INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES: A PANACEA FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Conflict is a society could arise from failure of the leadership. This is true as poor leadership in families, schools, communities, religious places and nations has led to violence, conflicts and wars. The paper examined the problems that arises as a result of break-down of unclear language which causes disharmony in the homes, society and the nation at large leading to lawlessness and breakdown of law and order. The paper points out that indigenous language should be used in mediating peace among warring parties through purposeful communication among ethnic groups in the country. As a way of giving our country more hope in the pursuit of conflict resolution among ethnic groups, the study recommended amongst others that Government should desist from being ethic bias to arouse hope in the common man. Ethnic warlords should be negotiated with and those who tale laws into their hands by those who speaks their native languages, and punitive measure be taking against them if they are found culpable. The government should put up slogans conveying the effect of conflicts and violence in indigenous languages.

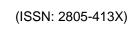**Keywords:** *Indigenous Language; Conflict; Resolution; Ethic Groups*

Introduction

Nigeria is a country characterized by intense ethnic polarization and conflict. The percentage of each ethnic group in the national population is the subject of intense political contestation, particularly amongst the majority groups and some of the large minorities. Nigeria is a mosaic of many ethno-linguistic groups, some large, many very small indeed, altogether numbering about 250. It is important however to remember that this nation came into being not by amalgamation of all these ethno-linguistic groups, but of two British Protectorates, Northern and Southern Nigeria, which could have gone on to develop independently like Northern and Southern Rhodesia.

Conflict is a situation between at least two interdependent parties that is characterized by perceived differences and that the parties evaluate as negative. This often results in negative emotional states and behaviors intended to prevail. Conflict is an inevitable and all-pervasive element in our society and in the world. Although conflicts may end up in destruction and even death, conflicts may also result in increased effectiveness, enhanced relationships, and further goal attainment. Indeed, in human terms conflict is one of the "engines of evolution" that allows us to learn, progress, and grow. Our goal is not to attempt to do away with conflict but rather to skillfully manage conflict to further its constructive potential.

The basic function of language is communication. Professionals and artisans all deploy language to perform or enhance their occupations and status. Adedun (2014) asserts that 'human activities are diverse and complex, and all involve a system of meaning making through language'. Through language, people are able to live and work together, pursue

individual and societal goals, settle conflicts, design socio-economic and political plans that would cater for the present and the future. Furthermore, Obuh & Omenogor (2012) opine that language as an instrument of communication may be used 'to influence personality, to declare war, to oppose ideas, intentions and actions; to scatter, to condemn and generate violence. It could also be used to entertain, inspire, educate, establish cordial relationship, settle disputes and make peace with people or communities. Language must be seen as a vehicle of communicating the intended meaning for achieving set goals, and not an end in itself. These set goals in this case, would be education, national unity and/or identity, and socioeconomic development.

Language

Adedeji (2015) submit that local or indigenous language can be construed to mean a language spoken of belonging or connected with a particular place or area which one is talking about or with the place where one lives. Language plays pivotal role in any human society. The functionality of language depends on its usage. The choice of words and the context of usage determine the effect on the people. Language can be used to unite and also be used to disintegrate people. Gardeazabal (2011) opines that language can be an instrument to unify people and also be used to separate people. The number of languages and ethnic groups in society may determine the tendency of the segregation caused by language and ethnic loyalty. Nigeria is a plural society with several languages and ethnic groups. At the moment, English is used as a language of wider communication (LWC) in the country, particularly for those who are literate in the language (about 39% based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

Conflict resolution is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. Committed group members attempt to resolve group conflicts by actively communicating information about their conflicting motives or ideologies to the rest of group (e.g., intentions; reasons for holding certain beliefs) and by engaging in collective negotiation (Mayer, 2012). Dimensions of resolution typically parallel the dimensions of conflict in the way the conflict is processed. Cognitive resolution is the way disputants understand and view the conflict, with beliefs, perspectives, understandings and attitudes. Emotional resolution is in the way disputants feel about a conflict, the emotional energy. Behavioral resolution is reflective of how the disputants act, their behavior (Methods, Conflict Resolution, 2016). Ultimately, a wide range of method and procedures for addressing conflict exist including negotiation, mediation, mediator – arbitration, diplomacy and creative peace building (Rapoport, 2012).

Conflict resolution curve paradigm

There are many examples of conflict resolution in history, and there has been a debate about the ways to conflict resolution: whether it should be forced or peaceful. Conflict resolution by peaceful means is generally perceived to be a better option. The conflict resolution paradigm derived from an analytical model that offers a peaceful solution by motivating conflicting entities (Das, 2018). Forced resolution of conflict might invoke another conflict in the future.

Conflict Resolution Paradigm (CRP) separates conflict styles into two separate domains: domain of competing entities and domain of accommodating entities. There is a sort of agreement between targets and aggressors on this paradigm. Their judgements of badness compared to goodness of each other are analogous on CRP. So, arrival of conflicting entities to some negotiable points on CRP is important before peace building. CRP does not exist (i.e., singular) in reality if the aggression of the aggressor is certain. Under such circumstances it might lead to apocalypse with mutual destruction (Das & Datta, 2018).

One basic fundamental that is prominent is the fact that there is always the presence of disagreement over an issue before conflict can erupt. For instance, in Nigeria, political, ethnic, education and religious conflicts amongst others have occurred across the nation. These amongst others includes but not limited to;

- Ile-Ife / Modakeke conflict in Osun State.
- Ogoni land crisis in Rivers State.
- Umuleri / Agulere in Anambra State.
- Ijaw / Itsekiri in Delta State.
- OPC phenomenon in the South West.
- Tiv / Jukun crisis in Taraba State.
- Religious uprising in Kaduna. Bauchi, Plateau and Kano States.
- Violence in many Nigerian Institutions of learning, resulting from conflicts:
   - 1994 University of Calabar students' protest over the "carryover system".
   - 2004 University of Ilorin students' riot over the death of one student at the University Teaching Hospital, Ibadan.
   - 2021 killing of Ms. Deborah at College of Education, Sokoto State on religious ground.

Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

Ethnic groups are categories of people characterized by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value system and normative behaviour, and whose members are anchored in a part of the new territory (Otite, 1990). The Nigerian federation is currently made up of 36 states, which are then grouped informally into 6 zones. Table 1 shows the zones and states, and the distribution of ethnic groups within them. Broadly speaking, each zone can be given an ethnic identification, based on the majority of the population in that zone. In this regard, the northwest zone is the core Hausa-Fulani area, while the northeast zone contains a mixture of Hausa-Fulani, Kanuri and many ethnic minorities. Both zones are regarded as the 'far north', with overlapping cultural and Islamic attributes.

However, Kanuri ethno-nationalism is an important factor in the northeast. The north Central is traditionally regarded as the zone of the non-Islamic northern ethnic minorities, many of whom are Christian. Though this zone was equally involved in the political construction of a monolithic Northern regional identity against the South in the 1950s, it is also a zone of resistance against alleged Hausa-Fulani 'domination' and cultural oppression. The southwest zone is made up of the old Western region, the heartland of the Yoruba, while the southeast is made up of the Igbo heartlands of the old Eastern region. The last zone, the south South, is the zone of southern ethnic minorities, from the peripheries of the old Eastern region, and the whole of the old Mid-West region.

Table i: Nigeria: Location of Ethnic Groups

States by zones	Dominant Ethnic Groups	No. of Minority Ethnic Groups
North West		54
Sokoto, Kebbi + Zamfara	Hausa	12
Katsina	Hausa	1
Kano + Jigawa	Hausa	9
Kaduna	Hausa	32
North East		205
Borno + Yobe	Kanuri	29
Adamawa + Taraba	Fulani, Hausa	112
Bauchi + Gombe	Hausa	64

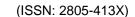|		
North Central		123
Old Kwara (+ some parts of Kogi)	Yoruba, Ebira, Igala	20
Old Niger	Hausa, Gwari	19
Old Benue (+ some parts of Kogi)	Tiv, Idoma, Igala	12
Plateau + Nassarawa	Birom, Angas, Yergam, Hausa	72
South West		4
Oyo + Osun	Yoruba	-
Ekiti + Ondo	Yoruba	2
Ogun	Yoruba	-
Lagos	Yoruba	2
South East		1
Anambra, Enugu + Ebonyi	Igbo	1
Imo + Abia	Igbo	-
South South		59
Edo + Delta	Bini, Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Igbo	13
Rivers + Bayelsa	Ijaw, Ogoni, Andoni, Igbo	10
Akwa Ibom	Ibibio	7
Cross River	Efik	29

Source: adapted from Otite (1990).

Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria

Some scholars have suggested that competition for scarce resources is one of the common contributory factors to ethnic conflicts, especially in almost some parts of Africa. In multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria, ethnic groups violently compete for property, rights, jobs, education, language, social amenities and good health care facilities. Nnoli (1980) emphasized on the empirical instances linking socio-economic factors to ethnic conflict in Nigeria. Another scholar, Furnival, cited in Nnoli (1980) that "the working of economic forces warrants for tension between groups with competing interests." According toMarshall & Gurr (2003), relative deprivation theory offers an explanation based on an ethnic groups' access to power and economic resources.

This is closely associated to Horowitz, (1985), that group worth is based on the results of economic and political competitions. According to Lake and Donald (1996) ethnic conflict is a sign of a weak state or a state embroiled in ancient loyalties. In this case, states act with bias to favor a particular ethnic group or region, and behaviors such as preferential treatment fuel ethnic conflicts. Therefore, in critical or difficult political situations, the effectiveness of governance is dependent on its ability to address social issues and human needs. A number of factors have conspired to induce and exacerbate conflict in Nigeria. Thus, from the theoretical expositions analyzed above, the causes of conflict in the country can be explained from many perspectives.

These perspectives include, Poverty and unemployment, Failure of the government security intelligence and law enforcement agencies in bringing the culprits to book, Northern Nigeria's tradition for carrying out Jihadist Islam, The imposition of Sharia Law in some northern parts of the country, lack of understanding of what the Islamic faith preaches and Indigene and Settler Controversy. Emerging findings suggest that one of the reasons why religious violence persists in the country, mostly at the north, is the menace of poverty and

unemployment among the teeming youths. Poverty is provoked by unemployment. Poverty also is a plague affecting most teeming youths in many parts of the country. Thus, in the midst of plenty, the phenomenon dehumanizes them as seen most in the Almajiri Institution as the only succor for survival.
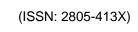
This group constitutes the vast majority that are always used to ignite fanaticism and in the end unleashing terror and mayhem on the other ethnic groups whom they see now as being the cause of their plight. This situation sometimes may be ignited because of the degree of frustration which may also determine the degree of aggression usually unleashed on the society, especially the Christians and others perceived to be non-sympathetic to their plight. Another factor that provokes ethnic conflict in Nigeria is that the culprits that mastermind these dastardly and abominable acts in the regions go unpunished and escape unhurt. Successive administration, like military and civilian, since independence has always paid lip service and deaf ear to bringing the perpetrators to book. Moreover, numerous religious uprising, especially in the northern part of the country with its attendant consequences in the socio-economic and political development in the country has been appealing to the leaders of the country. This is premised on the fact that Nigeria has been ruled majorly by the north and the emerging leaders see the situation as a means of bridging the development gap between them and the more prosperous south.

According to Mustapha (2005), emphasis are not lacking as there was no political will on the part of the leadership to bring to book the perpetrators of the Maitasine riots of the 1980s; Kano Riots of 1991, Sharia Riots of 2000, the Jos Mayhem of 2004 and 2010 respectively. As a result of government's insensitivity of the problem under reference, the culprits that were arrested were later released in the law court for lack of evidence. Following closely on the problem of leaving the perpetrators of violence to go unpunished and the weak institutional mechanisms to check these abuses was apathy and failure of security and intelligence agencies to live up to expectation in confronting the challenge. From a survey conducted, most of the security agencies including the police and the army usually brought in to quell these crises have performed woefully to the disappointment of many Nigerians who had clamored and hoped on it to bring the culprits to book.

It is interesting to note that these security agents even collude and conspire with the culprits. As a result, they have been caught napping when these crises erupts. Moreover, conflicts in the country, like for instances, the northern part of the country are also caused by the religion's tradition for carrying out jihad in the course of one's life (Mustapha, 2005). Thus, the extent of fundamentalism and radicalism among the adherents of the faith in other countries has been appealing to those in northern part of the country. Under this arrangement, fighting and violence attracts much premium and becomes institutionalized. It is gratifying to note that the Islamic incursion into the country through the north by Uthman Danfodio left in its wake the consciousness of aggressive and militant radicalism unparalleled in the annals of history of the country.

The Roles of indigenous Language and culture in Conflict Resolution

Language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflict. According to Awodun & Joshi (2022), language is a method of communicating ideas, thoughts, and desires by means of sounds for psychological and physiological survival. Culture has an influence on communication in in-group and out- group relationships. Culture forms one's values, norms and style in managing conflict. People tend to tolerate, listen, understand and co-operative with those who have similar values and belief system. Most often some intercultural conflict are resolved when the parties realize that their perceptions of divergent interest are erroneous. Misunderstanding is usually aggravated by the fact that one person/party underestimates or is

ignorant of the range of value systems or misinterprets the norms that exist in different cultures and social environments. Leonard and Law (2004) noted that in a context of international conflict, perceptions of and emotional reactions to an event could be bound by one's social-cultural assumptions. Many scholars claimed that interpretations of an event are bound by social-linguistic perceptions. In fact, cultural variation has an impact on motivation, cognition and behavior of citizen in dispute resolution.
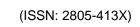
Similarly, indigenous language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflicts. The manipulation of language in communication can often strengthen or weaken group solidarity. It can also be used to categorize individuals into in-group members. For instance, it will be difficult for the native English speakers to negotiate on equal terms with the non-natives. The prominent linguists Sapir-Whorf emphasised that language influences thought processes. According to the source, individuals from different cultural and social units perceive the world through the lens provided by their unique vocabulary. Sapir-Whorf further explains that those who are monolingual, bilingual or multilingual that is, people from multi-cultural nations like China, Nigeria, and India etc. place greater emphasis on maintaining relationship, particularly long term relationships than people from monolingual and from individualistic culture (Butter, 2002).

In other words Nigerians perceive relationship differently from the Aglo-Westerns. The importance of indigenous language in conflict resolution is evident in the united nation's proclamation of 2001 as United Nations years of dialogue among citizens. At these occasions Schwartz (2000) declared "we are convinced that dialogue represents a new paradigm of security, especially in globalizing world with its manifold new challenges to individuals, communities and countries. A commitment to dialogue among civilizations is also commitment against resolutions but pursing resolution and seeking security through dialogue requires cultural and linguistic considerations". The question is what language is adequate in conflict resolution since people culture and language are inseparable? In fact languages are not merely means of communication: they stand for or symbolize people.

Recommendations

The issue of conflict resolution is all over the country and the world at large, and it needs to be handled as a matter of urgency for our dear country's social, economic and political development. The following are some of the recommendations that can give our country more hope in the pursuit of conflict resolution among ethnic groups;

- Government should take the matter of conflict resolution a serious thing for the citizens' future irrespective of ethnic affiliation. That is the only means for meaningful development.
- Government should find ways and means of promoting conflict resolution and security among ethnic groups or communities.
- Disarmament should be emphasized. The acquisition of arms serve as both symptom and cause of tension in that they create arm race.
- Peace and conflict conference, symposia and workshops should be organized at the federal, in all states, local government, communities, villages, and even at the council wards level and delegates should be from ethnic groups.
- Inter-ethnic marriages should be encouraged among ethnic groups to foster unity in the nation.
- Dialogue should be encouraged among ethnic groups and inter-religious. Instead of taking up arms against each other, selected committee of elder to help enhance and restore an atmosphere of peace, harmony and mutual respect through dialogue and usage of indigenous language.

- Moral values are fundamentals of conflict resolution. Such moral values includes commitment, patience, respect, truthfulness, forgiveness, confidence and trust, mutual respect and understanding, sacrifice, love, equity, neutrality and reconciliation. These if inculcated into the Nigerian citizens would serve some purpose. In essence, the principle of live and lets live should be indoctrinated.

- Effective communication is also a measure that would bring conflict resolution among ethnic groups in Nigeria. Most of the wars fought in the world often start with communication (words). Poor communication can sometimes be the root cause of conflict. Once the two persons are able to communicate well and clearly to each other, there would be no problem, and existing ones would easily be addresses and resolved.

- Government should desist from being ethic bias to arouse hope in the common man. Ethnic warlords should be negotiated with and those who tale laws into their hands by those who speaks their native languages, and punitive measure be taking against them if they are found culpable.

- The government should put up slogans conveying the effect of conflicts and violence in indigenous languages. The awareness being sponsored by National Orientation Agency on NTA on the negative effects of violence is good but this awareness should not be limited to pidgin English, it should be translated into as many indigenous languages as possible.

Conclusion

Indigenous Languages are effective tools for conflict resolution. This is because interpretations of events are bound by socio-cultural and sociolinguistic perceptions. We express knowledge and feelings using language. Nigeria from 1960 until now has been experiencing, ethnic divisions, confrontations, re-occurring conflicts both in politics, economy, leadership, religious, and class and so on. Nigeria's political crisis keeps degenerates the more. It is phenomenon that each ethnic groups in Nigeria belief is that they can only receive help from members of their ethnic group alone. The role of indigenous languages in promoting conflict resolution among ethnic groups in Nigeria is actual and should be taken into consideration.
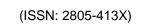
An effective conflict resolution tool should take cultural and linguistic factors into consideration. The future of the nation would be at stake if the ethnic groups find no peace among themselves. Since conflict resolution has become a vital ingredient for the survival of the human race, it is therefore believed that for conflict resolution to be attained in this nation, it must start with effective communication in our communities, which are the mirror of the larger societies. If conflict resolution prevails in our communities, definitely, our society will be peaceful and development impulses will be healthy enough for overall national development.

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