

## **ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN NIGERIA: A PURVIEW OF MECHANISM FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

No doubt, the polity Nigeria is one of the most ethnically divided society globally with diverse ethnic cocoons and myriads of dialect. Thus, the plurality of her composition has made national integration challenging. This then connotes that ethnic diversity has become a clog in the wheel of the progress of the most populous country in Africa. In view of the foregoing, this paper beamed search light on the origin and attendant challenges of Nigeria's diversity vis-à-vis successive government integrative mechanism for national integration.

**Key Words:** Ethnicity; Ethnic Diversity; National Integration; Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria like India, Canada, Malaysia, and Gambia is one of the countries that owe her existence to the imperialist activities of Britain (Adetiba & Rahim, 2012:70). The emergence of the Nigerian state created a conglomeration of diverse ethnic groups within the polity. Ethnicity is one of the keys to understanding Nigeria's pluralistic society. It distinguishes groupings of peoples who for historical reasons have come to be seen as distinctive--by themselves and others--on the basis of locational origins and a series of other cultural markers (country studies)

Nigerian polity no doubt is one of the most ethnically diverse societies in the world. The plurality of the Nigerian state can be best understood within the context of the myriads of

cleavages and cultures rooted in diverse ethnic nationalities. Cultural or ethnic diversity is really a phrase generally used in describing a society with folks of numerous ethnic roots which manifests in their languages, mode of dressing, arts, as well as other traditional practices, belief system and general way of life, which can be either similar or distinctively distinctive from each group (freelistinginnigeria,2014).

In fact, Nigeria is indeed a variegated political entity, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multi-cultural. Nigeria is said to have over 250 ethnic groups. As documented by Ogoanah (2012:147) ethnic groups in Nigeria connects 400 languages of the Niger-Congo, Nilo-Sahara and Afro-Asiatic Phyla. Roger Blench (2011) in Ogoanah (2012:147) put the figure at well over 500. From the foregoing, it is evident that the task of integrating a plural society like Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, with numerous ethnic cocoons, will be an enormous task with struggles between the majority ethnic groups and majority-minority dichotomy.

Furthermore, in the submission of Odeyemi (2014:1) ethnic diversity has been an obstacle to the overall political and economic development of Nigeria. He stressed further that ethnicity is the most definitive cause of social crisis, injustice, inequality and religio-political instability, fears and tension across the polity. Be that as it may, the poser is that, if the feeling of national identity is being threatened by cultural diversity what then can a nation-state like Nigeria do? This “national question” had dominated Nigerian politics and literature even before independence in 1960.

How then has successive Nigerian political leaders being able to manage the ethnic and cultural diversity for national integration (see Edewor, Aluko&Folarin, 2014:1). These among others form the fulcrum upon which the paper seeks to examine. The methodology employed in writing this paper is essentially qualitative, descriptive and historical; data are sorted from books, journals, working paper series and online articles.

### **CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE**

As documented by Chafe, the primary requirement for debating anything is to understand first and foremost the primary thing being discussed (cited in Ojo, 2009:10). This then depicts that

concept cannot be defined in any general sense, but in relation to specific cases (see Buzman, 1983:6). This paper will do a conceptual clarification of two principal key words: ethnicity and national integration.

### **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity as a concept is deeply related to the general practice of alienation and identity branding whereas branding has always characterized both intra-global and intra-national relations, and where also, opportunities, rights and privileges are functions of who you are and where you are from(Odeyemi,2014:87-95). To Osaghae 1995(as quoted by Edewor, Aluko& Folarin, 2014:2) ethnicity is conceptualized as “the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation”. The concept of ethnic origin is an attempt to classify people, not according to their current nationality, but according to commonalities in their social background (Wikipedia, 2013).

Furthermore, in the words of Thomson (2000:58) an Ethnic group is “a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language”. Ukpo corroborates Thomson’s position. Ukpo (1977) calls an "ethnic group" a "group of people having a common language and cultural values".

Ayatse & Akuva (2013:180) perceptive work observed that ethnicity is the deliberate and conscious tracing of one’s identity to a particular ethnic group and allowing such feeling to determine the way one relates with people and things, ethnicity creates the brackets of ‘we’ ‘they’ ‘ours’, ‘theirs’ feeling. Ethnicity makes it very difficult for different ethnic groups to agree on anything.

### **National integration**

National integration is another nebulous concept. Morrison(1972) cited in (Onah & Orluwene,2009:73) semanticed national integration as a process by which members of a social system develop linkages so that the boundaries of the system persist overtime and the boundaries of sub-systems become less consequential in affecting behavior. Jega also opined that national

integration is “a situation in which citizens of a country increasingly see themselves as one people, bound by shared historical experiences and common values, and imbued by the spirit of patriotism and unity, which transcends traditional, primordial diverse tendencies (Jega, 2002).

Elaigwu (1994:149) further asserts that the process of national integration or nation building refers to attempt by ruling elites at the centre (civilian or military) to create unity among heterogeneous groups in the state in order to build a new political community called nation.

### **THEORISING ON ETHNICITY AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION**

The importance of theory cannot be overemphasized. No doubt theory remains the backbone and bound edge of humanities and social science research (Ojo, 2014:4). Simmering from the foregoing, there are so many theories in literature of cultural and ethnic studies relevant for in-depth understanding of the ethnic challenge vis-à-vis national integration in Nigeria. This depicts that there is an avalanche of theories applicable for the analysis, understanding and resolution of conflict especially in ethnically divided society like Nigeria.

In the context of this write-up, the theoretical anchor for this paper is Human Needs Theory (HNT) by John Burton. Though there are various individuals who have applied human needs theory, varying from Abraham Maslow, Marshall Rosenberg and Manfred Max-Neef. This paper aligns with John Burton applied human needs theory. His application of the theory is relevant to current social and political conflict in our contemporary time.

The theory is relevant to understanding deep-rooted conflicts across the wide spectrum of human relationships especially in ethnically divided society or conflict situation. The credit of this theory goes to Professor Burton and his CAC colleagues-- an interdisciplinary group of anthropologists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, international lawyers, and others (Sandole, 2001).

John Burton’s contribution on conflict resolution can be traced to early 1970s. The focus then was on the East-West conflict and its spectre of thermonuclear annihilation; the endlessly intractable Middle East conflict and the Northern Irish "Troubles"; the brutal Apartheid system in

South Africa; the inexplicable Greek-Cypriot/Turkish-Cypriot conflict, and the like(Sandole,2001).

Human needs theorists argue that conflicts and violent conflicts are caused by unmet human needs. No doubt, when certain individuals or groups do not see any other way to meet their need, or when they need understanding, respect and consideration which look elusive it snowballs to violence. To Rosenberg (in Danielson) violence is a tragic expression of unmet human needs (Danielson, 2005:3).

However, human needs are not limited to subsistence, although there are conflicts over subsistence, most conflicts have to do with other unmet human needs, such as protection, identity, recognition, participation and understanding. Only by giving more importance to these latter needs, truly recognizing them as human needs essential to the wellbeing of all human being, will we be able to address current and intractable conflicts (Danielson, 2005:3).

Though the usage of this theory is not too popular among peace theorists, the author aligns with this theory in the context of this write-up .In the view of the author, human needs approach to resolving conflict is a good theory for resolving inherent challenges of national cohesion in a multi ethnic society like Nigeria. "Conflict Analysis and Resolution" has emerged to describe a major shift in decision making theory and practice from power theory to problem solving. "Conflict Analysis and Resolution" is a decision-making process which avoids the necessity to rest on power or enforcement by getting to the source of problems and resolving them to the satisfaction of all parties (Burton, 1990).

## **HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF ETHNICITY IN NIGERIA**

History is important being the bridge between the past and the present and greatly helps to prognosticate future occurrence (Ojo, 2014:5). Fafunwa avered (1974) history is to a people what memory is to individuals. A people with no knowledge of their past are a victim of collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without guide of precedence to shape their course (cited in Jekayinfa& Kolawola, 2010:1)

The present day Nigeria came into being as a result of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate in 1914 by the British colonialist. Prior to colonialism different ethnic group lived separately and independently. It becomes clear to say that; ethnicity was a deliberate and conscious creation of the colonial masters in order to use such sentimental expression to perpetually have dominion and control over the colonies in Africa(Ayatse & Akuva,2013:181).

Ethnic sentiments and the cut-throat struggle and competition among the ethnics in Nigeria today have a genesis in the political and economic activities which were the reasons for colonization and imperialism. Therefore, ethnicity cannot be totally separated from colonialism. It was colonialism that forcefully brought the different ethnic groups who were initially separate, together to govern them in diversity (Ayatse & Akuva, 2013:184).

According to Osaghae (2002) in Nkwachukwu(2013:2) Nigeria, ethnic conflict is a highly significant social phenomena because of its complexity and the social and political threats it poses to the society. The complexity of ethnic conflict in Nigeria reflects on its mode of occurrence. In Nigeria, ethnic conflicts occur along a tri-dimensional trajectory. The first is the conflicts among the majority ethnic groups; the second is the conflicts between the majority and the minority groups; while the third is the conflicts among the minority groups.

Since the foundation of ethnicity was laid by the British colonialist in Nigeria, the polity Nigeria has continued to grapple with the attendant challenge associated with her unique diversity. Nigeria's efforts at achieving national integration have remained largely unrealized. Ifeanacho (2005) succinctly opined that the integration crisis facing Nigeria is manifest in the minority question, religious conflicts, ethnic politics, resource control, and a host of other challenge associated with diversity. Nigeria's effort at achieving national integration has remained largely unrealized. The integration crisis facing Nigeria is noticeable in the minority question, religious conflicts, ethnic politics, resource control youth restiveness and a host of others.

In the insightful work of Suberu and Diamond(2002:3) the reknowned scholars submitted that Nigeria has trodden a complex, turbulent and contradictory political trajectory since gaining independence from Britain in 1960 and straddled the political poles between democratic

pluralism ,military authoritarianism, between pseudo-federalism and institutionally balanced federalism. They further gave a vivid picture of Nigeria's ordeal by classifying political cycles and inter-ethnic outcomes in Nigeria's post-independence into five broad moments capturing the militarization and exacerbation of ethno-regional conflict.

In the light of the foregoing, the five broad demarcations are, the initial phase, often referred to as the First Nigerian Republic, spanned a period of five year beginning with Nigeria's independence in October 1960 until the time the military violently overthrew the Republic in January 1966. The second phase involved the 13-year era of military rule from January 1966 to September 1979(Suberu & Diamond, 2002).

The next phase was the Second Republic; the brief interregnum of civilian rule between October 1979 and December 1983. The fourth phase began with the second coming of the military on the eve of 1984 and ended with the restoration of civilian democratic rule in May 1999. That restitution ushered Nigeria into the fifth, and ongoing, moment of its post-independence political history (Suberu & Diamond, 2002).

Harris and Reilly (1998:9) aptly submit that a combination of two powerful elements can be visibly seen to be at work in generating ethnic conflicts in Nigeria body polity. One is identity: the mobilization of people in communal identity groups based on race, religion, culture, language. The other is resource distribution: the means of sharing the economic, social and political resources within a society. Otite(2001:179) corroborates this. He opined thus:

*The control of the state is the greatest prize in ethnically plural societies— it is regarded not only as the source but also the distributor of resources commonly valued in the society. As the chief 'allocator' of services, facilities, and factors of development, the state becomes a target over which control, ethnic territorial groups engage in an endless struggle*

From the foregoing it is evident that ethnicity is the most conspicuous group identity in Nigeria (See Lewis& Bratton, 2000:27).Ethnic agendum had on several occasions heated up the polity

with violence and loss of lives and properties especially after independence. The most devastating is the 30 months agonizing civil war from 1967-1970. Osaghae and Suberu(2005) categorize different inter-group conflicts in Nigeria to four: ethno-religious clashes, inter-ethnic violence, intra-ethnic and/or intra-religious conflicts, and inter-group economic clashes. Numerous works have been done on the survey of ethno- religious crisis in Nigeria as there is a thin line between ethnic crisis and religious crisis(See Osaghae & Suberu, 2005;Jacob,2012).

### **PURVIEW OF MECHANISM FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA**

The positive and constructive handling of ethnic conflicts can be regarded as ethnic conflict management or mechanism for national integration in a multi ethnic society. Ethnic conflict management involves developmental and transformative processes. The main logic of conflict management is therefore, that conflict cannot be eliminated, but that they can be reduced or controlled more readily, by acknowledging and institutionalizing differences rather than suppressing them. Institutionalization of ethnic conflicts entails entrenching ethnic differences within a set of rules agreeable to competing groups(Nkwachukwu,2013).

This legal-constitutional strategy requires a constitutional democratic form of governance to thrive. More so, in a democracy, it is expected that the existence of varied and conflicting interests in the society will be acknowledged by democratic institutions set up to create a balance between competition and consensus among groups. Thus, democracy is seen as a form of government, which can directly channel ethnic conflicts into proper institutional outlet for peaceful resolution, ensuring that conflicts are expressed in accord with a commonly accepted set of rules. (Nkwachukwu, 2013:4)

Over the years, various policies have been articulated and implemented by different governments in Nigeria with the objective of containing ethnic conflicts. To start with, it is worthy to note that the adoption of federalism, characterized by the decentralization and evolution of state power to ethno-regional entities was a policy to douse ethnic tension in the Nigeria polity. Federalism, has been practiced in Nigeria since 1953, beginning with the three regions; north, west and east. These have since metamorphosed into the present thirty-six states and the federal capital, Abuja.(Ojie& Ewhrudjakpor,2009:6)

Furthermore, the establishment of National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973 after the devastating effect of the 30 months agonizing civil war is another step at uniting the polity. The scheme was institutionalized to cement inter- ethnic harmony. The scheme is basically for graduates of Nigeria tertiary institution to serve as integrative mechanism for Nigerian youths for a period of one year. It is a compulsory national service in a state/region different from graduates' state of origin. Similarly, the Unity Schools and Federal Colleges spread across Nigeria were institutionalized to enhance inter-cultural understanding and linkage.

The unabated search for a just policy for the harmonious coexistence of the diverse ethnic nationalities has been the critical concern of Nigerian politicians before and since independence. The quest culminated in the doctrine of 'Federal Character' enshrined in the 1979 constitution (Ojie& Ewhrudjakpor, 2009:6). Federal Character Commission is a scheme established to guarantee equitable distribution of opportunity across Nigeria,

Nkwachukwu(2013) observed that human right approach is the most classical approach to ethnic conflict management in Nigeria, since 1999 . Human rights approach to ethnic conflict management was first introduced to Nigeria by the Willink Commission. To Akinyele (1996) (Cited in NKwachukwu, 2013:5). this approach is another approach to integrate plural society like Nigeria. This approach sees the enactment of a bill of rights, with its guarantee of equality, liberty and non discrimination in the constitution as a major way of allaying the fears of the minorities and reducing the scope of discrimination against them

Because distributional issues are at the root of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, power-sharing has come to constitute the core approach to ethnic conflict management in Nigeria. Power-sharing to Nkwachukwu(2013) is “a set of principles that when carried out through practices and institutions, provide every significant identity group or segment in a society representation and decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group”.

These principles ensure a balance of power among competing ethnic groups by specifying not only how the groups are to share power within the polity, but also by allocating power in such a

way as to make it exceedingly difficult for any group to dominate the others (See Nordlinger 1972;Nkwachukwu,2013)

Finally, this paper cannot be concluded without mentioning the constitutionally unrecognized principle of zoning and rotation. In conducting informal ethno-political exchanges in Nigeria, the country's politicians have derived enormous inspiration and encouragement from the 'federal character' provisions of Nigeria's post-civil war constitution.

However, while the 'federal character' principle explicitly mandates only the effective or equal representation of the states in national bodies, the politicians have reinvented it to incorporate principles and strategies for regional, geopolitical, religious, ethnic and sub-ethnic 'balancing' at both federal and sub-federal levels. The most popular of these informal ethnic balancing or bargaining practices has remained the ethno-regional allocation and rotation of political offices and party posts (Suberu & Diamond, 2002:28).

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper has encapsulated the trajectories of ethnic identity in Nigeria, history and development of ethnicity in the body polity and the mechanism employed by successive government to hold the country together. For Nigeria to enjoy inter-ethnic harmony in the polity, there is need for the country to instill true fiscal federalism as against the pseudo federal practice in place. Also, there is need for distributive justice and equity to lay to rest the secession agitation, ethno-religious upheaval and dichotomy between and among ethnic groups. Finally, there is need for sustained education of the citizenry to see themselves as a Nigerian first as against the attachment to ethnic root and tribe.

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