Chapter 72

Role of Traditional and New Media in Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region:
A Primer on Peace Building and Community Development

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ABSTRACT

A chief obstacle to community development and progress in sub-Saharan Africa is persistent, widespread, low-scale, yet catastrophic, ethnic and communal conflicts. Nigeria is no exception! Nigeria's Middle-Belt region has experienced long-standing ethno-religious and political conflict/crises. Frequent and intermittent ethnic conflicts have persisted among the various ethnic groups. This research looks at the seemingly contrasting, yet complimentary, roles of traditional and new media in ethnic conflict transformation in the area. Using a peace journalism media-ecological model that incorporates spiral of silence, priming, agenda-setting, and framing theoretical frameworks, the research analyzes the (dis)functional roles legacy and new media play in conflict exacerbation, resolution, and mediation. It employs a qualitative interpretive critical approach to examine how traditional and new media respond to ethnic conflicts in the region. It proposes a new ethic for ethnic conflict reporting, suitable for professional and citizen journalists.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Middle-Belt region has been a contested zone of ethnic, religious, and cultural identities. Almost every community and locale faces competing claims of ownership and entitlement among different co-existing groups. Ethnic and religious skirmishes have become incessant among the various groups. These conflicts range from sporadic attacks resulting in few casualties to protracted conflicts that have resulted in the destruction of entire communities and the displacements of massive numbers of people.

Using the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Analysis model, this paper classifies conflicts into minor and major conflicts. Minor conflicts are considered as those conflicts that result in more than 25, but less than 1,0000 deaths in a year. Major conflicts are those that result in more than 1,000 deaths in a year (Hegre, Karlsen, Nygârd, Strand, & Urdahl, 2013).

Some have observed that since the end of the Cold War, there has been a decrease in some kinds of conflicts and an increase in other types (Tehranian, 1993; Musa, 2009a). Tehranian (1993) observed that:

The end of the Cold War... has unleashed the centrifugal, ethnic, and tribal forces within nation-states.... It has led to the breakup of the former Soviet Union, the world's largest multinational empire, the breakdown of multi-ethnic patchworks such as Yugoslavia and Iraq, has threatened the breakup of other nation-states such as Canada and India, and unleashed racial and ethnic violence in the United States, Israel, South Africa, and other multiracial and multiethnic societies. (p. 13)

In the time since the end of the Cold War, there have been reductions in the frequency of international and regional large-scale conflicts; the kind of conflict UCDP describes as state conflicts. Instead, internal conflicts between groups in various countries, or non-state actors, have been escalating. From conflicts in Syria to crises in Ukraine, many lives have been affected by wars, resulting in significant losses, catastrophes, and fatalities. Africa has had a significant share of these human and natural disasters. Somalia has been a Failed State since the early 1990s. Sudan's civil war which lasted many decades and claimed millions of lives, eventually leading to the eventual breakup of the country, with the creation of South Sudan. It was hoped that this was going to lead to peace among the groups. Instead, the conflict in Sudan has continued. Worse still, the new nation of Southern Sudan quickly deteriorated into another horrific ethnic conflict that continues till date. Likewise, there have been major conflicts in the Congo, Central Democratic Republic, Eritrea, and other countries in the continent.

For the scope of this research, attention will be given specifically to the central region of Nigeria. It is a region that comprises of many states; almost each state consists of tens of ethnic groups. The dynamics that drive the conflicts in Nigeria are reflective of the conflicts in other parts of Africa. The factors that account for the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria's Middle-Belt both account for and predict conflicts in other African countries. Understanding the role of communication in these conflicts have implications for development or lack thereof, not only for Africa's most populous country but also for the continent and the world.

Reporting on the recent ethnic conflict in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State, which led to the loss of 30 lives, although others report much higher casualty figures, Reuters News Agency asserted that:

Taraba State is part of a volatile region where Nigeria's largely Christian south and mostly Muslim north meet. The region is often the scene of violence between seminomadic, cattle-keeping groups like the Fulani and settled farming peoples like the Jukun, usually over land disputes.

The fact that Fulani settlers tend to be Muslim and other ethnic groups, including the Jukun, are mostly Christian, sometimes gives the conflict a religious dimension. (Reuters, 2013)

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