

ETHNICITY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: AN IMPEDIMENT TO NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Abstracts

Ethnicity has been the major problem of the Nigerian society. The paper examined the concepts of ethnicity, politics and national integration as they affect the national life of Nigerians. It discussed extensively the roles of ethnicity as a serious impediment to national integration in Nigeria. The paper stressed the need to organise a national conference where all stakeholders in Nigeria could discuss and come to a genuine understanding of how to make integration in Nigeria a reality. It also advocated the use of social studies education to instill the values of unity and integration. It concluded that effective teaching of social studies education, formation of political parties that wear national outlook, among others, would reduce divisive attitude of Nigerians and make way for national integration.

Key words: *Ethnicity, Politics, National, Integration.*

Introduction:

Ethnicity is increasingly one of the seemingly irreconcilable problems of contemporary Nigeria. The concept of ethnicity has no single and general acceptable history. Thus, it has a diverse and complex origin. Ethnicity means different things to different people. It began to manifest after the protectorate of northern and southern Nigeria were amalgamated in 1914. Before then, there were economic activities going on and some of the ethnic groups were engaged in trades, works of arts, agricultural and petty vocational activities. These were going on between the distinct ethnic groups which constitute the modern Nigerian society. The country is made up of about 300 ethnic groups or more. These distinct groups had traditional rulers such as emirs, obas, chiefs, kings, etc., who were in charge of the governance of the people. Surely, there were effective socio-economic cum political activities going on in the areas before the coming of the Europeans. Onigu (1990) stressed that when the

British left this country in 1960, the leadership misconceived the realities of our cultural background and worked from the theory that once we were called a sovereign state, everybody from every section magically became Nigerian in spirit, making it possible for ethnic loyalties to vanish. This is not so till date. For instance, the formation of political parties in Nigeria has been ethnically motivated.

We have had political parties like Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), Lagos Youth Movement (LYM), Action Group (AG) for the Yoruba, Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) and so on. Even the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which were formed by the Federal Military Government in the aborted third republic later toed the path of ethnicity. Thus, N.R.C. was dominated by the North while S.D.P. was dominated by the South.

Meanwhile, with this ethnic inclination in the formation of political

parties in Nigeria, almost all the election results at the federal level have not only been challenged in the courts, but also criticized and rejected by some segments of the country on the basis of ethnicity. Because of this, political instability has become endemic and national integration a mirage.

Concept of Ethnicity

Ethnicity can be defined as a collectivity of persons who are held together by shared cultural traditions or heritage, pivoting on common ancestry, mother tongue or language, religion, etc. which traditions are tenaciously held from time immemorial, not disorganised out-rightly by acculturation process, and which are not only a given group's identifier, but also distinguishes a given group from the others outside the group who also recognize them as such.

Macionis (2010) agreed that a people who share cultural heritage such as common ancestry, language or religion which give that group a distinctive social identity makes that group an ethnic group. According to Nnoli (1977), "ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with the interaction among members of different ethnic groups. It is also a sentimental protest of ethnic group in the society that feels that their identity is threatened by force within a larger state."

Politics

Politics means striving to share power or influence the distribution of power either among states or groups of individuals in a state. Politics in the words of Robert Dahi (1958) "is the study of who gets what, when and how."

National Integration

It is the transfer of loyalty by members of different ethnic enclaves to a more central authority; in other words, feelings of togetherness and solidarity on national issues. According to Okobia (1984:7), national integration is a state of fusion or harmonious interaction and interrelation of persons and groups within a nation to make them an identifiable single entity with common national goals.

The Effect of Ethnicity on the Political Life of Nigerians

The country has not fared well in its political life. According to Balogun (1988), our common historical experience is not one of fighting together but fighting against one another, the northerners against the southerners, Yoruba against Igbo, Ibibio against Hausa, Muslims against Christians, etc. It has not been possible in spite of the efforts of the colonial masters to have a common frame of political thought, all because of the cultural and especially, linguistic differences reminiscent of the Biblical tower of Babel.

In support of the above point, Adeniyi (1993) observed that when Shehu Musa was about to enter the presidential race in the aborted third republic of Nigeria, people asked a lot of questions in respect to his ambition to politics, one of which was should one who hails from Niger State aspire to succeed President Ibrahim Babangida another Niger man. One can easily see from the foregoing that there is the trait of ethnicity in the above question. However, Yusuf (1996) asserted that since the annulment of June 12 election by ex-President Babangida's regime, the Hausa who voted overwhelmingly for

Abiola against their own son, Bashir Tofa, have been subjected to all forms of abuse and indignities in the Yoruba controlled press. He added that Hausas were accused of masterminding the annulment because they did not want the southerners to rule Nigeria.

Meanwhile, Okonkwo (1988) observed that the evil of ethnicity split the efforts of the nationalists; the question towards the end of 1940s was who next should head the only viable party, the Nigerian Youth Movement. Ethnic consciousness destroyed the political party and the political aspirants withdrew to their respective base. To show also that politics in this country is one of sentiments and hatred, Achebe (1983) observed that he was an eye-witness to the momentous occasion when Chief Awolowo stole the leadership of Western Nigeria from Dr. Azikiwe in broad day light on the floor of the Western House of Assembly and sent the great Zik scampering back to the Niger where he came from.

State creation has been ethnically motivated because of fear of domination of the minority ethnic groups by the major groups. Thus, Anifowose (1982) asserted that these fears gave birth to widespread demand for the creation of new states out of the existing three regions.

Ethnicity: An Impediment to National Integration in Nigeria

In Nigeria, there have not been much practical efforts for national integration because as Madiebo notes "The federation of Nigeria as it exist today has never really been one homogeneous country, for its widely different people and tribes are yet to find any basis for true unity." As a result of

this, the Nigerian federation has been threatened; the call for secession by some groups in Nigeria has become the order of the day.

There have not been much practical efforts for socio-cultural integration in Nigeria. Ikara (1984), asserted that plurality of languages within one country does not normally conduce to peaceful co-existence and progress of the different people. There will always be battles for linguistic parity or dominance in national institutions, law, administration, education and, inevitable, cultural-ethnic and religious divisions centred on language at the expense of national integration.

The country has no truly Nigerian national holidays apart from the Christmas and Sallah holidays because there are no native or indigenous festivals that have received nationwide acceptance to occasion such a national holiday. What is an object of adoration in one part of the country is an object of ridicule or even scorn in another part. Out of the cultural diversity, no attempt has been successfully made to nationalize and promote any; hence all talks about ethnic revolution, war against indiscipline (WAI) have always made no impact. The forces necessary for cohesion are just not there. Okafor (2001) gives a list of these forces as a common language and a sense of ethnic kinship, geographical unity and contiguity and a frame of political thought, a common area of economic mutuality, and sometimes the fear of a common foe. Of these eight cohesive forces, Nigeria, strictly speaking, cannot claim even one, or else there would not be disharmony in its social life. Several divisive factors, chief of which is the Islamic legal code, sharia, enforced in

some northern states has threatened the existence of Nigeria as one united country.

National Integration In Nigeria: The Way Forward

As a way out, Okafor (2001) asserted that the time has come for the government to convoke a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) where all stakeholders in Nigeria can discuss and come to a genuine understanding not only on how to make Nigeria work as a country but also how to reverse the socio-economic stupor in which the preponderant majority of Nigerians are put by the reckless past regimes.

Nigeria's Political Bureau's Report (1987) stated to the effect that social mobilization for effective national integration may result from the utilization of school subjects such as social studies, coupled with the abundant literature on the role social studies has played in national integration in USA, Britain and Germany (Clark, Smith and Mason, 1984). Formation of political parties that are national in outlook. In order to ensure that registrable political parties carry along people of diverse ethnic groups in the country, it is a national pre-requisite that any political association seeking to register as a political party in Nigeria must have a good geographical spread, cutting across different ethnic groups (Njoku, 2011: 447).

National Goals: Nigeria as a geopolity has a set of national goals which are the developmental ideals or aspirations which all Nigerians as a socio-political team are striving to achieve. It is instructive to note that "without national goals, there is no basis for Nigeria's nation building" (Mezieobi, 2014). The national goals of Nigeria as enunciated in the National Policy on

Education (2004:7) are the building of:

- (i) a free and democratic society,
- (ii) a just and egalitarian society,
- (iii) a united, strong and self-reliant nation,
- (iv) a great and dynamic society,
- (v) a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

Therefore, all ethnic nationalities in Nigeria should ordinarily submerge their ethnic interests and place those of the nation above theirs as measure for achieving national integration.

Conclusion

Ethnicity has been the major problem of the Nigerian society. It has become a serious impediment to Nigeria's social, cultural, political and economic integration. Most religious riots and political crises in the country trace their origins to ethnicity. Federal and state governments in Nigeria have initiated various programmes in attempts to solve the problem of ethnicity, however, inter-ethnic competition, conflict, violence, mistrust are still pervasive. They appear to have defied any sustainable solution and have embarrassed Nigeria here and in the international arena. Okafor (2010:19) rightly captured the gravity of Nigeria's ethnic divide and ethnic disharmony whom he asserted that "right from time (till today), Nigeria have not seen themselves as one people". However, organizing a sovereign national conference, effective teaching of social studies in Nigerian schools, formation of political parties that are national outlook among others will reduce the divisive attitude of Nigerians and make way for national integration.

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