ETHNIC POLITICS IN NATION BUILDING: THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Iniobong Daniel Umotong

Department of Philosophy, Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State,

Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The actions and reactions of ethnic nationalities over the years have shown that their place in development cannot be ignored. The scenario is replicated all over the world where diverse ethnic groups, in social contract become a nation state. This work shall use Nigeria as a case study. Ethnic politics has rumbling effects in all spheres of the conglomeration of a polity, creating difficulties in achieving national integration. Nigeria is a multi-cultural and heterogeneous society. The diverse cultures, multiplicity of language and other factors that ought to have been the source of strength has become the bastion of disenchantment. The situation has an overwhelming effect such that a typical Nigerian's first allegiance is to his ethnic affiliation as against the country at large, this has in many ways affected policies of government where merit is sacrificed in the Altar of ethnic loyalty. This further empowers the fragmentary nature of our political space where issues of national importance are viewed in ethnic spectrum. The disparities has generated social conflict, distrust and withered patriotism. Any nation built on such foundation cannot go far in development be it human capital or infrastructural developments. This paper submits that if African leaders could play down on ethnicity as the deciding factor in political decisions, much of the uprisings would have been averted thus giving room for development, this entails, choosing the right person for the right responsibility or choosing the right location for a comparative advantage in citing projects. These are indices of development hindered by ethnic considerations.

Keywords: Minority, Language, Ethnicity, Development, Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic politics has been a major issue on African political debate for some time now. The debate on marginalization of the minority by the majority ethnic group in any African country has been a recurrent issue on the table of political conflict resolutions, these has made agitation for justice a common place and the effect thereof forms the basis or the slow pace of development. Debates on ethnic minority are gradually creating controversies around the application of the word minority. Although the word as opined by Diversity Training

University International (4) has a generic literal meaning – "the smaller number or part, especially a number or part representing less than half of the whole" (Google dictionary); common usage of the term within political, and societal stand point, indicate a statistical few. Academics, however, refer to it as "power differences among groups rather than differences in population size among groups" (Barzilai, 2010). Thus, a group of people within a community and/or country, who have different national or cultural traditions from the main population, is referred to as an ethnic minority (Google dictionary).

Ugbem(5400) is of the opinion that, today, ethnicity has even become a topic of discourse in almost all sphere of human association. It is now common place to hear things such as ethnic politics, ethnic conflicts, identity contests and the emergence of historically new ethnic identities. These are recurrent trends across many countries of the world especially Africa, where we have multi-cultural societies. Nonetheless, this does not imply that the discourse of ethnic minority is only an African affair. That would be a false claim as other continents of the world do share this experience. Though they may adopt different approach to handling the issues that may emanate from ethnic consideration in political decisions. Without being specific to any particular country, Galadima (13) avers that in most multi-cultural society, (such as Nigeria), the minorities are always disadvantaged; while the ethnic majority tends to be having advantages on every national issue.

According to Galadima, in a multi-cultural society, ethnic groups which had early contact with the colonialists tend to have this entitlement mentality as far as governance and power is concerned. Attoh and Soyombo express a similar view differently. They state that, "it was within the colonial urban context that ethnic groups acquired a common consciousness in Nigeria" (41). From the above, one can logically deduced that colonialism and post-colonialism is the foundation and the catalyst for the ethnic movement and consciousness in Nigeria. This is on one hand. On the other hand, ethnic groups with high educational attainment will also be a factor to command state advantages. Population is a major player in this social advantage game. With this, it can be easily assumed that these complexities surrounding a multicultural society such as Nigeria always harbours contention for justice.

Ethnic consciousness, the world over, shore up cases of ethnic classification whenever important political and sociological issues are raised. Recently, from cursory observations, some religious concerns are gradually embracing ethnic consciousness. Although these classification maybe seen on the peripherals as ethnic minority/majority dichotomy, in this context, majority is measured by the population of those speaking and understanding any of the diverse languages of the country. Nnoli posits that this classification emphasized alleged conflict of interests among the various groups. These conflicts of interests have been lubricated with the formation of political parties along ethnic borders. With different clichés seeking to bring the minority groups into the limelight; each party claims to be protecting and advancing the interests

of the ethnic nationalities (Nnoli 45). This becomes the foundation for conflicts of interest.

From the foregoing, it could be said that the crux of ethnic minority struggle is the disillusionment and disenchantment with the federal political structure. The political structure is perceived to be in favour of the ethnic majority without any consideration of the minority. The minorities in Nigeria in this case, according to Ahmad (92), are usually defined in ethnic terms as all ethnic groups that fall outside the majorities: Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. Ahmad points out statistically that the trio accounts for over 60% of Nigeria population: with 29%, 22%, and 18% respectively. Whilst, every other ethnic group regarded/grouped as minorities have been consistently left in oblivion. Ahmad categorically claims that, "politically, the minorities are relegated".Rindap & Auwal (1) as well as Anugwom (73) share in the sentiment that the political relegation of the minorities has constantly led to the cries by the ethnic minority.

The politics of ethnic minorities has reverberating effects in all sphere of the conglomeration creating difficulties in achieving national integration. The diverse culture, multiplicity of language and other factors that ought to have been the sources of strength has become the bastion of disenchantment due to greed and unnecessary ethnocentric commitments.

DEFINITION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

There are various criteria employed to define and classify ethnic minorities depending on scholars perspective of what constitutes 'ethnic minority'. According to Ukpo (19), an ethnic group is "a group of people having a common language and cultural values". Such people maintain interaction and association with the same ethnicity. Minority on the other hand refers to:

> groups that are numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state in a non-dominant position, whose members possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population and who have, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, tradition, religion or languages (Thornberry 257).

Therefore, in talking about ethnic minorities, we are referring to groups that possess a common language and cultural values and are numerically inferior to the rest of the component of the geographical expression or population of the state (or country) of which their cultural and religious values differs.

THE POLITICS OF ETHNIC MINORITY IN NIGERIA

It is a settled existential truth that Nigerian society is beclouded with plethora of ethnic nationalities, and each struggling for power and positions, while some gained strategic advantage over others due to some natural and non-natural factors. With these factors in place competition and un healthy

rivalry for equality and fairness becomes the order of the day. The unguided ethnic irredentism undermines the common good since it seeks to establish one ethnic group over and above others, the minority ethnic groups are always at the receiving ends, it is a pseudo-legitimate strategies of survival which according to Asouzu:

> Is an act through which people seek to secure consistently their private interests, at the expense of the common good, or in total or partial disregard of the interest of others, in an apparent legitimate manner (96).

It can be argued that the forceful marriage of 1914 was unholy, unromantic, and illegitimate, without the consent of the spouses, this to some extent is the etiology of marginalization, exclusion and subjugation of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Though it has been argued in extant literature that it was for administrative convenience, the common interest of the minority ethnic group was not considered *ab initio*. The politics of ethnicity though a social construct orchestrated social formation and boundaries, it has the colonial and western hegemony because it was introduced into Nigerian corpus of politics during the adoption of the policy of segregation which has the capacity of breeding disunity, distrust and acrimony.

According to Attoh and Soyombo, it was within the colonial urban context that ethnic groups acquired a common consciousness (41), from the above, it could be logically deduced that the colonial and post-colonial state is the foundation and the catalyst for the ethnic movement and consciousness in Nigeria. This socialization of the country into different components has been the paradigm of relationship among the people coupled with language, as people seems to relate more with people they share the same language, this will result in what Asouzu termed as "unintended ethnocentric commitment or unintended ethnocentric intrusion" (41). According to him, this is a sort of biases that arises due to the type of special allegiance we sense within us towards our races, ethnic groups, tribal groups and most things to which we have special feeling of intimate belongingness (41).

It has been argued by different scholars that the idea of ethnic minority spread and stretched wide as the result of insensitivity, scarcity of social resources, unemployment, violation of federal character, tribal sentiments and other social and economic *cum* political inequality. When these factors are on the front burner, people revert to their various ethnic group for solace. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria as a federation has failed to uphold the basic tenets of the name. The country has failed to integrate the component federating units and achieve equity in sharing the resources, thereby increasing the ethnic minority consciousness that was built by colonialism. For example, the Richard's Constitution of 1946 steered a political and budgetary regionalization of the country. The constitution was designed to preserve the indirect rule system (Attoh and Soyombo, 41); this has continued to be the blueprint of political and economic relations in the country even today. This constitution was predicated

on the importance of regionalization as the catalyst of ethnic segregation without any attempt or intention for national integration.

The first attempt ever made at solving the problem of ethnic minorities in Nigeria according to Rindap and Mari was the Henry Willink Commission set up on September 25, 1957 by the Colonial Secretary (94). The commission made their investigations and recommendations, power balancing was seen as the solution to the problem; but it was crystal clear that state creation seems to be the remedy. Unfortunately this was not considered by the commission.

THE PLACE OF MINORITIES IN THE DOMINANT ETHNIC TRIPOD IN NIGERIA

Ethnicity in Nigeria owes its origin to a surfeit of factors and has manifested in various ways in contemporary Nigeria (Ugbem 5403). As noted by some group of scholars, the issue of ethnicity in Nigeria derives its origin from the social construction of Nigeria on an ethnic tripod. The ethnic group/nations/cultures that make up Nigeria today had hitherto existed as independent nations and groups until British colonial occupation on conquest. These ethnic nations were selectively colonized and brought under the Northern and Southern Protectorates (Ugbem 5403). The merger of these two protectorates birthed Nigeria in 1914. However, there existed within these protectorates, ethnic nations/groups that has been forced together and given the identity of the most supposedly dominant ethnic group. This act marks the major political challenge of Nigeria. In the Northern protectorate, for instance, more than 250 ethnic groups were forced together and were given Hausa/Fulani identity which was the dominant ethnic group as such were regarded as superior to the other groups within them. On the other hand, the Southern Protectorate was initially divided into Eastern and Western regions. In the Eastern region, groups were the Efik, Ijaw, Ibibio, Ikwere, Annang, Ejagam, Obolo etc. They were squeezed under an Igbo identity. In the West, groups such as Edo, Ishan, Isoko were forced to adopt a Yoruba identity. This tripod structure existed through the colonial period and became the platform for the mobilization to contest for inclusion or against exclusion in the Nigerian political process and structure. Upon independence, the various political parties even operated within ethnic lines, giving rise to ethnic struggle for supremacy in the newly constituted entity. Following this regional line, groups began to mobilize on the basis of their ethnic consciousness to contest their relationship with the Nigerian state as a whole. This gave rise to the threats of secession within the regions.

On the account of her exposition, therefore, Ugbem (5404) is of the opinion that the creation of Nigeria on an ethnic tripod inherently implied that access to the "centre" had to be on the platform of ethnicity. She goes further to asserts that beyond the centre of resources, access to opportunities, scholarships, etc. had to be on the platform of ethnicity. The negative outcome of the tripod

allegiance, therefore, becomes that ethnic citizenship supersedes the Nationalist spirit. This renders Nigeria citizenship vague, thereby resulting in the formulation of the policy of no relation without ethnic affiliation and sentiment. Ethnicity in Nigeria is characterized on the whole by a majority-minority context where majority ethnic groups try to control power to the exclusion of others. This majority-minority setting is displayed at every political demarcation; the regional, state, local government and ward level. As such ethnicity has had a huge impact on Nigeria's democratic experience. Towns were created in areas were raw materials such as cotton, rubber, cocoa, tin were available as such individuals from various ethnic groups migrated to these areas to render various kinds of services in order to make a living from there. Also, the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups were seen by colonialist as superior, because of their violent nature and their large population as compared to other ethnic groups in that region. So the colonialists used them as administrators especially in the central area of Nigeria. The movement of various ethnic groups to settle later became a theatre for the mobilization of ethnicity. Issues of marginalization arose and this led to the riot in Jos tin mine in 1932 as well as the Tiv riot in 1960 and 1964.

In the recent scale of events, it has been observed that most ethnic groups in Nigeria have socio-political organizations which ethnic "entrepreneurs" mobilize to contest inclusion and exclusion issues within the Nigerian political process and structure. This has been noted to portray negative implications for Nigeria's democratic process and structure. The Nigerian democracy is characterized by competition between certain key actors. These actors comprise the Northern elite, the Yoruba elite, the Igbo elite and the few elites Middle Belt and the Niger Delta (Nwachukwu, 20).

THE CHALLENGES OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN NIGERIA

The major challenge of ethnic minorities in Nigeria centres on exclusion and inclusion identity contests and conflicts between the elites which marks the foundation of unhealthy emphasis on ethnic affiliations. These elites control the democratic process. They are usually able to use ethnicity to mobilize their people to contest against others and to make sure they maintain their hold on leadership. The power sharing arrangement in Nigeria is purportedly an arrangement for rotational leadership between these elite on behalf of their ethnic groups/regions.

Various militant movements have emerged around these groups agitating for equity, social justice, regional autonomy and their own share of proceeds from the country's resources, and other myriad of ethnic biased agitations. These elitist groups fly on the wings of ethnic agenda to decide who gets what, when and how. The militant groups are used to show displeasure at political arrangement. Most conflict in Nigeria result from failed attempts to access and control the "National cake" to the exclusion of others. Nigeria's democracy is covertly characterized by recurrent conflict between these elites.

Beyond the competition between the elites is political repression as another factor. Those in-charge of government machinery control it to the exclusion and suppression of others. Members of the ruling party are declared corruption free even with obvious evidence of misappropriation of funds, while those of the opposition are persecuted with the anti-corruption agencies for the mere reason that they belong to the opposition.

Nigeria's democracy is also characterized by a high level of instability (Omotola 209). This has also contributed to the volatility of the democracy in Nigeria. Clientelism and godfatherism are also issues of concern in the Nigerian democratic journey. This results in the political process being manipulated to the benefits of some and the exclusion of others. As such elections which are critical to democracy are characterised by competitive rigging through the use of political thugs, ethnic militia ballot stuffing and snatching, intimidation of opposition party members and agents, falsification of results (Oyedira & Adigon 230).

On the whole the social reality of ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria is such that majority and minority groups are locked up in a protracted competition for the control of state power and the resources. The application of Wolfgang Streeck (9-10) idea of political economy would reveal that Nigeria is characterized by a democratic capitalism where her political economy is ruled by two conflicting principles of resource allocation. Of these two conflicting principles, one is anchored on merit and the other on entitlement. However, these principles are antithetical. This economy is ruled by a dubious political class which on the whole, sums up the Nigerian democratic experience with its negative implications for development.

Ethnicity at the group and individual level promotes mutual suspicion. It results in a situation where members of ethnic groups are unable to relate with others outside their group without suspecting their intensions. This does not enhance peaceful co-existence and can in turn hinder meaningful development from taking place. Social interaction is a critical aspect of social existence in society but ethnicity results in creating meanings and suspicions even when they do not exist. Ethnicity promotes allegiance to the ethnic group at the expense of the Nation.

In Nigeria, allegiance is first given to ethnic affiliation before the country. The Nigerian state is structured to five an undue advantage to ethnic groups. There appears to be a pull from the consciousness of Nationhood. It is very easy to mobilize people through ethnic sentiments against national patriotic zeal. This is the bane of national development over the years. The emphasis on ethnicity results in a situation where the right people in many cases are not selected or elected for leadership positions. The emphasis is so much on the "son of the soil". As long as one comes from a particular ethnic group that is preferred once he or she is irrespective of qualification, is the given position. This has played out in several instances where some political office holders

know little or nothing about the offices they hold. The latent effect of this is that the Nigerian state is seen as an entity or centre where resources can be pulled from to enhance one individual and ethnic status. Most people see Nigeria in terms of what they can get from it and not what they can give to it. Observation in most educational, health and religious institutions in Nigeria is that ethnic considerations are paramount when benefits, resources or leadership issues are involved. This has led to so much mismanagement of resources. When corruption agencies apprehend people, it is interpreted as an attack on the access of the ethnic group to their share of the "national cake". As long as the leadership of an organisation is from a particular ethnic group, the important positions are given to members of that ethnic group. In the political sphere, ethnicity is the reason why party politics are organized around ethnic lines as such political office holders are ethnic representatives either at the local, state or federal level.

The menace of ethnicity has so pervaded the political institution of Nigeria to the point that the president of the country is seen first of all as a president of an ethnic group before he regards himself as the president of Nigeria. This has impacted negatively on Nigerian democracy as it leads to politics of division, promotion of mediocrity, political instability, violent conflict, un-heightened and unhealthy political competition, civil unrest, depletion of national resources as well as the ultimately lack of development in the country.

THE FATE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE DEFECTIVE FEDERAL AND CENTRALIZED SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

Rotimi Suberu in his celebrated memoir, *Ethnic Minority Problems and Governance in Nigeria: Retrospect and Prospect*, identifies the major factor that is behind minorities distress and disaffection in the Nigerian federal system today, as the over-centralization of power and resources. According to him, the over-concentration of power and resources in the federal government is perhaps the most widely lamented feature of the Nigerian federal system today. He further points out that this over-centralization has resulted from the extended periods of military rule in the country, the heavy reliance of the political economy on centralized oil revenues, the popularity of centralist philosophies and strategies of development and the weak commitment of key elites to the practice of democratic decentralization (Suberu 66). Among other consequences, this "extreme centralization" has led to the virtual abrogation of truly federalist institutions and values, the destructive competition for the control of the central governmental machinery (especially the federal p residency), the loss of financial coherence and discipline at the federal level, the extreme dependence of the states and localities on federal developmental patronage and financial largesse and, consequently, the persistent communal pressures for new, federally-funded units of state and local government (Olowu161).

For the ethnic minority communities, in particular, over-centralization has led to such inauspicious and obnoxious outcomes as the erosion of the autonomy and security that genuinely federalist arrangements assure for minorities, the inordinate appropriation by the centre of the resources of the oil-rich Delta minority communities, and the direct and often counter-productive intervention of central authorities in those local and regional issues, such as the determination of local government boundaries, that are best left to subnational authorities or communities (Suberu 67). According to one claim by MOSOP, "the fundamental problem of Nigeria is the centralization of state and economic powers which has led to the abject marginalization and impoverishment of minority groups and to some extent other non-ruling groups" (The Guardian, 27 June 1994:5). In the same manner,, a communique issued on February 1994, by S.A. Asemota, Graham Douglas, Edwin Clark, George Innih and other prominent southern ethnic minority elites, made explicit the "general opinion...that repeated military intervention and dictatorship had fully established unitary government in Nigeria, which was exploited by the three largest ethnic nationalities to the utter neglect of the interest of the small nationalities, especially the Southern minorities" (The Guardian, 6 February 1994:A20).

It is sometimes argued that a strong central state apparatus is needed if government is to intervene decisively to enforce, or prevent abuses of, ethnic minority rights at the subnational level. This argument would appear to be validated by Nigeria's experiences during the late sixties, when the abrogation of the centrifugal regional system, and the consolidation of centralized federal powers, helped to secure the autonomy and dignity of Nigeria's marginalized regional minorities. Nevertheless, the unchecked concentration of powers at the federal level has opened up the political process to excesses and abuses which invariably have harmed politically excluded or inadequately included segments, especially the ethnic minorities. Furthermore, given Nigeria's relatively centralized ethnic structure (with three ethnic groups predominating), it is inevitable that political processes at the federal level will revolve largely around the accommodation of the interests of the "big three", at the expense of the consideration and conciliation of the interests of the more fragmented ethnic minority groups.

In essence, it is on a decentralized structure of federalism, rather than upon a hegemonic central state apparatus, that Nigeria's minorities must rely for the protection and promotion of minority rights. Genuine decentralization at all levels of governmental authority would give minority communities the autonomy and security they need to protect their rights from being eroded by the hegemonic machinations of the bigger ethnicities. To be effective in the Nigerian setting, such decentralization should encompass both political and economic devolution.

CONCLUSION

Resolved! Nigerian society is beclouded with superfluities of ethnicities. From pre-independence to post-independence, ethnic divides are continuously at loggerheads with one another struggling for power and positions. The major ethnic groups make boast and lay claims on their perceived advent aged educational attainment and population size. While on the other hand, the minor ethnic groups decry the high rate of marginalization in national rationing of power and entitlements. The unguided ethnic irredentism undermines the common good and overall wellbeing of members of society greatly affected by this marginalization and conflicts of interest. The unguided ethnic irredentism seeks to establish one ethnic group over and above others, putting the minority ethnic groups always at the receiving ends – a disadvantaged position. According to Ahmad,

> The majority tyranny lies not just in the infringements of individual rights or the marginalization of a political minority, but also in the oppression of minority groups in society based simply on criteria such as skin color, ethnicity or nationality, language, religion, or sexual orientation. The most extreme treatment of minorities has been carried out in 20th and 21st century, among them the worst examples are those of totalitarian regimes that carried out genocide to eradicate minority groups in their society (Ahmad 91)

This creates a political and sociological sphere of unending competition and struggle for equality and fairness in the distribution of resources, office and positions available in society. In this love and war situation, everything seems to be fair, so the masses seek survival by constantly and consistently acting in their private interests. Again, this is at the expense of the common good, as well as in total or partial disregard of the interest of others. Nobody cares. Since the common interest of the minority ethnic group was not considered *ab initio*, the minority groups tend to act in accordance with their guts to survive. This has led to a lot of crises within the Niger Delta regions such as the prominent, 'Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta' (MEND) conflicts in Bayelsa.

David Miller (2003) quips that "democracy ought to be willing to include certain basic rights in the constitution, precisely, to protect minorities against unfriendly nature of the majorities at any moment" (cited in Rindap 91). However, it is not the case of lack of constitutional provisions that is the problem of ethnic minorities in Nigeria, nay, it is as a result of the failure to implement these provisions (Rindap 91). The lack of policy implementation in Nigeria is not just limited to the case of ethnic minorities; in fact, it is one of the major problems of Nigeria. Bills will be passed and new laws made, yet, there isn't enough done to implement such laws hence defeating the purpose of which such law or provision (s) was made. This position is corroborated by Toyo (1999) when he made the assertion that

how constitutional provisions are translated into practice depends on who is in power and this applies to federal, state and local government levels and the party in power are of crucial importance. A political party of tribalists, power sharers, sycophants, greedy opportunists and get-rich-quick gangsters can never translate intentions of the constitutions into practice (Toyo 179).

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria as a federal system of government has failed to uphold the basic tenets of the federal system as enshrined in rubrics. The country has failed to integrate the component federating units and achieve equity in sharing the resources, thereby increasing the ethnic minority consciousness that was built by colonialism. This has the great attendant effects on democracy and national integration in the country. Therefore, this paper recommends that it is on a decentralized structure of federalism, rather than upon a hegemonic central state apparatus, that Nigeria's minorities must rely for the protection and promotion of minority rights.

This paper shares the sentiment that only genuine decentralization at all levels of governmental authority would give minority communities the autonomy and security they need to protect their rights from being eroded by the hegemonic machinations of the bigger ethnicities. To be effective in the Nigerian setting, such decentralization should encompass political, sociological and economic devolution to enhance economic development which according to Efemini (281) "development is not economic growth even though economic growth in large measure determines its possibility".

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