RELIGION AND ETHNICITY AS STRATAGEMS FOR THE TRIUMPH OF MEDIOCRITY IN NIGERIA: RECONNECTING THE DISCONNECT THROUGH FEDERALISM

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ABSTRACT
Nigeria as a Nation has been experiencing socio-political convulsion on the basis of religion and ethnicity. The independent and post independent Nigeria is not an exception from this hiccup. This paper investigated religion and ethnicity as stratagems for the triumph of mediocrity in Nigeria thus reconnecting the disconnect through federalism. The research has adopted both descriptive and analytical methods of investigation. As a diverse and heterogeneous nation, the Northerners have consistently asserted their dominance and hegemony over others, as if Northerners are birthed with Nigeria political power. In their ethno-religious exhibition, other religions are subservient, and in their own view, the very least believer in their religion is far better than the greatest in other religion(s). The findings revealed that the aftermath of this promotion of religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian politics is the triumph of mediocrity, incompetent, unpopular and irrational candidates. The paper, therefore, recommends federalism as a means for reconnecting the disconnect between religion and ethnicity in Nigeria.

Introduction

It is obvious that leadership based on religion and ethnicity in Nigeria in this democratic era has successfully dislodged the good ancient and traditional system of merit and credible leadership at the altar of ethnic sentiments, religious persuasion, prejudice, ignorance and parochialism. In 1995, Alhaji Maitama Sule, one of the Nigerian's respected bureaucrats, created a storm among southern intellectuals when he noted that different communities in Nigeria were differently endowed: the Fulani with leadership qualities, the Igbo with Industry and the Yoruba with diplomatic skills. All those submissions point to the fact that the Northerners see leadership and power as their birthright. The regime of President Muhammadu Buhari, a civilian leader undermines the spirit of the Nigerian Federal Character by appointing political leaders and public office holders arbitrarily without a recourse to fair-sharing. His appointments have become lopsided by promoting Hausa/Fulani interest. Specific objectives of this work include:

1. Clarification of terms of religion and ethnicity
2. Juxtaposition of religion and ethnicity
3. Implication of religion and ethnicity

4. Reconnecting the disconnect through federalism

Account of Religion

Religion as a concept is open to various interpretations. Different approaches have been introduced to its study. The etymological meaning of religion is from latin word '*religare'* which means *'to bind', 'to bring together;* to come together, to exist side by side and to fuse people together the rationalists, enlightenment and modern thinkers have shown how irrelevant it is to societal growth and development. Religion is seen as "any system of values, beliefs, norms and related symbols and rituals, arising from attempts by individuals and social groups to effect certain ends, whether in this world of any further world, by means of wholly or partly supernatural". In the same vein, Vernon observes religion as an integral part of culture composed of share beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural and the sacred and man's relationship thereto, but which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as to what is good (in harmony with it approved by the supernatural) and what is bad (contrary to out of harmony with regards supernatural). Looking at religion from another perspective, Obilor cited in Iwuoha explains it as a capacity or a power which enables man to observe the laws of his nature, the natural law and/or the divine law. Ayantayo aptly describes religion "as any system which relates men to ultimate values, whether God or something else and which embodies a creed, a code and a cult[8]. Religion legitimizes, sustains and reflects social order. Religion occupies a distinctive place in the enterprise of world-building. From the observation above, it is pertinent to note that all religions possess one or more of five sources of power: They wield moral authority; shape people's worldviews; have the ear of multitudes of adherents; often possess strong financial and institutional assess and are strong generators of social capital, an asset in community growth and development.

Ethnicity

Okolie & Osayande state that, the term ethnicity does not offer itself to easy definition11. They further state that to fully comprehend this, some related terms like 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity' needs to be defined. Ethnic group according to Ohen is an informal interest group whose members are distinct from members of other ethnic groups with the larger society because they share kinship, religious and linguistics ties. Similarly, an ethnic group consists of those who are themselves alike by virtue of their common ancestry, languages, culture and who are so regarded by others. Nnoli sees ethnicity as the interactions among members of diverse groups. According to Achebe, ethnicity is "discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth". In Nigeria, the word 'ethnicity and tribalism' are used interchangeably. While ethnicity is a politically neutral concept and does not pose any danger to democracy or development but rather could positively engender development where interactions and interrelationships are healthy, it is the politicization and manipulation of ethnicity that poses a problem.

Juxtaposition of Religion and Ethnicity

Before and since Nigerian Independence, sixteen leaders who can be traced to same religion and ethnic stock have emerged. Suffice it to name them chronologically and geographically.

S/N	Date	Names	State	Region
1	1st October 1960 – 15th Jan1966	Tafawa Abubakar	Bauchi	North
2	15th January 1966 – 29th July 1966	J. T. U. Aguyi-Ironsi	Abia	South
3	29th July 1966 – July 1975	Yakubu DanYumma Gowon	Plateau	North
4	29th July 1975 – 13th February 1976	Muritala Ramat Mohammed	Kano	North
5	13th February 1976 – October 1979	Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo	Ogun	South
6	1st October 1979 – 31st December 1983	Shehu Aliu Shagari	Sokoto	North
7	31st December 1983 – 27th August 1985	Muhammadu Buhari	Katsina	North
8	27th August 1985 - 26th August 1993	Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida	Niger	North
9	26th August 1993 – 17th Novemeber 1993	Ernest Shonekan	Ogun	South
10	17th November 1993 – June 1998	Sanni Abacha	Kano	North
11	8th June1998 – 29th May 1999	Abdulsalam Abubakar	Niger	North
12	29th May 1999 – 29th May 2007	Olusegun Obasanjo	Ogun	South
13	29th May 2007 – 5th May 2010	Umar Musa Yar'Adua	Katsina	North
14	5th May 2010 – 29th May 2015	Goodluck Ebele Jonathan	Bayelsa	South
15	29th May 2015 – 29th May 2023	Muhammadu Buhari	Katsina	North
16	29th May 2023 – till date	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Lagos	South

Since independence in 1960 to date, sixteen political leaders have ruled the Nigerian nation of which ten of the sixteen are predominantly Northerners. This had further buttressed the dominance of Northern political hegemony. According to Alamu, in the political arena, there have been a Northern domination and monopoly or political power at the expense of the other regions. In other words, the North has ruled Nigeria for collective period of 45years out of 63 years of post-independence period.

Even in the face of Nigerian federal character and the purported six geo-political zones formula, religions and ethnic cleavage of the Northern hegemony hold sway.

Babarinsa observes that the rest of the country perceived the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy, the powerful ruling clique in Northern Nigeria, as conquerors to be appeased, resisted or barely tolerated. For insurance, the Northern oligarchy had dominated governance in Nigeria for about thirty-six out of forty-six years of Nigerian existence as an independent state.

The issue of dominance is fundamental to them, and they re-echo it as a password. Kukah recently reiterated the statement of Sultan of Sokoto who said that "let the Northern elite who have surrendered the space claim it back immediately". The regime of President Muhammadu Buhari, a civilian leader undermines the spirit of the Nigerian federal character by appointing political leaders and public office holders arbitrarily without a recourse to fair-sharing promoting and advertising religion and ethnicity in the nation's politics admit incompetent, unpopular and irrational leadership that explains away the beauty of diversity in Nigeria, at the altar of ethno-religious expediency. Kukah clearly states that religion and ethnicity as baits (stratagems) for the triumph of mediocrity have therefore ended up reinforcing prejudice and driving Nigerians to their various ethnic, religious and regional laagers where siege mentalities blossom. Winner-takes-all attitude of religion and ethnicity makes Non-Muslim elites in the North to remark that "the northern Muslim elites have not developed a moral basis for adequate power sharing with their Christian co-religionists".

Implications of Religion and Ethnicity on the Nigerian Nation

Alamu buttressed that exploring the interplay of religious and ethnicity in the politics of the Nigerian nation has shown that it has caused more damages to the polity, balkanized true federalism and caused a lot of setbacks to the nation. The politics of ethno-religiousity in Nigeria has already consumed both the wielders and the targets.

To slow that it is unhealthy to employ ethno-religiosity in Nigerian politics, Kukah bemoans that political mobilizes have become arrogant in exploring and exploiting religion to their own advantage, which is a minus to the entire nation. Even bearing in mind the experience that people have had with the Sharia even in the North, religion has become a liability and scapegoat. In essence, Nigeria as a nation has been in open confrontation since her creation and amalgamation by the colonial overloads. The implication has been the tuzzle between the North and the south, as well as between Islam and Christianity. Not only that the supremacy of the North for power, dominance and control led to balkanization of true federalism or regional system of government in our nationhood.

Despite the fact that General Buhari won the 2015 election overwhelmingly, he brought nepotism, tribalism and clannishness into his reign of power. Kukah argues that his government is marked by supremacist and divisive policies that push our country to the brink. He asserts further:

The president has displayed the greatest degree of insensitivity in managing our country's rich diversity. He has subordinated the larger interests of the country to the hegemonic interests of his co-religionists and clansmen and women. The impression created now is that, to hold a key and strategic position in Nigeria today, it is more important to be a Northern Muslim than a Nigerian.

Reconnecting the Disconnect through Federalism

It is pertinent at this juncture to explain federalism before reconnecting the disconnect. No concept is open to a simple definition. However, attempt will be made to present some scholarly positions on federalism. Oronsanya and Imhanlahimin see federalism as a government in which sovereignty is divided between the central and the state or regional government; the two arms are coordinated in

the sense that neither level authority. Put differently, the two levels of government that are federal and state or regional, exist side by side with each possessing certain assigned powers or functions. Frederick defines federalism as a political process by which a number of separate political communities enter into arrangement for working out solutions, adopting joint policies and making decisions on problems. A.V Dicey sees federalism as a political invention which is intended to reconcile national unity and power with the maintenance of the rights of the separate member states. Under federalism, negotiations, interactions, collective, bargaining, compromises and concessions are healthy; Constructive criticisms and public opinions are not seen as hate speeches. Therefore, a true, and competent leader that emerges through federation world learn and listen to the electorates, because would not be subordinates, rather, the leader would be seen as first among equals. But under ethno-religions politics, the masses are subordinates and subservient to the leader they choose through the so-called electoral process.

The ever-with-us enthronement of religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian political system since independence to date has been worrisome, problematic, it has been allowing miscreants, nonchalant, dullards and unpopular for elective posts, they eliminate their political opponents and become murderous. Electoral killings, violence and political thuggery are common ways of politicking in and ethnicity will go into oblivion, and there would be healthy competition and construction and constructive criticisms.

If true federation triumphs in the Nigeria political system, there would be equal and even distribution of political power. The decentralization of power to all six geo-political zones will be made possible.

At this point it is important to note that despite the beauty and pride of place of true federalism, it also has its weaknesses. Some of its shortcomings hang on structural imbalance, political hegemony, military experience and civil unrest (Ovwasa and Idowu). Truly speaking, federalism operates more effectively in a political system where constituent units are structurally balanced. The imbalance in the structure of Nigeria, in the area of ethnic majority of the North structure of Nigeria, in the area of ethnic majority of the North over the Southern group negates the federal principle, and this has led to the monopolization of political power, usurpation of privileges and subordination of one group by the others.

In spite of the weaknesses of federalism, its gain far outweighs its deficiencies. This Federal ideal in Nigeria is desirable path, which will ensure collective bargaining, effective concessions, protection of self-determination, competence, good and robust governance, beauty of diversity, resource control and identity. Above all, the current and deadly use of religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian polity coupled with their terrific implications are the disconnect whicn federalism is set to reconnect.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The work argues that the consequences and implications of politics of religion and ethnicity are regrettably bad, tribalistic, divisive, insensitive, hegemonic, precarious, nepotistic, rudderless with indices of failed state, failed economy, poverty, stunting squalor, insecurity and destitution.

The study has therefore, advocated that true federalism that gives room for devolution of power to the state or region without subordination, acceptance of resource control and restructuring; permission of equitable distribution of power among the six-geo-political zones, and the principle of federal character, which accommodates healthy competition and negotiations that would bring competent and presentable leaders. This, no doubt, would be the only viable alternative for solving all the multi-faceted challenges ever and currently experienced by the people.

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