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. These have, in small measure, impacted negatively on the country's socio-economic 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 research methodology of content analysis, anchored, as it were, on the historical descriptive approach. Among other things, its findings showed the inevitability of revisiting those factors in history which promoted inter-group relations among the peoples of present-day Nigeria prior to contacts with Europeans. It concluded that the current national culture of mistrust, mutual fears, hostility, and religious and regional dichotomy could be drastically reduced to manageable

proportions through the creation of a national history, culture, and ideology.

Keywords: Culture, development, history, nation, national integration.

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, 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, socio-economic and political interests which have combined to confine Nigeria to a state of anomie.[1]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 scare resources, as well as religious bigotry occasioned by lack of respect for each other's religion and culture, characterize the contemporary Nigerian state as an unstable environment which has continued to generate tensions in the polity. Such tensions, in their trail, have created fears as to the viability and continued existence of Nigeria as a country.

This paper is dedicated to examining how the various problems of the country are hinged on the issue of national integration. To achieve this, the paper starts by bringing into focus how Nigerian groups interacted with each other prior to contacts with Britain in the 19th century and the mechanisms through which such interactions occurred. 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 ordinary 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

It is customary for academics to acquaint their audiences with the meaning of some of the major concepts they employ in their lectures and discourses. In this paper, four major concepts are the focus of such an exercise. These are, nation, national integration, nation-building, and inter-group relations.

Nation

There cannot be a serious discussion about national integration without explaining what a nation is. Accordingly, the concept of a 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 the concept of state.

National integration

As a concept, national integration has been defined as:

> … those processes by which a state characterized by sectional or otherwise competing economies, polities, and culture within a given territory, is transformed into a society composed of a single all-pervasive, and in this sense, 'national' economy, polity and culture.[2]

Implicit in this definition is the fact that any attempt at achieving national integration must involve a shift in the locus of both identity and loyalty from the ethnic group to the national population as a whole.[3] This is an assignment that is 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 is referred to as inter-group relations. Such interactions are often influenced by the social identities and perceptions which individual members of such groups hold.[4] These include feelings, beliefs, evaluations, and behaviours which members of the in-group have towards members of the out-group.[5] 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.[6]

Interrogating the Past:

Pre-colonial intergroup relations in Nigeria

Prior to Britain's colonization and occupation, there were many ways through which the peoples of what is known as and called Nigeria today, 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.[7]

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.[8] 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 were 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.

As a matter of fact, during the period under review, ethnic particularisms and competition, though they 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.[9] 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 practised 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, 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.[10]

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 opinions 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.[11] 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, owes 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.[12]

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).[13] 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.[14] 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 and the Imperative of Creating a National History, Culture and Ideology

National integration is the anvil on which both nation-building and national development could be forged or fashioned. Put in other words, 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, namely, that 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, has not succeeded 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, and by obvious implication, the 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.[15]

Therefore, 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.[16] Secondly, if it is true that history leads the wise man and drags the fool,[17] 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 is meant 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 as an obstacle to socio-political change rather than as an agent of national cohesion.[18]

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.[19]

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".[20] Also, in pre-colonial times there were inter-regional migrations from the eastern to the western parts of present-day Nigeria,[21]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.[22]

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,[23] and when Nigerians recall how, in times past, they shared much in common and co-existed peacefully, fears and mutual suspicious will be minimized, for as has been 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".[24] 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 have no 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 engineering to resolve …issues that have plagued the polity.[25]

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 country whose peoples, nonetheless, interacted 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 and cultural borrowings and adaptions. 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 Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in the North, militancy in the South and bloody herders'-farmers' clashes 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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