Resurgence of Ethnic Crises and Instability in Nigeria

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Abstract

The three major ethno-political structures (the Hausa - Fulani of the North, the Ibo of the East and the Yoruba of the West) into which Nigeria was carved by the colonialist have been one of the most debilitating problem at the root of ethnic crises witnessed since the Nigeria independence in 1960.The communities conquered by the British military power were different in race and language and in social and political organization. The emirates of Northern Nigeria were largely under the influence of Islamic culture for over six centuries and had little in common with the Yoruba and Ibo ethnic groups from the south. For the colonialist the situation created the problem of how to unite the inharmonious elements into a coherent whole while preserving each group's sufficient autonomy to satisfy cultural aspirations The significant issue most especially in Nigerian Constitutional development from the colonization of Lagos territory in 1857 has been the unification and development of a common nationality. Though the struggle for independence in Nigeria was fought largely on one united front, disagreements among the several disparate nationalists groups were submerged. Despite several attempts that were made by the colonialist and Nigerian political leaders after independence to foster Nigeria unity, there exists persistent cavernous ethnic tension and crises engendered by mistrust and fear of domination, resulting to exaggerated political competition. The focus of this paper is therefore, to examine the effect of ethnic crises in the context of national integration process in Nigeria.

Background

The territory known today as Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic society made up of people of disparate cultures and traditions, and differing backgrounds of political, social and economic organizations. Idang [2005] for instance was of the view that what Lord Lugard hurriedly welded together in 1914 in to a polity, called Nigeria, was a conglomeration of about 250 ethnic groups that were linguistically and ethnically fragmented. He further observed that before the area covered by Nigeria came in contact with the Europeans it had within its orbit 30 odd ethnic groups including the Hausa/Fulani dominating the Northern parts; the Tiv; Igala, Idoma and Ebira dominating the Middle Belt; the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo and the Delta tribes occupying the East. Also out of the region emerged various states, kingdoms and empires including the Borno Empire and the Sokoto caliphate to the North; the Yoruba Kingdoms, the Benin Empire and the City States of the Delta zone to the South. There were also the segementary or 'state-less' societies among the Tiv and the Igbo whose basis of political organization was the village level with individualism emphasized in their social relations. Though these entities were to certain extent politically independent of each other and at times at war with one another they no doubt had commercial interactions with networks of trade routes connecting them in the four cardinal regions.

The southern part was the first to come in contact with the Europeans right from the second half of the 15th century through coastal trades. With this contact came later both Christianity and Western education. Colonization of the entities by the British started with the annexation of Lagos as a Colony in 1861. By 1900 the remaining parts of Southern area became the protectorate of the Southern Nigeria and within the next six years Lagos Colony became part of the protectorate. The Northern section came into effective contact with the Europeans in the last decades of 19th Century and was effectively pacified by the British by 1903. Western education and Christianity therefore came to the North very much later and developed at a relatively lower rate. This dichotomy till today has created serious gap between the southern and the northern Nigeria leading into serious acrimony, crisis and apprehension.

However, Nigeria obtained independence on October 1, 1960 with minimum level of internal cohesion. The country eventually adopted a Federal constitution after considering alternatives by her leaders who hoped they would achieve a viable unification of the various territorial subsections and the different peoples which the British colonial power had previously fused together for the purpose of their own administrative expediency. Post independence experiences, however, soon demonstrated that more meaningful factors, other than Federalism and common colonial historiography, had to be utilized in the effort to achieve that degree of national integration that could assure a politically developed, peaceful and stable society devoid of frequent violence and rancor.

Though the causative factors of the unending crises within the collectivity are diverse and complex and controversial, they include among others apparent irreconcilable differences among the peoples that constitute Nigeria; educational imbalance – intellectual and elitist falsehood, regional politics expressed in tribalism, disunity and fear of domination. All these prevented the development of real patriotism or national-spirit but rather paved the way for inter-ethnic hatred, bickering, nepotism, corruption, abuse of power, politicization of census, election and security system (Mohammed, 1988). Nigeria right from the beginning was plunged into confusion and unending crises by the ruling elites who fanned the embers of the above disintegrative phenomena into flame. Teething problems of nationhood, mainly revolving round the subject of power-sharing, had brought Nigeria to the brink of fragmentation and disintegration after the independence of October 1,1960. The Nigeria Army attempted to change the situation to no avail because the system had already been affected by chronic nepotism and sectionalism, its action instead led to a chain of events that ended up in the civil war of 1967-1970, political catastrophe, social and economic crises of 1983-99.

Objective and Significance of the study
This chapter examines the impact of ethnic crises in the context of national integration process in Nigeria. It argues that at the root of the national integration problem is the nature of accumulation and the struggle for power among the different ethnic groups. This explains the nature of ethnic relations and political dynamics that have shaped the content and direction of national unity. It is hoped that the study will enable Nigerians to answer that national question as it relates to unity, stability and peace of the diverse ethnic groups in the country. Literature has documented various factors that militated against national cohesion and integration with equal emphasis on those factors that can possibly foster unity of the various ethnic groups. This paper will help to reinforce those factors while providing additional solution to the problem.

It is obvious that the contemporary salient majority in Nigeria are getting more and more aware that the future of the nation lies in the survival as one united country as more factors that could reinforce the unity in diversity of Nigeria are becoming obvious. It is hoped that since the maintenance of national unity and stability as well as improving the quality of life of all Nigerians are sacrosanct to the various government administrations, it is therefore, imperative to focus on how far they have or have not achieved these objectives. Thus, the chapter will be systematic, historical and critical in the examination of the characteristic problems of ethnic crises as it relates to national integration during and post colonial periods.

Ethnic Crises and the Precipitants
The Nigerian federation that was bequeathed to the citizenry by the Lyttelton constitution of 1954 according to Babawale [2001] was, and still is, an unbalanced and lopsided one in which the Northern Region emerged as a bigger entity than a combination of the entire populations of the Western and Eastern regions. This alone has triggered untold struggle and persistent mistrust among the peoples of Nigeria. There existed serious divergence in the socio-cultural and politico-economic structures of the peoples of Nigeria before the British colonization. Instead of exploring ways of reconciling the apparently irreconcilable forces, for a united and focused nation, the Nigerian political elites emphasized them to the point of dismemberment for selfish reasons. The elites failed to encourage the need to harness extant elements of unity and co-existence instead they reinforced micro-patriotism with religion and tribe as instruments of nurture. Instead of the elites acting as conflict managers, given their educational background, they were in a stronger sense, conflict generators [Dudley, 1973]. These sorts of intense conflicts among the elites in Nigeria was what happened to the West African elites in (The National Congress of British West Africa, established in 1919) which had behind it Hayford Casely of Ghana as the moving spirit. Before he died in 1930 he expressed his disillusionment with the elite leadership in West Africa he was enthused to declare:

> The African God is weary of your wranglings, weary of your vain disputations, weary
> of your everlasting quarrels which are a drag upon progress and which keep from you
> as a people, the good that is intended for you [Hayford, 1930][2]

the Kirk-Greene [1976] posits that since 1914 the Nigerian socio-political scene has been bedeviled by sets of opposing factors each widening the wound and reducing the hope of healing it: North vs. South; Islam vs. Christianity; alleged feudalism vs. achieved elitism; haves vs. have-nots, each with sinister undertones, tensions,

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[2] Webster, J.B; Boahen, A.A and Idowu, H.O. 1967. *The growth of African civilization: the revolutionary years. West Africa since 1800.* London: Longmans Group Ltd.

irreconcilability and threatened withdrawal. These obvious or tacit dichotomous elements had always been used by the so-called Nigerian nationalists to further the forces of disunity and fire the embers of tension and inter-ethnic hatred which often climaxed in persistent violent crises. The three major ethnic groups often see their leaders as their redeemer, instead of cooperating to work for a strong united independent country they often think clandestinely that their status would be better enhanced in a rather dismembered country. According to Mohammed [1988] each of the three groups from 1947 and up till 2004 had at one time or the other publicly or privately dreamed of secession, each confident that if pushed, it could go it alone. For example Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa representing the view of the North was quoted to have said that "since the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper" [Kirk-Greene, 1976]. In 1966 also the North maintained that "we are different peoples brought together by accident of history, to pretend otherwise will be folly" [ibid]. Almost at the same period, Professor Oluwasanmi expressed the views of so many Yorubas that this reality of the federation as a geographical expression dictates that each of the constituent cultures should be autonomous [Dudely, 1973]. The massacre of the people from eastern region in the north in 1965, the subsequent exodus of the Igbos to their home land and the prevailing mood of secession among the soldiers encouraged the Igbos to spearhead secession from the federation.

The struggle for and against domination among the three regions in Nigeria according to Mohammed [1988] led the Emirs of Zaria and Katsina to assert that based on the preponderance of Northern population, unless it was given 50% of the seats in the proposed House of Representatives it would secede from the federation [Kirk-Greene, 1976]. This demand by the North to dominate the shaping of Nigeria's political culture has ever remained one of the major factors militating against national cohesion. The educational gap between the South and the North has also brought about mutual antagonism and suspicion that often finds expression in violent crises. Historically it was the Northerners fear of perpetual domination by the more educated Southerners that made them object to the demand for "self government in 1956" but instead preferred this as soon as practicable. The public humiliation suffered by the Northern representatives in Lagos over their stand did not only make Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto to say 'the mistake of 1914 has come to light'[3] but also exacerbated the existing mutual mistrust and contempt which resulted in aggravated assault between the Northerners and their Southern guests in Kano in 1953. The bitterness felt by the more educated and politically mobilized Southerners against the dominance of the feudal and reactionary North was an underlying cause of instability in the country. Mohammed [1988] also asserts that the colonial masters in their bid to divide and rule the peoples of Nigeria, saw to the segregated settlement of the Igbo and the Yoruba in the North into "Sabon- Gari" quarters which militated against cultural assimilation and group spirit.

 In stressing the prevalence and persistent ethnic crises in Nigeria, Babawale [2001] was of the view that the struggle for power sharing in Nigeria had been a struggle for hegemony among the three main ethnic groups – Hausa – Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. He posits that in the course of this struggle those who fall outside the three main groups were regarded as minorities who were marginalized not only in the allocation of power but resources as well. In his argument, Babawale maintains that the Hausa-Fulani faction has been the dominant group, which controlled the Federal power structure for three decades. Consequently, the two other major contenders have had cause to complain of marginalization and the need to restructure the country for better administration and governance.

To Mohammed [1988] and Babawale [2001] such feelings of marginalization partly accounted for the civil war that nearly dismembered the country between 1967 and 1970. Babawale and Mohammed point out those years of military dictatorship have resulted in an increasing hegemonization of the dominant Hausa-Fulani group to the near-exclusion of the other two contenders for power, the Igbo and the Yoruba. The minority groups had been complaining bitterly about their exclusion from power and their marginalization in the allocation of national resources; the southern minorities believe and rightly too, that they deserve better share of the oil revenue, a product which is largely extracted from their communities instead of the tokenism received in form of revenue allocation from the Federal account [Babawale, 2001:2]. He maintains that people are therefore frustrated by the gap between what they expect and what they can reasonably get from the political system. Hence the violence associated with peoples demand for justice from the government they thought has unjustly used the resources of the nation to develop a section of the country to the utter neglect of others in the entity.

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[3] Ahmadu Bello. 1962. My life an autobiography of the Sardauna of Sokoto. Cambrige: Cambridge University Press.

There is no doubt that the Igbo have been complaining and are still complaining bitterly about their being singled out for punishment and discrimination as a result of their secessionist attempt which led to the Nigerian civil war; the Yoruba felt cheated too by the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential elections which was presumed to have been won by one of their own, late chief M.K.O. Abiola, but was unjustly denied the victory by a military government dominated by the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group. The feelings of displeasure among several groups have grown to a distressing proportion for nearly a decade, it seems that the advent of the civilian administration gave vent to this pent up anger, frustration and bitterness and a host of other discontent.

These expressions came to a head during the Abacha's brutal dictatorship, though they were equally ruthlessly suppressed within the period. Thus the phenomenon of ethnic crises emerged in Nigeria against the conditions of willful domination and oppression. Anifowoshe [2000] also observes that the origins of ethnic crises are traceable to mass misgivings over perceived political marginalization, poverty and unemployment, collapse of social infrastructure and state welfare programme as well as the perceived inefficient social institutions.

Researchers like Alemika and Sesay have observed that the nation's urban centers have witnessed a phenomenal proliferation of street urchins, mostly comprising children and young adults; product of collapsed or homeless families, victims of various forms of exploitation and abuse, neighborhood hoodlums and street corner gangs. It is no doubt then that these youths spontaneously react to any minor incident of ethnic or sectarian violence, amplify the scope, and exploit the atmosphere of mayhem to loot shops and offices and harass or settle scores with innocent citizens. Majority of these youths on the long run become full members of ethnic militias ready at the slightest provocation to strike at the perceived or imagined enemy of their ethnic group [Sesay *et al,* 2003; Alemika, 2003].

Ethnic crises in Nigeria emerged at different times and for different purposes, this is not to deny the fact that there exists a common denominator in their emergence, particularly the struggle against tyranny and oppression with the purported involvement of the state in the assassination of notable Nigerians [Agbu, 2004]. The rise and resilience of the tradition of political brinkmanship, involving threats and counter-threats of breakdown of rule-induced and system-supporting behavior in contexts etched by the tendency of the political elite to prefer fission to fusion, coming apart rather than sticking together, at moments of great national crises, provided the background to the emergence of contemporary forms of ethnic crises in Nigeria [Agbaje, 2003]. Banwo [2003] also argues that it was the undemocratic nature of the Abacha led military administration in Nigeria that aggravated ethnic tension within the polity. This also inadvertently led to the growth and consolidation of micro-nationalist paramilitary organizations like OPC, MOSOP among others.

There is no doubt from all the accounts examined above that the unilateral annulment of the June 12, presidential election of 1993 in Nigeria by General Ibrahim Babangida snowballed into a train of events that could be linked to the resurgence of ethnic crises. Gani Adams [2003] according to Adebanwi [2005] explained that the contradictions that produced [and perhaps, reproduced] ravenous ethnic crises include, structural imbalance, the military and repressive decrees, destructive constitutional structure, conscious debasement of ethnic nationalities, insecurity of life and property, ethnic cleansing and degenerated educational system. The blame for most of these intractable problems has been put at the doorstep of the Hausa-Fulani faction of Nigerian governing elite and the national question.

Ethnic crises have their roots in what Alemika [2003b] calls endemic corruption, political intolerance and social prejudice in Nigerian society. He stresses further that they are also products of repressive governments, of a government that has failed to guarantee every citizen the opportunity – equal access to opportunities – to obtain the necessary resources to meet his or her basic needs. Ethnic crises are also products of militant elite employing their identities as a bargain in the competition for power and wealth, which in Nigeria are concentrated within the state [Alemika, 2003b; Adejumobi, 2002]. The crises that have occurred in Nigeria seem to be mere instruments in the hands of various sectional elites in their struggles for re-distribution of power and wealth concentrated within the state, to the exclusion of some group. At the roots, these crises are a reflection of an unjust and undemocratic society. Adejumobi [2002] categorizes the rise of ethnic tension into three; first he said the phenomenon of personal rule and high concentration of power in the hands of an individual entity whether in a military or civil regime, has a strong potential of promoting ethnic tension in the society. He observed that the logic of divide and rule is primary in personalized regimes; as such individuals usually have a constructed ethnic

road map of channeling and distributing social goods and scarce resources and thus create polarization and division amongst ethnic groups in order to perpetuate their rule [Adejumobi, 2000; Adejumobi, 2002].

Adejumobi [2000] pointed out that this was so rampant in Babangida and Abacha regimes in Nigeria as social differences of ethnic, communal and religious dimensions were played up by those regimes. This was why the unprecedented inter-ethnic, religious and communal crises were rampant. Adejumobi stressed that communities that were hitherto living together in harmony suddenly took up arms against each other; for instance the Jukuns and the Tivs in Benue state; the Aguleri and the Umuleri of Abia state; the Ife and Modakeke of Oshun state; the Yoruba and the Hausa/Fulani in Sagamu Ogun state to mention but a few. The import of this to Adejumobi is the ethnic boundary and consciousness that became more pronounced with the ferment of ethnic nationalism in ascendance [Adejumobi 2002]. The second dimension he gave as the contrivance of the public sphere for social action – expression and political action. Adejumobi observed that both the Babangida and Abacha regimes were extremely repressive, and sought to annihilate any group and individual that opposed them. The implication was that many people reclined into their ethnic cocoons to seek refuge from the onslaught unleashed on pan-Nigerian civil society groups while some went underground to conduct their activities. The third reason he gave was the issue of marginalization and social deprivation

Effects of religion, education and ethnic polarization

Nigeria is still tottering with national cohesion tending towards being torn with ethnic and religious disunity and rabid sectionalism. Far from providing, a basis and framework for the development of national cohesion and democracy, there is an intensification of the present decadent and grossly imbalance pattern of development, bureaucratic greed, individualism and chaos. Nigeria constitution is full of grand pronouncement about national unity, national integration and national loyalties. Far from proposing a basis and framework for these, they have provided the framework for the manipulation of ethnic and religious differences. If there is one thing which is so openly essential for ensuring the forging of national integration it is separating the Nigerian State clearly and unambiguously from religion and ensuring that its function is to protect the rights of citizens to practice the religious belief of their choice [Usman, 1979].

Ethnic rivalries plagued the nation from its inception. Under the autocratic leadership of Lord Fredrick Lugard the various ethnic groups forcefully yoked together were isolated from each other through the policy of divide-and-rule. Right through the 1940s according to Akintola[1982:4] there existed persistent rivalry between the Yorubas and the Igbos, the Igbo continued in their obsession to catch up with the Yorubas educationally and to overshadow them in the advocacy for black nationalism. This created a situation where both ethnic groups viewed each other as a competitor and, as such, something of a threat. By virtue of their western education both ethnic groups became the biggest discomfort for the British rulers during the colonial days, who were much more disposed to the gullible, pig-ignorant African than the educationally smart "trousered Negro" who will not readily acquiesce to the colonialists dictatorship. It is therefore understandable why the colonizers preferred the northerners to the southerners. The former showed no interest in being exposed to western education, and for a long time trailed behind the Yoruba's and the Igbos in that respect. The reasons were largely religious. Islam was bound to compare unfavorably with western education, which was the result of Christian teachings by the missionaries. Thus, in the role of philanthropic protectors, the colonizers were able to win northern support for their domination of Nigeria, hence keeping the northerners educationally backward, while succeeding in having them believe they were superior to the more educated, freedom seeking southerners [Akintola, 1982].

The situation in Nigeria was like unity within the façade of disunity, while recognizing the commonness of their cause against the racialism that accompanied colonial rule, the Yorubas, Igbos and the Hausa-Fulani were acutely ethnic conscious, each striving to overshadow the other. In this regard the ethnic rivalry between the Yorubas and the Igbos was the most intense, reaching a level of friction which under the surface probably rivaled the antagonism between Africans and Europeans. There was a whirlwind of sectionalism and ethnic instability between and within the north and the south resulting in to circumspection and mistrust with which they view each other even till today.

The question of national integration

The concept of national integration is not a novel phenomenon in literature but there is a great dissension among scholars over even a nominal definition of the concept. In this chapter therefore, national integration would refer to uniting all previously differentiated parts of a country into one entity or, put in another way, it refers to the

process of bringing together culturally and socially discrete groups into a single territorial unit and the establishment of a national identity. To Weiner (1967) national integration refers to the problem of creating a sense of territorial nationality which shadows or eliminates subordinate parochial loyalties.[4] Abernethy (1971) says national integration is a successful emphasis on unity that transcends conflict – without necessarily eliminating it.

In the urge to create political unity, the tendency has been to negate ethnic, regional and cultural diversities rather than recognize them as building blocks in the construction of a civil society. The result has been often a façade of seeming unity, a veritable smokescreen employed to mask unhealed wounds, crude subjugation and denial of the rights to self determination. [Mustapha, 1995].

Ever before the coming of the British rule in Nigeria, the entire land space now called Nigeria was, according to Akinyemi [2003], occupied by autonomous and independent nations based on clearly defined territories. These nationalities were in a state of war, some were in varying states of economic, cultural and religious relationship. He stressed that they were never in a subjugative relationship among themselves even though the colonialists subjugated them. The British themselves have been involved in the question of how to define what the relationship among these different nationalities should be [see Agbese [2000] and Akinkuotu [2005]. Agbaje [2003] asserts also that communalism in public life is a second thread of continuity in the invention of the Nigeria tradition. He says, before the colonial rule was imposed, cleavage conflicts in the areas now known as Nigeria tended to occur more within, rather than between, geographical zones occupied by ethno-regional constituencies now considered to be culturally united and homogeneous entities with colonial rule. However, what happened was 'a freezing of history as means of creating a governable state'. Thus, 'ethnic identity was regularized and manipulated to invent or at least rigidify tribal boundaries and divisions' with colonial historiography selectively emphasizing "inter-tribal", rather than "intra-tribal" conflicts [Ekeh, 1978]. Even Governor Clifford of Nigeria bemused and particularly scornful laughed at the idea that Nigeria could ever be a nation [Webster et al, 1967: 306].

Akinyemi [2003], maintains, that Nigerians were not originally consulted when the British overlords rolled out the various constitutions that were imposed to govern Nigeria. For example, the 1946 Richard Constitution which fell short of Nigerian hopes was imposed on Nigerians without consultation. Consequently, the constitution failed. Through this, the colonialists learnt and believed that a Nigerian constitution freely negotiated by Nigerians, was the best option in order to avoid any further misgivings and misunderstanding. To this end a national conference was held at Ibadan in 1950 where ethnic feelings ran high. The Hausa north showed its fear of Southern political domination and many Yoruba were perturbed about the sudden rise into prominence of the Ibo in the national movement. As a result the Ibadan conference demanded a federal form of government with strong regional governments. Before long ethnic feelings and prejudice in many leaders triumphed over national feelings, thus there were threat of secession and the general feeling was that the country was likely to break up. The President of the independent Nigeria Nnamdi Azikiwe also expressed his disgust in an interview with Peter Enahoro, the editor of Daily Times in October 24, 1964. He said:

> What is happening in Nigeria today does not inspire me to be optimistic that we shall survive as one nation. It is possible that Nigeria will disintegrate because I cannot conceive of a united country where the citizens of one region always regard their compatriots as interlopers. If we ultimately survive as a nation, then I would be too old and can only play whatever role is destined for me...

One thing that is important to note here is that in different historical instances Northern leaders were successful in their use of brinkmanship according to Agbaje [2003], to extract concessions from the British Colonial regime while the only instance in which Southern elements initiated brinkmanship met with failure and this in the words of Ayoade [1973], 'sowed the seeds of future grievances in the other parts of the Nigeria federation'.

From this point onward there was deep-seated resentment of the preferential treatment of the North by the colonial administrators the cumulative effect being a privileged position of the North in the political landscape after independence. And the southerner's view that that was the time to renegotiate the terms of Nigeria federalism questioning the fragile sovereignty handed over by the despotic colonial power [Agbaje, 2003].

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[4] Claude, E.W Jr.(Ed.) 1967. *Political moderation*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company Inc.pp.150-151.

The last experience with brinkmanship according to Agbaje was ironically triggered off under military rule when General Ibrahim Babangida, in the context of a botched re-democratization process intended to end a decade of military rule. Babangida's decision to annul the result of the presidential election held on June 12, 1993 to democratically elect a successor to him brought once more to the fore strong ethnic-regional sentiments and took Nigeria literally back to the pre-civil war years of the 1960s. The situation was not helped because it was the first election presumably won by a Southern Candidate (from the West) in the country's history. The inability of Babangida, a military officer from the North, to offer credible and acceptable reasons for annulling the result of an election, widely acclaimed by both local and international observers, including Babangida himself, as being free and fair led to a prolonged crisis [see Umar, 1998]. Babangida's successor, General Sani Abacha, heightened ethnic-regional tension in his bid to perpetuate himself in office, using or employing the mechanism of state terrorism against the Yoruba and other opposition groups, in the process igniting forces that led to the formation of a Yoruba self-help security group christened Oodua Peoples Congress [OPC].

Kukah [2003] argues that when the state fails to continue to serve as a platform for the individuals to attain their potentials, human beings tend to find alternative means of creating a sense of belonging. Disengagement sets in according to Kukah, as men and women adopt new survival strategies ranging from belonging to armed gangs, cults and extreme religions or cultural groups, or they adopt false nationalist agenda cast in tribal and religious moulds. They then continue to unleash all forms of terror on the state, its citizens and agencies.

Addressing the United States senate foreign relations committee in October 1997, William Twaddel, former United States ambassador to Nigeria depicted Nigeria as a state in which:

> Rampant corruption, the lack of transparency in decision-making, rule by military decree and the precipitous decline of government institutions undermine prospects for Nigeria as a coherent state. Instability or worse in Nigeria could have profound humanitarian, political and economic consequences for West Africa and other regions, including the United States.

No doubt, the period, since the transition to democracy in 1999, has witnessed repeated communal, ethnic and debilitating intra-governmental crises. Olukotun, [2003] avers that the debates over the politicization of Sharia, over resource sharing, the rise of ethnic militias, frequent communal affrays and contentions over ethnic and sub-ethnic arithmetic of appointments at federal and state levels suggest a milieu in which the prospect of democracy and of the Nigerian project can not be taken for granted [Abubakar Momoh and Said Adejumobi [eds.] [2002]. Olukotun, 2003; Ihonvbere 1994 drew a portrait of Nigeria thus:

> In spite of the military strength of the state and the expansion of its security services, it remains completely incapable of providing leadership and direction towards the creation and nurturing of values, interests, aspirations, institutions and processes which would support the cause of nationhood. People just dissolve directly and/or indirectly into their respective particular organizations which begin to compete with the state for the loyalty, support, emotions and patriotism of citizens.

The economic and political interests of the ruling elites or the different ethnic factions of the ruling class explain the various forms of exclusive practices that have hindered the much needed national integration and the consequent National spirit. The result is ethnic loyalty and persistent clashes among the various ethnic constituents in the polity.

The national question and the quest for national integration

It was right from the beginning of the constitutions, that Nigerians and the British colonialists confronted frontally the issue of national question. The proposals submitted by the British bore two questions encapsulating the national question.

- Do we wish to have a full centralized system with all the legislative and executive power concentrated at the center, or do we wish to develop a federal system under which each different region of the country would exercise a measure of internal autonomy?
- If we favor a federal system should we return to the existing regions with some modifications of existing regional boundaries, or should we form regions on some new basis such as the many linguistic groups in Nigeria? It is on these two questions that the national question lies.

The national question is believed to be at the root of the crisis of the Nigerian state and the problem of peaceful co-existence. This question varies in time and in space, but may be viewed from two angles: The first is inter-

group relations. That is the tensions and contradictions that arise from this relationship dwelling on the issues of marginalization, domination, inequality fairness and justice among ethnic groups. The second is the class dimension. That is the exacerbation of class inequalities and antagonisms in society between the rich and the poor, the affluent and underclass, or to use the Marxist parlance, the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The latter sometimes reinforce the former and do increase ethnic conflicts and antagonism in society [Adejumobi, 2002]. The two perspectives are apt for Nigeria but the former gain currency in the contemporary discourse of the national question in Nigeria.

The main issue of the national question in Nigeria is how to structure the Nigeria Federation in order to accommodate groups and guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources [Osaghae, 1998]. The background to it is the perceived domination of some ethnic groups by the other engendered by the structural nature of the Nigerian Federation, the heavy lopsidedness in center-state relations which, according to Wole Soyinka is highly "unbalanced, exploitative and acquisitive" and the growing impoverishment, frustration and disillusionment of the people, which is viewed as a direct consequence of power structure and ruling class politics in Nigeria [Adejumobi, 2000]. On the final analysis, Momoh noted rightly that the national question is fundamentally related to the question of rights and privileges of nations and peoples particularly in the context of oppression [Momoh, 2002]. The under-listed issues to Adejumobi, [2000:126] are very vital to the national question.

- What should be the component units and tiers of government in the Nigeria federation?
- How should they be constituted, based on ethnic contiguity or administrative expediency?
- How should political power and administrative responsibilities be shared among the levels and tiers of government?
- How should the ownership of economic resources be structure in the Nigeria federation?
- What should be the acceptable formulae for sharing federally collected revenue?
- What should be the nature of inter-governmental relations in Nigeria?

In Nigeria today virtually all the various ethnic groups talk about marginalization and domination, hence all the ethnic groups are affected one way or the other by the national question. Momoh illustrates this thus:

> For the Niger Delta and oil producing minority it is exploitation and environmental
> degradation; for the Igbo it is marginalization; for the Hausa Fulani, it is uneven development;
> for the minorities of the North, particularly the Middle Belt it is one of internal colonialism; for
> the Yoruba it is power exclusion. Hence everybody is demanding empowerment on the basis
> of one assumption – xenophobia [Momoh, 2002].

The fears and demands of ethnic militias basically revolve round the issues of National question. For instance, the concern of MASSOB is marginalization of the East in the power equation in Nigeria; that of OPC is about "power shift" and restructuring of the federation and the quest for self-determination by groups in the Niger Delta region is based on the social injustice, neglect and marginalization that the area suffers in the Nigerian nation. In an important sense, these ethnic militias are offshoots of the national question in Nigeria [Adejumobi, 2003]. Onunaiju depicts the argument thus:

> While not holding brief for OPC or other militant ethnic groups, it seems to me: a general
> poverty of creative thinking to suggest that OPC is simply a gang of blood thirsty youths,
> fronted by disgruntled politicians who seek to blackmail the country, as many otherwise
> Nigerians would suggest or argue. It seemed to be generally believed that were the security
> forces to be deployed sufficient with enough equipment and weapons, then the land would be
> brimming with smiling citizens irrespective of their widespread destitution or alienation.
> Nothing from the fact on the ground could be as absurd as this assumption…but the imperative
> to resolve the national question becomes even more urgent and to my mind, the activities of
> the OPC and other militant groups help clarify it [Onunaiju, 2000:12].

Most of the ethnic nationalities share the same ideas with the civil society organizations on how to resolve the national question. For most of the groups, the immediate solution is through the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference [SNC]. Osaghae noted; that the SNC would discuss the major issues and problems of the Nigerian federation. These include, "Northern domination, which became more vexing after the annulment of the June 12 1993, presidential election, believed to have been won for the first time by a southerner, majority domination and oppression of minorities, the security of the state and the rise of religious fundamentalism, resource allocation, power sharing, distributive Justice" [Osaghae, 1995]. He continues:

> Such a conference is justified on the grounds that a federal union is a voluntary union and that the Nigerian federation as it presently exists is an anomaly because the various groups have not been allowed to decide whether they want to continue to belong to it or not since the British "forced" them into union in 1914 [Oshagae, 1995:343].

The government in power during this time headed by General Sani Abacha criminalized the SNC; his government became paranoid about SNC that he was prepared to systematically eliminate leaders of group canvassing for the idea just as he eliminated some leaders of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People [MOSOP]. This is why both NADECO and OPC had to operate underground during Abacha's days.

The presidency in Obasanjo regime of 1999-2007, shares the position of National Assembly on the issue of a SNC, according to it, those clamoring for a SNC are either idle people, or those bent on fomenting trouble in the country. Its response to the national question issue is to institute a constitutional review process aimed at reforming the 1999 constitution. This view is just a window dressing offer, proposed to sweep the major and basic problem of Nigeria under the carpet.

An editorial of one of the Nigerian newspapers, the National Concord sums it up thus:

> It is our view therefore that these issues cannot just be swept under the carpet. To do so is to indulge in an act of self-deception. It is politically wrong to foreclose discussion on such a grave national question as the mode of government under which we hope to live. Our country is a multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic nation. This means that we are all stakeholders in the Nigerian Project. This confers on us the right to discuss the mode of our relationship… Unless the issues that threaten to tear our nation apart are frankly discussed, our nation may not know peace, which is a vital condition for economic development and national progress. It is our opinion, that unless the issues of the national question are solved a more ban on the ethnic militias by the government will on the long run give strength to these groups to resurface for a renewed agitation [National Concord, February 12, 2001:12].

The two main issues that have nurtured ethnic crises in Nigeria are the excessive centralization of the power of the state, reinforced at least until 1999 by a Hausa-Fulani Oligarchy, as well as the effort of civil society to provide those services such as security, which a dys-functional state has failed to provide [Olukotun, 2003].

The state of bondage in which we find ourselves in Nigeria is not imposed by nature but by man. It is, however, in the nature of men to seek for freedom, an impulse unacceptable to the beneficiaries of the unjust status quo. It is a fact that the impostors who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable. Thus, the alienation, subjugation and obvious marginalization, suffered by the other ethnic nationalities in the hands of the ruling ethnic group and their military allies, led to agitation and the fight for self-determination through the formation of ethnic militias in the parts of Nigeria

Adams [2003], in his contribution says, the rise of any militia in whatever form, ethnic or otherwise, in any part of the world, could be attributed to injustices and inequity under which OPC was created to fight in Nigeria. He said, "We in the OPC, having also understood the contradictions and prevailing crisis in Nigeria, took the pain to challenge the force responsible for the massive repression, injustice, victimization and gross underdevelopment of our fatherland". It is, therefore, clear that before there could be a fertile ground for ethnic crisis to germinate there must be a perceived or real injustice by one section of the society who are often forced to adopt a way of expressing themselves other than the means recognized by international community as stated in No. 2 of Article 20 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Right to which Nigeria is a signatory: "Colonized or oppressed peoples shall have the right to free themselves from the bonds or domination by resorting to any means recognized by the international community". The desire of the OPC to fight marginalization of its people the Yoruba, emanates from the words of the great sage Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who said in one of his writings that:

> In order that she [Nigeria] may attain her natural birthright and destiny, Nigeria must be re-made and recreated. Every aspect of her existence must be revolutionized…

Fasheun [2003] believes in this writing too, that the national question must be properly addressed failing which Nigerian unity will be futile and the whole process will be reduced to an unprofitable window dressing. He said, *"Nigerian Unity is a function of the tribes. Ignore the tribes and there is no unity, no nation. A strong reason the tribes must turn up at some venue to address their problems".*

In contextualizing the national question, Ekeh [1996], in his work "Political Minorities and Historical-Dominant Minorities in Nigerian History and Politics", says: Historically, Nigeria's 'federalism' has passed through several phases. First, there was a phase in which social and cultural barriers were imposed on other people to give them a stigma of "strangers". An example is the colonial inspired creation of Sabon Garis. Second, artificial dichotomy was created between the north and south flowing from the protectorates. Third, regionalism was imposed and the realities of Nigeria were viewed from the point of a trinity: North, West and East. Finally, the minority element became factored into the political calculus. This minority element has two sides to it, a political hegemonic and dominated element. The Fulani in the North, the Efik and Ijaw in the east and Delta region were all minority hegemonic groups in pre-colonial Nigeria [Ekeh, 1996].

Momoh [2003] added that many of the elites of the dominated minorities are in the forefront of and the politics of the current quest for restructuring of Nigeria. This is partly because they account for a sizeable proportion of the nation's wealth and yet they are victims of exploitation without any commensurate compensation, representation and social amenities. Worst still, the Nigeria state creates the impression that it is wrong, if not criminal, of them to complain against their social and political condition [Momoh, 2003].

One very basic point, that must not be lost sight of, is the argument that the Nigerian 'Federation' had never been previously as threatened as it is today and the cardinal reason for this, partly, has to do with the militarist values and structures of the Nigerian State. This has, overtime, not only thrown overboard the gains made in the development process and consolidation of the attempts at nation-building or federalism, but it has also, in addition, created centralizing and authoritarian values, institutions and structures that have posed a threat to the Nigerian 'Federation'. In one word, it is hard to talk of Federalism within militarist rather than democratic framework [Jega, 1997; Suberu and Agbaje, 1998]. Federalism has always been statist prerogative and all attempts to root it in the people have been aborted by the ruling class, who turn around to claim being the mouthpiece of the toiling people [Momoh, 2003]. The overall effect is that the nation has not been imprinted in the hearts of Nigerians till today instead like Idang [2005] observed an average Nigerian sees the demand to subordinate his familiar loyalty to superimposed social order, nation-state, as a threat to his perceived sense of identity and security. This is probably why Chief Obafemi Awolowo also said:

> The so called common Nigeria nationality or integration is a veneer of façade consciously or unconsciously put up by some Nigerians to cover up what many of their fellow men see quite plainly as rabid nationalism [Awolowo, 1968].

National cohesion has to be consciously and deliberately planned for as it cannot be achieved by accident or luck no matter how many centuries a people band together within one sovereignty.

Conclusion

It can be assumed from the above that the root causes of persistent ethnic crises hinged on the socio-cultural, political and economic differences of the peoples the British colonial government brought together under one political yoke for administrative and exploitative convenience. The Nigerian elite class capitalized and heightened these differences instead of harnessing them to build an ideal economically and politically virile nation. The dysfunctional use of their intellectualism helped in no small dimension to further disintegrate the country. This was done by always emphasizing the factors that divided rather than those that foster cohesion. The ethnic/sectional politics which was pervasive in the nation led to inter-ethnic mistrust, mutual hatred and fear of domination, corruption and nepotism – all resulting in persistent ethnic crises that exploded in the military coup d'état that followed in January 1966 and the subsequent civil war of 1967-70. This pogrom became one of the major factors that hindered national cohesion and building of national spirit.

The second republic, 1979-1983 also witnessed the come back of pre-civil war divisive and corruptive politics vigorously pursued by the same characters that plunged the nation into unfortunate civil war having learnt nothing from the mistakes of the past. Even the third and the fourth republics were bedeviled and ravaged by ethno-religious crises which have been the major tools employed by the elites as a ploy to cause confusion and division. The British might have created Nigeria arbitrarily but each section of the country needs to come into compromise with others to build a strong, virile and economically vibrant and developed nation. It is therefore only rational that political unity is maintained to harness the different potentials peculiar to each region towards the development of a great nation.

Crucial to the whole growth of nationalism in Nigeria was the fact that the elite often tended to be tribalist rather than nationalist. For instance an Ibo's loyalty was/is often to Igbo land rather than to Nigeria. Although social friends might be of the same ethnic group but intellectual and political friends and acquaintances may often be Nigerians across other ethnic groups.   Nigerians need to be just to one another. Though they belong to different tribes, spoke different languages, and had acquired different cultures, yet they have been obliged to live together as natives of one country through British connections. In other words, the cement which should hold Nigerians together is common identity engendered through mutual love, trust and confidence in common destiny.

Nigerian leaders must face squarely the problem of National conference like what happened at Ibadan in 1950 to discuss the major problems of Nigeria federation. Nigerians should be granted the freedom to decide whether they want to continue to belong to Nigerian federation or not since the British forcefully welded them together in to a union in 1914.

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