

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

Edited by
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ETHNIC RELATIONS AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

M.A. Adebisi

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation is characterized by an acute ethnic pluralism and this has presented itself as a clog in the wheel of democratic progress. Nigeria has all it takes to make itself a truly great country in every respect, given its arsenals of material and human resources. With a population of over one hundred million (1993 UN Population Estimate), skilled manpower, agricultural and mineral resources, clement climate and a generally hardworking labour force, the sky then becomes the limit in the general scale of development. The focus on political development vis-à-vis the state of relation among the myriads of ethnic groups in the country is designed in the main to accentuate the cruciality and necessity of the existence of a virile, stable and well-established political order as a springboard for the development of the Nigerian society, directed and nurtured by the norms and principles of what is termed here as 'democracy international', i.e. a system of government in which the people themselves establish the basic principles and conditions by which individual rights are regulated based on their collective conscience.

However, we must not fail to point out that the ascendancy and effective establishment of the culture of democracy in the society is determined to a very great extent by the degree to which the various segments of that society as determined especially by ethnic cleavages and other regional divides, are prepared to act in concert for the attainment of their collective social and political goals. The socio-political history of Nigeria is replete with inter-ethnic rivalry, mutual distrust, bigotry and ethnic cynicism. This problem is more pronounced among the majority tribes of Yorùbá, Igbo and Hausa-

Fulani (the so-called *Wazobians*) The multitudes of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria also constitute part of the problem rather than the contrary. For instance, Awolowo (1947:47) remarked that Nigeria can be described only as a "mere geographical expression". This is an example of how ethnically-informed political views had affected the development of a stable political dispensation in Nigeria. However, one could clearly state without fear of contradiction that the seeds of ethnic politics were sown by the British colonial policies in Nigeria which adopted a divide and rule tactics which robbed Nigerians of the common front for nation building. This allowed the emergence of regional (usually ethnic) leaders and political parties whose programmes and activities were designed along ethnically determined interests and sentiments. For instance, the A.G. (Action Group) under the leadership of Obafemi Awolowo became the dominant party in the Western Region; the NPC (Northern People's Congress), led by Ahmadu Bello was the political horse power of the Northern Region, while Nnamdi Azikiwe led the NCNC (Nation Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) in the East. Thus, regional leaders therefore employed ethnicity as a veritable vehicle for selfish political objectives and aggrandizement to the detriment of national unity.

Objectives

The main objective of this chapter is to critically discuss the role of ethnicity in Nigerian politics with respect to electoral conduct and voting pattern. The subsidiary objectives are as follows:

- i. examine the impact of ethnicity on politics in Nigeria;
- ii. examine the use of ethnicity by politicians for personal/sectional economic and political gains:

- iii. examine the causes of ethnic politics in Nigeria
- iv. examine the extent of the problematic
- v. proffer solutions to the problems.

Political structure and Ethnic Relations.

Prior to independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria as a nation was already divided along ethno-regional lines, paving the way for inter-ethnic political rivalries and bickering. This can be traced to British colonial policy that was based on the belief that the satisfaction of the yearnings and aspirations of the three dominant tribes: Yorùbá, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo in the West, North and East, respectively, could ensure political stability in Nigeria. This mistaken notion was later debunked by the bitter rivalries and political violence that characterized the socio-political life of Nigeria and its people. This tripod theory of stability was bound to fail from the onset because while it encouraged the ascendancy of local, regionally-based elitist groups, it equally ignored the stabilizing role that the minorities could play in promoting healthy political activities among the majorities, the so-called *Wazobians*.

Before the creation of the twelve state structure in Nigeria in 1967, three major regions, North, West and East existed in the country. Though the Mid-West was later created as the fourth region for the Edo and Urhobo speaking areas, it was an extension of Western politics, which was dominated by the A.G. (Action Group). As a further step in dealing with regional politics and ethnicity, more States and Local Government Areas were created in 1976, giving the country a nineteen-state structure. However, in spite of the attempts made to deregionalize politics, ethnic politics and inter-ethnic rivalry became acute. As shown below by Kurfi

(1983:177-178) ethnic bias or block voting pattern still existed during the elections. The following data attest to the prevalence of ethnic considerations in the pattern of voting amongst the various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

a. 1959 General Elections: Voting Patterns in the Regions

PARTY	EAST	NORTH	WEST & LAGOS	TOTAL
AG (& Allies)	14	25	34	73
NCNC/NEPU	58	8	23	89
NPC	-	134	-	134
OTHERS	1	7	8	16
TOTAL	73	174	65	312

b. 1979 Elections into Federal House of Representatives.

PARTY	EAST	NORTH	WEST & LAGOS	TOTAL
UPN	2	13	96	111
NPPP	60	16	2	78
NPN	37	121	11	169
PRP	-	49	-	49
GNPP	4	39	-	43
TOTAL	103	238	108	440

(c) 1979 Senatorial Elections

PARTY	EAST	NORTH	WEST & LAGOS	TOTAL
UPN	-	4	24	28
NPP	12	4	-	16
NPN	6	29	1	36
PRP	-	7	-	7
GNPP	2	6	-	8
TOTAL	20	50	25	95

From the data presented above, it can be seen quite clearly that the major political parties had the greatest support in the regions where the party leaders emanated from. This development made it possible for regional, ethnic and political opposition to snowball into serious national problems. For instance in the 1959 General Elections into the House of Representatives, the Action Group party led by Obafemi Awolowo, and based mainly in the Yoruba enclave of Western Nigeria (Lagos inclusive) made its strongest showing here, winning 34 seats out of a total of 73 seats won nationally. Compared with the other parties, it enjoyed a fairly general support having won 25 and 14 seats in the North and East respectively. On the part of the NCNC/NEPU, table (a) shows that the coalition had its greatest support (58 seats) in the East where the NCNC is based and led by Nnamdi Azikiwe. The NPC won all its 134 seats in the North where its leader, Ahmadu Bello of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic stock is based. The 1979 elections into the Federal House of Representatives and the Senate show that the major parties: UPN, NPN and NPP had major political support in the areas where the parties are based ethnically, although the National Party of Nigeria had a more national outlook than the other parties in terms of support base or vote spread.

Writing on ethnic politics in Nigeria, Nnoli (1978) sees language as the most crucial variable in African ethnicity. Ethnic groups, he defines as "social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries" (p.5).

According to him, contemporary ethnicity in Nigeria originated from the colonial urban centers as a direct consequence of deliberate colonial policies. For instance, in Nigeria, colonialism largely disrupted the organic interdependence of the various political entities which preceded it. The Land and Native Rights Ordinance of 1910 for instance encouraged the emergence of ethnicity in Northern Nigeria. The ordinance declares all land in the North as Native land that was to be controlled by the governor of

the area. The immediate effect of this ordinance was that it curtailed the movement of peoples from the South to the North. It also insulated and strengthened the authority of the feudal lords, especially the emirs, of the North against Southern liberalism. There is also the official segregation of settlement along ethnic group lines as follows:

- i. the indigenous Hausa-Fulani live within the walled city
- ii. *Tudun. Wada*: created for Northerners who were not indigenous to the towns;
- iii. *Sabon-Gari*: these areas were meant for those designated by colonial authorities as native foreigners; i.e. those mainly of Southern origin often with differential ethnic or religious background. Majority of this group come from Christian background in Southern Nigeria.

Hence, these parochial ethnic tendencies were created and encouraged by the colonial administration of the British. The policy of 'divide and rule' made the Indirect Rule System to be very successful in the North because it strengthened the despotic and exploitative rule of the feudal lords. In the Yoruba society in the South-West, the policy of indirect rule was less successful because the Yoruba Obas were less autocratic but exercised their authority within a largely democratic social system. The Yoruba Obas were not absolutist in the exercise of authority like the Northern Emirs, but rather exercised authority within a system of checks and balances, with laid-down mechanism for removing Obas exercising authority unlawfully. However, in the East, Warrant Chiefs, imposed by the British became unpopular as they lacked proper basis of authority. The political system of the Igbos was segmented, based on the age-grade structures. Therefore, the

appointment of Warrant Chiefs was resisted as a British imposition of an alien structure of authority.

In a similar vein, the colonial educational policy, which varied in quality and quantity across the country also helped to sharpen ethnic divide and distrust. Little education was given to the people just to have enough literate people to man colonial bureaucracies. Even then, the rate differed from region to region. In the southern part of the country for instance Christian missionaries were in the vanguard. In the North, Islamic education encouraged by the Jhadists led by Usman Dan Fodio, was already in place. Hence, the northerners resented western education, as it was seen largely as a ploy to christianize the North.

Morrison (1983) had studied the problems of ethnicity and political integration among the Ashanti of Ghana, in which he showed that strong ethnic base corresponded to traditional political power among the Ashanti people, and this made the importance of the group to the national economy to be visible. It will be recalled that the Ashanti once controlled a very powerful empire in Ghana. This factor, according to Morrison, made the cultural components of the Ashanti people to be prominent in the contemporary affairs of their country. For instance, the Ashantis would not hesitate to invoke their traditional institutions, symbols and power whenever they feel threatened, especially politically. They are also very sensitive to discrimination from the government at the centre. In Nigeria, ethnic groups usually exploit their traditional institutions, cultures, religions, even history for political gains. However, Morrison's studies of situational ethnicity among the Ashantis of Ghana show that higher degrees of integration of ethnic groups are brought about by urbanization, higher education and occupational status. However, in Nigeria though urbanization may be seen as having enhanced inter-ethnic relations, variables such as religion, illiteracy and traditional beliefs are still militating against genuine national integration. The failure of June 12, 1993 elections at

ensuring national unity is a good testimony. According to Nnoli, the attempt at the Nigerianisation of the public services attracted the character of ethnicity because each region favoured the employment of its own people even where there are better qualified persons from other places. This is exactly what Dudley (1968) found in the northernization policies of the NPC as formulated in 1957 in the Northern Regional public service commission. According to him:

If a qualified northerner is available, he is given priority in recruitment, if no northerner is available, an expatriate may be recruited or a non-northerner on contract terms

(Dudley 1968:220)

This policy, according to Sir Ahmadu Bello, the NPC leader, and Premier of the North at the time was aimed at enabling "northerners to gain control of every thing in the country" (p.220).

The policy of ethnicization of the public service was carried out in the various regions either overtly as was the case in the north, or covertly. All the regions were guilty in a sense or another. Odenigwe even noted that inter-regional conflicts in Nigeria emanated from the separatist tendencies exhibited by the separatist movements formed during the pre-independence era. He traced this development to the regional policy and politics introduced during British colonialism in Nigeria, as earlier pointed out. Hence, the regionalization of the Nigerian society by the British could be seen as creating the best conditions for the development of tribal loyalties and inter-ethnic conflicts in contemporary Nigeria.

Ethnicism and Political Practice

It is rather disturbing to see how in Nigeria today ethnicism has been conceptualized and operationalized not only as a theoretical ideology but as a weapon for the furtherance of ethnically-structured political objectives to the detriment of national integration. Nigerians could easily employ ethnic sentiments in order to achieve narrow, myopic micro-nationalistic objectives. This development has permeated the various facets of our national life. In the churches, mosques, clubs, associations and even in the academia, ethnicism rears its ugly head. This ethnic problem is gradually assuming the status of a cancerous growth that is terminally destroying our body politic. If one examines the problem of power transfer in Nigeria, the ethnic agendum is quite visible. The recent decision of the National Constitutional Conference, organized by the Abacha regime, to enshrine the rotational presidency clause into the constitution of Nigeria lends credence to this fact. By this development the potentials of a great country like Nigeria is gradually being destroyed, given the myriads of ethnic cocoons and conglomerations. Unfortunately, the ubiquity of ethnicity and ethnicism has made propaganda to become a regular pastime among the Nigerian people, especially in official circles as avenues for achieving selfish interests bothering on politics and economics.

Wilmot (1979) sees the legendary Zik as someone who preached one thing while practicing another. For instance, Wilmot alleged that *The West African Pilot*, a newspaper founded by Zik, was used effectively to project tribalism for which he attacked his political opponents. Colonial situation and policy as practiced in Nigeria and explained above, encouraged the development of tribal loyalties among the various political movements. For example, the Action Group (A.G.) founded by Obafemi Awolowo in the West was essentially an offshoot of *Egbẹ Omo Odùduwà*, a Yoruba-based cultural association. Regional politics, therefore, developed along

ethnic lines in the colonial era. This tendency was carried forward into the post-independence era and it is still very much around today. The current political impasse resulting from the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election can be linked directly in no mistakable terms to ethnic politics.

Meanwhile, there is the need to throw more light on the concept of ethnic group or tribe. Sanda (1976) says that the concept of ethnic group and tribe have been used interchangeably (R. Cignet 1976). In Wallerstein's conception of ethnic group, he presents a structure of rural-urban dichotomy between ethnic group and tribe. Sanda re-echoes Wallerstein's (1965) definition of tribe as a kind of rural, 'Gemeinschaft' community that claims the loyalty or allegiance of the rural, grassroots people, whereas the ethnic group is regarded as the 'new tribe', which relies on the allegiance of the people of the urban areas (towns, cities). According to Sanda, two theoretical propositions emanate from this dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the proposition which emphasizes continuity, while the other emphasizes discontinuity in ethnic identity between the rural and urban areas. For instance, the continuity perspective presented by Uchendu (1965), Lloyd (1967), among others, suggest that despite new status, education or roles, African migrants to the urban centres tend to retain their ethnic identities and loyalties. The discontinuity perspective on the other hand suggests that studies on urban ethnic relations must be carried out within the social context of the city itself. Gluckman like many other sociologists agrees that "ethnicity should be studied within the social context of the city" (1965:194).

However, it must be pointed out at this juncture that the African social systems and communalized basis of relations would obviously make it pretty difficult with various and often different cultural and linguistic elements to jettison their ethno-cultural backgrounds. Studies have shown quite clearly that ethnicity has been a crucial factor in the structural pattern of urban residency. Of course,

colonial policy of the British is directly responsible. They created the GRAs for themselves and the local petty bourgeoisie and other elite members serving the colonial bureaucracy, and in most northern Nigerian cities for instance, *Sabon-Garis* are created for non-indigenes; so people coming from the same ethnic or geographical background are most likely to live contiguously in the urban areas especially where there is sharp divide along ethnic, religious or cultural lines. Even in the south, where 'Sabon Garis' do not exist, new comers to the cities may tend to take up residency in neighbourhoods occupied by people of similar ethnic or cultural characteristics or background.

It is also to be noted that given the fact that Nigeria has not been able to put in place effective leadership that could turn around the economy as well as promote inter-ethnic relations, ethnicism as an ideology has been developed further afield as an important weapon for projecting sectional, parochial interests. This is the bane of politics and national development. Sklar (1967) believes as we do here that

"tribalism is widely supposed to be the most formidable barrier to national unity in Africa...."

It is less frequently recognized that tribal movement may be created and instigated to action by the new men of power in furtherance of their own special interests which are time and again the constitutive interests of emerging social classes. Tribalism then becomes a mask for class privileges"

(Sklar, 1967:6) (Cf. Sanda 1967).

Quite in unison with Sklar above, it is agreed here that tribalism has been constantly employed by the 'power elite' of Nigeria for the protection and aggrandizement of class interests and values. It has been used by civilian as well as military regimes as a mask for defending selfish interests.

Tribalism is everywhere--- in the corridors of power, public corporations, companies, universities and other institutions of higher learning, labour unions, and even in religious organizations.

It is also unfortunate that the high level of illiteracy does not promote good inter-ethnic relations because the ethnic barons and their cronies find it easy to use ethnic slogans and propaganda to incite inter-ethnic conflicts all in their attempts to defend their selfish interests. Even as shown by Sklar (1983), the major political parties in the first republic were founded along the three main linguistic groups, namely Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo. These are the AG, NPC and the NCNC, in that order.

Other political movements during the struggle for independence in Nigeria were mere ethnic associations, e.g. Urhobo Union, Ibibio Union, Egbado, Igbo State Union, Egbe Omo Oduduwa, etc.

In summary, ethnicity existed as a result of the attempt by the various ethnic groups to gain socio-economic control of the country. Ethnicity was also buttressed by colonial policy that was based on a system of divide and rule, the so-called "Indirect Rule". Ethnicity was also encouraged by the colonial educational policy of imbalance.

Role of Military Intervention

Ball (1988) sees military seizure of power as due mainly to their inability to achieve their political goals by other means. Though, Ball believes that military intervention should be seen in the overall interest of the nation concerned, it must be noted here that the politicization of the military has further worsened inter-ethnic relations in Africa.

The political scenarios in Nigeria, Ghana, Burundi, Rwanda, Liberia, Ethiopia, Uganda among others constitute ample political food for thought. Ball sees military interventions in Nigeria (1966, 1976), Ghana (1966, 1972) and the Sudan (1972) as due mainly to clashes of interest between elites, corruption and protection of military interests. In Nigeria for instance, military regimes have often claimed to be corrective, but quite often they have ended up

to be more corrupt, despotic, inefficient and conflictual. The military has often played on the intelligence of the politicians because as pointed out by Bienen (1985), "*Classes are weakly defined in Nigeria and elites are fragmented by ethnic --- language group membership, place of origin and institutional identity*" (1985:5). It is interesting, if not sad, to note that the problems facing the military do not usually end with the completion of intervention. There are the problems of when to retreat or disengage from the political scene. Their attempts at dictating the terms of democratization have often landed the military in more trouble, giving rise to continued intervention. The eight years of military democratic transition under General Babangida ended in disaster because military democracy was unsuited to the international norms of the concept of democracy as practiced by the civilized world.

In an attempt to disentangle itself it then becomes responsible for several unpopular decisions, bordering on relations with the press, human rights, suppression of opponents and fanning inter-ethnic conflicts as was practiced by Babangida and now by the Abacha regime.

In fact, the very act of intervention itself constitutes a great problem for the military. The military therefore becomes unstable because it is polarized along sectional or ethnic lines. Coups and rumours of coups then become common place.

Olowu (1995) sees military bureaucracy as the single greatest threat to democracy in Africa, especially in Nigeria, Togo, and Zaire. According to him these military regimes spend wastefully of course, huge sums of money on defense in order to sustain their unpopular rule in those countries where they have seized power. The present political logjam in Nigeria resulting from the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election, popularly acclaimed to be free and fair, and won by the billionaire businessman M.K.O. Abiola, has greatly worsened ethnic tensions

in Nigeria in recent times. In fact, in the wake of the crisis which followed the annulment, the disintegration of Nigeria was almost a reality. After the annulment, the military imposed an Interim National Government, headed by Earnest Shonekan, who was largely regarded as a puppet of the military. Tensions were heightened and Nigerians working or domiciled in regions other than theirs started moving back to their home regions. In fact, the Igbo traders who dominated the retail trade in Nigeria began moving eastward in order to prevent a repeat of the massacres of the 1960s which preceded the 1967-70 civil war.

Promoting Inter-Ethnic Relations

Several solutions have, and can be proffered, as a way of promoting inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria. Nigeria is no doubt a complex country given its numerous ethnic groups with varied cultural characteristics and interests. Ayida (1987) traces the genesis of the political problems of Nigeria to the British colonial policy. According to him, the British had wrongly assumed that for any political arrangement in Nigeria to succeed, it must satisfy the "aspirations of the three major ethnic groups; the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Ibos in the East" (Ayida 1987:54-5). This forms the basis of the tripod theory of power in Nigeria. Unfortunately, in an attempt to satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the majorities (so-called Wazobias) the wishes and stabilizing role of the minorities that once constituted about 45% of the total population of the country were ignored. The party system that later developed followed this tripodic power structure, and even with the creation of more states and local government areas, these three dominant ethnic groups still remain at the center stage.

Okediji calls for the establishment of a more humane-social order. This can be achieved through increased utilization of the intellectual resources of the land by encouraging social research

and using the results for solving social problems, which of course include those relating to ethnic relations (cf Akeredolu-Ale 1982). As an alternative to the capitalist social order, Okediji recommends the adoption of a socialist programme of action because capitalism has obviously failed the country. This view can be supported because it favours a more egalitarian structure of society where the gap between the rich and the poor can be bridged or at least narrowed. He also suggests that social science research should address itself to the somewhat fundamental policy questions related to the creation of a socialist political system in Nigeria. This may be as a result of the glaring evidence of the failure of capitalism in improving the lot of the less-privileged in Nigeria.

Similarly there is the need to mobilize Nigerians who are divided along ethnic, cultural, economic and religious diversities in the task of national development. Some of those factors constitute part of Okediji's social action recommendations for the resolution of the national crisis (See Akeredolu-Ale, ed. 271-283).

As a further step in the promotion of inter-ethnic relations among the Nigerian people, Nigerian leaders must address the problem of educational imbalance between the North and South. This will help reduce the different rates of development between the two regions. Also, the government must ensure that the economy of the country is nationally integrated. Most importantly, government must apply identical rules and principle, norms and regulations in relation to all national issues throughout Nigeria, irrespective of ethnic, religious, or geographical differences. Emphasis from now must be on actual production, not mainly on the distribution of national wealth. State of origin, religion and ethnicity must be de-emphasized in all issues of national interest. Finally, the federal system must truly reflect federal characteristics. Nationalist ideology must also be introduced into the school curricula, just as the agencies for socialization are to be encouraged.

to teach good moral ethics and things which bind Nigerians together.

Conclusion

In this chapter, focus has been on the implications of inter-ethnic relations for the political development in Nigeria. It has been shown that inter-ethnic rivalries and conflict result mainly from British colonial policy in Nigeria. The assumption that political stability will obtain if the wishes and aspirations of the majority ethnic groups are satisfied proved a big error as the series of inter-ethnic conflicts have shown. The neglect of the minority tribes whose stabilizing role is crucial to national unity has been shown to have adverse effects. Regionalization of the Nigerian society by the colonial authorities supported and encouraged the emergence of regional ethnic barons and cronies who advance their narrow political and economic goals by employing ethnicity and related sentiments. Military intervention and its inability to disengage easily also serve to worsen inter ethnic relations.

In most African countries, the military is divided along ethnic lines thereby exacerbating ethnic tension and conflict. The type of education given in terms of quality and quantity also created disparities between ethnic groups, thereby portraying some groups as disadvantaged. Urban residency policy of the British especially in the Moslem-dominated Northern Nigeria actually encouraged ethnic segregation and conflict.

Therefore, there is also the need to integrate the economy nationally and also emphasize real production and not just how to share the national wealth. There is also the need to allow the country to be governed by the same sets of rules, regulations, norms and principles. All these steps would help to place all citizens on the same footing for the task of national building. Nigeria has the potentials of being a truly great country but the unity and

cooperation of all the numerous ethnic groups, majorities and minorities alike, are important conditions that must be met.

In the final analysis, the role of the Nigerian military establishment largely infected by the ethnic malaise, must come to terms with the fact that military dictatorship is no longer fashionable anywhere. It must therefore confine itself to roles or activities which tend to promote national integration and the protection of the territorial integrity of the nation rather than the contrary.

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