

## The Sweet and Sour Aspect of Integration as Exemplified in Yorùbá Poetry

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**ABSTRACT** The incessant conflicts among the various ethnic groups in the Nigerian society have been a thing of concern for both the national and international communities. The Yoruba poets, being a part of the larger Nigerian society, have depended on their creative ability to offer some probable and viable solutions to the problems. This paper therefore examines how some Yoruba poets have depicted, in their works, the problems of ethnicity in the Nigerian society. The paper reveals that the main cause of ethnic and social conflict in Nigeria is the forceful integration policy being adopted in the Nigerian political system. It is also argued that the bid to express ethnicity, self-determination, self-affirmation and ethnic-identity has encouraged disintegration in the Nigerian federation. The paper concludes that Nigerian citizens have suffered degradation as a result of tribalism, ethnicity and cut-throat social conflict. Therefore, some of the poets have recommended a 'win-win' approach to conflict resolution, if, indeed, the Nigerian nation wants to enjoy the gains of integration.

Poetry, a form of literary genre, is a reflection of what its enabling society is. It could be a reflection of the past and present experiences in a society. In sum, it could be seen as a documentation of the society from which the poetry is produced and primarily consumed Akporobaro (1994: 26). Bamidele (2000) and Ogunsina (1990) also assert that works of arts cannot be in isolation. There is a symbolic relationship between an art work and the society.

Broadly speaking, Yoruba poetry could be categorized into oral and written (Fọlọrunṣọ, 1998). Oral poetry comprises the verbal arts that are composed and performed while the written poetry is graphically presented as a text; it could also be recorded on cassettes or compact disc and in turn orally broadcast. Statistically, the poetry that is orally broadcast via electronic media, record, cassette or compact disc have a wider coverage than the one graphically presented as text. The reason for the above lies in the fact that the audience for the former comprises the literates, while the latter is meant for both the non-literates and literates.

Satire is one of the weapons used by Yoruba poets to convey their messages in both pre-colonial and present age. Satire, as a literary genre also acts as target of political wit (Bamidele 2001: 7). According to Harris (2001: 1), one of the essence of satire is aggression or criticism, a criticism of an object that the satirist perceived

as being falling short of some standard. Such criticism can be directed against social groups institutions and individuals who act at variance with the norm of the society. The Yoruba poets satirically encapsulate some of the problems that characterize Nigeria, a nation with diverse ethnic groups, and thus offer a way of managing the conflict arising from what Iwuchukwu (2001: 111-112) tags as 'primordial solidarity and rancorous conflicts' in order to bring about the gains of integration in the nation.

This paper therefore intends to examine the issues of social integration and its impact on the Nigerian society as reflected in Yorùbá poetry. It is worthy of note that a random sample of Yorùbá poetry, both written and oral, will be analysed in this paper based on the Marxian approach to the study of literature.

### ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA

Ethnicity has been one of the most critical issues in Nigeria contemporary history (Arifalo, 1998). This had led to incessant conflicts between different ethnic groups in the nation. Social conflict in Coser's view as cited in Otite (1999: 2) is:

*a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only*

*to gain the desire values, but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals.*

The above definition pointblank explains the reason for ethnicity-self-determination, self-affirmation and ethnicity identity which have been the hallmark of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria confederacy.

There is no gainsaying the fact that disintegration will be a distinctive feature of a nation where ethnocentrism is visible in all what the citizens do. The Yorùbá poets stance tallies with Durkheim's (1951: 209) position on the essence of integration when he postulates that a society that is strongly integrated holds individual members under its control. Thus, Yorùbá poets as watchdogs on the society comment freely on the tragedies and gains of disintegration in the micro and macro Nigerian society. Hence, the call for integration which is perceived as a weapon for development.

Integration can be simply defined as the act of making whole or entire Maurice (1972: 219-249) as cited in Awoniyi (2000) also defines integrations as:

*Closer interdependence between the parts of living organism or between the members of a society.*

As desirable as integration is to a nation, its effect could be sweet and sour. The Yorùbá poets trace the political history of Nigeria to bring about the effect of integration on the various ethnic groups and individuals in Nigeria. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 to become a nation called Nigeria under the administration of Lord Lugard is referred to in Yorùbá poetry. The amalgamation, though is done to ease the administrative processes by Lord Lugard, could also be seen as a way of bringing the ethnic groups together to become one. but instead of it being a blessing, it ends up to be a tragedy on the nation. Ìdòwú in a poem titled "Bààrà Mèta" expresses this view:

Àṣepò Ajá, Òbọ àti Ìnàkí  
 Àdánù nlá nlá mo kà á sí  
 Ràkúnmí pèhú kétékété  
 Táá sokùn mó lórùn pé  
 Kó gbèrù lọ  
 Ìsòrò nlá ní

The relationship between dogs,  
 monkey and  
 gorilla  
 I regard it as a big loss  
 A donkey and a camel

That we yoked together  
 To carry a load  
 Is a problem.

It could be inferred from the poem that as a result of the amalgamation, Nigeria as a nation is defined by cultural diversities. According to Otite (1999: 17), the use of appropriate communication skills as well as metaphor is crucial in conflict management. Hence, the poet metaphorically and metonymically represents the three major ethnic groups in the nation, i.e. Yorùbá, Hausa and Igbo as dog, monkey and gorilla respectively.

The symbolic representation of the three ethnic groups shows that there will probably be ethnic struggle among the groups. The popular axiom 'monkey dey work baboon dey chop' comes to mind. Dog and monkey/baboon belong to different classes in the animal kingdom. They are not supposed to be yoked together. If they are forcefully yoked together, problems will be the outcome. One will not be surprised to see oppression and the cry for freedom from one or more of the groups. The Marxist theory of social conflict and class struggle explains the outcome of such inter/intra group conflict expressed in the above excerpt. The inference that could be drawn from the excerpt is that the amalgamation which is supposed to be a gain has become a tragedy to the nation. This view corroborates Ojo's (2000) claim that the artificial creation of Nigeria has led to the social, political and economic imbalance in Nigeria as a nation.

The quest for the control of the economy of Nigeria has prompted each ethnic group to struggle for the control of different things in their domains. Such glaring example is the bloody clash between the Ijaw youths and Ìlájẹ in the rivarine areas of Ondo State. The youths are claiming ownership of the mineral resources in their areas. The government in the name of integration always resists such claims, and, often there is violence and bloodshed, which is injurious to the development of the nation.

The economic imbalance that crops up as a result of the government clamour for integration is described in a Yorùbá poem as an illegal act of diversion of mineral resources from a particular ethnic zone to another. This sort of illegal diversion is encapsulated in the following poem:

Torí eléyàmèyà, tēyàn 'kan bá ti dépò apàṣẹ  
 Bí wón fẹ kólé isẹ kòkó  
 Ó le péSókótó ni wón o fiṣọ rẹ sí  
 Bí wón bá fẹ kólé isẹ èpà

Ó lè pé Bìni mà nibi tó yè  
 Níwòn ìgbà tó bá ti jé ilú è  
 Wọ̀n wépo rọ̀bì nírú Béndèlì ní ìsàlẹ̀  
 Kí lèrò ìjọba tó rí páipù lo sí Kàdúná?  
 Tó nǐbẹ̀ lá sì ti máa ẹ̀ epo

(Ìdòwú: Bààrà Mètá)

For the sake of ethnicity  
 If somebody assumes leadership position  
 If there is the need to establish cocoa industry  
 He may site it at Sokoto  
 If it is a groundnut industry  
 He may choose Benin as the appropriate place  
 Because he hails from there  
 Crude oil is mined at Benin in Southern Nigeria  
 What is government motive in laying oil pipe  
 to Kaduna?

Insisting that oil should be refined there

In answering the rhetorical question posed by the poet, it can be viewed from two different perspectives. Looking at it from the surface level, we can say the motive of the government in laying a pipe from Delta area to Kaduna is to integrate the Northern and Southern Nigeria, but a critical look at the political history of the nation shows that the underlying motive of government is ethnocentrism. Therefore, the above excerpt is a political wit aimed at exposing the wickedness of some Nigeria leaders who for selfish reasons and ethnocentrism take an oppressive decision which can hinder the economic development of the nation.

Some of the problems associated with this ethnocentric decision is the violence, protest and untimely death of innocent citizens in the nation. A vivid account of killing and maiming of innocent citizens, all in the name of integrating the Nigeria ethnic groups, is graphically depicted in Adélékè's 'Ògo Ni Àb'Ófò Ni?' In the poem, the poet makes an allusion to the historical hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and the eight Ogoni leaders by Abacha military regime (53-54). Ken Saro Wiwa and others were fighting marginalization and the unequal distribution of the economic gains accrued from crude oil which is mined in their area. The decision of the government to hang the Ogoni leaders is a heinous act which can jeopardize the development of the nation. The poet clearly reveals that proper integration is not possible in any society where there is an infringement on the rights of its people.

The alarming rate of bunkering of the nations crude oil and the incessant vandalization of the

pipeline is an indirect way of expressing the marginalization and oppression that exist in the Niger Delta. Though the vandalization of the nation pipeline is heinous, we can see it as a way of protest by the Niger Delta ethnic groups. As a result of this, the Federal Government of Nigeria rose to the occasion by creating the NDDC (Niger Delta Development Commission) so as to have positive effect on the citizens of Niger Delta areas. This confirms that the issue of integration can be sweet and sour at the same time. The vandalization and violence acts, though sour, bring about the sweet aspect of the development noticeable within the Niger Delta area today (Tell Magazine Story titled "Wind of Change In The Niger Delta", No. 36, September 2004).

Another sour effect of integrating the nation is also seen in the inequalities that permeate the distribution of basic social amenities in the nation. The big lens of the poets notice the underdevelopment that has eaten deep into the Nigerian system. The state of affairs in the Nigerian educational system is summarized in the following stanza:

Nínú ohun gbogbo la ti n rí ìdààmú ẹ̀lẹ̀yàmẹ̀yà

Òrò ètò èkọ̀ ti di wọ̀lùkọ̀lú

Nítórí ogun ẹ̀lẹ̀yàmẹ̀yà

Dídá la ñ dá ọ̀mọ̀ jọ bí ìgbà èyàn dájọ̀

Iye ọ̀mọ̀ bá yí lẹ̀yà bá yí yóò mú wà

Òrò ẹ̀lẹ̀yàmẹ̀yà ló fa kótà lílò

Bó ti ñ bẹ̀ nílẹ̀ isẹ̀

Ó ñ bẹ̀ nínú ìjọba ológun gan-an

(Ìdòwú: Bààrà Mètá)

Ethnicity problem manifests everywhere

The educational system is in shamble

Students are contributed as thrift

Each ethnic contributes certain number of candidates

Ethnicity introduces quota system syndrome

It manifests in the educational system

It manifests in work place

Even the military government embraces it.

The far-reaching implication of quota system syndrome is social injustice and oppression. There are times that brilliant students are not offered admission to unity schools because they are from a particular geo-political zone, while mediocres are allowed to fill the quota of some geo-political zone in the name of integration. The quota system turns out to be a negative experience for some Nigerians.

The negative experience of some Nigerians which later led to bitterness and social conflict is

bellowed by some poets as they agitate for a separation of the three major ethnic groups in the nation. The following verses from two different poets corroborate the above claim:

Bàrà mēta ò seé dìpò  
 B' Hausa bá ti ñ dà gbé látijó yí  
 Wọn ò bá ti gbé pẹ̀lì  
 B' Igbò bá ti ñ dá wà ni  
 Onà Ìbò ìbá ti jìn  
 Bí Yorùbá bá ti ñ dá sèlú láti ìbèrè wá  
 Onà wọn ì bá ti jìn  
 (Ìdòwú: Bààrà Mētá)

Three melon pods cannot be tied together  
 If Hausa had been living independently  
 They would have improved their lots  
 If the Igbo were independent  
 They would have gone far  
 Had the Yorùbá been politically independent  
 They would have developed greatly

Akú ò ní fé  
 Kedú kò ní gbà  
 Ajá kan ò fé sàtókùn ẹ̀kùn mọ́  
 Akú àti kedú ò joyè abésin káwọ́ mọ́  
 Òfón-ón ti tò ọ́ gbègìrì  
 Kélekọ́ kẹ́kọ́ è lówọ́  
 Kí kóowá gba sarè e baba è lo  
 Òràn-an-yàn kọ̀ lèsèpò  
 (Adéléké: 1997)

The Yorùbá will not concur  
 The Igbo will not agree  
 No dog is ready to clear the way for leopard  
 The Yorùbá and Igbo can no longer be enslaved  
 The mouse has pissed into the bean soup  
 Let everybody hold on to his pap  
 Each ethnic group should go back to his father's land  
 It is not compulsory to be an entity

A crucial look at the poets' position shows that the forceful integration of the three major ethnic groups results into a retarded growth in terms of development. To corroborate this view, Adeleke (1997: 46-52) in "Oníkàn yí Rọ̀ra" nostalgically traces the political history of the nation, and he vividly reveals the fact that the Hausa ethnic group is exploiting and oppressing other ethnic groups (Adeleke, 1997: 24-26) shows his disgust to the social injustice as he metonymically describes the Hausa as leopard, while Igbo and Yorùbá are referred to as dogs. Leopard is a wild and carnivorous animal, while dog is a domestic animal. The axiom "Ajá kan ò lè

sàtókùn ẹ̀kùn" (No dog is ready to be a guide for the leopard) shows that some ethnic groups are tired of being in servitude.

The poet's view, in the above, though exacerbating, reveals the pent up feelings of frustration by some ethnic groups in the nation. Okita (1977) as cited in Ikwubuzo (2001) asserts that "ethnic identity may manifest in different forms at different places and be given different names or labels, it is both fluid and dynamic, universalist and persistent and cannot therefore, be wished out of existence, irrespective of any desire for national unity and integration" (Okita 1997: 257). To corroborate this view, Nwankwo (2000: 54) asserts that ethnic identity can even be a vehicle for national development if it is properly managed by our leaders. From the above view, it is glaring that conflict, though it is always perceived negatively, can also be a vehicle for social integration.

The recent development in the political history of Nigeria shows how such a cry of negligence and marginalization by the Yorùbá race has brought a drastic change to who occupies the presidential seat of the nation in the past five years. The change could be seen as a sweet aspect of integration born as a result of a social conflict and self-affirmation.

Apart from perceiving the nation integration, the Yorùbá poets also express the views that for a nation to be developed, there is the need for integration within each ethnic group. Ológundúdú in 'Yorùbá Ronú' and Gbéngá Adébóyè in "Omọ Yorùbá" call for unity. Disunity is a mark of foolishness. The perceived foolishness of the Yorùbá ethnic group is satirically described through songs and telegraphic messages in Oládàpò's "Asòkúngbadé". His view is expressed in the following stanza:

Àimète, àimèrò tó n jáwa ní kọ̀ ìdí  
 Lẹ̀kẹ́kíní, lẹ̀kẹ́kẹ̀jì, lẹ̀kẹ́kẹ̀ta  
 Omọ́ Onḡ́dó leleyúnun ni  
 Ípínlẹ̀ Ògùn lenìkan  
 Omọ́ Ọ̀yọ́ ò dáa  
 Omọ́ Kwàrà ì í sèyàn àtàtá  
 Àwa làá mọ́mọ́ ọ̀kọ́ nínú ara tiwa  
 Àwa la síí mọ́mọ́ àlè omọ́ Odùduwà yàtò  
 (Oládàpò: Asòkúngbadé)

Panicle has caused us to fail  
 Once, twice and thrice  
 This one is an Ondo indigene  
 This other man hails from Ogun  
 The Oyo tribe is too bad

The man that hails from Kwara is not good  
 We know how to identify the heirs  
 From the bastard in Yorùbá society

The inference from the above excerpt is that intraethnic group conflict accentuates disintegration. Thus, the poet goes further to agitate for unity and cohesion among the ethnic groups in order to have positive impact on the integration of the larger Nigerian community. This view corroborates Nwankwo's (2000: 54) assertion that:

*Lack of cohesion in any of the six geopolitical zones of the country will impact negatively on the Nigerian states. It will undermine political stability and economic greatness of the nation. Therefore, it is important that we encourage every zone, every ethnic group to organize itself. In order words ethnic self-determination should be seen as a prelude to natural rebirth and advancement.*

However, Abiodun (1998) in 'Akoni Omo Oòduà' explains that the Yorùbá poets are chauvinistic in their approach to ethnic identity and call for unity because no ethnic group wants to be backward. This will invariably lead to the development of the whole nation.

### CONCLUSION

It could be seen from the above discussion that ethnic politics/tribalism is the bane of the contemporary Nigerian society. Nigeria citizens have suffered degradation as a result of tribalism, conflict and disintegration. It is also noticed that social conflict is omnipresent in every human society. Though social conflict is generally perceived as a negative phenomenon, it can impart the nation positively if properly managed.

Clarification of communication, as a mean of conflict management, allows the poets to express their strong feelings about the political situation of the nation. The feelings of various ethnic groups about injustice and unequal distribution of facilities which may be injurious to integration were also highlighted without any prejudice.

The poets have adopted a 'win-win' approach to conflict resolution and the gains of integration such as NDDC (Niger Delta Development Commission) is an evidence of the positive role poets have to play in integrating the Nigerian society.

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