

## **Ethnic Conflict and Political Instability in Nigeria: A Case of the 1967-1970 Civil War**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Predictability, indiscrimination is the neglect of individual differences and the overemphasis of similarities. It is also a form of perceptual set in which a person chooses to ignore differences and changes in events things and people. Ethnicity however, plays a significant role in our tendency to employ the principles of National integration to establish a stabilized political culture. In Nigeria, as worrisome as this may appear to be, most Nigerians have considered the civil war era as a period lost by Nigeria to ethnic chairmanism in her search for political stability. The thrust of this paper therefore is to examine ethnic conflict in Nigeria and political instability in the face of competing national interest, using the 1967-1970 Civil War as a basis of evaluation. This paper would further explore reasons why there are accounts of gory incidents of mindless killings of innocent souls by religious sects, armed robbery, militant youths, political thugs, kidnapping, corruption, electoral fraudsters and different cult groups which are disheartening events for an already troubled nation that barely survived a civil war.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Conflict, Ethnic, Political Instability*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The survival of Nigeria as an entity is daily being threatened by the seed sowed in the cause of building and developing her nation. The development of these seen of discord and the forces extracted from them are today pitching against her corporate existence. Evidence of these are abound in the calamitous happening across the length and breadth of the country. These are the daily baptism received in the account of innocent killing of Nigerians in the name of religious sects, armed robbery, military and terrorist attacks, political thugs, cultist, kidnapping and hired assassins. These disheartening events including official killing by the police under the cover of accidental discharge, branding of different names to justify their mischief are too many for an already troubled country which barely survived a revolution few years ago.

As Chinua Achebe (1983)<sup>1</sup> puts it, “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership, that there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigeria character, there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmark of true leadership”. While one is still pondering over analyses of Chinua Achebe in line with the realities of the day, it has in fact become very obvious that the qualities of integrity, honesty, commitment and competence of individual leaders at the top account for the settlement of some of the problems in the country. It becomes obvious that collective qualities of common vision, focus and desire for development of elites as a whole matters greatly in achieving the goals of a nation. In consideration of the highlighted issues, Ibrahim Gambari (2010)<sup>2</sup> in line with the positions presented earlier by Chinua Achebe (2010)<sup>1</sup> in examining issues a Nigerian leader should avoid as a poser of building the nation and having realized the standards of recruitment and general performance of leadership over the years have much to be desired. Therefore, in his recommendations, Gambari (2010)<sup>2</sup> maintained that: “we do not need leaders who see themselves as champions of only some sections of our population, we do not need leaders who do not understand the economic and political problems of the country, let alone how to find durable solution to them, we do not need leaders who are more interested in silencing their opponents than pursuing justice, we do no need leaders who preach one thing and do the exact opposite, we do not need leaders who place themselves above the constitution and the laws of the country, but leaders who lead by upholding and respecting the law, we do not need leaders who have no sense of tomorrow, other than that of their private bank accounts”.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In considering the topic of this paper, "Ethnic Conflict and political Instability in Nigeria" the assumption may be that political instability has relationship with ethnic conflict. On considering the relationship, an analysis of the two variables are inevitable, first the situation of conflict is the issue of ethnic groups pursuing incompatible goals which are just at the individual perspective and should be desired to them. As Karl Cardell and Stefan Wolf (Internet 2013)<sup>3</sup> stated whatever the concrete issues over which conflict erupts, at least one of the conflicting parties will explain its dissatisfaction in ethnic terms. That is, one party to the conflict will claim that its distinct ethnic identity is the reason why its members can not realize their interests, why they do not have the same rights, or why their claims are not satisfied. Thus, ethnic conflicts are a form of group conflict in which at least one of the parties involved interprets the conflict, its causes, and potential remedies along an actually existing or perceived discriminating ethnic divide. Then political instability can be said to be a situation whereby political structures and institutions are not well established in operating an acceptable system of government that provides good governance in a peaceful environment and exhibiting continuity in its policy and programs.

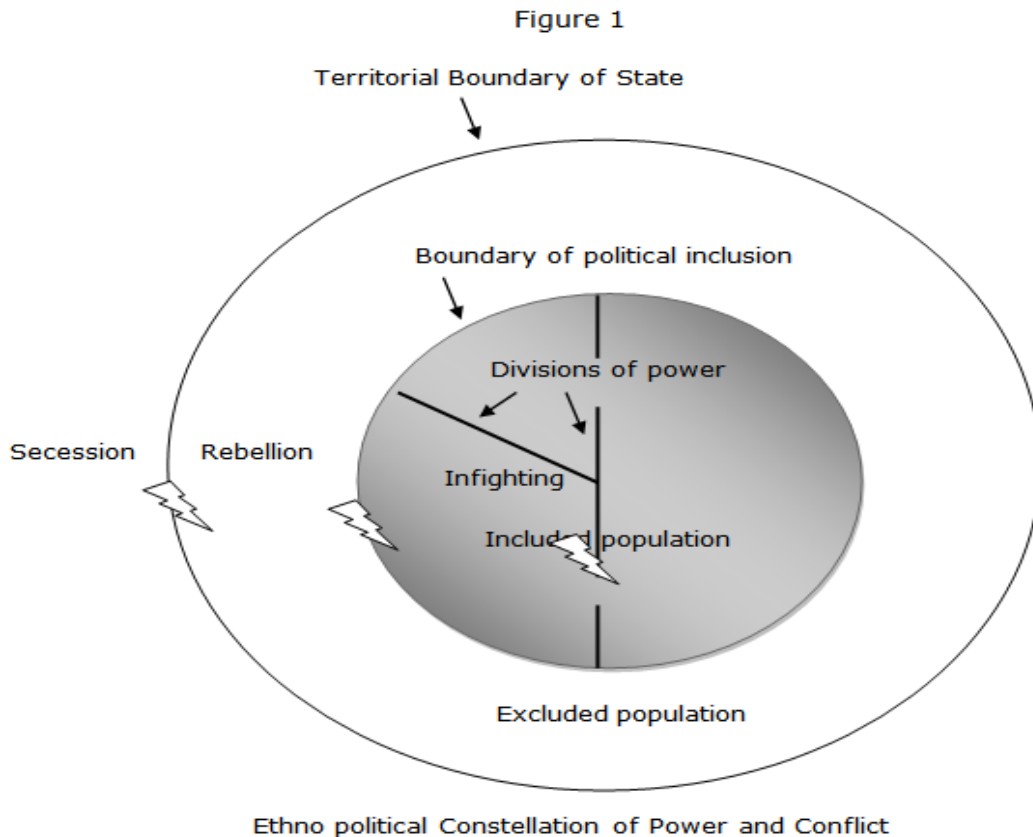
Political instability therefore depends on ethnic conflict. A society that is comprised of people with diverse cultures, traditions, languages and religion which have not been harmonized by the individual groups so as to work as one people in a nation state means practicing these differences in the polity, it implies that sentiments will prevail which will surely bring conflict with one another's interest. In essence, Naomi Weir (2012 internet)<sup>4</sup> portrayed ethnic ties as inherent in human beings, that we have deep, natural connections that link us to some people and that leads to natural divisions with others, whether based on race, religion, language or location, applies here. Also when some ethnic groups are larger than others with such sentiments, it is obvious that the big or large ones will suppress the small ones and the small ones will always struggle to be heard just as the big ones will keep suppressing. In a situation that among the big groups there is any attempt of such suppression on any or some of them will be violently resisted. Political leaders in the ethnic groups are always mobilizing their followers to ensure that suppressions are resisted and rather strive to move forward from the present position in the polity to higher position. While the others that have not had a share of the national cake keep striving to belong or have their share of the cake. Let us apply the theory of ethnic politics and conflict by Wimmer, Cederman and Min<sup>5</sup> in analyzing the situation.

Theory of ethnic politics and conflict by Wimmer, Cederman and Min<sup>5</sup> are based on two pillars. First is on institutionalists theories and the second is based on configuration logic. Institutional theories show how established structures of political legitimacy provide incentives for actors to pursue certain type of political strategies while the configuration logic shows how similar political institutions can produce different consequences and how similar consequences can result from different constellations of power. According to Wimmer (2012)<sup>5</sup> ethnicity matters in politics because the nation-state relies on ethno national principles of political legitimacy that the state is ruled in the name of an ethnically defined people, therefore rulers care for their own people. In the institutional environment, political office holders have incentives to gain legitimacy by favouring co-ethnic over others when distributing public goods and government jobs. Such ethnic favourism is more in poor states, and states with weak civil society institutions where non-ethnic channels for aggregating political interest and rewarding political loyalty are scarce. Political leaders and followers orient the strategies toward avoiding dominance by other ethnic group, they strive for self determination and self-rule, they also strive for adequate representation in the central government. The aggregate consequence of these strategic orientations is a struggle over control of the state between ethnically defined actors. Such ethnic politics lead to the process of political mobilization, Counter-mobilization and escalation. Political leaders mobilize their followers against threat of ethnic dominance by others. Conflict demands by ethnic groups may result to armed confrontation, particularly demand for self rule as the case of Biafra.

The second model is the configuration of power and types of ethnic conflict. This model look at levels of political, economic and social participation, political institutions that likely result to conflict in the ethnically based nation-state, there are three category of people, the first is those who have access to central government, second are those that are appendage to the bigger ethnic groups that have access to government and thirdly those that are excluded in the central government. According to Tilly's model the three types of boundaries that defined the constellation of power are as follows:

- [1] The territorial boundaries that define which ethnic communities are considered a legitimate part of the state.
- [2] The boundary of inclusion separating those who share government power from those who are not represented at the highest level of government.

[3] The division of power and the number of ethnic cleavages among the included sections of the population. This is illustrated in figure 1 (ethno political constellation of power and conflict) attach as appendix. Each boundary can become the focus of ethno political conflict. We can thus distinguish between three types of ethnic conflict depending on which boundary is at stake, and actors involved. When excluded segment of the population fight to shift the boundaries of exclusion, the conflict is called rebellions, when ethnic elites in power are fighting against each other this is infighting, and when the fight is aimed at changing the territorial boundaries of the polity is called secession.



The outer circle (territorial boundary) shows the nation comprising the various ethnic groups, in the case of Nigeria, over 250 ethnic groups. The inside encircling the grey (boundary of political inclusion) represent those ethnic groups that are fully involve in governance or involve in decision making, in the case of Nigeria, the big three ethnic groups – the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo groups. The white portion represents the other over 200 ethnic groups which may not have full representation at the center. Inside the grey divisions of power, for instance divisions among the big three elites groups, infighting occurs when ethnic elites fight among themselves in the power sharing. In the white portion where we have the excluded population, we have rebellion taking place when they struggle to be included in the power sharing, and in situations where they are totally denied or excluded, secession or secession attempt takes place. Also if there be any oppression on any of the big three, secession is still threatened.

Looking at the theory above as it has to do with the situation in Nigeria, the ethnic political parties as formed by the colonialist and handed over to the Nigerian political leaders, the electoral body and process, the regional structure, the legislator and the rest of the political institutions and organs that were the determinant factors of who rules at the center and excise leading political powers in the country. Parties were formed majorly with regional background. Like in the case of First Republic, for instance, the three major political parties with their leaders orchestrated the sentiment of their regions. For instance in the first election conducted there was no clear winner of the three parties to take up the center stage of the polity and so a coalition was formed by two parties (NCNC and NPC) and the third one (AG) as opposition, to form the central government. In essence, these ethnic base political institutions and organs provide the ethnic leaders such incentives they operated on. If one considers the Nigerian ethnic structure with over 250 ethnic groups, only three major ethnic groups dominated the major political parties prominently while the rest were either appendage to the major or excluded.

### III. ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

One of the greatest challenges of nation building in Nigeria is the challenge posted by ethnicity. After independence in 1960, it dawned on Nigeria and Nigerians that Arthur Richard (1979)<sup>6</sup> was in everything right. Uroh (1998)<sup>7</sup> noted that:

*“It is only the accident of British suzerainty which has made Nigeria one country. That it is still far from being one country or one nation, socially or even economically. That socially and politically, there are deep differences between the major tribal groups. They do not speak the same language and they have highly divergent customs and ways of life and they represent different stages of culture”.*

It was therefore quite clear from the beginning that ethnicity is and will be a major challenge to Nigeria unity. The bubble of this misfortune burst open in 1967, and 30 months, language and religion defined one's position on the rather blurred line of symmetry demarcating the enemies' camp from that of the loyalties. The civil war ended without “victor” and “vanquished”. But rather than suppressed ethnic question in Nigeria, it rather repositioned it as was expressed in the recommendation of CDC 91977:ix).<sup>8</sup>

*There had in the past been inter-ethnic rivalry to secure the domination of government by one ethnic group or combination of ethnic groups to the exclusion of others. It is essential to have some provisions to ensure that the predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups is avoided in the composition of government or the appointment or election of persons to high offices in the state”.*

In furtherance to the highlighted CDC (1977)<sup>8</sup> recommendations the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria<sup>9</sup>, and accordingly declared thus: -

*This composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs should be carried out in such a Manner as to reflect the Federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few state or a few ethnic or other sectional groups in the government or in any of its agencies”.*

Against the background of the establishment of the Federal character and its entrenchment in the 1999 constitution, the inter ethnic struggle for political power has been the major issue of Nigeria political stability parties in the country, the NCNC, AG and NPC had become associated with the three major ethnic groups, Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa and the three major regions in the country, East, West and North respectively. The leaders of these parties were ethnically based as shown in the table below:

**Table 1**

Party	Igbo	Other Eastern groups	Yoruba	Other western groups	Hausa/ Fulani	Other Northern groups	Others
NPC	Nil	Nil	6.8	Nil	51.3	32.4	94.
NCNC	49.3	9.9	26.7	5.6	2.8	Nil	5.6
AG	4.5	15.2	68.2	7.6	3.0	Nil	1.5

*Source: Richard Sklar and C. S. Whitaker, University of California press 1966  
Ethnic Distribution of Leaders of the Major Parties in 1958 as Percentage Total*

From the table above it is obvious that the distribution of the leadership of the parties are base on the three major ethnic groups of igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani with the other minority groups participating scantily just as the table below has shows the strength of the parties in the minority groups.

**Table 2**

Area	NCNC	AG-UNIP	Total
COR states Ibibio/Efik	7	11	18
Ogoja	2	4	6
Rivers-Ijaw	3	3	6
Total (COR)	12	18	30
Ibo Area	52	2	54

*Eastern House of Assembly Election 1957, Party Strength in Minority Areas*

From the above table of Eastern Region House of Assembly election in 1957 the COR (Cross River, Ogoja and Rivers) which is the minority area could go out of their regional political party and contest election as shown in the Ibibio/Efik and Ogoja elections that they won election under AG and NCNC which is the regional party. This is so because the minority strives to be heard and so seek for the party that will sympathize with their plight. That is to say that the majority areas suppresses the minority areas within the regions and so the minority rebels in the regions so as to belong. In 1954 constitution which the Nigeria Nationalists organized in which the various political parties, participated extensively in formulating, was the first to transform the structure on Nigerian government from unitary foundations to Federalism. These regionalists documents was hailed by the Nationalists leaders as most likely to preserve national unity. In reference to it as quoted by Nnoli (1980)<sup>10</sup> K. O. Mbadiwe gleefully noted that it “marked the first time in our history when Nigeria political parties, acting though their various leaders decided on the type of constitution under which Nigeria should be ruled”. But it was this same constitution according to Nnoli (1980)<sup>10</sup> which for the first time created regional premiers, regional governors, regional public service, judiciary and marketing bodies, and provided for separate regional progress toward the full attainment of self government. It fully institutionalized regionalism in the country. It reflected successful attempt by the regional factions of the emergent privileged local classes to carve out spheres of economic influence for themselves. Politically, these factions set about mobilizing the masses in a bid to control the governmental apparatus in these regional empires as a means of maximizing their economic benefits. In the process the regional leaders succeeded in creating the false impressions that the various political parties were the champions of the interests of various ethnic groups, and that struggle of these parties for political dominance in the country represented the struggle of the various ethnic groups for political ascendancy in the society. They covertly, according to Nnoli (1980)<sup>10</sup> openly used emotive ethnic symbols and on the alleged ethnic conflicts of interest as a means of mobilizing mass support for their own selfish class interest. In the quest to control the limited positions both at the centre and regions, the regional parties generated antagonism and hostility among the major linguistic groups in the country.

Ibrahim (1995)<sup>2</sup> stated that major contributory factor to ethnic conflict is the undemocratic nature of governance, that when governance decays, the people retreat into sectarian enclaves which are seen as providing security. Nwaezeigwe (1998)<sup>11</sup> opined that ethnicity is an instrument of groups’ consciousness which serves to elevate one’s pride and sense of being Osunubi and Osunubi (2008)<sup>12</sup> maintained that ethnicity entails a clash of clusters, that it pits against each other especially people whose values are in conflict who want different things and who do not understand each other. That this situation is created by modernization which has made people want the same things at the same time and this set up a great scramble for resources. He furthered said that ethnic conflict is the result of economic competition between ethnically differentiated segments of working class or ethnically differentiated traders or customers. In essence members of any ethnic group fight to protect or get what belongs to their group of strive to grasp their share of national cake which sometimes result to ethnic conflict. Wimmer, Cederman and Min (2004)<sup>5</sup> stated that because ethnicity is linked to the legitimacy of both state and its political elites, ethnicity is more politicized in the modern nation-states and so ethnic conflict has increased overtime as more territories of the world are governed as nation-states. Ethnic political elites and followers device strategies toward avoiding dominance by other ethnic groups. They strive for self determination and self rule, they strive for adequate representation in the central government. The aggregate consequence of the strategic orientation is the struggle over the control of the state between ethnicity defined actors which leads to political mobilization, counter-mobilization and escalation. It is obvious that adequate representation at the central government offers advantages such as access to government jobs and services, benefits of full citizenship rights, a fair trial and protection from arbitrary violence and prestige belonging to the state owning ethnic group. This is assumeably why ethnic groups struggle to be in control, for these advantages. Political leaders’ mobilization of followers against threat of dominance by others, and conflicting demands may result to armed confrontation. Ethnicity has enable nepotism, tribalism, favoritism, godfatherism and other sentimental vices to strive in the political, social and economic system. Ethnic conflict resulted to the 1966 coups by the military, with the intention to put out of the system ethnic sentiments, but according to Tehemba (2008)<sup>13</sup> after the coups the military also became ethnic champions and so led to arm confrontation.

### **The Civil War**

The Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 was fought between Federal or Central Government of Nigeria and the Eastern Region of Nigeria. The two camps were led by two Nigerian army colonel Lt. Col. Gowon as the head of state then led the eastern regional camp. The war claimed thousands of Nigerians lives and thousands of others were maimed, properties were also destroyed. It also destructed growth and development which took place after independence.

### **Cause of the Civil war**

Uji W. Terlumu in Adejo (2008)<sup>13</sup> stated that the socio-political changes that occurred with the January 1966 coup and that of July 1966 counter coup were dramatic changes that precipitated into the 30<sup>th</sup> months civil war in the country. He also pointed out that the manipulation of the economy of oil by the Northern and southern political class led to the crisis. That the war could have been avoided if not given the significant and pivot role of the economy of the oil boom played in the war. In essence, resource control and power struggle was exploited by the divergent interest groups which caused conflict and that resulted to the civil war. These issues analyzed here are in line with Karl Marx theory of class relations the understanding of the dynamics of conflict and struggle in human societies. In looking at the background issues in the system that culminated to the Biafran crisis, it is expedient to trace from the colonial constitutions of Aurther Richard which brought the three regions of North, West and East to work together. These regions compete among themselves for offices and dominant positions in government and civil service. Anthony Enahoro's motion which made the house of representative of North extraction opposition in the national Assembly which caused acrimony as the representatives were subjected to insult, abuses and ridicules in Lagos. With this, the Northerners felt they were not to work with the southerners and so after independence they introduced the Northernization policy which was to ensure that northerners gain control of every thing in the country. The policy caused the sack of southern Nigerians, particularly the Igbos from government service in the north and replacing them with northerners even though not qualified for such positions. If such position requires expert, they rather employ expatriate instead of a Nigerian of the southern origin.

The issues mention above from the 1946 Richard's constitution down to the 1954 elections, and the election crisis of 1962 and the 1963 census crisis, followed by 1964-65 election crisis resulted to the inevitable coup of 1966. Victor Anya (2012)<sup>14</sup> stated that the January 15, 1966 coup that claimed the lives of prominent Northern and Western politicians caused indignation in the two regions and left the people with the opinion that the coup was one targeted against their people. Henry Kissinger in his report to the American president, reported that the Biafra civil war was rooted in the failure of the first generation of British tutored politicians to make something of independence and unity of the country. That while the world expected dedication and commitment, corruption grew and tribal leaders were at loggerhead with one another. He pointed out that the coup was an effort by young army officers to set things right. But the trend of killing faultier, looked bias thus a counter-coup which resulted to the killing of the military head of state and a great number of Igbos. Many authors and commentators on the issue of the cause of the war said that the 1966 coups were the immediate cause of the war. As stated by Achebe (2012)<sup>1</sup>, that if the counter-coup has ended in the killing of Igbo officers and men in large numbers the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat, but that the brutal killing or massacres of thousands of Igbo civilians living in Northern Nigeria by the Northerners was described as pogroms, became a case of the Igbos not wanted or to eliminate them. The proximate cause of the war was the 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1967 proclamation of the Republic of Biafra by Lt. Col. Ojukwu, seceding Eastern Nigeria from the other parts of the country. This action was as a result of the pogroms mentioned above.

### **Methodology of the Study**

The historical research design was adopted for paper because it helped in interpreting past trend of attitude, events and facts as related to the historical antecedents of events in the country.

### **Area of the study**

The former Eastern Nigeria constituted the area of the study, but for accuracy of facts, emphasis was placed on ABI Local Government Area of Cross River State that constituted on important site of the war zone and has boundaries with Ebonyi and Imo states of Nigeria. The population of Abi is about two million people, comprising of six clans and villages. The sample population was limited to two hundred adults selected randomly among the six clans.

### **Sources of data collection**

The sources of data are the primary and secondary. That is from actual witnesses and middle men, reports or documents.

### **Sample and sampling technique**

The sample of mature males and females who have witnessed the various community conflicts were used. A simple random sampling techniques was employed to select opinion leaders in the various communities.

### **Research instrument**

The main instruments for collecting data were structured questionnaire and oral interview.

### **Data collection/analysis**

The data collected through the questionnaire and interview were base on the hypothesis and analyzed using simple percentage to ascertain the degree of popularity. The hypothesis is ‘there is no significant relationship between ethnicity and civil war in a country’.

*Table 3*

Variables	N	$\sum x$	$\sum y$	$\sum x^2$	$\sum y^2$	$\sum xy$	$\infty$
Ethnicity	88	200		460			
						5225	0.56
Civil war	87		528		7225		

### ***Relationship between Ethnicity and Civil War in the Country***

From the table above, there is a strong relationship between ethnicity and civil war in Nigeria. This is shown by a correlation co-efficient of 0.56; by implication moderate relationship exist between ethnicity and civil war.

## **IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULT AND FINDINGS**

The result of the research shows that there is positive relationship between ethnicity and civil war and incessant political instability in Nigeria. Accordingly, the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of alternative hypothesis as stated above. The Nigerian civil war was the most violent ethnic arm conflict in Nigeria which has created serious negative impact in the country polity. In an interview with a community leader who said he participated as Biafra soldier, he said the destruction done by the war has not been repaired yet even though there was not much development as at today and that the bridge project the government of Azikiwe, wanted to construct in his community was suspended upto today. After the civil war, Nigeria has witnessed, successful, failed, bloody or bloodless coups numbering up the eight which implies instability in the politics of the country. Ethnic conflict brought coup d’etat into the system which became part of the military regimes as the military perpetuated themselves in the politics of the country. Mobilization of ethnic political and military leaders caused or escalate ethnic conflicts, and instability of the political system.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The inter ethnic struggle for socio-economic ascendancy inevitably leads to nepotism and its anti social consequences. Over the years changes have taken place in the study of ethnic stratification in Nigeria. The early advantages enjoyed by some ethnic groups have been wiped away overtime. Those Nigerians who first made contact with the colonialists learned the colonial system of exploitation, unrestrained by the social authority and had colonial projects located in their ethnic homeland and have seen the gap between them and some being very narrowed.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATION**

Base on the findings, the following recommendations were made;

- [1] Ethnic tendencies should be removed from the Nigerian body politics, and operate national political parties and not regional or ethnic.
- [2] Tribal inclinations should be abhorred with absolute disdain.
- [3] Peace and patriotic education and campaign should be intensified in the country.

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