

CHAPTER TWELVE

ETHNIC PLURALISM AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria like other African states is inundated with social cleavages including but not limited to ethnic groupings, religious differences, differences in educational attainment, cultural differences. A State is said to have social cleavages when there are marked differences in the indicators listed above – ethnicity, culture, religion, education, political advancements/attainment

The nomenclature of homogeneity or heterogeneity in terms of describing a state is usually in consideration of the factors that are already listed above-whether a state is multi ethnic or not. Whereas a State that has mono-ethnic composition, cultural similarity is referred to as homogenous, those that have multi-ethnic composition, marked cultural differences are grouped as heterogeneous societies or plural societies (Lijphart, 1972).

Notwithstanding the lack of exactness, scholars seem to aggregate at the fact that Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups with over 450 different languages spoken across the 36 states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The large size of ethnic groupings in Nigeria has increasingly put a lot of pressure on the politics of the State as the ethnic divides thrive for identity especially in the allocation of public goods in the State. Public goods here defined in terms of political appointments, distribution of infrastructure such as educational institutions, medical facilities, roads, electricity, delineation of electoral constituencies, creation of political units-states, local governments etc. Ethnic identity and identity politics becomes an important part of plural societies which also give rise to heating of the polity e.g. religious and ethnic conflicts as the ethnic groups tend to get more of the resources for themselves, fear of political and economic domination, agitation for control of resource, agitation to end perceived marginalization and quest for political inclusiveness

For a better understanding of the chapter and for clarity, the trend of discussion interrogates the following Concepts: Ethnicity, identity and identity politics and related issues around them. .

Ethnic Group and Ethnicity in Nigeria

Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin American States are ethnically diverse and divided. These societies are described as multi-ethnic or plural societies giving credence to existence of a number of social cleavages within these polities with their attendant impacts or implication. Chief among the social cleavages that are inherent in heterogeneous societies such as Nigeria is the issue bordering on ethnic consciousness and attachment and how it affects politics and governance within the State.

The concept of ethnic, ethnic group and ethnicity dominate Nigeria's political landscape and shape our everyday interactions at individual, group, political, social and economic levels. As a matter of fact the explanations given by various scholars vary. Some of the definitions and explanations are:

- a. Ethnic and Ethnic group. According to Schermerhorn (1978) the concept of ethnic or ethnic group refers to a collectivity within a larger society that has a real or imagined common ancestry, memories of a shared history, and a focus on culture with reference to one or more symbolic elements which makes meaning and sense to the people. For instance kinship patterns, physical and emotional contiguity, religious affiliation, language or dialect forms. From the definition here ethnic or ethnic group evokes among others the elements of:
 - (i) A distinct group of people- that is a people set apart from others by reasons of those values and features that make them distinct from all others in the larger community of people.
 - (ii) A common ancestry. This may be real or imagined. The people must have a sense of shared history.
 - (iii) A common culture. An ethnic group must have a common culture which may embody symbolic element e.g. the food the people eat, languages spoken, festivals and dance steps, more of chieftaincy arrangements and governance of their communities.
 - (iv) Contiguity. By continuity, one refers to the proximity of members of an ethnic group. While some would want to talk about physical proximity, we note very importantly that contiguity need not be only physical in nature. Emotional proximity can bond ethnic groups who are set apart from themselves. Eg the Yorubas in Nigeria may be

close to the Yorubas in Brazil through other shared artifacts which the distance may not be able to diminish. It is to this extent that some may actually see ethnic group as a nation.

From the preceeding illustration, it is germane to say that ethnic group does not in any way portray negativity. Rather it is worth noting the fact that ethnic group is one of the ways of dividing the human persons in the world. Every one belongs to one ethnic division or the other. The only time ethnic group attains a pejorative inclination is when one or two or more ethnic groups interact with one another that the seeds of negativity is sown through what is known as ethnicity. This is aptly captured by Barongo (1987), who advanced two propositions in course of discussing the basis of conflict and consensus in the Nigerian society. According to Giddens (2009), society is a group of people who live in a specific place, subject to a common system of political authority, and aware of having a distinct identity from other groups around them (Okoro *et al.* 2023). Firstly, Barongo (1987) noted that ethnic and elite conflicts are mere reflection of the competing economic interest in society and that these interests have a class base. Secondly, ethnic and elite conflict assumes intense proportion in a capitalist environment and less intense in states that promote socialist principles. The summary of the argument is that ethnic conflict exists or is magnified when there is competition for public goods of social, economic or political dimension.

One thing that comes to the fore is the unbridled nature of class and elite consciousness in ethnic conflagration. An example will suffice, in Abak market the Annangs, Ibibios, Igbos, Hausas, Edos, Ijawsetc, meet every market day to do business in peace. Trouble of damaging proportion involving ethnic groups can only erupt when there is class or elite clash with threatened social, economic or political interest. That goes to speak to the fact that the masses unless used as rented crowd do not instigate and propagate ethnic conflicts.

Cohen (1974) sees an ethnic group as an informed interest group with members that are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society as they share common ties – kinship, linguistic and religious. In the same vein, Professor OkwudibiaNnoli, one of the known ethnic politics scholars in Nigeria, in his book- Ethnic politics in Nigeria sees an ethnic group as social group within a culture and social system that claims or is accorded special status on the basis of complex, often variable traits including religious, linguistic, ancestral or physical characteristics (Nnoli, 1980:38).

On the other hand, ***Ethnicity*** is a product of ethnic group interaction often highlighted as a result of scarcity of economic, political and social goods. Ethnicity is therefore behavioural in form and conflictive in content (Mbalisi, 2017). Ethnicity assumes as noted by Achebe (1983), a discriminatory role against a citizen based on his place of birth. It is in this sense that ethnicity is seen as exhibiting a negative posture. Government contracts, employment, admission into tertiary schools, political appointments and others are allocated and conducted through the lens and focus of ethnicity. High ranking personnel of government in position of trust will only find those from his/her ethnic group worthy of consideration. It is within this

context that Irukwe (1996) refers to ethnicity as a belief in superiority of one's own cultural group and corresponding hatred or misunderstanding of other such groups.

Going by the trend of discussion above, the question is raised as to why the relationship between ethnic groups assume a zero-sum position or is it that it is the original nature of ethnic relations? Nnadozie (in Mbalisi, 2017) aver that the relation between one ethnic group and others become that of grab all and conflictual when one ethnic group perceives marginalization in the distribution of public goods. Mbalisi (2017) observes that when there is no transparency, accountability, probity in the distribution of public goods, inter-ethnic conflict results given the available or perceived nepotism, corruption, and politics by identity and predendal nature of politics. Here, merit is jettisoned and replaced by ethnic championship and solidarity leading to an intense competition and rivalry and struggle for the control of political and economic resources in the State. This is the order of the day in a State such as Nigeria where for the moment, there is disregard for merit, disregard for the rule of law, eulogizing of ill-gotten wealth and neglect of moral values. It is based on the foregoing that Nnoli noted poignantly that:

It becomes possible for an ethnic group to adopt aggressive behaviour and hostility towards the other ethnic groups as a means of limiting competition in its favour. Consequently, demonstrations, rioting and other forms of violent agitations become instruments in the relationship among the different ethnic groups (Nnoli, 1980).

In essence Nnoli implies that in a polity where there is shrinking economic opportunities, social injustice, bad governance, unemployment etc. recourse to ethnicity becomes heightened as a means of individual and group survival.

Identity Politics and Politics of Identity

There are three key words to be considered in this section, viz; politics, politics of identity or identity politics. These are to be seen in turn:

Politics: Politics is variously defined among others as follows:

- a. **Harold D. Lasswell (1936):** Politics is defined as the study of who gets what when and how? Here politics is seen as the struggle over scarce societal resources.
- b. **David Easton (1965):** Politics is the authoritative allocation of values. This means that politics entails the various processes by which government responds to pressures from the larger society by allocating benefits, rewards or in essence David Easton postulates that politics is the exercise of authority for the benefit of society.

Identity: Identity refers to a given person especially what makes this person stand out or set apart from someone. It makes a group set apart from another group. It relates to what/who an individual or group is. Identity therefore in a very simple

sense means who I am, what group A or B is. Identity becomes important as a measure or tool to establish distinction when there are different individuals, groups, etc. It is in line with this that Connolly (2002:64) notes that:

an identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not co-exist in differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies, themselves in need of exploration, to conceal established identities into fixed form Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self certainty.

It is our hope here to simplify identity to especially beginners in an undergraduate programme such as the General Studies (GSS) as a socially constructed phenomenon that evokes the imagery of the “we” and “them”. Nwaorgu (2011) captures identity as the defining parameters, milestones and consciousness of a particular group that sets it out from others and their specific concerns. In conceptualizing the concept of identity, Nwaorgu (2011) reiterated two important variables that transcend to mean the purpose of identity manipulation and usage:

- (i) That identity is separatist in nature and content and so highlights the ‘we’ and ‘them’ property, as well as the ‘others’ and ‘theirs’.
- (ii) The important consideration in identity resonates around material benefits accruing from control or the desire to control for self and not for all.

Identity Politics/Politics by Identity in Nigeria

Identity politics revolve around political discussion built on self-interest of self-identified groups where politics is shaped by their identity e.g. race, class, religion, gender, ethnicity, ideology, nation, sexual orientation, profession (Mbalisi, 2017). From whatever, colouration one views identity politics, same is caused or is a reaction to a people’s experiences or oppression and marginalization, perceived or real.

Earlier on in this chapter, we explored the concept of politics and noted that one of the ways politics is x-rayed is that it involves the allocation of values in a State (Ataire and Mboho, 2019)., in course of allocating values the political system determines who gets what. It is in this process that competition and all other aspects of political life come in, some members of the state depending on their political strengths get more of the allocated values, some less and some may get ‘nothing’. Identity politics is therefore a result and a cause to survive in what Nwaorgu (2011) defines as a suffocating socio-economic and political environment. According to the scholar, individuals or groups who feel shortchanged, marginalized and exploited would react in a manner that would appear they are pulling in different direction. This different direction is the self. It is within this context that identity politics is seen as a distinct type of politics and noted by Kruks (2001:85) as:

what makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identitarian, form of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very ground on which recognition was previously denied: it is qua women, qua blocks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of universal humankind on the basis of shared attributes; nor is it for respect in spite of one's differences. Rather what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.

Identity politics like ethnic politics (itself a form of identity politics) produce consequences that are seldom in the interest of all the groups in the state and by implication the states' interest. These separatist platforms of politics target sectional/group or self-interest of identity promoters. Identity politics:

heats up the political space and sends waves of grievance and resentment that altogether heighten the problem of insecurity, poverty and hunger. However, it is possible and plausible to think that "authoritative allocation of values"- values which are mainly economic, would not only deprive or curtail the rights, access and privileges of some groups, but can make others aspire to the position of being in charge of the allocation (Nwaorgu, 2011).

Nigeria's experience of identity politics is particularly heightened and brought out by the fact that the power elite in a bid to fulfill its class functions exploit the docility, the abject poverty in the society, illiteracy to continually promote their class consciousness. An array of identity based groups spring up every day- the Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF), Southern Governors Forum (SGF) Northern Governors Forum (NGF), Association of Local Government of Nigeria (ALGON), the Igbo Peoples Union, the Oduduwa fronts, Arewa consultative associations, the Ijaw national Council and others. One thing is common about them- all seeking primordial interests and not the interest of those for whom they claim to represent.

Factors That Promote Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflicts and Identity Politics Based Issues in Nigeria

There are a plethora of factors that have contributed to ethnicity and identity based politics in Nigeria. The factors are considered below:

1. **Heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian Society:** The Nigerian state is an heterogeneous one or better still plural society. The plural nature of the Nigerian state encourages the acquisition and monopoly of power by a few individuals and groups. It also provides grounds where the interest of the stronger group of individuals pre-empts and dominates public policy (Barango, 1987).
2. **Bad Governance:** For purposes of this book, government is placed on a continuum. On one extreme is good governance- where those in control of

state affairs utilize the resources toward enhancing the welfare of the people. Here people-oriented policies are formulated and implemented. At the other extreme where you have bad governance is where those in governance usurps the people's resources for self and other primordial sentiments.

3. **Dearth of Infrastructural Facilities:** Scarcity of important infrastructure in the face of increasing demand and patronage is likely to produce a resort to the use of ethnic and identity platforms to grab the few available. For instance in the face of rising unemployment, those in power and opportunity are likely to employ sentiments in the allocation. In admission formalities into tertiary schools in a situation where so many students are applying for few spaces, identity and ethnic politics are freely applied for the interest of those in position of authority, the siting of important projects such as universities, medical facilities, roads, refineries and many more are also likely to be allocated following ethnic considerations.
4. **Competition for available socio-economic resources:** Right from the colonial period, the coming together of a large number of people of various ethnic backgrounds especially in urban settings resulted in problems of resource scarcity, and therefore limited access, competition naturally ensued. After independence and to the present day given the increasing population, increasing number of those who have attained formal education, socio-economic opportunities are shrinking vis-à-vis demand. It is therefore a natural thing for ethnicity and identity issues to be injected in the allocation of the available resources (see also Nnoli 1980) today this competition manifest in the form of political and economic marginalisation where some ethnic groups feel excluded in the scheme of things. The agitation of the Niger Delta militants, the Obong Victor Attah led campaign for resource control during the administration of General Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, the struggle by the Movement for the survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the separatist agitations of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and many others border on the issue of political and economic exclusion.
5. **Undemocratic Governance:** For selfish reasons Nigerian politicians have used divide and rule techniques of governance to create ethnic splitters/divisions. Today, the number of ethnic conflicts increases by the day. Democratic governance by its very nature gives the people opportunity to express themselves which was a luxury in military regimes. However, the Nigerian state in reaction to the demand for inclusive governance and more participation by ethnic national ties has employed violence and different methods to clampdown on dissenting voices.

EFFECTS OF ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA

The negative effects of ethnicity and identity politics when weighted against its positive side of promoting duty in diversity seems to be overwhelming on multinational or plural states. We now discuss these effects.

1. **Challenges of state and nation building**

State building points to the process and capacity of the central government (Federal Government of Nigeria) to penetrate and control the component units to establish its authority. That is to mean that the component units and its people accept the authority of the central government without question. In the case of nation-building, it means the creation of a sense of unity and oneness among different nationalities. A nation is formed when hitherto different people feel that sense of unity and also feel loyalty to the central government not in fear of the use of instruments of coercion (Police, law, courts, prison etc).

Ethnicity pose considerable difficulty at the process of state and nation building especially when the ruling elite and the available institutions and socio-economic and political structures are not utilised for the advancement of social justice and the rule of law. The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 was an express resort to ethnicity and questioning of the central authority. 51 years after the war the separatist agitations by IPOB and other ethnic nationalities points to the fact that state building and nation building in Nigeria is still fragile. The call for political restructuring and sovereign national conference as instrument also questions the existing political structures and arrangement in Nigeria.

2. **Creation of Ethnic Consciousness:**

Ethnic consciousness is one fall out of multiethnic or plural States. In apparent reference to ethnic consciousness and attachment, Manfred. Halperin and Ali Mazrui (Udoms, 2008) coined the concept of Emanation and sacred emotional container respectively. The duo used the concepts to explain how a people can be attached to their tribe, ethnic group, religion or dogmas. Ali Mazrui for instance sees sacred emanational container as one of the problems of national integration of the African country (see Udoms, 2008). Earl Contch Morgan and Shireen Kadivar used Emanation to explain Liberia's conflict thus:

...in ethnic conflicts so many willingly fight for the preservation of their tribe such that the emotional based motivation surpasses any national cost benefit analysis (1995:3).

The ethnic consciousness is what leads those who champion ethnic causes to employ even destructive and dangerous weapons that are detrimental to the other members of the state. It can be said therefore that ethnic consciousness is the negative application of ethnic group interaction stimulate

consciousness. Ethnic consciousness promotes one ethnic group above the others. Now the promoters of ethnicity ascribe loyalty to their ethnic group at the expense of the overall nations-state.

3. **Uneven and Underdevelopment:** Ethnicity creates ethnic consciousness (Mboho, 2021a, b). They crave and attach to ethnicity, which prompt those in power and positions of trust to think only of their ethnic groups. Two scenarios play out from this:
 - (a) Those in power and with the responsibility to allocate public goods became ethnocentric, taking all public infrastructures, appointments to their ethnic group locations.
 - (b) The rest of the areas in the state are staffed of the presence of government. No presence of government, infrastructure and important appointments resulting in lack of development.
4. **Corruption:** Corruption is used here in its holistic sense: applying the misapplication; misuse, embezzling of public funds or resources for self and group interest. Ethnicity and ethnic consciousness makes those entrusted with public resources to direct some of their ethnic groups. To make this happen extant rules are neglected, the rule of law jettisoned. Lopsided appointments are made in form of one ethnic groups, public infrastructures sited against known principles etc (Mboho and Sunday, 2011).
5. **Income and Human Poverty:** In its agenda-role setting enterprise on Human security, the UNDP in its 1997 report highlighted on two important threats to human security: income aspect of poverty and poverty as a denial of choices and opportunity for living a tolerable life by people. While income poverty relates to the physical income at ones disposal e.g. U S \$1 a day and below and what this can fetch for the person, human poverty concerns issues such as illiteracy, short life expectancy, opportunities to participate in civic life among others. As observed by Thomas (2000:8) “income poverty and human poverty are often but not always linked: for example in the Gulf States, people may suffer human poverty without being income poor” (See also Udoms, 2016).
6. **Inter-Ethnic Conflicts:** Inter-ethnic conflicts are conflicts that involve two or more ethnic groups. In multi- ethnic states where there is often competition in a bid to grab public goods it becomes difficult for national integration. This may be due to mutual suspicion on the part of the ethnic groups.

Mechanisms for Managing Ethnicity and Identity Conflicts in Nigeria

The fact that Nigeria is a plural state is not in doubt. The state has also taken measures to manage the heterogeneous nature of the state. Among these are:

1. The adoption of the federal structure since 1954. Nigeria became a federation following the adoption of the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954.
2. The use of federal character principle to ensure social and political equity in terms of appointment, election into certain political offices, admission into tertiary institutions, etc.
3. The establishment of National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973 as a means of fostering love, unity and a means for the various segments of the country to understand themselves. This was one of the measures adopted after the end of the civil war in 1970. It was targeted at young graduates of tertiary institutions at least those who have earned NCE, OND and First Degrees. These young persons were enlisted into the mandatory one year programme and posted to areas outside their home States.
4. The unity colleges (Federal Government Colleges) established in all the states of the federation. Besides providing avenues for young secondary school pupils, the unity colleges were meant as was the case for NYSC to building bridges of understanding amongst the various parts of the country.
5. Nigerian political parties are established with national outlook. A pre-condition for registration of political parties in Nigeria is that they must have the geographical spread in terms of membership and presence of other party structures.
6. Another strategy adopted in the management of ethnic and identity issues in Nigeria is the state creation. The creation of state started first with the creation of the three region structure in 1946, followed with the creation of the Midwestern state in 1963, then the creation of the 12 states. Today Nigeria has 36 states and 774 local government areas

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