The Ombatse Crisis in Nigeria: Background, Recent Developments and Possible Solutions

Simeon Onyemachi Hilary Alozieuwa Ph.D.
Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Abuja, alzworld67@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/jics

Part of the American Politics Commons, Comparative Politics Commons, International and Area Studies Commons, International Relations Commons, Models and Methods Commons, Other Political Science Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, and the Political Theory Commons

Recommended Citation
Alozieuwa, S. O. (2016). The Ombatse Crisis in Nigeria: Background, Recent Developments and Possible Solutions. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Conflict Science, 2*(2), -. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/jics/vol2/iss2/1

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CAHSS Journals at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Interdisciplinary Conflict Science by an authorized editor of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.
The Ombatse Crisis in Nigeria: Background, Recent Developments and Possible Solutions

Cover Page Footnote

References

This research article is available in Journal of Interdisciplinary Conflict Science: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/jics/vol2/iss2/1
The Ombatse Crisis in Nigeria: Background, Recent Developments and Possible Solutions

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the hegemonic politics between the Eggon and Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups in Nasarawa, North-Central Nigeria, which eventually erupted into the Ombatse crisis of May 2013—a precursor to the 2015 general elections. It addresses four research questions seeking to unravel whether or not: (1a) the crisis truly reflects a spiritual revivalist agenda as projected by the Ombatse promoters or merely espouses Eggon rejection of Muslim-Hausa/Fulani ethnic hegemony—mirroring broadly the identity, hegemonic and exclusionary politics in the area cum the larger Nigerian society; (b) the Eggon-Hausa-Fulani feud has the potential to exacerbate the sectarian strife in Nigeria’s northern region and therefore deepen the polarization among Nigeria’s disparate social groups—thereby threaten the consolidation of Nigeria’s young democracy; (2) there are any institutional safeguards in place to forestall the promotion of discriminatory tendencies in the politics of the state; (3) there is the likelihood of the tendencies in the Nasarawa politics nudging the state into violence after the 2015 elections; and (4) there are viable solutions available to address the potentially violate situation. Methodologically, using both primary and secondary sources—interviews and works of scholars, and media reports on the crisis, the study came up with the following findings: (1) the Ombatse crisis is not a religious-puritanical cause, but fits into the themes of identity conflict, hegemonic and exclusionary politics; (2) the election outcome still reflected the deep divisions and polarization among Nigeria’s disparate social groups—projecting Nigeria yet as a deeply-divided society; (3) contrary to the pre-election anxiety, there were no violence during and after the elections—owing essentially to the moderating presence in Nigeria during the 2015 election of the International Criminal Court (ICC), who threatened to prosecute person(s) or group(s) that perpetrate violence in the course of the election; (4) Nasarawa politics lacks any ‘institutional safeguards to prevent the emergence of conditions in which divisions within the society gain a salient discriminatory dimension and eventually facilitate the rise of violence as a means to realize group interest’. The study suggests six recommendations that can promote the solution of the potentially violate situation; importantly, evolving a well-defined power-sharing framework, which aims at rotating such political offices among the ethnic groups for a better inter-group relations, implementing past recommendations of commission of inquiries and having the presence of the ICC during elections.

Key words: Ombatse, Nasarawa-Eggon, Hausa-Fulani, identity, exclusionary and hegemonic politics, sectarian violence
Introduction

In the last two decades, following the end of 1967-1970 civil war, Nigeria has had to grapple with one form of violence or the other—all defining the acute security challenge increasingly confronting the country. Most of the violence are sectarian in character, mirroring the deep divisions, among Nigeria’s over 450 ethno-linguistic groups. These rifts generally arise on the one hand from rivalry and competition for the abundant but badly-managed material resources, and on the other by the subsequent hegemonic tendencies among the ethnic groups. In the North, it is epitomized by the Hausa-Fulani hegemony, whether real or perceived and its resistance by the minority ethnic groups. Although oftentimes localized—occurring in specific geographic locations, and constituting real threat to the immediate environment, they however also reverberate beyond the local boundaries thus generating enough concerns for the entire country. Most of these acts of the violence are usually viewed with ethno-regional and religious lens. Oftentimes, ignoring their underlying political and economic contexts, analyses focus on the façades of ethnicity, region and religion, as factors that inspire parties to feud against one another. Over all, although the violence remained local in context—between and among local ethnic, regional and religious forces in Nigeria—they nevertheless have nation-wide implication for the democratization process in post-colonial Nigeria. In recent times, external forces have teamed with local elements to raise the scepter of violence and insecurity in Nigeria, namely the Boko Haram insurgency. However, the Ombatse crisis of May 2013 adds up to the identity politics manifesting in sectarian forms along religious, ethnic and regional lines, sometimes also taking the form of indigene-settler rifts, all which continually shape the violence that define Nigeria’s security challenges. In this crisis scores of lives were lost, on both sides—security forces (30) - (BBC News, 9 May, 2013) and 21 Eggons, (www.informationng.com/2013/05) when the government agents stormed Alakyo, an Eggon village to arrest the chief priest of the Ombatse cult, BabaAlakyo. The cult group were allegedly embarked on forceful initiation into its membership of adherents of other religions and ethnic groups (ibid). Although the Ombatse cultists claimed it was on a spiritual renewal— to clean the Eggon society of sundry mundane ills, in reality, the crisis had a political component—Eggon protestation of their marginalization from the governorship of Nasara wa state since its creation in 1996. They were determined to produce the governor for the state by 2015, hence the mantra underpinning the revolt, Ombaste—‘Our Time has Come’.

This paper addresses the following four research questions about this crisis: (1). Does the crisis truly reflect a religious-puritanical mission or merely mirror the identity, hegemonic and exclusionary politics in the area cum the larger Nigerian society; does the Eggon- Hausa-Fulani feud have the potential to exacerbate the sectarian strife in Nigeria’s northern region and therefore deepen the polarization among Nigeria’s disparate social groups – thus threaten Nigeria’s efforts at consolidating her young democracy; (2) are there any institutional safeguards in place to forestall the promotion of discriminatory tendencies in the politics of the state; (3) is there the likelihood of the tendencies in the Nasarawa politics nudging the state into violence after the 2015 elections; and (4) what viable solutions are available to address the potentially violate situation? Indeed the first research question
becomes important as it can provide clues to similar scenarios in places as Taraba and Plateau states where identity and hegemonic politics are as verdant.

Some Theoretical Explorations

The Ombatse revolt certainly does not approximate contemporary Islamism, and may not likely do so. However, Ankie Hoogvelt’s explanation of the root of the current Islamic resurgence across the world may yet provide useful insight on how identity, hegemony and exclusionary politics can either acting solely, or combine to throw a society, especially deeply divided ones, into tumult. Thus according to her, “Islamic resurgence is best understood as a politics of identity in response to exclusion...” (Hoogvelt, 2001:199). Stefan Wolff (2011 as cited in Omeje, 2012:9) has argued that the “processes of democratization, especially in ethnically, linguistically, religiously, ideologically or otherwise diverse and potentially divided societies, are environments prone to conflict escalation.” Democracy in such society, he further contends, “requires a range of special institutional safeguards to prevent the emergence of conditions in which divisions within the society gain a salient discriminatory dimension and eventually facilitate the rise of violence as a means to realize group interest,” (ibid: 10).

The point has also rightly been made that while identity politics manifest in various concrete and abstract forms, its true significance however lies in its impacts on world events on a spectrum ranging from conflict to cooperation (du Plessis, 2011: 20). Identity politics in the developing world tends to manifest more on the dysfunctional and destabilizing conflict spectrum than cooperation. Elements of negative identity, therefore, are loss, exclusion, deprival, fear, insecurity as opposed to belonging, inclusion, sharing, safety, security that characterize positive identity (ibid:21). The theme of exclusionary politics has indeed continued to engage increasing scholarly attention in recent times, with regards to African politics, obviously because it has proved the underlining factor in many a political crisis in many places on the African continent. In their study of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Kenya, Boas and Dunn (2013) observe, for instance that, whereas in the past African politics tended towards inclusiveness, the exclusiveness characteristic of contemporary African politics is a recent development. They explored the phenomenon of "autochthony" - literally meaning "son of the soil": the politics of origin and belonging- the claim of first/earlier arrivals to exclude more recent immigrants, and the violent conflicts it has generated across Africa. But outside of the issue of land or resource scarcity, Boas and Dunn blame the increasing phenomenon of autochthony on the failure of neo-patrimonial system in Africa- the decreasing capacity of the African neo-patrimonial network to distribute resources. In the April 2015 election in Burundi, fear of domination and exclusion by the minority Tutsi ethnic group over majority ethnic Hutu insistence on holding to power after completing constitutionally-prescribed two-term limit through President Pierre Nkurunziza was the cause of the pre-election violence and a failed coup d’état. Exclusionary politics also accounts for the political crisis and instability in the Central African Republic since 2012.

In the context of the value of violence to politics generally, the tendency by the different social groups, especially in multi-ethnic societies, to use violence in different
historical circumstances for political ascendency has been vigorously explored (Alozieuwa, 2013). Empirical support of this theory, which derive from Alozieuwa’s work, include the Hausa-Fulani appropriation of the Nigerian military to hold central power between 1966 and 1999, Yoruba use of the June 12, 1993 presidential election de-annulment violence to gain the presidency in 1999 through 2007, and the Niger Delta militancy that culminated to the ascendency of the minority ethnic Ijaw to Nigeria’s presidency, 2010-2015. His work on the Boko Haram insurgency as a revolt and violent quest for Nigeria’s central power by the Kanuri minority ethnic group in Northern Nigeria also fits into this theoretical context (Alozieuwa, 2012). In the 2007-2008 general elections in Kenya, the youth reacted to four decades of political and social deprivation by successive governments through the use of violence (Mang’eni, 2010).

The tendency to hegemonic and exclusionary politics or resistant politics through the instrumentality of violence is however not value-free. It could be understood in the context of polities where according to Turner (1980: 69) politics becomes “the struggle to dominate the polity [and] … for gaining control of public resources and/or (making) an exclusive claim to allocate state resources….” While for such tendencies, as Nigeria’s political economist Julius Ihonvbere, (1989), has noted, one is not necessarily looking for economic motives behind all individual or group actions or even looking for economic explanation of all social action, the Marxian theory of the primacy of material condition behind human social actions remains relevant in looking at the agitation by excluded groups. Exclusion from the political leadership in such societies limits the ability of the elite corps of such groups to expand their frontiers of primitive accumulation. However, the probable impact of the leadership by the elite corps of such groups on the material well-being of their commoners remains at the realm of conjecture.

A History of Conflict

Nasarawa: A Distant History

Much has been written in the literature about the insensitivity of European imperialism in arbitrarily partitioning Africa without regards to the cultural differences of its peoples. Martin Meredith (2005:1) for instance, rightly notes that while marking out the boundaries of their new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, taking little or no account of the myriad of traditional monarchies, chieftoms and other African societies that existed on the ground. Where the European imperialism did not engage in arbitrary partitioning of African territories without regards to cultural differences of the people, it enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, language or religion. Thus, Nigeria, for example, contained as many as over 250 ethno-linguistic groups. Kingdoms that had been historically antagonistic to one another were lumped together into latent hostility (ibid).

North Central Nigeria, to which Nasarawa belongs, typifies Nigeria’s ethno-culturally fragmented society. It not only reflects the colonialists’ penchant for lumping together for a new social intercourse, disparate and oftentimes hitherto antagonistic social groups, but also
fits into the theory that Nigeria was formed not to bring about a nation state but rather to “perpetually create a division between the various peoples, [and] set one group against the other…” (cited in Badmus Isiaka Alani, 2003:80). Now comprising six states, namely Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau, and the federal capital territory, Abuja, it is home to a host of disparate ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria. Nasarawa state alone hosts about 25 of these groups, one of which is the Eggon. The specific date of the arrival and settlement at their present abode of some of the major ethnic groups in Nasarawa state such as the Alagos, Mada, Gwandara, Koro, and the Eggon (Premium Times, online, May 22, 2013), have been projected to about between 1232 AD and 1951 AD. But without any specific date, the Eggon claim to earlier arrival projects them as having arrived before any other ethnic group with whom they now co-habit the area. Despite claims of peaceful and harmonious co-existence among the ethnic groups in Nasarawa state, relations among the ethno-linguistic groups in the North Central region have recently been characterized by perennial communal and sectarian strife, especially the Plateau-Nasarawa-Benue-Kogi axis - fostered both by hegemonic and resistance politics.

The Eggon sense of political marginalization transcends the contemporariness of the current agitation however. But it can be located within the context of the Hausa-Fulani hegemonic politics with Islam constituting the single most important factor in the hegemonic drive. For emphasis, Nasarawa has always been governed by Muslims since creation. Although governor Al-Makura who currently epitomizes Eggon frustration, is a Muslim, he is Gwandara and not Hausa-Fulani. Yet there is a sense in which the Muslim domination of the political leadership of Nasarawa state resonates with the Hausa-Fulani Muslim hegemonic charge. According to Ibrahim Waziri, the Hausa and Fulani are two distinct ethnic groups. But when the term is used as Hausa-Fulani in Nigerian context, it refers to a socio-cultural group defined by loyalty to Islam as a religion and an ideology in broad sense. By a socio-cultural group, I mean people who share a destiny in norms and values in the social, economic and political spaces. Sometimes when this term is used it includes people who are neither ethnically Hausa nor Fulani but share the same vision of life that makes for the Hausa-Fulani. This is why a person like me even though being Kanuri ethnically will gladly pass for a Hausa-Fulani culturally (http://kadunavoic.com)

The Eggon angst, therefore, fuses identity, exclusionary politics and religion. The fear of the Hausa-Fulani cum Moslem hegemonic agenda, whether real or imaginary and even if nourished by the fact of the state having not been governed by a non-Muslim/Eggon since inception, is therefore a strong variable in the crisis (Chris Mamman: Interview, 10 October, 2013).

Nasarawa State: Present History

The Ombatse crisis in Alakyo village, Nasarawa state, contiguous to Abuja, in early May 2013, gained national attention when a contingent of Nigeria’s security forces detailed
to arrest the high-priest of the Ombatse cult was ambushed by the group. There were loss of lives including those of the security forces- 10 members of the secret police, the Department of State Services, (DSS) and 20 members of the Mobil Police, (MOPOL) unit of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). Ombaste belongs to the Eggon ethnic nationality in Nasarawa, state. The Ombatse cultists allegedly were forcefully initiating into their membership, adherents of other religions. The group claimed it was on spiritual renewal mission- to clean the Eggon society of sundry mundane ills (Joseph, 2013). But the crisis also espouses a political component. The incident which was only symptomatic of the sectarian tension that had festered in the area, especially between the Eggon and other groups, and fostered by ethno-religious dichotomies, was all about Eggon protestation of their crisis of marginalization from the governorship of Nasarawa state since its creation in 1996. Thus towards the 2015 general elections, the Eggon were determined to produce the state governor. The crisis, therefore, was specifically about the Eggon aspiration to the governorship of the state amidst the incumbent state governor’s desire for a second term. By convention the security forces were on the invitation of the governor.

After its creation, the first two military administrators (Milads) of Nasarawa state (Abdullahi Ibrahim, October 1996-August 1998; Bala Mande, August 1998-May 1999 were Moslems and non-indigenes in line with the prevailing military tradition at the time- not posting military personnel to their states of origin as Milads. Thus the Eggon or any other ethnic group in Nasarawa had no opportunity to preside over the affairs of the state from October 1996 when the state was created under military dictatorship to May 1999 when the military handed over power to civilian politicians. The state governors and their religion, ethnic nationality and political constituency from 1999 to date are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Governor</th>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Senatorial Zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999-2007</td>
<td>Abdullahi Adamu</td>
<td>Ahua</td>
<td>Moslem</td>
<td>South-West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>Aliyu Akwe Doma</td>
<td>Alago</td>
<td>Moslem</td>
<td>Nasarawa South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-Date</td>
<td>Tanko Al-Makura</td>
<td>Gwandara</td>
<td>Moslem</td>
<td>Nasarawa South</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Table

Although the Eggon governorship aspiration had met with frustration since 1999, the ethnic group was optimistic that 2015 was its appointed time- turn; they had prayed to their local god, Azhili for a change in their political (mis)fortune in the state. According to Zachary Zamani Allumag, an Eggon and retired magistrate, “[A]s 2015 is approaching, we are aware that some people are planning to ensure the Eggon people are dislodged from the politics of
the state. So, they call us all kinds of names to hang us” (Sunday Sun, 2 June, 2013). Thus the Eggon agitation is aptly encapsulated by the Ombatse mantra, ‘Our Time Has Come/This is our Turn’ despite that the cult, according to Eggon legend is as old as the ethnic group itself. The conflict, on the one hand was, therefore, about the struggle for political ascendancy and supremacy between the Eggon and the Hausa-Fulani in a culturally-defined sense and on the other, Eggon resistance to Hausa-Fulani domination, according to Martha, an Eggon (interview, 16 September, 2013).

Governor Al-Makura angst against the Ombatse cultists was allegedly due to earlier clashes between the latter and mercenaries allegedly procured by the former and camped at his Kwandere hometown. But crucial in understanding the distrust of the Eggon/Ombatse by Al-Makura’s Gwanda ethnic group and other supporter forces in Nasarawa and proscription of the Ombatse by the Al-Makura-led government is that the alleged forceful administration of oath on non-Ombatse worshippers in the Nasarawa Eggon area between March 31, 2013 and April 7, 2013, was intended that in the 2015 elections, the Eggon would only vote for Eggon candidates irrespective of party affiliations, (Sunday Sun, online, 2 June 2013). More so, under the cover of spiritual revival, Ombatse recruitment drive targeted mainly the youth who were given “native charms and/or amulets ‘that could ward off bullets,’” (Premium Times, online, 22 May, 2013). Martha (interview, 16 September 2013) like any other Eggon, as Zabura Musa Akwanshiki, Abdullahi Usman, Shuaibu Alkali, and Iliyasu Hassan Gyabo and Hasuna Musa Zico Kigbu however, contests Ombatse characterization as an ethnic militia or cult group (interview, 20 September 2013).

The Eggon claim the most-educated and enlightened of the ethnic groups in Nasarawa (Martha interview). Against the backdrop of Ombatse’s Eggon minority ethnic status, however, with the cult’s activities confined to Nasarawa geo-political space, alleged forced oath-taking among its folks and Eggon concomitant desperation for political power may all combine to project the group as a monster and so politically alienate the Eggon. In the context of power struggle, among the ethnic groups in Nasarawa, therefore, for Al-Makura, both Ombatse oath administration and Eggon agitation evoke the Mau Mau Movement of the Kenyan Kikuyu ethnic group oath-taking ritual during the independent struggles. The Mau Mau was characterized as “a sinister tribal cult affecting a largely primitive and superstitious people, confused and bewildered by their contact with the civilized world and prey to the malevolent designs of ambitious politicians,” (Meredith, 2006:79). Ombatse’s ‘This is our Time’ mantra, also draws a foreboding parallel to Umkhonto we Sizwe, (Spear of the Nation), the organization used by Black South Africans in the struggles against the Apartheid regime. Umkhonto we Sizwe had started its armed struggle, with a warning that, ‘[T]he time comes in the life of any nation when there remains only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come’ (Ibid: 24-125). The Uniao das Populacoes de Angola (UPA), which spear-headed the independence of Angola also started out as a tribal organization by the Bakongo ethnic group to resurrect the old Kongo Kingdom, before subsequently proclaiming nationalist objectives (ibid:135).

Although the Eggon have not expressed a separatist agenda either from Nigeria or Nasarawa state, they are nevertheless driven by acute sense of political marginalization
Their agitation thus is anchored more on a sense of exclusion, than on indigene/settler rift, the latter which has been an important ingredient nourishing the festering bloodletting between the ‘indigenous’ Christian ethnic groups in the Jos Plateau area and their settler Muslim Hausa-Fulani rival. For other ethnic groups in Nasarawa however, the counter charge of domineering tendencies against the Eggon and subsequent distrusted by those other groups have not helped the Eggon political cause (interview (2013): Abdullahi Liman, 21 September; Abdul Tukur, Rabo Bakare, and Asabe Musa: 12 October). Manshop Peter Garba, a Kagoro from neighbouring Kaduna state, links the Eggon-phobia among other ethnic groups in Nasarawa to the Eggon achievement in Western education and spread across the nooks and crannies of the state; hence the deployment policy (interview: 18 September, 2013). The distrust ensures that during elections, other ethnic groups in Nasarawa combine their respective populations to neutralize Eggon numerical strength (interview (2013): Hope Eweka, 19 September; Nkiru Okoro, 12 October and Zakari Adamu, 20 September).

Methodology

This paper is based on descriptive survey in Abuja and Lafia, capital of Nasarawa state, North-Central within the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Conducted in 2013, qualitative information is obtained through personal, in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions, constituting the primary sources of the study. The qualitative information from these sources are gotten from seven Eggon and eight non-Eggon natives, providing both Eggon and non-Eggon perspectives to the issue. The choice of non-Eggon minority persons is premised on the assumption that as minorities themselves, more so, from the Middle Belt, their perspective can be useful in understanding the politics of dominance and resistance in the area in the general framework of majority–minority politics in Nigeria and the North particularly. The interviewees are chosen based on their knowledge of the area and its politics and they range from government functionaries, peace and conflict experts, community association members, and ordinary folks (see their names and positions at the time in Appendix A).

The open-ended approach was used for the questionnaire in order to allow for as much information as possible. Some of the questions posed to the interviewees included: (1). How true is the allegation that Ombatse is a cult and ethnic militia; is Ombatse really out to sanitize society or is a political tool? (2). Why have the Eggon been unable to produce the governor of the state despite their numerical strength? (3). Why have the other minority ethnic groups in Nasarawa state failed to support their fellow minority, the Eggon, against the majority Hausa-Fulani? (4). What do you think the tense politics of Nasawara state potent for the Middle Belt in views its many disparate ethnic groups? (5) How do you think the problem can be solved even within the larger Nigerian context? Indeed the notoriety of the Hausa-Fulani hegemonic tendencies both in Nigeria and its North is well-documented in the literature. Therefore, secondary sources are used on issues in reference to that subject in this study. Other secondary sources include works of scholars, which were robustly x-rayed. The
study also made use of newspaper reports of the crisis because of the contemporariness of the subject.

**Empirical Findings**

This section addresses the four research questions which the paper sought to investigate from the outset.

**Research question 1 – Ombatse crisis: Religious-puritanical agenda or Identity/hegemonic politics**

Conflicts in the Nasarawa area revolve around the themes of mutual suspicion and fear of domination among the groups, discrimination/indigeneship/representation in traditional institutions/competition for farming/grazing lands and unaddressed complaints.*1 Empirical findings on the crisis under investigation while fitting into these traditional analytical frameworks, have no linkage whatsoever with any form of spiritual rejuvenation contrary to Ombatse claims. The following instances might suffice: the confrontation between the Eggon and the Gwandara ethnic group in Kwandere in February, 2013 during which the palace of the governor Al-Makura’s elder brother was burnt down, was a fall-out of the conflict between the Eggon and Fulani over farming and grazing issues; the deployment policy adopted by the state government aimed at relocating the Eggon from their settlements across the state back to Nasarawa Eggon and Akwanga areas, which was however challenged up to the Nigerian Supreme Court, derived from the Eggon search for farmlands and subsequent spread to other areas of the state outside of their ‘ancestral homestead’. That search constantly pits them against other ethnic groups, including the Fulani, whose livestock graze on the Eggon farms; the Fulani on their part allege cattle-rustling against the Eggon. Baba Alakyo’s insistence that the Emir of Lafia (a Hausa-Fulani) should first seek the permission of his ethnic (Eggon) paramount leader, (ThisDay, online, May 19, 2013) before he would respond to the Emir’s summon over Ombatse’s activities, clearly reflects the supremacy tussle in respect of the traditional institutions of the various ethnic groups in Nasarawa. This underlines Eggon’s rejection of Hausa-Fulani ‘domination since the creation of Nasarawa state in 1996.’ The deployment policy further nourishes the tension between the Eggon and the state government. The crisis, therefore, has no puritanical objective but strictly reflects domination and resistance politics.

**Research question 2 - The Potential to deepen sectarianism and polarization among Nigeria’s disparate social groups and threaten Nigeria’s efforts at democratic consolidation**

In 2011, two variables played important role in President Jonathan’s electoral success over his challenger, General Muhammadu Buhari, of then Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) in the non-Muslim Northern minority areas. One was the common Christian faith of Jonathan and the non-Muslim Christian minorities. The other, perhaps, more important, was Jonathan’s shared minority status with these groups, some of whom were neither Christians
nor Moslems. In the post-election office sharing politics, the protestation from other ethnic groups in the state against the ceding of Nasarawa ‘s slot in the federal cabinet to the Eggon seemed to have made little impression on then President Jonathan as the Eggon candidate, Labaran Maku who manned the administration’s information portfolio also became a member of Jonathan’s kitchen-cabinet. Maku’s appointment in 2014 as supervising minister of the defense ministry

*1. These issues are contained in the various reports on the crises in the state, including the 2002 Nasawara state Government memorandum explaining the nature and scope of the inter-communal conflicts in Nasarawa state submitted to the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Inter-Communal Conflicts in Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba states. Not only underlined Jonathan’s confidence in him, but further underscored the profound divisiveness Nigeria’s politics had turned towards the 2015 general elections.

Indeed towards the polls, the fault-lines of ethnicity and religion featured prominently in the electioneering campaigns. With the general perception, especially among the Christians that the Boko Haram insurgency was a Northern Muslim opposition to a Christian-Southerner presidency, appointment of Maku, a Christian Northern minority to supervise the defence portfolio hitherto superintended by a Hausa-Fulani Muslim resonated keenly among Jonathan’s non-Muslim Northern and Southern supporters who rightly or wrongly perceived it as a countervailing measure against Northern Muslim conspiracy. Thus, Nasarawa state in itself presented a scenario that mixed politics, religion, and ethnicity; remained potentially explosive, and raised the already charged political temperature in Nigeria. Without any real safeguard within the Nasarawa political firmament to address the Eggon concerns as the 2015 general polls approached, tension heightened and fears of breakout of violence was genuine. Eggon desperation for the Nasarawa governorship was quite obvious. Having thrown their support in 2011 behind Al-Makura, who has an Eggon mother, with the understanding that he would easily cede power to them after one term, the Eggon were sore over the disappointment from their nephew. Although of the Gwandara stock, Al-Makura’s paternal ancestry is Kano, a core Hausa Muslim city. Thus, rather than his maternal origin, Al-Makura’s loyalty went to his Hausa-Muslim paternity.

The Hausa-Fulani Muslims have never hidden their determination to establish their hegemony over Nasarawa from where they could spread both their political and religious influence in the surrounding areas and even beyond. In fact, the conspiracy theory contends that Nasarawa was carved out essentially for that purpose from the old Plateau state, where the Hausa-Fulani Muslims had been feuding with native Christian population. Hence the Muslim stranglehold on the political leadership of the state from inception. Al-Makura picked the gubernatorial ticket of the All Progressive Congress (APC), thereby denying the Eggon the much-anticipated support from him for 2015. Meanwhile, having failed to clinch his People’s Democratic Party (PDP) ticket for the poll, Eggon candidate for the Nasarawa
governorship, Labaran Maku, dumped the PDP for the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA). APGA as a political party was formed by the late Igbo folk’s hero, Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu essentially as Igbo political vehicle. Since its formation in 2003, APGA has only made marginal political impression in the Igbo South-east region of Nigeria—a predominantly Christian area. The Igbo outside of their area, reputedly are the second largest after the indigenous population. Maku’s permutations were to rally the Igbo support while also playing the Christian card, but poll’s results did not match his pre-election calculations.

Noteworthy is that as soon as the APC was registered as a political party in February 2013, by the Independent National Electoral Commission, (INEC), members from across Nigeria converged in Nasarawa to celebrate the achievement. The import was not lost on the discerning public. Until it joined forces with other political parties and associations to form the APC, the CPC controlled only one state in Nigeria-Nasarawa. Although neither the entire membership of the PDP nor CPC/APC is wholly Christian or Muslim, the CPC et al, now APC, is perceived generally as a Muslim Hausa-Fulani party. The Convergence in the only state under its control at the time was resoundingly symbolic: it projected the battle for Nasarawa as fought on two fronts, namely, political, and ethno-religious. By the gathering, the core Hausa-Fulani elements among the promoters of the APC hinted their resolve not to concede the state to any other political party or folks. The group was also determined to consolidate Muslim Hausa-Fulani control over the state. With the violence that erupted in parts of the North after General Buhari loss to Jonathan in 2011, amidst Eggon’s Ombatse mantra, fears of post-election violence in Nasarawa in 2015 was high whichever way the victory went- either to the Hausa-Fulani camp or the Eggon. Nasarawa’s proximity to the Nigeria’s capital also made the ethno-religious tension there more worrisome for Abuja against the backdrop of the rising agitation by the natives of the Federal Capital Territory that elective political offices in the capital city be their exclusive reserve. Indeed the appointment of another Eggon, Patricia Akwashiki, a Christian into the vacant Information portfolio towards the presidential election betrayed Jonathan’s seeming patronage of the Eggon. Strategically, it was premised on its potential to rally the region’s mainly minority Christian population for similar electoral outcomes as in 2011. Rightly or wrongly, the perception among Nigeria’s non-Muslims generally of Jonathan’s main challenger then as in 2015, General Buhari, as Hausa-Fulani Muslim candidate persisted. In the end, the PDP counter-measure against the APC failed to yield its anticipated outcome. The PDP garnered 273,460 votes (53.6 % of the votes) as against APC’s 236, 838, (46.4%) which however surpassed the 25 percent constitutional requirement for a presidential win. For the April 11, 2015 gubernatorial polls in Nasarawa, the Hausa-Fulani Muslim candidate, APC’s Al-Makura routed Eggon’s APGA candidate, polling a total of 191, 463 votes as against Maku’s 114, 674 for the second position thus confirming Garba, et al theory of alliance by other ethnic groups against the Eggon during the elections in spite of the latter’s numerical strength. Invariably Eggon allegation of ethnic cleansing agenda against their stock and both local and foreign mercenary involvement in the violence (Sunday Sun, online, June 2, 2013) add new dimensions to the crisis and is capable of exacerbating the tension in the area. Amid increasing violence by the Fulani militia in the state, Eggon charge against the Hausa-Fulani of importing their kinsmen from neighbouring countries in the fights against them (Martha,
interview, 16 September 2013), is capable of deepening sectarianism and polarization in a country where Fulani violence has become major a concern among other ethnic groups.

**Research question 3 - likelihood of the tendencies in the Nasarawa politics nudging the state into violence after the 2015 elections**

As our research has shown, Nasarawa state is a contested political turf. Hitherto the only state in the hands of the opposition CPC that merged with other political groupings to form the APC now in power both in the state and the center, the Hausa-Fulani/APC factor in the politics of the state combine with the Eggon crisis of marginalization to make the state potentially explosive especially during elections. The violence which marked Nigeria’s 2011 general election in parts of Northern Nigeria, owed essentially to northern hegemonic forces’ rejection of southern Christian presidency. Against that backdrop, towards the 2015 elections, there were genuine fears that with the Hausa-Fulani/APC resolve to retain the state clashing with Eggon/Ombatse ‘It’s our turn’ mantra, the Nasarawa election was likely going to be characterized by violence. But in order to deflate the built-up tension in the state, major candidates in the gubernatorial contest were committed to a non-violence pact by stakeholders, which entailed acceptance of the election results, without upsetting the peace.

**Research question 4 - Viable solutions to address the potentially violate situation?**

The only mechanism that approximates any discernable safeguard to the crisis of domination in Nasarawa politics was the zoning arrangement which aimed at rotating the governorship of the state among the three senatorial district of Nasarawa North, South and South-west. The zoning arrangement ran smoothly from 1999, until 2015 when Al-Makura insisted on another term rather than allow a candidate from Nasarawa North according to the zoning formulae. The zoning had run in the following order: Nasarawa South West (1999-2007: Alhaji Abdullahi Adamu); Nasarawa South (2007-2015: Alhaji Aliyu Akwe Doma and Alhaji Tanko Al-Makura). Had Al-Makura stepped down for a Nasarawa North candidate in the 2015 elections, Al-Makura could have done only a term, a development that could have maintained the zoning arrangement and doused the fear of domination. Towards 2015, signs that Al-Makura would contest the governorship sparked off the Ombaste crisis –‘It’s our time’- and fueled the tension in which Nasarawa was soaked during the elections.

Rather than the pre-election peace accord to forestall violent reactions to the election results, the prevailing peace could be deduced from two sources, namely, former President Jonathan’s conceding of defeat to his perennial challenger Buhari, which deflated the built-up tension across the country and the presence of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Nigeria during the election. The ICC signaled its intention to prosecute actor(s)/player(s) that incited violence prior to, during and after the elections, a development that obviously restrained trouble-makers. After initially fearing outbreak of violence, thus postponing the announcement of its decision on the election petition filed by Maku, against Al-Makura, the Elections Tribunal finally re-affirmed Al-Makura’s victory. The anticipated violent reaction to the development from the Eggon did not occur.
Discussion

The paper considered the Ombatse crisis vis-à-vis the 2015 general elections posing a number of empirical and theoretical questions as listed in the foregoing paragraphs.

As we saw, the politics of Nasarawa state generally, including the 2015 gubernatorial election outcome, on the one hand fitted into the themes of identity, hegemony, exclusionary and resistant politics. On the theme of identity, Boas and Dunn’s postulation that the phenomenon of autochthony is a recent development in African politics needs serious interrogation. This paper proposes a direction. The politics of origin and belonging or ‘son-of-the-soil’ has existed in Africa as far back as the colonial period and deservedly occupied the attention of many an African scholar. Nigerian scholar, Alubo (2008:1) for instance, underlines identity politics as being at the root of the many cases in which violence is perpetrated against Nigerians also by Nigerians “who are citizens of the Federal Republic but not regarded and treated as citizens of particular spaces within Nigeria’s territory.” Identity politics can thus manifest in the form of religion but more as ethnicity, the latter, which in its more visceral forms is further broken down into “indigenes” (natives/son-of-the-soil) versus “settlers” or “strangers” (ibid). Thus “[B]oth sets of identity refer to some relationship to the land; not a return to the feudalism of yore but claims over who arrived in a particular location first,” (ibid). For all intents and purposes, the indigene-settler feud underpins the perennial bloodbath in the entire Middle-Belt and North-Central generally and the Plateau particularly between the Berom, Afizere and others and the Hausa-Fulani. Within its identity politics framework, the Ombatse crisis espouses Eggon outrage over their feeling of marginalization and oppression by the Hausa-Fulani hegemony and subsequent resistance hinged on a claim of earlier arrival in the Nasarawa area by the former over the latter.

On the whole, the outcome of the Nasarawa election reflected a number of themes in our theoretical frameworks. For example, beyond identity, it mirrors the deep divisions among the ethnic groups in the state as also the struggle for the control of the political apparatus of the state between the Eggon majority group and the Muslim Hausa-Fulani, which underpins the Ombatse crisis. Although the Eggon bloc vote had secured the electoral victory for Al-Makura in 2011, in 2015 a political re-alignment between Al-Makura and other ethnic groups, effectively neutralized Eggon’s numerical strength. Ironically those other ethnic groups placed less premium on Al-Makura’s Hausa-Fulani Muslim religious affiliation. Their support invariably mirrors the distrust of the Eggon. Nasarawa politics obviously also falls within the framework of a polity characterized by the ‘struggle to dominate the polity [and] … for gaining control of public resources and/or (making) an exclusive claim to allocate state resources.’ It explains Maku’s desperation, which informed his decision to dump the PDP for APGA. His refusal to accept the election result goes beyond the primordial promptings of the Eggon folks. It is, specifically about the Eggon political elite, losing out to the Hausa-Fulani counterpart. Were the ‘It’s our turn’ (Ombatse) mantra not an elitist project, the Eggon commoner could have violently protested the electoral loss. Maku’s loss at the election tribunal failed to inspire them to violence.
More so, although the non-eruption of violence in the post-election period may seem to challenge our theory on the tendency by the different Nigerian social groups to use violence for political ascendency in different historical circumstances, the pre-election violence by the Ombatse cult yet supports the theory. Nevertheless, due attention needs be paid to the role of the International Criminal Court, (ICC) in the 2015 elections in Nigeria. The presence of ICC, arguably, served the deterrence function of discouraging the Eggon political elite from inciting the people to violence. Accordingly, the effect of the ICC presence during the 2015 election in Nigeria has proven the critical role, which the international community using such important instrument as the ICC can play in the consolidation process of emerging democracies. Mere sending of election observers and monitors to developing democracies is clearly no longer enough. The ICC should, therefore, make its presence in such polities a priority.

The voting did not however support Eggon pretensions to spiritual renaissance within the traditional African religious framework. The non-Muslim ethnic groups that joined forces with the Muslim Hausa-Fulani to defeat the Eggon candidate, Maku, thus making politically-irrelevant, Eggon’s 47 percent of Nasarawa population, are either adherents of the traditional African religion or Christians. This paper proposes that Nasarawa deserves more attention both nationally and internationally than it currently gets, one, because of the involvement of foreigner elements - fighters from neighboring African countries who came in support of their Muslim Hausa-Fulani folks in Nasarawa amid growing insecurity in Nigeria symbolized by the Boko Haram and Fulani militia violence. Two, because of the potentials of the violence feeding into the existing ethno-religious tension in Northern Nigeria generally and the North-Central in particular. With Nasarawa’s proximity to Abuja, amidst the restiveness of the Abuja indigenous population over political offices in the Nigeria’s capital, latent autochthony feelings in Abuja could spill to the surface. It is capable of threatening Nigeria’s stability and her young democracy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has attempted to provide an insight into the tenuous relations between the Eggon ethnic group and their Hausa-Fulani counterpart in Nasarawa state, North-central Nigeria. The Eggon, as the study has shown, are a minority ethnic group in Nigeria, whereas the Hausa-Fulani are a majority ethnic group. The Hausa-Fulani political forces, have always trounced the Eggon in the struggle for the political leadership of the state. There is, therefore, the likelihood of viewing the problem from the general framework of majority- minority politics in Nigeria. But this could be misleading in that although in the context of the status of ethnic groupings in Nigeria, the Eggon are a minority, they however constitute the largest ethnic group in Nasarawa. The Hausa-Fulani have however been able to perpetuate the Eggon political frustration by exploiting the mutual distrust between the Eggon and other non-Hausa- Fulani ethnic groups, even when the Hausa-Fulani hegemony hardly benefits these other groups. The paper therefore makes the following recommendations:
From indications, the safeguard, which Stefan speaks of in heterogeneous and divided societies is clearly absent in Nasarawa politics. Amid the reality of truncating the zoning arrangement, there is currently no discernable power-sharing framework that conveys a sense of belonging not only to the Eggon but also the other social groups in Nasarawa. Stakeholders, who should encompass political actors and other entities such as elders, religious leaders, ethnic associations, etc should insist that the zoning arrangement be respected. Within the senatorial districts, the zoning should further apply in order to accommodate less vocal minor and marginalized groups. The truncated PDP zoning arrangement, which stipulated rotation of the presidency between the North and South provides a good template. It broadly aims at dousing the unnerving tension usually associated with contestation of central power in Nigeria and to manage the tenuous social relations among Nigeria’s disparate social groups. In the meantime, Al-Makura’s should run an inclusive government that importantly accommodates the various social groups in the state.

While the sense of outrage over continuing eroding of the societal moral fabrics even within the Christian-Muslim milieu is a fact and has in some instances elicited suggestions of recourse to traditional templates with beliefs they could foster a more effective social control mechanism and moral system, Ombatse should however shed its self-imposed puritan mission. Ombatse can hardly camouflage its political agenda despite the spiritual revivalist posturing. The group’s claim as “a spiritual body that has emerged to revive the well-known and highly respected norms and traditions of the Eggon handed over by our ancestors… [with] the sole aim …to cleanse our society of increasing ills just as any religious body in Nigeria aims to achieve,” (Daily Trust, December 10, 2012, p. 58) can only excite a great deal of dissonance in an acutely and religiously-contested environment as Nasarawa. The state is not homogenous and attempt by the Eggon to impose its world-view on others exposes an extremist tendency that could also elicit extreme reactions from other forces while raising the scepter of religious-related violence in the North to which that region is prone. It will add to the growing insecurity plaguing Nigeria.

The parallel between the events in Plateau state and the scenarios in Nasarawa also deserve attention. Campbell and Harwood have noted that “[I]n Jos itself and in some outlying villages, the violence has led to ethnic cleansing that recalls the Balkans. Formerly mixed villages or Jos neighbourhood now consist of only single ethnic group,” (Daily Trust, Friday, 19, July 2013, p. 3). Although the Eggon have defeated the Nasarawa government deployment policy at the Supreme Court, the group’s perception of the policy as a containment strategy should guide policy makers in the state to ensure that no attempts are made in other subtle ways to outwit the law. No such policy should be directed against any group as doing so could only worsen social relations. What is needed are policies that enhance social cohesion.

Abuja should contemplate the Ombatse crisis beyond the death of security personnel or the state as a mere object in the political permutations. Seeming State perception of the problem as localized event with no direct threat to Abuja is faulty. Abuja should encourage peaceful resolution of the crisis. Western attention that views the crisis from the lens of festering sectarian violence in Nigeria is also mistaken. The Muslim vs ‘Other’ element in the
crisis could attract international mujahedeen, more so with the reported involvement of foreigner elements in the violence.

Recommendations of the past commission of inquiries over past violence and crises in the state should be implemented and those who suffered human and material loses in those circumstances should be compensated in order to invoke a sense of justice.

One important lesson from the ICC intervention in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, is the critical role international agency like the ICC can play in divided societies as Nasarawa and Nigeria. Nigerians and the civil society groups in the country should pressure that the presence of the ICC during major elections be part of Nigeria’s electoral process. Indeed hints by the African Union (AU) to commence trial of political offenders will be of added value.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

From the foregoing analysis, it is obvious that despite the prevailing calm, the Eggon/Hausa-Fulani political wrangling is far from over. The political situations in that state should, therefore, be of continued interest not only to scholarly research but also to policy makers, more so because of the proximity of the state to Abuja, Nigeria’s political capital. Indeed the inability of the Eggon or any other ethnic group in Nasarawa state to assume the governorship of the state rather than the political savvy of the Hausa-Fulani owes essentially to the inability of other groups in the state to pool together their political resources to throw off the Hausa-Fulani hegemonic yoke. We suggest that this should be of a subject of further research from this study. What has sustained the Hausa-Fulani Muslim hegemony in Nasarawa over and amidst mutually antagonistic ethno-religious groups despite the latter’s collective numerical superiority? Since democracy is a game of numbers, why have these other social groups been unable to exploit their aggregate superior numerical advantage to end their collective political predicament? Why would the Eggon align politically with the Hausa-Fulani Muslim elements in 2011 instead of rallying behind non-Hausa-Fulani political forces in the state? Moreover, while the Nasarawa problem is expressed in political terms, it is not limited merely to the struggle for the capture of the state political apparatus between the Eggon and the Hausa-Fulani. Issues of religion and particularly autochthony also underline the latent hostility that pervade social relations not only between the Eggon and Hausa-Fulani, but also among the ethno-religious groups in Nasarawa. After fulfilling the necessary conditions, why has Nasawara not yet assumed the dubious status of Jos Plateau, also in the North-central, where indigene-settler rift often mutating into ethno-religious feud has created perennial sectarian blood-letting? The potentials are still there. These should also be of interest to researchers in the areas of peace, conflict and security.
References


Daily Trust, Abuja 10 December, 2012, p. 58


**Internet Sources**

*Abel Daniel “We are not militias, we are a prayer group”- Ombatse Cult’ Vanguard, December 22, 2012. Available at [http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/12/we-are-not-militias-we-are-a-prayer-group-ombatse-cult/](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/12/we-are-not-militias-we-are-a-prayer-group-ombatse-cult/) (retrieved 12 November, 2015).*


Appendix A
Interviewees:

1. Martha X – An Eggon woman and Aide of former President Goodluck Jonathan. She lives in Abuja (interview, 16 September, 2013)
2. Hasuna Musa Zico Kigbu – (Chairman, Ombatse) (interview, 20 September, 2013)
3. Zaburah Musa Akwanshiki,(Secretary, Ombatse) (interview, 20 September, 2013)
4. Abdullahi Usman (Member, Ombatse) (interview, 20 September, 2013)
5. Shuaibu Alkali (Member, Ombatse) (interview, 20 September, 2013)
6. Iliyasu Hassan Gyabo (Member, Ombatse) (interview, 20 September, 2013)
8. Manshop Peter Garba- Deputy Director and Researcher at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, IPCR, Abuja. Although from near-by Kaduna state, Manshop lives in Nasarawa among the various tribes in the state. He has good grasp of the politics of the state (interview 18 September, 2013).
9. Hope Eweka- a non-Eggon who grew up in the Nasarawa Eggon. Formerly a Researcher with the IPCR, she is now with the Nigerian Communications Commission, NCC (interview, 18 September, 2013).
10. Rabo Bakare- of the Hausa/Fulani stock, Rambo formerly of the IPCR, now with the Nasarawa State University, Keffi (interview, 12 October, 2013)
11. Dr. Abdullahi Liman- An Hausa, formerly of the University of Abuja, but now with the Nasarawa State University, Keffi (interview, 21 September, 2013).
12. Nkiru Okoro, an Igbo, and trader, Nkiru was born in Agyaragu, Nasarawa State. She was raised among the Gwandaras, Koros, Alagos, Agatus, Eggons, and other tribes in Nasarawa state. She now lives in Masaka, near Abuja (interview, 12 October, 2013).