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Stakeholder Roles in Managing Ethno-Religious Conflict: A Case Study of Za'ar Land, Bauchi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the roles of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Za'ar Land (Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro Local Government Areas) in Bauchi State, Nigeria. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews with 235 traditional leaders, religious leaders, local government administrators, and political leaders. The findings reveal four key stakeholder roles: communication, problem-solving, mediation, and accountability. The study further uncovers that conflicts are deeply rooted in historical grievances, particularly the resistance to forced religious conversion and the long-denied creation of a Sayawa chiefdom. Elite manipulation, political marginalization, and perceived bias in government responses, including the failure to implement recommendations from past commissions of inquiry, are identified as critical factors perpetuating tensions. The study concludes that sustainable peace requires a shift from reactive to proactive governance, emphasizing justice, impartiality, and the establishment of inclusive governance structures like the Sayawa chiefdom. It recommends that the Bauchi State government demonstrate political will by implementing the findings of past commissions, ensuring accountability, and fostering inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, often described as the "Giant of Africa," is a nation of profound ethnic and religious complexity. With a population exceeding 200 million, the country is home to over 250 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own linguistic and cultural traditions (Akinwale 14). This diversity is mirrored in its religious landscape, which is predominantly divided between Islam, concentrated in the North, and Christianity, prevalent in the South, with traditional African religions practiced across various regions (Eze 13). While this pluralism holds the potential for cultural richness and national vibrancy, it has, since the colonial era, been a persistent source of tension and violent conflict. The interplay of ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria has been frequently politicized, manipulated by elites for political advantage, and exploited to mobilize support or marginalize rival groups (Onapajo 27). This instrumentalization of identity has led to a proliferation of conflicts, including communal clashes, religious riots, and insurgencies, which have collectively undermined efforts toward nation-building and the creation of a cohesive national identity (Olawale 75-79).

The failure to effectively manage this diversity has resulted in deep-seated ethno-religious fault lines. These divisions manifest in various forms, from electoral violence and regional agitations to religious intolerance and terrorism (Adesote and Peters 43). Scholars argue that the absence of deliberate and inclusive strategies for managing plurality has fostered widespread distrust among groups, creating an environment of exclusion, marginalization, and recurrent violence that threatens the very fabric of national integration (Agbodike 72). The consequences are devastating: loss of lives, destruction of property, mass displacement, and the deepening of

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intergroup mistrust that makes reconciliation increasingly difficult (Salawu 345).

Bauchi State, located in Nigeria's North-East geopolitical zone, exemplifies these national challenges. The state's structure was designed to accommodate diversity but has often failed to provide equitable representation, leading to grievances among ethnic and religious minorities (Agbodike 81). Ethnicity and religion have served not merely as identity markers but as potent tools for political mobilization, exclusion, and patronage. Politicians in Nigeria, including in Bauchi State, frequently exploit ethnic and religious sentiments to build political capital, resulting in increased polarization and violence (Onapajo 32). This instrumentalization of identity creates a fragile state structure vulnerable to periodic eruptions of conflict, especially during elections and national debates. Akinwale explains that this politicization of identity has translated into institutional bias, exclusionary governance, and regional marginalization, which provoke communal suspicion and unrest (62).

Za'ar Land, located in the Bauchi South senatorial district and encompassing Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro Local Government Areas, represents a microcosm of these national dynamics. This area has been a notorious epicenter of ethno-religious crises, with recurring violent clashes from 1999 to 2023. The conflict primarily involves the Sayawa (Zaar) people, an indigenous, predominantly Christian group, and the Hausa-Fulani community, which is predominantly Muslim. The Tafawa Balewa crises, for instance, were characterized by repeated clashes over issues of political representation, land ownership, and the implementation of Sharia law (Emmanuel and Pandi 24; Ibrahim 32). These conflicts have resulted in hundreds of deaths, massive displacement, and the destruction of property, leaving deep psychological scars and reinforcing narratives of exclusion and domination (Olayoku 56).

The persistence of these conflicts, despite various government interventions such as the establishment of commissions of inquiry (e.g., the Baba-Lakin and Shehu Awak commissions), the relocation of the Tafawa Balewa Local Government secretariat, and attempts at reconciliation, raises critical questions about the effectiveness of these efforts. The central problem is that while stakeholders including the government, traditional and religious leaders, political elites, and community members are ostensibly engaged in conflict management, their roles and the limitations of their interventions remain poorly understood. The recurring nature of the violence suggests a disconnect between Nigeria's multicultural reality and its integration goals (Adom and Ugal 79). This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by empirically investigating the dynamic roles of these stakeholders, focusing on four key latent constructs: communication, problem-solving, mediation, and accountability. By doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that sustain conflict and to offer pathways toward sustainable peace and peaceful coexistence among the conflict-affected communities in Za'ar Land.

Aim & Objectives

The main aim of this study is to determine the role of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Za'ar land.

In terms of objectives, the study sought:

1. To determine the communication role of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Za'ar land.
2. To find out the problem-solving role of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Za'ar land.
3. To ascertain the mediation role of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Za'ar land.
4. To determine the accountability role of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts in Za'ar land.

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of existing scholarly works on ethnicity, religion, conflict, and the roles of stakeholders in managing ethno-religious conflicts, particularly within the Nigerian context. It serves to situate the current study within the broader body of knowledge and to highlight the gaps that this research aims to address.

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Conceptualizing Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflict

Ethnicity is a complex and multifaceted concept. Osaghae describes it as "a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology" (50). It involves a belief in common origins, a shared history, and a set of cultural markers such as language, values, and traditions that distinguish one group from another. Ethnicity becomes politically salient when it is employed as a basis for competition, conflict, and cooperation in the pursuit of power and resources (Osaghae 80). Despres similarly views ethnicity as a subjective process of status identification, where actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for interaction (20).

Religion, like ethnicity, is a subject of extensive debate. Egwu notes that religion is a "difficult subject of inquiry" due to the multiplicity of its definitions (90). Adeniyi defines religion as "a body of truths, laws, and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being" (101). This definition emphasizes the normative and ritualistic dimensions of religion. Ejizu expands on this by describing religion as "man's intuition of the sacred and ultimate reality and his expression of that awareness in concrete life" (115). Durkheim, a foundational sociologist, defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (86). Egwu further distinguishes between the material sense of religion—religious establishments, institutions, and officials and the spiritual sense, which concerns the transcendent and the sacred as a system of language and practice that organizes the world (61).

Conflict is an integral and often inevitable aspect of human existence. Burton defines conflict as a kind of behavior "on the part of individuals, groups, or even nations that goes beyond normal disagreement and confrontation" (15). It is a behavior with the potential for destructiveness. Coser and Williams view conflict through socio-economic and political lenses, arguing that contact between ethnic groups is shaped by socio-economic and attitudinal factors, and intense competition over resources can lead to ethnic antagonism (54; 50). Osadeke et al. highlight that conflict can arise from "different unharmonious interests, disenchantments, friction, and incompatible goals" within any social unit (42). Scholars like Ojika emphasize that the key difference lies in how conflicts are managed, as strategic conflict resolution can bring about positive change (752).

Ethno-Religious Conflict in Nigeria and Africa

Ethno-religious conflict, as Jega describes it, is a situation where inter-group relations are "characterized by a lack of cordiality, by heightened mutual suspicions and fears, by quarrelsomeness, and by a tendency towards violent confrontations" (25). This type of conflict is particularly potent when ethnic and religious identities converge, as in Nigeria, making it more complex and difficult to resolve. The Nigerian experience is mirrored across Africa. In Kenya, post-independence politics were marked by the dominance of the Kikuyu ethnic group under President Jomo Kenyatta, leading to the marginalization of minorities and creating deep-seated ethnic tensions that erupted into violence in subsequent decades (Abdalla 16).

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 represents the most extreme case of ethno-religious conflict, rooted in colonial-era discrimination between the Hutu and Tutsi, which culminated in the massacre of over a million people (Abdalla 31). In Sudan, a protracted civil war, driven by ethnic, religious, and economic disparities between the Arab-dominated north and the African south, eventually led to the partition of the country (Abdullahi and Saka 61). These African case studies demonstrate that ethno-religious conflicts are not natural occurrences but are often the result of colonial legacies, elite manipulation, competition over resources, and failures of governance.

Historical and Contemporary Dimensions in Nigeria

Nigeria's post-independence history is replete with ethno-religious conflicts. The regionalization of the country in the First Republic, the 1966 coup, and the subsequent civil war (1967-1970) all had significant ethnic and religious undertones (Agbodike 15). Since the return to democracy in 1999, there has been a phenomenal

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increase in such conflicts. Between 1999 and 2004, at least 100 incidents of ethnic- and religious-related violence were recorded, leading to thousands of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands (Abdurrahman 65). Key drivers of these conflicts include the politicization of identity, the indigene-settler dichotomy, competition over land and resources, the proliferation of religious fundamentalism, and the instrumentalization of ethnicity by political elites for their own selfish interests (Nnoli 15; Salawu 345). The rise of Boko Haram in the North-East further illustrates the deadly fusion of religious extremism with ethnic and political discontent (Okpaga, Chijioke, and Eme 90).

The Roles of Stakeholders in Conflict Management

The management of ethno-religious conflicts involves a range of stakeholders, each with distinct roles.

1. **Communication Role:** Effective communication is vital for managing conflict. Gambo et al. argue that communication platforms can either inflame tensions or serve as tools for reconciliation (108). Stakeholders use various forms of communication—interpersonal, traditional, mass media to provide information, shape perceptions, and calm frayed nerves (Nwabueze 47). However, challenges such as biased media, social media amplification, and political manipulation can undermine these efforts (Gambo et al. 108). Strategies for impactful communication include promoting media literacy, engaging in conflict-sensitive reporting, and cultivating emotional intelligence among leaders.
2. **Problem-Solving Role:** This role focuses on multi-stakeholder collaboration to address the root causes of conflict. Akinwale notes that key stakeholders must collaborate through inclusive governance, interfaith dialogue, and economic interdependence to achieve national integration (18). Adegbite and Salihu add that strengthening civil society and implementing civic education on peace and tolerance are crucial strategies (135-138). The goal is to move beyond managing symptoms to resolving underlying grievances related to political exclusion, inequality, and historical injustice.
3. **Mediation Role:** Mediation involves the intervention of a third party to help conflicting groups reach a mutually acceptable agreement. In Nigeria, mediators include community leaders, traditional institutions, interfaith organizations, and government bodies. Their strategies range from leveraging established customs and dialogue to forming commissions of inquiry (Cuppen 42). The Nigerian government has often used panels and commissions of inquiry to mediate disputes, but scholars like Adom and Ugal note that these efforts are often reactive rather than proactive, with recommendations frequently going unimplemented (57). Successful mediation requires building trust, impartiality, and a holistic approach that addresses the complex dimensions of conflict (Orhero 754).
4. **Accountability Role:** Accountability is a critical but often overlooked aspect of conflict management. Emmanuel and Pandi assert that the government must ensure justice and equity, addressing systemic causes like political exclusion and economic disparity (98-113). Religious and traditional leaders are responsible for promoting unity and sensitizing their followers, while the media must avoid inflammatory reporting (Okoro and Yusuf 97). The lack of accountability, as Olawale points out, leads to continued political manipulation, eroded trust, and cycles of violence (79). Fostering accountability through good governance, the rule of law, and civic education is essential for addressing the structural drivers of conflict.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theories. The Instrumental Theory (Smith 16) posits that ethnic conflict is not a primordial given but is often driven by the

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manipulation of ethnic identities by elites for their own political and economic interests. This theory helps explain how political and socio-economic factors, such as competition over resources and elite manipulation, contribute to conflict.

The Protracted Social Conflict Theory (Azar 190) provides a broader framework, suggesting that deep-rooted conflicts arise from the denial of fundamental human needs, such as security, identity, and political participation, to certain communal groups. This theory emphasizes the role of the state, communal identity, and the international context in perpetuating conflict. Together, these theories offer a lens to analyze the ethno-religious conflict in Za'ar Land, examining both the instrumental role of elites and the deeper structural grievances that sustain the conflict over time.

Despite the rich literature on ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, a gap remains in the empirical integration of these four stakeholder roles communication, problem-solving, mediation, and accountability within a single study focused on a specific, conflict-prone locality like Za'ar Land. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a nuanced, qualitative analysis of how these roles are enacted, perceived, and constrained in a context of persistent violence.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, specifically an explanatory sequential design. The qualitative phase, which is the focus of this article, was designed to explain the quantitative findings in more detail.

Area of the Study:

The study was conducted in Za'ar Land, which comprises Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro Local Government Areas in Bauchi State, Nigeria. This area is known for its ethno-religious diversity and history of conflict.

Participants:

The population of the study consists of 579 stakeholders in Za'ar land, including traditional rulers, religious leaders, political actors, and local government officials. A purposeful sample of 235 participants was drawn from the larger quantitative sample. These included traditional leaders (village heads), religious leaders (pastors and imams), local government administrators, and political leaders who had direct knowledge and experience with the conflicts.

Data Collection:

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The questions were designed to explore the four stakeholder roles (communication, problem-solving, mediation, accountability) as well as the historical and political dimensions of the conflict. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. All names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis:

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and finally, producing the report. The analysis was guided by the study's research questions and objectives.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis yielded four primary themes related to stakeholder roles, along with several sub-themes that contextualize the conflict.

The Four Roles of Stakeholders

1. **Communication Role:** Participants emphasized the importance of communication as the "grease that keeps social relationships in motion." They noted that stakeholders use verbal communication, inclusive dialogue, and strategic messaging to bridge gaps and promote understanding. However, they also acknowledged challenges like the risk of misrepresenting religious information. As one participant stated, "once there is a breach or non-functionality of communication between two or more tribes,

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such may trigger crises or result in a state of unrest."

2. **Problem-Solving Role:** Stakeholders described using collaborative strategies to address the root causes of conflict. These included organizing forums and interfaith dialogue to foster cooperation, supporting civil society organizations to promote inter-tribal cooperation, and educating citizens on peacebuilding and tolerance. This role was seen as crucial for moving beyond immediate tensions to long-term solutions.
3. **Mediation Role:** Participants explained that mediation involves established customs, dialogue, and negotiation. Stakeholders, including traditional and religious leaders, act as intermediaries to find mutually beneficial solutions. They often institute panels or commissions of enquiry to mediate disputes. However, a participant lamented that such efforts are often "reactive and not proactive," and commissions "typically outlive their usefulness."
4. **Accountability Role:** This was a critical theme. Participants stressed that implementing good governance principles, including transparency and accountability, is essential. They argued that the lack of accountability leads to political manipulation, eroded trust, and cycles of violence. Stakeholders, particularly religious and traditional leaders, are responsible for promoting unity and holding leaders accountable for their actions. As one participant put it, by emphasizing accountability, "Bauchi can begin to address the structural issues that drive ethno-religious conflict."

Contextual Factors Perpetuating Conflict

Beyond the specific roles, the analysis revealed deep-seated issues that stakeholders struggle to address:

1. **Historical Roots & Interconnectedness of Religion and Ethnicity:** Participants traced the conflict's origin to the Sayawa people's resistance to forced conversion to Islam during the jihad era and the subsequent failure of the Bauchi emirate to honor a treaty that promised them a chiefdom. The choice of religion was seen as a key marker of identity, with one participant stating that "conflicts often arise due to differences in religious beliefs and practices among various ethnic groups."
2. **The Demand for a Sayawa Chiefdom:** The denial of a chiefdom was repeatedly cited as a core grievance. Participants saw chiefdoms as crucial for resolving disputes and maintaining order. The absence of a Sayawa chiefdom was described as a "rallying point missing," leaving the community at a disadvantage in resource allocation and political representation. The establishment of a Sayawa chiefdom was viewed as a "key step toward conflict resolution."
3. **Government Responses and Accountability:** A major source of frustration was the government's perceived inaction and bias. Participants noted that successive governments failed to implement the recommendations of commissions of inquiry (e.g., Baba-Lakin and Shehu Awak), which had explicitly called for the creation of a Sayawa chiefdom. One participant stated, "lack of government response to commission recommendations... did not see the light of the day." Furthermore, the handling of past conflicts was described as "unfair," with "one-sided arrests and detentions" fueling further tensions.
4. **Elite Manipulation and Power Struggles:** Participants acknowledged that elites manipulate ethnic and religious identities for personal gain. This power tussle was seen as a factor that not only perpetuates conflict but also creates divisions and factionalism within communities, preventing them from uniting behind common goals like the establishment of the chiefdom.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study align with and extend existing literature. The identified

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stakeholder roles communication, problem-solving, mediation, and accountability correspond with the theoretical constructs of the Instrumental Theory and Protracted Social Conflict Theory. The instrumentalist view is evident in the elite manipulation of identity for political and economic gain, as participants described how elites influence power dynamics and resource allocation. This supports the work of scholars like Nnoli (15), who assert that political elites often instrumentalize ethnicity for their own interests. The protracted nature of the conflict, as per Azar's (190) theory, is confirmed by the deep-seated historical grievances (the resistance to forced conversion and broken treaty), the deprivation of the human need for political autonomy (denial of a chiefdom), and the role of the state, which participants perceived as biased and unaccountable.

The study's findings on the failure of government accountability provide a critical explanation for the ineffectiveness of past interventions. Despite establishing commissions of inquiry, the state's unwillingness to implement their recommendations created a cycle of grievance and mistrust. This resonates with the work of Orhero (2020), who noted that coercive or incomplete conflict management strategies often result in brittle peace and recurring conflicts. The participants' demand for the Sayawa chiefdom underscores the importance of addressing structural and symbolic forms of marginalization. As social identity theory would predict, the creation of a chiefdom is not merely about administrative convenience; it is about granting the Sayawa people a distinct political identity and a "rallying point," which is essential for restoring dignity and ensuring equitable resource allocation (Tajfel and Turner 33-47).

The study also highlights the crucial yet often reactive roles of traditional and religious leaders. While they engage in mediation and communication, their efforts are frequently undermined by political manipulation and the state's lack of political will. This aligns with the observations of scholars like Maikasuwa et al., who note that while traditional institutions are vital, their strategic role is often underutilized in contemporary conflict prevention. The call for a more proactive and accountable government is a central theme, echoing the conclusions of Emmanuel and Pandi (2024), who argued that lasting peace requires justice, equity, and the correction of systemic causes of conflict.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that stakeholders in Za'ar Land do play significant roles in managing ethno-religious conflicts through communication, problem-solving, mediation, and accountability. However, the effectiveness of these roles is severely constrained by deeper structural and political factors. The persistent conflict is driven by historical marginalization, the unresolved demand for a Sayawa chiefdom, elite manipulation, and most critically, a lack of government accountability and impartiality. The failure to implement the recommendations of past commissions of inquiry represents a major failure of governance that has allowed grievances to fester and conflicts to recur.

To foster sustainable peace, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. **Immediate Implementation of Past Recommendations:** The Bauchi State government must demonstrate political will by immediately implementing the long-standing recommendations of the Baba-Lakin and Shehu Awak commissions, particularly the establishment of a Sayawa chiefdom with its headquarters in Tafawa Balewa.
2. **Ensure Government Accountability and Impartiality:** The state government must ensure that conflict management is impartial. This includes avoiding one-sided arrests, ensuring fair compensation for all victims, and holding all perpetrators of violence accountable, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation.
3. **Strengthen Stakeholder Roles Proactively:**
    i. **Government:** Should move from a reactive to a proactive approach, establishing a standing, multi-stakeholder peace council for the Southern Bauchi zone.

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ii. **Traditional and Religious Leaders:** Should be empowered and supported to continue their mediation and communication roles, with training on modern conflict resolution and peacebuilding techniques.
iii. **Civil Society and Community Groups:** Should be funded and encouraged to lead interfaith dialogues, civic education programs, and community development projects that foster interdependence and trust.

4. **Address Elite Manipulation:** A public campaign on the dangers of elite manipulation, alongside reforms that reduce the patronage system, is crucial to prevent elites from using ethno-religious identities for personal political gain.
5. **Promote Inclusive Governance:** The government should review its appointment and resource allocation processes to ensure fair representation of all ethnic groups in Za'ar Land, addressing the feeling of marginalization in political and economic matters.

By addressing these structural and accountability issues, the stakeholders in Za'ar Land can move beyond managing crises to building a lasting and inclusive peace.

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