Cultural-pluralism: implications for national integration and socio-economic development in Nigeria

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The process by which nation states are created makes them to be a conglomerate of various ethnic groups or sub-nationalities. These groups, as it were, surrender some of their sovereignty to the new state with the central objective of providing security and welfare for the people. This derives perhaps from the notion that things are better achieved within a cooperative environment. The state therefore strives to create a peaceful and conducive environment to enable it attain its objectives of sustainable development using appropriate structures. The state also ensures that its various segments live in harmony in their day-to-day interactions by establishing a consensus on norms, values and ethics of engagement. This leads to forging a ‘homogeneous’ culture which further engenders peaceful co-existence and socio-economic development of the country/state. However one cannot say this about Nigeria where ethnic rivalry has continued to undermine her developmental efforts. This paper examines the plural nature of Nigeria and concludes that rather than be an asset, the country’s cultural pluralism is a drawback to its development. Means of harmonious co-existence geared towards national socio-economic development are suggested.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Pluralism, Rivalry, Development, National, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The plural nature of all states has tended to be contractual. Today all nations of the world are still striving to create a harmonious and peaceful society for the understanding of their common values. The atmospheres of unity initially created among the various segments are disappearing as each of them is making recoil to its original ethnic or cultural roots. This has bred much conflicts the world over to the extent that many countries today are busier quenching the embers of discord than tackling the developmental challenges facing them. This stems from the fact that within the society the existing various groups reflect the different, sometimes conflicting, interests. Each group is engaged for the purpose of fostering its parochial interests which are derived from their mores, norms and values. The desire to attain the respective group goals and objectives invariably sets them in a competitive relationship with others. Yet the attainment of groups’ agenda is a function of available resources and where they are scarce, competition becomes more intense. In such a situation behavioural patterns among the groups emerge whereby:

a. Competition for scarce resources breeds mutual distrust;
b. Each group tends to distort its own position and, on occasion, even falsify it;
c. Each group sees the others as the “enemy” and forms its own stereotypes of opposing groups;
d. As conflict increases, individual groups become more cohesive as they band together to defeat the “enemy”, and
e. Emphasis is on strategy, gamesmanship, politics, and power plays rather than on common societal objectives (Gray and Starke, 1977).

Usually identification with and loyalty to the group becomes more dominant than to the larger society. Each
Conflict in Perspective

Conflict is endemic in all human societies. It is a situation of serious disagreement/dispute between two or more groups or parties. It is a manifestation of a failure on the part of the groups to reach an amicable resolution of the issues in dispute. The concept has been defined by various authors. Otite (1999) defines conflict as “a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralise, injure or dominate their rivals”. Jike and Ojie (2004) see it as a situation of “antagonism or a collision of interests among distinct categories of competing groups in the face of dwindling natural resources”. Similarly Ajayi (2011) opined that conflict is a behavioural pattern involving two or more individuals which can be inter-personalities, inter-groups, inter-organizations and inter-states. As every society is a contraption of various groups and interests, cooperative actions are instituted to foster their parochial interests which derive from their norms, values and mores. In this relationship each group strives to meet its own objectives over and above the others.

It is in the course of each group trying to out-do the other that conflict usually ensues. Owolabi (2007) identifies five types of conflicts thus-
- Interpersonal conflict: This is conflict between two individuals.
- Inter-group conflict: This occurs between two or more groups, usually triggered by a claim to supremacy.
- Intra-group conflict: This manifests when members of a group are in serious disagreement with themselves.
- Intra-national conflict: This is a conflict involving elements within a nation.
- International conflict: This type of conflict occurs between independent nations of the world.

As conflict is resource-based the usual causes especially within nations, are poverty, desire for power, religion, ethnocentrism and the desire for group autonomy. It must be stressed that conflict is not inherently negative or destructive. As a matter of fact, it is perceived as a desideratum as it enhances dynamism within the group through the change(s) it fosters. For example, the various struggle/war of independence between the colonialists and liberation movements/fighters in the Third World, the fight against racism, slavery and apartheid in the United States of America and South Africa, are regarded as ‘creative’ conflicts. Dahrendorf (1959) also sees the struggle of organized labour, as being creative, to the extent that it has been institutionalized. Thus groups generally have tended to embrace cooperative conflict as it portends progress, development and stability within the group.

Ingham (1974) captures this succinctly when he notes that:

The major developments, in twentieth century Western societies are those in which classes as strata have, through conflict, forged conciliatory institutions by which the instability and disorder of earlier capitalism have been overcome, (cited in Onyeonor 2005).

As conflict parades both productive and destructive credentials, this paper examines the Nigerian state with regard to conflictual relationship among its various ethnic nationalities.

Nigeria: A Prism of Ethnicity

Nigeria is a nation consisting of over 250 linguistic groups and their diverse cultures. The country is generously endowed with enormous natural and human resources, much of which have not been exploited fully especially, petroleum and gas resources, as well as other heavy metals. It also enjoys a favourable climate that supports all-the-year-round agricultural production. Thus the country produces many cash and subsistence crops such as cocoa, groundnut, palm produce, yam, among others, most of which are contributing to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Nigeria has an oil reserve estimated at over 32 billion barrels which is expected to last for over forty years at current rate of exploration. She is ranked the sixth largest oil producer among OPEC members and 13th in the world (National Planning Commission, 2004). This is in addition to a natural gas deposit estimated at 174 trillion cubic feet which is the equivalent of 30 billion barrels of oil, estimated to last for over 100 years.

In spite of this endowment in natural and human resources, the country still trails many others in all indices of development. Various factors have been identified for this state of under-development. However the conflictual relationship among the various ethnic groups in the country has been identified as prominent. Ethnicity has become a veritable tool in the hands of political leaders to attain their selfish agenda. A look at the origin and
development of the Nigerian state will give inkling as to where we are coming from. The space presently occupied by Nigeria had always been home to various ethnic nationalities ever before colonial creation and occupation of it as a ‘Nigerian’ nation. Thus Nigeria has always been a multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society embodying various larger and smaller groups, angling for access and control of her scarce and valuable resources. Of all these many ethnic nationalities, three stand out and have been prominent in the quest to be at the centre-stage of decision making in the country. These are the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani. All others are regarded as minority groups and of lower status, which nonetheless are usually used as cannon fodder by the majority group in their wars of attrition. 

Prior to colonialism, the various ethnic nationalities had cultivated an interdependent relationship especially at the economic front. It was colonialism according to Nnoli (1978) that disrupted these interactions and interdependence of these nationalities. He notes further that:

Ethnicity in Africa emerged and persisted either as a mechanism for adaptation to the imperialism system or as an instrument for ensuring a facile and more effective domination and exploitation of the colonized.

This, according to him, was to intensify the “degradation of the African in order to better and more easily exploit him”. Adebisi (1988) posits that in the case of Nigeria, the colonial government promulgated an ordinance in 1910 – The Land and Native Rights Ordinance – which served to encourage the emergence of ethnicity in Northern Nigeria. The ordinance declared all land in the North as native land under the control of the Governor of the area. The immediate impact of this law was that it stemmed the movement of peoples from the South to the North. Adebisi (1988) also notes that the law further insulated and strengthened the authority of the feudal lords -the Emirs of the North- against Southern liberalism, and brought about as a matter of policy, the segregation of settlement along ethnic group lines. Thus in the North today we find the consequences of the ordinance manifesting as follows:

a. The indigenous Hausa/Fulani live within the walled city;

b. Areas created and exclusive for Northerners who are not natives;

c. Areas that are created for those designated by colonial authorities as native foreigners. These are mostly of Southern origin with different ethnic or religious persuasion.

The British colonial policy of divide and rule made the ‘Indirect Rule’ system to be very successful in the North as it strengthened the despotic and exploitative rule of the Emirs. It was however less successful in the South (Lloyd, 1972). Arising from the official policy of the colonial administration it was obvious that ethnicity has been introduced into all facets of development in Nigeria. Within its policy thrust, the British Colonialist also divided the country into three regional lines for the purpose of administration with each of the three big ethnic groups being dominant in their respective domains. Adebisi (1988) thus sees regionalization policy, as “creating the best condition for the development of tribal loyalties and inter-ethnic conflicts in contemporary Nigeria”. Thus what emerged was a Nigeria standing on a tripod of North, East and West dominated and represented by Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, respectively. This later formed the basis for action or in-action with respect to the colonialists. Ethnic loyalties were not only therefore developed but overtly encouraged as the groups became more of ‘in-groups’ rather than obeisance in the Nigerian nation.

For instance in the agitation for independence from the colonialists, political movements employed ethnic associations as the tool for mobilization and decolonization. Such associations include Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Urhobo Union, Ibibio Union, Egbejo, TIV Union etc. This, the Nigerian state carried through independence up to date. Ethnic sentiments today are easily deployed to achieve narrow myopic and in-group objectives. Thus the practice has permeated all the fabrics of the Nigerian nation-academic, churches, mosques associations, clubs, and political parties among others. For instance, in the process towards the 1979 presidential elections in Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik) was disqualified from contesting allegedly for his inability to produce a tax clearance certificate paid as and when due. The next day he called a world press conference and alleged that he was being discriminated against because “he was Igbo”. He was reinstated on the order of the military head of state. Adebisi (1988) captures this succinctly when he notes that “the ubiquity of ethnicity and ethnicism has made propaganda to become a regular pastime among the Nigerian people, especially in official circles as avenues for achieving selfish interests bothering on politics and economics”.

Arising from this adversarial relationship within Nigeria’s plural entity are centrifugal tendencies camouflaging as ethnicity. Although ethnic groups are defined as ‘social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries’ (Nnoli, 1978), ethnicity connotes a universal concept for understanding the phenomenon which colonial racism referred to as tribalism. The concept of ethnicity therefore refers to culturally specific practices and a set of unique symbols and cosmology. Osaghae (1994) posits that ethnicity is a social construct used for ethnic identity and differences in order to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict and cooperation. Ethnicity is therefore a negative pattern of
interaction towards other groups of people whose unity rests on racial, linguistic, religious or cultural ties that are exclusive to the group (Adesina and Adefolaju, 2004). What this comes down to, is that the concept breeds prejudice and discrimination (Ojie, 1998).

In Nigeria today, these ethnic groupings have been the basis for discrimination and exclusion. This has led to suspicion and eventually, conflicts manifesting in intermittent eruptions of inter-ethnic disputes, mutual intolerance and religious strives in many parts of the country. This series of acrimonies led to a civil war between the Eastern part and the rest of the country between 1967 and 1970 that put the country on the brink of disintegration. According to former Governor Gbenga Daniel of Ogun State, the war was caused, among other things, by Nigeria’s inability to manage its plurality (The Guardian, Jan. 17, 2004). The period of the civil war turned out to be the most united period amongst the remaining non-seceding part of the country. However no sooner, the war ended than ethnicity resurfaced. Each ethnic group went back to ‘its tent’.

The aftermath was the resurgences of the agitation for self-determination by the various major ethnic groups. This urge of ethnic nationalism has led to the establishment of ethnic organizations whose objectives are similar to their pre-independence predecessors. They are Afenifere, for the Yoruba nation, Ohaneze for the Igbo nation, Arewa, for the Hausa/Fulani and Izon National Congress for the Izon (jawa) nation. Subsequently, military wings of these organizations have been established, they are Odua People’s Congress (OPC), for the Yoruba nation; Bakassi Boys for the Igbo, Egbesu Boys for the Izon nation. As opined by Ehusani (1996), all these organizations and similar ones function and operate to undermine the integrity and sovereignty of Nigeria.

**Cultural Pluralism and the Dynamics of Development in Nigeria**

The increased quest for ethnic exclusivity in recent times in Nigeria has continued to polarize the country with the attendant adverse consequences on development. Otite (2000) asserts that this enduring agitation is caused by the socio-economic imbalance in the country while Chief Gbenga Daniel believes that Nigeria’s heterogeneous status is problematic arising from the reality or perception that access to the commonwealth is unequal and far between (Guardian, Jan. 27, 2004). In consequences Nigerian leaders have exploited the situation to further their ethnically-structured social, economic and political objectives at the expense of national integration. That Nigeria is not a united country today is exemplified in the sing-song slogan ‘the unity of the country is not negotiable’ by government/political leaders.

This is evident in the appearance of many centrifugal tendencies which are threatening or working for the dismemberment of the country such as the current Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, the activities of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the East and the militants in the Niger Delta. The consequences of these acts of mutual intolerance, inter-ethnic clashes and extreme ethnic nationalism are located within the prism of the country’s level of socio-economic development. One hundred years since the amalgamation of the various ethnic nationalities and over fifty years since independence, the country is still under-developed.

The country is vulnerable on all indices of development in spite of the availability of human and material resources. Agbakoba (1996) posits that:

*By 1994, 90 million Nigerians had no access to safe water to drink in spite of huge resources and endowments. Social infrastructures have declined to a point where staying alive is a hazard. The cause of all this suffering is really and easily identifiable – a rapacious, corrupt and unaccountable government of military and civil rulers.*

In the manufacturing sector, for instance, the Federal Government admitted its frustration when it notes that ‘activities in this sector have fallen short of expectation… that even though the sector holds the key to income generation and poverty alleviation, its share of the GDP has been minimal’ (FRN, 2010). Amakom (2008) also notes that Nigeria’s interface with industrialization since independence is a classic case of misfortune as the sector’s share of GDP declined from 11 per cent in the 1970s to 5 per cent in 2000.

In the education sector, government’s investment has been dismally low in contrast to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) recommendation of 26% of annual budget of developing nations to be spent on education. Nigeria spends between 3%-5% annually (Daily Independent, 2013). The consequence of the many years of neglect in this sector is captured by Chidi Odinkalu, Chairman, Nigeria National Human Rights Commission when he notes:

*The educational system is in such a bad shape; it has become a threat to co-existence, national security… Adult literacy (15+) is well below 50% of the population: 38.38% for women; 59.30% for males or an average of 48.66% for the adult population; total adult literate population is estimated at about 21,823,300. Net secondary school enrolment is 26.95%; 24.93% for girls and 28.88% for boys. UNESCO estimated that over 10.5 million children in Nigeria do not have access to*
education. Nigeria ranks last – 136th of 136th countries surveyed by UNESCO with reference to public spending on education as a proportion of GDP, the proportion of public spending on education in Nigeria as a percentage of GDP is 0.89%. Education expenditure as a proportion of Gross National Income (GNI) is 0.85% or 167th out of 168 countries (Premium Times, 2013).

With regard to health, the abysmal state of health in Nigeria (Kolawole and Abegunde, 2011, Abdullahi, Fawole and Saliman, 2011), prompted Dr. Ogan, the then Chief Medical Director, University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, Calabar, to declare that “healthcare delivery in Nigeria is dead” (Vanguard, 2012). Poor funding and low infrastructural development have been the lot in this sector and thus has prompted many government officials and rich Nigerians to go abroad for medical intervention and thereby further impoverishing the country. In the area of job creation, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) has asserted that the unemployment rate in Nigeria is now 23.9percent (This Day, 2013).

At the political level, Dr Dapo Fafowora a former Nigerian Ambassador to the United Nations opines that the indirect rule system that accompanied the 1914 amalgamation remains the major source of ethnic and tribal politics today in Nigeria (The Nation, 2013). He further notes that ethnicity continues to have undesirable consequences on the country’s politics and subsequently governance in the following ways:

a. Political tension and instability as the various groups jostle for power and economic dominance at the center, state and local levels;

b. Lack of accountability in governance as the tribal leaders fan the embers of ethnic competition to conceal their lack of commitment to good governance and the democratic process; Massive public corruption at all levels in the quest for personal and tribal economic power and influence. There is no universality of values among the various ethnic groups as so much is at stake in the competition for power;

c. Electoral malpractices to keep the ruling group in power at all costs; and

d. The use of State-sponsored force to keep a ruling ethnic group in power regardless of its popularity (The Nation, 2011).

All these scenarios, among several other realities of underdevelopment have exacerbated poverty in the country. The country and its citizens now wallow in abject poverty. Dr. Obi Ezekwesili, a former Minister for Education and former Vice-President of the World Bank, concludes that Nigeria is the best example of the African paradox. According to her, the country has struggled with development process for over 50years since independence despite being the sixth largest producer of oil in the world, earning more than half a trillion dollars in oil export (The Punch, 2013). As at 2012, 69 percent of Nigerians lived in poverty (NBS, 2012). The per capita income is $2,700 compared to South Korea, $30,801; Malaysia, $17,143; South Africa $11,600 and Singapore, $6,180.

According to the Nigerian Employers’ Consultative Association (NECA), with the country’s Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of 153 (out of 186 countries), coupled with lamentable ratings in health, education, and per capita income, Nigeria remains one of the poorest countries in the world and among the 30 poorest in Africa (Vanguard, 2013). On the United Nations’ (UNO) quality of life index rating, Nigeria ranks 156 out of 187 (Vanguard, 2011).

This paper thus posits that successive Nigerian leaders are accountable for the current state of socio-economic development of the country. This is because of their inability to harness the country’s resources for the desired development. It further asserts that the bane of a nation’s development does not lie in its heterogeneity per se. Through a focused leadership many countries in the world, in the face multi-ethnic challenges, have motivated and guided their citizens towards national integration and development. Such countries include Russia, the United States of America, Canada, Brazil, Switzerland, Malaysia, Singapore and several others that have successfully blended their various ethnic groups for national development. These countries have tapped on their culturally-diversified population through consensus-building of their core values. This certainly is not the case with Nigeria which over the years has yearned for a nationalist and patriotic leader.

Leadership concerns the process of influencing and guiding other people to achieve group objectives. Alder Consulting in assessing the development status of Nigeria concludes that “the critical problem with Nigeria is leadership whose focus shifted from stewardship and trusteeship to power and self (The Comet, 2004)”. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo agrees with this notion as he notes that the solution to Nigeria’s problems lie in its leaders, adding that the socio-economic transformation of Nigeria lies in the absolute faith, confidence and trust in the country’s leadership (The Guardian, 2004). Akume (2012) believes that the weak character of leadership in the economic, social and political spheres have continued to produce undesirable environment favourable for growing poverty, unemployment and inequality among the population of the country. Similarly world re-known Nigerian author, Professor Chinua Achebe says the main reason for the horrible state of affairs in the country has nothing to do with geography or climate or the type of food that Nigerians eat. Rather the trouble with Nigeria is the recurrent blizzard of mediocre and corrupt leadership (Achebe, 1983).

The Nigerian state is not oblivious of the plural nature and structure of country especially with regard to the
adverse effects on nationhood and development. It has therefore taken some pro-active and affirmative measures to moderate the disruptive tendencies of the various configurations with a view to closing the ethnic divide. Some of these include the adoption of the ‘Quota system’ and the ‘Federal Character’ principle, the creation of states and local government councils and the establishment of federal institutions such as Unity Schools, National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), with a view to forging national unity with the involvement of Nigerians based on state representation. However the Federal Character principle is the most prominent of the affirmative actions taken by the Nigerian State. Federal Character principle is an affirmative action deliberately constructed to ensure the proper and equitable distribution of amenities and projects among the federating units in a country. This principle was given constitutional recognition as an affirmative action to correct and manage obvious inequalities in the Nigerian state, with the establishment of an institution known as Federal Character Commission (FCC) in Section 14: Sub-section 3 of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The principles were also captured in the 1999 Constitution under Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. Chapter II: Section 14 (3) provides that:

The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no pre-dominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies (FRN, 1999).

These provisions are applicable at both States and Local Government Areas of the country.

Furthermore, Section 15 (2) reinstates that national integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited. Section 153:1 then makes provision for the establishment of, among others, a Federal Character Commission with the objectives of:

(a) Working out an equitable formula for the distribution of all cadres of posts in the public service of the Federation and of the State, the Armed Forces of the Federation, Nigeria Police Force and other government security agencies, government-owned companies and parastatals of the States.

(b) Promoting, monitoring and enforcing compliance with the principles of proportional sharing of all bureaucratic, economic, media and political posts at all levels of government (FRN, 1999).

By and large, the Commission is to foster a sense of belonging among all Nigerians through the equitable sharing of the posts in the Public Service without sacrificing merit. It should also see to the fair distribution of socio-economic amenities to ensure even development among the federating units of Nigeria.

In spite of this bold attempt by government to stem the tide of mutual distrust among the various ethnic groups in the country as enunciated in the constitution, several commentators have condemned its implementation process. While Suberu (2001) sees it as ‘geographical apartheid’ Mustapha (2007) believes it is ‘discriminatory’. For Oyovbaire (1983), the Federal Character principle as practiced in Nigeria has nothing but encouraged “mediocrity in position of power and meritocracy helpless, of no value and unwanted”. The totality of the criticism against the implementation of this affirmative action is that it has fostered reverse discrimination and jettisoned merit as it has been found that qualified persons are rejected for unqualified and incompetent ones, all in the name of balancing. Dudley (1968) reports on the northernisation policy of the then ruling Northern People’s Congress (NPC) that: “If a qualified northerner is available, he is given priority in recruitment, if no northerner is available, an expatriate may be recruited or a non-northerner on contract terms”. While this has left the rejected persons frustrated, another consequence is the burden of inefficiency and poor performance bestowed on the system.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has focused on the issue of ethnic relations in Nigeria and the consequences on national integration and development. The paper posits that Britain’s amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914 and the subsequent colonial pattern of administration fostered ethnic rivalry among the various ethnic groups in the country. Unfortunately the successor local elite could not prevent playing the ethnic card due to their vested interests. This has led to the development of discriminatory and prejudicial opinions and attitudes by the ethnic groups against each other. This has manifested in all spheres of Nigeria’s life today—ethnic, religious, political, economic, social class, etc. Thus while leaders in other climes with multi-ethnic/cultural colouration were able to muster and motivate their people for national development, Nigerian leaders were busy fanning the embers of discord and disunity among the ethnic groups. When this is not the case they pretend that all is well with the system until other gory rounds of communal/ethnic clashes are recorded with attendant loss of humans and property. Thus rather than being an instrument for national development, the multi-cultural nature of Nigeria has become a source of conflict which has tended to undermine the corporate existence of the country.

In spite of all efforts by the State to prevent/ resolve these conflicts they have continued unabated. As it
appears that the source of the unhealthy rivalry among the various ethnic groups is the control of the national government which symbolizes power, prestige and wealth, the paper recommends the devolution of power to the federating units, where as it happened during the first republic when the regions operated as the federating units and therefore engaged in healthy competition for development. Nigeria currently runs a lopsided federal system of government- more or less a unitary system- with over-concentration of power and resources at the center leaving the forced federating units with little or nothing to run the business of governance. In addition Nigeria must ingrain social justice which is a veritable source for socio-economic development with the consequence of a healthy, harmonious, reliable, predictable social and psychological atmosphere for the economic growth and development of the country.

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