

## Colonialism and ethnic crisis in Nigeria: Barrier to nation building and national development drive

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

#### Article history:

Received 13 October 2015  
Received in revised form 23 May 2016  
Accepted 6 September 2017  
Available online 15 November 2017

This article has the interest to explore the influence of development on developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, which are largely constitute of the so-called the third world countries. It is found that since the colonial rule, these countries are still battling with the problem of elemental sentiment of ethnicity within the plan of prosperous development. Specifically taking Nigeria – a heterogeneous nation with multiple ethnic groups still face clear obstacles to develop as a united and prosperous. This article views that the ineffective inter-ethnic relationship among the multiple ethnic groups in Nigeria has created ethno-religion crises. Various measures have been taken up by the successive governmental administration in the country, yet forms of ethnic crises still broadly manifested through ethnic suspicion, ethnic rivalry, ethnic crises and civil war. These ugly ethnic manifestations block the development of nation building and national unity in Nigeria.

#### Keywords:

Development, ethnicity, ethno-religion crises, Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

It is a known fact that the third world countries which are the largely developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America that had experienced the colonial rule are still battling with the problem of primordial sentiment of ethnicity which is set like clogs in the wheel of unity and prosperous development [9]. Undoubtedly, Nigeria is a heterogeneous nation with multiple ethnic groups and managing it to evolve a united and prosperous country right from the colonial era to date has not yielded the desired results. The result of ineffective inter-ethnic relationship among these multiple ethnic groups in Nigeria has plunged the country into deep ethno-religion crises [3]. Though successive administration in the country has taken various measures to attenuate this ugly development, we still have manifestations of ethnic crises with us in different forms like ethnic suspicion, ethnic rivalry, ethnic crises and civil war in Nigeria [3]. Undoubtedly these ethnic crises

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are barriers to nation building and national unity as resources meant for national development would be expended on management of ethnic hullabalos.

The scramble for Africa, by the European states led to the partition of Africa after the Berlin conference of 1884-85. Britain acquired Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, and Sierra-Leone in West Africa. What followed was the imposition of a supposedly more developed culture over a less developed one, backed up with expansionist and economic adventurism that brought many ethnic groups together under one political system, especially in Nigeria [9].

There are different ethnic groups numbering more than two hundred and fifty (250) in present Nigeria. Prior to colonialism, each of these ethnic groups existed under an independent and autonomous political system either as chiefdom, empire or caliphate. Before the advent of colonialism, the relationship among these ethnic groups in some cases was cordial while it was hostile and suspicious among other ethnic groups. There were frequent inter-ethnic wars to capture prisoners that could be sold as slaves [6]. It was the British colonial master that forcefully brought these ethnic groups under one polity through the amalgamation of Southern protectorate and Northern protectorate in 1914; and the name Nigeria was suggested and christened by Flora Shaw, a British woman. Some have referred to the birth of the Nigerian nation as artificial creation, marriage of inconvenience, mere geographical expression and many more because unity among different ethnic groups is still not achieved. The three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa in the North, the Yoruba in the South West and the Ibo in South East Nigeria respectively.

Nigeria and indeed many other African states are referred to as failed states. This is because virtually nothing is working as expected. There are many problems that impinge on nation building and national development that is responsible for Nigeria to be referred to as a failed state, which include bad leadership, corruption and colonialism to mention a few. But countries that were also colonised like China and Singapore have gone ahead to break even in terms of development. But it is discernible that ethnicity is the most serious of all the problems. It is against this background that this paper examines how ethnic groups in Nigeria were forcefully brought together through colonial amalgamation and how ethnicity is a barrier to nation building and national development in the face of government efforts at attenuating ethnicity problems in the country.

## **2. Ethnicity Crises in Nigeria**

Managing different ethnic groups fused into polity, commonly referred to as colonial creation through amalgamation of 1914 is not without its hiccups and hullabalos. Ethnicity problems in Nigeria started right from the colonial era through divides and rule policy and tactics employed to have the support of the three largest ethnic groups – Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo – at the expense of minority ethnic groups which later created unhealthy ethnic relationships between the majority and minority ethnic groups [9]. The way these minority ethnic groups were marginalized throw out many challenges which affected the unity of the country. This ethnicity problem continued unabated after independence spanning through the first republic, second republic and still very much in existence in Nigeria polity to date [1]. This ‘divide and rule’ policy was manageable for a while until it became a major issue after independence.

The propelling forces that sustained the quest for self-determination or self-rule in the twilight of colonialism were the high hope that upon attainment of independence, there will be rapid economic and socio-political development. The belief then was that the moment the mantle of leadership is given to citizens of the country; they will be able to manage and govern the businesses of the country so that the country would rapidly achieve the level of development already attained

by the western world. This sounds logical when we consider the exploitative missions of the colonial master interests in their various colonies that would soon end. Also, the hope was high with abundant human and material resources which were seen as additional impetus that could fast track the level of development. Shortly after independence, the then leaders swung into action by rolling out a series of national development plans which was conceived as a glorious path towards national prosperity [3].

The 1970-74 development plans had five major national objectives which were to establish a united, strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy, just and egalitarian society, a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens and a free and democratic society. It is unfortunate that substantial parts of the first national development plan of 1962-1968 are still unattainable in Nigeria owing to ethnic problems that were hindering national unity and development.

Unfortunately, there has been a very pressing problem of national integration which connotes bringing together various ethnic and social groups into harmonious and working relationships with strong loyalty to the country above ethnic loyalty [3]. An ethnic group is people who ascribed to themselves the common blood and common ancestry against other groups. The common feature shared by an ethnic group is the claim to a common ancestor whether real or imaginary. The strong emotional feeling that accompanies the consciousness of this common origin stimulates togetherness and cohesion among members. This unflinching emotional attachment and cohesiveness among ethnic groups is a great hindrance to patriotism and nationalism which run contrary to national development.

There have been a series of inter-ethnic crises in quick succession in Nigeria. Shortly after independence in 1960, the governance was characterized by high levels of ethnic chauvinism at the expense of other ethnic groups in terms of appointment, and political patronages culminating into military taking over from democratically elected government by Aguyi Iroisi in January, 1966.

When the dust raised by the coup settled down, it was clearly shown that the military that took over the government had a purely ethnic agenda, as many Northern politicians were killed and one Northern acolyte from the Western region was killed in the process and there were no casualties from the Eastern part where the leader of the military juntas came from [9]. This was not properly managed which eventually led to counter military coup in July 1966 in which many military officers from the Eastern part were killed. This was perceived as retaliation by Northerners on the Eastern army officers. There were reconciliatory moves which eventually broke down and plunged the country into civil war between 1966 and 1969.

The civil war was fought, won and lost but the ethnic discord and hatred remains from the memories of the agonies of war. Apart from the civil war between the Ibos and federal government of Nigeria, the seed of discord from ethnicity in Nigeria is still growing in the minds of those who have suffered one form of ethnic discrimination or the other.

Therefore, the ethnic groups that existed ab initio as autonomous political entities and suspecting each other were eventually brought together under one country known as Nigeria through the acts of scrambling and partitioning Africa by the British colonial government and through the amalgamation of these political entities against their wishes.

### **3. Government Efforts at Promoting National Unity in Nigeria**

Realising the importance of national integration to development, successive governments in Nigeria had embarked on a number of measures that could engender unity among different ethnic groups to ensure a united, strong and self-reliant nation, just, with an egalitarian society, and to

build a land of bright and full opportunities for all its citizens.

Therefore, the federal government introduced the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973. This is compulsory for all Nigerian youths who graduated from universities, colleges, and polytechnics to carry out a one-year service in a different cultural environment to enable the youth to be socially and culturally integrated into the culture of the people where they are posted to serve [4].

Two unity schools were set up in all the states of the federation where students from all parts of Nigeria will have the opportunity of mixing together and thus become socially and culturally integrated. Even in higher education, a Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) was set up to ensure that students admissions into various universities to reflect the federal character of Nigeria.

Realising the importance of national unity, the Federal Character Commission (FCCE) was also established. This commission was statutorily responsible for the equitable distribution of appointments among states of the federation to ensure balancing, equity and adequate representation in the distribution of appointments among different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Another important measure adopted by the federal government was the adoption of national symbols like Coat of Arms, national flag, Federal capital Territory, national currency and many others to assist in promoting national unity, loyalty and sense of belonging.

Moreover, the federal government workers are posted to other cultural environments for them to live and relate with people from other ethnic groups in order to foster understanding and promote national integration. The federal establishment must recruit its employees to cut across all ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Teaching of the major languages of the Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo in most schools in Nigeria is aimed at cultural diffusion and consequently breeding greater understanding. This is with a view of breeding understanding and national cohesion that could engender national development.

Sports festivals are also used to encourage national integration like the Nigerian National Festival for Arts and Culture to encourage participants from all parts of the federation. In addition, national sports festival which comes up every year in different locations encourages cultural interaction.

The federal government of Nigeria has been encouraging inter-ethnic marriages with a view of fostering national unity and peaceful coexistence as a result of a web of interrelatedness among different ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria so that they can see themselves as one.

#### **4. Ethnicity Crises and National Development in Nigeria**

There are numerous instances to attest to the fact that Nigerians have become slaves to their ethnic origins instead of harnessing diversities into potential capabilities of breeding national unity and development. Nigerians are zealots when it comes to ethnicity. This is serious to the extent that whatever is done in Nigeria always has a tribal undertone with very strong feelings of its manifestations in political sphere, employment opportunities and provision of basic infrastructures that are amenities to the people.

Ethnicity and Nigerian politics have led to the growth of regional or ethnic leaders against national leaders that are not tied to ethnic-based political parties that are popular in a particular ethnic region or ethnic group. The political parties that contested elections in the twilight of colonialism and early part of the first republic were ethnic-cultural associations like Egbe omo Odudual (Yoruba Cultural Association that metamorphosed into Action Group (AG)). The Northern people's Congress (NPC) founded by Ahmadu Bello and Namidi Azikiwe led the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC). Both were ethnic political parties that were popular and

enjoyed support from their ethnic base (Adebisi, 2004).

The effect of these ethnic-based political parties was the formation of political parties with programmes and activities beclouded with ethnic sentiments which can never breed national unity and cohesion. This deep sense of ethnic affiliation is accentuating ethnic rivalry and discord among diverse groups in Nigeria which will forever be obstacles to national unity and development in Nigeria, if not properly and urgently addressed. Unfortunately, this trend continued and ethnic politics still manifest in modern day Nigeria politics.

The ugly effects of a highly ethnicised country like Nigeria are also manifested in the voting pattern and behaviour of her citizens. In most elections in Nigeria, the results always show that candidates secured a larger percent of votes according to their ethnicity state or region. Table 1 below shows the voting behaviour of Nigerians during the 1979 general election along the ethnic lines.

**Table 1**  
1979 Elections into Federal House of Representatives

Party	EAST	NORTH	WEST	TOTAL
NPP	2	13	96	111
NPN	60	16	2	78
PRP	37	121	11	169
GNPP	-	49	-	49
GNPP	4	39	-	43
TOTAL	103	238	108	440

Source: Adebisi [1]. Ethnic relations and politics in Nigeria

The table above clearly shows that the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) a political party formed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba man from South West Nigeria, won 96 seats (86.5%) from the South West, a region with his ethnic stronghold. The National People's Party (NPP) won 12 (75%) seats out of a total of 16 seats from the East, which is where the party founder, Namidi Azikiwe's ethnic stronghold is; that is the Ibos. On the other hand, National party of Nigeria (NPN) from the north won 121 (71.5%) out of 169 seats from the north. This clearly shows that most of the representatives won their election because of ethnic affiliation. Therefore it is logical to say that all the representatives were impregnated with ethnic agenda that gave them votes which is inimical towards national unity and development.

Undoubtedly, merit has always been compromised because of ethnic affiliation. Incompetent candidates contesting election under a political party is considered to be ethnically anointed and would normally win elections easily because what is at stake is their ethnicity and not the efficiency of the candidate representing the people. It is a hard fact that Nigerian voters often disregard candidates' qualities because of ethnic fanaticism and this is antithetical to the national development drive [1].

It is gratifying to note the appalling instances of ethnicity in Nigeria, which has become a weapon for politicians and individuals to further their interests through ethnically structured political ambitions to the detriment of national integration [1]. When politicians lose election, in other political contest or in one political crisis, they normally devised strategies that will appeal for sympathy and support from their ethnic people in order to circumvent due process. This further worsens already ethnically polarised societies because the attachment of the citizens first is to his/her ethnic group before the country.

The situation of ethnic relations in Nigeria reveals discriminations in almost all public offices. Appointments to public offices are based on ethnic favouritism. When ethnic-men or kinsmen are

more favoured at the expense of other ethnic groups, it mostly compromises the merit. Those members of ethnic groups who were discriminated against usually nursed ill feelings, acrimonious melancholy which inhibits national development. The plausible reason why ethnic loyalty thrives in Nigeria is because of the benefits attached to having kinsmen in positions and offices which translate into colossal benefits. The wish of every individual is to have one's ethnic-man at the helm of affairs, which is a guarantee level toward actualizing ethnic or personal interests that may be counter-productive to national interests.

A society where the survival of her citizens is tied to ethnic loyalty and chauvinism will always engage in unhealthy competition and struggle to win political offices and appointments realising its benefits for himself and his ethnic people. The ethnic groups used to be at each other's throats in a bid to win political offices and appointments. The consequential effect of winner takes all is unflinching ethnic support for their candidate be he a charlatan or underdog and who might be either in the wrong or right course since the end justifies the means.

The scenario where a winner of political office takes all in a society like Nigeria with mammoth ethnic supporters often results in inter-ethnic crisis and restiveness knowing full well that the loss of their candidate is zero-sum in nature; that is a loss for all members of the ethnic group. This has plunged the country into different inter-ethnic crises which pose a serious threat to harmonious relationships among different ethnic groups in the country.

The adverse effect of a highly ethnicised country is a sense of divided loyalty; that is being loyal only to one's own ethnic group who is in position of authority dishing out opportunities to them and disloyalty when other ethnic-man is at the helm of affairs. The dissenting views to government programmes and activities usually come from other ethnic groups who are not in power. Presently in Nigeria, there is higher loyalty to ethnic groups above national interests meaning that the unity of the country is in serious jeopardy. Umezinwa [10] rightly observed that the noises from different ethnic groups are distractions in the running of government.

The situation is so bad that the yardstick to assess the performance of political office holders is how much he has been able to impact the lives of people from his ethnic groups, and not how much national policies and programmes he carried out. To all political officials, they are more conscious of assessment from his immediate ethnic or community judged from parochial interest. Those officials who are able to favour their ethnic groups at the expense of others are honoured with chieftaincy titles and highly favoured to win elections or being representatives of their ethnic groups in future opportunities.

This explains why ethnic groups are always fighting each other over scarce resources termed as national cake, trying to manoeuvre each other; at end of the day, there is always a winner and a loser. Losing often results into onslaughts which further exacerbate the prevailing rivalry among ethnic groups.

There is educational imbalance among the regions that make up Nigeria. Because of one region that is more advanced educationally than the others; some states of the federation have surplus labour while others face inadequacy which forced them to appoint non-indigenes, but only on contract terms pending the time when the son of the soil is available [10] with few states like Lagos as exception.

## **5. Recommendations and Conclusions**

It is apparent that there are abundant instances of ethnic discrimination which had generated mutual suspicion among different ethnic groups in the country. One cannot shy away from the fact that these ethnic groups were forcefully amalgamated into a geo-political entity known as Nigeria, but the experience of fifty five years of co-existence had clearly demonstrated that it is a marriage

of inconvenience when we consider how volatile ethnic problems are in our polity. It has caused so many hullabaloo which are insalubrious to nation building and national development. A country that is divided against itself like Nigeria, cannot achieve any meaningful development. This could be corroborated with the popular saying "united we stand and divided we fall".

The issue of marginalisation is a common allegation among Nigerians of various ethnic groups or the same ethnic groups. Where there is no cry over ethnic marginalisation, other variables come into play. There are foul cries of marginalisation among people from the same state over state resources, therefore one should not be disappointed if different ethnic groups are at each other's throat over national resources.

The problem has always been ethnic or parochial interest against national interest. Every ethnic group and individual is preoccupied with what they can get from the country rather than what they can give to the nation. A nation like Nigeria with her citizens being conscious of what comes from the country as benefits will find it difficult to progress in the sense that whatever programmes and policies initiated by the government to forge national unity and development are done with the executors of such programmes being conscious of immediate gains rather than coordinating the programmes to achieve the desired results to benefit society.

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) that was supposed to foster unity through familiarisation with other ethnic groups during the service year had been an ugly experience for youth across the nation. The youth who are the leaders of tomorrow suffer serious discrimination during this period which further discouraged them from being patriotic and believing in the unity of the country.

The idea of posting staff of federal government to other states apart from their own state of origin has further aggravated the quest for national unity because of open discrimination they have encountered in their service state as non-indigenes.

Ethnic favouritism is indeed not a permanent thing because power is canvassed and already gaining momentum in the country to be on rotational basis at federal, state and local governments. In most cases, the system takes care of people only when their ethnic group is at the helm of affairs and suffers when power moves to other ethnic groups because most leaders are ethnically attached. It is only when there are national leaders that take care of all citizens that marginalisation could be avoided. A national leader will provide both employment opportunities and social amenities to all and sundry regardless of ethnic affiliation.

The idea of two unity schools created in each state of the federation to foster unity by admitting students across different ethnicities has been thwarted by admitting a large number of students from one particular ethnic group only or those who are related to the heads of such institutions. This jeopardizes the motive of establishing unity schools.

Therefore, there must be concerted efforts by all Nigerians to allow government-initiated policies and programmes to achieve its aims of fostering national unity and development. It is important to review the activities of political office holders from time to time at federal, state and local government levels with a view of redressing the issue of marginalisation. Although there are commissions and agencies charged with this responsibility but the common happenings are that they are asking for their own fair share or more and the moment that is achieved, national interest is jeopardised.

The idea of clinching on to ethnic politics either by political leaders is to get unalloyed support from kinsmen and people for their political leaders from similar ethnic groups because rewards come from such an ethnic-conscious environment. There is the need to build a strong political system that would lead to the emergence of true national leaders that will take care of all citizens from all ethnic groups at all time.

Discrimination of any kind melted out either to staffs of federal government or youth corps members serving in states other than their own should be addressed and whoever is guilty of such discrimination should be punished. The idea of living among other ethnic groups is lofty but the implementation should be problem free.

Unity schools established in each 36 states of the federation should be strictly monitored to ensure that students are admitted to reflect the national character of the country. When the heads of such unity schools are left alone to determine the admission of the students, it will forever continue to favour one particular interest against national interest.

The task of keeping Nigeria as one united country rests on all ethnic groups which must be supported by leaders of each ethnic group who are the stakeholders by seeing every Nigerian as citizens who deserved to be treated equally without discrimination. If Nigeria must remain as indivisible entity, there should be abundant opportunities for all citizens of the country so that they can all voluntarily key-in into the development agenda of the government.

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