LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE ON ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLEBELT REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract
Conflicts that are traceable to ethnic prisms and religious considerations constitute unceasing axial variables in the existence and prosecution of most intergroup conflicts in Nigeria. This paper is on the interface between leadership influence and the incidence of ethno-religious conflicts in parts of Nigeria. It examines and explains the potency or role of ethno-religious leaders’ verbal and non-verbal communications in intergroup conflicts that border on ethnicity and religion. While using the Middlebelt geo-political region of Nigeria as a case, the paper relies largely on general analytic and case study techniques in the interrogation of the problematic. In line with the objectives, the paper hypothesizes that on account of particularistic considerations ethno-religious leaders exert significant influence on ethno-religious conflicts in the region. The key findings of the paper underline the potency of ethno-religious leaders’ verbal and non-verbal communications in intergroup conflicts that border on ethnicity and religion as well as the fact that ethno-religious leaders exercise enormous authority and influence on the people. In the main, the paper recommends the convocation of town-hall forums at various levels, and the participation of broad spectra of persons including ethnic and religious leaders to, in the context of the social reality, deliberate and come up with consensus on various conflictive facets.

Keywords: communication, ethno-religious leaders, influence, intergroup conflicts and Middlebelt
1 Introduction

As is often the case, religion is conceptualized as a way to God (Ezekwugo, 1992). God is characteristically considered not only as all-knowing and all-powerful, but also as the being with only positive equalities and glorious intentions. Thus, a major characteristic of all religions is that they accept supremacy of Divine mastership. In addition to this acceptance, religion teaches man to be God-like, oftentimes through an avatar or go-between. Accordingly, Ezekwugo (1992:78) points out, “no religion encourages confrontation, throwing stones and breaking windows or marching out on the streets with bows and arrows. They abhor looting or carrying property of others. No religion encourages one to hate, envy, and be jealous or wicked to, or cruel to other beings”. As a matter of fact, both the Bible and Koran preach forgiveness, kindness, love, mercy, fraternity, patience and conversion through persuasion and good example. If this were so, why do we have religious conflicts? This becomes even more imminent when as a matter of fact it is not only irreligious to kill fellow human beings or destroy his property, but also sinful. Curiously, a major attribute of world religions is the fact that they are identifiable with temporal leaders.

Since gaining political independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced differing forms of intergroup conflicts that border on a variety of factors and magnitudes (Post and Vicker, 1973; Nwanegbo, 2003). Particularly in the last two decades or so, conflicts that are traceable to ethnic prisms and religious considerations have not only become increasing features in Nigeria, they have also turned out to constitute unceasing axial variables in the existence and prosecution of most intergroup conflicts in many parts of the country (Kukah, 2003, Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2014). As expected, the subject matter has received widespread of attention from a variety of scholars. Beside Nnoli’s (1978) seminal work titled Ethnic Politics in Nigeria many, such as Suberu (1996), Kukah (2003), Elaigwu (2004), Osinubi and Osinubi (2006), Best (2007),Ani (2012), Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2014), Paden (2015), Adetoje and Omilusi (2015) have also provided useful insights into various aspects of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

The focus of the paper is on the interface between ethno-religious leaders, communication and ethno-religious conflicts. The paper is guided by four specific anchor questions. Why are there conflicts between devotees of different religions and different ethnic identities? Do ethno-religious leaders encourage violent intergroup conflict in Nigeria? What is an individual’s line of action when the word of God is wrongly interpreted? How potent is the ethno-religious leaders’ verbal and non-verbal communications in intergroup conflicts that boarder on ethnicity and religion?

The paper centres on the Middlebelt, one of Nigeria’s six geo-political regions where the incidences of intergroup conflicts relating to ethno-religious identities appear to have assumed frightening proportions in recent years. Also known as Northcentral, the Middlebelt geo-political region is made up of six states: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau. While using the Middlebelt region as a case study, the paper relies substantially on the broad general analytic technique (Strauss, 1985; Obikeze, 1990 and Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2006) in the exploration and explanation of leadership and communication dimensions in the context of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Given the nature of the variables and the multi-dimensional nature of the issues involved, analytic inductive technique were specifically employed in the generation as
well as presentation and analysis of data. In particular, tabular tools and partial explanation were employed in the presentation and analysis of collected data.

Taking cognizance of the foregoing, the paper is divided into five interrelated parts. Following this brief introduction and problematization of the study, is a discourse on some salient contextual and conceptual issues. Part three is on the specificities of the research design and methodological issues. The fourth part is on the presentation and analysis of data on the impact of ethno-religious leadership and communication content on the tempo and texture of ethno-religious conflicts. The fifth part, which is the last, contains summary, finding and recommendations.

2. Contextual and Conceptual Discourses

Variety of literature has been accumulated on leadership, politics and ethno-religious issues. For Olugbade (1985), the important thing is that a leader establishes the goals, purposes or objectives of the collectivity, creates the structures through which the purposes of the collectivity are fulfilled and maintained or enhances these structures. Chemers (1997) conceptualizes leadership as a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task. The import here is that leadership is the act of influencing attitudes, institutions, behaviors, groups, influences or controls the thought, feelings or behaviour of other human beings. In line with this, Kruse (2013) argues that leadership is a process of social influence which maximizes the efforts of others towards the achievement of a goal. For the purpose of this paper, leadership is a process of influencing the behaviours, attitudes and institutions of a particular group towards the achievement of a general task which are in favor of the group.

The paper acknowledges that leadership exists in every sector of the human life, but is particularly interested in ‘ethnic and religious leaders’ in the context of politics or the political sphere. Chikendu (1985) sees political leadership as the “activity which is constituted by the organization, guidance and control of voluntary and joint efforts towards the attainment of common goals in the arena of politics”. From the foregoing, it can be discerned that leadership is geared towards the achievement of a goal or objective. Hence, in the political arena, the goal or objective of leadership is good governance rather than the generation or perpetuation ethno-religious conflicts.

In everyday usage, the term communication connotes an activity or process of expressing ideas and feeling or imparting information on a person or people (WCDEL, 2004). For Berdo (1960:24) communication is by and large “a dynamic interactive process”. The import of this is that as a process, communication involves series of actions undertaken so as to achieve a particular result. As is often the case, individuals in leadership positions oftentimes take advantage of their standing to distill and pass on specific information and views with both intended and unintended implications. Curiously, in conflictive situations there is heightened need for leaders to source and communicate direction to the people especially those who look up to the authority of the leader. Given this scenario, leaders exercise immense power and influence through communication.
While Laski (1930) sees politics as concerning itself with the life of man in relation to organized state, German (1952) say it is the business or activity that has to do with the actual condition of the affairs of the state. All these go to indicate the fact that politics is concerned with how human beings relate in a state. It is interested in who makes decisions and who benefits from the decisions that are made. In addition, the views point to the fact that human activities in a society become political when they deal with or emanate from power, influence and authority (Biereenu-Nnabugwu; 2008)

According to Chikendu (2002) the origin of conflict is better appreciated when one realizes that “individuals have different approaches to solving problems”. Thus, individuality of human being is a critical factor in explaining not only the origin of conflicts, but also their nature. Conflicts are products of human individuality, and are thus integral parts of human existence and activities. As Chikendu (2002) further points out, whenever men set themselves to accomplish any task – such as taking a decision, sharing resources or achieving something – conflicts relating to the goal to be pursued or method of its achievements usually ensues. While many subscribe to the fact that human individuality is a critical factor in the understanding and explanation of the origin of conflicts, the essence or value of conflict is still a matter of intense debate.

While some view conflict essentially as being destructive, unwarranted and therefore unacceptable (Igwe, 2005); for conflict apologists, particularly Kelly (1969), Coleman (1988), Zartinan (1997), and Anyakoha (1998), conflict is not entirely an unhealthy social occurrence, it is indeed a positive phenomenon. This is because, especially in the long run, conflict leads to positive changes. The problem with conflict apologists’ position is that although many conflicts appear inevitable, not all conflicts have positive implications, at least not to all the concerned parties. Further still, conflicts are neither cost free nor are they value free. Following this trajectory, Post and Vicker (1973), Nnoli (1978), Sharma (1982), Barongo (1987) and Anugwom (1997) among others, underpin the material or economic bases of intergroup conflicts. In this regard, Post and Vicker (1973) has arrayed the basic patterns of conflict in the immediate post-independence era in Nigeria, and underline the fact that:

The basic sources of conflict was mobilization of the people, not towards some transcending national loyalty but rather towards identification with an intermediate, most often in situations of competition between sections… since at least the early 1950s, one of the major grievances of various sections had been that their wealth was being used to subsidize poorer ones and the growing exploitation of oil deposits in the East and Midwest in 1960s, thus added fuel to fire which had been lit long before. Conversely, not only the mobilization of resources but their distribution was an important source of inter-sectional competition and conflicts… (in Nwanegbo, 2003: 18).

The view that economic interest is, by and large, at the root of most human actions has been subjected to both theoretical and ideological debates. As a matter of fact, an essential
The premise of Marxist theory is that “it is not men’s ideals, philosophies or religions that determine their social consciousness, but on the contrary, their economic or natural existence that determines the social consciousness” (Marx and Engels in Akpuru-Aja, 1997:2). Notwithstanding the fact that Marx’s economic determinism has been vigorously attacked, that economic factor determines, or at least is a major determinant of the form of politics, culture, religion, law and so on, cannot be reasonably denied. Our position is that conflict, particularly intergroup ethno-religious conflicts must be analysed in the light of the contest for political space to guarantee economic benefits. In the process, real or imaginary lines of exclusion has to be drawn, activated and put to advantage.

Ethnicity has been seen as “the character of social relationship existing between two or more groups in a plural society” (Obiajulu in Nnonyelu and Obiajulu, ed, 1997: 244). The implication is that characteristically ethnicity draws attention to the fact that two or more social groups relate between them on the basis of plural ethnic sentiments and consciousness. In addition, Obiajulu (1997), points out that ethnicity could be benevolent in character when members of an ethnic group cooperate and assist one another during crisis. It is perceived as being malignant when inter-ethnic relationship is conflictive and crisis-laden. The later is what Nnoli (1980), aptly calls ethnocentrism being product of subjective feeling of group pride and parochial orientation.

In his discourse on ethnicity and conflict, Harowitz (1988) identified a sizeable number of contemporary views. There is no doubt that given the nature of ethnicity, conflicts arising from ethnicity are bound to be real, caused and sustained by a variety of circumstances. Part of our task in this paper is to explore and determine which of these factors are relevant in the leadership phenomena in ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria’s Middlebelt. It is also important to note alongside Nnoli (1978) that ethnic communities represent the continuity of material and spiritual cultures as well as social and everyday forms of communication in the history of definite peoples. It is this fact which makes it possible for class actions to be successfully dressed in ethnic garb, the significance and influence of which should not be overlooked in the analysis of a society’s development. Therefore, in order to understand the social place and historical role of ethnicity, it is necessary to investigate the connection between the present and past socio-political societies to elucidate the historical origins and manifestations of the phenomenon. Accordingly, Nnoli (1978) states out that there is important relationship between the class element and the ethnic element, such that it can be safely stated that the process of ethnicity does not exist in pure form. It is always associated with other ingredients such as religion, politics and social reality.

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored on communication theory. As a conceptual frame of analysis, communication theory, otherwise called cybernetics, is useful in exploring and explaining the nature of the communication that dictates roles in social and political processes. Credit for introducing cybernetics to political discourse goes to Karl Deutsch (1963, 1968). Other proponents of the theory include Weiner (1948) and Ashby (1963). In a nutshell, communications theory looks at the process of government and politics in the sense of a steering process which coordinates human efforts towards the attainment of set goals. In keeping
with the cybernetic condition, the steering process manifests itself through decisions. Although the theory has been sternly criticized for among others favoring pattern maintenance at the expense of social change, being too mechanistic, laying emphasis on process rather than consequences, etc; it enables us to study the necessary processes in any system to focus attention on the essential links between man and society, etc. In the context of this study, communication theory enables us to appreciate the place of leadership communication in conflictual situations, using ethno-religious conflicts in Nigerian Middlebelt as a main focus.

In line with the foregoing, the key proposition of this paper is that ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria’s Middlebelt occur within the specificities of the social environment. Furthermore, though ethno-religious conflicts are affected by a matrix of factors, the influence of ethno-religious leaders’ verbal and non verbal communication on the phenomenon deserve examination and explanation. Accordingly, we hypothesize that on account of particularistic considerations ethno-religious leaders exert significant influence on ethno-religious conflicts in the region.

3 Research Design and Methodological Issues

Our research design relies largely on general analytic and case study techniques in the interrogation of the problematic. It focuses on the nature of the study as well as the structures, conditions and procedure relevant to the study. The main concern here is on the identification of ethno-religious identities. Two sets of ethnic identities exist in the Middlebelt; the territorial and quasi-territorial ethnic identities. The main territorial ethnic categories are Tiv, Nupe, Angas, Igala, Idoma, Igbirra, Gwari, Berom, Busawa, Bariba, Kambari and Kamuka; while the quasi-territorial are Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba and others. The Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba categories occupy unique positions because in some parts of the Middlebelt they are territorially distinguishable. Faith categories are based on broad religious identities distinguishable in Nigeria’s Middlebelt. The most dominant are Christianity and Islam. Other categories, particularly African Traditional Religion may be important but certainly not very manifest. The variables considered dependent in this research are the leadership influences that affect ethno-religious conflicts within Nigeria’s Middlebelt zone. Accordingly, the dependent variables are leadership influence and social reality. They are the dependent variables because the basic assumption of this study is that given the specificities of the social environment, ethno-religious leaders exhibit some potency in the generation and prosecution of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

The population used for this research is made up of members of all ethno-religious identities in the Middlebelt zone. The stratified and cluster sampling methods were used in the selection of those to be studied. Stratified sampling method enabled us to divide the members of the population into sub-groups based on predetermined criteria or characteristics. The advantage is that it made sense out of the heterogeneous population such that we were able to obtain a representative sample from our parent population. Factors considered are the number of states in the zone, their respective populations and frequency of conflicts. Accordingly, the population was divided into nine strata spread across the six states. The application of cluster sampling
method enabled the researcher to randomly select respondents in each of the strata. The selection of the cluster was guided by the need to give consideration to the following key items: ethnicity, religion, occupation, residence, social status, literacy level and spatial location. The major advantage of this method is that it generated more representative data as each stratum was divided into clusters of fairly homogenous sub-populations from which samples were generated.

In all, the research was guided by seven basic considerations. The basic considerations are: 1. Ethnic identity is a classification which people are born into at birth. 2. Each of the Middlebelt’s numerous territorial ethnic groups, particularly the major twelve, are usually identifiable with a specific spatial location; yet residence is not restricted to space of origin. 3. There are three largely non-territorial - in a sense extra-territorial - ethnic categories, viz: Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. In addition to their traditional locations, they are also found in appreciable numbers in other locations within the Middlebelt. 4. On a west - east divide in the Middlebelt, Muslim-Christian ratio tilts in favour of the former in the west and to the later in the east. 5. Ethno-religious identities and values affect people’s attitude to one another and the state. 6. Exploitation of ethno-religious identities enhances the satisfaction of a variety of basic wants. 7. Ethno-religious conflicts are affected by a variety of factors including economic, psychological, social and political factors.

The two main sources of information in this research are primary and secondary. Primary data were collected largely by means of questionnaire and interviews. The procedure to determine who constituted the actual sample size for the questionnaire involved a number of decisions and processes / steps. After a preliminary study of the area, including the analysis of secondary data we identified that two variables from demographic data of the study area are very important. These are (1) population figures and (2) the frequency of occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts in the study area. Accordingly, in constituting the sample population the character of the spatial distribution of population of states was married in a fair combination that reflected how often each state in the zone has been affected by conflicts. The population of the states and frequency of occurrence of ethno-religious conflicts since 1979 in the states were thus considered and weighted. See table I below.

The size of the population sample, as calculated above is 1260 respondents. We consider 1260 respondents a fair sample size. This is because in his work, Conducting Political Research, Trence Jones (1971:64) attests that a sample size of 384 is deemed appropriate for a large survey population. Properly computed, our sample size of 1260 respondents, which is 384 x 3 = 1152+108; means is that our working sample size tripled the sample ratio advocated by Jones in 1971. In addition, it also makes an allowance of 12 respondents each for the nine ample areas in the study, that is, 12 x 9 = 108. To get the actual number of respondents per strata, we relied on four factors of stratification: spread, balance, manageability and systemization.
Table I DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BASED ON POPULATION AND NUMBER OF CONFLICTS SINCE 1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Conflicts</th>
<th>Sample Areas</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benue</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kogi</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwara</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nassarawa</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>102</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>1260</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Field Survey, 2007-2008

Against the backdrop of the statistical maxim “a reasonable large number of items will, on the average, be representative of the characteristics of the large group” (Thirkettle, 1974:11); a total of nine strata were worked out. Given that the total or parent sample size is 1260 and the strata are nine, the implication is that the minimum strata size is 1260 divide by 9 equals 40. Simply stated, this means that 140 is the minimum sample size for each of the nine sub-sample areas. There are altogether a total of 9 strata or sub-sample areas for the research. The highlight of the status of each of the stratum is also stated. See table II below.

Table II: SUB-SAMPLE AREAS, THEIR STATES AND APPROXIMATE STATUS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No</th>
<th>Name of sub-Sample Area</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Makurdi</td>
<td>Benue</td>
<td>Administrative/Cosmopolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gboko</td>
<td>Benue</td>
<td>Cultural/Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lokoja</td>
<td>Kogi</td>
<td>Administrative/Plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ilorin</td>
<td>Kwara</td>
<td>Administrative/Cosmopolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lafia</td>
<td>Nassarawa</td>
<td>Administrative/Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bida</td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>Commercial/Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jos</td>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>Cosmopolitan/Administrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pankshin</td>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>Mixture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Shendam</td>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>Cultural/Historic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Field Survey, 2007 -2008
Data were generated from a field survey undertaken between July and September 2007 and in May 2008, from each of the nine sample areas. The respondents for the questionnaire were taken from ten sample clusters in each of the nine sample areas. The clusters are as follows: Staff and students of educational institutions, Police officers and men of the police force, Other national security/paramilitary outfits, Populace within the vicinity of the most prominent church, Populace within the vicinity of the most prominent mosque, Populace within the vicinity of the biggest market in the sample area, Populace within the vicinity of the cultural centre/motor park area, Staff of executive and legislative arms, Staff of the justice system and those who have some visible stakes in ethno-religious structures and processes.

In order to generate greater incisive details, we choose definite number of respondents per a cluster. In most cases a total of between 12 and 16 respondents were administered the questionnaire per cluster. This gave us 14.0 average respondents per cluster. When put together (i.e. x10) it entailed 140 respondents per strata and 1260 (that is, 140 x 9) were distributed accordingly. Although a total of 1260 questionnaires were distributed only 810 were returned and reasonably answered. Those rejected contained irredeemable shortcomings in their responses. The implication is that we are working with 810, out of the 1260; a 64.3% response return rate.

4 Presentation and Analysis of Data

The sources of ethno-religious messages are, broadly speaking, ethnic values and leaders as well as revealed texts and interpretations made out of the texts by various religious authorities and identity activists. Since ethnic identities are many, the sources of ethnic messages also tend to vary even within the same ethnic group. The implication is that, though opinions differ on a wide range of issues, they aggregate once a common ‘danger’ signal is identified. For the religious identities, the Koran and the Bible are the major sources. Even at this, differing interpretation of these texts have led to multiplicity of sects and denominations within the two broad folds.

Although Islamic values and interests are propagated by a broad section of transmitter organizations, consisting of Muslim clerics and opinion leaders, Ja’amatul Nasril Islam (JNI), Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Nigeria (SCIAN), Council of Ulama (CU) and Muslim Society of Nigeria (MSN), Muslim Students Society (MSS) appear to be the most visible. Added to these formalized organizations, there are also less visible and sundry sub-groups within the Muslim fold. Typical examples are the Young Muslim Association of Nigeria and the Tijamiya Muslim Group, both of whom were active participants in the Jos intersects conflicts of 1980. In recent times Boko Haram sect has gained unparalleled prominence in many parts of northern Nigeria, especially the Northeast geopolitical region.

It is important to note that these sundry groups often expound extreme views which in turn impact variously on Muslims in their relationships with fellow Muslims and Non-Muslims. Although in his assessment, Sani (2007) points out that these bodies have been very effective in sustaining the “integral validity” of Muslims in Northern states of Nigeria by ensuring that Muslims “have one voice and a well-constructed platform for articulating their corporate
political interest”, there is doubt whether this has always tallied with the overall national or corporate interest of Nigeria. Very importantly, it underlines the complex nature of ethno-religious contestations in the Middlebelt.

On the other hand, although structurally, organizations like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Northern Elders Forum (NOSCEF) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) are ready equivalents of SCIAN, etc for obvious reasons they appear not to be fairly matched transmitter organizations. The grounds and consequences of this miss watch will be handled later. Suffice it, however, to say straight away that Christian organizations exist largely to propagate the values and interest of Christians. As in the case of Muslim transmitter organizations, there is also need to appraise the existence of these two broad organizations against the backdrop of the corporate interest of the nation.

Some of the most active leadership structures in ethno-religious conflicts in the Middlebelt are as follows: Afizere Development Association, ADA; Bassa Community Association, BCA; Berom Elders Council, BEC; Gemai Unity and Development Association, GUDA; Jasawa Development Association, JDA; Pan Development Association, PDA; Tiv Development Association, TDA and Tiv Youth Organization, TYO. There are also large umbrella organizations for the propagation of ethnic and community values and interests. The most notable, though most times remotely or indirectly involved are Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Arewa People’s Congress (APC), Northern Elders Forum (NEF), Middlebelt Forum (MBF), Afenifere, Odua People’s Congress (OPC), Ohaneze, MASSOB, etc. Those occupying traditional institutions such as chiefdom rulers and heads of various ethnic identities in and outside the Middlebelt have alsoplayed notable roles in influence communication process found in the Middlebelt. Typical examples are the Ohimege Opanda in Toto conflict, Gbom Gwom Jos in Jos city conflicts, Long Gamai of Shendam and Emir of Wase in various conflicts in Plateau South District.

In analyzing the message content, it has to be borne in mind that religious messages hinge on two basic principles - the revealed text and interpretations pronounced by past and present religious authorities. These interpretations often seek to address concrete or felt needs of followers. Whereas in most of the messages disseminated in sermons by imams and priests could with all intents and purposes be pacifist, they do also have or possess the potential, to ignite violent conflicts. This is particularly the case when core values of the organizations, such articles or pillars of faith, economic interest, etc are threatened. In other words, the first possible level of influence is the content of the messages and interpretations associated with various ethno-religious organizations and individuals.

4.1. Presentation and Analysis of Data on the Potency of Ethno-Religious Leadership in Intergroup Conflicts

There is no doubt that religious leaders oftentimes exercise mostly hierarchical authority over adherents. As a matter of fact it has been posited that in extreme cases some people in religious authority: “hold people to ransom, dwarf their thinking and render them mere puppets and captives to the beliefs of clever maneuvers and manipulation of their more clever fellows. Barbaric acts of men are the result of inciting, and engineering less informed inferior minds to
commit acts capable of wrecking law and order” (Ezekwugo: 78). Against this backdrop, and taking cognizance of the fact that we earlier hypothesized that on account of particularistic considerations ethno-religious leaders exert significant influence on ethno-religious conflicts in the region, it is necessary to empirically ascertain the veracity of the claim that ethno-religious leaders canvass or communicate views that spur followers to engage in intergroup conflict. Accordingly, the statement that “some ethno-religious leaders encourage their members to kill or take revenge on others” was posed.

The responses we received showed that the opinions of people of the Middlebelt on this, is far from being unanimous. While 33.2% (269) of the respondents were of the opinion that ethno-religious leaders actually encourage violent conflicts, by directly or indirectly telling members to kill or take revenge, almost 28.9% (234) respondents say they do not. On the other hand 307 respondents (37.9%) say they cannot say whether the statement is valid or not. See table 4 above. Verbal interviews suggest that real or imagined threat to material advantage and attack on ‘article of faith’ are by far the most significant circumstance that spur ethno-religious leaders to verbally or non-verbally communicate and encourage adherents to take to violence.

Table III: WHETHER ETHNO-RELIGIOUS LEADERS ENCOURAGE VIOLENT CONFLICT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Do leaders encourage violent conflict?</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Can’t really say</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>810</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Field Survey, 2007-2008

4.2. Presentation and Analysis of Data on Extent of ethno-religious leaders’ influence

We asked our respondents what they would do if they found out that their religious leader has acted/interpreted the word of God wrongly. The answers we received are instructive. In the first place, it showed that 289(37.7%) would meet and complain to him, 202(24.9%) would pray for him and 197(24.3%) said they would report to his superiors. This also means that only 69 and 42 respondents representing 8.5% and 5.2% respectively are prepared to seek the removal of such a cleric or will chose to ignore him. Only 11 respondents (1.4%) said they will abide by the actions/interpretations of the word of God, even if they know he is wrong.

Table IV: WHEN THE WORD OF GOD IS WRONGLY INTERPRETED WHAT WILL BE YOUR AVAILABLE LINE OF ACTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Possible line of action</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Meet him and complain to him</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Report to him to superiors</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ensure that he is removed</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ignore him</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pray for him</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 | Abide by his interpretation | 11 | 1.4
---|---|---|---
Total | 810 | 100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2007-2008

The implication of all these is that the opinion of religious leaders matter a lot to most respondents in the Middlebelt and that they will always put such into consideration. As a matter of fact, the early September 2001 press statement by Ja’amatul Nasril Islam (JNI) in Jos North LGA, titled “Dariye’s Diatribe” in response to Governor Dariye’s broadcast banning blocking of roads during Jummat prayers is a typical example. It was meant to say that the Governor’s broadcast was largely contemptuous, describing it as being fuelled by intolerance and lack of balance on the part of the Governor” (Best, 2007: 121). Thus, rather than assuage the rising tension, particularly in the of Yelwa-Shendam and Jos, the broadcast was interpreted, believed and seen by certain groups as an evidence that time was ripe for further ossification of view points and positions.

Similarly, the unusual Muslim mid-night call to prayer, ostensibly in response to real or imagined threat created by the release of masquerades quickened the tempo of tension and slide into violence. In the conflict that ensued, several lives were lost and many worship centres and property destroyed in the 26 June 2002, Yelwa-Shendam ethno-religious conflicts. The import is that though ethnic organizations are less formalized, they are no less potent when appropriately manipulated. The implication is that the content or the messages dished out by ethnic authorities such as the traditional rulers, emirs and officials of diverse cultural associates reflect their self interest and strength.

4.3. Presentation and Analysis of Data on a Test Case

In the violent conflicts that broke out between the Hausa –Fulani and Taroh of the Wase LGA in Plateau state there were at least two accounts of why and how the conflict occurred. In one of the two versions, it was stated that:

The crisis in the area had to do with the agitation by Taroh people in Wase local government council for a separate local government area of their own. The local government, if created … would be known as Kadarko local government council, with headquarters in Kadarko. Kadarko is a district in Wase local government council. It was recently split into several districts by the state government. Infuriated by the agitation for the creation of the local government … the Hausa-Fulani organized and attacked the Taroh people resulting in the fight which spread to other Taroh villages and towns … (Lar, in Sani: 160).

The other version, which is attributed/traced to Plateau State Government, who spoke through the Commissioner for Information, Patrick Dakum (in Sani:160) states that “the crisis was sparked off by the directives given by the leaders of the Christians and Muslims to their adherents… the CAN had earlier given an order prohibiting young female Christians from having anything to do with their male Muslim counterparts. Irked by this directive, the Muslims also retaliated by prohibiting their adherents from buying foods sold by Christians.
All these underline the fact that not only is manipulation a factor in ethno-religious conflicts in the area; it also goes to emphasize the fact that manipulation works in very complex ways. Thus, in the two versions above, we observe that the controversy surrounding the quest for Kadarko LGA and the alleged directive given to the adherents of the two religions reflect a complex matrix in the manipulative communication process.

5. Concluding Analysis

Although the paper relied largely on general analytic and case study techniques in the interrogation of the problematic, it operated on the bases of analytic inductive inquiry. Alongside other questions, responses and observations we sought and received the study showed that the opinions of people of the Middlebelt on this, is far from being unanimous on many vital issues. In particular, we interrogated the interface between ethnic and religious leaders’ verbal and non-verbal communication and intergroup conflict with ethnic and religious prisms as terrains of contestations.

Our findings follow from the two main questions posed and tested, as well as from our test cases. Our first task was to empirically ascertain the veracity of the claim that some ethno-religious leaders encourage their members to kill or take revenge on others. Our finding on this is that opinions of people in Middlebelt are far from being unanimous on the matter. While 33.2% of the respondents say ethno-religious leader actually encourage violent conflict by what they communicate or fail to verbally and non-verbally communicate, 28.9% say they do not. Those who opine they do, say they encourage violent conflicts by directly or indirectly telling members to kill or take leverage. One possible explanation for the divergent views is the fact that ethnic and religious leaders are not a monolithic lot. Even within the two broad based religious groups, there are subgroups that expound views that are dialectically opposed to one another. Such is more or less also the same within various ethnic groups in the area.

Very important points to note however is that all those concerned do not need to agree before violent intergroup conflict can take place. It needs just a handful to buy into violent conflictive enterprise for violence to take place. All that is required is some elements of verbal and non-verbal communications to be transmitted and accurately decoded. These go to underline the potency of ethno-religious leaders’ verbal and non-verbal communications in intergroup conflicts especial that those that boarder on ethnicity religion. Secondly, ethnic and religious leaders constitute an important segment that cannot be fruitfully ignored in the quest for genuine and meaningful management of intergroup conflict that hinge on ethnic and religious prisms. In this regard, broad involvement of ethnic and religious leaders is considered a sine qua non for long and short term solutions to intergroup conflicts not only in Nigeria’s Middlebelt but in other parts of the country.

Our second finding is that most respondents revere or have great regard for their ethnic and religious leaders. On account of this ethno-religious leaders exercise enormous authority and influence on the people. In specific terms, even in situations where people are aware that the
actions and inactions of such leaders are incorrect, most respondents (only 5.2% of the respondents say they will ignore him or her) are inclined to actions that are supportive or accommodative. The impact of the foregoing is that ethnic and religious leaders, especially the later exercise enormous authority and influence on the people. It goes to not only support our first finding, but also the fact that such leaders are important in any meaningful calculation on how to overcome ethno-religious conflicts in the area.

The study also found out that in reality, ethnic and religious leaders, through their actions and inactions provoke or support intergroup conflicts. As the test case shows, actions and counter actions of Christian and Moslem leaders were largely responsible for the Hausa-Fulani and Taroh violent conflict that took place within the period under study in Wase LGA of Plateau state. Nevertheless, a major point to note here is that ethno-religious conflicts reflect a complex matrix. This is on account of the fact that intergroup conflict could, and do take a variety of courses. While some are spontaneous, others brew over a long period of time, yet mainly others are in between, and in differing contestations.

Our recommendations follow from the major findings of the paper. In the main, the paper recommends:

- The convocation of town-hall forums at various levels to, in the context of the social reality, deliberate and come up with consensus on various conflictive facets such as access to public patronage, equitable distribution of material resources, indigeneship questions, grazing rights and obligations, creation and status of local governments, etc.
- The participation of broad spectra of persons including ethnic and religious leaders in any meaningful peace building efforts at various levels.
- Ethnic and religious leaders should be involved in cross-cultural activities: a socialization process that involves accommodation and appreciation of other essences and viewpoints.
- Mechanism should be put in place for early warning signs.

In conclusion, communication is hardly neutral or value free activity. Ethnic and religious leaders knowingly and unknowingly, verbally and non-verbally communicate, say or do things that suggest a line of action for their followers. A way forward in curbing intergroup conflict in the Middlebelt and elsewhere in Nigeria is through deliberation and accommodation.

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