

## **ETHNICITY AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*One of the numerous problems confronting Nigeria today is unity. The structure of Nigeria's ethnic relations, more often than not generate tension that sometimes threaten efforts at national integration. Contemporary Nigerian society is a complex web of contending, often hostile, ethnic, religious and regional issues. Indeed, a study of the multiethnic, multi-religious, multiclass and multiregional dimensions of the Nigerian society and their impact on national integration makes this work invaluable giving the wave of oddities that presently threaten the peace and unity of Nigeria. This paper attempts an examination of the impact of ethnicity on national integration in Nigeria. There is no doubt that conflict among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria namely the Hausa- Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo began in the colonial era but assumed a disturbing dimension after the country's independence in 1960. The paper also seeks to examine the impact of these conflicts on national unity and integration.*

**Keywords:** *Multiethnic, Multiclass, Multiregional, Multi-religion, Ethnic Tension and National Integration.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is faced with a horde of problems chiefly among which is ethnicity. So Nigerians are yet to overcome their differences in terms of their pre-colonial socio-cultural, ethnic, religious and geo-political orientations. Thus, Nigeria has been labeled as "... a politically arranged country... the product of a British experiment in political cloning"<sup>1</sup>. Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, one of Nigeria's frontline nationalists once described Nigeria as a mere "geographical political expression"<sup>2</sup> or the "mistake of 1914"<sup>3</sup>. The country's situation is further complicated by its size and complexity. Nigeria boasts of over 250 ethnic groups and 400 distinct languages with Christianity, Islam and African traditional religions<sup>4</sup> as main religions. These ethnic groups had strong historical relations with one another before the advent of Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Hodgkin notes that "a variety of links existed between the various states and the peoples which were the predecessors of modern Nigeria ..."<sup>6</sup>

Almost all these pre-colonial entities existed for several years without any internal disruption before "colonialism" crept into them.<sup>7</sup> The arrival of imperial agents, however altered the peaceful coexistence hitherto enjoyed by these linguistic nationalities. Since the colonial period and even after, the country has been grappling with the challenges of welding these various multi-ethnic states into one indivisible and united country.

This paper focuses on the conflicts among the various ethnic groups since the colonial period and their impact on national integration. The first segment discusses the origin and development of ethnicity in Nigerian body politic between 1900 and 1946. The second section examines inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria between 1946 and 1966 and their impact on nation building. The third, aspect assesses the impact of ethnic politics on the socio-economic and political integration of Nigeria between 1996 and 2012.

## THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF ETHNICITY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS (1900 – 1946)

Some scholars have argued that ethnicity in Nigeria is colonial in origin;<sup>8</sup> that the phenomenon of ethnicity in Nigerian politics is externally motivated and that it does not develop as a result of conflict among the various pre-colonial polities. It is unarguable, however, that the

Europeans brought disunity to Africa through the balkanization of the continent; through the creation of 40-50 separate colonies; through the ruling of the colonies on the basis of divide and rule, and by encouraging ethnic rivalries within African states.<sup>9</sup> Right from the onset, the British bureaucrats in Nigeria gave the impression that Nigeria would never be united into a nation. For instance, Governor Hugh Clifford once described Nigeria as;

a collection of self contained and mutually independent Native States separated from one another...by great distances, by differences of history and traditions and ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers.<sup>10</sup>

It was this preconceived idea about African countries that made the colonialists to embark on arbitrary lumping of African linguistic groups into tribes without recourse to differences in the culture and traditions of these tribes. The effect of this was that every language all over Africa became identified with tribes. In the pre-colonial era, there was strong correlation between the Yoruba kingdom and Benin kingdom as well between the Yoruba and the Igbo. Similarly, the Hausas had contact with the Yoruba before the advent of Europeans. With the advent of colonialism, the old bond that tied these people together was cut off; they could no longer live together in unity. They perceived one another as belonging to different tribes.<sup>11</sup>

The colonialists having succeeded in turning the linguistic groups into tribes went ahead to create different abodes for these people. Even before the advent of this obnoxious policy, the Easterners or Westerners who travelled to the North lived harmoniously with their hosts. The British Government introduced the policy of separating the Hausa-Fulani from the Southerners ostensibly to pre-empt any form of conflict among them. The effect of this separation was that the migrants from the south were forced to live in separate abode variously called Sabongari, Tudun Wada and Sarkin Arabs wards.<sup>12</sup>

Unarguably the enthronement of ethnicity has helped in poisoning the minds of Nigerians against one another. A good example of the divide and rule system of Britain was the general strike of 1945 that was planned by Nigerians against the British administration. This strike was a protest over shortage of food supplies. Because of the severe food shortage, the British

officials decided to ration out food to the people who formed long queues outside market areas. The British Government capitalized on the food crisis which was more severe in the North to incite the Hausas against the Igbos claiming that the strike and food shortage were caused by the Igbos.<sup>13</sup> Consequently the Hausas unleashed a wave of terror against the Igbos although they may have been wrongly informed by British agents. Since then, there has been persistent ethnic tension and hostility among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria as manifest in the Yoruba and Igbo residents/traders in Lagos in 1948 as well as constant tension between the Yorubas and Hausas at Ibadan cattle market of recent memory. Today the, Northern part of Nigeria is regarded as the hotbed for ethno-religious and political crises.

A dangerous dichotomy thus developed between the Northerners and Southerners as a result of Britain's segregation policy to the extent that Nigerians living outside their places of origin were regarded as "native foreigners"<sup>14</sup> in their father's land! This category of Nigerians did not enjoy full citizenship right in those states where they migrated to.<sup>15</sup> This scenario has generated serious constitutional crisis in the country with respect to the rights of Nigerian citizens residing in states other than their own. Thus the colonial administration succeeded in bequeathing to Nigeria an enduring legacy of mutual suspicion and contempt.<sup>16</sup> The North derided the South as pagans, undisciplined and materialistic while the South in turn ridiculed the North as feudalistic, conservative, illiterate and tools in the hands of the colonial masters.<sup>17</sup> The antagonism between the North and South was so deep that Chief Awolowo saw both areas as "divergently and almost irreconcilably oriented."<sup>18</sup> The problem was worsened by the spatial imbalance between the North and the South which compelled Nigeria to enshrine in its constitution the principles of federal character and quota system.

### **INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA BETWEEN 1946-1966**

Although scholars on Nigerian history are wont to trace the origin of ethnicity in Nigeria to the doorstep of the colonial government the early nationalists cannot also be exonerated from embracing and accentuating it. Even if the colonial masters had no compelling reasons to evolve a Nigerian nation, many expected of the country's pre colonial and post-colonial leaders to create a strong united Nigerian nation devoid of ethnic chauvinism. During the colonial era, "the leaders of the anti colonial movement looked inwards to their nations of

origin, and cared little for the larger Nigerian nation. Any talk of the Nigerian nation belonged to the realm of propaganda.<sup>19</sup> Indeed early Nigerian leaders were more engrossed with beefing up their bargaining power, first with the British and then among themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Although the early nationalist movements had good intentions for the country (they were resolute in their anti-colonial stance) the leaders of these movements soon degenerated into sectional politics. For instance, the West African Student Union that replaced the Nigerian Progressive Union in 1925 was eclipsed by the ethnic nationalism. No sooner was this association formed than mushroom ethnic associations sprang up.<sup>21</sup> These included the oversea branches of the Ijebu Muslim College Old Boys' Association, the United Kingdom. Branch of St. Andrew's College Old Boys Association, the Warri (Nigeria) Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Ibo Federal Union, Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the Yoruba Federal Union.<sup>22</sup> The separatist attitude of these nationalists according to Professor Kenneth Dike showed that "...Nigerian intellectual, far from being an influence for national integration, is the greatest exploiter of parochial and clannish sentiment".<sup>23</sup>

Also, the Nigerian Youth Movement (formed around 1934) which was the first nation wide nationalist movement in the country was dissolved at the alter of tribalism, sectionalism and political intolerance<sup>24</sup>. The association failed because the consensus among its leaders was narrow and the ambition of its top leaders were irreconcilable and in a serious conflict with the aims of the organization.<sup>25</sup> Its demise eventually came as a result of the struggle over who would occupy the Legislative Council seat that was vacant following the resignation of Dr. Kofo Abayomi, the president of the movement who was appointed to the Governor's Executive Council. The post was contested by Ernest Ikoli (an Ijaw man) and Samuel Akinsanya (an Ijebu Yoruba man), the duo were one of the key founding member of the organization. Ikoli was supported by Chief Awolowo while Akinsanya was backed by Dr. Azikiwe. Eventually, Ikoli was selected as Abayomi's successor. His "... selection...was interpreted by Akinsanya and the Ijebu Yorubas, and by Azikiwe and the Ibos who supported Akinsanya a manifestation of tribal prejudice against Ijebus and Ibos."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, Dr. Azikiwe and his Ibos supporters as well as Akinsanya and some Ijebu left the party. This crisis "...became... the first manifestation of tribal tension that affected all subsequent efforts to

achieve national unity and political integration in Nigeria.”<sup>27</sup> This destructive legacy bequeathed to us by our early nationalists still continues to haunt the country’s unity till today.

With the bad precedence that had been set by Nigerian students abroad, communal or sectional loyalty was allowed to thrive rather than national loyalty. Back home in Nigeria, things were the same, regional loyalty prevailed. Different linguistic groups formed different cultural organizations which further jeopardized the struggle for national unity<sup>28</sup>. Such cultural organizations included: the Lagos Branch of the Ibo Union, the Ibo Federal Union, the Onithsa Improvement Union, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Jamiyyar Mutanern Arewa among others.<sup>29</sup>

Having entrenched themselves in their respective regions, these cultural associations were transformed into political parties. Chief Obafemi Awolowo was said to be the first nationalist leader to lay the foundation of regional parties in Nigeria.<sup>30</sup> His ideology was based on the thesis that no nationalist party should attempt, from the start, to cut across regional boundaries and established itself on national basis. Chief Awolowo believed such party should gain power and established itself in one region and later spread to other areas.<sup>31</sup>

As expected, this development gave birth to regional political parties that drew support largely from their former cultural associations. These parties include Action Group (AG) which drew its support from the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the National Council of Nigerian Citizen (NCNC) backed by the Igbos / Igbo Federal Union and the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) formed from both the Jamiyyar Mutanern Arewa A Yan, and the Jamiyya Jamaar Arewa. They were formed to protect and promote their regions alone. The Richard Constitution of 1946 further accentuated the pace of regional politics in Nigeria. The constitution strengthened the mutual suspicion among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria and marked the beginning of acrimonious ethnic politics in the country.<sup>32</sup> Each of the parties mentioned earlier became the instrument for the protection of its ethnic groups.

Also, each of the three main ethnic groups feared domination by the other. The Yorubas and the Igbos were suspicious of each other just as the Yorubas and Igbos who constituted the Southerner region were feared by the Northerners and vice visa.<sup>33</sup> The political statements of the leaders of political parties before and after their formation helped to inflame the fear of

domination. Their utterances sometime betrayed their intentions and also confirmed the fears of other groups about them.<sup>34</sup> For instance Dr. Azikiwe, a pan-Africanist and who vehemently criticized the formation of Egbe Omo Oduduwa, soon started to undermine his pre-eminent status in African politics with his remarks which placed the Igbos, his tribe ahead of other ethnic groups in Nigeria..<sup>35</sup>The July 8, 1948 edition of the African Pilot carried the statement of Dr. Azikiwe thus:

It would appear that the God of Africa has created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages...The martial prowess of the Ibo nation at all ages of human history has enable them not only to conquer others but also to adapt themselves to the role of preserver...The Ibo nation cannot shirk its responsibility from it manifest destiny.<sup>36</sup>

Without doubt, the Zik of Africa was inward looking and ethnocentric in his view about the Igbo race. Twelve years later, Chief Awolowo reacted against the various attempts made by Dr. Azikiwe to present the Igbo as the superior ethnic group in Nigeria. He opined in 1960 that: "It seemed clear to me that (Azikiwe's) policy was to corrode the self respect of Yoruba people as a group to build up the Ibo as a master race."<sup>37</sup>

Before the statement of Chief Awolowo a Yoruba nationalist, Sir Ade Alakija had angrily reacted against Dr. Azikiwe's stance on the formation of Egbe Omo Oduduwa thus:

We were bunched together by the British who named us Nigeria. We never knew Ibos but since we came to know them we have tried to be friendly and neighbourly. Then came the Arch Devil to sow the seeds of distrust and hatred. We have tolerated enough from a class of Ibos and addle headed Yoruba who mortgaged their thinking cap to Azikiwe and hirelings.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, a tone of group pride equally manifested in the reactions of the two Yorubas cited above. Besides the Ibo-Yoruba rivalry in the South, there was mutual hostility between the North and the South. The late Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa once commented on the fragile

unity that existed in the country thus: “Nigeria has existed as one country on paper, and that it was still far from being considered as one country much less to think of it as being united.”<sup>39</sup>

On another occasion, Tafawa Balewa declared that:” I was a terrible man when I was all out to fight the South I did not understand why I was fighting them so hard.”<sup>40</sup>

In a bid to free themselves from Southern domination, the Northern politicians and religious leaders began “... to teach the people to hate the Southerners; to look at them as people depriving them of their rights in order to win them over.”<sup>41</sup> The Northern leaders cleverly exploited religious symbolism and sentiments to promote their political interests. The simple strategy they employed was to present the Southerners as Christians who should not be rated better than infidels (kafiri).<sup>42</sup> Currently, nearly all Nigerian leaders still fan the embers of religion, sectionalism and tribalism in their bid to achieve their selfish interests.

The ethnic problem in Nigeria was worsened by the 1954 constitution which regionalised the Nigerian Public Service. Consequently the country’s public service became an instrument of discrimination in different parts of the country. In the North the Nigerianization policy was turned into the Northernization because of the fear that the policy would lead to the domination of the North by the South. The policy of Northernisation was defined in 1957 by the Northern Region Public Service Commission as a system where “if a qualified Northerner is available, he is given priority in recruitment, if no Northerner is available, an expatriate may be recruited or non Northerner on contract terms”.<sup>43</sup> This resulted into the dismissal of a total number of 2,148 Southerners in 1958.<sup>44</sup> They were replaced by Europeans, Arabs, Indians and Pakistanis.<sup>45</sup>

However, this practice was not limited to the North alone. Westerners dominated the Western Nigerian Civil Service while the Easterners also dominated the Eastern Nigerian Civil Service. This practice assumed a dangerous dimension even after the country’s independence. For examples, Oyo and Osun States have been at logger heads over the sharing of assets and liability after the later was carved out from the former in 1991. Oyo State has dismissed majority of Osun State indigenes working in Ladoke Akintola University. Ondo and Ekiti states are not also free from this problem. Recently, Abia state disengaged non indigenes of



the state from its civil service. Similarly, Lagos State, with its cosmopolitan features also discriminates against non indigenes of the state in the area of recruitment, appointment, promotion and admission into its tertiary institutions.

Moreover the adoption of the 1954 constitution somehow empowered the main political parties in the country to recognize their regional basis as their only and proper sphere of political action.<sup>46</sup> This arrangement did not prevent the dominance of one group by the other. As the country approached independence, the minority question also came up which led to the establishment of the Willink Commission in 1957 to investigate the fears of the minority and recommend means and ways of allaying them. For example, the minorities in Eastern Region formed the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) States Movement and demanded a separate state. In the Northern Region, minority groups also demanded for the creation of a Middle-Belt State while in the Western Region, minority groups equally requested for the creation of Mid-West State.<sup>47</sup> None of these requests was granted before 1960 because the Willink Commission insisted that the creation of new states would delay the proposal for Nigerian independence.<sup>48</sup>

It was in the midst of intense hostility, rivalries, political intrigue and inter-ethnic suspicion that Nigeria attained independence in 1960. Owing to the fact that the country's independence was achieved on the trust of weak and faulty lines, the First Republic was generally characterized by political crises including the Census Crisis of 1962, the Action Group Crisis of 1962, the Federal Election Crisis of 1964 and the Western Nigerian Electoral Crisis of 1965 culminating in the January 15, 1966 military coup which truncated the First Republic.

### **IMPACT OF ETHNIC POLITICS ON NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA**

The federal system government in Nigeria in the 1950s had an in-built mechanism for failure as manifest in the wave of political crises that engulfed the nation at independence. The inability of the Nigerian leadership to resolve the above-mentioned issues led ultimately to the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967. The 30 month war ended in 1970 with the slogan 'no victor, no vanquished'.

Rather than tackle the problem of marginalisation and other issues that masterminded the Biafran secession bid, Nigerian leaders even embarked on policies that increased tension and anxiety in the country. Because of the perceived injustice, marginalization and domination by the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the minority groups again began to cry for autonomy. For this reason, the internal composition of the federal state has been altered six times<sup>51</sup> since Nigerian independence in 1960. Even though Nigeria currently boasts of 36 states, the minority question still hovers over Nigeria like an albatross. This is because those states created so far:

... are known to protect their interests very jealously and to restrict the enjoyment of certain services and benefits provided by them and federal authorities to their indigenes, by promulgating discriminatory laws, rules and regulations. Such measures make inter-state mobility difficult.<sup>52</sup>

The failure of state creation to correct perceived problems of marginalization and domination of one group by another has led to the emergence of various political formula including the principles of federal character, quota system, catchment area, educationally disadvantaged states, among others as enshrined in the Nigerian constitutional provisions of 1979, 1989 and 1995. These various political arrangements were put in place to create a sense of belonging among different ethnic groups that constitute the Nigerian federation. The principle of federal character emphasized the need for ethnic balancing as a necessity in the evolution of Nigerian citizenship and for ensuring less acrimonious relationships among the various peoples of Nigeria.<sup>53</sup> Rather than strengthen the national unity, the principle of federal character unfortunately "... enthrones ethnicity."<sup>54</sup> The formula failed "...to address the problems of minority especially in states made up of different and unequal ethnic groups."<sup>55</sup>

The noble idea behind the federal character principle has been abused by its operators through sheer manipulation of its objectives "... by converting plumbers into engineers, book keepers into accountants, and effecting the appointments of professors through committee of friends, all in the name of quota/federal character."<sup>56</sup> Even the catchment area formula that was created to favour the educationally disadvantaged states goes against ethical standards. The scheme

has encouraged mediocrity. Every year gifted students from educationally advantaged states are denied access to tertiary education as a result of disparity that exists in admission requirements of both educationally advantaged and disadvantaged states. The crux of the matter is that “people who are discriminated against either in admission into public schools or employment into government establishments are the same groups of people who do not have access to political or economic powers of the country”.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, they are “...discriminated against in more than just one way.”<sup>58</sup>

Also, the usefulness and workability of power sharing formula in Nigerian political system raises this fundamental question thus:

What can the notion of power sharing produce and reproduce in a situation of asymmetrical relationships in deeply divided societies, such as Nigeria, historically exposed more to oligarchic than democratic rule, if not the existing structure of power inequalities, or worse forms thereof, making the attainment of democracy beyond its nominalist pretensions more tenuous, if not impossible ?<sup>59</sup>

In Nigerian context, Zoning Formula/Power Sharing/Rotational Presidency as state ideology for nation-building has failed to achieve the desired results in the Nigerian political system. This formula received its acid test at June 12 1993 Presidential Election. The election was believed to be won by late M.K.O Abiola but was annulled by Babangida’s military government. With the cancellation of the election however, Nigeria and Nigerians were back along the “... path of ethnic chauvinism, regional jingoism and religious bigotry.”<sup>60</sup> The annulment of the election shook the country’s corporate existence to its foundation. The second test of this formula came after the death of President Yar’Adua in May 2010 and the subsequent election of his Vice (Dr. Goodluck Jonathan) as President in April 2011. The succession crisis that followed Yara’ Dua’s death nearly split the country. Some cabal held the country to ransom by insisting that Yara’Dua who was undergoing medical treatment in Saudi Arabia should not hand over to his Vice-President.

Eventually, the voice of reason prevailed and Goodluck Jonathan took over the mantle of leadership of the country. Even at that, the country is yet to know peace as waves of violence continue unabated in many parts of Nigeria. The 2011 presidential election that was adjudged +free and fair (to some extent) by both local and international election observers was almost marred by wide scale violence even before the result of the election was announced by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC).

The orgy of violence currently being perpetrated by the Islamic fundamentalists popularly called Boko Haram is believed to be politically motivated. According to one human rights activist, Festus Keyamo “the spate of crisis orchestrated by the Boko Haram across the country is nothing but a discontent by some cabal who are discontented about change in power equation.”<sup>61</sup> This cabal “embarks on campaign of violence because they are out of power equation.”<sup>62</sup> Keyamo’s assertion may be true to some extent if we consider what Maitama Sule once said:

The Northerners are endowed ...with leadership qualities. The Yoruba knows how to earn a living and has diplomatic qualities. The Igbo is gifted in commerce, trade...God so created us individually for a purpose. Others are created as kings, as servants ... We all need each other. If there are no followers, a king will not exist.<sup>63</sup>

The deduction we can make from Maitama Sule’s statement is that some sections of this country are ‘born to rule’ while other sections are born to serve. Considering the antecedents of the Nigerian Army, the present state of anarchy in the country is enough excuse for the military to ‘strike’ but for the prevalent global ‘zero tolerance’ for unconstitutional governments.

## CONCLUSION

Since the attainment of independence by Nigeria in 1960, neither the military regimes that ruled the country for 29 years nor their civilian counterparts that governed Nigeria for 22 years

have solved the ethnic and political problems plaguing the country. Most of the various political arrangements put in place to salvage some of the problems bedeviling the unity of Nigeria have failed abysmally. The federal character principle, for instance, has been channeled to serve the overall interest of the petty bourgeois ruling class. Then what is the way forwards? If the 1914 amalgamation of the country was a ‘mistake’<sup>65</sup> and a marriage of inconvenience as postulated by some of the Nigeria’s politicians, there is therefore the need for the different ethnic groups that constitute the Nigerian federation to come together and discuss the future of the country. As Professor Julius Ihonvbere puts it:

We need to talk as a people across generation, location, class, nationality, gender and religion... We need a national conference to discuss the socio-economic, cultural and political structures of Nigeria and only such a conference would address the issues of power, political parties, resource control, state-federal relations, leadership, religion, language, citizenship and so on.<sup>66</sup>

The convocation of a sovereign national conference is inevitable, and the earlier the better if Nigeria is to avoid the abyss presently steering it in the face.

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