SUPRA-ETHNIC NATIONALISM: THE WAY FORWARD FOR NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT:

Nigeria has been characterised by a history of ethnic divisions and tensions after independence, which led to a military coup six years after nationhood and a devastating civil war few months later. Ethnicity has been the bane of the nation's socio-economic backwardness. Given that nationalistic values have not been given the consideration it deserved by political actors, thereby polarising the various ethnic nationalities in the nation, resulting in a feeble sense of national consciousness, most often manifested when Nigeria is engaged in sporting competition against other nations. This paper tries to examine this issue and the devastating consequences it has impacted on the drive to nationhood. This study reviewed the existing literature so as to generate academic discussions. Primordial and Instrumental theories was utilised as a frame of analysis. Inferences from the extant literature indicates that the colonial experience, coupled with divisive tendencies of the ruling elites fosters the present precarious relations in Nigeria. This study suggests that instilling supra-ethnic values is key in promoting harmonious inter-group relations for a semblance of nationhood.

Introduction

A competitive and disruptive tension that results from interactions by different ethnicities has been a resonating issue in Nigeria's socio-political development. This trend leads to distrust and suspicion among ethnic-nationalities yet micro-nationalism is a recipe for entrenching supra-nationality in Nigeria polity. To this end, ethnic nationalism has become the order of the day bygiving rise to social tensions in different parts of the country. It is expected that national ethos and values should be the driving force for national cohesion and unity in Nigeria. The destructive consequences of sectional politics during the 1960s, which led to the incursion of the military in politics and subsequent civil war that took place six years after independence, is supposed to serve as a rallying point for national unity. However, that does not seem to be the case, which portends a very bleak hope for national cohesion and unity.

Ethnic nationalism is on the rise in Nigeria prompting constant civil strife among the nation's ethnic nationalities. This development is not surprising based on the fact that ethnicity is said to be most prominent identity among Nigerians (Alubo, 2004; Osaghae&Suberu 2005).However, this precarious situation could be attributed to a political culture engendered by the power elites.

Previous studies posit that colonial divide and rule tactic is to a large extent responsible for the persisting ethnic sentiments and divisions in Nigeria. Noting that the colonialist pitted the various ethnic groups against one another, thereby emasculating the possibility for national consciousness and cohesion among the diverse ethnic nationalities (Nnoli, 1980; Alubo, 2004; Bah, 2004; Osaghae&Suberu, 2005). It could be argued that, the persistence of ethnic division in Nigeria, simply reflect the disposition of political actors whose primary interest is not very different from their colonial mentors.

Emphasis was placed on the cultural differences that exist among the natives by the British in a bid to ignite ethnic consciousness and separatism. Furthermore, they discouraged interactions among the colonised population by restricting cross border movements among Nigerians, particularly Southerners moving into the North and equally promoting separate residential settlements for Southerners resident in the North. The colonialist introduced the notion of "native foreigners" referring to Nigerians residing outside of their traditional homeland, in order to polarise the colonised and fracture national cohesion (Nnoli,1980, p.116). Clearly, the continuous clamour for separate ethnic territories in contemporary time by ethnic nationalist, which rekindles the position of Nnoli could have been avoided, if Nigerians had imbibed the desired nationalistic values that defines modern statehood.

Commitment to ethnic identity has become very endemic in the psyche of most Nigerians, to the extent that there is the tendency to subvert national interests and identity in place of primordial interests

giving rise to suspicion and persistent interethnic clashes. The narrative of ethnic mistrust and tensions is quite resonating in the existing literature. This study observed that most studies on Nigeria's ethnic problematic tend to focus on the historical antipathies that led to the present state of ethnic quagmire while there is need to explore issues that promotes harmonious intergroup relations. Thus, this paper will attempt to examine the rising ethnic nationalism and its destructive consequences that tends to obscure national identity and commitments.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

This section of this paper tries to briefly highlight key concepts around which the discussions revolves and the theoretical disposition of this study. Ethnicity has several meanings from the peaceful cultural affinity and attachment exhibited by members of an ethnic group, and the antagonistic relations of a group which feels different from others manifest towards outsiders tend to demonstrate the full connotation of the concept ethnicity. Therefore, ethnicity is a fluid concept denoting harmonious and frosty relations that exists between ethnicities.

Kottak (2000) views ethnicity as the affection and identity exhibited by members of an ethnic group which provides a sense of collective belonging and excluding non-members. He posits that the intensity of ethnicity changes over time and nations and the significance that an individual accord to an ethnic group or identity could be attributed to changes in the political system. Citing changes that spring up after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. giving rise to frosty interethnic relations in various parts of the Soviet Union which was not the case in the past.Obviously, socio-economic changes that influences the political system could heighten disruptive ethnic relations.On the contrast, tolerance nurtured by common unifying values could reduce ethnic tensions.

Nnoli (1980) views ethnicity as the antagonistic and competitive relations that exist between ethnic groups for political and economic advantages, though he acknowledges the fact that group characteristics such as a common language, customs, mythology and other primordial features that helps in defining and portraying a group as distinct in comparison to others is an essential aspect of ethnicity. However, he posits that it is the antagonistic and competitive relationships that accrue from interethnic relations that denotes ethnicity. If not for the vested interests of political actors, socio-economic competition might have not taken this ugly dimension.

Thus, ethnicity may be described as the mobilisation of ethnic sentiments for vested interests, usually involving manipulating members of one ethnic group against another with the aim of achieving a political objective. In essence, ethnicity may take different forms from harmonious interethnic relations and may degenerate into violence and prejudicial actions by political actors. What this narrative indicates is the undermining of nationalistic sentiments and

ethos by political actors who tends to benefit from the acrimonious relations that accrue from their manipulative actions.

Snyder defined nationalism as the principle which make people accept that their history, culture, religion or doctrines, and institutions are different and seek self-determination under a political entity that manifest and safeguards their distinct characteristics (as cited in Kersting, 2009, p. 8). Nationalism epitomised feelings and sentiments of oneness or similarity, providing the basis for national consciousness and statehood. Nationalism is that aspect of identity that is connected to a political entity; it is psychological thus provides the motivations for selflessness and patriotism (Adetiba & Rahim, 2012). Given that nationalism denotes the psychological basis of national cohesion and identity, it helps in ingraining mental processes of national unity in the citizenry of a nation. The quest for national consciousness and statehood was very rife during the anticolonial struggle; it was a straightforward matter between the colonialist and the colonised.

However, along the way after Nigeria's independence, ethnic sentiments begin to weaken the nation's drive to statehood. In other words, ethnic nationalism or feelings and overriding commitment to ethnic sentiments became paramount among the nation's diverse ethnic groups, which begin to fracture the feeble sense of national identity that was emerging after the process of colonial struggle. Unhealthy ethnic relations led to the first military coup which culminated to the civil war experienced few years after independence in Nigeria (Anugwom, 2000; Ojo&Faghohun, 2014). It could posit that failure by political actors to harness nationalistic ethos after Nigeria's independence aggravated ethnic separatism and tensions.

Aluko and Ajani (2009) views ethnic nationalism as a conviction about the superiority and uniqueness of an individual's ethnic group and the commitment to protect its interests over and above all other competing interests. In essence, ethnic nationalism tends to supersede all other interests, thereby posing a threat to nationalistic values which emphasises ideals such as common destiny and other civic obligations that cut across the constituent population. On the contrast, instead of Nigeria's political elites emphasising nationalistic ethos as was the case during the colonial struggle, emphasis tends to be tilting towards primordial sentiments or ethnic nationalism that is inimical to nation-building and national integration. Apparently, ethnic nationalism could have been avoided, if Nigerians were sensitised to accept one another irrespective of creed, language and particularistic values.

Bereketeab (2002) in examining Eritrean supra-ethnic nationalism, posits that two types of identities tend to exist in multi-ethnic societies ethnic or subnational and civic or national. Subnational denotes cultural or primordial identity, in contrast the national or civic is fundamentally civic, supra-ethnic, national identity. He further observes that Eritrea, symbolises a multi-

ethnic society which is bonded by its civic and ethnic identity. He is of the opinion that the diverse ethnic groups that make up Eritrea have been able to devise a national or civic identity that supersedes ethnic identity, through constant interactions and relationships that emphasised an imagined reality that became the basis of supra-ethnic unity. The Eritrean example reflects the path Nigeria should tread, instead of the persisting ethno-religious outlook typified by incessant divisions and conflicts. However, failure of political actors to reappraise and correct the colonial experiences that nurtured ethnic divisions in Nigeria, led to the persisting ethnic problematic which needs to be rectified for sustainable peace and progress.

Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria expresses itself in various forms that undermine national bonds and ideals. The constant conflicts witnessed between so-called indigenes and non-indigenes is a poignant example of how far ethnic nationalism has grown and how it is been utilised by political actors in fracturing the unity of the nation. During colonial rule, the colonialists were able to divide and rule Nigerians by manipulating ethnic sentiments that promote conflicting relations between the colonised to the advantage of their colonial interests This situation seems to be re-enacting itself in contemporary Nigeria due to the unpatriotic actions and motives of some sections of the ruling elites who tend to benefit from parochial ethnic nationalism. This situation, personifies Aluko and Ajani's (2009) description of ethnic nationalist who tends to identify first and foremost with their ethnic group before considering national tenets. Unfortunately, this has been the path that Nigeria seems to be treading in recent times. It is not uncommon for some ethnic groups in parts of the nation to be issued quit notice to relocate to their ethnic homeland or face violence. This development symbolises failure of the Nigerian state to nurture inclusive national identity.

This in itself portends a very bleak future for the unity and progress of the nation. Based on this unhealthy development, there has been a rise in ethnic tensions and the subsequent emergence of regional ethnic organisations claiming to champion the cause of their members or geo-political zones. In reality, unity in diversity which symbolises supra-ethnic doctrine that helps in bonding multicultural societies is being relegated to the background in national discourse. Although, it is argued that the persistence of ethnic nationalism in Nigeria is related to the colonial experience which makes ethnic identity paramount among the colonised, given that the natives were programmed to be more comfortable and relaxed in the midst of members of their ethnic group as non-members were portrayed as competitors and enemies in the struggle for socio-economic advantages (Nnoli, 1980). The quest of national unity should not be truncated by the motives of some undesirable political actors who seem to benefit from the precarious ethnic relations in the country.

Primordialism could be advanced as a factor for the persistent ethnic commitment and rivalry in Nigeria. Primordialism tends to view ethnicity as something programmed among human beings, given that individuals that share a common heritage such as language, traditions, and a sense of belonging to a unified community, tends to have strong commitment to their ethnic group. Thus, primordialism is seen as a basis of ethnic mobilisation, as it appeals to the emotive state of mind of members of an ethnic group. In other words, it has the tendency to arouse the collective emotions of a particular group of people claiming a common heritage or ancestry (Adetiba & Rahim, 2012). Given that primordialism has the ability to attract the attention and ignite a commitment to a particularistic cause, it could be described as a strong basis for the persistence ethnicity in Nigeria, as majority of Nigerians are believed to be more committed to their ethnic and religious groups, instead of a civic national identity (Osaghae&Suberu, 2005).

The overarching attachment to parochial sentiments, in postcolonial Nigeria reflects the political disposition of the elites, which could have been moderated if only they were truly nationalistic. Therefore, primordial sentiments to a large extent is responsible for many unnecessary civil strife being experienced in the nation. Given that primordialism demands total devotion and cohesion to the ethnic group (Adetiba & Rahim, 2012). Ideally, commitment to ethnic values, should not necessarily lead to disruptive conflicts. Nonetheless, with declining socio-economic opportunities and widespread ignorance, ethnic members are likely to be misled by political actors.

On the other hand, instrumentalism could be best described as a mechanism of achieving socio-political advantages by members of an ethnic group in relation to other social categories viewed as competitors for the desired public goods. Instrumentalist do argue that ethnicity becomes imperative only when there is competition for scarce economic and political resources. The struggle to control socio-political values tends to bring ethnic solidarity into play, as it is utilised against other ethnic groups (Adetiba & Rahim, 2012). It could be argued that if the masses were politically conscious, they might have not been manipulated to support ethnic chauvinist in the struggle for power. In essence, ethnicity becomes an instrument used by political actors when trying to control political and economic resources that determines how a society is governed. In other words, ethnic differences are exploited by political actors for a vested interest. In the Nigerian setting, political actors tend to exploit the nation's ethnic diversity when competing for political and economic resources and by so doing igniting ethnic tensions and divisions.

The Ethnic Question in Nigeria: The Challenges of Supra-nationality

Having attempted conceptual clarification in the preceding discussion, this section of the paper will focus on the persistence of ethnicity in Nigeria's socio-political

development and how it has posed a challenge to the emergence of a national identity. Ethnicity has been a major challenge in Nigeria's political development giving rise to divisive tendencies in the nation's polity. Alubo (2004) posits that ethnicity is a pervasive reality in Nigeria, influencing interpersonal relationships and state affairs. Nearly every aspect of life is viewed from ethnic prism. Ethnicity is at play in most aspects of national affairs in Nigeria from elections to political appointments and location of development projects some ethnic groups are favoured while others are marginalised. Obviously, the divisive aspects of ethnic identity have been exploited and utilised by political actors, which continue to undermine the collective interests of Nigerians.

The persistence of ethnicity in Nigeria is linked to her colonial history as a policy of divide and rule and the accentuation of ethnic identities at the expense of national identity. The colonialist encouraged ethnic polarisation by manipulating ethnic sentiments which makes the colonised to detest and mistrust each other in a bid to strengthen colonial dominance (Nnoli, 1980; Bah, 2004; Osaghae&Suberu 2005; Bagaji 2008). Admittedly, the British did all they could to dwarf the emergence of a national identity for a vested reason. However, Nigerians should also take part of the blame for stunting a supra-ethnic nationality.

Nnoli (1980) argues that interethnic conflicts were quite minimal before the advent of the colonialist. Intra-ethnic conflicts was more pronounced in pre-colonial Nigeria among the Yoruba people. For example, it is documented that different kingdoms were involved in damaging intra-tribal conflicts. That was the situation in most parts of the nation, with few instances of interethnic clashes. The near absence of interethnic confrontations in precolonial Nigeria suggests that frosty ethnic relations in contemporary time, demonstrate lack of patriotism and commitment to national ethos. Commercial activities were the major form of interethnic interactions before the arrival of the British. Hausa and Yoruba people were connected by long distance trade and their relations was very hospitable. The major trading partners of the Hausa before the advent of the colonialists were the Yoruba, the Asante, the Jukun and the Nupe people (Tijani, 2008).

If the precolonial setting guarantees peaceful coexistence among Nigerians and other people from distant places outside the nation, that situation portends that, the current spate of ethnic violence being witnessed typify parochialism at the expense of national commitment. Thus, it could be safely argued that political manipulation both in the colonial era and contemporary time has resulted in the use of ethnicity or ethnic nationalism as a political tool by political actors who stand to benefit from this manipulative strategy.

It is argued that the forceful merging of the disparate peoples of pre-colonial Nigeria into what is now known as Nigeria by the British gave birth to the present socio-political problems being faced by the nation. Noting that having administered the two

parts of the country separately prior to the amalgamation in 1914, the North and Southern protectorates were still governed separately after the amalgamation with minimal integration of the peoples of the two halves, which aggravated the socio-political problems in the nation (Mustapha, 2006; Osaghae&Suberu, 2005; Nnoli, 1980). The introduction of the three regional structure (North, East, West) in 1946 led to further complications (Osaghae&Suberu, 2005).

It could safely argued that, even though the colonial foundation of the present Nigerian state is faulty, yet the actions of political actors that succeeded the colonialist tend to tread the path set by the colonisers, which is inimical to national integration. Given this situation, the British and the incipient nationalist that were challenging colonial domination were both involved in the divide and rule tactic which further alienated the colonised and stunted the evolution of a national identity that supersedes primordial considerations (Ake, 1993). It will not be out of place to argue that political development during the colonial era that exposed the disunity and lack of cohesion of the nationalist help in strengthening colonial divide and rule tactic and the emergence of ethnic domination by the major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Mustapha (2006) notes that from the 1940s, when Nigerians begin to clamour for self-determination, political rivalry between the elites for supremacy became endemic, and was along sectional interests. To the extent that, the three major political parties that subsequently emerged were primarily defending ethno-regional interests, and were dominated by the three major ethnic groups. The Northern people's congress (NPC) in Northern Nigeria was controlled by the Hausa/Fulani, while the Yoruba were in charge of the Action Group (AG) in the Western Region, and the Igbo led the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) in the Eastern Region. He contends that, these parties were not interested in uniting the nation, but to control their constituency. Failure by the power elites to devise tangible means of uniting the nation, tend to lead to the persisting ethnic politics being practiced in Nigeria. This situation continues to challenge collective identity that recognises and respect the ethnic diversity of the country.

Ethnic minorities in the regions were left with no viable alternative rather than to team up with the major ethnic groups within their domain to compete for political dominance and resources. The Northern region being the most vast and populous and mainly Muslim. While the West and Eastern regions were mostly Christian, given this situation, ethnic and religious variances were employed by both the nationalist and the colonial masters to polarise Nigeriansalong sectional lines for selfish interests. For instance, the premier of the then Northern region is cited to have described the amalgamation of Nigeria as a mistake, while the then premier of the Western Region, Obafemi Awolowo is reported to see Nigeria as a mere geographical expression (Alubo, 2009). The will to build a pluralistic nation

in which all citizens a have sense of belonging was seemingly weak in the mind set of political actors, the goal of self-determination was shrouded in ethno-regional rivalry, thereby missing the opportunity to create supra-ethnic state.

The key point of Obafemi Awolowo is that Nigerian nation does not exist in the sense that modern nations exist in Europe. Citing the pluralistic nature of Nigeria, he believed a Nigerian nation was unimaginable (Kazah-Toure, 2009). The views of the founding fathers of the nation are illustrative of the level of ethnic politics that characterised post-colonial Nigeria. The centrifugal tendencies that dominated post-colonial Nigeria politics culminated in the sectional coup that toppled the first republic and the destructive civil war that accompanied the military putsch of the late 1960s.

Pertinently, post-colonial politics is driven by regional philosophy with the three major ethnic groups dominating political power. This development tends to truncate national unity and the enshrinement of sectional sentiments that threatens a common citizenship based on civil ideals, which reflects supra-ethnic nationalism. Ethnic sentiments have become a potent weapon used by the elites to secure power due to the gullibility of the masses (Ake, 1993). Thus, it could be argued that the colonial foundation of ethnicity in Nigeria is being fortified by the political class while failing to resolve its persistence. Reasonably, lack of political consciousness on the part of the governed, coupled with socio-economic imbalances tend to contribute to this ugly trend.

With increasing ethnic nationalism signified by pervasive ethnic clashes, which has led to the formation of ethnic militias claiming to champion the cause of their ethnic group or regional interests. Given this situation, Aluko and Ajani (2009) posits that it has led to the emergence of ethnic militias and organisations such as theOdua peoples' Congress (OPC), Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE), 'OhanezeNdigbo', Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), 'EgbesuBoys', 'Bakassi Boys', Union of Niger Delta (UND), South-south People's Conference, Middle Belt Forum (MBF), to mention but a few. Undoubtedly, this development tends to threaten national cohesion and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. Ethnic nationalism has bred frosty interethnic relations in Nigeria. The major point here is that, with increasing polarisation facilitated by ethnic chauvinist, who capitalise on the relative ignorance and poor economic condition of their followers, it appears quite easy to manipulate them along primordial lines which evokes their emotions. In essence, ethnic members easily become tools for ethno-regional confrontations that decapitate the ability to rally around a common identity.

Analysing the Tiv/Jukun conflicts in North-Central Nigeria, Egwu (2009) posits that ethnic prejudice and political marginalisation have played a key role in the Tiv/Jukun conflict, the Tiv are said to have migrated to Jukun territory prior to colonialism and that their relationship was to

a large extent harmonious before the advent of partisan politics at the dawn of Nigeria's independence. The numerical strength of the Tiv in Jukun land altered the harmonious relationship between the two ethnic groups since democratic participation is a game of number. Henceforth, the host community begin to view the Tiv as 'strangers' which resulted in tension between the two ethnic groups. Part of the punitive measures taken by the host community were to restrict the ownership of property particularly farmland by the Tiv and denial of political participation. Prejudicial treatment of fellow compatriots tends to ignite feelings of resentment and in the long run undermines interethnic harmony. The dichotomy between so-called natives and perceived settlers has been a catalyst for identity crisis in Nigeria.

Salawu and Hassan (2011) posits that ethnicity has been politicised which is reflective in most aspects of life in Nigeria. Given the sensitivity of ethnicity in Nigeria, it could be argued that the politicisation of ethnicity in Nigeria has prompted the perennial ethnic conflicts in the country as ethnic nationalist tends to take advantage of ethnic sentiments in fulfilling their myopic interests. The recent ethnic clashes that took place in Shasha market Ibadan, South-West Nigeria is a clear testimony of how ethnic prejudice bred by ethnic nationalism which could lead to a destructive conflict that engulfed many lives and properties. In other words, primordial sentiments tend to mobilise members of an ethnic group to engage in irrational conflicts without proper recourse to reason.

Adetiba and Rahim (2012) citing a Yoruba idiom which emphasised blind support for a fellow Yoruba man, irrespective of what wrong he might have committed best explains the violence that resulted in the Shasha market incident. It is quite worrying that an interpersonal dispute between two or more individuals, which should have been amicably resolved by the parties involved in the said disagreement between a Hausa trader and some Yoruba people in the Shasha incident was allowed to generate bitter intergroup conflict.

It could be argued that ethnic identity and loyalty have become supreme in the mind-set of ethnic nationalist, who do not care about the implications of their biased position and actions capable of fomenting social and political instability in the nation. This sad situation has been the dark reality that has characterised the nation's socio-political development, which in turn has weakened the commitment to national identity and ethos.

A poignant argument is that ethnic nationalism has been the basis for challenging the civic rights of fellow Nigerians resident in areas or states other than their state of origin. Ethnic nationalism has been a pervasive challenge to inclusive citizenship in Nigeria and the emphasis has been on nativity that questions the rights and privileges of fellow Nigerians located in areas considered not their original homeland (Kwaja, 2011; Adetiba, 2013). The

'son/daughter of the soil' syndrome as described by Jinadu (2000, p.35). The issue of not being an indigene in a particular geographical location has become a source of ethno-religious squabbles between members of different ethnicities in the country, which indicates a failure of the Nigerian state in effectively managing ethnic pluralism (Jinadu,2000; Kwaja, 2011; Adetiba, 2013).

The essence of supra-ethnic nationalism that emphasises the idea of unity in diversity, which symbolises genuine nationalistic valueswhich cut across parochial primordial interests, that helps in strengthening national bonds among the nation's ethnic diversity, seems to be lacking in the vocabulary and practice of ethnic jingoist that threatens national cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

The constant ethnic clash that has characterised socio-political development in Nigeria poses serious threat to nationhood and peaceful coexistence. This situation, as observed by scholarsis linked to the colonial divide and rule tactic, which apparently was adopted by political actors after independence. To the extent that ethnic suspicions and misgivings has become part and parcel of the Nigerian psyche, that challenges national values and common citizenship.This study posits that the persisting ethno-regional divisions that continue to haunt Nigeria's unity requires retrospection and not the fixation about the faulty colonial structure that is constantly blamed for the country's ethnic quagmire.The dire need for national unity symbolised by prominence of a national identity to which all ethnicities subscribe should be the priority of political actors and all those who genuinely believe in the peaceful progress of the nation. Political instability facilitated by ethnic fragmentation will lead Nigeria nowhere.

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