

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN PEACE BUILDING AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Today, Africa is faced with some of the most obstinate conflicts, most of them constructed from differences in religious and ethnic identities. Religious and ethnic nationalism has led to conflicts about control of state power, unequal allocation of resources, citizenship issues, state collapse, economic decline and ethno-religious clashes. Nigeria has been pushed hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional or state illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at economic transformation, democratization, national cohesion and stability (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005:4). With this continental background in mind, this research paper seeks to examine the relationship between religion, ethnicity and conflict in Nigeria, focusing mainly on issues in the North of the country. The question is: To what extent are conflicts emerging from ethnic or religious sources? This paper examined the notion of identity and how it explains the crisis of development and complexities in modern Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Peace-Building, Nigeria, Ethnic Groups

### Introduction

Nigeria is synonymous with deep divisions which cause major political issues to be vigorously and violently contested along the lines of intricate ethnic, religious and regional divisions. Issues that raise the most dust are those regarded essential for the existence and the validity of the state. Opposing and contending assemblages have a tendency to assume an exclusionary winner-take-all approach. These issues include the control of state power, allocation of resources and citizenship. As a result, states with such divisions are disposed to be delicate and unstable because 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 and Suberu, 2005:4).

Breakdown, breakaway, civil strife, civil war, minority nervousness, and violent clashes, all of which would typically be regarded unusual in normal states are common forces or actual occurrences in divided states (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005:4). Due to complicated network of politically silent identities, coupled with a history of protracted and seemingly stubborn wars and instability, Nigeria is high on the list as one of the most

unstable states in Africa. Since its independence, Nigeria has been driven hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional or state illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at democratization, stability, economic transformation and national cohesion.

A peak of the crisis appears to have occurred during the civil war of the 1960's, which began shortly after independence (Okpanachi, 2010). Since 1999 when Nigeria transitioned into civilian rule, the country has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of conflicts. The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between religion, ethnicity and conflicts in the country. It looks at the notion of Identity in an attempt to explain the crisis of development and the complexities of modern Nigeria.

A high level of corruption and the looting of state resources is another serious and 'pandemic' problem that makes all forms of conflict and trouble worse in Nigeria (Dike, 2005). The country is 'richly endowed with natural resources and high quality human capital' (Ogbeidi, 2012:1), but corruption is one of the main reasons that affect the development of the country in a negative way. The appropriation of state resources by certain hands makes poverty and bitter anger inevitable aspects of daily socio-economic and political routine. In this sense, though corruption is not peculiar to Nigeria, many sources call it the 'bane of the country' (Dike 2005; Ogbeidi, 2012:21). Corruption is considered to be one of the main causes of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2015). Poverty and injustice caused by corruption weaken any sense of mutual tolerance, social solidarity or coexistence, while reawakening social hatred, radicalism and violence. For this reason, corruption is seen as one of the most important issues that have to be resolved in order to cope with ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

### **The Identity Factor**

From a socio-political perspective, 'identity' bears a personal and a social meaning. Processes related to identity are 'located at the core of the individual and yet in the core of his community's culture' (Erikson, 1968-57; Okpanachi, 2010). This, identity can be said to be an individual's 'sense of belonging to a group if it influences his political behavior' (Erikson, 1968:57; Mary Anderson, 2010; Okpanachi, 2010).

Identity is built into an individual's physiological 'givens' and in social roles (Erikson, 1968:57; Okpanachi, 2010). Identity is characterized by features such as an 'emotive tie to a group', 'love and belief for a group', 'pledge to a cause', and 'commitments and duties to a group' with which a person identifies (Smyth and Robinson, 2001:7-11; Okpanachi, 2010).

General studies in identity underscore the fact that identity implies similarity and contrast at the same time (Jenkins, 2004; Okpanachi, 2010). 'For an individual, or for a group, there may be a plurality of identities. Yet, such a plurality is a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action. This is because identity must be distinguished from role-sets' (Okpanachi, 2010). Oftentimes, self-definition of identity overlaps with role expectations, but identities are more stable springs of meaning than those social roles. This is because identities establish the meaning, while social roles shape the functions (Okpanachi, 2010; Castells, 2010:7). However, identity is not uniform or stable among groups or individuals. Its strength and importance is dynamic and differs from group to group. While identities are somewhat stable, identity consciousness keeps on changing to reflect the fluctuating role of the identities and the swelling magnitudes (Jega 2000:11; Okpanachi 2010). This elasticity of identity avoids coming up with an all new identity for the particular role and circumstance.

Recent studies on religious identity have also underscored the positive function of religion

in promotion of peace. On the other hand, however, mobilization of identity has been used to incite political groups to struggle; and religious groups to legitimize wars and various modes of brutal and violent acts (Alger 2002:101; Okpanachi 2010).

### **Politics of Ethnic Identity in Nigeria**

Ethnicity is a social phenomenon that is manifested in interactions among individuals of different ethnic groups within a political system where language and culture are the most prominent attributes. The formation of dialects within languages was one of the ways in which ethnicity became fixed in Nigeria. Although there are over 400 languages in Nigeria, only three are considered 'major', while the rest are considered minor languages. However, the distribution of these languages is directly proportional to both political and socio-economic power, and therefore the language group to which one belongs defines his/her status in the society. Missionaries and local politicians created standard languages and hoped that they would homogenize language and ethnicity, and create more harmonious ethnic identities.

Ethnicity is natural in almost all societies made up of more than one ethnic group. This observation tends to offer the suggestion that the interaction between different ethnic groups within a single political set-up generates ethnic identity. An interaction of this kind can create 'a common consciousness of being one in relation to other relevant ethnic groups' (Eriksen, 1996:30). That in turn, results in the emergence of in-group and out-group confines which come to be guarded jealously over time. Based on this approach, ethnicity thus becomes a process through which ethnic identities are politicized (Eriksen, 1996:30).

Historically, identities have played a significant role in the Nigerian political process during the colonial period and in the post-colonial era. During the colonial period, the administrators allowed the emergence and aggravation of an 'us' versus 'them' syndrome, where Muslims were pitted against Christians, Northerners against the Southerners, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo against each other, and so on (Adefemi 2003:14; Okpanachi 2010). In this era religious and ethnic differences became prominent factors in instituting and executing socio-economic strategies and applications. Therefore, the differentiating outcomes of colonialism became the forerunner of the socio-economic disequilibrium among the different regions, and then this became an important factor in the stimulation of identity awareness so as to efficiently 'divide and rule' (Fearon and Laitin 2003:82; Okpanachi 2010). But, as a counter argument it must be said that internal factors are more determinant than the external ones in creating the cleavages in Nigeria. This is also the case in many other countries.

Ethnicity is seen as the most basic and politically salient identity of Nigerians. This argument is based on the premise that in competitive and non-competitive contexts, Nigerians tend to define themselves in terms of ethnic affinities as opposed to other identities (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:8). A survey conducted in Nigeria by Lewis and Bratton found that almost half of Nigerians (48.2%) labeled themselves with an ethnic identity compared to 28.4% who labeled themselves with respect to class and 21% who identified with a religious group (Lewis and Bratton 2000:27; Osaghae and Suberu 2005:9). This means that over 66% of Nigerians view themselves as members of an elemental ethnic or religious group. What is even more interesting is the fact that religious and ethnic identities are more salient than class identities (Lewis and Bratton 2000:26; Osaghae and Suberu 2005:9). However, this is not at all that surprising, especially if one considers that ethno-religious formations are the most persistent behavioral units in

Nigeria (Nsongola-Ntalaja 2004:404; Osaghae and Suberu 2005:9).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the fact that ethnicity is the most salient, and the large number of studies conducted on this issue, the total number of ethnic groupings in Nigeria remains unknown (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:9). Some sources put it at 374 (Otite 1990:34; Okpanachi 2010), while some other sources count more than 250 different ethnic identities (Central Intelligence Agency 2016). However, the population percentages of the majority of these groups are small when compared with the seven largest ethnic groups constituting about 88% of the country's population. These are Hausa and Fulani (29%), Yoruba (21%), Igbo (18%), Ijaw (10%), Kanuri (4%), Ibibio (3.5%), and Tiv (2.5%) (Central Intelligence Agency: 2016). This population disproportion, when combined with the disparities in the political influence of individual ethnic groups roughly classifies the Nigerian population into two major groupings: the majority and minority ethnic groups. While the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo form the majority, the rest of the ethnic groups are fitted into the minority classification which in itself possesses different degrees of status relative to their size and political influence (Rakov 1990; Paden 2008:4; Okpanachi 2010).

The Hausa-Fulani and other smaller ethnic groups that inhabit the north of the country are Muslims while the Igbo and the other smaller groups residing in the South are mainly Christians. Groups lying in the middle comprise of a mixture of Christians and Muslims while the Yoruba found in the Southwest are almost half Muslim and half Christian. This Muslim North and Christian South cleavage enhances ethnic fractionalizations in Nigeria, especially in Northern Nigeria where Islamic identity plays a dominant role (Paden 2007:8; Okpanachi 2010). It is clear that nearly the entire Northern half of the country consists of states with Sharia law.

Of course, exceptions should not be overlooked for both parts of the country. There is a considerable population of Muslims in the South, especially in the Southwest, and a sizeable number amongst the Benin in Edo State. Even in the Southeast, amongst the Igbo, there has been a rising number of Muslims, causing the governors of some Igbo-speaking states to introduce state programmes for Muslims. The same goes for Christians in the North, where the considerable number of Christians cannot be disregarded in any analysis of religious groupings in Nigeria.

Lewis (2007:6) attributes the historical prominence of Islam during the formation of Northern states in the early 19th century to the continued prominence of Emirs and religious authorities in framing identities in Northern Nigeria. Lewis argues that a number of principles of ethnicity are used by political leaders and others to frame their arguments as to how things should be accomplished. First, ethnic identity is the most important and consistent basis of social identity in the country. Second, ethnicity is seen as a way for collective action. Finally, ethnicity is presumed to be a destabilizing factor with far-reaching impacts on democracy. These principles breed a number of outcomes. Because political competition is played along lines of ethnicity, the resultant 'democratic' but authoritarian government ostensibly has an ethnic character (Lewis 2007:2).

Lewis states that civilian governments supposedly promote the creation of an ethnic politicization and political schism. On the other hand, non-democratic regimes like military rules are usually repercussions from the side of the political elite. In most cases, therefore, mechanisms of political governance are formed on the basis of ethnicity via custom-made patronage systems (Lewis 2007:2). For instance, in Nigeria the ethnic factor is seen when political parties are formed and during elections. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) was formed in the first Republic and it was a Hausa-Fulani party.

Similarly, the Igbo belonged to the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) while the Yoruba prided themselves as members of the Action Group (AG) (Cohen 1968). These parties later transformed into The National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Nigerian People Party (NPP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) during the second republic (Edoh, 2001:87).

The third Republic had the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), which were disbanded by annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections by General Ibrahim Babangida, due to suspected ethnic reasoning when it became clear that the Northern political hegemony risked losing out. Thus, here it is possible to detect that stimulation of ethnic awareness easily turns into a conflict in order to get more from scarce societal resources. And this situation provokes political tensions and cleavages among the ethnic groups. Nigeria is not the only country in the world where such things are experienced.

In recent times, socio-economic and political changes have taken place and transformed the delineations of identities and politics in Nigeria. To begin with, patterns of group mobilizations have shifted, in the traditional models of Nigerian ethnic politics, emphasis was on competition among the country's three largest groups – the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo. The minority groups comprising over 250 smaller ethnic groups have often been regarded as inconsequential in political contests. However, since 1999, Nigeria's political arena has been changing following political action by groups in the Niger Delta and the 'Middle-Belt' communities who have increasingly become vocal in national politics and economy (Soludo 2007). Ethnic solidarity has also faced opposition from religious mobilizations by the Muslims and the Christians especially in the Muslim North.

Since the restoration of democratic rule, ethnic identity and mobilization in the Nigerian political landscape has often resulted in political instability. Between 1999 and 2013, more than 11,000 deaths have occurred as a result of more than five hundred incidents of communal violence. Ethnic violence has been witnessed in almost all regions in the country but with particular frequency in the Niger Delta, the Muslim North and Northwest and along the middle-belt (Uzodike and Whetho, 2011:220). The level of insecurity witnessed during the post-military period is considerably higher than that experienced during the three decades of military rule that ended in 1999. It is often assumed that there exist stable identities in Nigeria and consistent group motives in the approach to ethnic politics (Rotberg 2002:88).

### **Religious Identity**

Nigeria is the most crowded African country with a population of about 182 million by 2015 (World Population Prospects 2015:21). A majority of the scientific academic sources accept that half of the population is Christian and the other half Muslim. However, there is uncertainty about the exact percentages hence various sources give different figures. In a report published by Pew Research Center in 2010 the numbers from different sources are compared in the report's Appendix B. If we mention them chronologically for instance, the 1963 Census certified 36% Christian, 48% Muslim and 16% other. However, the Demographic and Health Survey gave 53% Christian, 45% Muslim and 2% other in 2008. Similarly, Afro barometer found 56% Christian, 43% Muslim and 1% other, also in 2008. And finally, Pew Forum declared 46% for Christians, 52% for Muslims and 1% for others in 2009 (Pew Research Center 2010).

Whatever the exact percentages are, it is clear that Nigeria is a country with very large

Christian and Muslim populations. This situation makes this country a potential fault line between the two different identities and even civilizations. In this sense, Nigeria, with the largest Christian plus Muslim population in the world, can be defined as a 'cleft country' and then a 'test case' of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis (Paden 2007; Olojo 2014:7).

Although the general presumption is that ethnic identity is a more prominent and stable source of identity in Nigeria, some researchers have demonstrated that religion was more significant than ethnicity as a source of identity and conflict in Nigeria (Ruby and Shah 2007; Pew Research Center 2010; Green 2011). In fact, in the Hausa-Fulani North, religious identity is more pronounced than ethnic identity and only serves to stimulate ethnicity (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:10). Therefore, of the two major ethnic groupings in the country, the Yoruba are more likely to identify themselves with their ethnic group than are the Northern Hausa-Fulani (Lewis and Bratton 2000:20; Osaghae and Suberu 2005:11).

Nigeria has three major religious identities: Christian, Islam and traditional religions (Omorogbe and Omohan 2005:557). Traditional religions are the most politically inactive of the three groups, 'numbering several hundreds of ethnic groups and subgroups, villages, clans and kin groups; and, involving the worship of different gods and goddesses' (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:11). On the other hand, Christian and Muslim identities have continued to be the backbone of religious disparity and conflict (Lewis and Bratt on 2000:5; Osaghae and Suberu 2005:11). This differentiation underlies the North-South cleavage.

It is worth noting that, within the wide Christian and Muslim categories, there lie many sub-cleavages and intra-group conflicts that have either been active politically in the past or have a potential of being salient in the future. Among the Christians, sub-cleavages include the Protestants (Anglican 10%, Baptist 8%, Methodist 5%, and Lutheran 5%), the Catholics 15%, the Evangelical Church of West Africa 2%, Jehovah's Witnesses 5% and a myriad of other local (Aladura, Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial Church of Christ 20%) and Pentecostal churches 30% (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:11).

The Pentecostal churches form the fundamental division of Christianity in Nigeria which has experienced rapid growth in numbers of followers in the last few years with the majority of adherents, especially the youths, joining the church from the older and more traditional denominations. The church has played an important role in civil society in anti-military struggles and democratization. This has been made possible through umbrella bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PEN), and the Catholic Bishops Conference (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:11). However, politicization of Christianity has been reliant on moves by the Muslims and the interventions of the government. Still, Protestant-Catholic cleavages have continued to play an important role in elections among the Igbo communities living in the Southeast of Nigeria (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005:11).

Muslims also belong to a number of sub-cleavages that include Ahmadiyya 12%, Sanusiyya 5%, Tijanniyya 3%, and Quadriyya 8% which have in turn been in conflicts. As among the Christians, the Muslims also have umbrella bodies which aim at propagating different understandings of Islam. Notable among these organizations is the Jamaatu Nasril Islam (JNI) which was established by Sardauna of Sokoto in 1961. Following events in Iran during the Islamic revolution of 1979, radical fundamentalist activities increased among Muslim youths. These conditions resulted in the formation of fundamentalist Muslim factions such as the Maitatsine, the Isala movement, the Shiites, the Talibans and

most recently the Boko Haram (Fayemi: 2011) which demanded the establishment of a purist Islam based on Sharia law, the abolition of unorthodox innovations, and the creation of an Islamic theocracy (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:11). These relatively new sentiments that depend on a unique and radical interpretation of Islam provoke conflicts with the traditional and/or more moderate understandings

### **Ethno-Religious Conflicts**

The fact that an average Nigerian is very religious was observed by some sources (Oluduro 2010:209; Athyo 2013:29). Religion plays a critical role in Nigerian society and has expressed itself as a potent force in the geopolitical development of the country. This force which has been used to unite Nigerians is the same force that has led to numerous conflicts in the country. Nigeria has been engulfed in numerous religious crises or conflicts between 1980 and 1994 (Warner 2012:38).

Due to their tendency to spread into other areas after an early stay in one area, ethno-religious conflicts have gained notoriety as the most violent crises in Nigeria. Most of these conflicts occur in the Middle-Belt and along the culturally borderline states of the predominantly Muslim North, and also take place between Hausa-Fulani groups and non-Muslim ethnic groups in the South (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:19). In conflicts of this nature occurring along the convergence of ethnic and religious lines, it is often very difficult to tell the differences between religious and ethnic crises because the dividing line between them is slimmer than thin. Examples of such ethno-religious conflicts are the Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis that occurred in the 1980's and 1990's, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000 and 2012 (Osaghae and Suberu 2005:19). Several hundred lives were lost during the Kaduna crisis of 2000 and the Jos insurrection of 2001. The crises caused violent ripple effects that spread beyond Kaduna and Jos (Enukora 2005:633).

Other recent ethno-religious conflicts include the July 1999 conflict among the Oro cultists in Sagamu in Ogun state who claimed that the Hausa women had come outside when the cultists were outside with their gnomes. The result were arguments that finally turned into a full-scale crisis. Many Yoruba and Hausa people were killed before a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on the Sagamu town. Even as the infamy was being put under check in Sagamu, reprisal attacks continued in Kano - a Hausa city - leading to deaths and destruction of property worth billions of Naira (Kura, 2010:33-34).

Another ethno-religious conflict that had far reaching impacts on the people of Nigeria was the October 2000 Lagos-Kano (Idi-Araba/Oko-Oba) conflict which was caused by a misperception between the Hausa inhabitants and the Yoruba living in Lagos over the use of a convenience by a man from Hausa. The mayhem resulted in the death of many Yoruba. As a consequence, the O'dua People Congress (a Yoruba militia) was formed and worsened the situation as the violence later spread southwards to Kano (Enukora 2005:633; Kura 2010:34).

Worse still, in September 2001, ethnic friction between the Tivs and the bunkums in the Plateau state reached fever pitch following what came to be referred to as 'mistaken identity'. 'What this means is that some Tiv took some nineteen soldiers to be bunkums in fake army uniform. The Tiv youths captured them and slaughtered them one by one' (Kura 2010:34-35). And then the Nigerian army embarked on devastating reprisal attacks in Zaki-Biam. According to some controversial members at least a hundred people died in the army attacks (Human Rights Watch 2001). Violence spread to Jos plateau especially after a Christian was appointed as a Local Council Chairman. By the time the menace was brought to a standstill, over 160 lives had been lost (Kura 2010:35).

### **A Case of the North: Boko Haram**

Between 1999 and 2013, numerous conflicts have been witnessed in Nigeria. The most important among them is the Boko Haram crisis which is on-going. This group has started a bloody campaign to impose a sui-generis Islamic regime based on Sharia in the Muslim North of the country. Actually, it is hard to argue that Boko Haram is a religious or ethnic conflict. In the former case, it targets more Muslims than Christians. In the latter, it is mostly an ethnic Northern conflict. For this reason, though Boko Haram uses a religious discourse, it may be more appropriate to call it simply a terrorist organization. With regard to the numerous conflicts and the Boko Haram menace in particular, the country's stability is under constant threat Boko Haram has introduced into Nigeria's political and social life a level of insurgency never witnessed before. The insurgency became violent in 2008 even before the country could heal from previous ethno-religious conflicts (Shehu 2011:3).

Boko Haram was founded in 2002 by Muhammad Yusuf. It is formally identified by its members as '*Jama'at ahliSunnah lid Da 'waswal Jihad*', which means 'people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad'. The name of the group 'Boko Haram' is loosely translated from the Hausa language to mean 'western education is sinful'. This meaning is extended to mean any western culture is prohibited. It is for this reason that followers of this outfit advocate for a government based on Sharia as opposed to a democratic one.

It is possible to count Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamic fundamentalism as the basic items of the Boko Haram's ideology. The group which was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri did not become militant until 2009 when its leader was captured and killed by the Nigerian army. Since then, the group has engaged in gun battles, arson, bombing and stabbing, in promoting their ideology (Warner 2012:40). Moreover, Boko Haram has captured a territory in and around Borno state in the Northeast part of Nigeria in 2014. However, the territorial control of the group has been removed by the Nigerian army in 2015.

Boko Haram can be examined in various ways. Firstly, it refers to a long history characteristic of Northern Nigeria and the continued radical Islamic movements. Secondly, the group has its foundations in the socio-economic marginalization of the country's northern population. Thirdly, Boko Haram is understood as seeking revenge especially in response to unacceptable behavior of the law enforcers. The fourth understanding is based on the perception that Boko Haram is utilized by the elites from the North to express their grievances over lack of interest demonstrated by the central government. Finally, the group can be understood as developing as an offshoot of the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and probably Al-Shabaab (Warner 2012:39).

It is important to note that apart from the group targeting national events, markets and churches, they are sometimes engaged in sporadic bombings in major towns in Northern Nigeria including Kaduna, Zaria, Jos, Kano, Maiduguri, and in Damaturu. During such instances, the fighters kill indiscriminately – Muslims and Christians alike. Despite everything, the group leaders have often stated that they are still fighting for justice and the Islamization of Nigeria (Roach 2012:4). The group has declared its allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), as has been done by a series of terrorist groups from various parts of the world. In this context, Boko Haram can be seen as yet another reflection of the religious looking international tenor campaigns now sweeping the globe scene.

### **Inter-Religious Conflicts**

Inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria form part of the dynamics of identity politics. Political elites in Nigeria have always sought to reap advantages from the multidimensional

identities, more so during electioneering periods, and this has resulted in conflicts and instability. This politicization of religious identities during contests for political office often lacks any sustaining unifying ideology. Somehow, politics in Nigeria are fashioned on the appeasement of religious motives. As a consequence, religion attains the level of deification that is difficult to challenge or overpower. In the quest to assume power and control state resources, the elites constantly modify patterns of political domination. In this perpetually changing pattern of domination, fears and anxieties are bred that motivate an upsurge in struggle and intolerance (Ibrahim and Kazah-Toure 2003:18; Okpanachi 2010).

Since the return of civilian rule in 1999 following a protracted period of military rule, Nigeria has continued to experience recurring ethno-religious conflicts. Although some of these struggles are low-intensity contestations and rancorous wars of words, other has degenerated into bloody sectarian fights. Thousands of Nigerians have been left dead, wounded and homeless over the years due to constant religious strife pitting people of different religions against each other (Okpanachi 2010).

The main forms of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria are between the Muslims and the Christians, The conflicts are sometimes so intense that they have turned into wars in different parts of the country, and they range from the Kano revolt (1980), Bulunktu Bizarre (1982), Kastina crises (1999), Zamfara conflict, Kaduna revolt, Bauchi crises and Sokoto (1999). More recent examples are the Jos crises and the current conflict by Boko Haram against Christians and moderate Muslims. These are only a few examples of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria, since not a year passes without three to four incidences of inter-religious conflicts.

Inter-religious conflicts are brought about by a number of factors. One of these causes is the clashing interests of those in authority. The ruling class has applied a number of processes to express their dissatisfaction with exclusion from important decision-making processes of the country. The methods employed include religious violence and military coups d'état. A majority of the religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria are reported to be due to the large number of rich Southerners who reside there. Many Northern elites are hurt by the business inventiveness of the Southerners and employ religious calls to incite people to destroy property belonging to non-natives. The results are wars fought under the pretence of being religious (Falola 1998).

### **Major causes of Ethno-Religious conflicts in Nigeria**

Unlike other forms of social conflicts, ethno-religious conflict entails different ethnic groups that belong to different religions. It is essential to advert that both religious and ethnic causal agents have always acted together in the majority of social conflicts in Nigeria. At different levels and times in the past, the Nigerian people have complained of religious and ethnic discrimination. Most ask for religious and ethnic rights within their state. Another cause of the conflicts has been the state's use of religion and ethnicity in political discourse or action. Therefore, it is clear that accusations and allegations of neglect oppression and domination are the major causes that fuel ethno-religious conflicts (Ikelegbe 2001:14; Kura 2010:35-36; Salawu 2010:348).

Nigeria, like many other countries in the world, lacks a consensus on how necessary changes and reforms are affected. This is caused by the fact that different religious and ethnic groups have varying benefits in which case some groups will have their interests met while others will not. This means that tension occur when individuals who feel that they are deprived attempt to increase their stake of power or wealth or to alter the central beliefs, values, norms and philosophies. In Nigeria therefore, there appears to exist a contentious interaction of politics, ethnicity and religions, which has resulted in an increased sense of

belonging and militancy. It is important to note that the general outcome of this is the intensification of numerous ethno-religious struggles in Nigeria. And this intensification can be seen as the main source of ongoing discrimination, subordination and domination in this country (Kura 2010:36).

From one perspective, the failure' of the Nigerian political elite to enact good governments, promote national integration and foster good economic progress via thoughtful and pronounced policies has resulted in massive unemployment. This has in turn led to the rise of communal, ethnic and religious conflicts that are characteristic of the Nigerian politics. Since poverty and unemployment have acted as the mainstay for various ethno-religious conflicts in the country, an accumulation of pauperized people can end up acting as paid militants. This could be the reason why any conflict in Nigeria is usually characterized by a large number of fighters (Kura 2010:36; Mu'asu 2011:19-20).

There is a correlation between ethno-religious conflicts and low standards of democracy due to protracted military interferences in politics. This appears to legalize the application of coercion and violence as tools for social change and for the achievement of anticipated desires and objectives (Kura 2010:37). Based on this understanding, it is common in Nigeria to observe that as a consequence or an aftereffect of a military period, the application of both force and intimidation as a means of settling a misunderstanding has become very frequent. When this is coupled with easy acquisition of illegal fire arms, violence erupts more quickly and there is more difficulty in negotiating peaceful settlements.

The absence of vehicles of social control that were characteristic of traditional African societies, such as kinship, religious and political systems concerned with the wellbeing of the community, has led to the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts. The failure of these institutions is partly to blame for the ethnic and communal conflicts witnessed in Nigeria today. Broken families and the inability to make ends meet in many homes have led to an increase in the level of immorality while at the same time providing a reservoir of youths who readily take up arms to execute ethno-religious conflicts at a fee.

## **Conclusion**

This study in one sense has tried to look at the emergence of identities and their impact on the conflicts in the most crowded African country, Nigeria. From social and political perspectives, 'identity' has a personal and social meaning. Identity can be defined as distinct qualities, characteristics and beliefs of an individual or a group of people. And it is an individual's sense of belonging to a group which often has an impact on his/her political behavior (Erikson 1968:57; Mary Anderson 2010). Identity has been a significant aspect of the Nigerian political process, during the colonial period and in the post-colonial era. Ethnicity is a social phenomenon that is related to interactions among individuals of different ethnic groups within a political system where language and culture are the most prominent attributes. Both ethnicity and religiosity have emerged as the most basic and politically salient identities of the Nigerians.

In Nigeria, structures of political control are formed on the basis of ethnicity and religiosity via a custom-made patronage system. These identities have been a constant source of conflict and cleavage in the country. Since the restoration of democratic rule, ethnic identity and mobilization in the Nigerian political landscape has often resulted in political instability and constant conflicts. A number of uprisings and concomitant mayhem have been reported since 1999 and have resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and the destruction of property. In recent times, for instance, the militarization of Boko Haram has undermined Nigeria's stability and placed the country under constant threat.

Despite some exceptions, such as the Yoruba being made up of both Christian and Muslim segments, ethnic identities generally overlap with religious identities in Nigeria. For that reason, it is difficult to distinguish ethnic conflicts from religious ones in this country. However, it can be said that ethnic differences in Nigeria would not have been such a prominent cause of conflict if they had not overlapped with the religious identities, or vice versa. In other words, in many instances, religion provides a mobilization flame for conflict and this effect is amplified when religious and ethnic cleavages run parallel. And there is no doubt that inter-religious conflict in Nigeria forms part of the dynamics of identity politics.

As stated above, while some sources (Lewis and Baton 2000) reveal the importance of ethnicity as a causal factor of cleavages, others (Ruby and Shah 2007; Pew Research Center 2010; Green 2011) underline religious identities as a more determinant element in the perception of difference. The diversity in the scientific findings and literature was probably caused by researchers focusing on different groups in Nigeria. Basically this means that for some groups ethnicity is more binding, while in others religion plays a dominant role in group identification and a sense of belonging. Since this paper has been mostly concentrated on conflicts in the North, the religious factor might be highlighted – due to the decisive religious cleavages in this region.

Of course, there is much ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, not only in the North and in the Delta, but also in the Middle Belt. However, the importance of the conflict in the North comes from its global origin. It is apparent that this conflict is a manifestation in Nigeria of religiously oriented global-scale violence. There are similarities between Boko Haram and other radical Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, Al-Nusra and the like in terms of discourse and praxis. This makes the conflict in the North more interesting for the rest of the world and this is the main reason for the emphasis on the subject in this paper.

It is generally accepted that the inefficacy of politicians in Nigeria at the points of good governance, national consolidation and economic development has caused political cleavages, social disintegration and massive unemployment (Kura 2010:36; Mu'asu 2011:19-20; Ogbeidi 2012:21). This, together with the absence of social control mechanisms and a high level of corruption, has stimulated ethno-religious

Finally, the nation-state model is in danger in Nigeria, as in many other so-called nation-states. Of course, globalization feeds this process, but the main reason is related to inherent features of the model. The majority of modern states consist of different groups and usually one of them tries to rule the system while provoking the objections of others. Consequently, the ethnic, religious and maybe ideological groups compete for dominance and this weakens the basis of any achieved unity. This is then seen as the inevitable character of heterogeneous nation-states (Gordon Anderson 2010:29)

This paper having examined all the factors which possibly may militate against peace, hereby recommends that:

1. There is the need for various religious and ethnic groups to have a form of dialogue whereby they can interface through discussion for a meeting ground.
2. The Christians represented by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the Muslims represented by the Islamic Supreme Council (ISC) should regularly meet and dialogue for peace among the various religious
3. Various political parties as well as regional interests should be tackled to disabuse followers from self-centeredness (which often create conflict) in order to make way for peace among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

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