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Xenophobic Factors in Inter-Group Conflicts: A Look at The Nigeria Case

Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of
Political Science (NAJOPS).
2002, Vol. 2(2)
ISSN:2992-5924
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Introduction

One of the paradoxes of our earthly existence is the ubiquity of social strife, conflict wars. These concepts are coterminous terms and will be used inter-changeably in this paper. Men as Thomas Hobbes has told us entered into civil society in order to preserve their lives and avoid the "war of everyone against everyone". But the irony of it is that war or civil strife has become a recurring social decimal in human history. Think of the great human conflicts that history has recorded: the Persian wars (499-449 BC) between Greeks and the Persian Empire; the Peloponnesian War, (431-404 BC) between Sparta and Athens; the great Punic wars (264-146 BC) between Rome and Carthage; the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815 AD) in which France under "Napoleon 1 destabilized the peace of Europe in a bid to "establish the supremacy of France over that continent. As in Europe so it has been in other parts of the world. Think of the Zulu wars (1820-1846) between the indigenous South Africans and the invading white settlers; the Ashanti wars (1824-1896) between the Ashantis of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and the British imperialists; the Inca wars (1525-32) between Huascar and Atahualpa of South America; the Sino-Japanese wars (1856-1860 and 1894-1895) the latter of which was fought for the control of Korea. In the 20th Century, the world has witnessed two great wars; the first and second World Wars (1914-18 and 1939-45 respectively), both of which seriously threatened the continued existence of man on our planet earth. These wars and many more minor ones fought by social groups and sovereign nations underscore the fact that in trying to avoid the interpersonal strife's characteristic of life in pre-civil society, men have made strife a cardinal principle of inter-group relations. In international relations, sovereign states have relied on the so-called ultima ratio (the recourse of war) as the decisive factor in settlement of disputes. Yet humanity needs peace for its progress, its happiness, and above all its raison d'etre. How can this paradox be explained? The explanation, it seems, could be sought in the reality of things generally, and in the human nature. Some great minds in history have reflected on the reality of things and affirmed the inevitability of conflicts, including social conflicts. For Heraclitus strife is the parent of things. It is the nature of all realities. As he put it, that which differs in itself, is in agreement; harmony consists of opposing tension, like that between the bow and the Lyre". For Hegel, adopting the ideas of Heraclitus, the logic of things rests on the triad of the thesis, antithesis and synthesis. For Karl Marx, still building on Heraclitian principle; human progress comes about as a result of the clash of

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opposites. Ralf Darendorf, the great sociologist has in the same vein stated that "Every society display at every point dissensus and conflict; social conflict is ubiquitous.

There is also to be considered, the reality of human nature. Man is essentially a selfish animal concerned primarily with his self-preservation. It is, paradoxically, in his bid to preserve himself that man makes war, in the prosecution of which he stands a grave risk of losing his life. This quest to preserve self is what Thomas Hobbes calls diffidence; that is to say apprehension cast into future. Diffidence is the motif that impels men of the same stock to live together, and as Nnamdi Azikiwe once put it:

Very few human beings live in isolation from their kind, consciousness of kind leads to community living. A community develops into small world with its own ethos and taboos. Each member of a community owes it allegiance and, in return the community gives security and provides protection to the individual.

This endogamous community is what is usually referred to as tribe or ethnic group. They are usually descended from a common ancestor, and having occupied a specific territory for a long time in social interaction, they soon develop cultural, religious and linguistic homogeneity. They begin to look askance at other group, or any person from outside their fold and perceive them as enemies. In other words, they develop what we have chosen to call xenophobic tendencies.

Xenophobic tendencies usually find expression in ethnocentrism, Stereotypes, pride and prejudice, all of which lead to irrational hatred of those regarded as strangers Ethnocentrism, according to H. M. Johnson, is the partly conscious but largely unconscious tendency, when one comes in contact with foreigners' (bearers of any strange cultural patterns), to take the culture of one's own group as the basis of one's emotional reactions cognitive assessments, and aesthetic and moral judgments⁷. Ethnocentrism strengthens a person's loyalty to his own group, and loyalty to one's group reinforces ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism has constituted serious barriers to international peace and harmony- and has indeed been at the root of major wars and inter-group conflicts. To be sure, the origin, and to some extent the course of the second world war, owed much to the xenophobic and edino-centric proclivities of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party members who extolled the imagined supremacy of the Germany race, and whose fear of the Jews led to the greatest program that ever took place in human history. It has also been mooted that the 'A bomb could never been used if the Japanese belonged to the white Caucasian race.

Stereotypes can be defined as the attribution of general psychological characteristics to large human groups. They are standardized mental pictures that are held in common members of a group and that represent oversimplified opinions. Affective attitude of uncritical judgements. Stereotypes can generate inter-group prejudice, which would lead to physical confrontation. We shall see later how stereotypical utterances and innuendos led to violent communal conflict and riots. Pride and Prejudice are complementary phenomenon, which reciprocally reinforces each other. Pride is inordinate self-esteem, which makes one exhibit disdain and conceit in his dealings with others. A given social or ethnic group may have a bloated image of itself; which predisposes its members to arrogant and condescending, behaviour towards other social groups, which they perceive as inferiors. When that is the case the possibility of violent clash in the event of any trifling misunderstanding between the imagined superior and inferior groups becomes great. Thus, a little disagreement between two social groups, which could have been settled through dialogue, and negotiation may flair up into open war as a result of pride and

prejudice skulking in the bosom of members of the groups. Again, as we shall see, some of the serious inter-group wars and conflicts in Nigeria resulted from this phenomenon.

We shall now examine a few cases of inter-group wars and conflicts in Nigeria, caused mainly, but not exclusively by xenophobic factors we have discussed above.

Some Inter-Group Conflicts in Nigeria Since 1900.

Nigeria, as exists today, is a 'gift' of imperialism and colonialism. Before the year 1900, there was no country, defector and dejure called Nigeria. Rather there were many mini-states scattered along the basins, estuaries, confluence, and distributaries of the Rivers Niger and Benue. Each mini-states was culturally and linguistically homogeneous and enjoyed independent and sovereign status. But when Britain, in 1900, formally declared the area currently known as Nigeria her colonial territory, a new, multi-national but dependent nation-state came into existence¹⁰. The amalgamation of the northern and Southern parts into one political entity in 1914, further strengthened the nascent state. But within this syncretic state were over 200 ethnic-linguistic groups" - a veritable theatre for inter-group tensions and conflicts.

Some of the significant ethnic groups in Nigeria include the Hausa, the Fulani, the Kanuri, the Nupe, the Tiv, the Igala, the Gwani, the Idoma, the Igbira, the Chamba, the Birom, the Jukun and the Jeba-all in the North. In the South - west we have the Yoruba, the Edo. The Urhobo and Isoko, and the Itsekiri. In the South - East we have the Igbo, the Ijaw, the Efik- Ibidio, and the Ekoi. These ethnic groups co-existed in pre-colonial period without tensions and strifes. This is because as Nnoli has noted, ethnicity "cannot exist unless individuals from different communal groups are in contact. Thus with increased contact, particularly in the context of political power-sharing and resource allocation within the single' .Nigerian polity, frictions and tensions developed, leading in some cases, to outright violent strife and wars. Little wonder then that inter-group conflicts, climaxed by a horrendous civil war, descended on the country sentencing her to chronic political and social instability and wreaking havoc on her development efforts.

Inter-group conflicts and wars in Nigeria since her inception in 1900 are beyond count. For the purpose of this paper we can only mention a few categorical ones because of their relative weight on the scale of socio-political instability in Nigeria. The first category' consisted of uprising against the imperialist/colonial administration and administrators. For example the Egba Uprising (or Adubi war) of 1918, which could be classed as nationalist struggle since it was motivated by deeply felt resentment against alien rule and-termination of Egba independence. A similar uprising was the Aba women riots of 1929, during which the Igbo women of Aba and environ attacked both the warrant Chiefs and the European administrators for contemplating to impose taxes on women, and the abuses of native court process by warrant Chiefs. The violence that erupted in the wake of the 1945 general strike, as well as the riots and shootings of

Enugu coal miners, which led to the death of twenty-one miners, belongs to this Category too.

The second category of inter-group conflicts in Nigeria would include the Kano riot of 1953, the Tiv riots of 1960 and 1964, the post - election riots and violence western Nigeria in 1965, the May 1966 (unitary decree) riots in Northern Nigeria. The Boro-Nottingham revolt of 1966, the Nigerian civil war 1967-70,

the Maitatshine religious riots in Kano (1979), Maiduguri (1982) Kaduna (1982) Yola (1984) and Gombe (1985) the Zangon-Kaiaf conflicts of February and May 1992, the Ogoni riots of 1993-94, the incessant chashes between the Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba ethnic mouth-piece - Odua People Congress (OPC) in Lagos state and the Jukum/Tiv ethnic was in Benue state since the beginning of the 21st century. With the exception of the post-election riots and violence in western-Nigeria in 1965, all the inter-group conflicts listed in the second category were motivated by xenophobic factors. We shall now briefly discuss a few of them to illustrate our point.

(a) The 1953 Kano Riots

On May 16, 1953, a very serious riot broke out in Kano, Northern Nigeria, between the Hausas on the one hand, and the Igbos and Yorubas on the other. In the riots that spread throughout the city, 36 people lost their lives although unofficial account put the figures at 46 dead and over 241 wounded. The riots resulted from political misunderstanding between the northern and southern members of the House of Representatives in Lagos over the historic self-Government for Nigeria in 1956 motion by Tony Enahoro of the Action Group. Southern members supported the motion while northern members were opposed to it, on the ground, that the North was not yet ready to shoulder the responsibility of self-governance. On account of this, the northern delegates were booed, ridiculed and called names by their southern counterpart, including the irate Lagos crowd. The Northern delegates went home crest-fallen. In an attempt to explain the issues involved to the northern people, Chief Akintola led a delegation of his party to the north, and when they came to Kano, the Hausas used the opportunity to express their morbid hatred for the southerners. They descended mercilessly on the ordinary southerners particularly the Igbos. It is evident therefore that the riots had ethnic and xenophobic undertone. The refrain in Northern leaders; and even followers; thinking was that the south should leave them alone. They regarded the amalgamation of the North and South by Lugard in 1914 as a "mistake.

(b) The Tiv Riots:

The Tiv riots yet another example of xenophobic factors at work. The Tiv were known to have deep resentment for the Hausa Fulani hegemony and have taken every available opportunity to express that resentment. They shortly warded off the incursion of Islam into their homeland. They adopted an attitude of non-cooperation with the Northern regional government dominated by the Hausa Fulani, and spearheaded the formation of the United middle Belt Congress (UMBC) which strongly agitated for the creation of the middle-Belt State. According to Ahmadu Bello, the Tiv people refused to accept lawfully constituted authority in that they refused to be counted for tax or to answer summonses. They obstructed the staff of the regional government in the course of their duties, and disobeyed the lawful instruction of the Native Authority.

These recalcitrant behaviours of the Tiv indicate the extent the people hate and disdain the Hausa Fulani and their imposed authority. This recalcitrance became very much pronounced after the 1959 Federal elections in Nigeria. The UMBC had embraced the Action Group, hoping that its electoral victory would ensure the creation of the much-desired middle-Belt State. Unfortunately the Action Group failed to win the 1959 election, having won only 73 seats in a House of 312 seats. This left the Tiv greatly disappointed and frustrated and so they decided to take up arms. According to Ugbana Qkpu, between March and October 1960 (i.e. a few months after the release of the results of the 1959 elections) there were many incidents of sporadic protests and insurrections in which the Tiv used dane guns, arrows, spears and other

arms to attack supporters of the Northern people's Party (NPC), Native Authority officials and police. The Regional Government did not succeed in solving the Tiv problem even with the dissolution of the Native authority, which had lost the peoples confidence, nor by evacuating the Fulani nomads in the Tiv area whose cattle were subjected to intolerable arrow attacks. Hence in February 1964 a more serious wave of demonstrations, riots house burning and killing swept across Tiv land. Police units were subject to attacks which now took the form of gorilla warfare with distinct military character.

Although the Tiv riots have been variously explained with frustration aggression hypothesis, we would like to contend that ethnocentrism was a major variable in the riots. It was the deep-rooted resentment of the Hausa Fulani domination that provided the base on which other variable rested. After all, as United States Government publication had correctly asserted; There is no single cause (for political violence), which is more or less potent. In fact, usually there are multiple causes and important contributing conditions rooted in historical relationship and brought to violence by a variety of catalysts.... The fact was that the Tiv people never entirely welcome the Fulani nomads and their leaders.

(c) The Maitatshine Religious Riots

No record of inter-group conflicts in Nigeria will be complete without any mention of the Maitatsine riots. The riots were remarkable in their intensity and persistence, and devastating in their impact. The uprisings first started in Kano on December 18, 1979. It was contained though not without a staggering casualty figure of 4,177 dead, with many more seriously wounded. Next the Maitatsines struck at Maiduguri. 26-29 October 1982, leaving 188 souls dead. On 29 September through to October 1982, they struck again in Kaduna and 53 persons were killed. In Yola they replayed their February to 5th March 1984. And number was 568. Then the same episode was repeated in Gombe, Mauchi state, 26-29 April 1984. This time 105 people were murdered in cold blood.

Many, writers and commentators have sought to explain the Maitatsine saga as a result of 'in-built triggers in the Islamic faith', or as a result vaulting ambition on the part of Mallam Muhammadu Marwa, Alias Maitatsine, who was the central figure in the Maitatsine riots. Nevertheless hatred of 'strangers', or those who do not belong to a given endogamous social, or religious family, lies at the root of the so-called Maitatsine riots. The Islamic Religious itself appears to be the quintessence of hostility towards non-believers. Thus in Sura 2.21, 9.29, the Muslims are enjoined to attack absolutely at all times and in all places in the event of encounter with the unbelievers. In fact, the Muslims are under obligation to

Slay the idolatries whenever you may find them... Fight those of the disbelievers who are near to You and let them find harshness in you... strike Off their heads (unbelievers) until yee have made a great slaughter among them and build Them in bands; and neither gave them a free Discussion after wards....

Our argument is that even though the Maitatsine rioters were motivated by intense religious ardor, nevertheless the riots had ethnocentric connotations. Carrying out injunctions such as those stated above is an expression of loyalty to Islam, and as we have noted earlier loyalty to one's own group is, in a sense, ethnocentrism. It is a manifestation of one's belief in the superiority of his group vis-a-vis any other group. Such blind belief puts sense at a discount in any form of social relation.

The Zangon Riots

The Zangon conflicts in Northern Nigeria represent a fervid effusion of jealousy and blind hatred based on ethno religious differences. The riots came in two fell swoops in February and May 1992. And they collected a rich harvest of casualties. In the first Act, which was played on 6 February 1992, 95 persons lost their lives. 250 others were injured and 133 houses and 26 farmlands were destroyed. The second act was played during May 1992 with scenes in Kaduna, Zaria and Ikara. In the end "471 persons were officially confirmed killed...., With 250 and 188 of these deaths occurring in Kaduna city and Zangosn Kataf respectively". In addition to dead, 518 persons were injured, and 229 houses and 218 vehicles were destroyed in the same riots. These figures were, of course, official ones. The Zangon Hausa community in their own account recorded "names, of some 1, 528 members of the community who reportedly died in the disturbances".

The causes of the riots were multiple. According to Subera, "complex historical, political, cultural and economic factors, were at play in this outbreak of communal rioting, but the underlying factor was of course xenophobia. Two ethno cultural and religious groups, contemptuous of each other, were living in Zango, a town in the Zango Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna state - the numerically inferior, but politically dominant Muslim Hausa Fulani, settlers and the numerically superior but politically inferior "pangan population" of Kataf. These two socio-cultural groups were living together under conditions of mutual distrust, jealousy and prejudice. The dominated Kataf resented their domination and did so by "protests, which in certain cases were reinforced by violence". The dominant Hausa-Fulani group buoyed up by their traditional hegemony over this 'pagan' community treated the bitter with condescension. The tension between them was like tinder only a little spark to ignite a conflagration. And that spark was provided by the decision by the Zagon Kataf Local Government Council under the Chairmanship of a Kataf. Juri Babang Ayok, to relocate the Zangon weekly- market to a new site in the outskirts of Zango town. The Hausa community resisted the relocation claiming that the proposed site was part of their Muslim annual Eid praying ground. These conflicting positions finally escalated into violent confrontation we have described above.

The Zangon Katab communal conflicts stand out as a typical case of xenophobic reactions to conflict situations. The Hausa Fulani did not hide their disdain for the Kataf whom, they called such derogatory names as "Ama" or "Kafirai". The Kataf, on the other hand, demanded their freedom by resorting to violence, using their numerical superiority as an asset.

Space will not allow us to examine other outstanding cases of inter-communal violence actuated by the phenomenon of xenophobia. Nevertheless, it is patent to mention, if only in passing, such other inter-group conflicts that left permanent scars on Nigerian body politics.

The Nigerian civil war 1967 - 70, is one of them; the Ogoni crisis is another. The ethnic elements in them constitute major variables in explaining the cause and courses of these tragic events. During the Nigerian civil war, many soldiers on both sides were fighting not necessarily for the unity of Nigeria but to avenge wrongs done to member of their ethnic groups. The Hausa/Fulani soldiers for example, might be fighting to subdue the arrogant "nyamili" who had plotted to dominate the "Nigerian politics through his brashness and unbridled ambition. The Yoruba's resentment of the Igbo man, might explain why he took active part along with the Hausa Fulani, to 'feed fat the ancient grudge he bore the "kobokobo". In the same vein, the young Igbo soldiers might have no political stake in the civil war except to avenge the 'program'

visited on his ethnic group by the- "indolent" Hausa Falani ethnic group and his 'perfidious' Yoruba accomplice. James Coleman recorded how the Yoruba-Igbo animosity "boardered on the range of violence" said he:

At the height of the tension, radicals on both sides descended upon the local markets and bought up all available machetes, etc.

Such was the emotion by ethnic hatred, which bordered on xenophobia.

The same ethnic jingoism could be perceived in the activities of some of the Ogoni people, which led to the Ogoni-Andoni bloodbath, about which Newswatch of November 1993 reported thus: "the scope of carnage and destruction of properties is even more chilling than the Zangon Kataf case in Kaduna state". To be sure, the Ogoni people, and in fact all the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta, deserve compensatory treatment for the ecological problems created by oil exploration. But the agitators for compensation used the ethnic cord to press home their points. And in doing so, they provoked unnecessary hostilities both within their sub-ethnic groups and toward other ethnic in the country.

Conclusion

Inter-group hostilities and conflicts are categorical imperatives. It cannot be otherwise if we remember, first that conflict is immanent in nature, and secondly, and more pertinently, that human beings are naturally conflict-oriented. This makes them to seek protection through group identification. And this in turn, breed xenophobic tendencies in both the individual and the group. Xenophobia among social groups predisposes them into engaging in inter-group wars and the like. Although there may be other valid causes of inter-group conflicts, a deeper probe would reveal that xenophobic factors constitute the base of these conflicts. Thus, in Nigeria, with her numerous ethnic and linguistic groups inter-group conflicts have featured abundantly. The question then is, how can we reduce the incidence of inter-group, conflicts in Nigeria.

To my mind, two major factors may help one is education. Education liberates the mind, and helps to breakdown barriers keeping individuals and groups divided. With education individuals and groups will be able to appreciate and respect the cultures and ethos of other groups. Secondly, integrative measures should be introduced and seriously pursued. Some of such measures have, however been introduced in Nigeria, e.g. .the NYSC scheme, unity schools and cultural exchanges. But the problem lies in haphazard implementation. If Nigeria succeeds in fighting the "evil" of haphazard and perfunctory implementation of her taken towards communal peace, social justice and political stability.

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