



Anger and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria: A Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity and religion have been two major causes of conflicts among various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Nigeria has suffered intense ethno-religious conflicts resulting in massive fatalities in Northern Nigeria. Many lives have been lost during the various aggressive and violent incidents in Northern Nigeria sparked by various ethno-religious conflicts. One central emotion contributing to ethno-religious conflicts is 'anger'. Anger is the power mobilizing force, amongst other emotions, behind the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Thus, this paper attempts to reflect on the role of anger in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Anger, Emotion, Ethno-religious conflicts, Nigeria, Northern

INTRODUCTION

The history of Nigeria's development reveals the grip of historical exigencies connected to ethnicity and religion. Since attaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has suffered extreme ethnic and religious conflicts resulting in massive casualties. Nigeria is one of many nations that is known for ethno-religious conflicts. Ethno-religious conflicts are endemic to today's world. Certain events like riots in Kano, Kaduna, Zaria, Kafanchan, Bauchi, Sokoto, Nasarawa, Maiduguri, Taraba, etc., attacks on Christians, and the Boko Haram attacks have led to the heated discussion about ethno-religious conflicts. Conflicts in Northern Nigeria have been purely religious or ethno-religious (Gambo & Omirin, 2012, p. 129). In recent times, ethno-religious conflicts have been exacerbated by Boko Haram.

I want to note that this paper is not intended to be an in-depth study of anger or a critique of its usual formulations in various literature about emotions and anger. Instead, I want to reflect on anger in connection to ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria. Thus, my paper aims to discuss and reflect on the role of anger in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria. In the first section of this paper, I will briefly define emotion and the general conceptions of anger without spelling out a detailed and developed analysis of this emotion. In the second section, I will briefly show how colonialism played a part in the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Thirdly, I will reflect on how anger has played a role in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria. Consequently, I would like to underscore that what I have witnessed and read are the reasons behind this reflection.

ANGER: A BRIEF DEFINITION

Let me start by stating that my definition and discussion of anger in this section will be a basic understanding (one amongst many other understanding) of anger that does not fully consider all its biological, physiological, and different under pinnings and evolutionary history and arguments on anger. Instead, I will briefly define anger in its simplest forms. These will be the working definitions that I will connect with the ethno-religious conflicts discussed in this paper.

As human beings, emotions are beneficial and have valuable functions to us in connection to our environment. Emotions do certain things which can be helpful or detrimental to an individual or others. Emotions are responses of the whole person. Karen Jones writes that "emotions are clever design solutions to the problem of making fast decisions in response to significant practical problems posed by the natural and social worlds" (2006, p. 3). Below are the generally accepted defining characteristics of emotions:

1. Emotion involves some sort of perception, comprehension or 'grasp' of an object, even if this is not conceptual.
2. Emotion involves some sort of appraisal or evaluation, which may again be non-conceptual.
3. Emotion involve physiological changes and often characteristic facial expressions.
4. Emotion involves a 'characteristic feelings'.
5. Emotions involve action tendencies; they 'push' us towards certain actions or 'pull' us away from others. (Faucher & Tappolet 2008, pp. 106-108)



The above are the defining characteristics of emotions. Emotions can have both positive and negative effects depending on the problem posed by the environment we live in or when they are expressed. Here, Aristotle's (*Rh* 2.1, 1378a 19–20) idea of emotion is rather salient.

Emotions, through which people in virtue of undergoing change [*metaballontes*] differ with respect to their judgments [*pros taskriseis*], are those things [2] which are attended by [*hepetai*] pain and pleasure [*lupêkai hêdonê*], like [1] anger, pity, fear, and other such things, and their contraries [*enatia*] (Aristotle quoted in Nieuwenburg, 2002, p. 88).

Though Aristotle makes a conceptual claim, the above is quite salient because it clearly shows that emotions have negatives and positives. That is, they are accompanied by pleasure and pain. There are several emotional impulses, such as anger, fear, resentment, contempt, shame, greed, happiness, etc. Anger as an emotional impulse is considered potentially destructive, and it is often considered a negative emotion. Questions like, should we control or express it is of great importance. Generally, anger is viewed as an expression of an extensive sensation of aggression. Aristotle defines anger as “a desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived revenge, on account of a perceived slight on the part of people who are not fit to slight one or one’s own” (*Rh* 2.1, 1378a 20–3; Nieuwenburg, 2002, p. 89). It is essential to note that anger is accompanied not just by pain alone but also by pleasure, which derives from the desire for revenge or harm.

Albert Rothenberg explains that ““To be angry” is considered to be an aggressive act, and “to feel angry” is considered the subjective awareness of aggressive impulses” (1971, p. 455). The outcome of anger includes aggression, violence, hate, hostility (hostile destructiveness), and other forms and manifestations of destructiveness. According to Leonard Berkowitz and Eddie Harmon-Jones, anger is “a syndrome of relatively specific feelings, cognitions, and physiological reactions linked associatively with an urge to injure some target” (2004, p. 108). In many cases, the “frequent expression of anger has costs for individuals’ wellbeing, social functioning, and physical health, suggesting that it is important to regulate negative emotions” (Mauss, Cook & Gross 2006, p. 698).

Acting in an aggressive way towards another person is often evidence of anger. In other words, being aggressive to another person constitute anger. Such directed “anger treats targets as though they are blameworthy, even when they are not” (Clare & Centerbar 2004, p. 141). There cannot be anger if there is no perceived issue or wrongdoing. In other words, there should be a reason for the manifestation of anger, and the reason is the perceived issue or wrongdoing by the individual. Thus, this individual will want to correct this issue or wrongdoing by being aggressive, violent, hostile, and destructive in most cases. This is really problematic because there is that embodied conviction in that individual that others have acted wrongly no matter what, even when the issue can be easily resolved through dialogues or reporting to

an authority that can handle the situation appropriately. This focus on wrongs sometimes fuels aggression and extreme actions (Clare & Centerbar 2004, p. 141).

COLONIALISM AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze described colonialism as “the indescribable crisis disproportionately suffered and endured by the African peoples in their tragic encounter with the European world from the beginning of the fifteenth century through the end of the nineteenth into the twentieth” (1998, p. 213). Historically, much of Africa has been the scene of a long series of invasions by European fortune seekers. Each of these fortune seekers was “attracted to the continent by self-interest: economic, political, military, and prestige” (Harris 1998, p. 203). This self-interest aimed to extract and trade natural resources and raw materials like gold and ivory, among others. Sooner than later, this commercial, individual and institutional interests “quickly expanded into the exportation of able-bodied Africans and their children as slaves to the Americas and other parts of the world” (Eze, 1998, p. 213). According to Aimé Césaire, “colonialism of the past three hundred years, particularly of the black people of Africa, has had more sophisticated weapons – efficient methods of economic exploitation, pseudo-psychology, pseudo-anthropology, uprootment of large populations to areas of new white settlements, and cultural indoctrination” (1969, p. 10).

The colonial period is a period “marked by the horror and violence of the transatlantic slave trade, the imperial occupation of most parts of Africa and the forced administrations of its peoples, and the resilient and enduring ideologies and practices of European cultural superiority (ethnocentrism) and “racial” supremacy (racism)” (Eze, 1998, p. 213). This period, can be understood as what Cornel West categorized as “the Age of Europe.” According to West, this is the period between 1492 and 1945 (1993, p. 5). The colonizers maintained the balance of power by instigating fear and violence. They often kept a constant watch and control over the colonized, preventing them from any form of rebellion. For instance, the Apartheid regime in South Africa used several forms of segregation and cruelty to dominate and stifle any rebellious acts by black natives (Nwosimiri, 2015).

Various parts of Africa, such as Nigeria, South Africa, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Central Africa, Rwanda, and Burundi, to mention a few, have experienced and some are still experiencing conflicts and dysfunction caused by some diversities that exist between ethnic groups, religious groups, and communities caused by colonialism. In Nigeria, for example, tribal or regional unity is considered more important than national unity. Hence, Nigeria struggles to accommodate ethnic and religious differences among its people, which is arguably Nigeria’s biggest problem today (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 162).

Ethno-religious conflicts are the cause of division in Nigeria. The history of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria can be viewed in retrospect back to the colonial intrusion that introduced the indirect rule policy through the agency of native rulers in the Northern protectorate (Hausa/Fulani) and the Southern protectorate (Yoruba and Igbo) to become a political entity in 1914. These native rulers believe that ethnicity and religion are essential in their administration. Nevertheless, the Northern and Southern protectorates joined together and established a single Nigeria (Falola, 1999, p. 68; Thomson, 2000, p. 66). Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton note that this political unification “into a single Nigeria was... inorganic, alien, and transformative” (2008, p. 109). The three major ethnic hegemonic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbo. But it is worth noting that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation comprising more than 200 ethnic groups that speak over 250 languages (Falola, 1999, p. 5). Falola and Heaton note that “[t]hroughout Nigeria, ethnic and *religious* identities began to solidify and become politically meaningful by the 1940s” (2008, p. 150, *italic my emphasis*). The vision of colonialist unification in Nigeria appears to be flourishing. Still, after the independence in 1960, the fight for ethnic domination began, which later brought about breakaway and civil war from 1967 to 1970. This created competition, rivalry, deep hate, distrust, and persistent conflicts and riots between Nigeria’s ethnic and religious groups, especially among the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. Thus, Nigeria is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines to date (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 163).

Despite many years of independence from colonial rule, ethnicity and religion remain significant sources of problems and conflicts in Nigeria. More specifically, Nigeria experienced ethnic conflicts because of ethnic and religious differences. During each conflict, ethnicity and religious groups sometimes want to label the other as bad or misleading. As a response, I will like to underscore that even if we’re going to label a particular ethnic or religious group as bad or misleading, we should bear in mind that at birth, the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into an ethnic and religious group. For religion, one only chooses to enter a particular religion when they probably understand more about that particular religion. This is not the case for ethnicity. Nevertheless, even if ethnicity and religion are residual narratives of Nigeria, we should avoid social practices that affirm these because they purport to a sign of inequality, thereby consolidating the argument and idea of the best of ideal ethnic or religious groups (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 165).

Thus, the above brief discussion of colonialism in Nigeria attests to the fact that colonialism had a part to play in the cause of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

ANGER IN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Ethno-religious conflicts are “a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic or religious group and another of such group in a multi-ethnic and

multi-religious society is characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, and a tendency towards violent confrontation” (Salawu, 2010, p. 346). One constant fact about conflict is the fact that it is an inevitable phenomenon that remains ever-present in society, organizations, and social gatherings. Even if conflict is inevitable, the killing of humans and the destruction of properties should be avoided by all means. Conflict usually happens when behaviour is mixed with emotions, expressed in an aggressive form. The same can be said of ethno-religious conflicts. Ethno-religious conflicts have gained an unsavoury reputation as the most violent crisis in Nigeria. These conflicts occur for ethnic and religious reasons. Most of these conflicts occur in Northern Nigeria. It occurs mainly between the Muslim (mostly Hausa-Fulanis) majorities and the Christian (mostly Igbos and Yoruba) minorities.

There have been many ethno-religious conflicts in the North between 1980 and to date. Human beings, churches, and Mosques are the primary targets for torching in various cities across the north during these conflicts. Some of these ethno-religious conflicts include the Kano riots in 1953, the *Maitatsine* crisis in Kano in 1980, the Kafanchan crisis of 1987, 1999, the Reinhard Bonke riot in Kano, 1991 (and other riots in Kano, 1984, 2001), Zangon Kataf crisis in 1992, Kaduna Polytechnic crisis of 1992, Jos Crises of 1994, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2008 and 2010, and the Boko Haram attacks since 2009 (Sule, 2015, see also Meagher, 2013, p.212). These waves of religious conflicts involved Muslims attacks on Christians and retaliatory attacks by Christians. I want to note that besides the ethno-religious conflicts mentioned above, there have also been various ethno-religious conflicts that have happened at the same places mentioned above and some other places too within the country. It is important to note that some of these ethno-religious conflicts spread beyond where it begins, and in most cases, they threaten the entire country’s stability. In other words, a series of conflicts in a particular place can be aggravated by a conflict happening at a different place.

Ethno-religious conflicts begins usually as a struggle between two or more individuals from different ethnic and religious groups over apparent incompatible differences in values, belief(s) (systems), aspirations, and desires to be in control. Given the incompatible differences among these ethnic and religious groups, emotions are expressed, especially emotions of anger, resulting in ethno-religious conflicts. One major emotion that is expressed is *anger*. Anger is usually accompanied by violence, aggression, and hostility (hostile destructiveness). Thus, these feelings and behaviours expressed during ethno-religious conflicts result from the anger felt by an individual or individuals. Some things trigger this emotion. However, the aggressive, violent, and hostile outcome during ethno-religious is usually catastrophic. Thus, these outcome is as a result of anger.

A more recent example of an ethno-religious conflict where anger resulted in violence and aggression is the murder of

a student in Sokoto, Nigeria. The student allegedly insulted Prophet Muhammad. Deborah Yakubu was a student of Shehu Shagari College of Education. She was beaten and burnt to death by some Muslim students on Thursday, the 12th of May, 2022. They accused her of posting blasphemous statements about Islam in a WhatsApp group on Thursday. "In an audio obtained by ALL News Nigeria, Deborah Yakubu was apparently frustrated that some Muslims students in the WhatsApp group were sending messages related to Prophet Muhammad (SAW)" (Ahmad, 2022). She opened her message with "holy ghost fire" as a response to this. Adding that "nothing will happen to us; this group was not created for you to be sending nonsense stuff. It was created for us to get past Q (slang for past exam question papers). If there is a test or if there is an assignment to be sent, not all nonsense stuff... She then used cursative language against the Prophet, PBUH" (Ahmad, 2022). This apparently angered some students who resorted to violence instead of reporting to the authorities (Ahmad, 2022). After the incident, some angry youth protested for the release of the arrested youth involved in the gruesome incident because of anger. The protest turned violent. "In the course of the protest by Sokoto youths, churches and Kuka's house were reportedly attacked over the arrest of suspected killers of Deborah..." (Ukhueleigbe, 2022). Seeing that the protest has escalated beyond its current state, the Governor of Sokoto State, Aminu Waziri Tambuwal, imposed a 24 hours curfew on the State. At the same time, various religious, traditional, and community leaders and rulers called for calm.

Similarly, following the protest in Sokoto, several other States like Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Niger State Governors called for calm in their respective States. "Amid the agitation surrounding the demise of Deborah Yakubu and the ensuing protest in Sokoto State, Kaduna State Governor Nasir El-Rufai has banned religious protest in the state" (Elike, 2022). Similarly, in Niger State, the Governor, Abubakar Sani Bello, "appealed for calm in the wake of disturbances and tension in some parts of the North following the murder of Deborah Samuel..." (Okpe, 2022a). Also, in Nasarawa State, the Governor, Abdullahi Sule, appealed to leaders that they do not join the planned peaceful protest because of the fragile nature of the state (Okpe, 2022b). The idea of the "fragile nature" here simply shows that conflict can arise from the protest. The above clearly shows how disastrous ethno-religious conflicts are, how they can be escalated, and how they can spread beyond where they started. Also, it evidently shows how (mass) anger plays a part in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria.

Acting aggressively and violently towards another person is often evidence of anger. This is clearly evident in the above. The youths' anger altered their judgments resulting in the horrible and unfortunate incident. They directed their anger toward her and acted aggressively and violently. In them, there is this embodied conviction that she has acted wrongly. Thus, their focus on what she said, tagged as blasphemy on Prophet Mohammed (SAW), fueled their extreme action. Their anger, aggression, and violence were evident in their

actions and protest. And as a result, they are ready to do whatever it takes for the youths responsible for the murder of Deborah Yakubu to be released. This gruesome incident shows how powerful and problematic (mass) anger can be. Also, in view of the circulated clips of the incident, those that took part in the gruesome incident appeared to be pleased with their actions. Their perceived desire to revenge or murder her was accompanied by pleasure to them and many others. This is obvious in the actions of the protesters protesting for the release of the suspects. This shows that those protesting for their release were pleased with the suspects' actions.

In view of what I have shown thus far, it is evident that there have been numerous ethno-religious violent conflicts in Nigeria. In the Northern part of the country, ethno-religious conflicts area habitual catastrophe. It has consumed and destroyed so many human lives and properties. The recurring killings and destruction of properties have affected the ethno-religious activities in these states and the country at large. This conflict has made the North very insecure about social gatherings. Even the country as a whole has been affected by this. Ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria have now become a norm, culture, and tradition, "where impunity has become law, where the government feels so helpless that it is now appealing to religious leaders to talk to non-state actors not to make the security situation in *the country worst*" (Ukhueleigbe, 2022; *italic my emphasis*).

Growing up in Nigeria, I grew up with the idea that I belong to the Igbo tribe or ethnic group. I grew up in the Northern part of Nigeria, Kano State, among the Hausa people. During this time, I witnessed several ethno-religious conflicts between different ethnic groups, for example, conflicts between Hausa and Igbo, and the Muslims and Christians. While I have never been physically attacked, I have experienced different forms of aggression that leave me feeling unsafe, scared, and dismayed. To this day, as already shown, ethno-religious conflicts still persist. These conflicts persist because some members of these ethnic and religious groups see diversity among themselves, ignoring every effort to see themselves as Nigerians and not as Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba, Muslims, or Christians.

Ethnicity and religion involve the idea of "tribalism". One thing to keep in mind is that "Nigeria's "tribalism" is very different from the modern phenomenon of racism, just as the anthropologist's idea of "tribe" does not nearly overlap with the modern idea of "race"" (Eze, 2001, p. 217). The idea of tribe in Nigeria has little or nothing to do with the colour of one's skin, eyes, or hair. In Nigeria, all the peoples who belong to the various tribes and ethnicities may be said to be considered racially "black" only because, as other Africans growing up in the modern world and I have discovered, one can be black—with those special and overdetermined meanings attaching to the label—without knowing or choosing it (Eze, 2001, p. 218). This is with the exception of those educated individuals who have read extensive literature or have traveled to America, Europe, and other parts of Africa (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 168).

Given the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, I will suggest the idea of *a/our common humanity* as a helpful ideology or way to reduce these conflicts. This is because tribe, ethnicity, and religion are not necessary but contingent reality. They are not essential to understanding and defining humankind. The effect of ethnicity or religion is best invalidated than maintained. Ethno-religious conflicts have pervaded Nigeria, as I have shown thus far, and it has hampered one's pursuit and realization of what it means to have a meaningful social life and a sense of peace. Humans don't need to belong to a particular "ethnicity or religion" in order to pursue and realize a socially meaningful sense of peace or what it means to be human or live in a place or world without conflict or war. How did we come to have ethnicity or religion? Whatever the answer to this question, I believe that our sense of our common humanity can help us navigate the present realities of ethno-religious conflicts. Because what has been of interest in matters of conflicts is the dialectical and transcendental elements of conflict discourse. Appreciating our common humanity can help fashion a system or perspective that recreates the dialectics of conflicts. I believe that knowing what it is to be human with the idea of our common humanity could help one intellectually clarify some of the most subtle ethno-religious conflicts. If this is achieved, I envision a future in which, without denying that ethnicity and religion exist, one can no longer be disadvantaged or live in fear for their lives simply because they belong to a given ethnicity or religious group, and one can no longer be advantaged over another simply because one belongs to a particular ethnic or religious group (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 169).

One's perception of ethnicity and religion has to do with one's knowledge acquired through interaction with other people, studies, learnings, and readings. One's knowledge of these concepts can be modified by the society you live in or travel to, because as much as one can acquire their idea of ethnicity and religion within their culture, the truth is that no ethnic or religious group has historically been devoid of knowledge of other ethnic and religious groups. Society and societal interactions will help one discover things one is unaware of and something beyond what you think you know. Thus, this new outlook will change one's view of other ethnic and religious groups. So, whether we belong to a different ethnic or religious group, one thing is certain, and that is the fact that the human mind in many areas functions alike, especially as it concerns humans (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 171).

In view of the above, there is an urgent need for the introduction and realization of the idea of *a/our common humanity* in (northern) Nigeria, given the various ethno-religious conflicts. We need to emancipate ourselves from the false, aggressive, violate, hostile, harmful, destructive, and extreme ideologies of ethnicity and religion that directly and indirectly fuel these ethno-religious conflicts, so that we embrace the idea of *a/our common humanity*. The idea of *a/our common humanity* presupposes that certain values, experiences and characteristic features are common to all human beings. Our common humanity opens us up to

sharing some values or basic needs, welcoming common desires, expectations, and objectives that we would regard as fundamentally human, made for our human fulfillment (Gyekye, 2004). Our common humanity refers to the idea of unity in diversity and the identification of human nature and essence that is common and foundational to all cultures. Our common humanity is grounded in our human nature. Our common humanity is fundamentally essential in inter-cultural and inter-religious communication and understanding (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 171, see also Nwosimiri, 2019, p. xi).

The idea of *a/our common humanity* fosters the recognition of "all persons, irrespective of their racial or ethnic background, as brothers. This is the reason why in African cultures, the word "brother" is used to cover various and complex family relationships linked by blood ties. But the word is also used, significantly, by persons between whom there are no blood ties at all" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 291). This refers to the recognition of humanity as one. Gyekye explains that our common humanity "grounds (or should ground) the culture-neutrality or at least some degree of universality of values that can appropriately be characterized as human values, to which people who make critical judgments about another culture would wittingly be appealing" (2004). This simply refers to the idea of our universal values. Thus, our common humanity "opens a window through which we can appreciate a defensible conception of universal values" (Gyekye, 2004). This should be the grounds for our actions. In essence, there should be a universality of the world's different cultures and the visible possibilities of transcending the false, aggressive, violate, hostile, harmful, destructive, and extreme ideologies of ethnicity and religion that directly and indirectly fuel these ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria (Nwosimiri, 2021, p. 172).

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this paper has been to discuss and reflect on the role of anger in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria. In the first section, I briefly defined emotion and the general conceptions of anger. In what follows, I showed, briefly, how colonialism played a part in the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. In the final section, I reflected on how anger has played a role in ethno-religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria.

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Citation: Ovett Nwosimiri, "Anger and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria: A Reflection", *American Research Journal of Humanities and Social sciences*, Vol 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 112-117.

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