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ETHNO-RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL MANIPULATION AND CONFLICTS IN AFRICAN STATES: ISSUES AT STAKE

Abstract:

Manipulation of religion, ethnicity, politics and consequential conflicts in African states have at the recent times increased heat in African states polities and further painted the continent so black that the unpopular claim that Africa is the dark continent seems to by characteristics, assume the truth path. Manipulation of ethno-religious and political activities and attendant conflicts have rendered people across the length and breadth of Africa unsecured, migrants, hostile, inaccessible jungles and the peoples rendered homeless, powerless, confused and many turned refugees in their fatherlands. This paper explores the ethno-political, religious manipulation and resultant conflicts among African states. The paper used secondary sources of data and the following were found among others: ethno-religious affiliation is a common feature of typical African states/societies and all issues related to same are very sensitive to Africans; African leaders use the instruments of ethnic and religious differences to achieve political ends; failure of the African states and the leadership to appropriately discharge their obligations has largely contributed to the increased manipulation of religion and ethnicity among African states for it is an easy means of appeal to political support; many have been lured into religious politicking; misuse of religion by politicians has led to excessive ethno-religious and sectional divisions and lack of trust of one another among the various religions and their adherents; use and misuse of religion has heated the polity and electoral matters; youth are the most vulnerable group used in igniting and fuelling such conflicts while women and children fall as the major victims, most political activities are greatly determined and influenced by ethnicity and religion which in the end often result in dysfunctional conflicts in virtually all parts of Africa. Recommendations made include: extensive civic and political education, proper control of religious preaching and other activities, proper regulation of campaigns/political activities, institutionalization and inculcation of national values and integration, de-emphasizing ethno-tribal and religious differences, entrenchment of democracy and good governance, drastic reduction in levels of poverty and more emphasis on provision of social services and amenities to the people, enactment of popularly accepted and just land tenure system among African communities, use of improved and mechanized farming methods and proper orientation by both the African states and societies to the youth.

Keywords:

Africa, Conflicts, Ethnicity, Manipulation, Politics and Religion.

Introduction

African continent has historically been a scene of many strategic heritages, politics, economy, civilization and religions. It has at the same time been one continent that stands unique among others for both the good (population, resources, land, history et cetera) and the bad (conflicts, assumed backwardness, poor human and material resources exploitation and management, dependency et cetera); bound by challenges of growth and development of states/societies including that of overcoming local and national heterogeneities inherent in every social setting which are overcome over period of time with increased experience, growth and development, socialisation and civilization. In Africa, reverse is the case as differences which are common and natural to human and social existence are easily abused and manipulated by leaders, people and politicians for selfish ends. These heterogeneities are however not supposed to be basis for conflicts which African common peasants do not seem to understand (Ake, 2000:60 and Rwomire, 2001:42). Conflicts associated with ethnicity, politics, religion, genocide and their manipulation are in every corner of Africa. Ethiopia and Eritrea, Nigeria, Mali, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Central African Republic among others have at one time, the other or are currently being ravaged by such conflicts on one hand and insurgencies in Somalia (Al-Shabab), Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger Republic (Boko Haram) and in Maghrib countries (Al-Quaeda).

Africa - Background

Africa, one of the world's continents is close to Asia as the two are separated by water body of not long distance. It comprises of about 54 countries from the West, East, North and South. Majority of its population is black but there is also large number of other coloured peoples in for example the countries of Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, parts of Mali and Niger Republic. The Republic of South Africa also has a number of whites who are minority and of European (English) descent as a result of domination in the previous centuries. (Skinner, 1973:7) has made a summary on Africa maintaining that:

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, 11,635, 000 square miles in area. It straddles four hemispheres, for both the Prime Meridian and the Equator pass over it. In the Gulf of Guinea below the great African Hump, the two lines cross, the Prime Meridian bisecting the bulge, the Equator and the continent. Africa extends 37 ° N and 35 ° S of the Equator and is the most tropical of the continents.

Of all the world's continents, Africa is the richest in terms of natural resources (mineral deposits et cetera) and so attracted the attention of all the then respective super powers/colonial masters. Falola (2001: x) has in the same vein added that: "Ecological and cultural differences vary from one region to another. As an old continent, Africa is one of the richest in culture and customs, and its contributions to world civilization are impressive indeed. Africa has strategic importance to the politics, cultures and economy of the world being the continent with heritages of indigenous traditional, Western, Islamic and Christian cultures and values. Africa has for centuries during slave trade remained

the major supplier of slaves to Europe and America; it became a major source of raw materials after industrial revolution and a base for the colonial masters; It is also the central focus of all the continents with both negative and positive characters of despair and hope, wealth and poverty, unexploited human and material resources, crises and conflicts it is thus a home of many theatrical absurd as observed by (Rwomire, 2001:41). Linguistically, African languages fall into four broad stocks of Afro-asiatic, Niger-Congo (formerly West Sudanic and including Bantu) Sudanic, and Click (former Bushman, including Hottentot and two other East African languages (Skinner, 1973:71). For many people, Africa and the Middle-East represent an alluring, yet dangerous region - a set of places where the explorer, adventurer, fortune hunter, missionary, or a colonist could quite easily become ill or die as the result of thousand causes and that current world seems to be filled with accounts of widespread conflict in Africa (Hitchcock and Osborn, 2002:6-7). Similarly, "Violent conflicts of one type or the other have afflicted Africa and exacted a heavy toll on the continent's societies, politics and economies, robbing them of their developmental potential and democratic possibilities" (Nhema & Zeleza, 2008:1) .

This study is premised on theories of pluralism, theology of religion and ethnicity to fully explain the relationship between religion and societal pluralities of (ethnicity, economy, class and power relations in politics). The Theological theory of religion used here maintains that human nature has religious dimension and that makes man 'incurably religious'. Man has within him an irresistible desire for the infinite being – God in whom man seeks certainty, security and stability. This theory traced the origin of religion to man's search for his source and that constitutes the essence of belief and practice of religion. Man undergoes insecurity, uneasiness, emptiness which necessitate the need for infinite being – God in whom to seek relief through religion (see Omoregbe, 1999:11-12). While the Pluralists theory asserts that power, in state is shared among heterogeneous groups and at the same time varied ideas, opinions and expressions on social issues arise in the process. As more interests, ideas and opinions arise, there is the need for aggregation of these varied interests together with representation of all the groups for peace, order and stability to reign and almost all smaller groups within the larger society aim at maintain their unique identities, values and practices (Wikipedia, 2013). The Instrumentalist theory/approach to ethnicity as maintained by Banton (1993) posits that ethnicity is a both socio-political and cultural resource that is or can be used in or during competition and can also motivate the eruption and or persistence of conflicts among peoples with different ethnic backgrounds.

Review of Related Literature

Tribalism has different meanings and there seems to be a general confusion even among the scholars on tribalism/ethnicity and so invites fruitless definitional arguments among professionals and intellectuals such that there is much knowledge but without commensurate understanding of ethnicity while ethnic problems are a complex of political, economic and ideological aspects that are reduced to tribalism (Ismagilova, 1978:4 & Horowitz 1985: xi). Ethnicity is broadly an aggregate of surviving archaic institutions and organizations associated with the tribal system which involves (inheritance, traditional ceremonies and customs the strength of bonds of blood relationship, sense of ethnic

solidarity) but according to (Ismagilova, 1978:45) it is also narrowly seen as hostile attitude to members of some other ethnic group. To Mazrui cited in (Nhema & Zeleza, 2008:38), the word 'ethnic' is currently used to refer to the older word 'tribal' and accordingly, the worst conflicts in Black Africa are ethnic. Anthropologists have also maintained that ethnic groups are collective groups of people who believe that they share a common ancestry and that membership of an ethnic group is frequently defined on basis of shared language, religion, dress and food habits (Hitchcock and Osborn, 2002:6). For Lindergren (2004:173) ethnic grouping is process of naming self, others as well as being named by others. An ethnic group refers to people who share a common ancestry, identity, language and culture (Alubo, 2006:5). In such a process of forming social identity, construction and deconstruction of tribal identities were features of man's history in social life (Willis 1992: 193).

Religion

Religion is universal to humans involving belief in supernatural beings that can influence human lives who can themselves be approached and influenced through performance of the appropriate rituals which consist of system of beliefs and ideas, rituals and actions and in all societies until recently, religion was closely integrated with other aspects of social life and differences of religion are characteristic of different types of society while state religions where they exist have primary objective of reinforcement of the state's validity and identity (Whitehouse and Wilkins, 1986:115 & 122). As pluralities among human is natural, religion today is both a disintegrating and integrating force and it is an influential part of the wider belief system, ideology as well as people's social, political and economic life (Momoh et al, 1989:59).

Relationship between Ethnicity, Religion and Politics

Most scholars have agreed that there are linkages and or relations between ethnic belongings and religious practices of people. Egwu (1998:34) has observed that ethnicity and religion interact very closely in the social process and are salient factors in the course of political mobilization. The linkage between religion and ethnicity among societies is so significant that Yinger (1994:225) maintained that:

There is a close link and I think it is fair to say natural affinity between religion and ethnicity. This affinity is strongest where the sense of primordial attachment to an ancestral group and its traditions is most deeply felt. Almost nowhere however can an ethnic order be described and analysed without reference to a religious factor.

Conflicts

The post cold war era has come for Africa with proliferation of conflicts related to politics, ethnicity, resources et cetera. Akokpari cited in (Nhema & Zeleza, 2008:88) has noted

that conflicts are not unique to Africa but African conflicts are unique because of their dramatic increase in number especially in the recent decades. Conflicts in Africa are many sided, violent and carried out at many levels involving regions, states, clans, ethnic groups and lineages (Markakis 1994:217). Fukui (1994:9) sees conflicts as struggle for recognition and power between those who control the state and those that seek a share of the state power, autonomy or independence; struggle for scarce resources with the state as the protagonist and the prize or a resistance struggle against state directed process of deracination of inferior groups. By implication therefore, ethnic and or cultural differences overlap with socio-political and economic disparities and in many cases, ethnicity becomes the manifest of such conflicts. And as observed by Horowitz (1985: 291 & 1994:291), in divided societies, ethnic affiliations are powerful, permeative, passionate and pervasive and that ethnic conflict constrains the bonds that sustain civility and is often at the root of violence that results in looting, death, homelessness and the plight of large numbers of people. The ultimate goal of most of parties in ethnic conflicts as noted by Markakis (1994:217-18), is to enlarge their share of resources commanded by the state and this forms the basis of conflict by whatever name it is carried out – nation, religion, region, ethnicity or clanship, or politics.

Causes of Conflicts in Africa

Conflicts in life are inevitable and they occur in all facets of human endeavours (McKee, 1981), and from their respective independencies, about one-third of all the African states have undergone large scale violence or wars and “the causes of the conflicts are as complex as the challenges of resolving them are difficult” (Mazrui in Nhema & Zeleza, 2008:1 & 36). Conflicts in the name of religion, ethnicity, politics and power are widespread and found all over Africa for which Wada (2012: xii & 145) noted that most conflicts and wars plaguing the African continent are not between different countries of the continent but civil-wars and sectional insecurities that are rooted in greed for power and materialism, sponsored by local gangsters, invisible foreign elements and bodies; and that proliferation of using force to effect changes and control of resources by the various African communities has largely resulted in intra-national conflicts.

Realist Conflict theorists have maintained that ethnic feeling and tendencies among people are engineered by competition for scarce resources - land, power et cetera (Robert & Campbell, 1972). According to Hembe (2000) & Vavar (2005), causes of conflicts include historical instances and experience, politically motivated struggles, environmental/ecological factors (loss of grazing lands, loss of fertility, erosion, deforestation) as well as economic related and social factors of grievances, superiority et cetera. Dispute over land (a major factor of production among all peoples and nations) has been a major cause of conflicts and from the ancient to modern times, conflict over control/possession of lands has characterized humanity especially in divided societies (Shakhnazarou, 1978 and Horowitz, 1985: 291).

Proliferation of Small and Light Arms and Weapons among Citizens

In many African states especially Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Central African Republic, Algeria and Libya, large number of people are in possession of small arms and light weapons and have become used to trading in them due to widespread of conflicts and proliferation of the weapons especially along borderlines with armed conflicts, internal insurgencies in many states and increased rate of crime. Rifles like AK 47 Kalashnikov and many other dangerous small and or light weapons and arms are now in possession of and easily operated by many African locals. This is despite the high cost of purchase, protocols and risk in procuring such. Wada (2012: xiii) has observed that: "Many organizations and even African governments themselves have acknowledged the need to control the proliferation of small arms and light weapons across the continent. It is so embarrassing when you look at the sophistication of such weapons in contrast to the poverty in the eyes of the youth that carry them" which Mazrui in (Nhema & Zeleza, 2008:36) has also referred to as having modern weapons and but pre-modern armies characterized by less discipline and professionalism.

Hatred and Negative Stereo-typing: conflicts in Africa are attributed to hatred i.e. prejudice to one or some by others on the bases of religion, tribe, economic status or other differences and is mostly sound among Africans (Alubo, 2006:75 and Reid, 1997:237). The conflicts are also influenced by stereo-typing which Young (1993:147) referred to as set of imputed traits that are physical, behavioural and given to a communal group, tribe or religion especially negative one among people, tribes and religions.

The Roles of States

The African states are to the large extent responsible for the occurrence and recurrence of conflicts as lamented by Rwomire (2001:27), that the States in Africa are central to problems particularly with regard to the abuse of power, restrictions, lack of probity, ethical behavior and accountability of those in public offices thereby making them to determine and largely influence the extent to which the problems escalate, persist or come to an end. On the other hand, many African Heads of States and Governments have resorted to prolonging their rule and or transmutation by avoiding the democratic and constitutional provisions of their respective states and these attempts have created or increased elements of political tension, instabilities and sometimes conflicts in their political systems and among ethnic groups as in Kenya, Niger Republic, Burkina-Fasso, Cameroon, Algeria and Cote de Ivory among others.

Poverty/Uneven Development

The African continent is rated the poorest in the world. The per capita income of the people is the lowest in the world. Most of the nations in the region are in debt peonage condition from where there is little or no hope of escape (Awa 1992 in Aderinwale 1993:49). The difficulties of socio-political and economic development, continuing foreign

domination of the African economies, increasing gap between rich and the poor, continues influence of indigenous unpatriotic and selfish political class cause conflicts in African states. According to (Ismagilova, 1978:44) “low level of the socio-economic development of tropical Africa, the incompleteness of the processes of class formation, the mixed character of the economy characteristic of most African states, the continuing domination of foreign monopolies, the retention of many of the archaic forms and traditional institutions of tribal society- are undoubtedly complicating the ethnic problems”. It has also been noted by Rodee (1980:119) that an appeal to particularistic political feelings and identities even in homogeneous societies is more likely to arise in times of already existing political instability or in times of relative economic stress and change. Similarly, poverty as defined by (The World Bank, 1990) as the inability to attain a minimal standard of living which involves the welfare characteristics of the individuals who are located below the line that separates the poor and the non-poor (Rwomire, 2001:112) is one of the main causes of such conflicts in Africa as many individuals, families and homes live below poverty line and hardly in their lives, access the necessary and required calorie intake. Currently, eleven (11) out of the twenty-five (25) poorest rated countries in the world are for example located in the West African sub-region hence the general socio-economic and political instability in the sub-region. But the African countries lie on wealth such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) which according to Wada (2012: 138) has \$24 trillion worth of untapped mineral resources), South Sudan lying on oil, Sierra-Leone with precious minerals and diamonds and Nigeria’s Niger Delta also lying on oil reserve.

Colonialism

In relation to what Mazrui in (Nhema & Zeleza, 2008:36) referred to as ‘black violence, white roots’ and that the roots of these conflicts lie in the whites legacy, one of the greatest negative legacies of colonialism and imperialism in Africa have been the artificial boundaries and ethnic problems uniting some recognizably distinct peoples and conversely dividing homogenous groups into different countries or regions or local states divisions (Hagher, 2002:9 and Ismagilova, 1978:43). Colonialism has been responsible for dividing people where they were hitherto together and uniting those that were separate which later manifested in inherent complications and consequent disaffection/loss of identity among peoples. Subsequent attempts to regain identity, autonomy or reunion result in conflicts involving both states and peoples.

Quest for and Monopolisation of Power

One other dominant feature of African states politics is ethnocracy (monopolization of power by certain ethnic groups and exclusion of the many others) thereby making the ruling groups to have proprietary attitude on the state and politics and most of the times narrow national identity to portray and promote their ethnic tendencies and desires (Mazrui 1975). Dissident groups seek to restructure the state in order to gain access to its power, and when they fail to do that, they seek to gain autonomy or total independence. In most states, exclusion of some or others from state power and its control which also

involves access to and control of state's resources aggravate such ethno-religious, power and conflicting tendencies as they widens disparities among people. Many of the politicians also through insatiable quest for power convert religious institutions into the new political battlefield, propaganda and particularistic ideological spread. Ethno-religious bases are cynically manipulated for political and other personal gains.

Implications of Ethno-Religious, Political Manipulation and Conflicts in Africa

Conflicts have impacts on African education, family, states, societies and political economy. According to Horowitz (1994:291), Ethnic conflict constrains the bonds that sustain civility and is often at the root of violence that results in looting, death, homelessness and the plight of large numbers of people. In the same vein, Scott (1958:298) has lamented that neither justice nor peace can be found without the other and to search for either separately is to render one incapable of finding the truth. Ethnic divisions pose challenges to the cohesion of a people and sometimes to peaceful relations among states. Ethnic problems have always played an important role in social development. They have many facets and various political, economic, and ideological aspects, including the following: the whole complex of problems associated with both interrelationships of the peoples of different ethnic origins and relations within any one ethnic group; the processes of nation-building; ending of existing imbalance in the development of the different peoples; the language problems; the development of the ethnic features inherent in an ethnos; education of the new man in a spirit of respect for members of other ethnic groups; and the fight against tribal separatism and manifestation of tribalism (Ismagilova, 1978:43).

Summary and Conclusion

In African societies, ethnic and religious identities, manipulation and politics (with little or no achievement and which are often manipulated) are favoured at the expense of civilized identity and achievements which are insignificant. Majority of the inhabitants of Africa are poorly fed, educated, employed and paid amidst wealth and most of the population is comprised of medically endangered (aids, Ebola and other diseases), cultivators whose lives and existence and are jeopardized by drought, famine, poverty and violent (economic, political, ethno-religious) conflicts. Ethno-religious and political manipulation are part of fundamental socio-economic and political reforms in African states which cannot be fully resolved without transformations in social, economic and other aspects of Africans lives. The future development of African states along the road of consolidating national independence and social progress depends on proper tackling of all these matters (Ismagilova, 1978:43). Nigeria, African Union and ECOWAS as the leading state and organizations in Africa are expected to play greater, active and more participatory roles than they are doing especially in the area of conflicts prevention, management and resolution.

Recommendations

The study has made the following recommendations to the governments, politicians, religious bodies and the civil-societies:

- There should be immediate and enforced halt of trade in, circulation and proliferation of small and light arms and weapons in the hands of people.
- Border patrols and other routine security operations along borderlines should be given special attention as arms are easily moved from one border/state to another among the African states.
- The issues of insurgency, terrorism and secession within and among African states must be taken with all seriousness and properly tackled by the respective states.
- Religious clerics should ensure true teachings of their respective religious and avoid casting animosity and hatred among different religious adherents.
- Politicians should be made to move away from campaigns based on calumny, hatred and negative stereo- typing.
- Governments should ensure provision of positive, functional and relevant political and civic education of their citizens.
- Governments should ensure involvement of development plans where there are none, and where available such should be strictly adhered to.
- Poverty should be drastically checked and reduced among the people especially by creating enabling environment for the poor to have intensive skills acquisition training and programmes, entrepreneurship development and be engaged in gainful employed.
- Special attention, entrepreneurship educational programmes should be given to the youth who are easily recruited and used in conflicts that may not augur them any well.
- Those found to be involved in such conflicts should be made to face the wrath of the laws with speedy and just trial to serve deterrent to others.
- All the rebels groups across the African continent engaged in armed conflicts should be sanctioned and barred from involvement in public affairs.
- The African states should all design and adopt comprehensive operational conflicts prevention strategies.
- The Africans states should also place more emphasis on conflicts prevention strategies rather than waiting or allowing the conflicts to arise and make fire brigade approaches.
- Stakeholders (civil-societies, traditional rulers and institutions, security agencies and non- governmentally based conflicts prevention and management organizations) should synergise efforts towards proper prevention, management and ending of conflicts.

- There should be establishment of a special, professional and always stand by African special peace keeping force for rapid deployment and response to areas where conflicts seem to be beyond immediate control. This will also reduce the extent of French and other outside African forces with other motives behind peace keeping.

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