

Managing Ethnic and Cultural Diversity for National Integration in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse society that has witnessed conflicts arising from this ethnic and cultural diversity. This paper expounds such conceptual issues as ethnicity, cultural diversity, federalism and national integration and then presents the historical background to ethnic and cultural conflicts in Nigeria. It is argued that national integration in the Nigerian context has been an attempt to forge “unity in diversity”, seeking to wish away socio-cultural differences and imposing uniformity in spite of complex cultural diversity. This has created more conflict and posed obstacles to unity, peaceful co-existence, progress and stable development. It recommends that national integration and its benefits can be realized only with the development and entrenchment of a supportive public culture; understanding, respecting and tolerating differences occasioned by socio-cultural diversity; as well as the development of new institutions and mechanisms that address poverty, revenue allocation and other national issues peacefully.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, cultural diversity, conflict, national integration, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Right from the 19th century, sociologists have wondered how societies manage to create and maintain stability and social order. During that era, it was clear that traditional and rather authoritarian ways to impose order and deference could no longer be defended in the wake of the French and other democratic revolutions. Nevertheless, most sociologists would agree that social cohesion and social order could only be maintained by the presence of a normative consensus among the population. For most inhabitants of the nation-state, there should not be any discussion about the basic values of society. In most countries, the educational system was used to strengthen or to establish such normative consensus. Of course, during the 19th century too, a number of western societies were faced with the arrival of new immigrant groups. This form of diversity led to some tensions at some points, but it did not challenge the fundamental paradigm of the need for a normative consensus among the population (Hooghe, 2006). Newly arriving groups were expected to integrate into the already existing social value pattern, and the education system was used to achieve this normative integration (Hooghe, 2006). For those groups which did not wish to become integrated, or which did not succeed in the integration task, only a second-class form of citizenship was possible. These groups were considered, either as only temporary inhabitants, or as not really or fully belonging to society.

In fact, the preference for homogeneity was still present well into the 20th century, and it was even strengthened because of the occurrence of communal violence in the 1950s and 1960s. The violence in countries like Bangladesh, India or Nigeria strengthened political scientists in their conviction that ethnically diverse societies inevitably would lead to conflicts, or that at least they would undermine a sense of national belonging or the loyalty toward the nation-state. It is important to keep in mind in this respect that social order, to some extent, is dependent on a shared identity among the members of a society. It is only if this common identity is present, that we can expect that a feeling of generalized trust will be present, and this form of trust can be considered as one of the main foundations of social order.

The poser, therefore, is, if the feeling of national identity is being threatened by an increasing cultural diversity, what can a nation-state like Nigeria (which is a good example of a society in which cultural divisions appear especially implacable) do? The “national question” had dominated Nigerian politics since before independence in 1960. The vilification of ethnicity as the scapegoat of all vices associated with the Nigerian body polity has made the subject a dominant theme in the study of Nigerian political economy. How then has her leaders upheld the nation’s ideal of a “just and egalitarian society” by reducing inequalities in interpersonal incomes, promoting balanced development among various communities in different geographical areas of the country? How has Nigeria managed or how can it manage its ethnic and cultural diversity to attain national integration? These, amongst others, are what this article seeks to examine.

2. Conceptual Issues

To begin with, *ethnicity* is conceptualized as “the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation” (Osaghae, 1995). This definition is preferred because it identifies two issues that are central to discussions on ethnicity. The first is that ethnicity is neither natural nor accidental, but is the product of a conscious effort by social actors. The second is that ethnicity is not only manifest in conflictive or competitive relations but also in the contexts of cooperation. A corollary to the second point is that ethnic conflict manifests itself in various forms, including voting, community service and violence. Thus, it needs not always have negative consequences.

Ethnicity also encompasses the behaviour of ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are groups with ascribed membership, usually but not always based on claims or myths of common history, ancestry, language, race, religion, culture and territory. While all these variables need not be present before a group is so defined, the important thing is that such a group is classified or categorised as having a common identity that distinguishes it from others. It is this classification by powerful agencies such as state, religious institutions and the intelligentsia such as local ethnic historians that objectifies the ethnic group, often setting in motion processes of self-identification or affirmation and recognition by others (Ukiwo, 2005). Thus, ethnicity is not so much a matter of “shared traits or cultural commonalities”, but the result of the interplay between external categorization and self-identification (Brubaker *et al*, 2004). Most analysts agree on the basic constitutive elements of ethnic groups but disagree on how and why they were formed, why ethnicity occurs, why it occasionally results in violent conflicts and what should be done to prevent its perverse manifestations. Also, in most cases, members of ethnic minority groups are faced with structural forms of discrimination and exclusion. Despite all these negative trends and events, however, it is not the case that the increase in ethnic diversity can be considered as a fundamental challenge for the stability and cohesion of a society.

Next is *cultural diversity*. This is the variety of human societies or cultures in a specific region, or in the world as a whole (Wikipedia, 2007). Culture itself is usually defined in two ways: a narrow definition, which focuses on cultural products and expressions, such as traditional dance, theatre, sculptures or buildings, and a broader definition, which views culture as “the way we live”. The latter, which is applied in this paper, is all-inclusive of human endeavour. Within this broad definition, military action would even be culturally-embedded. Culture is a constructed phenomenon, created through the human endeavours to transform nature and the environment in order to sustain and enrich life. As human beings are social beings, culture becomes established through particular ways of living. Culture is transferred through human interaction, from trans-generational ones (e.g. through family and ethnic group) to inter-group ones (cultural interaction). In this transferal process, culture is often adapted to new circumstances or restructured, e.g. to address new beliefs, opportunities, a crisis or a threat. As a construct, culture is continuously re-affirmed and/or redefined.

The broad definition of culture tends to dominate current debates, particularly where the concept is linked with democratization processes. The result is that culture and cultural diversity have become vague terms, to be interpreted within specific contexts in order to make them useful. This need and potential for re-interpretation make the concepts vulnerable to misuse within conflict situations. Leaders interpret the concepts through their own specific historical and political perspective on relationship between competing groups.

One typical use of culture in mobilization of support is in its combination with the concept of human “identity”. Cultural identity then defines people’s cultural bonding, the group to which they belong. Within mobilization tactics, cultural identity is usually portrayed as a fixed characteristic, which must be defended against “others” who are generally viewed as competing for the same resources, power or status (Kaufman, 2006).

National governments tend to emphasize national identity to increase social cohesion, national consciousness and nation building. The challenge then is to make diverse cultural identities an integral part of the national one. This is particularly important in a country like Nigeria which has about 370 different ethnic groups (Alubo, 2006). Cultural identity implies freedom of association with groups, communities and ideologies which can go beyond national boundaries. People can and do have multiple identities that are complementary, e.g. ethnic, social, gender, religious, work. Research has highlighted that cultural identity and national identity can coexist. In fact, success stories of peaceful societies world-wide highlight the positive results of this coexistence. Acceptance of cultural identity within national identity prevents stifling of social relationships and promotes dynamic interactions, creativity, critical thinking and acceptance of history as a shared legacy and the future as shared aspirations (Edewor, 1993; Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2002). Suppression of cultural identity by national governments or inequity in recognition can lead to resistance, conflict and civil war. Recognition of cultural identities through proportional representation in institutional arrangements easily entrenches cultural identities and does not motivate for national integration. This may increase tensions, rather than resolve them (Kotze, 2002).

This brings us to the issue of *federalism*. As we understand it, this is a form of government in which the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a cooperative manner

though the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, amongst others, tend to pull their people apart. Delicate arrangements of this kind, where carefully worked out, provide sufficient room for the co-existence of centre-seeking and centre-fleeing forces. Peace, for lucky communities which achieve and sustain measures of this under these arrangements, is not necessarily that of the grave. Where people agree sometimes, and disagree at other times, concerning the goals and means of cooperative governments of this kind, friction and conflicts do occur (Tamuno, 1998). Where also their systems work, as planned, conflict resolution is quite possible: through the timely and effective intervention of accredited authorities and organs of government.

As interpreted and applied by a succession of military rulers at the federal and state levels in Nigeria, federalism engendered fears of over robust centralism. In turn, advocates of confederal alternatives had a field day in Nigeria when conflicts could not be resolved with the consent of the governed (Tamuno, 1998). Nigeria's past experience of coup *d'état* and counter-coups, since January 1966, indicated that these, like the proverbial bad penny, always turned up. Developments such as these helped to give Nigeria's succession of federal arrangements an unstable base during the first four decades of independence and to date. Suberu (2001) rightly criticizes federalism as highly distorted and overly centralized. The proposed structures and reforms have existed only on paper and have increased the centralization of resources while widening gulfs among different groups. Various military and civilian central governments have sought to manipulate the federal system for their own gains, not for national developments or the easing of ethnic, religious, or regional tensions.

Lastly, is *national integration*. This concept describes a situation in which citizens of a country increasingly see themselves as one people, bound by shared historical experiences and common values, and imbued by the spirit of patriotism and unity, which transcends traditional, primordial diverse tendencies (Jega, 2002). In post-colonial societies, such as Nigeria, in particular, it embodies a strategy of forging unity in diversity, and connotes a striving to be a unified people in a modern, colonially created, nation-state. National integration has become a major post-independence project, which was perceived to be necessary and critical to national progress and development. It sought to create patriotic citizens out of disparate, often antagonistic groups.

Indeed, while at the level of rhetoric, national leaders espoused beliefs in, and commitments to, national integration, at the level of real politics, they simultaneously pursued ethno-religious, regional and other divisive agendas, whipping primordial sentiments and generating conflicts, which further disunite rather than integrate the people. This tendency reached its peak under prolonged military rule. Clearly, there is a connection and relationship between the failure of purported efforts at national integration, as evidenced by increased violent political and communal conflicts, and socio-economic instability, which in no small measure, is a constraint to progress and development. In fact, in a sense, the democratization process of the last couple of years has been exploited to pursue division and potentially disintegrating agendas by reckless members of the political class. Ethno-religious jingoists and warlords have used the relatively expanded political spaces created by democratization to push extremist notions of self-determination, resource control and political restructuring.

3. Historical Background to Ethnic and Cultural Conflicts in Nigeria

Ethnic and cultural conflicts in Nigeria are rooted in the 1914 merger of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the colonial administration of Lord Frederick Lugard. The amalgamation brought about the involuntary unification of culturally and historically diverse ethnic groups, some of which had been rivals and overlapping imperialists in the pre-colonial times (Ajayi and Alagoa, 1980). For instance, Benin, at the height of its power from the 15th century, had established imperial control over some states in the fringes of present-day Northern Nigeria, including Igala and Nupe-speaking areas, which, by virtue of their vassalage were compelled to pay tolls and tributes as vassals to the Benin monarch. Benin had also extended control to the South and enjoyed suzerainty over several Yoruba states, including Eko (now Lagos), Ondo, Ekiti. This overbearing influence of Benin over the Yoruba states had pitted Benin against the declining Oyo Empire before British colonization (Ajayi and Akintoye, 1980).

Similarly, Oyo Empire, prior to its decline and fall, had wielded considerable amount of influence in the entire Western part of Nigeria and had also upturned the Benin hegemony to gain control of significant Benin provinces and former vassal states. Oyo's influence also resonated in Ilorin, Ebiraland, Igalaland and Nupeland (Ikime, 1985). Thus, the relationship between the Yoruba and Edo-speaking people before colonialism had been that of the proverbial cat and mouse, which had led to cold war, mutual distrust and mounting tension. In the North, the fourteen Hausa states (Hausa *Bekwai* and Hausa *Banza*) were embroiled in a prolonged and chaotic relationship of overlapping imperialism. Even the seven legitimate states (*Bekwai*) had no love lost between them, let alone cultural or political synergy between the *Bekwai* and the illegitimate states (*Banza*). Kano rose to power at the expense of Gobir's decline, while Kororofa and Kebbi besieged Kano and Rano to rise to power and fame and it is on record that it was during the imperial reign of Kebbi under Kotal Kanta that the Hausa states reached their height of disunity (Balogun, 1980). It however took the intervention several decades later of the Islamic jihadists led by Othman dan Fodio to forcefully unify the Hausa-speaking states under the Islamic religion (Balogun, 1980: 217).

In the South-South, as culturally homogenous as they seemed, they were far from united. The Efik and Ibibio were constantly at loggerheads, while the Urhobo and Itsekiri had ceaseless confrontations. The divisiveness and fissiparous tendencies among the ethnic nationalities in this region were capitalized upon by the Europeans to “divide and rule” and in the process establishing their hegemony and colonization.

The 1914 amalgamation was therefore a marriage of convenience (Osaghae, 1991); that is, it was to suit the sole purpose of ease of administration and exploitation of the colonial powers. The union of the over 250 ethnic nationalities was therefore “unity by a rope of sand” (Folarin, 2012a; 2012b). Nigeria was not meant to work because it was not unification by natural evolution. The “Nigeria” project was a distant comparison to Italy, Germany and Spain whose unification from the Middle Ages to the 19th century was by the freewill or choice of the people under dynamic leadership. The act of merger by the European colonial powers merely forced the diverse ethnic groups of Northern and Southern Protectorates into a single entity without consultation with the various ethnic groups or their leaders. This autocratic and undemocratic British colonial policy, therefore, marked the origin of ethnic conflicts in the country.

It is pertinent to note that the primordial ethnic underpinnings in the creation of the Nigerian State began to resonate before independence. For instance, in 1953 when the nationalists representing Nigeria were offered the platform to come to terms with an agreed date of independence, ethnic sentiments and insecurity came to the fore as the Northern (Hausa-Fulani) delegates at the constitutional conference objected to a 1956 date proposed by the Southern delegates, among whom was late Chief Anthony Enahoro who moved the motion (Ikime, 1985:15). The Hausa-Fulani leaders had made it clear by their stout objection that they were not ready for independence as the fear of Southern dominance in a post-colonial Nigeria was rife.

Similarly, as the country prepared for independence, political parties emerged from erstwhile vociferous and respected political movements and organizations, which were basically ethnic unions. The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) as the name suggests was a cultural movement for Northern peoples’ development. The Action Group (AG) was a modified version of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, a pan-Yoruba socio-cultural group; while National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons metamorphosed into the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), a Southeastern group led by Igbo ethnic unionists. Other clear ethnic unions that changed to “national” parties included the Northern Elements People’s Union (NEPU) and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), which struggled for the control of the centre (Taiwo, 2000).

Interestingly, however, these regional cum ethnic parties had internal infractions. The UMBC, for instance, grew unpopular because of the disagreements among the Nupe, Igala, Idoma, Birom, Angas, Jukum, and the others, whose interests the party claimed to represent. This was so because these were the same ethnic groups that constantly engaged one another in warfare in the pre-colonial times in search of conquests and glory. The NCNC too had issues - the Igbo were distrusted by the South-South groups and would prefer to be politically insulated from the former (Ikime, 1985:22). Incidentally, one of the tribal parties, the NPC won the elections and constituted the national government in 1960, thus crystallizing an ethnic-based leadership.

The events of 1960 to 1966 were a critical test of an evolving nationhood. The NPC and NCNC subsequently formed a coalition government, which technically meant that the Hausa-Fulani and Igbo had reached an understanding while the Yoruba (AG) had been pushed to the political margins as Opposition. The power equation between the ethnic nationalities had left the ethnic minorities in the cold, but the understanding between the Igbo and Hausa-Fulani soon broke down with the military coup of January 15, 1966. The coup, because of the Hausa-Fulani elements that were the most casualties, was perceived as ethnic motivated (Ademoyega, 1981). The catalogue of events that followed, including a Northern Nigeria-led counter-coup, ethnic cleansing in military barracks and the North in which Igbo elements were the victims, and the 30-month Civil War, demonstrated an outburst of the deep-seated ethnic resentment and hate that had etched into the polity before and shortly after independence.

After the Civil War, rather than abate, ethnic equation became the underlying factor in much of national life in the Nigerian State. These included appointment and promotion in the armed forces, employment in the civil and public services, political appointment into public office, admission into institutions of learning, revenue allocation, infrastructural development and formation of political parties as well as coup plots (Omoruyi, 2008). The federal character principle and quota system, initiated in 1976 and institutionalized by the Babangida administration in the mid-1980s became schemes to ensure ethnic balancing in public life. The level of separatism and volatility of ethnicity also led to the conception and establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973 (Taiwo, 2000:87).

It is interesting to note that in spite of the plethora of ethnic crisis from 1966 to date, the basic underlying factor in election, allocation of resources, party formation and political appointment is ethnic consideration. The concepts and propositions such as geopolitical zones, zoning and rotational presidency seem to be more modest ways of perpetrating ethnic politics. An uglier dimension of ethnic crisis is intra-ethnic and intra-regional disagreements which have led to fratricidal wars and conflicts such as the Tiv-Jukum, Tiv-Hausa, Andoni-Ogoni, Umeleri-Aguleri, Ife-Modakeke, and Birom-Fulani conflicts (Folarin, 2011). One basic factor that is

comprehensible about these developments is that ethnic conflict has gained momentum because the polity from the top-down is structured along ethnic lines and conditioned by a primitive tribal and primordial culture.

4. Managing Ethnic and Cultural Diversity for National Integration

The following three assertions can be made about Nigeria: First, there is significant inequality within regions as well as nationally. Second, state policies are likely to be highly regressive, with an extraordinary share of state expenditures captured by national and regional elites. And, third, ordinary as well as elite Nigerians tend to view their society in ethnic or religious terms. Therefore, the questions for us here are: (i) to what extent are the ethnic (or religious) patterns in Nigerian politics the product of a primordial cultural diversity? (ii) To what extent are they the product of a struggle for spoils in a specific institutional context? (iii) To what extent are they the cause and the consequence of political conflict? (iv) What constitutionally backed institutions can be developed to manage these ethnic/cultural diversity and conflicts? (v) How do we achieve national integration in Nigeria?

Years before the attainment of independence, Nigeria's constitutional development experiences were concerned with the principal goal of managing ethnicity which had shown clear signs of subverting the nation-building project. Federalism, the creation of regions and states and local governments, the shift from parliamentarism to presidentialism, the institutionalization of quota systems, the prohibition of ethnic political parties, consociational politicking, and the adoption of the federal character principle are some of the approaches that Nigeria has taken to manage ethnic diversity (Ukiwo, 2005). These mechanisms have enjoyed the intellectual backing of institutionalists who posit that there is a connection between ethnic conflict or peace and the nature of political institutions (Horowitz, 1985). Several works on ethnicity in Nigeria have been committed to examining the impact of these approaches to the management of ethnicity (Ekeh and Osaghae, 1989; Adamolekun, 1991; Ekekwe, 1986; Horowitz, 1985; Mustapha, 1986; Nnoli, 1995; Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001, Edewor, & Aluko, 2007).

The verdict of such scholars who have examined the issues from different theoretical standpoints is that while these initiatives have solved some old problems, they have generated many unintended consequences that have exacerbated ethnicity. What is more, they have been destabilizing for the Nigerian state system. As Suberu (2001) has noted with respect to revenue allocation and states creation:

The establishment of nine separate commissions on revenue allocation since 1946 has led to neither development of an acceptable or stable sharing formula nor the elaboration of an appropriate framework of values and rules within which a formula can be devised and incrementally adjusted to cope with changing circumstances (p.11).

Given the sheer multiplicity of fluidity of the territorial and cultural cleavages that can be used to justify the demands for new states and the federal resources they bring with them, there is no certainty that the states-creation process will ever be concluded in Nigeria (p.15).

Analysts have attributed the limitations of the ethnic management policies to improper implementation, distortion of visions and lack of political will. Some, however, doubt the possibility of a state that generates fissiparous tendencies (Ibrahim, 2000) and a predatory class that is endlessly looking for formulas to divide the Nigerian peoples (Mustapha, 1986) implementing policies that promote ethnic peace and harmony. Also, the viability of these new states created is unclear, with the exception of the oil-producing states in the south. Some of these states have recently become conduits for the personal enrichment of the elites at the expense of alleviating poverty and creating job opportunities for the rest of the population.

There have been reports of disparities in the distribution of oil resources in Nigeria for many years. This contentious issue has fuelled most of the recent ethnic conflicts in the country. Some ethnic groups, especially those in the oil producing areas argue that they are not receiving enough funds for their own development (Irobi, 2005). These are the dynamics behind the Ogoni crisis and the recent sporadic ethnic violence in the oil producing Niger Delta states. We would argue that unless this issue is resolved, the economic base of the country will be jeopardized. The undemocratic 1999 federal constitution lacks the support of the citizens. The constitution was drafted by military dictators and handed over to the people. It has not gone far enough to resolve the problems of ethnicity that the country has faced since independence.

National integration in the Nigerian context has been an attempt to forge "unity in diversity" and aggressive attempts to ignore, if not dissolve, historic differences. Successive military rules sought to wish away socio-cultural differences and impose uniformity in spite of complex cultural diversity. Unfortunately, the more such projects were pursued, the more acute the contradictions become, the more conflicts erupted; and the more problems were created, which posed obstacles to unity, peaceful coexistence, progress and stable development.

National integration in a multi-cultural state like Nigeria is unattainable without an entrenched public culture because this comprises the values shared by all groups and constitutes the common grounds on which the diverse

groups conceptualize and appreciate the state. In Nigeria, groups strive to impose their particularistic definition of public culture on the entire polity. The area of society-wide agreement which constitutes public culture is still too narrow (Ikpe, 1991). People, therefore, struggle to overthrow existing public culture rather than identify with it due to its parochiality. National integration and its attached benefits, like democracy and political stability can be realized only with the development and entrenchment of a supportive public culture.

What is to be done? Perhaps, the best way to begin to address these threats to “national integration” is to recognize that unity does not mean uniformity, and that understanding, respecting and tolerating differences occasioned by socio-cultural diversity, is by far better than strenuously striving to wish them away. A complex, plural colonially created “nation state” such as Nigeria can only survive and flourish in the 21st century on the basis of tolerance and accommodation of socio-cultural differences, rather than on a narrow-minded pursuit of an exclusivist and parochial self-interest (Jega, 2002). Also, since the rules for sharing federal revenues clearly provide incentives for regionalist politics, Suberu (2001) recommends a further decentralization of funds through further revision of vertical division of revenues, together with a revised horizontal division with increased rewards for local revenue generation. In general, however, federalism is a bad way of getting public resources to the poor, and it is unclear how far reforms can overcome this.

5. Conclusion

It can be seen that ethnic conflict arise as a result of the denial of the basic needs of access, identity, autonomy, security and equality, compounded by the autocratic roles played by the government and the military. Also, the violent conflicts in Lagos, Kano, and the Niger Delta resulted in a more distorted pattern of governance, which led to further denial of basic needs to the masses. Conflict management is more effective if government is devoid of corruption. In tune with John Burton’s theory (Burton, 1997), this is the only way to satisfy people’s basic needs.

In addition, the role of good political leadership cannot be overemphasized. Nigeria has been less fortunate in its leadership. Ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria have continued because Nigerian elites are corrupt and split along lines of religion and ethnicity. This has resulted in ethnic rivalry, suspicion and hostility among leaders. Without a bold and articulate leadership, conflict management, prevention and national integration, will always be a mirage.

Also, there is the need to transform ethnic politics into mutually beneficial relationships. To do this, Nigeria must withdraw from its old and ineffective approaches and develop new institutions and mechanisms that can address poverty, revenue allocation, and other national issues peacefully. Strategies of discrimination and ethnicity are not in the interest of peace and democracy. The provision of the people’s basic human needs is a major strategy that would lead to lasting peace and harmonious living.

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