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Ethno-Religious Tension: A Discourse of Nigeria and Russia's Perspectives

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Abstract:
This paper unravels ethnicity and religion in relation to the interrelated conflicts in Nigeria and Russia. These countries are specifically chosen because of the perceived similarities that exist between them. Nigeria and Russia are plural societies. Each of the countries is multi-ethnic, having numerous ethnic groups co-existing in them. Religion and beliefs of individuals have also contributed to the identity construction of the citizenry of these countries. The implications of ethno-religious relationship among the varying ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and Russia are discussed. In doing this, the paper devises content analysis methodology. The paper discusses available literatures that abound on ethno-religious conflicts, bringing into focus, the perspectives of Nigeria and Russia. The research concludes with the establishment of interrelated ethno-religious tensions in both Nigeria and Russia, thereby, contributing to the extant reservoirs of knowledge in the discourse of ethno-religious conflicts in general and Nigeria and Russia in particular.

Keywords: Ethno-religious, Nigeria, Russia, Ethnicity, tension, Multi-ethnic

1. Introduction

The world in general has witnessed two main global disturbances frequently termed the First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945) respectively. These two World Wars of course, had their various distinct causal factors. Apart from the global Wars, countries of the world have at one time or the other battled with internal conflicts caused by varying agents, Nigeria and Russia inclusive. In the discourse of internal conflicts across the globe, the role played by ethnicity and religion cannot be overemphasized. Scholars have at different times adumbrated on ethno-religious conflicts as one of the very many instruments of genocide worldwide. Thus, the research into this particular area in relation to Nigeria and Russia becomes worthwhile.

Nigeria and Russia are specifically looked into in the context of this paper mainly because of the attributes shared by the two countries. The two countries are multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and religiously porous. Nigeria, a country in West Africa, has an estimated population of 195.9million. It is occupied by more than 250 Ethnic groups speaking over 300 dialects and divided along Muslim North and predominantly Christian South (Britannica.com). Ethno-religious discourse had been a part of the country's daily talks since independence from Britain in 1960. Ethnic tension could even be the reason for civil war that began in 1967 and ended in 1970 (Çanci and Odukoya; 2016). That stated, fifty years after the internecine war, end to ethnic tension in Africa's most iconic country is far insight. This is so because the dominant groups that constitute 88% of the population (Yorubas, Hausa/Fulanis and Igbos) see themselves as lords over others (CIA). Presently, division between groups is so wide that an average Hausa does not feel safe in company of his Yoruba/Igbo compatriots. This same ugly trend brewed its head among religious faith. Christians abhor Muslims and vice-versa.

The Russian Federation occupies the largest landmass of the world's geographical coverage. In the course of its metamorphosis, that is, from the Tsarist era, Soviet era, down to the Contemporary Russian Federation, ethnic plurality has been predominantly, an attribute of the Russian state (Omotade and Oluwafemi, 2017). Also, in Russia, plurality has become significantly instrumental to the interrelated conflicts, especially, in the post-Soviet Russia. The post-Soviet Space has witnessed dialectics of nationalism informed moves, most especially, in the North Caucasus. This hitherto, has inspired agitations for self-determination among some constituent republics in the post-Soviet Russia, for example, the Chechnya quest for independence and other agitations in the region of Dagestan as well as Ingushetia (Zhemukhov, 2018). Ethnicity and religion have also contributed to ethno-religious conflicts in the post-Soviet Russia. This research paper, thus, unravels ethno-religious tension in Nigeria and Russia in relation to the multi-ethnic nature of the two countries.

2. Research Methodology

The paper uses the secondary data collection to delve into the matters of ethno-religious issue in both Nigeria and Russia. In the course of the research, existing academic debates among scholars in relation to ethnicity and religion are

discussed. In doing so, published books, articles and other extant literatures are contextually analysed. Also, the internet played appreciable role in the source for relevant materials that are published online in reputable academic journals.

3. Review of Literatures

Veritable academic debates abound in the discourse of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria and in Russia. Many scholars (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Ayantayo, 2005; Salawu, 2010; Adamolekun, 2013; Zhemukhov, 2018; Malashenko and Yarlykapov, 2009; Omotade, 2009; Tonoyan, 2018; Dannreuther, 2010) have espoused varying contributions in relation to ethno-religious issues in Nigeria as well as in Russia. Nigeria is a plural society, incorporating different ethnic nationalities. With the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates and the Protectorate of Lagos in 1914 by the then British governor general, Lord Fredrick Luggard (Oluwafemi & Omotade, 2017), different distinct ethnic groups were brought together to form a formidable country, Nigeria. This has been substantiated by Salawu (2010) in his article entitled: *Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria; Causal Analysis and Proposals for New Management Strategies.* While justifying the plurality of Nigeria, Salawu (2010) avers thus:

> with over four hundred (400) ethnic groups, belonging to several religious sects. Nigeria since independence has remained a multi-ethnic nation state, which has been grappling and trying to cope with the problem of ethnicity on the one hand, and the problem of ethno-religious conflicts on the other. P345

As stated by the scholar, since her inception in 1914, Nigeria has witnessed varying degrees of conflicts masterminded by ethnicity and religion. These ethno-religious conflicts have hitherto, led to the loss of more than three million lives and unparallel psychological as well as material damage (Salawu, 2010). Research has shown that a single discourse cannot capture the totality of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. The reason for this is not farfetched, because of the singular fact that scholar may be interested in a particular aspect of the discourse, say for instance, conflicts masterminded in the direction of the two major religions in Nigeria, that is, Christianity and Islam, or moves made by some group, anchoring their activities on a distinct religion (a case of the Boko Haram group), among others. Very often than not, ethno-religious issues herald basically as a result of the varying numbers of the available ethnic nationalities as well as, displayed intolerance in relation to religion which as Salawu (2010) argues:

> have given birth to many ethnic militias like the O'dua People Congress (OPC); the Bakassi Boys; the Egbesu Boys; the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC); and the Igbo People Congress (IPC)... the Arewa People's Congress (APC); the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB); and the Ohanaeze N'digbo. ibid

Salawu's work principally looks into the manifestation of ethno-religious issues in Nigeria. It examines their causes and presents dimension for new management strategies to contain this cankerworm that has pervaded the Nigerian society, thus, making it a good literature for this research.

In this like manner, Adetoye and Omilusi (2015) in the article entitled: *Ethno-religious Conflicts and Democracy in Nigeria*, have contributed to the lot of available debates on the phenomena of ethno-religious issues in Nigeria. Their work further substantiates the multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria. According to these scholars, Nigeria is 'a melting pot of ethnic nationalities, class, regions, religions and other socio-cultural markers'. This means that many ethnic groups are forged in order to have a single geopolitical entity, Nigeria. The place of politics with regards to ethno-religious conflicts is justified by Adetoye and Omilusi (2015) thus:

> the political class, in collaboration with their religious counterparts has exploited ethnicity and religion as symbols of mobilization and instruments of negotiation for patronages and sharing of national resources...most conflicts which ordinarily could have been seen as distribution based had assumed ethnic and religious character. p51

In general, Adetoye and Omilusi (2015) examine the recurrent waves of ethno-religious and political issues and the aftermaths on Nigerian democracy. Thus, these scholars conclude that good and accountable governance that will look into reducing poverty and unemployment and as well, restructure federalism has to be put in place as this will permanently proffer solution to the problem of ethno-religious and political rivalry which has always confronted the nation's democracy.

4. Ethnicity and Religion Revisited

The concept of ethnicity is complex to define. In the broad sense, ethnicity cannot be discussed void of social grouping. Identity plays a vital role in relation to the debates on ethnicity. Although issues pertaining to ethnic grouping and ethnicity have been immemorial, scholarly works have shown that ethnicity as an academic field is relatively new. Fawole and Bello (2011) adumbrate that enquiries through available academic debates have shown that ethnicity is a relatively new concept which emanated in less than half a century ago. Ethnicity is seen as a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology (Osaghae, 1992; Fawole & Bello, 2011). In that sense, ethnic nationality possesses a belief in common organs, common history, culture and tradition. While showcasing the scholarship of Osaghae (1995), Fawole and Bello (2011: 212) aver that as a social construct, ethnicity can be regarded as the employment of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict and cooperation.

From another perspective, ethnicity is seen as largely a subjective process of status identification (Despres, 1975; Fawole & Bello, 2011). Fawole and Bello go further to substantiate that ethnicity is conceived to be an interaction or relationship that exist among people of different ethnic groups who decides to base their relationship on the differences,

such exist when two or more ethnic groups interest relate with one another, which normally brings about competition on issues like power or wealth (Fawole & Bello, 2011).

Religion cannot be devoid of ethnicity. Man, from pre-historic, has been connected with religion. This, thus, makes religion to be an integral and inseparable part of human existence. From scholarly exposition, different people have different opinions, perceptions and perspectives about religion. Hence, this makes religion to possess different definitions, like ethnicity (Egwu, 2001). Generally, religion is seen as the linking ligament that connects man to his creator, God. Individuality in relation to man's ethnic inclination goes to some extent in fermenting religious practices, though not in all cases. The complexity of religion has thus, contributed to the reason why many definitions abound in relation to religion (see Fawole & Bello, 2011). Adeniyi (1993) avers that religion can be defined as a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being. In the course of religious practices, two factors are involved. These are the immortal (God) and the mortal (man). This, hitherto, implies that through religion, man is brought back to his creator, God. This claim is concisely summarised by Fawole and Bello (2011: 213) thus*: religion...a system of relation which linked man to an ultimate being or ultimate value epitomised in God.*

5. Ethno-Religious Conflicts: Nigeria's Perspective

Generally, conflict is an integral part of human existence. Thus, as human beings co-exist in the society, the occurrence of conflicts cannot be separated. Ethno-religious conflict is viewed as conflict ensued in relation to ethnic groups and religious practices. As substantiated by Salawu (2010), ethno-religious conflict is argued to mean:

> a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic or religious group and another of such group in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is characterised by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, and a tendency towards violent confrontation. P346

Although Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state, despite the fact that there are many ethnic groups in the country, two major religions (Christianity and Islam) have always fueled crises that are religion oriented over the years. It must at this juncture, be noted that though there are other forms of conflicts in the Nigerian society, what differentiates ethno-religious rivalries from other forms of conflicts is the fact that such conflicts take place among ethnic nationalities that in most cases indulge in the practices of different religions. In that regards, we hear of conflicts between the Hausas and either the Yorubas or Igbos, and vice-versa, in the name of religion. Of course, this has claimed thousands and millions of lives, coupled with the destruction of many valuable properties including businesses.

Ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria is dated to as far back the year 1980 (see Fawole & Bello, 2011; Salawu, 2010). From available academic discourses, ethno-religious conflict is prominently pronounced during the Fourth (4th) Republic Nigeria, though prior to that time, tensions in relation to ethnicity and religion had swept many lives away, like flood (Salawu, 2010; Fawole & Bello, 2011). The events of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are traceable to notable crises like the Maitatsine conflicts in Kano as well as Maiduguri, during the early years of 1980s. These conflicts were religion oriented. Not only that, the Jimeta Yola religious upheaval in 1984, the Kafanchan College of Education Muslim-Christian riots, the Polytechnic of Kaduna Muslim-Christian upheaval of 1981-1982, the University of Ibadan Christian-Muslim riots of 1981-1985, the Bulumkutu Christian-Muslim conflicts of 1982, the Usman Danfodio University religious riots of 1982 and the Ilorin Muslim-Christian riots of 1986. Also, it is worthy to note the Zango Kataf disturbances of 1992 in Kaduna State (see Salawu, 2010; Fawole & Bello, 2011).

Extant literatures on Ethnicity and religion inspired mayhems have shown many other activities of Nigeria's Fourth Republic as very instrumental to the discourse. Stating from the recent times, particularly, since the military rule ceases to exist and hitherto, gave way for democracy to reign since 1999, when President Olusegun Obasanjo became the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, till the present time, ethno-religious crises are yet to be permanently put to rest. As Salawu (2010) argues:

> the first leg of ethnic and religious riots in Nigeria in recent time was in July 1999, when some Oro cultists in Sagamu, in Ogun State accused a Hausa woman of coming out when the cultists were outside with their gnome. This led to some altercations, which eventually led to full-blown crisis. P346

The foregoing event led to the death of a great number of people occupying the concerned area, particularly Hausa and Yoruba tribes. The killing of the Hausas in relation to this event is argued to have sparked sporadic killings in the city of Kano in Kano State. In furtherance of retaliation in relation the massacre of the Yorubas in Kano, violence emanated in Lagos. This happened when the OPC attacked Hausa/Fulani tribe men. These activities led to great loss of lives and properties. Worthy of note is the place of the Islamic Legal Code. The implications of the Islamic Legal Code that was enacted by some states in the Northern Nigeria cannot be underestimated in the discourse of ethno-religious mayhem in the country. Principally, this is taken to be the root cause of the Kaduna/Enugu inter-ethnic crisis. The crisis is thus, observed as ethno-religious in the sense that it entails religion undertone. This is because the Igbo tribe men, particularly, the Christians died mostly in Kaduna. Thus, the Igbos in Enugu, alongside with some other Igbo communities, retaliated the death of their tribe men. The riots eventually underscored unparallel loss of lives and valuable properties.

In the subsequent years, Nigeria witnessed ethno-religious conflicts. Prominent among them were the Lagos/Kano riots of 2000, Tives/Iunkuns ethnic crisis of 2001, Jos crisis over the appointment of a Christian as the Chairman of a Local Council in 2001, Kano crisis of 2001 which claimed mostly the lives of the Southern Nigerians and the Ijaw/Ilaje crisis (Oluwafemi & Omotade, 2017).

6. Boko Haram Insurrection in Nigeria

The activities of the Boko Haram group have been a serious issue for the government of Nigeria to contend with. Till the present time, the incessant attack by group has been of great concern for both the government and the citizens. With regards to the emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2002, under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf, as ably established by extant academic debates, (see Çanci and Odukoya, 2016; Usorji, 2016), it has been argued that the group has not withdrawn from the hazardous belief that Western Education is sinful. Thus, the group is committed to the spread of Islam and the teachings of the Holy Prophet, including Jihad. Boko Haram is noted for Islamic fundamentalism. In 2009, their leader was apprehended and executed by the government of Nigeria. This, hitherto, has aroused violence and volatility in the group's operations. Consequent to this, members of the group have so far indulged in gun fighting, arson, rape, bombing, hostaging, among other social vices (Warner, 2012; Çanci & Odukoya, 2016). As Usorji (2016) argues:

> Boko Haram emerged with an ideology that rejects modernity and Western education and an objective of establishing Sharia law in all the Nigerian States... nobody within the international community knew Boko Haram prior to 2009, the group was carrying out its small-scale activities in Borno State. The first pronounced violent attack orchestrated by Boko Haram was in 2009 when it launched a simultaneous attack in four northern States of Nigeria, Bauchi, Borno, Yobe and Kano. 37

Although, arguing based on the operations of the group members, this paper establishes that the operations of the Boko Haram group are out rightly anti-Islam. This paper discovers that the operations of the group are majorly in the northern Nigeria which is predominantly occupied by the Hausa/Fulanis (these people are mostly Muslims). Thus, if Boko Haram is to propagate Islam, then, the members will always spare Muslims in their attacks.

Taking into consideration, the various destructive moves of the Boko Haram group; it becomes very complicated to argue that the activities of the group are ethno-religious. The singular reason for this submission is that the members kill both the Muslims and the Christians. Be that as it may, the group has constituted itself as a major threat to the peace and security of the Nigerian state till date.

7. Situating Ethno-Religious Conflict in Russia

Available literatures (Dannreuther, 2010; Malashenko & Yarlykapov, 2009; Tonoyan, 2018; Migacheva & Frederick, 2018), have presented major Ethno-religious cases in Russia to revolve around the post-Soviet Space. The post-Soviet Space means the years after the Soviet Union disintegrated. Prior to the era of Mikhail Gorbachev as the leader of the Soviet Union, religion and religious activities were subjugated by the government of Russia. Between the years 1917-1991, Russia was under Communist regime. This, as a result of the political situation of the country, the state spearheaded total control of all spheres of life, religion inclusive. Because of the fact that religion had little or no influence during this era, very many academic debates do not have much to account on the social dissonances of the ethnic populations in relation to religion.

Arguably, right from 1991 that the Soviet Union collapsed, virtually the various forms of social dispositions and relation have assumed metamorphosis, particularly, in the Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan as well as Georgia. With the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), populace religious interaction which had been brought under the subjugation of the Soviet Union government began to spring forth with momentum. Also, this gave room for the emergence of new lines of social and political formations in the light of self-determination. The argument is succinctly substantiated by Tonoyan (2018) thus:

> it was not surprising that in this new religiously permissive environment, churches, religious organisations, and Islamic orders attempted to reassert themselves as chief arbiters of public morality and to reclaim their lost status as the locus of these nations's spiritual and cultural heritage. P11

Taking a cursory look into the global scene, particularly Europe and Africa, it becomes obvious that social and political mayhems, especially, since the 20th century till the present time, have been instigated by religion. Since the collapse of the USSR, ethno-religious conflicts have become pervasive in the post-Soviet Space. As the countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) began to retrace their roots in the global political relations, religion, thus, became particular as the people began to reclaim their religious confession again, after decades of outright subjugation.

Thus, the 1990s till present become very important in the discourse of ethno-religious palavers when dealing with the present-day Russian Federation. Although Russian Orthodox faith has enjoyed a long lasting tradition in Russia, specifically, since the conversion of Vladimir the Great, when Orthodox Christianity was incorporated as the state religion, upheld by the Kievan Rus (987), during the Tsarist era, the Russian state had always identified with the Russian Orthodoxy until the Soviet era, when religion was separated from national life as the Soviet policies marginalized religion. Gradually, Islam already found its way into the Russian society. Thus, Orthodoxy and Islam became the two main religions of the Russians.

As it has been roughly estimated, about 20 million inhabitants of the Russian Federation are Muslims. Among these populations, there are about 3.5 to 4 million migrant Muslims. Over the next 15years since the disintegration of the USSR, the Russian Federation, as a geopolitical entity, has come under intense effects of ethno-political crises, with apparent confessional components (see Malashenko & Yarlykapov, 2018). Since the people have had the freedom to religious confession, radicalism has become apparent, especially, among the Islamic faithful. As Malashenko and Yarlykapov (2009) argue:

> Islamic radicalism has become an integral feature of the internal situation in Russian society, exerting an influence on the county's public policy. It includes two closely intertwined components- a purely religious

and a political one. To ensure a correct assessment of radicalism, however, it is advisable not to combine these two trends into one. P159.

Radicalism and religious conflicts in Russia have been associated with the Caucasus, especially, Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. Not only that, the adjoining regions of the Stavropol territory are also worthy of note. The main reason being that these areas possess substantial Muslim population. Thus, the regions become mostly volatile in terms of religious radicalism. In Russia, specifically the Northern Caucasus, the '*Jamaat*' (an Islamic prayer gathering) has been identified as the main foundation for radicalism. From the scholarship of Malashenko and Yarlykapov (2009: 162), *Jamaat* means elementary, grass root form of organization of Muslim society. It is an association of Muslims performing congregational prayer, ideally, a group of Muslims attending the same mosque.

Islam has been argued to be instrumental to anti-colonial mobilizing force in the course of Russian conquest during the 19th century, especially, in the North Caucasus (Zhemukhov, 2018). It is also worthy to note that ethno-religious conflicts in the post-Soviet Russia is devised to revolve around nationalism (Omotade, 2009). In the birth of religion resuscitation in Contemporary Russian Federation, following the disintegration of the USSR, nationalism also infiltrated into the post-Soviet political landscape. As adumbrated by scholars, nationalism penetrated the North Caucasus with the fall of the Soviet Union and incited several regional conflicts; including the North Ossetian-Ingush conflict of 1992, Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993, Russian-Chechen war of 1994-1996. Also, Russian-Chechen war of 1999-2009 is another conflict to behold (Zhemukhov, 2018). In a concise investigation, the influence of Islam in the regions of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia inclusive, especially in the mid-2000s, has become a thing of great concern in relation to conflicts in these regions. When Russia is looked into critically, it becomes obvious that religion finds itself between two main factors namely: nationalism and separatism. Of course, these two factors have become instrumental in the discourse of ethno-religious conflicts in the region.

8. Conclusion

Nigeria and the Russian Federation are discussed in relation to the multiethnic nature of the two countries. The place of ethno-religious tensions cannot be underestimated in the Nigerian and the Contemporary Russian societies. As ethnically plural countries, the place of nationalism and separatism become spectacular in the discourse of conflicts, particularly, conflicts inspired by ethnicity and religion in the two countries studied. Efforts should be intensified by government and all concerned individuals to address the varying factors that can continually pose problems to the peace and security of the Nigerian and the Russian societies.

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