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## **Ethnicity and the Dilemma of Ethno-Communal Conflicts in North-Central Nigeria: The Case of Nasarawa State**

### ABSTRACT

This paper considers the contemporary phenomenon of ethno-communal conflict and its dilemmas in north-central Nigeria, with particular reference to Nasarawa State. By way of a synthesis of primary and secondary research, enabled by a combination of field interviews/discussions and library sources, the paper posits that the incidence and prevalence of ethno-communal conflict in north-central Nigeria has been influenced by the socio-ecological dialectics of the region. It observes that existence of multiple primordial cleavages in the area has created an enabling ambience for volatile inter-group relations and identity contestations. Hence, it is submitted that contemporary trajectories of communal conflict in Nasarawa State reflect a fundamental contradiction of identity/ethnic politics; situation that has been complicated by elite politicking and the apparent failure of the government to moderate conflict drivers and fault lines in a manner that leverages mutual and sustainable inter-group co-existence/inter-ethnic relations.

### KEYWORDS

ethnicity, elites, ethno-communal conflict, Nigeria, north-central Nigeria, Nasarawa State

### **Introduction: Research Problem**

Nigeria is a large and diverse polity. It is characterized by immense heterogeneity in terms of ethno-cultural composition and complexion. Hosting a multiplicity of cultural, religious, linguistic, and sectionalist formations;

with over two hundred and fifty ethnic nationalities,<sup>1</sup> Nigeria represents a typical instance of a poly-ethnic society.<sup>2</sup> The ethnic groups that make up the country are not monolithic in themselves. In effect, each of the ethnic nationality is as well characterized by marked divergences in terms of religion, language, and other aspects of culture.

In addition to its multifarious socio-demographic mix, Nigeria is also characterized by deep-seated primordial political culture.<sup>3</sup> The various ethnic groups in the country tend to express primordial ties based on culture, language, religion, and nationality, and are antagonistic to other groups at the level of national political relations. They often perceive and relate with one another with mutual mistrust and suspicion.<sup>4</sup> To Coleman, Nigerians display five different modes of nationalism at the same time: «Africa», «Nigeria», «Regional», «group» and «cultural.»<sup>5</sup> The unhealthy relations among these groups are often complicated by the machinations of the political elites who divide the people by raising false barriers among them in their inordinate quest for state power.<sup>6</sup>

Mobilization of ethnicity to advance political cause has therefore become an important attribute of national political life in Nigeria. This phenomenon, otherwise referred to as ethnic politics, has resulted into the politicization of ethnicity and ethnicisation of politics in the country.<sup>7</sup> More crucially, this

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<sup>1</sup> I. Ngare, *Politics of Ethnic and Religious Alignment in Nigeria: A Philosophy of Liberation for Mutual Co-existence*, Jos 2012.

<sup>2</sup> L. Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democratic States: Nigeria, 1950–1966*, “Comparative Studies in Society and History” 1983, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 457–489; F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Difference*, Oslo 1998; W. Ademoyega, *The Federation of Nigeria: From Earliest Times to Independence*, London 1962; A. C. Okoli, P. Iortyer, *Electioneering and Dialectics of Political Stability in Nigeria: Implications for Sustainability Democracy*, “Research on Humanities and Social Sciences” 2014, Vol. 4, No. 13, pp. 20–30; D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture. Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba*, Chicago 1986, pp. 1–29, 97–108; A. C. Okoli, *Political Orientation*, Gashua 2003.

<sup>3</sup> C. Geertz, *Primordial and Civil Ties*, [in:] *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. C. Geertz, New York 1963, p. 29; I. C. Okoye, *Participation in Politics in Nigeria*, Onitsha 1996.

<sup>4</sup> O. Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, Enugu 1978.

<sup>5</sup> J. Coleman, *Nigeria*, [in:] *The Interpretation of Cultures: Elected Essays by Geertz*, [online] [https://monoskop.org/images/5/54/Geertz\\_Clifford\\_The\\_Interpretation\\_of\\_Cultures\\_Selected\\_Essays.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/5/54/Geertz_Clifford_The_Interpretation_of_Cultures_Selected_Essays.pdf) [accessed: 26.05.2017].

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Okoli, S. Orinya, *Evaluating the Strategic Efficacy of Military Involvement in Internal Security Operations (ISOPs) in Nigeria ISOP*, “Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IOSR–JHSS)” 2013, Vol. 9, No. 6, pp. 20–27.

<sup>7</sup> O. Nnoli, *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa: Intervening Variables*, Lagos 1994; A. C. Okoli, *Political Orientation*, op. cit.

ethnic politics has, over the years, engendered inter-communal conflicts often violent, which jeopardize the prospect of sustainable national integration and stability in Nigeria.

Generally, ethnic groups in Nigeria have been classified as either majority or minority. The 'majority' ethnic groups refer to the dominant ethnic nationalities that are easily recognized in the geo-regional politics of Nigeria. On the other hand, the ethnic 'minorities' refer to pockets of other ethnic and sub-ethnic nationalities that are scattered across the different parts of the country. They are largely found in the central axis of Nigeria, otherwise referred to as the north-central region.

The north-central Nigeria is characterized by immense ethnic diversity. In fact, it is second to the north-east zone in terms of ethnic spread and cultural diversity. The north-central Nigeria has been notorious for contradictory inter-group relations. Despite long-standing inter-mingling and mutual association among the various groups in the region, there has been high incidence and prevalence of inter-group crisis often resulting in ethno-religious or communal/sectarian conflicts and violence. The State of Nasarawa has been particularly notorious in this regard. This paper investigates the sources, nature and significance of politicized ethnicity and the accompanied ethnic conflict cum inter-communal conflicts in Nigeria; especially in the north-central region, with emphasis on the Nasarawa State of the country that is most vulnerable to ethnic strife. What is the nature of ethno-communal conflict in Nigeria and Nasarawa State in particular? To what extent is communal conflict/violence in the area related to ethnicity? Under what conditions does ethnicity become salient in inter-communal relations in north-central Nigeria and in Nasarawa State in particular? What are the impacts and complications of communal conflict/violence in the State? These questions are implied in the salient issues which the study seeks to address.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To Eriksen approaches to ethnicity could serve for different purposes, however, different perspectives are in accord that ethnicity is linked with people classification and "«group relations» which in anthropology has something to do with 'aspects' of relationships between people which consider themselves, and are regarded by others as being culturally distinctive."<sup>8</sup> Generally,

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<sup>8</sup> T. H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London 1993, p. 4.

ethnicity is understood as “the common consciousness of shared origin or traditions.”<sup>9</sup>

This paper conceptualizes ethnicity as subjective consciousness of belonging to and identifying with an ethnic group, that is, with certain ‘people’ who share a distinctive culture and identity. Esman pointed some of the factors that induced Scottish nationalism which could also account for the escalation of ethnic conflict and grievances in the western world; these factors could also condition the inducement of ethnic consciousness in other places of the world.<sup>10</sup> To him ethnic conflict results from “Grievances based on perceived political deprivation, economic and cultural deprivation”<sup>11</sup> compared to other ethnic groups in the country as well as the waning effectiveness and authority of the political centre owing to its failure to deliver public goods to the citizens. In the light of the above observations, Osaghae and Suberu, conceive ethnic conflict as political competition for power and resources in the context of deep-seated inter-ethnic cleavages un-mediated by the state.<sup>12</sup>

This paper conceptualizes ethnic conflict as disagreement arising from claims and contestations over competitive stakes, interests, and values among ethnic groups left unmediated by the state and political actors who use ethnicity as a lever to access power, resources, and wealth. Ethnic conflict is understood in this paper as an outcome of elite management and manipulation of ethnic identities.

Communal conflict is a social conflict that relates to a group in a society. It is a community-based conflict principally arising from competition, claim and contestations over communal values.<sup>13</sup> The community in this context could be a clan, a town, a sect, or an ethnic group. Values in contention may be a land, territorial water for fishing, or a farmland. In this paper, ethnic conflict is used in the study as corollary of communal conflict in view of the fact that most communal conflict in the area of study have ended up in socio-political antagonisms and violent confrontations.

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<sup>9</sup> I. Mclean, A. McMillan, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*, Oxford 2003, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> M. J. Esman, *Ethnic Conflicts in the Western World*, Ithaca 1977, pp. 371–390.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> E. G. Osaghae, T. R. Suberu, *A History of Identities, Violence and Stability in Nigeria*, “CRISE working paper Centre for Research on inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity” 2005, No. 6, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> G. Azoonwu, *Understanding of Group Dynamics: Effective Tool for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria*, Ibadan 2002; V. U. Oboh, A. Hyande, *Impact of Communal Conflict on Agriculture Production of Oye Community of Ojo LGA in Benue State*, [in:] *Conflicts in Benue Valley*, eds. T. T. Gyuse, O. Ajene, Makurdi 2006, pp. 44–65.

Elites are conceptualized as “persons who are able by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations to affect political outcomes, usually at the level of national states regularly and substantially.”<sup>14</sup> Generally, elites are privileged few in society who occupy the domain of power, excellence, and affluence in that context. The elite formation in any society is characterized by what has been designated by James Meisel as the “three C’s” (Cohesion, Conspiracy and Group Consciousness.)<sup>15</sup> These characteristics underpin the uniformity of intention that characterizes elite action and formation. Other characteristics of elites have been well highlighted by pioneer political sociologists.<sup>16</sup>

This paper conceptualizes elites as people with power, the key political actors-players, and the most powerful groups monopolizing important decisions, ruling minorities. Elites differ in their ‘levels’ (national, local, regional, tribal, etc.), as well as structure and orientations. Our conception of the elites in this paper is restricted to its political application in line with its general academic usage and political research, one may call it an approach or a “paradigm,” that recognizes a key role played by elites in shaping social and political change. This presupposes the fact that the elites dominate the political process and/or arenas of society and determine the nature and outcomes of public policy. They also dominate the processes of socio-political mobilization and all facets of politico-partisan engineering, giving them definite characterization as the political gladiators of society. With reference to the issue of ethno communal conflict in Nigeria, it is to be observed that such occurrences have been, in the main, activated by the activities of the political elites in the political and socio-economic arena.

## Methodology

The study is a qualitative and exploratory research. It presents some of the findings of a field research conducted in north-central Nigeria in 2015. The outcome of the field research was synthesized in this paper with insights from secondary sources, particularly library, internet, and documen-

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<sup>14</sup> J. Higley, J. Pakulski, *Elites, Elitism and Elite Theory: Unending Confusion? Paper Prepared for the 2012 Research Committee on Political Elites (RC02) Panel ‘Elite Dilemmas and Democracy’ Future*, Madrid 2012, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> J. H. Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the “Elite”*, Ann Arbor 1962, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> V. Pareto, *The Mind and Society: Treatise of General Sociology*, trans. A. Livingston, New York 1935; G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, ed. and trans. A. Livingston, New York 1939; C. W. Mills, *The Power of Elites*, New York 1956.

tary materials. The use of secondary materials enabled the author to triangulate the findings of the field research in a manner that made for cross-validation of relevant points. In effect, the creative application of primary and secondary data in this context makes for methodological hybridization, which ensures that the limitations of both data sources are moderated in such a manner that enhances research validity and reliability.<sup>17</sup>

The paper appropriates elite manipulation theory as its analytical anchorage. This theory is concerned with the untoward or abusive influence of the political elite in the context of high-stake inter-group political relations. The paper, however, situates the application of this theory within the prism of Nigeria's peculiar context of pluralist identity politicking. Enabled by this theory, the outcome of field research and secondary researches were qualitatively harnessed and weaved into an analytical synthesis in a manner that adds to the prevailing perspectives on the subject matter. The thrust of analysis was schematically laid out under select themes and sub-themes carefully designed to answer the basic research question in fulfillment of the research objectives.<sup>18</sup> Conclusions were reached at the end of the analysis in the light of the underlying assumptions of study.

### **Nature and Structure of the Study**

The study indicates that Nigeria is a typical instance of a hyper-plural country with an immense degree of heterogeneity in terms of ethnic diversity and mix broadly polarized in such a manner that precipitates sectionalism and primordialism. With her primordial orientation, Nigeria presents a veritable contests and contestations, particularly in the area of competitive political relations. In this context, ethnicity becomes both politically pertinent and salient.

The study posits that the north-central Nigeria depicts the microcosm of the entire country in terms of ethnic heterogeneity and diversity. A multiplicity of ethnic nationalities is concentrated in this region, which makes it a veritable 'fault-line' in terms of ethnic crisis and violence.

The substance of the paper is derived from a synthesis of primary and secondary research conducted in 2015 in the focal area as a pilot study in

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<sup>17</sup> A. Royce, A. B. Singleton, M. S. Margret, *Approaches to Social Research*, New York 1998; F. Uwe, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, California 2009.

<sup>18</sup> G. Rossman, S. F. Rallis, *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, California 1998.

respect of a doctoral thesis.<sup>19</sup> It makes a significant departure from the prevailing scholarly thinking on the subject matter by probing the socio-ecological dynamics and dialectics of communal conflict in north-central Nigeria, with particular reference to Nasarawa State. The states have played host to high prevalence of sectarian and inter communal conflicts over the years. The thrust of the paper is schematically organized under the following themes: ethnic composition of Nigeria; the study's setting: north-central Nigeria; incidence and prevalence of communal conflict in north-central Nigeria; communal violence/conflict in north-central Nigeria, and Nasarawa State in particular; conclusion and recommendation.

### **Ethnic Composition of Nigeria: A Synoptic Overview**

Nigeria is an ethnically diverse country. Different accounts have come up with different figures regarding the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Some of these accounts suggest that Nigeria has as much as 400 ethnic groups while some claim that there exist only less than a hundred (100) ethnic groups in the country.<sup>20</sup>

The yardstick for characterizing and classifying ethnic groups in Nigeria has remained problematic. Most accounts have emphasized common linguistic ancestry as the basis of their classification while some have stressed other ethnological considerations.<sup>21</sup> The use of language (linguistic identity) as the basis of classifying ethnic groups in Nigeria, however, is at best problematic. According to Anugwom:

[...] while language may be one of the important factors for defining an ethnic group, some groups in Nigeria may have lost their original linguistic roots while retaining their identity, as a result of intense interaction with larger ethnic groups. And in the same vein, many ethnic groups may use the same language to ease communication, as in the case of smaller ethnic groups in the North of Nigeria, where Hausa has become more or less a lingua franca. Therefore, there is no direct relationship between language and ethnic grouping in Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> O. D. Nlewem, *Ethnicity and Communal Conflict in North Central Nigeria: A Case of Nasarawa and Plateau State*, [Draft PhD dissertation], Warsaw 2017.

<sup>20</sup> W. Ademoyega, op. cit.; A. C. Okoli, P. Iortyer, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> O. Nnoli, *Ethnicity and Democracy...*, op. cit.; A. C. Okoli, *Political Orientation*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> E. Anugwom, *Ethnic Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria: The Marginalization Question*, "Journal of Social Development in Africa" 2000, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 61–78.

Often, ethnic groups in Nigeria have been classified as either majority or minority. The ‘majority’ ethnic groups refer to the dominant ethnic nationalities that are easily recognized in the geo-regional politics of Nigeria. On the other hand, the ethnic ‘minorities’ refer to pockets of other smaller ethnic and sub-ethnic nationalities that are scattered across the different parts of the country.<sup>23</sup> The basic criterion for classifying ethnic groupings either as major or minor revolves around the size of population strength and geopolitical spread. Table 1 highlights the majority ethnic nationalities in Nigeria.

Table 1: Ethnic Majorities in Nigeria

<b>Group</b>	<b>Comparative strength</b>
*Hausa-Fulani <sup>24</sup>	29%
Yoruba	21%
Igbo	18%
Ijaw	10%
Kanuri	4%
Ibibio	3.5%
Tiv	2.5%

Source: A. C. Okoli, P. Iortyer, *Electioneering and Dialectics of Political Stability in Nigeria: Implications for Sustainability Democracy*, “Research on Humanities and Social Sciences” 2014, Vol. 4, No. 13, pp. 20–30.

Table 1 indicates that the Hausa-Fulani is the most dominant ethnic group in Nigeria. The group consists of the ethnic Hausa and Fulani who have apparently cross-bred into a single ethnology by dint of prolonged mutual association, inter-marriage and cross-civilization. They are predominantly Muslims and use Hausa language as a lingua franca. The group is largely found in most parts of Northern Nigeria.

In addition to the ethnic majorities (Table 1), there exists a multiplicity of minority ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Most of these minority ethnic groups are found in the north-eastern and north-central parts of the country. Some of these ethnic groups share some linguistic and cultural affinities

<sup>23</sup> S. Egwu, *Ethnic and Religious Relations in Nigeria*, Jos 2001; U. O. Uduma, *The Challenges of Ethnonationalism for the Nigerian State*, “Journal of African Studies and Development” 2013, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 33–40.

<sup>24</sup> Hausa-Fulani is not recognized by critical ethno-linguists as an ethnic category. A. C. Okoli, P. Iortyer, op. cit., p. 21.



while some are characteristically distinct from each other. Table 2 highlights some of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria alongside their regional distribution in contemporary Nigeria.

Table 2: Some Minority Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

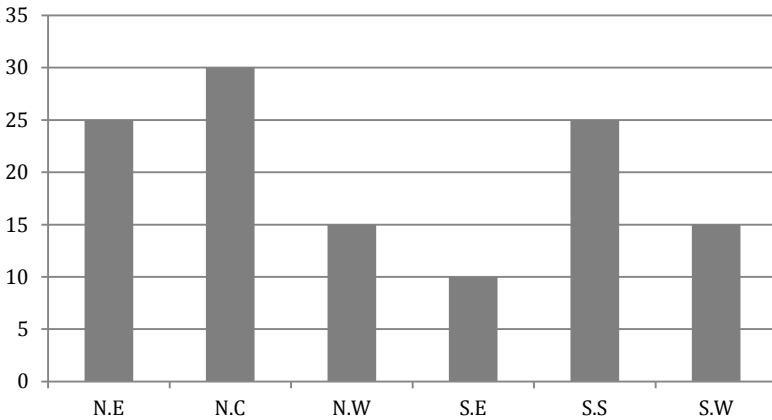
<b>S/n</b>	<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	Bachama	North-East
2	Ora	South-West
3	Yekhee	South-West
4	Edo	South-West
5	Bassawa	North-Central
6	Igala	North -Central
7	Idoma	North-Central
8	Mbula	North-East
9	Ijo	South-South
10	Isoko	South-South
11	Urhobo	South-South
12	Itshekiri	South-South
13	Boatonum	South-West
14	Kambari	North-Central, North East
15	Bulawa	North-East
16	Kamaku	North-Central
17	Igbira/Ebira	North-Central
18	Nupe	North-West
19	Gwani	North-Central
20	Tiv	North-Central
21	Jukun	North-East; North-Central
22	Chomo-Karim	North-East
23	Jarawa	North-East
24	Angas	North-Central; North-East
25	Haggi (Kamwe)	North-East
26	Kerekare	South-West
27	Eloyi	South-West
28	Bade	North-East
29	Buri	North-East

30	Balta	North-East
31	Kanuri	North-East
32	Margi	North-East
33	Delta Ethnic Minorities	South-South
34	Gwandara	North-Central
35	Chamba-Deka	North-East
36	Katang	North-Central
37	Birom	North-Central
38	Kadara	North-West; North-Central
39	Kurama	North-East
40	Mada	North-Central
41	Alago	North-Central
42	Migili	North-Central
43	Eggon	North-Central
44	Bokyi	South-South
45	Ekoni	South-South
46	Agoi	South-South
47	Efik	South-South
48	Ibibio	South-South
49	Annang	South-South
50	Mumuye	North-East
51	Waja	North-East
52	Busa	North-East
53	Dandi	North-East
54	Buduma	North-East
55	Shuwa	North-East
56	Marghi	North-East
57	Babur	North-East
58	Bura	North-East
59	Tangale	North-East
60	Chamba	North-East

Source: E. Anugwom, *Ethnic Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria: The Marginalization Question*, "Journal of Social Development in Africa" 2000, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 67 (adapted with author's modification).

Among other things, Table 2 indicates that the north-east and north-central areas of Nigeria have the highest concentration of ethnic nationalities. It is within this zone that the bulk of the ethnic and communal skirmishes and violence in contemporary Nigeria has occurred.

Figure 1: Incidence of Ethnic Crisis in Nigeria per Region<sup>25</sup>



Source: Field Work, May-June, 2015.

Figure 1 above highlights the incidence of ethnic crisis in Nigeria based on the outcome of the field work. It suggests that North-Central region was characterized by high incidence of ethnic crisis to the tune of 30%. The region is followed by the North East and South-South that recorded 25% incidence of ethnic crisis respectively. The prevalence of sundry ethno-communal conflicts in the North-Central within the time under investigation largely explained the leading position of the region in the ranking chart. The figures reflected on the chart are relative to other forms of social crisis prevalent in the era.

### Study's Setting: North-Central Nigeria

North-central comprises Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, Benue, Niger, and Kwara States. It also encompasses the Abuja Federal Capital Territory, the administrative headquarters of Nigeria. The need to concentrate on this region was principally informed by the fact that it constitutes the most volatile zone in

<sup>25</sup> Key: N.E – North-East; N.W – North-West; N.C – North-Central; S.E – South-East; S.W – South-West; S.S – South-South.

terms of incidence and prevalence of ethnic conflicts and communal violence on contemporary Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> Virtually, all the states in the region have had pockets of ethnic and communal disturbances over the years.

Within the zone, the study takes its research case from Nasarawa State. The choice of Nasarawa was predicated on the fact that the State has witnessed more complicated occurrences of ethnic conflicts over the years. This makes it a veritable destination for an inquiry on ethnic communal conflict in Nigeria. Besides, the State has a number of peculiarities in terms of ethnic composition and social diversity, which makes it a fascinating case study.

It is important to note that the area already referred to as north-central Nigeria in the foregoing is not unanimously acknowledged as such. In effect, the area has been variously designated by various sources as the Middle-Belt of Nigeria, central Nigeria, or the Lower Savannah Basin of Nigeria.<sup>27</sup> It is also noteworthy that the geographical conception and denotation of north-central Nigeria extends beyond the confines of the six states (Table 3) in this particular understanding, The region encompasses parts of Southern Kaduna and Niger States in the north-west as well as Southern Taraba in the north-east. For the purpose of this paper, however, the conception of north-central Nigeria has been restricted to its conventional geo-regional understanding, presupposing the land and peoples of the six states alongside the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) (Table 3).

North-central Nigeria is characterized by immense ethnic diversity<sup>28</sup>. In fact, it is second to the north-east zone in terms of ethnic spread and diversity. Each mentioned region is inhabited by prominent ethnic nationalities (Table 3).

Table 3: Ethnic Distribution in North-Central Nigeria: Selective Overview

STATE	MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS
Benue	Tiv, Idoma, Igede
Plateau	Biom, Katang, Hausa
Kogi	Igbira, Yoruba, Igala

<sup>26</sup> *Conflicts in the Benue Valley Makurdi*, eds. T. F. Gyuse, O. Ajene, Makurdi 2006; A. C. Okoli, *Pastoral Transhumance and Dynamics of Social Conflict in Nasarawa State, North-Central Nigeria*, [Draft paper, Department of Political Science, Federal University Lafia] Nigeria 2015.

<sup>27</sup> O. Alubo, *Ethnic Conflicts and Citizenship Crises in Central Region of Nigeria*, Ibadan 2008.

<sup>28</sup> *Conflicts in the Benue Valley...*, op. cit.

Nasarawa	Eggon, Kambari, Alago, Migili, Mada
Kwara	Yoruba, Fulani, Nupe
Abuja FCT	Gwari, Hausa
Niger	Nupe, Hausa, Gbagi (Gwari)

Source: Author's compilation, 2017.

The people of north-central Nigeria are predominantly farmers. They exploit the vast arable lands in the region for varying scales of subsistence and semi-commercial agriculture. They are also famous in other forms of land-use occupation, such as hunting, artisanal mining of solid minerals, and fishing. In terms of cultural characteristics, the north-central region is also equally diverse. It has a fair distribution of adherents of Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). It is also characterized by complex communal and linguistic divergences. As such, a multiplicity of languages is spoken in the region.

The north-central Nigeria has been notorious for contradictory inter-group relations. Despite long-standing inter-mingling and mutual association among the various groups in the region, there has been high incidence and prevalence of inter-group crisis often resulting in ethno-religious or communal/sectarian violence. Nasarawa State has been particularly notorious in this regard.

### **Incidence and Prevalence of Communal Conflict in North-Central Nigeria**

North-central Nigeria has a number of essential attributes which makes it vulnerable to communal strife and contestations. According to the National Orientation Agency (NOA), these features include:

1. The zone is home to over 50% of ethnic groups in Nigeria;
2. Christianity, Islam, and ATR all command considerable influence in the region;
3. In addition to rich mineral resources, the zone is also endowed with massive land and grazing fields;
4. In terms of development, the zone is one of the least developed in Nigeria;
5. The zone has a very large pool of ex-serviceman, and uneducated youths some of whom are not gainfully employed.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> T. N. Ambe-Uva, *Identity Politics and the Jos Crisis: Evidence, Lessons and Challenges of Good Government*, "African Journal of History and Culture" 2010, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 42–52.

It is pertinent to evaluate the implication of these specific attributes of the north-central zone for conflict and inter-group crisis. Firstly, the fact that the zone hosts over 50% of Nigeria's ethnic groups implies that it is characteristically plural and segmented. These characteristics make the region very particularly prone to inter-communal and sectionalist conflicts, especially when elite manipulation and politicization set in.

Secondly, the fact that Christianity, Islam, and TAR all command considerable influence in the religion means that it is religiously plural and diversified. Although there is 'unity in diversity', Nigeria's experience tends to suggest that diversity has been the bane of inter-group harmony. Expectedly, such diversity has often created pretexts for ethno-religious bias and antipathies in the zone, with volatile outcomes.

Thirdly, the availability of minerals and agricultural resort in the zone has made the zone a haven for ecological struggles and/or competition. This has been exemplified in high incidence of farmer/herder conflicts, boundary disputes as well as other form of livelihood conflicts in the zone. This trend has been accentuated in the era of climate, characterized by environmental scarcities and competition.

Fourthly, the fact that the zone is one of the least developed in Nigeria implies that there is high incidence of poverty in the area. There is a correlation socio-economic malaise, as exemplified in poverty, and conflict.<sup>30</sup> The poor material condition of people in the zone therefore makes them prone to restiveness and conflict.

Lastly, the fact that the north-central Nigeria has a pool of ex-servicemen who is hardly gainfully employed poses the danger of militancy and violent crime. During one of the key informant interviews, the analyzed key informants were asked about factors that bring about complications of communal conflict/violence in their area with the aim of understanding the link between poverty and conflict. A key informant stated: "involvement of such men in the planning and execution of communal violence has been one of the worst complication of security crisis in the zone."<sup>31</sup>

Generally, the north-central Nigeria has been quite notorious for communal conflict/violence over the years. The crises have been variously motivated by struggles over land, boundary, chieftaincy, natural resources, and political power. There have also been rising waves of ethnic and religious contestations in the zone. Conflict in north-central zone has been more ob-

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<sup>30</sup> A. R. Mustapha, *Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of Public Sector in Nigeria*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Key Informant Interview (KII), Jos Plateau 2015.

vously pronounced. The conflict in Nasarawa State has been much more diffused and inter communal.<sup>32</sup>

### Communal Conflict/Violence in Nasarawa State

Nasarawa State is typically a heterogeneous state with a multiplicity of ethno-communal groupings, which often makes it susceptible to the dialectics of identity politics.

Table 4: Ethnic Composition of Nasarawa State

Major Ethnic Groups	Minor Ethnic Groups
Eggon	Afo (Ajiri Afo)
Tiv	Bassa
Alago	Gbagyi
Migili (Koro)	Igbira
Mada	Gwandara
Hausa/Fulani	Jukun
	Kambari
	Rindre
	Kantana

Source: A. I. Ajo, F. S. Upav, *The Tiv People of Nasarawa State*, Makurdi 2017.

Since its creation, Nasarawa State has been a theatre of various dimensions communal conflicts and violence. Shortly after its creation in 1996, the state was plunged into a wave of communal conflict particularly in its southern axis. A prominent instance of such conflict occurred between the Bassa and Egbira (also designated Igbira) communities in Toto Local Government Area of the State in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This conflict was ignited by contestation pertaining to lands and boundary disputes. Also in the 2000s, there were other incidents of communal conflict between the Tiv and Kwala peoples of the State, which had a lot to do with contestation over land resources and/or ecological space. These sets of conflict were principally driven by land and livelihood struggles, which were accentuated by the dynamics of climate and demographic changes in the contemporary world.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> A. R. Mustapha, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> A. C. Okoli, G. Atelhe, *Nomads Against Natives: A Political Ecology of Farmer/Herder Conflicts in Nasarawa State, Nigeria*, "America International Journal of Contemporary Research" 2014, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 788.

A key informant in the area opined that “these conflicts were characteristically vicious and violent.”<sup>34</sup> In April 2012, there were violent clashes between the Fulani herdsmen and local farming tribes in Gidinye, Duduguru, Baba, and Yelwa areas of the state leading to a spiral of inter-communal tension. According to a key informant in the area: “this turn of conflict involved a great deal of rural violence and destruction.”<sup>35</sup> The conflict also involved a great deal of arms bearing and militancy by the feuding parties, resulting in pervasive and massive collateral damages on both sides.

The conflict situation in Nasarawa State assumed a dramatic turn in mid and late 2012. In May 2012, for instance, there was a brutal attack on the Alago ethnic community in Assakio by a militia group that claimed to be the military vanguard of the Eggon ethnic group – the Ombatse. This incident was followed by another attack by the Ombatse on the Migilis in Agyaragu area of the State. The Ombatse uprising of 2012 introduced a militia dimension to the communal disturbances in the State. The Ombatse is composed of bands of violent youths that have been involved in acts of ethnic brigandage throughout the State.<sup>36</sup>

The Fulani-farmer conflicts continued unabated throughout the State up to late 2014 amidst the rising incidence of the Ombatse militancy. The events came to a head between September and December, 2014 when there was a sort of implosion of inter-communal conflagration in the State. In these clashes, the Fulani and Kambari rose in counter-militancy against the ethnic Eggons. Consequently, there ensued a violent confrontation between the Ombatse representing the Eggon and the various bands of arsonists and militias fighting for the Fulani/Kambari groups. The outcome of this episode of communal conflict in the State was pertinently horrifying. As an eye witness-informant put it: “Bloodletting was widespread and «wholesale». The gangs of fighters exhibited the worst of brigandage and brutal efficiency. The lines of violence and killings were clearly drawn – people were isolated and killed based on perceived ethnic identity. The whole scenario was quite chaotic and maddening.”<sup>37</sup> It is evident from the foregoing that the security atmosphere in Nasarawa State over the years has been significantly volatile. The spate of communal conflict and violence in the State created an ambi-

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<sup>34</sup> KII, Obi, Nasarawa State, June 2015.

<sup>35</sup> KII, Yelwa, Plateau State, June 2015.

<sup>36</sup> A. C. Okoli, C. A. Uhembe, *Of Cult and Power: A Political Phenomenology of the Ombatse Cult in Nasarawa State, Nigeria*, “International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science” 2014, Vol. 2, No. 7.

<sup>37</sup> KII, Lafia, Nasarawa State, June 2015.



ence of perpetual siege and crisis that negated peaceful co-existence and cordial intergroup relations in the State, leading to a vicious cycle of insecurity and instability.

The conflict scenario in the state has equally been associated with a variety of stakes and groups. In all these, the ethnic factor has been the most dominant and most critical factor. Normally, the communal conflicts were framed and prosecuted in ethnic terms. Even the perennial farmer/herder conflicts have always been expressed in ethnic terms. The reason for this twist is simple. According to a researcher-informant, who was engaged in a study chat in Lafia:

There is a marked occupational divide between the natives and the nomads (Fulani). The former are largely farmers while the latter are mainly herders. The conflict between them tends to be executed in ethnic terms in the sense that the Fulani nomad would ordinarily think that the attack on them by the native farmers is an ethnic agenda. Consequently a conflict that was principally motivated by ecological struggles would naturally end up in ethnic fighting. This has complicated our situation in the State.<sup>38</sup>

Even the Ombatse militancy has been widely perceived by the locals as a typical instance of ethnic agenda. Some of our informants opined that the Ombatse militia was being used by the ethnic Eggon to intimidate and dominate other ethnic minorities in an attempt to “«assert» and «establish» their hegemony throughout the State.”<sup>39</sup> The framing of conflict in ethnic and primordial terms has been the most critical complication of communal conflict in Nasarawa State.

Table 5: Some Ethno-Communal Conflicts in Nasarawa State (2000–2014)

<b>Location</b>	<b>Parties</b>	<b>Nature of conflict</b>
Toto, 2003	Egbira/Bassa/Gbagyi	Land, chieftaincy politics
Nasarawa south senatorial district, 2001	Alago/Others/Tiv	Land, ethnicity, politics
Nasarawa south senatorial district, 2011–2014	Fulani/Others/Tiv	Grazing/farmland, ethnicity, politics
Duduguru, Obi, 2012	Fulani/Milgili	Grazing/farmland
Agyaragu, Obi, 2013	Eggon/Milgili	Land, ethnicity

<sup>38</sup> Focus Group Discussion, Lafia, Nasarawa State, June 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Rounds of Group Discussions, Lafia, Nasarawa State, May–July 2015.

Assakio, Lafia, 2013	Alago/Eggon	Land, chieftaincy, ethnicity
Obi, 2013	Alago/Eggon	Ethnicity
Nasarawa south senatorial district, 2014	Fulani/Eggon	Grazing/farmland

Source: A. I. Ajo, F. S. Upav, *The Tiv People of Nasarawa State*, Makurdi 2017.

The dynamics of communal conflict in Nasarawa State over the years has found expression in crises of public security in the State. This is exemplified by the spate of violent scenario as highlighted in the following sub-themes:

**Farmer-herder confrontation:** Farmer-herder conflict is a prevalent phenomenon in Nasarawa State. This dimension of communal conflict is as old as the State itself. It has occurred in virtually all parts of the State with greater incidence in the rural areas of Lafia, Obi, Keana, and Awe Local Government Areas. The conflict is usually ignited by the herder's encroachment on farmlands, or farmers' encroachment on traditional/dedicated grazing fields or routes. Farmer-herder conflict in Nasarawa State has assumed a terrifying dimension over the years. According to a key informant in Obi area of the State: "There used to be pockets of milder incidents in the 1990s, which were easily resolved by local authorities. The situation has degenerated since the 2000 when much violence has been introduced into the crisis. Nowadays, the situation is certainly getting out of hand."<sup>40</sup>

The degeneration of farmer-herder strife in Nasarawa State has been marked by immense arms bearing and confrontation. Sometimes weapons such as AK-47 and automatic rifles were used by the feuding parties in prosecuting the fight. There have also been claims and counter-claims of the use of mercenary fighters. According to a key informant respondent in Lafia: "The Fulani nomads go as far as hiring mercenary militants to help them fight the farmers. The mercenary fighters have been identified by our local vigilantes as foreign elements who must have come from other parts of Africa. These militants often operate in military uniforms for strategic reasons."<sup>41</sup>

The incidence of farmer-herder conflict has been accentuated in Nasarawa State owing to the poor regulation of farming and grazing activities in that context. For instance, the government approved grazing routes and

<sup>40</sup> KII, Obi, Nasarawa State, June 2015.

<sup>41</sup> KII, Lafia, Nasarawa State, June 2015.

reserves have been trespassed over the years by land grabbers, particularly commercial farmers and land developers.<sup>42</sup> The available grazing reserves in the State are bereft of basic infrastructure, and so are not functional. They are also not clearly delineated and gazetted. In the same vein, the activities of local small scale farmers and commercial group growers have been so poorly regulated by the government. The consequences of this scenario are the incessant farmland or graze-land encroachments that often precipitated conflict.

Farmer-herder conflict in Nasarawa State has resulted in dire socio-economic and humanitarian consequences. These include human deaths and injuries, population displacement, rural-urban out-migration, volatile inter-group relations, decline in rural productivity, livelihood crisis among farmers, herders, etc.

**Ethnic militancy:** Another crucial dimension of communal conflict in Nasarawa State is the rising wave of ethnic violence and/or militancy. This is evident in the emergence of organized ethnic militia groups in the State. A case in point is the Sojan Patari group, which was formed by the ethnic Tiv to enable them counter the growing excesses of the Fulani nomads.<sup>43</sup> There is also the Ombatse group, a violent militant movement that maintains affiliation with the ethnic Eggon. The Ombatse has been responsible for the spate of ethnic violence in the State since 2012: "It was principally formed to enable the Eggon ethnic group protect itself against the onslaught of the Fulani nomads, who are getting more militant than ever nowadays."<sup>44</sup>

The phenomenon of ethnic militancy has militarized the farmer-herder conflicts in the State. It has also compounded and complicated the communal conflict situation in the State. The spate of arms bearing and brigandage associated with this trend has been one of the worst undoing of public safety and security in Nasarawa State. The activities of ethnic militia have also been complicated in the rising wave of arms proliferation and violence in the State. The implication of this trend for sustainable peace and security has been pertinently dire.

**Rural and urban banditry:** There has been a rising incidence of banditry in both rural and urban parts of Nasarawa State. For instance, the phenomenon of cattle rustling has been quite prevalent in the hinterlands of the State. Similarly, there have been incessant occurrences of over-night and highway robbery in the urban areas of Karu, Keffi, Akwanga, and Lafia. The-

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<sup>42</sup> A. C. Okoli, G. Atelhe, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> A. C. Okoli, C. A. Uhembe, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> KII, Nasarawa-Eggon, Nasarawa State, June 2015.

se incidents are linked to the incidence of arms proliferation and armed conflicts in the State. As a key informant put it: "The spate of robbery and armed violence in the State is not unconnected with the issue of arms proliferation in the context of the pervasive communal conflicts in the State. Arms used in prosecuting the violent struggles in various parts of the State have been used by criminal gangs to foment trouble. These robbery cases everywhere are the consequence..."<sup>45</sup>

With particular reference to the rural areas, there has been an obvious rise in the incidence of cattle raids and rustling in Nasarawa State. The Fulani nomads are inclined to hold the natives responsible for these incidents. The natives on the other hand contend that such crimes are "Perpetrated by the organized syndicate of criminal nomads who come from the far north."<sup>46</sup> This blame game holds critical implications for inter-group relations among the natives and the Fulani herdsmen.

**Indigene/settler confrontation** is another critical dimension of communal conflict in Nasarawa State. The indigenes see themselves as the 'owners of the land' who are vested with the full rights and privileges of citizenship while the settlers are considered as 'stranger' with little citizenship rights. Sentiments emanating from this scenario have often precipitated conflict in the state. For instance, native ethnic groups in the State in the early 2000s were principally motivated by indigene-ship question. Similarly, the long-standing feud between the ethnic Eggon and the politically assertive Hausa/Fulani/Kanuri/Kambari group of ethnicities has been also borne out indigene-ship tussle. The indigene-ship crisis in Nasarawa State bears the tendency to polarize the state into divides and closures of identity. It breeds the divisive consciousness of 'we versus them' or 'us against them' which has been at the root of identity conflicts in the State. The indigene-ship crisis has been worsened by the issue of political exclusion and minority fears. The tendency for the so-called indigenous groups to marginalize the non-indigenes in the scheme of politics and socio-economic relations tend to have led to increased inter-group tension/crisis in the State. The outcome of this has been the volatile ambience of inter-group relations.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The incidence and prevalence of ethno-communal conflict in north-central Nigeria has been influenced by the socio-ecological dialectics of the region. The existence of multiple primordial cleavages in the area has created an

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<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, Lafia, Nasarawa State, June 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem.

enabling ambience for volatile inter-group relations and identity contestations. Contemporary trajectories of communal conflict in Nasarawa State reflect a fundamental contradiction of identity politics. The situation has been complicated by elite politicking and the apparent failure of the government to moderate conflict drivers and fault lines in a manner that leverages mutual and sustainable inter-group co-existence. The solution to this menace rests with ability of federal and state governments to pragmatically assuage ethno-communal tensions among various ethnic groups through inclusive governance paradigm capable of moderating and transcending existing ethno-communal fault lines.

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