ETHNICITY AND STATE CREATION IN NIGERIA: EXPLORING THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE BABEL OF TONGUES AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

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Abstract

This study explores the nexus between ethnicity and state creation in Nigeria. It also interrogates the interrelationship between multiplicity of ethnic nationalities, ethnic majorities and minorities and the politics of state creation and political restructuring in the Nigerian federation. The study finds out that states were created in Nigeria based on ethnic identities and lingua cultural considerations rather than socioeconomic and institutional reasons. The study concludes that rather than achieve national integration and balanced federation, the state reorganization and political restructuring carried out so far in the country had deepened ethnic particularism thereby elevating ethnicity and primordialism to the level of state ideology.

Keywords: Ethnicity, State Creation, National Integration, Federation, Minorities

INTRODUCTION

The ethnic factor is very prominent in the politics of state creation. The first and second state creation exercises in the country were carried out, ostensibly, to address the issues of the domination of the ethnic minorities by ethnic majority in the country.   Even when it can be said that there are no more ethnic minorities in the real sense of the term, ethnicity still persists, because Nigeria is a multi-ethnic developing society and, unlike in the developed polities, ethnicity has become the strategy (in the hands of the elite) for the competition for national resources, particularly, via state creation. Ethnicity consequently becomes a product of such competition.

Because of Nigeria's formula for resource allocation, ethnicity is intertwined with demands for the creation of new states or local governments. Since 1970 reform, Nigeria's federal revenue allocation mechanisms represent a self-sustaining incentive for creating new states or local governments. Once created, the states are guaranteed statutory revenues proportionally higher than those previously received by the area from which it was excised. Whereas during the 1960s, demands for creation of states came exclusively from the "minorities" elites everywhere now canvass for the division of their states. The process of ethnogenesis is largely self perpetuating, as the division of a state generates concomitantly a modification of alliance networks among the elites of the new entities. New majorities are bound to emerge and new "minorities" prepare to organize to make demands for further fragmentation. The consolidation of the Nigerian state, therefore, carries a process of recessive integration which undermines the nation's efforts at nation-building.

Suffice it to say, however, that in examining the issue of ethnicity in Nigeria, there is a need to differentiate between the healthy assertion of ethno-cultural identities in a plural context and ideology or a mindset of ethnicity and sectionalism which could be disruptive. Ethnicity and sectionalism become problematic as a result of real or perceived differential access to jointly owned resources in a plural society, especially when the elites of these ethnic populations seeking political advantage parade ethnic symbols to assert their relevance or negotiate access to power.

In this regard, this study distinguished between the real exclusion of groups, clans and communities in a plural context and the opportunistic deployment of allegations of marginalization in the quest for political advantage, of which creation of states is an important part. In the Nigerian context, where almost every ethno-cultural group complains of deprivation and marginalization, this thesis suggests that we must look deeper than the banner headlines or the high decibel of protestations to frame policy.

This thesis argues that pluralism *per se* does not constitute a problem on its own but the mismanagement and or manipulation of it. The mismanagement of the multi-ethnic nature of the country, which gives rise to identity politics of a pernicious brand, sometimes threatens national unity and poses a danger to the viability of the democratic order. A deep understanding of ethnicity and the reality of the ethnic configuration of the Nigerian nation can also lead to an understanding of the class, religious and other socioeconomic bases of conflict in the Nigerian society and polity.

This study reveals that a large proportion of the states so far created were a product of false ethnic dichotomies by the elite's superficial ethnic affiliations. States' creation in Nigeria has, therefore, elevated ethnicity to the status of national ideology. As a result, a vicious cycle

has been created. Other groups who are yet to benefit from the state creation largesse are wont to start fresh agitations for their own states. Demands for states then become concentric and hence emphasize the level of the country's heterogeneity, on the one hand, and a manifestation of progressive differentiation and fragmentation of the country on the other. Nigeria is not likely to attain the desired national integration and unity which state creation was meant to achieve if this phenomenon persists (Adetoye, 2000).

The need for balanced federalism was at the base of creation of states but today Nigeria is yet to achieve the balance. The northern section which was one of the three regions the country emerged with at independence has 19 states and Abuja, while the others (East, West and Midwest) have 17 among themselves. This has provoked more agitation for further creation of additional states in the country. Since North-South imbalance is one of the reasons for state creation, it is advisable that 6 more states be created to give every zone equal number of states. Except for the North-West zone that already has 7 and therefore should remain so, the remaining four zones (North-East, North-Central, South-South, and South-West) should each have additional state while the South-East having only 5 states should have two more. With this, every zone will have an equal number of 7 states. This will bring the number of states from the present 36 to 42 plus Abuja, the FCT.

The Ethnic Minorities and State Creation

The first question to address here is what it is that we mean by the term "minority group". There is no doubt that ethnic majority and ethnic minority groups are delineable within the framework of ethnicity but it is important to illuminate the conceptual confusion and or controversy surrounding the term. According to Valien (1964) cited in Eteng (1997) the term "minority group", alternatively referred to as the "minority" is applied to an ethnic, racial or religious group but that the term ethnic group is utilized when invidious distinctions are not intended while "minority group" connotes such invidious distinction. However, both terms, according to Eteng, underscores physical, religious, racial and other cultural features of a designated group which distinguish them from other "dominant" ethnic groups in society. He further observes that other markers that could be used to identify the minority group could also be statistical or numerical size, socio-economic and political power distribution, homogenous physical and/or cultural traits and differential treatment or status.

Eteng, distilling the various characteristics of the minority group as posited by other scholars (Schermahorn 1949: 51; see also Wirth, 1945: 347) profiled the main characteristics as A social category, a collectivity, a social class, large or small… exists within a socio-culture…whose members are distinguished from the majority or dominant ethnic group in

power…on the basis of inherent or contrived homogenous, physical, biological, national racial, cultural and social characteristics…and are therefore hated and consciously excluded-socially, physically and sometimes legally- from participating in the social, economic, political economy or some sections (sic) of the larger society…on account of which they are self conscious of their minority status and hence often exclude themselves from the mainstream culture. A minority group is thus almost always embroiled in a discriminatory, unequal and clientilistic power relationship with the dominant groups, in which they often consequently assume subordinate status as the exploited, expropriated, isolated, marginalized and then targeted.

From the foregoing, it would be easy for us to use these markers, among other things, to guide ourselves in arriving at which of the groups in the old Ondo State constitute, conceptually, the minority or majority.

Viewed from the perspective of *ethnic minority* in the literature, it has been argued that state creation is capable of soothing the frayed nerves of minority ethnic groups. Naturally, the polyethnic nature of the Nigerian society has always constituted a political problem for the country. This is so especially in the specific area of the insecurity of the minorities in the country. Thus, state creation agitators have rationalized their demand as a way of escaping domination by larger ethnic groups. This fear of domination becomes real and palpable when viewed against the backdrop of the ethnic and geo-political structure of immediate post-independent Nigeria where each of the three regions was dominated by a particular ethnic group and political party. Theoretically, this negates the fundamental principles of federalism which, according to Mill (1946), stipulates that no individual member state in a federation should be more powerful than the rest or be so powerful as to be capable of vying in strength with many of them combined.

The minority problem in Nigeria is multi-dimensional. It includes the desire for self-determination and escape from domination by major ethnic groups; the quest for political relevance in the Nigerian political equation; and the desire to benefit directly from the national wealth. It is also the belief of the minority that it could achieve identification through the creation of its own separate state. According to Eteng (1997) agitation for state creation by the excluded minorities between 1940 and 1967 was perceived as the most effective solution to the menace of majority domination in the circumstances. The creation of Mid-west in 1963 out of the West was a product of this struggle. Eteng (1997) further states that since the petty-bourgeoisie among various ethnic minority groups were the major beneficiaries of incessant creation of states between 1963 and 1990, doubts have been created about the genuineness of minority agitation in the first place.

A lot of controversy has been generated by this phenomenon. The problems have emerged from the inseparability or otherwise of the objectivity of the issues raised by minority agitation and the appropriateness and efficacy of state creation as a solution to the problems of the minorities. There is a convergence of opinion among the Willink Commission Report of 1957, Ekekwe (1986: 132-133), and Nnoli (1978: 168), that grievances of minorities are most of the time truly political and socio-economic and less cultural or linguistic in complexion. Reinforcing this view, Nnoli stated that for domination to be inherently and uniquely ethnic, it must take place along the lines of the inherent characteristics of ethnicity namely, language and culture. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to distinguish ethnic domination within the same group from the domination of one class by another (Nnoli, 1978: 120).

Contrary to this position, Eteng argues that Nnoli's observation was an attempt at dislodging the interface that connects social relations within which ethnicity, micro-ethnic loyalties, class, religion, statism and other primordial forces operate. He avers that ethnic minorities in Nigeria and other societies are usually exposed to cultural and linguistic domination, and that ethnic minorities usually suffer social, political, economic and cultural neglect from the larger Nigerian political economy. Eteng reiterates that the linguistic, religious and cultural differences of these groups are generally used as rationalization for this neglect, concluding that agitation for separate states cannot be and should not be seen as an escape route from cultural domination. He observes further that under circumstances of grossly underdeveloped peripheral economy, intense scarcity, zero- sum competition, asymmetrical distribution, political repression and the like, ethnicity will almost and always be malleable and generally susceptible to extreme manipulation by class, political, statist, religious and related force to their own advantage.

The Willink Commission on its own part, while confirming the genuineness of the fears of the minorities, refused to recommend the creation of states, apparently conscious of the fact that granting all or some of the requests might delay or further extend the independence date. It, however, recommended that constitutional guarantees be provided for the rights of minorities, including the right to economic development, as reflected in the proposal for ad hoc development boards or councils for areas that need special attention (Yaqub, 1997: 196-197).

In Yaqub's view, state creation is a response to several grievances, injustice, marginalization and unfairness. He posits that state creation should be situated in the context of the political economy and that it does not seem structured on economic viability but on conquering the centre. He notes that states should be created during economic boom and not when the economy is lean. He argues that states should be economically stronger than the centre such that they (the states) can survive. Since states creation tends to be divisive, Yaqub

suggests that states should be created in the interest of the federation, to unite the country and not to promote the interest of a given political class or the minorities (Yaqub, 1997:197).

Arguing along the same line, Nwoye contends that it is wrong to conclude that agitation for state creation is induced by greed for control of political power. Nwoye further argues that agitation is based on the *grievance principle.* He, therefore, suggests that other ways should be explored for fashioning and maintaining a true federation where the lot of the common man can be improved.

The process of state creation is widely viewed by scholars and politicians alike as a means of achieving a balanced and stable federalism. Both federalism and state creation are intentioned in the constitutional and political history of Nigeria. According to Ayoade (1997: 12), states were created to redress federal imbalance in Nigeria but so far the exercise has ended up in greater imbalance. He chronicles the state creation exercises by successive regimes in the country from 1963 to 1996 and concludes that:

Apart from perpetuating the North-South imbalance, the creation of states reduced the political power of the states ... the result is a vassalage of the states to the federal government which is fast becoming a Northern preserve.

Ayoade (1999), in line with Mill (1946) argues further that: It is true that big and powerful constituent states can threaten the stability of a federation, but small and weak states neutralize the deterrence effect of states in centre-state relations. The consequence is that the Nigerian federation no longer provides sufficient guarantees for equity, territorial justice, and mutual security.

Similarly, Oyediran (1997: 76) bemoans the futility of the present federal arrangement, and concludes that for me and in respect of Nigeria, a reconsideration of the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 is valid at this time in the political development of Nigeria.

Arguing further, Oyediran advises thus: Within the context of Nigeria in 1996(ostensibly referring to the intergovernmental relations between the centre and the states), in my view, the answers provided by men and women who took part in the 1953 and 1957 meetings are adequate in 1996 (1999).

Ethnic Majority /Ethnic Minority Relations

What constitutes the majority is commonly attributed to numerical superiority. This is more relevant especially in democratic societies where number counts in arriving at political decisions and other dimensions of authoritative allocation of resources. According to Ikporukpo (2007: 114), numerically superior groups become majorities in the context of their ability to control power or influence through an electoral process. He posits that it may be possible for a group

which is not numerically superior, through its control of political power, to emerge as a special case majority. There are handful examples of this category. But before we turn to them, we shall explore further some theoretical underpinnings of majority-minority relations.

Some scholars are also of the view that the process that produced the majority-minority politics at the national level has replicated itself at both state and local levels. For instance, it has been suggested that the regionalization process over the years clearly indicates that the majority-minority issue is not one restricted to the national level, but has also emerged at the level of the state, and to some extent, at the local government areas. At this level however, the traditional national minorities are joined by some groups within national majorities who now find themselves in some states where they are outnumbered by minority groups. (Ikporukpo, 2007: 113). Examples of this category, that is, majorities who find themselves in states where they are outnumbered, are the Yoruba in Kogi, the Ekiti in Kwara, the Igbo in Delta and Rivers, and the Ijaw in Ondo State. A closely related dimension to the issue discussed above is the question of what process produced "*minorized majorities*" and or "*dominating minorities*".

It has been proven with cognate examples and cases that minority status has little or nothing to do with numbers. According to Nzongola-Ntalaja (2007: 18), "a numerical majority may be reduced to the status of a sociological minority if such majority is economically dominated as well as politically and socially oppressed". He went further to illustrate this thesis with the cases of Africans under colonialism including the apartheid regime in South African and settler colonialism in Liberia under the Americo-Liberian oligarchy. It is also the case with the ethnic polarization in Rwanda and Burundi between the Tutsi and the Hutu. In Burundi, the Tutsi were in the minority constituting 20% of the population while in Rwanda, the Tutsi formed 9% of the general population. In the two cases, the Tutsi controls the state system (Microsoft Encarta Suite 2008). Also, Ethiopia presented an apt example of a system in which one ethnic group (the Amhara) imposed its political and cultural hegemony over all the others. Other examples are the Fulani's overthrow of Hausa settlers in northern Nigeria and the Hausa-Fulani hegemony over the other groups in Nigeria.

What are the variables responsible for this paradox? The phenomenal emergence of what Ekeh (1986: 33-63) refers to as "dominant minorities" can be explained multi dimensionally. Whichever way it is conceptualized, majority cannot always be conceived in numerical terms, for what bestows majority status on a population could indeed be superiority in other variables than numbers. Ikporukpo (2007: 114) captured this thesis with his submission that several special cases of majorities which may be different from the conventional majority may be identified within a given country, although in some cases, these may be coterminous with the conventional definition. These include political, and social, economic and geographical.

The first is defined in terms of political power base/social standing, the second in terms of economic resource base and the last is reflection of geographical extent. The above proposition explains to a large extent why and how the Tutsi and other dominating minorities acquired their special status. In all the cases cited above, the dominating minorities possessed more economic power and therefore, political power.

Identity Politics in Multi Ethnic Societies

Identity politics, inter/intra-ethnic conflicts and state creation are other concepts that are prominent in the issues raised in this study. The point of departure of our discussion here would be what exactly we mean by the ethnic, how is it different from other ascriptions like sub ethnic, clan, cultural groups and so on. To help us avoid the sin of tautology, it is necessary to operationalize these terms and highlight the nexus between them.

"Minority group" and related issues itemized above are assumed to have their roots in "ethnicity". Both concepts are seen as inseparable. Nonetheless, the application of ethnicity concept per se in the country's intellectual discourse has apparently produced two seemingly opposed schools of thought. One school apparently with Marxist-Socialist outlook represented by Nnoli (1978) and Ekekwe (1986) sees ethnicity largely as a super structural concept with hardly any independent explanatory power. As such, its utility lies mainly in the extent to which it dialectically interfaces with, or is mediated by, other more powerful class-related explanatory variables such as power, wealth, ideology and so on and the advantages and opportunity they confer on those who manipulate it . There is also congruence between this school and the one that gave "Instrumental" accounts of ethnicity. This theory sought to explain such persistence as the result of the actions of community leaders who use their cultural groups as sites of mass mobilization and as constituencies in their competition for power and resources, because they found them more effective than social classes. This school viewed ethnicity as instrumental identities, organized as means to particular ends.

The other school consisting mainly of "Primordialists" or ethnic relativists such as Ben Naanem (1995: 46-78), late Ken Saro Wiwa (1992), and late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, argues that ethnicity was a potent force in Nigeria. Accordingly, the structure and operation of the Nigerian federation cannot be understood if ethnicity is not taken into account or structurally anchored to it. This school, however, concedes that the collapse of nation-building experiments in a majority of cases in Africa, has resulted from rugged ethnic particularism of given constituent units of these nations. Naanem (Ibid) argues that the experience stated above has resulted in the wrong portrayal of ethnicity as anachronistic as destructive by politicians and academics alike.

Contributing to this conceptual debate, Osaghae (1995) argues that contrary to popular perception, the competitive and conflictual aspects of ethnicity may be very prominent, ethnicity is not always conflictual. He posits that, it can also involve cooperation and collaboration between members of different ethnic groups. He argues further that ethnicity can also be consciously employed by the actors involved and that it is not the awareness of ethnic differences that produce ethnicity but the consciousness of the purpose to which the differences could be put. He concludes that the conditions which lead to the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and how the ethnic strategy is articulated are germane to the understanding of the phenomenon.

Ethnicity, according to Osaghae (1995), can be analyzed at three concentric and closely related levels namely; inter or cross group; intra-group; and interpersonal. At whatever level, actors manipulate ethnic symbols or identity to mobilize support for personal interest. Osaghae argues powerfully that, on its own, ethnicity may not have any analytical value because individual's ethnic identity does not mean that he or she will employ it to serve his or her interests. He observes that the individual has an array of identities to choose from; class, gender, political party, professional, and so on; all of which he holds in addition to his ethnic identity and he or she could decide to adopt any of these identities based on his perception of the identities and strategies employed by them. To this extent, actors choose whichever identity that is most relevant for negotiating depending on specific circumstances.

What then is ethnic? Studies on ethnic relations have usually proceeded with ambiguous definition of the ethnic groups and ethnicity. Some of such studies trivialize, neglect or gloss over the problem in spite of the fact that the conceptualization and operationalization of the phenomenon under study is most necessary for an efficient treatment of the research problem and the collection of relevant data. It is therefore incumbent upon us to define these concepts with considerable clarity.

In the United State of America, the concept of ethnic group has been variously defined based on nationality, race, religion, time or sequence of migration or any combination of these criteria (Sanda, 1976: 29). To Gordon (Undated), an ethnic group is any group which is defined or set off by race, religion, or national origin or a combination of these categories. This definition as we can see is relative to America whose culture and politics belong to the developed and western category. Hence, we may not be able to successfully operationalize the American typology of the concept in our analysis of Africa or Nigeria.

To Rose (1965), ethnic groups are those whose members share unique social and cultural heritage, passed from one generation to the next frequently identified by distinctive patterns of family life, language, recreation, religion and other customs which cause them to be

differentiated from others. Above all, members of such groups feel a sense of identity and an independence of fate with those who share the customs of the ethnic tradition.

This definition appears to contain some features and markers which tend to describe ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, Alubo (2006: 5) in his work defined an ethnic group as "people who share a common ancestry, identity, language and culture". He stated further, that the concept is also a "process of naming self, naming others as well as being named by others". Similarly, ethnic groups according to Eteng (1997) are delineable within the framework of ethnicity and he describes them as "social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries in terms of language and culture or both."

These definitions have been adopted by many researchers in inter/intra-ethnic studies (Nnoli, 1978; Osaghae, 1995) and they have appropriately situated the problematic in the intra and cross ethnic relations. Deriving from this conceptualization of the ethnic, intra-ethnic relations therefore can be defined as a sum total of all relations and interactions that take place between and among groups within the major ethnic groups. These sub-ethnic groups, whatever characterizes the relations among them, (conflictual, competitive or cooperative), remain more meaningful, more enduring and stronger identities than the main ethnic groups because politics or conflicts, so to say, are usually fiercer especially in the process of distribution of state resources. For instance, the Yoruba ethnic group consists of sub groups like the Ekiti, Egba, Ijebu, Ijesha, and Ondo, Oyo etc. characterized by common ancestry, culture, dialects, religion and system of government. These sub-groups once constituted the former Western region and later Western state prior to the creation of their different states arising from agitations resulting from distributional conflicts.

Up till this moment, subgroups within states in the country who share similar historical, linguistic and cultural affinities still clamour for creation of their separate states occasioned by intra ethnic politics, especially in their competition or struggle for development projects, appointment into public offices, and in other locus of power. This development has been exacerbated by the priority attached to creation of autonomous communities, local and state governments.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of federalism and state creation as devices for decentralization for the purpose of effective governance and service delivery has been sacrificed on the altar of ethnicism and ethnic representation. Rather than seen and used as a dispassionate tool of developmental administration, these political units (states) into which the Nigerian federation has been divided, have become instruments of negotiation for patronage by the ethnic elite and the ruling class.

Hence, state institutions in the country now serve primordial purposes rather than as constitutional structures for effective administration.

The failure of state institutions in Nigeria to perform their statutory and constitutional functions has led to situations whereby groups and individuals employ culture and other narrow identities to compete for state patronage. This has resulted in the factionalization and fractionalization of the country into competing and warring ethnic and sub ethnic nationalities. To this extent, ethnic politics or ethnicity in Nigeria, as it were, has percolated to the sub levels- state and local government areas (Osaghae, 1995). Hence, we hear of requests for Ibadan state from Oyo State, Oke Ogun state from Oyo State, Ijebu State from Ogun state, Okun state from Kogi State etc. The agitations appear interminable with the concomitant effect of balkanizing the country and creating mushroom states bereft of operational capacity.The problem with Nigerian federal system, as noted earlier in this study, is that the central government is the custodian of the largest proportion of national revenue but the farthest to the communities. To this extent the other levels of government are financially hamstrung and can therefore not perform their statutory developmental roles. Rather than demand for additional states as a means of development or proximity to governments, agitators should ask for the creation of more local government that would be transformed to development centers for the grassroots people, that is, if the Federal government can devolve more funds to that level of government and if the funds would be judiciously utilized by the political and bureaucratic leaders at the local level. Also, emphasis should shift from the federal character principle as a basis for sharing national resources to merits and performance. As long as appointments and other state patronages are done on the basis of ethnic consideration, it does not appear as if agitation and demand for states would abate in the country.

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