

NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA: INTERROGATING THE PAST AND RESHAPING THE FUTURE

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Abstract

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has had to contend with a myriad of problems which in no small measure, have impacted negatively on the country's socioeconomic development and international image perception. In particular, the lingering challenge of national integration has frustrated efforts at nation-building and national development. This paper adopted the qualitative research methodology- content analysis, anchored as it were, on the historical descriptive approach. Among other things, its findings showed the inevitability of revisiting those factors that promoted inter-group relations among the peoples of present-day Nigeria prior to contacts with the white man. It concluded that the current national culture of mistrust, mutual fears, and hostility, religious and regional dichotomy could be drastically reduced to manageable proportions through the creation of a national history, culture, and ideology.

Key Words: Culture, development, history, nation, national integration.

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Introduction

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated population of about 200 million, made up of about 300 hundred ethnic groups. The three major ethnic groups are the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba. It is generally believed that one in every African is a Nigerian. The official language of communication in the country is English. This is understandable because Nigeria was colonized by the British in the 18th century. The country, however, was granted independence on October 1st, 1960.

The reality of the Nigerian situation today is that its disparate ethnic groups were lumped together by the British colonial regime, along with their intertwining and contradictory religious, socioeconomic and political interests that have combined to confine Nigeria to a state of anomie (Nwobu, 2007). The political aspirations of the aggregating ethnic nationalities domiciled in various parts of the country have exacerbated ethnic and religious conflicts. Mutual distrust and suspicion, in-fighting over national and natural resources, as well as religious bigotry have combined to cause tension and instability in the body polity of contemporary Nigerian state. Such tensions, in their trail, have created fears as to the viability and continued existence of Nigeria as an indivisible entity.

The objective of this paper is to examine how Nigeria's multifarious problems are hinged on the unresolved tensions in national integration. To this end, the paper investigates how Nigerian groups interacted with each other, as well as the dynamics and mediating structures that facilitated inter group relations prior to contacts with the British in the 19th century. It concludes that contemporary efforts at achieving national integration and by extension national development cannot ignore the lessons of history. In other words, it is imperative for both Nigerian leaders and the citizens to appreciate the fact that various Nigerian ethnic groups and communities had lived peacefully and harmoniously before the British colonized them and constitute them into one country.

Definition Of Concepts

Some major concepts associated with this paper require clarification and exegesis. These are: nation, national integration, nation-building, and inter-group relations.

Nation

The concept, nation, presupposes the existence of a group of people with a harmony of cultural and political interests, sharing common attributes, and usually confined to a given part of the globe. Thus, geography, ethnic homogeneity, a common language, and a common culture are the distinguishing features of a nation. Contextually however, a nation in contemporary usage is usually made up of a multiplicity of ethnic groups and therefore, equates with the concept of state.

National integration

National integration has been defined as a multidimensional process that strengthens the unity and stability of a nation by connecting its diverse elements. In the process of National Integration, a state characterized by sectional or otherwise competing economies, politics, and culture within a given territory, is transformed into a society composed of a single all-pervasive political economy (Morrison, 1972). This is an assignment that is always entrusted to the political system and its managers.

Nation-building

This means the sum total of all policies and efforts devoted towards bringing the disparate constituents of a given nation into one united sovereign state. Put differently, nation-building refers to the process through which and by which the boundaries of the components units of a given nation are collapsed to constitute the boundaries of one single political entity using the power of the state. This must of necessity, include the identification and possible amelioration of the central problems of socio-economic inequalities, social and religious immobility, political victimization, economic stagnation, and political instability, among others.

National development

This has to do with the ability of a given nation to introduce changes that will accelerate economic growth and reduce inequality and poverty, among others. It is a process involving a nation's ability to transform its citizens. Such a process has to be continuous and should involve incremental qualitative changes in the lives of the citizens and their environment in an interdependent manner. Therefore, as a concept, development should not be equated with the growth of national wealth in terms of output, or the replication of artefacts found in the advanced countries.

Inter-Group Relations

The processes and methods through which people from different ethnic or social backgrounds interact with each other are referred to as inter-group relations. Such interactions are often influenced by the social identities and perceptions which individual members of such groups hold. These include feelings, beliefs, evaluations, and behaviours which members of the in-group have towards members of the other groups (www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs, 2021). As a matter of fact, inter-group relations oscillate between tolerance and hostility because more often than not, group goals are incompatible, especially regarding material resources (www.ajol.info/ijdmr/article/view, 2021).

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks are incorporated into the subsequent analysis. A major reason for the choice is that they help to address the current challenges and opportunities in promoting national integration in Nigeria. The three theoretical frameworks are: the system/structural functionalist theory (which interrogates the current dynamics); the conflict theory (which examines the past); and the modernization theory (which provide insight into how the future could be shaped).

The relevance of the system/ structural functionalist theory lies in the fact that the maintenance of stability and order in Nigeria cannot be divorced from the interconnectedness of its political, economic, social and cultural components whose dynamic interaction sustains the fabric of the Nigerian state. However, there are discernible weaknesses and strengths in the existing institution and structures. For example, ethnic and religious tensions, political instability, corruption, economic instability, and insecurity, have corroded efforts at genuine national integration. State-backed social institutions like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme, and the Federal Government Colleges, as well as structures like the National Orientation Agency, have not succeeded in erasing the spectre of fear and mistrust among some members of Nigeria's various ethnic groups. Today, young Nigerians from certain parts of the country are denied admission into Federal Government Colleges despite having good scores. The quota system is a structure that is routinely invoked to frustrate such candidates in much the same way as the Federal Character principle has continued to prioritize mundane considerations over merit in recruitment into the Federal civil service.

On its part, the conflict theory's relevance in interrogating the past is anchored on the fact that it explores how historical injustices (such as British colonial rule, military dictatorship, and unequal resource control have not only exacerbated but also sustained divisions within the polity. While there is, therefore, power struggle among ethnic, religious and even class groups in Nigeria due to the country's colonial experience, minority groups in the Niger Delta and even in the South-East geopolitical zone, have experienced obvious cases of marginalization and injustice in both the current power-sharing agreement and in resource control and allocation.

Similarly, what makes the modernization theory germane to this paper is its ability to advocate progressive and inclusive policies to transform Nigeria into a united "modern" state if she is to remain relevant in the context of contemporary globalization characterized by shifting power balance. The framework calls for institutional reforms (such as strengthening meritocracy) to replace the current situation where patronage networks dominate in the recruitment into and promotion in Federal Ministries, Agencies, and Departments. The adoption of "modern" values such as democracy, technology and secularism, should take precedence over traditional divisions which are more or less vestiges of colonial rule.

A synthesis of these three theoretical frameworks, therefore serves to, among other things bring into focus the historical grievances that are root causes of division in Nigeria. It is also to expose how institutional weakness have undermined national unity and frustrated national integration, as well as to show how to deliberately embark on inclusive policies in order to achieve real national integration through shared aspirations of prosperity and global competitiveness.

Interrogating The Past

Pre-Colonial Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria

Prior to Britain's colonization and occupation, there were many ways through which the peoples of what is known today as Nigeria interacted with each other. Politically, culturally and economically, they related with each other along clearly defined lines. In other words, their interactions were guided by norms and conventions. However, there were occasions when such

relationships experienced strains. In such instances, conflicts became inevitable, though steps were often taken to ensure that violent conflicts were minimized.

Therefore, in pre-colonial Nigeria, ethnic groups and communities had shared networks and interconnections that served to reduce disagreements and conflicts. These also engendered agreements and mutual respect and tolerance among such groups. For example, neighbouring ethnic groups and communities inter-married, traded with each other, and shared/borrowed both political and cultural ideas (Ota, 2019).

It was not uncommon to also see such contiguous and even consanguineous neighbours fighting wars. In essence, pre-colonial inter-group relations were characterized by periods of harmonious peaceful existence and those of animosity and hostility. Usually, the end of hostilities was followed by the restoration of peace, sometimes through blood covenants. This was in realization of the fact that no one group could, in reality, exist in isolation since no community or group has ever been self-sufficient. Rather, interdependence was a feature of pre-colonial inter-group relations.

In the pre-colonial era, ethnic particularisms and competitions, though existed, were not as pronounced as they are today. This does not in any way imply the total absence of social and cultural cleavages, social consciousness, as well as feelings of solidarity. However, it is instructive to note that these were never transformed into platforms for engaging in venal struggles for power and relevance. Therefore, underlying inter-group relations in pre-colonial Nigeria were harmonious social, cultural, political and economic interactions among the country's different ethnic groups and societies. For example, there were political relations between the Bini and Igbo, and the Isoko and the Urhobo. There were also some commercial and political relations between the Igbo and the Igala, in much the same way as there existed social and political relations between the Igala and the Nupe (Obaro, 2006).

Similarly, frontier Igbo communities like Ihechiowa, Arochukwu, Ututu, and Isu (collectively grouped, along with Abam, Abiriba, Afikpo, Amasiri, Edda, Nkporo, and Ohafia into the Cross River Igbo) interacted with their Efik and Annang neighbours. Such interactions resulted in the former borrowing certain secret societies like the Ekpe, Akang, and Obong from their non-Igbo neighbours. The matrilineal system of inheritance which is practiced among the

Cross River Igbo communities is also an outcome of their interactions with their non-Igbo neighbours. There were a number of links which mediated pre-colonial inter-group relations. These include such important rivers as the Niger, Benue, and the Cross River, among others. For instance, frequent commercial interactions between the Ijo, Igbo, Igala, and Nupe on the banks of the River Niger helped in building and sustaining trust, peace and confidence among these groups. In addition, trade enhanced interactions between members of various ethnic groups, especially those that lived in close proximity to each other. Individuals from such contiguous ethnic groups who became participants in long-distance trade had to, out of necessity, establish relationships with groups, communities and even individuals who lived along the trade routes. That was how inter-ethnic marriages became largely inevitable because they served to cement relationships (Afigbo, 1981).

Similarly, local or domestic markets provided ample opportunities for participants from neighbouring ethnic groups to interact with each other. This, in the long-run, resulted not only in the sharing of ideas, but also of values as well. It also reduced ethnic consciousness and by extension, prejudices and hostilities. Furthermore, migrations occasioned by population pressures on land, warfare, and political domination, as well as sundry economic factors, led to movement of individuals from one ethnic area to the other where such migrants were often accommodated by their hosts.

State formation, expansion and incorporation also contributed to positive and progressive inter-group relations among pre-colonial Nigerian peoples and societies. In the first place, many of such groups were acephalous and their traditions of origin, migrations, and settlements lack any unitary direction. In many instances, such traditions are either contradictory or reflect the opissnions of the dominant families. Among the Igbo and Ibibio of eastern Nigeria, for example, there are no common traditions of origin. A possible explanation for this could be the obvious lack of any recorded history of a unifying political authority among them.

Among pre-colonial groups and communities with forms of political authority, however, the situation is different. Here, the directions of migration were distinctive and straightforward. For example, among the Efik, there is a common tradition of migration from a village in Arochukwu, known as Ibom (Alagoa, 1999). Similarly, the evolution and metamorphosis of Ijo

communities and groups into city-states and their traditions of origin, migrations and settlement in their present locations, owe a lot to their ability to establish an effective political system which was anchored on a kingship institution and the House system between 1200 and 1400 (Alagoa, 1999).

At other times, the existence of highly centralized political institutions ensured relative stability in the polities and economies of such groups as the Bini, Hausa, Igala, Kanuri, and Yoruba. With the passage of time, these groups expanded beyond their ethnic borders and eventually incorporated members of other ethnic groups in the process of state formation. For instance, the Oyo Empire in pre-colonial Yorubaland, was to overshadow other independent kingdoms like Owu, and even incorporated such non-Yoruba groups as the Tapa and Bariba (or Ibariba) (Akinjobin and, Ayandele, 1979). In the same vein, the Igala kingdom which emerged at about the same time as the Oyo Empire, expanded beyond Igalaland to not only attract the attention of Benin but to also threaten its existence in the 15th and 16th centuries (Obayemi, 1979). Thus, state formation enhanced inter-group relations by incorporating a multiplicity of ethnic groups within a single political entity. That way, relative peace existed among many pre-colonial Nigerian peoples, especially those under the same political authority.

Reshaping The Future

National integration is the anvil on which both nation-building and national development could be forged or fashioned. Put differently, nation-building and national development efforts would amount to nothing unless and until they are incorporated as fulcrums of national integration. The reason for this is obvious: the adoption of federalism in Nigeria (through the Lyttleton constitution of 1954) which was intended to balance and contain the forces generated by Nigeria's cultural diversity and the heterogeneous nature of her peoples, did not succeed in achieving national integration. Indeed, the Nigerian brand of federalism has come to be characterized by an over-concentration of power at the federal level. The obvious implication is the over dependence of the constituent units (states) on the federal government for their survival. There is also regional imbalance in both political representation and the attendant benefits or advantages which have been nurtured and sustained through official government policies and programmes (Ota, 2020).

Lessons From History

There are lessons to be learnt from history in the search for national integration, nation-building, and national development in Nigeria. For one thing, there is a dialectical relationship between history, society and the state. This means that every nation builds its future on its past (Dike, 1953). Secondly, if it is true that history leads the wise man and drags the fool (Hegel, 1975), then those factors that have frustrated efforts at achieving real national integration should be scrutinized and analyzed through the periscope of history. Factors like ethnicity, corruption, political instability, and religious bigotry and intolerance, are all products of British colonial rule in Nigeria.

While it is true that national integration efforts between 1951 (when the motion for independence for 1956 was moved by Anthony Enahoro, and 1966 when the military intervened in national politics), were frustrated by party politics and ethnic and regional considerations, the many years of military rule did not help matters at all. One of the key elements in balancing pluralistic pressures against the need for national unity is the distribution of political power. By this we mean a situation where the component ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups are all represented in the nation's highest decision-making institutions or bodies. The import of this scenario lies in the fact that an inclusive arrangement will make it imperative for all such groups to identify with the nation, given the fact that their own interests are predicated on the stability and well-being of the nation instead of their respective ethnic or religious or other parochial groups. It is usually easier at least theoretically, to achieve this objective in a democratic system of government since election manifestoes might influence the voters' behaviour and voting patterns.

Conversely, by the very nature of military regimes, national integration through balancing of power is a lot more difficult to attain under military rule. The reasons are not far-fetched: while civilian administrations tolerate, in relative terms, freedom of expression, this is usually muzzled in a military dictatorship. Also, while political power could be easily balanced under a democratically-elected government, the top hierarchy in a military regime could be drawn essentially from a particular part of the country. This appears to have been the case between the

1960s and from the 1970s to the 1990s where the military was dominated by Southerners and Northerners respectively, at its top echelon.

As a result of the many years of military rule and the fact that since 1970 the top hierarchy of the military was drawn mostly from the former Northern region, disparities in the allocation of political offices and regional economic development have tended to make certain ethnic and regional groups to feel neglected, especially since those sections of the country whose indigenes dominated governance were not seen to have contributed more to the national treasury. It was situations like these that gave rise to militancy in the Niger Delta and the formation of ethnic militias in parts of southern Nigeria. As Bill Dudley has rightly observed, the military has, more often than not, posed an obstacle to socio-political change rather than as an agent of national cohesion (Dudley, 1976).

These unfortunate hiccups notwithstanding, the fact remains that national integration is a necessary requirement for Nigeria's domestic stability and international image perception. Since interactions between the peoples of modern Nigeria predated British colonial rule, and since Nigerians must live not just as neighbours but also as brothers and sisters, the study of Nigerian history should, of necessity, follow the advice of A.E. Afigbo that such a study should, in his words give:

...more attention to the pre-colonial period of our history because this would teach the different nationalities that contact and interactions amongst them predated colonial conquest and rule, and thus that the Nigerian state is far from being "a mere geographical expression" coined only in the 20th century by the British (Afigbo, 1999, p.13).

This advice is in tandem with E.O. Erim's position that "Modern Nigeria is an amalgam of the various pre-colonial states and civilizations which today constitute... Nigeria" (Erim, 1981). Also, in pre-colonial times there were inter-regional migrations from the eastern to the western parts of present-day Nigeria (Oloidi, 2011), and from the North to the South, though these were first and foremost a function of the opportunity structure and secondarily, a function of distance (Ugwuaja and Onuegbu, 2013).

Unfortunately, the study of History as a subject and a course in Nigerian secondary and tertiary institutions has suffered untold neglect in the hands of the country's leaders and policy

makers. As a rational discipline, history satisfies the need for identity (Onwudufor, 2009), and when Nigerians recall how, in times past, they shared much in common and co-existed peacefully, fears and mutual suspicion will be minimized. As already asserted 'Nigeria's past has been a heavy burden on all of us.' A proper knowledge of that past is our only hope of emancipating ourselves from it (Uzoigwe, 1989). Today, cleavages and aloofness have come to characterize inter-ethnic relations, and Nigerians from different ethnic, religious and regional backgrounds no longer trust each other because they do not have knowledge of shared historical identities. Thus, it has been argued that "It is a fact of our history that no attempt has really been made in the post-independence constitutional development to resolve ...issues that have plagued the polity' (Olaniyan, 2003).

Finally, there is a compelling need for an articulated ideology which can provide the requisite framework for national cohesion. The political system in Nigeria has failed woefully in this regard. Political parties are formed without any ideological bent. What Nigerian political parties and politicians present to the electorate are merely vague statements of principles intended to achieve not any long-term goals, but personal gains. In other words, there are no well-laid out plans by the political class to encourage and sustain economic prosperity and political stability in the country. There is, therefore, need for political ideologies which will provide the citizens the basis and opportunity to evaluate the right political parties and candidates to vote for during elections.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural entity whose people, no doubt, interact with each other prior to their colonization by the British. The mechanisms or channels which facilitated such inter-group relations include state formation expansion, and incorporation, as well as commercial linkages. Others were; inter-ethnic marriages, cultural borrowings and adaptations. British conquest and rule had a disruptive impact on these relations.

Unfortunately, independence from British colonial rule was accompanied by inept political management, and the political class failed to build on pre-colonial inter-group relations

to foster lasting national integration. The result is the country's lingering and infantile paralysis in the area of nation-building and national development. Lack of commitment to the ethos of

nationhood such as patriotism and pride in the country has resulted in the flowering of parochial and primordial attachment to ethnic nationalism and religious bigotry and intolerance.

Among the consequences of this inauspicious and regrettable circumstance is the violent expression of discontent as evidenced by the BokoHaram insurgency and banditry in the North, militancy in the South and the so-called herdsmen-farmers conflict, and other violent conflicts all over the country.

A panacea for these national maladies is a political leadership that is visionary, selfless and committed. It is imperative for the political class to embrace transformative leadership: one that can honestly and dispassionately harness the country's enormous natural resources and human capital to propel national development. That is one way through which the country could be rescued from its age-long governance quagmire and development logjam.

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