

**ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NIGERIA: A CHALLENGE TO INCLUSIVE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Abstract**

*Nigeria, is a product inequality among the various ethnic groups orchestrated by a long period of colonialism; a period which witnessed the ascendancy of three major ethnic groups to the socio-political domination of other ethnic groups and a period when the three major ethnic groups were used as a pedestal for the distribution of socio-political goods, resulting in the inability of other ethnic groups to access these socio-political goods. This situation has continued to impact negatively on the forces of national integration and cohesion in ethnically divided Nigeria. Considering the relationship between ethnicity and development; socio-political exclusion is not only ethically dangerous to development but also economically unproductive. It deprives groups and individuals of the opportunity for the necessary development that can be beneficial to the society. Thus, it is important to develop an integrative socio-political frame-work that explicitly recognizes the participatory role of every ethnic group in governance. Hence, there is a need for the adoption of inclusive governance to manage ethnicity in Nigeria. Notwithstanding, ethnic conflict still persists and an attempt will be made in this study to identify the reasons. Central to socio-political sustainability in Nigeria is a system that should recognize that differences are important to development and encompass notions of equality. Such a system should acknowledge the socio-political and economic power of every ethnic group and promote a system devoid of ethnocentric. Ideology.*

**Introduction:**

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed a period of unforeseen sociopolitical and economic instability as well as bloodshed. This is partly due to the petty- bourgeois origins of Nigerian nationalism and the politicization of ethnicity in the polity. Like the national formations on the Indian subcontinent, the political formation of Nigeria came into being alongside several contextual socio-economic and political factors; the fear of domination, economic exploitation, social and sometimes religious discrimination (Rahim, 2007). These and others have not only set the tone for socio-economic and political underdevelopment, but have also set the various ethnic groups against each other.

Nigeria is located in West Africa bordering on the Gulf of Guinea, and lies between the Benin Republic and Cameroon. The country has a total of 923,770 square km, 13,000 square km of which is covered by water. The boundaries of Nigeria extended for 4,047 km and countries with co-joining borders include; the Benin Republic (in the South West), Cameroon (in the South East), the Republic of Chad (in the North East) and Niger Republic (in the North West) (Ijeoma, 2010). The three major ethnic groups are Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. There are, however, other sizable ethnic groups which include Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Ogoni, Igbira, Jukun, Tiv etc. The major religious groups are Muslim, Christian and indigenous beliefs. The official language is English. This is as result of British colonisation that lasted for more than hundred years; whereas, the other languages associated with the three major ethnics groups are Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. These socio-cultural differences have separated Nigerians from each other and constitute one of the main factors militating against national integration. However Nigerian leaders seem to be driven by the problems they create, even though Nigeria's very diversity may indeed prove to be the guarantee of its stability and moderation if properly managed. Nigeria, like India, Canada, Malaysia, Ghana, today is one of the countries in Africa that owes its existence to the imperialistic activities of Britain. The pursuit of British economic ambition and expeditions through conquest crystallized in the rather "artificial" creation called Nigeria in 1914, subjugating people from diverse culture, traditions and ethnic nationalities and organizing them to construct the Nigerian state.

Ethnicity therefore, assumed an added dimension and the forces that it generated plunged the country, first, into the secession of the East, and then, the bitter civil war of 1967-1 970 that engulfed the country when Colonel Ojukwu tried to carve the State of Biafra out of the

former Eastern Region of Nigeria. Military governance came briefly to an end in 1979 to give room for a civilian government with constitutional provision for the American presidential system of government. In 1984 the military under Gen. Buhari (1984-1 985) again came into power. For another period of 15 years Nigeria witnessed the military governments of Gen. Babangida (1985-1993) Gen. Sanni Abacha (1993-1997) Gen. Abubakar Abdusalami (1997-1999) as well as a brief period of Interim National Government headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan (August-November 1993). Of course this period (1985-1999) witnessed the process of subdividing the country into smaller units all in an attempt to curtail ethnic conflicts. Nigeria, today, is made up of 36 states and 774 local governments' areas (LGA) with Abuja as the federal capital, (See figure 1). For administrative expediency and the sharing of political office, the country is sub-divided into six geo-political zones namely; South West, South East, South South, North West, North East, and North Central. Today the country is beset with myriads of conflict stemming from the inability of the state to provide adequate socio-political and economic security for all ethnic groups. One of the themes that have dominated discussions about Nigeria today is whether the Country will survive as one indivisible political entity (Makinde 2012).

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing the 36 states of the federation.



Source: Nations Online Project, Retrieved from

<http://www.mapsofworld.com/images2011/Nig> accessed on 12/09/2011.

Examples of conflicts in Nigeria in recent times include Yoruba/Hausa community clash in Shagamu, Ogun state; Eleme-Okrika in Rivers state; the intermittent clashes in Kano, Kano state; Chamba-Kuteb in Taraba state; Itsekiri-Ijaw/Urhobo in Delta state; AguleriUmuleri in Anambra state; Ijaw-Ilaje conflict in Ondo state; Hausa/Fulani-Sawaya in Bauchi state; Fulani-Irigwe and Yelwa-Shendam both in Plateau state; Hausa-Yoruba clashes in Mile 12 and Idi Araba in Lagos state; and Ife-Modakeke in Osun state ZangoKataf in Kaduna state; Tiv-Jukuin in Wukari, Taraba state; Basa-Egbura in Nasarawa state; Ogoni-Adoni in Rivers state (Ubi, 2001; Imobighe,2003; Omotayo, 2005 in Abidemi 2007). These and other ethnic cleavages and overlapping affiliations of religion have undermined prospects for socio-political and economic development of Nigeria. Compounding the problem of underdevelopment in a poor country like Nigeria is ethno nationalism, access to resources and allocation of power, which pose a great threat to peace, security and progress of the nation. The reality is that development cannot take place in a crisis ridden environment. One of the pillars of development is stability. The ethnic tensions that resulted in the civil war

of 1967-1970 is a case in point. Negative use of ethnicity – preferring people from one's ethnic group over others in the distribution of socio-economic and political goods; making access to the state as essential for sectional opportunities and claims on resources. It is a strategy for group advancement and therefore focuses on securing control of government or gaining important representation through electoral office, cabinet appointments, the civil service, or public enterprise to the detriment of other groups – no doubt negates socio-political and economic development. It becomes a powerful force that leads to socio-political instability that in turn defines the realization of a country's resources. Once the state is controlled by one or more ethnic groups, upward social mobility becomes the preserve of such groups, who use the state machinery for group interests as opposed to national development concerns. To stop ethnic conflict, an attempt must be made to create an enabling environment which engenders peace and stability and guarantees the security of the people and the optimal utilization of both human and natural resources leading to improvement, enhancement, elevation, progress of the citizen, to mention a few.

When Nigeria's socio-political and economic failure is examined, it becomes evident that ethnic conflict is central to its current developmental syndrome. It seems to thrive in uncompromising and confrontational social and political environments. The endless images of this are irreconcilable differences and struggles between groups over access to socio-political and economic power and the opportunities that go with them. It is a negative force that is utterly destructive to civil society and consensus building. It negates socio-political development, undermines a country's economic stability and flouts the rule of law. Glickman (1995) however links ethnicity to political processes. He points out that despite the persistent ethnic conflicts in the politics of African states – including Nigeria – significant liberalization and democratization leading to socio-political development is possible. In other words it can be a required ingredient for the realization of socio-political and economic integration if it is properly appropriated.

The problem of ethnicity as it emerged under the auspices of colonialism ensured that Nigerians had no control over the central power and often were kept divided into administrative districts. The colonization of Nigeria ensured that people of diverse culture were brought together to form one country. Most of these were not properly integrated into their new states. The implication of this is that the Nigeria state was unable to create an overlapping national interest which would have disregarded parochial and group interests even after many years of independence, hence the instrumentality of colonialism to ethnic conflict in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the colonialists provided the urban setting which constitutes the cradle of contemporary ethnicity. The British colonialist, while pretending to carry out a mission of uniting the warring ethnic groups consciously and systematically separated the various Nigerian people thereby creating an atmosphere of social-political and economic conflict. According to the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) on behalf of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2000 found that ethnicity is the strongest type of identity among urban Nigerians. Almost half of all Nigerians (48.2%) choose to tag themselves with an ethnic identity. In other words ethnic conflict is more pronounced in the urban areas. At the heart of ethnic conflict in Nigeria according to Nigeria Strategic Conflict Assessment (NSCA) lie political corruption and the lack of good governance. The politicians are many times indirectly involved in virtually all the conflicts. They stimulate ethnic consciousness, the aim of which has been to mobilize ethnic grievances in order to achieve their ethnic group objectives. Scholars have argued that some of the communal conflicts in some parts of the country are proxy wars engineered and executed by the political class to divide and rule the people. They allocate opportunities in employment, education and other life chances to individuals from their tribes or regions. Such policies undermine the political, economic and administrative authority that manages the country's affairs at all levels comprising the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interest, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate differences. Therefore, the decline in social, political and economic growth of Nigeria in the last decade despite its enormous human and natural resources can be traced to political actions often dominated by ethnic interests, hence the incessant conflict that has engulfed the country.

The consolidation and survival of Nigeria's union thus depends on the ability of the centre to manage the pressures that come from the socio-political and economic demands of every ethnic group. A major contributory factor to ethnic conflicts is the undemocratic nature of governance. This is because most political leaders in Nigeria have employed the divide-and-rule method of governance and created more ethno-religious divisions than the colonialists ever did. Before the country's democratic government was inaugurated in 1999, ethnic conflicts were not so pronounced, although feelings were expressed. Thus, the survival of the Nigerian federation hinges on proportional control so that the federal government

can control and contain ethnic tension by regulating the power mechanisms.

In response to mis-governance there has been an array of ethnic mobilizations such as Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Arewa People's Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Movement (IYM), and Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), among others, which have evolved in the North, West, East and South of the country; to protest against socio-political and economic marginalization. The prevailing ethnic situation in Nigeria seems to show that the country is yet to be a united one because of inter-ethnic distrust and destructive rivalry which must be carefully addressed when there is still a chance to salvage the fragile unity of the country. Prevailing illusions notwithstanding, Nigeria can only be held together by negotiated consensus not force. Despite the fragmentation of the country into thirty-six states and 774 local government area (LGA) by successive governments to ease ethnic tension and promote development; inter-ethnic rivalry still persists.

Democratization seems to have reenergized long suppressed feelings among the hundreds of ethnic nationalities in the country. Some are pushing for greater participation in the running of the affairs of the Nigeria state, and in state creation, while others are clamoring for greater autonomy. To date the response from the federal government has been the use of violence to suppress the intensity of ethnic conflict in the country.

Ethnic conflict management whether by local elites or governments should be seen as a continuing process with no end point or final resolution (Lake and Rotchild 1996). It is also an imperfect process that, no matter how well managed will still leave some potential for violence in virtually all multi-ethnic politics. Effective ethnic group management seeks to reassure every ethnic group be it major or minor of their sociopolitical, economic and cultural security. In essence, there are possible ways of managing ethnic conflict such as democratization, power sharing, free and fair electoral processes, proportional representation or zoning systems can produce a congenial atmosphere for the interdependence of groups, and political participation and prevent ethnic groups from being locked out of government (Glickman, 1995). This means that regional autonomy, confidence building measures, promoting the rights of every ethnic group reduce the socio-economic and political factor that produces violence.

By and large, the impact of ethnic conflicts on socio-political and economic development in the polity has been negative. Apart from the loss of lives and property, investible resources are often diverted to security issues and conflict management. Yet, its psychological impact through depression is agonizingly too traumatic. The most worrisome element is the gradual re-militarization of the state and society, as opposed to the desired goal of de-militarization in the name maintaining peace in trouble spots across the country. Cosmetic solutions, such as the creation of local government councils will only lead to the emergence of majority minorities and more agitation for socio-political and economic rights; which means that sustainable development will remain a pipe-dream if the root causes of ethnic conflict are not given adequate attention by all who envisage the re-awakening of Nigeria.

### **Paper Problem**

Inequalities (socio-economic) among the various ethnic groups as orchestrated by a long period of colonial administration (1860-1960) have made Nigeria a cynosure of ethnic conflicts. The central issue is that the social formation of Nigeria which is basically ethnically heterogeneous and by implication a multi-cultural society may result in a high potentiality for lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear and in addition a high tendency towards violent confrontation for various socio-political reasons.

Ethnic conflict has arisen out of this context of mutual fear and suspicion over distribution of socio-political and economic goods and lack of cordiality. Thus the inability of every ethnic group to access socio-political and economic goods continues to impact negatively on the force of national integration and cohesion. It is a product of the long history of unequal access to power, resources and opportunities among the different ethnic groups in the country. Thus the demands of such a challenge are exacting. Significantly, this context has led to open confrontation and conflict because the stressful condition of the body polity raised questions that challenge the very basis on which the political community – modern Nigeria – is organized. This prompts the question, 'is ethnicity in Nigeria an invention of the people or of colonialism?' What raises this question is the fact that the various ethnic groups that constitute the pre-Nigeria state once co-existed socially and economically, hence the question of whether ethnicity is a social construct or a natural order?

Contemporary ethnic communities and identities in Nigeria are not likely to dwindle even with the inevitability of civilization, but rather represent critical aspects of Nigeria's experience of modernity itself. Ethnic conflict in Nigeria is therefore the outcome of a continuous and continuing process of social construction emanating from the encounters of different ethnic groups with each other as

well as the deliberate mobilization and manipulations of ethnicity by the political class. Of importance here is the problem of socio-political exclusivism of ethnic groups and individuals in Nigeria. As a result ethnicity has become a bane to the socio-political development of the country. Ethnic pluralism no doubt is and will remain a fundamental characteristic of modern Nigeria that must be recognized and incorporated within any project of nation-building. Thus, this informs us that Nigeria's many ethnic fingers can be transformed into a formidable fist for socio-political development.

This study proceeds from the view that without consideration for equality and the acknowledgement of the inclusion of every individual and ethnic group big or small in governance, ethnic conflict in Nigeria will be exacerbated, ignoring every effort to make every Nigerian see himself or herself as a Nigerian and not as a Yoruba, Hausa or Igbo.

### **Ethnicity and Ethnic Consciousness**

Ethnic consciousness can be viewed as the basis for group pride and unity, through which groups seek to unify their members around group specific socio-cultural attributes and through which specific socio-political goods and self-respect is attained within and from those groups in the dominant population. It can as well be seen as an ideological construct carefully crafted by the political class to give them access to political power. It thus sets against each other people whose values are in conflict, who want different things, and who do not understand each other. It is the result of socio-economic and political competition between ethnically differentiated groups. Nnoli (1978) posited that the malaise of ethnicity had infected all facets of communication. In the process of socialization, ethnicity has increased and become internalized. Consequently, the ethnic factor assumed a self-fulfilling and sustaining dynamic of its own which daily reinforced the individuals' internalized ethnic sentiments.

However a conflict based on the consciousness of one's group's socio-political position in the polity is considered to be ethnic when it involves organized political movement, mass unrest, separatists' action, and civil wars with opposing lines drawn along ethnic boundaries. It is usually a conflict between minority groups and dominant (majority) groups, where the majority controls access to the power and resources of the state and the minorities, often without going into open confrontation with the dominant groups, question the state structure as a whole and act violently when the society and the state are unable to suggest any mechanisms for regulating and resolving these socio-political and economic contradictions (Stavenhagen 1991). Sometimes as in the case of Nigeria conflict occurs among the majority ethnic groups over the allocation of socio-political and economic goods.

Various theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic conflict have been articulated. The sociological approach argues that ethnic conflict is catalysed by the usurpation by one ethnic group of certain privileged social niches and also effects of social discrimination based on ethnic characteristics. For example, the control of the state is considered to be the greatest prize in ethnically plural societies. This explains why political positions such as presidency, governorship, legislative posts are keenly contested by the various ethnic groups. In political science theory, a powerful dynamic in the explanation of ethnic conflict is the roles played by the intellectuals and politicians in mobilizing ethnic consciousness and inter-ethnic strife. This approach is very relevant to ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

Ethnicity cannot be conjured out of thin air. It must be built on real cultural experience. Before ethnicity becomes the basis for political mobilization and action, it must be a work of intellectual construction, an imagining or invention of a common history, language and culture, typically expressed in oral or written text combining and reworking both old and new elements (Berman, 1998). The ethnic problem in Nigeria was partly man-made and partly tailored by nature itself. Man-made problems relate mainly to the fusion of the various ethnic groups hitherto independent of each other by the colonialists perhaps for administrative purposes and for economic exploitation, while problems created by nature concerned its geography and ethnic composition. Consequently, ethnicity when mobilized and manipulated can be the root cause of internal problems connected with disrespect for human rights and social justice. If appropriated properly, on the other hand, it could be the ingredient required for the realization of the ideal society, political integration, participation and common good. It could thus be said that the nature of ethnicity in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa is instrumental rather than primordial.

### **Ethnicity and Development**

Presently ethnicity and several other socio-political and economic problems have been a force to reckon with in the country and in many African states, many of which have reshaped people's lives and the manner in which institutions have responded to people's needs. One can say here that ethnicity is the bane of socio-political and economic development in Nigeria which is a reflection of the development

strategies that are related to the colonial blue prints adopted by the Nigeria nationalist leaders after independence. When the term development is considered, it is important to realise that all conceptions of development necessarily reflect a particular set of socio and political values. Development, one would believe, can be conceived within an ideological frame work. Development is seen as synonymous with socio-economic and political growth of a country.

Development is a dialectical phenomenon in which the individual and society interact with their physical, biological and human environment transforming them for their own betterment and that of humanity at large and being transformed in the process. Development connotes training in the art of using local resources and creative human energy in problem solving rather than an imitation path to the good life that some societies have achieved (Nnoli, 1995). This means that development is all about positive societal organisation for the benefit of all.

Lawal (2007) sees development as the process by which a type of social change is introduced into a system in order to produce better production methods and improve social arrangement. It involves a structural transformation of the economy, society, polity and culture of a country. Development is the improvement of any society and the living standards of its peoples through the organised tapping and utilization of the resources, human and material, available in the society. Development is rights based and could be integrated into a dividend or to deliverable of the democratic process. Ideally, development should be a process that raises the material and living conditions of the people. For development to take place, therefore, other kinds of improvement in health, education, social welfare and security must be in place. Development also means improved access to life chances and opportunities such as employment and social security. Development is impeded when these are blocked, due to the fact that people may be from one ethnic group or the other.

Claude Ake (2000) posits that development should be a lived experience instead of a received one; people become the agents of development as well as its means and its ends. In other words if those responsible for deciding what development is and what values it is to maximise, they must also have ultimate control of public policy. People must not only participate in the conventional sense, they must have the responsibility of deciding how to proceed with social transformation and every other major common concern. People must become the means of development if people are the end of development, then their interest and well-being is the measure of all things, the supreme law of development. However the level and rate of development of any particular society is influenced by so many variables such as the system of government, leadership, ethnic interests and sometimes religion.

Governance has also been defined as the total ability to organize, synthesize and direct the various actions of the working parts of the government machinery in order for such a government to perform meaningfully, creditably and acceptably (Eregha,2007). Thus governance involves both the governing class and the governed people and good governance must of necessity be democratic, entail recognition, popular support and participation by the people, accountable and ensure basic freedom. Akpotor (cited in Eregha, 2007) submitted that governance covers all aspects of the relations (complex or simple) that exist between a government and a people. The extent to which the people's affairs are managed depends on the class of people in power. Thus governance could be good or bad.

The relationship between governance and development has raised the international policy agenda. There is widespread agreement that governance matters intrinsically and for improvement in economic and social outcomes. Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting socio-political and economic development. But what exactly is "good governance"? When, why, and how do governance issues make a difference to the way countries develop? Thinking about how best to govern is not a new issue. It was central to Aristotle's thinking about how best to facilitate people's ability to lead flourishing lives in Ancient Greece (Ogundiya, 2010). There is now substantial literature on governance. Virtually everyone agrees on some key points. First, that governance refers to process – how things are done. Second, that a discussion of governance requires more than a focus on government. It also relates to the nature of relations between state and society. Governance refers to the nature of rules that regulate the public realm – the space where state and economic and political actors interact to make decisions. The concept of good governance seems to be a problematic one. But, the fact is, it remains a useful concept for obvious reasons. This is because good governance is a universally accepted socio-political instrument that could help overcome the challenges of political instability, particularly in multi-ethnic states. "The concept could be used to invite judgment about how the country concerned is governed. It enables the raising of evaluative question about proper procedures, transparency, responsiveness, the quality and process of decision making, and other such matters" (Doornbos, 2001: 94). Therefore if socio-political

development/stability must be achieved; the society must aim for growth that cannot be easily reversed through the political process of imperfect –bad – governance.

The lack of good governance is evident in the inability of a state to achieve its socioeconomic and political goals at a particular time. Bad governance negates a nation's socio-economic and political development. Governance can only be termed good if the socio-economic and political needs of the people are met; but, when such government cannot meet the needs of its people, it becomes bad governance, the symptoms of which are incessant crisis (which may be political or religious), ethnic conflict engendered by social, economic and political instabilities and frustration and insecurity among the people. The evolution of good governance would provide a basis for good conflict management conversely; good governance cannot evolve if the conflicting parties (groups) do not resolve their differences.

Good governance can be said to be almost everything. Once the state gets it right (politically) nothing else matters. This means that any state devoid of good governance tends to exhibit an increase in criminal violence, the provision of limited quantities of essential political goods, flawed socio-economic and political institutions, corruption flourishes, the state; driven by ethnic hostility victimizes its own citizens who are regarded as political enemies or hostile. The resultant effect of this is turning to ethnic identities that, naturally, are on hand to protect their members. However, when democratic values and the fundamental human rights of the citizens as entrenched in the constitution and its manifestation visible within the polity, there is a tendency to achieve societal goals. In other words where citizens and ethnic groups accept their fundamental obligation to work for the common good and benefit of the country, with regard to political, social and economic equality, the promotion of a common bond occurs that disregards disunity and promotes national integration regardless of ethnic affiliation.

Democracy is described as a system of governance in which, through elections, and persistent checks, the people utilize their political power to choose those who occupy the various political roles or positions. Democracy, if adequately understood, is a theory that sets some basic principles according to which a good government, in whatever form must be run. Effective democratic governance relies on public participation, transparency, and accountability. Democracy not only prescribes how political offices (power) should be acquired but also what to do with it or how it could be exercised.

### **Conclusion:**

There have been different explanations to ethnicity in Nigeria, two of which are the primordial school and the instrumental. This chapter began with its operational measures through a theoretical understanding of what ethnicity is. A thorough analysis of ethnicity suggests that ethnicity in Nigeria can be conceived as a product of deliberate division of ethnic groups using the instrument of administration; hence, the need to search for the elusive socio-political stability through the instrument of good governance, human rights and democracy. This is to say that the deconstruction and reconstruction of ethnicity among different ethnic groups is the catalyst to political instability in Nigeria. The promotion of citizens' fundamental freedoms paves the way for peace that is mostly needed for the survival of a democratic government, while development remains an essential attributes of a sovereign nation in which citizens are given the opportunity to pursue their safety and happiness.

The consideration of the relationship between human rights, democracy and development however shows that each of the three terms is identifiable with certain fields of study; human rights is more related to law, democracy is more of political science while development is more technological. The three discipline are likely to overlap, in their daily application because these terms are popular and of much relevance in the political affairs and process of governance of every nation. Idowu (2008) opined that the protection and promotion of fundamental rights should come before democracy and development; based on the fact that citizens are the most distinctive elements in democracy and their fundamental rights must be guaranteed and protected before they can be in a position to render their human resources for effective democratization and overall development of their nation. That is promotion of human right is fundamental to the establishment of an enduring democracy and national growth (socio-political and economic development).

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