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HISTORICIZING THE CONCEPT OF ETHNICITY IN NIGERIA DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria as a political entity came into being following the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates by Lord Fredrick Lugard, then British Governor General of the territory. Since the amalgamation, Nigeria has been struggling with the challenges of nation-building fueled partly by the misplacement and the misapplication of the idea of ethnicity. The historical experiences of the peoples of Nigeria prior to colonial rule on the contrary does not support the misplaced application in the context of Nigeria development. Colonialists, with the support of Nigeria's elite manipulated ethnic differences for parochial gains during the colonial period, while the latter have continued to feast on these sentiments in postcolonial period for similar gains. Relying on written materials by some of the key players and other secondary sources, this study by way of historical comparative analysis attempts to explain that contemporary ethnic conundrum in Nigeria political space that has whittled down her development can be controlled when emphasis is laid on common mutual beneficial interests, which have directed past intergroup relations among the peoples of Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, amalgamation, Ethnicity, Nation-building, Colonial rule, Intergroup relations.

INTRODUCTION

The term ethnic groups, as social formation in Africa and in Nigeria in particular could be said to have a recent historical background. The nomenclature 'ethnicity' though not a new English word, could be seen as one in application to the various cultural communities in Nigeria. The conquest and subjugation of Nigeria people by the British from the beginning of the 20th century necessitated the institution of administrative colonial rule to administer the conquered territories. The need for easy colonial administration to take care of finance, manpower and other needs, led to the division of the conquered territories into regions and the earlier amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914. Regional governments, however, were instituted based on factors like geographical proximity, cultural affinity, language similarity, among others. Although the divisions that were made, based on

the above variables were not sacrosanct, nevertheless, it was with this new arrangements in colonial Nigeria, that ethnic groups and its consciousness could be said to have emerged. Nnoli (1980:5) conceptualized ethnic groups as:

> …Social formation distinguished by the communal character of the boundaries. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture or both. In Africa, language has clearly been the most crucial variable. As social formations, however ethnic groups are not necessarily homogenous entities even linguistically or culturally.

Alex Thomson (2010:61) defined ethnicity as, "a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language." However, it needs to be pointed out that even though the term 'ethnicity' in Nigeria is associated with colonial period, the appurtenances to its emergence were already on ground. For instance, the existence of structures, like cultural similarities, intra and inter relationships arrangements among the communities and states over time where already on ground. Randrianja (1996:29) rightly say that what the colonial ethnographers did when they came into Africa was to harness such "existing protocols of ties between groups". Further, Randrianja (1996:30) argues that ethnic group as understood and defined by Eurocentric scholars "is not always a unit defined by reference to a fixed territory and culture, nor is it as permanent as colonial ethnographers…" asserts. Randrianja gave a pungent illustration of a historical occurrence in a pre-colonial Africa territory, where an ethnic group emerged, not based on "fixed territory and culture", but rather as a result of the need for survival. The historical experience occurred, as pointed out "in the central highlands of Madagascar during sixteenth-eighteenth centuries." (1996:29)

Erim (1984:41), has argued that ethnic groups had existed in Nigeria prior to colonial rule and therefore, not necessarily a colonial creation. He points to the history of the former Kwararafa kingdom (Jukun), in north central Nigeria, as characterized with evidence of "a plethora of ethnic groups…, each distinct from the other, and finally that it was the interaction between the diverse people that provided the local antecedents for a later take-over of that region of Nigeria by the British colonial administration."

However, from 1940s, R. Okonkwo (2009:32) notes that ethnic-based cultural unions began to emerge in colonial Nigeria. These include "…the Ibibio Union, the Igbo State Union, and Egbe-Omo Oduduwa", among others in metropolitan Lagos. The emergence of these ethnic based unions and association, in colonial Nigeria, though inevitable, was to subsequently influence the political permutations of events in the country. It has continued to define not only the nature of Nigeria politics but, even the social, economic as well as religious developments in the country. But, unlike in pre-colonial times where 'ethnic groups', communities, can be said to have pursued mutual common goals of unity, security and progress of the states, communities and empires then, the same cannot be said to exist currently – where relationships among groups have gone sour because of manipulating influence on ethnic differences by the colonial government and Nigeria elite. Recent events in Nigeria political history lend credence to this view. Though, the momentous events of Nigeria's colonial

history, cannot be wished away, there is need to redefine the nature of the corporate existence of the nation taking into consideration the lessons of her pre-colonial inter group relationship, built on mutual trust and benefits. The need for a paradigm shift to interrogate the challenges of ethnic conundrum in Nigeria development has therefore become compelling and a necessity.

This research work therefore, from a historical perspective engaged in a holistic examination of some of the challenges posed by the misconception and the misapplication of ethnicity in Nigeria. It specifically survey the implications of ethnic manifestations in the areas of politics, social and economic matters in Nigeria. The study takes its bearing from 1960, the time of political independence from Great Britain to examine contemporary issues bordering on ethnicity in Nigeria development. The work is a historical study and made a comparative analysis to arrive at its conclusion. The imperative to acknowledge ethnic differences, as they exist in Nigeria and building bridges across board has become a sine-qua-non for her development. Further, it was that since most ethnic tensions in Nigeria arose primarily as a result of the parochial manipulating influence of ethnic divide by the elite for power and economic competition, the lesson of past intergroup relation built on mutual goal and interest rooted in African communalism than on individual interest need to be emphasized and experimented in Nigeria.

Colonial Footprints of Ethnic Tussles in Nigeria

The 1914 amalgamation of the former "Niger territories" of Northern and Southern protectorates by the British colonial government under the leadership of Lord Fredrick Lugard the then Governor General of the territory, sealed the formation of the political entity called Nigeria. The year 2014 marked 100 years of that eventful episode in Nigeria's history. Since then, the country has continued to face serious challenges weighting on her fragile unity. Prominent among these was the disproportionate nature of the division in which one section was made to have a domineering advantage over the other groups in landmass and population. More so, the problems of religious and cultural differences were tactfully widened through political and educational policies that emphasize more exclusivity than inclusivity of Nigerian people by the colonial administration. Soyinka (2014:7), comments on the challenges posed by ethnic diversity in Nigeria opines that, "… there are about 300… ethnic nationalities sharing amongst them about 800 languages and dialects" in the country. Coleman (1986:4) equally points out that "Nigeria is the only political entity in Africa where most of the main African language groups are found". Considering the nature of the diversity found in Nigeria, that include religion, geography, ethnic and cultural differences, any attempt to harp on them to achieve parochial gains would naturally be devastating to the well-being and development of the country. However, quite unfortunately that has been the case of Nigeria's historical development where ethnic differences were harped on by colonialists and currently by the elite to achieve parochial gains.

The colony of Nigeria was divided into three unequal regions of North, East and West by Richard's Constitution of 1946, by endorsing the three administrative units previously created by Sir Bernard Bourdillon in 1939 (Uchendu and Eyeh 2022: 126) Close to the attainment of independence, in 1954, the Littleton Constitution of that year formally introduced the concept

of Federalism in the country by constitutionally apportioning powers to the regions. This was after the 1950 Constitutional Conference at Ibadan, where the Northern leaders demanded half of the number of seats or Representatives in the national Assembly or they would opt out of the Nigerian project (Orobator, 1987; 302). The event of 1954 was, however, interpreted by scholars as a tactful endorsement of Northern demand by the colonial government. This event has continued to chart the political development in Nigeria, as envisioned by the British colonial power. Unfortunately, this legacy has continued to constitute a clog in the political progress of the country, because of the idea of rights and entitlement implied in the colonial policies.

As has been rightly said, the history of Nigeria nation has been permanently affected positively or negatively by her colonial experience. Therefore, in reference to her history past and present and in the future subsequently, the shadows of colonial hangover would continue to trail Nigeria political and economic developments. Referring to the amalgamation of 1 January 1914, for instance, which centenary the Federal government of Nigeria celebrated in 2014, Undiyaundeye notes that "only governmental services were amalgamated" (2012:260). This is in reference to what many believed was the unwillingness on the part of colonial government to cement the two protectorates (North and South) into political, economical and cultural entity, except only in name for the sake of administrative and economic conveniences. The issue involving ethnic tussles in Nigeria thus, cannot be traced far from this manipulating and half-hearted marriage of convenience, that has worked over the years to the detriment of the peoples' aspiration of a growth driven development.

Nigeria's political developments during colonial rule especially between 1914 and 1960 clearly show lopsidedness in the changes brought on at the time. However, there were colonial administrators like E.D. Morel who made suggestion of equal division of the country, in the form of provinces to cater for and at the same time take care of her ethnic differences. The British colonial government did not accept such suggestions, since they were at variance with the colonial agenda of divide and rule. This would then explain why the various constitutional reforms from 1914 – 1960, could be termed as self-serving. The Richard's Constitution of 1946 when it came even raised more dust, in dividing the supposedly united country into 3 unequal regions when it began. The Henry Willink Commission of inquiry of 1957 which looked into the fears of marginalizations of ethnic minorities from Eastern Nigeria and other areas, in the white paper reports clearly supported the idea of a federal system and the dissolution of the regions into states to take care of the fears of the minorities. However, nothing tangible came out of the exercise as the British were more interested in securing their economic gains in Nigeria – via getting pliable leaders than in settling the grievances of any aggrieved group.

British colonial policy on education in Nigeria was another area where lopsided and biased agenda was pursued, which eventually heightened ethnic tensions in Nigeria. From the onset of colonial rule in Nigeria, the Christian missionaries who were at the forefront in the propagation of the Christian faith relied on the support of western education which they tailored to achieve much conversion to the faith. However, considering the ethnic-cum-religious, composition found in Nigeria, where there is not much separation between ethnic and religious identity – the establishment of western education became stalled in Northern

Nigeria – partly to respect their religious sensibility, and to honour the earlier agreement which Lord Fredrick Lugard had with Northern Emirs in 1903, after surrendering to the British soldiers with the promise of non interference in their religion given to the Emirs by Lugard, in order to calm their nerves in the administration of the vast northern territory. The implication of the above policy was that the teaming population of Northern people could not have western education on time until later in the period – which led to serious gap in education attainment when compared to southern Nigeria. For instance Osaghae (1998:5) notes that,

> By 1912 there were only thirty-four primary schools in the North to the South's 150 primary, and ten secondary schools (the first in the North was established in 1922)… In 1950, while southern graduates and professional with university degrees ran into scores of hundred, there was only one Northern university graduate. These gaps had grave consequences for political competition as well as competition for socio-economic goods like employment in the public service and admission to government owned secondary and tertiary institutions in the latter part of colonial rule and the post independence period.

Furthermore, Clarke notes that with respect to colonial policy to the north, that it "was designed to preserve the status quo in the north and thereby secure a firm foundation for the colonial regime. It is, however, a fact that there was little demand for western education in northern Nigeria until the Second World War" (1982:223).

However, a far more dire implication of the overall colonial policy of divide and rule in Nigeria was the creation of a kind of separatist identity clause among Nigerians. The effect of this was that Nigerians thenceforth began to see and assess other groups from the prism of colonial lenses as strangers and interlopers in their midst.

With lopsided development in the regions, the East and Western Nigeria produced disproportionately higher number of educated elite ready to fill administrative offices/spaces and, to eventually, take over from the British at independence. This possibility led to apprehension in the North which took further actions to contain such potential threat posed by them. The result was the creation of uneven development in the emerging Nigeria state. According to John Hatch (1971) cited in Undiyaundeye,

> Since Muslim schools did not prepare their pupils for modern professions, workers were drawn from the South and non-Muslims areas of the North when the administration began recruiting local staff, when postal, telegraphic and railway services needed worker, and when commercial firms required clerks (2012/262).

The net result of uneven development and the attempt to contain threat from non natives was the establishment of Sabon Gari quarters (strangers' quarters) in Kano, in the North, where non-indigenous workers were quartered, outside the city walls. The Northern leaders obviously saw the taking over of appointments by non-native as a threat to their economic power and survival as a people. Subsequently, this led to the development of contract workers, in which people from outside the area were employed in the north on contract basis.

The Ethnic Tussles in Post-Colonial Nigeria: Some Implications

With the achievement of independence from British in 1960, following the cessation of colonial rule in Nigeria, the terrain became open for ethnic political gladiators aroused by the manipulative influence of the colonial administrators to dig in their trenches for a fight, though obviously using the circumstances to pursue personal agendas. As has been noted earlier, the Ibadan conference of 1950 opened the emerging political scenario of power contest to revolve around ethnicity. The Littleton Constitution of 1954, in a way, consolidated the development of how Nigeria politics would henceforth be played based on ethnicity on the foundation of superior numerical strength and vice-versa. It was not surprising therefore that the First Republic has the unenviable reputation of being run on regional-cum ethnic lines. "Extreme regionalism" was the rule of the game "North for the Northerners, East for the Easterners, West for the Westerners and Nigeria for nobody" (Okonkwo, 2009:32). Where a neutral candidate emerges from a certain region, and happens not to be from the ruling party in the region: Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizen (NCNC) or Action Group (AG) of the three major groups of Hausa/Fulani – in the North, Igbo from the East or Yoruba from the West respectively, the individual becomes an enemy of progress and therefore was punished. Instances therefore abound where the ethnic group the person comes from would not be spared the wrath of the local ruling master, through discrimination, destruction and denial of political and economic patronages. Hence the 1966 election which came up after the First Republic, in the Western House of Nigeria. In that election, Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC won, but was schemed out of power on account of ethnic origin. Therefore, he subsequently moved down to the East and usurped power from Eyo-Ita, an Ibibio man, based on his capacity as the leader of the party in the Eastern House. These events have had far-reaching effects in the polity, as the political space has continued to resonate with ethnic-cum selfish induced decisions and actions. The net result has been the failure to develop an enduring political culture that gives all participants a sense of belonging in the Nigeria project.

Furthermore, the coalition government that emerged with independence achievement in 1960, led by NPC and NCNC had been interpreted in some quarters as a clear manifestation of ethnic politics. Damola Awoyokun had argued in *The News Magazine,* that the events of the Frist Republic and the political maneuvering which he believed were latched on ethnic parochialism. He said that the First Republic and the coalition that brought NCNC and NPC together in forming a new government, was a plot by the Igbo to scheme the West out from being part of the new government. He opines that,

> After the 1959 federal elections to usher in a government for the soon-to-be independent Nigeria, there was no clear winner between the three main parties NPC, NCNC and AG. A coalition government had to be formed. Azikiwe and Opara of the NCNC went to Kaduna to forge an alliance with Sardauna's NPC simply to deny Awolowo and his Action Group the power to have a say in the affairs of the new nation. The move shocked many. Southerners had spent the previous 15 years complaining that the colonial masters had imposed a powerful north on Nigeria to continue to dominate and hold back the progress of the rest (of the) country. And yet there came the opportunity to nullify once and for all the colonial design. Azikiwe

> refused partnership with AG and went up north to form a coalition government with Sardauna and the NPC (2016:15-16).

At the cessation of Nigeria – Biafra war that lasted from 1967-1970, which its origin and causes cannot be far removed from ethnic politics, subsequent Nigerian governments have made efforts to address and tackle the problem of ethnic parochialism. For instance, General Gowon's military government in 1973 came up with the idea of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), to help bring our youths together and in an attempt to whittle down the ethic divides. The establishments of National (Unity) Schools were also done in the same light – with the aim of bridging cultural differences and barriers among Nigerian youths. In the political arena, the creation of 12 states by Gowon in 1967 which took effect after the end of the Biafran secession, in 1970, not only helped to break down regional hegemony in Nigeria politics, but at the same time assuage the fears and agitation of the 'minorities' which the Willinck Commission of 1957 attempted to address, but did not receive British colonial support. In addition to these, the 1979 Constitution has the provision that makes it impossible for any political party in Nigeria from any ethnic group to win an general election in the country based only on numerical strength alone without spreading its tentacles to other areas, and winning a 2/3 percent of the votes cast in 24 states of federation. This new provision in the constitution has changed permanently the face of Nigerian politics, unlike what transpires earlier. In the same vein, in recognition of the diversity of our cultural groups coupled with our past historical experiences and the understanding of the essence of oneness and unity, the 1979/1999 constitution made provisions for the Federal Character Principles in employment, admission, revenue sharing and so on. The essence of this introduction in the Nigeria political economy was to address the issues of discrimination that are hinged on one's ethnicity. This principle is very good in it's conception based on the issues it tried to address.

However, the problem comes with its implantation which seems to have negated the very essence of it's enactment. This is seen in situations where a person could be discriminated against based on the Federal Character Principle.

Implications of Ethnic Tussles to Nigeria Development

> " In a system of government that relied on ethnic patronage for it's survival, corruption was hard to control. Politics had become centred on the short -term winning of state resources, and gaining political or economic planning could survive in this institutionalized system of political exchange. Resources capture and distribution had become more important to politicians and bureaucrats than the actual development of the economy that produced these resources". (Thomson, 2010:77)

The above assessment distinctly depicts the depth of political, economic and social quagmire that ethnic 'politiking' in Nigeria has led the country into. For instance, prior to independence achievement, Chief Anthony Enahoro in 1953 tabled a motion for the immediate granting of independence in 1957. The North led by Ahmadu Bello rejected the move on the ground that they were not ready. This episode in Nigeria has its antecedents on past decision of colonial rule, which has heightened ethnic tensions through accusations and counter accusations from

protagonist and antagonist and their supporters. These kind of ethnic tensions have continued to trail the development of Nigeria political history. It was also very conspicuous during the past general presidential elections of 2015 and 2023. All these no doubt emanate as a result of the parochial and manipulative stand of political leaders who because of the perceived high stakes attached to the attainment of power, would go to any length to achieve their aims. There is no doubt that Nigeria political terrain has continued to heat up whenever there is election to the office of the presidency. The first military coup of January 15,1966 in Nigeria and the counter coup that followed six (6) months later, had all been tagged as ethnic induced coups, staged to achieve ethnic parochial gain over others. The burg of ethnic politics induced by parochial gains which the colonial masters instituted, became inherited by the politicians and later found its way into the military establishment.

Consequently, the Nigeria military known for its professionalism, based on its outstanding performance in international peace keeping circles like in Congo and other parts of the world, became infested by ethnic conundrum, with it's involvement in politics. Take for example, the events that took place in 1993, during the presidential election of that year. Ibrahim Babangida, the military president annulled the election of that year when it was evident that MKO Abiola, a Southerner, though a Muslim would emerge as the winner over the Northerner Alhaji Basha Tofar. The annulment led to serious ethnic tensions in Nigeria, which could have led to total mayhem in the country. This very incident was perhaps, the reason why with the resignation of Ibrahim Babangida, and the subsequent emergence of General Abdulsalami Abubukar as the Head State following the death of General Sanni Abacha, Northern political power brokers reasoned the need to appease the Western zone in the political equation by supporting and installing General Olusegun Obasanjo to power in 1999, following the general election of that year. In an article in Africa Today Magazine, Afonja (2014) vividly capture the tragedy of ethnic politics in Nigeria development. He opines:

> A nation with very many ethnic groups and many religious faith as probably exist on earth and which cannot tell the world the exact composition of these various groups is certainly having a serious problem of identity (Daily Sun: 2014:19).

To say that Nigeria as a state in its present form has an identity crisis of great proportion, fueled partly by the underlying ethnic induced politics is an understatement. For instance, the issues emanating from the 2006 Nigeria population census exercise succinctly reveal the dilemma of the state with regard to the problem of ethnicity. Afonja further explains that in that year's census exercise, religion and ethnic data were removed, based on the past and present politics they were put into, yet the exercise was marred by irregularities. Nigeria the self-acclaimed "giant of Africa", 111 years after amalgamation and 65 years after independence does not know the exact number of her population. In other words, Nigeria as a country cannot make serious plan for her development efforts because of the absence of genuine data of her populace.

A far more serious implication of ethnic politics in Nigeria development could be seen in the inability of Nigeria populace to truly elect an acceptable leader without the manipulative influence of the politicians. The situation which existed in the First Republic where

regionalism held-sway and, the election of the president was only by simple majority without the overwhelming support of 2/3 votes in 24 states is no more tenable. However, the manipulation of ethnic sentiment by the political class does not seem to have stopped going by the experience of 2023 general election in Nigeria.

In recent times, there have been cases of discrimination and humiliations meted out on Nigeria citizens based on their states of origin. In the Daily Sun editorial comments of July 31,2014 some issues were raised. It stated some of the challenges being faced by Nigerian citizens in the country as a result of their ethnic background in the following terms:

> Willful disengagement of civil servants for the reason that they are not originally from a particular state; the denial of education privileges to so-called non-indigenes; discriminatory school fees for non- indigenes, segregation of places of abode and branding of sections of our cities as places for aliens; and bars (ban) on employment of non- indigenes in state civil services do more to deepen our fault lines than eliminate them (Daily Sun, 2014:19).

The 2014 deportation of destitute of Eastern origin to Onitsha by the Lagos State government under Governor Fashola reflects this problem. The pronouncement of the Imo State governor, Owelle Rochas Okorocha in 2014 to the effect that Northerners residing in the state would be issued with identity cards could be seen as another instance of this. All these point to one fact and that is Nigeria is still far from being a united and integrated nation. Ethnic sentiment after 111 years of amalgamation has not been tackled in Nigeria, even with the various government efforts to eliminate it. Biyi Afonja further opines that the situation on ground in Nigeria political space had led to "very serious issue arising from...the near absence of a discernible spirit of genuine patriotism among Nigerian youths" (2014:27). In addition to what has been said already, the continuation of ethnic fault-line – in Nigeria has continued to clog on the wheel of Nigeria economic progress and development, where a sizeable number of the populace feeling marginalized and denied their rights as Nigerian citizens, would not stake their life for the country's well-being. This scenario may also explain the challenge of migration to foreign lands by many Nigerian citizens especially the youths on account of neglect and hopelessness.

Achebe (1983) commenting on the challenges facing the Nigerian nation since independence, made allusion to the hypocritical attitudes found in Nigeria (with respect to tribe/ ethnicity), which though condemned and renounced by the law and government pronouncements, are being brought through the backdoor. Achebe, gave example of what happens where a Nigerian citizen seeks for either admission to a higher institution or employment in government offices, would be required to write his/ her state of origin in the form being filled. He therefore advised that, "although we may not be able to legislate prejudice and bigotry out of the hearts and minds of individual citizen, the state itself and all it's institutions must not practice, endorse or condone such habits" (1983:9).

Further to this, the astronomical increase in corrupt practices in Nigeria would not have been the height it is now, if not in some cases the ethnic colorations often associated with them in the country.

Summary and conclusion

According to Ikime (2006:145) "In the multi- ethnic, multi- cultural setting of Nigeria the need to mould human attitudes and human action on the basis of a thorough understanding of how things have come to be as they are must be obvious". This is what this paper has been attempting by a comparative assessment of the problem of ethnicity from the historical perspective, in the hope that experience can be galvanized in the search for nation building in Nigeria.

The essence of nation building then in the words of Hooquelt, cited by Afigbo and Ikime (2006:144):

> Is the search for collective identity which is co- existensive with the territorial boundaries, of the nation states a collective identity, furthermore, that can become the basis for consensus, solidarity and the shared acceptance of patterned normative order.

This position in my view addresses the essence of nation-building which takes into consideration the collective interest of the whole. The activities often associated with the issues of ethnicity in real term are parochial, selfish, narrow-minded and are detrimental to the essence of collective identity of the whole.

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