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**Federalism, State Creation and the Minority Ethnic Groups in
Nigeria's National Integration Project**

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Abstract

Nigeria gained independence in 1960 as a tripartite regional federal system which promoted the hegemony of three major ethnic groups (the Yorubas in the west, the Ibos in the east and the Hausa-Fulanis in the north). The regions unfortunately did not form homogeneous ethnic entities as they were made up of myriads of ethnic minorities who were subject of internal colonialism. Consequently, ethnic minority groups in Nigeria have been engaged not just in different efforts to reduce the dominance of the major ethnic groups but also on how best to live side by side with them. Federalism and states creation exercises are two major solutions that have been tried over time in the quest

for national integration in Nigeria and they are the major focus of the paper. Both measures have helped to multiply the arenas of politics as well as rewards. They have also helped to reduce the pressure for capturing the centre. There has been continuing agitation for the establishment of larger number of states as the last hope of the minority ethnic groups in their fight for the liberation of their areas from the internal colonial order in which they found themselves.

Key words: State creation, ethnic domination, internal colonialism, national integration

Introduction

Conflicts involving the rights of ethnic minorities represent one of the greatest challenges to the Nigerian state and its strategy of nation-building and national integration. The high frequency of such conflicts and their potentially disintegrative effects give some observers the impression that Nigeria may never be firmly integrated and therefore may continuously find development elusive. Interestingly however, most of the rebellions by ethnic minorities in Nigeria as in several other Africa countries are expressions of rightful claims and demands of an economic, political and security nature. The problem of ethnic minorities is perceived in Nigeria mainly in the delivery of social justice, equity and equality. Through demands and advocacy for justice, ethnic minorities in Nigeria have been able to force certain social and political measures towards addressing their fears while addressing the challenges of national integration. With no intention to down play others; this paper will focus on two measures: federalism and state creation. The objective of the paper is to show that both measures have been effective instruments of national integration in Nigeria in spite of the continued challenges and limitations of nation building in the country. Federalism and the issue of state creation have come to encapsulate many of the contradictions and conflicts associated with the political management of cultural plurality in Nigeria. State creation exercises in particular have been helpful to Nigeria's ethnic minorities in their quest for self-determination and equality in the power equations in the country.

The problem of national integration though common to all political systems, is particularly acute in a plural polity like Nigeria, which is remarkable for her heterogeneity. Nigeria has one of the most remarkable and complex ethnic configurations in the world. A major political challenge for the state in post-colonial Nigeria has generally been how to maintain national unity in the face of widespread ethnic diversities and competition for resources. Fear of inter-ethnic domination is a glaring political problem in Nigeria. Consequently, in analyses of Nigerian government and politics, problems of ethnicity and national integration are continuously significant and have received scholarly attention as well as public importance. Ethnic pluralism, understandably, gets reflected in the practices of competitively elected governments and public policy in Nigeria.

The area known today as Nigeria was inhabited by independent ethnic groups, before they were brought together and held together by various colonial agents: chartered companies, religious missions, and later British colonial administration officials. Whatever was put together before 1914 was grouped into different units- Lagos Colony and Protectorate with headquarters in Lagos, the protectorate of Southern Nigeria with headquarters at Calabar and the protectorate of Northern Nigeria with headquarters at various times at Lokoja, Jebba, and Zungeru. The Lagos and Southern protectorates were amalgamated to constitute the Southern protectorate with headquarters in Lagos in 1906. Between 1906 and 1914, Nigeria was administered as two distinct administrative units- the North and South. By 1914, these two parts were formally brought together to form the entity called Nigeria. Throughout these divisions and amalgamations, the people constituting the areas were never consulted. The overriding importance in the minds of the colonial officials was to find the minimum administrative cost for running the occupied territory.

British colonial policy failed to integrate the diverse Nigerian peoples. Instead, the country came into independence in 1960 as a centrifugal union of three multi-ethnic regions with one large ethnic group dominant in each region. The regions were indeed not homogeneous ethnic entities. The Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, numerically dominated the Northern, Western and Eastern regions of the country respectively. They are the ones that are usually referred to as the majority ethnic groups. Others like the Edos, Urhobos, Ibibio/Efik, Ijaws etc., in the South and the Gwaris, Tiv, Idoma, Kanuri etc., in the North are lumped together as minority ethnic groups (Omoruyi, 2001)

Conceptualizing Ethnic Minority and National integration

Ethnic groups are typically:

social formations which are distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The relevant common factor may be language, culture or both, but language remains the most crucial variable. As a social formation however, ethnic groups are not necessarily homogenous entities even linguistically and culturally. Minor linguistic and cultural differences often exist within the groups forming the basis for the delineation of its sub-ethnic systems (Nnoli, 1976 p.1).

Ethnic groups are socio-cultural entities, which consider themselves culturally, linguistically or socially distinct from one another, and most often view their relations in actual or potentially antagonistic terms. The nature of ethnic groups in each society and the competitive short-term tactics and long-term strategies they employ are functions of history and of the resources they seek to control. Ethnic groups in new

states and developing plural societies are in keen competition for the strategic resources of their respective societies. Ethnic minorities are however, small groups of people or ethnic identities with low numerical strength when compared to other ethnic groups with whom they coexist in a state or in the federation as a whole.

Generally speaking, a minority is differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion, and language, as well as identifying itself as a differentiated group by its members. Minorities are often characterized by their lack of power and their subjection to certain exclusions, discriminations, and other differential treatment. This definition captures the Nigerian conception of an ethnic minority as a small group of people who live in the midst of a larger ethnic group. For instance, the Etsako people of Mid-Western part of Nigeria with a population of 440,538 feel they are a minority group in Edo state when juxtaposed with numerically stronger neighbours like the Benins or, even on a broader scale, when they compare themselves with the Yoruba, Igbo, or the Hausa in the federation. Similarly the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta, though numerically the fourth largest ethnic group in the country is however, perceived as a minority group because they are only the majority ethnic group in one state (Bayelsa) and are minority communities in the diasporas of the six states of Rivers, Delta, Ondo, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River and Edo States.

What is evident from the above definitional discussion of the concept of minority is that it has a psychological import. Members of an ethnic group must feel that they share a common subordinate identity to be considered an ethnic minority, and the larger society should also perceive it to be so. The minority phenomenon may manifest itself in different forms. It can be economic, religious, occupational, linguistic etc. in nature. In the definition of minority ethnic status, it is not necessarily important that there is actual domination. What is important is that groups fear domination, for this influences their actions and reactions towards one another. Given this fear, the political system tends to witness the manifestation of centrifugal tendencies, as each ethnic group seek greater autonomy to protect its interests.

It is also necessary to define the concept of national integration as it applies to the Nigerian context. The Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake, (1976:9) defined integration by the extent that the minimal units (individual political actors) develop in the course of political interaction a pool of commonly accepted norms regarding political behaviour patterns legitimized by these norms. Similarly, Karl Deutsch, (1953) equated integration with the attainment, within a territory of a sense of community and of institutions and practices strong enough and wide spread enough to assure, for a long time, dependable expectations of a peaceful community. Integration involves not only the association of different cultures in a common arena, but also the forging of links that are conducive at a minimum to effective governance and communication between political elite and mass society. Integration is not merely

unification; it is more than simply bringing diverse groups of political units under central control. Integration implies some level of effective commitment to the commonality of all groups or political levels, but it does not require the obliteration of primary identifications of ethnicity, religion, or culture. National integration therefore, pre-supposes the existence within society of structural and/or value conditions which enable collective decisions to be made and applied on behalf of that society.

The process of integration involves the penetration of the primary groups by a broader national identification. Integration entails the acceptance on the part of primary, associational groups of the fact that other group interests are legitimate and must also be satisfied (Grossholtz, 1970: 94). National integration in Nigeria is undermined by the lack of meaningful universal symbols, such as common heritage and historical past that could have bound the Nigerian polity together. Integration and negotiations with the colonial authority varied from locality to locality. Negotiation for independence, notwithstanding the long period of amalgamation, did not take place in unison.

Federalism as a Means of Inter-ethnic Integration in Nigeria

Federalism is a halfway house between separate independent states and unification. It is a process of seeking unity without uniformity in the face of cultural and linguistic diversity. Federalism is considered the most appropriate framework for governing multi-ethnic societies. Scholars of federal studies have little difficulty in appreciating the significance of the federal idea in dealing with ethno-politics in Africa and several other regions of the world. The global picture appears increasingly to be one in which the international community is turning to the federal prescription in order to regulate the management of ethnic differences and diversity, especially in those states where such conflicts have degenerated into violence. Indeed, over 40% of the world's population lives under federal systems today (Anderson, 2007).

It is now clear that moving away from a unitary government offers the potential opportunity to channel ethnic conflict into peaceful competition by dividing power and by distributing it between center and regions. Federalism modifies the effects of the perceived threat of exclusion by counteracting the tendency of a regional majority/national minority to dominate. The case for federalism in Africa's multi-ethnic states is that it will diffuse the intensity of policy competition for the top spots at the national level, relegating it to arenas where the stakes are not so high. In some instances, federalism can even transfer competition to levels of greater ethnic homogeneity. Federalism also offers territorial minorities a chance to govern in their home areas, although it may fragment nationalities into hostile clan-families-tribes. In countries where ethnic groups and regions remain closely tied, forms of federalism multiply the arenas of politics and therefore possibilities for cross-ethnic co-operation. In all cases, federalism multiplies rewards in politics and therefore reduces pressure for capturing the central government.

Federalism is indeed one of the several worthy devices that have been explored as part of the process of national integration in plural societies. Federalism offers political space in which groupings do not get wiped out and powers can countervail. Some African countries, like Ethiopia have proclaimed constitutions based on ethnically determined federalism. At the other extreme are federations that counteract ethnicity by prescribing provincial boundaries in sufficient number to cut across previously strong expressions of ethno-regionalism.

There is no reason to suppose that federalism inherently guarantee integration in a deeply divided society. The acceptability of the central political institutions and associations depends on the level of security that contending groups feel is provided them and their interests, and the cognition on the part of the contenders that the interest of other groups are legitimate (Grossholtz,1970).The ability of federalism to contribute significantly to integration in plural societies depends on a number of factors including the nature of power given to the units; provision for the representation of the units in the national government; nature of the party system, and the measures to protect minorities within the relevant units. It is possible however, that federalism may fail to perform an integrative function or may even contribute to disintegration for any of several reasons.

There is enough evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of federalism as a method for achieving integration in Nigeria. As pointed out earlier, federalism provides the potential opportunity for multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria to channel ethnic conflict into peaceful competition by dividing and distributing power between centre and component units (regions, states etc) in a manner that could diffuse the intensity of political competition for the top spots at the national level by relegating it to arenas in which the stakes are not so high.

The history of federalism in Nigeria reveals its effectiveness as a device for integration and the protection of minorities. To be sure, our attempt to conceptualize integration give no clear indication of what the end product would look like and how one would recognize an integrated polity. How much cohesion and which commonly accepted norms denote an integrated political or social unit? How would an observer identify integration, or is it dependent on some other manifestations (such as conflict) to demonstrate a lack of integration? What institutional form will an integrated unit take? Would it be democratic or authoritarian? Would it be a centralized organizational entity with full sovereignty, or would it be a loose federal unit? Or are institutional forms irrelevant to integration? (Neuman, 1976:1).

Federalism is one of the legacies of British colonialism in Nigeria. The choice of federalism by Britain in 1954 was in response to the political pressure for devolution because of the country's multiple languages, ethnicities and indeed economic differences among the regions. Nigeria has since endured as a federal system although

the absence of genuine democracy has affected federal constitutional arrangements and practices. Nigeria is Africa's most well-known federal system. There is a robust civilian political consensus in support of federalism in Nigeria. Nigeria stands out among other African federations by the sheer scope, creativity and ingenuity of the effort made to adapt the federal model to the country's ethno-political peculiarities (Suberu, 2009).

Nigerians in general finds in federalism, "the magic formula" for solving the governmental problems of multi-ethnic societies. As pointed out by Mazrui, (1971:300) federalism is "an institutionalization of comprise relationship, complete with the institutionalization of most essential ingredients; it is creative and flexible enough to incorporate several accommodation formulas." This, in fact, is what has made federalism the magic formula for integration in Nigeria.

Nigerians, especially those from ethnic minority groups, have never hidden their support for federalism. Nigeria's progress towards national integration may have been slow and tortuous but without the federal compromise, Nigeria might have already entered the graveyard of history. The one attempt made in all our post-independence history to scrap the country's federal constitutional structure and establish Nigeria as a unitary state vide the unification decree no. 34 in May 1966 by General Ironsi who came to power following the January 1966 coup resulted in serious problems in the country (Nzeribe,1986: 22). There was outbreak of rioting in several northern cities leading to a counter-coup in July 1966 by a group of officers (predominantly northern) as a result of which Ironsi was killed and his regime toppled bringing General Gowon to power and eventually civil war. Expectedly, on August 31, 1966, General Gowon abolished Decree no. 34 and restored the federal system, thereby confirming that Federalism was never a luxury in Nigeria, but a necessity.

Ethnic minorities in Nigeria have made more sacrifices in the past for the unity of Nigeria as a federation than the majority ethnic groups. The contributions of the ethnic minorities to the Federal war effort during the civil war (1966-1970) are very instructive here. The position which the ethnic minority dominated states took by supporting the federal government during the civil war, especially after the creation of more states in 1967, saved the federation. David Ejoor who was then the military governor of Midwest region had declared that he would never allow the Midwest to be used as battlefield in the event of war. For the ethnic minorities, the federal solution provides for them a cocoon of security on the horizontal plane as they interact with one another in a larger network. Thus, while the majority ethnic groups have contemplated secession at one time or the other, leaders of ethnic minorities all over the country have often stressed the unity of Nigeria. The majority ethnic groups actually, at various times threatened to secede from the country. In 1953, the Northern Region issued the famous eight point agenda that would have brought about a virtual secession of the region if it had been implemented. Similarly, in 1953, the Western Region threatened to secede

over the issue of revenue allocation and the separation of Lagos from the West as a Federal Capital. In 1964, following the census and election crises Michael Okpara who was premier of the Eastern region also threatened that the East could secede (Adigwe, 1974). In short the regions used the potentiality of secession as a political capital in their relations with the Federal government. The Eastern Region moved from this situation of potentiality to actuality by the creation of 'Biafra' in 1967 thus challenging the process of state building in Nigeria. The principle of federalism has helped Nigeria to handle delicate issues such as the establishment of Sharia Courts for Muslims in Nigeria during the Second Republic. Amidst the controversies over the Sharia Court of Appeal, it was finally resolved that there shall be for any state that requires it, a Sharia Court of Appeal for the state.

State creation: a Search for Homes for Ethnic Minorities in Nigeria

Nigeria emerged from colonial rule as an Independent nation with a federal constitution and made up of three regions. As rightly observed by Suberu, (2001, p. 127) "the palpable casualties and predictable critics of the colonially bequeathed trilateral federal system which promoted the hegemony of the three major ethnic groups in general and the oversized northern region in particular, where the country's estimated 250 minority communities which constituted approximately one third of the regional and national population." Expectedly, the nationalists opposed the artificial nature of the regions and the provinces and urged the dismantling of the regions and the creation of provinces based on ethnic communities. They argued that provinces should be created along ethnic lines and indeed, advocated the right of ethnic communities to states or regions of their own as the only basis for a federal system of government in Nigeria (Awolowo, 1966, p. 99) As pointed out by Ola Balogun (1973, p. 26) "as far back as 1945, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe had advocated the creation of eight states, while chief Awolowo went as far as recommending the creation of 40 states in 1947." The Mid-west region movement came into being in 1951 under the direction of Oba Akenzua of Benin in the Western Region. The people of the middle belt area also agitated for new regions to be carved out of the Northern Region and quickly formed a party, the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) to this end. In the Eastern Region, there was Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (C.O.R) Movement.

The Kanuri people under the leadership of the Bornu Youth Movement (BYM) also sought to equally have their own regional status in the North-Eastern part of the Northern region for the same objective as the others mentioned above. The principal motivating factors behind the claims of these minorities were the fear that they would be incorporated into their more populous regional ethnic groups and eventually cease to exist as a distinct ethnic group if they do not have regions of their own. All these agitations led to the establishment of the Henry Willinks' Commission in 1957 by the British colonial administration with the aim of investigating the problems of the

minorities and recommending solutions. Though the commission found the fears of the minority ethnic groups to be genuine, it however, did not recommend the creation of new states for them. The Commission justified its unwillingness to recommend the creation of states for the minorities on two grounds: (a) the new states will be lacking experienced trained staff and a proper framework of administration, and all these deficiencies may not be properly checked by the British Colonial Government, since the agreed date for the transfer of power to Nigerians in 1960 was fast approaching; (b) the case for new states was weakest in the northern region alone, thus it would bring about a still greater imbalance in the federation with an overwhelming powerful north and four or five smaller states in the south. In addressing the issue of domination, the Commission recommended the insertion of safe guards into the new constitution that was to be promulgated at independence, which was a short while away (Willinks' Commission Report, 1958). The pre-independence agitators for states creation decided to soft- pedal, when they realized that it was going to jeopardize the country's march to independence, since the British Colonial administrators decided to tie the creation of more states to an extension of the tenure of colonial administration in Nigeria; thereby ignoring the opportunity to create states before independence, in 1960. The emergent political class immediately following the country's attainment of independence, also found it difficult to create new states or regions except for the carving out of Mid-west Region from the Western Region in 1963. It took the aborted secession of the Eastern Region in 1967 before the Nigerian government in a panic measure split the country into 12 States in place of four in 1967. Minority ethnic groups were given their "homes" in Rivers and South Eastern States in the south and Benue and Plateau and others in the north. The splitting of the country into 12 states arrested the agitations of the ethnic minorities for more states, only temporarily as many other ethnic groups pressed ahead with their own agitations. Demand for additional states in the federation, reached another peak in 1976 when the regime of General Murtala Mohammed created 7 additional states. Even with 19 states in the Federation, more ethnic nationalities campaigned vigorously for their own states. The regime of General Babangida in 1987 added yet two more states, thus increasing the number of states in the country to 21. On August 27, 1991 the Babangida administration increased the number of states in the Nigerian federation to 30. By 1996 the number had increased to 36 states. Yet the demand for new states is still very much with us as several ethnic minorities are still struggling to have their own states. The 2014 constitutional conference in its report, recommended the creation of additional 18 states. (Leadership Newspaper, July 4 2014).

Expectedly, successive Nigerian constitutions since independence have included elaborate provisions for regulating the creation of new states and related boundary changes. State-creation exercises though often implicated in the crisis of unity and federalism in Nigeria with respect to its arbitrariness regarding geo political

resource distribution, has however, resulted in the empowerment of Nigeria's previously disenfranchised minority ethnic communities as well as vitiation of ethno-regional challenges to the authority of the central government. The ethno-regional hostilities over the 1962 and 1963 census exercises; the federal election of 1964; the iron and steel industry location tussle and the crisis over revenue allocation (especially after the Binns Commission Report of 1964) demonstrated the relative inability of the Federal Government to effectively control the regions within the Nigerian federal structure, before the creation of twelve states in 1967 (Ayoade, 1988). Before 1967, the regions were too large, self-sufficient, powerful and almost entirely independent. The federal government, which ought to give lead to the whole country, was relegated to the background. Most people did not even realize that the federal government was the central political authority in Nigeria. The creation of twelve states in 1967 provided a conducive medium for the federal government to assert its authority over the whole country.

The political geography of the creation of states contributed to the strength of the federal centre. For example the former Eastern Region accounted for 65.4% of the output of oil by 1967, and the Midwestern Region, 34.6%. The creation of new states altered the situation. Individually, the states are most unlikely to challenge the authority of the federal government. They are more likely to combine in order to put more pressure on the federal government to allocate funds to them, than to challenge its authority. It is most unlikely that any of the federating units in their present state can relegate the federal government to the background, anymore. They are neither geographically and demographically large enough nor are they financially strong enough to challenge the process of state-building by seceding, or threatening to secede from the country.

The act of creating more states no doubt aided the process of state building by strengthening the authority, and the scope of the authority, of the federal centre. Thus far, this has sustained the Nigerian State. The authority and legitimacy of the federal or central government is not in question in any part of the country anymore, though the legitimacy of political incumbents at the federal centre is usually challenged. For example, the victory of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan a southern minority from Bayelsa in the 2011 presidential election resulted in a new political debate especially as it relates to the accusation that the Hausa-Fulanis used Boko Haram (terrorist group) to destabilize the federal government under his leadership, thus reviving the ubiquitous minority question. The ethnic nationalities in the South-south would want to know whether they are equal partners in the federation. It is in the light of this perception of the southern ethnic minorities, that one can appreciate the current increased clamour for the redefinition of the structure of the country's federal system. (Aribisala, 2014). The close ties between many ethnic groups and states in Nigeria, has also helped to multiply the arenas of politics and therefore possibilities for cross-ethnic co-operation.

By helping to multiply rewards in politics, state creation has helped to reduce the pressure to capture the central government in Nigeria. It has to be pointed out that the Nigerian states have so far been unable to transcend significantly pre-existing socio-ethnic cleavages within and across their boundaries. This is perhaps due to the context in which states have been created; their establishment has largely been supported by temporary alliances among socio-cultural groups. Once their objective is achieved, they divided anew and new minority groups start to agitate for their autonomy from the new 'majority.'

Conclusion

Nigeria is composed of various ethnic national groups that are by and large distinguished from one another and resides in more or less well defined land masses. Forming a union has created an alliance between or among different peoples with different cultures. In such diversity there should be great strength, as long as there is cooperation based on equality, accommodation, compromise and conciliation and as long as one or two ethnic groups do not dominate the country. The paper reviewed and analysed federalism and state creation as measures that have been used in the quest for national integration in Nigeria. Nigeria has managed to achieve some degree of national integration, with its diverse ethnic nationalities working together for political and security survival since 1960. This is mainly due to the adoption of federalism and state creation. Federalism has been very effective as a device for integration and the protection of minorities in Nigeria. By maintaining a strong central government so that regionally weak ethnic groupings can find coalition partners at the level of central government, the Nigerian federation has largely achieved inter-ethnic moderation. The operation of federalism in Nigeria modifies the effects of the perceived threat of exclusion, by counteracting the tendency of a regional majority/national minority to dominate. Federalism has however, been an expensive and politically cumbersome and complex system for Nigeria. The cost of maintaining federal and state executives, legislatures and bureaucracies as well as local government councils and their bureaucracies are prohibitive. With the problems of welfare services, economic growth and other demands on public treasury, the federal solution is no doubt an expensive venture. In addition to the political economy of federalism, the need for bureaucratic outfits for the sub national units calls for the training of skilled workers to do the job in order to save the system from suffering intergovernmental relations related problems. States creation exercises have not only contributed to the increased strength of the federal centre but as anticipated by several observers and analysts, it has also gone a long way to solve the problem of ethnic minorities who have complained of domination by providing them with greater autonomy through their own autonomous states thereby freeing them from internal colonialism. To the ethnic minorities, operating as separate entities (states) in the wider Nigeria is more reassuring than to be subsumed and locked up in the regions to which they had been part. The initial agitation for new states in the

country originated overwhelmingly from the ethnic minorities. The 1967 and 1976 exercises were designed primarily to secure self-governance for politically vulnerable communities and went along way to assuage the fears of ethnic minorities. Later state creation exercises were more or less designed to gratify the economic interest of the majority ethnic groups.

New states have become more of conduit for federal economic and political patronage. Unfortunately, Nigeria's boom in oil is no more. Revenues from oil can no longer be relied upon. Further, aggravations from oil producing states are increasing due to poverty and neglect of their area and non-sufficient reward for the destruction of their environment. The 'distribution of the national cake' ideology should be removed from our political culture. Greater attention need to be paid to economic viability of states, their ability to generate substantial internal revenue and consequently establish a certain degree of autonomy.

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