THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC POLITICS AND ITS IMPACTS ON POST COLONIAL GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria party politic has been polluted by ethnic chauvinism. This problem is one of the major qualms confronting the progress of liberal democracy in Nigeria since 1960, to the extent that ethnic sentiment has gradually crept in to find a place in every faced of Nigerian political activity. Ethnic sentiment has been one of the factors responsible for most of the inefficiencies and low productivity in Nigeria. The major focus of this paper is to trace the historical origin, growth and development of ethnicity and the effects it has had on post-colonial governance in Nigeria. In the findings of this paper, it was discovered that ethnic sentiment was deliberately introduced and propagated in the polity by the British colonial government to realize colonial and imperialist economic and political objectives. It was also found that since the end of colonialism in 1960, Nigeria has carried forward the spirit of ethnicity into the post-colonial Nigeria, this vice has been discovered to have been responsible for most of the political, administrative, economic, social and cultural maladies in Nigeria. The data that was used to support this argument was got from the secondary method of data acquisition. At the concluding remark, it is suggested that, indigene-settle phenomenon should be strong discouraged while the Federal Character principles be genuinely implemented at the federal, state and local government levels in other to remove the age long ethnic unrest in the governance of Nigeria.

Keywords: The Origin, Development, Ethnic Politics, Impacts, Post-Colonial Governance

Introduction

It has been estimated that Nigeria has as much as 350 ethnic groups based on lingual classification. However, the "United Nations says there are

250 ethnic groups in Nigeria many consider this as underestimated. A federal government demographic survey in 1976 identified 394 language groups, one estimate put it as high as 400 with the highest density of languages in Taraba and Adamawa States" (www.thenation onlineng.net). The above statement clearly depicts that Nigeria is multi-lingual in nature. The diverse nature of the Nigeria state as a result of tribal differences, this therefore lays the foundation for the exploitation of what goes on in the country. This is further precipitated on the fact that these ethnic groups though housed in one country, they do not have the same needs, objectives and aspirations. Based on these ethnical inclinations, it seems cumbersome as it were to treat the Nigeria project without considering the ethnic formation of country.

Ethnicity therefore has become a strong factor in the political life of Nigeria. Most often ethnic sentiments are used to replace merit and skills, such that round pegs are no longer found in round holes. This chauvinistic behavior affects the efficiency and productivity of Nigeria.

Nonetheless, is fundamental to inquire where this, feeling of "we and they" notion came from. When did Nigerians start feelings that the other person does not belong to his enclave or he is better than the other group or ethnic?

It seems ethnicity was a colonial heritage bequeathed to Nigeria at independence by the colonial masters. In effect, whatever damage ethnicity has generated in the process of governing Nigeria it could be trace to colonial arrangement.

The major objectives of this paper are to carefully trace the historical origin, growth and development of ethnicity and the impacts it has on the governance of Nigeria.

Definition of Ethnicity

The concept ethnicity and tribalism has always been a confused matter. Some scholars use the two concepts as though they carry the some meaning and strongly inseparable. However, it is pertinent to note that there is a difference between ethnicity and tribalism even though the difference is water-tight. Nnoli (1978:5) for instance sees ethnicity as a:

… Social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of the largest possible competing communal groups (ethnic groups) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture, race religion and/or common history. Ethnicity is only one of the phenomena associated with interactions among communal groups (ethnic groups). Others include trade, diplomacy, friendship enmity, corporation, self-abnegation and self extension. What is peculiar to ethnicity is that it involves demands by one group on other competing groups …

From the definition above by Nnoli, ethnicity exists where the communal groups comprise either of: language, culture, race, religion or common history. If we go by Nnoli's position, tribalism which has to do with a tribe is only an element that could constitute ethnicity hence ethnicity in this case is wider in context than tribalism. Ethnicity in the words of Nnoli above shows that it does not yet exist until a demand is made by one group to seek for advantage and benefits for its group relative to what another group is seemingly enjoying. In support of this argument of the difference between ethnicity and tribalism, Eteng (2004:45) says that:

An ethnic group, however, is not necessarily linguistically or culturally, homogeneous, insofar as it often subsumes sub-cultural, linguistic, dialectic   occupational and class differences, depending on the prevailing level of socio-economic development and cultural differentiation.

Similarly, according to Thomson (2000:60) a basic definition of ethnicity is:

… a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship, ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language. In this sense, an ethnic group is much like the imagined community of the nation. Ethnicity, however, focuses more on sentiments of origin and descent, rather than the geographical considerations of a nation.

From the definition above, ethnicity obvious is a smaller community found within a larger society which of cause is the implication of Thomson "… imagined community of the nation". So, it has to do with a unique group behavior seeking for favor restrictive to its group members. Ethnicity involves the display of sentiments in bias to a special set of group one belongs to. In concord to the foregoing, Omu (1996:170) says that:

…ethnicity 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.

On the whole, ethnicity has to do with a unique group with distinct and peculiar features which are sources of common ties on which the feeling of sentiment and emotion is being expressed in protest or support of an action taken against or in favor of such a group.

In sum, ethnicity is the deliberate and consciousness of tracing of one's identity to a particular ethnic group and allowing such feeling to determine the way one relates with people and things, ethnicity creates the brackets of 'we' 'they' 'ours', 'theirs' feeling. Ethnicity makes it very difficult for different ethnic groups to agree on anything.

The Historical Origin, Growth and Development of Ethnicity in Nigeria

If we understand ethnicity as an in-group feeling and expression of sentiments by such a group against another in order to attract favor for its

members, how do we explain pre-colonial Nigeria when the different ethnics lived separately and independently? These groups were not even aware of the existence of some ethnics let alone to express ethnic sentiment against any. This clearly means that in the beginning of the Nigerian entities before the arrival of the colonial masters, the people who lived in the territories today called Nigeria were not in any serious conflict with any group hence, there was none to compete with around them. It becomes clear to say that; ethnicity was a deliberate and conscious creation of the colonial masters in order to use such sentimental expression to perpetually have dominion and control over the colonies in Africa. That is the more reason Nnoli's (2011:66) submission is accepted when he says that:

… the British colonialist introduced various policies that emasculated the revolutionary potential of the working class and the trade unions some of these policies were part of the overall colonial strategy and tactical of subjugating the colonized people as a whole. Others were design specifically to counteract working class consciousness. In the specific case of the working class in Nigeria, the imperialists used ethnicity to destroy working class collective action… consequently the working class could not provide political leadership to the more militant peasantry, its natural political ally.

Initially, the different ethnics were living in small autonomous villages of 100 to 500 persons (www.mongabay.com) in different geographical locations without any problem of envying or being jealous of another ethnic hence their locations were far apart. For instance the Hausa Yoruba and the Igbo's were far apart located that there was no need for chauvinistic feelings. It was the colonial maters who gradually gather these ethnic entities in provinces, protectorates, regions and finally brought these different ethnics together into one geopolitical entity to be governed by one person using a common treasury.

The origin of ethnicity began with the evolution of the Nigeria federalism. It was Sir Bourdillon who initiated the idea of federalism for Nigeria in 1939. He divided the country into provinces and regional councils along the three major ethnics in the country. According to Nwabughuogu (1996:49):

Bourdillon himself now begun to develop the federal idea … which would provide for regional councils in the provinces with a central council in Lagos… Bourdillon took a practical action to implement his ideas. He divided the protectorate of southern Nigeria into: eastern and western provinces… But he had not yet built a true federal structure before he left Nigeria in 1943. For he still left the North intact thereby worsening the imbalance which is inimical to the growth of true federation. Nevertheless,…Bourdillon had created a skeleton of a federation.

The federal structure which Bourdillon laid generated the nation of divide and rule. The west and the east that was initially intact as the southern protectorate got spited to separate the Yoruba (west) from the Igbo (east) however the Hausa/Fulani (North) was left not divided, whose size was bigger than the west and the east put together. One question which remains unanswered is the non-divisions of the Northern region, perhaps the Hausa/Fulani ethnic was the major dominant of the north. At this point, the West and the East who used to do things together under the notion of southern protectorate solidarity withdrew into identifying with their unique ethnics.

By 1951, Nigeria was already clearly structured into three major regions: the Northern Region (Hausa/Fulani); the Western Region (Yoruba) and the Eastern Region (Igbo). These major ethnic regional entities became the basis for many political administrative and economic policies in Nigeria. These groups became conscious of their groups and insisted on wooing favors from the central government to the regions which they belongs to.

Buttressing further on the ethnic consciousness created by the British colonial masters in Nigeria, Ekeh (2004:21):

Under British colonial rule, in the old Provincial Administration of Eastern Nigeria before 1950, the component ethnic groups developed separately. Igbos were largely separated from the Ijaw, the Efik and the Ibibios in Calabar province and several other small ethnic groups in Ogoja province this had their own administrative divisions in the region. With the political changes in of the 1950s all such ethnic autonomics in Eastern dissolved. The rationalization that occurred turned the Igbos into the majority ethnic group, both demographically and politically.

Just the same way the Igbos emerged as the dominants ethnic group in the Eastern Region as a result of the provincial rationalization, the same thing applied to the Yoruba in the Western Region. Initially, the Yoruba was not the dominant ethnic among the ethnics it found itself. This is what Ekeh (2004: 19-20) says:

Under the British rule, Western Nigeria had six provinces. Four of these were Yoruba. Two of them Benin and Warri provinces were areas that had very little contact with the Yoruba before colonial rule. With colonialism there was considerable labour migration that brought Yoruba and non-Yoruba in the western region into contact. However, politically, the provinces including the Yoruba ones, were administered separately. All of these political arrangements changed dramatically with the political rationalization of Nigeria, beginning in 1954, that dissolved provincial administrative autonomy. In a spate of a few years, the Yoruba emerged as the political power of western Nigeria and the non-Yoruba ethnic groups in Warri and Benin provinces became ethnic minorities.

Consequent upon the above political events of the federal move, the reactions from the new minority ethnic groups in Warri and Benin Provinces were varied. While a Yoruba-led political party, called the Action Group had important following among the Yoruba linguistic kinsfolk of Itsekiri and a good amount of support in Northern Benin Province and Urhobo in Warri later Delta Province. The political relations between the new ethnic majority Yoruba and the new minority ethnic groups in Delta and Benin provinces were fiercely brittle (Ekeh, 2004:22).

Another factor that gave birth to ethnic sentiment was the implication of the incorporation of Nigeria into the world capitalist system. This meant that the British colonial masters needed raw materials from their African colonies to feed their home industries at the same time look out for market to dispose of their finished goods which were brought from Europe for sale. To get away with the raw materials from Nigeria they need to move the raw materials from their different production joints to the seaports or hinterlands for evacuation to Europe. The process of gathering the raw materials necessarily required the establishment of infrastructures such as roads, railways, and telecommunications. The people were coerced into force labor to be part of these public works, besides the local people needed money (the British currency) to pay the taxes that were imposed on them by the colonial masters. This resulted to several persons migrating from the rural areas to the urban centres were there was job opportunities in the European rail way constructions and other public works.

As a result of this rural-urban migration, the urban cities became a place of high concentration of the different ethnic groups who came to work. The different ethnics groups began to identify with themselves in groups. It was at this time that ethnic and cultural organizations were formed in the cities by the different ethnics to pursue their common goals. These ethnic unions later became powerful unions /associations to the extent that they started responding to the needs of their members beyond what the government could do for them. Some of these unions were the Idoma Hope Rising (for the Idoma ethnic group); the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (for the Yoruba ethnic group), the Tiv Progressive Union (for the Tiv ethnic group), Jamyyan Mutanen Arewa (for the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group). According to Fafowora (2011:2)

The emergence of urban centers in colonial Nigeria … brought many migrants into the new urban area to look for employment following the introduction of tax regime by the colonial government. Economic integration made colonial rule easier and more profitable. But this development set in motion a process that was to lead to greater contact and Competition among the various ethnic groups for dominance and the

economic advantage one other ethnic group that would accompany such dominance.

It is clearer now that, ethnic sentiments and the cut-throat struggle and competition among the ethnics in Nigeria today have a genesis in the political and economic activities which were the reasons for colonization and imperialism. So, ethnicity cannot be totally separated from colonialism. It was colonialism that forcefully brought the different ethnic groups who were initially separate, together to govern them in diversity. It was this forcefully union of the various ethnics that have generated sentimental feeling by the ethnic group against the others hence the state has proved to be a failed state for not guarantying the safety and provision of social amenities to the people.

By 1948 and 1951 when the colonial masters gave the nationalist the go ahead to form political parties. For instance; the Egbe Omo Oduduwa" a Pan- Yoruba" organization whose aims included the effort to ensure a 'big tomorrow' that would enable the Yoruba people to hold their own among other tribes in Nigeria, suddenly transformed into a political party known as Action Group (AG). Invariably the AG was a Western Nigeria Yoruba based political party. Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the leader of the Western Region and AG.

In the Northern Region, the Western Nigeria experience repeated itself. The Hausa/Fulani cultural/ethnic organization, Jamyyan Mutanen Arewa became a political party known as the Northern People's Congress (NPC). The north was led by Sir Ahmadu Bello who was also the political leaders of NPC. In the Eastern Nigeria Region, the Igbo ethnic Union the Igbo State Union which was headed by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe became a political party for the East, known as (National Council for Nigeria and Citizens NCNC).

By 1959 when the Federal General Election was to be conducted, it was on these three ethnic based political parties that the elections were conducted. That is the NPC, NCNC and AG. After independence, it was very clear that Nigeria politicians had not learnt their political lessons on the implications of living on ethnically based political parties.

The Effects of Ethnicity on Post-Colonial Governance in Nigeria

One of the factors that have seriously dampened the image and glory of Nigerian party politics is ethnicity. The first open display of ethnic chauvinism in Nigerian party politics was the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) episode in 1941 when the party broke-down due to ethnic feelings expressed in party politics.

In 1941, the then President of NYM Dr. K.A. Abayomi was elected into the Legislative Council as a result, the post of the NYM President became vacant. Two foundational members of NYM, Ernest Ikoli (Ijaw by tribe) and Samuel Akinsanya (Ijebu Yoruba by tribe) strongly contested.

Awolowo supported Ikoli while Azikiwe supported Akinsanya. At the end of the contest Ikoli won (Akuva, 2010:86).

This episode generated tension between the Ijaw and Ijebu ethnic groups and their supporters. Coleman (1986:227) says that:

The selection of Ikoli as the candidate of the Movement was interpreted by Akinsanya and Ijebu Yoruba and Azikiwe and the Ibos who supported Akinsaya as a manifestation of tribal prejudice against the Ijebus and the Ibos. The result was that Azikiwe and most Ibos, as well as Akinsanya and some Ijebus, left the Movement… which after 1941 was composed mainly of Yorubas… This was the political spirit that was used to form the political parties that contested elections between 1959 to 1965.

The post-independence party politics activities in Nigeria took off on ethnic prejudice, Iroanusi (2000) argues that:

The major factors responsible for the post-independence economic and political turbulence in Nigeria: …were the shaky tripartite federal structure with strong regionalism, disparity in the sizes and populations of the three regions; three regionally based and tribally sustained political parties and a weak political class driven by ethnic ideologies.

Obviously, ethnicity affected the foundation stone laying of party politics in Nigeria since independence in 1960. For instance,

During the First Republic, three major political parties contested in the 1959 General Elections: Action Group (AG), Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and National Council for Nigerian Citizen (NCNC). The AG which was launched by Awolowo in 1951 as a political party emerged from the Pan-Yoruba Organisation, Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Society of the Descendants of Oduduwa) organized by Chief Awolowo in 1948. The AG was purely a Yoruba based party… In March 1951, the AG was declared as a Western Region Political Organization (Ajene, 1996:196).

Furthermore, the effect of ethnic politics on party formation was experienced in the Second Republic. Out of the five political parties that contested elections in 1979, three of them were highly northern in orientation and outlook. These parties were National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP), besides all the leaders of these three political parties Shehu Shagari-NPN, Aminu Kanu- PRP and Waziri Ibrahim-GNPP were of the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group. Closely related Dr. Azikiwe headed the Eastern Regional party in the Second Republic (Nigeria Peoples Party –NPP). The same thing applied to the Western Region, its major political party in the Second Republic was the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) headed by the Western Region Chieftain Obafemi Awolowo.

This ethnic background of political parties went on up to the Third Republic whereby the Social Democratic Party (SDP) was deemed more

tilted to the Southern Regional states while the National Republican Convention (NRC) was more inclined to the northern states. Currently, the leading party in the Nigeria Fourth Republic Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) is having some internal crises; the northern ethnic group feels they have been robbed of the post of the presidency. Even though Jonathan who was the Deputy of Yar'adua the Nigerian former president from the north is made the president, to the northerner's Goodluck is not seen in the light of a Nigerian citizen but as an outsider of the northern enclave. This is the damage ethnicity has cause to Nigeria. Ethnic consideration in Nigeria today is more important than who one is and what he can deliver!

The demand and desperation for the creation of states and local government councils in Nigeria over the years has been provoked by ethnic marginalization. In Benue state for instance, the Tiv ethnic group is the most dominant group is the state, it has being producing the civilian executive governs since the creation of the state. In the first republic the chief executive was Aper Aku, Third Republic it was Moses Orshio Adasu in the Fourth Republic it was George Akume and today is Gabriel Susuwan. The Idoma who are a minority tribe have been crying foul over the political marginalization in the state. They feel the way out is the creation of 'Apa State' a project they have been upon for a long period now. This is just one case out of several calls from minority ethnic groups for state creation in the country. Currently the National Assembly has over 30 demands from different ethnic groups in the country demanding for states of their own.

Ethnicity also affected the allocation of federal resources in the first republic, because the Hausa/Fulani was in charge of the administration in the First Republic they used the opportunity to allocate most of the federal funds to the Northern Region than they did to other regions. Table I below is evident of this fact:

Table 1: Statutory Allocations to regions by central government 19960/61-1965/66
(£=pounds)

Year	Northern Region	Western Region	Eastern Region
1960/1961	£13,742,087	£6,905,153	£10,639,928
1961/1962	£15883,229	£7,980,715	£11,514,427
1962/1963	£16,880,556	£8,158,291	£12,381,302
1963/1964	£17,876,906	£6,079,699	£13,780,873
1964/1965	£24,632,836	£14,699,196	£18,081,945
1965/1966		£14,461,725	

Source: Olumide, E and Ekanade, T (2011:1) "The First Republic and the Interface of Ethnic and Resource Allocation in Nigeria's First Republic" in Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences Volume 2, No. 2

From Table 1 above, is clear that, from 1961 to 1966 the Hausa/Fulani NPC Northern leadership allocated more funds to the Northern

Region than the West and the Eastern Regions. This financial injustice pained NCNC who was in coalition with NPC at the federal level but could not do otherwise.

Ethnicity has also been seen as a major factor behind most of the civil unrest in the democratic journey of Nigeria According to Imobighe (2003:14) and Alebo (2006):

Ethnic and inter-communal conflicts have become so pervasive that there is hardly any part of the country that has not been affected. More revealing still, hardly does any month pass without some form of civil disturbances have become a defining characteristics of the return to civil rule…. Since May 1999, it is now generally understood that Nigeria is grapping with a rising wave of ethnic …. Bloodshed in which well over 2000 people have died since military rule ended in 1999.

Another effect of ethnicity on the Nigerian polity is that it has heightened political competition in electoral contest. Most ethnic group insisted on winning elections by duress especially in their regions. No wonder, in the First Republic, Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) had to return some candidates unopposed even before the elections were begun. This kind of political behavior created tension in the polity, according to Hembe (2003:110):

The contestants sought power by projecting themselves as champions of this or that ethnic group, thereby splitting the country into hostile ethnic blocks. The struggles were spearheaded by regional governments and the leaders chose to rationalize them in ethnic rather than intra-class terms (Nnoli, 1978).

Furthermore, Hembe (2003:110) citing Onobu (1975) says that:

Each party sponsored and supported ethnic minorities in order to destabilize the areas dominated by others, thereby promoting the proliferation of ethnic sentiments and the growth of ethnic tension throughout the country. It was essentially these inter-ethnic struggles that led to the emergence of political parties in Tiv land.

It is quite obvious therefore that ethnicity has affected every aspect of the governing process in Nigeria. It will be highly deceptive for anybody to think that ethnicity is not harmful to Nigeria and its quest for development.

Concluding Remarks

It is possible that if Nigeria was not colonized, the entrenchment of ethnic sentiments among the different ethnic groups would have been very impossible. Beyond rhetoric, the British colonial masters initiated colonialism, first through the pattern of territorial conquest and grouping which later resulted to the amalgamation exercise of 1914. This was the beginning of the ethnic qualms in Nigeria. The initiation of federalism which introduced strong regional sentiment among the educated elites created a

dysfunctional effectiveness among the elites to pursue a common cause, Nigeria would have been independent before 1960 if the zeal of the nationalist was not tampered with given the ethnic tension in Nigeria Youth Movement in 1941.

The foundation of ethnicity which the colonial masters left since independence is what has determined several issues in the country. The desperate outcry for states and local government creation is a way of seeking solace in the face of provocative ethnic marginalization of the major ethnic groups against the ethnic minority groups.   If the ethnic question in Nigeria is not constitutionally addressed on time, its effect will forever linger among the generations to come in Nigeria.

The Federal Government should strongly discourage the spirit of indigene-settler phenomenon in Nigeria in addition; the Federal Character Principle should be strongly implemented both at the state and local government levels. Ethnic chauvinism should be perceive in Nigeria especially where it is used as a yard stick to determine appointments and reasons for existence.

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