

The Post-Colonial Themes of Racism in the Nigerian Army (NA) 1966-2014

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Abstract

This paper discusses the activities of racial prejudice in independent Nigeria that revolves within the circle of “tribalism”¹ among the contemporary Nigerian society, which emanated through the resurgence of ethnic and religious nationalisms. The practicability of racism has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian society. However, the research has only examined its diffusion into the Nigerian Army (NA), which has become a stagnant weapon in the prevailing advocacy for an assured nationhood in Nigeria.

Meaning, Origin and Development of Racism in Africa

Racism is the systematic practice of denying people access to rights, representation, or resources based on ethnic or tribal differences. Institutionalized racism is a thorough system of discrimination that involves social institutions and affects virtually every aspect of society.²

Race is a significant social issue because people use racial differences as the basis for discrimination. Much of today's racism can be traced back to the era of colonialism that began in the 1400s. When Europeans began colonizing Africa and the Americas, the white settlers adopted the idea that they were superior to the other races they encountered and it was their job to "civilize the savages." This false notion became known as "the white man's burden," and was used to justify the Europeans' manipulation of African land and enslaving its people. In this way, naturally-occurring racial differences became the basis for systems of exploitation and discrimination.³

Throughout the pre-colonial multi-racial Africa, the concept of living under the umbrella of ‘unity in diversity’ had played a paramount role in the societal settings. Following the colonial intrusion, some form of integrated bigotry began to manifest, prevailing between the Europeans and aboriginal African societies. The extreme idea of ‘superiority complex’ over the looked-down speechless inferior class was expressed, in all their spheres of life. This unequal act survived up till independence. However, after decolonization, racism was believed to have witnessed a little bit of relief, bearing in mind that ‘*those who brought it (Racism) have departed for good*’, unlike in some other places like *The Cape of Good Hope* (South Africa) and its vicinity, where the European presence has relatively remained static to date.⁴ Consequentially, even lay persons have had a little bit of historical experience about the South African brutalities of racial segregation that transpired between the Whites and Negroes, and also how the rightfully matured indigenous African class confronted the shackles of colonialist chauvinism.

Distinct nature of Nigeria’s postcolonial issues of Racism

Sooner after independence, Nigeria like the other freely rejoiced African independent communities have consciously twisted a new form of *home-grown racism* in black Africa that proves far injurious than what was experienced during the colonial era.⁵ It was an indication of a narrow-minded dispensation on the side of the Africans, that could be justifiably lament that they (Africans) have ‘learnt nothing and forgot nothing’ from their recent awkward anti-racial struggles in the 20th century. This act has still produced far reaching effects on the entire spheres of African lifestyle.

It needs to be noted that various European powers at independence days have succeeded in planting a solid seeds of racism, which later suddenly grew and yielded fertile, but tasteless fruits that were consumably addicted into the African minds and hearts. The British in West Africa seem to have handed over the mantle of leadership to one favourite particular ethnic group. Indisputably, mostly to their African loyalists who reliably hosted, accommodated and supported the colonial atrocities.⁶ For instance in Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group were given the country’s political control that sets to be against the wishes of the other ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba and many others). From that time, utmost fear over the question of political domination by one particular ethnic group (Hausa-Fulani) was ignited and became subject for debate in the country amongst the other powerful ethnic groups. This undoubtedly produced severe effects that first instigated the plan to a bloody military coup on 15th January 1966, which also led to the outbreak of a barbaric ethnic clash that later turned into 30 months Civil War in Nigeria (1967-1970), following the pronouncement of Biafra’s tribal-based secession attempt. This marked the official beginning of new form of racist politics in Nigeria, where current generation leaders are brought up, guided and soap-washed in the bowl of such a modern racial sentiment in Nigeria.

Origin and aspects of Ethno-Racial challenges in the Nigerian Military service

Racism in the Nigerian military service has traced its origin during the colonial period, when the white military officers accorded themselves high posts over the indigenous black subordinates. Moreover, the black infantries were disallowed to wear uniform with long sleeves or even long trousers like their white colonial superior officers. That was the system throughout the colonial era in the entire Africa and particularly in Nigeria, which only ceased to exist after the attainment of the Nigerian independence in 1960.⁷ By January 15th 1966 Nigeria became civilized for tribalized military coups. The Nigerian military has since then become ethnically politicized, with each faction serving and defending its tribal interests, an issue that fueled the axis of sectional coups and countercoups. The Nigerian soldiers were divided along the shackles of military unionism. The first military coup was purely an attempt by the eastern military wing of Igbo origin to *Igbonise* the Nigerian Army.⁸

Following the failure of the first coup, the future of the country hung in a dilemma after the revengeful massacre of Igbo civilians in northern Nigeria in July 1966 'revenge coup' and the murder of the head of the Supreme Military Council, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, by the conglomeration of northern military contingent. This was aimed at quenching the grief of the Igbo committed military bloodshed. The level of tribal hatred escalated between the Eastern and Northern civilians and also between the military commandants. In return, the Igbo in the Nigerian Military withdrew their deference and allegiance from the Hausa military head of States, General Yakubu Gowon and his allies. This had directed the political trend of Nigeria into civil war.⁹

On 22nd April, 1990, another unsuccessful ethno-racist facet of military coup d'état was staged by a group of Nigerian Army, mainly from Middle Belt and of southern origins, against their northern military counterparts. The coup was led by Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar against General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985-1993). In his coup address, amongst other things Major Orkar called for the consideration of an excision of 'five northern Hausa-Fulani Muslim States of Borno, Bauchi, Kano, Katsina and Sokoto, the stronghold of Islam in Nigeria. Meaning that the map of Nigeria was to be redesigned with the exclusion of those 'so called foreigners', who should alternatively redefine the course of their historical origins by creating their new country or join the Republic of Niger, with whose society they share common socio-cultural affinities.¹⁰

The naked pronouncement of this racial hatred was not surprising, as one of the survivors of the coup later reported to have re-affirmed their grievances in these words:

*"Anytime we went to the Hausa areas in the North, we were given Hausa and Islamic regalia and if you didn't wear it, they would not be happy with you. It got to a stage that if you were in the Army, you have to speak Hausa"*¹¹

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election by the northern military high-ranking officer late General Sani Abacha, against the southern democratic winner late Chief Moshood Abiola (a Yoruba), was also considered by some Nigerians as a form of disgusting racism that was aimed at preventing the Yoruba ethnic group from tasting and dominating the political scene of the country.¹²

It is quite unfortunate as the scourge of *Boko Haram* becomes a national and international threat that affects every citizen in Nigeria irrespective of religion or ethnic differentiation, some indigenous communities and religious leaders were fond of disassociating themselves with the problem. They perceive the *Boko Haram* terrorist movement as a northern regional unrest, which to them should therefore be single-handedly controlled by the northern military and security personnel of Hausa-Muslim stratum. For instance, on 30th April 2014, the Archbishop of the Enugu Province of the Anglican Communion, Most Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Chukwuma had called for immediate transfer of security operatives of Northern extraction to *Boko Haram* ravaged areas. Speaking during an event at the Cathedral Church of Good Sheppard, Enugu to mark his 25 years of Episcopacy, he stated that northern military and police officers were in a vantage position to fight the insurgents because they know the terrain of the *Boko Haram* strongholds.¹³

In his ethno-religio-racial statement, he stated:

*"I'm calling on the Federal Government, particularly the President of this nation to begin right now to send down all northern officers to go and fight Boko Haram in their area, they know the terrain. Also: "They should go and fight their brothers and get the place peaceful"*¹⁴

This statement is clearly a clerically sentimental call to reinstate and rekindle the fire of sophisticated religious and ethnic phobia and repulsion in the military, thereby discouraging them to perform their national duties in promoting the country's peace and unity. Unfortunately, even in the highest academic circle when such provocative debate was often twisted and thrown for discussions amongst the mixture of new breed caucus of intellectuals in my midst, the cleric statement was vehemently supported by a considerable number of Christian tribes, mainly from eastern part of the country. The northern sympathy was only gained by few Middle Belt Christian intellectuals, who were having the love of their country at heart. They saw the statement of such a great religious leader as devilish act. For better goodness of Nigeria, it needs not to be forgotten that even the pre-colonial Africa was characterized by flexibility of identity, which made it possible for migrants to be completely absorbed into their host communities without participatory barriers in social, civil, political and religious life, as long as they exhibited enthusiastically strong sense of identification and integration into the host communities.

However, certain element of religious racialism was shown during the early days of Islamic evangelism in some societies.¹⁵

However, these kinds of crisis did not yet fully succeed in changing the totality of occupational destiny of the Nigerian ethnic relationships on the course of their service specializations. The level of cohesion and inter-ethnic dependency in the organizational structure of the society is of paramount stage. In 1992, the veteran politician, Alhaji Maitama Sule said in a speech:

“Everyone has a gift from God. The Northerners are endowed by God with leadership qualities. The Yoruba man knows how to earn a living and has diplomatic qualities. The Igbo is gifted in commerce, trade and innovation. God has created us individually for a purpose and with different gifts.”¹⁶

In conclusion, from the available discussed evidences, it should be noted that if such attitude continues in the military, then the better hope for Nigerian future is endangered as there will hardly be a truly standing army that can fight for the common course of the nation. The providers of peace- “soldiers” lack “peace” among themselves. In the contemporary Nigerian society, the level of prejudice is far beyond the activity of complexity in colour, rather highly deep-hearted discriminatory activities that could be described as forces of tribal and religious inclination. The rise of neo-aggressive sentiment of racial and religious dichotomy has dominated the scene of Nigerian politics today. People tends to identify themselves through their region before they identify themselves as Nigerians, so corrupt politicians who lack every concept of political morality uses this “loyalty” to their advantage. Every ethnic group has selfish sensation to ardently steer his regional and local affairs independently, rather than allowing the continuation of a long existing “cross-boundary beneficiary federal policy” that enables individual contribution towards the development of the whole country.

The issue of settler/indigene has also been intensified, escalating ethnic crisis and other disturbances in the country. Recently in 2009, the Plateau State government had ordered the sinister expulsion of the Fulani nomads from the state⁷⁶ despite the constitutional arrangement giving every one right to move and settle freely in any part of Nigeria.¹⁸

Notes and References

- 1 Tribalism is the state of being organized in, or advocating for, a tribe or tribes. In terms of conformity, tribalism may also refer in popular cultural terms to a way of thinking or behaving in which people are strongly loyal to their tribe than to their friends, their country, or any other social group. See: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: The Living Dictionary, UK, new edition 2003, p. 1774. Ontologically, tribalism is oriented around the valences of analogy, genealogy and mythology. This means that customary tribes have their social foundations in some variation of these tribal orientations, while at the same time often taking on traditional practices (including through religions of the book such as Christianity and Islam), and modern practices, including monetary exchange, mobile communications, and modern education. James, Paul, et al., *Sustainable Communities, Sustainable Development: Other Paths for Papua New Guinea*, 2012.
- 2 In Africa, there is repulsion within the traditional African environment or other such groups susceptible to racial discrimination, intolerance, exclusion, restriction and the development of preference based on colour, language, descent, national or ethnic origin resulting from fear, inferiority complex, superiority complex, religion or cultural dislike, social or economic displacement, clan or tribal dislike or jealousy. See: Danfulani, S. A., *The Metamorphosis of Warfare: Sophisticated Intelligence, Military Might, Political Power and Strategy in the International Order*, Ibadan, University Press, 2010, p. 33.
- 3 Harris, E. Joseph, *Africans and their History*, New York, Penguin Books Ltd., revised ed. 1987, Pp. 78-80.
- 4 See: Sefali, Michael, “African Culture and the Struggle against Racism in South Africa” in a paper presented for the Culture Seminar, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University, 13th-20th April, 1977, p. 2. Sefali by then was a lecturer in the Department of Economics at National University of Lesotho. He added that in the colonial-racist Republic of South Africa which covers 1.8 million square kilometres, the 4 million whites control claimed as their own 87% of the territory of the Republic of South Africa and 13% of it was declared “homelands” of the 22 million blacks. In *Ibid*. From 1912 when the African National Congress (A.N.C) was formed, a solid basis was created to bring the various tribes of SA under one umbrella for their political and cultural consciousness towards their national and class identity as the proletariat in a white capitalist economy. For detailed information about the SA struggles against the Apartheid Regime, see: Mandela, Nelson, *Longman to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1994, Pp. 95-140.

- 5 To mention few, every living human on earth has had about the sacrilegious experiences of the *Rwanda's Hutu-Tutsi's* injurious massacre, *Somalia* ethno-political war, *Uganda*, and *Nigerian Civil War* and the sorts of gory betrayal lives have faced. Also see the recently widespread issues of *Sudanese Arab Janjawed/Black* discrimination.
- 6 So were exactly the cases in almost all those countries where the British had established their imperial rule: See the handing over of political power to Asante's Nkrumahism in Gold Coast. In Uganda, the Baganda tribe were put in place over the Banyaro, Ankole, Basoga, Bagisu etc. likewise in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta's Kikuyu tribe has gained. For more discussions about the post independence ethnic violence in those countries, see: Meredith, Martin, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, London, The Free Press, 2006, Pp. 600-616.
- 7 Until independence, the parade uniform of the King's African Rifles (KAR) comprised *Khaki* shorts with *Khaki* fez cover cummerbunds. African *Askari* (soldiers) wore sandals or were even barefooted. This was on the colonial rationale that the heavy military boots of the period were unsuitable for African recruits who had not previously worn footwear. For details, see Adrew, Mollo, *the Armed Forces of World War II*, p. 133. Also in Major R. M. Barnes, "Military Uniforms of Britain and the Empire" accessed from Mills, T. F. Buyers, and Christopher, *Land Forces of Britain, the Empire and Commonwealth at Regiments.org-kings African Rifles*. Retrieved from the original archive- 9/12/2007.
- 8 The casualties of the coup comprised of only non-Igbo political leaders because it was organized and staged by the Igbo military officers under the leadership of Lt.Col. Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. Those assassinated were the Prime Minister of Nigeria, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and The Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello Sardauna (all northern Muslim Hausa); The Premier of Western Region, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola (A Yoruba Christian) and the Federal Minister of Finance Chief Festus Ekotie Eboh (a Christian Middle-Belter). For more details about the 1966 military coup, See: A.M. Mainasara, *The Five Majors- why we Struck*, Zaria, Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982, Pp. 15, 30-31. Also, see: Achebe, Chinua, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, London, Penguin, p .64.
- 9 See: Ogunsanwo, Olufemi, *Awo Unfinished Greatness: The Life and Times of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, Ikeja, Pace Books and Periodicals, 2009, Pp. 123-124.
- 10 Other coup plotters were Captain Harley Empere, Captain Perebo Dakolo, Lieutenant Cyril Ozoalor and Lieutenant Nicholas Odeh among many others. The failure of this coup was on tribal reason. See "Gideon Orkar", in www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gideon_Orkar, accessed 18/8/2014.
- 11 See "1990:Gideon Orkar, for a Nigerian Coup", in www.executedtoday.com/2011/07/27/1990-gideon-orkar-a-nigerian-coup/, accessed 18/8/2014.
- 12 Akinlaja, Banke, "Nigerian National Conference: Looking Back", in *Historical Flash Back: The Nigerian National Memoirs*, Lagos, Flashback Publishers Ltd., Wednesday, April 2-Tuesday 29, 2014, p. 32.
- 13 See:<http://dailypost.ng/2014/04/30/archbishop-tells-jonathan-transfer-military-policemen-northern-origin-boko-haram-areas/>, accessed 18/6/2014. The event was attended by Nigeria's Deputy Senate President, Ike Ekweremadu, General T.Y. Danjuma, (Rtd), Deputy Governor of Anambra State, Nkem Okeke, among many other dignitaries.
- 14 The cleric argued that he recalled that when the late dreaded armed robber Lawrence Aninuh was terrorizing Bendel State, the government sent security operatives from the state to fight the late notorious robber, adding that the efforts of the government was not in vain as Aninuh was swiftly apprehended by his kinsmen. See *Ibid*.
- 15 See Danfulani, U. H. Dadem, "The Jos Peace Conference and the Indigene/Settler Question in Nigerian Politics", Jos, University of Jos, p.15. Moreover, it was evident that certain element of "religious tribalization" had been displayed over the non-Hausa Muslim converts, by the early Hausa Muslim community whom they lived with. The Hausa Muslims living in the far northwestern area of Nigeria had denied giving out their daughters for marriage to the new Muslim convert tribes of Kambari, Gungawa, Laru, Kamuku, Laru and Lopawa among many others. No wonder some of these tribes showed their extreme abhorrence to Islam, which is certainly attached to the Hausa culture of racial superiority shown on them. Many had decided to return back to paganism. Towards the end of the 20th century, the intermarriages resumed and the tribes today are closely being a Hausanized society. In a discussion with Alhaji Abubakar Salihu Wara, (over 70 years), interviewed at New Wara, house No. 274, 6/5/2012.
- 16 Ngwodo, Chris, "Racist Politics in Nigeria", posted in Nigeria Intel- September 13, 2012, accessed in www.nigeriaintel.com/author/joel.on 17/8/2014.

- 17 According to the report, the expulsion was based on Plateau indigenous ethnic hatred against the dominant Fulani people, who were at the same time secured both economic and political control in the State. The Commissioner for Information Mr. Yenlong, further explained that about 14 trucks of 2,000 Fulani, including women and children were relocated to “where they came from” in different parts of some neighbouring northern states. Many took refuge to Bauchi, Adamawa, Gombe and Borno states. For detailed information about the causes and effects of expulsion of the Fulani ethnic group from Plateau State, see Agbese, Andrew (etal), “Wase Fulani: The inside story”, in *Weekly Trust*, Vol. 12, No. 29, Saturday, May 16, 2009, Pp. 2, 3 & 5. ISSN 119-1732.
- 18 See: section 41 and 42 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The constitution states that “No Nigerian citizen is denied the right to settle in any part of the country of his/her wish”.

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