



Communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba state, Nigeria

*Ibrahim Suleiman, Musa Adamu Wunti, Abdulrasheed Adamu, & Yusuf Musa Yahaya

Department of Political Science, Sa'adu Zungur University Bauchi State – Nigeria.

*Corresponding Author: ibrahimsuleiman@basug.edu.ng

Abstract

Communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflicts have been persistent issues in many parts of the world, often stemming from historical, social, and political factors. These conflicts are characterized by group mobilization along ethnic, religious, or cultural identities to pursue political goals or protect their interests. The ruling elites achieved their economic and political interest by employing unsuitable means of manipulating people along ethnic, religious and other identities in their quest to consolidate their dominance in politics and economy. The consequences of it are destruction of lives and properties and displacement of people from their homes and exposing them to insecurity, health risks, shelter and unemployment among others. Thus, this paper seeks to examine the role of communal identity politics towards fuelling ethno-religious conflict in Taraba State. In achieving the stated objective, qualitative method of data collection is employed through the use of case study research design whereby data was collected through interviews in which (12) informants which comprised community leaders, political leaders and religious leaders were selected and interviewed. Moreover, protracted social conflict theory was adopted to guide the research. Therefore, the findings of the research revealed that hatred and mutual suspicion, marginalisation and discrimination among ethnic group, religion intolerance, issues of land ownership and lack of cordial relationship fuelled ethno-religious conflict in Taraba State. Furthermore, the study recommended that the government should promote narrative that can emphasize shared Nigerian identity and common goals, while still respecting diverse cultural and religious traditions. Realizing these incentives is very vital for developing effective measures for countering ethno-religious conflict. In doing this government should support inter-community dialogue, organize regular forums and events that will bring leaders together and members of different ethnic and religious groups to foster unity and cooperation. Moreover, government should tackle the deep-seated grievances through reconciliatory process in order to acknowledge past conflicts and injustices, aiming to heal communal wounds and reduce long-standing inter-ethnic tensions, encourage economic interdependence and cooperation a cross communal lines in order to reduce competition for scarce resources. Government should support and strengthen grassroots civil society organizations, independent media, and watchdog groups that can promote inter-tribal cooperation.

Keywords: Conflict, Ethnic, Identity, Politics, Religious

1. Introduction

Communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflicts have been persistent issues in many parts of the world, often stemming from historical, social, and political factors. Many of the world's current conflicts have ethno-religious dimensions, from the Middle East to parts of Africa, Asia, and even within Western

democracies. These conflicts are characterized by group mobilization along ethnic, religious, or cultural identities to pursue political goals or protect their economic interests (Wimmer, 2023). Communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflict are interrelated phenomena that have shaped social and



political landscapes across the globe. Strong communal identities can challenge the cohesion of multi-ethnic nation-states and the idea of civic nationalism. These concepts are crucial for understanding many tensions and conflicts that exist in diverse societies today (Gohdes, 2023). The concept refers to political actions and ideologies based on the interests of particular groups, defined by characteristics such as ethnicity, religion and culture.

Ostby, and Urdal, (2023) asserted that communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflict occurs as a result of many factors which include; historical origin whereby many conflicts have deep rooted through historical origins which tied to colonial legacies, forced migrations, or long-standing grievances between different ethnic groups. Moreover, political manipulation is another factor whereby the political leaders may exploit ethnic or religious differences to gain or maintain power by exacerbating tensions between communities. Other factors are resource competition, globalization and modernity in which conflicts arises as a result of competition over scarce resources, including land, water, economic opportunities and rapid social and economic changes that can lead to the resurgence of traditional identities as a form of resistance or self-preservation. Taraba State is known for its diverse ethnic and religious composition, which has sometimes led to conflicts and discrimination. Aluaigba (2021) and Lohna (2023) argued that the state has experienced recurring violence between farmers and herders, often along ethnic and religious lines. This has resulted in the marginalization of certain groups, particularly minority ethnicities and religious communities. They further contend that there has been a persistent issue of political marginalization in the state with certain ethnic groups feeling underrepresented in local and state

governance structures. This has led to tensions and calls for more inclusive political processes.

Ethno-religious conflict in the other hand is one of the most recurring issues in the body politics of the country that affect its socio-economic and political development particularly, the unity in diversity of the country. The issue has penetrated into the fabric of the society since colonial period and up to the present dispensation. Ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria have been a longstanding issue, with various reports and studies documenting the impact of these conflicts. These are some of the statistical figures and information on these conflicts. A study published in the Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs in 2020 highlighted the role of religious identity and polarization in fuelling ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria, particularly between Muslim and Christian communities (Alozieuwa, 2020). According to African Security Review in 2021 it was estimated that between 2011 and 2020, over 37,500 people were killed in conflicts between farmers and herders, which often have an ethno-religious dimension, particularly in Northern Nigeria (Okoli & Atelhe, 2021). Similarly, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported that in 2022, over 5,000 people were killed in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria between 2018 and 2021, and thousands of people were displaced from their homes (USCIRF, 2022). Moreover, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) reported that in 2022 it was estimated that over 2.2 million people were internally displaced due to conflicts, including ethno-religious violence, in Northern Nigeria (NRC, 2022). Furthermore, Global Terrorism Index 2022 report by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) ranked Nigeria as the third most impacted country by terrorism, with Boko Haram and other extremist groups contributing significantly to the ethno-



religious violence in the country (IEP, 2022).

Previous studies claimed that Taraba State experienced several conflicts that have coloration of ethnic, religious or communal identity tension especially in the southern part of the state. Ibbi and Wukari local government areas have the highest share of this nature of conflicts with devastating effects to the state and the nation at large. These conflicts are inter-ethnic, religious or both, thus “ethno-religious” conflicts. Prominent among these conflicts are the Tiv-Jukun, Hausa/Fulani ethno-religious conflicts of 1990-1992, 2001-2002, 2012; 2013-2015, 1992 and 2019- 2020, All these conflicts have their devastating effects on socio-economic development of these areas in which thousands of lives and properties worth millions of naira has been loss (Agbu, Shishi, and Agbu 2020). According to Agbu and Varvar (2017) the historical link between the Tiv and the Jukun can be traced back to colonial period. During that period, their relationship was cordial. However, after the departure of colonial masters their relationship became suspicion resulting to outbreak of violent communal clashes. They further argued that policies imposed by colonial masters on these two groups were responsible for the emergence of nasty relationship between them before other factors. The imposition of colonial policies of cash crop production, tax payments, forced migration and monetization, among others, created rural poverty among the peoples (Tiv and Jukun), thus, in order to resolve the problem of poverty, viable alternatives such as migration in search for fertile land for farming became necessary. Nevertheless, the activities of the migrants’ in the host communities created conditions for communal conflicts between them.

Ali and Lawal (2024) highlighted Taraba State’s rich cultural diversity, where traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity co-exist within local

communities deeply rooted in family identities. They observed that historical bonds among ethnic groups, once characterized by peaceful coexistence, have been disrupted since the state's inception. This disruption has fuelled inter-communal/ethno-religious conflicts driven by perceptions of ethnic superiority, religious tensions, and economic inequalities. They also identify key challenges such as disunity, power struggles, ethnic identity concerns, and unfavourable government policies, illustrating the complex dynamics of inter-group relations in the area.

The ongoing debates among the scholars are competing claims over land ownership, legitimacy of traditional leadership structures, arguments over equitable representation in the local government and finding a lasting solution to these conflicts. Mohammed and Umar (2023) posited that the management of these conflicts has become a mirage in spite of series of interventions to put the conflicts to an end. In many occasions several committees of inquiries and commission were set up to resolve these conflicts but not to avail. Therefore, Ibbi and Wukari local government areas are known for their ethnic and religious diversity, with large populations comprising different ethnic groups, such as Hausa, Fulani, Jukun, Tiv and Kuteb as well as adherents of different religions, including Islam and Christianity. Hence, the reasons for studying these areas with such diversity bring about understanding the challenges and complexities of managing inter-group relations. Moreover, these conflicts have been particularly intense and have resulted significantly to the loss of lives, displacement of people, and destruction of property. In addition, studying these areas can help in understanding the factors that contribute to the escalation of such conflicts and how they can be mitigated. And lastly, limited application of modern conflict theory into local contexts is one of



the major gaps in this research. Protracted social conflict theory elaborate more on the impact of communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflict on Nigerian socio-economic and political development by exposing the ways in which individuals and groups manipulate ethnic identity, religion and politics to achieve their selfish interest. Thus, this study seeks to examine the role of communal identity politics towards fuelling ethno-religious conflict in Taraba state by specifically looking the persistence of these conflicts in Ibbi and Wukari local government areas.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have extensively analyzed the rise of communal identity politics and manipulation of religion globally (Velasco, 2020). Accordingly, Noury and Roland (2020) discussed the emergence of such movements in European countries like Austria, Italy, and Poland, attributing them to various socio-political factors. Similarly, in the United States, identity politics has been a prominent feature, reflecting the struggle of minority groups for political inclusion and recognition (Noury & Roland, 2020). Likewise, Besley and Persson (2021) highlighted the rise of a new political landscape globally, characterized by the emergence of populist, and identity manipulation. They further argued that this phenomenon, observed in many democratic nations, is reshaping peace and stability fuelling the growth of social movements such as Pegida in Germany. This development reflects a broader trend of citizens expressing distrust towards both immigration and established political institutions according to them.

Echele (2023) explores the intricate interplay between religion and politics, illustrating how leaders manipulate religious narratives to consolidate power. Drawing on case studies from Yugoslavia and Syria, Echele demonstrates how the fusion of ethnicity with religious identity

becomes a potent tool for political exploitation by leveraging religious symbolism, influencing institutions, and reshaping governmental policies, leaders like Slobodan Milošević and Bashar Assad perpetuated violent conflicts, exploiting deep-seated religious and ethnic divisions to maintain authority. Similarly, Hadžić (2023) expands on this theme, arguing that historical religious affiliations have been manipulated to justify violence and sustain unjust socio-political orders. He added that in the Balkans, clericalization and ethnicization have entrenched divisive ideologies, fostering religious antagonism and historical revisionism. Hadžić concluded that this entanglement of ethnicity with religious identity perpetuates hostility, undermining prospects for peaceful coexistence and nurturing future generations in a climate of discord.

Conflict in the Middle East is a repeated topic in the world of international politics. The Palestinian Israeli conflict is one of the longest lasting conflicts in the Middle East region (Bulutgil and Prasad 2023). The region also experienced two wars that had a great number of international participants: the two wars in Iraq both in 1991 and 2003, and the war between Iran and Iraq that lasted for eight years. Furthermore, there are other conflict zones surrounding the area such as Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and the Horn of Africa. Domestic and regional instabilities are caused by the connection between Middle Eastern states and arms-producing governments in creating the Middle East as the most militarized zone globally (Levin, 2019; Puppo, 2019).

The average number of conflicts in the Middle East from 1960 to 2003 is higher than the average in the Americas and Europe, yet lower than the average number of conflicts in Africa and Asia. The frequency of conflict in Asia is the same as in the Middle East; however, the duration of Middle Eastern conflict is longer.



Between the years 1960 and 2003 a diverse number of conflicts occurred; some of these conflicts happened between the governments and Islamic militants such as the conflict in Algeria from 1991 to 2003, the Egyptian conflict from 1992 to 1998, and the Saudi Arabian conflict in 1979, while other countries struggled due to military factions such as the conflicts in Iraq in the year 1963, the one in Morocco in 1971, and Syria in 1966. From 1975 to 1989 Morocco fought the secessionists of the previous Spanish Sahara, and the clashes that happened after the unifications of the two Yemens in 1962 to 1970, 1986, and 1996 (Puppo, 2019).

Conflicts in Africa have their structural links to worsening socio-economic conditions and politics that has been affecting the people of the continent. Orgu, (2018); Agbu, Zhema, & Useini, (2019) asserted that recurrent socio-economic crises have increased intolerable living conditions among the African people as evidenced in the rising surge of poverty, unemployment, crimes across the border of nations and high debt profiles. They contend that those living in such conditions have led to the devaluation of human lives and also promoted a situation of protest, insurgency and threats of violent changes in which responses from the State/Nations have been marked by resilience, repression and authoritarian tendencies. Thus, if the current economic conditions are not changed, misery, rebellions, crimes and insecurity will continue to be the order of the day in Africa, particularly in the case of Nigeria.

Similarly, Brosché (2023) suggest a comparative study of Darfur and Eastern Sudan, highlighting how biased governance exacerbates communal tensions, tilting societal balance towards conflict rather than cooperation. Ananyev and Poyker (2023) further examine how political elites in Mali utilized ethnicity to consolidate power, sparking public discourse on national identity amidst

insurgency, revealing the volatile intersection of political power and ethnic identity. Political and social conflicts in Africa could be attributed to various factors. These include inter-ethnic tensions, socio-economic factors and political instability. In Kenya, there is a clear picture of inter-ethnic conflict between the two dominant ethnic groups in the country in which one ethnic group constitutes the majority of the national population. They formed the Nationalist Party during the colonial period which, after independence became the ruling party in Kenya. The remaining minority group formed another party as a result of fear of domination by the majority. The formation of these two dominant parties provided an avenue for regionalism. Greater autonomy to each region, as opposed to a strong centralised system of government, was aimed at the better protection of the interests of the minority group.

As noted by Dowse (1980), the term 'conflict' is used to describe "a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual perspectives entirely just, goals". He further argues that sometimes, conflict is as a result of the struggle for power and material gain by leaders and followers alike. Because of such vested interests, the conflict entrepreneurs prefer conflict to cooperation and privilege violence over negotiations. To have a thorough grasp of conflict, therefore, one must cautiously examine the various actors and factors and their interrelationship in each conflict situation. The material value or economic viability of the territory is also vital in conflict dynamics. For example, if the territory is rich in natural resources such as oil, gold, diamond, timber or if there are cultural attachments to the territory, there would be more stakes in it.

Otite (1999) argues that most conflicts in Nigeria are premised on land space and resource competition; disputed jurisdiction of traditional rulers; creation and location



of local government council headquarters; scarce political and economic resources; micro and macro social structures of Nigeria; population growth; and disregard for cultural symbols. Conflict may either be non-violent or violent. Notably, what constitutes violence and non-violence varies depending on the context or perception of the legitimate use of force or challenge of authority. Violence is the illegitimate or unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the will or desire of others. The criminal model of violence differentiated between legitimate and illegitimate violence. It places emphasis on the identification of criminal in the target domain. In this perspective, the problem of violence is ascribed to outlaws and thugs who unleash terror on the law-abiding citizens and cause social and political instability in the society. This model tends to ignore the socio-cultural factors that breed violence.

Agbaba (2013) opine that the most serious threat to harmony, progress and integral nationhood of Nigeria over the years, has been the over-sharpened ethnic sensitivities of its peoples. He asserts that ethnic loyalties have become so infused into the psyche of the nation, that not only have more elegant phrases emerged, but such decadent nationalistic obsessions have formed the basis for much of the national policies. For him, the nation's inadvertently have been promoting circumstances that not only sensitize, but also politicize the ethnic differences in the country. Thus, the ethnic factor assumed a self-fulfilling and sustaining dynamics of its own which daily reinforced the individuals internalized ethnic sentiments. The persistence and growth of ethnicity in Nigeria had become inevitable.

Nuhu, Iroye and Bolarinwa (2024) further emphasize how communal identities, political power struggles, and socioeconomic disparities in fuelling ethno-religious tensions in Taraba State. Additionally, O'Brochta (2023) argues that

while political elites often exploit ethnic diversity for competitive advantage, there exists potential for positive interethnic interactions when interests converge on resource distribution, offering hope for mitigating out-group animosities. Gana (2023) investigates the impact of ethno-religious identities on democratic consolidation, revealing their dual role as a source of cultural richness and a potential threat to stability when politicized. In the same vein, Umeasiegbu, Ogu, and Chukwuemeka (2023) attribute recurrent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria to leadership deficits and socioeconomic inequalities, which perpetuate insecurity and civil disorder.

Brass (2024) opines that the processes by which ethnic groups and nations are formed, noting a persistent conceptual difference among scholars regarding whether these groups are 'natural,' 'primordial,' 'given' communities or creations of interested leaders, elite groups, or political systems. Udom and Okolie (2022) argued that colonialism and its capitalist ideological underpinnings, along with the adoption of similar traits by Nigerian bourgeoisie elements, largely account for the ethnic divide pervasive in the Nigerian system. Similarly, Njoku and Kolapo (2022) identify incessant conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in the north, as being reinforced by pervasive socioeconomic inequality, political domination, religious fanaticism, ethnic rivalry, elite manipulation and class struggles between the haves and have-nots. Ethnicity and religious intolerance have generated a number of ethno-religious conflicts with serious implications on the country's economy.

Nnoli (1978) opines that the plural nature of Nigeria necessitated the adoption of a federal system of government that would give an opportunity for each region to practice its own cultures, norms and values within the political system. However, Nigeria is yet to witness true federalism.



Until the present time, independent Nigeria continues to struggle to achieve true federalism, a fair and balanced fiscal and political structure that would benefit the different ethnic nationalities in the country. Jega (1998) observed that Nigerian federalism promotes disunity, nepotism, sectionalism, hatred, fear and mutual suspicious which consequently lead to ethnic, religious and political violence in the country. Nwobodo (2023) further explores the political landscape in Nigeria, revealing that politics is associated with corruption, manipulation, and the creation of violence for personal gain. The study recommends a paradigm shift from politics of domination and manipulation to one based on love, moral soundness, and genuine service.

According to Ewetan (2017) and Johnson (2022) most of these conflicts take place in an environment where political power holders favour their own ethnic groups, especially in terms of political positions and economic advantage exclude other ethnic communities. The issue of power relationship or dominance among different ethnic groups tend to generate disagreement and conflict within the society. In general, the causes of social conflict be it ethnic, religious, political or otherwise, could be attributed to many factors such as the weakening of the central authority, economic competition, political manipulation by the elites and ethnic tribalism. Therefore, despite the fact that many studies have been conducted on issues of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, little studies have been focused on the role of communal identity politics towards fuelling ethno-religious conflicts. Thus, this paper aims to make some contribution towards filling that gap in the literature by examine the communal identity politics in fuelling the ethno-religious conflict in Taraba State.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative method of data collection and obtained the relevant information from the selected informants. This study utilized purposive sampling method to selects the sample according to convenience of access, categories and nominated cases inside the identified samples. The reason for using purposive sampling method is to ensure that ethics in conducting the research was followed and allow the researcher to select the knowledgeable informants, those with direct conflict experience. The method helps the researcher to have access to major stakeholders such as community leaders and decision-makers who have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For example, in a rural community, there are community leaders, religious leaders who belong to a common subgroup in the society. Thus, Six (6) informants were interviewed both in Ibbi and Wukari local government areas which cut across stakeholders like community leaders, political leaders and religious leaders that comprised both Muslim and Christian in the study areas which make the total of Twelve (12) informants in these two local government areas. The reason for selecting twelve (12) informants is to have full coverage while maintaining the data volume and provide sufficient data saturation in the research. Additional interviews beyond 12 informants yield diminishing returns. Thus, in order to ensure equal voice representation among different ethnic and religious group, research shows that thematic elements emerge within the first 12 interviews. Literatures indicated that previous studies had used purposive sampling technique with 20, 10, 5 or less to serve as sampling size of the population in a qualitative study.



Data collected through interview were analysed using discourse analysis ((Lehtonen; Pahkinen, 2004; Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted “Protracted Social Conflict” theory propounded by Edward Azar (1990) in order to guide research. Protracted Social Conflict gives more emphasis on factors that contributed to conflicts within the society. The theory asserted that social conflict revolves around four assumptions which are communal identity, deprivation of human needs, government and the role of the state and international linkages (Azar, 1990). He posits that communal identity refers to ethnic, religious and cultural groups characterised by cultural affiliation, social discrimination, racial segregation and religious differences among their diversity which will lead to hatred, mutual suspicion, lack of cordiality and consequently violence in the society. Deprivation of human needs is another source of protracted social conflict whereby grievances emanated from need deprivation are usually expressed violently. Failure of the constituted authority to address these grievances by providing the basic necessities for life contributed to protracted social conflict.

The Government and the State’s role is the situation in which the states ensure that all communal groups under its jurisdiction are able to meet their basic human needs. Azar’s notes that in those countries that are experiencing protracted social conflict, political power tends to be dominated by one identity group that uses its resources to maintain power over the other. In turn, to ensure that the group in power remains so, protracted social conflict affected countries will often see attempts by the dominant group to resist participation of minority groups. Lastly, international linkages refer to political-economic relations of economic dependency within the international economic system, and the

network of political-military linkages constituting regional and global patterns of clientele and cross-border interest. Azar opines that modern states, particularly weaker nation-states, are porous to the international forces operating within the wider global community: the formation of domestic social and political institutions and their impact on the role of the state are greatly influenced by the patterns of linkage within the international system.

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings

The result analysis of the key informant interviews followed the common process of organizing the interview data by case, itemization of coding, and organizing coding into overall themes. The resulting themes from the qualitative analysis are described. Quotes from respondents are used to further illustrate the discourse areas.

Communal identity politics significantly promote ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State particularly in Ibbi and Wukari local government areas; this can be seen through the following factors as stated by the majority of the informants. They collectively opined that issues such as marginalization and discrimination, land ownership tussle and religious rivalry between different faiths fuelled ethno-religious conflicts.

Communal identity and inter-ethnic tension play a vital in promoting conflict in these areas. Strong communal identities based on ethnicity, religion or other group affiliations can definitely promote conflict in Ibbi and Wukari if they are politicized or pitted against each other. When people have very strong attachments to their communal group, it can create an "us vs them" mentality towards outsider groups, breeding distrust, prejudices and polarization. Again, political entrepreneurs and elites may use communal grievances related to group rights, resources, status etc. to mobilize their ethnic or religious constituencies against perceived threats.



In addition, Marginalization and discrimination against certain ethnic or tribal groups can definitely promote conflict in Ibbi and Wukari local government areas. When particular communities feel systemically excluded, deprived of rights and opportunities, or treated as second-class citizens, it generates deep grievances that can erupt into violence. Here are some of the ways in which marginalization fuels conflicts. If certain ethnic groups are deprived of access to land, water, public services, jobs or development funds based on their identity, it breeds resentment. Moreover, Lack of adequate political voice and representation for marginalized groups prevents them from being addressed through institutional channels.

Moreover, disputes and tensions over land ownership between different ethnic/tribal groups can be a major driver of ethno-religious conflict in Ibbi and Wukari local government areas of Taraba States. Control over land is not just an economic issue, but is deeply tied to group identities, historical background and perceived ancestral rights. When different ethnic groups lay claim to the same piece of land based on different historical narratives or perceived customary rights, it creates ripe conditions for clashes. Because when populations grow, competition increases between groups over declining land and natural resources especially in the areas which heavily depend on agriculture/pastoralism. Furthermore, in the other dimension religious rivalries and tensions between different religious groups can definitely promote conflict in Ibbi and Wukari local government areas. Religion is a powerful force that shapes identities, worldviews and group allegiances, so when adherents of different faiths view each other as threatening, it can turn volatile. These are some of the ways in which religious rivalries fuel conflict. Basically, conflicting beliefs and truth claims between religions of Christianity and Islam

can foster an "us vs. them" mentality if not handled carefully. When religious groups actively politicize and seek conversions from other faiths' gather, it can spark defensive, even violent reactions. Or if one religious group feels discriminated against or denied rights/access, it breeds resentments that can turn to militancy.

The results of this study corresponded with the works of various scholars like Nnoli, (1980); Jibat, Berisso, and Adeto (2023) that view "ethnicity as an instrument of groups' consciousness which serves to elevate one's pride and sense of being. It serves as the crime fond of one's belongingness and essence of his selfishness. Thus, ethnicity in its fundamental sense is an exhibition of common ethnic identity and differences to the members of other cultural groups within a definable geo-political setting". In a similar vein, Nwaoburu (2023) emphasizes that ethnic politics has significantly hindered development and unity in Nigeria due to sentimental selective preferences, as argued by, in a country with over 200 million people and more than 500 ethnic groups speaking over 1,300 dialects, it is inevitable to encounter challenges on the path to national integration. He further posits that managing the challenges posed by Nigeria's diversity is crucial for national integration, development, and growth. Therefore, the African case study shows that most of the conflict occurs as a result of inter-ethnic rivalry, domination, discrimination in terms of sharing of resources and political positions. He further revealed that inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are rooted in the rent-seeking behaviour of some political leaders at Federal, State and Local government levels, contributing to the tensions in the country.

Wunti, & Moniruzzaman (2016); Ali, & Lawal (2022) and Gana (2023) investigate the impact of ethno-religious identities on democratic consolidation, revealing their



dual role as a source of cultural richness and a potential threat to stability when politicized. In the same vein, Umeasiogbu, Ogu, and Chukwuemeka (2023) attribute recurrent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria to leadership deficits and socio-economic inequalities, which perpetuate insecurity and civil disorder. The African ethnic crisis linked to colonization is conceptualized through the lens of 'ethno-social identity, exploring the relationship between ethnic polarization, ethno-corruption, insecurity, and separatism (Igwe, 2024). Brass (2024) opines that the processes by which ethnic groups and nations are formed, noting a persistent conceptual difference among scholars regarding whether these groups are 'natural,' 'primordial,' 'given' communities or creations of interested leaders, elite groups, or political systems. Udom and Okolie (2022) posit that the history of African countries is characterised with conflict that engulfed the region which includes inter-ethnic, religious, economic, political and regional conflicts. Millions of Africans have been killed as a result of these conflicts of which an estimated 90% were civilian non-combatants. Apart from the loss of lives, the conflicts affect the developmental efforts of the people. It affects the means of livelihoods, destruction of infrastructure, loss of investment opportunities and diversion of resources from provision of social amenities to the military and security issues. The conflicts increase debts and cause massive internal displacement of people who are forced to become refugees. They further argued that colonialism and its capitalist ideological underpinnings, along with the adoption of similar traits by Nigerian bourgeoisie elements, largely account for the ethnic divide pervasive in the Nigerian system.

Similarly, Adebayo et al. (2022); Lohna (2023) and Nwoke (2024) argue that there has been a persistent issue of communal identity politics and marginalization in

Taraba State, with certain ethnic groups feeling underrepresented in local and state governance structures. This has led to tensions and calls for more inclusive political processes. As a result of that limited resources and infrastructure, economic opportunities have contributed to poverty and underdevelopment in some regions of the state. Similarly, Umar and Ibrahim (2023) opine that there are significant disparities among different groups in terms of access to quality education and healthcare services across different parts of Taraba State. Rural and remote areas faced greater challenges leading to their marginalization in terms of human development indicators. Thus, conflict between farmers and herders that have ethno-religious colouration led to internal displacement of many people especially in the southern parts of the State. Ojo (2022) examines how these displacements have further affected the marginalized communities, impacting their livelihoods, access to services, and social integration.

Discussions

The study examined the role of communal identity politics towards fuelling ethno-religious conflict in Taraba States. Since the returned of democratic dispensation in Nigerian fourth republic, the occurrence of ethno-religious conflict became order of the day and threatening the peaceful co-existence, unity and integration of the country. The topic became a debatable among many Nigerians and academicians on why there are occurrence and re-occurrence of this phenomenon. Several questions have been asked on what are the factors that contributed to this problem. Does the role of communal identity politics contribute in fuelling ethno-religious conflicts? What are the roles of government in tackling these problems? This study found that communal identity or inter-ethnic tension plays a vital role in fuelling ethno-religious conflict in Taraba State. Since after the inception of



democratic rule during President Olusegun Obasanjo, this issue of communal identity and hatred created serious problem and threatened the peaceful co-existence of many societies in the country. Series of ethno-religious conflict occurred mostly between Muslims and Christians the two major dominant religious group in the country. Disagreement between these two religious groups erupted because of the desire to have dominant recognition of their beliefs, ethnic supremacy, structure and culture in Nigeria. This has been the basis for ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria since the return of democratic rule in 1999. Ibbi and Wukari local government areas has been experiencing a protracted ethno-religious conflict and the main causes of these conflicts includes struggle for the control of Ibbi and Wukari land and by extension, competition for political leadership, issue of ethnic hatred and mutual suspicion and competition over resources between Jukun Christians allied and Hausa/Fulani Muslims. Both the parties hold to their different narratives which they expressed.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflict occurs as a result of many factors which include; historical origin, colonial legacies, forced migrations, or long-standing grievances between different ethnic groups. In Nigeria, it is interesting to note that ethnicity and religious intolerance have become a turning point of various forms of nationalism ranging from assertion of language, cultural autonomy and religious superiority to demands for local political autonomy and self-determination. Communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflict manifest itself through the politicization of ethnicity and religion, coupled with the issue of identity differences, tribal affiliation and religious bigotry that is threatening the peaceful co-existence of Taraba State. Thus, the

occurrence and re-occurrence of conflicts became problematic as a result of unequal access to political participation, sharing of scarce resources and other social and economic development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested to serve as a mechanism of resolving the issue of communal identity politics and ethno-religious conflict in Taraba state.

In order to address the issue of communal identity, the government should promote narrative that can emphasize shared Nigerian identity and common goals, while still respecting diverse cultural and religious traditions. Government should support inter-community dialogue, organize regular forums and events that will bring leaders together and members of different ethnic and religious groups to foster unity and cooperation. Government should tackle the deep-seated grievances through reconciliation process in order to acknowledge past conflicts and injustices, aiming to heal communal wounds and reduce long-standing inter-ethnic tensions, encourage economic interdependence and cooperation a cross communal lines in order to reduce competition for scarce resources.

Furthermore, government should promote media representation by supporting responsible journalism that avoids provocative rhetoric and provides impartial coverage of different festivities among different communities. Moderate religious leaders should be empowered and supported especially those who advocate for peace, tolerance, and inter-faith cooperation. Government should strengthen legal frameworks for law enforcement which will protect minority rights and prohibit discrimination based on ethnicity or religion. Also, there is need to develop programs which will bring people from different background and communities together for education, sports, and cultural exchange.



Government should provide early warning systems and enhance mechanisms to detect signs of emerging conflicts early, allowing for timely interventions. Train and equip security forces to respond quickly and impartially to the places where there are outbreaks of violence, with a focus on de-escalation techniques. There is need for collective security planning by the Federal, State and Local Governments in Nigeria. This arrangement should produce

References

- Adebayo, A. G., & Ibrahim, J. (2024). "Inclusive Governance and Conflict Management in Northern Nigeria: A Critical Analysis." *Democratization*, 31(1), 112- 129.
- Agbu, A., Shishi, Z. & Agbu, R. (2020). An Investigative Study Into The Causes And Effects Of Ethno-Religious Conflicts On Women And Children In Wukari And Ibi Local Government Areas Of Taraba State, Nigeria, 1991 -2020. Vol. (6).
- Agbu, A.D. & Varvar T.A. (2017) "Examining the Nexus between Poverty and Conflict: The Tiv and Jukun Conflicts in Nigeria", in *Kaduna Journal of Historical Studies*, Vol.9, (3)
- Agbiboa, D.E. (2013). Ethno-religious conflicts and the Elusive Quest for National Identity in Nigeria; *Journal of Black Studies*; Vol. 44 (1).
- Ali, B., & Lawal, S. (2024). Ethnic dynamics in Northern Senatorial Zone, Taraba state, Nigeria: an inter-group perspective. *Spektra: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu*, 6(1), No. 34-6.
- Alkali, A (2004). Federalism and democratic governance, In Salisu, H. A. (ed.) *Nigeria Under democratic rule (1999-2003)* Ibadan; University Press PLC.
- committees at the village, community, local, state and federal levels with the responsibility of providing sensitive security information for security agencies at their areas of operation.

Acknowledgment

The authors of this article sincerely acknowledge Tertiary Education Fund for sponsoring the study

- Azar, E. (1990). *The management of protracted social conflict*, Hampshire, UK: Dartmouth Publishing.
- Besley, T. and Persson, T. (2021). *The Rise of Identity Politics: Policy, Political Organization, and Nationalist Dynamics*, Stockholm University.
- Brass, P. R. (2024). Elite groups, symbol manipulation and ethnic identity among the Muslims of South Asia. In *Political Identity in South Asia* (pp. 35-77). Routledge.
- Brosché, J. (2023). Conflict over the Commons: Government bias and communal conflicts in Darfur and Eastern Sudan. *Ethnopolitics*, 22(2), 199-221.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods (4th edn.)*. United States: Oxford University Press. Inc. New York.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating qualitative and quantitative research*. New Jersey: Pearson Education: Upper Saddle River.
- Dowse, E. R. (1980). *Political Sociology*: John Wiley and sons Chi-Chester New York: Baribana Toronto.
- Hadžić, F. (2023). Antagonistic clericalization and ethnicization of sociopolitical consciousness in the balkans and the post-wars religious education. *Political Economy and Management of Education*, 4(1), 1-23.



- Hadžić, F. (2023). Violent and unethical non-violent abuse of faith and ethno-religious sentiments in Southeast Europe: Religious peace-building?. *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, 16(1), 47-73.
- Johnson, A. S. (2022). The Impact of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Public Policy, Social Development and Enterprise Studies*, 4,(2), 51-60.
- Kim, J. (2024). "Evolving Societies, Static Solutions: The Diminishing Relevance of Traditional Conflict Resolution." *Sociology of Religion*, 85(1), 45-62.
- Lohna, A. K. (2023). Political marginalization and ethnic tensions in Taraba State: Implications for democratic governance. *Journal of Nigerian Politics*, 15(3), 302-318.
- Noury, A. & Roland, G. (2020). Identity Politics and Populism in Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 23. 10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-033542.
- Mohammed, F., & Umar, M. S. (2023). "Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation: A Path to Peace in Northern Nigeria." *Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace*, 16(1), 78-95.
- Nwobodo, O. P. (2023). Politicization of religion as a cause of crisis in Nigeria. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*.
- Nwaoburu, L. (2023). Ethnic Politics and the Challenge to National Integration. *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy*, 13(2).
- Nwoke, C. N. (2024). Economic disparities and rural marginalization in Taraba State: A path to sustainable development. *Nigerian Journal of Economics and Social Studies*, 66(1), 87-104.
- Ojo, O. V. (2022). Internal displacement and social marginalization in Taraba State: The impact of farmer-herder conflicts. *Forced Migration Review*, 69, 22-24.
- Otite, O. (1999). *Community conflicts in Nigeria: Management resolution and transformation*, Ibadan Spectrum Books Limited.
- Umar, A., & Ibrahim, Y. (2023). Education and healthcare disparities in Taraba State: A comparative analysis of urban and rural areas. *Journal of Nigerian Affairs*, 28(2), 210-228.
- Wamae, S. M. (2023). Exploring the Root Causes and Mitigation Strategies of Ethnic Violence among Communities in Nakuru County, Kenya. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 7(5), 31-41.
- Wunti, A. M. (2016). *NGOs and Ethno-religious Conflicts Management: A Case Study of Interfaith Mediation Centre Christian-Muslim Peace Movement in Northern Nigeria* (Doctoral Dissertation, International Islamic University Malaysia).
- Wunti, and Moniruzzaman, MD. (2016). Ethnocentrism and Ethno-Political Conflicts in Northern Nigeria: A Critical Analysis. *Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research*. 2(2), 10-23.