

# Ethnicity as a Culture in Politics and Administration in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this work is to espouse ethnicity as a factor in politics and in the practice of public administration in Nigeria. It stresses the heterogeneity of Nigeria, coupled with the deliberate policy of 'divide and rule' by our colonial overlords, which made national integration cumbersome. The policies which government made with a view to integrating and harmonizing the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria have exacerbated the situation rather than abating it. It therefore recommends that a sense of morality and discipline will make the people active in solving social problems.*

**Keywords:** *Ethnicity, politics and administration, culture*

## INTRODUCTION

Before colonialism, the geo-political entity now known as Nigeria existed as independent nations. These nations operated its own system of government and administrative system. As a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Igbo, the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani. The political system of a society is largely influenced by the political culture. Of course, political culture is said to be the values, identities, symbols and premises of any society. According to Hari and Choydhury, (2002) political culture is the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments which give order and meaning to political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system. It is perhaps, for this reason, that Ajayi and Ikara (1985) state that one of the value of exploring the evolution of political culture in Nigeria within its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting is to shed light on the extent to which some of the contradictions in Nigeria politics are due to clash of different norms which if better studied could contribute positively to the evolution of a detribalized Nigeria. The concern of this work therefore is on ethnicity as a culture in politics and administration in Nigeria.

### **Pre-Colonial Politics and Administration of Major Ethnic Nationalities in Nigeria**

The Igbo inhabit the forest belt area between the Cross River east of the River Niger and Benin west of the Niger. The physical features of most part of the Igbo land are characterized by thick tropical forest. The physical environment has greatly influenced the history of the people. This thick forest provides excellent natural defense against invasion from external invaders. There was no conquest of the Igbo people which could have influenced the

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socio-cultural development of the area as was the case with the Fulani conquest of Hausa land and parts of northern Nigeria and northern Yoruba land. Secondly, the inaccessible nature of the forest made mobility and communication among the Igbo's themselves impossible. Hence, no one Igbo group was able to unite the people under one government through conquest. These reasons explain the non-evolution of a centralized polity as was the case with Yoruba land. Another important reason was that the Igbo people are by nature extremely egalitarians and individualistic. They love personal freedom and strongly resent autocratic government over them. They enjoy living in small village republics. The Igbo government and politics, was a peculiar one. The society was made up of many clans, each clan comprising people who spoke similar dialect and have certain distinctive social and religious customs, traditions and institutions. Clans were divided into villages, while the villages were made up of people from common ancestor. A village is sub-divided into kindred. A kindred comprises a number of families who claim descent from a great grandfather.

According to Ukaegbu (2005), the highest religious institution in Igbo land prior to the advent of Europeans is the '*Ofo*' (God of Justice) under the priesthood of '*Aka ji Ofo*'. Issues pertaining to customs, traditions and rituals were referred to the Council of Elders (Ndichie). Generally speaking, the government in Ndigbo in pre-colonial times was essentially democratic. Each village was a small republic. However, the Igbo of Onitsha and west of the River Niger were notable exceptions to this general pattern. In these areas some forms of monarchical institution said to have been inherited from Benin has been preserved in the Obi or King such as the Obi of Onitsha, Obi of Aboh, and Obi of Agbor. These Obis like the Oba of Benin governed through a Council of titled notables known in Onitsha as the Ndichie or red Cap Chiefs.

In the administration of justice, the democratic approach was also used. The making of laws, the settlement of disputes and the punishment of offenders were not left to a selected jury but to the whole Village Assembly. In the event of more serious cases which the Village Assembly could not easily resolve, oracles such as the *Kalu* (god of thunder) of Ohafia, the *Igwekala* of Omuoha near Owerri, the *Amadioha* of Ozuzu, and the *Agbala* of Awka or the *Chukwu* of Arochukwu were consulted and their verdicts were final and indisputable. Ukaegbu (2005) notes that before the legal system of the Igbo people prior to the coming of the Europeans, 'the ancient Igbo had no earthly king; God was their king'. This is the foundation on which the Igbos built their worship of the 'God of Justice'. Therefore, the notable features of the pre-colonial government and administration among the Igbo are democracy, republicanism and equity and justice.

The Yoruba politics and administration was established before 1900. The Yoruba chief had to rule with a group of other chiefs whose opinions he must obtain on every important issue. He lacked the autocratic powers of the Emirs in the Northern Nigeria. As posited by Okonjo (1974) all Yoruba Obas trace their origin to Oduduwa the legendary prince who fathered the Yoruba Obas and whose ancestral home was in Ife. This fact, is said to have invested Yoruba Obas with the element of sacredness, and before their people, they were regarded as God's deputies on earth. An Oba deserves his throne only as long

as he truly administers the state with wisdom, benevolence, and concern for the people's welfare. He was not a despot and in practice, various checks and balances effectively checked a drift towards autocracy and despotism. The Yoruba people had a clearly defined way of removing an Oba who was considered to be bad. These ways were the sending of a parrot's egg or the ritualistic reciting of an invitation to go to sleep. Furthermore, the Yoruba system was segmentary in nature and more democratic than the Hausa/Fulani system as prevalence of autocracy was not clearly evident here (Chimezie, 1997). The Hausa-Fulani practiced theocracy in politics and administration. Muslim religion brought a centralized system of government in the Northern part of Nigeria. The Emirs combined secular and religious duties in one. He (Emir) was the head of his area administratively and as well as the priest.

The Emirs appointed people to head the towns under him. He had a royal council which advised him on state affairs. Again, he appoints people to posts such as the Galadima who were a high official of the royal council. The Galadima looks after the town in the absence of the King. Furthermore, he had an official known as Madawaki who was the Commander-in-Chief of the army. There were the posts of Waziri of Chief Minister, Magaji or Lord of Treasury, the Yari or head gasler, the Sarkin Dogarai or head of the king's bodyguards, and the Sarkin Yan Doka or Chief of the Police who took charge of prisoners charged with serious offences. He acted also as the town crier and watchman. In the area of administration of justice, the Maliki code of Muslim law was applied. The King was the supreme judge of the State, and he gave final decision in important cases concerning land, murder and manslaughter. He did these important duties with the advice of the Chief Alkali and his jury of legal experts. Lesser judicial matters were settled by the Alkali and his jury. In small village, the village head exercised judicial authority on minor offences.

### **The Field of Public Administration**

The term public administration is commonly used to refer to both the activities concerned with the management of government business and the study of these activities (Ademolukun, 1986). The practice of modern public administration in Nigeria could be traced to the amalgamation of Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria into one geo-political entity in 1914, by Lord Lugard. Thence, Lugard became the Governor of Nigeria, while Lt. Governors were appointed for the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria. The provinces were manned by Residents who had under them the District Officers and the Assistant District Officers and the Assistant District Officers who also served as advisers to the native authorities (Okonjo, 1974). There was also the Secretariat, the Executive Council and the Legislative Council. Under the Secretariat were the departments responsible for various services. It was out of this that, public bureaucracy was evolved in Nigeria. Hence, the characteristics of Nigeria bureaucracy were tainted heavily by the styles obtaining in the western countries like British, the United State of America and France; and such, terms like political neutrality, impartiality, anonymity amongst others became forms for public administrators or civil servants in Nigeria. For the policy formulators or politicians, the concept of separation of power, *primus inter pares* (first among equal), and ministerial

responsibility were norms to be generally kept (Humans, 1961). In modern public administration, there are objectives and goals which a department or parastatal is meant to achieve (Golembiewski, 1977). For instance, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) as a public organization is meant to ensure that television programmes are transmitted from one place to another within and outside Nigeria. Administration is said to be efficient only when the targeted objectives of the organization are being achieved and the services are being properly and promptly rendered to the people (Harzary, 1985). There is a sharp division of functions between politicians and civil servants. A case in point is the policy of public officers joining the Western Region Public Service. The great expectations the people had towards the modern practice of public administration in Nigeria immediately after independence stem from the enthusiasms of the people to participate in their own governance (Oronsaye, 1984). The traditional system of government in Nigeria had deprived people mostly in the Northern and Western parts of the country, the right to contribute their views on matters affecting them. In the words of Gboyega and Abubakar (1989) the public service in Nigeria was regarded as one of the most important legacies of British colonialism. The modern public administration as installed by the colonial masters has in-built checks and balances such as the principles of separation of power, equity and rule of law.

### **The Genesis of Ethnicity in Nigeria's Politics and Administration**

Scholars have pointed out that the politicization of ethnicity in Nigeria had its root in colonialism, which, through the obnoxious 'divide and rule policy', encouraged the use of different applications of colonial policies on the traditional institutions and structures of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria (Onyekpe, 2003). This has led to the unequal impact of colonial policies in the perpetration and dynamism of the forces of modernization (Chimezi, 1997). It has also given rise to distrust, rivalry and lack of cooperation that have characterized the relationship between the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba leading to the use, by each group, of its geographical area as a basis for political support. It is believed that colonialism entrenched the policy that has led to instability in the political system and a situation where the ethnic groups are directing loyalties to themselves.

Again, before Europeans conquest of Nigeria, we have an estimated three hundred ethnic groups of sometimes widely differing languages and systems of internal rule. According to Maier (2002), although its constituents had traded and often lived among each other for centuries, the land of Nigeria had never existed as one political unit. It is a fact that the people gathered within its borders had different cultures and stood at very unequal levels of development, this prompted Awolowo to describe Nigeria as a 'mere geographical expression' (Ojiako, 1981). This prompted Maier (2000) to state that: Ojukwu freely admits he is a tribalist – "the very circumstances of Nigeria only permit an idiot to be 'detrified' – and says that what he calls "ethnic sovereignties" should be the building blocks of a more just society. Furthermore, Umez (2000) as cited in Uduma (2006) feels that it might not be so proper to heap all our national problems, specifically that of development on colonialism. He therefore opines that:

*...or inter-ethnic conflicts could be attributed to the so-called haphazard creation of African countries by colonialism, how does one explain this kind of bigotry and hatred within the same ethnic group that has the same language and culture?*

He further argues that we should ask ourselves why any section of the Igbo ethnic group should object to marrying from any other section. How committed the Modakekes and Ife are fighting among themselves simply because of a shift of the local council headquarters from one section of the town to another? What of the Ijaws and Itsekiri, Itshekiri and Urhobo's fighting themselves? Why did we have the inglorious 'indigene' and 'non-indigene' factor between Abia and Imo civil servants in 2012 even when know Abia people are of the same ethnic group? The same infamous policy of "go back to your own State of origin" was implemented between civil servants of Cross River and Akwa Ibom State as well as the Aguleri war in Anambra State.

### **Ethnicity as a Factor in Nigerian Politics**

The problem of our contemporary public administration started from the time our political creators merged independent nations together for their own economic and political gains. The politics of regionalism or statism, the politics of federal character or quota system, the politics of Mecca and Jerusalem pilgrimages have so coloured the thinking of our contemporary public administrators in Nigeria that the cardinal doctrine of public administration appeared to have been neglected or ignored (Grozier, 1964). The doctrines of public administration such as that of public accountability, neutrality, fairness or equity were fundamentally meant to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the system (Murray, 1978). Accordingly, to Uduma (2006):

*The conflict among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria for the promotion and advancement of ethnic interest at the expense of those of the nation has manifested in the process of elite recruitment being informed by the state of origin syndrome.*

From our attempts to form political parties, the three major political parties the Action Group (AG), the National Council for Nigerians and Camerons (NCNC) and the Northern People Congress (NPC) were all regionally routed (Nnoli, 1988). Hence, little or no effort was made at truly unifying and integrating the various parts of Nigeria. This spirit was even carried to the army to the extent that sectional and ethnic interpretations were given to the Major Nzogwu's led coup of 1966 (Amfowese, 1982). It was this coup that enthroned Major-General Ironsi as the head of the first Military Government of Nigeria. Ironsi was quickly eliminated in a bloody counter-coup *détat* barely after six months (Anger, 2004). These unpatriotic tendencies resulted in the Nigeria-Biafra war which claimed the lives of many innocent Nigerians. The same regional and or ethnic propensity led to the abandoned property saga in Rivers State immediately after the civil-war (Balewa, 1994). The abandoned property policy was primarily targeted at Ndigbo. According to Oronsaye (1984),

*It has to be recognized that the Nigerian bureaucracy does not exist in a vacuum, as a sub-system within a large system; it exists in the social setting of Nigeria conditioned by history and tradition.*

According to the Udoji Commission of 1974 the British government dedicated responsible service to the nation. In Nigeria, family, local and ethnic loyalty was allowed to compete with and often take precedence over loyalty to the state or nation. It is a fact that ethnicity in Nigeria manifests its impact in concrete ways by which it affects citizenship and the interests of persons and groups who are usually easily neglected, manipulated and discriminated against (Nnoli, 1988). This is because of their relative powerlessness and gross handicap. The contemporary public administration in Nigeria is bedeviled by the socio-political environment of Nigeria. There is total lack of patriotism, equity and fairness in the distribution of national (Balogun and Colin, 1975) resources and amenities in Nigeria.

Industries and social facilities such as roads, pipe borne-water, hospitals and electricity are more often allocated on political and ethnic considerations. Employment in the federal or even state ministries and government owned companies are mostly based on tribal considerations. Promotions in the same institutions take the same way and the end result is that mediocrity blossoms in most public organizations in Nigeria which in effect lowers standard and productivity. As noted, the processes of coexistence and growth of the various ethnic groups, re-organisation into State and local government areas have created a deep sense of group inclusiveness for themselves, on the one hand, and group exclusiveness for others, especially in their mutual competition for power, wealth, status and progress. Chimezie (1997) points out that the ethnic groups manipulating and intensifying regional and state sentiments for personal and social class struggles, are undermining the growth and development of Nigeria.

Accordingly, the need by each ethnic group to promote and protect its economic and political interests at the expense of other groups had persisted in Nigeria since independence (Okpu, 1977). It is for this reason that the struggle for the control of the federal government has been extremely combative. For this, Ukaegbu, (2005), notes that:

*Elections were rigged in the most blatant fashion; census figures were manipulated to give political advantage to the competing regions; violence, corruption, arson, and brigandage were employed in.*

Accordingly, what is needed for the success of democracy in Nigeria is uniformity of the people as a nation. This is because as a single nation, inspired by the feeling of having a common history, common life in the present and a common future is also a common centre of loyalty.

### **Ethnicity in Nigeria and the Development of Politics**

According to Gauba (2007) the general theory of development is largely concerned with the economic activities undertaken by a country for the improvement of equality of life of its citizens. Since the developing countries are more concerned about their development, it is the focus of their public policy to ensure the improvement of the quality of life of their citizenry. Political development has been described as the process which seeks to transform political environment and institutions of a developing country in order to make it more efficient to fulfill the changing needs and aspirations of its citizens. This means that political development denotes the process through which the political system of a developing country acquires characteristics. The concept of political development is derived from the liberal

tradition of the West. It projects Western liberal democracy as the model of a developed society which is also regarded as modern society. It is the view of some scholars that traditional values and institutions are only fit for an agrarian economy and society whereas modern ways of life are regarded as fit for industrial and technology-based society. It is believed that only the modern system is capable of fulfilling the needs and aspirations of a 21st century man. Scholars, in analyzing the features of traditional political system, points out that in traditional political system, people were not involved in politics; government simply exercised power over them. But under modern political system, people are closely associated with politics. They do convey their demands and opinions to government. This made Gauba to posit that the three characteristics of modernization are:

- i **Differentiation:** This refers to the process of progressive separation and specialisation of roles, institutional spheres and associations within the political system.
- ii **Equality:** This is regarded as the ethos of modernity. It implies the notion of universal adult citizenship, legal equality of all citizens and the psychic equality of opportunity for all to gain excellence according to their respective talents and efforts, and
- iii **Capacity:** This denotes the increased capacity of political system for the management of public affairs, control of disputes and copies up with the new demands of the people (Gauba, 2007).

Some of these factors in power relations and struggle for power are based on primordial sentiments and feelings like prebendalism, ethnicism, sectionalism and religion (Joseph, 1991). However, it does not promote development and healthy political contest for power and legitimacy. In fact, ethnic persuasions and perceptions pervade every government action or pronouncement in Nigeria. Government's policy is often looked through ethnic mirror to see which tribe such a policy favours or disfavours. For example, the recent sanctioning of five Banks' chief executives and some directors (by the Central Bank of Nigeria) for alleged misdemeanors, is being interpreted by some people as a deliberate action against the Southern part of Nigeria, while some people are alleging that the recent adoption of tenure for positions of permanent secretaries and full fledged directors in the Federal Civil Service is directed against people from the Northern part of Nigeria. The tenure argument was as a result of the Head of Service, Stephen Oronsaye's circular dated August 25, 2009 through which the informed permanent secretaries and directors that those who, by January 1, 2010 had served eight years in their positions, should begin to prepare for their disengagement from the nation's service. This type of attitude is more divisive than integrating or cohesive. Anazonwu (2009) states that:

*I think it is uncharitable, especially to explain the Sanusi tsunami from the perspective of ethnic or regional agenda. That is cheap blackmail; a mindset that brings no good.*

It is really because of our penchant for giving whatever that happens in Nigeria ethnic colouration that the critics of the actions of the Central Bank Governor were only interested in reminding us that Sanusi is from Northern part of Nigeria while the five Banks' Chief Executives came from the South.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most people have argued that the failure of Nigeria to over grow ethnic pettiness in its politics and administration is more of leadership ineptitude. We are finding it difficult to operate our own constitution for so many reasons among which are: ethnic loyalty, greed, venality, intolerance, prebendal politics, massive poverty and low level of education. Again, in the contemporary world, democracy has been adopted as a form of government in a large number of countries. It is not fully, successful everywhere. The successful working of democracy depends upon many conditions. It is a fact that true national sentiments cannot be created without the spirit of toleration.

In fact this spirit is the keystone of democracy. In a democracy we do not demand infirmity or assimilation, but different groups are expected to coexist in spite of their reference. High moral character of the people as well as leaders is another condition for the success of democracy. On the contrary, a sense of morality and discipline will make the people active in solving social problems. Generally, the people should be literate if not highly educated so that they are able to learn more and exercise their judgment in the matters of common concern. Free access to the media of mass communication is provided within the democratic structure itself. Only a literate, preferably an educated, can make best use of this facility. Lack of economic in the masse is bound to undermine the people's faith in democracy.

Similarly, vast economic disparities are bound to destroy the sense of equal dignity of individuals. In fact, democracy without a reasonable level of economic security and equality is a farce. Some of the acclaimed Nigerian nationalists had made pronouncements showing their faithlessness on true integration of Nigerian ethnic groups and the need to emphasize national loyalty rather than ethnic loyalty. Even as at today, some highly placed Nigerians still believe that ethnicity is the only way to get anything in Nigeria. Quite unfortunately, this ethnic line of thought has greatly stunted and scuttled both the vision and development of Nigeria. Evidently, before the Europeans, Nigeria was home to an estimate three hundred ethnic groups of sometimes widely differing language and often lived among each other for centuries, the land of Nigeria had never existed as one political unit. What happened as could be seen from history was that the people gathered within its borders had different cultures and stood at very unequal levels of development. For instance, a state of affairs that once prompted the Awolowo to describe Nigeria as a 'mere geographical expression'. Agreeing further, Achebe (1983) is quoted as saying that "if we want to climb out of the hole we are in, it is a job for all the people". The position of this study is that it is high time we climbed out of this seeming ethnic quagmire. Nigeria and her citizenry could witness and enjoy high level of political stability, economic growth, technological advancement and earn respect in the comity of nations.

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