

**THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND
NATIONAL UNITY IN NIGERIA, 1960-2015****Tor Geri Godfrey,**

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Abstract

This article contends that the world is traditionally divided and conflictive in nature and that, humanity has to a great degree, grown to accept conflict as part of its nature. In its bid to underline the role of history in conflict management and, the need for Nigeria to embrace history in the attempt to manage its national challenges. The article posits that growth and development are predicted on conflicts. It also argues that since political independence, African states have gone through one conflict or the other as they are confronted with the realities of nation-building and state-building problems in an unequal world. Equally problematic is the question of adequate, effective capacity to manage the myriad of conflicts in the continent. Much of what countries in Africa have put in place, as they endeavour to sustain western type of government system, is inadequate for the stormy present. The article concludes that conflict resolution is not just a technical task; the method of managing the conflict should appeal to the people's shared values, beliefs, customs and practices. The article therefore, points out that a careful and thoughtful experience of human events shows that history takes its revenge on nations and individuals who have neglected it.

Introduction

Although conflicts permeate Nigeria's national, sub-regional and regional affairs, the institutional frameworks for the management of these conflicts are either non-existent or are grossly inadequate in terms of expertise, required material resources and other logistics. A nation-state like Nigeria which has experimented between democratic and authoritarian regimes needs not be told of the glaring need for adequate conflict management mechanisms. Too often, the instrument of history is not employed in addressing the problems thus leading to undue stress in the entire polity. Nigeria may not have experienced the gory tales of Somalia (horn of Africa), Congo, Liberia or Sierra Leone but the ingredients of what blew up the lid of the pent up frustrations in these countries are very much latent in this country. The ability to handle volatile circumstances maturely with adequate use of history will be the only safeguard against rapture and disintegration.

For the purpose of examining this and other variegated issues, this essay is divided into three sections. After the introduction, section two examines conceptual issues, while section three treats the relationship between history and crisis management for effective national unity in the country. Section four serves as the conclusion. The discourse will therefore take a brief look at the conceptual issues of history and conflict, and allow a sense of history to prevail in addressing the question of conflict management for effective national unity and integration.

Conceptual Issues

The challenges of state and nation building in any study and societies of the world require serious historical approach. This is all the more important for a third world nation like Nigeria where the search for stability and national unity remains a fundamental touchstone. State-building refers to problem of the political Centre 'penetrating' or 'controlling' the periphery to make its presence felt and to maximize its authority, Elaigwu (1998). Nation building is the wide spread acceptance of the process of state building; a progressive acceptance of members of the polity of the necessity and legitimacy of a central government and the identification with the central government as a symbol of the nation, Elaigwu (1998). This process often manifests in competition and conflict as the citizens allocate scarce resources.

In dealing with the question of state-building (which is a problem of structure, authority and control) and nation-building (which is a problem of culture, identity and consciousness), the central place of history is incontestable and its proper understanding in resolving the contentious issues which arise therein is primal inter-pares. Harold Perkin in Adejo (1999) states that history is the

summarized experience of the society and experience. In this regard, it is the condensed history of the individual without experience. He believes the individual is as lost as a baby without a mother, a potholder without a torch. In essence, history as Charles Firth writes, Adejo (1999) "seems the record of the life of societies of man, of the changes (social cultural, economic, political) which those societies have gone through, of the ideals which have determined the actions of those societies and of the material conditions which have helped or hindered their development.

It is often stated that although the knowledge of history does not simply make for easy answer in solutions to our conflicts and conflict management, it at least makes possible necessary distinction between those who are genuinely seeking a solution and those who are cynically using popular prejudice. The more changes occur in our society, the more it becomes imperative for the past to be studied with a view to establishing the connection and continuity between what has been and what is. Just as Rowse (1947) admits, it is indispensable to understand the world, which we live in and which gives us such frightful hard knocks if we do not know what to expect. These blows are thoroughly deserved if we allow ourselves to be ignorant of the panorama of life.

What is being noted here is that the future, from proper analysis, is like the past and it is only by ascertaining accurately the courses of past events that we may equip ourselves to solve future problems of man. Johnne Donne, in Adejo (2004) said, "No man is an island entire of itself, everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of the man."

There are several unanswered question we often asked include: Why do states fight? Why do people fight? Easy to ask as these questions may seem, addressing their substance has remained the most unresolved matter among scholars over the ages. Conflict does not mean only the outbreak of war but it includes the existence of mutual distrust, lack of respect and co-operation amongst individuals, groups and societies. Conflicts are often disruptive of socio - economic systems and smooth running of organizations. Conflicts often lead to loss of human lives and property.

Conflict management refers to the ability to contain the outbreak of hostilities and wars amongst communities or breakdown of government machinery. Conflict management is very crucial in the era of economic crisis and adjustment. The people are highly tensed with socio-economic, political, religious and psychological frustrations which could easily lead to conflicts. Therefore, conflict management is taken to mean measures put in place to minimize conflicts and problems thereby promoting national unity in Nigeria.

Conflict is also a period or moment of great danger, difficulty or uncertainty especially in politics or economics. In the same vein, conflict according to Donne in Adejo (2004) is defined as violent collision, a struggle or contest, a battle, and a mental struggle. It is also defined as "to fight, contend, to be in opposing." The conceptual predilection here, because of the broader and embracing nature of the term, is conflict. It will be interchangeably used with crisis when connoting a period or moment of great danger, difficulty or uncertainty.

Conflict, according to Stagner (1967) is;

a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both. Each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desired object or situation and each perceives the other as a barrier or threat to that goal.

The above definition suggests that conflict is inherent in human society. On that basis, Simmel sees conflict not simply as a pathological phenomenon to be prevented or adjusted but rather as an essential ingredient in the balance and vitality of group life, which emphasizes that conflict is positive and will always be part of human nature. Coser (1956) notes that:

Conflict comes from an incompatibility of goals... a struggle over values and claims to scarce status; power and resource in which the aims of the opponent are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals.

In some ways, it could be suggested that conflict is a way of settling disputes, even if the means employed is destructive and injurious to either or both of the parties in conflict and by extension, to their neighbours. Consequently, conflict by nature is dynamic and so tends to be chaotic and uncontrollable and often manifests into violence. Violence in this case is the application of injurious physical force to persons or property. In this vein, Stephen (1991) believes that:

When individuals and groups turn to violence to solve problems, conflict takes a second-dimension - security and survival. Conflict management becomes as multifaceted as conflict itself. Solutions must also satisfy the hunger of individuals for justice, but must also obey the fears of the participants. Conflicts become prolonged because the antagonists come to fear the consequences of settlement in which parties choose mutual security arrangement over the individuals' pursuit of security more than the consequences of continued violence.

Ironically, scholars are not unanimous or sure what the causes of conflict and ultimately of war, are. It is noted that human life is complex and the social sciences are so young that definite answers are not provided by analysts. Howard (1983) on the other hand asserts that the causes of conflict or war have not changed fundamentally throughout the centuries. He noted that:

Just as Thucydides had written that the causes of the Peloponnesian war were the growth of Athenian power and fear this caused in part, some of the principal causes of World War 1 were the growth of Germany's power and the fear this aroused in Britain.

Donald Kagan in Dougherty (1997) surveying conflicts from the Peloponnesian War (431 - 404 BC) to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, sees conflict not as an aberration but instead as a recurring phenomenon. In his view, war and conflict are the results of competitions for power. He argues that states seek power not only for greater security or economic gain but also for greater prestige, respect, and deference, in short, honour, (Kagan also concludes that fear, not always of immediate threats but also of more distant ones, against which reassurance may not be possible, accounts for the persistence of conflict as a part of the human condition not likely to change.

No single theory of conflict and war exists that is acceptable to social scientists in their respective disciplines and the causes of conflict are not only multiple but they have kept multiplying throughout history. A study of war between 1448 and 1989 by Kalvi J. Hosti (1991) identifies twenty-four different issues that caused wars. He indicates that factors that cause war rise and fall in importance over time. According to the study, territorial disputes cause over 1/3 of all wars between 1648 and 1914 but have caused less than 1/3 of all wars since then. Of the causal factors that have increased in importance, various national drives (liberation unification, secession) have increased the most, up from an average of 3% (1648 - 1814) to an average of 13% (1815 - 1989). In another study, Grievances (1977) reveals that in 1925, the conference on the causes and cure of conflict and war, concluded that there were more than 250 causes of war listed under the four general categories of politics, economic, social and psychological. With this, right at the end of his analysis of crisis concluded in rather confusing manner that: war has politico-technological, juror -ideological, socio-religious and psycho-economic causes.

In more simpler sense, analyses of conflicts and war are usually based on three level dimension: the system level, which generally talks about the nature of the world's political system; the state level which is treated under the broad factor of the political and the economic due to the internal political dynamics of countries (as to whether it is capitalist, dictatorial, underdeveloped etc or their economic resources and wealth which could determine the level of aggression proneness of a state). Other scholars have cause to study whether anything in the character of a nation has a cultural trait that can be correlated to warlike behaviour; equally, nationalism (state level dispositions) in form of ethnocentrism, xenophobia and the like could cause conflict. The third level of analysis of theories of conflict is the

individual. In this, some analysts argued that the cost of conflicts and war may be in the nature of human beings which according to Berridge and Waltz (1987) is "proud, power crazed, stupid and vicious". Such conflict arises over matters of territoriality and human aggression can stem from stress, anxiety or frustration. At this level, conflict could also arise as a result of the psychological need for power as some leaders have a power drive that may cause aggressive behaviours. This equally goes with the inability of some national leaders to perceive events objectively due to the proclivity of human being to see their opponents a more hostile than themselves.

Naturally, conflicts do not normally result in the destruction of the societies in which they occur. Conflicts often follow their own course and stages and usually terminate in the reconciliation of the communities concerned. Such reconciliation restores society to at least some degree of order, which permits it to continue to exist in a changed form. In academic discourse, the concept of settlement and resolution of conflict may be used interchangeably. Conflict management is essentially aimed at intervention to change or facilitate the course of a conflict. In a plural society, as Nigeria, conflicts management can be quite complex, mainly because of the determinate effects of culture and other symbolic tools like language. All in all, conflict management performs a healing function in societies and it provides opportunity for the examinations of alternative pay-offs.

Sources of Conflicts in Nigeria

It is pertinent to know that there are many problems facing Africa as a continent and specifically African state like Nigeria. We cannot claim to know all their problems. Not even to mention proffering solutions to them. However, it is gratifying to note that we are conscious of the problems. Most often social problems in our setting are so multidimensional that it is only possible to identify approximate causes of appropriate problems where solutions are only approximate.

Observers and critics of the African scene have variously ended to attribute cause of high incidence of intra-state conflicts in the continent to the question of marginalization were older and newer majorities squeeze out the minorities in virtually all state matters of patronage and infrastructural locations. The issue of under-representation largely is similar to cries of marginalization; injustice and wanton criminal tendencies of some significant members of the citizenry; religious and socio-cultural diversity; (between 1953 and 1972 over 17 major religious conflicts took place between Christian and Muslims in Nigeria) Garuba (1998). leadership failure - the autocratic and inept governments pioneered over the decades by those not meant for government houses have caused conflicts of different dimensions; bad governance as a result of undemocratic tendencies,

corruption and nepotism; lack of accountability and ethnic chauvinism, which have led to internecine crisis in Bauchi state, the Zangokataf in Kaduna state, Boko Haram and a host of other conflicts in Benue, Taraba and Southern States of Nigeria.

Other sources of conflicts in our nation state, as elsewhere in Africa, arises out of the international and internal boundaries bequeathed by the colonialist without respect for the historical and cultural affinity of those divided. Apart from the colonially induce boundary disputes, Nigeria have inflicted untold wounds on the nation through land and chieftaincy disputes where people refuse to take instructions from history; principal one and current include the Aguleri- umeleri conflagration in Anambra State, Modakeke-ife mayhem, the Mbaduku -Obudu conflicts, Jukun-Tiv disputes, Tiv- Fulani etc.

Out of these debris have arisen conflicts over succession as witnessed in several legislative assemblies where greed and ignorance, along with ignorance have been prime-mover; crisis of confidence in the nation-state and the new found definition of restructuring Nigeria, the convocation of sovereign nation conference and the adoption of confederation system even by those who were sworn in to defend the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria. We are thus witnessing a reinvention of political allegiance. In the Nigeria condition, in summation, it is proper to observe that conflict can hardly be discussed outside concept of pluralism that is that we have groups of intercultural encounters in the process of fostering specific interest and aspirations in view of the limited common resources.

History and Conflict Resolution

Resolving a conflict involves turning opposed position (the claim and its rejection) into a single outcome. The objective of conflict resolution is not as Garba (1998) maintains, to eliminate the conflict but remove the fundamental cause of crisis, to remove the factors that actually caused the conflict, to the satisfaction of the parties in conflict. However, conflict resolution is not just a technical task of making the best changes or just a question of having the right answer and then convincing the parties in conflict; it is a cultural and political task of generating support of the parties in conflicts to real agreement and be satisfied with the outcomes. The support can only be got if the method of resolving the conflict appeals to their shared values, beliefs, custom, and practices as well as their past. This is where the use or the application of the knowledge of history assumes centrality. The contending forces or parties are motivated to reach settlement because of previous success in similar endeavour, which becomes a tradition and a precedent.

The African approach to conflict resolution for the unity of the community or nation is quite different from the western method which is based on formerly prescribed law, contract, organizational rules, protocol and agreement not specifically for conflicts resolution but for conflict management, generally. African state has largely accepted those methodologies but have lack the effective grasp of their instrumentalities to properly address the African question. This approach has led in several instances to the non-resolution of conflicts even at the localized levels for example; boundary and land disputes in Nigeria have largely been tackled from a top-down administrative approach with little regard to the values, beliefs and customs of the people

Many of our leaders and members have no knowledge of history of the traditions of origin and settlements of various ethnic groups of Nigeria. Theirs is only apologies of our lack of integration and unity because they are convinced that our multi-ethnic nationalities are so separated and diverse to constitute a united nation. They stress that Nigeria is not monolithic and not monolingual, that the nation is a mere geographic expression. If they are adequately knowledgeable in the history of the nation their opinions could have been less adverse. They would have known that the people who constitute the nation-state of Nigeria were not as disparate and separate as they claim.

The stories and legends of migration are evidence that support this assertion. For instance the Igala, the Idoma and Yoruba have not separated from each other for too long as glut chronological studies indicated. So also the cultural affinities and a linkage of common sojourning in the Kisra legend connecting people from the Lake Chad Basin to Busse in the Middle Niger. The significance of this is intellectually discernible because it is a chain of migration, which does not necessarily imply physical migration but might be referring to diffusion of cultural traits over wide areas. Such traits, together with voluntary migration and settlement were clearly visible in the history of Northern Igbo and the people of Igala kingdom. Consequently, most groups in Nigeria. In his views Adejo (1999) opined that

Having myths of ancestral migration from the north or East the historicity of which can be rightly questioned but which can be taken as inductive of similarities in aspects of socio-political culture.

This is also why a historian like Yusuf Bala Usman as quoted by Adejo (1999) pities those calling for sovereign National Conference for the restructuring of the country. He notes that:

Those who are advocating the restructuring of the Nigeria federation into a federation of nationalities and ethnic groups have failed to grasp the

substance of the historical process which has produced our ethnic groups and the Nigerian policy.

He believes that the advocates seem oblivious of the responsibility of demarcating the boundary between most of the ethnic groups of contemporary Nigeria and their neighbours. The nationalities, he contends, have no boundaries as they intervene into another at the level of language, Cultural identity and territory, Adejo (1999). To avoid the pitfalls of ignorance over this matter, adequate grasp of Nigerian history, taught by those who know how to recall it becomes imperative. It is only then that stereotypes could be done away with because, as Obaro Ikime citing Ensor (1990) notes:

If a culture group knew enough about the background and antecedents of their neighbours, inter-group relations would be advanced, for that would enable one to know the merits and defects of the other and so they can tolerate one another and interact with minimum friction and conflicts.

If this is taken lightly, it is imperative to point out that people will not look forward to posterity who never looked backward to their ancestor (or the past). True history, as Adejo (2004) point out, is the study of conduct of the things that men and women in the past have done why they did them, and what the doing caused. He contends that the person who accurately knows these things, not as words on article but as human conduct, should thus have been prepared to understand the conduct of the men of his own time, including himself consequently, such a person has the information for wise choice among the actions open to himself or to others whose wills he may direct, as teacher or as responsible leader.

In history, human experiences repeat themselves; particular currents of causation which the mind can pick in the stream of events may be deemed invariable, yet the past and future are never just the same. History, however, makes people aware that the chain of human obligations binds us not only to our contemporary but also to those who went before us and those who will come after. It is lamentable how much that awareness is lacking among the educated elite of this country especially if their studies included no history worth mentioning. According to Ensor (1990) history consists of knowing how to allow for them; it involves acquiring a sort of sixth sense. Perhaps the greatest service that history can render us lies in its power to stimulate that sixth sense.

This is why the traditional African methods of conflict management have enough recourse to history. Such methods stem from the accumulation of the peoples experiences in fighting disorder in the society. Some of the methods were peaceful while others were violent. The peaceful methods include the following, as elucidate by Audu Braimah (2004): The citizens diplomatic method carried out

through institutionalized elders forum in the community; the elders were peaceful facilitations, regarded by their communities and neighbours as eminent peacemakers. There was the joking relationship method typical of adjoining communities or groups who trace their origin to a similar source. Sometimes both parties may take advantage of the other and abuse without offence being taken. Sometimes it takes the form of name-calling or stereotyping. Stylized forms of joking relationship (e.g. abokinwasa in Hausa) are very salient to easing inter-ethnic or inter-state rivalries or historical tensions. A third type of conflict resolution method was oaths taking where contending parties maintain their innocence or insistence or right to claim in contest. Communities could recourse to cult-agency on which that innocence of one or both parties is then sworn. The consequences of false declaration of innocence could fall on the oath taker, upon his relatives now and in the future. Another method of traditional conflict resolution was the symbolic diplomacy where elders and leaders exchanged visit during conflict and it served as symbolic turning point in the relationship.

Violent traditional methods of conflict resolution included raids as a means of settling disputes; blood feuding, used to inflict reciprocal homicide on the offending group by members of the group whose member was killed and warfare which had some large scale consequences.

Conclusion

It has been stated that conflict resolution is not just a technical task; the method of managing the conflict should appeal to the people's share value, beliefs, customs and practices. A careful and thoughtful experience of human events shows that history takes its revenge on nations and individuals which have neglected it. National unity has not always been a child of natural growth but a product of history. Unity requires deliberate action that is rooted strongly in the people's history and culture. It is highly recommended that there should be adequate attention to the teaching of history at all levels of Nigerian school system. Such knowledge will remove the veil of ignorance from our faces so that we shall return to the path of peace and progress.

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