

## Ethnicity and ethnicism in Nigeria nation

Asanebi, Daupamowei Henry

Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

### Abstract

Ethnicity and ethnicism is a matter of great concern to Nigeria and her citizenry. This hydra headed monsters have eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigeria nation, has been demonized and mismanaged by Nigerians and her ruling elites. Sardonicly ethnicity has failed to ameliorate the status of Nigeria and her citizenry rather, it is gradually breaking the nation into different fragments, as these has created a social change in Nigeria, as Nigerians now see themselves first from their ethnic origins or groups before seeing themselves as Nigeria. Furthermore, Nigeria nation today is bedeviled with ethnic conflicts and confrontations, nepotism, cronyism, favouritism and patronage which implications has created a Mephistophelean, repugnant and gigantic wound in the nation that can't be healed in a hurry. This research paper critically X-ray ethnicity and ethnicism in Africa under which Nigeria was the focus. Thus, the research paper went further too succinctly examine the concept of ethnicity and ethnicism by different scholars and authors among others. However, an abridged origin and manifestations of ethnicity and ethnicism were critically discussed and some recommendations were advanced at the end of its conclusion.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, ethnicism, Nigeria, social change

### Introduction

Nigeria is a federal constitutional republic comprising of 36 states and its federal capital, Abuja. Nigeria nation is a constituent of several ethnic nationalities therefore, there are over 250 ethnic groups in the nation and the major ethnic groups are Fulani/Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. However, it is very heart broken and disturbing that Nigerians have become slaves to their ethnic origins instead of harnessing these diversities towards national development. Nigeria today is bedeviled with ethnic tensions and conflicts. Objectively scholarship on ethnicity and ethnicism in Nigeria is relatively long, because of its importance and implication on Nigeria society. Thus, ethnicity and ethnicism were over looked during nationalism era in Africa. The concept of ethnicity was largely ignored by foreign observer during the first decade of contemporary independence period, one reason for this neglect was the strong belief, especially among American researchers and policymakers, that ethnic division would fade away as modernizing African societies set aside ethnic identities in favour of western cultural practices. Secondly, ethnicity was ignored due to shared belief of African leaders and western observers that the future success of newly independent African countries depended on their ability to promote a unifying nationalism that transcended ethnic differences. If nationalism was a progressive and worthy topic, ethnicity was a retrogressive and shameful one to discuss in African. However, events of post independent era in Nigeria especially the January 15<sup>th</sup> coup and the counter coup that followed with its concomitant effects created a paradigm shifts towards the study of ethnicity in Nigeria, as explained by Crawford Young (1994:4) <sup>[21]</sup>.

*“Before independence ethnicity was a forbidden fruit, for to touch, taste or write about it was to summon forth from the societal depths, demons who might subvert nationalism at its hour of triumph. But after post*

*independent, it became apparent that bidden or not, the demons of disunity were at hand and as such did ethnicity begin to receive systematic studies”.*

The above explicitly validate the assertion that scholars from the world and various African nationalist concerned with the unifying force of nationalism during the 1950's down played or out rightly over looked the importance of ethnicity. According to Shareader (2005:101) <sup>[16]</sup> events of later decades, most notably the outbreak of ethnic tensions and conflicts clearly demonstrated the usefulness of ethnicity scholarship. Thus, ethnicity is a very important concept among Nigeria multi ethnic states and even among individuals. However, Jenkins (2008:172) <sup>[7]</sup> opined that we must take seriously the fact that ethnicity means something to individuals and that when it matter, it can really matters. The fulcrum of this research is anchor on the following. Firstly, a definitional framework of the concepts ethnicity and ethnicism by different scholars. Secondly, the research will treat the origin of ethnicity in Nigeria, how it relates to social change and how it influenced the social change process. Thirdly, this research will examine the manifestation of ethnicity and ethnicism in Nigeria society and provide recommendation at the end of its conclusion.

### The concepts of ethnicity and ethnicism

#### Ethnicity

Ethnicity as a concept evolved from a Greek word *ethnos*, which means people of the same ancestry”. However, ethnicity like any other social science and humanities concepts is saturated with a plethora of definitions; this research will therefore examine few definitions from scholars. According to Nnoli (1978:5) <sup>[9]</sup> ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. However, extensive research into ethnicity in the Nigeria polity by Cohen (1969) <sup>[1]</sup>, Nnoli (1989) <sup>[10]</sup>, Otite (1990) <sup>[14]</sup>

Osagbe (1992)<sup>[12]</sup>, Elaigwu (1994) and Egwu (2001)<sup>[4]</sup> have summarily pointed to five main issues that ethnicity is bound to be in a plural state, it is characterized by exclusiveness, the common consciousness of the feeling of one's cultural superiority to the others. It is a tool of competition for individuals and groups for scarce public resources such as contracts, employment, political appointments, scholarships, access to land as well as opportunities for lucrative trade and commerce; furthermore, it is widely used as a political tool by all and sundry including the state to canvass for support or sympathy. Finally, it is a situational consciousness which alters in its form, role, incumbents and place as the social process demands it, that is situation changes as the event unfolds. The above definitions succinctly validate the true state of ethnicity in Nigeria, as Nigerians used their ethnic group or affiliation to the detriment of others.

According to Doders (2012)<sup>[3]</sup> ethnicity is seen from two stand point. Firstly from a narrow perspective as a community of people who believe they have common claims to origin, descent, culture and traditions in form of language spoken, dressing style, history and common destiny pursuit by each other. Secondly is from a broad perspective which sees ethnicity, as that factor which is built on ascription of solidarity among people of people tied to race, nationality and victory won or even religion. Thus, Shareader (2005:101)<sup>[16]</sup> succinctly examine ethnicity as a sense of collective identity by which folks perceives themselves as sharing a historical past and a variety of social norms and customs. However, Giddens (2006:487) opined that ethnicity refers to the cultural practices and outlooks of a given community of people that set them apart from other groups.

Ethnicity can be seen as a shared believed of a people by their ancestry origin. It builds solidarity, recognition and direct social intercourse among folks of the same ethnic group. Nnoli (1987:4) opined that where ethnicity has made its appearance, it has tended to persevere and grow intensity and spread, essentially because it performs some valuable functions for the relevant ethnic groups such as, ethnicity promotes the appreciation of an individual's social roots in the community, the creation of a social network which provides material and emotional support for members of society. Ethnicity operate at the intermediate level of society, it fosters in the relevant population sense of belonging and also mediates between the individual and the larger society. Finally, ethnicity therefore offers a personal solution to the generic problems of exploitation, oppression, deprivation and alienation.

### **Ethnicism**

According to online oxford dictionaries ethnicism is the consciousness of or emphasis on ethnic identity or culture, ethnic self-determination or nationalism ethnic separation ([www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ethnicism](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ethnicism)). However, ethnicism can be seen as an emphasis upon ethnic identity or prejudice based on ethnic origin (<https://en.m.wiktionary.org/wiki/ethnicism>).

Ethnicism therefore can be seen as love, solidarity or emphasis of one ethnic origin or identity. Thus, ethnicity deals with cultural and ethnic roots of folks; therefore ethnicism is the product of ethnicity, as the effect of ethnicity is the outcome of ethnicism.

### **Ethnicity: abridged origin in Nigeria**

Ethnicity in Nigeria can be traced to her colonial master "Great Britain". Before the coming of her colonial masters, there was nothing of sort in the entity to be called Nigeria. Put simply, colonialism created ethnicity. According to Nnoli (1989:3)<sup>[10]</sup> the colonialist began to categories African linguistic groups as tribes and attribute to them difference in culture, norms and mores.

Under this context of categorization of the indigenous people emerged a new social order, to this end a social change in the manner folks views themselves and others. However, if ethnicity given it pervasive presence in our present Nigeria system, Nnoli argued, that it would have been represented in the pre-colonial linguistic dictionaries, therefore it a fact that ethnicity in Nigeria is a creature of the colonial and post-colonial order (Nnoli, 1989:35)<sup>[10]</sup>. Furthermore, it is imperative to note that, there was nothing like Yoruba land, Ijo land or Hausa land before the British came, Nigeria then was made up of different sovereign independent nations, kingdoms and city states who trade and fought international wars between themselves, but the coming of the British created a social change which led to the introduction of ethnicity.

The Britain colonialist having introduced ethnicity exacerbated it by playing the ostrich with manipulating the prevalent fears of ethnic domination, exploiting regional imbalance or preying on inter-ethnic hostility and tension, thus the resultant effects of these, was a social change in the way folks see and regard themselves in the entity to been called Nigeria. The 1914 amalgamation saw the division of Nigeria by linguistics and ethnic groupings, even though this act have seen by different scholars, experts and public analysis among others as the birth of an entity called Nigeria, the negative effects was that, it brought the introduction of ethnicity in Nigeria which will exacerbate the good and cordial relationship enjoyed by different Nigeria groups. For example, the Tiv, Idoma, Ebira and Berom folks will now see themselves as different protectorate or zone from Igbo, Ijo and Bini folks among others in the southern protectorate. Furthermore, according to Nnoli (1989:63)<sup>[10]</sup> the colonial urban centers are the cradle of ethnicity. These urban areas created a meeting point as a result of migration. The social change that came about as a change in the mode and means of production forced rural dwellers to move in mass to these urban areas. Therefore members of an ethnic group will identify with his or her group for support. He further opined that the consequent inter group cohesion acts separate it from the other ethnic groups. The social change as a result of group identification and cohesion in the city created a feeling of both belongingness and rejection used to differentiate folks in the cities.

Finally, the handovering of power to the northern Nigeria (Fulani/Hausa) by British and the secret inculcating to (Fulani/Hausa) by their ruling elites the syndrome of born to rule in Nigeria exacerbated the relationship between Fulani/Hausa and other ethnic groups in the country, as this created a social change from the way Fulani/Hausa folks see themselves from other ethnic folks in Nigeria. These syndrome or issue is still present and have eaten deep in Nigeria society.

### Manifestations of ethnicity and ethnicism in Nigeria

Ethnicity and ethnicism is hydra headed monsters that have eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigeria society, from the composition of political parties, voting behaviour, government appointments, recruitment into civil services, amongst others have not escape string grip of ethnicity and ethnicism. Thus this love and solidarity show by ethnic nationalists in Nigeria have created several ethnic tensions, confrontations and fracas which in 1967 exploded into full-blown civil war between the Igbo ethnic group and the rest of the country. Since 1967 till date, the ethnic mistrust among the various ethnic groups and dialectically different people in Nigeria has not ceased.

However, among the various forms of ethnic confrontations and conflicts in recent times which indicate vividly the lack of cordiality, existence of mutual suspicion and fear of domination among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria include, a violence ethnic violent confrontation between Hausa and Igbo in Kano in may 1995, a violent clash between the Ijo and Itsekiri in 1999, a violent ethnic conflicts between Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba in 1999, a violent fracas between Ijo and Ilaje communities of orobo in Ondo State 1999, others are, a violent ethnic conflicts between the Eleme and Okrika ethnic groups over traditional and legal titles to the stretch of land where Port Harcourt refinery is located in Rivers State, a violent ethnic conflict between Hausa-Fulani and Irigwe indigenes in Bassa, Plateau state in 2002, an ethnic confrontation between the native people and Hausa settlers in Yelwa-Shendam, Plateau state in 2003 and ethnic conflicts between the Ijo and Itsekiri over the former agitation for political autonomy of warri in 2003 among others ( Daily Sun, 2004 Guardian, 2004 and News Watch, 2004) <sup>[19, 20, 8]</sup>. Though it is very different to know the exact and extent of damaged these ethnic conflicts, confrontations and fracas mentioned above have really caused to lives and properties, starting from the Nigeria civil war in 1967-1970 down to the present ethnic conflicts, fracas and confrontations, but the truth remains that millions of lives and properties has been lost, great destinies has been cut short, because of ethnicity and ethnicism in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the social formation of Nigeria which is basically heterogeneous by implication multicultural society, one would expect a high potentiality for lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion, fear of domination and a high tendency towards violent fracas, conflicts and confrontations for various reasons. Hinged on this fact, Nigeria has witnessed and still experiencing a number of ethnic conflicts and confrontations as cited above. All these conflicts and confrontations have implications for Nigeria unity, national integration, development and progress. It is for this that Adeleye (2007:1) restated that:

*“The US central Intelligence Agency” Report of March, 2005 warned that Nigeria could face outright collages within 15 years. The reason adduced was that the deadlock in the reform drive may drive more Nigerians to support a growing alliance of radical factions bent on dissolving the union of Nigerian ethnic groups imposed on them in 1914 during British colonial rule. A Coalition of these groups have continued to use lethal and non-lethal means to drive home their demands”.*

From the foregoing, it can be seen that a major fall-out of ethnicism and ethnicity in Nigeria is social conflict, which as

we have seen from the few-examples of inter and intra ethnic conflicts cited above, has characterized the Nigerian nation. All these ethnic conflicts mentioned above are either struggle over values or claims to status, power, secession and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain some desirable values, but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals and gain political independence through secession.

Thus, the formation and composition of political parties in Nigeria is influenced by ethnicity. According to Nnoli (1989:124) <sup>[10]</sup> political parties in Nigeria understood that to win the support of an ethnic group is to win a political constituency. Right from the first republic till date, Nigerian political parties are ethnically situated; little wonder Salih (2001:33) asserted that a common feature of colonial and post-colonial African parties is ethnicity. The first republic political parties were ethnically based such as the NPC represented the Hausa\ Fulani, the NCNC represented the Igbo’s while AG represented the Yoruba’s. The above succinctly show the role of ethnicity in the formation of political parties in Nigeria.

This party’s formation and ethnic affiliation led to a social change because Nigerians started identifying themselves with their ethnical represented political parties, therefore ethnicity made political parties no longer a unifying factor. Sardonicly, this social change in the composition of political parties is still present in Nigeria politics. Thus, the fourth republic political parties carry this ethnically based formation and affiliation. For example Alliance for Democracy (AD) was known as an Yoruba party, All People Party later change to All Nigeria People Party (ANPP) represented the North, All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) is seen an Igbo party, while People Democracy Party (PDP) shared two ethnical zone of North and South therefore PDP represent the North and the South in Nigeria, as it is the case up till this present republic, the only difference is that AD, ANPP, Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and a faction of APGA have successfully merged to formed a political party called All Progressive Congress (APC), but this new political party is seen as Hausa/Fulani with little Yoruba in it. Going back to the first republic, it is pertinent to note that ethnic party representative and affiliation was not the case during eve of colonialism as NCNC was viable in western Nigeria with strong organization structure under the control of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who was chased out of western region by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Action group, and the subsequent impeachment of Eyo Ita from eastern region created a seed of discord which snowballed into ethnically divided political parties (Owunwa, 2005:25). This action by Chief Obafemi Awolowo destroyed and exacerbated the cord of unity amongst Nigeria ethnic groups.

Today presently the Nigeria political party politics and system has been polluted by ethnic chauvinism, ethnicity and ethnicism has created voters not sharply divided on ideologies or programs but on ethnic grounds, as political parties are ethnically based and bias, during election, the voting pattern or behavior will be stream lined into choice of candidate, therefore members of an ethnic group will vote for candidate from their ethnic group irrespective of parties programs or policies. The recently concluded 2015 general election in Nigeria showed that most Hausa/Fulani voted for President Muhammadu Buhari and his party the APC as a result of ethnic bias, sentiment, solidarity and identification.

Furthermore, ethnicity changes the political perception of Nigerians, to this end, Nigerian no longer see themselves as first Nigerians but as members of their various ethnic groups. It is not out of place to state that Nigeria citizenry are fanatics when it comes to ethnicity.

According to Asari Dokubu in one of his interviews made it crystal clear that, I am an Ijo man first before adding any entity affiliation to me. Also Chief Obafemi Awolowo once credited Nigeria as a mere geographical expression. Thus, Chief Emeka Ojukwu asserted that, it is only an idiot that will be detribalized in Nigeria (Owunwa, 2005:30). Little wonder Nagata (1981:102) opined that ethnic identity is a unique blend of affective, expressive and basic ties sentiments and loyalty with instrumental, calculated political interest where by the latter is explained and given meaning by the former. This social process of identification is understandable gives the role ethnicity play, for ethnicity is seen as a means of identification, sense of purpose and unity among ethnic groups. Additionally, after independence the ruling class in Nigeria in their quest for political power strokes the flames of ethnicity in the country in order to maintain the status or change it. From the first republic to the present, the ruling class in Nigeria politics have used ethnicity to political divide the Nigerian masses. According to Nnoli (1989:125)<sup>[10]</sup>.

*“The class character and interest of Nigerian political parties were most glaringly reflected in their activities, for when Nigerians assumed political positions of authority, they were more desirous of a imbibing the lifestyle and privileges of colonialism than in abolishing it injustice and oppression of the Nigerian masses”.*

The Nigeria ruling class has over the years hide under the shadow of ethnicity to continue to perpetuate them in power or as a means to wrestle power from other ethnic groups. The appeal to ethnic sentiment by Alhaji Ango Abdullahi and other northern folks that power should go back to the north when former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan was in power was a strong evidence to support the above statement.

Ethnicity which has been demonized and mismanaged by Nigerians and her ruling elites has influenced the Nigerian system a lot. The authoritative allocation of values in the country is predominantly defined in ethnic constructs. However, the distribution of social amenities and the establishment of government owned industries are filled with ethnic sentiment and coloration. For example University of Nigeria is filled with Igbo ethnic group, it is the same case to University of Ibadan, as it is filled with Yoruba ethnic group from the teaching staff, to the non-teaching staff down to the students who gains admission into these prestigious universities in Nigeria. Additionally, government political appointments, awarding of contracts, scholarships amongst others are done base on ethnic nepotism, cronyism, favouratism and patronage. This ethnic sentiment, nepotism, cronyism and favoritism leads to social change in the sense that ethnic groups in power will continue and deliberately enrich themselves at the direct detriment of other ethnic groups thereby creating a tense or a hostile environment that can lead to conflicts or full-blown war in the country.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

The issue of ethnicity and ethnicism is a matter of great concern to Nigerians, instead of uniting Nigeria, is breaking

the nation further into fragments. These hydra headed monsters that have eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigeria nation has been demonized and mismanaged by Nigerians, her ruling class and elites. However, there is need to go back to the drawing board as a nation to fix this ethnicity and ethnicism issues which has resulted to mephistophelean and dangerous activities by ethnic fanatics. Nigeria and her citizenry have forgotten history as such engaged in constants ethnicism, ethnic sentiment and conflicts amongst others, as her society is pluralize with ethnicity.

This research paper will conclude with a definition of history by Daniels, R.V. (1972:3)<sup>[2]</sup>.

*“History is the memory of human group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that measure to be human. Without history we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be, like victims of collective amnesia grouping in the dark for our identify”.*

The Neglect of memory of human group experience (History), the struggle for federal resource, space, recognition and fear of domination has over the years been the cause of ethnicity and ethnicism in the nation, in the form of ethnic nepotism, cronyism, favouratism, patronage, conflicts and confrontations. Nigerians should began to see themselves as one and began to value and appreciate her rich history, however, this research is therefore advancing some recommendation to the Nigeria leaders and her citizenry.

- Ethnic leaders in the country should constantly caution their followers to see other ethnic groups as their brothers and sisters.
- Favoritism, nepotism, cronyism and patronage by ethnic leaders and Nigeria leaders in all sectors should be reduce to the bearer’s minimum or if possible eradicated.
- Nigeria government should as a matter of urgency call for ethnic national conference to listen and adequately address and resolved ethnic issues arising from different ethnic groups or urgently implement the recommendations of the just concluded national conference in Nigeria on ethnic issues, if there is any.
- Furthermore, love, peace and unity should be preach and encourage in cultural gathering by ethnic leaders to their followers.
- Developmental concentration of government should be centralized to every part of the country, to enable every ethnic group in the nation have a sense of belonging.
- Finally, Nigeria legislature should enact laws that will totally eradicate state of origin and ethnic/tribal origin in application forms among others in the country.

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