

Personal and Communal Relationships: Implications for Ethno-Religious Violence Oluwayemisi Obashoro-John (Ph.D.)

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Abstract

Nigeria, the most populous country in black Africa has been wrecked by periodic violence, and has been described as a deeply divided state in which major social and political issues are vigorously or violently contested along the lines of the complex ethnic, regional and religious divisions. Ethnic conflicts and disputes over land and many other resources often end up as religious conflicts. Although many states are affected with violence between innumerable ethnic groups and the resultant growth of the ethnic militia groups, many Nigerians believe that the real reasons for the frequent violence (in several parts of the country) is not based on ethnic or religious differences but the scramble for land; scarce resources poverty, joblessness, political clout, corrupt politics and the negative role of regional and ethnic elites. This paper addresses conceptual issues regarding the place of personal and communal relationships, ethnicity, religion and violence and draws conclusions as regards the implications for ethno-religious violence. It presents a positive panacea against violence induced by ethnic and religious affiliations.

Keywords: *Personal and communal relationships, ethnicity, religion and violence.*

1. Introduction

Despite the increasingly complex, contradicting, changing world and trends in population shifts, people still retain many of their old attitudes and reactions. Some of these are tendencies towards prejudice, egocentrism and ethnocentrism. People tend to divide themselves into in-groups and out-groups. The capacity for attachment and the capacity for violence are fundamentally connected to human beings. We fight with other people in the belief that we are protecting ourselves, our loved ones, and the group with which we identify most strongly (Hamburg, 1998).

In Nigeria, violence is not a stranger. Of our 50 years of independence, 34 years have been spent under military rule not to mention the three or so years wasted on unnecessary and bitter civil war that claimed millions of lives. In the last fifteen years, unnumbered lives have also gone down, no special thanks to political, ethnic and religious brouhaha.

In the Nigerian society, religion plays a major role and there exists strong relations between religious and ethnic identity. Although, it can be said that democracy permits greater freedom of ethnic and religious expressions, in Nigeria, it has also intensified the political and economic friction between ethnic groups.

Understanding Relationships

Relationship comprises a series of interactions each affected by past episodes and in turn affecting future interactions (Hinde, 1981). That is to say, in any relationship, the behaviour of each affects the outcome of the other. Unless interactions are interrelated and affect each other, an interaction between the same individuals does not constitute a relationship. Discussions about relationships show that relationship is fundamental and form the basis of human interactions. There could be close, personal and communal relationships.

Relationships have their own internal dynamics and properties like patterns of interdependence, styles of conflict resolution, interpersonal norms, private cultures, mutual regulation and control and interactional habits. They affect both (personal) psychological and (social) or sociological levels of life.

In a close relationship, a warm, intimate bond, presence of positive, intense emotions, helps to differentiate it from one that is formal and peripheral in nature. Literature reveals that neither the presence of intense emotions nor their positive character is a sure sign that relationship is close that some close relationships are very negative, and other, smoothly operating ones display little emotion until conflict or change occurs. In essence, a close relationship is one of strong, frequent and diverse interdependence that lasts a considerable period of time (Kelley, 1983).

As a close relationship develops into a personal relationship, a second level of interdependence is added. Over the course of time, the two people become interdependent at the level of personal dispositions and characteristics. It is expected that understandings will be constructed but individuals remain unique. Since personal relationships are a mixture of the institutional and the idiosyncratic, cultural norms and scripts cannot be ignored (Blumstein and Kollock, 1988). It would then be safe to describe personal relationships as relationships between humane individuals that would use their particular character if one of the participants were replaced.

Communal relationship refers to an interpersonal association between individuals who are more concerned with what their partner gets rather than what they themselves receive. It is a relationship in which people's primary concern is being responsive to the other person's needs (Psychology Glossary 2011). It can be described as a relationship in which a member has concern for the welfare of the other. In a communal relationship, benefits are given to the other, when that other, has a need for the benefit or to show concern for the other. Members provide each other with help of many kinds – providing resources, information and companionship (Harvey & Wenzel, 2001).

In communal relationship, a member is motivated to provide benefit to the other without expecting a specific benefit in return as opposed to the situation in Exchange Relationship. This relationship varies in strength i.e. the degree of motivation to be responsive to the other's needs. However, this relationship owing to its nature may be exploitative in which one person with more power takes advantage of the other. It may also be a relationship in which individuals are competing with one another rather than cooperating.

Furthermore, the benefits given or received are not part of an exchange. Receipt of benefit does not create a specific debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit. Friendships, romantic relationships and family relationships often exemplify communal relationships, whereas relationship between people doing business with one another, acquaintances and strangers meeting for the first time, often exemplify exchange relationships. In all cases, openness, self-silencing communal orientation, trust, self-monitoring and network orientation are required (Armonk and Sharpe, 2011). Let us attempt to put some other terms in perspective.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity is ascribed to groups or to others, or self-ascribed by particular people who identify themselves according to shared ancestral myth, religious belief or language. It refers to a group of people with a common socio-cultural identity such as language, common worldview, religion and cultural traits. Literature reveals that researches on ethnicity rests on a set of communally constructed borders in political, economic, cultural, social and moral time and space. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive themselves; and culture and identity are closely intertwined (IDEA, 2001). The belief in common origins, a broadly agreed common history provide an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values and hierarchies and common social identities of both insiders and outsiders.

Religion: This is expressed as the belief in a super-human controlling power that is entitled to obedience and worship. It is a particular system of faith and worship that one is entitled to (Olu-Adeyemi, 2006). It is something one believes in and follows devotedly; a point or a matter of ethics or conscience. Religion has embedded in it, a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe; fundamental set of beliefs and practice generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects.

Violence: This term could take several forms – physical, psychological, social, political, economic and cultural—depending on the scope of discussion in criminal law, violent acts are regarded as violent offences – crimes characterised by extreme physical force or by the means of dangerous weapons (Juan, 1996). In general, and simply put, violence or violent acts have actual or potential capacity to inflict physical, emotional or psychological injury on a person or group of persons (Short and Wolfgang, 1972). It could also include such violations of rights like killing, disabling causing pain, injustice and discrimination.

Nigeria's Ethnic and Religion Diversities

Nigeria description as “a mere geographic expression” is as a result of the forceful packaging of unwilling communities of diverse origin, culture and ethnic groupings under the same system of government. The relationship among the various groups has witnessed and is characterised by mutual suspicion and hatred. With over 250 different languages and dialects are spoken within her borders, there is also an important religious split to two major religions (Christianity and Islam) which are sometimes depicted as monolithic entities confront each other in pitched battles.

Generally speaking, ethnic or sectional interests are predominant and most times, these overshadow collective and national interests. In his arguments, Olu-Adeyemi (2006) quotes Nweke (1994) as follows:

“One of the most striking characteristics of Nigeria is its singular ethnic diversity, a demographic tapestry woven of more than 200 different ethnic groups (and about 400 languages are spoken) where except for the effect of migration, are often geographically homogenous and often coincide with linguistic, cultural and religious groups”.

In Nigeria, no single group enjoys an absolute numeric majority. Individuals or settlers who are not members of a dominant group in a region or and space, but who have worked and lived in such territories of decades, are still considered ‘aliens’. Settlers are perceived to be unwilling to adapt to the culture of indigenous populations and to appreciate the religious inclinations of indigenes. These often lead to resentment and subsequent destructive, violent ethnic and religious conflicts. National commitment and citizenship behavior, building trust and fostering concerns for others may offer some hope for mitigating these.

Causes of Ethno-Religious Conflict and Violence

In the recent times, Nigeria has suffered increased in religious and ethnic violence. This could be a by-product of accumulated deprivation, marginalization, anger, destruction and frustrations of the past. Kwala (2011) and Hutchison (2011) note that “the ethnic or religious dimensions of the conflict have subsequently been misconstrued as the primary driver of violence when, in fact, disenfranchisement, inequality, and other practical fears are the root causes”. We are faced with unexpected events and clashes that challenge us to think and act in different ways. Multidimensional factors (person, environment and time) affect human and communal relationships. Some other areas of violence observed and found in literature include:

Pursuit of differing goals

In most systems of the world, conflicts arise from the pursuit of differing goals, interests and aspirations by persons and groups in specified social and physical environments. Ethnic conflicts especially, derive their rationale and configuration from perceived socio-cultural differences and interests.

Economic Dimension

In Nigeria, a great deal of the bloody mayhem in most parts of the country is experienced in poor neighborhoods which suggest an economic dimension to the general atmosphere of distrust and violence. The economy has failed to keep pace with the needs of the teeming population. The reasons include an inherited mismanaged and decaying economic system, perennial over-dependence on oil, apathetic foreign investment, a bloated public sector and omnipresent corruption in high places (Olu-Adeyemi, 2006). In these poor, overcrowded and deprived communities, jobless and often uneducated youths of various religious backgrounds, burn down worship places, maim and kill others of differing religious convictions. Rarely do such killings and destructions take place in city centres or in the wealthier residential neighbourhoods (Onwudiwe, 2004).

Ethnic Differences

In low-income areas of urban centres, there are pockets of ethnic neighbourhoods. Ethnic differences and rivalries between and or, among the indigent inhabitants of such neighborhoods are frequently exploited by unscrupulous political, ethnic and religious elites who use such divides for their personal gains. The ensuring communal hostility is generally aggravated by such social conditions as demographic changes, economic migration and anti-poor government policies. But more importantly, these types of communal conflicts may be fallouts of multiple political and socio-economic causes rather than ethnic causes.

Governance Shortcoming

Some very bad cases of outbreaks of communal clashes were typically preceded by days of simmering tensions and conspicuous mobilization. Prior to most clashes, ordinary community members sensed the tension and the threat of danger. But the insensitivity of leadership, poor intergovernmental coordination and response to tensed conditions give room for dreadful things to happen. The table below shows some typical examples.

LARGE-SCALE COMMUNAL CLASHES IN AND AROUND JOS

	Proximate Trigger	Extent of Violence
1994	Appointments of local government leaders prompt protests and counterdemonstrations.	Four killed. Several city markets, an Islamic school, and places of worship destroyed.
2001	Appointment of local administrator of welfare allowances leads to weeks of demonstrations. Tensions rise, resulting in violence.	An estimated 1,000 to 3,000 killed. Violence expands across Plateau State. Attacks by youth groups in Muslim and Christian neighbourhoods, on mosques and churches, and at the University of Jos. Sporadic attacks continue through 2002–2003, killing hundreds and destroying 72 villages.
2004	National elections held but postponed in Plateau State. Local officials are appointed, resulting in disputes.	More than 1,000 killed in attacks against Muslim and Christian villages from February to May, and 250,000 are displaced. Federal government removes state governor and appoints temporary replacement.
2008	Local government elections—the	Nearly 800 killed in gang attacks

	first in Jos since 2002—are scheduled then delayed three times. Disputes emerge over party nominees and results.	and riots from November to December.
2010	A dispute over reconstruction of a home destroyed by clashes in 2008 leads to violence in January and reprisals in March and throughout the year.	January: Up to 500 residents killed over 4 days in January. Many villages and homes destroyed. March: Up to 500 killed in an overnight attack. December: Nearly 80 killed following twin car bombs. Hundreds more die in frequent intermittent attacks.
Source: Kwaja (2011)		

Contempt for the Rule of Law

Another cause of conflict in Nigeria is contempt for the rule of law by citizens including the ruling elite class. Rule of law is treated with disdain even by government officials who themselves disregard court orders. Ordinary Nigerians generally take their cues from identified official disregard for the rule of law.

Politics

Dirty politics is another cause of conflict and violence. Often, and indeed, in more in the recent times, devious politicians capitalize on youth restiveness and aggressiveness of things to perpetuate their evil intentions of winning at all costs. Sometimes, the political instability occasioned by this uprising may be to discredit incumbent government, hinder good governance and malign the opposition.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The nature of the State and the ideological thrust of state policies continue to shape the character of the economy and social relations of Nigeria. State economic policies, political reforms, economic and class groupings, social power compositions, and social welfare need to be addressed (Adejumobi, 2011).

The challenge for Nigeria is to boost its positive potentials while minimizing the negative; to harness the similarities among the various ethnic groups and religious affiliations for national unity; to manage their differences so as to ensure harmony and foster positive personal and communal relationships. A pattern of distinctive phases of experience – a specific sequence of cognitive, affective and relations features can generate an enhanced perspective out of confusion and lead to action (Taylor, 2011).

A cleric once said, we have offended one another in Nigeria. The Igbo needs to forgive the Hausa, and the Yoruba needs to reconcile with the Igbo. The Hausa-Fulani and Kataf, the Ijaw and Itshekiri, Aguleri and Umuleri, Modakeke and Ife (ethnic communities in conflict) need one another.

Government and civil society (NGOs, CBOs and faith-based organizations) should with dispatch address in their zonal development programmes the following.

- Advocacy for peaceful and harmonious relationships between communities.
- Advocacy with government to ensure security and protection of all marginalized groups and people in the country.

- Advocacy on protection of Human Rights.
- Corruption and mismanagement as the root causes of the prevailing violence in the country.
- Strengthening of communal harmony and solidarity.
- Facilitation of constructive discussions regarding the conflict situation in specific areas.

Conflict resolution in our context demands honest and capable leadership and good governance. It should address reducing the level of unemployment, poverty, oppression, domination and marginalization and improving standard of living. True federalism with reduced federal powers, responsibilities and resources, and a greater local autonomy and self-determination for the federating units or states may reduce inter-ethnic tensions.

- Advocacy for thorough judicial inquiries and processes to reveal the true causes of conflicts or violence.
- Encouraging relationships that cut across ethnic, religious and cultural lines. This will help to combat the effect of narrow identity groups and harsh intolerance and move individuals towards a wider sense of social identify.
- Fostering mutual accommodation.
- Problems of intergroup violence may not solved by granting sovereignty or total self-determination to each different group. In fact, separating groups may occasion violence.
- Encouraging modern survival goals. Trends reveal that in order to prevent intergroup violence, we must adopt super-ordinate goals i.e. goals that are shared across particular groups or which are common to human beings e.g. protecting the environment, avoiding advanced weaponry and nuclear arms and maintaining a sense of community.

Conflicts and violence strain relationships and make it difficult for groups to recognize that they share common needs and goals. Interaction is then based on fear, anger and hostility, leading to distrust and suspicious. For these to be diffused, there is need to

Establish community – based state - supported peace building committees.

- Establish personal relationships with people on the other side to reduce problems that may encourage conflict escalation.
- Bear in mind that personal relationships humanize adversaries, improve communication and increase the general level of mutual understanding and trust.
- Reduce the likelihood of “destructive misunderstandings” and increase tolerance among highly diverse groups (Kriesberg, 1998).
- Move toward change of attitude. Parties should develop a sense of mutual understanding irrespective of divergent interests and unmet needs. Issues should be approached through cooperation rather than by competing or trying to destroy one another.
- Make protection of minority rights a serious issue.
- Provide opportunities for groups to develop personal relationships with their “rivals”. Various groups, networks, persons and organizations can bring people, from opposing sides together in a positive and cooperate way (Hamburg, 1998).
- Provide opportunities for inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue groups. Dialogues usually do not seek solutions, but better understanding.

- Advocate for joint projects. These might be improving living conditions, and common infrastructure, protection of the environment and improvement of economic prospects. It could be rebuilding damaged houses, roads or joint educational efforts.
- Organise special trust-building programmes and prejudice reduction workshops. This will help parties to explore their stereotypes. It could include: community conferences, cultural festivals and carnivals.
- Appropriate social education may help create conventions between groups. Education should emphasize pro-social norms, skills, attitudes in cooperation, mutual aid, sharing and constructive attitudes of one's self and of others.
- Establish a state security trust fund to serve as a coordination point between communities and government.

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