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# 13

## NIGERIA'S ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND ITS PRONENESS TO CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

E. A. Ikegbu, Ph.D,

D J. N. Ogar, Ph.D

And

J. O. Inyang, Ph.D

### Abstract

Nigeria as a socio-political formation is plagued with vagaries of problems ranging from political instability, economic slow down, religious and ethnic rivalries. These attendant challenges have constantly marred the developmental pedestal of the country, and consequently raised eyebrow against the backdrop of her relationship with other countries of the world. It is argued that the forced amalgamation by the colonialist rather than solve the problem of disunity, has encouraged fragmentation of the country. This paper aligns itself the very fact that the conflict associated with the diversity of Nigeria is as a result of the inability of the leaders of the country to fashion out a dependable economic platform and / or blueprint that has the socialist credentials of carrying every member of the society along. It is therefore, the contention of this paper that a well-patterned socialist policy will reduce and possibly eliminate the palpable tension and violence and in the spirit of complementarity sees every fragment of the society as an indispensable unit in a whole.

### Introduction

A plethora of arguments abound that point to the fact that palpable tension and violence are disturbing phenomena occasioned by the glaring cases of social injustice in the distribution and allocation of social goods in the society. The inability of the government of the day to fashion out an acceptable and formidable platform upon which goods and services commonly owned can be distributed in order of equality or equitability has the tendency of brewing

tension of monumental magnitude and also brings about the fragmentation of the society.

Marx, an ardent socialist and liberation fighter was unequivocal when he made a case against class distinction. In his opinion, class distinction is immoral, anti-human and should be completely eliminated. This philosopher of repute underscored the very negative and attendant problems of fragmentation and class distinction could cause to the society that he called for its elimination. In the same vein, the ethinicisation or fragmentation of the society is injurious as this has the tendency of retarding the growth of the Nigerian society.

Nigeria today is a nation existing with three major ethnic groups -Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, and about two hundred and fifty ethnic nationalities representing different interests and backgrounds. The desire to project a particular interest over the others would as a matter of fact conflict with the national interest which is paramount and as a consequence, palpable tension and violence would ensue. Again, it is most evident that the issue of Nigeria's conflict is traceable to political and economic disequilibrium, while religious, linguistic and cultural cases are mere addenda to the above.

However, the Nigerian society is a conglomerate of individuals who have accepted to live together under one indivisible, indissoluble nation, called Nigeria. What is needed to clearly address the theatre of violence and palpable tension that bifurcate the nation is a formidable policy framework that would appreciate every segment as a significant complementary ontology of being. This complementary unity is mostly seen in a socialist political framework not as ideology, but a formidable authentic practical solution to the ensuing quagmire especially in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

### **The Emergence of Ethnicity in Nigeria**

Prior to the advent of colonialist in Nigeria, people had existed in what is today called Nigeria adopting a peculiarly non-written constitutional framework to administer their affairs. Nigeria as a socio-political entity was a creative coinage of the British Colonialists. During colonial administration in Nigeria, the colonial master seemed to have found it wise to divide the country into regions for administrative convenience and efficiency. As regionalism manifested in the constitutional history of Arthur Richard, subsequent colonial governors like John Macpherson introduced policies such as federalism, which complemented the regional structure already subsisting.

The wisdom behind federalism is hinged on the fact that regions were to manage resources that accrue to them from within their areas, while they paid royalty to the central government. This was the logic that governed the

political economy of Nigeria in her pre-independence and independence periods. In one of his classics, Okwudiba Nnoli writes that the colonial urban setting was the cradle of ethnicity in Nigeria. According to him, "it was there that what we refer to today as ethnic groups first acquired a common consciousness" (35). He writes further that the "contemporary Nigerian ethnicity is not the result of some barbarous misque peculiar to Africa" (35). Okwudiba Nnoli makes it abundantly clear that tribalism or ethnicity in Nigeria is a creature of the colonial and post-colonial order. He supports this further when he argues that:

It was only after colonialism that the term Yoruba-land began to be used to refer to the demains of all rulers who claim descent from the mythical Oduduwa, instead of the kingdom of Oyo to which it was previously limited (35).

As valid as Okwudiba's argument on the centrality of ethnicity as a handmaid of the colonialist may be, it is interesting to note the contrary opinion of Ihonvbere as cited by Asouzu that, "prior to the advent of colonial domination ethnic groups in Africa fought violently between and with themselves" (67).

The argument of Okudiba may very well find its validity on political basis. Even before colonial invasion, different ethnic groups in Nigeria at one time or the other convened to deliberate on thorny issues concerning leadership of their area and other attendant political issues. Although, there may be clear absence of central political fora, nevertheless, this may be discussed in various town union meetings, age grade meetings, elder's forum and youths' forum respectively. It may be interesting to note that political events in the country especially the development of political parties followed regional lines as established by Richard's constitutional administration. It is evident that none of the political parties that had existed before 1946 had ethnic origin. Such political parties as the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and National Council for Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC) were in every sense of it, national and international in outlook and orientation. It is on this premise that Collins and Nganya write:

It was not until 1959 that NCNC was reduced to a regional and ethnic party as a counter weight to the already regionalized and ethnically based political parties. The Action Group (AG) started as a Yoruba part (14).

According to Adigwe, in March 1951, the Action Group was launched in Ibadan in the then Western Region. Its origin can be traced to a Yoruba

cultural organization, the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*. Adigwe states that in spite of the fact that the Action group was the official opposition in the North and East, it was identified as an ethnic (Yoruba) based party, (187).

Dare and Oyewole contend that December 1949 was noted for the formation of Northern Nigerian People's Congress (NNPC). This could be termed the genesis of the development of ethnic politicking in Northern Region. This regional Congress, the NPC which later metamorphosed into a political party was formed to protect the political, economic, social and cultural interests of Northern Region. Adigwe summarily puts it that "they converted the NPC into a political party in order to be able to control the pace of nationalism in the North" (187).

It is clear though arguable that the factors so far analyzed and other subsequent developments were the springboards for the emergence of ethnicity in Nigerian polity with its attendant problems. Adigwe acknowledges that "the establishment of Regional Councils tended to weaken the units of the country" (188). National issues that ought to have been perceived and treated started receiving ethnically- oriented attention. Each region or ethnic group started socio-political maneuverings geared towards outwitting the other. Subsequent National Conferences were viewed from ethnic point of view. Each conferee was out to defend his/her own region at the expense of the unity and development of the entire nation. At this stage of the nation, primordial politics and parochial sensibilities influenced the reasoning and intellectual faculties of the Nigerian people.

Decisions reached at any one of the conferences did not reflect the ever-sought unity that members claimed to have caused their gathering and convening together. Rather, members presented various ideological trappings that had the propensity of yielding results for them. The different ideological strands manifested in their attitudes, contributions and the rest as the conference progressed. Ojukwu showed dismay in this type of attitude shown by the Nigerian nationalists apart from Azikiwe whom he described as a dreamer. According to him:

With bitterness, we began to learn that Zik, whom the British colonial administration could never incarcerate, had willingly constituted himself a prisoner of what appeared to us as northern interests... the foregoing coupled with the fact that the Igbos appear today to be marginalized and lacking in any appreciable influence within the power structure of Nigeria, invariably has made the leadership of Igbos by Zik a subject of a vast amount of discussion. In my own candid opinion, Zik did not set out to lead the Igbos and has not in fact led the Igbos. He has been first

and foremost a Nigerian who aspired to a Nigerian leadership. When the British withdrew in 1960, Nigeria was left in the hands of three great men. Of the three, Zik could be said to have been the dreamer whilst the others were hard-headed realists. Zik believed, worked for and made sacrifices for a Nigeria that had not yet come into existence – the ideal increasingly unattainable, they found themselves deflated and deprived vis-à-vis the realists, who from the beginning, ensured for their groups a share of whatever was going. (158)

The reasoning posture exhibited above by Ojukwu cannot be far from the true position. Azikiwe was a reflection of a true nationalist who sought only for the unity of Nigeria and not the unity of a segment of the country. Although, the party he founded had ethnic character the ideology was nationalistic. He eminently departed from the standpoint of the other acclaimed nationalists of his contemporary. The prevalent ideological character of sponsoring for the good of a peculiar region would be beautifully challenged by others as these were issues built on sentiment. The prevalence of ethnic divisions got further expression during the Lagos conference of 1954, which was to consider the advice of the fiscal commissioner in charge of Revenue Allocation. In this conference, each ethnic fragment adequately canvassed to have a better deal for its region disregarding what the fate of other ethnic regions and ethnic minorities that made up the expression – Nigeria.

Be that as it may, Nigeria and her African allies were engrossed with the evils of ethnicity. This goes to absolve the colonialists of any blame arising from the fragmentation of the Nigerian society. The only rationality respecting this position is that ethnicity is natural. It is a kind of special psychology naturally discovered between and among people who are communalistic in language, culture, colour, and tribe with the group to successfully forge a common goal. For an ethnic group to successfully emerge and pursue a common goal, there must be a common belief in themselves and their pursuit.

In addition to the above, there is a psycho-socio and natural angle to the explanation of the emergence of ethnicity in Nigeria. Defending this view, Agi maintains that unregulated competition over something that is in short supply always gives rise to ethnic and selfish feelings for the preservation of oneself and ones kinsmen. To quote him:

The arbitrariness of God's arrangements seems at first sight to be the source and cause of division and unhappiness among

men... the scarceness of earthly goods available in an economy that God seems to have made is one more factor which contributes to the break up of humanity (9).

Agi argues further that: "Divine parsimony seems an incitement to materialistic competition" (9). He (Agi) sees the geography of Nigeria's existence as a symptomatic influence to the emergence of ethnicity. This he perceives thus:

Nigeria is by no means a homogenous society. Rather, Nigeria is not only a pluri-ethnic society, it is also, one made up of diverse religions; and sect within the regions, stressing no common values (13).

There is no gainsaying the fact that the emergence of ethnicity or fragmentation of the society will eliminate the possibility of consensus or common values from the psychology of Nigeria's existence. This is because, what constitutes value system is what a particular ethnic group appreciates and not what Nigerian state as a whole welcomes. It may be wrong to argue constructively that ethnicity is African or Nigerian. All over the world, ethnic related issues dominate the sub-consciousness of people's existence. This is premised on the fact that there are always people from the clan, community, village, etc with common language, culture, religion and political orientation who would assemble to reflect on how the affairs of the nation are carried out. This is pertinent for no one is self-sufficient. Again, these people with common existential background and affinity enjoy the protection of natural law to ask certain basic questions which may range from security, leadership, devolution of power, distribution of social goods, etc.

At any rate, the inequitable distribution of social goods and the failed system of leadership could awaken the consciousness of the people. This was exemplified in the ideological trappings of the foremost African nationalists. The ignition of ethnicity, which, was widespread during the colonial era in various conferences, had not gone down decades after independence of Nigeria. Rather, the spirit and negative wisdom entrenched in ethnicity still controls the affairs of Nigeria even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nigeria has asymmetrically refused to align itself with a formidable logic of complementarity, which has the appreciable tools of building bridges and by extension, collectively and complimentarily confront the Nigeria's existential situation, which is a therapeutic healing balm for quelling the palpable tension and violence. The utility of this logic anchors on a philosophical trite that members of a given society who had defined themselves earlier as coming

from ethnic group A, ethnic group B, ethnic group C, etc, and as such act or respond on ethnic related manner, would give up the ideas and behave or respond complementarily and collectively in an issue that affects the other parts of people.

### The Implication of Ethnicity

Most analysts of the African political and social scenes admit the fact that ethnicity constitutes one of most dangerous threats to the realization of stable government in Africa. Ethnicity in Africa is not an accident of history, but that which comes up as a result of struggle and competition by all the stakeholders. What is more is that each ethnic group seeks to protect its own area with less regard to what becomes of the entire state. What is paramount within the framework of those that churn out ethnic sensibility is how best to protect their parochial aims at the expense of the entire nation. Bala Usman contends that:

If there is a problem of ethnicity in Nigeria today, it is certainly not because these ethnic groups existed before the colonial conquest. The contemporary tribes and ethnic groups' action today never existed in any real historical past of the peoples of this country (46).

The seeming deducible assumption by Usman is suggestive of the fact that apparent ethnic and parochial sensibilities became fully acknowledged at the time of the colonial infraction in Nigeria. This view is opposed to the assumption of Nnoli. Usman goes further to argue that what dominates ethnic ideology is the pursuit of its peculiar interest owing to the fact that some segments of the society especially those that make meaningful contribution of the resources are often times abandoned with little or no care of their welfare. He argues thus:

This process of enrichment of the leadership and the impoverishment of the citizenry continues in Nigeria because those engaged in the production of goods and services do not individually and collectively play a dominant role in political system. The political system is dominated by those who parasitically acquire wealth from their control of commercial and financial transactions often through their capability to block and put obstacles on the path of any transactions which favour production. This is why they become richer while the rest of the country becomes poorer and poorer (33).

It is evident though arguable that the alienation of those whose 'soil' produces the natural resources from the scheme of affairs and, or from political activities in Nigeria can quite clearly generate a tension-laden situation. The full integration of the people from the locality where resources are generated massively would make them play a protectionist role. The basic logical strand in the argument of Usman, which Barongo corroborated, aligns him into following a similar logical deduction as a panacea for the growing socio-political disorder and ethnic tension in the Nigeria polity. It is the contention of Barongo that a socialist government for Nigeria will reduce political crisis, ethnic tension and restore stability in the polity. Barongo argues that:

The emergent capitalist mode of production, distribution and consumption in Nigeria tends to breed and intensify ethnic and elite conflicts of a kind that militates against the building and functioning of an integrated society and a democratically stable political system and that, if national integration and political stability are to be achieved and maintained, there is an imperative need for the country to escape from capitalism and adopt an economic system of a socialist type which has inherent mechanisms of minimizing conflicts and enhancing consensus and social cohesion (65-80).

The above expressed view has captured the glimpse of the sermon of this paper – national integration, social cohesion and fraternity, a relationship builds upon the foundations of complementarity. That is the type of relationship that is capable of ameliorating the already palpable state of confusion. If the political structure of the Nigerian state is built upon the solid foundation of socialism not as an ideology, but a practical system of political process with the empirical imprints of addressing the problems of marginalization, oppression, suppression, ethnic and political chauvinism and other attendant frustrations, Nigeria would now be seen as extending her hands of fellowship and co-operation towards family-hood.

To corroborate the necessity of this unity, Asouzu had argued on the impossibility of an individual existing without the other. He sees the reflection of the existence of 'A' in the life of 'B' and with this, 'A' cannot claim superiority over 'B' hence 'A' cannot be on its own but requires 'B' in a complementary perspective. The existing relationship of 'A' and 'B' is a relationship *ad continuum*. It is not an ad hoc relationship, which terminates at the expiration of their individual pursuit. But this relationship continues to go on and so far as humanity exists.

By the obvious implications of ethnicity, what is the guarantee that relationship of any kind would ever exist in an atmosphere of rancour and ill feeling? Obviously, this is not possible. People cannot be seen to fraternize and harmoniously pursue set goals that are capable of repositioning the society. What increasingly exists in the minds of Nigerian populace is nothing but how best to foster ethnic interest and tribal logic of "*Ndia bu ndi nke anya*" (These are our own people), a parochial reasoning 'virus' and or leprosy that has convulsed every segment of our bloodstream. This shares similarity with what Asouzu calls "the nearer the better and the safer" (65).

With this, ethnicity will not be entirely perceived as one of the evils of colonial contraption because of its natural connotation. The naturality of ethnicity rests on a philosophical trite that people have the desire to protect and seek for the interest of the place or locality where they come from; tracing their identity and origin from a particular geographical entity and acting assiduously to protect this area from infraction by others. Asouzu writes that:

The tendency to ethnic cleavage has a dimension that is natural to human nature but which can easily be misappropriated and manipulated. In other words, ethnicity is not a negative factor per se but one that has an inherently ambivalent dimension (Redefining Ethnicity with the Complementary System of thought in African Philosophy, 67).

Asouzu believes there is nothing wrong in one identifying oneself to have been a native of a particular place in history. But the natural tendency in human beings will manifest in a negative dimension as these human beings press to defend and protect their locality. This is to say that the individualistic expression of people's existence manifests in their thoughts, associations and /or relationship entered with others and also in the quest to protect these peculiar interests. This is where the sense of, and perception towards ethnicity is hatched. In this wise, Asouzu posits:

Ethnic matters are some of those decisive moments where the mind seeks to convince itself that a person or group of individuals are better off and are safer in the midst of those that share certain common, unique or exclusive qualities. These are our kith and kin, our own tribal people, people of our race, of our nation, etc. Thus in most contentious situations of life, we tend to act in keeping with this maxim. Worst still, tend to assume that there are certain natural rights attached to its dictates in the form of an ordinance of the natural law (63-78).

In line with the above view, ethnicity revolves around a collectivity of people that share the same aspiration, whose mindsets are fixed towards pursuing a parochial goal. It has something to do with ideology. Although different ideologies would exist within the same ethnic group, but it is this ideological consciousness that brings them together; that gives them the impression that "the nearer the better and the safer" (65).

There are situations when we attempt to seek our own preservation and existence with conscious neglect of the preservation of the existence of other beings in the universe. This attempt will certainly lead to something that has the propensity of collapsing the fabric of the society. A society with high-level ethnic dominance witnesses dwindling economic growth, social upheaval, political uprising and monumental killings, kidnapping, rituals, and other forms of social ills.

In Nigeria, it is a common phenomenon that ethnic-based politics has not allowed the Nigerian state to advance like other countries of the world. Take a clue from the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, which was the consequence of ethnic-based politics. Obasanjo posits:

The election of that year was fought in regional loyalty, with a strong tribal bias. But the government that emerged was a coalition of two regionally based parties leaving the third party, also regionally based, within the cold. With no patriotic feeling sectionalism and tribalism being extolled... North for the Northerners, West for the Westerners and East for the Easterners. Nobody seemed to care sufficiently for Nigeria as nation (Nzeogwu, 79).

Because Nigeria was ethnically based, this gave the people the unwarranted license to press for the security and safety of their own ethnic group without concern for the nation at large. This philosophy still plays in the minds of people in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. It beats one's imagination therefore, how progress and development could be achieved in a country with well over 250 ethnic nationalities representing different aspirations and goals. Ethnicity punctures a nation's desire to advance economically, socially, politically, and culturally. Its presence in a society is an inevitable anathema that is constantly perceived to be a clog in the wheel of progress and development.

Nothing moves in an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability. This is the major offspring of ethnicity. Any state that finds itself in the theatre of ethnicity is greatly bewildered, and cannot correctly locate its bearing. This retards to a large extent the development pedestal of the state. There is urgent need to make a u-turn and put in place a logical draw back that will evidently fast track Nigeria as a nation.

## **Conclusion**

The spectre of monumental violence erupting from ethnicity is what should bother every member of a given society. The display of emotions and passion by each segment of the society has caused grievous harm than good. Although the emotions displayed by various ethnic groups, which could be regarded as a response to their peculiar existential challenge, may be justified when viewed from the angle of neglect by the government of the day whose duty it is to provide social infrastructures to the Nigerian populace, this paper, is of the opinion that feigning ethnic sentiment has impaired the nation's desire to be known significantly in the area of economy, politics and social advancement. All the ethnic regions have pragmatic contributions to make for the development of Nigeria, and none can be dispensed with. Within the ambit of the logic of this paper, the 21<sup>st</sup> century wisdom of complementarity, which has been seen as a formidable therapeutic healing balm is advocated. Also, as a healing pill, the National Commission on Ethnicity as an act of the National Assembly should be established. This forum (N.C.E.) If established shall be independent of the executive arm of the government, but under the headship of Chief Justice of the Federation. This symbolic Assembly (NCE) shall comprise of representatives of all the ethnic nationalities and other groups that feel so marginalized in the past, present and who may suffer threat of marginalization in future. It is not an ad hoc committee which ceases to be at the expiration of its functions, but the commission shall continue to exist in order to review acts of ethnic disenchantment, appointments, promotion, recruitment into the army, police, navy, air force, etc to be sure that the principle of federation and federal character are equitably discharged.

This paper contends that (as one of its numerous recommendations) a classical and urgent survey of the parts of Nigeria be carried out with a display of honesty to discover areas that are infrastructurally backward, in order to urgently address such situation. The parts of the country with native talents and natural resources should be fully integrated in the scheme of affairs, in order to reflect the Rawlsian philosophical beacon aimed at addressing social injustice.

The feigning of ethnic sentiments are mostly carried out or propagated by the idle youths through direct or indirect sponsorship by some group of people from the areas, who perhaps, may be pursuing selfish agenda; the youths should be properly engaged by way of establishing cottage industries in the areas, skill acquisition centers, rehabilitation centers, especially for those militants that gave up militancy.

An enlightenment campaign should be carried out by the government with the aid of relevant agencies, traditional rulers, community leaders, the

church and mosque, various non governmental organizations, market women and other relevant organizations on the dangers associated with ethnicity.

It is significant to note the role played by the church and mosque in the shaping of the character of people. In this case, the church and mosque should not isolate themselves from the path of peace. The two are agents of peace building and stability to any society fully determined to advance in all spheres of existence.

The Nigeria's educational curricula should be reviewed and / or redesigned to incorporate ethnic study for primary, post-primary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Where this is done, the dangers of ethnicity would permeate the ears of members of the society like a song.

The structure of political governance should be designed in such a framework that leadership will not be based on chauvinistic principles. This process, if objectively articulated, will nip in the bud the over-growing influence of the "fallacy of the nearer the safer and the better", which has polluted the body polity in Nigeria.

This paper, therefore, expresses fervent opinion that the conscious articulation of the recommended therapeutic pills would go a long way into reducing if not eliminating the negative behavioural attitudes associated with ethnicity.

The commission if put in place shall serve as a prototype of Truth Commission of the South African extraction chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This commission would recommend to the government remedial measures, compensations and reparations to be religiously paid by the government to those states and regions that have legitimate claims of marginalization, neglect, oppressions, etc. This is a somewhat socially-driven methodic pattern of ensuring stability and good-governance to its people.

In conclusion, no matter the threat of ethnicity and its overbearing consequences, the society which has been harmoniously structured to be together would evidently come to realize the principle and intendment of the new morality of "live and let live". The new morality anchors on the strength of cooperation, upon realizing the objective truth embedded in Asouzu's complementary paradigm and Aristotle's expression that everyman is a political animal who needs the cooperation of every member of the society.

This new reflection (philosophy) of "live and let live" if properly understood, would erode every sentimental feeling of ethnicity, acrimony, prejudice and discrimination, and this will give rise to peace, unity, togetherness and stability of socio-political and economic harmony in the society.

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