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Abstract

The Middle Belt of Nigeria has continued to witness ethno-religious and political conflict which has become a defining feature of inter-group relations among communities in other regions of Nigeria. This paper examines the ethno-religious and political rivalry in Benue State, Nigeria in relation to the current Benue farmers and cattle Fulani conflict. The study looked at the brief history of Tiv and Idoma of Benue State. It discussed the Islamic jihad in Northern Nigeria and its implications. It also addressed religion and ethnic conflict, Christianity and political consciousness in pre and post independent era. The paper reviewed related literature and made use of interviews conducted among the Tiv and Idoma speaking people of Benue State. The paper discovered that the historical antecedence of ethno-religious and political rivalry aimed at creating a religious identity in the eighteen century has continue to echo in the hearts and minds of those who reside in the middle belt, Nigeria.

Keywords: Political Rivalry, Middle-Belt, Ethno-Political

Introduction

This paper focussed on the role of ethnicity, religion and politics in understanding the crisis in the middle-belt, particularly Benue state, Nigeria. The Nigerian society has continued to face crisis/conflict of different kinds, emanating from the rivalry of religions, ethnicity and politics. This paper therefore, examines the role of ethnicity, religion and political rivalry that has a long standing effect in the ongoing crisis in the middle-belt with emphasis in relations to the cattle Fulani and Benue farmers in Benue state, Nigeria. The paper reviewed related literature and results from interview conducted among the Tiv and Idoma speaking people, since the two ethnic groups are the major ethnic groups in Benue state. It also addressed religion and ethnic conflict, Christianity and political consciousness in pre and post independent era.

The Tiv and Idoma

The Tiv and Idoma are found in Benue state Nigeria. These ethnic groups significantly differ in their historical, social and cultural make-ups from other ethnic groups. This reality creates a complex problematic to understanding the tangible socio-political proportions constantly manifested in the socio-cultural conflicts, political marginalisation amidst others within the pre-colonial and



colonial periods. The largest group in terms of population and spatial coverage is the Tiv, followed by Idoma (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia). The Tiv people are said to have distinctive qualities such as outstanding strength, mental prowess, moral courage, transparent behaviour, hygienic consciousness and environmental cleanliness.¹ The above qualities elucidate and portray the identity and makeup of the Benue people however, the presence of global crime, insensitivity and the unconscious nature of humans which has cut across the globe could perhaps must of have downplayed some of these character traits.

The Tiv for instance have different legends and narratives regarding their origin.² The Tiv are said to have emanated from the Bantu continuum that lived within the Cameroon-Obudu complex between 1475 and 1505 before moving down the hills into the Benue Valley.³ The Tiv had variety of enemies as they were migrating to their present location in Benue State of Nigeria. These enemies were said to have appeared in human, animal and reptile forms, whose activities could be seen by day and night, although those by night also presented a more frightening and ominous picture to their movement.⁴

Another important point to note is that, while in the course of this migration, the Tiv met with a group of Fulani nomads, who were warriors. The both ethnic groups were good to each other until in recent time. The Tiv are good famers while the Fulani are known for cattle rearing. Although according to Chief Denis Gwambe, there's no evidence as to when the two communities met, we are made to understand that they eventually departed but on a friendly basis. Due to this friendly relationship, the Tiv began to exercise intermarriage(s) with the Fulani, but would hardly allow the Fulani to take their daughters in marriage because of the religious differences. The Tiv were so engrossed with their belief and value system that they (Tiv) would not want to give up for any reason (Oral interview). Judging from the above and the present relationship of these ethnic groups, one would say that the former friendly relationship between these people was deceptive in nature.

On the second thought, one would be tempted to ask if this could be one of the reasons the cattle Fulani are now killing and destroying the Tiv people, since the people had been sceptical about their religious beliefs thus, they want to force the Islamic religion on the people who refused to be subjected to the capturing and conversion in the days of Uthman dan Fodio as happened in the cases of the neighbouring states like Taraba, Nassarawa, Kwara and Kogi respectively.

¹East Rubingh, *Sons of Tiv: A Study of the Rise of the Church among the Tiv of Central Nigeria* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1969), 59.

²See Ajiki, *Challenges of Christian Apostolate in Central Nigeria*, 55. And Makar, *The History of Political Change Among the Tiv in the 19th and 20th Century*, 9.

³Joe Iyo, 'The Origin, Early Migrations and Settlement Patterns of Tiv in Lower Benue Valley of Nigeria, C.1475-1900 AD', in Y.A. Ochefu, e'tal, *A History of the Peoples of Benue State*, (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2007), P.37

⁴Ajiki, *Challenges of Christian Apostolate in Central Nigeria*, 54-55.

Idoma as an ethnic group in Benue State is considered the second largest group after the Tiv in Benue State, Nigeria. The name Idoma significantly represents the people, area and the language spoken by the people (Odumuh). Although the Idoma, prior to the colonial rule was a diverse society that had many groups with slight differences in culture, identity and dialect. For example, the Otukpo or central dialect is spoken in Otukpo, Adoka, Ugboju, Oglewu, and Onyangede. The second language is the Igumale-Agila. The third is the Agatu which is spoken in Agatu, and Ochekwu and the last is the Okpoga dialect. The Idoma ethnicity thus, is found in the modern society. Apart from the Idoma found in Benue State, other Idoma ethnic groups are found in Nasarawa, Cross River, and Plateau and Anambra states respectively.⁵

Idoma people according to Erim as opined by Ted Anyebe occupy a land mass of approximately 5,956 square kilometres, located at the Benue valley and Cross River basin. The main thrust of Idoma land is an extended belt of territory from the Benue River to the northern borders of Igboland.⁶

The Islamic Jihad in Northern Nigeria and its Implications

In an attempt to purify Islamic religious practices among some of the Northern States such as Sokoto, there was an outbreak of war that coercively forced many people into accepting what was already known but alleged to have been adulterated. This was said to have had both the religious, political and economic undertones, depending on the different lenses by which different scholars perceived it (Aremu, 1-2).⁷

In agreement with Olaosebikan, Jock Matthew Agai opined that the 1804 Islamic Jihad led by Uthman dan Fodio is one of the religious resultant crises which rose to its upshot by way of reformation. Reformation here means that, there were certain expected Islamic precepts that Uthman dan Fodio claimed were distorted by the people, thus, dan Fodio felt the urgency to curb these practices. He states further, that the said reformation by dan Fodio was caused by the unacceptable administrations of the Hausa leaders due to the social injustice practiced in their era. During the period of the Hausa leadership, the commoners experienced heavy taxation, slavery and nepotism. People with higher status or upper class were exempted from punishment, the eldest son of each family as alleged at that time was the only entitled person to inherit wealth and property of the parents.⁸ The jihadist movement took a lot of lives, perhaps both men and women, even though the number of women that lost their lives is not certain, on the general note, so many lives and properties

⁵Joseph Gbenda, *The Traditional Religions of the Benue People: A Research Report*, (ed) S.D Shishima (Makurdi: Academic, 2008), 6-7.

⁶Ted Anyebe, "Reincarnation in Ritual Display: A Discourse of the Alekwu Mythopoeia in Idoma Traditional Dramaturgy" *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 5, No. 6, (2015):579.

⁷Johnson OlaosebikanAremu, "The Fulani Jihad and Its Implication in the National Integration and Development in Nigeria," vol. 5 no.22, 2011, pp. 1-2Baker Book House, 1969.

⁸Jock Matthew Agai, "The Rise of Islamic Jihad in Northern Nigeria and its Implications on the Jos-Plateau Religious Conflicts." *Social Sciences*. Vol. 3, No. 3, (2014), 67-73.

were destroyed leading to the displacement of people, rendering them homeless. A similar ugly occurrence is that of the Maitatsine movement.⁹

Religion and ethnic conflict

Religion and ethnicity gives a better and clearer view to understanding identity conflict. Ethnicity is said to be biologically originated. From the socio-anthropologist point of view, ethnicity is

something given, ascribed at birth, deriving from the kin and clan structure of human society, more or less fixed and permanent. It is conceptually seen as an instrument, a contextual, fluid, and a negotiable aspect of an identity, a tool used by individuals, groups, elites, to obtain some larger typical material end.¹⁰ Another definition of ethnicity from structuralist perspective, considers ethnicity to be a social construct that is often created by political elites of power seeking class.¹¹

Ethnicity is recognised by a group of people who share a common language, culture, myth of common origin and a territorial homeland. The feasibility of ethnicity becomes realistic when any group of humans share in the above features or relations between any ethnic groups who turn to be competitive rather than cooperative. Often times, ethnicity is characterised by cultural bigotry and political discrimination. However, the Nigerian society and Benue State in particular also manifest some form of ethnicity, often surfaced from the standpoint of political mobilisation of ethnic identity in order to gain favour or advantage of any situation of competition, particularly in politics and conflict.¹² Ethnicity can be recognised by a group of people who share a common language, culture, myth of common origin and a territorial homeland.¹³

Religion and ethnicity are closely linked together. Religious competition is interwoven with the other rivalries that dominate Nigerian local politics so much that the relationships between the state and religious organisations are uneven and inequitable. Therefore, it is opined by in recent decades, religion has become an important factor in public debate and a means of political mobilisation in Benue state. For example, Akume Godwin, states that the 2011 and 2015 General Elections in Nigeria essentially revolved round ethnic, regional and religious factors. The same scenario played out among the Benue

⁹Maitatsine was an Islamic movement in the Northern part of Nigeria. It was founded by Mohammed Marwa whom was popularly known as Maitatsine in the 1980s. His followers were known as Yan Tatsine. This movement fought against the accumulation of wealth by the Muslims. See more on Maitatsine- Mervyn Hiskett "The Maitatsine Riots in Kano, 1980: An Assessment." *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. 17, Fasc. 3 (Oct., 1987), pp. 209-223.

¹⁰Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, "Ethno-religious Conflicts and the Elusive Quest for National Identity in Nigeria." *Journal of Black Studies*(2013), 5

¹¹Ibid., 5

¹²Ibid., 5

¹³Ibid., 5

people, particularly the Tiv. Owing to their bitter experiences from the religiously-induced violence in the North, most Northern and Middle Belt Christians were afraid of voting for a Muslim candidate notwithstanding his/her personal merits (Oral interview).

A similar scenario of religio-political conflict, played out among some of the indigenous people of plateau state and the Hausa-Fulani in Jos, Nigeria. The indigenous people of Beron, Anaguta and Afizere had an ethnic clash in 2001 with the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group called (Jasawa) who also claimed to be indigenes of the state. The clash took a religio-political dimension that later transformed into religious riots since the two opposing groups belonged to different religious faith. The violence destroyed a lot of lives and properties.¹⁴ The Northern and Middle-Belt of Nigeria has continued to witness this form of religious crisis, conflict, and violence over time. Religious violence was triggered by Islamic millennial with the intension of purifying Islam and to renouncing worldliness. They tried to fostering their religious fundamentalism on fellow Muslims but later became destruction to the peace and stability of the Nigerian nation. The Maitatsine sect, a fundamentalist Islamic group rejected Western values and tried to force its own interpretation of Islam on other Muslims. After attacking Muslims and the Police in Kano city, in December 1980 and later fled to Maiduguri, Yola and other Northern areas in 1982.¹⁵

Another religious crisis is that of the Boko Haram militant jihadist sect of Mohammed Yusuf. The sect broke out in Maiduguri since July 2009 and is still on going. The sect preached against Western education. It attacks Christians and fellow Muslims who disagree with its interpretation of Islam, and their rejection of the authority of the Nigerian Government with the claim that it was led by “infidels” unbelievers. In 2011 also, the sect attacked and destroyed churches because Christianity became a prime suspect and a threat to the Islamic hegemony. The sect also abducted about 200 secondary school girls, mostly Christians, from Chibok town, Borno State, in April 2014. Some of these girls were forcefully married to the jihadists (Thurston, 5).¹⁶ while some were cajoled into denouncing their faith to accepting Islam.

Another similar crisis which is almost the same with the cattle Fulani and farmers’ crisis in Benue State is that of the Kaduna State people of Zagon-Kataf which gained the attention of the media in May 1992. The conflict destroyed the Zagon-Kataf town totally and had hundreds of casualties both on the side of the Fulani and the Kataf people. The violence had a religious dichotomy in addition to the coloration of the existing cleavages which was the British imposition of Muslim rulers on the people that has a deep-rooted hostility between the two ethnic groups (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada). The question is, since 1992, the Kataf crisis has been ongoing till date. Does that still amount to the mare historical memories of the British imposition of Muslim

¹⁴Human Rights Watch, “NIGERIAJOS: A City Torn Apart.” vol. 13, no. 9, 18 December, 2001. A1309, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3c272b4e7.html> (accessed 28 January 2022)

¹⁵Mervyn Hiskett, “The Maitatsine Riots in Kano,” 1980: An Assessment” vol. 17, no. 3, 1987, pp. 209-223. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1580875>

¹⁶Alex Thurston, The disease is unbelief: Boko Haram’s religious and political worldview. Brookings, 2016.Pp. 5. www.brookings.edu

rulers on them? Or could it possibly be reasoned that the crisis is ongoing because of the resistance of the Muslim domination and Islamisation of the entire Zagon-Kataf community as currently witnessing between the cattle Fulani and farmers in Benue state.

Christianity and political consciousness in pre and post-independence era

In Nigeria, politics and religion are intertwined. Isawa Elaigwu points out that religion and politics are a coin with two sides. He states that:

in an aggressively competitive polity, such as Nigeria, in which primordial forms of identity become instruments for ascending to national leadership, religion provides a veritable lever for mobilisation, creating in the process, a paradox of dual identities— between faith in religion and faith in the nation.¹⁷

Politics and religion is said to complement each other particularly Christianity. They are both geared towards the maintenance of peace and good governance. According to Ayodele C. O “the ideals of Christianity and Democracy are very much similar even though the methods evolved for advocating towards the goals vary.¹⁸But they can harmoniously go together if both are faithfully and sincerely practiced with a sense of humane, featuring God-fearing and well-informed people as both of them seek to attain peace, love, social justice, harmony, progress and happiness (Oral interview). Christianity and democracy according to Emmanuel, are “twin-sisters that cannot live without the other, just as the human body and soul. He further asserts that, the reason why most Nigerian Christians actively participate in politics and pray for the success and good performance of political leaders at all levels is the belief that God approves of earthly governance (Oral interview).

Going by the scriptural and doctrinal injunctions of many religions all over the world, religion ought to maintain peace and harmony in the human society. The moral capacity of most African people in general and Nigerian people in particular seems to be derived from religion according to Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti respectively (Idowu).

Perhaps, this was the main reason why the very first political association in the Benue society was ethno-religiously based, thereby giving the Benue people a familiar political identity. It seems that virtually all political parties in the first republic were ethno-religious in their outlook. The Tiv ethnic group for instance, remained loyal to the worship of their traditional deities until the arrival of Christianity, rejecting Islam as it is viewed by the Tiv as a religion of the Hausa, Fulani and other settlers. According to Dzurgba, Muslims settlements in Tiv towns were known as *Zongo*, the Tiv had rejected Islam because of their strong

¹⁷Elaigwu J. Isawa, *Nigeria Yesterday and Today for Tomorrow: Essays in Governance and Society* (Jos: Aha Publishing House, 2005), 89.

¹⁸C. O. Ayodele, “Christianity and Democracy in Post-Independence Nigeria,” in *Towards a Better Nigeria: Reflections on Contemporary Issues in the Socio-Political and Economic Development of Nigeria*, ed. J. O. Akinbi (Ibadan: Ben Quality Printers, 1999), 23.

commitment to their Aondo, Akombo, Tsav and Azov which is now relegated to the background with the presence of Christianity. Tiv traditional religion has theological, legal and moral basis for the political organization and governance. As egalitarian people, with love of freedom of expression and action, equality of persons in a quasi-democratic community, open minded and transparent conduct, it was difficult for them to accept Islam that was likely to bring hierarchical organization and political administration that was based on kingship system with authoritarian rulers or caliphs. Therefore, the Tiv could not give up their cultural heritage in order to embrace Islam but rather preferred Christianity which was more parallel to that of their traditional religion; rendering the impact of Islam on the Tiv people insignificant (Oral interview).

According to Remi Anifowose, party politics was introduced to Tiv Division in the 1950s, with Nigerian Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) as the first political party to be introduced in the region. The party had no base in Tiv Division because of its interest in the development of northern institutions rather than the creation of a Middle Belt State.¹⁹ Similarly, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), founded in 1951, was a party dominated by the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group. It had no grassroots support in Benue state because the party had no ideological appeal to the Tiv.²⁰ On the other hand, the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) which was founded in 1955 gained a wide support among the Benue people. Prior to 1955, all the eight Benue provincial representatives in the Northern House of Assembly in 1951 were all Tiv elected on the Tiv principle of "*ka se*" (it is us) which has religio-cultural basis rather than political and party affinity.²¹ The political practices in Benue State reflect this construction of ethno-religious identity.

In the past, especially in the 1950s, the ethnic and cultural biases characterised their lives just like any other tribes in Nigeria. Later, politicians continued to make use of religion and religious people have been making use of politics to achieve their respective individual self-interests. In particular, the desire by the Benue people to maintain cultural identity and political independence led to the politicisation of religion (Oral interview). This was first noticed in the relationship between Christians and Muslims, particularly in the Middle Belt of Nigeria during the period of decolonisation. As rightly observed, "Political conflicts were primarily a construction of the religio-ethnic relations with the so-called ethnic minorities, most of whom had strong Christian political leadership fighting to maintain independence from the Hausa-Fulani hegemony."²²

However, this religious consciousness of the Benue people of central Nigeria made them loyal to the worship of their traditional deities until the arrival of Christianity, rejecting Islam as it is viewed by the Tiv as a religion of the Hausa,

¹⁹Remi Anifowose, *Violence And Politics in Nigeria: The Tiv, Yoruba and Niger Delta Experience*, pp. 84

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 85

²¹*Ibid.*, . 84

²²Niels Kastfellet, *Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Study in Middle Belt Christianity* (New York: British Academic, 1994), 75.

Fulani and other settlers. The first political party in Benue state was known as the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) under the leadership of Joseph SarwuanTarka who wielded tremendous power, influence and reputation. This political party as echoed by Dzurgba was said to have been extremely ethnicised so much that it led to the production of ethno-political chauvinism, bigotry, fanaticism, and parochialism.

It could also be viewed that ethnic self-determination and the search for social justice of the perceived oppression by the Hausa-Fulani hegemony in Northern Nigeria gave rise to the formation of UMBC which was aimed at resisting the Hausa-Fulani rule. In addition, Dzurgba also asserts that religious propaganda was one of the causes of the formation of the political party. Religion, he ascertains, was an effective tool for political mobilisation among UMBC leaders and their supporters Tiv society.²³ Perhaps Dzurgba is correct, observation shows that religious rhetoric characterised the political rally at Kornya in Vandeikya Local Government Area of Benue State. While addressing the people, according to Dzurgba, Tarka said: Nevertheless, I thank God for sparing my life and giving me strength and wisdom to wage my bloodless jihad in order to secure a decent and respectable place for minorities in the affairs of my country.²⁴

Looking at this statement closely, one will discover that religious language such as image of God and jihad was employed by Tarka to appeal to the conscience of the people. Against this backdrop, it could be deduced that the political struggle among the Tiv of Benue State at that period was religiously determined. Thus, religion became an effective tool for political campaigns and mobilisation in the Benue society. It could be argued though, that while religion played a significant role in political practices, it nevertheless contributed to the existing social disorder that brought about confusion and instability in Benue state. To this effect, the Benue people were left with no option other than to choose between Christianity and their traditional religion or Islam, even though Islam was erroneously conceived by the Benue leaders to be the religion of the North.²⁵ Meanwhile, Dzurgba said that a vigorous religious propaganda was launched, spread and sustained by UMBC leaders and their supporters. The UMBC told the people that the Northern Regional Government of Ahmadu Bello had a programme to Islamise Benue state through government ministries, departments, and agencies operating in the Tiv division. This was accompanied by religious and political slogans and the use of short songs in contemptuous manner against the Muslim.²⁶ Religion has continued to dominate party politics in Benue state. Religion is an instrument which has kept party politics ongoing in Benue state. This is evident in the visibility and active participation of religious leaders in public offices and especially politics, which was very rare in the previous decades, that is, before the advent of Christianity. For example, the

²³Akpenpuun Dzurgba, *Case Studies of Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria: Religion and Political Conflict among Tiv of Central Nigeria: Democratization and the Rule of Law in Nigeria: Challenge for the Humanities* (Ibadan: John Archers, 2008), 18.

²⁴Dzurgba, *Case Studies of Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria*, 19.

²⁵Dzurgba, *Case Studies of Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria*, 19.

²⁶Dzurgba, *Case Studies of Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria*, 19.

governorship seat of Benue State is currently occupied by a pastor.²⁷ This could be reasoned that it was due to the aversion the Benue leaders and the people had against the NPC and the Islamic religion.

The majority of Benue people, particularly the Tiv are Christians, prejudiced against Islam. Their belief was, if a Tiv becomes an Islamic fellow, he/she would imbibe Islamic customs and beliefs with abandonment of the Tiv beliefs and practices (85). Religion, as perceived during the pre-colonial period, was a determinant factor of politics in Benue state. The Tiv rejected NPC because it was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani group who were perceived to be Muslims. In addition to this, Dzurgba said that, following the two months of Nigeria's independence in 1960, there was an outbreak of political violence in Benue state. UMBC members went about burning houses, property, and food stores belonging to Northern People's Congress (NPC) members. This political crisis was called *nande-nande* (set ablaze, set ablaze).²⁸ Civilian rule in Nigeria, generally, has witnessed tremendous violence and political thuggery, which resulted in destruction of lives and property. With the influence of education and particularly religion today, political violence in Benue State has been reduced to a barest minimum; perhaps as majority of the political leaders tend to tilt towards one religion, especially the Christian religion.²⁹ Yet, there are still traces of political violence here and there.

Today, religion especially Christianity, is given a wider consideration in Benue State in such a way that before a leader is voted to an office, he or she must identify with the popular religion, which is Christianity. Perhaps, this is why any form of attack on the Benue people carried out by people of differing religion particularly the Fulani Muslims is perceived to be an attack on their religious identity. Benue farmers whom are predominantly Christians see cattle Fulani as an Islamic force. According to Aaron, the cattle Fulani movement in Benue state in recent times has a different agenda from the grazing of land as known in previous decades. From the past seven 7 years or more, the Fulani seems to be pursuing a religious agenda (Oral interview).

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of ethnicity, religion and politics in the middle-belt with particular emphasis on Benue state, Nigeria. This was with the view to understanding the current nature of cattle Fulani and Benue farmer's conflict in Benue state. The relevant literature reviewed showed that the Middle-belt and Benue state to be precise has continue to experience different forms of conflict raging from religious, ethnic and political rivalries. The study however, ascertains that these conflicts, especially the jihad of 1804 by Uthmandan Fodio

²⁷NengerMemshima Sandra, A Sociological Analysis of the Paradoxical role of Religion on the Political practices of the Tiv of Benue state, Nigeria (2017, ObafemiAwolowo University, Ile-Ife), M.A Thesis, pp.110.

²⁸Dzurgba, Case Studies of Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria, 21.

²⁹Memshima, "A Sociological Analysis of the Paradoxical Role of Religion on the Political practices of the Tiv of Benue state," 81.

has a long standing effect in the ongoing crisis of cattle Fulani and farmers in Benue state, Nigeria.

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