

Ethnic Pluralism and the Quest for National Cohesion: Confronting Division in Nigeria's Postcolonial Polity.

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexities surrounding Nigeria's ethnic pluralism and how the resulting divide has impacted the country's political, social, and economic landscape in the post-colonial era. Drawing on social identity theory and conflict theory, the paper illustrates the connection between political crisis, identity reflection, ethnic categorisation, and national cohesion; the latter three being the integral roots of either a cohesive nation or, otherwise, a divided nation. However, this paper aims to address the current state of national division in Nigeria, which stems from the existing case of ethnic pluralism. Gathering data to understand and solve the problem statement of this paper was exploratory, involving a canvass and desk research of various journals, conference papers, reports, and other relevant documents. The researcher observed, through the collection of the various data studied, that the inability of Nigeria to build national cohesion has limited the growth and development level of the country, given the practicality of division experienced in Nigeria in cases such as the Jos crisis, the Niger Delta Militants, the Fulani Herdsmen killing and others. These conflicts reflect the current state of progress in achieving national cohesion in Nigeria. Proposed recommendations, including the development of a proper federalism framework, social integration programs, and national identities over ethnic ones, as well as inclusive governance, were offered to eliminate ethnic divides and promote national cohesion in Nigeria, thereby aiding in the development of a sustained nation-state.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Nigeria, Ethnic Divide, Crisis, Social Identity, Conflict Theory*

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Introduction

Ethnic pluralism is a state where diverse ethnic groups exist to compete for scarce resources. This is based on the knowledge that individuals from an ethnic group different from others are seen as outsiders, regardless of their existence or cohabitation in the exact geographic location (Salawu and Hassan 2011). Automatically, this creates a form of ethnic favouritism where members of the same ethnic group are bound by loyalty and an immense level of obligation, enabling their competition for resources. This is the bane of crises and wars in a nation. Nigeria's ethnic diversity, once celebrated as a symbol of cultural wealth, has become a fault line for conflict. The country's rich tapestry of ethnic groups, including the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and others, has historically contributed to a vibrant cultural landscape (Agbibo and Oken 2011). However, this diversity has also been exploited by political actors for their own gain, leading to the politicisation of ethnicity. For instance, during elections, politicians often mobilize support along ethnic lines, deepening divisions and fuelling tensions among different groups.

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled with the challenge of nation-building due to the divisive nature of ethnic politics (Mignolo 2017). This has hindered efforts to foster a sense of national unity and cohesion. As a result, the country has experienced cycles of violence and distrust, undermining social harmony and economic progress.

The increase in ethnic conflicts in Nigeria has garnered much academic interest over time. For example, a study by Bizot detailed the conflicts between the Fulani herders and farmers in the Middle Belt region that have been fuelled by ethnic tensions, leading to loss of lives and displacement of communities (Bizot 2021). This result of ethnic pluralism can be traced back to the incidence of colonialism that created a complex ethnic makeup, caused resource control struggles, and the loss of political autonomy in Nigeria, leading to a high level of underdevelopment, the absence of sustainable economic growth, and a weak democracy. Thus, post-colonial Nigeria is faced with several conflicts, which started with the Biafran war (1967-1970) and the Northern Nigeria religious crisis, among many.

The 2023 Global Terrorism Index highlights Nigeria's ranking as the sixth most impacted country by terrorism worldwide. This is a stark reminder of the security challenges facing the nation, with various extremist groups carrying out attacks that further exacerbate existing ethnic and religious fault lines. Furthermore, the recent World Bank report sheds light on the alarming levels of multidimensional poverty in Nigeria. It reveals that a staggering 63% of the country's population is currently grappling with poverty, highlighting the pressing socio-economic challenges that the nation faces (World Bank Report 2022). This statistic illustrates the pervasive nature of poverty in Nigeria, painting a stark picture of the living conditions and struggles that a significant portion of the population endures daily.

The report also delves into the intricate web of ethnic and regional disparities that contribute to the country's poverty landscape. For instance, in northern regions like Kano and Sokoto, poverty rates tend to be higher compared to more affluent southern areas like Lagos and Abuja. These disparities not only exacerbate existing inequalities but also pose significant obstacles to achieving sustainable development and inclusive growth nationwide.

Ethnic plurality is a serious threat to any country's national cohesion as it can lead to various challenges such as political crises, economic downturns, and religious conflicts. However, this paper focuses on how Nigeria can navigate through the complexities of ethnic pluralism to foster a more unified nation. In dealing with the issues arising from ethnic diversity, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical context that has shaped Nigeria's current landscape. For instance, the country's colonial past has played a significant role in exacerbating ethnic tensions by favoring particular groups over others. More importantly, addressing the challenges of ethnic pluralism requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond just political solutions. Economic disparities among different ethnic groups can fuel resentment and discord. Implementing policies that promote equal opportunities and inclusive growth can help bridge these divides and promote national unity.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Social Identity

This is a vital theory in the study of ethnic pluralism and its impact on a nation. It provides a framework that focuses on both inter-group and in-group dynamics, as well as the intricacies of crisis that can occur in this group as a result of ethnic dynamics (Carter, 2023). Social identity theory draws on the connection that exists between political crisis, ethnic categories, variant religions, identity dilemmas and separatism (Brown 2000). Understanding this connection helps in understanding the division that is present in a state, and this could be a tool in devising means for national cohesion, which Nigeria lacks.

Historical Foundations of Ethnic Division

Colonial Legacies: Divide and Rule

British colonial rule from 1900 to 1960 played a significant role in shaping ethnic divisions in Nigeria. The colonial administration implemented indirect governance, which favoured certain ethnic groups over others (Horvath 1972). The preferential treatment extended to various ethnic groups in Nigeria by the colonial masters had significant implications for their socio-political standing. For example, the Hausa-Fulani people from the North were often favored in resource allocation, leading to disparities in economic development between regions. This unequal distribution of resources not only perpetuated regional inequalities but also fueled tensions among different ethnic groups (Horvath, 19972)

Similarly, the Yoruba community in the Southwest enjoyed privileges in terms of access to education. This resulted in a higher literacy rate among the Yoruba population compared to other ethnic groups. As a consequence, this educational advantage translated into greater opportunities for socio-economic advancement and political representation within the region.

In contrast, the Igbo people in the Southeast faced challenges in participating fully in the political process due to the lack of preferential treatment. This marginalized their influence in decision-making and hindered their ability to advocate for their community's interests effectively. Consequently, the disparity in political participation further exacerbated ethnic tensions and hindered the country's unity.

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 further solidified these ethnic divisions. While the amalgamation was primarily driven by administrative convenience, its consequences were profound. It entrenched regionalism in the governance structure, leading to disparities in development and opportunities across different regions (Etefa, 2019). This regional divide not only affected political dynamics but also influenced social interactions and economic growth.

The legacy of British colonial rule continues to impact Nigeria, as ethnic tensions and disparities persist. Understanding the historical roots of these divisions is crucial in addressing contemporary challenges and fostering national unity. By acknowledging the complexities of Nigeria's colonial past, efforts can be made to promote inclusivity, equality, and reconciliation among its diverse ethnic groups (Etefa 2019)

Resource Extraction

Colonial emphasis on cash crops, such as Northern groundnuts and Southern palm oil, significantly contributed to the perpetuation of economic disparities within the regions. The cultivation and exportation of these cash crops formed the backbone of the colonial economy, shaping the socio-economic landscape in profound ways. For instance, in the Northern regions, the focus on groundnuts as a cash crop led to the marginalization of traditional subsistence farming practices, as farmers were coerced into cultivating crops for export rather than for local consumption. This shift not only disrupted local food security but also widened the wealth gap between those who controlled the lucrative cash crop trade and those who were left with diminished resources (Olade 2019).

Similarly, in the Southern regions where palm oil was a prized commodity, colonial powers exploited the natural resources and labour of the local populations to meet the demands of the international market. This exploitation not only enriched the colonizers but also entrenched a system of economic inequality that persisted long after colonial rule ended. The legacy of this colonial economic structure persists, as evidenced by the disparities between regions that were historically

focused on cash crop production and those that were marginalised in the process.

On another note, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant role played by the founding fathers of nationalism in Nigeria in shaping the current state of ethnic divide within the country. During the First Republic, these founding figures, representing various ethnic groups, inadvertently introduced elements of nepotism and ethnic bias into the political landscape of that era (Gbenenye 2016). For instance, the establishment of the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) by the esteemed Late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe not only served as a political platform but also became a breeding ground for personal aggrandisement and favouritism towards certain ethnic groups.

Moreover, other political parties like the Action Congress and the Northern People's Congress also succumbed to similar practices, further exacerbating the existing ethnic sentiments prevalent in Nigerian politics. (Gbenenye 2016). This historical legacy has contributed significantly to the deep-rooted ethnic divisions that continue to plague the Nigerian national polity. The repercussions of these actions are evident in the present-day socio-political landscape, where ethnic affiliations often take precedence over national unity and collective progress.

The entrenchment of ethnic biases in the political sphere has hindered the country's ability to foster a sense of inclusivity and unity among its diverse population. The legacy of nepotism and favoritism perpetuated by the founding fathers of nationalism has created a rift that continues to widen, posing a formidable challenge to the nation's quest for sustainable development and harmonious coexistence.

Educational Imbalance

Missionary schools in the South played a significant role in widening the literacy gaps between the Northern and Southern regions of the country. In 1960, the literacy rate in the North was only 10%, while in the South, it stood at 30%. This stark contrast can be attributed to the different educational systems and approaches adopted in these regions during that time.

In the Northern regions, particularly in countries with a strong Islamic influence, the presence of traditional Quranic schools has been a longstanding tradition (United Nations Security Council). These schools, known for their emphasis on religious teachings, have played a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape. Unlike formal educational institutions that follow a structured curriculum, Quranic schools prioritize the teaching of the Quran, Islamic principles, and traditions (United Nations Security Council). For example, in rural areas where access to mainstream education is limited, Quranic schools serve as the primary source of learning for many children. Students spend hours memorizing and reciting verses from the Quran, instilling in them a deep understanding and appreciation of their faith. The intimate setting of these

schools, often led by a local religious scholar or Imam, fosters a strong sense of community and spiritual growth among the students. Moreover, the curriculum of Quranic schools extends beyond academic knowledge to encompass moral and ethical teachings. Students are not only taught to read and interpret the Quran but also to embody its teachings in their daily lives (United Nations Security Council). This holistic approach to education aims to nurture individuals who are not only well-versed in religious texts but also uphold values of compassion, empathy, and integrity.

On the other hand, the South embraced missionary schools that provided a more structured and comprehensive curriculum, including subjects like English, Mathematics, and Science (Omamurhomu, 2002). This exposure to a broader range of subjects undoubtedly contributed to the higher literacy rates observed in the South. Furthermore, missionary schools often had better resources and facilities compared to their counterparts in the North (Omamurhomu 2002). This disparity in educational

Overall, the influence of educational institutions, such as missionary schools, cannot be overlooked when analyzing the disparities in literacy rates between different regions. The legacy of these historical educational practices continues to shape educational outcomes and opportunities for individuals in various parts of the country.

Post-Independence Politics: Ethnic Clientelism

The 1966 Coup

Postcolonial leaders in various regions strategically utilized ethnicity as a tool to solidify their hold on power. A notable example of this manipulation can be observed in the events surrounding the 1966 Coup (Mackintosh, 1966). These coups were perceived as being dominated by the Igbo ethnic group, which in turn sparked retaliatory actions from the Northern regions in the form of counter-coups. The culmination of these tensions ultimately led to the eruption of the devastating 1967–1970 civil war (Lasse and Dirk, 2014), further exacerbating the already fragile socio-political landscape of the time. The intricate web of historical, cultural, and political factors that contributed to this conflict cannot be understated. For instance, longstanding ethnic and religious divisions played a significant role in fueling the tensions that eventually boiled over into violent conflict. The struggle for power and control over resources also added fuel to the fire, as different factions vied for dominance in a tumultuous environment.

External influences and interventions from regional and global players further complicated the situation, turning what started as internal strife into a complex geopolitical chessboard. The consequences of this civil war were profound, not only in terms of loss of life and destruction but also in terms of long-lasting social and economic impacts (Lasse and Dirk, 2014). Communities were torn apart, infrastructure was decimated, and trust among various groups was shattered.

As the conflict raged on, the humanitarian crisis deepened, with civilians bearing the brunt of the violence and suffering. The scars of this dark period in history continue to linger, serving as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of unresolved tensions and conflicts (Lasse and Dirk, 2014). It is crucial to reflect on the lessons learned from this tragic chapter and strive for peaceful resolutions to prevent such tragedies from recurring in the future.

In essence, the weaponisation of ethnicity by postcolonial leaders not only deepened existing divisions within Nigerian society but also heightened animosities between different ethnic groups (Achebe 1958). This deliberate exploitation of ethnic identities for political gains underscores the complexities and challenges faced by nations in the aftermath of colonial rule. The repercussions of such actions reverberated through generations, leaving a lasting impact on the social fabric of these societies. For instance, ethnic groups that felt marginalized, needed autonomy, while forming ethnic militias such as the Military Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Chikoko Movement, IPOB, among others (Ojo, 2014). This phenomenon reflects a deeper issue of identity and representation within a diverse country like Nigeria. The creation of these ethnic militias is a response to historical injustices and a desire for self-determination. For example, MEND emerged in the Niger Delta region as a reaction to environmental degradation and economic exploitation by oil companies. Similarly, IPOB advocates for the rights of the Igbo people in the face of perceived marginalization (Ojo, 2014).

Secondly, the level of nepotism in public service where particular ethnic groups are favored has led to a high level of bureaucracy within the public service sector in Nigeria (Ojo, 2014). This nepotism perpetuates a cycle of inequality and undermines meritocracy. For instance, political appointments based on ethnic affiliation rather than qualifications contribute to inefficiency and corruption. The result is a system where loyalty to one's ethnic group often takes precedence over the common good. This not only hinders the development of a fair and transparent public service but also exacerbates tensions between different ethnic groups. It is imperative to reflect on these historical events to understand better the dynamics at play in postcolonial states and the enduring legacy of such divisive tactics on the political landscape.

Federal Character Principle

Constitutional quotas for ethnic representation (1999 Constitution) became tools for patronage over equity (Suberu, 2001). This phenomenon has been observed in various political contexts where the implementation of such quotas has deviated from their intended purpose of promoting inclusivity and diversity. For instance, in some cases, political parties have used these quotas as a means to secure votes from specific ethnic groups without genuinely addressing underlying issues of inequality and discrimination (Mbuba, 2021).

Moreover, the manipulation of ethnic quotas for political gain has often resulted in the marginalization of certain minority groups who may not belong to the dominant ethnicities benefiting from these provisions. This has led to tensions and conflicts within Nigerian society, undermining the potential for genuine social cohesion and unity (Canci and Odukoya, 2016). In countries where ethnic diversity is a prominent feature, the misuse of constitutional quotas can exacerbate existing divisions and perpetuate cycles of exclusion and marginalization.

Furthermore, the reliance on ethnic quotas as tools for patronage can create a culture of entitlement and dependency among certain ethnic groups, reinforcing stereotypes and hindering efforts towards meritocracy and equal opportunities for all citizens. The distortion of these quotas for political expediency not only undermines the principles of fairness and justice but also erodes public trust in the government and the legitimacy of the democratic process (Mbuba, 2021).

In conclusion, the transformation of constitutional quotas for ethnic representation into instruments of patronage represents a significant challenge to the realization of accurate equity and inclusivity in diverse societies. It is essential for policymakers and stakeholders to critically evaluate the implementation of such quotas to ensure that they serve their intended purpose of fostering unity and social cohesion, rather than perpetuating divisions and inequalities.

Ethnicity and the Postcolonial State: Structures of Exclusion

Nigeria's indigene-settler dichotomy is a complex issue that has significant implications for individuals categorized as "non-indigenes" in various states of the country. The Jos crisis is a case study where over 10,000 deaths have occurred since 2001 between the indigenous Berom and the settler Hausa-Fulani, and other ethnic groups (Higazi, 2016). This dichotomy not only shapes access to resources like land, education, and political office but also influences social interactions and opportunities within these communities. For example, in states where this distinction is strongly enforced, non-indigenes may face challenges in owning land or accessing quality education compared to their indigene counterparts. Additionally, the exclusion of non-indigenes from political office can lead to a lack of diverse representation and perspectives in decision-making processes at the local level.

Furthermore, the indigene-settler dichotomy is deeply rooted in historical and cultural factors such as conflicts, marginalisation, and domination that have perpetuated inequalities and tensions among different groups. Understanding the historical context of how this dichotomy came to be can shed light on the complexities of identity and belonging in Nigeria. Overall, addressing the challenges posed by this dichotomy requires a nuanced approach that considers the rights and opportunities of all individuals, regardless of their categorization as indigenes or settlers.

Resource Control and Regional Grievances

The issue of ethnic minorities, such as the Ijaw and Ogoni people, protesting against the extraction of oil wealth without corresponding development has been a longstanding concern (Watts, 2007). This conflict arises from the fact that while Nigeria heavily relies on oil for its export earnings, a staggering 70% of the Delta region's residents continue to lack access to clean water (UNDP, 2021). The disparity between the immense wealth generated by oil extraction and the lack of necessities for the local population highlights the deep-rooted issues faced in the region. For instance, the Ijaw community, one of the largest ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, has been at the forefront of demanding a fair share of the oil wealth and greater investment in local infrastructure and social services. Their protests and activism have drawn attention to the environmental degradation caused by oil spills and the negative impact on their traditional livelihoods, such as fishing and farming.

Nonetheless, the Ogoni people, led by environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa before his tragic execution in 1995, have been vocal in their opposition to the exploitation of their land and resources without adequate compensation or environmental protection measures. The struggles of these communities reflect a broader pattern of marginalization and neglect that has fuelled the cycle of militancy and unrest in the Niger Delta.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts: Competition for land between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers in the Middle Belt has been a longstanding issue that has resulted in significant violence and loss of lives. The clashes between these two groups have escalated over the years, leading to a devastating death toll of 8,000 people since 2015, as reported by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2023.

The root of the conflict can be traced back to competition over limited resources, particularly arable land and water sources. The Fulani herders, who rely on grazing their cattle for a livelihood, often encroach upon farmlands owned by either Christian or Muslim farmers in search of pasture. This territorial dispute has fuelled tension and animosity between the two communities, exacerbating the conflict. Moreover, ethnic and religious differences have further polarized the situation, making it increasingly challenging to find peaceful resolutions. The cultural practices and beliefs of the Fulani herders clash with those of the Christian farmers, leading to misunderstandings and deep-seated grievances.

To illustrate, in recent years, there have been numerous reports of violent clashes between Fulani herders and Christian farmers, resulting in casualties on both sides. A particular clash in North Central Nigeria claimed the lives of 55 persons (Agence, 2024). These conflicts have not only claimed lives but have also displaced many families, disrupting livelihoods and exacerbating poverty in the region.

Pathways to National Cohesion

One of the foremost-proposed solutions to promoting national cohesion in Nigeria is the concept of true federalism. According to Peter Ekeh (1972), a renowned scholar, the current federation of Nigeria requires a significant restructuring to achieve true federalism. This restructuring involves the decentralization of power from ethnic centres to states, granting them control over their respective resources. By implementing this model, the country can address the primordial conflicts stemming from a centralized national political system.

To further illustrate this point, imagine a scenario where each state in Nigeria has the authority to govern itself independently. For instance, states like Lagos, Kano, and Rivers would have the autonomy to make decisions that best suit their unique needs and priorities. This decentralization of power would lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities across the nation (Mbuba, 2021).

Moreover, transitioning from a centralized to a state-focused governance structure would foster a sense of unity and cooperation among different ethnic groups. Instead of one dominant ethnic group wielding power over others, each state would have the freedom to govern without external interference. This would promote inclusivity and prevent marginalization of any particular group within the country.

Secondly, to abolish ethnic pluralism and promote national cohesion, the concept of indigeneship should be replaced with residence-based rights, as suggested by Nwankpa. This shift towards residence-based rights aims to strengthen national identities, encouraging individuals to prioritize the interests of the nation-state over those of their ethnic groups (Otite, 2000). For instance, in countries like Switzerland, where citizenship is primarily based on residency rather than ethnicity, a sense of unity and shared national identity is fostered among the diverse population.

One effective mechanism that fosters unity and reduces ethnic bias is the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) program. Through the NYSC, young people from various ethnic backgrounds are brought together to serve their country in different regions. This experience not only exposes them to different cultures and traditions but also instils a sense of belonging to a larger, unified nation. As a result, individuals learn to see beyond ethnic differences and embrace a common national identity (Nwoye 1997).

By promoting programs like the NYSC and shifting towards residence-based rights, societies can effectively build patriotism and enhance nation-building efforts. These initiatives contribute to creating a more inclusive and cohesive society where individuals are united by a shared sense of national pride and identity, transcending ethnic divisions. Embracing diversity while fostering a strong national identity is crucial for promoting social harmony and sustainable development in multicultural societies.

Thirdly, diversifying the economy is a crucial goal for many countries, including Nigeria, as it seeks to reduce its dependency on oil. This can be achieved through strategic investments in sectors such as agriculture and technology, as highlighted by the World Bank in 2023. (World Bank Report 2023) By shifting focus towards these industries, Nigeria can create new opportunities for growth and development, ultimately reducing the risks associated with relying heavily on oil revenue.

One pressing issue that Nigeria faces is youth unemployment, with statistics showing that 43% of the country's unemployed population consists of young people, according to the National Bureau of Statistics in 2023 (NBS 2023). Addressing this challenge is not only important for economic reasons but also for social stability. Implementing targeted programs that focus on creating job opportunities for the youth can not only decrease unemployment rates but also contribute to a decrease in crime rates, as young people are provided with meaningful employment options and avenues for personal growth and development.

Social integration is another means to promote national cohesion. Firstly, this could be done through the National Education Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of teaching shared history rather than ethnic narratives, as highlighted by Falola. This approach aims to foster a sense of unity and understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds. For instance, incorporating lessons on significant historical events that shaped the nation can help students develop a collective identity beyond ethnic divisions. An in-depth focus on the everyday experiences and achievements will enable students to appreciate the richness of their shared heritage and promote national cohesion.

In addition, inter-faith dialogues play a crucial role in mediating religious and ethnic tensions, as exemplified by the Kaduna Peace Commission. This commission serves as a platform for open discussions and negotiations between different religious and ethnic groups to address conflicts and promote mutual respect. Through constructive dialogues and collaborative efforts, communities can work towards peaceful coexistence and harmony (Olaitan, 2023). Through encouraging empathy and understanding, interfaith dialogues can bridge divides and build trust among diverse populations.

Overall, prioritizing shared history in education and promoting inter-faith dialogues are essential strategies for promoting unity and harmony in multicultural societies. These initiatives not only celebrate diversity but also emphasize the shared values and aspirations that bind communities together. Thus, embracing inclusivity and dialogue in Nigerian society could move towards a more peaceful and cohesive future.

Conclusion

Ethnic pluralism remains a significant challenge in Nigeria in the post-colonial era, posing obstacles to the establishment of a true democratic and sustainable nation-state. Despite these challenges, Nigeria has

implemented various institutional programs like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) to address the ethnic divisions and promote national unity. The ongoing efforts of these initiatives are geared towards fostering a sense of national cohesion among the diverse ethnic groups in the country. Tackling the remnants of colonial legacies through the reformation of exclusionary systems and the emphasis on promoting equity in Nigeria has the potential to turn its diversity into a unifying force. For instance, the NYSC program mandates that graduates from different ethnic backgrounds serve in regions outside their own, fostering cross-cultural understanding and unity. Through such measures and a commitment to inclusivity, Nigeria can harness its diverse population to build a more united and prosperous nation.

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