

Africa and Ethnic Conflict Management: A Comparative Study of Nigeria and South Africa

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Abstract

This paper proposes, among other things, that ethnic conflicts in Africa are fallout of colonialism. Relying on the comparative study of Nigeria and South Africa, it is the contention in this paper that ethnic conflict which has been at the heart of African countries development problem is a product of skewed economy, authoritarian governance and religious bigotry. There is no gainsaying the fact that African countries in contemporary times contend with greater challenges to peace and stability than ever before. Conflicts igniting factors in Africa have been a hotch - potch of insecurity, instability and poverty manifesting in hunger and starvation. All these are themselves products of corrupt and rapacious political institutions that assumed power in the African countries. This has been the case in countries of sub-Saharan Africa like Sierra-Leone, Ivory Coast, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The contention therefore in this paper is that conflict has become a re-occurring decimal in Africa because the countries lack political will and consequently ineffective in conflict management. This paper is also meant to be a contribution towards the ongoing search for new means of managing ethnic conflict in Africa. The paper compares the management of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and South Africa with a view to underscoring the intricacies in managing deep-rooted and complex conflicts in Africa.

Introduction

Experts in International Studies and Diplomacy have come to realize that nowhere is conflict management as well as peaceful resolution of conflict more important and needed than in Africa. This belief is understandably so because about 45% of the world's violent conflicts is traceable to Africa.¹ Except in the last few intervening years, the continent has come to be recognized as the most war-torn in contemporary times. Interestingly a good percentage of the African conflicts has to do with ethnic identities. It is difficult to explain the reality of African conflicts using the prism of conceptual framework alien to the continent. The pattern of African conflicts is unique and lack semblance in most other continents. This is so for some obvious reasons. Africa is recognized as the world's second-largest and second most-populous continent, after Asia. Apart from the fact that it covers up to 6.0% of the earth's total surface area, its population put at over 900 million is considered to account for about 14% of the world's human population.²

Africa houses over 50 countries and some 850 ethnic and linguistic groups. It has the history of five major external colonial waves and three religious systems broadly

speaking.³ The plethora of ethnic configuration together with external hegemonic influence culminated in ethnic conflicts in Africa. The impact of colonialism vibrates and manifest in ethnic conflicts in Africa.

Before Western influence, national borders were not much of a concern as ethnic co-existence was fashioned along socio-cultural, economic and geographical dictates. Border delineation was never artificial but respected natural occurrences or barriers like rivers, desert or mountains. With the Western scramble and partition of Africa, there was apparent insistence on drawing border around territories of various colonial powers to isolate and delineate areas of hegemony. The implication of this is that some traditional ethnic enemies were forced to live side by side without buffer between them. Some ethnic groups were unusually caught on both sides of the partitioned area of control. The point is that most colonial rules merely for political gains fanned the ember of ethnic conflict in Africa. The main and most enduring cultural fault-line in Africa was the induced divide between traditional pastoralist and agriculturalist. The divide was not based on economic competition as such, but on the colonial racial policy that identified pastoralists as constituting a different race from agriculturalists. This racial re-categorization of Africans to fit European stereotypes was not only contradictory and incoherent but also induced conflict that was ethnic in nature. There were also evidences of colonial applied quasi-scientific eugenics policies and racist politics on Africans in experiments of misguided social engineering.⁴ All these laid the foundation for ethnic conflict in Africa.

The intention in this paper is to attempt a comparative study of South Africa and Nigeria in underscoring ethnic conflict management in Africa. It would be necessary and indeed most appropriate to first justify the choice of these two African countries and show traces of ethnic conflicts before assessing conflict management. Few lines of terms definition would be useful in here as flow point.

Definition of Terms

Some terms which ordinarily one would have glossed over needed be defined here to eliminate ambiguity.

Ethnic group is simply defined as a community of people who share cultural and linguistic characteristics including history, tradition, myth and origin.⁵ Thompson sees ethnic group as a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship, ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language. While ethnicity may include tribes, races, nationalities and castes, it focuses more on sentiments of origin and decent rather than the geographical considerations.⁶

Conflict is defined as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scare resources among two or more parties that perceive incompatible interests or express hostile attitudes.⁷ It can also be described as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. There are two sides to conflicts. Conflict could degenerate to non-productive results in the form of irreparable damages. It could also culminate in some beneficial outcome in the form of equity or emergence of a new situation agreeable to the parties hitherto in conflict. The determining factor therefore is how a conflict is managed.

Conflict management, simply put, is the constructive handling of difference. The assumption in conflict management is that not all conflicts can necessarily be resolved. This assumption marks the major difference between conflict management and conflict resolution. Contending or manipulating the conflict in such a way that it does not degenerate to irreparable damage is the focus of conflict management. No matter the difference, conflict management involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict modes, conflict communication skills and positioning of structure for management of conflict in your environment.⁸ Understanding the nature of conflict is very vital in conflict management.

Choice of Nigeria and South Africa as Comparative Case Study

Some salient points informed the selection of Nigeria and South Africa for a comparative case study. Nigeria and South Africa both emerge as regional and continental giants. Nigeria reigns supreme in the sub-Sahara or West African region while South Africa occupies the same position in the Southern African region.

Nigeria sits on one of the largest proven oil reserves in the world and has population of over 140 million to rank the highest among nations in Africa. It has reputation for being one of the fastest growing economies in the globe. For instance, between 1995 and 2005, the economy had an upward thrust to average 5% growth.⁹ Nigeria accommodates over 250 ethnic and linguistic groups with English being the official language. There are three major ethnic groups namely: the Hausa-Fulani, the Yorubas and the Igbos. While the Hausa-Fulani are mainly Muslims, the Igbos is mainly Christians. This is not to say the religious divide is absolute as there are always evidence of both religions in any chosen group. Except for the continuous infiltration of the western culture, the ethnic groups in Nigeria have distinguishing life-styles.¹⁰

South Africa, on the other hand, is also recognized for its wealth of natural resources being the world's leading producer of both gold and diamonds. With a population of 44million, South Africa ranks as the most populous country in the Southern African region and among the first five in African continent. Apart from the well-established legal system in South Africa, it has strong economic base with access to financial capital, numerous markets, skilled labour and world-class infrastructure to show for its resources and years of going through the mills.¹¹ South Africa has long been polarized along racial lines. The country has about 11 ethnic and linguistic groups with English being the official language as it is in Nigeria. South Africa is mainly populated by indigenous Africans, coloureds and Indians. The country has a history of racial discrimination with blacks being at the lowest stratum. In the past, indigenous Africans were forced to live in impoverished and segregated ethnic homelands under the apartheid regime. The apartheid policy has since been dismantled and replaced with democracy. It must however be noted that the institutionalized racism and discrimination in language, history and culture subsequently aggravated ethnic conflict in South Africa.¹²

Traces of Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria and South Africa

Nigeria and South Africa have disturbing histories of colonialism, which perpetuated hatred and conflict among different ethnic groups. They both experienced British colonization. Prior to the so-called scramble for Africa both countries had European influence though on different scale. While there were evidence of early peripheral Portuguese contacts with Nigeria, it was mainly on commerce level. This is not quite the case with South Africa. Before the nineteenth century British colonial rule in South Africa, a large number of Dutch augmented by French Huguenots and Germans settled there. Their descendants, the Afrikaners and the Coloured, remain the largest European-descended groups in Africa today. Large Indian communities also settled in South Africa. On the whole, the indigenous blacks form about third-quarter of the entire South-Africa population. Ironically, the majority blacks suffered under the apartheid regime which was characterized by a high degree of oppression and discrimination. This in itself only opened and deepened ethnic conflicts in South Africa.

British colonial rule in Nigeria provided identities, languages and symbols for ethnic and racial groups. Evidences abound that colonial rule was responsible for creating ethnic divisions and regionalism. The British found it convenient to adopt the divide – and – rule strategy which by design distanced ethnic groups from one another in separate areas like “Sabongari” in northern Nigeria and “Abakpa” in Eastern Nigeria.¹³ This arrangement encouraged ethnic conflicts.

The colonial rule in South Africa had the same pattern but with a more conflict prone approach. Mixed race were segregated from the so-called white groups through culture, residence, occupation and status. Policies were initiated to further deepen the differences among the mixed race. For instance, there were evidences of conflicts between Zulus and Xhosas, Ndebele and Vendas, Tswana and Qwagwa.¹⁴ One interesting point is that inspite of the animosity, very few physical conflicts occurred between the dominant minority white and the black majority ethnic groups. This has been explained in terms of the strategy adopted whereby the white distanced their settlement and maintained minimal contacts.

It is pertinent to emphatically posit that the policies of segregation or discrimination in South Africa acted as catalyst to ethnic conflict. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed economic racism which consolidated the structures of white domination and black disenfranchisement and exploitation. The black South Africans were, by enactment of the 1913 Black Land Act, denied access to land ownership or produce food for themselves. There was also regulation of the job market such that skilled work was reserved for whites alone while Black African workers were banned from organizing or forming trade unions. The consequence of these was that Africans were forced to evacuate the major cities and settled in remote part of the country. There were limitations to the movement of blacks in the cities. The erroneous assumption on which the discriminatory policies were built was the belief that Africans were both biologically and culturally inferior to whites and therefore incapable of running their own affairs. The resettlement of black majority only gave the white minority further opportunity to download their discriminatory policies. There existed a separate administration plan for the blacks. The blacks became a

source of cheap labour to the white. Infact, institutionalized racism and apartheid took control of black people's lives and resulted in hardships, poverty, despair and diseases in the black settlement usually referred to as homelands. These low-life ingredients formed the platform for ethnic conflicts and violence in South Africa. The period between 1976 and 1980 witnessed the height of this violence in the mostly black populated towns of Johannesburg and Soweto where youth and school children drew the ire of the brutal police repression.¹⁵

Another dimension to ethnic conflict as engineered by colonial rule was the use of divide-and-rule strategy to turn the facets of blacks against one another. Scholars have come to believe that the Zulu traditional ruler, Chief Mongosuthu Buthelezi was one of the forces skewed by the colonial masters to program ethnic conflict among the black South Africans. Chief Buthelezi was lured by economic and political power in the homeland. He embarked on creating ethnic boundaries between the Inkatha and the other ethnic groups. Chief Buthelezi became so associated with the apartheid leadership that the then African National Congress (ANC) was forced to exorcise him from the party. Undeterred by this, Buthelezi was known to have caused or escalated most ethnic conflict that occurred in South Africa between the 1980's and 1990's. The apartheid regime had no problem setting blacks against themselves. The blacks were made to view the competition for scarce resources like jobs, social amenities and education through ethnic prism.

On the whole, it could be said that the immediate causes of the ethnic conflict in South Africa are linked to the high rate of poverty, unemployment and the deliberate attempt to introduce politicking and discrimination in the homelands. The apartheid favoured Inkatha group spearheaded the ethnic connotation to the conflict. The ensuing ethnic conflict intensified human carnage and destruction in the townships. As already mentioned, the induced ethnic conflict manifested in the creation of rigid boundaries among the renowned ethnics like the Zulus and the Xhosas. Attempts by successive South African governments to find solution to the violence were actually cosmetic in approach as they were biased toward the Inkatha and the white Afrikaners. This window dressing approach to ethnic conflict spanned all through the 1980's and witnessed massive loss of lives and destruction of properties. Genuine respite only came with the introduction of reforms by the then president of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk in the 1990s. The bold steps of de Klerk ushered in true democracy in South Africa. The reforms included the release of political prisoners like Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela who later became the President of South Africa in 1994.

Nigeria as much as South Africa has its history of ethnic conflicts interwoven with colonial transgressions. The amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorate in 1914 suggests the bringing together of strange bedfellows. This turned out to be so because the various ethnic groups brought together by the amalgamation were not consulted. Needless to mention here, that this British policy which was undemocratic and indeed autocratic led to ethnic conflict. It has been argued that there were artificially drawn British boundaries that led to social re-alignment of ethnic groups.¹⁷ Each of these groups was forced to mobilize in a distinct geographical region that closely resembles the administrative boundaries of the colonial period. Ethnic groups strove to develop and re-assert their identities within each region. This engendered

ethnic conflict and regionalist pressures.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the colonial policy tilted towards introducing separate governments in the North and South for administrative convenience and better colonial grip on the Nigerian society. The policy was unmindful of the growing ethnocentrism.

Along side this was the introduction of indirect rule which was anathema to the management of tribal animosities in the colony. Indirect rule complicated the task of uniting the diverse elements into a Nigerian nation. The strategy distanced ethnic groups from one another. Indirect rule entrusted power to traditional rulers who corruptly used it in the villages to amass wealth, land and establish patronage networks which was laced with tribalism and nepotism. The colonial laws which limited the mobility of Christian south to Muslim north only deepened and widened the ethnic conflict. Particular quarters were carved out for settlement by the non-indigenes. Unequal and differential treatments of ethnic groups arouse intense competition and resulted in educational, political and economic gaps. In 1947, a colonial constitution divided Nigeria into three political regions namely East, West and North. The North was predominantly Hausa-Fulani and the largest region. The Igbos and Yorubas dominated the East and West respectively. The creation of these regions did not take into account the needs of the ethnic minority groups as they were lost in the majority.¹⁹

Such was the legacy left behind by the colonial rule. Since independence, ethnic politics had continued to intrigue the entire nation. Ethnic groups continually scheme to attract federal resources to their regions with mild regard for the generality of issues central to the entire nation. This was what characterized the Nigerian nation to the close of the first republic. Evidently the military intervention that followed this era was also bedeviled with the said ethnic rivalries. This was the primary cause of the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970. In the light of this discourse, it must be resounded that the war was ethnic in nature. The Igbos of eastern Nigeria felt maltreated and threatened to secede from the federation.

Of course, the Igbos' grievances were caused by the denial of their basic human needs of equality, citizenship, autonomy and freedom. It is obvious that wherever such basic needs are denied, conflict emerges as aggrieved groups fight for their human rights. This situation captured the Nigerian Civil War, sometimes referred to as the Biafran war.

The war recorded one of the highest casualties ever known in the history of Nigeria. The real point to take home here is that the colonial masters were indirectly responsible for ethnic laden war and the casualties thereof. As earlier explained, the lumping of incompatible ethnic group by the colonial agents presupposed the struggle for socio-cultural survival of the constituent groups. Since the military was a product of the larger community, ethnic conflict and acrimonies crept into the military. Every military coup in Nigeria had always among other things identified corruption as the reason for the coup. Ironically, the history of military rule in Nigeria is replete with corruption, ineptitude and confusion. These have manifested in complete economic quagmire and continued ethno-religious conflicts. The Southerners had always viewed military regime with distrust as it was regarded as attempt to maintain Hausa-Fulani hegemony in Nigeria.²⁰

June 12, 1993 is mostly remembered in Nigeria as the day the widely acclaimed free and fair election was held. The election which Chief Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba from Southwestern Nigeria won as presidential candidate was annulled. The annulment was viewed to have ethnic undertone as the Muslim north was opposed to power shift to the South. In retaliation, pockets of militant groups began to spring up in Southern Nigeria. The Afenifere and the Oduduwa People Congress (OPC) came up among the Yorubas. The Bakasin boys emerged in the east among the Ibos. The Niger-Delta appears to have multiple militant groups that are at the verge of taking the nation by storm. The import of this analysis is that these militant groups represent the high rate of ethnic conflicts and crisis in Nigeria.

Conflict Management Approaches

What has been established in this comparative study is that ethnic conflict is a reality in both South Africa and Nigeria. What is left to be done here is to attempt a comparative study of the approaches to conflict resolution or management in both countries.

Just as the leadership of both South Africa and Nigeria recognized the potential danger inherent in ethnic conflict, so had both countries developed institutions for conflict management. In South Africa, a constitution that guarantees freedom of association, languages and bill of rights was introduced. This created room for continual negotiation of interest groups. In view of the diversity in ethnic interest, plethora of approaches were spread in South Africa. The focus was to fully establish peace and security in South Africa. The constitution as well as government had packages for the minority or disadvantaged groups. The constitution evolved power-sharing mechanisms to check ethnic or racial domination of any group. For instance, the Nelson Mandela led administration tried as much as possible to represent the various South Africa ethnic groups in the composition of his government. This approach legitimizes the government as it was seen as evidence of accommodation and tolerance. Ethnic conflicts were greatly reduced by virtue of the representation.

Another significant step towards conflict management was the collapse of ethnic homelands which hitherto served as reservoir for the blacks being discriminated against. The dismantling of the homelands signified the end of apartheid. The homelands were characterized by inhuman conditions, poverty and denial of social amenities. It is pertinent to know that the neglect of the homelands and townships was vulnerable to ethnic entrepreneurs. Ethnic groups were made to fight for the scarce economic resources. In place of these homelands and previous four provinces, the constitution provided for nine provinces. There was relative autonomy attached to these provinces. The intention was to manage ethnic conflict by distributing power among the sub-national units.

In realization of the need to heal the wound inflicted by the apartheid system, the South African government set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Archbishop Desmond Tutu was saddled with the responsibility of chairing this conflict management instrument. The underlying push was that creating a window for the aggrieved to release some fume of anger would invariably reduce the concentration of conflict. It was also meant to project the transparency of the government by laying emphasis on forgiveness. Truly, many heavy hearts and cloudy animosity among

ethnic groups gave way soon after the commencement of this commission.

To manage the conflicts emanating from economic inequality, the South African government introduced the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This was meant to create openings for the economically disadvantaged groups. It is believed that economic equality would reduce ethnic conflict. There are enough to show that Nigeria, like South Africa, has displayed attempts at conflict management. The provision for federalism in the Nigerian constitution is to effectively manage the nation's abundant ethnic and regional differences. Again, the Nigerian 1999 constitution recognizes bill of rights as much as that of South Africa. This is to protect the existence of minority groups.

Another giant stride taken to manage ethnic conflict in Nigeria, is the creation of more States along ethnic concentrations. Nigeria has, since independence advanced from three regions to thirty-six States. The relevance of this is that ethnic relative autonomy presupposes less ethnic friction. This is not to say the creation of these States was perfect all through. The creation of additional States is among other things usually meant to bring development closer to the people. The reverse of this happens in practice as most State governors, local government chairmen and other government functionaries have become conduits for siphoning funds meant for development. Lack of funds implies poverty for the people. Logically, poverty has direct bearing with conflict. The Obasanjo government as part of reform rolled two strong anti-corruption organs to check societal and governmental excesses. There are enough evidences to claim that Independent Corrupt Practices Commission as well as Economic and Financial Crimes Commission achieved some measure of success. The functions of these organs have lately become the subject of manipulation by politicians.

Overtime the use of geo-political zoning as a yardstick for the distribution of the country's resources and appointments could be said to be a right step towards conflict resolution in Nigeria. The approach ensures no section is neglected or assumes perpetual domination. There had always been pockets of peace conferences and panels on conflict resolution in Nigeria just as we had in South Africa. The 1994 constitutional conference arranged by General Abacha's regime was meant among other things, to resolve the national debate over ethnicity. Although this conference was boycotted by the Yorubas being one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC) also unearthed hitherto hidden ethnic animosity. The commission also known as Oputa panel contributed to ethnic conflict resolution in that many forgave after having the opportunity to tell the whole world what was the problem.

The final report of the commission which was completed in May, 2002 was released though unofficially by the Washington based Nigerian Democratic Movement (NDM) and the Civil Society Forum in Nigeria.²² The Olusegun Obasanjo administration was continually criticized for the non-implementation of the commission findings. Whatever the criticism, it does not take away from commission's impact on conflict resolution management in Nigeria.

In a subterranean manner, Nigeria has been opened to both governmental and non-governmental conflict resolution management agents. One of such is the Academic Associates Peace Works (AAPW). This organisation, among other things, develops the

framework for the peace process through action-oriented research and intervention in current or potential conflicts. Over 170 skills-building workshops in various parts of Nigeria has been conducted by AAPW. It has also trained about 420 peace education teachers in 20 cities/towns throughout Nigeria. Its latest targets are the youth leaders and elders in local governments across the Niger Delta.²³ The focus of AAPW is to identify the sources of conflicts and proffer solutions accordingly.

One of the giant steps taken by Olusegun Obasanjo on assumption of office as the President of Nigeria was the appointment of a commission to investigate human rights abuses committed from January 1, 1994 until his taking over office on May 29, 1999. Again, in formally inaugurating the commission he extended the inquiry further to cover the period when President Shehu Shagari was deposed in a military coup.²⁴ The intention was to heal inflicted injuries and bury animosities that have manifested in various forms including ethnic suspicions and conflicts.

Disparities in the distribution of oil resources in Nigeria sparked off various ethnic conflicts most especially in the Niger-Delta area. The Nigerian government has programmed various activities to respond to the needs of the people and manage ethnic conflicts. Separate bodies like the Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC) were put in place to administer to the needs of the people. There is however a gradual shift in the Niger-Delta conflicts. It has moved from the initial inter-ethnic rivalries to that of militants' action against government and foreign investors.

Recommendations and Conclusion

It is conspicuously evident from the foregoing discourse that there are four basic underlying historical and cultural causes of ethnic conflicts in Africa. First was the unusual colonial lumping of different ethnic groups by colonial powers. This interfered with the geographic and demographic features hitherto establishing the distinct cultures of the ethnic groups. Attempts to re-establish this distinctiveness continually crystallized in ethnic conflicts. Second was the authoritarian governance of both countries. While apartheid government in South Africa aggravated ethnic conflicts, military rule in Nigeria posited the same conditions. Divide and rule continued to be the trademark of the Nigerian military rule. This is the situation in most African countries. The third cause of ethnic conflict in Africa is economy. All across Africa, the economy perpetually remained at lower ebb. The issue is not so much the non-availability of human and material resources as it is with the management of these resources. A comparative study of Nigeria and South Africa, which is the subject of our study, shows that leadership had always affected the economy negatively in Africa. There is usually unequal distribution of resources among the regions thereby creating political tension and frustration among the ethnic groups. Post-apartheid illusion exist in South Africa while there is post-military rule consequences in Nigeria. Both situations have a common and inbuilt mechanism to spark off ethnic conflict. The fourth cause of ethnic conflict in Africa borders on religion. Comparative study of Nigeria and South Africa shows that this is more pronounced in the former. Religion until lately was a divisive factor in Nigeria. For decades, the Christian South was afraid of the larger-populated Muslim North while the relatively underdeveloped north feared the better-educated south.

Having identified the major causes of ethnic conflict in Nigeria and South Africa, by extension Africa, certain recommendations stand out. Since corruption, nepotism and induced poverty constitute the immediate pull on ethnic conflict, economic factors should be viewed as the key to effective management of ethnic conflict in Africa. Apart from adopting democracy in enthroning leaders, citizens should always challenge the actions of ethnic leaders who have used violent ethnic conflict for personal gains. Conflict management is more effective if a government is devoid of corruption.

In all this, the effectiveness of the available conflict management mechanisms are in most cases dependent on the applied government policy choices and decisions. It is hoped that justice, equity, responsiveness, accountability, transparency in governance will constitute the launching pad of ethnic conflict management in Africa.

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