MANAGEMENT OF INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA: A STUDY OF NIGERIA, 2000-2019

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Abstract
This paper examines the management of inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria between 2000 and 2023, with a focus on root causes and governmental responses. The objective is to analyze how historical grievances, economic disparities, and political marginalization contribute to persistent inter-ethnic tensions and to evaluate the effectiveness of various conflict management strategies employed by the Nigerian government. Utilizing a qualitative methodology based on secondary sources—including published books, journal articles, and newspaper reports—the study finds that colonial legacies, cultural and religious differences, and competition for resources are primary drivers of inter-ethnic conflict. Key findings indicate that while military interventions and policy reforms have achieved limited success in curbing immediate violence, initiatives such as the Niger Delta Amnesty Program and the Plateau Peace Building Agency show promise in promoting long-term peace through economic development and sustained dialogue. However, the study highlights the need for more proactive and comprehensive approaches to address the structural and systemic causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Nigeria.
Keywords: Inter-ethnic conflicts. conflict management, ethnicity, post-colonial Africa, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria's colonial history laid the foundation for inter-ethnic dynamics. The British colonial administration, in its quest for administrative convenience, amalgamated diverse ethnic and cultural entities into one nation-state in 1914. Fredrick Lugard, in the Report on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria, summarized the necessity for amalgamation under two headings: Finance and railways.[1] According to Michael Crowder:

> The immediate reason for the decision … was economic expediency. The Northern Protectorate was running at a severe deficit which was being met by a subsidy from the southern protectorate, and an Imperial Grant-in-Aid from Britain of about £300,000 a year. This conflicted with the age-old colonial policy that each territory should be self subsisting…
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> It was also felt that the prosperous southern protectorate could subsidize its northern neighbor until such a time as it became self-supporting. Furthermore, there was the pressing need to co-ordinate railway policy, which at the time was practically non-existent.[2]

The colonial political structure initiated by the British encouraged communal sentiments among Nigerians. The British seized every opportunity to spread the myth and propaganda that Nigerians were "separated" from one another by great distances, differences in history and traditions, and ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social, and religious barriers.[3] For instance, in 1920, Hugh Clifford made it clear that his administration would seek to secure "to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality, its chosen form of government, and the peculiar and social institutions which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and the accumulated experiences of generations of its forebearers."[4] This encouragement was reflected structurally by the administrative system of indirect rule and regionalization. The application of different colonial policies to the traditional institutions and structures of the various ethnic groups in Nigeriafurther sowed the seeds of discord among the divergent ethnic nationalities.[5]

The importance of the ethnic question and the need for each ethnic group to promote and protect its economic and political interests at the expense of other groups became reflected in the events of the late 1940s and early 1950s and remain a part of the Nigerian political system today.The rivalry, distrust, and lack of cooperation that characterized the relationship between the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria led each ethnic group to use its region as a basis

for political activity. As a sign of increased political awareness and solidarity among the main ethnic groups, ethnic associations were formed in the three regions. These included the Jamiyaar Mutanen Arewa (Association of the Peoples of the North), a cultural association formed in 1948 to unite all northern peoples, which later developed into the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in 1951. In the Western region, another cultural association, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Society for the Descendants of Oduduwa), was formed by Obafemi Awolowo in 1948 and transformed into a political party, the Action Group (AG), by 1949. In the Eastern region, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) emerged from and derived substantial support from the Igbo State Union formed in 1936.[6]

By 1951, the three main political parties in Nigeria were regionally based and derived most of their support from their respective ethnic groups through various ethnic associations.[7] The NCNC had a national spread more than the AG and the NPC. From 1946 to 1966, politics in Nigeria saw increased conflicts between these regionally-based parties for control of the center and consolidation of their authority and influence within their regions. For instance, supporters of the NPC and the supporters of the AG clashed in Kano in 1953. The violence was the high point of Enahoro's 1953 motion for self-government by 1956, which the north amended with the words "as soon as practicable."[8] During the conflict, "Southerners and Northerners were attacking each other, burning and pillaging each other's property, mutilating bodies of victims…leaving fifty people dead and over two hundred injured."[9] Moreover, the political parties that emerged in the early post-independence period—and even during the Second Republic—continued to reflect ethno-regional biases

The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked a significant period in Nigeria's political trajectory. However, the transition did not immediately translate into harmonious inter-ethnic relations. The power dynamics at the federal, state, and local levels often mirrored ethnic considerations, leading to a struggle for political influence and resource allocation. The unequal distribution of resources, particularly in oil-rich regions, fueled inter-ethnic conflicts. The Niger Delta, home to various ethnicities, experienced tensions over oil revenue allocation and environmental degradation. The struggle for control and benefit-sharing became a flashpoint, demanding nuanced conflict resolution strategies.

Also, Nigeria's diverse ethnic composition fostered identity-based politics, with politicians often exploiting ethnic sentiments for electoral gains. This era saw the rise of ethno-regional militias and identity-driven political movements, contributing to the complexity of inter-ethnic relations. Religion, closely intertwined with ethnicity, added another layer to conflicts. The Christian-Muslim divide, particularly pronounced in the Middle Belt and northern regions, manifested in sporadic violence. The introduction of Sharia law in some northern states heightened tensions, necessitating a delicate approach to manage inter-religious and inter-ethnic dynamics. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the management of inter-ethnic conflicts in post-colonial Africa, looking at Nigeria, between 2000 and 2023. The chosen timeframe of 1999 to 2023 encapsulates the post-military rule era, marked by attempts at democratic governance and economic development.

Definition of terms
It is necessary to begin this paper by defining key terms used in it. Conflict, according to G. Evans and J. Newham, is defined as "a social condition which arises where two or more parties pursue goals which are incomparable."[10] It also refers to a situation in which two or more parties perceive that their interests, needs, values, or goals are incompatible and are actively opposing or competing against one another. Conflicts can arise in various contexts, including interpersonal relationships, groups, organizations, and societies. Conflicts can manifest in different forms, such as verbal disagreements, physical confrontations, or prolonged disputes. Inter-ethnic conflicts are, therefore, disputes or violent confrontations between different ethnic groups within a society or region. These conflicts often arise due to historical grievances, competition for resources, political power struggles, cultural differences, or perceived inequalities. Inter-ethnic conflicts can lead to significant social and political instability, human suffering, and loss of life. They often require comprehensive approaches to address underlying issues and promote reconciliation.

Another term that requires definition is "conflict management". According to D. A. Lake and D. Rothchild, "Conflict management is a continuing process with no end point or final resolution".[11] They add that conflict management is an imperfect process and that it is not possible to eliminate all threats of future ethnic conflict in a multi-ethnic society. Conflict management also involves the process of identifying, addressing, and resolving conflicts in a constructive and effective manner. It encompasses various strategies and techniques aimed at minimizing the negative impacts of conflict and finding mutually acceptable solutions. Conflict management can include negotiation, mediation,

arbitration, and other forms of dispute resolution. The goal of conflict management is not necessarily to eliminate conflict but to manage it in a way that reduces harm and promotes positive outcomes for all parties involved.

Causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria
Inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria present a significant challenge, rooted in a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors. These conflicts often stem from deep-seated historical grievances and are further exacerbated by contemporary issues. Socially, ethnic divisions are reinforced by cultural and religious differences, leading to mistrust and a lack of cooperation among communities. Economically, competition over scarce resources—such as land, employment, and government allocations—fuels tension and rivalry. Politically, the struggle for power and representation within Nigeria's multi-ethnic state often results in ethnic favoritism, marginalization, and disputes over political control. Each of these factors—social, economic, and political—will be examined in detail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Nigeria.

Social causes: The social causes include cultural and religious differences, historical grievances and injustices, and identity and ethnic loyalty. Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups, each with its unique cultural and religious practices.[12] These differences often lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. For instance, the historical rivalry between the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north and the predominantly Christian Igbo in the southeast and Yoruba in the southwest has fueled tensions and conflicts. Historical events, such as the Biafran War (1967-1970), where the southeastern region attempted to secede from Nigeria, have left lingering resentments and distrust between ethnic groups. These historical grievances continue to influence inter-ethnic relations and often spark conflicts. In addition, strong ethnic identities and loyalties often overshadow national identity. Ethnic groups may prioritize their group's interests over national interests, leading to clashes with other groups perceived as threats. For example, the Tiv-Jukun conflict in Benue and Taraba states is partly fueled by strong ethnic loyalties and competition for cultural dominance.

Economic causes
Competition for resources, economic inequality and poverty and unemployment and underemployment are major economic causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Nigeria's wealth in natural resources, such as oil in the Niger Delta, has led to intense competition among ethnic groups for control and benefits. The perceptions of unequal distribution of these resources often lead to conflicts. For example, the Niger Delta militancy arose from grievances over the exploitation of oil resources and environmental degradation without adequate compensation to the local communities. Also, disparities in economic development and access to opportunities among different regions and ethnic groups contribute to tensions. Regions perceived as being marginalized economically are more likely to engage in conflicts. The herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt region are partly driven by economic pressures and competition over land and water resources. In addition, high levels of unemployment, particularly among the youth, create a fertile ground for recruitment into ethnic militias and armed groups. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, while primarily driven by ideological factors, also exploits economic grievances among the youth.

Political causes
Among the major political causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are political marginalization, electoral violenceand State policies and federalism. Perceptions of political exclusion and marginalization by certain ethnic groups often lead to conflicts. Ethnic groups that feel under-represented in government and decision-making processes may resort to violence to express their grievances. The agitation for Biafra by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) stems from perceived political and economic marginalization of the Igbo people.
With regard to electoral violence, ethnic groups often mobilize around political candidates from their own ethnicity, leading to violent clashes during elections. Electoral violence is common in Nigeria, with political parties exploiting ethnic sentiments to gain support, as seen in the post-election violence in northern Nigeria following the 2011 presidential elections.

In addition, Nigeria's federal structure and state policies sometimes exacerbate ethnic tensions. The creation of states and local government areas often based on ethnic lines, frequently lead to conflicts over boundaries and resource allocation. For instance, the settler-indigene dichotomy in states like Plateau and Kaduna has fueled conflicts between ethnic groups competing for political control and access to resources.

Examples and case studies

Inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria from 2000 to 2019 have been numerous and varied, reflecting deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and socio-economic tensions. One of the most notable examples is the Jos crises, which began in the early 2000s and have erupted periodically since. These conflicts primarily involve the indigenous Christian Berom, Anaguta, and Afizere communities clashing with Muslim Hausa-Fulani settlers. The Jos crises have been driven by competition over land, political representation, and economic resources.[13] The violence has resulted in thousands of deaths and the significant displacement of people. Efforts to resolve the conflicts have included government interventions, peacebuilding initiatives, and interfaith dialogue; however, the underlying issues remain deeply entrenched. The Jos crises highlight the complex interplay of ethnicity, religion, and politics in Nigeria, demonstrating how historical grievances and competition for resources can ignite prolonged and deadly conflicts.

Another significant conflict is the Tiv-Fulani clashes in Benue State. These conflicts are primarily over land and grazing rights, with the predominantly farming Tiv people clashing with the nomadic Fulani herders.[14] The violence has intensified in the 21st century, exacerbated by environmental changes, population growth, and competition for scarce resources. The Tiv-Fulani conflict has seen numerous violent episodes, resulting in many deaths, displacement, and destruction of property. Government responses have included military interventions and attempts to establish grazing reserves, but these measures have often been inadequate or poorly implemented. The Tiv-Fulani conflict underscores the broader issue of farmer-herder clashes across Nigeria, driven by demographic pressures and changing land use patterns.

In Southern Kaduna, conflicts between the predominantly Christian indigenous communities and the Muslim Hausa-Fulani settlers have been another major source of violence. These conflicts have roots in historical land disputes, religious differences, and political marginalization.[15] The violence has been particularly severe, with frequent outbreaks resulting in numerous casualties and destruction of property. Efforts at conflict resolution have included government interventions, peacebuilding initiatives, and inter-community dialogue, but the deep-seated mistrust and grievances have made lasting peace elusive. The Southern Kaduna conflict highlights the challenges of managing ethnic and religious diversity in Nigeria, particularly in regions with a history of inter-communal tensions.

In the Niger Delta, inter-ethnic conflicts often revolve around control of oil resources and revenue distribution. The conflict between the Urhobo and Itsekiri, for instance, has been particularly intense. The violence is driven by competition for political representation and control over oil-rich lands.[16] The conflict has seen numerous violent clashes, including attacks on oil installations and communal violence. Government interventions, such as the creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Amnesty Program for militants, have aimed to address some of the underlying issues but have not fully resolved the ethnic tensions. The Urhobo-Itsekiri conflict underscores the economic dimensions of ethnic violence in Nigeria, where resource control and revenue distribution are central issues.

Nigerian government response to inter-ethnic conflicts

The Nigerian government has employed a variety of strategies to address and manage inter-ethnic conflicts across the country. These responses have ranged from military interventions to policy reforms and dialogue-based initiatives. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of these measures has been mixed, with some notable successes alongside persistent challenges.

Military interventions: One of the most common responses to inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria has been the deployment of military forces to restore order. For instance, during the Niger Delta militancy, the government launched several military operations, such as Operation Restore Hope and the Joint Task Force (JTF), to combat armed groups and secure oil infrastructure. While these interventions sometimes succeeded in quelling immediate violence, they often failed to address the underlying grievances of the local communities, leading to cyclical violence.

Peacekeeping and dialogue initiatives: The Nigerian government has also pursued peacekeeping and dialogue initiatives to foster reconciliation between conflicting ethnic groups. The Plateau State government, for example, established the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA) to address the recurring conflicts in Jos between the Hausa-Fulani and Berom communities. The PPBA engages in dialogue, mediation, and community-building activities to promote peaceful coexistence. These efforts have seen some success in reducing tensions and promoting understanding, though challenges remain in fully restoring trust.[17]

Policy reforms and legislative measures: In response to ethnic conflicts, the Nigerian government has implemented policy reforms aimed at addressing structural inequalities and fostering national unity. The federal character principle,

enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, mandates equitable representation of different ethnic groups in government appointments and public service positions. This principle aims to reduce perceptions of marginalization and ensure a more inclusive governance structure. However, its implementation has been criticized for being uneven and sometimes exacerbating ethnic tensions.

Socio-economic development programs: The government has launched various socio-economic development programs to address the root causes of conflicts, such as poverty and unemployment. The Amnesty Program in the Niger Delta, initiated in 2009, offered militants financial incentives, vocational training, and employment opportunities in exchange for laying down arms.[18] This program significantly reduced violence in the region and reintegrated many former militants into society. In the northern part of Nigeria, there is the Operation Safe Corridorinitiative, which offers a deradicalization and reintegration program for repentant Boko Haram members.[19] The program aims to rehabilitate former insurgents and reintegrate them into society, addressing the human aspect of conflict resolution.However, long-term success requires sustained investment in the region's development and addressing environmental degradation in the case of the Niger Delta region.

Legal and judicial responses: The Nigerian judiciary has played a role in resolving inter-ethnic conflicts through legal means. Courts have been used to adjudicate disputes over land, political representation, and resource allocation. For example, in the herder-farmer conflicts in Benue State, the implementation of the Anti-Open Grazing Law sought to reduce clashes by regulating grazing practices. Also, Ekiti have implemented laws to regulate grazing practices and reduce herder-farmer conflicts. While the law has faced resistance and implementation challenges, these laws represent attempts to use legal mechanisms to manage resource-based conflicts.

Regional and international collaboration: Recognizing the transnational nature of some conflicts, the Nigerian government has engaged in regional and international collaboration to address inter-ethnic tensions. Nigeria is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which facilitates regional peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising forces from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin, has been instrumental in combating Boko Haram, a group that exploits ethnic and religious divides.[20] This regional approach underscores the importance of collective action in addressing security threats.

Conclusion

This study explores the intricate dynamics of inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, examining the social, economic, and political factors driving these tensions. The research utilizes secondary sources—including published books, journal articles, and newspaper reports—to provide a comprehensive analysis. The colonial legacy, particularly British policies of amalgamation and divide-and-rule, laid the foundation for ethnic divisions that continue to shape Nigeria's socio-political landscape. The transition to civilian rule in 1999 did not immediately resolve these issues, as ethnic and regional rivalries have persisted in both political and economic spheres.

The research findings reveal that inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are fueled by historical grievances, economic competition, political marginalization, and strong ethnic identities. Socially, cultural and religious differences create barriers to trust and cooperation. Economically, competition for resources—such as land and oil wealth—exacerbates tensions, particularly in the Niger Delta and Middle Belt regions. Politically, the struggle for power and representation often results in ethnic favoritism and marginalization, further entrenching divisions. The Nigerian government's responses—ranging from military interventions to policy reforms and socio-economic development programs—have achieved mixed results. While initiatives such as the Niger Delta Amnesty Program and regional peacebuilding efforts show promise, addressing the root causes of these conflicts requires sustained, inclusive, and comprehensive strategies.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to managing inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Such an approach should include fostering inclusive governance, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and promoting continuous dialogue among ethnic groups. Effective conflict resolution must also take into account the historical context and address the socio-economic inequalities that fuel tensions. By understanding and tackling these underlying factors, Nigeria can move towards a more harmonious and stable society.

Endnotes

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