

# Ethnic Pluralism in Nigeria, Adverse Effects and the Way Forward

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**Abstract:** - If Nigeria is a project that requires the collective efforts of the diversity of its ethnic nationalities to survive, then we are faced with a threat of its collapse as a single entity given the perception of its constituents about national issues along the lines of ethnic divide. As a socio-political entity run according to the principles of federalism, one would think that the unity-in-diversity ideology of national integration should be upheld rather than the diversity-in-unity ideology. Politics, work and business opportunities, admissions into schools (especially tertiary institutions), sharing of the national largess, marriages, to mention but a few, are all conducted along the lines of divisive ethnic consciousness. This is a desktop research which looked at the problems of ethnic pluralism as they affect the corporate existence of Nigeria as a unitary entity. It also proffered solution on the way out of the woods of divisive ethnic consciousness.

**Keywords:** project, functionalism, Socio-political, ethnic consciousness, cultural pluralism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Functionalism as system of social interaction and integration, based on the principles of cohesion, harmony and conformity, analogously compares itself to the human biological system having many parts working in harmony for the success and survival of the whole. Consequently, if one part or member of the system is sick or dysfunctional it affects the whole system. Therefore, from the functionalist perspective, Nigeria is a socio-political and multi-cultural organism having diverse ethnic nationalities as parts working in social institutions for the survival of the whole. Where some ethnic groups see themselves as superior, or more deserving of the national cake than others, and begin to act along this line, it amounts to prebendalism where national conventions and due process are subverted or sacrificed on the altar of ethnicity, favouritism and nepotism. Ojo (2014) noted that colonialism in Nigeria is the genesis of the marriage of the diverse ethnic nationalities in Nigeria that has resulted in prebendal politics and ethnic biases. Fundamentally then, many ethnic nationalities see Nigeria as a mistake of the British colonial masters which must be undone. Along this line of thought, Brown (1996) cynically defined a “nation” as a people unified by error, common in ancestry and in dislike of their fellow kinsmen. Given this ethnic mentality, nothing can actually work as an organized and harmonious system, where national unity hangs on the edge of the precipice, waiting for the opportune moment to tumble and crash like a pack of cards. The intermittent communal and ethnic

conflicts, political instability, and so on, are all tell-tale signs of a country that believes rather in its ethnic singularities rather than in its collective ethnic multiplicity. Ojo (2014) captures this quite clearly when he wrote that the different incongruent ethnic nations that make up Nigeria were forced into a union, so to speak, under duress, during the unpopular amalgamation of 1914, and this is the root of the resultant variables of ignominies that have made themselves visible in the forms of state anarchy, political brouhaha, general breakdown of security of lives and property and a sense of mutual suspicion amidst the diversity of the ethnic tribes.

According to Google (2016) a project is “an individual or collaborative enterprise that is carefully planned and designed to achieve a particular aim.” Just as the human being is a developmental project from birth to death, so is the Nigerian project a developmental enterprise from its inception at Independence till date, requiring careful planning and design to achieve the collective goals of peace, unity, progress and happiness of all. Where there is a disorganisation in terms of ethnic confederation at the expense of the collective aspirations of all, then there must be a re-planning and re-designing to achieve the collective goals of patriotic nationalism. For Nigeria, therefore, to rise from the doldrums of ethnic malediction, all concerned nationalities must sacrifice their ethnic consciousness and affiliations on the altar of national unity, peace and progress.

## II. THE THREAT OF ETHNIC PLURALISM

Ethnic pluralism is a threat to national integration, not just in Nigeria alone but also around the world. According to Handelman (2011), in the early part of the 1900s, including the present century twenty-first century, many of the developing countries have suffered from religious, racial and ethnic traumas which have been intermittently punctuated by outbursts brutality and mass murder. Hence, calm in one geographical location was often followed by tension in another. The peace treaty which was signed in Sudan in 2005, for example, granted the South Sudan autonomous self-rule which triggered of a twenty-one-year old civil war that registered the death of about two million Sudanese. Soon after the conflict, Government-sponsored Arab militias, known as the Janjaweed, killed several thousands of Black Sudanese Muslims (Global Policy Forum, 2005.) About a hundred years earlier, in the second decade of the eighteenth century, amid the First World War, the Turkish government mass-murdered

about a million-and-half Armenians within the Armenian borders (Handelman, 2011.) When Britain handed over power to the Indians in 1947, the country had been balkanised into the minority Hindu India and the majority Muslim Pakistan. Religious upheaval between the two divides metamorphosed into savage genocide, resulting in deaths totalling about a million. In more recent times, the Rwandan genocide, in which the Tutsi were massacred by their Hutus Brothers, resulted in about some eight hundred thousand deaths. The story in former Yugoslavia, now the six independent States of Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia, is nonetheless gory. The “ethnic cleansing”, as the militias of Serbia called it, motivated the mass-killing of several of their Croatian Brothers, numbering about forty thousand (Larsen & Vedsmann, 2016.) Even in the twenty-first century, ethnic, racial, religious and political rancour has often left in its wake a horrifying number of deaths, perpetrated by sheer human butchery, such as have never before been perceived by the present generation.

The tussle for power in Nigeria has been along ethno-political consciousness. In a country of about 250 ethnic groups and 400 languages where a preponderant majority of the ethnicities are neglected or despised in the national government, there is mutual suspicion and distrust, and a rallying around ethnic groupings for protection, and political and economic benefits. As Dennis Brutus of Apartheid South Africa captions his poem “A Common Hate Enriched Our Love and Us”, any social group who feels a common hate from others tends to unite in order to protect themselves and their interests. Political party formation and campaigns have been done along ethnic divides, based on the belief that if a particular ethnic group gains power, it will protect the interest of its members. Nigeria’s democracy since the sixties has been coloured by ethnic-based politics. In First Republic Nigeria, ethnic-biased and nepotistic politics was the order of the day in the scramble for power among the three prominent parties, which were the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), headed by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo nationalist of the Southeast who popularised the party among his Igbo countrymen and urged them to vote him into power. This ethnic sentiment became stronger when the media script fight between Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Sir Adeyemo Alakija further stained the public image which either man painted about the other man’s tribe. The Igbos and Yorubas thus pitted against each other led to the withdrawal of the Yorubas from the NCNC to form the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (descendants of Oduduwa), which later metamorphosed into a political party called the Action Group (AG) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Southwest (Gbenenye, 2016: 67.) The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) as the name of the party implied was to further the cause of the Muslim North; it was led by Sir Ahmadu Bello with its foothold among the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria. This pattern of ethnic politicking replicated itself in the Second Republic Nigerian politics as the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo was popular in the Southwest. A large chunk of its

loyalists were followers from the earlier Action Group of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, most of whom were Yorubas. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the Nigeria People’s Party (NPP), like his former NCNC party, drew Igbo loyalist to his new party, which dominated South-Eastern States of the Igbos of Nigeria. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) had its majority of supporters from the North and it mirrored the legacies of the erstwhile Northern People’s Congress. Thus, the politics of decolonisation in the First Republic was reincarnated in the Second Republic Independent Nigeria (Ebegbulem 2011) and was to provide a favourable breeding ground for continuous ethnic/tribal politics in the country. This ethno-political rancour since the 1960s has fertilised in the hearts of many Nigerian ethnic nationalities, who feel cheated and short-changed, the desire to form ethnic militias either asking for their own autonomy or challenging the crass neglect and failure on the part of the national government to deliver on its promises to the masses which it always beautifully tags “the dividends of democracy”. According to Ojo (2014), notable of these militias are Niger Delta ones, like the Chikoko Movement, Niger Delta Volunteer Force and the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA). Recently, other militia groups have made their impact felt on the altar of agitation for equity and good governance, bereft of ethnic bias and favouritism. Among them are Arewa People’s Congress (APC), the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the O’dua People’s Congress (OPC).

Apart from politics, Nigerians have conducted their affairs over the years based on ethnic divisiveness. Government job opportunities are for the most part given on ethnic, nepotistic and favouritism grounds. Government contracts are also given along these lines. Admissions into academic institutions, especially tertiary ones and sharing of the commonwealth are conducted on the basis of ethnic divisiveness. The balkanization of the country basically into North and South, and Geo-political Zones, as a basis of sharing the national goodies only helps to accentuate ethnic consciousness and alignment. Many prospective intra-tribal marriages have been aborted not just on the basis of cultural difficulties but because either parents or both of the spouses have failed to give their consent based on ethnic bias.

### III. CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethnic pluralism is the relationship that exists among diverse ethnic nationalities as they compete for scarce resources. An ethnic group is a social community of persons who see themselves as belonging to a common ancestry, sharing linguistic and cultural ties (Cohen, 1974), to such an extent that others see them as such, and members display ethnic loyalty and attachment and consider others as outsiders. Ethnicism is ethnic consciousness rooted in the ejective behaviour of others considered as outsiders. Salawu and Hassan (2011) noted that, embedded in the perception of loyalty is the eagerness on the part of the ethnic-conscious to rally in support and act in such a manner that is favourable to

his ethnic group. Therefore, ethnic alignment or ethnicism always demands some level of obligation and is usually followed by a repulsive behaviour towards those considered as “outsiders”, namely, those of other ethnic nationalities.

Ethnicism can be theoretically explained on the basis of its particularity, specificity and quest to grab scarce resources for its member. Salawu and Hassan (2011) reiterated Parsons' Pattern Variables as arguing that whereas developed countries are recognised by the variables of achievement orientation, universalism, and functional specificity, the developing ones are recognized by the opposite variables of ascription, particularism, and functional diffuseness. Then Coser (1957) argued that people competing for scarce resources such as wealth, power and prestige is the main source of conflict in social interaction. Thus, the conflict of interests and values, the conflict between what is obtainable and what some groups feel should be obtainable, the tension between vested interests and emerging groups demanding their share of wealth, power and status have been catalytic of social agitations and change.

#### IV. AFTERMATH OF CULTURAL PLURALISM AS A THREAT

*Domination by the Northern Region and artificial boundary creation:* Cultural pluralism has resulted in northern domination and the creation of artificial boundary, initiated by the British colonial government. The British, through the colonial constitutions, gave the North more say in governance than the South, because they were more cooperative with them. This preferential treatment introduced a rift between the North and the South.

*Promotion of ethnic identity politics:* The dominant ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) and some recent minority ethnic groups run in politics to command the natural wealth of the country, throwing to the winds the principles of democracy and good governance. The virtuous face of democracy thus kept at bay, the politics of bitterness and rancour is the order of the day, done along ethno-tribal and regional alignments. The Head of government surrounds himself with people of his ethnic group rather than people who are qualified to man those offices. For example, Buhari's appointments are largely northern. Onyebuchi (2016) noted that, looking critically at the federal appointments by the president reveals a tilt in favour of the Muslim North, with particular favouritism shown the North-West Geo-political zone of the country where Mr. President hails from; the South being particularly ill-favoured in those appointments.

*Ethno- Political Party Formations:* Party politics is done along ethnic gang-ups to outsmart other ethnic groups. It is more or less the conspiracy of one ethnic group to gang up, take over power and sit pretty on the national cake, believing that their time has come to take their share, and they must do so with daredevil brutality and mindlessness, even though people of other tribes should go to blazes they would never give a hoot. This was the case in the Second Republic politics

when Northern-led political parties ganged up against Western-led Action Group (AG) of the Yorubas. Coleman (1960) cited in Ebegbulem (2011) emphasized that the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the North formed an alliance against National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the Igbo East, and likewise against the Action Group (AG) in the Yoruba West. Each political party from these tribal zones stood as a selfish political colossus ready gang up, take over power and control the county's resources at the expense of other political parties and tribal groupings.

*Scramble for State and Local Government Creations:* Since 1960 when the British relinquished power to the Nigerian nation, the diverse ethnic groups have continuously canvassed for Local Governments and States creations to satisfy their diverse ethnic interests. By so doings, the national resources will be shared along these ethnic/tribal groupings in the name of States and Local governments. The agitation for these ethnic/tribal groupings reveals deep-seated particularistic and selfish interests in the pursuance of the various causes of these multiple ethnic groups.

*Nurturing of Political Corruption:* Corruption is the order of the day in Nigeria. This is due to its ethnic diversities. For example, an Igbo politician or public servant who steals from the national coffers is likely to go unpunished because, when singled out for prosecution, his fellow Igbo Brothers will see this as “a maltreatment of their illustrious son” who has done them proud by trying to take the national wealth to their Igbo people, especially if the prosecution is initiated by a person of another tribe or ethnic group. Moreover, if the corruption is perpetrated by this Igbo man who has his Brothers in high offices, they hush up the corruption and treat it as if it were a piece of smart art done by a smart Brother. A good instance of the tinge of ethnic consciousness in political and public corruption was the accusation of corruption brought against the Minister of Aviation, Mrs Oduah, who served in the Goodluck Jonathan-led administration. She was accused of inflating the price of the purchase of an armoured car. The committee set up to investigate the matter found her guilty of corruption but President Jonathan had refused to take any punitive action against her because he is one with her in tribal consanguinity. Political and public corruption is the bane of Nigeria's democracy (Ojo, 2014.)

*The Formation of Geopolitical Zones:* The division of the country into six Geo-political Zones such as North Central (Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States), North East (Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe and Taraba States), North West (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina and Kebbi States), South East (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States), South South (Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta States) and South West (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo and Osun States) goes a long way in accelerating ethnic consciousness and divisive thinking in the minds of the various ethnic groups. This should not be so in a

just and egalitarian society where everyone is given his place on merit.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Cultural Pluralism remains the bane of development in Nigeria and many African countries, because the various ethnic groups that make up the plurality of the national government have not risen beyond their ethnic peculiarities and selfish interests to the level of thinking of the good of the country as one, indivisible entity, poised to provide the goodies of nationalism our children and children's children. Until they rise beyond this ethnic sentiment, ethnic pluralism in Nigeria will continue to be a curse rather than a blessing.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All the tribes/ethnic groups in Nigeria should engage in dialogue in order to expose the dangers of ethnicism and refrain from it for the good of all.
2. Merit rather than ethnic affiliations should be the criterion for selection in politics, work, admission into schools and appointment.
3. The collective consciousness of all must be fertilized by media orientation and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) toward patriotism, and all holding public offices must operate an open door policy to ensure that there is no bias whatsoever along ethnic lines in taking official actions.
4. If it is impossible for all the ethnic groups to subsist as one, then a referendum should be held and the decision of the majority upheld towards dividing the country into such a number of sovereignties as will ensure equity, zero-tolerance to ethnic bias, peace and commitment to the national government.

5. Legislation should be made to punish those public officers who show flagrant disregard for merit in favour of their ethnic inclinations.

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