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Introduction

The geographical area mapped out as Nigeria runs the risk of being like a childless mother. The land that is so blessed with human and natural resources is becoming unhealthy for survival. Towns and villages have become beehives of violent activities. There is no guarantee of safety even in the federal capital city of Abuja. Day in day out, the gory pictures of death bodies in the media create fear and panic. Apart from migration of people to foreign countries in search of peace and greener pasture, investors are folding up, thus creating unemployment.

The citizens trapped in this orgy of violence and have nowhere to go employ different strategies of survival to cope with life. Most of these conflicts are attributed to Ethnic and religious diversity. Ethnic and religious plurality is a variety that can enrich a country if properly harnessed.

The multiple ethnic groups can serve as a source of cultural diversity, while the religions will provide alternative routes to the Devine. In Nigerian ethno-religious is rather a source of discord. Hardly will a conflict start and end without wearing an ethno-religious badge. From the Biafra war, military coups, political crisis, market clashes, gangs' uprisings, insurgency, land crisis, grazing related riots, bandits' violence, kidnapping for ransom and so on, there is always an ethno-religious nuance appended to the conflicts. This reality is a source of worry to many concerned Nigerians. Efforts to build a nation with a better understanding of ethnicity and religion have not yielded any success.

Individuals and groups have made frantic efforts to check the occurrence and spread of ethno-religious conflicts in the nation. This paper on “Ethno-religious Conflicts and Social Peace Education in Nigeria” is another input into the search for peace in the nation.

Definition of Terms

Every study has its unique aim and objectives. Also concepts that are commonly used differ from one study to the other. This is why significant terms are often defined to provide clarity of ideas and give readers a direction. The concepts given attention here are; ethnicity, religion, conflicts, social media and peace education.

Ethnicity

An ethnic group is a community distinguishable from others on the basis of specific characteristics that include cultural, linguistic, physical and biological. The characteristics of ethnicity in themselves do not spell out conflicts among different groups. “Generally speaking, ethnicity as a source of conflict results from long persistent periods of domination and unfair treatment or unresolved socio-economic and political imbalances, injustices and inequities by the politically dominant ethnic group” (Ladan, 2010:3).

Religion

Religion on the other hand is the belief in God, the creator of the universe and all that is in it, to whom worship, homage, and obedience of man is due (Ladan, 2010). Religion does not create instability or destabilizing effects for a nation. On the contrary, it is a means of upholding justice and equity. It is an agent of stability, peace, love and unity of mankind. “Religion as a source of conflict is the result of religious intolerance, fanaticism, and politics” (Ladan, 2010:5).

Social Media

Social media is “a collective term for websites and applications which focus on communication, community – based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration” (Wigmore, 2021). It is “any digital tool that allows users to quickly create and share content with the public” (Hudson, 2020). It is a designation for “a computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts and information through

the building of virtual networks and communities” (Dollarhinde, 2020). The social media is a “category sites that is based on user participation and user-generated content” (Lake, 2009).

It consists of online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspective with each other. “An umbrella term that defines activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words and pictures” (Lake, 2009). “Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation” (Manning, 2014). “Social media networks (SMNs) are online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online and participation and collaboration” (Uzuegbunam and Omenugha, 2018).

Peace Education

Peace education is an academic program designed to teach the populace about the evil of violence and the importance of maintaining peace in the society (Junne, 2013). It is “an interdisciplinary area of education whose goal is institutionalized and non - institutionalized teaching about peace and for peace. Peace education aims to help students acquire skills for nonviolent conflict resolution and to reinforce these skills for active and responsible action in the society for the promotion of the values of peace” (Biswas, 2018). In UNICEF, peace education “refers to the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable the children, youths and adults to prevent conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international” (Biswas, 2018). “Peace education activities promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help people either to prevent the occurrence of conflicts, resolve conflicts peacefully, or create social conditions conducive to peace” (Peace Insight, 2021).

Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

The combination of ethnic and religious sentiments to produce clashes among different groups of people is that which is commonly referred to as ‘ethno-religious conflicts (Igbuzor, 2012). These conflicts assumed a massive scale in 1980s and 90s. Today, the conflicts have devalued the

social and cultural fabrics of the nation. The diversity in language, religion, culture, history and even attitude which could serve as an enriching variety in a pluralistic society, are yielding a huge harvest of conflicts since independence (Musa, 2004).

The gaining of independence in 1960 was accompanied with the birth of new identities seeking relevance in the nation. Few years after independence, the East of the country demanded self-rule. The declaration of the Biafra state by Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu led to the Nigerian civil war from 1966 to 1969. In 1992, a land dispute between Takad and Ganawuri in Plateau state metamorphosed to an arms conflict between the two communities (Achi, 2021). During the thirty years of military rule in Nigeria, a notable uprising was in the Niger Delta. A protest group came up over the extortion of oil in the Delta and the alienation of the people from the benefits of the petrol produced in their land. Kaduna state wrestled with the Ikulu and Bajju clashes in early 2000s. The violence was on land, chieftaincy problems, church politics and political manipulation. Taraba state has been the hosts to the Kuteb/Jukun/Chamba conflicts caused by the struggle to occupy the stool of the Ukwe Takum that became vacant in 1996. The Shagamu 1996 clash between Yorubas and Hausas in Lagos state was a product of the violation of a Yoruba custom by a prostitute alleged to be from the north (Achi, 2021). Plateau state witnessed the Pan/Goemai clashes of 2005 instigated by land ownership, disagreement on chieftaincy and government declaration of Namu development area (Yakubu, 2008).

The religious conflicts in Nigeria have been between Christians and Muslims. The conflicts formerly started in 1962, the year Muhammadu Marwa (Maitatsine) a Cameroonian by birth became a resident of Kano. Marwa trained a militant group of 10000 followers. From 1980 to 1985, the group unleashed havoc in Kano, Bulumkutu in the outskirts of Maiduguri, Jeimeta in Gongola State and Gombe in Bauchi. The Military administration of Babangida took a step to make Nigeria a member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in 1986. The attempt was viewed by many Christians as an attempt to promote Islam and suppress Christianity. The kafachan debacle of 1987 in Kaduna state caused by a preacher ignited another round of violent clashes across the north of the country along religious divisions. In 1991, there was mayhem in Kano as a protest against the Christian crusade of Reighard Bonke.

Other conflicts gleaned with religious binoculars are; Tafawa Balewa Civil Disturbances of 1991 (Bauchi State), Zangon – Katab Civil Disturbances of 1992, Sharia Violent Conflicts in 2000, Miss World Conflict in 2002, Religious Conflicts in the Institutions of learning from 2002 to 2006 (Kaduna state), Jos Crises in 2001, Yelwa Shendam Conflicts in 2002 and 2004 (Plateau State), Crises on the Danish Cartoons in 2006 (Achi, 2021), Boko Haram Attacks from 2009 to date (Agbibo, n. d) and Herders/farmers clashes from 2012 to date (Ngwoke and Ituma, 2020).

Effects of Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Ethno-religious conflicts have caused harm to the corporate existence of the people in Nigeria. In pre-colonial times, the most vibrant economic class of people in Non-Muslim communities of the north was abducted and taken away by Hausa/Fulani slave raiders. The effect on the economic development of the areas today cannot be undermined. Also Hausa/Fulani slave raiders demanding tribute from their colonies led to neighboring communities betraying each other. It is not uncommon to hear ‘tribes living close to each, inter-marrying, having a similar culture and sharing linguistic similarities in the middle Belt saying that it has been made clear by their forefathers that they will never be in good terms with each other’. The historical wound and hatred is likely a product of betrayal during the period of the slave raiding (Toure, 2003).

In Kaduna state alone, human life at an alarming proportion has been lost. According to official estimate, the Kafachan (1987) crisis claimed 19, Zangon Kataff (1992) 566, Herdsmen and Farmers in Takad (2013) 19, Herdsmen and Farmers in Maroa (2014) 149, and Herdsmen and Farmers in Godogodo, Jankasa and Manchok (2017) 26 lives. Property worth millions was lost. In the Kafachan crisis (1987), 169 hotels, 152 churches, 5 Mosques and 95 vehicles were destroyed. In Zangon Kataff crises (1992), 362 houses, 218 vehicles and 26 farmlands were destroyed. In Kaura (2017), 205 cows were killed. People in large numbers were displaced. Takad chief, Mr. Tobias Nkom Wada in Kaura local government was displaced. There was hunger and malnutrition related disease of children (Biniyat, 2013).

The ethno-religious conflicts have halted economic and educational activities. Farmers have abandoned their farmlands in search of safe havens. Many herdsmen are roaming about without cows. Schools and market places were closed down. The crises have given birth to ethnic militias, thus increasing the spiral of violence. A culture of violence has pitched its tent in different communities. Settlements in some parts of Kaduna and Jos are in accordance with ethno-religious cleavages. As Tudun Wada, Kawo, Rigasa, Anguwan Sarki and so on in Kaduna are no go areas for non-Muslims, Television, Sabon Tasha, Anguwan Romi, Narayi and so on are considered as axis of death to Muslims. This ethno-religious acrimony determines those who settle in Anguwan Rogo, Anguwan Rukuba, Bukuru, Gada Biyu and so on in Jos. Some parts of Bauchi and Niger state suffer the same fate (Achi, 2021). Bombings, abduction and kidnapping for ransom by Boko Haram have made many people to migrate from the north east of Nigeria to neighboring countries like Chad, Cameroun and Niger (Agbibo, n.d).

Social Media and Conflicts Escalation

Autocratic governments, despots and dictators are always feverish at the mention of the social media. To them, it is the worst technological innovation that came with the 21st century. It is people centered; as such it is subject to so many abuses. The social media is identified with rumor mongering, fake news, exaggeration of conflict related issues and hate speeches to fuel existing sentiments. “A Burmese Monk self – titled himself the “Burmese Bin Ladin” to fuel racism and hatred on social media forums like YouTube and Facebook. He spread anti-Muslim sentiments and blaming Middle Eastern forces for providing local Muslims with financial, military and technical ability to attack Buddhists” (Madzima, 2013). The social media is the masses controlled media; as such abuses of its usage are not out of place. It “often spread unfounded rumors, half-truths, and can also be used to mobilize people to commit acts of violence” (Junne, 2013).

As more and more people move online, individuals and groups have found new niches to play out their sentiments of hate and discrimination. Social media networks have reinforced their views and goad them to violence. They also offer “actors the opportunity to publicize their acts” (Laub, 2019). Religion seems to be the scaffolding for the orchestration

of such violence across the world. The United States of America have been battling with internal violent activities related to religion acrimony. The Charleston Church shooter that killed nine black clergy and worshippers in June 2015 was inspired by online self-directed learning. The circulation of whites' supremacy theories online and on the social media influenced the man to carry out violence against the blacks. The 2018 Pittsburgh Synagogue shooter was a participant in online racist indoctrination. The propaganda that Jews want to bring to the US immigrants that will edged out the Whites population moved the man to carry out the killing of the eleven worshippers at a refugee – themed Shabbat service (Laub, 2019).

New Zealand encountered a similar violence in 2019. A fear of non-whites replacing the whites expressed in the social media made so many whites' patriots and racist restless. This situation led to the 2019 New Zealand Mosque shootings. In the violence, forty nine Muslims were murdered in their prayer ground. The perpetrators even sought to broadcast the attack on YouTube (Laub, 2019). A similar racist and religious related violence was expressed in Myanmar. The military leaders and Buddhist nationalists used the social media to slue and demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority during a campaign of ethnic cleansing. "Though Rohingya comprised perhaps 2 percent of the population, ethno nationalists claimed that Rohingya would soon supplant the Buddhist majority" (Laub, 2019).

Since 2014, India has been suffering the harassment of a group known as "Lynch Mobs". The lynch mobs violence in many cases is inspired by rumors from WhatsApp groups. Such violence has been on the increase with the coming into power of the Hindu – Nationalist Bhairaitiya Janata Party in 2014. In Sri Lanka, violence inspired by Rumor spread online has been meted on Tamil Muslim minority. "During a spade of violence in March 2018, the government blocked access to Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as the messaging app Viber, for a week, saying that Facebook has not been sufficiently responsive during the emergency" (Laub, 2019).

Social media "may foster the formation and strengthening of like – minded people, and add to the fragmentation of opinions and views rather than building compromises" (Makinen and Kuira, 2008). In the

Kenyan election conflict of 2007, “many bloggers took sides and the discussion could be ethnically tense. Similarly, while SMS has been a powerful tool for good during and after the elections, it was used to spread rumors and messages laden with ethnic hatred. It was reported that SMS predicted attacks and called recipients to act on the basis of their ethnicity. People also received anonymous calls or flyers threatening” (Makinen and Kuira, 2008). In Nigeria, Photo-shopping of pictures to create conflict scenes in the social media have raised tempers and instigated violent attacks, leading to so many deaths and loss of property in the country. “Expression of ethnic and religious sentiments in the new (social) media has led to some inter-ethnic, inter-religious disputes and crisis in the northern part of the country” (Uzuegbunam and Omenugha, 2018). Gory pictures and videos of threats, murder, and bombings from Boko Haram are turning the country into a state of anarchy (Uzuegbunam and Omenugha, 2018).

Social Media and Peace Education

Many governments in the world that want to oppress and silent opposition demonize the social media as a theater for hate speeches and rumor mongering. However, the social media is undeniably is a resource for peace mediation. It can help build peace by encouraging dialogue among people of different ethno-religious backgrounds and nationalities (Madzima, 2013). The social media that has a large coverage can be of help in reaching and educating people with peace decisions and jingles in different parts of the world. Facebook has a large coverage of subscribers. With about “1.06 billion monthly active users and 680 million users as of February 2013” (Madzima, 2013), it has become a continent on its own. “Google + has 343 million active users, twitter pulls 500 million, and there are 800 YouTube million users generating 4 billion news per day.

This shows just how people’s lives are influenced by social media and online engagement” (Madzima, 2013). With educational programs in different hubs, the social can serve as an instrument to change perception on ethnicity and religion, change attitudes and promote tolerance and mutual understanding. “Thus it can bridge the divide between ethnic groups that wouldn’t otherwise communicate with one another” (Madzima, 2013).

Rather than proscribing social media activities as it was the case with twitter in Nigeria, they could be transformed into educational programs for peace building exercises. The Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDGAF) is helping “young people run peace programs and intercultural activities, such as organizing multiethnic youth festivals, using social media to promote peace and tolerance and discouraging hate speech in social media” (Madzima, 2013). MDGAF is funding workshops for young people to change their perception and attitudes that generated the Macedonians and Albanians clashes in 2001 via the social media. Through the social media monitoring technology developed by iHUB, the violence that threatened the Kenyan election in 2013 was controlled. The technology fostered civic participation, transparency and accountability (Madzima, 2013).

Social media has fared well in checkmating domestic violence than the mainstream media in the world. “The international global campaign themed “One Billion Rising” on the social media got a mass gathering of over 200 countries to put an end to domestic violence” (Madzima, 2013). The key to effective action lies in the ordinary citizens, the change makers at the grassroots. Educational programs engaging and making them aware of the power of social media is a step towards transforming communities and curbing violence (Madzima, 2013).

During crisis, the social media “especially mobile phone technology, have provided new opportunities to collect data from many different localities and to aggregate these data to provide a real time overview of local development” (Junne, 2013). Also it provides “unique opportunities for individuals to articulate their opinion get their voices heard and draw public attention to issues that need to be addressed” (Junne, 2013). At a hot phase of a crisis, social media, especially mobile phones can be used to keep contact with relatives, warn people not to enter dangerous zones, rescue people and reunite families dispersed by the conflict (Junne, 2013).

The charged atmosphere following irregularities in the 2007 election of Kenya threatened the corporate existence of the country. Ethnic sentiments were brought in to further escalate the post-election conflict. To restore calm to the country, social media peace education was invoked.

The social media offered narratives by “citizen reporters” and digital activities that were more diverse than the views presented in the mainstream media, and represented grassroots reactions during the crisis. While the international media only scratched the surface of what was happening, and the traditional media partly resigned to censorship due to fears of repression, the social media acted, offered swifter, more subjective, and more detailed coverage during a fast moving and changing situation” (Makinen and Kuira, 2008).

The Ushahidi – website that was launched helped a lot. “Ushahidi.com is a tool for people who had witnessed acts of violence in Kenya after the election to report them. The website shows the incidents on a map of the country, and the site also accepts SMS – delivered reports about ongoing events” (Makinen and Kuira, 2008).

Conclusion

The menace of ethno-religious conflicts and their effects call for urgent attention to save the lives and property of people and foster sustainable development in the nation. From the discussion, it is pertinent to posit the following as a conclusion.

- i. Ethnicity and religion in Nigeria have been used to divide and pitched the people against each other. The result is often violent clashes leading to loss of lives and property.
- ii. Social media has the capacity to aggravate or serve as a means of peace building. It is often condemned for promoting conflicts without looking at its ability to build peace in Nigeria.
- iii. Peace is a state of tranquility and calm that is needed for the development of every country in the world. This is why it has attracted the attention of the educational system.
- iv. Peace education in the social media that is yet to be fully employed in Nigeria has been able to transform conflicts and promote calm in some countries of the world.

Recommendations

- i. Government should train experts in inter-ethnic/religious peace mediation in the social media. Their activities may bring about interactive dialogue that will help to promote peace in conflict situations.

- ii. During conflicts, the conventional school system is sometimes grounded. Security measures through a declaration of curfew often impede interaction between people. The online space is sometimes the only means of interaction, teaching and learning. Thus, courses in online media peace education should be introduced in the school system for the management of conflict situations.
- iii. There should be special social media hubs for addressing conflict issues. The ability of such platforms to enlighten and throw light on gray issues may serve as a preventive measure to possible crisis.
- iv. Peace building is not the sole responsibility of government. Religious organizations should create networks of interactive dialogue for peace education. The inter-religious dialogue taking place between Christians and Muslims has a limited coverage. With the social media peace education networking, there will be more participation and hopefully ethno-religious violence will be reduced to the barest minimum.

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