Breaking Ethnic Barriers:
A Communication Model

by Onyere Mgbejume*

Abstract

This study uses communication model of feedback and signals to analyse the dynamics of nationalism, selflessness and discipline which are so essential in holding together African nations. Drawing from Miller and Rice's (1972) theory of systems organization, it points out that national systems must have attractions for individuals, groups, clans, and communities whose ideas compete for ascendancy in the national schema. National leadership, often rooted within clan or ethnic heritage, must eschew parochialism and allow for the expression of diverse group (ethnic) interests and opinions if nationhood (seen as an abstract term) is to acquire positive identification by the individuals, groups and communities.

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Un modèle de communication qui brise les barrières éthiniques

Résumé

Cet exposé utilise un modèle de communication de feed-back et de signaux pour analyser les dynamiques du nationalisme, d'altruisme et de discipline, éléments essentiels pour la cohésion des nations africaines qui sont si fréquemment ravagées par des crises socio-politiques nées du clanisme, et de l'éthnicisme. S'inspirant de la théorie de Miller et Rice (1972) sur l'organisation des systèmes, l'article fai remarquer que les systèmes nationaux doivent avoir de l'attraction pour les individus, les groupes, les clans et les communautés dont les idées sont valablement compétitives dans le schéma national. L'autorité nationale qui souvent prend son origine dans l'héritage clanique ou éthnique se doit d'éviter l'esprit de clocher et permettre l'expression des intérêts et opinions des divers groupes (éthniques), si l'on veut que l'idée du nationalisme (dans son sens abstrait) soit positivement reconnue par les individus, les groupes et les communautés.

Introduction

Africa is a continent with a multiplicity of culturally and linguistically diverse people. This diversity has created complex political, social and economic problems which have manifested themselves in every facet of the continent's development.

Africans are egocentric, ethnocentric and fanatical followers of elites in their communities. Generally, Africans lack patriotism and empathy which are great virtues for individual and national development.

The political and social problems in Africa are created by various interests, most especially ego and ethnicity. These interests were nurtured by the colonial masters. B.J. Dudley (1973) argues that:

> ... colonization succeed in intensifying the cleavages inherent in the social structure of the colonized societies. On the other hand, it left with the nascent political elite a role profile of political leadership cast in an elitist mould and created political structures calculated to foster in the elite particularistic values (p. 39).

The misinterpretation of mass media messages in Africa owes much to the individual's desire to protect his ego and his ethnic interests. No matter what greater advantages to be gained nationally in a given situation, if the ego of an African or his ethnic interest is not protected, he will always oppose the situation, in the absence of any counterforces such as law enforcement agencies, until his ego or ethnic interest is protected.

This paper is based on an information model of feedback and signals which can be used to encourage nationalism, selflessness and discipline, and discourage self-centredness and ethnicism among the various ethnic groups and political leadership in Africa.

Shared Experience

Miller and Rice (1967) argue that '... every enterprise requires resources to produce the 'units of work' — the activities — through which its processes are carried out'. To be a nation, i.e. socially, economically and politically, a country needs the resources and co-operation of all its citizens irrespective of ethnic leaning. In Africa, one community (clan) may have blood relations through several generations. While several clans make community, an ethnic group will comprise several communities.

Building one nation with one ideology out of a combination of several ethnic groups with different ideologies is by no means easy and requires various systems of feedback and signals. One of the important signals is the shared experience of various ethnic groups. Shared experience can be

gained through several ways, for instance, fighting a common foe, geographical boundary, etc. Shared experience is the coupling device or the locus of control which ties each ethnic group whose members are, in most cases, bound together by affinity to the main national system.

Therefore, the national system must have attractions for individual groups. This means that a nation, which is really an abstract entity, must have connotative meaning for various groups. What individual group gains from its membership of a nation-system can be called feedback. Unless the various ethnic groups (subsystems) have something to gain by their membership of the big system they call their country, their actions will be directed toward the disruption of the entire nation-system (Hage 1974). This can be one of the reasons for inter-ethnic or tribal rivalry in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Ideas and Societies

Miller and Rice (1967) have said that:

> The theories of human behaviour and of activity systems are in many respects analogous. Like a system, which exists and can exist only through processes of exchange with the environment, ... individuals and groups, however, have the capacity to mobilize themselves at different times into many different kinds of activity systems; and only some activities are relevant to the performance of the tasks of the various enterprises to which they belong (p. 14).

Apart from linguistic groups, common culture, physical geography, etc., people are usually brought together by ideas. Those who have identical political beliefs are generally bound together under one banner. The groups we belong to, according to social scientists, have a lot of influence over us (Lerbinger 1972). We belong to groups because of need-satisfaction we derive by being members. Another reason for belonging to a group is our instinct of gregariousness. Once we notice that our group no longer works toward the satisfaction of our needs, we begin to look for avenues to overhaul it. When we fail, we begin to dissociate ourselves from group activities until we finally decide to pull out from the group. Since we naturally want to associate with people, we may now either begin to look for other groups to join or organize people with ideologies similar to ours to form a new group.

The foregoing explanation underlies the reason why in the 16th century England, people migrated to the New World — i.e. partly to have religious freedom, and partly to be politically independent. The United States, therefore, offers an example of how ideas can build a nation. Since the colonization of the New World (16th to 18th centuries), the United States has been a haven for people who seek one type of freedom or the other. Thus, people from various nations of the world, especially Europe,

brought their respective ideologies and coupled them up to build what we now call United States of America.

Figure 1 represents a nation — homogeneous or heterogeneous. A nation, as we have noted, is an abstract term created by ideologies from various people and groups. The square represents any nation. The five concentric circles, A, B, C, D, E, represent various ethnic groups. Individuals, clans and communities within one ethnic group are represented by the smaller letters a, b and c in each concentric circle. The broken ellipses represent small parts of experiences, ideologies, beliefs, etc. garnered by the individuals, groups or communities from outer world of experiences around them which they employ for keeping their nation working. The big circle is the limitless outer world where members of various societies gather experiences and also seek new knowledge to keep their respective systems working.

From figure 1 we conclude that a nation is built with a combination of ideas from individuals, clans, communities and ethnic groups. The various groups and their ideas must be coupled and have a looping system of feedback and signals to keep their big nation-system united. This nation-system can be disrupted by any of the subsystems if it fails to employ its coupling mechanisms in controlling its subsystems. One of these coupling mechanisms is the ability to have attractions for its varied subsystems.
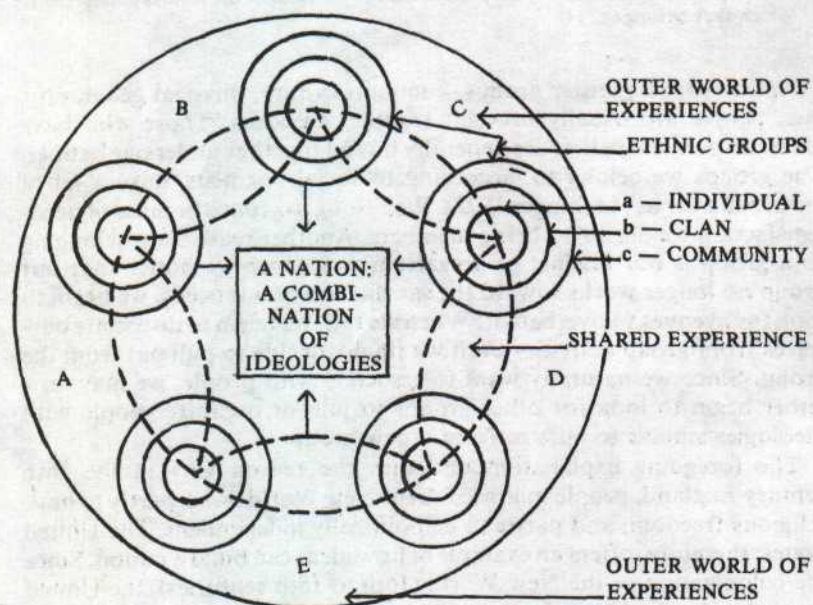

Figure 1. Systems Diagram with Feedback for a Nation of Multiple Ethnic Groups.

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Group Interaction

Group interaction in societies is brought about by a common understanding of common problems. The United States offers a good example.

Irrespective of the ethnic background of those who migrated from Europe to the New World, the idea of building one nation — the United States — was utmost in their hearts. As the various groups who now make up the United States think of their nation, they put aside some of their peculiar ethnic characteristics to accommodate others who do not share their individual uniqueness. From this explanation we can hypothesize that as a group of varied people move toward centralization, the amount of their ethnic bias decreases. This decrease in ethnic bias creates space for the ideas of other groups.

When groups decide to meet co-operation can come in the form of the knowledge, experience and skills of group members. Because the groups want to persue common goals, they will need to extablish methods of communication within themselves. How they communicate with each other depends on the level of experience the individual group has acquired from its external world. But the external experiences are modified and re-interpreted by the individual group through its internal world.

The internal world of a group is made up of the contributions the members make toward the group and the feeling and attitudes each member develops about the group (Miller and Rice *op. cit.*)

An ethnic group is a unit. Several ethnic groups make up a nation. An ethnic group comprises communities, clans and individuals. In fig. 2 we have a reproduction of an ethnic group from fig. 1.
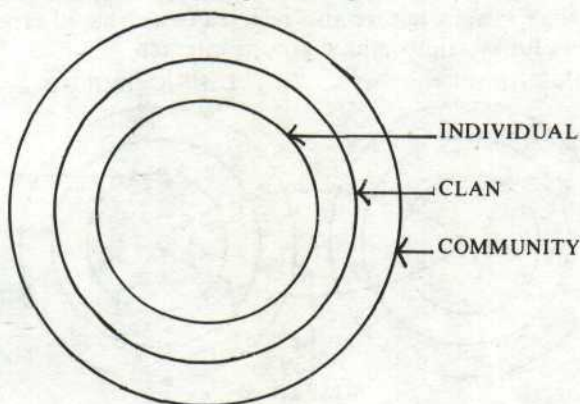

Fig. 2. Components of an Ethnic Group.

INDIVIDUAL

CLAN

COMMUNITY

A clan in some societies comprises chains of people with blood relationship. A combination of clans form one community. We should not confuse community in this context with the broader use of the word, for instance, in world community. Community in this sense refers to clans in a multi-racial society usually bound together by tradition. Clans may also be politically grouped into one community for the purpose of efficient administration. Several communities make up an ethnic group. Communities in an ethnic group can vary culturally and dialectically. The Nigerian society offers a good example. In the Igbo ethnic group, various communities exist. Although people in Igboland speak the same language, some communities find it difficult to understand and speak the Igbo spoken by other communities within the Igbo ethnic group.

Group Interaction

Miller and Rice *(op. cit.)* explain that:

> Any form of intergroup relations involves transactions of some kind across group boundaries. But for transactions across group boundaries, a group has to have some means of speaking as a group. It has to have a voice to be coherent and understandable, not only outside the group but inside as well; some mechanism, some political mechinery, has to be devised (p. 22).

This political mechinery is what we have referred to as a nation. Nigeria, for instance, is a nation. It is an abstract word — a combination of ideas from hundreds of ethnic groups. These various ideas that make up Nigeria are what we also referred to as 'shared experience'. Figure 3 shows how various ethnic groups interact.
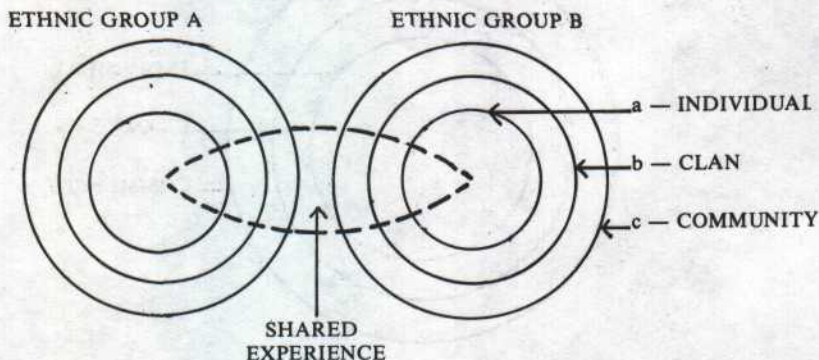

Fig. 3. Interaction mechanism of various Ethnic Groups.

The boundaries existing within the various groups are broken by 'shared experience'. When various ethnic groups decide to live together under one banner (nation) they combine their individual ideas. Thus, as the various ethnic groups decide to move toward centralization, the amount of their ethnic bias will decrease. Ideas may come as a result of one political ideology: fighting a common foe, for the sake of quicker development (eg. the Republic of Tanzania which is made up of Tanganyika and Zanzibar), etc.

Forming a nation comprising several ethnic groups reduces the power of each ethnic group as a group. The broken boundaries, connected by the ellipses, represent a proportion of ideas taken from ethnic groups A and B. This is shared experience, a common area of agreement. Conflict may arise among the various groups if one group tries to make its own ideas dominate all the other groups in the same system (nation). Several of these examples are found in Africa. These include the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) in which the Igbos accused the Hausas of domination and vice versa; the genocidal activities of Field Marshal Idi Amin of Uganda during his administration (1972-79); and President Mobutu's incitement of the pygamies in Zaire against Shaba Province secessionists in 1977. Idi Amin and Mobutu each represents an ethnic group in their respective countries.

The Individual

An individual's personality comprises his physical inheritance and the experiences he has acquired in the course of his development. Playing major roles in the development of the individual are the home and the immediate environment of the individual. The individual is nurtured by his home and those with whom he associates. The other associates include his extended family system and the school. As he grows into the world, the individual, while maintaining his ego, tries to accommodate the wishes of others.

Thus, the society plays a very important role in socializing the individual. Within the various circles the individual behaves differently. By this it is meant that some characteristics displayed in the home may not be brought to the outside world. This means too that the individual's actions are not only refined but his chances of getting more attention than he would otherwise have in the home or community are reduced when a larger group is involved. Figure 4 explains channel reduction as the individual moves from the home to the community, to the ethnic and to the national levels.
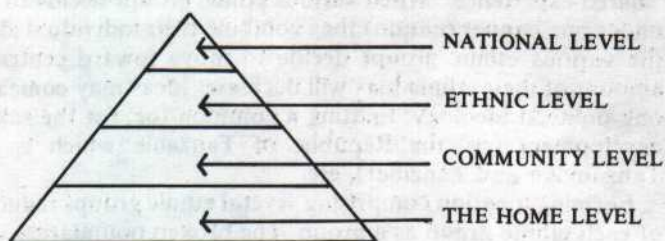
Figure 4. Channel Reduction: Chances of individual's ideas being accepted dicreases as he proceeds to national level.

The individual's conception of how he will be treated by others within the various levels in figure 4 is always a factor in determining the form of his personality. The 'beliefs and attitudes on which he bases his code of conduct derive from these relationships and are built into the pattern that becomes his personality' (Miller and Rice *op cit*: 15). This is his internal self. The internal self comprises his native born impulses and the native controls over them by his earliest authorities, represented by his parents. The internal world also is made up of the rebellious self which is always seeking to disobey authorities. We refer to this as the individual's ego.

The individual's ego — his unique nature — is the mediating link between the internal and external world of the individual. We can refer to this as the mature self — the individual's characteristics which enable him to see the reality of human existence. It is this ego-self which helps the individual to draw the line of demarcation between one level and the other. In an ascending order in figure 4, the projection of the individual's ego narrows down. This is so in order to accommodate some percentage of other people's egos within the society.

Unless the individual is a leader, the chances of his ego being felt at all levels in figure 4 are limited. This is where representation accounts for group opinion. It is a reduction of the projection of the individual's personality influence. This is channel reduction. Therefore, the external world of the individual limits the projection of his ego or influence.

But when the individual is determined to make his ideas felt at the national level, he intensifies his persuasive ability (idea intensification). This means that although the individual's channel of communication becomes narrow because of the people's ideas which also occupy the same channel, the individual has to intensify all his persuasive efforts in order to be able to convince other ethnic groups who also have their own ideas and visions about their nation.

This means that the individual has to excel in his profession and intellectual ability to be able to be heard at various levels outside the

home. Excellence rather than mediocrity, quota system or federal character has to be accepted as a yardstick for appointing people within a nation into positions.

When the foregoing is adopted, there will be rapid national development. There will also be a sense of belonging to the national system.

However, a concerted effort should be made to curb the over-projection of individual and ethnic egos among the so-called ethnic leaders who do not only think that their ideas should always dominate other ideas but also see themselves as the only arbiters of their people.

Conclusion

In a country of multi-ethnic groups, there must be leaders whose ideas of leadership are above self interest, clanism and ethnicism. The foundation of any good leadership, however, is usually the home, the clan and the immediate community. Unless a potential statesman or leader has butressed himself as a good leader in his community, he could have problems leading a larger community.

From the foregoing, therefore, it can be concluded that to be a good statesman or leader, one must have a solid home foundation to back up one's national leadership. And unless one is an able ethnic or group leader, one is likely to be a failure as a national leader. The extent to which a national leader dances to the tune of his ethnic instinct determines his capabilities as a nationalist.

Thus, we have the limits of ethnicism. The limits of ethnicism simply means that as long as a national leader or public servant is carrying out a selfless service to his nation, he does not have to ignore his ethnic or group background which helped to mould him as a national leader. But such ethnic affliation or group interest should not in any way interfere with national ideals. Interference will lead to the disruption of the national system.

Group or ethnic interest is counterproductive in a nation of multi-ethnic groups. To be heard at the national level, the individual has to intensify his ideas because a lot of other ideas, intellectual or professional capabilities, will have to occupy the same narrow channels as ascent is made from home to national levels. Therefore, as a group of varied people move toward centralization, the amount of their ethnic or group ideas or biases decrease in order to make room for other competing ideas or biases.

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