

## **Conflicts in The Middle-Beltzone of Nigeria (Benue, Kaduna, Kogi, Kwara, Nasawara, Plateau & The Federal Capital Territory)**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The conflict is fundamentally a land-use contest between farmers and herders across the country's Middle Belt, as well as communal conflicts. It has taken on dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions, however, because most of the herders are from the traditionally nomadic and Muslim Fulani who make up about 90 per cent of Nigeria's pastoralists, while most of the farmers are Christians of various ethnicities. Large-scale displacement and insecurity in parts of Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba and Kaduna states hinder farming as well as herding and drive up food prices. The violence exacts a heavy burden on the military, police and other security services, distracting them from other important missions. Conflict's roots lie in population, climate-induced degradation of pasture and increasing violence in the country's far north, which have forced herders south; the expansion of farms and settlements that swallow up grazing reserves and block traditional migration routes; and the damage to farmers' crops wrought by herders' indiscriminate grazing. Militias and vigilantes are not new phenomena in the Middle Belt. Over the last decade, some of the region's so-called indigenous groups – including the Tiv of Benue state, the Berom and Tarok of Plateau state, the Eggon of Nasarawa state and the Jukun of Taraba state, all predominantly farming communities – reportedly formed militias and vigilante groups to fend off Fulani herders whose cattle grazed in their fields.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Conflict is an individual fact of social existence. In any social formation, conflict is inevitable as cooperation. Whenever there is interaction between two or more people, difference of age, sex, parentage, kinship, ethnicity, religion, race or political interests have to be handled somehow. Conflicts are part of social life, they may be functional to the social system by creating a form of social cohesion within a group but it is the dysfunctional aspects that tend to be of interest to analysts. Conflicts may be associated with numerous parameters of human endeavors. These include economic, social, religious, political, ethnic, communal, gender, racial, sectarian, or professional issues.

This paper will try to explicate the theoretical and conceptual perspectives of conflict from the viewpoints of Liberal and Marxian scholars. Secondly, a general typology of conflicts in Nigeria will be attempted with their dysfunctional impact on society. The third, but most relevant issue is a general survey focusing on the Middle Belt peoples, and then the types of conflicts in the zone with the references to specific areas. Lastly, there will be a general conclusion with some suggestions on how conflicts can be avoided, minimized, solved or transcended. In the light of this,

this paper is divided into five parts/sections. This section is the introduction while the second parts focuses on theoretical and conceptual issues. The third part examines the nature of conflicts in a plural state like Nigeria, subsumed under this is the analyses of communal conflicts which are categorized into two: namely inter and intra-communal conflicts. The fourth section of the paper zeroes in on the Middle Belt Zone with brief historical sketches of the major ethnic groups, followed by a state by state expose of communal conflicts. The last part is the conclusion.

## **II. CONFLICTS: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FORMULATIONS:**

Conflict is a type of interaction that is characterized by antagonistic encounters or collisions of interest, ideas, policies, programme and persons or entities. In social science, or political analysis, the opposing concepts of conflict and cooperation (or consensus) are used to classify the two basic forms of political activity. Many social interactions involve neither of the two opposing concepts in pure form, but rather include some elements of each. Although theorists have generally recognized the overlapping duality of conflict and cooperation some such as Karl Marx (1975) and Thomas Hobbes (Strauss, 1950) have stressed that conflicts are inherent in human nature and particular political systems.

### **(a) The Liberal Perspective:**

A spate of literature abounds on the liberal perspective on social conflicts (Coser, 1962, 1968; Merton, 1949; Lewin, 1948; Parsons, 1949), Simmel, 1955; Enloe, 1973; Olorunlola, 1972; Young, 1982; O'Connell, 1967). Liberal scholars see conflict as an inescapable feature of society, just like cooperation. Conflict is seen as inherent in the social structures, sometimes even functional to the survival of society. However, particular types of conflict that are evaluated negatively are recommended for elimination through structural and policy change. Some theorists go to the extent of positing that conflict is sine-qua-non for the survival of a social system. "Conflict- Park asserts, "tends to bring about integration and a superordination and subordination of the conflict groups" (Park, 1941-pp, 551-70). Conflict is ranked among the few basic functional forms of human interaction.

### **(a) Marxian Perspective:**

The Marxian perspective exemplifies the conflict model of society. The model includes theories of history and society which see social behavior and transformation as the outcomes of conflict between rival interests and forces, and which places less emphasis on planning, friendship, cooperation, and consensus. The extreme example of conflict model is dialectical materialism (Marx, 1975; Althusser, 1969; Kolakowski, 1978, Dialectical materialism has been widely thought as the philosophy of Marxism, in contrast and relation to Marxist science, distinguished as Historical Materialism (Bottomore, 1983:120). The fundamental laws of dialectical materialism are;

- (i) The law of the transformation of quantity into quality, according to which gradual qualitative changes give rise to revolutionary qualitative changes;
- (ii) The law of the unity of opposites which holds that the unity of concrete reality is an opposite or contradictions;

- (iii) The law of the negation of the negation, which claims that in the clash of opposites, one opposite negates another and is in turn negated by a higher level of historical development that preserves something of both negated terms (a process represented in the triadic schema of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis).

In correlation with dialectical materialism, historical materialism; or materialist conception of history sees the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of the classes against one another. In the words of the Communist Manifesto:

### **(III) NATURE OF SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA:**

As a creation of imperial colonialism Nigeria exhibits the attributes of a heterogeneous state that is trying to create a nation state. Nigeria is an amalgamation of several culturally distinct nations (ethnic groups) that were glued together by the British colonial administration (Post and Vickers, 1973). There are over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria. Sir Hugh Clifford, a British colonial Governor described Nigeria of 1920 as a:

One policy of the colonial administration that exacerbated cultural differences was indirect rule. This policy favoured the tradition rulers who saw themselves now and then as custodians of these diverse cultural values and heritage, and worked hard to protect same (Dummoeye, 1987). With the advent of independence, the political leaders that emerged saw themselves as communal champions rather than 'nationalists' in the true sense. The political parties that emerged were rooted in the regions and ethnically based (Dummoeye, 1990). The national arena became the Centre of the regions and ethnic, communal and religious interactions more often resulting in conflict. The most noteworthy and devastating was the civil war that occurred between 1967-1970. The civil war led to the loss of millions of lives.

There are three identifiable forms of social conflicts, which may also be sub-divided into six types. These are the inter-communal and intra-communal conflicts, the one, which may be regarded as the 'globalization' of the first two types, is the national conflict eg. Civil war. The is outside the purview of this paper however. The inter-communal conflicts which may occur between two or more communities are:

- (I) Ethnic Conflicts
- (II) Religious Conflicts
- (III) Boundary Disputes
- (IV) Political Conflicts
- (V) Disputes over farmlands and grazing areas.

**Table I: Types of communal conflicts**

#### **INTER-COMMUNAL**

- (I) Ethnic conflicts

#### **INTRA-COMMUNAL**

- (i) Chieftaincy crisis (succession disputes)

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (II) Religious conflicts                     | (ii) Religious conflicts (Sectarian)                    |
| (III) Boundary disputes                      | (iii) Political representation                          |
| (IV) Political disputes                      | (iv) Land issues-inheritance & transfer of<br>Ownership |
| (V) Disputes over farmland<br>Grazing lands, |   |

### **(I) ETHNICISM**

Ethnicity is utilized as a tool for cognition of identity as an instrument of cultural distinctiveness, but more often, it is manipulated and becomes an uncontrollable source of aggressiveness, violence, conflicts and bloodshed (Dummoye, 1984:123). An ethnic group can be defined as a people sharing the same historical experience, having the same culture, speaking the same language and sharing the same belief about the future. Social scientists often equate ethnic group with tribe, which is defined as “a group united by a common name in which the members take a pride, by a common language, by a common territory and by a feeling that all who do not share this name are outsiders, enemies in fact” (Huntingford, 1963:66-67).

### **(II)RELIGION:**

In Nigeria, religion cannot be ignored as a mere object of manipulation by the political elites. It goes beyond that. It is because it is reality that renders it susceptible to manipulation. Religion is a social and spiritual phenomenon which involves the grouping of people around a faith perspective. Faith is an individual phenomenon which involves trusting in some object: event, principle, or being as the source of meaning in life (Roberts, 1984:43). Although religion serves moral purposes and provide adherents with spiritual needs it is also characterized by conflict-experiencing internal discord and contributing to conflict in larger society.

### **(iii)Boundary Disputes:**

As a result of the arbitrariness of colonial boundary demarcation, many ethnic groups find themselves in several administrative units. This often creates problems of identity and loyalty. Secondly, the pressure on land has forced some groups to encroach on what is regarded as other people's territory, this often creates tension and conflicts. Thirdly, communities often fight for land where there has not been clear demarcation of boundaries either by the state or traditional authorities of the part. By far, boundary disputes has been the most recurring sources of conflicts between communities, local government and states,

### **(iv)Political Conflicts/Representation:**

In a situation where two or more communities are in the same electoral constituency (federal/state), representation often causes conflicts, this may be more acute where the communities belong to different ethnic groups. Political and representation have come to be seen as being intricately linked with the access to resources, employment, social infrastructure and political appointment hence the issue of representation has become a serious source of competition and conflicts. These conflicts should not be confused with political thugery and violence that are often

associated with electioneering campaigns, this can occur in a seemingly homogeneous community. The inter-communal struggle for representation may exacerbate violence however.

**(v) Disputes Over Farmlands/Grazing Land:**

This type of conflicts often occur between sedentary farming communities and the itinerant Fulani herdsmen who are often accused of destroy cash/food crops. These conflicts is prevalent in most Middle Belt states between the Fulani's and their host communities.

**(vi) Chieftaincy Disputes:**

This is often conflicts within communities, although where two ethnic groups occupy the same territory, conflicts, may also occur. As intra-communal conflicts, chieftaincy disputes are usually associated with problems of succession after the demise of a traditional ruler. It usually occurs between contending ruling houses within the community, especially where there is an absence of a universally acceptable percepts of formula for succession.

**(vii) Natives (Indigenes Vs. Settlers Syndrome:**

A more source of conflicts in many communities in Nigeria, and especially in the Middle Belt Zone is the dichotomy and pathological mistrust between those who regard themselves as settler or non-natives. This dichotomy often degenerates into conflicts especially in situations where resources, especially land, are scare. In peculiar circumstances where the 'settlers' are numerically more than the 'natives', political representation and appointments become contentious. Studies however have shown that only few communities/ethnic groups can be regarded as autochthonous in what is now known as Nigeria (Usman, 1994; Green, 1974). Most Peoples/communities in contemporary Nigeria migrated from numerous places in the pre-colonial and early colonial period. However in most urban Centre's of Nigeria, the tendency has been to separates the 'setters' from the 'natives'.

**IV PATTERN OF CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE BELT ZONE:**

**(a) Ethnic & Administrative Composition of the Zone:**

There are six states that are covered under this zone. These are Benue, Kaduna, Kogi, Kwara, Plateau and Nasarawa, with the Federal Capital Territory.

**TABLE II: POPULATION OF THE ZONE:**

STATE	POPULATION	NUMBER OF L.G.A'S
1. Benue	2,780, 378	24
2. Kaduna	3,967, 252	21
3. Kogi	2,079,046	21
4. Kwara	1,566,469	16
5. Plateau)		17
6. Nasarawa)	3,283,704	13
7. Abuja FCT	378,671	6

Sources: National Population Commission, Abuja: 1991 Provisional census

This zone is made up of 118 local Government Areas. It is situated in the defunct Northern Region with about one hundred ethnic groups. In terms of pre-colonial political organization these societies within the zone are made up of centralized and decentralized systems (Dalli, 1996). The major centralized political systems include the Nupe, Yoruba, Eriba (Igbira), Hausa/Fulani and Igbala, while the decentralized or acephalous political system are the Tiv, Idoma, Iggede (though the two now becoming centralized), Berom, and the autochthonous groups in the southern Kaduna state Bajju (Kaje), Angan, Bekulu (Ikulu), Atyab (Katab), and Tachevak (Kazah-Toure, 1995).

Table III: Middle Belt States & Main Ethnic Groups:

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 1. Benue     | Tiv, Idoma, Iggede   |
| 2. Kaduna    | Hausa, Fulani, Bajju, Katab                                  |
| 3. Plateau   | Berom, Angas, Hausa & Other 'Chadic' Communities             |
| 4. Kogi      | Igbala, Yoruba (Okun), Igbira, Ogori/Magogo, Nupe (Bassange) |
| 5. Kwara     | Yoruba, Fulani, Baruten, Nupe                                |
| 6. Nasarawa  | Hausa, Fulani, Igbira, Gbajji, Bassa, Tiv                    |
| 7. FCT Abuja | Gbajji, Hausa, Nupe, Igbira (all autochtones)                |

In Benue state, there three dominant ethnic groups in Benue the Tiv, Idoma and Iggede. In Kwara state, there are Yoruba, Nupe, Baruten and Fulani. Kogi is made up of the Yoruba (Okun), Igala, Igbira, Ogori/Magogo and Nupe (Bassange). Plateau has Berom, Angas, Hausa and other communities collectively and linguistically as Chadic people. Kaduna is composed of the Hausa, Fulani Bajju, Katafs and the small communal politics in the former Southern Zaria.

#### (V) CONFLICTS WITHIN THE MIDDLE BELT ZONE:

Table IV shows the locations of communal conflicts in the zone together with dates, and nature of conflicts. This table has not covered all conflicts, but selected a few that we can think are representative of the categorizations that we made earlier. One fact has come out clearly, conflicts is not limited to any particular community, ethnic group or state. It is a pervasive phenomenon. A major factor of communal conflicts in the zone is land or boundary disputes. This shows that land is becoming a very scarce factor of production either due to population pressure, land alienation, or concentration of land in a few hands.

Not all conflicts mentioned in Table IV will be covered, but we shall endeavor a few notable cases that have generated interest and concern nation- wide.

#### (a) NASARAWA STATE (IGBIRA & BASSA COMMUNITIES)

These two communities occupy Toto and Doma Local Government Areas of Nasarawa state. The Bassa and the Igbira have been living together in the past. However, the Bassa claim that the Igbira given chiefdoms while the Bassa and Gbagyi who are in clear majority have none. The Igbira claim that the Bassa are 'settlers'. The Igbira are spread in areas north and east of the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. They are therefore found in Kogi, Edo, Nasarawa, Niger and the



Federal Capital Territory of Abuja (Brown, 1995). The Igbira claim origin from the Igala. Their main occupation in agriculture. The Igbira-Bassa conflict is not new. Between 1985 and 1995, the old Plateau state government set up six different commissions Enquiry on the issue. One of the While papers (1985) reported that the Bassa and Gbagyi are in the majority, but the two chiefdoms area are headed by the Igbira.

**(b) KWARA STATE (ILORIN: AFONJA DESCENDANTS VS THE FULANI RULING HOUSE:**

Historically, Ilorin is a Yoruba town under the control of the Alafin of Oyo. Following the Fulani Jihad of 1804, the town fell to the Jihadist, following what was regarded as the treachery of Afonja of Ilorin, who was the Are OnaKakanfo (Field Marshal) of Yoruba land. He solicited for the military support of MallamAlimi itinerant Fulani Islamic leader in Ilorin to rebel against the Alafin of Oyo (Johnson, 1973:99). By 1824, MallamAlimi with his followers and the support of some former lieutenants of Afonja killed the latter (Afonja) and sized political authority in Ilorin. Since then, the descendants of mallamAlimi took over the traditional rulership (Emir) of Ilorin from the descendants of Afonja. For more than a century, the descendants of Afonja seemed to have accepted this transfer of power which was reinforced by the British colonial administration, until the advent of party politics in the 1950s, when the Afonja descendants started to agitate for a return to the status-quo-ante. **KADUNA STATE (RELIGION CUM ETHNIC CONFLICTS: THE ZANGO-KATAFS CRISIS)**

A lot has been written on the zango-katafs crisis that it has become part of the unfortunate history of ethnic-cum-religious conflicts in Nigeria (Kukuh, 1993; Kazah-Tour, 1995; Sako, 1998). In 1992, hundreds of lives were in the Zango-Katab crisis. Most of those who were both member of the Hausa and zango-katafs communities. The conflicts and wanton destruction of lives and property spread to other urban centres in Kaduna state, Zaria (Sabon-Gari) Kaduna, Ikara, and Kafanchan becomes theatres of ethnic violence. In the words of Kazah-Toure (1995) several factors were responsible for this inter-communal conflicts:

The last crisis occurred in 1992 as a violent inter-community clash between the Atyab and the Hausa community, the conflicts spread to other towns and for about three days, there was virtual anarchy as a systematic ethnic cleansing went on both sides. Following the crisis, the judicial commission was set up, many were jailed- but a final solution has not been found.

**(c) BENUE STATE (THE TIVS & THE QUEST FOR LAND ):**

THE Tiv language belongs to the Benue-Congo sub-family of the Niger-Congo family of languages. The Tiv claim they have no dialects, that they speak the same language and can understand one another. This is because unlike many other people of Nigeria, the Tiv were never conquered or seriously penetrated by other people before British colonialism. As farmers, the Tiv need land, and as their population increases, they move outwards and in the process encroached on the land of their neighbors. The Tiv identify the land with the people who live and work on it.

**(d) PLATEAU STATE (BEROM VS HAUSA NATIVES SETTLERS SYNDROME):**

The Plateau area which is popular for its clement climate and tin mining was a resort for refugees fleeing from invasion in the pre-colonial period (Dalli, 1996; 190-191). The Ngas were driving from Borno about 1100 AD, and they came in contract with other groups like Anwei, Sura Tal. These groups constitute the Chadic linguistic peoples. The Berom also entered from the north and entered Plateau, they expanded and displaced other ethnic groups in areas around the present day Jos. The people of the Plateau, inspire of the linguistic affinity were not united. The Hausa migrated to Jos in the early period of British colonialism, and the number increased during the period of tin mining. They are engaged in commerce and farming.

**CONCLUSION:**

We have tried to show that conflict is an inescapable phenomenon in human interaction, but when such conflicts become dysfunction to the political system, they become a source of worry. Communal conflicts in Nigeria has been exacerbated by the economic crisis and pauperization of citizens in recent times. Factors that account for these conflicts are numerous. These include ethicism, religious differences and their manipulation, land hunger and burgeoning population, chieftaincy disputes and the native/settler syndrome.

In the Middle Belt Zone, most of these conflicts are based on the notion of perceived injustice by one community or group against another. However, the fundamental reason for social conflict is the quest by the individual within a group/community for security, self-actualization and survival in the midst of serious socio-economic constraints. Conflict is an endemic phenomenon within the Nigeria polity, so no zone, state, community has a monopoly of it. What makes the difference between a volatile situation and an ordinary disagreement or the difference between hostile attitude and open conflict is the level of tolerance of the those involved, the mechanism for conflict resolution, and the nature of the involvement or reaction of the state, be it local, state or federal government.

Since offering solution to conflicts is not within the purview of this paper, conflicts can be mitigated if those who hold leadership positions in government react promptly to danger signals and put in place policies that emphasis cooperation rather than conflict. Conflict cannot be erased totally, but it can be mitigated through accommodation, super ordination by a superior arbiter, compromise, toleration, assimilation, through cultural diffusion, and good governance.

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