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**ETHNIC MINORITIES AND THE NIGERIAN STATE**

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**Abstract**

*The ethnic-minority relationship is a universal issue in all multi-ethnic societies. In Nigeria, the issue started with the amalgamation of the colony, that is, southern and northern protectorates by Sir Lord Frederick Lugard in 1914. The out-cry has always been the marginalisation of the minorities by the majorities especially in terms of economic and political opportunities. However, in the course of history,*

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*some of these fears were allayed by epochal political developments such as the creation of states and local government areas out of the three (3) regional structure of the country which had hitherto entrenched the lopsided nature of the relationship between the two groups and heightened stiffed competition for power and meagre economic resources. Despite the devolution of power and restructuring of the Nigerian state; the problems of the minorities is yet to be tackled adequately. However, the researchers proffered some recommendations to the problems; and it is hoped that it would in no small measure make Nigeria a peaceful and developed nation in future.*

**Key words:** Ethno-minority, Nigerian state, power, marginalisation, development

### **Introduction**

In a multi-cultural society like Nigeria, there are bound to be some people who will be on the advantaged side due to either their population, early contact with the colonialists or their educational attainment. These always give rise to competition and struggle for equality and fairness in the distribution of resources, offices and positions available to the society to which they belong to (Galadima 2010, p.13).

This is exactly the situation in Nigeria since independence in 1960. The minority ethnic groups have been struggling for equality, fairness and full participation in the baking and sharing of the 'national cake'. The majority tribes are the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. While the minority ones are people of different ethnic groups found in the northern and southern parts of Nigeria (Galadima, 2010, p.13).

At the vortex of the ethnic minority question is the disenchantment with the structure of the Nigerian federation perceived by the ethnic minorities to be skewed in favour of the three dominant ethnic groups by the three ethno-regional blocs: Hausa in the North, Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. For the ethnic minorities, the federation is not inclusive and this results in political, economic and cultural marginalization. According to Anugwom (2000:73), marginalization exists when an ethnic group or any other kind of group feels disenchanting with the political system.

The three regions, the North, West and East have within them minority populations and each of these has its own peculiar problems. In the South West, the minorities asserted that the government at Ibadan was dominated by the Yoruba and that it would be difficult for a non-Yoruba ethnic group to become the Premier of the Western region (Ojiako, 1981:41). This led to the demand for a mid-Western Region. In the South East, the minorities expressed fear that the Igbos would over-run them commercially and politically (Ojiako 1981:41). For this reason, they demanded for the creation of a separate region to comprise of Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers States. In

the Northern part of Nigeria, the Ilorin and Kabba Division complained that the system had been autocratic and that a change to democratic methods was yet to be established. They demanded to be transferred to the Western region. In non Muslim part of the Emirate, there was strong objection to the operation of Muslim Law i.e. sharia law (Ojiako 1981:43). There was a strong agitation by minorities in the North central Nigeria for the creation of Middle Belt region to cater for their interest and self-autonomy.

Reflecting on the problem of minorities in general, David Miller (2003) underscores the point that “democracy ought to be willing to include certain basic rights in the constitution, precisely, to protect minorities against unfriendly nature of the majorities at any moment”. It is however important to observe that the problem of the minorities in Nigeria does not lie in the lack of constitutional provision and protection of their basic rights. Their problem rather, is a function of certain existential conditions, which negate the implementation of the provision. According to Toyo (1999:179), that

how constitutional provisions are translated into practice depends on who is in power and this applies to federal, state and local government levels and the party in power are of crucial importance. A political party of tribalists, power sharers, sycophants, greedy opportunists and get-rich-quick gangsters can never translate intentions of the constitutions into practice.

### **Definition of Terms**

Minority group constitutes the core of ethnic turbulence and violence world-wide. In a definition that adequately captures the critical properties of the concept, a United Nations source describes minorities as groups that are numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state in a non-dominant position, whose members possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population and who have, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, tradition, religion or languages (Thornberry, 1980, p. 257). Thus, minorities are considered to be culturally distinctive and relatively cohesive groups which occupy a position of numerical inferiority and actual or potential socio-political subordination vis-a-vis other cultural sections in a political community. Ukpo (1977:19) calls an ethnic group, “a group of people having a common language and cultural values”. These common factors are characterised by frequent interactions between the people in the group, community or region.

In Nigeria, the ethnic groups are occasionally fused together created by intermarriages, intermingling and/or assimilation. In such fusions, the groups of

which they are composed maintain a limited individual identity. According to Jega (2003:15), “identity politics is the mutually reinforcing interplay between identities and the pursuit of material benefits within the area of competitive politics”. This means that identities are used mostly in political competition by groups within a society for the distribution of scarce resources and procurement of positions, appointments, winning of elections.”

### **Theoretical Framework**

The problematic nature of ethnicity can be explained in the context of the conflict perspective. The basic assumption of the conflict perspective is that the social structure is best understood in terms of tensions between competing groups. The result of conflict is not necessarily violence, but more significantly is structural, and includes economic and educational inequality among others. It results in differential access to job opportunities, housing, healthcare etc. by groups due to certain social distinguishing factors (Usman 2014:285)

Social conflict can be defined as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain desirable values but also to neutralise injure and/or eliminate rivals (Nnoli 1978:47). According to the conflict perspective, groups with different economic and political power compete over control of the economy and power. Conflict perspective with regards to ethnic groups can be approached from two levels. The first is at the inter-ethnic level; minority ethnic groups are exploited by the dominant majority group who control the economy and political power.

While on the second level the conflicting relationship is intra-ethnic, whereby the dominant elite in an ethnic group subjugate and exploit the masses of the same ethnic group from within (Usman 2014:285). The implication of this is that conflict is inevitable under conditions of inter-ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources. There is no doubt that this type of ethnic conflict will strengthen the in-group and out-group feelings of the members of ethnic groups involved in the conflicts (Pal 1977:16).

### **Historical Overview of Ethno-Minority Issue in Nigeria**

Before 1914, colonial conquest had altered the pattern of inter-group relations in the Nigerian geographical area, but it was the strength of the existing interactive factors which made it possible for Sir Frederick Lugard to contemplate a proposal in 1913 for the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates which could have developed as two separate countries. The decision of Lugard to create a unified Nigeria on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1914 did not result from the pressure of local political groups;

it derived from considerations of administrative convenience. Lugard considered it unnecessary to carve out a territory undivided by natural boundaries, more so, since one portion (the South) was wealthy enough to commit resources to even “unimportant” programmes while the other portion (the North), could not balance its budget, necessitating the British taxpayer being called upon to bear the larger share of even the cost of its administration. It nevertheless, saddled the country with an issue – the relationship between North and South that has dominated its politics to this day (Osadolor, 2000, p.34).

The country was further divided into three regions; North, West and East in 1947 when the Richards Constitution came into effect, after Arthur Richards, who succeeded Lugard as Governor-General. With this new constitutional arrangement, the central legislature based in the capital Lagos administered the whole country, while regional Houses of Assembly were created in each of the regional capitals of Ibadan (West), Enugu (East) and Kaduna (North). These Houses acted as advisory bodies to the federal legislature on regional issues (Uwechue, 1971:5). After the Richard’s constitution, the Macpherson’s constitution of 1951 not only retained the regions but also accentuated their powers. To exploit the opportunities provided by the new constitutional arrangement, the Action Group (AG) was formed in 1951. It became an opposition party to National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon which later became National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led by Nnamdi Azikiwe. In October 1951, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) was formed specifically to serve the interest of the Northerners (Nnoli, 1980:157). Each of these parties encouraged regional thinking and being regionally based, the NCNC, AG and NPC became associated with the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa respectively. Following this, the structure of Nigerian government got transformed from unitary foundations to federal system. Regionalism got fully entrenched and institutionalized and for the first time, regional public service, judiciary and marketing boards came into existence (Nnoli, 1980, p.158).

Since the 1951 Constitution did not give the regions the possibility of maintaining their identity as part of a unified state, the political crisis was the inevitable consequences of the surface manifestation of deep and unresolved tension in two inter-related areas, that is, Northern fear of Southern domination in a self-governing Nigeria, and Southern dissatisfaction with the 1951 Constitution in particular and frustration over the slow rate of advance towards self-government in general. To find solution to the political crisis, the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttleton, convened a Constitutional Conference in London from July 30 to August 22, 1953 to revise the 1951 constitution, originally expected to expire in five years. At the conference, a federal constitution was accepted by the leaders of the main political parties. The

work of the conference was completed by a further conference in Lagos in January and February 1954 (Osadolor, 2000:43). The nature of competitive federalism before 1960 made it impossible to satisfy the increasing demands for local autonomy by minority groups within the existing three regions. For example, the minorities in Eastern Region formed the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) state movement and demanded a separate state. In the Northern Region, minority groups formed various associations to demand the creation of a Middle Belt. In the Western Region, the Mid-West State Movement demanded the creation of Mid- West State. The pressures from these movements led to the establishment of the Willink Commission (Osadolor 2000, p.44).

The first attempt ever to address the minority question in Nigeria was the Henry Willink Commission set up on September 25, 1957 by the Colonial Secretary. The Willink Commission completed its investigation in April 1958. In a recommendation that affirmed that the minority fears were not unfounded, the Commission proposed the balancing of power within the country so that there would be minimal temptation of the majority to use power solely for its own advantage (Ojiako 1981, p.44). While state creation was seen as the panacea to the problem of the minorities, the Commission downplayed this for the reason that it would create further minorities. Instead of state creation, the Commission felt that the interests of the minorities could be best protected at the Federal level by working out some democratic machinery which would safeguard their interest (Ojiako 1981, p.45). Although, the minority populated Mid-West region was carried out from the Yoruba West in 1963, the political aspiration of Nigeria's minorities for the security of their own regions or states was not given any real attention until the collapse of the First Republic in January 1966.

With the counter coup of July of 1966, in particular, the reins of power fell directly into the hands of Yakubu Gowon, an officer from the Angas tribe, an ethnic minority in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Furthermore, Gowon's decision to divide the country into 12 States in May 1967 dramatically altered the configuration of the federal structure and the nature of majority-minority relations. By giving relative satisfaction to the long-standing ethnic minority demands for new States, Gowon's 12 State structure not only overturned the structural hegemony of the North, but also liberated many minority communities from the regional stranglehold of the majority groups and undermined local ethnic minority support for the secessionist bid of the Eastern region (Suberu 1999, pp. 499-522). Gowon administration (1966-1975) and the Mohammed-Obasanjo government (1975-1979) progressively de-emphasized the long-standing principle of allocation by regional derivation in the distribution of centrally collected revenues. Instead these revenues were distributed on the basis of

population and inter-state equality. Consequently, whereas the old regions were the primary beneficiaries of commodity export revenues in the fifties and sixties, the new oil rich States were denied the export revenues derived from their territories by the centre. For instance, while in March 1969, 50% of both off-shore and onshore mining rents and royalties were allocated to the State from where they had been derived, by March 1979 only 20% of onshore mining rents and royalties were allocated on a derivation basis.

The State re-organisation exercise implemented by the Mohammed-Obasanjo administration in April 1976 further underscored the growing subordination of ethnic minority to majority interest in the post-civil war period. While Gowon's 12 State structures had included at least six ethnic minority States, the new 19 State structure consisted of a total of 12 ethnic majority dominated States and only seven minority-controlled States. Indeed, key ethnic minority dominated statehood requests for New Cross River, Port Harcourt and New Kaduna (Zaria) were overlooked in the 1976 exercise.

The return to civilian rule in 1979 did little to enhance the fortunes of ethnic minority communities. To be sure, the ethnic minorities did in a sense marginally benefitted from:

- The establishment of an American Style presidential system, which required the President to obtain appreciable electoral support in at least two thirds of the states in the federation.
- The introduction of the "federal character" principle, which required broad ethnic or inter-ethnic representation in the composition of key national bodies (Suberu 1992, p. 29-56).

The patterns identified in electoral processes of the first republic were re-enacted in the elections of the second republic. Though, it was presumed that the political parties of the second republic were new ones, the old identities and loyalties predominated and pervaded the electoral processes. Three of the five registered political parties were directly linked to the leaders of the three dominant political parties of the first republic. Though, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which was peopled by Sardauna's followers became the party of the north, while the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo became the dominant political parties in the states of the old Eastern and Western regions respectively. The fact that these political parties replicated electoral victories along established ethnic and religious lines in the 1979 and 1983 elections again provided ample illustration of the identity politics in the second republic (Ayokhai 2013, p.38).

The political arrangements that gave birth to the presidency of Chief Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo, a Christian from the south –west at the elections that ushered in the fourth republic illustrates an incontrovertible case of identity politics in Nigeria. Based on the circumstances of the state of the nation at the death of General Sani Abacha, it was the political calculation that only a president of the south-west extraction and of the same ethnic siring as Chief M.K.O. Abiola could atone for the sins of the annulment of the June 12 presidential election and douse the tension in the already overheated polity.

### **The Challenges of Ethnic Minorities in Nigeria**

The success of democratic experiment in a country can be attributed to a political party that has a strong mass support and leaders that have interest of the nation at heart.

Nigeria had political parties built along religions and leaders that were naïve and selfish (Achebe, 1964, p.13). In the 1964 elections, three major regionally based and tribally sustained political parties came existence. The major competitors were the Northern People's Congress (NPC), Hausa in the North, the Yoruba and Action Group Party (AG) in the West, and the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and the Ibo in the East. There were also the virile but minority ethnic groups such as the Bini and Urhobo in the Mid –West, the Tiv and Idoma in the Middle Belt and others in the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) area (Ojigbo 1980:19). (The main-stay of the NPC whose motive was the consolidation of Northern hegemony) .The United Progress Grand Alliance (UPGA) formed by the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) and Action Group (AG), Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) was to halt hegemony (Ojigbo 1980, p.19). This trend still continues today.

The other feature that the party politics exhibited and which affected the smooth functioning of democracy was the increasing use of violence. The parties employed violent tactics which sometimes involved the physical elimination of opposition candidates. This was well seen during the 1964 elections when opposition candidates were harassed, prevented from campaigning and even the filling of nomination papers was made impossible (Osaghae 1998, p.45). This has been a culture from the post-colonial era to the present day democratic experience.

Also, the post- civil war period after 1970 was characterised not just by an explosion in revenue from petroleum exports, but also by various attempts to unify the country particularly after the intense trauma of the crises of 1966 and the Civil War of 1967 to 1970, led to the very deliberate efforts at establishing the representativeness of

national institutions. This was the context for the adoption of the constitution provision on 'federal character' in the 1979 constitution. The federal character principle, which directs that "the composition of the Government of the federation or any of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria ... has been employed, this aims to ensure that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few ethnic or other sectional groups or any of its agencies" (Section 8:1b, 1999 Constitution).

The posts that are subject to federal character application include those of Permanent Secretaries, Director-General, Director, Senior Military Officers, Senior Diplomatic posts, Federal and State parastatals, Agencies and Institutions. But allegations of marginalization still persist.

Also, State creation was seen as a panacea in the 1950s and 1960s by ethnic minority movements. But concrete existential situations appear to contradict this optimism. The reality is that the domination of regions has been thrown off only to be replaced by the domination of the majority within minorities in the micro-spaces called States. According to Larry (1983, p.475), ethnic minority fears and grievances centred around obtaining a fair share of the rewards and resources of an expanding economy and state; contracts, loans, scholarships, processing plants, water supplies, street lights, schools, hydro-electric projects.

Since then the number of States have multiplied from 12 in 1967, 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, and 30 in 1999 to 36 in 1996. In order to bring governance closer to the grassroots, the number of Local Government Areas was also inflated from 301 in 1976 to 775 in 1996 (Osaghae 1998:63).

Though, with the State creation, there was unceasing marginalization in various states by some ethnic minorities. For instance, in Benue State, Tiv, a major ethnic group, which is a smaller group in the Nigerian context, dominates other smaller ethnic groups within the state, such as Idoma, Igede, Jukuns and others. It is alleged that since the creation of Benue State, only the Tivs have governed the state while the other groups have been sidelined. As Dare Babarinsa argued, "that unless constitutional rotation is adopted, I don't think in the nearest future any other nationality there would produce the Governor apart from the Tivs" (*Tell Magazine*, May, 2002, p.3).

Another mechanism employed in the settlement of the question is that of federalism. But in the midst of federalism, the minority groups assert that since independence, ruler-ship of Nigeria has been monopolized by the northern majority in partnership with the Igbo and Yoruba to the exclusion of the minorities.

The Gideon Orkar's attempted coup of April 22, 1990 is regarded in some quarters as a minority rebellion and given what the coup makers articulated as reasons for the attempted coup. The coup announcer presented it as a revolution executed for the marginalized, oppressed and enslaved people of the Middle Belt and the South so as to free them from external slavery and colonization by a clique ([www.dawodu.com/orkar.htm](http://www.dawodu.com/orkar.htm) 09/02/2014).

Also, it is in this connection that resource control agitators have argued that Nigeria has not been practicing true federalism in both political and fiscal terms. It is however, noteworthy that the Igbos, one of the big three that supposedly dominated the regions, at present has joined the queue of the marginalized. This sense of marginalization on the part of the Igbos has brought forth the ethnic militia, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) aimed at drawing attention to the marginalization of the Igbos in Nigeria using a non-violent approach. The Yoruba ethnic group at one point agitated for secession from the Nigerian federation to form Oduduwa Republic and the incessant debate and counter debate for shift of power to the South is a clear demonstration of feelings of alienation, exclusion and outright denial to rule (Idowu 1999, p.85).

Also, in the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war when the hopes of the Niger-Delta minorities that they would gain full rights over the oil mined in their territory were dashed by the shift from the allocation principle of derivation to those of equality and population of states which benefited the big ethnic-nationality groups which had historically marginalized the minorities. Federal fiscal centralisation under military rule further alienated and shut off the Niger-Delta minorities from any direct access to oil, the new wealth of Nigeria (Obi 2000, p.269). Ever since, the oil minorities have mounted pressures for the return to derivation as a major allocating principle that would ensure justice, equity and fairness.

With the principle of derivation, each region would receive revenue from the central government in proportion to its contribution to the centrally collected revenue. Prominent groups were formed, they are, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Ethnic Minority Rights Protection Organisation and the Southern Minorities Movement. The pressures from these groups led to local resistance to continued oil exploitation. It was in this response that the Babangida's administration in 1991 raised the statutory allocation to 3% of their annual investment in capital projects to community development programmes in their area of operation (The African Guardian 1991, p.35). Also, resolving the Niger-Delta problem was a cardinal part of President YarAdua's seven point agenda. There were for instance, two issues to the region that he felt could only be tackled together: the challenge of development following decades of neglect and the burgeoning rate of criminality

characterized by the spate of kidnappings and violence. (Adeniyi 2011 p. 61) As a prelude to the summit, the President set up two Committees, and at the end of their sessions, the Committees, recommended the immediate increase of the allocation accruing from oil and gas revenues to the Niger Delta to 25 percent within a framework in which the additional funds are dedicated largely to new infrastructural development of the region. The federal government was also urged to create credible conditions for amnesty by setting up a Demobilisation, Disarmament and Rehabilitation Commission with a negotiated undertaking by militant groups to stop all kidnappings, hostage taking and attacks on oil installations. It was at this point that the idea of amnesty for Niger Delta militants began to crystalize (Adeniyi, 2011, p. 71).

Moreso, calls for sovereign national conference by spokespersons of some ethnic groups to decide whether they want to remain part of Nigeria as well as the future of the federation are indications that the prevailing arrangement is not satisfactory. Thus, the minority issue still remains unsettled.

### **Recommendations**

1. There is the need to address the leadership crisis. Attempt should be made to discourage the idea of choosing a leader because of his ethnic group, religion and political affinity. Whoever would serve to the best interest of Nigerians should be given opportunity to serve, especially at the highest seat (president) irrespective of his or her tribe, religion or political affiliations.
2. The cry by the minorities concerning political exclusion and marginalization is an indication that theory is not matched with practice in respect of popular democracy in Nigeria. Thus, sustainable development upholds popular representation, equitable participation and distribution of wealth as opposed to the selection of candidates whose loyalty is to the party and not the people.
3. To solve the problem of unhealthy rivalry, Nigeria should operate a truly federal system in which every section or even ethnic group is autonomous in regard to its internal affairs.
4. Since policies of reorganisation are half-hearted, attempts at readjusting revenue allocation had met with failure, the only way is to make the Niger Delta communities in particular “stakeholders” in the oil economy of the country.

### Conclusion

Since the attainment of independence in 1960, the ethnic-minority groups in Nigeria were subjected to a majoritarian oppression, founded on the ethno-regional structure of the country. Many ethno-minority groups came up to project their grievances.

Though, many gains have been registered in the promotion of minority interests, many problems still remain. Be that as may be, the problem of minorities in Nigeria is likely to go on unless if constructive solution of ethnic minority problems are proffered through the promotion of equity and reciprocity in inter-state relations in Nigeria and equal opportunities with the majority groups are effected, only then will state creation certainly be meaningful to the Nigerian people and the unity and democratic governance in the country will be guaranteed. The resolution of this problem will not only ensure improved local identification with governmental structures, it will also make these institutions more responsive to the needs of their constituencies.

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