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Essay Title: Ethnic diversity in Africa is not the cause of conflict.

Essay Subtitle: The Nigerian Biafran War.

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to address the issue of ethnic conflict in African states. It discusses the complexities of ethnically diverse societies, and whether this diversity is indeed the cause of conflict. To analyze the statement, the case study of the Nigerian Biafra war was used to further evaluate the concept of ethnic diversity and conflict. The three main theories of ethnic diversity were discussed, as well as the political analysis of Nigeria's current economic, political and social development. The paper concludes by stating that ethnic diversities are not the main cause of conflict, and instead many wars have underlying factors that are not only on the basis of ethnicity but also involve other aspects such as religion, political and economic gains.

Table of Content

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theories of ethnic identity.....	4
2.1. Primordialism.....	5
2.2 Constructivism.....	5
2.3 Instrumentalism.....	6
3. Nigerian Biafra War.....	6
4. Nigeria’s Current Affairs.....	7
5. Conclusion.....	8
6. Reference List.....	10

INTRODUCTION

Africa being the most ethnically diverse continent in the world with many people possessing ethnic consciousness and loyalties to their ethnicity, has had the highest recorded incidence of civil war caused by ethnic clashes (Osinubi & Osinubi 2018, p.101). Today, the media often characterizes conflicts in many African states as an ethnic or tribal war, considering that these conflicts are usually fought by ethnic groups that tend to oppose each other (Olayode 2016, p.245). An example of ethnic conflicts can be drawn from the Rwandan genocide; the battle between the Hutus and Tutsis, the Nigerian Biafra war, as well as the civil war in Sudan fought between the citizens of North and the South Sudan. Nevertheless, many ethnic wars in Africa have underlying factors that are not only on the basis of ethnicity but also involve religion, political and economic gains. However, the media tends to hide the primary causes for these wars and classify them all under ethnic conflict (Olayode 2016, p.245). Therefore, in this essay, an attempt will be made to discuss the complexities of ethnically diverse societies, and whether this diversity is indeed the cause of conflict. A case study of the Nigerian Biafra war will be used to further analyze the concept of ethnic diversity and conflict.

This essay begins by defining ethnicity and examining the major theories of ethnic diversity. It then discusses the Nigerian Biafra War as a case study to illustrate the role of ethnicity in conflict. Next, the essay analyses Nigeria's current political, economic and social development in light of its ethnic diversity. Finally, the essay concludes by summarizing the key arguments and findings.

THEORIES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnicity refers to a sense of belonging to an ethnic group, a group of people who identify with each other through shared heritage, often comprising of shared linguistics, culture, beliefs, religion and in most cases, a geographical area (Kelman, 2007, as cited in Olayode 2016, p.244). In the context of ethnic diversity in Africa, as stated by African Holocaust (n.d.) it is estimated that there are 3000 different ethnic groups as well as 2000 languages in the continent, making it home to the most diverse people on earth. Nevertheless, of the many problems that Africa faces, ethnic conflict has been said to be a perpetual issue in the continent. From the mid-twentieth century till date, conflicts within state borders have become

progressively dominant. Today, ethnicity has become more of a challenge in many African states, leaving the continent perpetually vulnerable to large-scale violence along ethnic lines (Olayode 2016, p.244). Additionally, some individuals believe ethnicity is deeply rooted in every human while others argue that it is a social construct. However, through the years, many academic scholars have theorized the concept of ethnic identity and these theoretical approaches that underpin the study of ethnicity have been divided into three categories; primordialism, constructivism and instrumentalism (Adlparvar & Tadros 2016).

Primordialism- According to Williams (2015, p.147), primordialism argues that ethnic identities are ascribed, in that memberships are assigned at birth and therefore difficult to change. It further claims that ethnicity is an inherent attribute and is deeply rooted in every individual, connecting us to people as well as differentiating us from others, based on our race, religion, language or location. Likewise, this theory also states that ethnicity is static, inborn and passes down across generations (Yang 2000, p.42). In primordialism, “ethnic differences are perceived as ancestral, deep and irreconcilable and as such ethnic conflict stems naturally and inevitably from ancient hatreds between ethnic groups” (Williams 2015, p.147). An example of a primordialist view would be a South African who identifies as Zulu or Xhosa rather than just their national identity. Furthermore, as stated by Yang (2000, p.42) there are two views within the primordialist framework, the sociobiological factor and the culturalist perspective. Pierre van den Berghe, as cited in Yang (2000, p.43), explains that sociobiological factors, such as kinship should be used to determine an individual’s ethnicity. On the other hand, the culturalist perspective explains that having shared cultures such as a common language and religion, determines an ethnic group membership (Yang 2000, p.43).

Constructivism- This is the idea that our ethnic and national identity are socially constructed by the modern era (Varshney 2009, as cited in Boix & Stokes, 2009, p.285). This statement is somewhat true when it comes to the idea of national identities, due to the fact that nations were born with the rise of the industrial age. Additionally, this theory does not claim that there were no ethnic identities in the pre-modern era, but rather, mass identity were locally and regionally used and accepted, compared to identifying with an ethnic group (Varshney 2009, as cited in Boix & Stokes, 2009, p.285). According to Dunn and Englebert (2013), an example of social construction of identity can be seen in Nigeria under the British indirect rule, that strengthened the Igbo identity and in Rwanda between the Hutu-Tutsi division

which previously, ethnicity was not so important in the 1950 but became an extreme significance and destructive tool by the 1990s. Another idea of constructivism is that people have multiple identities such as their race, religion, language or citizenship and have the freedom to choose what they would like to identify as (Dunn & Englebert 2013).

Instrumentalism- Unlike the primordialist and constructivist theory, Yang (2000, p.46) explains that the instrumentalist theory focuses on how ethnicity is used as an instrument or strategic tool to acquire resources and a device used to restrict resources to a few individuals. Amone (2015, p.136) further explains that “elites select and frame aspects of existing cultural repertoire to differentiate one ethnic group from another and build internal cohesion within a group”. This theory argues that in relation to politics, it is rational when political parties unify themselves based on their ethnicity and depending on what they could gain (William 2015, p.148).

NIGERIAN BIAFRA WAR

Background information that led to ethnic conflict

Nigeria is a country located in the Western part of Africa, and is regarded as the most populous country in the continent with over 250 different ethnic groups (World Population Review 2019). Nigeria was colonized by the British under an indirect rule system, and in 1914, Nigeria was merged into two British colonial territories that consisted of the current north and south part of Nigeria. According to Ochonu (2014), “the amalgamation was an act of colonial convenience, mainly because the British colonizers were desirous of a contiguous colonial territory”. However, the merging of these two parts only brought about conflicts in the relationship between the south and north regions of Nigeria. As time went on, the British colonial masters went further to divide the country into three main ethnically defined regions, with the Igbo’s occupying the south-east, the Yoruba inhabiting the south west, and the Hausa and Fulani the north (Norwich University 2017). Nonetheless, ever since the colonial times, the southern and northern parts of Nigeria have had political disagreements and suspicions between themselves (Ochunu 2017).

The war

On October 1st of 1960, Nigeria gained its independence from the British. Not long after

Nigeria gained independence, the country launched its first military coup in 1966, led by mostly the Hausa's from northern Nigeria. This military coup ultimately resulted to the killings of 30,000 Igbo's living in northern Nigeria (BBC News 2017). Due to this incident, the Igbo's decided to break off from the country and form a new state because they viewed themselves as a marginalized ethnic group. On May 30, 1967, Colonel Emeka Ojukwu a military officer from the south-east of Nigeria declared the independence of the Igbo nation the Republic of Biafra to be separated from the rest of the country (BBC News 2017). Nevertheless, on the 6th of July 1967, the Nigerian federal government reacted to this which led to a civil war against the Igbos of the southeast. As stated by the Norwich University (2017), "the Nigerian government took control over the oil-rich in the southeast coast and blockaded supplies to the region, causing severe famine and leading to the deaths of nearly two million civilians and hundred thousand military personnel from the south-east of Nigeria". In 1970, after two and a half years of war, the conflict ended as the Biafra state surrendered to the Nigerian military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon. Therefore, the Biafra war came about as a nationalistic attempt to reunite and restore Nigeria after many years of colonization. However, it resulted into an ethnic war, leading to the death of many Igbo civilians, as well as an economic crisis.

The Biafra war could also be regarded as an economic war, which was on the ground of gaining economic resources like the oil from the southeastern part of Nigeria. Also, many Igbo's believe that they have been largely excluded from holding power in Nigeria hence the action they took. On the other hand, another factor which influenced the civil war was on the ground of religion as it is believed that Nigeria is ruled by the Muslims from the northern part in the attempt to make the country an Islamic state. Also, due to the European arbitrary post colonial borders, and the social construction of ethnic identity by the British, the Igbo's identity were equally strengthened. This can be seen in the theory of social construction of ethnicity- the constructionist approach. Additionally, according to research, during the pre-modern era in Africa, people identified themselves as being part of a local and regional group, unlike ethnic groups (Varshney 2009, as cited in Boix & Stokes, 2009, p.285). Nevertheless, the construction of ethnic groups by the European colonial masters led to many people feeling marginalized in the country and the effort to gain economic power by their ethnic groups.

NIGERIA'S CURRENT AFFAIRS

Nigeria's current president, Muhammadu Buhari, who hails from the northern part of Nigeria and currently started his second serving term on the 27th February 2019 has made little efforts to develop the country (Blanchard & Husted 2019, p.4). It has been 59 years since Nigeria gained its independence, and 52 years since the Biafra war. Nevertheless, Nigeria has made little progress politically, socially and economically, as the political system is still crippled by corruption with many ethnic tensions still arising.

Nigeria is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations mainly in the northern part and the Christians residing in the south. According to Blanchard & Husted (2019, p.6) in the north there has been an Islamic Sharia law which under the law, does not pertain to non Muslims population but nevertheless, there have been reports about the sharia law being enforced in public disregarding citizens' religion. Also, there have been terrorist attacks in northern Nigeria perpetuated by a group called Boko Haram. As stated by Congressional Research Service (2018, p.1), "Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as a small Sunni Islamic sect in Nigeria advocating a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law, and has evolved since 2009 to become one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups". Their aim is said to destroy western education and culture as they see it as forbidden and corrupted. One of the greatest issues facing Nigeria as an African state has been due to many religious conflicts arising in the different regions. In addition it has also been speculated that the Nigerian armed force has been allegedly accused of human rights abuses (Congressional Research Service 2018, p.11). It is been reported that there has been extrajudicial and arbitrary murders as well as the presence of torture in detention facilities, sexual abuse, child abuse and the destruction of properties.

Nevertheless, the Nigerian economy is expected to advance this year as the president promises to address the issue of conflict and human right abuse. Also, it stated that the production of oil will continue to support the growth of the country as there would be lower prices to crude-oil and petroleum (Focus Economics 2019).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ethnic conflicts are often seen to arise in an ethnic diverse and underdeveloped society. In most cases this is as a result of an ethnic group dominating the state and

marginalizing other minority groups. Nevertheless, most ethnic conflicts stem from the result of an unequal access to power and resources by certain ethnic groups and not from an intrinsic hatred (Olayode 2016, p.245). Additionally, as mentioned throughout the essay, many ethnic wars in Africa have underlying factors that are not only on the basis of ethnicity but also involve religion, political and economic gains. However, the media tends to hide the secondary causes for these wars and classify them all under ethnic conflict (Olayode 2016, p.245).

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