

Ethnic Nationalism and the Nigerian Democratic Experience in the Fourth Republic

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Preamble: While we are pulling down the economic borders, these ethnic crazies are putting up national borders.

John Le Came "Our Game"

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a nation presently in a deep infectious and outrageous crises that cries, loudly and painfully, for attention. Like an illness whose malignant path has been clinically dissected, political observers have found Nigeria's nascent democracy in a deep sea beset by inclement weather. So many nautical perils massing together are a night-mare even for a helmsman of undisputed genius: from the war cry of resource control sweeping the southern states, to the creeping islamisation of the states in the north of the nation; from ethnic militias with a separatist agenda; to sharia enforcers angling for religious self-determination in a secular state; from insecurity occasioned by the state's loss of the monopoly of the instruments of violence, to the insubordinate restiveness of a military faction unhappy with its loss of despotic fiat. All the contradictions contained or buried under dictatorship have erupted with advent of democratic governance.

For while there is every possibility that as usual Nigeria will fumble and wobble through the ship of democracy and will ride the storm and return safely to harbour, there is an even greater possibility that the ship of democracy may capsize. The fundamental source of the crisis has to do with either failure to appreciate and therefore come to grips with the truth that the consolidation of democracy is the indispensable key to sustainable socio-political and economic development. But it is important to reiterate the fact that in international circles and in the comity of nations, a nation where democracy has been consolidated is given and accorded much respect.

This paper is an inquiry into ethnic nationalism and the Nigerian democratic experience in the fourth republic. Before continuing however,

it will be in place to dwell briefly on the concept ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is a complex social phenomenon. It may be defined as a set of beliefs about the superiority and differences of one's ethnic group and a defense of its interest above all others. It also implies the individual's identification with an ethnic group, its culture, interest and goals. It is ethnocentrism that cuts across all other loyalties to stress loyalty to a particular ethnic group.

Why is this so? According to Hofstede (1994) there is always a strong tendency for ethnic or linguistic groups to fight for recognition of their own identity, if not for national independence. This tendency has persistently been on the increase rather than decreasing in the latter part of the 20th century. Following the Hofstedian analysis, the Nigerian experience with pronounced ethnic nationalism is not particularly a strange phenomenon.

In real life, an ethnic nationalist identifies with and sees himself or herself first as a member of a particular ethnic nationality before identifying himself or herself with a nation. Thus, this help to explain the emergence and proliferation of ethnic associations and militias such as Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE) *Odua Peoples Congress*' (OPC) "*Arewa Consultative Forum*" (ACF) '*Arewa Peoples Congress (APC)*' '*Ohaneze Ndigbo*', '*Egbesu Boys*', '*Bakassi Boys*' '*Middle Belt Forum*' (MBF) Movement for the survival of *Ogoni People (MOSOP)* South-south Peoples Conference, Union of Niger Delta (UND) among others.

Having defined the concept of ethnic nationalism, we shall now proceed to examine the literature and identify the following:

1. the factors that accounted for the reemergence and predominance of ethnic nationalism;
2. impact of ethnic nationalism on the current democratic dispensation and
3. what can be done to reduce the negative concomitants of ethnic nationalism.

The literature is full of factors that accounted

for the rise of ethnic nationalism in Nigeria right from independence till now. The first factor is the legacy of colonialism. According to Dare (1986) Aluko (1998) Ake (2000) among others, the problem of ethnic nationalism in Nigeria came with the advent of colonialism. This happened when disparate, autonomous, heterogeneous and sub-national groups were merged together to form a nation. Again, the colonialists created structural imbalances within the nation in terms of socio-economic projects, social development and establishment of administrative centres. This imbalance deepened the antipathies between the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria (Nnoli, 1980; Young, 1993 and Aluko, 1998). Events that have followed since the first republic up till now have been overplayed significantly by political actors. These political actors tend to emphasize our diversity and those things that separate us rather than emphasizing things that unite us.

Stavenhagen (1994) argued that ethnic nationalism is common in all plural societies and came up with two schools of thoughts on the meaning and nature of ethnic nationalism. These two schools of thought are –the primordialists and instrumentalists. Primordialists may be defined as those who hold that ‘members of the same ethnic group have a common primordial bond that determines their personal identity and turns the group into a natural community of a type that is older than the modern nation or modern class systems’ Instrumentalists, on the other hand, are those who see ethnic identity as a means for people, especially leaders, to pursue their own purpose such as ‘forming’ mobilizing and manipulating groups for political ends’ It is however sad to observe that the Nigerian political sector is dominated largely by people who belong to both schools of thought; most especially the primordial group.

In Lijphart’s (1984) opinion, all multi-ethnic nations are, ‘profoundly divided along religious, ideological, linguistic, cultural, ethnic or racial lines. He also believes they are, ‘virtually made up of separate sub-societies each with its own political party, its own interest group and its own means of communication. In these societies, ‘flexibility necessary for a popular democracy would be lacking. Under these conditions majority rule would be not only undemocratic, but also dangerous, because the minorities who are constantly denied access to power would feel

excluded; and would stop showing allegiance to the government (Lijphart, 1984: 22-23).

Again, Ekeh (1975) in famous theory of two publics sufficiently explained why a typical African nation usually have problems of attracting the loyalty, commitment and patriotism of its citizens. According to Ekeh, the historical root of the crisis in Africa lies in the fact that the present (nation) state in Africa evolved not from within the society as was the case in most parts of Western Europe, but from outside, as an imposition of the colonial authorities. The process of establishing this alien structure on largely artificial political formations which brought together formerly separate sub-nationalities led to the development of the public realm as two publics rather than one in addition to the private realm which was coterminous with the society.

First was the civic public which was basically the government and consisted of modern institutions such as the – military, bureaucracy, courts, political parties and the likes – all of which were imported wholesomely from the West. Second, there was the primordial public which, as an emergent social formation because it evolved out of the dynamics of the colonial process grew up to satisfy some of the personal and group demands that could not be met by both the colonial and postcolonial government. This public is what Joseph (1987) think is best described in communal terms as ethnic nationalism and the origin of prebendal politics in Nigeria. Simply put, prebendalism has been described as the process of using government positions to pursue personal and parochial or group interests.

In the civil public in Nigeria, it is perfectly in order and the norm to exploit one’s position in the public realm to pursue private, parochial or sub national interests. The real problem is that the same sets of individuals operate in the two publics being altruistic in one and very instrumental in the other. This duality, which has subsisted since colonial times, helps to explain the problems of ethnic nationalism, corruption and of course political instability in Nigeria.

The problem of having a universally acceptable revenue allocation formula has been on in Nigeria for long. According to Nnoli (1980) there are ‘ethnic watchers’ who monitor what each ethnic group gets from the federation account. When they think that what their ethnic group is getting is not favourable they are

expected to raise 'ethnic alarm'. Even in the ongoing democracy, the experience has also been very volatile with the derivation formula put in place. The already volatile situation was aggravated by the supreme court judgment which settled the on-shore-off-shore dichotomy in favour of the central government. The crisis now has taken on some ethnic colourations. The oil producing states from the south want a political solution to the crisis but the states from the Northern part want the *status quo* to remain. It is our opinion that Nigeria has reached a stage whereby natural resources should be owned and controlled without any recourse to ethnic, political or religious inclination. However, this is not to be and it is indeed sad.

In his seminal book, *The Strategy and Tactics of the People's Republic of Nigeria*, Chief Awolowo, remarkable for his forthrightness, has this to say:

"In discussing this principle (i.e of revenue allocation on the basis of derivation), I would like to make only six observations. Firstly society, whether it is a federation or not, it is untenable and dishonest in the extreme, to insist on sharing another person's or another state's wealth on any basis other than that which the rules of the capitalist game allow. In the type of society every state is perfectly entitled to keep any wealth that accrues to it either by the sweat of his brow, by cunning or by the unaided bounty of Nature. And to accuse a rich state of lack of fellow-feeling or patriotism, because it insists on keeping practically all that comes to it by whatsoever means, is unreasonable and unrealistic. For it must be remembered that, in a capitalist society, the over-riding code of conduct is naked self-interest."

One dimension of the problem with ethnic nationalism is that most Nigerians are not patriotic. Right from 1960, patriotism, as far as Nigeria is concerned, has been thrown into the river and ever since, it was replaced by individualism, personalism, sectionalism, nepotism and parochialism. To worsen matters, you hardly could find loyalty to a cause, a symbiotic construct of patriotism, in an average Nigerian. The highest levels of patriotism are expressed at the sub national levels. The common explanation for this is that Nigeria is not doing enough to attract the patriotism of its citizens. Most importantly, Nigeria daily shirks its

governmental responsibilities to its citizenry. It is incapable of providing food, shelter, security and other basic necessities. Nigerians don't feel the impact of Nigeria in their lives. Because Nigeria is incapable of doing anything for Nigerians, it is thus a gratuitous insult for her to demand patriotism from her citizens.

Again, most students of politics will readily agree with Locke and others that a nation compels patriotism and loyalty when the citizens perceive it to be representative of, and pursuing their common good. A tentative hypothesis therefore would be that where a nation does not take sufficient care of its citizens, the level of patriotism is likely to be low and vice versa. As to why this should be the case, two plausible reasons have been adduced.

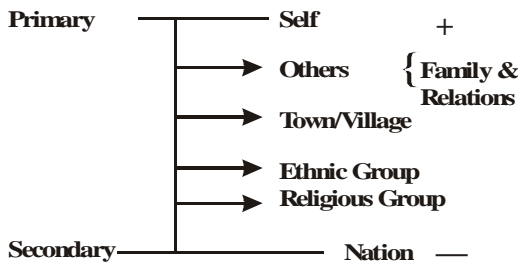
First, ethnic nationalism was already well developed before the nationalist era. Ethnic loyalty was something that made sense to a lot of people, and its utility was already demonstrated in the urban areas, where ethnic associations catered for the needs of new immigrants from the countryside. Secondly, the appeal to ethnicity was very likely to be successful in a society with little industrialization and a rudimentary development of secondary associations (Ake, 1978). In another instance, Ake (2000), argued that the civil society in Africa is so rudimentary that political society is not constituted as a "public", a unity of abstract legal subjects and a solidarity of complementarities and reciprocities arising from their self-seeking. Instead of political society being one public, it is segmented into a plurality of competing and alienated primary publics, because people are alienated from the state and tend to give their primary loyalty to ethnic, sub-national or communal groups rather than the state.

In the theoretical model of patriotism, allegiance and loyalty of a typical Nigerian illustrated below, one is able to see what an average Nigerian stands for in his or her relationship with the Nigerian state. First, a typical Nigerian thinks of 'self' before others. And when he or she think of others, the thought is about members of both the nuclear and the extended families. From that level a typical Nigerian think of people from his or her native town or village and then to the level of the ethnic group. And from the level of the ethnic group, the loyalty, allegiance and patriotism of a typical Nigerian moves to that of the religious group. This is because most

Nigerians are very religious and have very strong emotional attachment to one religion or the other. This is the more reason why ethno-religious violence is very common in Nigeria. The final stage to be reached is that of the nation.

Everyone puts the nation last in the scheme of things. Even some of our past Heads of state and highly placed Nigerians are not left out. They make parochial declarations and utterances all in the spirit of protecting ethno-religious agenda and interests. All these again goes further to lend credence to the assertion that most Nigerians have not imbibed the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Thus it is not surprising to find people more patriotic at ethnic or sub-national levels than at the national levels.

Theoretical Model of Patriotism Allegiance and Loyalty of a typical Nigerian



The entrenchment and institutionalization of ethnic nationalism in Nigeria has also meant that parties are formed along ethnic lines. According to Ake (1978) - "... the regions and political constituents tended to be homogenous in ethnicity. Thus to win an election you had to win an ethnic group and if this happened to be large, a political base was guaranteed."

It is thus a norm for parties to be formed along ethnic lines in Nigeria. This was the trend in the first republic when the three predominant parties Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigeria and the Camerouns (NCNC) stood for the three dominant ethnic nationalities – Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo respectively. The trend was not different in the third republic when the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) again stood for the three major ethnic nationalities; Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo. The third republic was different then because the military on the

recommendation of the Political Bureau did not register more than these two political parties. Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC). In the ongoing dispensation things have not changed radically. The ruling party – Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) is a party of the Hausa/Fulani but captured many states in Ibo land. The All Peoples Party (APP) is more or less a party of the Northern people as it did not capture any state in both Ibo and Yoruba land. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) is exclusively and predominantly based in the Southwest and a party of the Yoruba people. From all indications, parties in the ongoing democratic dispensation are still ethnically based thus allowing the pursuit of sectional agenda.

There is problem with power relations in Nigeria politics. As events and reactions in the ongoing democratic dispensation have shown, the northerners are not comfortable that power is not in their hands. The propaganda of the Northern oligarchy is that the South have always being in control of economic power and to balance the equation, the North must hold on the political power. Since the inception of the fourth republic the Northern elites have began to rock the boat. This is accompanied by cries of marginalization all the time. The fact that power has often been monopolized by the three dominant ethnic nationalities has also meant that the minority groups have been marginalized in the rat race for power. Again, power at the centre and the resources that comes with it in Nigeria is too attractive. This thus makes the competition for power so fierce, because if an ethnic group loses at the centre, it has lost all. This is more so because politics is a zero-sum game in Nigeria. The way power is obtained and used in Nigeria is usually in terms of what the various ethnic nationalities can benefit. But in many instances in the past, power has been used to pursue sectional or parochial interests. Marginalization of some groups will inevitably arouse consciousness and then sensitize such groups for action, resistance, apathy and other related negative vices.

Having dealt with the factors that accounted for the predominance of ethnic nationalism in Nigerian politics, our next task will be to examine the impact of this phenomenon on the ongoing democratic dispensation.

First, the interplay of ethnic nationalism has meant persistent threat to political stability. There

are cries of marginalization and impeachment all the time since the inception of this republic. Again, this has also meant a threat to the consolidation of democracy. For it is going to be difficult to consolidate democracy in a country that is politically unstable.

Second, the predominance of the spirit of ethnic nationalism also gave rise to the emergence of ethnic militias all over the country – the common ones are – *Odua* Peoples Congress (OPC) for the Yoruba nationality, *Arewa* Peoples Congress (APC) for the Hausa/Fulani nationality, *Bakassi* Boys for the Igbo nationality and *Egbesu* Boys for the Ijaw nationality. The emergence of these ethnic militias has also meant an increase in the level of political violence, riots and conflicts.

Third, the interplay of ethnic nationalism has also made the sharing of the national revenue a much more volatile and sensitive issue. In Nigeria, the centre is the primary source of private wealth accumulation. So much resources lies with the government at the centre. This consequently makes the struggle for control of power at the centre so fierce, competitive and intense. The current on shore/offshore dichotomy in the principle of derivation also aggravated the already tensed situation. This offshore/onshore dichotomy is now seen as an indication of contempt and hatred for the ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta who believed that they are already marginalized, traumatized and exploited.

Finally, the interplay of ethnic nationalism has also divided and fragmented the civil society in Nigeria. Oyadare (1994) contended that the problem in Nigeria is traceable to the heterogeneity and the adversarial nature of the civil society itself. The civil society in Nigeria is relatively weak, parochial in outlook and divided most especially along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines. If the civil society is divided, it is obvious that it will have some adverse effects on the nascent democracy in place.

The fact that the problem of ethnic nationalism continue to stare us in the face is an indication that something is wrong somewhere with the Nigerian state and this must be looked into. Nigeria is once again at a turning point. Will it settle permanently the terms and conditions of living together in one polity of its diverse peoples, so that it can indeed-and not just in words become a united, strong and self-reliant nation with a free and democratic society? Or, will it forever

remain, in spite of the rhetoric to the contrary, a mere collection of independent native states separated from one another by a multiple of barriers? What are the things that need to be done in order to reduce the negative impact of ethnic nationalism on the current democratic dispensation.

First, we suggest the convocation of a national conference. There should be a forum where all the various ethnic nationalities will come together to address the national question. The multi-dimensional nature of the problem with ethnic nationalism have shown that only a national conference, could adequately address them. The conference is inevitable if the government sincerely desires an end to the crises. It is obvious that the multi-dimensional nature of the crises will not allow piece-meal solution, it should be a national approach.

You cannot deal with *Odi* in isolation from the *Tiv-Jukun* conflict, not the Niger-Delta conflict from *Fulani – Bachama* conflict, the zero allocation, boundary adjustment, asset sharing or revenue allocation, resource control, secularization and several others.

Second, some form of power rotation or sharing must be institutionalized and entrenched in the constitution. According to Olasebikan (2002) it is absolutely ridiculous for any section in the country to have sole control of power while the other so-called ethnic nationalities remain in servitude. It is however sad to note that the northern oligarchy have come to see power as their own inalienable right. Power must be made to rotate among the various ethnic nationalities using the six geo-political zones. Again, this must be accompanied by some form of power sharing among the various ethnic nationalities so that no section of the country will be marginalized at any point in time.

Third, it is also important that the population of the states and not the land mass or geographical space be used in the distribution of resources from the centre. It is the people that matters and not the geographical space they occupy. This is why the present arrangements of using the land mass is not acceptable to the ethnic nationalities from the southern part of the country.

Fourth, is the argument that a 'Two Party system' is best option for a country like Nigeria where people manipulate our diversity to cause trouble. The history of party formation in Nigeria show largely that they are usually ethnically

based. The only exception to this was the third republic when the military registered, only two political parties (SDP and NRC) on the recommendation of the Political Bureau. It is our opinion that if the 'Two Party System' is entrenched into the Nigerian constitution, it will prevent the various ethnic nationalities from hijacking any of the two parties and this will reduce the impact of ethnicity in politics.

Fifth, it is important that Nigeria remains a secular state otherwise there may be no end to ethnic-religious violence.

Sixth, it is also suggested that Nigeria should remain a federal state. What we have in practice in the ongoing democratic dispensation is not federalism *per se* but a combination of unitarism and federalism. For peace and tranquility to prevail, Nigeria must practice true federalism.

Furthermore, there must be constitutional provisions that gives less power to the Presidency. According to Ake (2000:187) Nigerian constitutions give far too much power to the presidency, sometimes to the point of constituting it virtually a dictatorship. It is all the more necessary to correct this, because apart from being an impediment to democracy, the concentration of power in the presidency gives politics an unhealthy intensity. Because this office is so powerful, those who compete for it readily resort to means that are unlawful, as if to indicate that for this particular office, the end justifies all means. Again, this is the more reason why the competition for power at the centre takes on ethnic colourations all in the attempt to sidetrack other ethnic nationalities.

It was Charles de Gaulle who said that politics is too serious a business to be left for politicians alone, the project of the structuring of society, the distribution of resources, the maintenance of law and order, the protection of lives and property, the provision of social, economic, agricultural, industrial and health infrastructures and the protection of the citizens from external attack, which make up what we call governance, cannot and must not, be left entirely in the hands of those who are popularly elected into power, or those who steal their way, rig their way or shoot their way into power, as often been the case for us in Nigeria.

The greed of many of these professional politicians often rides in tender with their lust for power. Over time they have demonstrated that they are not genuine democrats, honourable

statesmen or true patriots, but neo-feudalists, contract chasers, callous mercenaries, ethnic jingoists and prostitutes of power. This is the more reason why the Nigerian political environment is characterized by widespread falsehood, political sycophancy, social injustice and economic profligacy, where what matters to many people are brown envelopes and 'Ghana-must-go-bags'.

It is true that there are contradictions, flaws and injustices in the very structures of the country that need to be addressed at a national conference or through a major constitutional review process, nevertheless, the negative input of many individual Nigerians from North and South and from East and West, especially, the monumental frauds, the greed and graft and the politics of bitterness and acrimony which we have witnessed at the hands of successive leaders at all levels, have been a major factor in the failure of the Nigerian state and there is no amount of restructuring that will resuscitate ailing Nigeria, if these deadly viruses are not dealt with severely.

The Nigerian civil society, made up of labour organizations, religious groups, the press, students unions, civil rights and pro-democracy groups, etc cannot afford to fold its hands, sit idly or watch as it were helplessly, while a few ethnic war-lords mortgage our common patrimony, destroy our commonwealth and render desolate our nation. We cannot leave our fate and destiny in the hands of self-serving ethnic jingoists. Indeed the exigencies of the times demand that all hands must be on deck and that all serious-minded groups and individuals of talent and vision must be passionately engaged and in the project of building a strong, virile and united nation.

Finally, there is the inevitable need to re-orientate Nigerians to shift their allegiance, loyalty and patriotism from the level of their ethnic groups to that of the nation. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) which is already in place could be saddled with this responsibility.

CONCLUSION

From all the discussions made in this paper, it evidently clear that the consolidation of democracy is on shaky grounds as long as the problem of ethnic nationalism remain in place. That in spite of nationwide increase in violence revolving around ethno-religious identities, Nigerian governments are still treating them as

“residue of the past and are therefore reluctant to recognize the inevitability of the ethnic identities that divide the population of the overwhelming majority of the people in Nigeria. Today, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that ethnic divisions and the ‘nationalism’ attached to it are losing their importance in any part of the world. In the words of Sindjoun (2000: 223) ‘plural societies are not only places where we identities clash, they also include dynamics of overlapping and crossbreeding, multiple positions and multiple allegiances’.

Informed by this philosophical orientation, we suggest the acceptance of the inevitability and indeed the legitimacy of ethnic identities and taking this as a precondition to finding means of preventing violent conflict. This can best be done by the convocation of a national conference in which the various ethnic nationalities will state categorically those things that will make them shift their allegiance, loyalty and patriotism from the level of their ethnic nationalities to that of the nation at large. This may be slow and difficult. But the logic of our reasoning remain that ethnic identities are not fixed, but can change a great deal over time through a slow process of political manipulation with social and economic transformation.

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