Tracing the Historical Roots of Ethnicity in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT　*The existence of ethnic diversity is a feature of many developed and developing societies. The variation that can exist is0 in terms of the management of this diversity by the countries. In some countries the diversity is well accommodated by the State whereas in others the diversity existing in terms of ethnicity poses a major challenge before the political system and therefore has serious repercussions. This can well be seen in the case of countries like Nigeria, where cleavages along ethnic lines are very strong and have a long history that can be traced to the British era.*

Key Words: *Nigeria, Ethnicity, Relative Deprivation, Colonisers, Northerners, Southerners*

Introduction

With the passage of time, diversity existing along ethnic lines in Nigeria has not weakened but has taken deep roots. It continues to exert its influence in society having political, economic and environmental implications. It is because of this that scholars like Rotimi Suberu have pointed out that in Nigeria there are three major forms of sectional cleavages i.e; ethnic, religious and regional which significantly overlap. But he emphasizes that of the three it is ethnicity which is the most pervasive (Suberu, 1996). Owing to the significant role played by ethnicity in Nigerian society, it therefore becomes pertinent to trace the historical roots of it, the study of which is the primary concern of this paper. But before getting into the study of the historical background of ethnicity, the paper in Section A will provide a conceptual view of the term ethnicity and an understanding of factors that play an important role in giving shape to the feeling of ethnicity. This will be followed by Section B, in which an idea of ethnic diversity in Nigeria will be provided and the study of historical roots of ethnicity in the context of Nigeria will be undertaken.

Section A: Understanding of the Concept and Factors Responsible for Giving Rise to Ethnicity

The term ethnic or ethnicity is derived from the Greek word ethnikos meaning people or nation.

Like any other terminology employed by a social scientist, the concept of ethnicity does not lend itself to easy definition. Its popularity has made it an "unwieldy concept". There is thus an absence of a precise definition of the term. Nnoli for instance sees ethnicity as a social phenomenon where members compete with one another and protect their interest on the basis of their identity (Nnoli,2003).In a general sense ethnic group consists of those who share a unique social and cultural heritage that is passed on from generation to generation. This conceptual understanding can better be made possible by focusing on the factors that are economic, psychological or political in nature. The details of each of these follows:

Economic factors play an important role in giving rise to the feeling of ethnicity. This happens especially when a differential economic policy is pursued either at the individual or at the regional level. The sidelined people develop a sense of frustration which motivates them to look for means which would enable them to seek maximum support for their cause. One such means that holds significance for the people and which can be understood easily by the people belonging to the traditional societies, is that of ethnicity. The ethnic ties are therefore given a shape by the feeling of economic deprivation experienced by the

people. However, a better understanding of this factor in generating the feeling of ethnicity can be made possible by incorporating the psychological factor. The psychological theory propounded by Gurr(1970.pp.24) brings this out very clearly. According to him the feeling of relative deprivation emerges when people start comparing themselves with those who are experiencing rapid upward social mobility. This feeling takes a concrete shape when people possess the potential and are yet deprived of chances of economic mobility. Ethnicity therefore can be regarded as an outcome of economic deprivation strengthened by psychological factors.

Besides the above mentioned, other factors that lead to ethnicity are those which are political in nature. The ability of economic and psychological factors to generate the feeling of ethnicity is further accelerated by the political factors. This happens when the political leaders, with a motive to stay in power, formulate such policies which sub serves them. This kind of preferential policy instills a feeling of deprivation amongst those who have been sidelined. In due course of time they alienate themselves from the political system.

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be said that while studying the issue of ethnicity one has to take into account the role played by all three factors that is economic, psychological and political. Nevertheless, a close study of the three factors shows that more emphasis has to be laid on the political factors for the following reasons:

a) It is basically within the fold of this factor that the other two factors are in a position to give rise to ethnicity. The operation of political factors provides a viable environment for the economic and psychological factors to give rise to ethnicity.

b) These factors play an important role in group formation for the people can easily identify their source of dissatisfaction

The present study therefore studies the political factors in terms of the role played by the Colonisers in giving a form to the idea of ethnicity in the context of Nigeria. But before tracing the historical roots of ethnicity in Nigeria, it is pertinent to have an idea of the ethnic groups that prevail in Nigeria

Section B
i) Ethnic Groups in Nigeria
Nigeria is marked by the presence of numerous ethnic groups which can broadly be classified under two broad categories: Minority and Majority. Under the former category there are around 250 groups like the Tiv and Kanuris. The latter consists of 3 groups: Hausa-Fulani, Ibos (Igbos) and Yorubas. Each of these predominate a specific geographical area and has a belief in a particular religion. The Hausa-Fulani dominate the Northern region and has faith in Islam; the Ibos dominate the Southern region and follow Christianity while the Yorubas dominate the Western region and reflect a mix of Islam and Christianity. The present study is dealing with the Majority groups focusing on the relationship between the Hausa-Fulani and the Ibos. Without the focus on these 2 groups an understanding of Nigerian Politics is impossible. Their influence on the Nigerian Politics can be regarded as basically an arena reflecting the conflict between the two groups. This hostility between the Hausa-Fulani and the Ibos is not new but has roots in the colonial period when the Britishers pursued differential policy for the two regions to concretize their idea of Divide and Rule.

ii) Historical Origin of Ethnicity in Nigeria
In the earlier times, before the coming of the Britishers as colonisers, the ethnic groups lived in autonomous villages which were located geographically apart from each other. Owing to this there was no feeling of enmity existing amongst them. For instance the Hausa Yoruba, dominated in the northern part of Nigeria and the Ibos were located in the Southern part of Nigeria, hence there prevailed no chauvinistic feelings. It was the colonial masters who divided the country into provinces, protectorates and regions.

Different ethnics groups were brought together into one geographical entity to be governed by single authority.

The Britishers operated keeping in mind their policy of divide and rule and for this the feeling of ethnicity was generated amongst the ethnic groups. It was this feeling of ethnicity and regionalism that propagated the Britishers to curb Nigerian nationalism and to maintain colonial power. In 1920, Sir Hugh Clifford weakened the feeling of West African nationalism by using the ethnic sentiment of the Nigerian members of the National Congress of West Africa when they called for the reform of the colonial order. A local Nigerian faction emerged that opposed the Congress Movement in Nigeria and supported pro-government reform. As a result of this by 1934 the nationalist movement in Nigeria was totally weakened as the. Nigerians channeled their political attention and sentiments toward their own ethnic groups and organizations. This ethnic division enabled the Britishers to spread propaganda that Nigerians did not have a common destiny with respect to political independence because they were separated by differences of history and tradition. Their efforts were was to secure the right of each ethnic group to maintain its identity, individuality, nationality. They encouraged the ethnic groups to retain their chosen form of government and political and social institutions that were presumed to have evolved from the wisdom and accumulated experiences of its previous generations. This idea was well expressed by the colonial Governor Sir Hugh Clifford in 1920 when he supported the idea of nation that prevailed amongst the ethnic groups. (Coleman, 1958:194).

The Britishers further generated ethnic divisions in Nigeria through the promulgation of Land and Native Rights Ordinance. In 1910, this Act formally proclaimed all land in the North as native land to be controlled and administered by the colonial governor. This law was used to curtail the movement of Southern Nigerians to the North. This was done by the colonialist with an objective as they believed that the southerners would weaken the alliance between them and the Fulani ruling class which was considered crucial to colonial enterprise in Nigeria. Those Southerners who did not abide by this law had to face the policy of "sabon garri". This was a policy that was directed towards segregating the southerners from northerners.

The feeling of ethnicity was further given a concrete shape with the initiation of the idea of federalism in 1939 by Sir Bourdillon. By focusing on the three ethnic groups ,he divided the country into provinces and regional councils. The protectorate of southern Nigeria was divided by him into eastern and western provinces but he left the Northern part intact. The federal structure created by Bourdillon reflected the policy of divide and rule. The Western and Eastern part which formed the southern protectorate was separated. As a result of this, the Yoruba (West) were separated from the Igbo (East). However, the undivided Northern part had a size bigger than west and east combined. As a result of this divide and rule policy, by 1951 three major regions emerged in Nigeria: the Northern, the Western and Eastern Region. This in turn separated the ethnic groups as each region was dominated by ethnic group of one kind that is the eastern region has inhabited by the Igbos and the west and north by the Hausa Fulani respectively. This regional/ethnic division lead to many political administrative and economic policies that were followed in Nigeria. This created an ethnic consciousness where each group tried seeking favours from the central government for the regions which they belong to.

The divide and rule policy was even adopted for the manipulation of elections in favour of some section of the country and against another. It was clearly reflected that the British colonial officials were sympathetic to the Native Administration in the North. Their main objective was to protect it from radical nationalist influences of the Southerners and their northern allies. This was clearly reflected in the 1951 elections where the colonial authorities in Kano directed their serious efforts to frustrate the northern allies of southerners opposed to the candidates of

the emirs. These allies were not permitted to hold public meetings and any acts of intimidation and victimization undertaken against them were not even investigated. But in spite of this harassment, the candidates opposed to the traditional rulers won the polls during the primary elections in the Kano metropolitan area. The election results where no single candidate of the emirs was successful was shocking for the colonial authorities in Kano and in the regional capital Kaduna. The office of the Chief Commissioner for the region in Kaduna therefore instructed the residents who headed the Provinces to render their support to the Native Administration in the remaining rounds of the election (Nnoli,1978:122).

As a result of this manipulation of elections done by the colonisers, the Northern part was divided from the Southern part. Even when leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe who was a member of the Legislative Council complained of official electoral malpractices, the northerners regarded it as a attack on the colonial regime and its Native Administration in the North. Even Azikiwe efforts of reporting to the British Secretary of State for the colonies and asking for intervention for ensuring a free and fair election in the region was resented by the northern politicians.

The policy of the colonisers to divide ethnically/ regionally was even reflected in the 1951 Constitution. Under it, the indirect system of elections existed throughout the country. But while in the Eastern and Western region, there prevailed three stages that is the primary, intermediate and final electoral colleges, in the Northern region there existed four stages that is -the town or village, district, emirate and provincial levels. The differential policy of the colonisers to the regions was even reflected as far as universal suffrage was concerned. While direct universal suffrage was first introduced in the Lagos Town Council election in 1950, in the Western region it was introduced in 1956 and in the Northern region direct elections based on taxpayer suffrage were only introduced in 1956 for the election to the regional House of Assembly.

The coloniser continued to pursue differential policy for the regions and was even reflected in the federal election of 1959 which was concluded on the basis of universal adult suffrage in the East, West and Lagos. In the Northern part on the other hand only male persons were eligible to vote or to be voted for. Even before 1959 federal election in the1958 local government elections, the differential policy of the Britishers was seen. As in the East, West and Lagos were elections were conducted, on the basis of direct election and universal suffrage. But in the North, taxpayer suffrage prevailed in subordinate local councils, including district, village and town councils. In all parliamentary contests, local government elections in the East, West and Lagos and in town councils in the North voting tto place by secret ballot. But in the North open voting prevailed with voters grouping behind the candidates of their choice.

The ethnic divisions created by the colonisers were also responsible for the political crisis of 1953 and the violence that took place between the Hausa and Igbo in Kano that year. The genesis of this crisis was the self-government crisis in the House of Representatives. Interparty rivalry between the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), a party that dominated the southern region and the Action Group (AG) which was the main party in the western region for supremacy in the drive to independence led them to fix 1956 as the date for Nigeria. On 31 March, Action Group member moved a motion in the House of Representatives to implement this policy. However, the Northern People's Congress which was the dominant party of the northern region, expressed their opposition to the motion on the ground that the North was so far behind the south socio-economically that it would be subordinated to the Southeners in Independent Nigeria

As a result of the Kano riot a greater mutual distrust emerged between northerners and southerners. It also led to the passing of a motion for strong regional governments in both the House of Chiefs and House of Assembly in the North. This led to the

Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 which concretised the idea of regionalization which was reflected in the Civil Service, Judiciary and law making bodies. This made each region became more independent than before to run its government as it deemed fit.

The Lyttleton Constitution also created conditions which enabled the northern regional government to propagate its northernization policy. This policy was well reflected in the recruitment policy of the Regional Public Service Commission of the North which gave priority to a northerner. It further specified that if a northern is not qualified then a non-northerner will be recruited only on contractual basis (Dudley 68:220). Even eminent leaders like Ahmadu Bello who was the head of government and also of the ruling party that is the Northern People's Party in the North, referred to the policy as one that whose main objective was to enable the northerners gain control of everything in the country (Dudley, 1968:220). In reality the policy laid emphasis on the exclusion of southerners. As a result of this policy by August 1958, a total of 2148 southerners were dismissed from the northern public service. The number was further reduced by October 1959 when only one southern senior civil servant was left in the public service compared to 24 in August 1958 (Sklar, 1963: 327).

For this divide between the northerners and the southerners again the Britishers were responsible. It was in the southern part that the British rule was centred owing to its commercial location. Since the southern part was therefore in direct touch with the colonial rule, it was able to avail certain benefits in terms of education. The southern part therefore was imparted western education whereas the northern region continued to remain within the old fashioned form of Islamic world. The Britishers also by pursuing the policy of indirect rule did not make any attempt to bring changes in the Northern part. The result was that the Northern region was left behind the southern region in terms of education.

Another factor that can be identified as giving rise to the feeling of ethnicity was the incorporation of Nigeria into the world capitalist system. As a result, the African colonies would provide raw materials for the home industries of the colonisers and at the same time provide market to dispose of their finished goods which were brought from Europe for sale. The process of gathering raw materials from Nigeria needed infrastructures such as roads, railways and telecommunications. The local people were forced to work and as they had to pay tax imposed by the colonial masters. This resulted to several persons migrating from the rural areas to the urban centres where the job opportunities were available in the European railway constructions and other public works.

The outcome of this rural-urban migration was that the urban cities became a place of high concentration of the different ethnic groups who came to work. To pursue their common goals, different ethnic groups started unions in the cities. These ethnic unions later became powerful to the extent of propagating the needs of their members leading to competition among the various ethnic groups for dominance and economic advantage.

One can therefore conclude that the ethnic sentiments and the cut-throat struggle and competition among the ethnic groups in Nigeria has a genesis in the political and economic activities which was the reason for colonization and imperialism. So ethnicity cannot be totally separated from colonialism. For proper understanding of it, one needs to focus on the role played by the Britishers through their policy of divide and rule that facilitated conditions in concretizing the idea of ethnicity.

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