

Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia and Nigeria: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a comparative analysis of the conditions of ethnicity, ethnic conflict, and the political order of federalism in Ethiopia and Nigeria. Both Ethiopia and Nigeria share common highly ethnically diversified and large numbers of the population, recurrent inter-ethnic conflict, and the adoption of federalism as a system of ethnic conflict management. Also, the two countries depict differences including the status of ethnicity in each country's version of federalism. While ethnicity is accepted as a means of political mobilization and base of structuring the Ethiopian federation, the Nigerian model unwelcomed ethnic-based political mobilization, and exclusive claims over a particular geography. Despite such different considerations of ethnicity in relation to federal political order, Nigeria and Ethiopia have been hosting ethnic conflicts that negatively affect the countries' peace and stability. Neither Ethiopian experiences of ethnic celebrating federalism nor the Nigerian model of geographic federalism is successful to mitigate ethnic conflicts. At the same time, both countries have not practiced democracy and built strong institutions. Based on the common denominators in both countries, this article argues that ethnicity as an explanatory factor to conflicts impedes alternative explanations to the conflicts in terms of ill-functioning democracy and institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity and ethnic conflicts are integral and dominant part of African countries' politics. Different explanations have been forwarded about the relationship between ethnicity and conflict along with political orders by various scholars. These explanations range from ethnicity as a single essential factor of conflict to a broader comprehensive perspective combining identity, socio-economic and political dimensions.¹ This article examines the trends and relations of ethnicity, ethnic conflict, and federalism in Ethiopia and Nigeria in comparative terms. Being the two most populous and diversified African countries, Ethiopia and Nigeria have experienced frequent ethnic conflicts and political crises. As part of efforts to address this problem, the two countries adopted federalism as a political order to manage ethnic conflicts. Despite commonalities in diverse and multi-ethnic populations, federal political order, and inter-ethnic conflicts, both countries vary in historical contexts, emanating from Nigeria's colonial heritage which Ethiopia fought off, and models of federalism they adopted. This article examines the patterns and regularities of ethnicity, ethnic conflict, and federalism to draw commonalities from the experiences of the two countries. By considering the experiences of these countries, the article tries to address questions: is ethnicity a source of conflicts in Ethiopia and Nigeria? Do we have alternative explanations for the problems of ethnic conflict in these countries?

¹ Abiero, Opondo (2003). *Ethnicity: A Cause of Political Instability in Africa?* Austin: University of Texas Libraries.

UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY, ETHNIC CONFLICT, AND FEDERALISM

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is one of the red-hot issues in developing world politics though the concept does not have standardized ways to think about it. Different scholars give different definitions and hypotheses about the formation of ethnic identity or ethnicity. The term ethnicity refers to human categories who identified themselves through common ancestral memories, reading of history, socio-cultural heritages, psychological makeup, language, and group membership.²

Theoretical explanations about ethnicity and its formation fall into three broad categories: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. The primordialism assertion of ethnicity maintains that ethnic identity can be defined based on objective essences, which are rooted in biological traits inherited through bloodlines.³ According to the proponents of this idea, ethnic identity can be assessed objectively as a permanent reality. Conversely, the instrumentalists view ethnicity as a tool at the disposal of political elites to be manipulated in their efforts to advance their group's political interests.⁴ For instrumentalist ethnic identity is malleable based on elites' bargaining power in the course of interaction with either state or elites from other ethnic groups. Instrumentalist thought ethnicity being subject to manipulations, reformulation as conflicts unfold and political circumstances change which reduces the very conceptions of ethnicity to a mere calculation of political elites.⁵

Meanwhile, the theory of social constructivism holds the view that ethnic identities and boundaries are the results of the complex socio-political process and are often subject to negotiation and reconfiguration as part of the socio-political dynamic process.⁶ This theory emphasizes that ethnicity as an identity marker is a matter of construction and choice than kinship inheritances and a mere subject of the elite's manipulation. This has become the standard theory of identity politics in the Post-Cold War period. The logic behind that is to avoid the danger of relying on a single factor and oversimplifications in the study of identity and ethnicity. In this regard, Victor Azarya (2003) argued that belief in primordial traits may contribute to the successful construction of ethnic identity, but primordial traits do not offer immunity from changes and reconfigurations though they are not so amenable to quick manipulations. At the same time, ethnicity is not such an ephemeral phenomenon easily controllable as for immediate and rapid changing benefits as that of instrumentalist's claims.⁷ This follows that the three explanations are not contradictory and mutually exclusive, but they may reinforce each other depending on contexts.

² Basedau, Matthias (2011). *Managing Ethnic Conflict: The Menu of Institutional Engineering*. GIGA Working Paper No 171. Hamburg: GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

³ Zagefka, Hanna (2009). The concept of ethnicity in social psychological research: Definitional issues, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 33. Pp. 228–241.

⁴ Ibhawoh, Bonny (2010). Beyond Instrumentalism and Constructivism: Reconceptualising Ethnic Identities in Africa, *Humanities Today*, Vol. 1, Number 1. Pp. 221–230.

⁵ Azarya, Victor (2003). Ethnicity and conflict management in post-colonial Africa, *Journal Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Volume 9 (3). Pp. 1–24.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Ethnic Conflict

Ethnic conflict is a conflict between two or more self-proclaiming ethnic groups caused by divergent socio-economic and political interests channeled through ethnic lines.⁸ While ethnic and tribal conflicts have been a significant part of the developing world politics, scholars have never agreed on what causes ethnic conflicts.⁹ Many researchers tend to agree that ethnic conflict is the principal fact of today's politics; particularly in ethnically divided countries though there is no common explanations about causes behind that conflict.¹⁰ Victor Azarya (2003) argued that ethnic conflict is an endemic, a natural order of things as long as the scarcity of resources exists. He further argued that ethnicity becomes an issue when conflicting parties stress on some of its components to improve their positions over opponent groups in conflict and enlarge ethnic boundaries to build a broader basis of support. In light of this, Tatu Vanhanen (1999) asserted that ethnic conflict is a universal phenomenon and it can be explained by human's evolved predisposition to ethnic nepotism, whereby members of an ethnic group tend to favor their group members over non-members. They become more related to their group members than outsiders. He loudly attributes ethnic conflict to human's disposition to favor kin over non-kin in social life, political process, and in competitions over scarce resources.¹¹

Ethnic conflicts mostly occur in less developed parts of the world mainly Africa and Asia. Several factors have been attributed to the recurrence of conflicts in Africa along ethnic lines ranging from varied ethnolinguistic and tribal diversities to colonialism, economic impoverishments, maladministration, and bad governance. Although ethnic cleavages were an essential feature of pre-colonial African society, current ethnic based conflictual developments in every corner of the continent are products of the colonial period politics and border delineations.¹² The impacts of colonialism are felt not in the very essence of ethnicity, which is a universal phenomenon, but in the crystallization and reconfigurations of ethnic entities for political uses.¹³ Then an important question can be raised here if ethnicity had been politicized during colonialism why it didn't revert or depoliticized with post-colonial Africa? Several explanations have been forwarded about the continuation of ethnicity in the post-colonial African politics. According to Victor Azarya (2003), the continued significance of ethnicity is attributed to its usages as a political tool of mobilization when Africans were struggling to replace the colonial system with newly independent states. According to him while the struggle between Africans and European colonial power culminated with the triumph of the former, other waves of struggle emerged among the Africans themselves on which groups would control the political spaces left behind by colonial powers.

At that juncture ethnicity, often combined with regional or religious affiliations, appeared as the basis of support in the political bargaining process to control the new state institutions and basis of resource allocation. Moreover, as ethnicity created the communal links between the officeholder and his/her group, it becomes a large part of public discourse about political participation and exclusion. As a result, political disputes and grievances of inequalities, underrepresentation, and unfair distribution of power and resources have gained ethnic definitions which amplified the level of totalities in which people organized

⁸ Bekalu Atnafu Taye (2017). Ethnic federalism and conflict in Ethiopia, *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, Volume 17, Number 2. Pp. 41–66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ Vanhanen, Tatu (1999). Domestic Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Nepotism: A Comparative Analysis, *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 36, Issue 1. Pp. 55–73.

¹¹ Isajiw, Wsevolod W. (2000). Approaches to ethnic conflict resolution: paradigms and principles, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Volume 24, Issue 1. Pp. 105–124.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

to express grievances. On several occasions, elites deliberately try to define conflicts in ethnic terms to mobilize support more effectively, by showing their potential followers in the course of negotiation and bargaining to their opponents. Thus ethnicity by itself cannot be the driving force of conflicts, but when used to oppress and exclude people in a political process of resource and power allocation, utilized by political elites to mobilize their followers in pursuit of power, wealth, and resources. The peaceful co-existences of thousands of ethnic groups based on mutual recognition and respect, inter-ethnic marriages, socio-economic partnerships, and shared values in pre-colonial Africa is a showcase that ethnicity or diverse society is not essentially prone to conflicts.¹⁴

FEDERALISM AS A TOOL OF ETHNIC CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Federalism as a mode of political organization and form of political order has been gaining acceptance in many countries. Federalism refers to a political framework to conduct the political process and to adjust the relations between the national and sub-national governments within a certain polity. Federalism is a system of power-sharing between the central administration and diverse autonomous units. Ronald L. Watts (2008) pointed out three essences or cores of the concepts of federalism as ‘unity in diversity’, ‘shared rule’, and ‘self-rule’. According to him, the phrase unity in diversity stands for the existence of diverse identity markers, groups, and socio-cultural units under the umbrella of one political community government which represents aggregate interests of all sub-national units. The shared rule refers to existence of political power commonly practiced by the central government and constituent units of the federation while ‘self-rule’ stands for the autonomous status of provincial or sub-national administrations to decide upon their matters without the interferences from the center or the national authority.¹⁵ Put simply, federalism is a system of government where power is divided between the central or national government and several sub-national authorities, each of which has its sphere of influence and power to act independently from the other.¹⁶

As pointed out above, ethnicity has been serving as a means of political mobilization, thereby formation of different political forces and organizations along ethnic lines in various countries. Even in countries with a long history of statehood establishment and with no trauma of colonialism like Ethiopia, frequent conflicts over public policy arise due to past interactions of groups that involve ethnic identification of historical socio-economic and political problems.¹⁷ In such contexts, federalism emerged as a tool to manage the relations between the groups with divergent interests and instrument state-building after the collapse of old colonial empires and as a means to rectify past injustices.¹⁸ Multi-ethnic countries in Africa such as Nigeria and Ethiopia adopted federalism to accommodate ethnic pluralism as well as harmonizing different ethnic groups under one political community.

Despite this idea at the center of federalism as a political system and state arrangement, what particular type and implementation of federalism can effectively address the problems of ethnic conflicts remains a matter of scholastic and policy-making debates. In this sense, federalism denotes conflict and diversity management as a proper terminology to deal with ethnic conflicts.¹⁹ The following section addresses questions: what is the political significance of ethnicity in Ethiopia and Nigeria? How federalism is being

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Watts, Ronald L. (2008). *Comparing Federal Systems*, 3rd edition. Kingston, Ontario: McGill Queen University Press.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Rudolph, Joseph (2006). *Politics and Ethnicity: A Comparative Study*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁸ Watts, Ronald L. (1994). “*Contemporary views of federalism*”. In: B. De Villiers (Ed.). Pp. 1–29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

employed to manage ethnic conflicts through a comparative study of ethnic conflicts and federalism in Ethiopia and Nigeria.

WHY COMPARE ETHIOPIA AND NIGERIA?

There are four principal reasons to compare Ethiopia and Nigeria as far as the topic of federalism and ethnic conflicts are concerned. The first reason goes to the fact that the two countries are multi-ethnic and the two most populous African countries. Secondly, both of these countries have adopted the federal political system due to the plural nature of populations and to prevent potential inter-ethnic conflicts. Thirdly, ethnic conflicts are continuously rising in both countries despite federal state structures. The fourth reason attributes to look at the different patterns and applications of federalism in the two countries and its implications to ethnic conflicts.

ETHNICITY, DIVERSITY, AND POLITICS IN ETHIOPIA AND NIGERIA

Following the collapse of the Ethiopian Marxist regime in 1991, an ethnic coalition front known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power and adopted ethnic federalism and secularism as a political order of the Ethiopian state.²⁰ That political transformation paved ways for ethnicity and ethnic chauvinism to be the formal characteristic of political terms in Ethiopia where ethnicity serves as a base of provincial arrangements, party membership, and popular mobilizations. Unlike multi-national federations in The Western World which reconciled questions of ethnic autonomy through a prolonged negotiating between the states and organized minority groups, Ethiopian federalism involved a top-down rearrangement of the country based on ethnicity as a major criterion to determine constituent units of the federation.²¹

In this respect, many ethnic groups in the country were not only required but also forced to organize themselves along their ethnic lines to fit into the new ethnic-federal system.²² This resulted in the ethnicization of politics and the politicization of ethnicity in the country. The assumption behind this move was to rectify the country's old statehood establishments based on the assimilationist approach of state-building under the umbrella of the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity to which the country's diverse ethnolinguistic and religious groups were subjected to acclimatization. Although the assimilation project drastically failed, its legacies have been reproduced conflicts and challenges to the country's present politics. Despite the current government's political rhetoric to correct the historical injustices and prejudices by adopting multi-cultural and federal political order based on constitutional recognition of the diverse ethnolinguistic, cultural and religious group's rights, the country remains in a political crisis that often takes the forms of inter-ethnic conflicts and violence.

The government restructured the country as a federation of nine regional administrations and two city administrations, while the constituent units of the federations drawn mainly based on ethnolinguistic boundaries. Beyond the formal politics of ethnicity as a base of politics, ethnicity, and religion also coincide along with particular geographic locations. In this way, the Ethiopian experience of federalism has enabled ethnicity to be a legitimate means for both state structure and political mobilization.

²⁰ Serawit Bekele Debele (2018). Religion and politics in post-1991 Ethiopia: making sense of Bryan S. Turner's 'Managing Religions', *Religion, State and Society*, Volume 46, Issue 1 (2018). Pp. 26–42.

²¹ Will, Kymlicka (2006). "Emerging Western Models of Multination Federalism: Are They Relevant to Africa?" In: *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective* (ed). Oxford: James Currey.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous and large country occupied by highly ethnically diverse people with different languages and cultures.²³ Ethnicity has been at the center of various forms of conflictual relationships between different groups in the country. Being a country with a wide variety of ethnic groups and cultural diversity, the country has been vulnerable to frequent ethnic conflicts, discrimination, and domination since Nigerian independence in 1960.²⁴ As a response to this problem, subsequent governments in post-colonial Nigeria have tried to address the issue of inter-ethnic tensions by adopting federal political order and arrangements with several modifications in different periods. The Nigerian federal character was first adopted in the country's 1979 constitution as an effort to balance contending or rivalry ethnic claims over territory, natural resources, and political power.²⁵

The purpose of the federal charter was to ensure fair representation to various regional units and communal groups in the country's new institutions and allocation of political power and influence.²⁶ Similar to Ethiopia, Nigeria is home to heterogeneous societies, often estimated to be more than 250 ethnic and cultural groups.²⁷ Unlike the Ethiopian case, ethnicity is not accepted as a legitimate political tool in Nigerian federalism neither as the base to arrange the constituent units of the Nigerian federation nor as means of political party mobilization in official political discourse. Unlike in Ethiopia, Ethnic based political mobilization and structure are not welcomed under the Nigerian legal frameworks based on the logic that it will weaken the country and spread divisive sentiments.²⁸ At the time of independence from Britain's colonial rule, Nigeria was a federation of three administrative regions each of which was characterized by multiple ethnic nationalities.²⁹ The continuous rivalry between and among various ethnic factions and the entrenchment of conflicts in the post-colonial Nigeria have put pressures on successive Nigerian governments to reconstitute the *federal* system, again and again, to devolve powers and ensure equitable distribution of resources and revenues which raised the number of regional units of the Nigerian federation from three to thirty-six.³⁰

Contrary to the Ethiopian federation, Nigerian federalism continued to have geographic natures than ethnolinguistic one. Currently, Nigeria is a federation of thirty-six sub-national administrative units, which are artificially defined by geographic features and significant ethnolinguistic and cultural heterogeneity. Despite the pressures towards ethnicized administrative units from various ethnolinguistic groups, the country's constitution has not recognized ethnicity as a political tool for sub-national units' arrangement and party mobilizations. According to Adiele E. Afigbo (1999), the rationale behind the Nigerian government's resistance to the ethnic forces is that political processes such as party mobilizations and territorial configurations along rigid ethnic and tribal lines will severely dismantle the country.

²³ Oputa, C. A. (2006). *National unity in diversity: A case of Ndigbo*. Lecture delivered during the inauguration of Ndigbo Switzerland (Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya) held at Palladium hall, Geneva, Switzerland. Accessed on.....

²⁴ Tamuno, T. N. (2004). "*Nigerian federalism in historical perspective*". In: *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria* (eds). Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.

²⁵ Tyokase, C. T. (2012). *Nigeria: The search for nationhood – structure, institutions and issues*. Abeokuta: GOAD Educational publishers.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Suwirta, Andi & Wani, Hilal A. (2013). Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria: A Need for True Federalism, International Journal for Historical Studies, Vol.5 (1). Pp. 57–70.*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Afigbo, Adiele E. (1991). Background to Nigerian Federalism: Federal Features in the Colonial State, *The Journal of Federalism*, Volume 21, Issue 4. Pp. 3–29.

³⁰ Ibid.

As a means to avoid inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions, political elites in Nigeria preferred to design heterogeneous regional units and reorient the politics as “plural persons”, maintaining affiliation to their ethnic groups to identify and relate themselves within the contexts of broader Nigerian society.³¹ In comparative terms, while Ethiopian federalism bases on constitutional recognition of ethnicity as the capital of state structure and legitimate political mobilization, the Nigerian experience contradicts the Ethiopian case as the latter’s constitution doesn’t welcome ethnicity to serve as a political formula and group political mobilization.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The different experiences of federalism and the problems of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and Nigeria boldly tell us about different attitudes of African governments towards public recognition of ethnicity as a political standard. While ethnicity as a formula of state’s domestic sub-territorial order and as a means of political party formation has been supported by the state in Ethiopia, it has denied in Nigeria to which Victor Azarya (2003) referred as acceptance and ignorance respectively. The Ethiopian model, acceptance of ethnicity, allows different ethnic groups in the country to form their administrative regions based on exclusive claims of the territory and legitimized ethnic-based political parties that denied people who are out of that particular ethnic group full-fledged political and civil rights. Thus, ethnicity serves to privilege members and exclude others in the Ethiopian federation in its operational terms.

The objective of relying on ethnicity as a base for a political formula, as per the Ethiopian constitution is to rectify historical discriminations and injustice and to politically empower different ethnic groups in the new polity of the federation. This belief of elites capitalized ethnicity as the natural basis through which a political consociational pact could be reached. The Ethiopian case seems to assume that democracy can only be achieved through regionally defined ethnic group rights.³² Despite such political rhetoric and ethnicization of public discourse as a phenomenon of democracy, equality, and recognition, in reality, the EPRDF government has been dominated by a minority party, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).³³ The stance of the TPLF as a major revolutionary fighter from the Tigray ethnic groups led to exclude genuine political parties from other ethnic groups such as Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) early in the political process of bargaining and adoption of federalism.³⁴ Moreover, the coalition government was made up of only people from political parties representing four ethnic groups and their regions. The other five regions in the country’s periphery had no role in central decision-making process, but were only affiliates to the coalition government. As a result, there have been widespread resentments among populations of five regions; namely Gambella, Afar, Somali, Benshangul, and Harari.

At the same time, the government’s conception of ethnicity and geography has not been congruent with the multi-ethnic setup of many areas and cities in the country including the Amhara, Oromia, Harari, Dire Dawa, and Addis Ababa city administrations which are highly heterogeneous society.³⁵ The Ethiopian constitution provides for ethnic groups the right to self and autonomous administration up to secession which drilled opponents of Ethiopian ethnic federalism that it may lead the country to adverse ethnic

³¹ Otite, Onigu (2002). *Ethnic Pluralism, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria*, (2nd Ed.). Ibadan: Shaneson C. I. Limited.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Frank, Marijke (2009). *Effects of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia. Holding Together or Splitting Apart?* Summer Institute Guadalajara 2009, Ethnicity, Diversity and Democracy, EDG Project.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hassan, Abdullahi Nurow (2012). *Federation in Africa: Case Studies of Ethiopia and Nigeria*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi.

conflicts and disintegration of the state at all. Despite the constitutional provision and hope that ethnic federalism would bring peace, stability, and democracy, Ethiopia could not escape from traps of frequent small and large scale inter-ethnic conflicts since adoption of the federal political model. For instance, violent inter-ethnic conflicts have caused the death of hundreds and more than 3 million people's displacements in Amhara, Somali, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' regions since 2017.³⁶ Most of these conflicts are between the 'host ethnic communities' and 'settlers' who reside in the area.

On the other hand, the Nigerian model of federalism prevents ethnicity from becoming a political means either to arrange provinces or formal party mobilizations. While the Nigerian government prohibits any forms of ethnic politicization, it recognized ethnic and regional diversities in its policy approaches.³⁷ Ethnicities as a social bond neither ignored nor suppressed, but still were regarded as a potential intensifier of conflicts which should be contained better.³⁸ However, despite the government's commitment to preventing ethnicity from becoming a political means of interest articulation and state structure, Nigeria has been hit by frequent bloody inter-ethnic conflicts since the country gained its independence from Britain's colonial rule.³⁹ The Federation of Nigeria has been shocked by bloody violent ethnic conflicts, of the most severe of these disputes was the three years old civil war that occurred between 1967–1970 and caused by the interest and plan of three eastern states to secede from the federation. This brutal civil war that caused the deaths of more than a million Nigerians was fueled by the feeling of dominations and dissatisfaction among Igbos in the East by sizable northerners.⁴⁰ Unlike the Ethiopian case, the problem of Nigerian ethnic conflict is partly the legacy of the British colonial policy of divide and rule which was initially adopted to confront the nationalists and anti-colonial assertions to maintain colonial authority and power over the vast Nigerian territory.⁴¹

Against the background of ethnicized and factional colonial units of administration, successive governments in post-colonial Nigeria have tried to reduce ethnic sensitivities by discouraging the ethnic-based provincial formation and political organizations. The hallmark of these measures went to the adoption of federal-state structure based on geographic criteria and administrative simplicities without any considerations of ethnicity. Besides, claims of ethnic groups to have their own ethnically defined administrative zones. In the course of designing and rearranging the original constituent units of the federation, some ethnic groups have appeared to be dominant in certain regions while others become minorities. This created tensions over the distribution of power and resources and matters of representation. For instance, competition over oil resources in the Niger Delta region, which is occupied by forty ethnic groups, caused conflicts and tensions among the five main ethnic groups; Urhobo, Ogoni, Ukwuani, Isoko, and Ijaw. The trend is further complicated when the state represses ethnic-based claims to deescalate ethnic animosities.⁴² Although ethnicity is not welcomed in Nigerian federal politics as a means of constituent unit formation and party mobilization, ethnic conflict continuously reoccurred in the Nigerian federation.

³⁶ Semir Yusuf (2019). *Drivers of ethnic conflict in contemporary Ethiopia*. Monograph 202 published by the Institute for Security Studies.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁰ Mazrui, Ali A. (2008). "*Conflict in Africa: An Overview*". In: *the Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs* (eds). Addis Ababa: OSSREA.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*

The point to be made at this juncture is that despite efforts to avoid ethnicity by adopting geographic federalism through the relatively balanced distribution of political power, representation, and resource allocation, Nigeria couldn't escape the disruptive and destabilization effects of widespread ethnic animosities and conflicts in the country. Frequent violence in the country has witnessed opposite directions to the very purposes of federalism, which was reducing conflicts by providing an enabling framework for diversity and multi-ethnic administrative units within the federation. Nigerian model of geographic federalism couldn't eradicate tensions and fears from one ethnic or group domination of the particular sub-national administrative unit which complicated the question of who gets what and how in the distribution of local revenues and the national cake at large pose a major challenge to the Nigerian federation.⁴³

One may argue that most studies on Ethiopian and Nigerian ethnic conflicts overemphasize ethnicity as a source of conflicts paying lesser attention to the general structure of governments and its core institutional functioning in these countries. To put in other words, there should be other explanatory factors to the ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia and Nigeria than ethnicity as a sole determinant factor. The Nigerian case of avoiding ethnicity in politics and the Ethiopian case of politicization and celebration of ethnicity gave a good lesson that though both countries adopted different approaches to manage ethnic diversities and to avert potential conflicts; neither of these models is effective in dealing with ethnicity, ethnic conflicts, and violent conflicts from taking ethnic dimensions. Thus it needs considerations beyond ethnicity.

FACTORS OF CONFLICT BEYOND ETHNICITY: A SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

The preliminary questions about whether ethnicity causes violent conflict and what position ethnicity should take in the political process of multi-ethnic society continues to be a point of scholastic debate and public policy-making discussions. Ethnicity as communal patterns of social cleavages has been part of humanity since the time of human existence on the planet earth. The contemporary political definitions of the term associate the natural phenomenon of ethnolinguistic diversities to conflict as these differences have been used for political purposes. The mere existences of diversities in the forms of ethnicity or religion are not essential to inter-group conflicts and animosities to disprove the natural fact that the planet earth is so large enough to fit a variety of humankind.⁴⁴ Diversity in its various forms is the reality we are living. An assertion that human diversity essentially facilitates and causes violent conflict is not only a misreading of humanity and its history but also affects human's harmonious collective existence.

At the same time conflict is an essential part of the history of human societies. The very complex phenomena, conflict should be viewed from various dimensions and contexts of the society experiencing violent conflict than a mere attribution of such developments to diversity. The relation between ethnicity, conflict, and conflict management should be viewed comprehensively to understand and address the problem effectively. Thus, it demanded to contextualize the problem of ethnicity and related conflicts in the existence of two or more self-identifying ethnolinguistic groups, multi-dimensional interactions (historical, political, economic, cultural, etc.) among these groups, the existence of the winner and loser as a result of the multi-faceted interactions. This follows that the contemporary meaning of ethnicity entails

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Aapengnuo, Clement M. (2010). *Misinterpreting ethnic conflicts in Africa*. Africa Security Brief (No. 4/April 2010). Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

meaning about the nature of interactions, not to the mere existence of different groups.⁴⁵ Adele L. Jinadu, (2004) argued that ethnic differences cannot explain conflictual and hostile relations although it appears to dominate most conflict studies.

Due to such over emphasizes on ethnicity most studies have become blind to rule out poor governance, dictatorship and abysmal poverty, discrimination, the marginalization that facilitate the ground for conflictual developments. In this regard, Barbara F. Walter & Elaine K. Denny (2013) argued that injustice in its various forms like disparities as a result of discrimination and marginalization in economic activities, exclusion from political decision-making process between, or inaccessible political and government positions, is a structural source of discontent in many conflicts, not ethnicity.⁴⁶ Dan Smith (2004) further asserted that ethnic differences are of central importance not as a sole cause of conflicts, but rather as an instrument of mobilization for political leaders. This particularly lets us consider the process of state formation in Africa where the natural stages of state genesis were distorted by European colonial powers who draw boundaries between African states based on their goodwill, regardless of the local context of African society. This resulted in the continuing disturbance of African states and societies.⁴⁷

The colonial borders put people from the same ethnic group in different countries as well as in different provinces within the same country which creates winner and loser ethnic groups in the political game of post-colonial state in Africa.⁴⁸ In this regard, Paul T. Zelela (2008) asserted that there is hardly any zone of conflict in contemporary Africa that cannot trace its root to colonial history. Discrimination could be the result of past colonial and oppressive regime's policies and arrangements of artificial administrative units which created dominant and alienated groups.⁴⁹ While many economic, social, and political phenomena may impact ethnic violence, a minimum of ethnic diversity is a precondition for the onset of ethnic violence.⁵⁰ This follows that the mere existence of different ethnic groups cannot be a primary factor for violent conflicts.

In this regard, Dan Smith (2004) argued that conflict must always be understood in political and economic contexts, in particular concerning the pursuit of material interests and fair power-sharing. According to Victor Azarya (2003) avoiding the situation of winner takes it all and establishment of representative democratic institutions is the only way to prevent violent conflict in multi-ethnic societies. He further suggested that ethnicity can be used constructively for consociation and creation of collective pacts which would preclude winner-take-it-all situations. This follows that if there is a genuinely democratic institution and representative political systems ethnicity could not serve as channels of conflict as people would rely on institutional frameworks to express their grievances and loyalties to the political forces.

⁴⁵ Paglia, Pamela (2007). *Ethnicity and Tribalism: are these the Root Causes of the Sudanese Civil Conflicts? African conflicts and the Role of Ethnicity: a Case Study of Sudan*. Available at <https://1filedownload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Are-Ethnicity-And-Tribalism-The-Root-Causes-Of-The-Sudanese-Civil-Conflicts.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Denny, Elaine K. & Walter, Barbara F. (2014). Ethnicity and Civil War, *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 51, issue 2. Pp. 199–212.

⁴⁷ Smith, Dan (2004). "Trends and Causes of Armed Conflict". In: *Transforming Ethnopolitical Conflict: The Berghof Handbook* (eds). Switzerland: Springer Nature.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Zelela, Paul T. (2008). "Introduction: The Causes and Costs of War in Africa- from Liberation Struggles to the 'War on Terror'". In: *The Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs* (eds). Addis Ababa: OSSREA.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

To sum up, while ethnicity is a social reality in both Ethiopia and Nigeria each has been dealt with differently politically by adopting a federal system of government to accept and reject ethnicity as a base of politics respectively. However, these strategies could not bring effective solutions in preventing inter-ethnic conflicts both in Ethiopia and Nigeria. This is because federalism as an operational system needs effective democracy and genuine institutions which both Nigeria and Ethiopia lag. Ironically, opponents of Ethiopian ethnic federalism blame ethnic-based arrangement as a source of conflict and intercommunion tensions and sought federalism to be redrawn geographically. While Nigerians demand a federation that grants ethnic groups their territorial administrative units as a way to get rid of ethnic conflicts. However, both views overlook the absence of good governance, widespread corruption, youth unemployment, and unfair distribution of resources that generate grievances, often take ethnic ramification, and channeled through ethnic lines.

Despite variations in recognizing ethnicity, adoption of the federal political system as a solution to the problem of ethnicity, and historical and economic contexts the Ethiopia and Nigeria are the two most eminent evidence of ethnic conflict in contemporary time. The failed promises and experiments of federalism and its different mode of implementation in the two countries to manage diversity and ethnic conflict merit reconsidering the question: does ethnic diversity breed conflict and focus on other structural explanations to grasp the conditions of ethnicity and conflict properly.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic identities and boundaries, ethnic conflicts, and the political order of federalism have constituted a significant part of Nigerian and Ethiopian politics. The assumption that the existence of multiple ethnic groups fuels inter-ethnic conflict dominates the academic debates and public policy discussions in these countries. As a result, governments in the respective countries have adopted their version of federal political order as a solution for both potential and actual inter-ethnic conflicts. While Ethiopia welcomes ethnicity as a way to structure the state's institutions and sub-national political units, Nigeria adopted federalism based on geographic frontiers paying less attention to ethnicity as a political means. Despite these attempts both Ethiopia and Nigeria have been hosting frequent and catastrophic ethnic crises and consequent political violence and instability in reality. At this juncture, it is important to question the dominant narratives that ethnicity dominantly contributed to these conflictual developments in both countries and search for other explanations.

Ethnicity is a social fact in the two countries and subject to reconstruction and reconfiguration in the course of long-range political processes and as part of conflict management. Although conflicts in these countries are taking the form of ethnicity, scholars argue that there are no essential ties between ethnic differences and violent conflicts. Ethnicity by itself could not be the cause of violent conflicts. Any effort to address and understand intergroup tensions needs to consider the overall historical, political, socio-economic, and structural contexts. While the federal political order has been employed as a solution for ethnic conflict in both countries, the absence of institutional and democratic support disable the former from the realization of the promise and hopes of peace, stability, and democracy.

The problem in Ethiopia or Nigeria is not ethnolinguistic diversities, rather the non-genuine establishment of federalism, authoritarianism, and abysmal poverty, discrimination, and marginalization to which ethnicity has been manipulated to cover the malfunctioning of systems and as the sole explanatory factor and unit of analysis for the complex problems of conflict. Although the governments in Ethiopia and Nigeria have adopted different models of federalism as a rhetoric of diversity and conflict management, historical injustices, structural violence, the absence of good governance, democratic culture, and

representative democracy made federalism ineffective to ensure the harmonious existence of plural societies. Thus Ethiopian and Nigerian experiences can prove neither ethnicity causes conflict nor does federalism as an unsuccessful form of government as both lack the engine of federal political order, the democracy.