# Socio-Cultural Factors and Ethnic Group Relationships in Contemporary Nigerian Society

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Much has been discussed and written about ethnicity. This paper is therefore intended as a contribution to the management of interethnic/intercultural conflicts in Nigeria, with a focus on new ways of handling the basic socio-cultural institutions shaping ethnic consciousness. Furthermore, this paper highlights the basic social cultural institutions in the country, addresses their contribution to the present ethnic conflicts and suggests ways of harnessing their potential to stimulate tolerance in an inevitably ethnically diverse nation.

#### INTRODUCTION

nation with diverse ethnic groups and thus cultural diversity would indubitably face difficulties in formulating, articulating and implementing strategies that would be acceptable to its vast constituency. That not withstanding, development initiatives must pay serious attention to this issue because failure to address diversity can jeopardise such efforts. When one delves deeply into the issue of ethnic group relationships in Nigeria, one finds that crucial factors that often surface, and which must be attended to, are the phenomenon of "Socio-cultural factors" and "Ethnicity."

#### 1. Culture and Socio-cultural Factors

Culture has become a topical issue in contemporary developme discourse. This could be related to the suggestion by Shuknab Kangas and Phillipson (cited in Jerman, 1998) that since the linguistic and cultural identity constitutes the core of the cultures most ethnic groups, "absence or denial of these linguistic are cultural rights could promote conflict and violence."

Culture is seemingly so all encompassing that some people finding it difficult to define it, fall into the bandwagon of those whonchalantly say, "Culture is the man or Culture makes the man probably because culture is viewed only as the values, institution practices and norms that guide people's relationships interactions. For me, this is merely a static view of culture which would suggest that man has remained the same since the days our ancestors. Indeed, Jerman (1998) captures the ever-changing dynamics of the term thus:

The way one relates to somebody has to do with culture. What is very important is to make an attempt to understand the dynamics of social relationships in the environment, since culture is integrated in society and social development it must be made manageable. Culture is heterogenous, dynamic and holistic.

The inference therefore is that apart from the social and cultur criteria such as common descent, common language of which ware familiar, and which distinguish one group from the other in society, other crucial elements or factors are regrettably omitte. For this paper, socio-cultural factors englobe the economic, social political and educational establishments in a specific society. Society wherever cultural/ethnic conflicts occur, every facet of that societies shaken or upset.

# . Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts

Obioha (1999) posits that, "Consciousness of one's ethnic origin or ackground is a psycho-sociological reality that is largely universal an nature. Ethnic consciousness may be described as that subconscious or conscious identification with one's ethnic ackground." The reasoning therefore is that conflicts abound in all ocieties. It could begin with simple misunderstandings to a point then open and uncontrollable violence is inevitable, and a constant hostile environment is entrenched (Osaghae, 1993). He also attests that ethnic conflicts could be non-violent or violent. Ion-violent ethnic conflicts occur as part of our daily existence and are evident in competitive party politics, judicial redress, media rotests and peaceful demonstrations. However, ethnic conflicts abitually become violent when government either gives a egative response or failes to respond to persistent expressions of ispleasure (Osaghae, 1994).

n brief, ethnic conflicts are bound to occur when people with iverse cultures, economic conditions and political systems are rought together regardless of their dissimilarities (Obioha, 1999).

## . The Emergence of Ethnicity in Nigeria

cohen (1969:4) depicts ethnicity as the strife among ethnic groups in their bid to stress their identity and exclusiveness. The stress ould be on the uniqueness of their language (linguistic) or cultural eritage. This could also corroborate the argument of some African cholars that ethnicity existed even in our traditional African ocieties in form of ethnic boundary disputes.

Ionetheless, it is still upheld that the genesis of ethnic crises in frica could be traced to the manner with which ethnic groups were haphazardly crammed into African States after colonial onquests (Ake, 1993:32, Uroh, 1998:98). Nigeria's Colonial Governor in the 1920s, Hugh Clifford cited in Coleman (1958:194),

explained to members of the National Council for British West Africa that this cramming together of the territories of erstwhile distinct people to form colonial territories was a premeditated policy of the colonisers. The same Colonial Governor claimed to be "convinced of the rights, for example, of the people of Egbaland... of any of the great Emirates of the North... to maintain that each one of them is, in a sense, a nation...(and that) it is the task of the government of Nigeria to build and fortify these institutions." From this statement, it can be deduced that though the colonisers acknowledged the differences between the ethnic groups that were crammed together, the ultimate goal was to dispossess them of the values and practices that had served as facilitators of social identity and cohesion (Ebijuwa, 1999). More so, for Oladipo (1998:108) the main aim of this cultural and social dispossession was to exert such intense control over the people of the colonies that they would be powerless to question not only colonial practices but also their guiding assumptions.

Colonial leaders also contributed to the growth of ethnic conflicts with the imposing of Hausa/Fulani Emirs on the non-Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups. In effect, leaders of these non-Hausa/Fulani groups were punished for disobedience to the artificially instituted authorities. Obiorah (1999) alludes that memories of that period could have provoked the Zangokataf/Hausa conflict of 1992.

In addition to its exploitative and oppressive action, colonialism also created a new bourgeoisie class in Africa. After independence, Nzongola Ntalaja cited in Ebijuwa (1999) reported that the Nationalists were not only concerned with taking over power from the Europeans, but also with creating opportunities for plundering the economy to ensure that existing benefits went to them, their cronies and people of kindred ethnic groups.

From another angle, Udoh (1998:43) argued that the old colonial urban centres, after rural migration, were the breeding ground for contemporary ethnicity. It was in these urban centres that ethnic

groups acquired that common consciousness and perceived themselves as separate and autonomous groups. Also, Lloyd cited in Modo (1999) reported that it was with the colonisation of Nigeria that the ethnically explicit terms-Yorubaland, Igboland and Hausaland gained common usage. Not surprisingly therefore, before independence, major ethnic groups saw a need to be united to enhance their chances. As such, the Ibibio Union was formed in 1928, the Igbo State Union in 1934, the Pan Yoruba Organisation "Egbe Omo Oduduwa" in 1945 and the "Yam Lyar Mulamen Arewa"- Northern Peoples' Congress in 1949 and the Birom Progressive Union for the Middle Belt in 1950 (Udoh, 1998:45).

Finally, using Nigeria as a case in point, from 1960 to the present, Northerners have with persistent control of power, cunningly initiated and executed policies and programmes that would secure key leadership positions for them in the political and economic spheres of the country. Ebijuwa cited the case of the much-disputed Federal character clause in the 1979 constitution (section 14 (3) (a)) presented below:

The composition of the government of the federation or any of its affairs should be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

Although the inclusion of this principle in the constitution was meant to prevent the domination of Nigeria's affairs by persons from a few States or ethnic groups, Northerners have manipulated this principle to control political power and thus put obstacles to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. Other ethnic groups are guilty of

the same offence. There was the case of Dr. Ikejiani, an Easterner and Chairman of the Nigeria Railway Corporation in the first republic. He was responsible for the appointment of Ibos as majority holders of senior staff positions of the Nigerian Railway Corporation and majority staff in the Nigerian Ports Authority (Bamisaye, 1976:90). Similarly, Chief Obafemi Awolowo played on his close relationship with General Yakubu Gowon, (the then Nigerian Head of State 1967-1970) and the economic vacuum created by the lbos as a result of the civil war to advance the economic, educational, industrial and bureaucratic security of the Yoruba people (Adesina, 1998: Nnoli, 1981). Whereas some ethnic groups had people in power creating unlimited benefits and opportunities for their growth, other minority ethnic groups felt sidetracked from the scheme of things and this led to a lack of confidence and trust in those governaning them. Ebijuwa (1999) further explains that:

as the state becomes derelict in its responsibility to its citizens, that is being unable to cater for the common good of its citizens, they gradually withdraw into their tribal or ethnic enclaves for social fulfilment. This withdrawal is enhanced because of the great value traditional Africans attach to their communal way of life.

It is indeed obvious that regardless of the contribution of colonial rulers to the growth of ethnicity in Nigeria, ethnic conflicts may remain unmanageable when certain issues remain unresolved. For instance, consider, the incessant disregard for the needs and interests of diverse ethnic groups in the country or when one ethnic group is consistently in authority and another ethnic group is consistently in a minority position without due attention to its needs and interests.

#### **EMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

geria (Year 1995)

rban Population:	39.3%	Rural population:	60.7%

opulation by ethnic composition

ausa:	21.3%	Edo:	3.4%
oruba:	21.3%	Tiv:	2.2%

o: 18.0% *ljaw*: 1.8%

ulani: 11.2% Bura: 1.7%

ibio: 5.6% Nupe: 1.2%

anuri: 4.2% Others: 8.1%

# eligious affiliation

Muslim: 50.0%

Christian: 40.0%

Protestant: 21.4%

Roman Catholic: 9.9% African indigenous: 8.7%

Other: 10.0%

purce: The Robinson Rojas Archive (1998)

eligion

which

Nigeria has a higher percentage of Muslims than any other country on the African continent. Not surprisingly, differences in religious inclinations have become the major social division in Nigeria. This could be attributed to the colonial tendencies that brought about a regionalization of Nigeria's religious geography. For instance, a greater percentage of Christians are concentrated in the southern part of the country while Muslims abound in the northern half of the country. More importantly, a high percentage of Christians and Muslims reside in many large urban areas. The Standard 10 report on Nigeria (2001) believes that this could pose serious problems because, "Just as ethnic separatism is more vital when ethnic groups are concentrated in space, so are religious conflicts more troubling are accompanied by geographical when thev concentration."

Related to this is the fact that religious or ethnic groups could seek to exert some influence on government. The Nigerian sharia'a law debate is a vivid example of a regional religious conflict.

Since the late 1990s and with the transfer of power from the military to civilian rule. Muslims in the north have ceaselessly demanded the introduction and use of the sharia'a (a set of rules and regulations as evident in Islamic law). In the heat of Christian protestation at the end of 1999, the Northern State of Zamfara was the first to announce the introduction of the sharia'a. After this announcement, several Northern States indicated intent to join in the seemingly laudable course, regardless of the fact that under such a law, the future of non-Christians would be either unknown or could be jeopardised. Though proponents of Islamic law explain that the enactment of the sharia'a will not apply to Christians. citizens of Nigeria are still wary of the deplorable act of chopping off of arms and legs as punishment to erring Muslims. There are also the segregation tendencies of the law which advocate separate taxis and buses for men and women, a ban on the sale of alcoholic drinks and separate schools for boys and girls in sharia'a practicing States.

The social changes that follow the adoption of the sharia'a in some Nigerian States are bound to affect Christians or non-Muslims. An example was the violent and bloody riots of mid-February 2000 that erupted with the announcement by the Kaduna State government that it was considering the introduction of the sharia'a in the State which has a strong Christian and Muslim following. Some people may view the sharia'a dispute as merely a conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims but The Standard 10 report on Nigeria (2001) analyses it as a battle by individual Nigerians over place. So, for the Muslims, religion and more specifically the sharia'a is of paramount importance in the making of place. This sense of place could include the embodiment of emotional associations, meanings and unique characteristics associated with particular places. For instance, a sense of place associated with many Islamic areas could be the massive human road block around Central Mosques during Friday prayers or the loud five times a day regular call to prayer.

Also related to religion is the recent September 2001 religion-motivated violent demonstration in the erstwhile peaceful city of Jos. There are indications that the mostly Christian population was displeased with the appointment of a Moslem to head a strategic post in the State. This displeasure resulted in bloody riots that got churches and mosques burnt, left many wounded, dead, homeless or simply dependent on relief material.

It is therefore evident that in Nigeria, people are often appointed or recommended to prominent positions in government on the basis of religious sentiments rather than on that of visible competence. This could be detrimental to citizens practicing minority religions such as the African traditional religion.

#### Education

Since the shift from traditional African education to the Western type, education is another socio-cultural institution that has posed a threat to ethnic group relationships in Nigeria. The debate among Nigerians always boils down to comparisons between the north and the south. Generally, educational standards in the coastal

states of the south have been far ahead of those in Northern Nigeria. This could be explained by the initial 16th century contact with missionaries or Europeans in the coastal towns of Lagos, Port Harcourt, Abeokuta and Calabar. Through untiring missionary efforts, these coastal towns were quick to imbibe European education before the later European contact with Northern Nigeria in the 19th century.

Thus, the disparity in education between the north and the south was great and made even greater with the colonial policy of indirect rule. Under this, Northern Nigeria under the emirs agreed to cooperate with colonial rule if the British did not interfere with the status quo in their region. With this agreement, missionaries were banned from operating schools and preaching in Muslim dominated Northern Nigeria.

With Independence in 1960, the political effect was even more critical. There was the growing fear by Northern leaders of losing their independence to more educated southern Nigerians. To safeguard their territory, southerners were banned from gaining employment in the Northern Nigerian Regional bureaucracy. While, in an attempt to close the yawning educational gap, a University was opened in Zaria, with entry requirements for northerners that were far below those required of southern candidates (Washington Times-Nigeria, 1999). Such imbalances in educational standards across Nigeria ignited negative ethnic sentiments against the aggressive northern bid in the area of education.

In order to offset or reduce this educational imbalance in Nigeria's multi-ethnic community, the "Quota System" was introduced for admission into all Federal educational institutions (Primary, Secondary Schools and Universities). The policy allowed 20% for those States categorised as educationally under-developed, 30% for candidates from the geographical areas in which the school was established, 40% reserved for academic merit and 10% for institutions discretional admission.

Inspite of the fact that this policy appeared fair on paper, the ideas of catchment area and the "educationally disadvantaged" were

misconstrued and misapplied by successive administrators or politicians for fifteen (15) years after its introduction. A major consequence is that academic excellence as criteria for admission is accorded second place with preference to being given to disagreeable non-academic factors that may steadily make our institutions breeding grounds for ethnic patronage rather than academic prowess.

To raise educational levels in Northern Nigeria without losing quality standards, other strategies were adopted by successive governments, especially the introduction of the national policy on education in 1977. These include free primary education, Universal basic education and Mass Literacy Programmes, with programmes specifically designed for nomads in northern Nigeria.

#### Language

Nigeria is the most linguistically diverse country on the African continent, if not the world. Also, while the continent has approximately 1000 distinct languages, Nigeria has approximately 25 to 50% of these languages (The Standard 10 report on Nigeria 2001). Though there is evident human linguistic diversity, the report upholds that the interaction of people with each other determine cultural forms and processes. This could explain the evident cultural complexity in parts of Nigeria. For instance, while two groups may be considered as one ethnic group because they speak the same language and partake in similar economic activities, there may be reasons to view them as disunited. This could be because differences abound in religious, political, settlement type and educational preferences.

With colonial rule, about 400 West African ethnic groups were brought together to form modern day Nigeria (Okonkwo, 1978). Out of the linguistically vast nation, three ethnic groups-Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo are the three main population groups in Northern, Western and Eastern Nigeria respectively. With the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, their three

languages were recognised as the major languages for conducting proceedings at the National Assembly.

As would be expected, the promotion of these ethnic groups and their languages was hotly contested, criticized and rejected by speakers of minority languages. Oha (1999) attests that vehement criticisms were based on the suspicion that promoting these three languages was a clear indication of cultural assimilation "...especially as language expresses and transmits culture or is perceived as a signifier of cultural identity." There is also the fact that language promotion could be pointers to ethno-cultural domination. That is reinforced by the fact that the three ethnic groups have constantly produced successive leaders and contenders to the headship of the nation.

## Marriage

Marriage is a very sensitive aspect of our coexistence in a multiethnic society. Ordinary, we would assume that inter-ethnic marriages would foster unity since it is believed that it would discourage kinsmen from engaging in conflict with their in-laws.

While this may appear easy on paper or verbally, such feats are difficult to attain. This could be because inter-ethnic marriages are often hindered by cultural and religious differences. For instance, the family of an Ibo woman from a typical Christian background would be reluctant to give their daughter out in marriage to a Hausa Muslim. It is believed that cultural and religious differences with regard to the perception and treatment of women could ruin a marriage before it takes off. Also consider the case of a Yoruba lady getting married to a Tiv man and being requested to have sexual relationships with her husband's cherished visitor. Of course, while the notion of wife hospitality may appear normal to the Tiv people, it would appear weird to the Yoruba bride.

While I am not implying that inter-ethnic marriages do not occur, my summation is that they are minimal and should be encouraged. For when we have relatives in almost all ethnic groups in the

country, peaceful existence could be assured, for it is unlikely that brothers would go to war with one another. With inter-ethnic marriages, people could be encouraged to adopt attractive names from other Nigerian tribes. For now, people are afraid to adopt names other than their tribe's because even a name could cause one to be marginalised in the allocation of scarce resources.

## **Dressing**

This is an aspect of our socio-cultural existence in which there is evident mutual intermingling and appreciation. Previously, there was a trend towards wearing mostly western clothes especially in the southern part of the country. This has changed in recent times, as there is a greater appreciation of traditional clothes.

The southern Nigerian has always been favourably disposed towards the northern style of dress possibly due to their more cosmopolitan and liberal views of events and trends, which includes dressing.

The dressing style of the middle belt has never really been accepted outside their ethnic group, possibly because they have always been marginalised in contemporary Nigerian society.

It is my opinion that with the mounting call for acceptance and relevance in the mainstream of the society, and with increasing political and economic self-determination and freedom from Northern control, the dressing style of the people of the Middle belt will gradually gain popularity amongst other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

In recent times, identifying ethnic groups based on dressing, especially in the metropolitan areas, has become increasingly difficult, as there is a high degree of homogeneity in the dress habits of the contemporary Nigerian. This can be interpreted to mean greater acceptance of each other and a desire for further social and cultural integration.

#### Music

Music has always been one of the most powerful tools for se expression, especially amongst Africans, and the various tribes Nigeria have made great use of this means of expression. T fluid movement of dancers is also used to convey messag rooted in our African past but relevant to the occasion.

These forms of expression have gone a long way in fostering interesting relationships as children are taught the various music a dance routines of the several tribes that make up the entity call Nigeria as part of their school curriculum. Also, during national a regional celebrations, the music and dance routines of vario ethnic groups are exhibited for the enjoyment and appreciation all.

# Ethnic group relationships and the right to power

It would be impossible to have a meaningful discussion of soc cultural factors and ethnic group relationships without addressi the political implications. Conflict over control of power in Nige pervades all sphere of life and assumes different forms- it could a persistent rage between the north and south, moslems a christians, minority and majority ethnic groups, the rich and t poor. Whatever form it takes, caution is advised in handling caus of disagreement.

Northern Nigeria has produced the Nation's military heads of Stafor 34 out of the 41 years of its Independence. More saddening the fact that those military administrations have contributed ethnic group divisions in the country. This is because since most the high-ranking military officers were of Hausa/Fulani origin, efforts were directed at enhancing the lot of the northerners duri their long tenure in office.

The present transition to civil rule and Obasanjo's president ticket could be related to calls for a shift in power from the north the south especialy as it is known that a southerner, Mosho Abiola, clearly won the controversial June 12 election in 1993, but the northern military rulers annulled the election, leaving the nation in a confused state for about five (5) years and thus paved the way for increased tribal political groupings and primordial loyalties. It therefore became more evident that the key unifying factors that prevented some ethnic groups from seceding is chiefly oil revenue and an aggressive military strength.

Probably to appease the injustice of the 1993 election, the last presidential election was keenly contested between two (2) Yorubas - Olusegun Obasanjo and Olu Falae.

The former emerged as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

On taking over the mantle of leadership, Obasanjo on the basis of State identification, endeavoured to appoint Ministers and other top-level officials from key ethnic groups. Nevertheless, several ethnic groups in Northern and Southern Nigeria voiced their displeasure at being constantly marginalised. Such disgruntlement, has sentenced the nation to a sad game of ethnic politics where only the strong survive.

Not one to have his spirit dampened, the current President, Olusegun Obasanjo, proffered this unique thesis on ethnicity:

The ethnic factor exists more with the elite who want power and office.

They are the people we have to watch. It is the elite that deserves special appeal as the ordinary people do not pose any danger to the unity and peace of the nation.

The President is adamant that the problem faced by the Nation lies with the educated elite who instigate the mass of illiterate people in their ethnic groups and encourage them to fight for the actualisation of what they do not understand, telling them that it is for the enhancement of their standard of living.

Other dimensions abound in this ethnic tousle. Ejibuwa (1999) pointed out that there is a common tendency in plural societies to inflict the view of the majority on minority ethnic groups and deny the minority the means with which to satisfy their basic needs and make use of the opportunities or benefits to be derived from being Nigerians. A typical case is the ever-boiling Niger Delta, the enclave of minority ethnic groups that generate over 85% of the country's oil wealth. Yet, these ethnic groups are plagued with socio-economic and ecological problems that could be attributed to "... certain ethnic groups who are simply interested in exploiting the offices of the Nigerian State rather than its transformation."

At present, minority ethnic groups predominantly from Southern Nigeria, have persistently asserted their claim to the presidential post because they are tired of being marginalised regardless of the fact that they produce the nation's oil wealth.

# Ethnic Group Relationships and Competition for Scarce Resources

One of the main causes of ethnic conflicts between the Yorubas and the Igbos was the stiff competition for control of scarce national resources. The Igbos who arrived late on the scene both in exposure to Western education and to the cash economy rushed to catch up with the Yorubas in the 1950s and 1960s. This ardent desire to catch up was viewed with anger and mistrust because of the intrusive and aggressive determination of the Igbos.

Thus to Nwosu (1977:26), the scarcity of goods and services ultimately gives more value to the limited goods hence the competition for such scarce resources such as jobs, contracts, scholarships, political seats, career opportunities is fierce.

A major cause of this deisre to grab and accumulate resources, a situation that generates antagonistic relationships among peoples, is modernisation. Modernisation has increased people's desire for more highly paid jobs, better education, improved health facilities, good roads and other infrastructures that would make life more

confortable. Barongo (1987) in condemning the quest for modernisation says:

The allocation of these resources has inevitably had to be politicised.

Opinion leaders and elite members of ethnic groups have invariably tended to judge the development of the country in terms of the visible social amenities available in their own ethnic areas...All this has tended to create an environment conducive to inter-ethnic competition and rivalry.

Barongo aptly depicts what prevails in Nigeria. Competition pervades all spheres of our existence. Now, to be recruited to fill an advertised position, you must not only know people in power, but also come from the same ethnic group or even practice the same religious faith as those Godfathers in power that would be of help in actualisation your ambition. The same procedure is adopted in even in the admission of young people to all Government owned primary and tertiary institutions. Little wonder then that those from minority ethnic groups or who neither have nor know those in power should become frustrated with the system.

It is these frustrated products of our ethnic based society that are currently plaguing our towns in the guise of "area boys" (thugs, or street boys) and armed robbers.

#### Conclusion

From the foregone, it can be observed that Nigeria's socio-cultural environment is characterised by differences with regard to the cultural heritage, dressing, religious inclination and language of the various ethnic groups and their patterns of contact with Western education. But caution is needed in tackling the diverse needs of Nigeria's many ethnic groups and in taking decisions to ensure that

the nation's scarce resources reach a reasonable percentage of the population rather than benefit only selected ethnic groups or persons as as is now the case. More explicitly, the West Africa Weekly Magazine (1996) summarised thus:

...because our societies comprise a multitude of religious, ethnic...

groups with competing interests, competing values and needs, conflict is inevitable and natural to most societies... the challenge is how to develop African political processes, institutions and cultures that can mediate these competitions peacefully, routinely and in a way that does not plunge our society into the spiral of conflict and violence

I must add, at this point, that when tackling the issue of ethnic conflicts in our environment, it is be important to note that those that appear as stable societies world-wide are not necessary the ones that are devoid of conflict, but the ones that have, with experience, learned to manage conflicts to thwart explosive situations. The duty facing Nigerian leaders therefore is the need to reeducate people on the various socio-cultural factors that frustrate ethnic group relationships. These leaders should also examin previous solutions to the problems and look for alternative strategies, not necessarily to totally eradicate the problem, but to seek to understand ways to effectively manage ethnic conflicts in order to enhance social advancement and economic development.

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