

Ethnic and Religious Militia in Nigeria: The Case of Boko Haram

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Abstract

Boko Haram(BH) is the name given to the Islamic militia group found within the residents of Maiduguri the North-Eastern City of Borno State, Nigeria. Their meaning and mission is simply put as western education is forbidden in Nigeria. It is for this reason that BH has been rising to great influence. It is in this city that the group is formed and has its headquarters. As an ethnic group, ethnicity is therefore defined as a social phenomenon associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups. Boko Haram is also understood to be an ethno-religious militia group. Various theories are employed to give clear understanding and background to the study. Examples of ethno-religious instances, formation and activities were also discussed while the data used for the study was purely secondary. The study was undertaken to determine how the ethnic and religious groups are formed in complex ethnic countries like Nigeria with 250 languages.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Militia Groups; Religion; Boko Haram; Nigeria

1. Introduction

The dynamism of human behaviour quantifies the inherent conflict that is associated with a group of people. The study classifies these groups of people as militia, ethnic and religious groups. Ethnicity is defined as a social phenomenon associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups¹. He further explained ethnic groups as social formations that are distinguished by the ethnic boundaries. Such boundaries are attributed to language, geographical location and religious belief of the people.

This in essence is the case of Nigeria: with 250 spoken languages, three main ethnic groups with sub-tribes and clans. Among these three major ethnic groups found in Nigeria they are religiously divided between Christians in the East and West (mixed with Christians and Muslims) and North (mixed with Christians and Muslims). These three main ethnic groups constitute the Yoruba's in the West speaking Yoruba language, Hausa-Fulani in the North speaking Hausa language and the Igbos in the East speaking Igbo language, which suggests that each ethnic is identified by her language. The involvement of various ethnic and religious militia conflicts in Nigeria sort to solicit for support within and outside the ethnic group to carry out their course which in most cases is attached to sentiment and to get favours to kill or destroy lives and properties. At the early stage of identification of this support seeking, if they are not guided at the early stage of formation there is every tendency of transforming from micro ethnic and religious conflict into macro conflict; as in the case of Nigeria². The study therefore focussed on Boko Haram as an ethno-religious militia group. What determines how the ethnic and religious groups are formed, mobilized and escalate to national conflict? What steps has government taken to address the fall out of the various ethnic identities which has led to conflicts in Nigeria? The paper is classified into 5 sections which includes the introduction, theories that guided the study, the focus of the study principles and methodology of the study.

II. Underpinning Theories

The study is guided by five fundamental theories as it applies to the situation in Nigeria:

a. The theory of ethnicity: By definition ethnicity refers to a social identity formation that rests upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology³. This means that ethnicity is a collection of belief of a group of people with a common origin and history. Such beliefs and history are based on inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values and hierarchies, and conform to social identities of both insiders and outsiders. According to International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance⁴ ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves, where culture and identity are closely intertwined.

Theory of Ethnicity articulates the relationship of ethnicity in a multi-cultural society like Nigeria and the causes of ethnic conflict in Nigeria. The complexity of these inter and intra ethnic communities of Nigeria, presents how each ethnic community violently or forcefully competes against one another for political power and supremacy, property, rights, jobs, education, language, social amenities and good health care facilities. Hostilities within these ethnic groups produce empirical examples linking socio-economic factors to ethnic conflict in Nigeria¹. In the case of South Africa, ethnicity and ethnic conflict appear to be a response to the uneven development in South Africa: causing some ethnic groups like the Xhosas, Zulus or Afrikaners to compete for resources along ethnic borders. This suggests why some provinces are more developed than the others example, Eastern Cape compare to Guateng Province. Understandably, multi-ethnic countries are likely to experience distributional conflicts.

b. Theory of primordialism: The theory that attaches the supremacy of ethnicity as a positive sign of development. This theory is relevant to analyse the belief by the political North of Nigeria as they claim to have the inherent right to rule the country for ever. Furthermore, primordial theory stresses the uniqueness and the overriding importance of ethnic identity. As such ethnicity is argued as biological and fixed characteristic of these set of individuals and communities⁵.

c. Theory of nationalism: This theory lays emphasizes on the love for one's nation and the supremacy of the state. There are factors that determine the extent to which militia activities and uprising can stretch within the nation⁶. Militia uprising of any sect is one in which the activity of one is actually or forcibly imposed at unacceptable costs, materials or psychic, upon another⁷.

d. The theory of instrumentalism discusses how political elite class hijacks apparatus of state power to promote their group interest. Facilitating the growth and development of sub-ethnic militia groups, negligence of national development plans and structures. In Nigeria, each region is represented with various militia group example Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in Yorubaland; Arewa People's Congress (APC) of the North; the Bakassi Boys in the East and the Egbesu in the South-South. Amongst these militia groups comes Boko Haram, is relatively, new to the militia activities, yet more deadly.

These national formations of militia agitate for various inadequacies against the government which is intricately financed by top politician. Due to the combination of poverty and shortage of resources this has sharpened ethnic divisions both in Nigeria⁴. As a result, ethnic sectarianism has left a trail of destructive violence and, in the case of Nigeria has threatened the territorial integrity of the country. It has also resulted in easy manipulation of the less privilege, vulnerable and the poor are mostly used in these militia activities. Theory of instrumentalism is very important to the study because it provides the grass-root understanding of power plays and mal-administrations that has fuelled the uprising of various ethnic, religious militias in Nigeria.

According to scholars in Africa argue that poverty and deprivation are becoming endemic, mostly as a result of distributive injustice; ethnicity constructionism, revolt, destruction and recognition remain an effective means of survival and mobilization⁸. On the other hand, they argue that ethnic groups that are formed for economic reasons are easily disbanded after achieving their objectives. This concurs to argument that ethnicity is "a construct" rather than a constant⁹. Theory of Social Constructivism is used to see if Nigeria could be reconstructed to accommodate every section of the country. Furthermore, the literature incorporates the idea of social reality in an attempt to present the ideal situation in Nigeria.

2.1 Study Focus

The study try to give detailed insight into the name, activities of Boko Haram then relate their activities to the impact on Nigeria and foreign investments in the area. The name, Boko Haram, is given to the Islamic group by residents of Maiduguri the North-Eastern City of Borno State, Nigeria. It is in this city that the group is formed and has its headquarters. Accordingly, the group's official name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, which in Arabic means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad." Boko Haram as it's now called is translated as "Western education is forbidden"¹⁰.

Boko Haram is both a militia, ethnic and Islamic (religious) group that seek to eradicate western education in Nigeria; which according to the group Western education is a sin. The group was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, a predominantly Muslim region. Muslim ethnic groups are conceptualized in Nigeria as dangerous, convergence of religious and ethnic fears which are often difficult to differentiate between religious and ethnic conflicts, as the dividing line between the two is very thin⁴.

a. Advances of the insurgents

Until recently, the Boko Haram's characteristic attack has been the use of gunmen on motorbikes. From gunmen on motorbikes, their activities recently have escalated to another level. They now deeply involved in more bombings in recent times, assassinations and killing of both military, Para-military and innocent Christians, targeting police officers, Government officials and religious leaders in Nigeria's northern city of Born, Plateau State (Jos) Kano and Abuja. The group has been responsible for several explosive attacks including the bombing of the National Police Headquarters in Abuja in June 2011, UN building in Abuja on the 16th of August 2011.

b. Militia classifications in Nigeria

However, they are not the only ethnic and militia group(s) in Nigeria that has contributed to socio-political and economic instability in the Northern and the entire nation. Others include such Islamic ethnic and militia groups such as Ahmadiyya, Sanusiyya, Tijanniyya and Quadriyya, among which there have been conflicts²⁰.

It is estimated the total number of ethnic groups in Nigeria is close to one thousand with every ethnic group, tribal and clans having intentions of developing a militia group, therefore, conflict in Nigeria is a huge mile stone to conquer if the Nation is determined to develop¹¹. This has described Nigeria as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingua and multi-cultural nation. Example of recent conflicts in Nigeria include Jos, Tiv/Jukun, Bauchi, Kano, Ife/Modakeke, Sagamu, offa/Erinle, Kaduna, Saare/Tsaragi and of later Kafancha which are largely ethno communal in nature. According to former federal minister Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai, most of the apparent ethnic and religious crises in the north, and the youth violence and criminality in the south, can be linked to increasing economic inequality, corruption and weak judicial system. As such, the oddity and complexity of Nigeria as a nation attributes to the country's deepening ethnic and religious contradictions¹².

Therefore, Poverty and unemployment in the north, coupled with population increase and government's

inability to deal effectively with non-state groups, can turn Northern States into an ideal recruitment ground for religious extremists and a foundation from which they could expand into the rest of the country and the world at large. The Abuja attacks suggest that this is already occurring. Boko Haram draws its membership from unemployed and marginalised youth.

III.Social Construction of Reality of Boko Haram

Social construction of reality is defined as the reality that exists only in people's minds; with the expression, "if no one took it into consideration either positively or negatively, consciously or unconsciously then it would not exist in his/her mind"¹³.

3.1 Classification of social construction of reality

Social construction of reality is classified into primary and secondary realities. Primary reality comprise of basic data of social science while secondary reality refers to the accounts of primary¹⁴. Primary construction of an ethnic and religious militia conflict in Nigeria refers to the product of direct or indirect interaction between the members of the ethnic and religious group and to some extent between members and the rest of the society. Secondary construction is depictions of the movement that are offered in the public arena by sociologists and others as they seem to understand the situation and activities of Boko Haram as well as other various ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria and about their movement.

The stand point of scholars and sociologist assumes that no two individuals think and perceive situations of the Boko Haram alike. Due to the complex nature of their activities differences between perceptions, structure and understanding of social reality of Boko Haram vary. The variation depends on various factors and interests, were scholars have argued that past experience of Christians living in the Northern part of Nigeria, hope of the people still living in Northern part of Nigeria and their fears, what makes them live in such volatile area and their interest, what values and expectations they expect as well as social position from which they view the activities of Boko Haram and the impact of the reality their activities on residents of the North.

Undoubtedly the media fuels much of these perception and understanding of the true nature of these factors. Arguably due to short time to meet the demands of readers, viewers and listeners, as a result much of the broadcast are either over exaggerated or may not represent the true nature of reality, thereby given rise to different individual perceptions understanding of the social reality.

3.2 Social reality and religious militia

Social reality is not an unchanging structure. It is on-going processes that exist as far as individuals recognise their existence and act responsively¹⁴. Example: The armed assault on the branch Davidian compound in WACO, Texas in 1993, the massive killing of religiously identified opponents in former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, brings the question: who can deny that ordinary religion can also be a hazard to life? Therefore, it is important to understand why and how these ethnic and religious militia groups are formed and developed under the auspices of religion.

Under these conditions, children of the poor, who are in the majority are denied good education and by implication, robbed of a future built on the capacity to fulfil their potentials. Thus, majority of Nigerian youth have been condemned to unemployment and poverty and, unfortunately this has provided fertile land (mostly in the northern state) for militia activities like the Boko Haram which is on the rise, flourishing and recruiting new

members. Scholars have agreed that the political class of Nigeria and the leaders, has contributed greatly to the formation of any ethnic or religious as well as militia activities in Nigeria^{4,15}. The analysis of the formation of these ethno-religious groups could be based on the conditions through which these militia groups rising processes. This inundate processes follows an analysis of the process by first considering factors such as exploitation, authoritarianism, leadership, harassment, abuse, systematic fraud and deception, violence and patriarchy in the religious group¹⁴. The fact that members of same religious fraternity choose to oppose and live their lives in accordance with different priorities from the religion make them objects of public suspicion; this is among other things their unconventional ways of living imply that something is wrong with the machinery of normalisation¹⁹. It is also important to suggest that understanding their religion could be based on acceptance by faith or by reason.

Islamic religious outward expression becomes a threat to the Nigerian society; example in their way and mode of dressing, public language, educational and sexual orientation. These outward expressions assume a form of brainwashing of both the old and new converts which has been the medium through which Boko Haram operates¹⁹. They do this by brainwashing their converts through traditional education under the trees and mosque teachings. Brainwashing is modern expression representing the late medieval accusation of witchcraft and demonic possessions^{16,17}. In essence such ethno-religious brainwashing of converts is represented as a free will exercise by the convert which is an unfair registration to which the accusers are deaf, blind and irresponsible. Therefore, a devotee must be prepared to give his/her entire self to live a life of day to day obedience and service¹⁸.

IV. Methodology

The study was based on secondary data sources such as government policies, international agendas, books, articles/journals, reports and electronic materials/internet sources. Furthermore, data it included speeches, figures and papers delivered by stake holders both within and outside the country. However, internet sources were significant and unavoidable. Above all, the constitution of federal republic of Nigeria was not neglected in the process. This is necessary to ascertain if these conflicts are instituted by corporate entities; historical or constitutional problems.

V. Significance and Justification of the Study

The study offers readers the opportunity to understand the ethnic and religious sects or militia in Nigeria, their social, cultural and historical phenomena. Interpretation this phenomena as there is nothing intrinsically beyond the pale of comprehension or threatening about religious or ethnic militia as a subject of inquiry⁷.

Boko is not the only militia group in Nigeria as earlier stated. The interest of focusing on Boko Haram is justifiable because while other militias groups are mainly located in various corners of Nigerian ethnic sections especially in the South-South and South-East, their objectives and aims specifically are targeted at the oil industry within the region. But the effects of Boko Haram seem to be spreading rapidly all over Nigeria causing national panic and extreme fears. Their attacks and reprisal bombing on every state in the country have come to questioning with the possibilities of affecting every economic activity in all sectors of the economy in Nigeria.

VI. Conclusion

Nigeria as a country presents a Nation with complex militia, ethnic and religious conflicts. However, some of the conflicts are individually as well as group motivated. Resource control, power and religious superiority are few examples of the causes and formation of conflict in Nigeria.

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