



## **Ethnic Nationalism And The Quest For National Unity: Nigeria Experience.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria national integration and social harmony of its populace is in a serious jeopardy. This is as a result of the activities of individuals and groups who have committed their efforts with high level of involvement at encouraging ethnic nationalism at the expense of national unity. This ethnic chauvinism with force of ethnic loyalties to sub-national level has hindered the growth of Nigeria national consciousness and patriotism of its populace. This statement has been described as one of the major influence responsible for the country's low productivity and ethnic violence of different periods. Different ethnic divisions draw support that promote their cultural closeness, communal connections and seek to defend their interest at the national level. Views are held in different tribal quarters of the country that British colonialism created modern Nigeria in error due to the fact that ethnic grouping were not considered during the amalgamation, especially for interdependence of these ethnic groups. British colonialists were complete aware of the multiple background of the people and believed that the amalgamation was to bring together people who have common goal and who can strive better in unity. This paper examines the degree of ethnicism in Nigeria from the time of amalgamation. The paper opines that Nigeria unity can be restored and promoted only if individuals at different ethnic level will wipe away entire sub-national sentiments and strive for patriotism in the promotion of national unity of different ethnic divisions in Nigeria. This paper at its conclusion will suggest solutions necessary to foster nation unity

**Keywords:** ethnicity, nationalism, amalgamation, Nigeria, region

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ethnic nationalism is constituting serious danger to Nigeria national unity. This is due to essentially to sentimental attachment of individuals, groups in Nigeria to their sub-national base. This stem from the fact that ethnic division or groupings in Nigeria share diverse traditions, values, languages, political belief and different political background and orientations that militates against Nigeria's national unity. Ejimofor (1987) puts that this situation to a great extent decides the type of relationship between these ethnic groups or the pattern of behaviour of these groups towards one another. Gudu (1989), postulates that people in a country who share same language, tradition and of the same political behaviour or belief

are likely to exhibit high level of co-operation and understanding. According to him, as a result of ethnic sentiments in all spheres of Nigeria, different sub-nationals are disillusioned and would always scramble to have their gains selfishly for the growth and development of their group.

Many Nigerians have emphasized on the issue of sub-nationalism, consequent upon the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 by the then Governor General-Lugard Frederick, without due consideration of different background of ethnic groups in the amalgamation. These diverse nationals have well developed cultures, tradition, population, land, sophisticated enough to be accorded the status of sovereign state (Okeke: 1992). Other Nigerians have in contrast to the above opinion express that lack of patriotism, wrong policies formulation implementation and corruption are responsible for growth and rise of sub-nationalism to the detriment of Nigeria unity. The above mentioned factor are evident in some policies such as zoning formula, the concept of geo-political zones, quota system and other ways which Nigeria government tend totally fears expressed by the ethnic groups. This group further argued that Nigeria is not more heterogeneous than states such as India, United States of America, etc. who have excelled in unity with prejudice. (Ejimofo, 1987) Onyinkola and Dazang (1996) have put that authors are inconsonance that ethnic nationalism has not at any occasion promoted cordial relationship within a given state, thus Nigeria according to them should be re-organized in a detribalize manner. Okwudiba (1978) reveal the extent ethnicism has sparked off demands for more state creation in Nigeria. Kelther (1978), Ojiako (1983); and Ella (1982) have viewed the orientation of ethnic demand if they are geared towards satisfying the interest of other ethnic group or make to realize personal (group) interest.

### **Background to Ethnicism in Nigeria**

The origin of ethnic nationalism is traceable to the era of colonialism in Africa, when the British colonial government carved up areas they referred to as protectorates and which were later merge for administrative convenience. These carve-up areas are geographical locations of different ethnic groups who have developed respective cultures, traditions, belief system and political institutions and have existed many centuries prior to the advent of Europeans. The British colonial administration by so doing did not consider these ethnic cleavages nor make efforts at harmonizing their differences. At the end of this European creation, it was evident that these sub-nations still owe allegiance to the cultural closeness and consanguine relationship that brought them into existence (Nwude, 1996).

Nigeria as a political entity of British creation began to exist in the post colonial era and has within its geographical boundary over 250 ethnic groups who by this creation were fused together as one united (nation state) political entity. These ethnic group has nothing in common prior to European advancement and some were at times hostile to each other and at times at peace with each other. Yet, the British colonialists in their effort to acquire their own colonial territory, care-up for themselves the big chunk of area containing these diverse ethnic groups that was to be transformed to a political entity called Nigeria (Ejimofo, 1987). Consequent upon this development, this area of British colonial creation became a fertile ground for ethnic interest. According to Lord Hailey in Ejimofo (1987), "in creating Nigeria, British had created perhaps the most artificial of the many administrative units created in the course of European occupation of Africa". With the amalgamation of 1914, the British colonial powers brought together two different regions that were separately administered and little or no effort was made at their unification.

An essential step at Nigeria unification was made with the introduction of Richard's constitution of 1946. This constitution introduced regionalism with the aim of promoting the unity of Nigeria and to adequately provide for the diverse ethnic make-ups of the country. Ejiofor (1987) puts that Governor Arthur Richard's aim of introducing regionalism was to create a political system within which diverse elements may progress at varying speed, amicably and smoothly towards more closely integrated economic, social and political unit without sacrificing the principles and ideas inherent in their divergent ways of life. Richard's constitution of 1946 and its introduction of regionalism made little effort at unifying different ethnic groups in Nigeria instead it became the basis for establishing fear of domination by the minority ethnic groups who found themselves sparsely spreaded into these three regions alongside with other major ethnic groups. Different regions at the period began to view with suspicion of other regions and would

negatively or wrongly understand any slight move by any of them. Thus, opponents to the idea of regionalism such as Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and other nationalists gave their voice against this colonial policy. To Azikiwe,

Richard's constitution divides the country into three zones which are bound to departmentalize the political thinking of this country... Thus by the time a new constitution was promulgated in 1951 to replace the Richard's constitution, the Action Group has been found virtually with the motto: Western, Eastern region for the Easterners, Northerners region for the Northerners, and Nigeria for all."

Ejimofo (1987) in line with the above puts that tripartite division of Nigeria was bitterly contended. To him, the Northern region was larger than the other two regions combined which in the opinion of Adamu Ciroma was the only shield... against domination by Southern elements. Thus, other ethnic divisions found themselves being treated as minority ethnic. This arrangement (Ciroma, in Okeke: 1992).

Demands for separate autonomy by ethnic division who felt dominated and marginalized were made. These ethnic groups felt that the regional arrangement accorded recognition to major ethnic group-Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. These demands also draw them further to demand for creation of state especially as independence was sighted. Ellah (1996) opines that the non Hausa elements of the middle Belt demanded for Middle Belt state and for the Western region the mid-west state, the Eastern region-the Calabar Ogoja-Rivers (COR) state. Equally there was again in the western region the agitation for Lagos state. These agitations gave room to the establishment of Willink four man commission of inquiry headed Henry Willink, especially to address these demands. This commission acknowledge the existence of ethnic-phobia in these regions in these region but went further to disagree with the idea of state creation. Post independence Nigeria witnessed the creation of mid western region in 1963, as demands for state creation increased among these ethnic divisions.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Ethnic nationalism also known as ethno-nationalism, sub-nationalism according to the website of political research, is a form of nationalism where the nation is defined in terms of ethnicity. Oxford Dictionary in Wikipedia state that it is a category of people who identify with each other based on similarities such as common ancestry, language, society, culture or nation. Henry George (2015) opines that the central theme of ethnic nationalists is that nations are defined by a shared heritage, which usually include common language, common faith and common ethnic ancestry. Nnoli (1980) defines ethnic nationalism as a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. To him, ethnic group exist only within a political society consisting of diverse ethnic groups. Ethnicity is characterized by a common conscious of being one in relation to the relevant ethnic group (N... 2006). Stabbert and Welsh (1979) recommended that ethnic group should be defined in the broadcast term as a group that is bounded of from other comparable groups or population, categories in the society by a sense of its difference which may consists in some combination of a real or mythical ancestry and a common culture and experience.

Smith (1991) gives a taxonomy of six main attributes of ethnic community as follows. " a collective proper name; a myth of common ancestry; share historical memories; one or more differentiating elements of common culture; association with a specific home land; and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of population. Scholar like Osaghae (1994), (1998) insist that ethnicity is a situationally defined, that ethnic group boundaries are malleable and permeable and that ethnicity may be acquired and divested at will communal groups whose competitive interactive interaction produces ethnicity are called ethnic groups. To him, prejudice and discrimination characterize ethnicity.

Ethnic nationalism of sub-nationalism is the loyalty of individual members of ethnic group to such group, having shared origins, tradition and having developed high level of consciousness on the factors that binds them together in a given area. According to Mclean (1996), ethnic nationalism involves the common consciousness of shared origin and traditions. To him the Greek ethnos is variously translated "tribe" or nation and its meaning can be taken as being some way between the two (tribe or nation). Thus members of this group submit entirely to the binding force that fuse them together, and can engage in

competition with other existing group of sub nations outside their circle, Bah (2003) states that for ethnic groups inhabiting the same state, the interaction is frequently characterized by competition for resources, power and the assertion of cultural identity. This sub national feelings and consciousness tend to make ethnic group go home with the belief that they are fundamentally different from one another. In every political setting sub national consciousness and loyalty of it make-ups determine the level of co-operation and existence of these group in a given period.

### **Impact of Ethnicism in Nigeria**

Nigeria as a sovereign state is endowed with both human and natural resources. The human endowment is so massive that Nigeria has within its geographical territory over 250 ethnic divisions. As stated early in this work, some of these ethnic cleavages have well developed cultures, traditions, economic and political system so advanced to be accorded the status of state. Thus, Nigeria is regarded as a multi ethnic nation state whose unity is consequent upon the agreement, and co-operation of these sub-national divisions. Despite these differences, Nigeria after 1914 was administered as one and united political entity. The quest for sectionalization of Nigeria began with its demand by these ethnic cleavages who perceive domineering influence of the bigger ethnic groups within the same political circle. Political parties were also formed to move forward the dreams and aspiration of respective ethnic group especially the three dominant groups- Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbo. With this fear of domination, suspicion of ethnic group against other ethnicism was initiated. Nnoli (1978) puts that with the approach of independence, each ethnic group began to fight for recognition and those that did not succeed within this period continued after independence. Consequent on this background ethnic chauvinism crept in scramble for ethnic recognition and hostilities among these ethnic groups developed. Members of this ethnic groups thus began to give their loyalty, solidarity to their respective ethnic group against Nigeria nationalism. They equally engage in utterance that depicts one ethnic groups superiority over another and at times indulge in making have-speech against one ethnic group.

An instance of this was an ethnic chauvinistic display by Late Nnamdi Azikiwe at the Igbo conference in 1949 where he stated thus:

“It would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Igbo nation to head the children of Africa from the bondage of age... The martial prowess of the Igbo nation at all stages of human history has enabled them not only to conquer others but also to adapt themselves to the role of preserver...”

By these words, the overbearing habit of the Igbo nation was stimulated, and also the confidence and resolution of the ethnic groups in the same political circle with the Igbo nation to strive against this domineering trait. This statement created ethnic arrogance and oneness of one political group against another. Thus the split between ethnic groups especially the majority and the minority ethnic group became involved. Different ethnic group began a hurriedly move aimed at occupying sensitive positions at the national level and considering the welfare of their group alone. With this development, no effort was made toward checkmating the growth of ethnicism in Nigeria. This also awaken the minority ethnic group who feel neglected and discriminated by the larger group.

The institution of ethnicity and tribalism in Nigeria, marginalization, favouritism and discrimination was introduced as a distinguished feature of Nigerian society. This favouritism marginalization, discriminatory treatment given to other ethnic group became evident in government institutions such as schools, civil service, public service political official positions. They are also evident in public enterprises, market places and even in religious worship centres. Most of political development such as political crises are regarded as being instigated from tribal quarters.

Ethnicism .... nationalism in Nigeria has degenerated especially with the introduction of some government policies aimed at allaying the fears of ethnic minorities in the country. Government policies such as the creation of state has gone a long way to reduce constitutional rights of citizen because such citizen is not indigenous to the state of his/her residence. Northernisation policies has convey the message that northern region was exclusively reserved for the indigenous people of the northern Nigeria. Ellah

(1982) opines that the national policies and attitudes are such that actually feed the germs of tribalism and ethnicism which appear to be endemic to the society.

### **CONCLUSION/REMEDIAL STRATEGIES**

It has been observed from the foregoing that the quest for national unity is hindered by ethnicism. The constant struggle among different ethnic groups in Nigeria, to be identified by the colonialists in the colonial era, and the intense struggle to control power at the national level in the independence and post independence Nigeria have given room for political instability and national underdevelopment. At independence, no efforts were made to compact these ethnic cleavages. Post independence Nigeria witnessed such government policy like creation of state, aimed at harmonizing different ethnic groups which under this creation would see bounded in a state for enhanced co-operation. But the desired peace and unity of ethnic group was not achieved in Nigeria through this creation. Problem of boundary disputes among tribes resulting to protracted conflict situation became so apparent. Assets sharing problem increase wave of tribalism and ethnic politics among these ethnic cleavages became order of the day. This the creation of state complicated the issue of ethnicism that sowing the problem. This paper is of the view that the idea of state creation should be carefully observed to consider the sincere readiness of the people to form a state with specially emphasis placed on the homogeneity of the communities in question. Consideration of past history of these people and their cultural trait to obtain if there will be any possibility of harmonious and peaceful existence if they are limped together in a state.

National policies which has being described as feeding or fueling ethnicism should be reconsidered. These include the conflict of geopolitical zone which excludes individuals who are non indigene of that zone from certain rights/privileges; quota system that not only great sense of ethnicism, but also gives room to mediocrity. To ensure true federalism, government should pledge to efficiency and equitable distribution of resource and amenities to these targeted ethnic division. In addition to these, government should promote fundamental rights of citizens that cut across these ethnic cleavages and adhere strictly to it.

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