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The Challenge of Nation Building in Nigeria: A New Perspective on Ethnicity and Propaganda

Jude Uwakwe Eke

Abstract

The conduct of politics along ethnic lines, coupled with the constant practices of tribal and religious bigotry and the use of hate propaganda against other religions, ethnic groups, political parties and, by extension, other regions has continued to undermine attempts at nation building in Nigeria. Ethnic chauvinism and the use of atrocity propaganda in Nigerian politics have continued to pose a serious security threat to Nigeria, with adverse effects on prospects of promoting democracy, good governance, sustainable development and nation building. The shift by the leaders, from centripetal to centrifugal political structure has strongly encouraged primordial tendencies among the Nigerian citizens. Politics of exclusion and marginalization has led to the emergence of different groups dissatisfied with the prevailing socio-economic and political structure in the country. The use of hate propaganda to reinforce societal myth, ethnic divisions and stereotypes is now a common phenomenon in Nigeria. A major danger of atrocity propaganda is its capability to establish pre-conditions for human catastrophe. It is against this background that this paper argues that ethnicity and propaganda are some of the major challenges militating against nation building in Nigeria. The study hence, concludes that as long as politics in Nigeria is conducted along ethnic lines, and the use of atrocity propaganda continues to hold sway in the country's political life, attempts at nation building will remain unattainable. It therefore recommends proper and sincere integration of all the groups in Nigeria so that the desired nation could be built. The study adopts a historical research method, using descriptive, analytical and narrative approaches. It relies on primary and secondary sources.

Key words: Bigotry, Ethnicity, Nation Building, Nigeria, Propaganda

Introduction

Several attempts at nation building in Nigeria have suffered major setbacks, following the conduct of politics along ethnic lines and the use of atrocity propaganda against political opponents. Ethnicity, for instance, has been elevated to dominate national discourse in Nigeria, thereby controlling how people perceive and behave towards other ethnic groups. In other words, tribal intolerance has continued to power ethnic related conflicts in Nigeria with catastrophic consequences on the people and the nation's economy. It is important to note that the failure of the Nigerian government and other relevant stakeholders to give credence to the concept of "place of residence" as against the traditional state of origin in Nigeria has continued to fuel ethnicity in the country. Hate propaganda on the other hand is now a common phenomenon in Nigeria. Political elites have devised means of using propaganda to persuade and manipulate the opinions and actions of the public towards their desired intent. (Okeke, 2019) In other words, the use of social media platforms to disseminate well calculated propaganda messages are currently having unprecedented effects on nation building effort in Nigeria. Furthermore, Nigerian politicians have devised means of employing hate speech, fear, and ethnic stereotypes to persuade and manipulate the electorates towards their desired intents.

Nation building in Nigeria is also confronted with the problem of prejudice which is one common element of ethnicity. The word prejudice is often used to refer to a preconceived (usually unfavourable) evaluation of another person based on that person's political affiliation, sex and sexuality, gender, beliefs, values, social class, age, disability, religion, race/ethnicity, occupation, education, criminality among other personal characteristics (Dovidio, *etal.* 2010)

Ethnic chauvinism and the use of hate propaganda have continued to pose serious security challenges in Nigeria with adverse effects on attempts at nation building. In Nigeria today, politics of exclusion and marginalization have led to the emergence of different groups dissatisfied with the prevailing socio-economic and political

structure in the country. At present, creation of ethnic nationalism and regional militancy is common with almost all the different ethnic and regional groups in Nigeria. For example, the activities of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), in Western Nigeria, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Eastern Nigeria, the Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC), and the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) in Northern Nigeria, and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and other different groups representing the Niger Delta region in the Southern part of the country, show that things have fallen apart in Nigeria and that if appropriate measures are not taken by the relevant stake holders, the center in the nearest future may not hold (Egbegbuna, 2016).

Conceptual Clarifications on Nation building, Ethnicity and Propaganda
Nation building involves the construction of a national identity using the power of the state. Nation building aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run (Wikipedia, 2018). Nation building could also be defined as a process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, histories, language, cultures and religions come together within the boundaries of a sovereign state with a unified constitutional and legal dispensation, a national public education system, an integrated national economy, shared symbols and values with the aim of eradicating the divisions and injustices of the past and fostering national unity. (www. ac.gov.com.za/content/-what-is-nation-building)

Ethnicity on the other hand, refers to ethnic affiliation or distinctiveness. It refers to prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different ethnic group based on the belief that one's own ethnic group is superior. An ethnic group is a category of people who identify with each other usually on the bases of a presumed common genealogy or ancestry or on similarities such as common language or dialect, history, culture or nation (Google.com, 2010).

Propaganda according to (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012) is "the expressions or actions carried out deliberately with a view to influence the opinions or actions of others for predetermined ends often carried out through psychological manipulation." It is a form of communication that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (Smith, 2016) defines propaganda as the information that is used primarily to influence an audience and further an agenda, which may not be objective and may be presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or perception, or loaded language rather than rational response to the information that is presented.

The Effect of Ethnicity on Nation Building in Nigeria
The historical legacies of colonialism in Nigeria created some challenges for nation building. The amalgamation of the protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Lugard for instance, brought into being the most populous country in Africa. Thus, Nigeria in its modern sense could be regarded as the creation of European ambition and rivalries causing international boundaries to be drawn in such a way that little or no regard was paid to the existence and influence of ethnic groups and distinctive peculiarities of the different geographical areas being amalgamated (Obasa, 1995)

The division of Nigeria into North and south with different administrative system at the earliest stage did not help to unite the political leaders of the period. According to Ibrahim Gambari "it was almost as if these regions were two separate countries, held together by currency and transportation system." Most members of the Nigerian elite class in the 1950s and 1960s had their education and world view molded by the regional institutions. Some of these had little or no understanding of other regions. Under the above condition, it was easy for prejudice and fear to thrive. For example, during the period of decolonization struggle, Nigerian nationalists from different regions fought each other as much as they fought the British colonialists. The primordial tendencies among the nationalists from the different regions that made up Nigeria continued to hold sway (Gambari, 2018).

It could be said that ethnic hatred has often been exploited and even fueled by some political leaders to serve their agenda of seeking to consolidate their stay in office and in some cases, to work against a common political enemy,

real or imagined (Pocha, 2002). This to a very large extent inhibits attempts at nation building because it creates unfavourable ground for national integration and collective responsibility.

Arguing from a different perspective (*Ejovi, etal, 2016)* assert that there is a direct relationship between economic dissatisfaction and the strengthening of the ethnic roots. According to Lewis, as quoted in *(Ejovi etal)* "as long as the overall security and well-being of individuals are not provided for by the state, they will be forced to rely on traditional tribal principles of co-operation." Consequently, the more incompetent a state is, the wider the gap between it and the people. In addition, the authors contend that it is usually the mishandling and exploitation of ethnicity that lead to conflict and not the conflict itself.

It must also be noted that the Richard constitution of 1946 which introduced regionalism in Nigeria exacerbated regional and ethnic based politics among the three regions that were created. The first crops of political parties in Nigeria before independence were regional based and ethnic centred. For instance, the Action Group (AG) was of the Western region, the National Council of Nigerian and Cameroun (NCNC) which later became National Council of Nigerian Citizens was of the Eastern region, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was of the Northern region. As expected, the conduct of politics along regional and ethnic lines continued unabated thereby making several attempts at nation building unsuccessful (Gambari, 2018)

Fundamental differences between the various ethnic groups created fears in the minds of the people particularly the elite groups about the ability or even the willingness of these ethnic groups to remain a united country should the umbrella of British colonial rule be lifted (Obasa, 1995) Such fears were expressed by some scholars and political elites of the period.

Michael Crowther was one of those skeptical about the future of Nigeria. His argument was that even though every country is in a sense an artificial creation, in the case of Nigeria, the union was so sudden and included such widely different groups of people that not only the British who created it, but the inhabitants themselves have often doubted whether it will survive as a political entity (Crowther, 1966)

Therefore, from the statements and the actions of some of these political elites, it was quite clear that there was a shift from centripetal to centrifugal political structure. Unwarranted bias, favouritism and alignment to one's own particular ethnic group, cause and ideology became a regular occurrence among the different ethnic groups.

Obasa, noted that Nnamdi Azikiwe once declared in the West African Pilot of 8th July, 1949 that "it would appear that the God of Africa had created the Igbo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of ages. The author went further to assert that Azikiwe's primary concern was no doubt with the Igbo nation. "

Similarly, when Adeyemo Alakija, the then president of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, declared in 1948, that "Yoruba will not be relegated to the background in the future" obviously, he was trying to protect the interest of his Yoruba ethnic group. Some of the objectives of this organization include creating and actively fostering the idea of a single nationalism throughout Yorubaland, cooperating with existing ethnic and regional associations. His primary concern was also his ethnic group (Obasa, 1995, p.2)

Furthermore, the late Sir Ahmadu Bello also did not believe in the unity of Nigeria. He was of the view that the 1914 amalgamation was a great mistake. In his words:

> What kind of trouble had we let ourselves in by associating with such people? We should set up our
> own: we should cease to have anything to do with the southern people: we should take to our own
> way. We were certainly viable; we could run our own show. (Obasa, 133)

The above quote shows that Ahmadu Bello undoubtedly questioned the unity of the Nigerian state concerning the fact that the distinctions between the North and the South are just too many. From his statement at the earliest stage of the amalgamation, it was clear that he preferred conducting politics along regional lines instead of seeking to achieve national coercion through integration.

In other word, the idea of building a common citizenship failed right from the earliest period. Even though the leaders of the period made some efforts at nation building by adopting federalism and advocating a policy of unity-in-diversity, unfortunately, the lack of consolidation of Nigerian federalism around commonly shared values, beliefs and ideology means that these challenges of divisive and primordial tendencies will continue to undermine the efforts at nation building in the country. The absence of sincere national unity has been a major source of domestic tensions emanating from tribalism, religious and ethnic bigotaries (Gambari, 2018)

It is also pertinent to note that ethnic politics in Nigeria has led to socio-economic inequalities. The failure of the relevant stake holders to ensure equity and justice across all groups in Nigeria has continuously led to the emergence of some groups who feel that they are marginalized. Contemporary nation building can only be achieved by preventing social exclusion or marginalization and also by promoting national unity.

It is germane to note that many Nigerians today are denied their basic rights such as the right to education and good healthcare services. The result is that citizens are no longer motivated to support the state, because they do not feel that the state is adequately concerned about them. In other word, they feel marginalized by the central government and as a result have decided to seek refuge in their respective ethnic groups.

Therefore, socio-economic inequalities often create fears, suspicion, hatred and disunity and under such exigencies, attempts at nation building cannot be effectively achieved because the state has failed to give the citizens sense of belonging. This is evident in the oil producing region of the Niger Delta. The people of this region feel that they are being marginalized and that the only way out is through resource control which they have pursued using different means including dialogue, kidnapping, destruction of oil facilities and open confrontation with the Nigerian security agencies.

Ethnicity, is also a major cause of conflicts in Nigeria. It has led to discrimination, political violence, marginalization, religious conflicts and nepotism in the country. Ethnic conflicts have seriously threatened nation building in Nigeria. Certain patterns of inter-ethnic conflict had emerged in both colonial and post colonial Nigeria. (Mustapha, 2004) The best known of which are the ethno-regional conflicts which are between political blocs concentrated around specific ethnic, religious and regional elements from the Hausa-Fulani parts of the Kanuri and Muslim communities of the North: the Igbo in the mainly Christian East: and Yoruba in the West. There have also been series of ethnic conflicts in the minority areas.

It is obvious that the escalating level of sectarian violence poses serious threats to democratic rule and national unity in Nigeria. Ethnic sectarianism is a real threat not only to Nigerian democracy, but also to the territorial integrity of the country and this threat is little understood and all too often sensationalized (Mustapha, 2004)

It is also essential to note that it was the recognition of the primary hegemonic confrontation that led to the adoption of federalism in the terminal colonial period with minority interests' demands being largely ignored. Though each region had substantial powers, the competition generated enormous tensions. It was the inherent instability of this federal system that led to the collapse of the First Republic in 1966. Since then, attempts at political engineering have sought to reconstruct the foundational architecture of Nigerian federalism (Mustapha, 2004)

Challenges posed by ethnicity to nation building in Nigeria cannot really be adequately examined without taking a cursory look at the federal character principle and its effect on nation building. The term Federal Character is one of the ideas of the constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) inaugurated by the late general Murtala Mohammed on October 18, 1975. In the course of their meetings, the (CDC), spitted into two ideological groups. While the first group argued that there is the need for federal character principle to be enshrined in the Nigerian

constitution because there had in the past been inter-ethnic rivalries to secure the domination of government by one ethnic group or combination of ethnic groups to the exclusion of others (Afigbo, 1987)

The group went further to argue that it is essential to have provisions in the Nigerian constitution which will ensure that the predominance of persons from a few states or ethnic or sectional group is clearly avoided in the composition of government or in the appointment or election of persons to high offices in Nigeria.

On the other side of the spectrum, the second group agreed that inter-ethnic rivalry exist in Nigeria, but that the creation of states as well as other provisions of the constitution is sufficient to ensure the protection of the rights of the various communities including the minorities. This second group out rightly rejected that federal character principle should be enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. They also argued that it is unnecessary to insist on the participation of all the communities in government and that such participation may be impracticable, and that it may retard national loyalty by playing up the role of sectional representative in the conduct of the affairs of the state (Afigbo, 1987)

Therefore, even though the principle was later enshrined in the constitution, scholars and analysts have come to condemn the federal character principle. They are of the view that the principle has failed to achieve its purpose. It must be noted that to some extent, the intention of introducing the federal character principle was good, however, its application has being faulty.

As *Duruji et tal* put it, federal character principle on admission into federal unity schools and public Universities in Nigeria is seriously having negative effect on education and development in Nigeria. The issue of ethnicity which has fueled distrust, suspicion, competition and marginalization among the ethnic groups, has resulted in the introduction of certain resolutions such as the quota system to accommodate people in those states described as educationally disadvantaged states. According to (*Duruji etal, 2019: 11-12)* the wrong application of quota system on public university admission in Nigeria has led to the deprivation of qualified applicants the opportunity of gaining admission. It has also displaced brilliant academics abroad, leading to loss of those that would have contributed their own quota in building the desired Nigerian nation.

Many people especially those from the groups being disenfranchised have come to condemn the use of quota system in Nigeria. In their view, the system is an institutionalized corruption which has enthroned mediocrity at the expense of meritocracy.

From the foregoing, it has been proved beyond every reasonable doubt that ethnicity is a serious challenge to nation building in Nigeria. The conduct of politics along regional, ethnic and religious lines has continuously led to conflicts in Nigeria, threatening the unity of the over 250 different ethnic groups. These exigencies have continued to hinder attempts at nation building in Nigeria.

The Negative impact of propaganda on Nation Building in Nigeria
The use of propaganda by political elites in Nigeria to pursue their selfish interests is seriously undermining attempts at nation building in Nigeria. On several occasions, propaganda has led to inter-ethnic and religious conflicts. For example, the broadcast made by Radio Cotonou and rebroadcast by Radio–Television Kaduna which stated that there were some disturbances in Eastern Nigeria and that Northerners had been killed, led to the massacre of people of Eastern Nigeria living in the Northern part of the country. Atrocity propaganda is dangerous both at peace time and in war situation. The pre-war political scene in Nigeria was full of both verbal and physical conflicts among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria namely; Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The same can also be said about the two major religious groups (Christianity and Islam), which have always engaged each other in conflicts.

Propaganda statements have led to series of misunderstanding and poor human relationship among these different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Alhaji Ribadu, a one-time minister of Defense in Nigeria's first republic was reported by the New breed Magazine of mid-January, 1977 to have once said that;

> The political conquest of the Southern Nigeria was a religious obligation that the Northern Nigerian people's congress owed the world of Islam. The Koran had to be dipped into the Atlantic Ocean at the extreme southern Nigeria, before the Jihad would stop. (Nwankwo, 1979)

The climate in which this kind of statement was made and cheered was largely contributory to the ruin of the first republic and subsequent religious, ethnic and political conflicts. The danger of religious fanaticism is such that can break any nation, no matter how united and powerful such nation might be. It is therefore, disturbing to note that occasionally national issues have given rise to outrageous outbursts capable of disintegrating Nigeria.

The danger of atrocity propaganda was made manifest during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. The belligerents in the war used atrocity propaganda extensively and this led to the death of innocent civilians particularly on the side of the Biafrans. According to Cervinka;

> Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Nigerian war was the fact that the lives of the two million people who died and of the many more who suffered from starvation became secondary consideration to the political issues which were at stake. Both conflicting parties exploited the misery of the civilian victims of the war for their political ends *(Cervenka, 1972, 136).*

The author went further to note that the Nigerian government was convinced that the starvation would force Biafran into submission, while the Biafran leaders believed that it would rally international support for Biafra's cause.

Therefore, drawing example from Rwanda before and during the civil war, and the genocide which occurred within its contexts, it is germane to note that ethnicization of the country which was initiated by the colonialists (Germans and Belgians) and consolidated by the Hutu ethnic group, disintegrated the country, led to revolution in 1959, caused series of massacres and finally led to the Rwandan Civil War and the genocide which claimed over 800000 lives and maimed countless others (Melvern, 2004)

In Nigeria, the use of hate propaganda to reinforce societal myth, ethnic divisions and stereotype is now a reoccurring decimal. The consequences of hate propaganda on nation building are quite destructive. Apart from having the capacity to encourage division and hatred of other groups, it also can lead to an attempt to exterminate a hated group (genocide), as were witnessed in Nigeria and Rwanda during their civil wars.

Conclusion

Ethnicity and propaganda are two major problems working against nation building in Nigeria. Since the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, politics in Nigeria has been conducted along regional, ethnic and religious lines. This has negatively affected the unity of the country. The use of atrocity propaganda by political elites on the other hand, has also continued to work against nation building in Nigeria.

Therefore, at present, politics in Nigeria is full of both verbal and physical conflicts and this has thwarted series of efforts at nation building. The solution to challenges militating against nation building in Nigeria, lie on how to balance various competing interests such as the interest of north and south, the interest of Christianity and Islam and other religions, the proper review of the constitution, and the effective control of atrocity propaganda, both at peace time and in war situation. In addition, credence should be given to "place of residence" over the traditional "state of origin" which has continued to encourage ethnicity in Nigeria. When all these are done, building the desired Nigerian nation will be effectively achieved.

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