Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria

Real challenges remain if Nigeria’s fractious ethnic groupings are to be managed successfully.

By Sally Matthews and Hussein Solomon

From Chiapas to Chechnya, from India to Indonesia and from Algeria and Angola to Afghanistan, the world is witnessing a return to the “cult of origins” where difference often means destruction, destitution, despair and death. This was most graphically illustrated in the killing fields of Rwanda in 1994 where almost one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed. Ironically, the Rwandan genocide took place at a time when South Africans were freeing themselves from the last vestiges of apartheid and where differences were exalted in the notion of a “rainbow nation”. This irony, however, underscores an underlying truism: that the politics of identity can be both benign and malign.

It is natural for people to associate with each other. One way in which people associate is through ethnic groups. These groups provide people with a sense of belonging and identity and can thus play a vital role in modern society where many people feel lonely and alienated. However, ethnic groups can be a source of division and strong ethnic identities have frequently led to conflict and bloodshed. Nigerian society has seen many upheavals over the past century and ethnic identification and ethnic conflict have been causes as well as outcomes of much of the uncertainty and instability in Nigeria.

Examining Ethnicity

The term “ethnic group” is usually used to describe a group of people who have some idea of being united as a result of certain shared characteristics. Thomson describes an ethnic group as “a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language”. He notes that the focus of the concept is on sentiments rather than on geography. Morris-Hale discusses ethnicity, saying that it encompasses some combination of race, religion, culture and group identity, while Schrire says that the essential component of ethnicity is “assumed common descent, real or mythical”. Ethnicity is subjective rather than objective – it is a perceived sense of common origins and interests. It is also, at least to some extent, the choice of the individual involved. Individuals of a similar background may have different ethnic identities and different levels of identification with an ethnic group, and levels of ethnic identification may differ from one historical period to another.

There are a number of different theories regarding ethnicity. Each of these theories views the nature of ethnicity differently and has different approaches to the resolution of ethnic conflict. Three prominent theories are the primordialist, the instrumentalist and the constructivist approach. Primordialism sees ethnicity as a fixed characteristic of individuals and communities. Primordial attachments supposedly arise out of a sense of natural affinity rather than from social interaction. Supporters of primordialism claim that ethnic affiliations and identities are natural and ancient, and that modernisation tends to eliminate such identities. Ethnic identities are thus seen as fixed, and ethnic conflict is viewed as the natural outcome of these identities. However, this approach has been criticised by many and refuted by sociological evidence. Primordialism tends to explain conflict between ethnic groups as “natural” and therefore does not try to address the underlying causes of the conflict as ethnic tensions are taken as normal.

Instrumentalism, in turn, looks at the way in which ethnic identities and affiliations have been manipulated for political and economic gain. Ethnicity is viewed as a tool which is used by certain groups or individuals in a society in order to gain something. The instrumentalist approach does not see ethnic identification and ethnic conflict as different from any other type of political identification or conflict, and therefore ethnic conflict can be resolved in a similar way to other conflicts between com-
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The last four decades in Africa have been witness to several civil wars, many of which have an ethnic basis. In just the last decade over two million people have died in such wars. 

Ethnic conflict is thus an issue that cannot be ignored in Africa. The Western media seems to often explain such conflict as being the result of African “tribalism”. 

Ethnic conflict is seen as an inherent characteristic of African society implying that no further explanation of such conflict is required. This perception needs to be challenged and a deeper exploration into the nature of ethnic conflict in Africa should be undertaken. Ethnic conflict in Africa has origins which stretch back into the colonial era and even earlier, and is a result of a number of interacting factors. Several writers have drawn attention to the role played by colonialists in the development and promotion of ethnic identification. Leroy Vail notes how in pre-colonial times there are many examples of ethnic groups in Africa which coexisted peacefully, trading and intermarrying with each other.

It is thus not ethnic identification itself which is a problem, but the conflict which often, but not inevitably, ensues from such identification.

Islamic fundamentalism is playing an increasing role in ethnic-related conflict in Nigeria. Much of the conflict has to do with the introduction of Sharia law in several states in Nigeria. The end of colonialism left African states with a number of competing groups. Critics of this approach would argue that ethnicity is different from other types of political affiliations because individuals cannot at will decide which ethnic group they belong to as ethnic identifications are embedded and to some degree controlled by the society in which they occur.

Thirdly, constructivists attempt to bridge these and other theories of ethnicity. Ethnicity is seen as a social phenomenon which is not entirely the choice of the individual and is more than a tool to achieve a political or economic goal, but is also not immutable and unchanging. Ethnicity evolves with society. It is a process rather than a condition and should be studied in the specific context in which it developed. 

Ethnic conflict can therefore only be resolved through an understanding of the specific context in which it occurs. The analysis of ethnic conflict undertaken in this article will follow a constructivist approach.

It is important to note that ethnic identification is not synonymous with ethnic conflict. Rothchild notes that “[m]ost ethnic groups, most of the time, pursue their interests peacefully through established political channels”. In pre-colonial times there are many examples of ethnic groups in Africa which coexisted peacefully, trading and intermarrying with each other. It is thus not ethnic identification itself which is a problem, but the conflict which often, but not inevitably, ensues from such identification.

The Ethnic Composition of Nigeria

The boundaries of the state of Nigeria were, like the boundaries of many other African states, drawn up in an arbitrary manner by imperialists. The colonisation of Nigeria by Britain began during the second half of the 19th century and continued until independence in October 1960. The boundaries of Nigeria were consolidated in 1914 with the creation of the Nigerian Federation. These boundaries resulted in the modern state of Nigeria being the most populous African state by far and consisting of over 250 ethnic groups.

The colonial administrative division of Nigeria into three regions (North, East and West) led to the development of three dominant ethnic groups out of the diversity of ethnic groups existing in the area at the time. The creation of these regions encouraged the ethnic groups in those regions to organise and unite because the power of the region depended upon it. As a result, some of the many minority groups in Nigeria became consolidated into the three ethnic groups which have dominated politics in post-independence Nigeria. These three are the Hausa-Fulani, which consists of 30% of the population; the Yoruba, which makes up 20% of the population; and the Ibo people who make up 17% of the population. The Hausa-Fulani are a Muslim group of people who live in the North and include a further 29 ethnic divisions. The Yoruba people live in the Western Region and include approximately 12 further ethnic divisions. The Ibo live in the East and consist of about 32 separate ethnic groups. Both the Yorubas and Ibos are predominantly Christian, although other religions are also practised. There are also a number of minority ethnic groups living in each of the three regions, as well as members of each of the dominant ethnic groups who do not live in the region where their group dominates.

An Overview of Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria

Nigeria's multi-ethnic nature makes it especially vulnerable to the outbreak of ethnic conflicts. The history of Nigeria includes many examples of such conflicts and failed attempts to resolve these conflicts. Akinrinade notes that at some point in time every major ethnic group in Nigeria has threatened secession and that some of the worst periods of conflict in Nigeria were a result of ethnicity. Rothchild produces figures to show that over two million people have died in ethnic-related conflict in Nigeria since independence.
Colonialism and its long-term influence
The seeds for ethnic conflict in post-colonial Nigeria were sown by colonial administrative practices. Under colonial rule, Nigeria was divided into three regions, which were not equal in size or in population and were not treated equally. The Northern Region, for instance, was considerably bigger than the Southern Region. Until 1914, the two territories were administered separately, but even after they were amalgamated the British administrators allowed them to develop along different lines. The Muslim emirs in the North were allowed relatively free rein over the region and the North was generally shielded from Western influences. As a result, by independence there was a great disparity in education and development between the North and the South with the people from the South being better educated and more politically developed. This meant that at independence the Northerners felt threatened by the more developed and educated Southerners and the Southerners felt threatened by the more populous Northern Region.

Post-colonialism and ethnic conflict
At independence the division of Nigeria into three regions was maintained, with Nigeria structured as a federation. The political parties which took part in the election for Nigeria’s first parliament were largely organised along ethnic lines, with each of three dominant ethnic groups being represented by a political party. This meant that ethnic divisions in Nigeria were reinforced by both the regional divisions of Nigeria and the party cleavages. Ethnic and regional tensions were rife from the beginning of independence. These conflicts included ethnic-related coups and attempted coups; ethnic tensions as the result of dubious census results in 1963 and 1973; civil war as a result of the attempted secession of the Eastern Region; and several regional and religious conflicts with ethnic characteristics.

Religion as an exacerbating factor
Islamic fundamentalism is playing an increasing role in ethnic-related conflict in Nigeria. There were serious incidents of Islam fundamentalist uprisings against the government during the 1980s, and some reports suggest that such conflicts will only get worse. Much of the conflict has to do with the introduction of Sharia law in several states in Nigeria. Riots and protest marches have left hundreds dead and destroyed much property.

The religious conflicts in Nigeria have an ethnic dimension. The Hausa-Fulani ethnic group is predominantly Muslim with Christianity and other religions being dominant among the Ibo and Yoruba. Hausa-Fulani elites have attempted to use Islamic bonds to consolidate political power in the North with Christianity being used as an ideology of counter-mobilisation by various Northern ethnic minorities. This has meant that it is very difficult to distinguish between ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria as many conflicts have an ethno-religious nature.
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The military and ethnic conflict
The military has played a very dominant role in Nigeria, with about three-quarters of Nigeria's forty years of independence under military rule. Under military rule, conflicts are likely to be suppressed rather than resolved through bargaining and political changes. This results in a situation where minority groups are violently suppressed by military governments and turn to the use of violence themselves in an attempt to pursue their interests. Military governments often worsen ethnic loyalties as illustrated by the numerous acts of ethnic and religious manipulation which occurred under the military governments of Generals Muhammad Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha.37

The instability of the various military governments in Nigeria also contributed to ethnic conflict. According to Rothchild and Groth, the displacement of one regime with another frequently worsens intergroup tensions.38

Violent changes in government add to insecurity and uncertainty in a country, which makes people more likely to turn to ethnic affiliations in the pursuit of their interests, as there is no legitimate government that can be expected to respond to the needs and demands of the people.

Theories of Ethnic Conflict Management
Ethnic conflict results in death, disruption and insecurity. Ryan lists a number of negative results of ongoing ethnic conflict, noting that the longer conflict continues the more likely it is to lead to destructive processes which cause even more conflict.39 Because of the unpleasant outcomes of ethnic conflict, many suggestions have been made as to how to address such conflict. Different theorists have called for conflict elimination, conflict resolution, conflict management, conflict transformation and a variety of other impressive-sounding ways of dealing with such conflict.

Conflict elimination simply means to get rid of conflict. This need not occur through resolving or transforming the conflict, but may simply involve suppressing a conflict. Attempts to eliminate an entire ethnic group through genocide could even be considered a form of conflict elimination. Forcefully suppressing rebellions by ethnic groups is another way of eliminating conflict (at least temporarily) without adequately addressing the problem. This approach to addressing ethnic conflict leads to as many negative outcomes as the conflict itself and is unlikely to be a permanent solution.

The idea of conflict resolution implies that conflict can be solved. Ethnic conflict is thus seen as a temporary state of affairs which can be brought to an end. This perspective has been criticised by recent analysts of ethnic and other conflict. Lake and Rothchild point out that while ethnic conflict can be contained, no final resolution for such conflict can be found.40 The development of ethnic conflict is a process and so addressing ethnic conflict should also be a process rather than a finite event. Galtung criticises the idea of conflict resolution for privileging Occidental time cosmology by seeing time as linear and thus assuming that conflict has a finite life that can be definitively ended.41

The concepts of conflict management and conflict transformation are two recent and fairly similar perspectives on addressing conflict. The idea of conflict resolution is rejected and instead the response to conflict is seen as an ongoing process—conflict must be continually managed or gradually transformed. According to Lake and Rothchild, conflict management is "a continuing process with no end point or final resolution."42 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. Rupesinghe describes conflict transformation as a "flexible, yet comprehensive process, by which ultimately a culture of negotiation and accommodation replaces a culture of violence."43 Both concepts suggest that the response to ethnic conflict needs to be long-term, but they differ in that conflict transformation does allow for the possibility of a conflict-free future, whereas conflict management is more cynical about the possibility of eliminating conflict.

Practical Ways to Manage Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria
Procedures for addressing specific ethnic conflicts
The management of ethnic conflict resolves skilful negotiating and a careful assessment of each group's demands and fears. The management of specific incidences of ethnic conflict usually involves a mediator or negotiator who should be skilled in promoting co-operation. Such mediators could be international mediators or from the international arena. Individuals and groups playing this role need to pay attention to the variety of practical methods of managing conflict between ethnic groups that have been suggested by experts in the field.

Mediation involves providing positive incentives and threats of punishment.44 Information is made available to both sides and changes in their strategies are facilitated. Rewards are given for compliance and opportunities to save face are provided. Diplomatic pressure may be exerted and economic sanctions or military intervention can be threatened to encourage co-operation between conflicting groups.

The Harvard Negotiation Project produced four basic practical principles that should guide negotiation.45 Firstly, people should be separated from the problem; negotiators need to encourage groups to see their opponents' point of view and to see their opponents as people with needs. Secondly, negotiators ought to focus on interests rather than positions as this facilitates the identification of shared or compatible interests. Thirdly, options for mutual gain should be invented by negotiators; and finally negotiators should insist on objective criteria.

Negotiation techniques are valuable in the confrontation of specific conflicts and can lead to an end or reduction in violent conflict. Such techniques should be taken into account when resolving the incidences of ethnic conflict that regularly break out in Nigeria. However, skilful negotiation alone is inadequate for the successful management of ethnic conflict in Nigeria for two reasons. Firstly, because each ethnic conflict occurs in a specific context, general negotiation skills need to be contextualised before they can successfully be applied.46 Secondly, ethnic conflict must be seen as a result of the interaction of several broad factors. Certain general political and economic situations in a state can be conducive to the proliferation of ethnic conflict. While negotiation skills may result in the termination or abandonment of a particular conflict, ethnic conflict will be inevitable if
in 1996, six new states were created bringing the number of states in Nigeria to 36. This exercise was partly in response to demands from various ethnic groups, and partly an attempt to increase support for Babangida’s regime. Abacha’s rule saw the creation of even more states – in 1996, six new states were created bringing the number of states in Nigeria to 36. This followed the submission of almost 100 demands for new states.

Whether or not Nigeria’s adoption of federalism was a suitable and successful solution to Nigeria’s multi-ethnic nature has been the subject of many debates. There have been various differing perspectives on the success of federalism in Nigeria. Some thinkers express strong support for the use of federalism. Diamond describes the federal system as a “crucial resource” for Nigeria and argues that decentralised power and local autonomy are essential. Akinnuoye agrees, stating that the Nigerian experience illustrates the need for “the development and practice of true federalism”. He sees the devolution of power and respon-
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sibilities to federal units as vital and criticises the Nigerian federal
system for having a central government with too much power. Rothchild sees federalism as a possible way to make politics in
Nigeria less threatening and to encourage co-operation between
groups, but notes that federalism as a solution to ethnic conflict is
undermined if ethnically exclussivist regional governments refuse
to allocate resources equitably and act repressively.62

He notes that when carefully crafted, federalism and other
systems of decentralising authority can place necessary limitations
on central authority and promote confidence among regional
leaders. However, federalism can increase conflict and worsen
inter-ethnic relations if it is not introduced carefully.63 Osughae
does not believe that federalism, as implemented in Nigeria, was
an adequate response as it favoured majorities and powerful
minorities at the expense of smaller ethnic groups. While ethnic
groups ought to be given increased autonomy, Osughae does not
believe that awarding particular regions increased autonomy suf-

"clear material basis. The competition for access to economic
opportunities within this area are impoverished and politically marginalised. 69 The
fare of its citizens. Because of this indifference Nigerians
organise in voluntary associations, especially ethnic groups,
according to ethnicity in order to compete for the scarce
resources, especially the income generated from oil sales, has
not provided people with resources, the people may mobilise
against the state's allocation of resources, especially oil
productions. However, Obasanjo has not introduced any urgent measures to address these
problems, leaving at least 40 people dead. President Obasanjo has not intro-
duced any urgent measures to address these conflicts, believing
that they will soon “fizzle out”.74 He has been criticised for lack-
ing the decisiveness and political will to deal effectively with the
situation.77 Clearly a more proactive approach is needed to deal
with these problems.

Conclusion

The nature of the Nigerian state makes it susceptible to ethnic
conflict. It consists of hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, which
are regionally based and unequal in terms of power and
distribution of the land upon which they live. The ethnic groups in the
area feel that the major Nigerian ethnic groups have exploited
them. This has resulted in a situation where some interest groups
in the Niger Delta which were fighting for their interests with
regard to oil-production have degenerated into violent ethnic
militias which sabotage oil pipelines and abduct officials.70

In order to address ethnic conflict in Nigeria, the question of
oil-production and who benefits from this production needs to be
examined. The issues of an equitable distribution of resources and
an adequate approach to social welfare in Nigeria also
require attention.

Ethnic Conflict in the Obasanjo Era

In 1999 Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president of Nigeria,
ending years of military rule. The death of Sani Abacha and the
dawning of democracy in Nigeria gave many Nigerians and
international commentators hope that the future of Nigeria
would be more peaceful and stable than its past. It was also
hoped that the election would alleviate ethnic tensions in the
land and pave the way for a Nigeria free of ethnic conflict.

There are some hopeful signs that this optimism is not com-
pletely unfounded. Unlike many past leaders, Obasanjo's support
does not come mainly from his own ethnic group. Obasanjo, a
Westerner, won most of his votes from Northern Hausa-Fulanis,
Eastern Ibos and minority ethnic groups.71 This shows that it is
possible for Nigerians to overlook ethnic loyalties in their choice
of political leader. Obasanjo has introduced several new mea-

asures, some of which can be seen as attempts to alleviate ethnic
tension by addressing the root causes of tension. For example, he
has introduced measures to end the corruption in the fuel indus-
try and to rehabilitate the ecology.72 These measures both relate
to the oil-related issues which have been leading to ethnic conflict
in the Niger Delta.

But the election of Obasanjo has certainly not signalled the
end of ethnic conflict. Just seven weeks after Obasanjo assumed
power, violent ethnic conflict broke out in South-Western Nigeria
between the Hausa and Yoruba.73 More than 100 people were
killed and many Hausas were forced to flee the area. Retaliatory
violence broke out in Kano in the North, leading to even more
deaths. Despite changes introduced by Obasanjo with the hope
of appeasing the ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta, violence
still regularly breaks out in the area.74

Ethno-religious conflicts centring around the introduction or
proposed introduction of Sharia law in several states have also
arisen since Obasanjo's assumption of power. Thousands were
killed during conflicts in the Northern city of Kaduna which then
ignited conflicts in several other areas in Nigeria.75 In February
2002 ethnic clashes erupted in Lagos between local Yorubas and
Hausa-speakers from Northern Nigeria. Dozens were killed and
thousands more displaced.

In March 2002, violence erupted between the Apiapum and
Ufutura communities in Nigeria's southeastern Cross River State,
leaving at least 40 people dead. President Obasanjo has not intro-
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that they will soon “fizzle out”.74 He has been criticised for lack-
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resources. Given this combination of difficult factors, Nigeria can be commended for having survived 40 years of independence with only one period of civil war and without any territory successfully seceding.

It is important to note that while ethnic conflict has been a feature of Nigerian politics, many of the measures introduced to address this conflict have had some success. Horowitz praises Nigeria for the way it has addressed its multi-ethnic nature and suggests that its measures for producing incentives for ethnic realignment, balancing and toleration make it a model for other African states. It is clear that Horowitz believes that Nigeria has coped relatively well with the very difficult situation it inherited from the colonial powers.

However, while Nigeria’s approach to its ethnic divisions can be given some praise, it is still possible to identify problems in Nigeria which encourage the development of ethnic conflict. The unfair distribution of resources and power, as well as the lack of a cohesive national identity provide real challenges to the management of ethnic conflict in Nigeria. The election of a democratic government and a few policy changes will not be sufficient to successfully tackle ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. The broader underlying situations discussed in this paper as well as the recent increase in ethno-religious conflict need to be tackled before Nigeria can truly be seen as a model for the successful management of ethnic conflict in an African state.

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Notes & references

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33 Syngye 2000, p 819.
40 Lake and Rothchild 1996, p 96.
42 Lake and Rothchild 1996, p 98.
44 Lake and Rothchild 1996, p 222-223.
45 JM Richardson and J Wang, ‘Peace accords seeking conflict resolution in deeply divided societies’, in KM De Silva and SWR