

The Relevance of Dialogue To Conflict Resolution in Benue State

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Abstract

This paper appraises the role of religious dialogue in conflict resolution in Benue state. Conflict is a disturbing phenomenon in human lives, which occurs in relation to interactions for socio-cultural, economic and political purposes. In the past few decades, Benue State has experienced several scores of violent conflicts resulting from communal clashes, ethnic hostilities and Fulani herders' invasions. These conflicts usually result to injuries, loss of lives and properties. Attempts at forestalling violent conflicts have yielded fewer results. Hence, the need for more practical intervention models becomes necessary, for the wellbeing of the Benue society. The aim of this paper is to examine the causes and effects of conflicts and resolution models in Benue state. To achieve this, the paper adopted qualitative approach based on descriptive and analytical methods. The paper found out that conflicts are occasioned by several factors including land shortages, political differences, marginalization, bad governance, greed and lack of respect for human life,. The paper found that so far, violent conflict has affected the State in several fronts, such as loss of lives and property, extreme poverty, hunger and displacement of thousands from their ancestral homes. The paper also found that conflicts would be resolved, when parties learn to shift grounds in their differences and also take a pluralistic approach to existence. It recommends that people should learn to settle their differences through dialogues, since violence brings setbacks to societal development. Therefore, everyone should preach love and peace, and ensure that their adherents put same into practice.

Keywords: Conflict, Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, Development, Benue State

Introduction

Benue State has been ravaged by violent conflicts that threaten peaceful co-existence. Incessant killing of innocent people through insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, armed robbery, communal clashes, cultism, gangster related

activities and farmers/herders' crisis, have brought about a state of unrest in the State. As a result, many people have been displaced from their ancestral homes. Worst of these conflicts is the farmers/herders' crisis, following herders' invasion of hinterlands, hitherto occupied by farmers. These conflicts have led to ruthless aggression and hostility between the villagers and invaders, who are believed to have lived in peace in the past. In such circumstances, conflict management and resolution has become key and integral in inter group relations or among ethnic groups within the state.

According to Aliyu (2015), giving the scarcity of economic resources as well as political resources, there is bound to be excessive competition as to who controls resources within a society, or what group distributes and allocates values and resources within the state. Economic realities and the scramble over resources is often the root cause of several inter group conflicts in modern nations. In addition, Danjuma (2017) avers that the struggle over economic resources can be reinforced or is sometimes reinforced by negative perceptions and cultural attitudes arising from ethnic and religious colorations, as to how we interpret change and inter group relation in a modern state.

Being pro-active in terms of conflict prevention is the most effective strategy in conflict management. The idea that whenever there is a conflict, coercive instruments of a state are used to quell the conflict; set up crisis management committees; draft a white paper on conflict resolution, among others, is defective and ineffective in managing conflict in a modern state. The “fire brigade” approach, which is very common in Nigeria, has failed from time to time in tackling the fundamental roots of conflicts. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to appraise the role of dialogue in conflict resolution in Benue State. The paper also discusses the causes and effects of conflicts, as well as the role of dialogue in conflict resolution.

Conceptual Clarification

Dialogue

According to Rule (2006), dialogue involves the recognition of differences, not as a way of foreclosing engagement (let us accept our differences and leave it at that), but of “seeing” and engaging with each other. The etymology itself indicates a negotiation or contestation of the word (*logue*)

between two who are different (*dia*) and this is the value of dialogue; not that the two become one, but that they create new, shared meaning out of their engagement to which they contribute.

According to Sulaiman (2010), dialogue is a special kind of discourse that enables people with different perspectives and worldviews to work together, to dispel mistrust and create a climate of good faith, break through negative stereotypes, shift the focus from transactions to relationships and create peaceful community. It also makes participants more sympathetic to one another, even when they disagree, prepare the ground for negotiation or decision making, on emotion-laden issues and increase the number of people committed to decisions on challenging issues. For Umaru (2013), to enhance the process of dialogue, seminars, symposia and conferences are organised, experts are invited to facilitate, and joint actions for peace are proposed and considered for implementation. To explain dialogue, we contrast it with debate, a more common form of discourse. Both are essential in decision-making, but they have different purposes. Debate is about winning; dialogue is about learning. It gives the participants the opportunity to express their positions in an atmosphere of sincerity, objectivity, freedom and mutual respect.

Dialogue is also a reciprocal communication, mutual friendship and respect, as well as joint effort for the sake of shared goals, all in the service of a common search for truth and in the context of religious pluralism, as a complex of human activities, all founded upon respect and esteem for people of different religions. According to Kamau (2018), the basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue is that Christianity and Islam are geographically the most widespread world religions. It does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but it is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. Bidmos (2006) adds that dialogue does not grow out of the opportunism of the tactics of the moment, but arises from reasons which experience and reflection, and even the difficulties themselves, have shown. The above observation by Bidmos justifies the fact that, dialogue is a long time phenomenon that grows out of conscious efforts to live in harmony.

Conflict Resolution

Miller (2003) posits that conflict resolution is a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems,

distinct from management or transformation of conflict. For Mial and Wood House (2001), by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitude hostile any longer, while structure of the conflict has been changed. In the understanding of Mitchel and Banks (1996), conflict resolution refers to an outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with, through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship, between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

In all this, one understands conflict resolution to imply that conflict is bad, hence it is something that should not be encouraged. It also assumes that conflict is a short term phenomenon that can be “resolved” permanently through mediation or other intervention processes. Best (2005) putting these ideas together, concludes that, in principle, conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement, and the conflict is resolved in a true sense of it. Some conflicts, especially those over resources, are permanently resolvable.

Causes of Conflict in Benue State

There are varying causes of violent conflict in Benue State. Basically, the causes of violent conflicts are land squabbles, political differences, poor economic conditions, high level of illiteracy, and marginalization.

Land Squabbles: Land disputes have been one of the major causes of violent conflict in Benue State. Communal crises in the state have to do with the struggle for farmlands and the exploitation of land related resources. The crises are therefore linked to the mode of economic production and distribution practiced in the society. According to Hembe (2000), in the pre-colonial Tiv society, land was the major means of production, both arable and cash crops. Farming, hunting and fishing were collectively carried out, and the proceeds were equitably shared. There was little surplus and therefore no exploitation. The society was egalitarian and government was gerontocratic.

However, the experience of colonial rule resulted in the fixation of boundaries and the introduction of new methods of farming. Also, it brought

about several other aspects of capitalist economy, which have continued to erode the base of communalism. Therefore, related conflicts had become intermittent and destructive. The efforts by retired civil servants, ex-service men and politicians to privatise communal lands did not help matters (Aule, 2011).

Benue farmers as well as their neighbours are in preference of bigger and better farmlands; consequently they encroach on other people's farmlands. This implies that they thus have to fight fierce battles to maintain such farmlands (Hembe, 1995). In another dimension, Avav and Myegba (1992) pointed out that the Jukun, Etulo, Chamba, Nyifon and Abakwa who were not particularly interested in the fertile farmlands during the colonial era, as they were basically fishing communities on the banks of rivers Katsina-Ala and Benue, have joined farming. These have created land shortages, resulting to disputes.

Farmers / Herders Disputes: Currently, there are herders/farmers' crises in Benue State, which has so far destroyed lives and properties at an unprecedented rate. The emergence of herdsman terrorism in Benue State is indeed alarming. Report of the *Benue State Government Committee on Conflict Resolution and Peace-building in Tivland* (2014) have shown that, clashes between farmers and cattle herders over land contestations, crop damage, cattle rustling among others, have been a common feature in Benue State. Benue State Emergency Management Agency (2014) also reports that, there has been a new trend in the nature and character of the conflicts, since the beginning of 1999, which has been adjudged to be the most extensive and devastating of them all, being a build-up of many years.

As at 2014, the Benue State Emergency Management Agency reports that the fright of the conflict lies in the preliminary investigations, by which a total of 212, 260 persons were displaced in 2014, which excludes the over 11, 700 estimated to have lost their lives to the conflicts, and over 36, 500 displaced persons who had been estimated to be finding refuge in Benue State from neighbouring States of Taraba, Nassarwa and Kogi, where similar conflicts were ongoing. Also an estimated N17, 491, 293, 526.00 was said to be the value of household assets lost in the affected local governments. Similarly, an estimated value of foodstuff and economic trees lost in the crises stood at N65, 543,733,259.00 while the total value of livestock lost in the crises was estimated

to be N8, 286,409,973.00. Nevertheless, the total number of houses destroyed during the crises as at 2014 stood at 343,502 which comprised thatch and zinc-roofed houses.

Since then till date, the amount of loss can be said to be multiple, following series of herdsmen invasions in Benue State, from 2017-2021. These attacks have far reaching impacts on social and economic development in the region. The herders often accuse the locals who are farmers of rustling, killing or refusing their herds the land and water to graze. Another block of the herders group would claim that herders have been part of communities where they are no longer wanted. To this group, the issue of grazing on crops and criminal activity is orchestrated by alien herders, who may be fleeing some parts of the continents like Senegal, Mali and Libya, as a result of climate change, in search of greener pastures.

Political conflicts: Several factors such as lack of internal democracy within political parties, corruption, failure of justice system, inefficiency of electoral commissions, marginalization, misunderstanding of political ideologies, and insecurity have contributed to the appalling nature of politics in Benue state. There is no doubt that political differences cause violent conflict especially in Tiv nation. This violence is perpetrated in order to achieve political goals. It can include violence which is used by one political party against another political party.

According to Orkaa (2021), violent conflicts that are experienced in politics are mostly caused by the supporters of a particular party against another. Orwase (2017) attests that, since the inception of democracy, Benue State had scores of political violence that started in form of slight differences. Mbaiorga (2018) identifies Tarka, Kwande crisis of 2003, Logo, Ukum crisis in 2011, and the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) clash in Konshisha LGA, as few examples. These unfortunate incidences usually escalate into burning of houses, several other similar incidents leading to personal hatred and destruction.

Lack of Respect for Human Life: Respect is an overarching consideration that represents recognition of each human being's intrinsic value. Violent Conflict in Tiv land can be blamed on total lack of respect for human lives. One

of the most disturbing aspects of our society is the utter lack of respect for human life. It seems to permeate every aspect of society, and people of all different beliefs and viewpoints. Rich or poor or middle class, religious or secular, the one common denominator throughout society in general is a total disregard for human life. The mindset that a human being must be respected - as a person - from the very first instant of his existence is completely eroded. This can be blamed on the commercial world we live in, where greed and apathy are encouraged at the expense of others, and efficiency is regarded as the ultimate judge of value. The worst part is that no one seems to care.

According to Pope Francis (2017), a lack of respect for human life from conception to natural death, and a lack of respect for the environment are both signs of people claiming power over something that is not theirs to control. When the moral fiber breaks down in a society, when the sanctity of life is lessened, when there is no well-defined definition of right or wrong, no moral compass, the evil people in the world do evil things. Cindy Wooden (2020) captures this succinctly when she states that:

It is the same indifference, the same selfishness, the same greed, the same pride, the same claim to be the master and despot of the world, that lead human beings on the one hand to destroy species and plunder natural resources, and on the other, to exploit poverty, to abuse humanity, to overturn the laws of the nuclear family (and) to no longer respect the right to human life from conception to its natural end.

Lack of respect for human life culminates into infringement on rights to life. Although, the commitment of the United Nations to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1945) was not just to grant freedom of life, but also its value. Thus, it became the most resonant and beautiful words of any international agreement that, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. The commitments made by all States in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are in themselves a mighty achievement, discrediting tyranny, discrimination and contempt for human beings that have marked human history. Sadly, the sanctity, value and respect to human life is usually grossly undermined in conflict situations, leading to killing of even children and women.

The Impact of Conflicts on Development

Conflict has a lot of negative impact on development. Different types of conflicts have peculiar impacts on societal development. According to Adetula (2009), conflicts have the capacity to severely constrain development endeavours, by destroying infrastructure, interrupting the production process and diverting resources away from productive issues. Conflict puts a society in a state where the indices that determine development are undermined, and even the structures that are the subject of development are greatly impinged upon. In addition, in situations of conflicts, the general standard of living drops and basic life supporting resources become scarce, either because they have been destroyed or the distribution process is interrupted. This is the impact of conflict on human beings that are the direct subject of development. Consequently, basic necessities of societal life such as food, health, education and economic activities are adversely affected. The impact could be felt from the angle of infrastructure that supports the societal economic activities being destroyed, thereby crippling the system. Commenting on conflict, Horowitz (1985) writes that conflict strains the bonds that sustain civility, and is often at the root of violence that results in looting, death, homelessness and flight of large numbers of people.

Mohammad (2018) examined the impact of conflict on the economy with particular reference to Plateau State, and other parts of Nigeria. He argued that conflict has had negative effects on agricultural production, livestock production, commerce, shelter, and transportation. Considering the violent conflicts across the nation, George-Genyi (2013) corroborates that all these violent conflicts have contributed to the state of underdevelopment in all ramifications. She bases her position on the fact that there has been loss of lives, livelihoods, destruction of infrastructure and natural resources, as well as employment opportunities, which coincides directly with a weakened social safety net and a decline in the capacity of the State, to provide services such as health, education and indeed security for the people. It follows, therefore, that, the cumulative effects of the impact of conflicts in the various forms they come on national development is negative, because development structures are grounded and determinants of development are compromised.

Dialogue as a Tool for Conflict Resolution

Among other models, this paper argues that dialogue remains the most vital to conflict resolutions in Benue State. Gbenda (2006) avers that dialogue showcases in talking together; a talk between people or groups with the intention of exchanging ideas for better appreciation and understanding of each other amidst diversity. Dialogue is not a mere conversation that takes place between persons, but it is an exchange of ideas or views or opinions between groups. Certainly, dialogue is never one way traffic; it must involve two parties who are desirous of listening to each other with the view of resolving out their differences through inter-personal communication. Elom (2008) sees dialogue as an opportunity of bringing warring parties together at conference table, so that the peculiar problems of the parties are discussed and decision can be reached in favour of each party. In this case, either of the parties may lose or gain. Dialogue is not judgmental and it does not apportion blames to either of the parties. This is why Omonokhua (2012) reiterates that:

Dialogue is not about judging, weighing, or making decisions, but about understanding and learning. Dialogue dispels stereotype, builds trust, and enables people to be open to perspectives that are very different from their own. Dialogue is one sure way to heal memories and wounded hearts. In dialogue; education, formation, awareness and understanding are keywords.

Uche (2011) said that dialogue means an inter-personal relationship that occurs between persons. Dialogue can take place between two or more persons or groups who share different views. In dialogue, there is a communication between groups that is aimed at explaining and enlightening each other, so that both parties can have mutual understanding. It is essential for parties to make sincere effort to listen, so that they can arrive at meaningful understanding of truth and life of each other, in openness and mutual trust.

The solutions for fostering unity and enhancing development are numerous. What people need is a reorientation on the thinking of individuals and reengineering of the political will. Notably, various models have been suggested by scholars for various societies. Whichever model one suggests or adopts, it is apt to note that the best way to resolve conflict is to understand the causes of conflicts, and find out what best measures could be taken to

checkmate them, which dialogue arguably remains the best option.

Although it will be utopian to imagine that people's interests could all be satisfied at once to ensure balance in the society. However, there is a way in which different interests in a diverse setting could be met to mitigate excessive conflict situations. This is the secret many key actors in Nigeria have refused to take into consideration. They preferred to fuel small fire into an inferno by their lopsided ideologies and principles of governance, both traditionally and politically. Considering the widespread conflicts which have rocked the State recently, there is the need for the government to go into the root causes of the conflicts, in order to find out what steps could be taken to check them.

According to Kuruvachira (2005), the need for dialogue is ignited by demand for peace in the society. The need to communicate with others is something fundamental to every human being. Through interpersonal dialogue, one identifies one's own limitations and becomes aware that one does not possess the whole truth but needs to walk together with others towards that goal. Dialogue is an occasion for mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction and purification, fraternal exchange and interpersonal communion, and mutual enrichment. Dialogical style of human relations is demanded also by the growing interdependence in social life, for harmonious living together, human promotion, and for peace. Although, there are multiple ways of dialogue, but the most relevant for conflict resolution in Benue State are; dialogue of life, dialogue of works, dialogue of experts, and dialogue of religious experience.

The dialogue of life is described as a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit which guides one's behaviour. It implies concern, respect and hospitality toward the other. It leaves room for the other person's identity, modes of expression and values. This paper also calls this form of dialogue 'dialogue of daily life', because everyone is called by the virtue of their humanity to live in dialogue in his daily life, whether one finds oneself in a majority situation or that of a minority. Fitzgerald (2006) says that, dialogue of life is not something passive or mere co-existence. It requires openness, a desire to enter into relations with others. Its aim is to establish good neighbouring relations, in order to ensure that people live in peace and harmony.

This form of dialogue in the neighborhood, at school, and in the work place, concerns everybody and is within the capacity of all. It does not require any special training, but calls on qualities of the heart, such as, sympathy,

respect, patience, and it is in this form of dialogue that the masses have a particular responsibility and a special role to play. Dialogue of life may appear to be spontaneous, but it does require an effort. It is easy to close in on oneself and ignore the other, especially if that other belongs to a closed community, which apparently does not want to enter into dialogue. It requires perseverance to overcome the barriers of diffidence and suspicion. Hence, this form dialogue cannot be taken for granted. When adopted, this form of dialogue will address the ethnic differences in Benue State.

The second form of dialogue is dialogue of works. It is a dialogue of deeds and collaboration with others for goals of a humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature, which are directed towards human liberation and advancement. For example, it can be for the defense and promotion of social justice, moral values, peace and liberty. The underlying reason for dialogue of works, which is called 'shared action' is that, good neighbourliness also means giving and receiving, and rendering mutual service (Kuruvachira, 2005). Here again there is a vast field for involvement of lay people. This form of dialogue also has a profound value. To work for the integral development of human beings, and to strive to liberate people from unjust structures of oppression or poverty, is to share in their building up.

The third form of dialogue relevant for conflict resolution in Benue state is dialogue of experts, which is of particular interest to specialists. This is more easily accomplished in pluralistic societies like Benue, where diverse traditions and ideologies coexist and sometimes come in contact. In this type of dialogue, the partners come to a mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's values and cultural categories, and promote communion and fellowship among people. Dialogue of experts is perhaps the most familiar type of dialogue.

According to Cassidy (2005), it can be bilateral or trilateral or multilateral with people of many different backgrounds taking part, and each has its own special advantages. Meetings will also differ in the number of participants, ranging from large congresses to groups that can meet in people's homes. Again, the topics addressed may be religious or social issues. The way of organising the meetings can differ: the choice of participants may be through inviting individuals, or by institutions selecting their own representatives. In any type of formal discussion, members of the public can take an active part by: reading papers, acting as discussants, or simply joining in the exchanges.

The fourth form of dialogue is dialogue of religious experience. Kuster (2004) admits that at a deeper level, persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their spiritual experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, as well as their expressions. This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and fruitful co-operation for promoting and preserving the highest moral values and spiritual ideals. It leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for one's own faith. Sometimes profound differences can exist between religions, but it does not prevent this form of dialogue. Dialogue of religious experience also gives the Christian the opportunity to offer to the other, the possibility of experimenting in an existential way with the values of the Gospel.

On another hand, the government needs to pay attention to the issue of marginalization which is at the centre of most conflicts. The dictates of justice must be allowed to reign supreme as injustice is found to be at the base of most conflicts. There should be no double standard in treating conflict cases. Frantic efforts should be made to weaken those who use the instruments of the state to cause conflicts for their selfish interests. This is especially common among politicians who manipulate the ethnic and religious sensibilities of citizens, for their selfish gains. Peace and conflict resolution requires total involvement. Government, non-governmental organizations and religious bodies should periodically provide enabling environment for dialogue such as workshops, seminars, symposia, where members of various religious backgrounds will be taught the relevance of living in peace with one another.

Conclusion

This paper revealed that violent conflict has become a disturbing phenomenon in Benue State. It affects human lives, leads to loss of property, leads to poverty and retrogression. The paper argued that of all models, dialogue remains an inclusive process in resolving conflicts in the state. Dialogue brings together a diverse set of voices to create a microcosm of the larger society. Dialogue entails learning, and not just talking. The process is not just about sitting around a table, but changing the way people talk, think and communicate with one another. Unlike other forms of discussion, dialogue requires self-reflection, spirit of inquiry and personal change to be present.

Sincere dialogue recognises the right to life by other people. To interact

well, there is a need for a deep understanding of each other's religious, social and cultural inclinations. This will encourage tolerance and foster trust, harmony and the right attitude of accommodating different points of view. Dialogue provides access to windows of understanding of how other people define themselves, and challenges us to grow in our own situations, through the experience of others. It necessitates a shift in paradigm, asking us to embrace those we have previously demonised or excluded in many ways, ranging from assimilation, to abandonment, indifference and domination. Therefore, with sincere dialogue, conflict in Benue State will be reduced.

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