

## Ethnicity and Religion: The Twin Identity Challenge to Nigerian Integration Drive

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### Abstract

Nigeria as Africa's most populous country and biggest black nation in the world, is an ethnically and religiously diverse country encompassing of well over 250 ethnic nationalities belonging to about 350 spoken languages who majorly religions of Islam, Christianity and traditional followers. This paper examined the challenge posed by ethnicity and religious identity towards Nigerian integration drive. The ethnic groupings are not uniformly spread, hence, have a differential level of power and influence. Invariably, three major ethnic groups constitute two-thirds of the country's population among who are the predominantly Christian Igbo in the South East, the majority Muslim Hausa, Kanuri, Nupe and Fulani in the North (often lumped as Hausa/Fulani) and the religiously mixed Yoruba in the South West. Within the midst of the three major ethnic groups, the remaining one-third coexists, thereby opening up the vista of agitations by the minority groups against the domineering tendencies of the trio numerically advantaged. What is more glaring is the political space provided by democratic practice to select and elect political representatives in the federation at all levels. The level of competitive democracy and power seeking of the political elite since 1999, have left much to be desired, who exploited gullible Nigerians by dividing them on ethno-religious fault lines. This paper seeks to analyze the identity pogrom of Nigeria as it relate to democratic practice and political integration.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Religion, Identity, Integration, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Ethnicity is inherently perceived as conflict prone; hence, the belief that it is capable of escalating and fanning the ember of discontent and mutual suspicion whether it is taking from the perspectives of primordialist, instrumentalist or the constructivist. The perspective taking from this assertion is aligned to ethnicity with a consequential to ethnic conflict (Ukoha, 2003). Ethno-religious identity conflict in this contextual situation is potent to be either a covert or overt as the case may be. However, when the interest involved centres around ethnicity and religion, the consequences are enormous to such an extent that vicious circle of violence may ensued if the issue at stake is left unattended to or perhaps left to linger with little or no effort to address its root causes.

Similarly, ethnicity and religion in the context of Nigerian government and politics was exacerbated with the intensification of these twin identities and indeed the growing socio-economic crisis that prevailed in the fall

of the Second Republic dwindling oil revenue, and the disastrous effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) from 1986. That has led to the emergence of communal politics which became more acute whereby social and political exclusion on the basis of ethnicity and religion increased. Though that does not fully explain the precarious occurrence of conflict on such a large scale throughout the country, but the peculiar circumstances of the ethno-religious politics of exclusion further increased polarization along communal lines among both Muslims and the Christians in many parts of the country, thus posing a challenge to Nigerian integration drive.

Moreover, the instances of ethno-religious identity pogrom can be attested to from over two decades of conflicts in Kaduna particularly in the Southern part of the State and indeed that of Plateau State that have been incessant. One of the immediate consequences evident in the ethno-religious identity conflict in for instance in Jos, is the segmented settlement of exclusive Christian and Muslim communities and by

extension educational institutions including markets spaces in some places.

### **Methodology**

The study is pegged on qualitative method of data collection and analysing same as obtained in journals, books, conference proceedings, unpublished works, and of course the internet sources which is more accessible among other sources. More so, the study utilised any other documents useful in the analysis of the phenomenon with a conceptual framework.

### **Examining Citizenship/Indigene-ship Pogrom: An Impediment to Integration**

Citizenship and indigene-ship crises more often on the basis of ethnic chauvinism and religious jingoism has slowed down the desire for political integration and thereby affecting the wave of overall national integration due to continued resistance by forces of ethnic, religious and regional sentiments as basis of identity. The origin of these divisive characters of identity in Africa and Nigeria in particular, has been closely linked to the colonial heritage. The Nigerian state is one of the sharply divided countries in Africa south of the Sahara having a plethora of ethnic and linguistic variance, in addition to large adherents of the religions of Islam and Christianity. The defunct autonomous powerful regions of Northern, Eastern, Western and subsequently Mid-Western Regions, were in fierce competition for regional identity and driven interest. While this development is ongoing by the federating units in protecting their individual regional interests during the pre-independence and indeed the First Republic that was terminated in 1966, there were agitations expressed by the minorities within each of the regions in fear of dominance by the majority ethnic groups of Hausa, Igbo and the Yoruba even before independence which necessitated the Willinks Commission in 1957.

Amongst the hitherto regions, is one of the complex and diverse among the regions in the country especially the central area popularly referred to as the '*Middle Belt Region*' (sic) with a plethora of ethnic and linguistic groups sharing religious affiliations and other divergent cultural practices. However, the management of this complexity and diversity has, for the greater part of its history, provided a dynamic

framework for the peaceful co-existence of all Nigerians and the greatest sense of its strength, (Bobboyi & Yakubu, 2005). To fully grasp the intent nature and dynamics of conflict in Nigeria today, one has to beam his searchlight on the basis of mobilizing ethnicity cum-citizenship idea of indigenes as important factors and root cause of the conflict situation in most parts of the country as manifested overtime.

For instance, African post-colonial history in this order shows how difficult it has been to create a functioning polity from scratch among peoples without a history of common political organization. But surprisingly how persistent was the attachment to the units created by the colonizers (Manby, 2009). The Sub-Saharan Africa by reference has cultural diversities which seem to pose serious challenge to political integration due to ill-informed citizenship and indigeneship identity clues. Unarguably, during the colonial domination the colonial policies in most of African countries succeeded by implanting the seed of division and the effect of which began to manifest in the post-colonial State. Thus, they exploited the relative and the real pluralist nature of the continent to their socio-economic and political advantages (Manby, 2009, Abdulsalam, 2011).

Overall, on the larger context, one of the biggest challenges that confronted most African countries after the departure of the colonialists was the fragmentation character base on ethnic, regional and religious divisions, only that the degree of identity consciousness varies base on socio-cultural and historical experiences. This mythical notion was solely a divide and rule tactics for European domination, as attested to by Nnoli, (1978) who observed that; the Europeans were very tactical, maintaining that, it was the illegitimacy of the European colonisers and oppressors which snowballed to the formation of the myth of the inferior "native" as an instrument of domination in most of the former colonies and by extension complete alienation of the colonized African. This development later manifested in the post-colonial elite power struggle which assumed different dimensions with unique features and implications for African societies (Atim, 2011).

### **Between Ethnicity and Religious Identity: The Dilemma of a Nation**

Bangura, (1994) sees religion as majorly is an aspect of ethnic identity formation which have had a powerful impact upon politics within a state or region, especially in the context of broader cultural conflict and other identity pogrom. To this end, the power of religious identity in Nigeria has been so enormous which pervade many aspects of our national life with deadly negative consequences. Nonetheless, Bangura further raised a fundamental question as to what is responsible for the growth of religiosity and religious conflicts in many countries. To him, religion serves both material and spiritual sense in human's life. The material sense refers to religious establishments that of institutions and officials as well as to social groups and movements whose *raison d'être* are to be found within religious concerns. In the spiritual sense, religion pertains to models of social and individual behaviours that help believers to organize their everyday lives. He lamented that on both material and spiritual senses, religion has to do with the idea of **transcendence**, i.e. supernatural realities; with **sacredness**, i.e. language and practice that organize the world in terms of what is deemed holy; and with **intimacy**, i.e. the ultimate conditions of existence (Bangura, 1994).

However, with this in mind, on one hand, ethnicity and tribalism are a strong pillar of identity in Nigeria to which the diversity rather than been a strength has become a nightmare. And this identity myth has halted potential for integration drive and meaningful development of Nigeria's prospects on the notion of "Unity in Diversity". Similarly, religious identity is a sensitive element that more often than not goes with ethnicity. In fact, a survey by Ellsworth some twenty years ago discovered that;

*Ethnicity and religious affiliations are the major highest ranked identity makers for a vast majority of Nigerians, than other indices such as state, national and African identity... thus religion was discovered to be the first and ethnicity was the second highest ranked identity country-wide, with state and national identity carrying third and fourth respectively.*

(Ellsworth 1999).

In a related study by Lewis and Bratton (2000) quoted in Osaghae and Suberu (2005) reveals that; "according to the authoritative 2000 survey on "Attitudes to Democracy and Markets in Nigeria", ethnicity "is demonstrably the most conspicuous group identity in Nigeria". The findings were Thus;

*The survey found that almost one-half (48.2%) of Nigerians chose to label themselves with an ethnic (including linguistic and local-regional) identity, compared to almost one-third (28.4%) who opted for class identities, and 21.0 percent who chose a religious identity. In essence, close to two-thirds of the population see themselves as members of primordial ethnic, regional, and religious groups. In other words, "Nigerians tend to cluster more readily around cultural solidarities of kin than the class solidarities of the workplace (Lewis & Bratton, 2000).*

The survey further demonstrates arguing that;

*What is more, "religious and ethnic identities are more fully formed, more holistic and more strongly felt than class identities" as evidenced in the fact that "whereas those who identify with religious and ethnic communities are almost universally proud of their group identities...those who see themselves as members of a social class are somewhat more equivocal about their pride". All of this is not surprising, considering that ethnic formations are perhaps the most historically enduring behavioural units in the country, and were further reinforced by the colonial and post-colonial regimes (Lewis & Bratton, 2000).*

The concept of identity magnifies a politically relevant and irrefutable fact on social relations. The 'realist' conceived identity as "socially significant and context specific, ideological

construct that nevertheless refers in non-arbitrary ways to verifiable aspects of the social world” (Alcott, et'al 1997). Identities are markers for history, social location and positionality. They are always subject to an individual interpretation of their meaningfulness and salience in person's life, and thus their political implications are not transparent or fixed. To the realist, further advanced that;

*Identities are not our mysterious inner essence but rather social embodied facts about us in our world. Moreover, they are not mere descriptions of who we are but rather, causal explanations of our social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations in a distributed and hierarchically organized manner (Alcott, et'al 1997).*

Ethnicity is generally regarded as the most basic and politically salient identity in Nigeria. This claim is supported by the fact that both in competitive and non-competitive settings, Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity Osaghae and Suberu, (2005). The above discovery revealed the salient feature of not only Nigerian politics but that of Africa as a whole with the elite exploiting the vulnerability of these identity makers to their self-aggrandizement to seek power and control resources. The relationship between ethnicity and religion coincided with the socio-cultural disposition of Nigerians with particular ethnic group being predominantly aligned to a faith of Islam, Christianity or a mixed.

Flipping through the chequered history of Africa and equally in Nigeria reveals that, one of the legacies of colonial administration in a way is the mythology of ethnicity born out of tribal enclave. As Nnoli (1998) noted from a theoretical perspective in analyzing African politics opine that; It is common to interpret African politics in tribal terms... and that tribalism is perceived to be the central unifying concept for the analysis of African life. He further advanced the thesis that, the above perspective as popularized by the European anthropologist made it indelible print in the minds of the African to such an extent, that it has

been internalised and Africans themselves now think of the dynamics of the phenomenon

Even further, within the Nigerian context, ethnicity and tribal identity consciousness as a colonial legacy was a deliberate policy put in place by separatist tactics for effective colonial domination and subjugation of ethnic groups on residential basis. As advanced by Nnoli, (1998), “the colonialists” began to separate these linguistic groups from one another, on the basis of ethnic tribal makeup. Concurring with Nnoli, (1998), Usman, (2006) in his argument over the question of 'Modernity and Nation Building' acclaimed by the colonialist, opined that,

*The colonialist's policy adopted towards settlement reveals clearly that the British were working to block the process of integration which had been taking place and which had been affected by the introduction of the colonial economy (Usman, 2006 p. 61).*

This tactical posture contributed in no small measure in creating ethnicity and tribal identity orientation compelling the people to think of them as different thereby arresting the prospects for socio-political integration with little or no suspicion. It is evident that during the colonial period in Nigeria for instance, Northern migrants were put in a residential quarters of *Tudun Wada* while their southern counterparts were settled in areas known as *Sabongari* away from the original inhabitants. This is evident in cities like Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, and Ibadan among others. A particular reference was made to Zaria on the ground design by the colonialists divide and rule tactics, in a study undertaken by M.M. Tukur as quoted by Usman (2006) thus;

*...before the coming of the Europeans, in Zaria there were communities of Nupe and Yoruba stock in the city who had been there for centuries, and the process of integration had made them assimilated as Zazzagawa.*

He went further arguing that, when the Europeans realized this in the 1920s, they made a regulation that people who are not indigenes could neither live in Zaria city nor live in *Sabongari* especially the Muslims from the

emirate has to live only in *Tudun Wada* areas and the southern migrant were confined to *Sabongari* area". This act of colonial legacy had survived the wave of distinction way into the modern day Nigerian society where residential quarters can easily be distinguished by way of concentration of ethnic, religious and regional groupings, be it in the Northern or in the Southern axis of the country. Thus, this segregation had profoundly breed suspicion and mistrust, thereby exacerbating ethnicity-cum-ethnocentrism as well as religious intolerance.

On the mythology of ethnicity and tribalism, Lemarchand, (1999) was of the view that; in order for ethnic entrepreneurs to make capital out of tribalism, a tribe must first and foremost exist as basis for ethnicity. On this instance, it will be argued that, the colonial ethnic entrepreneurs had succeeded in their enterprise riding on the existing tribes to delineate and subsequently create ethnicity consciousness amongst the colonized. Ethnicity is a social phenomenon in this sense associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. And ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries Nnoli (1998). Consequently, the relevant communal factors may be language, culture or both. In Nigeria, language has been the most crucial variable of social formations, and that ethnic groups are not necessarily homogeneous entity even linguistically and culturally. This made it possible that minor linguistic and cultural differences often exist within the group forming the basis for the delineation of sub-ethnic system.

Constitutionally every Nigerian is a citizen wherever he/she may reside, but however long Nigerians reside in a place outside their ancestral home, they are assumed to be non-indigenes. And the pogrom of indigene/settler divide is unconstitutional which contradict the conceptualization of Republican citizenship of the federation in all respect. In Nigeria, the citizenship problem is a microcosm of the larger problem of citizenship in Africa. Due to the ethnic diverse nature of the country, "a federal character" principle was adopted in 1975 so as to ensure an equitable distribution of power among the components, yet, by insisting that for appointment of ministers of the federation, one

ought to be an indigene of that state is where the problems lies. By that provision, the constitution created its own problem for it did not define who an indigene is. Consequent to this, many Nigerians are now being denied indigeneship of the only place they have known and lived due to different rendition of who an indigene is. Stemming from this ambiguity is the heinous crises that currently engulf some parts of Nigeria (1999 Constitution).

Going beyond Nigerian experience of indigene/settler pogrom, revealed that, the history of African states is that of massive movement of people from one place to another in search of trade and resources as a means of livelihood. Borrowing from the experiences of some African countries, the denial of citizenship to groups has political objectives that; those being denied these rights have no other place than where they reside.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the norm which guides citizenship in African societies became subject to colonial interpretations. During this period of empire days, only few were granted full citizenship rights, women for instance were not, during the colonial period therefore, only few privileged Africans had citizen rights (Many, 2009). Colonial period hence, was a time when being a native of a land, means being a "second class citizen". All of the colonial states had their diverse citizenship laws. In British colonial empires, different citizens exist; some are called "British Protected Persons" others "British Subjects" with the latter having more privilege than the former (Manby, 2009).

Similar classification exists in French colonies. There were citizens with full French recognition (citoyens Francais a part entire) and the vast majorities that were called French subjects (sujets Francais). In Portuguese colonies, Indigene (native) and nao-indigena (non-native) existed. Same classifications were obtained in Belgium and Spanish colonies. The common factor in all these differential citizenship is that there also existed two kinds of laws; customary law for the natives and municipal law for the foreigners and Africans that were granted foreign citizenship (Manby, 2009).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

It is obvious from the above evidence that the seed of discontent against socio-political integration process of Nigeria was a decade's long phenomenon which evolved with colonial experience. However, the post-colonial Nigeria is yet to exhibit any departure in character from the colonial experience, rather the twin identity pogrom of ethnicity and religion is deepening the crater of primordial division which has further threatened national integration and by extension widened the clamour for disintegration. Be that as it may, this study recommends that purposive mass mobilization to promote socio-political cohesion and patriotism is indispensable. Similarly, concerted effort must be made to de-emphasise the primordial attachment to ethno-religious identity incorporated in a comprehensive school curriculum targeting the younger generations as a civic engagement.

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