

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ETHNIC REALITY OF NIGERIA: THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The extent to which ethnic nationalities are able to effectively manage the interplay of ethnic differences determines to what extent a multi-ethnic nation develops without crisis. Historically Nigeria has come a long way from multi-ethnic entity with political differences and background to the amalgamation of 1914 till the present structure of thirty-six states. Ethnicity, no doubt has contributed immensely to ethnic conflicts in Nigeria because of long standing revulsion or resentments towards ethnic groups different from one's own or fear of domination which can as well lead ethnic groups to resort to violence as a means to protect and preserve the existing ethnic groups. ethnicity in Nigeria, is a product inequality among the various ethnic groups orchestrated by a long period of colonialism; a period which witnessed the ascendancy of three major ethnic groups to the socio-political domination of other ethnic groups and a period when the three major ethnic groups were used as a pedestal for the distribution of socio-political goods, resulting in the inability of other ethnic groups to access these socio-political goods. Considering the relationship between ethnicity and development; socio-political exclusion is not only ethically dangerous to development but also economically unproductive. Hence, there is a need for the adoption of inclusive governance to manage ethnicity in Nigeria. Notwithstanding, ethnic conflict still persists and an attempt will be made in this study to identify the reasons.

Introduction

The International Day of Peace which was established by a United Nations resolution in 1982, and marked every year on September 21, is a global event whose activities are significant in highlighting the worldwide efforts toward conflict resolution and peace building. However this day is more relevant to the continent of Africa where most conflicts have taken place, with some running for decades, and seem to have defied every proffered solution.

Today, various parts of Africa such as Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda to mention a few, have experienced and some are still undergoing dangerous scenes of dysfunction and conflict, which have occurred between communities, ethnic groups and religious groups. Nigeria is no exception. A close observation has shown ethnicity as a mobilizing agent among the most important questions of this century, as conflict linked to ethnicity has led to significant loss of life and injuries in many countries, and become a major element of impoverishment, undermining human security and sustainable development.

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed a period of unforeseen sociopolitical and economic instability as well as bloodshed. This is partly due to the petty- bourgeois origins of Nigerian nationalism and the politicization of ethnicity in the polity. Like the national formations on the Indian subcontinent, the political formation of Nigeria came into being alongside several contextual socio-economic and political factors; the fear of domination, economic exploitation, social and sometimes religious discrimination

(Awoshakiu, T. 2002) These and others have not only set the tone for socio-economic and political underdevelopment, but have also set the various ethnic groups against each other.

Nigeria is located in West Africa bordering on the Gulf of Guinea, and lies between the Benin Republic and Cameroon. The country has a total of 923,770 square km, 13,000 square km of which is covered by water. The boundaries of Nigeria extended for 4,047 km and countries with co-joining borders include; the Benin Republic (in the South West), Cameroon (in the South East), the Republic of Chad (in the North East) and Niger Republic (in the North West) (Awe, B. 1999). The three major ethnic groups are Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. There are, however, other sizable ethnic groups which include Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Ogoni, Igbira, Jukun, Tiv etc. The major religious groups are Muslim, Christian and indigenous beliefs. The official language is English. This is as result of British colonisation that lasted for more than hundred years; whereas, the other languages associated with the three major ethnics groups are Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. These socio-cultural differences have separated Nigerians from each other and constitute one of the main factors militating against national integration. However Nigerian leaders seem to be driven by the problems they create, even though Nigeria's very diversity may indeed prove to be the guarantee of its stability and moderation if properly managed. Nigeria, like India, Canada, Malaysia, Ghana, today is one of the countries in Africa that owes its existence to the imperialistic activities of Britain. The pursuit of British economic ambition and expeditions through conquest crystallized in the rather "artificial" creation called Nigeria in 1914, subjugating people from diverse culture, traditions and ethnic nationalities and organizing them to construct the Nigerian state.

The amalgamation in effect, produced two Nigeria with different social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds and development within the country. Some of the independent nation-states, kingdoms and communities that were thus combined included Kanem Bornu, the Sokoto caliphate, all in the present day Northern Nigeria; the city states of the Niger-Delta; the largely decentralized Igbo-speaking people of the South East; the old Benin Empire as well as the Yoruba Empire of Oyo, which had once been one of the most powerful states on the West African Coast. What the imperial government thought to be advantageous to them; today has come to be a major problem for the socio-political development of Nigeria. In other words, its artificial origin, coupled with other socio-political and economic factors, bequeathed it with a number of fundamental problems, which have turned to be the challenge of her socio-political and economic development.

With the adoption of Richard's constitution in 1946, Nigeria was divided into three unequal regions (North, West and East). The Mid-Western Region was created in 1964. Political parties were thus, formed and maintained throughout the colonial era on regional and ethnic basis. Then, urban centres were formed, culminating the dispersal of people of the three major ethnic groups into different areas in the country, hence the question of exclusivism rocking the unity of the country today.

During the colonial era Nigerians only spoke with one voice perhaps to fight the common enemy "colonialism", with each ethnic group having a different agenda which surfaced after the flag of independence was raised in 1960. Competitive elections and Africanization of the bureaucracy began to make ethnicity increasingly important as the basis for political support and access to higher levels of state in Nigeria after independence. Nigeria today is beset with strings of socio-political problems which stem from the lop-sided nature of the political divisions in the country, the uneven socioeconomic development and the type of federal system and the spirit in which it operates.

Post-independence Nigeria was turbulent and was marked by a succession of sociopolitical crises, as parties and ethnic groups violently struggled for political power and resources of the centre; embroiling the institutions of the state in a battle against each other. Due to the lack of tolerance among politicians (ethnic groups) and their unwillingness to abide by the rule of fair play in governance, political instability engulfed the newly independent state of Nigeria. Thus; the first phase of government under the leadership of the then Head of State, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa was prematurely brought to an abrupt end in 1966 when the military assumed control through a coup widely regarded as ethnically motivated. The first military government headed by late General Aguiyi Ironsi who ethnically belongs to the Igbo ethnic group was soon brought to an end six months later through a coup by Northern officers. The second coup was seen as revenge resulting in the death of Aguiyi Ironsi and some southern officers. Ethnicity therefore, assumed an added dimension and the forces that it generated plunged the country, first, into the secession of the East, and then, the bitter civil war of

1967-1970 that engulfed the country when Colonel Ojukwu tried to carve the State of Biafra out of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria. Military governance came briefly to an end in 1979 to give room for a civilian government with constitutional provision for the American presidential system of government. In 1984 the military under Gen. Buhari (1984-1985) again came into power. For another period of 15 years Nigeria witnessed the military governments of Gen. Babangida (1985-1993) Gen. Sanni Abacha (1993-1997) Gen. Abubakar Abdusalami (1997-1999) as well as a brief period of Interim National Government headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan (August-November 1993). Of course this period (1985-1999) witnessed the process of subdividing the country into smaller units all in an attempt to curtail ethnic conflicts.

When Nigeria's socio-political and economic failure is examined, it becomes evident that ethnic conflict is central to its current developmental syndrome. It seems to thrive in uncompromising and confrontational social and political environments. The endless images of this are irreconcilable differences and struggles between groups over access to socio-political and economic power and the opportunities that go with them. It is a negative force that is utterly destructive to civil society and consensus building. It negates socio-political development, undermines a country's economic stability and flouts the rule of law. Asiyanbola, A.R (2007) however links ethnicity to political processes. He points out that despite the persistent ethnic conflicts in the politics of African states – including Nigeria – significant liberalization and democratization leading to socio-political development is possible. In other words it can be a required ingredient for the realization of socio-political and economic integration if it is properly appropriated.

The problem of ethnicity as it emerged under the auspices of colonialism ensured that Nigerians had no control over the central power and often were kept divided into administrative districts. The colonization of Nigeria ensured that people of diverse culture were brought together to form one country. Most of these were not properly integrated into their new states. The implication of this is that the Nigeria state was unable to create an overlapping national interest which would have disregarded parochial and group interests even after many years of independence, hence the instrumentality of colonialism to ethnic conflict in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the colonialists provided the urban setting which constitutes the cradle of contemporary ethnicity. The British colonialist, while pretending to carry out a mission of uniting the warring ethnic groups consciously and systematically separated the various Nigerian people thereby creating an atmosphere of social-political and economic conflict. According to the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) on behalf of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2000 found that ethnicity is the strongest type of identity among urban Nigerians. Almost half of all Nigerians (48.2%) choose to tag themselves with an ethnic identity. In other words ethnic conflict is more pronounced in the urban areas.

Paper Problem

Inequalities (socio-economic) among the various ethnic groups as orchestrated by a long period of colonial administration (1860-1960) have made Nigeria a cynosure of ethnic conflicts. The central issue is that the social formation of Nigeria which is basically ethnically heterogeneous and by implication a multi-cultural society may result in a high potentiality for lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear and in addition a high tendency towards violent confrontation for various socio-political reasons.

Ethnic conflict has arisen out of this context of mutual fear and suspicion over distribution of socio-political and economic goods and lack of cordiality. Thus the inability of every ethnic group to access socio-political and economic goods continues to impact negatively on the force of national integration and cohesion. It is a product of the long history of unequal access to power, resources and opportunities among the different ethnic groups in the country. Thus the demands of such a challenge are exacting. Significantly, this context has led to open confrontation and conflict because the stressful condition of the body polity raised questions that challenge the very basis on which the political community – modern Nigeria – is organized. This prompts the question, 'is ethnicity in Nigeria an invention of the people or of colonialism?' What raises this question is the fact that the various ethnic groups that constitute the pre-Nigeria state once co-existed socially and economically, hence the question of whether ethnicity is a social construct or a natural order?

Through the division of the country into 6 geo-political zones, all the major ethnic groups are now found within these zones along with the minority ethnic groups, as Arowolo, D. (2011) has put it, the re-engineering

of the country into 6 zones has made the minority groups in the country to cluster around the major ethnic groups, thus giving the country a tripartite ethnic structure. By implication, the mobilization for socio-political contest still revolved around the major ethnic groups. Invariably, this has made it possible for the politics of exclusion to persist even to the detriment of the minorities, which has resulted in conflict over the demand for such rights as well as underdevelopment of the polity.

The foundation for the politics of exclusion was laid by the construction of the Nigerian political environment around the three major ethnic groups which saw this as an opportunity to exert their hegemonic power over the rest of the country. "Fragment of a democracy: Reflections on class and politics in Nigeria" opines that the Nigerian regional political elites within the frame work of regional politics see democracy as a mechanism through which political power can be gained or distributed together with economic power and the social status that follows. It could be reasoned that right from the beginning the minorities have always been sidelined within the polity. Or better still the regional political leaders contributed to the ethnic conflict in the country through the consolidation of each ethnic group's main political parties which was equally evident in the Second Republic.

Thus politics in Nigeria before and after independence was used as an ethnic weapon to the detriment of the minorities in the country. It became a game between the majorities where the distributive resources were under their control with the minorities significantly excluded from the mainstream of governance. That is, they are given positions only to solicit for their political support and not as forces to be reckoned with in the political game. This situation provided leverage for ethnic identity as well as politics of exclusions to thrive. Without mincing words this has been a challenge to the unity of Nigeria or the survival of Nigeria as a state; given the plurality of Nigeria state.

The political judgment that the only people who counted in Nigeria are the Yoruba, the Hausa-Fulani and Igbo before and after independence deepened the resentments of the various ethnic groups; major or minor against one another. This justifies the reason for which the main political parties were located in these regions. The original three regions which finally transformed into 36 states through restructuring still remain as of old as rallying points for the old regions. This is the reason one can state that the creation of states in Nigeria has not been able to nail regional politics. Rather it has restructured it. Moreover, states are used as units of distribution of socio-economic and political resources, which means that going by the number of states in each of the six geopolitical zones of the federation, the majority still has more access to the country's resources than the minority groups.

In the present political dispensation, efforts are being made by civil society to consolidate the hard won democracy through its various intervention activities on issues of human rights, electoral reforms, constitutional reform, gender equality, civic education, transparency and accountability. The efforts of civil society to promote good governance are likely to remain futile as long as the problems of unemployment, corruption, political apathy, and people oriented constitution and the like are not addressed. This is because civil society has put Nigeria in a market place of idea and ideologies, the essence of which is to propel healthy competition towards national integration, growth and development. This has made civil society an indispensable tool in the consolidation of socio-political development due to the fact that citizens can actualize their goals through their operations in the state.

Without mincing words lack of socio-political stability accounts for many of the development problems in post-colonial Nigeria. The ethnic diversity of the country is extraordinary. Thus making participatory development (where every ethnic group is involved) very difficult. National endeavours have been hampered by ethnic conflicts. The forces behind these conflicts are often complex thus making ethnicity to override all other forms of loyalty to the national government. Shrewd and ambitious politicians take advantage of the ethnic instinct for all it is worth. What this means is that ethnic differences and political and cultural traditions have made it difficult to build strong socio-political institutions – of the kind developed in Malaysia – that have been able to address the challenges of ethnicity. Ethnicity therefore plays significant roles in explaining the current state of underdevelopment in Nigeria.

The implication of this is that a Yoruba person can only belong to one group and it is the status of his/her group that boost his/her own status. Put in another word as a Yoruba person he is from the majority and if he belongs to Ijaw that makes him a minority person. Explaining further it means all groups as well as all

Nigerians are not equal in terms of national relevance and access to political power. According to Anugwon, E.E (2000) to emphasize the facts that there are two levels of citizenship in Nigeria and that while every Nigerian is a citizen of the Nigerian state, they could lose their citizenship statuses in state other than those of their origin.

Observably, state (ethnic) citizenship contradicts the constitutional provisions on national citizenship. As Osoba and Usman cited in Arowolo, D. (2011) put it, this dubious notion of state citizenship is even more stringent and biologically determined than national citizenship, in the sense that it does not make on state citizenship comparable provisions to those on national citizenship by registration or naturalization. In spite of the rhetorical and platitudinous pronouncements on the duty of the state to encourage free mobility of people throughout the country and to secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the country a culpable implication of its definition of state citizenship is that non matter for how long a Nigerian has resided in a state of Nigeria of which none of his parents is an indigene, such a Nigerian cannot enjoy the right to participate fully in the public life of that state.

Clearly defined under state (ethnic) citizenship, the individual cannot belong to all the thirty six states – this states has been grouped into six geo-political zones with each of these zones having major and minority ethnic groups – or all the ethnic groups which make up the Nigerian federation which alone can guarantee that he is not discriminated against in any part of the federation. Logically the implication of this is that though one is a Nigerian citizen, arguably, outside one's state (ethnic) of origin, one is not a citizen.

One phenomenon that will help us to understand citizenship (ethnic and civic) is the need to look at how colonialism created a split in the personality of average Nigerian under colonial rule. Until recently, engagement with state–society relations in Nigeria has been dominated by the idea of a divided society as espoused by Ekeh (cited in Aiyede, 2009). To him, colonialism worked to set state and society apart in Nigeria. The forces of the colonial state alienated the individual and led to the emergence of two domains; the primordial (ethnic) domain, which is the domain of modern social formations associated with ancient structures of kinship, and the civic domain, which is the political space within which the formal state operates. This division has created a dilemma for public accountability and collective action because people are attached and committed to the primordial domain against the civic public realm. Predatory rule reflects the underlying illegitimacy of the civic realm. Morality holds sway in the primordial realm, but the civic realm is amoral. Politicians are inclined to steal from the civic realm for personal benefit and for the benefit of the primordial realm.

As espoused earlier the most noticeable feature of British colonial rule from the very beginning was the divide and rule style of administration of the Northern and Southern parts of the country. While Western education, mainly sponsored by the missionaries, thrived in the South and was fully embraced by southerners, British officials, especially in the North, were opposed to missionary penetration of the North, apparently to protect the Islamic North from the debasement of missionaries and Western education. The result was a Southern lead in Western education and other so-called modernizing forces, such as urbanization, schools and commercial enterprise.

Conclusion

Ethnicity in Nigeria, no doubt, has been a significant challenge to the socio-political development of the country; not because the phenomenon is in itself dangerous but that the tendency is for political leaders to manipulate it. Thus, the functionality of ethnicity can either be negative or positive. Ethnicity can be problematic if not managed properly and at the same time, a highly rewarding phenomenon if well managed, which means that ethnicity will continue to remain a force to be reckoned with notwithstanding the strategic mechanisms adopted to diffuse its flame.

However ethnic conflict notwithstanding, the various socio-political and integrative mechanisms such as decentralized governance, the federal character principle, power sharing, human rights and the adoption of multi-party democratic system to manage ethnic conflict have become part of the Nigerian polity. This is as a result of the consistent maintenance of a highly centralized socio-political and economic system which has placed the tripartite ethnic groups in a vantage position. In addition, the incompatibility of ethnic groups within the states in terms of language, culture and even political awareness, weak and corrupt socio-political and economic institutions, the systemic exclusion of the majority minority ethnic groups from laying claim to the Nigerian state through the construction of the Nigerian political system around the

three major ethnic groups, the complexity of socio-political and economic differences of the ethnic groups in the polity as well as systemic discriminatory and exclusive policies motivated by ethnic consciousness.

Nevertheless ethnic differences in Nigeria can still be maximized to enhance sociopolitical and economic development which means that ethnicity can be deconstructed and reconstructed, to borrow the words of Arowolo, D. (2011) in a way that will encompass all ethnic groups through which a more stable polity can be obtained and taking into consideration the complicated nature of ethnicity in the country. A multifaceted sociopolitical and economic approach is needed. In essence it is possible to approach the challenges of ethnicity from many perspectives. Thus, for the Nigerian State to move forward, calls for the reconstruction of the polity, where every ethnic group will be included and see the task of nation building more important and above ethnic loyalty. The recommendations in the following section will go a long way in supporting this.

The Way Forward

From an understanding of ethnic composition of Nigeria, there should be different methods through which the ethnic groups in Nigeria can be composed into states (provinces). Considering the dynamic distribution of ethnic groups in Nigeria prior to the state creation experiment that gave birth to the current 36 states, there were majority and minority ethnic groups within the polity. This indicates that the ethnic composition of Nigeria raises more question than answers. Consequently, consideration should be given to the diversity and the homogeneity of each state to be created, in terms ethnic group, size, and economic viability. The religious factor is also crucial. Furthermore, consideration must be given to the fact that there are many different socio-political and economic challenges that are peculiar to each ethnic group as well as each ethnic group's interests politically and economically.

The suggestion therefore is that the creation of states (province) should be done in a way that will make each state a uni-ethnic group instead of the present multi-ethnic ones. Nigeria can take a cue from India's experiment when its former 29 states were reconstituted into 14 states in 1956 with each state having the same language as well as equal socio-political and economic status. It will help resolve the question of citizenship and indigeneship which poses more challenges for the unity and sociopolitical integration of the country.

Regional imbalances and overall national development in Nigeria, has been perpetuated in the country over time. The result has been the prevailing and unwarranted uneven distribution of socio-political and economic resources and benefits of development; the brunt of which have been bore by the minorities. What this translates to mean is that decades after independence Nigeria has fell short of evolving a strong mechanism to mediate and reconcile a series of conflicts and contradictions that arose from the nation's constellation of economic, socio-political and ethnic forces on one hand. On the other hand the socio-political and economic distributive mechanism of federal character has been used by the political class to serve ethnic interest at the expense of national development and national integration. What the nation is witnessing has been inter-ethnic competition and winner takes all politics. The tripod theory of power which has subsisted in Nigeria since the First Republic seems to have encouraged unhealthy rivalry among the three major ethnic groups, Notwithstanding the fragmentation of the country into smaller states. The major ethnic groups particularly the Hausa-Fulani used federal might to concentrate federal expenditure in their region. Put in another word the ethnic group with political power use the opportunity of having federal power to mobilize and divert federal revenues, infra-structures, industries, public work projects and federal patronage to their ethnic home land.

It is no longer news that the reconstruction of the old 3 regions into the present day 36 states provides leverage for fierce competition for socio-economic and political goods, the resultant effect of which is ethnic conflict. To some extent, the discriminatory attitude of the majority ethnic group against the minority ethnic group within these states is a product of what Anugwon, E.E (2000) described as the centre-inspired competition that underpins these cleavages. Hence, there is the need for basic information on each ethnic group at least before any decision is taken. This may, eventually throw light on the ethnic situation in the country, as well help to avoid ethnic conflict.

The search for a balanced and sustainable state (politically, economically and socially) can end in reconstructing the country, taking into consideration it's the ethnic composition. One basic fact that

has greatly undermined Nigeria's socio-political and economic stability is its structural imbalance even after the fragmentation of the country into its current 36 states (with 774 local government areas) and the subsequent division of the states into 6 geo-political zones for the purpose of administration and distribution of socio-political goods, but the fact remains that within these zones lie powerful majority ethnic groups, making it difficult to diffuse the flames of ethnic conflict in Nigeria.

Therefore the major ethnic groups of the Hausa-Fulani in the North can be divided into three, the Yoruba of the West as one and the Igbo as one taking into consideration language, culture and religion. The remaining major-minority groups can be reconstructed into a number of homogeneous separate states. For example the ethnic groups in the present Benue, Plateau (excluding the Hausa ethnic groups which are expected to join the Hausa of the North) and the Igalas from the present Kogi state can become one state (province) considering the religious factor. The same can be done to the Ijaw in Ondo state, Edo, Delta, Urhobo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom and Cross Rivers in the Southern part of the country taking into consideration religious affinity and language. This of course should be in form of well-grounded provincial governance like that of South Africa.

This would make socio-political development more meaningful to all ethnic groups. It would also promote interdependence of states; the product of which is likely to be unity and prosperity of the states in particular and Nigeria in general. Moreover, it will make competition for political power at the centre less attractive. The overall result will be the sustainability of Nigerian unity and the desired development.

It can therefore be concluded that a country like Nigeria that is characterized with deepened ethnic cleavages and where socio-political issues are violently contested along ethnic divisions no doubt should see good governance and its attendant features as the hall mark of national integration. Features of good governance include protection and promotion of the significance of every ethnic group through the institution of democracy. In other words when each ethnic group is "treasured" the probability of an ethnic conflict-free society is very high and this is likely to result in the development of the polity.

One means through which a share of the proverbial national cake is guaranteed is through socio-political and economic competition which has been the bane of good governance within the polity. Thus ethnic identification is seen as the bedrock of competition for socio-political goods among the ethnic groups, the gain or loss of which always fired up ethnic consciousness, creating the belief that as long as each ethnic group is guaranteed its share of the national cake they will always play along. However, in a situation where one ethnic group uses its numerical or political power to wrestle and manipulate the distribution of socio-political goods, there is bound to be conflict. This is because ethnicity was sharpened and consciously or unconsciously institutionalized. It, thus, becomes easier for ethnicity to thrive within the Nigerian polity. No doubt ethnicity significantly increases in a multi-ethnic society where contestation over distributive socio-political and economic goods coincides with ethnic affinities.

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