

The Nigerian Experience of Democracy and the Burden of Ethno-Sectarian Conflicts

by

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Abstract

Nigeria is acclaimed as a diverse and complex state. This assertion is neither an imaginative nor whimsical construct of an armchair analyst, but a reflection of the true nature of the country. One does not need to travel the length and breadth of this country to ascertain the validity of the multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and multi-religious composition and structure of the country. It is a fact that one encounters and experiences in a bus ride, in eatries and different retreats of secular or religious nature. Again, this claim is given credence and affirmation by some expression in official quarters, which usually point to the fact that Nigeria is a diverse country and that her diversity is the source of her strength – unity in diversity. It is the belief of most Nigerian leaders and some scholars who have theorized the ethnic and national question in Nigeria that the factors of Nigeria's diversity should not necessarily constitute or pose any obstacles to the country's political stability, democratization and national integration. However, this optimism is threatened and truncated by the high level of intolerance and hostilities bordering on ethnic and religious sensibilities. Added to this is the resurgence of sectarian militia, *Boko Haram*, which is opposed to western education and lifestyle, and has continued to terrorize and decimate the people mostly from the northern part of the country. In the southern Nigeria is the existence of a band of militant ethnic groups which have no clearly defined agenda other than crime, murder, rape, kidnapping for a ransom and other forms of social pathology. The intent of the paper is to show that the proportionality of ethnic and religious conflicts at the moment is a retrograde to the Nigeria project of democratization. The paper submits that any attempt at the resolution of the problem requires serious soul searching on the part of the leaders and followers in terms of good governance and management of democratic dividends.

Keywords: Democracy, Ethnicity, Conflict, Religion, Culture

The Context

A discourse of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria cannot be complete without a quick excursion or foray into the content of the problem of ethnicity and religious conflicts. Nigeria, as we have it today, is an artificial creation of the British colonial administrator. That is to say that Nigeria before the arrival of British colonial masters was a conglomeration of ethnic groups with their distinct cultures, identities, languages etc. It is pretty difficult to come up with the exact number of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Some scholars have suggested different figures ranging from 250 to 619. According to Onigu Otite, some of these scholars based their enumeration from a variety of factors ranging from geographical and settlement oriented to anthropological or linguistic¹”.

For instance, Gandonu came up with the figure of 161² which, according to Otite, apart from being grossly inadequate, was based on geographical and settlement-oriented. In a similar vein, Hoffman quoted in Otite has shown that Nigeria ethnic groups consist of about 394. He seems to arrive at this figure based on language criterion³. Otite seems to accept this figure since a provision was made for possible modifications owing to “contractions and expansions” in the ethnic territories. Based on this, he is less optimistic in coming up with a figure which truly reflects the exact number of ethnic groups in Nigeria. On this, he says:

It is a gigantic task to get at the actual number of such [ethnic] groups. Ethnic boundaries are contextualized, particularly at moments of economic or political needs and crises. Their identities and identifications are equally dynamic. Hence, the Nigerian ethnic map, presents a fact changing picture resulting from manipulations and adaptations of surviving strategies in changing environments and democratic processes⁴.

Conceptualising Ethnicity

What we have done thus far is to show the plural context of the Nigerian society, which Otite has described as inherently conflictual⁵. Again, Otite tried to creatively explain the intricate and dialectical relationship between ethnicity and class in the Marxist sense, which, according to him, some scholars have tended to emphasize at the detriment of other variables like religion. But the question is: What is ethnicity? What is religion? What is intended here is a kind of conceptual clarification, however briefly of the terms like ethnicity, ethnic group, religion etc. The term ethnic in Greek means “a group of people who share a common and distinctive culture”. Suberu seems to subscribe to the views of some scholars and analysts who use the term, ethnicity to refer specifically to mobilization and politicization of ethnic group identity in situations of competitive or conflictive ethnic pluralism⁶.

According to him, ethnic group is regarded generally as a social collectivity whose members not only share such objective characteristics as language, core-territory, ancestral myths, culture, religion and/or political organization, but also have some subjective consciousness or perception of common descent or identity⁷. Similarly, Okwudiba Nnoli regards ethnicity as “a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Hence, to him, ethnic group “are social formations distinguished by the communal character as language and culture of their boundaries”⁸.

Also, Otite expressed a similar view like Nnoli when he said, “ethnic groups are categories of people characterized by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value system and normative behavior, and whose members are anchored in a particular part of the new state territory⁹. These views on ethnicity, according to Imobighe, share something in common, that is, they all see ethnicity in a negative way. For him, the emphasis on the negative side of ethnicity has the tendency of blurring an analysis of its positive aspect. In his opinion, such perception by Otite and others, can be employed and used to serve particularistic interests and undermine national cohesion and integration in many countries¹⁰ by mischievous people or for selfish political advantage.

However, Imobighe posited, as a counterpoise to the negative aspect of ethnicity as deposed by the scholars considered above, a positive conception of it. Apparently relying on the Greek origin of the word ‘ethnos’, meaning “a group of people who share a common and distinctive culture”, he conceives ethnicity “as the feeling of belonging to a distinctive cultural or linguistic group, or a manifestation of ethnic consciousness in relation to other groups”¹¹.

According to him, this negative construct of ethnicity has created another spurious understanding of it as being responsible for conflicts, especially as noticeable in multi-ethnic or plural or diverse societies like Nigeria. To be sure, Nigeria is a typical case of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic nation. Little wonder then, the frequent cases of conflicts in the country usually find a sort of tailor-made explanation in the socio-political and geographical as well as economic structure of the country.

He contended that the correlation between ethnicity and conflicts cannot be established a priori or as some scholars are wont to believe. For there are other factors acting in concert or individually that are responsible for conflicts. The reason simply is that there are countries in Africa, for example, Somalia, which is more homogeneous and yet occasionally embroiled in conflicts, while there is some stability in countries that are diverse and plural. The point that Imobighe is stressing here is that most of the conflicts that occur cannot be attributed to ethnicity or diversity. For there are a plethora of factors like religion, resource and territorial control, geography, economic inequality etc, which are directly linked to conflicts. Hence, he surmises that “ethnic exclusiveness is not part of the normal process of inter-communal interactions in Nigeria. If it were so, it would have been difficult for ethnic groups to welcome the arrival of other ethnic groups in their midst and provide land for them to settle; a phenomenon which has led to the intermingling of different ethnic groups within the country”¹².

According to him, the fact that one finds Yoruba people in the South Eastern Nigeria which is dominated by the Igbos and Igbos and Hausas in the South Western Nigeria populated by the Yorubas, and the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups scattered in various parts of the Northern part of the country reinforces the claim that ethnicity plays a secondary role in terms of instigation of conflicts. Again, it shows that Nigeria had enjoyed the tradition of free admixture of its diverse ethnic groups in various parts of the country”¹³.

Imobighe’s conceptualization of ethnicity in a positive sense is shared by Veronica Nmoma who sees ethnicity fostering identity solidarity, a sense of close relationship and loyalty among group members”¹⁴. The point that Nmoma is making here boils down to saying that “when people claim membership and origin of a particular ethnic group”, they are referring to three interrelated factors. Firstly, occupying a particular geographical origin; secondly, having a similar identity and thirdly having a sense of solidarity and loyalty for their kind. Also, there is an awareness by Nmoma of the role played by other variables like “history, language, culture, religion, and physical appearances”¹⁵. This point is supported by Ayantayo, who enumerated the principal ways of identifying ethnic group, which include, “language, culture, religion, folk practices, dress, gestures, mannerism”¹⁶.

In fact it should be stated that Aristotle in the ancient Greece ruminated on ethnicity and provided explanations, which tended to support the positive conception of it. According to him,

children love their parents as being the source of their being, brothers love each other as being from the same source, since the identity of their relation to that source identifies them with one another, which is why we speak of being of the same blood’ or of the same stock or the like; brothers are therefore in a manner the same being though embodied in separate persons”¹⁷.

The validity of a group of people claiming to trace their ancestral origin from a personage can be established on the basis of this. The Igbos and Yorubas, for example, believe that they are descendants of *Ani*, *Ala-Earth* goddess and *Oduduwa* respectively.

Notwithstanding, the potentials of a positive conception of ethnicity, the recent events in Nigeria are pointing to the contrary that the negative sense of ethnicity now characterize the nation states of Nigeria, where violence, terror attacks, insurgency, militancy are given rein and have taken ethnic and sectarian colouration. Since Nigeria transited to civil rule in 1999 after over three decades of military dictatorship, the country has been grappling with the challenges of democratization, national integration and economic reform.

From all indications, attempts by the government at addressing these challenges have been disappointingly slow since the majority of the people are still threatened by the scourge of poverty, disease, and illiteracy. To worsen matters, the resurgence of armed groups like the *Boko Haram* and *Ansaru* mostly found in the Northern part of the country and militant groups in the Niger Delta region have conspired to subvert whatever modest attempt by the government at democratic consolidation.

Democracy: A Definition

Embarking a conceptual definition of democracy is not an easy task. The reason for this is not farfetched, one of the reasons is that it has become fashionable for most countries to proclaim that they are democratic when in actual fact they are pursuing dictatorial, authoritarian, totalitarian etc. ideological systems. This point is stated by Ajume H. Wingo, when he confessed that the word democracy' is a conceptually vague word and one that is emotively charged'¹⁸. Again, on the same issue, George Orwell as quoted by Wingo said;

A word like democracy not only has... no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it; consequently the defender of every kind of regime or claims that it is a democracy and fears that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning¹⁹.

Still on the conceptual problems concerning the definitions of democracy, Sophie B. Oluwole claims that \one of the fundamental problems of academics and professionals, especially in Nigeria today, is that we are very often under the assumption that the meanings and implications of some commonly used terms like [democracy], governance and government are clear to us'²⁰. The question is: why is there an apparent lack of consensus on what democracy is? Akinpelu seems to proffer an answer. For him "a major reason is that it (democracy) is a pro-word, especially in its adjectival form-democratic. It is a word of commendation and has therefore been hijacked for propaganda purposes, by organizations and institutions that could be described as being worlds apart, ideologically"²¹. A similar view is expressed by Owolabi, when he gave two reasons, firstly, 'that democracy has become in current usage, another word for political decency and civilization. Democracy in a way has become a moral concept, with a regime laying claim to it just for the sake of survival, without any commitment to its ideals', and secondly, its ideological connotation and the struggle between the societies and the capitalists have generated a situation where regimes are conferred with the democratic title, not because of its participatory tendency but mainly becomes of its ideological persuasion"²².

The point that is being made here is to show the difficulties or challenges that may confront any attempt to define democracy. But saying this should not be taken to mean that the term is indefinable, for if it were so, we cannot talk of its application. This is true of what Tocqueville says, as quoted by Owolabi in an essay cited above, ‘if democracy is not properly defined’ people will live in an inextricable confusion of ideas, much to the advantage of demagogues and despots’²³. The term democracy as a normative and descriptive concept is a derivative from two Greek words, ‘*demos* and ‘*Kratia*’, which translate as ‘the people rule’²⁴. The phrase ‘the people rule’ in the definition needs further explication. According to Dipo Irele, people referred to the citizen body which consisted mainly of adult free males of indigenous status, the ‘ruling’ was a direct one, that is, legislative decisions were taken by the people at mass assemblies’²⁵. Also, implicit in the definitions of democracy is the idea of equality’. What this means, according to Irele is that all are equal before the law, and enjoy a considerable degree of freedom’. The original birth place of democracy was the Athenian state, which, according to Akinpelu, “sought to involve every free citizen in the governance of the polity and where serious state issues such as politics, diplomacy, declaration and waging of wars were matters for every adult Athenian citizen to pronounce upon or decide”²⁶, Even though, democracy in the Athenian state is affirmed to be the most shining example in European antiquity’²⁷, its limitations lay in its exclusion of women, children, foreigners, slaves and ex-convicts, among others.

It should be noted that democracy has shifted in meaning and conceptualization since its usage in the Greek city-state of Athens. The most popular and often quoted is, according to Onah, the rhythmical definition of democracy by Abraham Lincoln as, “government of the people, by the people, for the people”²⁸. It is a matter of opinion whether this definition reflects the political process in most modern states. Another definition that is usually canvassed is to say as Oluwole has proposed that;

Democracy, adequately understood, is a theory that sets some basic principles according to which a good government, whatever its form, must be run. Such principles include those of justice, freedom, equity and liberty. It is these principles that are used as criteria for distinguishing between good and bad governments...²⁹.

One interesting thing about the definitions of democracy given above is that it possesses certain ideals or standards without which we may not ascribe the epithet democratic.

These ideals, according to Jim Unah, include, ‘popular participation of adult citizens; provision of political parties; promotion of fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of speech, religion, association, economic freedom etc; equality of all citizens’³⁰. They are others which include, accountability, right to vote and be voted for, tolerance. In any genuine democracy, there is an emphasis on the “sovereignty of the people”. The point here is that any democratic government that does not derive its legitimacy from the people cannot survive for any length of time. This point is aptly summarised by Eghosa Osaghae thus;

... in spite of the differences in conceptualization, and practices, all versions of democracy share one fundamental objective: how to govern the society in such a way that power actually belongs to the people...³¹

Equally basic to democracy is the institution of the principles of accountability, participation and tolerance of opposition. The practice of democracy has significantly changed from direct participation as it was in the Athenian state, apparently owing to its small population, to representative democracy as it is now in most liberal democratic societies. This form of democracy is in place when, according to Irele, the people choose through periodical elections those who will represent them for a period of time"³². On this point, Schumpeter says;

Democracy is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote"³³.

It is important to stress that some scholars have expressed the view that participatory democracy", which demands that everybody should participate in the democratic process, should supplant the representative style democracy.

The overall role of ethnicity on democracy can be seen from our discussion above. The construction of ethnicity in its negative sense, which usually degenerates into violent conflicts portends danger, "inhibits national development and retards the process of fostering global peace, democratization projects and international understanding between and among nations of the world"³⁴. The situation in Nigeria is palpably disturbing because ethno-sectarian conflicts are becoming more frequent now than ever witnessed in the nation's history, particularly the negative impact of it on Nigeria's political stability and democratic experiment.

We can summarise the basic thrust of our argument here by saying that the "good life" and "happiness of all the people" can be achieved when democratic institutions like, accountability, equality, rule of law, security, participation and tolerance are strengthened.

However with the exist of the British colonialists following Nigeria's attainment of nationhood, political power and administration of the country was dominated by a section of the country leading to what is referred to in Nigeria's political lexicon as Hausa-Fulani hegemony. This means that the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group has occupied the political administration of Nigeria for more than 40 years out her 53 years as a sovereign nation. What this dominance has introduced into the country's political landscape is a pursuit of exclusionist policies which in turn have led to the twin problem of loyalty and alienation. These concepts need to be elaborated upon no matter how briefly.

On the issue of hegemony, Dipo Irele gave a perspective quoting Antonio Gramsci, that hegemony refers to a social situation in which a certain social group or an alliance of certain social groups have “a total social control or authority over other social groups”³⁵. According to Irele, this can be taken as both the immediate and remote causes of,

ethnic assertiveness in various parts of the country, which has taken a violent dimension with the formation of many ethnically based groups whose aims and objectives threaten the survival of Nigeria as a corporate political entity”³⁶.

The resurgence of ethnic militancy was a by-product of socio-structural dysfunction of the Nigerian society and irresponsible leadership which cares less about improvement in the wellbeing of the citizenry, but rather embroiled in egoism and self-perpetuation through ruthless corruption and looting of the country’s wealth. This scenario seemed to have prompted Chinua Achebe to state in a seminal essay that;

... the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership³⁷.

Due to the leadership deficits as identified by Achebe as the obstacle to Nigeria’s socio-economic development, there is a yawning gap between the rich and the poor. The wealth of the nation has been appropriated by a few people leading to a total alienation of the majority of the people. And alienation, in the opinion of Karl Marx, quoted from Irele, “occurs when the products and creations including all those things that are extensions of man’s personality... are controlled by external forces”³⁸.

Now the question that is forced on us is: why should a country expect my loyalty when it cannot take care of my basic necessities of life? Patriotism as unwavering commitment to one’s country is reserved only for the few who are parasitic on the state.

The dominance of the hegemony of the ruling class seems to have instigated and fuelled the emergence of violent militancy and terror attacks in Nigeria. Recently, the President Goodluck Jonathan led administration declared a State of Emergency in some Northern States of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe following incessant attacks by Boko Haram insurgents leading to loss of lives and property as well as the internal displacement of people” mostly women and children.

Now it is apposite to examine some of the ethnic and sectarian conflicts that had occurred earlier in some parts of the country in order to underscore the enormity of the threat to national security and corporate existence of Nigeria. The point being canvassed here is well summarized by Ujomu when he says” that;

It has been noted that the problem of national security in Nigeria has been aggravated by the intolerance among the various ethno-cultural and religious groups. This situation has led to the engendering of mistrust and divisive tendencies in the society... The social and economic development and hence the security of the various interests and segments of the Nigerian society are hindered by social ills like corruption, poor planning, nepotism, tyranny and selfishness in the society. National security is threatened by the absence of proper principles and values that determine harmonious and productive human personal and social behaviour³⁹.

Ethnic and Sectarian Conflicts in Nigeria

Inter-faith and Religious Violence

The Kaduna violent conflicts like many others in Northern Nigeria often wear religious colourations. Even when some of these conflicts may be entirely religious or political, they had a way of spiraling into full scale ethnic confrontations that left millions of naira worth of property destroyed and high numbers of human casualties. To be sure, some of the ethnic conflicts witnessed within a sixteen year period in Kaduna State had their roots in certain acts and verbalizations of some religious leaders and their overzealous adherents.

As a matter of fact, the first time ethnic riots broke out in the defunct capital of Northern region was in 1987. Before, then, Kaduna was regarded as about the most peaceful state in the North. That religious issue as reported by Fwa was the clearly ill-conceived idea of the then ruling military junta of General Babangida to enroll Nigeria into the International Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)⁴⁰. Of course, on getting wind of that decision, the Muslims and their equally numerous and angry Christian counterpart in the North, simultaneously began what Fwa describes as “vicious and emotional campaigns for and against the country’s membership of the OIC⁴¹. The so-called social and political elites took sides in the matter, and tribal ill-feelings gathered fresh momentum.

The Shariah Crisis 2001

The latest of the riots in Kaduna was the Shariah induced mini-war of 2001, it was later to be described as “the worst (riot) since the Civil war in 1967-1970, and the most destructive in the history of Nigeria⁴². The then President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo after visiting Kaduna shortly after the riots had lamented that he was yet to come to terms with the fact that the people of Kaduna was capable of committing the massive atrocity. A student of ethnicity with an understanding of ethnic prejudice would probably be less surprised, but wouldn't have been spared the shock all the same.

The crisis began the moment Ahmed Sani Yerima, the then Governor of Zamfara state ill-advisedly decided to extend the application of Sharia-the Islamic legal code from its hitherto ‘personal law’ status to criminal law’. As he was doing this in Zamfara, a number of other Governors from the North decided to follow his example apparently for political reasons.

Trouble started as the State's House of Assembly attempted to pass the Shariah bill into law. The Muslim first began the demonstrations in favour of the bill. The anti-Shariah demonstrations by the Christians followed almost immediately. As a result of this confrontation between the Christian and Muslim protesters, ensued leading to a massive destruction of property and human casualties.

Ethno-religious Conflicts in Bauchi

The hostilities between the Hausa/Fulani/Jarawa and the Sayawa, both major ethnic groups in Bauchi has a long history. The Hausa/Fulani are predominantly Muslims, while the Sayawa are mostly Christians. The former because of their dominance and political control of the affairs of the Tafawa Balewa Local Government Area, was viewed with suspicious by the latter. However, crisis erupted when a Sayawa, a Christian was said to have sold a roasted beef (*Tsire*) to an unsuspecting Hausa/Fulani Muslim. The issue was not really the fact that, a Christian sold a piece of meat to a Muslim, but that the ‘roasted meat’ fell below the standards expected by a Muslim. The minor disagreement was later snowballed into fighting between Christians and Muslims which consumed lives and property like churches and mosques, hotels and hospitals in 2001.

Jos Crisis

Jos, the capital of Plateau state, which was once adjudged to be the most peaceful state in the region suddenly, became a battle ground between Christians and Muslims. The animosity between them seems to be exacerbated by the activities of the Boko Haram sect. The Hausa/Fulani and Birom ethnic groups have been at dangers drawn with the latter claiming to be the original indigenes while the former are settlers.

Intra-Communal and Ethnic Violence

Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Plateau, Benue, Niger States and FCT, Abuja

The states that make up this zone include Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Plateau, Benue, Niger and the Federal Capital Territory, (FCT) Abuja.

The zone, comprising about six states including the F.C.T, is more ethnically diverse than the other zones in the country. According to Sanda, the Middle Belt as the zone is often called, accounts for “about two third of Nigeria’s estimated 383 ethnic nationalities and 400 linguistic groups”⁴³. Given this scenario of multiplicity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion and culture, it is not surprising that ethnic and sectarian hostilities are a frequent occurrence in this zone. Again quoting Sanda, ‘the most virulent conflict in Nigeria in recent times has been the ethnic or ethno-communal and its worst manifestations have been in the North Central Zone’⁴⁴.

In the case of Nasarawa and Plateau States, there had been a long standing or deep rooted ethno-religious conflict particularly in the former. One recalls the festering crisis between the Bassa and the Egbura in 1986 and even earlier. This bordered on the dominant hegemony of the Egbura people to the traditional headship of Toto. The Bassa people felt that they were excluded from the politics of the Toto Local Council because when the *Sarkin Kasuma* (Head of market), an Egbura man died, he was to be replaced by another Egburaman to the exclusion of a Bassa man who was the deputy to the late *Sarkin Kasuwa*. As it is natural, the Bassa people resisted this overt marginalization and in the ensuing crisis, many people died leading to the displacement of women and children. The most recent upsurge of violence in Nasarawa state was the unfortunate massacre of about twelve security personnel by suspected Boko Haram sect and cult group popularly called the Ombaste cult early this year.

Ife-Modakeke Conflict

The conflict between the Ife and Modakeke in Osun State of the south Western Nigeria has a long history. Unlike the cases considered above, ethno-religious conflict is not a common feature in Yoruba land. This is simply because the two dominant religions in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam – are found in every family and home in Yorubaland. In other words, adherents of both religions are often found in the same family living together as husband and wife, nephews and uncles. This situation where the adherents of different religions co-exist peacefully in the same family in Yorubaland is described by some scholars like Olunloye in the following words, “if a day the Yoruba decides to engage in a religions war then such a day would be their destiny because virtually everyone would be killed since everyone knows everyone”⁴⁵. This practice amongst the Yorubas is a lesson in religious tolerance and harmony which has eluded Nigeria for sometimes now.

However, saying this does not mean that intra-ethnic violence and skirmishes do not occur in the Yoruba, like Ife – Modakeke. Again, the influx of people from other ethnic groups like the Hausa, Igbos, Urhobos and others into the region seems to have increased the tendency of inter-ethnic conflicts. The periodic eruptions of conflicts between Ife and Modakeke essentially borders on claims of so-called “indugenship and settler” syndrome. The Ifes are claiming to be the rightful and original “owners of the land”, while regarding the Modakekes as settlers. The Ifes are accusing the Modakekes of having migrated to their present abode – Ife from other towns and communities as a result of many wars of Yoruba in the 19th century. The Modakekes in turn accuse the Ifes of appropriating their property, farmland and forcing them out from their ancestral homes. As the accusation and counter accusation goes on, a new dimension to the ‘cold war’ between them occurred when the Headquarters of Ife-East Local Government was relocated to Oke-Ogbo in Ile-Ife from Modakeke. Naturally, this aggravated the already tense situation leading to violent conflicts of a monumental proportion with lives and property destroyed.

The Fratricidal Conflicts Between Umuleri and Aguleri

The lingering animosity and bitterness between the Umuleri and Aguleri in Otuocha Local Government Area of Anambra State imploded in 1999 when the two neighbouring communities engaged each other in a soulless massacre of one another over a land dispute. The issues here may have little to do with ethno-religious factors, but nonetheless may be connected with what Dipo Irele calls “alienation and the problem of loyalty”⁴⁶. The point being canvassed here is that when an ethnic group is economically deprived and coupled with bad governance, violent attacks whether to the state or person to person are bound to occur. The recourse to ethnic factor as being responsible for the unfortunate mayhem can hardly be sustained because ‘both the Aguleris and Umuleris agree that they descended from *Eri*’⁴⁷, their common ancestry, speak the same language and are bound by the some culture and tradition. The thrust of our analysis so far is that the emergence of ethnic militias and ethnic violence portend grave ‘danger to Nigeria’s democracy, national security and political stability.

Ethnic Militias and Insurgency

The Urhobo-Itsekiri Conflict and Militancy in the Niger-Delta

The Niger Delta region, otherwise known as the South-South Zone in current political literature in Nigeria, is home to three major ethnic groups namely: Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw. The region, according to some scholars, accounts for about 96 percent of Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings, and yet the region is the least developed in terms of physical and infrastructural development. Like the Ife-Modakeke crisis discussed above, the violence in the Niger Delta is far from being ethno-sectarian in nature. But it is a combination or a hybrid of ethnic, ecological and political factors. Besides the current festering violent conflicts in the region, there have been perennial battles between the three major ethnic groups in the zone.

It is contended that the animosity and hostilities between the Urhobo and Itsekiri date back to pre-colonial times and since then have assumed a dangerous dimension. The bone of contention between them has been a struggle over the so-called indigene and migrant-settler dichotomy. One of the problems is the proper designation of the title of the traditional ruler of Warri. While, the Itsekiri claimed, with the benefits of historical antecedents, that the traditional ruler of the area was called and addressed as *Olu* of Warri, the Urhobos and Ijaws protested against such imposition. As it is expected, this unresolved issue of title designation led to a breakdown of law and order as well as eruption of conflicts. Also, the discovery of the black gold – oil in the Niger Delta region in the late 1950's further aggravated the tension in the region.

The protest against the political domination of Itsekiri by the Urhobo and Ijaw and the economic undevelopment of the area combined to increase the festering crisis in the region. It is even mind boggling that violence of any kind should result from the ethnic groups since they had lived together for ages and intermarried making it impossible to neatly isolate one group from the other. This point is summarised by Eguavoen, when he said that the Urhobo and Itsekiri are;

Known to be socially interrelated with high frequency of intermarriage amongst themselves, live together in the same community, commercially interdependent and remain very much so up till date⁴⁸.

In spite of this blood relationship in terms of marriage, the hostilities against each other continue. Added to the economic deprivation and 'ecological devastation' of the region, there has been a resurgence of armed militant groups who are engaged in oil bunkering, kidnapping and all sorts of criminal activities. Of course the present armed militancy in the region was precoded by the 'armed insurrection against the Nigerian post-colonial state', which was championed by Isaac Adaka Boro who, with his group, protested against the undevelopment of the area by the hegemonic ruling class. Now, the original intention and genuine struggle for self-determination, and justice in terms of equitable distribution of the oil wealth is vitiated and negated by the current wave of criminality, vandalism and violent attacks on innocent people, both Nigerians and foreigners alike. No doubt, this is a serious threat to national security. But, again as Dipo Irele said, quoting Adebayo Williams, that;

What is required is visionary leadership (and good governance) ... the current efforts to save the Nigerian state cannot be won by military peremptoriness or by my bazooka is bigger than yours grandstanding⁴⁹.

The emergence of violent ethnic militants with their associated destruction of lives and property constitutes a serious retrograde in terms of Nigerian project of democratization and vision 20-20-20.

What is Political Stability?

Stability as it relates to political discourse is a social phenomenon which “reflects the ability of the state to persevere and manage internal conflicts and weather the storm of centrifugal and centripetal forces”⁵⁰. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd, ed) defines stability as the “power of remaining erect, freedom from liability to fell or be overthrown, immunity from destruction or essential change”⁵¹. However, stability as we intend here is more broad than it is given so far. According to Lambert Ejiofor.

Stability as a framework for analyzing a system is deemed to exist when the system enjoys peace either because it has no disruptive problems or because it contains its problems without undue strain. The containment of problems, postulates a high degree of integration of roles and structure as well as their reciprocal adaptation to one another even in a state of social change⁵².

According to him, stability does not preclude the incidence of conflict which is inevitable in politics, but it assumes that solutions will finally be found to resolve those conflicts. Let us quickly examine its converse – instability. According to Jim Unah, the phenomenon of change, that is, social change especially where it is disruptive of the existing political order is another name for political instability⁵³. It seems that Unah’s ontological perspective is not too dissimilar from the socio-political analysis given by B.J. Dudley who defines instability in terms of changes within a society which do not conform to or proceed from the rules governing the organizational processes in the society⁵⁴. Further, he argues that instability is the inevitable consequences of the failure of political actors to play politics according to the constitutive and regulative rules of the game.

The danger of ethnic pluralism is that the elite class (political, military, intelligentsia etc) usually exploits it for its selfish interest and by so doing exacerbates social, political and economic discontent and marginalization within the system. The practice here is that when a particular ethnic group takes control of political power, the people who hail from that ethnic zone would feel that it is their turn to “grab” whatever they could in terms of resources, employment, admission and other privileges to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. This no doubt creates a sense of alienation and the consequences of this are better imagined than discussed.

One obvious implication of it is a preponderance of agitation and in some cases armed struggle for self-determination and secession or break up. The Nigerian civil war in the late 1960s and the current spate of ethno-religious conflicts, xenophobic attack on the so-called settler by the indigene, emergence of ethnic militias like Boko Haram and the clamour for fragmentation of the country are a reflection of the failure of the Nigerian federalism.

Past and Present Heads of State

Year	Name	Ethnicity/Religion	Class
1957	Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	Hausa/Fulani, Muslim	Civilian/Politician
1963	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	Igbo/Christian	Civilian/Politician
1966	Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi	Igbo, Christian	Military
1966	Gen. Yakubu Gowon	Hausa/Fulani, Christian	Military
1975	Gen. Murtala Mohammed	Hausa/Fulani, Muslim	Military
1976	Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo	Yoruba, Christian	Military
1979	Alhaji Shehu Shagari	Hausa/Fulani,, Muslim	Civilian/Politician
1983	Gen. Mohammedu Buhari	Hausa/Fulani,, Muslim	Military
1985	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida	Hausa/Fulani,, Muslim	Military
1993	Chief Ernest Shonekan	Yoruba, Christian	Civilian/Politician
1993	Gen. Sani Abacha	Hausa/Fulani,, Muslim	Military
1998	Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar	Hausa/Fulani, Muslim	Military
1999	Chief Olusegun Obasanjo	Yoruba, Christian	Civilian/Politician
2007	Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua	Hausa/Fulani, Muslim	Civilian/Politician
2010	Dr, Goodluck Jonathan	Ijaw/Christian	Civilian/Politician

There is a clear case of domination of the Nigerian political system by a section of the country in terms of ethnicity, religion and class. This is capable of imploding the country as it is capable of generating tension, discontent, resentment and political instability.

The dominance of the national politics by a section of the country with its attendant consequences may have prompted Chief Anyiam-Osigwe to suggest that a person from each of the major ethnic group can head the country for four years, while minority ethnic groups can be organized so they too can produce a president⁵⁵.

Another factor responsible for political instability is the perverseness of official corruption. According to the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission Act, corruption includes bribery, fraud and other related offences, gratification in form of money, donation, gift, loan, reward, property (moveable or immovable) given or promised to any person with intent to influence such a person in the performance or non-performance of his duties⁵⁶. But why is corruption rampant among those at the corridors of power and in positions of trust? In order to answer this, we need to understand the linkage between corruption and power. According to Chinua Achebe;

Corruption goes with power... Therefore to hold any useful discussion of corruption; we must first locate it where it properly belongs – in the rank of the powerful⁵⁷.

Corruption like the factor of ethnicity discussed above is a threat to democracy and political stability because in the midst of ravaging poverty and socio-economic inequalities, any person once appointed to public office will, just like his kinsmen and extended family, see it as an opportunity to meet “all” their problems and in turn receive traditional titles. But corruption like sin is a reproach to any nation, and according to Achebe ‘Nigerians will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and inconvenient’⁵⁸.

This is possible if there is the political will on the part of the government to curb corruption by an act of legislation or legal framework.

It is instructive here to remember what Peter Ekeh calls two public realms in African politics, namely; primordial and civic public⁵⁹. The former is associated with the “communal sectional, or ethnic group, which secretes some feelings, and moral urge on its members, while the latter, that is, the civic public is likened to the “popular politics” and “civil service’, which lacks the kind of moral imperative as the former and is therefore amoral. Again under the civic public there is an apparent lack of a sense of belonging. The relationship of the citizens to the civic public is based on how much (in material terms) they can benefit from it without a “corresponding moral urge to give back to the state”.

For Ekeh the individual seizes largess from the civic public in order to benefit the primordial public⁶⁰. But Irele disagrees with Ekeh and contends that the individuals seize or “grab” from the civic public not to benefit his primordial or ethnic group but for personal comfort and luxury⁶¹. The consequences of this include widespread corruption, national disintegration, political instability and lack of loyalty to the nation-state.

The Role of Culture and Indigenous Platforms

We discussed above that Nigeria is a classic example of multi-ethnic and plural society. This diversity rather than constitute a barrier to national integration should be a source of strength since “most countries in the world are multi-ethnic and multi-national. According to Abiola Irele “nations, are created rather than natural. He argues that the “national integration which Nigeria needs now can be achieved through the medium of culture”⁶². A similar view is expressed by Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe in his preference for a fusion of pristine cum traditional models with those of modern Africa, which is summarized in his treatise, thus; ‘As it was in the beginning: synthesis for Africa’s socio-political and economic transformation’. Using his Igbo society as an example, he argued that political system and decision-making revolve around a network of kinship relations and flow from *Umunna* (political unity) through village to town. He pointed out the significance of *Ofor* (sacred mace), *Ala* (Earth goddess), *indichie* (ancestors), congress of town Unions, *Umuada* (females) in the administration of justice and settlement of disputes. Thus, Anyiam-Osigwe subscribes to a kind of democracy with an African cultural flavour as suitable for contemporary Nigeria, and he says:

Africans need to define for themselves the meaning of democracy in their own historical and cultural context, drawing on their participatory traditions and the experience of democratic societies elsewhere⁶³.

And therefore, we acknowledge that African world-views, which emphasize life affirmation, respect for elders, mutual dependency, reciprocity, tolerance, transparent living, honesty, duty and responsibility etc., should form the foundation of our democracy and political order.

The *Ala* and *Ofo* within the context of Igbo culture embody the political structure and activities of in which *Ala* serves to categorize men into different political units, namely, *Ala umunna*, which designates the ancestral lineage, *Ala Ezi*, refers to the family, and *Ala Obodo* which indicate the town. This political arrangement in Igbo traditional political thought is akin to the contemporary politics where the process for election starts from the ward or council to the state and the federal levels. Also, *Ala* is the source and custodian of *omenala* in Igbo custom and tradition of the Igbo, and (*Ala*) serves as the guardian of morality and stipulates sanctions for various misdemeanor acts, and according to Njaka as quoted by Emma D. Inyama;

Ala is constitutional deity of the Igbo. Truly, as a constitution, *Ala* in its *Omenala* equates all modern state constitutions. Through its shades of meaning, *Omenala*, like any other states constitution contains the following – natural laws, happenings according to events in the physical world, traditions and conventions, the actual practice or order, enactments – private and public sanctions⁶⁴.

Similarly, *ofa* (sacred mace) is the symbol of justice, authority and power in Igbo thought, and is believed to confer some religious and spiritual powers to the decision and judgment of the *ohanaeze*, (the whole group). Thus, *ofa* and the *Ala* serve the judiciary and executive functions respectively similar to the three arms of government viz, executive, legislature and judiciary as we have it in contemporary politics, and thus, there is a kind of horizontal and flexible political process in Igbo political structure. This point is aptly summarised by Inyama in the essay cited above thus;

This lack of absolute authority has given Igbo society all the attributes of democracy... the Igbo value for participatory and consensus politics is a hand-down from their world-view which posits a world in which life is a bargain like in a market place⁶⁵.

Hence in town hall meetings or congregation, every adult male and female are given a chance to express his or her opinion on issues of common interest, until decision is reached. In these assemblies or congress of town unions, one often hears such thunderous ovation like Igbo *Kwenu*, (salutation), *Any Kwurusi* (we said that...), *Anyi Kwu gi na azu* (we are behind you) *Olu oha* (people's voice), *Nzogbu Nzogbu enyimba* (group solidarity). And thus, these expressions reveal the deep commitment of the Igbo to participatory and consensus politics' and democratization process.

The Rise of Terrorism and Militancy in Nigeria

The *Boko Haram* and *Ansaru* insurgents have no clearly defined ideology save that they are against western education and its values, their barbaric activities are akin to those of the Afghan trained Arab militants. What is perplexing to most people is that their terror attacks cut-across the religious divide as they kill Christians, Muslims and engage in suicide bombings of churches, mosques, public buildings, worship centres, motor parks, schools and markets.

Equally worrisome and disturbing is the threat to national security is a band of armed militia in the Niger Delta region. Like the first group, they do not have a clear vision of their mandate except the cry of marginalization perpetrated by the central government to the people of the region. Their grouse, truly or falsely, is that the region is economically strangled by the government even though it (the region) produces about eighty (80%) percent of the nation's wealth. They engage in killing, armed robbery, kidnapping of expatriate workers and influential politicians and their relatives for a ransom, and in the vandalism of the public infrastructure and even oil pipelines.

Conclusion: The Way Forward for Nigeria Democracy

The above situation brings to fore the inventive need for Nigerian leaders at all levels to tackle headlong the problem of ethnicity and ethnic militias rather than to pretend that they do not exist or that they might somehow go away. The hitherto idea of poor handling of ethnic conflicts or foot-dragging on the implementation of change in certain post-ethnic conflict areas should be consigned to the past. Many new conflicts could easily have been prevented had government hastened to enthrone good governance.

Furthermore, it should become the concern of all to begin to see ethnicity as a means of projecting the interest one feels bonded to without necessarily doing so in an exclusivist manner that disdains the humanity and the rights of others. It should be to our interest to heed the advice of John Rawls to focus on deeply disputed questions like ethnic, social and political questions, to see whether, despite appearances have some underlying bases of philosophical and moral agreement that can be uncovered⁶⁶. It should not be too difficult to further reason with Rawls suggestion to see whether we can narrow down diverging philosophical and moral standpoints that underlie the root of ethnic and political differences to a point where social cooperation on a footing of mutual respect among citizens can still be maintained. This will help us to overcome the seemingly intractable problem of new waves of conflict in contemporary Nigeria. Also the adoption of dialogue, communication and consensus rather than an engagement in hostilities amongst deferent ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in Nigeria will definitely bolster the nation's democracy, and foster a bright future.

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