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A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria

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Acronyms and Foreign Language Terms

Acronym/Term	Explanation (English)
<i>Aguleri</i>	A sub-ethnic group within the Igbo ethnic group
<i>Ahmadiyya</i>	A Muslim sect
<i>Bini</i>	A historically dominant minority ethnic group
<i>CAN</i>	Christian Association of Nigeria
<i>Damnosa hereditas</i>	Burdensome inheritance
<i>Efik</i>	A historically dominant minority ethnic group
<i>Fulani</i>	An ethnic group predominantly situated in the North (sometimes grouped together with the Hausa, Hausa-Fulani)
<i>Hausa</i>	An ethnic group predominantly situated in the North (sometimes grouped together with the Fulani, Hausa-Fulani)
<i>Idoma</i>	A minority ethnic group
<i>Igala</i>	A minority ethnic group
<i>Igbo</i>	An ethnic group predominantly situated in the East
<i>Ijaw</i>	A historically dominant minority ethnic group
<i>Ikwerre</i>	An ethnic group in the Rivers state
<i>Itsekiri</i>	A historically dominant minority ethnic group
<i>Izala movement</i>	A Muslim sect
<i>JNI</i>	Jamaatu Nasril Islam, an umbrella Islamic organisation
<i>Jukun-Chamba</i>	An ethnic group originating in Cameroon
<i>Kataf</i>	An ethnic group
<i>Kutebq</i>	An ethnic group
<i>Maitatsine movement</i>	A Muslim sect
<i>OIC</i>	Organisation of Islamic Conference
<i>Oyo Modakeke</i>	A sub-ethnic group within the Yoruba ethnic group
<i>PFN</i>	Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria
<i>Quadriyya</i>	A Muslim sect, brotherhood
<i>sabon gari</i>	Strangers quarters
<i>Salariat</i>	Intelligentsia, Bureaucrats, Technocrats
<i>Sanusiyya</i>	A Muslim sect
<i>Tijanniyya</i>	A Muslim sect, brotherhood
<i>Tiv</i>	An ethnic group (Taraba and Benue States)
<i>Umuleri</i>	A sub-ethnic group within the Igbo ethnic group
<i>Urhobo</i>	An ethnic group
<i>Yoruba</i>	An ethnic group predominantly situated in the West

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By Eghosa E. Osaghae and Rotimi T. Suberu

1. Introduction

Nigeria is usually characterised as a deeply divided state in which major political issues are vigorously – some would say violently – contested along the lines of the complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions in the country (cf. Smyth and Robinson 2001). The issues that generate the fiercest contestation include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the state, over which competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-take-all strategies. These include the control of state power, resource allocation, and citizenship. As a consequence, deeply divided states tend to be fragile and unstable because almost by definition, there are fewer points of convergence and consensus among the constituent groups than are required to effectively mitigate or contain the centrifugal forces that tear the society apart.

Thus, disintegration, secession, civil strife, civil war, minority agitation, and violent conflicts, all of which would normally be considered aberrant to 'normal' state formation, are quite common threats or actual occurrences in divided states. It is not surprising therefore that divided states have devised some of the most innovative and delicate systems of government. Most states practice some variant of the federal solution, with the emphasis on political accommodation and inter-segmental balance. This emphasis has made it necessary and expedient to adopt instrumentalities that mitigate the effects of majoritarianism, as well as promote inclusion, equity, and distributive justice between the different salient groups. Yet, and despite the precautions taken, divided states remain perennially unstable and many survive on the brink of collapse and disintegration (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972).

By virtue of its complex web of politically salient identities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa. From its inception as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability and economic transformation (Dudley 1973; Herbst 1996; Kirk-Greene 1971; Maier 2000; Melson and Wolpe 1970; Post and Vickers 1973; Soyinka 1997). The high point of the crisis seems to have been the civil war in the late 1960s, which ensued shortly after independence in 1960. However, rather than abate, conflicts have become more or less pervasive and intense in the post-civil war period, and disintegration continues to be contemplated by aggrieved segments of society as one of the possible ways of resolving the 'National Question'. This means that the consequences of Nigeria's diversity in an unstable political context remain as dire as ever.

But, contrary to what some overly simplistic analyses of the implications of diversity in Nigeria and other countries suggest, diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict. In other words, the very fact that a country has different ethnic, communal, religious, and racial groups does not make division and conflicts inevitable. And for that matter, empirical evidence shows that division and conflict are not dependent on the degree of diversity, as some of the most diverse countries (for example, Switzerland,

Belgium, Malaysia and Tanzania) enjoy relative peace and stability, while some of the least diverse are the most unstable or violent (for example, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and, perhaps, Sri Lanka).

Thus, James Fearon and David Laitin (2003:75, 82) have claimed that “a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity... by itself” is not “a major and direct cause” of violent civil conflict. Rather, they see violent civil conflict as associated with “conditions that favour insurgency,” including “poverty, which marks financially and bureaucratically weak states” (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 75). Other factors that have been identified to intervene between diversity and conflict include the role of formal and informal institutions for conflict regulation, the different sizes of groups relative to the national arena, and the extent to which different identities (ethnic, regional, religious, class, etc) overlap with, or crosscut, each other (see Fearon and Laitin 1996; Horowitz 1985; Posner 2004; Weingast 1997).

The implication of all this is that there is a set of intervening variables between diversity and conflicts that needs to be interrogated: to unravel the nature of the connection between them and, in particular, to discern the linkages between how identities get mobilized and politicized and how this relates to the level of conflict. The dynamic character of identity formation, mobilization processes, and of the shift from identity-diversity to conflict suggests that interrogation must necessarily be contextual and historical, if we are to capture the ebbs, flows, nuances and changes that are involved. These are the parameters that will guide our analysis of identities and conflicts in Nigeria in the following sections of this paper. The key questions around which the analysis is organized are: what are the major identities of political salience and how are they related? How and why have they become politically salient? What is the nature of conflicts that have ensued from identity and citizenship contestation, and how have they been managed or mismanaged?

In order to answer these questions, this paper is organised into a further four sections. The following section (2) examines the scope and nature of Nigeria’s identity diversity, providing discussion of ethnicity, religion, regionalism, class, gender, and youth. Section 3 examines patterns of conflict in pre-colonial and colonial times. Section 4 draws our attention to the most salient identity cleavages in conflicts in the post-colonial era. The final section (5) looks at state management of conflicts and its effects under the federal system in Nigeria.

2. The Nature and Scope of Nigeria’s Identity Diversity

Following Erikson’s (1968) characterisation of identity as the intersection between group and individual identity¹, we shall broadly define identity as any group attribute that provides recognition or definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group, acting individually or collectively. There are at least two approaches that could be used to capture and analyse the nature of Nigeria’s identity diversity. One is to classify them on the basis of Geertz’s (1963) famous distinction between primordial ties which are basically ascriptive and based on the “givens” of life (tribe, kinship, and ethnicity among others), and civil ties, which hinge on

¹ Identity, according to Erikson (1968: 22), is “a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of these two identities”.

industrial society-type aggregations like class, political party affiliation, interest group membership, and so on (also see Shils 1957).

For Geertz, primordial ties are prevalent in the 'new states' of Africa and Asia. Their resilience has made it difficult for the integrative revolution, which involves the erosion of primordial ties by civil ties, or what Oommen (1997: 35) describes as the transition from exclusionary and inequality-generating ethnicity and nationality identities to inclusionary and equality-oriented citizenship, to take place. Many studies of identity-based conflicts in Nigeria, including those of contested citizenship and national cohesion, take their theoretical cues from this formulation (cf. Ekeh 1972, 1975; Oyovbaire 1984; Oyelaran and Adediran 1997; Suberu 2001). The problem with Geertz's scheme, however, is that by presenting civil ties and primordial ties as mutually exclusive categories, it creates a false dichotomy between them. In reality, there is no way the prevalence of supposedly primordial ties like ethnicity and kinship can be understood in isolation of class and other civil ties. This is because, as adherents of the constructivist school of ethnicity argue, identities based on the so-called "givens of life" are constructed and not natural (cf. Bhaba 1994; Yeros 1999). It is also not true that class and other civil ties are equality-oriented, especially where they are recursive with ethnicity and other supposedly primordial ties. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Geertz's distinction provides a useful schema for summarizing the complex of identities into manageable categories.

A second approach is provided by what is essentially a conflict-based perspective, in which only identities that form the basis of political demand, mobilization and action, or so-called politicized identities, may be regarded as salient and relevant (Young 1976; Kasfir 1976; and Rothschild 1981 are some of the leading proponents of 'politicized ethnicity'). While this approach has the merit of focusing attention on active identities, it is mistaken in the exclusion of identities that are not politically active. This is first because by the nature of their invocation, identities tend to be situational (Okamura 1981), that is salient based on the situation at hand. As it were, the individual has an array of identities that s/he can decide to adopt or play up depending on the perception of the situation, including the identity adopted by competing actors.

Although the situationality thesis is more easily observed at the individual level, it also exists at the collective level. Thus, members of a group can decide to identify themselves as religious rather than 'ethnic' - as groups in Northern Nigeria do from time to time - depending on the level and scope of conflict. Indeed, as the adherents of the constructivist school of ethnicity have argued, identities are constructed. Second, like volcanoes, identities that are dormant today can become active tomorrow. For example, gender has certainly become an active identity marker in Nigeria today due to several local and global factors, yet three decades ago gender-based identity would have been considered dormant. Finally, identities have a way of being intricately inter-connected and mutually reinforcing, meaning it is unlikely that any one identity can exist in a pure form.

The exclusion of any identity from the 'action-set,' therefore, runs the risk of denying the active identities of their robustness. But the central point from the conflict-based perspective, which cannot really be disputed, is that different structures or configurations of identities do generate different levels or patterns of conflict (Diamond 1987; Horowitz 1985: 3-54). For example, ethnic and race based mobilization, which evoke nationalist claims and notions of territoriality strong enough to challenge the validity of extant states, tend to be more violent and dangerous than gender or generation-based identities like

youth, which usually do not involve territorial claims. To this extent, it is possible to distinguish territory-based identities, supposedly more volatile and prone to violent mobilization, and non-territory based identities, which are benign and amenable to regulation. But this distinction is similar to that made by Geertz's between primordial and civil ties, and as such can also be faulted on the grounds of creating a false dichotomy between identities.

What clearly emerges from the previous discussion is that any examination of Nigeria's identity diversity would have to be inclusive of all identities – civil and primordial – and the ways in which they are intricately linked. This is necessary to enable us situate the various identities, especially the more active and politically salient identities, in their fuller, robust and recursive contexts. Hence, the following discussion of salient identities in the Nigerian context uses these parameters.

Nigeria presents a complex of individual as well as crisscrossing and recursive identities of which the ethnic, religious, regional and sub-ethnic (communal) are the most salient and the main bases for violent conflicts in the country. This is both from the point of view of the identities most commonly assumed by citizens especially for political purposes and the identities often implicated in day-to-day contestations over citizenship as well as competitions and conflicts over resources and privileges. To emphasize the inter-connectedness of ethnic, regional, and religious identities and the fact that they are often mutually reinforcing, they are sometimes compounded or hyphenated as ethno-regional and ethno-religious. The latter references have historical, geographical and political origins. They evolved from the old regional structures of the Nigerian federation, where identities were shaped by leaders of the dominant ethnic groups – Hausa/Fulani² in the Northern region (predominately Muslim), Igbo in the Eastern region and Yoruba in the Western region – that exercised some form of hegemonic control over the regions. As a result, ethno-regional identities were, and continue to be, used as shorthand references to the dominant ethnic groups acting as regional 'hegemons'. This is the sense in which conflicts among the three dominant groups are generally referred to as ethno-regional. With the division of the country into six semi-official geo-political zones in the late 1990s, which not only have ethnic referents but have also gained currency in the political lexicon, the usage of ethno-regional categories is likely to expand, but so far the old regional references remain dominant.

Similarly, the category of ethno-religious identities initially owed its origin to regional formations. It has been useful for differentiating the predominantly Muslim North from the predominantly Christian South. The category has also helped to differentiate the dominant Muslim group in the North from the non-Muslim minorities in the region. Indeed, unlike the south where majority groups are distinguished from minority groups on the basis of ethnicity, majority-minority distinctions in the north have been more religious than ethnic. Thus, a member of the Hausa/Fulani majority group in the north who is Christian is as much a minority in the overall scheme of things as say an Idoma or Igala, (both of which are northern minority groups) and is actually likely to enjoy lesser privileges than an ethnic minority person who is Muslim. Since the early 1980s when the Maitatsine riots ushered in a regime of religious fundamentalism in the Northern parts of the country, ethno-religious categories have been more frequently used to describe conflicts that involve an intersection of ethnic and religious identities. Again for partly historical reasons, this has been truer of the North where, as has been pointed out,

religious differences play a major part in ethnic differentiation. Thus, conflicts between Hausa/Fulani and minority ethno-religious groups are described as ethno-religious. However, the increased politicisation of religion by the state, including the adoption of Islamic penal law by several Northern states in the Fourth Republic, has led to the generalisation of ethno-religious conflicts all over the country, a point we shall return to later in this paper.

In the recent past, other 'primordial' identities that have gained wide currency and greater political significance, especially in contestations over citizenship, are those of 'indigenes', 'non-indigenes', 'migrants', and 'settlers'. These categories have ethnic, communal, religious and regional origins, and have evolved from an entrenched system of discriminatory practices in which non-indigenes, migrants and settlers are shunted out or denied equal access to the resources, rights and privileges of a locality, community, town or state, to which 'sons and daughters of the soil' have first or exclusionary access. The system produces and sustains a hierarchical, unequal, and ranked system of citizenship that has provoked violent conflicts all over the country, and goes to the very heart of the 'National Question'. Although these identities have grown in significance in the recent past, which obviously has to do with the aggravation of the 'National Question', they have deep historical roots in pre-colonial patterns of inter-group relations, and the discriminatory practices and ethnic inequalities entrenched by both the colonial regime and continued by post-independence administrations. These have cumulatively provoked various forms of self-determination agitation by different groups. All of these factors are further discussed in the next sections.

The final set of identities which fall under Geertz's category of civil ties, are those further distinguished by their non-territorial character. The main identities here include class, gender, and a host of generational identities, of which the most important is youth. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the modernization-radical political economy debate dominated the scene, an examination of identities in Nigeria would have been reduced to a debate of whether class or ethnicity was more real, but the matter has been resolved in terms of the acknowledgement that both have important consequences for each other. Class interests underlie supposedly ethnic mobilization and demands, but at the same time, ethnic divisions have stymied the process of class solidarity (Otite 1979). Gender and youth have also emerged as critical and active identities, especially in the struggle for rights and privileges. What is more, gender and youth identities in many parts of the country have strong ethnic complexions, especially in the Niger Delta region where violent minority nationalism has been on the rise since the 1990s.

Having outlined the various functional identities in Nigeria, and the ways in which they are inter-connected, the next task is to further elaborate on them in terms of definition, prevalence and action trajectories. For this purpose, the focus will be on what may be called primary identities that provide the most basic divisions or cleavages from which other identities take their cues and are constructed. Broadly, the basic identities are ethnicity, religion, regionalism, class, gender and youth.

2.1 Ethnicity

Ethnicity is generally regarded as the most basic and politically salient identity in Nigeria. This claim is supported by the fact that both in competitive and non-competitive settings, Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity. Indeed, according to the authoritative 2000 survey on "Attitudes to

Democracy and Markets in Nigeria”, ethnicity “is demonstrably the most conspicuous group identity in Nigeria” (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 27). Thus, the survey found that almost one-half (48.2%) of Nigerians chose to label themselves with an ethnic (including linguistic and local-regional) identity, compared to almost one-third (28.4%) who opted for class identities, and 21.0 percent who chose a religious identity (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 24-25). In essence, close to two-thirds of the population see themselves as members of primordial ethnic, regional, and religious groups. In other words, “Nigerians tend to cluster more readily around the cultural solidarities of kin than the class solidarities of the workplace” (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 25). What is more, “religious and ethnic identities are more fully formed, more holistic and more strongly felt than class identities” as evidenced in the fact that “whereas those who identify with religious and ethnic communities are almost universally proud of their group identities...those who see themselves as members of a social class are somewhat more equivocal about their pride” (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 26). All of this is not surprising, considering that ethnic formations are perhaps the most historically enduring behavioural units in the country, and were further reinforced by the colonial and post-colonial regimes.

Yet, in spite of the salience of ethnicity, and the large number of studies that have been devoted to the subject, the exact number of ethnic groups in the country is not known. Different estimations have been given, notably, including: 248 (Coleman 1958), 394 (Hoffman 1974), 62 (Murdock 1975), 161 (Gandonu 1978), 143 (Odetola 1978), 619 (Wente-Lukas 1985), and 374 (Otite 1990). A recent ethnic mapping project puts the number at over 500 (PEFS 2001). The wide variation is largely explained by the different criteria used by the authors. Although language, kinship, core territoriality and myth of common origin are the main criteria, with in-group/out-group self definitions as correcting factor, there is no agreement on how to treat dialects of languages for example. Do these dialects constitute separate groups, or should they be regarded as sub-groupings or communal groups? Matters are not helped by the fact that ethnic identities and differentiations are intricately linked with other identities like religion, and furthermore they do not exist in pure forms.

There is also the fact that ethnic identities and boundaries, including myths of common origin, are fluid and subject to continuous construction and reconstruction. The case of the Ikwerre in the Rivers state is a good example of the problematic definition. They were Igbo before the civil war, but have since re-defined themselves to be a separate group. Migrant and dispersed groups that have somewhat become distant from the original group constitute another category of problematic classification: should they be regarded as part of the original group or as a different group?

In the final analysis, it is clear that ethnic diversity cannot be defined only in terms of categories employed by linguists and ethnographers. There is also the whole dimension of self-definition by members of the group and outsiders, which is a much more important determinant of so-called ethnic-based behaviour. As much as possible therefore, the objective diacritic, which many scholars emphasize, should be consistent with the ‘constructed reality’, self-ascribed identities, or ‘imagined communities’ of members of the group and outsiders to be valid. This is one useful way of assessing the validity of the various estimations.

Historically, ethnic identities in Nigeria have been summarized into the two broad categories of majority and minority groups. Although unequal size and population are essential to this differentiation, its origins lie more in the power configurations of the

former colonial regions in which the large groups – Hausa/Fulani in the North, Igbo in the East and Yoruba in the West – held sway. This is all the more important because prior to the creation of these regions, there were no major or minor group distinctions in the country. However, with the regions came a ‘core’ comprising the major group and a ‘periphery’ made up of numerous ‘small groups’ or minorities. The creation and multiplication of states and local government areas (the number of states has increased from 12 in 1967 to 36 in 1996) which have replaced these broader regions has led to the emergence of new majorities and minorities; but, the old historical contexts remain, especially with regard to the major groupings. This is one of the things that has ensured the continued political relevance of the old regions and of the ‘historical minorities,’ which remain both regional and national in scope (Osaghae 1986).

While the category of majority groups remains intact, a number of scholars have identified important distinctions and reconstructions within the ranks of minorities that in fact show that there are inequalities among minorities. Ekeh (1972, 1996) has moved from differentiating ‘marginals’ or dispersed minorities such as the Ijaw and Epira (cut from their kith and kin in other regions) from other minorities, distinguishing between ‘historically dominant minorities’ which were powerful overlords in the pre-colonial and colonial periods (Ijaw, Bini, Efik, Itsekiri) and ‘political minorities’ which were marginalized and excluded both from power in the regions and the overall national power grid (see Ekeh, 1972 and 1996 for this progression). Osaghae (1998) on the other hand, has pointed to the multiple characteristics of minorities and identified categories of powerful national minorities made up of: historically dominant minorities, which have been influential national actors; northern and southern minorities; and religious minorities, all of which have unequal access and opportunities in the power and resources arena. Finally, in the struggles for more equitable access to power in the 1990s, it became fashionable and expedient for several non-minority groups including the Igbo and some Yoruba subgroups to redefine themselves as ‘minorities’ in view of their alleged marginalization and exclusion from power and resources. Such redefinitions have not however, changed the historical context of the majority-minority cleavage.

There have been other important developments in the domain of ethnic politics. The creation of more states and local government areas has led to an expansion in the domain of salient identities, but at the same time, there has been a concentration of contestations and conflicts around local issues. This has provided the impetus for the sharpening of communal identities and conflicts, which have manifested in conflicts between ‘indigenes’ and ‘non-indigenes’, ‘sons-of-the-soil’ and ‘migrants’ and ‘settlers’. The resultant system of discriminatory citizenship has deep historical roots as we shall analyze below, however, the phenomenal rise of communal conflicts beginning from the 1990s can be partly attributed to: shrinking state resources and the attendant recourse by groups to communal resources on the one hand; and, on the other hand, to a number of state policies, interventions and omissions, including the neglect and abuse of police and security bodies, that are supportive of discriminatory practices.

2.2 Religion

Ranking next to ethnicity is religious identity. In fact, in parts of the North commonly referred to as the ‘core’ or ‘Hausa-Fulani North’ - which is roughly coterminous with those states that adopted Sharia law in the Fourth Republic - religious identity is more critical than ethnic identity and in fact serves to activate ethnicity. Thus, among Nigeria’s

“two largest ethnic groupings, the [southern] Yoruba were considerably more prone to define themselves ethnically... than were the [northern] Hausa-Fulani ...who rather opted for a religious [Muslim] identity” (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 25). Religious identities in Nigeria are usually classified into three – Christian, Muslim and Traditional. Of the three, traditional religions is the least politically active; numbering several hundreds of ethnic groups and subgroups, villages, clans and kin groups; and, involving the worship of different gods and goddesses. However, in parts of the Kogi, Kwara, and Nassarawa states, masquerade activities associated with traditional religion have been a major source of conflicts. In effect, Christian and Muslim identities have been the mainstay of religious differentiation and conflict, with Nigerian Muslims much more likely to evince or articulate a religious identity than Christians (Lewis and Bratton 2000: 5). We have already referred to how this differentiation underlies the North-South cleavage (in terms of the North being predominantly Muslim and the South predominantly Christian) and sharpens ethnic cleavages in the North.

However, underneath the broad Christian-Muslim categories are several sub-cleavages that have at one time or the other been politically salient or have the potential to be, and have generated intra-group conflicts. Among Christians, there are several denominations, including: the Protestants (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran), the Catholics, the Evangelical Church of West Africa, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a host of ‘home-grown’, ‘white garment’ (Aladura and Celestial) and Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal churches, which by some accounts represent the fundamentalist segment of Christianity in the country (cf. Udoidem 1997), have witnessed a rapid growth in number in the recent past with many adherents, especially youths, crossing over from the older and more traditional denominations. Through umbrella bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), and the Catholic Bishops Conference, churches have played important roles as an integral part of civil society in anti-military struggles and democratization.³ But even so, the politicization of Christianity has been largely dependent on the moves made by Muslims and interventions by the state. Nevertheless, Protestant-Catholic cleavages have been a major factor in elections among the Igbo of the southeast.

Muslims on the other hand belong to different sects, including the Ahmadiyya, Sanusiyya, Tijanniyya and Quadriyya, among which there have been conflicts. There are also some umbrella organizations, which aim at the propagation of Islam. One of these is the Jamaatu Nasril Islam (JNI), which was founded by the Sardauna of Sokoto in 1961. Following the Iranian Islamic revolution of the 1970s, there was a surge of radical and fundamentalist activities especially among Muslim youths. This was the context within which some fundamentalist Muslim sects, notably the Maitatsine, Izala movement, the Muslim Brothers or Shiites, and most recently the Talibans emerged to demand, amongst others: purist Islam based on Sharia law; the eradication of heretical innovations; and, the establishment of an Islamic state or theocracy. The activities of these sects were a major precipitant of the religious conflicts that proliferated the Northern political landscape in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these involved conflicts between Muslims and Christians, with clear ethnic undertones, but some especially those involving the Izala, also entailed anti-state mobilization. Factors that have accentuated the politicisation of Muslim identities include: state policies and

³ The Catholic Church, which has Justice and Development Commissions all over the country, in addition to a politically active Bishops Conference and other structures, has been very active in this regard.

interventions, which Christians allege are pro-Muslim (state sponsorship of pilgrimage to Mecca and membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference - OIC - are cases in point); the attempts to extend Sharia law to the federal level; and the adoption of Sharia law as the basic law by a number of states.

2.3 Regionalism

Regional cleavages and identities evolved from the structures created and consolidated by the colonialists in the process of state formation in Nigeria. The most fundamental of the cleavages is that between the North and South, these being the initial structures of the colonial state which were administered separately even after the two units were amalgamated in 1914. The other cleavages emerged with the introduction of a three-region structure (North, East, and West) in 1946. A fourth region, Mid-West, was created in 1963, but partly because of its status as home to minorities, the creation did not fundamentally alter the tripartite regional structure existing before the First Republic was sacked by the military in 1966. The ethnic majority-minority cleavage and the majoritarian basis of politics took roots within these structures. The emergent elite were regionalized from inception, and especially after 1946 when the political space was opened to more Nigerian participation, the majority elite segment deployed strategies of ethnic mobilization and exclusionary politics to establish hegemonic control of the regions.

With the meaning of regionalism reduced to “North for Northerners”, “East for Easterners” and “West for Westerners”, a discriminatory system under which people from other regions living in these areas were deprived of rights and privileges and excluded from the political process has become entrenched. This was how the infamous distinction between indigenes and non-indigenes strengthened. Although the erstwhile regions were abrogated in 1966, they remain crucial political cleavages for reasons which have already been advanced. They also provide the basis for new forms of exclusionary politics that have evolved alongside new political-administrative structures and reinforced discrimination against non-indigenes, namely ‘statism’ and ‘localism’.

Another category of regional identities that has gained currency is the one that developed around the six geo-political zones into which the country was divided in 1996 for the purpose of sharing and rotating federal power and resources – Northeast, Northwest, North central, Southwest, Southeast, and South south (cf. Agbaje 1998). To a large extent, the zones reinforce the old regional cleavages: the Southwest and Southeast are coterminous with the Yoruba core of the old West and Igbo core of the old East respectively; Northwest covers the so-called ‘core-North’; Northeast is the core of the old ‘Borno axis’ of the North; North central encompasses the old Middle Belt (in fact, leaders of this zone have a strong clamour for the name to reflect the old reality); and South south covers the old league of Southern minorities. Even so, the old regional divisions remain very strong, particularly with the efforts by the various elite segments to re-organize along old regional lines. A case in point is the Northern elite, which, through organizations like the Northern Elders Forum and the Arewa Consultative Forum, has continued to mobilize around the theme of pan-regional unity.

2.4 Class, Gender, and Youth

Partly due to the strong influence of Marxism and radical political economy perspectives, analyses of class identities in Nigeria have divided them into two broad classes (Imoagene 1989). First is the dominant class or elite, which has also been variously referred to as the ruling class (elite), the political class (elite), the privileged class, and the hegemonic class (elite). Second is the dominated class, also called the masses, the ordinary people, and the non-elite; terms that describe the urban segment of the poor and underprivileged, as well as the peasantry which is the common name for rural dwellers. The working class, whose identity is built around labour, constitutes a special category of the dominated classes. For a long time, analysts talked of a middle class, made up of the educated elite and the privileged *salaried* – intelligentsia, bureaucrats, technocrats, and so on (see Bienen and Diejomaoh 1981; Diamond 1988; Graf 1988; Osoba 1977; Sklar 1963; Williams 1980). Today, the existence of this class is the subject of a debate because, as some argue, the middle class was wiped out by the regime of structural adjustment and authoritarianism that encouraged massive brain drain and pauperized members of the class (Jega 2000; Olukoshi 1993).

Although class categories exist, it has been argued that in terms of consciousness of belonging to classes and acting on that basis, classes are fragile and underdeveloped in Nigeria. This explains why the term ‘elite’ is sometimes preferred to ‘class’. It is, however, generally agreed that the Nigerian elite is divided along ethnic, regional and religious lines, and that this is a major factor in the underdevelopment of class forces, including working class consciousness. As Otite (1979: 93) puts it, “the attachment to the exclusive symbols of ethnicity weakens class cultures as well as elite organization and occupational collegueship”. Notwithstanding such structural weaknesses, however, both the elite and the non-elite have proven capable of class-based mobilization and action, especially when their constitutive interests are threatened. This is true of labour, which has been able to mobilize workers to oppose unpopular government policies and to demand better conditions of service and political transformation including decolonization and democratization (cf. Ihonvbere, 1997). However, it is no less true for the divided political elite that have closed ranks at critical points to ensure the survival and stability of the state. The circumstances that led the military to hand over power to civilians, and specifically to a Yoruba president in 1999, is a case in point.

Gender and youth identities have grown in importance over the last two decades, partly due to the strategic roles played by women and youths in the democratization struggles, and partly due to the expansion of political space. However, a large part of the emergent youth identities is well entrenched in ethnicity and communalism, having emerged from redress-seeking struggles by aggrieved ethnic groups. This is evident in the activities of new militant ethnic youth movements like the Odua Peoples Congress, the Arewa Peoples Congress, the Ijaw Youth Council, the Egbesu Boys of Africa, the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, the Bakassi Boys, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, the Hisba or Sharia Vigilante groups in the Muslim north, and the militias of the Tiv, Jukun and other ethnic groups in Nigeria’s many conflict zones. This ethnicization and militarization of Nigerian youth culture has been promoted significantly by: widespread socio-economic frustration and alienation (including relatively high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment); the legacy of state repression and impunity since 1984; and the sheer failure or inability of

the national police and security agencies to fulfil their basic obligations to maintain law and order or protect lives and properties.

Gender identities have also sometimes been pursued through religious, ethnic, and regional structures, but they mostly belong to mainstream elitist and professional struggles for equality, representation, and participation. On the one hand, gender and sectional identities are often linked together in the construction of political claims in the Nigerian setting. Many Nigerian women have channelled their demands for recognition and participation through primordial organizations. Examples include the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations, the Federation of Ogoni Women's Associations, and the Southern Kaduna Women's Organization. Indeed, ongoing attempts to promote and protect the rights of women living under Islamic penal codes have been most credible and successful when such efforts have been framed within, rather than outside, the framework of Islamic communal identity and the broad paradigm of Islamic jurisprudence. Yet, more often than not, ethnic, religious and regional divisions constrain the effective national mobilization of Nigerian women against entrenched patriarchal practices both in customary procedures for land use, marriage, divorce and inheritance and in the allocation of diverse resources in the modern public arena.

On the other hand, Nigerian women are divided not only by primordial identities, but also by class and professional fissures. Indeed, the representatives of the majority of ordinary, poor women have not spearheaded the most politically visible women's associations in Nigeria. Rather, these associations are mainly led either by politically connected and often corrupt 'femocrats' (first ladies of political office holders) or by professionally privileged feminists. Because their authority derives solely from being married to powerful men who are implicated in the structures of gender inequality and other social inequities, the 'femocrats' are unable to fulfil their rhetorical commitments to the advancement of ordinary women. The feminists, on the other hand, are often preoccupied with the narrow interests of an upper class of professionals and businesswomen. Torn between the false populism of the 'femocrats' and the crass elitism of the feminists, the majority of Nigerian women have shunned political mobilization on a gender basis and maintained their preoccupation with individual and household economic survival (Denzler 1999; Mama 1997).

3. Enduring Patterns of Pre-Colonial and Colonial Conflicts

Although identities are not wholly interest-begotten and instrumentalist - after all things like pride play a crucial part in the adoption of identities by individuals - it is imperative for the analyst to interrogate the circumstances under which particular identities and not others become salient. Similarly, identities do not by themselves lead to conflicts. In other words, the fact that a country has several ethnic or religious groups does not make conflicts inevitable. It is only when mobilization around identities occurs or they are politicized that they constitute the bases for conflicts. The task, therefore, is to examine the conversion process by which identity diversity is transformed into conflicts, what scholars of ethnicity call 'ethno-genesis'. This is what we attempt to do in this section from a historical perspective.

It is helpful, as a backdrop, to identify the various types of identity-based conflicts that have ensued over the years in Nigeria. Broadly, these include ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, regional conflicts, communal (sub-ethnic) conflicts, and the more complex conflicts involving more than one identity, namely, ethno-regional conflicts, ethno-

religious conflicts, and ethno-cultural conflicts. What distinguishes these conflicts and underlies the characterization of Nigeria as a deeply divided state is the tendency of these conflicts to be violent because they often involve territorial claims in a context of (i) sharp and often overlapping cultural cleavages (ii) historical (pre-colonial and colonial) conflict legacies (iii) competition for highly valued, but relatively scarce, resources, including land, new administrative boundaries and headquarters, bureaucratic and political placement, infrastructures, trading opportunities, and other goods (iv) actual and perceived horizontal inequalities in access to diverse resources and (v) state failure or mismanagement of inter-ethnic relations.

Although it is generally agreed that colonialism is the 'cradle' of ethnicity in Nigeria (Nnoli, 1978) and, more specifically, that the politically salient identities evolved within the context of the contemporary Nigerian state, some of the conflicts that have ensued in the country have remote origins in the patterns of pre-colonial migration, conquest, and control. For example, the contemporary ethno-religious turbulence in Kaduna state, including the February-May 2002 Sharia mayhem, can be traced back to at least the mid-nineteenth century when Kaduna's southern non-Muslim communities were raided, enslaved and eventually inequitably incorporated into the emirate structure by the Hausa-Fulani Muslims (Kazah-Toure 1995). This history has focused current attempts to alleviate ethno-religious conflict in Kaduna state on the establishment of separate chiefdoms, autonomous of the Hausa-Fulani emirates, for the southern Kaduna peoples. Pre-colonial migratory patterns were perhaps even more important than pre-colonial conquest and control in shaping the contemporary contours of identities and identity conflicts in Nigeria.

There are numerous examples of pre-colonial migration, usually stimulated by wars or natural disasters, which have continued to generate bitter conflicts today owing to continuing discrimination against the immigrants by the original settlers. These include the eighteenth century mass migration of Oyo Modakeke into Ife in search of a safe haven from the internecine wars of the Oyo empire; the movement of Urhobo and Ijaw into Warri, where the Itsekiri claim to have been the original settlers; the migration of the Jukun-Chamba from Cameroon to parts of the present Taraba state, originally settled by the Kuteb; and the sixteenth century settlement of Hausa merchants in Zangon Kataf within a territory occupied by the Kataf (Isumonah 2003; Mustapha 2000).

The advent of colonialism in the late nineteenth century and the subsequent amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria in 1914 witnessed more migration in response largely to modern economic opportunities in emerging colonial urban centres. A phenomenal instance of such colonial economic migration was the early twentieth century influx of southern Nigerian immigrants, especially the Igbo and Yoruba, into northern cities like Kano, Kaduna, Zaria and Jos. This migration did not however, lead to greater integration as might have been expected. This was partly due to the continuing strands of state consolidation by the Muslim overlords in the core North in the aftermath of the Fulani jihad of 1804 that produced an acute sense of territoriality, and partly to the response of the British colonizers to this situation. The British response was basically to preserve the Islamic Puritanism of the north and avoid potential inter-group tensions by discouraging movement of non-Muslim migrants into the core Muslim areas, and to 'quarantine', as it were, the migrants in *sabon gari* or strangers' quarters. This territorial demarcation, which was to be extended to most Northern cities and southern cities like Ibadan and Lagos where *sabon gari* were also created (in the south to house

Northern migrants who were mostly Muslim), became one of the strong bases for conflictual identity formation and discriminatory practices.

Indeed, colonialism was the single most important factor in the crystallization of contemporary identities and identity conflicts in Nigeria. By cobbling the different Nigerian groups into a culturally artificial political entity for instance, the British stimulated inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources in the new state, thereby fostering ethnic conflicts. The colonial urban settings were particularly key in the development of ethnic contact, competition, consciousness and organization. James Coleman (1958: 8) characterized these new colonial cities and mining, commercial and administrative centres as “aggregations of tribal unions” because the urban centres encouraged the formation of kinship, lineage or ethnic associations as a means to cushion the insecurity, instability, alienation and competitiveness of colonial urban life. In addition, the British policy of ruling indirectly through indigenous political institutions or native authorities led to the reification of local tribal political institutions and loyalties.

More important, British colonial policy fostered the uneven socioeconomic and political development and mal-integration of the various Nigerian peoples. The more damaging aspects of the British colonial policy of uneven development included the exclusion of Christian missionary activity and the highly prized mission-sponsored schools from the predominantly Muslim areas of the north, thereby creating a huge imbalance in westernization between north and south, which continues to haunt the federation; the discouragement of any official political contact between north and south until 1947, when politicians from the two regions sat together for the first time in the central legislative council; the official promotion of segregated residential settlement patterns – the so-called *sabon gari* or strangers’ quarters to which reference has already been made – and, inflexible land tenure systems, both of which reinforced discrimination against migrant communities; and, the lopsided recruitment of Nigerians into the army and police (Coleman 1958; Diamond 1988; Dudley 1973; Luckham 1971).

The single most divisive policy of the British, however, involved the establishment during the late colonial era in 1954 of a federal structure of three units, namely, the northern, western, and eastern regions. Although it reflected the historic patterns by which the British acquired and administered Nigeria as well as the country’s tripartite major ethnic configuration, the three-region federal structure was inherently divisive, disintegrative and unstable. The tripartite federal structure, in particular, promoted the invidious political hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani-dominated northern region, which officially contained over half of the country’s population and two-thirds of its territory; fostered ethnic majority chauvinism and secessionism by erecting the boundaries of the northern, western and eastern regions around the identities of the major ethnic formations of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, respectively; fuelled ethnic minority agitations because it denied the country’s non-Hausa-Fulani, non-Yoruba and non-Igbo groups the security of their own regions; and encouraged an enormous degree of ethno-regional polarization as the imbalanced tripartite ethno-regional structure (which became even more structurally lopsided with the creation of the Mid-west region in the south in 1963) inexorably collapsed into a bi-polar north-south confrontation.

Given the multiple cumulative ethnic contradictions and tensions built into the colonial experience in Nigeria, it is not surprising that this period actually witnessed the initial major instances of inter-ethnic violence in the country. In 1945, for instance, amidst a general strike and food shortages that the British colonial authorities blamed on Igbo

nationalist politicians, violence erupted in the mining town of Jos between Igbo and Hausa migrants over residential and trading opportunities in the city (see Nnoli 1978: 235). The violence, which lasted for two days, left two persons dead, many others injured, and considerable amounts of property damaged (Nnoli 1978: 235). In 1953, the Hausa and Igbo again clashed in the northern city of Kano over the attempts by southern parties to hold rallies in the city in support of their anti-colonial campaign for Nigerian independence. The riot officially left at least 36 people dead (21 of them of Igbo ethnicity) and more than 200 people injured. The violence reflected the bitter opposition to the independence campaign by northern politicians, who feared that an end to British rule would mean domination of the north by the more developed south (for a good account of the xenophobic tone by which the northern elite mobilized the masses, see Feinstein, 1987: 159). The riot also reflected the resentment of Ibo domination of socioeconomic opportunities in Kano by the city's indigenous Muslim Hausa population. Most important, the 1953 Kano riot presaged subsequent large-scale ethnic violence in Nigeria, including the 1966 anti-Igbo massacre in Kano and other northern cities that would accelerate the country's descent into catastrophic civil war (Suberu and Diamond 2003: 120). In essence, colonialism effectively set the stage for the explosion of violent identity conflicts in post-independence Nigeria and for the huge challenge of national restructuring that would be required to hold the country's multiple identity constituencies together in a single political community.

4. Patterns of Post-Colonial Identity Conflicts

The postcolonial era in Nigeria has witnessed two contradictory tendencies. The first trend is the continuation and even aggravation as well as proliferation of colonial conflict legacies, leading to at least two waves of violent identity conflicts in Nigeria during 1960-70 and since the early eighties, respectively. The second tendency in postcolonial Nigeria involves a more or less concerted attempt to manage identity conflicts through innovative federalist practices.

The colonial state, to reiterate, pursued divide-and-rule policies that entrenched systems of ethnic segmentation and polarization. These included the 'Warrior tribe' policy of recruitment into the army and the police, the exclusion of Christians and southerners from the core north and their restriction to strangers' quarters, and the privileges accorded leaders of the major groups in the regions, all of which bequeathed a fatal legacy – part of which Kirk-Greene (1980) has referred to as *damnosa hereditas* (burdensome inheritance) – for post-independence Nigeria.

The lopsided colonial ethno-regional federal structure in particular, was heavily implicated in the first wave of violent ethno-political discontent and conflict in the postcolonial era, as evidenced in the Tiv riots of 1962 and 1964, and the secessionist campaign of Isaac Boro and his Ijaw collaborators in 1966, all of which underscored the continuing disenchantment of the ethnic minorities with their inequitable incorporation into the majority-dominated regions. The polarizing effects of ethno-regional federalism were more or less directly expressed in several other political tribulations that assailed Nigeria in the sixties, including: the 1962 declaration of a state of emergency in the Western region; the bitter ethno-regional dispute over the 1962-63 census; the 1964 federal election crisis; the 1965 western election debacle; the eventual overthrow of the First Nigerian Democratic Republic in 1966 following a bloody ethno-military coup; the complete fragmentation and politicization of the military establishment along ethno-regional lines; the attempted secession of the Eastern region, under the leadership of its

Igbo military governor, Odumegwu Ojukwu, as the independent Republic of Biafra; and, the eventual outbreak of the 30-month civil war, which claimed an estimated one million lives, mainly in the ill-fated Biafra.

Arguably, the civil war could have been averted if the country's Igbo first military head of state, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, had restructured the federation by, for example, establishing new sub-federal regional units for Nigeria's restive minorities in the north and south. Instead, Ironsi's purported abrogation of federalism through the unification decree of May 1966 was broadly interpreted as an attempt to replace northern domination under the lopsided regional federalism with Igbo hegemony under an even more obnoxious unitary system. The Decree immediately provoked anti-Igbo killings in the north, which were followed by the murder of several Igbo soldiers (including Ironsi himself) in the counter-coup of July 1966, and an even more massive round of anti-Igbo killings in the north in September 1966. The May-September 1966 massacres of thousands of Igbos in the north, and the attendant influx of Igbo migrants back into the East, more than any other single factor, generated popular Igbo support for secession.

The end of the civil war in January 1970 ushered Nigeria into an era of relative inter-group stability that lasted until the early eighties. This stability was promoted by the following factors: the decisive federal victory in the civil war, which promoted a revitalized sense of Nigerian nationhood; the dissolution of the four regions into twelve and nineteen states, in 1967 and 1976 respectively, which transformed the federation into a more horizontally balanced union; the use of expanding oil revenues to soften inter-group resource conflicts through various ethno-distributive measures, including the provision of infrastructures in new state administrative capitals and the expansion of the general distributable pool account (DPA) under the revenue allocation system; and the crafting of innovative statutory mechanisms of ethnic conflict accommodation, including the federal character principle and the inter-regional distribution requirement for the election of the federal president, which were embodied in the 1979 Constitution for the Second Republic, which ended the first phase of military rule in Nigeria. To be sure, the seventies were not entirely free from sectional tensions, as evident in the north-south dispute over the 1973 census, the assassination of the military head of state in a barely disguised ethno-military coup in 1975, and various inter-group disputes over the boundaries of new sub-national administrations. Yet, compared to the sixties and the period since the eighties, the seventies stand out as an era of relative tranquillity in Nigeria.

Indeed, the factors that underpinned the post-civil war peace had begun to evaporate markedly by the eighties. For instance, the oil boom more or less ended with the collapse of international oil prices in 1980/81, while the creative federalism of the 1979 Constitution virtually disappeared with the collapse of the Second Republic in 1983 and the subsequent rule of a succession of hyper-centralizing ethno-military administrations during 1984-1999.

Two events in Kano in the early eighties signalled the beginning of the end of the post-civil war peace in Nigeria. The first involved the Maitatsine (or "Yan Tatsine") riots of December 1980, which claimed thousands of lives and set the tone for subsequent riots involving the Maitatsine heretical, anti-materialist, Islamic sect in other northern cities like Bulunkutu, Yola, Jimeta and Gombe (Chistelow 1985 ;Lubeck 1985, 1986). The second event was the destruction of churches and other properties belonging to Christians by Muslim mobs protesting the construction of a church in Kano's Muslim heartland in

October 1982. But the turning point in Nigeria's relapse into inter-group strife was the 1987 Kafanchan-Kaduna ethno-religious riots, which revived age-old tensions between the Muslim Hausa-Fulani and non-Muslim communities throughout the north and beyond. The deluge of inter-group conflicts that has afflicted Nigeria since the Kafanchan-Kaduna crisis may be classified into the following four main, often overlapping, types: ethno-religious clashes, inter-ethnic violence, intra-ethnic and/or intra-religious conflicts, and inter-group economic clashes.

4.1 Ethno-Religious Clashes

Partly because of their tendency to spill over from their initial theatres into other localities, states, or even regions of the federation, ethno-religious clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of inter-group crisis in Nigeria. They have occurred mainly in the Middle-Belt and cultural borderline states of the Muslim north, where Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups have been pitted against non-Muslim ethnic groups in a "dangerous convergence of religious and ethnic fears and animosities...[in which it] is often difficult to differentiate between religious and ethnic conflicts as the dividing line between the two is very thin" (International IDEA 2000: 296). The major examples of violent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have included the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises in 1987 and 1999, Zangon-Kataf riots of 1992, Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2000, the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000, and the Jos riots of 2001. Although no exact figures of casualties are available, the Kaduna riots of 2000 and the Jos riots of 2001, each claimed several hundreds of lives and generated violent ripple effects beyond Kaduna and Jos, respectively.

4.2 Inter-Ethnic Violence

Like ethno-religious violence, recent inter-ethnic clashes in Nigeria have also been particularly combustible especially when they have involved relatively large groups like the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Urhobo or Ijaw. The major cases of inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria since the late eighties have included the Tiv-Jukun conflicts in Taraba and Benue states, the three-cornered Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri clashes in Warri, Delta state, the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba clashes in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Kano states, and the recurrent clashes between Hausa-Fulani and Igbo groups in Kano state, which have acquired an ethno-religious complexion since the Hausa-Fulani are Muslims and the Igbos are mainly Christians. While the Tiv-Jukun, Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri, and Hausa/Fulani-Igbo clashes are long-running conflicts that have erupted periodically during the eighties up until the present moment, the Hausa/Fulani-Yoruba clashes took place mainly in 1999-2000 in the wake of the transition from northern-dominated military rule to a Yoruba-led civilian administration.

4.3 Intra-Ethnic and/or Intra-Religious Conflicts

The major recent instances of intra-ethnic clashes in Nigeria are the Aguleri-Umuleri conflicts in the Igbo state of Anambra and the Ife-Modakeke conflicts in the Yoruba state of Osun. Like many inter-ethnic clashes, the intra-ethnic Aguleri-Imuleri and Ife-Modakeke conflicts have involved conflicting claims to land, which were aggravated in the Modakeke-Ife case by government's arbitrary and inconsistent demarcation of local government boundaries. The violent conflicts involving the Maitatsine movement, which invoked Islamic themes but was rejected as heretical by mainstream Nigerian Muslim

groups, were largely intra-religious in so far as the movement's lethal uprisings against official security agencies and the wider populace took place in northern Muslim towns and cities. Significant tensions have also developed in the Muslim north between the two major brotherhoods of Quadriyya and Tijanniyya, between these brotherhoods and more puritanical or radical Islamic movements like the Izala and the Muslim Brothers (Shiites), and between these puritanical or radical groups themselves.

4.4 Inter-Group Economic Clashes

Although virtually all inter-group clashes in Nigeria have involved the mobilization of identities in the competition for some socio-economic and/or political resources, it is still possible to isolate a class of conflicts that are almost exclusively defined by the competition for scarce economic goods. The classic example is the conflict over grazing opportunities that has taken place across the length and breadth of the country between Fulani herdsmen and sedentary farming populations. Many communal clashes in the oil-rich Niger Delta have also involved purely distributive sectional struggles for the largesse of the oil industry, including infrastructures and financial compensations provided by the oil multinationals.

Although the diverse conflicts identified above have involved various degrees of violence or bloodletting, they have stopped short of actually precipitating the implosion or disintegration of the Nigerian entity. Since overcoming the 1967-70 civil war, Nigeria has been able to avoid the kind of large-scale internal disorder that has convulsed some African countries such as Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan. Part of the explanation for this outcome lies in Nigeria's relative success in crafting and reinventing institutions of ethnic conflict management and accommodation, including the African continent's most longstanding and well-known, yet significantly flawed, federal system.

5. Federalist Conflict Management and its Contradictory Effects

This paper has alluded to the role of the colonial tripartite federal legacy in exacerbating ethno-regional conflicts and paving the way for ethno-military infighting and secessionist warfare in Nigeria. On the eve of the outbreak of civil war, however, the Nigerian Federal Military Government, led by the Northern ethnic minority officer, Yakubu Gowon, dissolved the country's four regional units into twelve states, six each in the north and south. Although it failed to stop the war, the creation of new states contributed crucially to the collapse of the Igbo secessionist campaign, to the relative stabilization of post-war Nigeria, and to the prevention of any further major secessionist conflict in the federation. These achievements reflect the genius of Nigeria's multi-state federalism in mitigating conflict through the following five mechanisms (Diamond 1999: 152; Horowitz 1985: 602-613):

1. The partial compartmentalization or decentralization of conflicts in separate, multiple, sub-federal arenas (rather than a few large regional centres), thereby reducing the capacity of such conflicts to polarize or destabilize the entire federation;

2. The fragmentation and relegation of each of the three major ethnic groups into several states, none of which can individually threaten the stability or continuity of the federation;
3. The establishment of several more or less heterogeneous ethnic minority-dominated states, thereby promoting the political accommodation and empowerment of communities that were previously disenfranchised under the defunct regional structure;
4. The moderation and sublimation of ethnicity through the promotion of intergovernmental alignments that cut across ethnic fault-lines as constituent states that are not exactly isomorphic with ethnic boundaries cooperate and compete along functional lines of interest, including issues of states' rights and constitutionalism; and
5. The promotion of some form of distributive justice through the devolution and redistribution of resources to multiple sub-federal jurisdictions as well the representation of diverse sub-federal elites in national government institutions, as concretized in Nigeria's revenue sharing and "federal character" policies, respectively.

Yet, deep contradictions and costs have vexed Nigeria's multi-state federalism, as evidenced in the continuing acrimonious debates about the country's federal arrangements, the instability that has plagued both military and civilian governments since the civil war, and the loss of more than ten thousand lives in ethnic and religious violence since the restoration of democratic rule in May 1999. The major weaknesses of Nigeria's post-civil war multi-state federalism can be summarized as follows:

- a) Nigeria's multi-state federalism has suffered enormous structural erosion both from the country's extended lapses into military rule and from the overwhelming dependence of sub-national state and local authorities on centrally collected revenues, which have accounted for over 80 percent of all government finances in the federation since the seventies. The economic over-centralization of the federation, in particular, has explosively focused partisan, sectional, and factional political and economic competition in the country on the control of the central government, with devastating implications for national stability.
- b) The centralized funding of sub-federal authorities has stimulated ethnic and sub-ethnic pressures for the formation of new sub-national units as an avenue for easy access to national oil revenues. Yet, the sweeping proliferation of states, now 36 in number, has simply compounded the syndrome of over-centralization since "the greater the number of states, the weaker and less viable individual states will become, with the direct consequence that the center [sic] would actually gather more powers" (Diamond 1987: 211).
- c) The proliferation of sub-federal administrative boundaries and identities, in a context defined historically by discrimination against settlers and non-indigenes, has led to a sharp contraction of the geo-political space in which a Nigerian can claim indigene status within a particular state and enjoy full citizenship rights. The Nigerian constitutions since 1979 have compounded the unfortunate dichotomy between indigenes and non-indigenes at the state level by explicitly mandating the representation of an indigene of each state in the federal cabinet, and then defining an indigene genealogically (rather than residentially) as a person whose 'parent or... grandparent was a member of a community

- indigenous to that state' (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999: 318). In essence, in several Nigerian localities and states considerable turmoil and violence, sometimes involving hundreds of fatalities, has resulted from attempts to exclude large, but ostensibly non-indigenous, resident communities from socio-economic and political opportunities, including land and placement in educational and politico-bureaucratic agencies, claimed or controlled by 'indigenes' or local or state governments.
- d) The proliferation of economically inefficient and dependent sub-federal jurisdictions, and the emphasis on the redistribution of opportunities among sectional constituencies or 'indigenes,' reflect and reinforce the 'ethno-distributive' nature of Nigerian federalism and 'federal character.' This invariably involves the systematic subordination of principles of economic efficiency and viability to politico-distributive considerations, which nudges the federation towards economic stagnation and fiscal insolvency. At the same time, the fiscal crisis of the Nigerian federation has promoted the recruitment of economically disillusioned youths into violent ethnic movements (the so-called ethnic militias and vigilantes), while undermining the capacity of the federation to maintain ethnically neutral and professionally competent police and security forces that can prevent the escalation of sectional conflict into large-scale violence.
 - e) Nigeria's distributive multi-state federalism, which is based essentially on the massive redistribution of resources from the oil-rich Niger Delta to the rest of the federation, has engendered violent struggles for local or regional 'resource control' in the oil-rich sections. These economic grievances have persisted in spite of recent constitutional and statutory provisions that are designed to return at least 13 percent of centrally collected oil revenues (including offshore oil revenues) to the oil-bearing states on a derivation basis.

The aggravation of the contemporary tensions of Nigerian federalism by dominant military political elites bears reiteration. Despite their remarkable reconfiguration of the Nigerian federation in response to the Biafran secessionist threat, Nigeria's military rulers have generally governed in an arbitrary, self-serving, sectional, centralizing and polarizing manner (see Diamond 1995; Joseph 1996; Lewis 1996). Their civilian counterparts, although constrained by constitutional and electoral imperatives to govern in a more accommodative manner, meanwhile have not hesitated to manipulate sectional sentiments, such as Muslim pressures for Sharia, as a way of deflecting mass-based pressures for the socio-economic dividends of democracy.

6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the development, diversity, density and trajectories of identities and identity conflicts in Nigeria. The identities are mainly ethnic, regional and religious, these being largely territorial identities within which the non-territorial identities of class, gender and youth tend to be encapsulated. These identities have been enormously shaped by the colonial experience, which created a culturally artificial and divided Nigerian state but did very little to nurture a unified Nigerian nation. Instead, the colonial regionalist federal legacy fuelled big-tribe hegemonic ethnocentrism, ethnic minority insecurity, democratic instability, ethno-military infighting and secessionist warfare.

Perhaps, the most remarkable feature of Nigeria's post-colonial political development has involved the transformation of the dysfunctional colonial federal legacy into a relatively more accommodative multi-state federalism. The relative success of this multi-state structure in sustaining Nigeria's unity in diversity is underscored by recent surveys suggesting that an overwhelming majority of Nigerians (75% or more), including a clear majority in the former secessionist Igbo states, profess firm commitments to both national and sub-national ethnic identity, and would not contemplate the dismemberment of the country (Lewis and Bratton 2000; 2001). Despite the many structural pathologies and violent conflicts that plague Nigeria as a multi-ethnic polity, the federation's achievement in accommodating multiple identities should not be trivialized.

7. References

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