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Ethno-Religious conflicts and The Voices of the Past

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Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria. All these African countries are noted for the violence that has become part of their most recent history ([Rwanda's 1994 conflict](#) and [Higazi's work on the Jos conflict](#)). Conflict resolution has proven particularly difficult in most of these countries and studies of conflicts in the region have focused on social, economic and political deprivations. While these reasons do help in providing some understanding of some of the conflicts they have not been able to help in providing lasting solutions. We can see that some of these conflicts like the ones that are ravaging the northern part of Nigeria are proving intractable, while the tensions between ethnic and religious groups remain tense in many African countries.

Examining the conflict in Nigeria has shown that there is a need to take a different perspective to understanding conflicts in plural countries like those of sub Saharan African. One approach is to examine how social groups use narratives to determine their interactions with other groups. Taking Nigeria as a point of reference we note that since the return to democracy in 1999 there has been an upsurge in the number of ethno religious conflicts in the country. The conflicts have been centred in northern Nigeria where there has been a long history of contestations between the numerous ethnic groups especially in the so-called middle belt region. This region was historically home to large pagan tribes that were slowly converted to Christianity and the current conflicts are between these groups and the Muslims that migrated there to trade and eventually settled there. These conflicts in the Kaduna and Jos areas have been on going since 2000 and 2001 respectively.

It can be argued that the reasons for the conflicts go beyond the social, economic and political discourse that are currently dominant. It is obvious the reasons are much more complex and more deeply rooted. It would seem that the dominant discourses have focused on the immediate causes of the conflicts, ignoring the more remote reasons that seem to have a greater effect on finding long lasting solutions. There is a general failure of these perspectives in explaining one very important question, which is why mobilizations are based on either ethnic or religious identities.

Mobilizations and contestations during conflicts that are based upon identities has made it harder to find longer lasting solutions. In northern Nigeria, identities play major roles in the way groups interact with each other, with religion and ethnicity forming the very basis for social interactions. In Jos and Kaduna the contestation between the two religions of Islam (made up of the Hausa Fulani) and Christianity (made up of the other ethnic groups in the region) in their attempts to assert their hegemony led to serious conflicts and continues to form the basis for current interactions between the groups.

So how do these groups mobilize using identities? Groups tend to rely on group narratives to either construct, maintain or reconstruct these identities all with the sole purpose of maintaining the group cohesiveness and also to justify whatever actions they take. However the narratives tend to be selective, focusing on those narratives that support their actions no matter how violent. Both Bar-Tal (2007) and Liu (2011) note that differences in the way in which social groups see events determine how they confront these issues. Liu states that 'when social representations of history are polemical, or in serious disagreement across different groups, they indicate the presence of historically rooted conflict. One group may have an historical grievance against another group, and this may require special treatment to resolve' (2011:5). Bar-Tal also notes that the memories that emerge from narratives are usually 'biased, selective and distorted in ways that meet the society's present needs' (2007:1436). Social groups thus use these selective historical narratives to legitimize current actions against other groups (Ross; 2007).

The narratives usually focus on religious and political issues citing attempted domination by one group over another and the groups use these fears to whip up ethnic or religious sentiments to mobilize social groups. These narratives, some purportedly over a hundred years old, thus help in maintaining the identities of the various ethnic and religious groups and determine the kind of interaction they have with one another. During a study of the conflicts of Jos and Kaduna and a series of interviews, I discovered that group identities were very strong and group actions were based on group narratives. In an interview, one respondent in reference to the so-called cries of persecution by Muslims in Jos stated that;

'You see I used to laugh when people are talking, why am I laughing? How Muslims feel in Plateau, they forget that, that is how Christians feel in Kano and so forth and even there, there are worst you see a Kano man born and breed in Kano, he is a

Christian, they will say there are no Christians in Kano, they are denied anything you can think about, they can't put their Christian names they have to turn around and so forth'.

The same respondent cites an example of a case where a Christian man went to court because he was denied what he believed was a rightful promotion because of his faith and this increased his feeling of religious persecution. He noted that the judge handling the case had told him that;

'He was very sad about the whole thing because it is creating bad blood to the generation below because the children of that man will look at that [the] system as a wicked system. [They] will grow and they'll be hating anybody Muslim because of what they did to their father'

These narratives are just some examples of perceptions of discrimination and have helped to determine how Muslims and Christians interact in these areas and tend to support the existence of deep-rooted animosities.

Another respondent when discussing the conflicts in Kaduna and why it is seemingly intractable also cites the use of historical religious narratives, noting that these conflicts persist because;

The Southern Kaduna people still feel they are enslaved they are not liberated, what they want is liberation, when you have a chat with them, they tell you Nigeria became independent in 1960. 'We are not independent yet'.

And he notes that he attempts to get them to drop these historical grievances he counsels them by telling them that;

*Look, the people who actually molested and explored this areas they are no longer alive and you people claim to be Christians, there is room for forgiveness, **don't visit the sin of the fathers on their children**. But it is difficult, that is where we are now in Kaduna.*

As Christians and Muslims continue to rely on these narratives for how they see the world they live in, these narratives continue to determine the way they interact with other groups. And as long as these are narratives of domination and persecution from both Muslims and Christians it would make it more difficult for either side to find some common ground to resolving the conflicts.

So how does knowing this help in finding a solution to these conflicts? As long as these narratives are being spread through the pulpits of churches and mosques and media outlets, they will continue to strengthen these identities making group positions more rigid and reducing the chances of finding resolutions to the conflicts. We saw this in 1994 when memories of past conflicts between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda were evoked to justify the massacre of the Tutsis.

So how does what we know help in finding solutions to many of Africa's conflicts? What is required is for conflict resolution practitioners to understand where these historical animosities come from and the issues that need to be addressed to reduce the risks of these conflicts recurring. Governments must additionally try and strengthen national identities that place less focus on ethnicity and more on national cohesion.

References

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