

# Ethnicity in Africa: Euphemism for Political Pluralism

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**Abstract:** - Contrary to orthodox understanding which presupposes ethnicity as the bane of the instabilities that defines contemporary African. This study examines the existence of plausible properties of pluralism inherent in ethnic heterogeneity. Upon analyzing primary data using the online data analysis tool by Afrobarometer and reviewing relevant literature; the study argue the lacuna created by the in-existence of an organised and proficient civil society, resonates the reach of ethnicity in the region. Furthermore, it is of the opinion that ethnicity is not only existential; it constitutes the thorn of individual and group identity in contemporary African states. In its capacity, ethnicity remains of the most effective social mobility and collective action mechanism in contemporary Africa. The study concludes by arguing ethnicity as not problematic, rather it is problematized by ethnic entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Identity, Political Pluralism, Civil Society and Biafran Agitators.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Being the second largest continent in the contemporary world, Africa remains of the most heterogeneous societies. Stretching from the Mediterranean in the North, Atlantic in the South, the continent houses a population size of an estimated 500 million inhabitants, which according to Africa Holocaust is made up of about three thousand ethnic groups and home to over thousand spoken dialects. Owing to the societal pervasion inherent in colonial imperialism, the underlying ethnic groups were coercively amalgamated in an arbitrarily fashion, accounting for the emergence of modern states in the African continent. Consequentially, the inability to integrate competing ethnic groups has resulted in civil unrest and a myriad of social instabilities. In several instances ethnicity has fuelled political secessions, sustained societal disintegration, as it has also produced a society marred by an unending plethora of dual identity crisis.

Contrary to orthodox understanding which presupposes ethnicity as the bane of the instabilities that defines contemporary African. This study is of the opinion ethnicity as a basis of group identity, connotes the bane and framework for collaboration, resistance, welfare and collectivity. The lacuna created by the in-availability of an organised and proficient civil society, ethnicity is argued to assumes the role of civil society. Besides providing a platform for the furthering collective group interest, ethnicity arguably remains a particularly effective mobilizing mechanism through which political, cultural and socio-economic aspirations are pursued.

In other times it has also played the principal role of an intermediary between individual and state.

In deviance to a seemingly popular perspective, this study is of the opinion that ethnicity is not only existential; it constitutes the thorn of individual and group identity in contemporary African states. The exclusive existence of ethnicity is exhibited in numerous failed efforts at practical creation of supra-national identity in Africa. Secondly, the frequent agitations for secession across the continent on the basis of perceived cum actual marginalization by a handful of ethnic and regional minorities, substantiates not only the existence of ethnic consciousness in Africa but also its reckoning force.

In Nigeria for instance, few years after independence the country experienced a civil war in 1967-70, between the Igbo dominated East and the Nigerian Army. The Igbo's citing regional marginalization and ethnic exclusion as the propelling determinants that informed their unilateral decision to secede from Nigeria. As rightly spelt out by Fanon (1963) national mindfulness is nothing but a crude, hollow fragile shell. The inherent flaw illuminates how easy it is for young independent states to regress from a nation to ethnic groups and from state to tribe. A regression he conceives as damaging and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national integration<sup>1</sup>.

While the above considerations depict the negative impacts of ethnicity, it paints a lucid picture substantiating the veracity of ethnicity in Nigeria as in most African states. On the contrary the instantaneous regressions were not in their totality negative, as they also created a sense of belongingness and frameworks for collective bargaining.

Accordingly, owing to the dysfunctional or subverting impacts of ethnicity, there remains the intricate inclination to resonate the denigrating and conflict inducing properties of negating identity in Africa. In assent Barbero (2007, p. 29) affirms that the aims and motives for the surge in the trend of politicizing of identity encumbers elements of derelict historical grievances, land claims, rooted biological prejudices, religious enthusiasm, cum long-standing battles for resource control and access to state mechanism of political authority. While no society is void of ethnic claws or social cleavages, the incidence of ethnic membership as a basis of identity remains particularly prevalent in the developing world. By providing a platform for re-asserting belongingness,

membership and ownership to people, ethnic identity has been largely exploited to promote 'the us versus them' paradigm. Are we then to conclude ethnicity as the bane of socio-political and economic plethora that characterizes the post-colonial state? While there remains the audience to entertain such arguments, a conclusion in that direction entails elements of hastiness.

Alternatively, Ake (1993, p. 4) opines if ethnicity is conceived and manipulated in tandem with selfish seeking interests, then it falls short of been the only causality of the myriad of problems habitually attributed to it. Kagwanja (2003, p. 113-114) in similar vein, claims identities could be employed or manipulated to foster a universal identity, as abound in nationalist or continental identities.

## II. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The contemporary African state is multi-national, multi-cultural and multi-lingual, encompassing a myriad of nations and ethnicities of dissimilar culture, size and historical ancestries. The ethnic diversity has been overtime blamed for the incessant socio-economic and political instabilities as well as developmental challenges that plague the continent. While there remain the audience to entertainment such claims; it is of utmost important that unlike the developed western states, the African continent is yet to experience a course of nation-building pigeonholed by reciprocal romanticism of national mindfulness and alertness. Contrarily, identity is strappingly disheveled with the incidence of kin group, ethnic groups, religious or social cleavages, which fractionizes and segregates these societies.

While it is not an anomaly to assume societies fractionized by ethnic diversities are less likely to produce or bring about collectivism, rather they are thought to be a breeding ground for civil wars, ethno-nationalist driven secessionist movements, under-development, and primitiveness to mention but a few. This foregoing study in deviance from dominant scholarly perspectives sets out the address the incidence of problematizing ethnic diversities. Claiming in the absence of organized and vibrant civil society, ethnic groups constitute the most salient mechanisms for resistance, shared common interests, collective ascription and thorn of political pluralism in contemporary Africa. Hence, rather than problematizing ethnicity and attributing the contextual challenges in Africa to ethnicity, this study will explore the plausible existence of pluralistic properties that abounds in ethnic diversity.

## III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Contrary to dominant perspective in mainstream studies, which claims ethnicity as a social construct, this study sets out to interrogate the plausible realness and existence of ethnicity, with recourse to political pluralism in Africa. Hence, the concise objectives of the study are stated as follows;

- To examine the contextual dynamics that assent's to the existence and realness of ethnicity beyond social constructions.

- To explore the properties of political pluralism, resulting from the ethnic fragmentation of post-colonial Africa, with laid emphasis on contemporary Nigeria.

## IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In light of the surge in the plethora of ethnic misrepresentation rocking the African society, the underlying study poises certain pertinent questions given as;

- Is ethnicity real or a mere construct? If yes, then how central is it in informing political pluralism in contemporary Nigeria?

## V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Regardless of the methodology of social inquiry in focus, understudying ethnicity and its inherent implications and intricacies remains a daunting task. In an attempt to capture the slippery but essential dimensions of ethnicity, the study adopts the ex-post facto research method. In minimal term necessitates the application of readily available data, to suit specific research objectives. It can be employed to account for an outcome or consequence based on antecedent determinant, as it is also useful in establishing causal relationships amongst variables. Accordingly Kerlinger and Rint (1986) claim that ex-post facto within social science endeavor, sets out to reveal the probability of a correlation, by examining plausible historical causal mechanisms. Afro-Barometer (AB) an independent non-partisan research network, which measures civic attitudes across Africa on subject matters of political, social and economic phenomena, will serve as the data hub of this study, while other relevant secondary literatures will also be contextually analyzed.

## VI. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

By way of complimenting the introductory prologue to this study, this section is committed to elucidating concepts central to understanding research. They include ethnicity, identity, political pluralism and ethnic politicization.

### *Ethnicity*

Although scholarly endeavors at attaining a consensus as to what ethnicity entails remains largely inconclusive, hence the discourse of ethnicity occupies a central position in the analysis of the post-colonial state. They however remain a recurring obsession with ethnicity in Africa and its problems. Conceived or real, ethnicity remains a prominent and fundamental constituent of post-colonial Africa. While they abound a myriad of frameworks through which ethnicity is studied, Osaghae (1991, p. 44) claims ethnicity as a derivative of ethnic groups, have a habit of recurring in instances involving copious ethnic groups or identity with lucid elements of the us and them saga. Cohen (1974) weighs in on the discussion, claiming ethnic groups as informal groups, whose members are divergent from members of other groups,

within a joint territorial boundary on the foundation of shared kinship, religious or linguistic ties.

In contemporary Africa where class struggle are thought to be passive, ethnicity remains the medium through which individual identity is re-informed, in relation to the norms, values and beliefs of a larger group. While the incidence of ethnicity is alterable and fluid, association to groups remains primordialily conditioned by shared mutual history, linguistic, culture, region and similar objectives. In isolated circumstances, membership to ethnic groups can be attained through migration and resettlement, ascription to and recognition with groups on the basis of understanding or belonging to mutual language, religion or culture.

In furtherance ethnicity relics the basis for collective bargaining; resistance to oppressive authority, propagation of regional or group interest and in other times serves as welfare apparatus. In societies such as Nigeria where you have numerous ethnicities and nations competing for access to resource control, the tendency of dissimilarities in policy preference is bound to result in conflicts. Such occasions are chiefly abused by ethnic elites, who command the respect and loyalty of their kinsmen. While ethnic driven agitations may incite civil unrest they can also serve in their capacity as a unifying platform against systematic marginalization, exclusionary policies, political exclusion, relative deprivation and the likes. A textbook example is that of the Biafran agitators who base their unilateral decision to secede as a backlash against claims of regional marginalization and political exclusion by the Federal Government. Albeit its shortcoming, unconventional methods and intricacies, the movement for the Biafran state, represents collective front at resisting hegemonic domination by the Hausa populated north as well as a medium through which indigenous ethnic group states and define their policy and political preferences.

Historically, the Biafran movement represents a reaction to claims of perceived or actual state sponsored marginalization in the areas of appointment to key political offices, neglect of the regions decaying infrastructure and more pronounced is their inability as one of the three major ethnic group to occupy the seat of the presidency. Should we assent to the claims that ethnicity as a basis for identity, also doubling as the engine room for political pluralism in contemporary Africa, what is or are the mechanisms through which it does?

### *Identity*

The single most important factor employed by ethnicists to further collective group actions remains the idea of common identity shared by individuals. Identity as a concept is particularly multi-layered and complex to decipher at a glance. While identity manifests in varying propensities and contexts, its central importance in informing domestic politics on a spectrum ranging from cooperation to conflict cannot be downplayed. In abstract terms it symbolizes shared similarities within a group that distinguish them from others. Accordingly identity is defined as;

As a combination of socio-cultural characteristics which individuals shared or presumed to share, with others on the basis upon which one groups is distinguished from other. In furtherance, identity is a group concept, in the sense that it is based on traits which make individuals members of a group Olayode (2016, p. 244).

Having attempted to clarify the boundaries of identity within the context of this study, the political dimension of identity will be further delved into in a bid to locating the impacts of ethnicity in informing domestic politics in contemporary Nigeria. In this regards Bergham (2013, p. 73) claims at general level, identity politics is an effort to address the lacuna of political representation, or for that matter any form of politics that seeks through institution of representation without resorting to direct violence. With respect to multi-party politics in contemporary Africa, it is argued that party politics and elections in Africa which do not emphasize their ethnic character are quiet rare Kasfir (1976). In furtherance, Jackson (1974) claims the weak state capacity in the developing world, hinders their abilities to address instances of relative deprivation amongst competing groups, consequently leading to the spread of ethno-nationalist sentiments.

The incidence of ethnicity resulting in the politicization of identity can occur for various reasons. For Hashmi (2015, p. 323) state policies may result in the politicization of ethnic identity, in instances where public policies are lopsided and thought to favor a particular group over another. This is particularly so in primordial societies like Nigeria, where kinship and ethnicity are crucial to access or in-access to resources. A vivid example is of ethnic based collectivist agitation elsewhere is the Palestinian resistance to Israeli state policy of occupation. Hence, through institutional and systematic exclusion, relative deprivation and political exclusion the state triggers shared sentiments amongst members of particular groups.

Elsewhere, identity is conceived as a place in the society Simon (1999). Place in the society is understood to entail space occupied by individuals within a larger society, which could be exclusive or non-exclusive. The idea of exclusivity is conditioned by the 'our, my, your' paradigm, within this sense segregation is derived and reinforced. This like a chain reaction awakens the sense of collective belongingness or otherwise. Based on the foregoing Klandermans (2014, p. 3) Is of the view that group identification establishes a social and collective identity, which is akin and to pursue committedly the cause of the group.

With recourse to the ongoing discussion, an established social collective identity is tied to certain objectives, goals and ideologies of group. Should such groups be driven by the desire to secede, members are more than likely to mobilize for the cause of secession, consequently transforming ethnic groups into some political movement of a sort. As in the case of Biafra, the singular most important motive upon which the movement was conceived and sustained remains shared ethnic identity.

Penultimately, politicization of collective identity within an established power tussle, unfolds sequentially, transforming the relationship binding groups to a social movement. Typically the process is thought to be instigated by awareness of shared grievances Klandermans (2014, p 4). Within the Nigerian context, shared grievances amongst the Igbo ethnic tribe revolves around the notion of institutionalized marginalization and political exclusion. This is thought to be the framework upon which ethnicity was politicized into a movement for social, economic and political inclusion. Resultantly, ethnicity in the absence of a vibrant civil society void of ethnic sentiments, affiliation and origin serves as a medium for political pluralism.

#### *Political Pluralism*

The concept of political pluralism is central to democracy as we have come to know it. It entails the existence of diversity, multiplicity and or plurality of opinions, where groups are at liberty to express their policy preferences with an established political system. According Konard (2010) is of the view that, the interface between democracy and pluralism is integral. In the sense that democracy postulates persons of dissimilar ideologies, beliefs, opinion and values are at liberty to interact with the state and be interacted with. Further claiming, ideally pluralism denotes that no single group should assume priority above others, in this regards democracy reinstates that all groups and their diverse ideologies, are at liberty to compete for attention and followers.

In heterogeneous societies such as Nigeria, ethnicity arguably remains the medium through which collective bargain or policy preferences are echoed. Political parties amongst other formal and informal cleavages are usually conceived along ethnic lines. The implications of ethnic fragmentation are numerous; they include amongst others autocratic tendencies, ethnic cum regional marginalization, relative deprivation, and political inequality. In Nigeria for instance, minority groups are rarely accorded proportionate privileges; in terms of political equality, access to wealth, infrastructural development, job opportunities and the likes.

This singular act creates and fosters a sense of belongingness, as well as ascription to one's ethnicity group, which in turn develop into formal or informal institutions. The underlying institutions serve as mechanisms through which collective bargains are made, as instruments for fostering the aspirations and interests of persons bounded by ethnicity.

#### *Theorizing Ethnic Nationalism*

The functions of ethnic-nationalism amongst others is to clamor for equal redistribution of wealth, political authority, resource control and the furtherance of the collective aspiration of individuals on the basis of shared history, ancestry, dialect, culture, tradition and other social formations binding cohesion amongst groups. As rightly argued by Yakubu (2017, p. 16) ethnocentric nationalism usually

prevails in heterogeneous societies, where political bigwigs, state elites and power brokers prioritize the cause of their ethnic regions over the other; he further claims that political appointment and access to the corridors of power has largely been constrained and informed reach of ethnicity in contemporary Nigeria. Adeosun (2011) in a similar claim is of the view that political elites in Nigeria compete for power among different ethnic groups across the country.

Furthermore, Nnabuihe et al (2014, p. 55) argue that ethno-nationalist define the nation in terms of ethnicity, this encumbers some elements of descent from previous generations or ancestry. It also connotes the idea of a culture shared between members of a group with common ancestors and language amongst other shared social phenomenon. In a similar instance Yakubu (2017, p. 13 ) is of the opinion that ethnic dimensions of nationalism abounds and depicts the geographic, social, political and economic demography of Nigeria, as at numerous instances ethno-nationalist have expressed their desire to break out of existing political communities, on the basis of institutional marginalization. In the opinion of Hashmi (2015, p. 326) a well-coordinated and well-thought-out assembling, be it a political party, armed militia or nationalist agitators, can efficaciously articulate and pursue demands. These demands could be political, economic or socio-cultural.

In pluralist Africa, state policies are largely geared towards addressing the needs and demands of various ethnicities and nations. The inability or ability of the state to integrate or marginalize a group or region plays a significant role in fostering ethno-nationalism. In Nigeria for instance the Biafran agitators base their desire to secede on grounds of deprivation and regional marginalization. Consequently, the leaders of the group drum up support along ethnic lines. In contemporary Nigeria, ethnicity remains a major determinant of development in rural societies, and the closest supplement for welfare, collective action and furtherance of shared aspirations. In the absence of a vibrant civil society void of ethnic chauvinism, ethnicity remains the intermediary between the individual and the state. Against this backdrop the study develops a graphical model depicting ethnicity as the intermediary between individuals and the state.

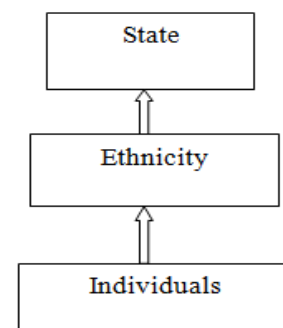


Figure 1, Source: Author, 2018

In figure one the author attempts to demonstrate the mechanism through which ethnicity conditions political pluralism in the developing world. In ethnic fragmented societies, the inefficiencies of civil society inform the rise of ethno-nationalism, in the sense that political affairs are largely championed along ethnic lines. This assumption is buttressed by Adeosun (2011, p. 2) who states that a definite attribute of politics in Nigeria is the immense elite competition for power among varying ethnic groups. Unsurprisingly, the recognition of the impact of ethnicity on political discourse in Nigeria led to the enactment of a legislative act termed Federal Character Principle (FCP). Accordingly, Nnoli (1996, p. 234) states in; pursuant of section 135(3) of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria decrees, that in the appointment of ministers, the president shall reflect the FCP of Nigeria, that he the president shall appoint ministers from each state of the federation who must be indigenes of the states. On this note, it will suffice to claim that ethnicity in Africa is not necessarily problematic as conventionally assumed; rather the manner in which it is employed manipulatively makes it so.

*Causality*

To begin with, ethnic politicization is not by anyway a new phenomenon neither was it an instantaneous occurrence and more so in heterogeneous societies. Based on the foregoing, the study will interrogate the properties of consensus mobilization, identity mobilization and action mobilization inherent in ethnicity. According to Klandermans (2014, p. 4) consensus mobilization entails the dissemination of a social movements standpoints, identity on the other hand creates the sense of belongingness across group member, while action which is the final stage that turn sympathy to participation. Furthermore, Goldstone (2014) claims individuals are prone to subscribe to the standpoints of actors or figure heads, if they identify with or share a similar identity with the individual in view. Consequently, ethnicity as a mobilizing agent is more likely to be proficient in mobilizing individuals for collective actions. In similar vein Brewer and Silver (2002) claim that group identification is a mindfulness of correspondences, in-group identity, and mutual faith with other persons in same or similar capacity. For Klandermans (2014) the propensity at which individuals identify with social movements, determines the probability of such individuals behavior been conditioned by the orientations, values, norms and beliefs become congruent with those of such group.

In lieu, Bert (2014) argues consensus mobilization entail matters such as proficiency in persuasive communication, the mobilization channels, and the perceived cost and benefits of participation. Using Biafra agitators, the use of dialect in mobilizing to be participants inevitably has an impact on prospective participants. Like a chain reaction, the idea of shared language represents similarity in identity, which is also thought to be particularly instrumental in the mobilization process. The final stage which is action mobilization depicts the stance of the Biafran agitators at present. The incessant rallies, march, radio propaganda by the movement has led to

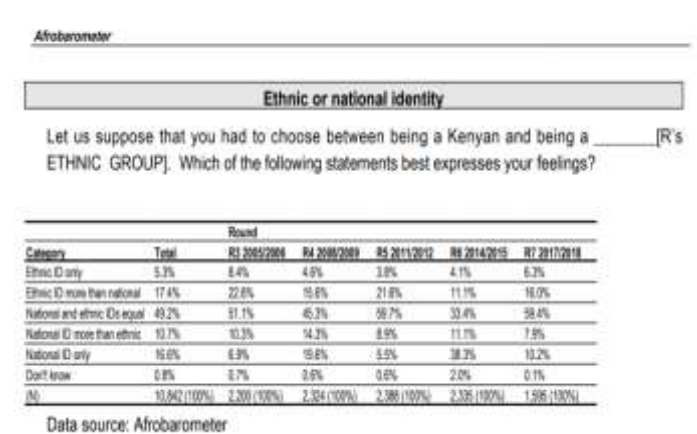
the incarceration of top figures within the group, military repressions and civil unrest in the Eastern part of Nigeria.

Penultimately, it is of the views of this study that identity mobilization is less difficult to attain as compared to consensus and action mobilization. By being a member of ethnic groups individual identities are shared primordially, constructively or ascriptively. Owing to the possibilities of existential policy preferences within ethnic groups, consensus can easily be attained on the existence of perceived or actual collective grievances, frustration or relative deprivation. Conclusively, action mobilization remains the most difficult to attain. This is thought to be so, because the possibilities of competing courses of actions amongst members of ethnic groups cannot be ruled out. Some may prefer more conventional methods of channeling demands while others may not necessarily.

*Ethnicity at Play*

As commendable as the legislation enacting the FCP is, it falls short at attaining predetermined outcomes. This is evident in the incessant and unhealthy competition between the underlying ethnic groups that make up contemporary Nigeria. To substantiate the underlying assumption Samuel and Ukpere (2013) argue the major challenges of Nigeria can be tied to the competition of ethnicities in the ploys for ascendance to political authority or power. The inherent impact of ethnicity in contemporary Nigeria is further compounded by weak and almost non-existent state institutions. As pointed out by Kokole (1996) who claims ethnic mindfulness and constancies lend themselves to easy manipulation, predominantly so because other loyalties are relatively weak or absent.

In furtherance, Afrobarometer established in 1999 is a Pan-African institution that collects and analyzes public attitude survey of national data in the areas of governance in Africa. Figure represents the results of data analyzed using the online data analysis tool on the official webpage of Afrobarometer<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [file:///C:/Users/pc-pc/Downloads/doc%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/pc-pc/Downloads/doc%20(2).pdf)

The above data set constitutes the findings of a five round survey carried about by Afrobarometer in Nigeria within the period of 2005 to 2018 respectively. A total number of 10, 842 respondents were asked if they were to choose between been a Kenyan and a particular ethnic group, which would they prefer. A total of 5.3 % prefer ethnic identity only, 17.4 % choose ethnic identity more than national, 49.2 % national and equally ethnic, 10.7 % national more than ethnic, 16.6 % preferred national identity only and 0.8 % were of the opinion that they do not know. The findings of the research substantiate the reach of ethnicity in contemporary Nigeria. While a huge number of the participants preferred to be as ethnic and national concurrently, the participants who preferred only ethnic identity surpasses those who prefer to be nation. The number on a head to head basis illustrates the reach and place of ethnicity across Africa.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The concept of politicizing ethnic identity and its ability to mobilize and command large groups of people in their pursuit for mutual objectives, goals and aspirations cannot be overemphasized. Despite the advent of liberal democracy in post-colonial Africa, ethnic as an identity denominator continues to simmer in many multi-ethnic societies. In the absence of proactive civil society void of partisanship and selectivity, ethnicity in Africa remains a viable mechanism of collective action, as it also mediates between citizens and state. Expectedly majority ethnic groups tend to discriminate against and deprive minorities of certain privileges and entitlements. The mutual grievance is exploited by ethnic entrepreneurs who drum up support and turn sympathy into action along ethnic lines. In Nigeria for instance, elements of ethnic consociationalism abounds in the constitutionally decreed Federal Character Principle. Penultimately, the study claims ethnicity in Africa is as real as the states in the region. However, the need for further research into the extant through which it affects relationship between individual and state cannot be over-emphasized.

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