

# ETHNICITY IN THE MATRIX OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

Some come features of the post-colonial states in Africa include their multi-ethnic composition, disagreements and conflicts among the groups and sometimes armed conflicts. Unfortunately for Nigeria it fits into the above hue. Considering the unending antagonism among the ethnic groups in Nigeria, the subject of how best to manage their relationships remains topical. Among other things, this work examines the nature of the ethnicity phenomenon in Nigeria, how it has affected and negated reconciliation among the groups and re-emphasizes some steps that must be adopted to continuously address the problem.

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**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Nigeria, Reconciliation, Matrix

## Introduction

The multi-group composition of most modern states constitutes a major visible feature of such states. These groups have sometimes been referred to as “tribes”, and other times as “ethnic” groups. The negotiations, struggles and competitions among the diverse groups in such states have often had the capacity of generating conflicts. While some states have done relatively well in recognising and reconciling their multi-ethnic configuration, others have not done so well. This latter situation has sometimes threatened the stability and unity of such states. Nigeria belongs to the latter group.

The Nigerian state, like many other African States, has often been compelled to deal with the issue of national integration, especially in moments of intense ethnic disagreements which have sometimes degenerated into violent conflicts, with the attendant destruction and waste of both human lives and properties. At the heart of the cause of the Nigerian Civil War

was the disagreement between some of the major ethnic groups in the country.(Erhagbe,2002; Ekeh,1972).

Scholars and general commentators on Africa have sought for the reasons for the disintegrative tendencies in African States. While other points are sometimes highlighted, the seeming most portent and often volatile cause has been found in the concept, manifestation and application of ethnicity, as a factor in intergroup relations within the body politic of the different nations. In recent times, ethnic conflicts such as those involving the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda as well as those of the ethnic Albanians, Serbs and Croats in Old Yugoslavia, are indicative of the universal capacity of ethnicity to generate conflicts and destruction. Although Nigeria has not in recent times witnessed ethnic conflicts of the magnitude of the Nigerian Civil War configuration, the fact remains that the “ethnicity bug” has remained and has spun out competition and conflicts, some of which have been catastrophic for inter-group relations, and even threatened the fabric of the country’s unity and nationalism. As observed by Otite, “the ethnic virus has been one of the most important causes of social crises and political instability of Nigeria; and ethnicity has been perceived in general as a major obstacle to the overall politico-economic development of the country.”(Otite,1990:145). What is this “evil”, ethnicity, how has it manifested itself in Nigerian body polity, and in what ways is it likely to affect the efforts aimed at peace and reconciliation in Nigeria?; these are some of the questions that are covered in this work.

### **The Concept of Ethnicity**

The concept of ethnicity has over the years generated multitude of definitions, in terms of its meaning, manifestations, dimensions and effects on society. Different theoretical expositions on it have been offered, but for our purpose we will want to adopt the definition of ethnicity as a phenomenon which as a concept “applies to the consciousness of belonging to, identifying with and being loyal to a social group distinguished by shared cultural traditions, a common language, in group sentiment and self-identity.”(Otite,1990). It is well known, that in the past, it was the concept of “tribalism” which European writers, including anthropologists, historians and political scientists used to describe African groups that fit into the mode of the definition of ethnic groups. Thus it is not uncommon that the two concepts are often used as mutually inter-changeable. The pejorative connotation of “tribe” which is used to categorise groups that are “uncivilised” has led many contemporary writers on African societies to prefer “ethnicity” to “tribalism” in discussing group affiliation and identity.

It is obvious from the working definition above that ethnicity as a concept has to do with identification of groups within a given country or state. This identification is based on those common features that tend to distinguish the members of a group from other groups. An important feature of ethnic identification is the fact that relations among members of the group are based on origins, descent and the evolution overtime of common cultural features such as language. In this regard, ethnic groups are taken as given, that and are in a sense static. More recent discussions of ethnicity however, point out that although “ethnic groups” may have a natural existence, the consciousness about them and making them functional in a society or nation is the result of deliberate effort of highlighting the differences among the groups.(Otite 1990:17-19; Nnoli,1978).

In the light of the last assertion above for example, it could be argued that the concept of the Yoruba ethnic group as a factor in Nigerian politics came by way of deliberate political engineering that emphasised the commonality of their affiliation especially in relation to other ethnic groups in the country. It has been elsewhere that it was this ethnic identification that influenced the early political parties in Nigeria, whose membership were dominated by identifiable ethnic groups.(Erhagbe,2002).

In a way, it could be argued therefore that “ethnic groups” exist naturally, but bringing them to “true and active” life is the handiwork of men and women, especially politicians.(Ake,1985; Eteng,1990).

As argued by Professor Fred Omu “a sense of ethnic affiliation is not inherently a threat to harmonious inter-group relations”, this is because, “people in one ethnic group may be aware of socio-cultural differences with other groups but they continue to live together in peace. However, ethnicity has the capacity to acquire passionate and aggressive attributes, when it is now a factor in some given situations, the most important being that of competition for socio-economic and political privileges or rights in a geo-political set-up.”(Omu,1998). In this last regard, Omu further avers that, “political competition and rivalry seems to be the most inflameable instrument of ethnic aggression”(Omu,1998). Brass argues that, “the cultural forms, values, and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elite in competition for political power and economic advantage”(Brass,1991). Thus ethnicity has the potential of being manipulated to the level that it generates conflicts within society. It is in this light that, some commentators on Nigeria’s political history seem to have come to the conclusion that ethnicity is “an all pervading evil which must necessarily be obliterated from (the) society, if social progress and political stability are to be achieved” in Nigeria, which is a plural society.(Ajayi,1998). Thus ethnicity is seen as “throwing up centrifugal forces which

result in the mal-integration of ethnic groups and consequently political instability” (Ajayi, 1998:40) within the country. The history of inter-group (ethnic) relations in Nigeria, including its immediate past, has tended to make germane and relevant, the question of whether ethnicity is an obstacle to peace and reconciliation in Nigeria, especially as the country has continued to contend centrifugal forces that threaten the unity of the country, as recently displayed in the 2011 General Elections. What had been Nigeria’s historical antecedents in terms of ethnic relations, and in the light of contemporary developments in the country’s socio-political life, is ethnicity, likely to be an impediment to reconciliation and peace in the country?

### **The Ethnicity Factor in Nigeria before 1966**

Nigeria, with a land area of approximately 923, 768 square kilometres now has an estimated population of more than 167 million people. It is now generally estimated that there are some 400 ethnic groups of varying sizes and cohesiveness that are to be found in Nigeria. These groups for the most part, before British Colonial rule had remained largely separate, although some form of interaction, especially in form of trade, religious ties and sometimes politics did occur (Ikime, 2006). It is interesting to note here that these members of the same “ethnic group” in many cases did not see themselves as necessarily belonging to the same family, and sometimes they had better and more cordial relations with people of other ethnic groups than they had with members of their own group. Hence, it has been argued elsewhere that although some ethnic groups may conjure the image of long-established and homogenous entities some others are historically recent accretions (that is being brought together) some obvious facts about the ethnic groups in Nigeria are that they vary in sizes, level of cohesiveness or homogeneity, religions, language and otherwise and they are in most cases to be found within identifiable geo-political boundaries. (Otite, 1990).

Nigeria’s heterogeneity as a nation is clearly manifested in the multiplicity of its ethnic groups. While recognising the existence of over three hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria, it has become fashionable to categorise these groups along the lines of majority and minority ethnic groups. (Otite, 1990:44-57). Incidentally, each of the major ethnic groups has a geographical area of dominance, while myriad of minority groups exist side by side with them. Sometimes, major ethnic groups are presented in a compound form, hence in terms of the identification of the ethnic groups in Nigeria, one of the often identified groups is that of the Hausa/Fulani which predominates in the North of Nigeria; while the other often identified major groups are Yorubas in the West and the Igbos in the East. A remarkable feature of this

order of things is that there are such other recognisable groups as the Kanuri, Tiv, Ibibio, Efik, Kalabiri, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaw, Edo, Birion, who as stated earlier are settled in various regions where the major groups exist.

It is important to note that the various groups are identified on the basis of consanguinity in terms of their traditions of origins, cultural affinities and similarities, especially in the realm of language, and sometimes in terms of their political preferences and practices. It should be noted however, that within the major ethnic groups, there exist sub-ethnic divisions, as is more visible among the Yorubas, “where the Oyo, Egba, Egbado, Ijebu, Ijesa, Ekiti, Ondo, Akoko, Owo and Ife retain a strong consciousness of their separateness”. Thus within their regions or locations this separateness features in the determination of the dynamics of their relations.

While internal differences and dichotomies do exist within the major ethnic groups, the fact remains that outside of their geographical location and at the level of national interaction there is a greater tendency towards oneness among the sub-groups. As noted earlier in this presentation, there is nothing inherently destructive, negative and disintegrative about ethnicity and the identification with members of one’s group, but the fact remains that ethnicity has the capacity of being manipulated to becoming quite disintegrative, destabilising and destructive, especially in terms of the ways that various groups interact with themselves. Historians, political scientists, sociologists/anthropologists and general observers of the evolution of the Nigerian polity recognise ethnicity as a major factor that has affected and helped to chart the course of the country’s history. Most of the works that have examined the place of ethnicity in the nation’s evolution, have emphasised the way it has negatively impacted on the nation’s development, and many still believe that the ethnicity factor remains a portent force that could and still works against peace and reconciliation in the Nigeria of today.(Ikime,1987, Otite,1990:145).

A pertinent question here is why is it that ethnicity has been a problem for Nigeria, and many other nations. This answer is best captured by Pieterse who identified different forms of ethnicity, including “competition ethnicity”, there is competition over resources of the states and development.(Pieterse,1997). Thus the mere existence of ethnic groups identified along the lines of cultural forms, values and practices, does not automatically guarantee conflict in a nation, rather it is the way these groups see themselves, relate and compete for power, and other resources of state, that has the capacity of creating crisis, this is exactly what has happened in Nigeria.

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In Nigeria, from the immediate pre-independence era, ethnicity reared its head, as was noticed in the formation of political parties each of which was dominant in a particular region and was attached to each of the major ethnic groups in the region. It is instructive to note that some of the parties had at their nucleus at the time of formation, members of an ethnic group that had established pan-ethnic group that had established Egbe Omo Oduduwa of the Yorubas that dominates the Action Group Party, the Igbo State Union, whose members became dominant in the National Council of Nigerian Citizens and the “Jamiyya Mutanen Arewa” that metamorphosed into the Northern Peoples Congress.(Erhagbe,2002; Coleman,1958;Ezera,1960). The inherent concomitant consequence of the origins of these parties was that their ethnic coloration later clearly manifested in their areas of dominance and the political agenda that they pursued in subsequent years.

It is instructive to note that the political parties aimed at protecting the interests of the members of the ethnic group that dominated their membership. It is for this reason that many have argued that when ethnicity was introduced into the Nigerian political terrain, it came as a disintegrative force, since it fuelled competition for power and national resources for development along ethnic lines. In the subsequent ensuing contest, and in the administration of the Regions where each of the parties was dominant, the minority ethnic groups in these areas now felt marginalised, neglected and oppressed, hence the early agitation for minority rights, which now led such groups to seek for regions of their own and later states.

The immediate post-independence politics of Nigeria, witnessed so much acrimonious struggles, disagreements and contests among the ethnic groups, and these eventually culminated in the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. The fact is that although many reasons have been adduced for the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, the pivotal and over-arching cause was the ethnic disagreements, and perceived insecurity of members of the Igbo ethnic group in the Nigerian nation. It was therefore not surprising that in the course of the war, it gradually became obvious that most of the minority ethnic groups in the Eastern region were

not in support of the succession bid of the Igbo. Without doubt, the outbreak of and prosecution of the Civil War, marked the high point in the way ethnicity has negatively affected the unity and peace of Nigeria.(Erhagbe,2002; Ekeh,1972). It can be argued that the immediate post civil war era in Nigeria witnessed the dousing of bellicose ethnic struggles in Nigeria. But in the politics of the Second Republic (1973-1983) the ethnicity factor once again reared its head, especially in the formation of political parties and citizens' affiliation and identification with the parties. Hence it was not surprising that the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), and the Nigeria's People Party (NPP) were dominant, respectively in the areas or states where the leaders of the parties had their ethnic groups as could be noticed in the UPN dominance in Yorubaland and the NPP in Igboland. Political debates and contests during this period were always tainted with ethnic biases and proclivities.

As it were, the Second Republic was toppled by the military. The immediate past period of military intervention in Nigeria's politics, witnessed a seeming brazen blatant and flagrant utilisation of ethnicity in deciding on national policies and in the making of political appointments. In this climate, massive consistent and orchestrated cries of ethnic marginalisation and domination tended to pervade the political terrain. (Ako-Nai, 2004). The cries of the ethnic minorities rent the air, and even the major ethnic groups jumped on each others throat, accusing others of marginalisation and domination. The most eloquent testimony to these acrimonious disagreements among the diverse ethnic groups was and is still to be found in the call for a sovereign national conference where all the ethnic groups in Nigeria were and are expected to re-negotiate the basis of nation's federation, with a view to protesting and respecting the rights of all the ethnic groups in the federation. (Azeez,2004; Eteng,2004).

Protests by ethnic group agitators have bordered on neglect in appointments to offices especially "key offices", neglect in terms of allocation of resources to their areas for development, and perceived victimisation in the scheme of things. Interestingly, these protests have been determined by the relative geo-political level of interaction. Thus, a major ethnic group that might be complaining of neglect at the national level may at a state level of administration accused of marginalising and dominating other groups. In the ensuing contests for power and resources, the different ethnic groups have sometimes resorted to violence, especially in recent times when the minority groups have become very militant and assertive about their rights and in seeking for better deal from the system. Some of the groups, although they have not overtly resorted to violence or arms in seeking for redress in their fight against exclusion, or struggle for supremacy vis-a-vis the others, had threatened to

break away from the union, that is the ultimate solution. Agitators of ethnic rights in Nigeria have been able to latch on to the threat of secession because the ethnic groups are territorially based, i.e. they have geographical areas where they are dominant and therefore always think that they can break away from what some of them have called the “artificial federation” in Nigeria.

It is obvious that because of the fact that the state is the main controller of power and the agency for enrichment by individuals and for provision of social amenities, there has been consistent struggle for the control of state power. This situation has been exacerbated by the seeming over concentration of power and resources at the centre-hence there is often an unceasing struggle for supremacy among the major ethnic groups, while the minority groups have been unrelenting and unwavering in their protests against marginalisation and clamour for equity, justice and respect for their rights. Ethnic competition and struggle would remain a permanent feature of nation states that have plural ethnic groups. Most states have tried to work to ameliorate and reduce the intensity of the contents and the conflicts they generate by adopting different tactics especially constitutional provision for safeguards for the interests of all groups within the country (federation). The Nigerian State right from the colonial period has admitted to address the issue of its multi-ethnic complexion.(Eteng,2004).

A major way in which Nigeria has sought to address the problem of multi-ethnicity has been through the process of deliberate political engineering, such as the adoption of constitutional frameworks that have specially addressed the problem. The various constitutions of the country since independence have deliberately addressed the issue of ethnic balancing in terms of political appointments and distribution of social amenities. A very eloquent constitutional provision that attempts to recognise the ethnic plurality of Nigeria is to be found in Chapter II Section 14 Sub-section 3 of the 1999 Constitution. (Nigerian Government,1999). This constitutional provision states inter alia that: “The composition of the Government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried but in such 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 predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.”(Nigerian Government, 1999:LL26). In Section 15 Sub-section 2, the Constitution states 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.” Unfortunately

ethnic disagreements and sometimes conflicts have tended to hinder the efforts at national integration.

It can be observed that if adequate attention has been paid to the above provisions, it would have gone a long way in ensuring an even and equitable spread in terms of representation in government which in itself would have helped to douse ethnic proclivities among the citizens of the country. Unfortunately this has not been the case.

It was with the objective of realising the “Federal Character” principle of representation in government that the idea of the “quota system” was introduced. While the “Federal character” principle is laudable, the fact remains that unfortunately it has sometimes been ignored and in other cases when used it has been abused, in such a way as to favour persons from the same ethnic group with those in government. It has therefore not been surprising that in recent years in Nigeria, everybody seems to have been talking of marginalisation of his/her ethnic groups, and their general alienation from the nation. This situation led the new Head of State General Olusegun Obasanjo to declare in his inauguration speech that he intends “to reconcile all those who feel alienated by past political events.” Without doubt, past actions of government whether at the federal, state or local government levels had tended to favour some ethnic groups, to the detriment of others in terms of appointments and allocation of resources, this is why ethnicity has become a serious obstacle to national reconciliation. Would this always be so?

Our analysis leads us to assert that from our knowledge of comparative history and politics, ethnicity as a basis of affiliation, like other forms of group identification, which sometimes include religious affiliation has come to stay. That is to say that even in a “United Nation” like the United States of America, ethnic identification and the general recognition of their society as a multi-cultural and ethnic one, have come to stay.(Young,1993). Although ethnicity and multiculturalism have the potential of creating conflicts, antagonisms and disharmony in societies, such as Nigeria, they can be better and properly managed to minimise their negative features or consequences. For Nigeria, in the years ahead it is imperative that in order to minimise the negative consequences of ethnicity, some, if not all the following points must be adhered to or noted, and vigorously pursued:

In the first place, there is the urgent need to practise “true Federalism” in the country, which means there should be reduction in the powers and resources at the centre. Such a reduction would invariably reduce the intensity of the struggle of the various ethnic groups for control of the centre.

Secondly, the “Federal Character” provision as entrenched in the Federal Constitution should be applied at the national level, and this would ensure that no group would have a feeling of alienation and marginalisation. In addition, at other tiers of government, a deliberate effort should be made to be equitable in appointments and distribution of amenities.

It is also imperative that national integrative policies, such as the National Youth Service Corper ( NYSC), federal character clause, in terms of admission into federal Unity Schools and universities should be consolidated and expanded, instead of the current retrogressive policy of reducing the “Catchment area” for Federal institutions. While some have tended to criticize the issue of ‘quota’ in the body politic of Nigeria, the fact remains that the policy is akin to the US policy of ‘affirmative Action’ which is targeted at addressing the imbalances among groups, especially those identified as marginalized in the society. It follows that for the sake of addressing the urgent need for ethnic harmony in the country this policy should be conscientiously pursued. It is in the same vein that we strongly aver that although the NYSC scheme is presently facing a major challenge in the form of terrorist attacks and bombings in the Northern part of the country, which is causing prospective youth corpors from the South to reject postings to the North the noble ideals of the scheme should not be jettisoned, rather, a review to address the exigencies of the moment should be carried out.

Thirdly, non-ethnic affiliations such as trade unions, class and professional affiliations should be encouraged. This latter policy would help to break the boundaries of ethnicity and foster unity. Solidarity achieved in these spheres has tended to foster national integration.

It is a well known historical fact that through the ages, and across times positive inter group relations have been fostered through inter-group marriages. Hence inter-ethnic marriages amongst the diverse groups in Nigeria should be encouraged and celebrated.

The national policy on education as it affects language acquisition should be strengthened. (Awonusi, 2004; Emananjo 1985:123-134). Along this line it is expected that apart from the student’s indigenous language, he or she should develop competency in one of the recognized languages of Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba.

In the final analysis, justice, fairness, and equity would engender the peoples trust in the system and minimise the ethnic antagonisms that have tended to undermine reconciliation in Nigeria. The surest way to achieve this is the entrenchment of good governance in the country. While meeting the needs of the citizenry as per the basic necessities of life and the

general delivery of the ‘dividends of democracy’, the national incubus, corruption, that is having a strangle hold on the country needs to be decisively tackled.

It is important to point out a disturbing aspect of ethnicity, which in very recent times has tended to undermined and threaten ethnic harmony and co-existence in Nigeria. This transcends the issue of struggle for power and resources, instead, it is the issue of ethnic clashes, that have resulted in the serious loss of lives and properties. It is instructive to note that most of these clashes have been precipitated by rather seeming innocuous harmless and personal conflicts, which are quickly mis-read along ethnic lines. Sometimes, religious conflicts have been transformed into ethnic conflicts. These conflicts if unchecked and properly managed could threaten the very fabric of national unity, especially with the settlement patterns of persons of different ethnic groups in different parts of the country. Through deliberate and planned information management, the peoples of Nigeria should be made to realise that no ethnic group can molest or manhandle those from other groups settled among them, because this has the capacity of igniting reactions and counteractions against the kith’s and kin’s settled in their “peoples territories”. Harmonious, peaceful and fraternal co-existence should be emphasised.

An emerging new trend in ethnic conflicts in Nigeria which seems to have a salutary impact on the co-existence of the major ethnic groups in the country, is that most of the new conflicts are not among the majority groups, so the territorial dichotomization doesn’t exist, instead the conflicts are among neighbouring ethnic groups such as the Berom and Fulani in Jos, Plateau State. In a recent statement the berom claimed they had lost over 10,000 people due to Fulani attacks.(Vanguard,July 16,2012:6) It follows that the need for good ethnic co-existence should not only be emphasized for the major ethnic groups but amongst all the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of ethnicity is common to multi-ethnic societies or countries. It can manifest itself in different forms with the worst manifestation being that of ethnic misunderstanding leading to ethnic cleansing. The Nigeria situation shows that the ethnicity factor is a vital and vibrant one which has and still affects the evolution of the country. Like in most other parts of the world, the phenomenon has generated competition, tension and conflict in the inter-group relations in the country. While these have sometimes and do seem to threaten national unity and reconciliation, the fact remains that the leaders of government and elite of the various ethnic groups have major roles to play in minimising the negative

effect of ethnicity. Ethnicity in itself is not destructive instead it is the result of what it is put to that makes it a negative factor and would constitute it into an obstacle against national reconciliation.

For Nigeria's stability and the achievement of national unity and reconciliation, it is imperative for Nigerians to see themselves as belonging to one indivisible country, where 'thou tribes and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand.' The reign of justice, equity, fairness and respect for the rule of law and the rights of all citizens will go a long way in guaranteeing true national reconciliation in Nigeria. Nigerians have shown for the most part that they can accommodate themselves and co-exist, what is therefore required is a conscious pursuit of the relevant policies and programmes that will foster the bonds of unity in the "country and help to bring down the barriers to reconciliation often created by ethnicity".

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