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## *Critical Issues in Ethnic Leadership and the Imperatives of State Building in Nigeria*

*Iwara Eno I**Iwar*

### *Introduction*

*The British colonial rule in Nigeria created a tripartite ethnic delineation of the country which housed the ethnic communities within the country's colonial unitary administrative structure. This structure invariably explains the ethno-genesis and the ethnic tensions that later followed the initial myths that the country was associated with during colonial rule. Unfortunately, it was on the basis of this arrangement that ideational factors developed over which the political behaviour of the ethnic leaders and their clusters was shaped.*

*Suberu (1999:8) argues that the rise of ethno-political consciousness along regional lines, to a large extent prevented the rise and success of Nigerian nationalism. According to this argument, the consciousness it creates, rather promotes ethno-regional nationalism as a way of achieving political power. One of the most dangerous developments arising from the quest for power by ethnic leaders is that the ethnic leaders' interest for power has produced elements of origins of national security dilemmas in the country (Omololu, Senior Lecturer, Lead City University, Ibadan.2013). Ethnic leaders are usually desirous of political power at all costs,*

*using various political machinations and utilising as well as promoting ethnic military outfits for realising their ethno-regional ambitions at the expense of state interest or the common good.*

*The activities of the ethnic leaders speak volumes. The politics they lead is unconventional; their political socialisation is usually education for domestication, which prepares their subjects for antagonistic acts in the society, intolerance of political opponents, terrorism, kidnapping and other forms of criminality. For instance, the activities of some ethnic leaders of the Kanuri ethnic extraction that motivated the insurgency in North-East of Nigeria, and that of some Igbo leaders that have been motivating the Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra for the Igbo, are clear examples. All these indices of leadership vices generate tensions in the Nigerian society and promote not only centrifugal tendencies, but*

*also exclusivist politics and mass politics which over politicises the Nigerian State.*

*Accordingly, the formation and operation of political parties assume to a large*

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extent, the ethnocentric based loyalty, as accentuated by the first and second republic political parties. Invariably, there are also traces of ethnic coalitions and lack of national commitment in the third and fourth republic political parties, even in the so-called national parties with national membership spread, like the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the newly formed All Progressives Congress (APC), where ethnic coalitions determine the agitations that are made for the sharing of national offices or ministerial appointments.

Ethnic politics in Nigeria has since amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates in 1914, continued to be an impediment to a coherent national system (Iwara, 2010). Like many other countries that were subjected to colonisation and domination, Nigeria was not prepared to engage even at the very least, in the gradual process of aggregation, or national integration as suddenly, the various ethnic groups were forcefully and grossly amalgamated by the colonial masters. Thus, the ethnic leaders who assumed the leadership of their various regions configured political struggle with absolute disregard to fraternity, rule of law, due process and common good (Obiyan, 2010). The leaders' preference of the antagonistic norm and unconventional political practice in the country explain the dangers and the unreliability of the ethnic leadership approach to nation-building, particularly involving the way they perceive acceptable bargaining for power and equitable distribution of resources at the federal level.

This approach to nation-building is one of the reasons that have fostered the systematic militarisation of ethnic followers to demand

for equity. Perhaps the nation-building misshapes that accompany ethnic chauvinism are due to the fact that, there was no fair nation-state bargaining in the first instance, by Nigerians. This is why the call for secession is easier to make with action, than the call for integration. Some of the incidents which attest to this are still very fresh in the memory of Nigerians:

- (i) The disagreement between Odumegwu-Ojukwu, an Igbo ethnic group leader over a national issue with his colleagues in the Supreme Military Council (SMC) who were of Hausa-Nupe ethnic origins, culminated in the declaration of Biafra and the eventual perils of the civil war which took place between 1967 and 1970.
- (ii) The cancellation of MKO Abiola's presidential election result in 1993 (a presidential candidate from the Yoruba ethnic group) resulted in the June 12, 1993 crisis in the South-West of Nigeria and by implication, the whole country.
- (iii) The defeat of presidential candidates of Northern Nigeria origin in the general elections of 2011 intensified the Boko Haram insurgency. It is believed in some quarters in Nigeria that the comments made by Mohamadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change after the election and also Atiku Abubakar's similar comment intensified the Boko Haram insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria shortly after the 2011 general election.

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In all of these instances, the aggrieved ethnic group leaders express break-up as an option. Just recently at the National conference 2014, a King of Adamawa threatened to secede with his people to Cameroun because he felt the resolutions at the conference were pro-south of Nigeria. It has been noted that conflicts or insurgencies reinforced by ethnic competitions for power have created a situation in which integration is difficult as the political elites work along ethno-regional lines and largely not willing to stay in opposition (Iwara, 2011). The problem of cross purposes among ethnic political elites makes the political environment hostile to development. The inability to build political consensus as besieged by a multitude of hostile ethnic forces prevents the common national good of the country, and engenders a corresponding attitude where ethnic leaders' withdrawal of efforts from development and common concern further worsens the state of insecurity in the country to the extent that leaders could not address problems of national security across ethnic lines in a responsible manner.

Bello-Imam (2010) accentuates the point that in spite of the economic potentials of the country such as human, material and fiscal resources, the country has failed to transmute them into visible socio-economic growth and development to the extent that Nigeria almost became a failed state. The demonstrated incompatibility among the major ethnic groups in the country presents the Federal leadership of the country with multiple and diffusive variables on account of which it is unable to find a strategic and coherent high ground to face security challenges and choose

rational modes of development in the country. For instance, the character of Boko Haram was seen through the mirror of several images and along ethno-religious lines. For instance, there was division over the nature of Boko Haram, when some Muslims initially maintained that it was not a terrorist group.

Some northern traditional rulers went *ahead* to advocate that the group should be given amnesty and negotiated with, because they were reacting against misrule in the country. To this end, the United States' declaration that Boko Haram was a splinter group of 'Ansaru' terrorist organisations was seen by those encouraging the group as a declaration that was detrimental to Nigeria's image, not until now that the group proved beyond reasonable doubt that it is a terrorist outfit, particularly as seen in the abduction of the Chibok Secondary School girls and other merciless killings. The implication of such parallels or incongruence among the ethnic leaders explains the reason why the problem posed by the terrorist group could not be nipped in the bud. It also affects consensus building in terms of planning and execution of strategic development of security infrastructures especially spatial data, automated tactical information system and other security armaments.

The divisive tendencies among the ethnic leaders are further absorbed in the larger framework of conspiracy engineering prevailing in the country. This manifests in the realm of national elections where some ethnic coalitions usually conspire to deliver the presidency, while scheming out others. These ethnic forces largely constituted by centrifugal tendencies deny the state any form

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of integration and consensus-building for common responses to common problems. Conspiracy does not allow communities of the country to draw strength and synergy from their values and uniqueness. As already known, such denials have not culminated in development of the country, except the satisfaction of particularistic interest of top ethnic political elite who are either elected officials of government or are acting in their capacities as sectional patrons.

There is therefore, in view of the ethnic complexity in the country, a paradox involving the gap between the gamut of public wealth that abounds in the country and the development expectations in the country. Distribution of opportunities in terms of access to the seat of power at the centre is monopolised by a particular section of the country, while marginalising others. This ethnic dominance has resulted in discontent which over the years, has generated conspiracies and security challenges for which the country has not developed common basis or ground to tackle. This has led the country into several failures, such as failure to attain national unity, socio-economic development, infrastructural development including security infrastructures and so on, all of which have denied impacts on nation-building of the Nigerian nation-state.

In view of the foregoing, this paper sets out to examine the link between ethnic leadership and nation building in the Nigerian state, and to address itself to the central question of the lack of national coherence to confront common challenges. The basic claim of this paper is that the parallels of ethnic leaders have direct bearing on state

incoherence for integrated approach to State development in the country. What is so far clear is that colonialism played a very big role in the incongruence in the country, in view of the primordial sentiments it accentuated. The paper is organised into four sections. Apart from the introduction which consists of the problem statement and the reason for the paper, the second section contains the conceptual mapping of ethnic leadership. While the third section discusses ethnic perils and state building in Nigeria, the fourth section summarises and concludes the discourse.

#### **Conceptual Mapping of Ethnic Leadership in Nigeria**

A fundamental basis of understanding ethnic leadership in Nigeria is to take a careful look at the interplay of the manifestation of the politics of compensation which characterises and determines the process of recruitment of national leaders. The process of recruitment of national leaders begins with a coalition of self acclaimed individuals in ethnic groups who at one time or the other have benefited from the patronage of their people, either by virtue of being elected or appointed to occupy positions allocated to their communities or constituencies. These opportunists then form (so to say) elite ethnic clubs or associations with the view to ensuring that the public wealth continues to percolate up without having a trickling down effect to the masses. This plays a key role in Nigeria's political and economic development landscape and in growing political crisis in Nigeria. This manner of public wealth and elite circulation produces national leaders who emerge when

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each elite ethnic coalition produce out of their members those who are fast in breaking the rules and by engaging similar individuals from other ethnic settings over struggle for power. This process of recruitment of national leaders undermines due process of selection of responsible and responsive national leaders (Coleman, 1960),

Recruitment of national leaders by ethnic coalitions is navigated and absorbed into a larger framework of politics of compensation driven by ethnic conspiracy and corruption in the country. Compensation is a principle which attempts to indemnify those that the Nigerian state had offended either by calamities or displacements inflicted on political actors, or their kith and kin. Perhaps, a few examples of theories that support this ethnic intransigence would suffice.

The cancellation of M.K.O. Abiola's presidential mandate in June 1993 and his eventual death were major reasons why Olusegun Obasanjo had an easy ride to the country's Presidency in 1999. This according to public knowledge in Nigeria was because of the fact that Chief M.K.O. Abiola was a Yoruba who hailed from the same place as Chief Obasanjo, and so the Yoruba had to be compensated by facilitating Obasanjo's easy ride to Aso Rock. The same goes for President Yar'Adua in 2007; because it was generally believed that he was compensated in view of his elder brother's death in the ill-fated Third Republic. The events of 2011 Presidential elections also show that the political equation during that election was in favour of President Goodluck Jonathan who hails from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The people of the Niger Delta were seen as being so much marginalised

so much so that compensation in terms of political office was contemplated. President Jonathan's election of 2011 therefore was seen as compensation in some quarters, to have played along this tune of thought.

In the process of leadership recruitment at the national level, ethnic consciousness was created and motivated by ethnic leaders who in some cases, especially in the First and Second Republics, developed ethno-regional political parties which stimulated ethnic tensions. Eventually, these ethnic tensions arose from ethnic genesis that inevitably became the stumbling block for national integration.

Recently, a coalition of parties such as Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the All Nigeria People Party (ANPP), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and a small fraction of APGA registered the All Progressives Congress (APC) which also by courtesy of that alliance has a national outlook as the PDP. But in the operation of these parties is found ethnic-regional blocs or caucuses within the so-called national parties where ethnic agenda and positions are discussed and fostered. This makes it abundantly clear that ethnicity is a canker-worm that affects national unity, socio-economic development and State building in Nigeria. In fact, ethnicity in Nigeria has now become an instrument of resistance, negotiation for national cake, and mobilisation for equity and human rights propaganda.

A second basis that explains ethnic leadership in Nigeria finds expression in Ekeh's "two publics" (Ekeh, 1975). For him, the Nigerian state manifests two publics - the primordial public which is usually the ethnic

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base of political actors, and the civic public which is the public realm or the federal state of Nigeria - which is the theatre of operation. This ugly context of characterising the Nigerian state according to Ekeh, started during the colonial era when the colonial government created a situation in which public funds belong to nobody and so can be appropriated by the ruler as he deems fit, as the funds belong to nobody. It was along this line that the civic public was seen as an immoral public where anything can be done without consequences and accountability.

Impression was created by British Colonial masters as if the public offices they occupied or indeed governance as put in place by them was to reward their kinsfolk and their nations back in Europe. This occurred in many ways such as giving the most prestigious jobs to their fellow Europeans, expropriation of natural resources in favour of their industries back home, and carrying out clear discriminations against Africans.

Where aid was given, the relations that followed often resulted in reverse flows in a proportion and magnitude that left the balance in favour of the donor. The point therefore is that the Nigerian political actors who were under the 'stewardship' of the colonial masters assimilated the two publics conception of the state and transferred the attitude to governance in Nigeria after independence. The Nigerian local bourgeois class that took over power from the colonial masters regarded their ethnic settings as their primordial publics, while the state and government constituted the civic public. It was in view of this realisation that Ekeh in his theoretical statement of the two publics argues that:

The experiences of colonialism in Africa have led to the emergence of a unique historical configuration in modern post colonial Africa the existence of two publics instead of one public as in the West.

These publics patterned along ethnic interests, define the parallels of contending forces in Nigeria's peripheral state. Ethnic incongruence and the state discourse on Nigeria cannot be complete without mention of the forceful amalgamation of the various ethnic nationalities into a nation-state called Nigeria. Thus, one of the initial myths was the amalgamation of 1914 artificiality instituted by the British colonial rule. The amalgamation was devoid of a common sense of affiliation and shared bond between the various ethnic nationalities. The premature amalgamation contradicts what Carens (not dated) regards as the determinants of nation-state. For Carens:

The establishment of a nation-state is determined by the sharing of commonalities in language, culture and traditions, and by a range of national groups which have engendered habits of cooperation among one another overtime.

In the case of Nigeria, the various ethno-national groups were forced to come together to form the Nigerian nation-state, and so far, these groups have proved ungovernable together, in a way that is conspicuous. In view of the characterisation discussed above, ethnic leadership as a concept can be said to involve a clique of comprador elements who pilot the struggle of ethnic group's recognition or struggle for distribution of opportunities or wealth in the federation. By so doing, they assume charismatic statuses that endear them

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with their ethnic groups, just as they engage in processes of embourgeoisment.

### **Ethnic Perils and State Building in Nigeria**

Ethnic perils involve the dangers posed by the consciousness and activities of ethnic leaders and their ethnic followers in aggravating the tensions and the conflicts which characterise the Nigerian peripheral state. In recent times, such activities have taken the dreaded dimension of the lack of concerted effort at developing consensus and will to face common challenges. Indeed, the political discourse and narrative of Nigeria's 53 years of existence after independence is the history of a recurring decimal of insecurity and violence starting with the political violence of the immediate post independence election in the then Western region. This was followed by the first military coup of 15 January, 1966. The coup was countered on 29 July, 1966. The coup elements instructed Northern Nigerians in Lagos to leave Lagos for the North, giving a deadline within which to comply (Ojatorotu, 2013). What followed was the genocide committed against the Igbo living in the North, bringing a kind of distrust in the Nigerian state, and the subsequent declaration of the Republic of Biafra as an Igbo country in 1967. Before the civil war which actually commenced in July 1967, Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro had formed what he called the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) with about 150 men who later declared a Niger Delta Republic. Boro was tried and sentenced for treason.

The annulment of 12 June, 1993 Presidential elections which was said to have

been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, precipitated another ethno-regional crisis which caused the formation of Odua Peoples Congress (OPC) as the armed wing of the struggle for the validation of Chief Abiola's election result. The OPC and indeed the people of South-West Nigeria perceived and interpreted the cancellation of the 12 June election as an attempt to deny the Yoruba ethnic group access to the office of President of the country at that time. The return to civil rule in 1999 after the general election provided a fresh platform for the evolution of some militant groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) which reinforced the struggle against exclusion.

The Presidential elections of 2011 which brought President Goodluck Jonathan into office was perceived by some Northern Nigerian leaders as detrimental to their power quest in Nigeria as their candidates were defeated in the election. For instance, the Presidential candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) in the 2011 election said it openly that the country would be made ungovernable for the President Jonathan regime, in view of what the candidates perceived as electoral irregularities. Indeed it was shortly after the candidate's comments that the Boko Haram's terrorist acts coincidentally intensified.

Ethno-national militant groups which had emerged in Nigeria such as MEND, MASSOB and OPC, engaged in moderate militant operations which were containable. The militant groups had identifiable members and

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their overt and covert objectives and agitations were clearly stated just as they made themselves available as Nigerians for negotiations with government. There is a sharp contrast between the above mentioned militant groups and the insurgent group called Boko Haram. The activities of Boko Haram are negatively sophisticated and most disturbing, in view of the quantum of deaths recorded, and the strange strategies such as guerilla warfare, suicide bombing, kidnapping or abduction of female children such as the Chibok girls, and so on that characterise their operations. The Boko Haram sect shows dangerous acts that are unparalleled in the history of insecurity in the country by taking war and their anger to the civilian population centres.

However, the precursor of all these agitations, violence, terrorist insurgency and other forms of conflicts was the ethnic consciousness developed and motivated by ethnic leaders which led initially to the formation of ethnic political parties. The point here is that the consciousness developed by ethnic leaders continues to be on the ascendency. With ethnic consciousness as the initial myth, Nigeria's political and economic performance also falls below par in comparison with other countries in Asia and South America such as Brazil and the Koreas with which we were in the same level of growth in the past and with which we have comparable resources.

Ethnic consciousness gave room for development of conspiracy in economic planning and electoral representation, thus : ringing about underdevelopment, to the that the conspiracy determines the

location of industries and development projects rather than feasibility studies or viability of the location for instance, the location of Ajaokuta Steel Mill, Iwopin Paper Mill and Oku Iboku Paper Mill, among other were projects so affected. This conspiracy and ethnic politicisation in the Nigerian state by ethnic leaders have been detrimental to national integration and socio-economic well being of the people of the country. It is important to note that most of these conflicts in the country are caused by ethnic leaders having been under the tutelage of the "divide-and-rule" strategy of the British colonial masters (Osaghae, 1994). Of course, as we might have known already, the British pitched ethnic groups in Nigeria against each other, and by so doing, keeping the people from rising against the colonial powers. Distribution of resources by them was often skewed in favour of a particular ethnic group while marginalising the others who are then forced to mobilise their people to fight for equality. These are actually the seeds of discord sowed in the country and the very myth responsible for the parallels in State capacity building that we are experiencing in the country.

### Conclusion

It is probably apt to describe the present situation in Nigeria as a crisis of mission. The distrust among particularly the leaderships of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria speaks volumes. Things are indeed, falling apart as politics is going on as usual without national cohesion to solve impending national problems. The Nigerian state is now being seriously challenged in the realm of security. Insecurity of life is now being accentuated by

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terrorism and insurgency variously characterised and designated in the literature of terrorism in Nigeria. Indeed, the crisis of mission has made Nigerians to believe that there is need for a search for a new Nigeria. There are however, a gamut of problems in the country which affect consensus building for development, governance and security in the country. There is first and foremost the fact that the ethnic politicisation has been detrimental to ethnic parallels and by implication, state incongruence and socio-economic well being of Nigerians. The federal government by implication has a lot to do, in view of its centrality and power enormity. The federal government, having captured the natural resources throughout the country is required to develop deliberate policies for industrial and infrastructural development of various parts of the country, including industrialisation policies. The point here is that industrial development ought to be a way of finding appropriate palliatives to conflict resolution. Industrialisation provides opportunity for the employment of the citizenry, particularly the youth. It also follows that the denial of an industrial climate automatically is a denial of auto-centric production of security infrastructure. There is need for ethnic leaders in the country to harmonise their interests and activities with the purpose of the Nigerian state which is to provide good life to the citizens of the country. As noted by Iwara (2011):

The parochial consideration which envelops the leadership of ethnic politics in Nigeria, affect policy decisions issued by government . . . the leader in Nigeria shuts his mind to discussions which do not have direct bearing on his primordial ethnic setting.

Scholars who have written extensively on the 'purpose of the state' particularly such scholars as Larry Diamond (2008) accentuates the fact that the state has a manifest role to ensure that citizens are not denied property rights and development so that majority of the people of the state can draw strength from public wealth. This means that the government of the Nigerian state should allow dividends of democracy flow down to the people. Dividends of democracy do not imply the ignorance used to exploit and confuse the masses by the ruling elite in Nigeria who equate dividends of democracy to the construction and maintenance of roads, and building additional classrooms. Rather, Max Weber's conception captured in Owolowo (2013), who regards dividend of democracy as being related to power distribution through equitable distribution of wealth which ensures that the people are the repository of power, is the contention of this paper.

The Nigerian situation also requires psychological integration or the harmonisation of interests of ethnic leaders in the country. Allied to the need for ethnic leaders to harmonise their interests with the purpose of the state is the need for regular consultation in order to achieve the necessary consensus for common action in the country. Also important is the need to establish more youth programmes for youth employment. If there is massive employment of the youths, they definitely would not be available for ethnic leaders to use for the formation of ethnic militia for the selfish political interests of the ethnic leaders. It has often been said that an 'idle mind is the devil's workshop'.

Finally, this paper is of the opinion that

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since Nigerians appear economically and politically integrated as the North, East and West trade with each other in common markets, and also belong to same political parties in which membership is spread across ethnic divide, then, focus should be directed to psychological integration which is missing as far as integration in the Nigerian state is concerned. For now, it is observed that psychological integration is the missing link on the integration and congruence in the country. Psychological integration could be promoted through social mobilisation, and it could be made part of the curriculum of schools and an agency established (NGO or Governmental) for its mobilisation.

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