are among the righteous. Whatever good deeds they do will never be denied, for Allāh knows well the righteous. (Qur'an, 3:113-115).

It would be wrong to negatively stereotype an entire ethnic or religious group as evil, with all of its unique individuals and diverse practices. For this reason, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) firmly censured the poets of his time who had a habit of excoriating entire tribes. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said:

Verily, the greatest criminal among people is a poet who disparages the entire tribe. (Bukhari 870).

If we accept blanket indictments of an entire group, then we are making a claim of collective guilt that will ultimately lead to 'collective punishment' and collective punishment is a crime of war. Islam rejects collective guilt and punishment, in words and deeds, because innocent people may never be held accountable for the crimes of others. Allah (SWT) says:

Say: "Shall I seek a lord other than Allah, while He is the Lord of all things No person earns any (sin) except against himself (only), and no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another. Then unto your Lord is your return, so He will tell you that wherein you have been differing. (Qur'an, 6:164).

Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud (RA) reported: Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said:

No man is to be punished for the crimes of his father or his brother. (Bukhari 431)

The existence of social groups that differ on the basis of ethnicity or religion carries the potential of competition and conflict between them. People are required to overcome inter-group tensions and their potential negative outcomes through good will and the commitment to live together in peace and justice with their fellow human beings, whatever the odds.

5.0 Conclusion

In this paper, it was found that among the causes of ethno-religious conflict in North Central Nigeria are ethnic and religious intolerance, religious fanaticism, unbridled action of the press, aggressive or militant preaching/evangelism, poverty, wrong religious orientation, low literacy level of religious adherents, selfishness on the part of ethnic and religious personalities and external influence. The frequent clashes which erupted as a result of this have inflicted untold hardship on both the individuals, in term of loss of lives and properties, and on the government in terms of occasional provisions of relief materials for the victims of the disturbances. The frequent eruption of these conflicts has caused psychological trauma to those who witnessed the killing of their relatives and burning of their properties. In good conscience, religions are meant to bring peace and stability to the world irrespective of tribes or nations. Moreover, anyone who understands the teachings of religions will not relate the overwhelming presence of this violence to religions mission.

6.0 Recommendations

In respect to the conclusion above, the paper thereby recommends that:

1. Governments should fairly and justly develop comprehensive remedial and rehabilitation strategy for victims of the ethno-religious violent conflicts who lost their properties and empower them in the affected states.
2. It is the responsibility of the people of the North Central zone in Nigeria to work collectively to protect and safeguard their existence. In doing so, they must avoid ethnic sentiments and religious extremism; exercise caution by recognizing their differences; show high level of understanding and respect for one another such that all and sundry are given equal opportunity so that they can all live in peace and harmony with one another.
3. The media has an ethical duty and a moral responsibility to objectively promote peace not conflict through fear and balanced journalistic activities.

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