



ETHNICITY AND NATION-BUILDING: NIGERIA'S EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity does not by itself produce conflict but the subjective interpretation of it does. This interpretation implies that one group feels ethnocentric towards others; that is, it sees other groups as relatively inferior and more or less as rivals. This feeling brings about certain attitudes, which distort reality and breed subjectivity in the evaluation and perception of events. Nigeria is bedeviled by ethnic cleavages and inter-ethnic fears and tensions which may affect its nation- building efforts. This study therefore, attempted to examine how ethnicity has affected nation-building using Nigeria as a reference point. It was revealed that nation-building has been a difficult and delicate task due to the presence of some seemingly irreconcilable differences that were toxigenic to nationhood but having survived a civil war and some major crises, Nigeria can no longer be regarded as a mere geographical expression but a country. Consequently, it is recommended that efforts at nation-building should be sustained especially in the area of making the federal arrangement more equitable.

KEY WORDS: Ethnicity, Ethnocentric, Nation-building, conflicts, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

An ethnic group is one which ascribes to itself common blood or common ancestry. The group may be numerically or geographically big or small but shares a common feature which is the claim to a common ancestor whether real or imaginary. Apart from being controversial, ethnicity is a diehard phenomenon that scholars have endlessly continued to grapple with.

Ethnicity does not by itself produce conflict but the subjective interpretation of it does. Reasoning in the same vein Sithole (1992) as cited in Anyebe (2002:1) asserts that mere difference and an awareness of (ethnicity) is of no consequence, but it is the subjective interpretation of the difference that is of consequence. Ethnicity implies the fact that one group feels ethnocentric towards others; that is, it sees other groups as relatively inferior and more or less as rivals. This feeling brings about certain attitudes, which distort reality and breed subjectivity in the evaluation

and perception of events. It is also characterised by a common consciousness of being. And this factor, more than any other, defines the boundary of the group that is relevant for understanding ethnicity at any point in time (Nnoli 1978: 6). Ethnicity, in addition, often contains an obscured class component. In this sense, it becomes a tool for the elite members of society to exploit to their advantages.

The class bias often imbued in ethnicity has been well articulated by Sklar (1967) as cited in Osaghae (1994). Sklar views ethnicity as implying the fact that in Africa, ethnic movements may be created and instigated to action by privileged men in a bid to further their own interests. Such men of power may be seen as the emerging elites of society who may use ethnic sentiments to consolidate their power base and further their own selfish interest.



From an array of alternative instrumentalist weapons (for example, religion, region, class, and gender) an actor may decide to employ ethnic conflict strategy for a number of reasons, ranging from the strategy adopted by rival actors to the historical precedents of the conflict situation. This does not however, rule out the possibility of spontaneous ethnic outbursts which may follow threats to the collective well-being or survival of a group.

In Africa, ethnic conflicts have remained one intractable problem of the post-colonial state. According to Osaghae (1994) there are two analytically distinct phases of these conflicts. The first followed independence when there was intense rivalry among the emergent elite who found the ethnic weapon most expedient in the competition for state power. Virtually every sub-saharan African country experienced this conflict at independence, but they proved to be most disruptive in Congo, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, and Sudan (before the creation of South Sudan out of it) where civil wars erupted. In some countries, for example Ghana and Tanzania, charismatic leaders used one party regimes to create a veneer of well-managed ethnic situations but underneath lay repressive strategies.

The emergence and consolidation of personal authoritarian rule all over the continent in the 1970s and 1980s created a situation in which there appeared to be lull in ethnic conflicts with only sporadic eruptions. The second phase of ethnic conflicts began to appear by the late 1980s and early 1990s. This phase witnessed the resurrection of old conflicts, which had all along been suppressed, and the emergence of new and more complicated conflicts. Countries such as Togo, Senegal and Tanzania which were assumed to be free from ethnic conflicts were not spared in this phase.

This resurgence of ethnic conflicts was largely due to democratization and economic restructuring which gave room for pent-up tensions and conflict to be released. The economic restructuring, in particular has led to amongst other things, retrenchment of workers, massive unemployment and overall decline in living standard. The situation has sharpened ethnic consciousness as an expedient resource for dealing with hard times. This second phase has led to overheating of the polity in Nigeria and virtual destruction of Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, where the civil wars have clear ethnic undertones (Osaghae, 1994).

Since ethnic groups provide basis for ethnic conflicts, it is usually assumed that conflicts take place only between and among groups. While it is true that a lot of the more troublesome and conspicuous conflicts involve

groups, it would amount to oversimplification to assume that is all there is to ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflicts are a complex of inter-group, intra-group conflict whose linkages, contrary to popular belief, could be immensely contradictory.

One of the few attempts at linking intra-and inter-group conflicts is found in the anthropological theory of segmentary opposition (Otite, 1976). In its classical formulation, the theory states that:

Ethnic identity is highly ambiguous and fluid. Within every large group, there are recognizable subdivisions. In a situation where perceived conflict is with an external group, social actions relate to the larger ethnic referent. But when threats from outside the group diminish in intensity, then the locus of conflict and cleavage may transfer to the subdivisions of the larger group (Young, 1965) as cited in Osaghae (1994:11-12).

For example, in relation to the Hausa-Fulani, Ibo and Yoruba (major contestants for power), when it comes to presidential elections in Nigeria, the Yoruba may present a united front, but when it comes to appropriating government favours conflicts may move to the intra-group level of Ijebu, Egba, Ijesha, Ekiti, etcetera. In extreme cases emergent deep division may lead to a permanent or temporary split amongst the constituent groups. A case in point is the Ikwerre which stopped being an Ibo sub-group on account of discrimination by other Ibos during the Nigerian civil war (Osaghae, 1994:12).

Nation-destroying could be one of the consequences of ethnic conflicts and no country can afford the luxury of allowing it free rein. This study, therefore, attempted to explore the relationship between ethnicity and nation-building with particular reference to Nigeria.

2. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

The data used in this study were obtained mainly from the following sources:

- i. Journals, government publications and books
- ii. Internet materials

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section results are discussed.

3.1. Ethnicity and Nation-Building:-

Ethnicity as a relational product is quintessentially adversarial. Two reasons are responsible. The first, as observed by Fumagalli (2007), though in different context but very applicable to African social systems by its peculiar nature of state-formation, is that millions of citizens found themselves, almost overnight, in

the new condition being labelled or viewed as minority. However, the tag '*minority*' denotes the presence of some sorts of critical competitions in which the former is delicately pitched against a majority other with a leverage of number among other factors. Multi-ethnic states e.g. Nigeria are consequently in a flux of nagging competitions. This is particularly relevant to Nigeria where there is heavy dependence on public resources for virtually every form of sustenance, more so that there is chronic shortage of capital and capital markets in the private sector.

A major blunder committed by our early post-independence leaders in their state-building effort is that the state is paternalistically conceived. The state became an omni-provider of an overwhelming plethora of goods and services, many of which could have been efficiently provided by the private sector. Access to the state's resource base which is even finite, is thus crucial to the competing groups. This explains why privatization of certain public enterprises in Nigeria initially demonstrated a pattern of go-stop-go, reflecting some degree of public resistance to the policy, whereas Nigerian government is already overwhelmed and has become incapable of maintaining the over bloated public enterprise sub-sector.

As observed by Teshome (2008), ethnicity could be the basis for the unequal treatment of people and it may be the cause of ethnocentrism and prejudices against members of other ethnic groups. The second, which derives from the first, is a function of several factors.

The fact that the Nigerian state is in a constant scenario of political competitions is an indication of the economic fact that the resources available are also never surplus. It is indeed the scarcity of resources that inevitably necessitates, and at times aggravates the politics of its allocation (Odeyemi, 2014).

The stakes of politics are extremely high. Politics extends beyond mere governmental organisation and operation of the state and its institutions as it is critical and determinative of people's fate or fortune in life. Without any doubt, it's a functional determination of *who prospers or perishes, who lives or dies, who is favoured or marginalized and who is famed or defamed*. Politics could be used to engender development and underdevelopment, depending on who is at the winning end of power play. The politics of allocation essentially is about competing to get some scarce benefits from government. Such include appointment, wealth, scholarships and education, public utilities, infrastructural facilities, loans and grants, livelihoods, fame, respect, land, resource control, security, contracts, oil blocks, influence etc. How much that one could get is a critical function of where one belongs in the

endgame of politics. Two classical definitions of politics are succinct here. Politics for Harold Lasswell, though bitterly and in the ordinariness, is about *who gets what, when and how*. A technical interpretation of that is David Easton's definition that politics is *the authoritative allocation of value*. Thus, a synergetic fusion of the two, that politics is the *authoritative determination of who gets what, when and how*, brings forth a crucial case of fate determination (Odeyemi, 2014).

The real reason why people or groups struggle for governmental power is because it is essentially at the decision end of politics *of allocation*. Therefore, intergroup competitions for the authoritative allocation of value in multi-ethnic states are inevitable and vicious. They are usually the root cause of inter-ethnic civil uprisings. Nnoli has thus rightly argued that it is not inter-ethnic contact between groups that breeds conflicts; rather it is the extent of competing claims that are associated with the economic and political problems of modern nation states (Nnoli, 1978) as cited in Odeyemi (2014). However and notwithstanding the status of resource availability in terms of scarcity or surplus, the *politics of allocation* may become the vulturous *politics of enrichment* to the group with the upper hand in the interplay of power politics, whereby greater opportunities of amassing wealth are effectively, deliberately and greedily cornered by the dominant group. The history and politics of revenue allocation in Nigeria clearly depicted this scenario. At Independence when Nigeria's economy relied solely on agricultural exports, the revenue sharing formula based on the *principle of derivation* was adopted. By this principle, federal revenues were distributed to the federating units based on the total or some proportion of certain taxes assumed to have been paid by the citizens of the units. Two of Nigeria's three units then, the Western and Northern Regions (also with two dominant ethnic groups – Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani) tremendously got enriched under this principle through their exportation of cocoa and groundnuts (then in very high demand in the international market) and other cash crops. The Eastern Region was then less endowed and thus profited less comparatively.

Following the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in the Eastern Region and the windfall of petrodollars which far outstripped total revenues from agro-exports, there was agitation by the same two chagrined regions for the country to adopt a new revenue sharing formula that was either based on the *principle of need* or the *principle of even development and national interest*. Revenue allocation here was either based on the size of the population in an area, or on the basis of public

expenditure deemed to be in the best interest of the nation as a whole. The two former regions still profited significantly in this new arrangement as they contained major population centres of the country. And that is in addition to the fact that the political and bureaucratic elites from these regions were also some of the most influential in the authoritative allocation of values and the determination of deemed issues of national interest. The politics of allocation is jealously ridiculous in Nigeria that even a non-oil state would out of sheer greed agitate for similar federal oil-related compensations to oil-producing states, for instance, to cater for environmental oil spillages, or at least would create spurious excuses to partake of similar federal largesse. Geo-political zones that are unable to benefit from certain largesse may agitate to discourage its allocation to the needy zones (Odeyemi, 2014).

Nation-building involves the deliberate creation of national paraphernalia and symbols of unity such as national flag, national anthem, national day and national investments and holdings, etc. At a deeper level, national identity should be constructed by molding different groups into a nation, especially since colonialism had used particularistic tendencies to maintain its imperial hold (Anyebe, 2014:28). Nation-building involves the intricate inclusion of all groups, towards fostering social cohesion and harmony as against the exclusiveness and rancorous nature of ethnicity. The opening phrase of the first Nigerian national anthem, "Nigeria, we hail thee, our own dear native land, though tribes and tongues may differ, in brotherhood we stand", is a pointer to this. The initial effort at nation-building in Nigeria thus aimed at forging a brotherhood, vis-à-vis, a nationhood of the diverse ethnic groups, organised in unity for a common purpose within. However, the attainment of social harmony may of essence be antithetical to the adversarial nature of inter-ethnic politics in post-independent Nigeria where every ethnic group is most tendentially hostile to members of other groups. The pertinent question is how does a multi-ethnic state achieve social harmony in the face of ethnic politics, rivalries and adversities involved in the competition for scarce resources and the high stakes of politics? Undoubtedly, nation-building is an uphill task in multi-ethnic states, and it is only within these contexts that the political history and the crises of ethnicity in Nigeria can be examined.

Attaining nationhood has been difficult and delicate because of the presence of some seemingly irreconcilable differences that were toxigenic to nation-building. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, former Prime

Minister of Nigeria, was absolute when he declared, "We are different in too many ways". He went further to say elsewhere: "the people are different in every way, including religion, custom, language and aspirations...", and in the acknowledgement of this fact Sir Ahmadu Bello, former Premier of the defunct Northern Region, described the amalgamation as "the mistake of 1914". Chief Obafemi Awolowo, former Premier of Western Region, in blunt derision, described Nigeria as "merely a geographical expression" that lumped together an arbitrary collection of disparate groups following colonial rule. But despite these scathing criticisms from these foremost pioneering elites, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, former President of Nigeria and a contemporary of theirs was rather hopeful that something could still be created out of the nothingness, hence for him he enjoined that *Nigeria is now a political reality, let us bury our differences and build it together* (Onwudiwe, 2011).

From the above it is crystal clear that Nigeria, though a huge national enterprise, had suffered the poliomyelitic viral attack of ethnicity from its colonial embryo leading to a defective birth, hence it became the *crippled giant*, to use Osaghae's words (1998). These fundamental differences, among other factors, made Nigeria go through the painful experience of a civil war between 1967 and 1970 when the Eastern Region attempted to secede from the Federation. At the instance of the demand for self-determination by this Region, the country was for political expediency, split into 12 states in 1967 by the Federal Military Government.

At the end of the civil war, a war that was won by the Federal Government in 1970, the then head of state, General Yakubu Gowon declared that: "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done". That task is indeed arduous but having passed through a civil war and other major crises without breaking up, Nigeria is more than mere geographical expression as earlier described.

In an attempt to stabilise the federation, on four other occasions more states were created by decrees to make up the present 36 states. This seeming irrationality was among other reasons aimed at stabilizing Nigerian federation since one condition for establishing a stable federation is to ensure that no single constituent unit is so big it terms of populations and land areas to insist on dominating the deliberations of the central legislature. The various educational and economic establishments were built along regional patterns. The coming of states out of these regions did not in any way disturb the continued existence of some of these institutions. The governors of the share-holding states were holding regular

meeting which could not but have political undertones for the advancements of the cause of the region in the scheme of things within the Federation. Appointments and admission into these institutions were virtually restricted to the indigenes of the share-holding states. There was no doubt in the minds of those with nationalist aspirations that these institutions were suffocating and stultifying the growth of federation in Nigeria. They turned out to be political instruments pointing attention in the direction of region and hindering the building of a true Nigerian nation. The decision of the Federal Military government in 1991 to disband all these associations and institutions which were based on regional patterns was therefore a right step in the right direction. Such institutions should not be allowed to exist again since their existence constitutes a hindrance to the harmonious growth of Nigeria Federation (Anyebe, 2014).

It is worth mentioning here that the issue of reforming the Nigeria federation has eventually received some attention as a result of the fall-out from the annulment of the June 12 presidential election in 1993 and 2011 general election. Thus, sentiments such as marginalization from power and national affairs began to be voiced by Nigerians. The National Constitutional Conference of 1994/95 and the National Conference of 2014 became the battle grounds where Nigerians fought over such demands as the modification of the federal arrangement, power sharing including rotational presidency and the division of the country into zones, devolution of power from the centre to the states, the sharing of major offices among various zones, and the allocation of resources based on derivation.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study came up with one inescapable conclusion which is that ethnicity does not by itself produce conflict but the subjective interpretation of it does. This interpretation implies that one group feels ethnocentric towards others; that is, it sees other groups as relatively inferior and more or less as rivals. This feeling brings about certain attitudes, which distort reality and breed subjectivity in the assessment and perception of events.

Nation-building has been a very difficult and delicate task due to the presence of some seemingly irreconcilable differences that were toxigenic to national growth. This is evidenced by the statements of some of our leaders that we are different in too many ways; we are different in every way, including religion, custom, language and aspiration; and that Nigeria is *merely a geographical expression* lumped together as an arbitrary collection of disparate groups following colonial rule. However, Nigeria can no longer be regarded as a mere geographical expression, having survived a civil war and some major crises. Consequently, it is recommended that efforts at nation-building should be sustained especially in the area of making the federal arrangement more equitable.

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