

Governance and Indigene - Settler Phenomenon in Nigeria: Lessons from Australia

Sherrif Ghali Ibrahim, Aliyu Isah Mohammed and Dahiru Ibrahim

Department of political science and international Relations, University of Abuja, Abuja

sherfboy@yahoo.com

Phone: +234 7063372013

Abstract

With a vast and fertile land area of about 923, 768 square km; it would appear that there is enough land space for every Nigerian to use for whatever productive purposes. To the contrary however, the country has found itself struggling to survive a persistent communal conflicts between the so-called "indigene" and those that have migrated from their ancestral lands "settlers" which has resulted to loss of thousands of life's and properties especially in the North Central region and parts of North East and other parts of the country. Though mostly reported to be over claims to territories in the North, the emersion of indigene - settler conflicts in the southern part of the country where it is clearly impossible for the "settlers" to lay claims to land ownership, calls for a more holistic resolutions to curtail it. The paper provides insights in to the Australian effort in promoting and maintaining indigene and settler co-existence by way of effective service delivery, through their Multicultural policy and concludes with general lessons to be learned. In doing this, the library research source of data is adopted through which related literatures were reviewed. It recommended as learned through the Australian Multicultural policy, that the government has a responsibility to maintaining a just, inclusive and cohesive society by first providing the citizens with basic amenities and ensuring an equal access to opportunities by the population with less or no discriminations in its quest for a lasting peace and security.

Key Words: Governance, Indigene, Settler, Conflict, Multiculturalism.

Introduction

Ranked as the Ninth most ethnically diverse country in the world by Erkan's (2013) research, Nigeria's over 250million population splits among over 250 ethnic groups who speak about 500 languages. In effect, like many of her sub-Saharan African neighbors, one of the country's most challenging tasks has been the struggle to accommodate these hundreds of historic political units, cultures, languages, and microeconomics that jostle each other in the quest to access or control the "scarce" resources and power.

The above situation, even under the best circumstances of governance and administration, would present real challenges for development, nation-building, and security. Sadly, as observed by Cletus (2021), in dozens of Nigerian communities, the administrative styles and lines drawn by government have always fuel violence instead of managing this diversity for peaceful co-existence. First and most common among these, is the thorny question of who is an indigene? Meaning roughly the original inhabitant of a place and who is not (the settlers), mostly leading to the emergence of unhealthy ethnic-based divergent interests, desires, and aspirations in the crude competition for scarce resources to meet the conflicting demands (Nwagwu, 2016).

In this regard, as pointed by Ibrahim (2012), Nigerians leaving in part of the country and who have their ethnic genealogy elsewhere from their current place of inhabitant, even if they were born in those particular state or lived all their lives there are regarded as “settlers” who always stand the risk to be excluded or denied opportunities owing to their parental genealogy. As a result, this discriminatory tendency especially at the local levels emerged to become one of, if not a major source of rivalry, distrust and resulting to protracted violent conflicts among communities and between community members across the country.

Consequently, appearing to have gradually overwhelmed governments coercive apparatuses as the crises are being managed rather than being resolved in the submission of Nwagwu (2016), the emergence of indigene and settler rivalry has remained for many decades, one of the principal sources of obstinate violent conflicts within and between communities in Nigeria- accounting for prodigious destruction of properties, loss of lives and displacement of innocent citizens- mostly women and children to the vulnerability of abuses, hunger, infections, epidemics and other related consequences.

Conceptualization

Governance

Governance can be defined as the frame wok that involves the processes and structures through which decisions are made and enforced within an organization or society. That is, it is the framework by which organisations are directed and controlled. The Chartered Governance Institute (2022) defines governance as a dynamic process, adapting to changing circumstances and motivations that involves the interplay of laws, social norms, power dynamics, and communication, shaping the conduct and order of a social system that could be formal entities like governments, organizations, or informal groups like the family. It entails to manage, allocate and mobilize relevant resources and capacities of different members and sets the overall direction of a group in order to effectively address its specific collective needs, problems and challenges (Bevir, 2012). It is the overall complex system or framework of processes, functions, structures, rules, laws and norms born out of the relationships, interactions, power dynamics and communication within an organized group of individuals. Hence it involves the setting of boundaries of acceptable conduct and practices of group members as well as the control of their decision-making processes through the creation and enforcement of rules and guidelines (Pierre, 2020).

Indigene

The word indigene literally used to refer to an aborigine or native, simply refers to an indigenous people or individuals who are original inhabitant of a place or are the first to settle in an area. It is conceived as a native; one who first settled in an area and has the right of claim over land, grazing

field and other sites of historical importance including chieftaincy of the area (Ladan 2022). Jones (2012) defined the term ‘indigenous people as referring to the original or native inhabitants of areas that have been colonized by Europeans, especially in Africa, Asia, America and Australasia. In Nigeria, Commonly expressed or refer to as “son of the soil”, an indigene is a native of a particular area by lineal descent, birth, longest resident or first to settle in an area. It is used to refers to ownership of mostly land, and is supported by section 14 (3) and 147 (3), chapter two section 15 (3) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended.

Settler

The Cambridge English dictionary defines the settler as referring to a person or persons who arrive, especially from another place in a new place in order to live there and use the land. Settler according to Patrick (2006) is a person or persons who migrated to an area and established a permanent residence. In Nigeria, it is used to refer to a resident of an area to which he/she do not originate from or do not belong to by their lineage descent. In this context, a persons’ birth or time spent in an area does not necessarily qualify one for the status of a native. If you cannot trace your lineal descent to a group that is culturally and historically endogenous to an area, you cannot qualify as a native of the place.

Conflict

Literally, this refers to a deepened argument or disagreement that is usually protracted. It could also refer to the state of clash or being at variance. Just like other social concepts and phenomena, there hardly is any generally accepted definition of conflict either as concept or as a process. However, common to most scholarly submissions, central to conflict is the differences in interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations, as well as perceptions towards resources and or status which are mostly scares and in some cases, values that are hardly homogeneous. This, as held by Dunmoye (2005), can be found at all levels of social life ranging from individual, group, community, nation as well as inter-personal and international among others. Conflict in the definition of Coser (1976) is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. Also, Otite (1999) defines it as the pursuit of “divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and/or groups in defining their social and physical environments.

In the context of this paper, it is a state of violent disagreement or clash between individuals of variant interest. It is an escalation of a disagreement, which is characterized by violent behavior in which the parties involved actively, makes effort to damage one another or their properties.

Multiculturalism

The Australian Department of Immigration and Culture explained Multiculturalism as a coordinated long range response to migration patterns that have resulted in diverse people and cultures occupying the same locality, who share the aim of making a home for themselves and their families in a community within a safe, stable and cohesive nation (DIAC, 2012). It is a demographic fact of cultural diversity; a set of policies, programs and services; as well as a concept that articulates normative ideals about society (Australian Parliament, 2013). Multiculturalism is defined by Sev (2016) as a social compact or agreement by modern states like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and USA about how to arrange social, political and economic relationships between different cultural strata. It is the social compacts organised around a complex set of agreed national values and goals, normative and structural systems as well as policy, budgetary and program responses put in place to manage diversity.

Theoretical Framework

The Realistic Conflict theory is that theoretical construct which views conflict as a product of the struggle for scarce resources among various groups in proximity, within a society. Rooted in social psychology and sociology, the theory believes that conflicts arise when groups compete for scarce resources, power, and prestige which can lead to heightened tensions, prejudice, and even violence between groups. Baumeister and Vohs (2007) defined it as a frame work that explains how intergroup hostility can arise as a result of conflicting goals and competitions over real or perceived limited resources like Money, power, social status, land water and so on. It explains the rise of resentment as well as the feelings of prejudice and discrimination by a group towards an out-group that fuels intergroup hostility and conflict on the perception that one group's gain is another's loss (Whitley and Kite, 2010).

Developed in the 1950s through 1960s, Muzafer Sherif is widely accepted as the proponent of the Realistic Conflict Theory through his 1954 study, titled “Robbers Cave Experiment” that offers a framework to comprehend how competition over limited resources can escalate into conflict between groups. Other scholars of the Realistic Conflict Theory is includes; Carolyn Wood sheriff, Lutfy Diab, Bobo Lawrence and Donald Campbell whom according to Aurthur et’al (2005) is the first to officially name the theory.

Central to the Realistic Theory is the concept of competition for “Resources” - land, water, jobs, or even power, that is exacerbated by “Scarcity” (real or perceived)- the feeling or believe that one group's gain is another's loss as the escalator of violent conflict among groups. Esses and Jackson (2008) submitted that very significant about the group conflict theory is that, aside the origins and functions of inter-group conflict- Competition, the theory tends to place particular emphasis on the role of either socially prevalent ideologies or situational factors - Perception which functions together to create an inter-group tension and hostility. Furthermore, as rightly upheld by Davies (2024) that the theory not only explains the origins of conflict but also explains on its persistence and potential resolutions, positive relation according to the RCT can only be restored if superordinate goals are in place (Michael, 2013). The key concepts and processes in realistic conflict theory are Competition for resources, Intergroup bias- the tendency of individuals to favor their in-group, Negative stereotyping – a means to dehumanize the other group and justify aggressive or discriminatory behaviors, and Contact hypothesis (proposed intergroup conflict solution) - that increased contact between groups under certain conditions (equal status, common goals, cooperation) can reduce impartiality and foster positive intergroup relations (Davies, 2024).

Results and Findings

Causes of Indigene and Settler Conflict

The interaction between indigenous and non-indigenous Groups and or societies throughout history of mankind has been complex, ranging from outright conflict and subjugation to some degree of mutual benefit and cultural transfer. While Nigeria’s 1999 constitution as amended makes no clear preference for the so-called indigenes over the so-called settlers based on her citizen-ship conception, social practices have remained exclusionary; using the binaries of indigene-ship and settler status in accessing often scarce public resources and enhancing socio-economic and political advantage.

In Nigeria, in addition to the struggle for political power, agreeing with the submissions of Ladan (2022), a combination of potent identity-based factors with wide perceptions of economic and social injustice is central to the “deep-rooted” indigene and settler conflicts. According to him, two powerful elements “Identity - the mobilization of people based on race, religion, culture, language etc, and Resource Distribution –the means of sharing the economic, social and political resources within a society” often combine to ignite settler/indigene conflicts. In the instance where perceived or real imbalance in distribution coincides with identity difference, opportunistic leaders seize such opportunity for exploitation and manipulation and the resultant effect is the potential for conflict (Harris, in Segun,, 2014). The situation is often further perplexed when there is a complicated or contested history of migration which normally give rise to disputes about primacy and ownership of land and resources (Jones, 2012).

The claim of the ownership and indigene -ship of Jos according to Segun, (2014), is widely identified as the remote causes of violent conflicts which was later to be fueled by delimitation of electoral wards; blockage of roads during worship; indiscriminate use of speakers; Fulani headers trespassing on farmlands; alleged effort at Islamization, and discrimination against Muslims by government. Similarly, Eme et al (2019) reported that disputes over land between older communities “indigene” and presumed newcomers “settlers” accounted for much of the ethnic and religious unrest in the country. In their arguments, Land ownership claims were central to the violence involving Tivs and Hausa-speaking Azeris that broke out in Nasarawa State, Clashes between local Christians and Hausa-Fulani Muslims in Jos, and between Tivs and Jukuns in Taraba state, as well as the protracted crisis of Bassa and Igbira ethnic in Nassarawa communities were also rooted in similar character, bordering on who should pay allegiance to whom.

The scramble for power, political space, and relevance occasioned by the abnormality identified with the Nigerian federalism according to Olusola and Akumka (2017) is another reason for settler - indigene crises. Post independent Nigeria in the report of Abba (2005) witnessed political crises like the 1951 Western Region House of Assembly election crisis occasioned by the Igbo/Eastern NCNC’s defeat of AG in the Regional assembly by 35 against 29 seats. Other politically motivated indigene/settler crises include the 1954 federal election crisis, 1964 federal election crisis, 1979 federal election crisis, and even the 6/12, crisis (Olusola and Akumka, 2017) The Tiv and Jukun protracted crises especially of the Wukari region though hinged on the indigene and settler question, violent clashes between the two tribes is rooted in the Jukun’s rigid denial of Tiv the access to political entitlements, participation and to power on the bases that they were settlers according to Akintola and Yabayanze (2017) and in effect, the outcome has been the continues violent clashes including the Tiv riot of 1959-60, the 1964 ‘head breaking’, the 1979-83 fracas, the local government election crisis of 1987, 1990-92 local government election crisis, the 2001-2002 clash, and August 2010 riot (Agaba & Akintola, 2012).

Another causative factor of Indigene-Settler dichotomy that leads to ethnic and religious crisis is bad government policies and governance. Studies on conflict over the years according to Ojukwu and Onifade (2010) have shown that the nebulous constitutional provisions on citizenship and discriminatory tendencies of elitist politics have been the reinforcing factors for ethno-communal violence that is mostly ignited in the instance of leadership failure through the indigene/settler dichotomy. Unpopular politicians in the efforts to sustain their regime’s legitimacy tend to employ repression, and the divide and rule tactics by ‘politicization’ of ethnic and religious identities bearing in mind that the masses in most instances retreat into sectarian enclaves once there is decay

in governance (Usman, etal, 2021). The nature of the economic and social environment and the mode of political governance have a lot to do with the causes and dynamics of communal conflicts whether they are related to entitlements or to real or perceived oppression based on identity Ntalaja (2012), as unemployed and underemployed citizens -indigenes are likely to attack migrants – settlers because the latter are easy targets against which they can vent their frustrations and anger vis-à-vis their own government.

Australian Multiculturalism (Lessons for Nigeria)

Multiculturalism according to Ozdowsk (2016) could be understood as a set of government legal provisions, policies and programs such as antidiscrimination laws, welfare, and language training for new migrants among others that are developed in response to, and to manage cultural diversity and the attainment of social integration. That it is a social compact or agreement “largely founded on the principle of equality of status and opportunity” about how to arrange social, political and economic relationships between different cultural strata. It is the compact in modern societies which is organised around a complex set of agreed national values and goals, normative and structural systems as well as policy, budgetary and program responses put in place to manage diversity (Sev, 2024). Amidst divergent usage by different personality, Vertovec and Wessendorf (2010) believe that it can be an ideology, set of policy practices, and description of society and or political philosophy.

Multiculturalism in the conception of Australia is a policy that is built on the acceptability of migrants along their cultural heritage, and their economic and civic contributions are cherished. It is a policy that makes for migrants to belong to Australia while keeping their original culture and traditions (ADHA, 2025). That is, as used by its advocates especially government, the term is used to promote openness, tolerance, intercultural pollination, social justice and cultural rights, as well as the politics of identity. Multiculturalism – Australian, in the view of Lim (2021), is both a category of practice, used by actors to convey practical orientations to diversity in society, and a category of analysis intended by scholars to carry analytical weight.

As a diversity management strategy, Australia’s Multicultural policy is the 4th official diversity management strategy evolving through the periods of exclusion, assimilation/White Australia Policy, integration, and finally multiculturalism -introduced in 1973, but coming into effect some years later when formally adopted in 1978 (Moran, 2017; ADHA, 2025). In a paper titled “A multi-cultural society for the future” Immigration Minister Grassby of the Whitlam Government in 1973 issued what is considered the first Australian Multiculturalism policy paper. The paper, according to ADHA (2025) presented a bold version of a society that embraced cultural differences while fostering unity

Amidst series of changes and reforms occasioned by change in government, Central to multiculturalism is the popular core principles that serve as the compass for all regimes. This include the right to: Cultural identity-the right to express and share the ones individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion; Social justice-the right of all to equality of treatment and opportunity, free of racial, ethnic, religion or gender barriers; and Economic efficiency- the need to maintain, develop and utilize effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background (Koleth, 2010; Ozdowski, 2024). Similarly, the Australian government states that the four principles of the new multicultural policy are that the Australian Government: values cultural diversity for all Australians, within the broader aims of national unity,

community harmony and maintenance of Australia's democratic values; is committed to a just, inclusive and socially cohesive society in terms of access to opportunities; welcomes the economic benefits of our multicultural nation; and will act to promote understanding and acceptance while acting against intolerance (Australian Government 2011).

The above principles which were first consolidated in the 1989 National Agenda for a multicultural Australia (Ozdowski, 2024; Australian government 2017) are to be achieved through the Australian established culture and values such as; the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, civil liberties and freedoms, equality of sexes and English as a national language among others (Australianpolitics.com, 2012; Ozdowsk, 2016). The National Agenda also according to Ozdowski (2024) also defined the "limits of Australian multiculturalism" which includes: all Australians should have an expected overriding and unifying commitment to Australia; the acceptance of the basic structures and principles of Australian society and a reciprocal responsibility to accept the rights of others to express their views and values (OMA in Ozdowski, 2024) .

The themes of Australian multiculturalism are embedded in such laws like the Australian anti-discrimination legislation – especially in the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Jakubowicz, 2019) which have been maintained by all regimes, the Citizenship Act -2007 under which, "Australian citizenship is a common bond, involving reciprocal rights and obligations, uniting all Australians, while respecting their diversity (Ozdowsk, 2024). Furthermore, the policy is pursued through such institutions like the Department of Home Affairs, Australian Human Rights Commission-that is empowered to fight racial and other discrimination and human rights breaches "(Koeth, 2010, Ozdowsk, 2016). Others include the Australian Multicultural Council (AMC), the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), the Ministry of Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs (MICMSMA), the Council for Multicultural Australia (CMA) and the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs (Markus, 2023)

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is worthy to mention that multiculturalism is an indisputable success story for Australia. The policy has contributed to the transformation of Australia from an insular community to a cosmopolitan nation with an ameliorating vision of social harmony, and one which delivers practical commitments to social inclusion and respect for difference. The policy has been able to build and maintain an unparalleled level of social cohesion that serves her high and culturally diverse population. It is the opinion of the study that the Australian Multiculturalism offers instructive insights that; respect, inclusion, purposive governance and equal citizenship are central to peaceful coexistence in a multiethnic society and also present for Nigeria, several strategies to address indigene-settler conflicts which often stem from issues of identity, citizenship, access to resources, and political representation. It is against this backdrop that the paper recommends amongst other things that:

1. Like the Australia's multicultural policy that is centered on a unifying national identity while respecting diverse cultural backgrounds, it is imperative that "citizenship" status in Nigeria is redefined to promote an "Inclusive National Identity" that supersedes the binary of "indigeniety". A policy that moves the country away from indigeneity as a legal/political tool that institutionalize the "indigene/settler" dichotomy (e.g., in education, employment, or political participation), to a broader inclusive framework that recognizes and enforces every Nigerian's right to belong and thrive anywhere in the country.

2. To eliminate or at least reduce the too much ethnic and regional inclination that is exacerbating the countries divide along this line, a national civic education and campaigns that promote shared values and a pan-Nigerian identity over ethnic or regional affiliations is recommended. Through the National Orientation Agency and the Media, Nigerians should be educated on things that unite them and sensitized about the essence of unity. In schools, reforms that promote Nigeria's unity in diversity through curricula that emphasize mutual respect and intercultural competence—highlighting the contributions and importance of all ethnic groups, and support for joint community projects that build bridges across identities should be developed and implemented.
3. Governments at all level should as a matter of must, change the narrative of bad governance to effective and purposeful leadership in Nigeria. The federal government must addresses the widening socioeconomic inequities through programs and policies that ensures equitable distribution of federal resources to avoid the perception that one group is benefiting at the expense of another as well as the fear of domination, and political marginalization.
4. Like the Australian Racial Discrimination Act, the paper further recommends anti-discriminatory laws as well as other constitutional and legal legislation that discourages ethnic, regional or indigene/settler discrimination in public life and guarantees equal access to rights and opportunities for all Nigerian citizens, regardless of origin within the country.
5. There should be Local Government reform that facilitates grass root effective service delivery and empower local councils and communities for inclusive local governance, where settlers and indigenes both have representation and a voice in decision-making.
6. Also, there is the urgent need for the modernization of animal husbandry especially by state governments through the establishment of grazing reserves in the home states of cattle owners and herdsmen to end the perennial fights between farmers and herdsmen in different parts of the country.

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