Diversity is often seen as detrimental to nation-building. Yet diversity can also lead to much greater accommodation in a multinational state. In Nigeria, federalism has been adopted as a mechanism for accommodating diversity and managing potential conflict.

An extraordinarily heterogeneous society, Nigeria has a population of about 140 million according to the 2006 census, more than 400 linguistic groups and some 300 ethnic groups. Under British colonial rule from 1914 to 1960, Nigeria used English as the single common language. The most important aspects of diversity in Nigeria are language, ethnic identity, religion, majority/minority cleavages and regionalism or geo-ethnicity.

It is not uncommon to hear 10 different languages within a radius of 20 kilometres, as you can in Plateau State. Language is a key indicator of ethnic group. Often, ethnic identity coincides with residential territory. At times, administrative boundaries overlap with regional boundaries, within which there is a dominant ethnic group, such as the Hausa/Fulani in the North, the Yorubas in the West and the Ibos in the Eastern region. However, in each region, there are also numerous minority groups, with their own specific identities.

There are three basic religions in Nigeria - African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. While Islam was introduced in Nigeria by Arabs along their northern trading routes, Christianity came with European missionaries from the South.

Little contact under British rule
While diversity in Nigeria has been a source of administrative concern, the nature of colonial administration, which regionalized Nigeria in 1939, meant that Nigerian groups coexisted but had little contact with one another. The 1946 Richards Constitution brought Nigerian leaders together in the Legislative Council (1947) for the first time. Yet, by 1951, as the British colonial umbrella was gradually folding, nationalists began to compete to inherit political power from the British, withdrawing to their familiar ethnic and ethno-regional bases to organize for the struggle. Thus, between 1951 and 1959, major ethnic groups in many regions were mobilizing against other regions. Finally, suspicion and fear among Nigeria’s groups led to the adoption of federalism in 1954 in order to manage the conflict. Still, the colonial authority found it necessary to set up the Willink Commission to investigate the fears of minority ethnic groups in the regions, and opted to allay them by including a human rights clause in the Independence Constitution of 1960.
But various regional politicians and groups continued to be alarmed. The South feared the tyranny of the Northern groups who represented 54 per cent of the population. On the other hand, the North feared the Southern tyranny of skills, as the region was more advanced in Western education and therefore had more jobs in the developing government and business sectors. Such suspicions and resentments significantly affected a number of political developments, particularly the census exercises of 1962-1963, the federal elections of 1964, and the Western regional elections of 1965, and ultimately led to the military coup of 1966 and the aborted secessionist bid of the Eastern Region – the Biafran War – between 1967 and 1970.

An unbalanced federation
As the leader of a military coup in 1966, Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi’s government inherited the ongoing problems of an unbalanced federation, in which the regions were more powerful than the centre. It therefore opted to alter the structure of the federation, creating 12 states out of the existing four regions in 1967. This grew to 19 states in 1976, 21 states in 1987, 30 states in 1991 and 36 states in 1996. The revised federal structure provided a useful medium for the central government to compartmentalize conflict areas among the old regions and to reduce their intensity. But, as new states emerged, erstwhile minorities became new majorities, often more vicious than the old. Ethnicity and regionalism did not die with the creation of states, and often standing issues crept back through other avenues, such as recruitment into public office and resource distribution.

The issue of language often rose to the surface. In the Second Republic, from 1979-1983, the House of Representatives found, as had the Constituent Assembly of 1978-1979, that it was convenient to continue to use English as the official language. In addition, however, it approved the use of the Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba languages, a move that was sharply opposed by representatives of minorities who saw it as “cultural slavery.” This controversy subsided with the adoption of English as the official language at federal and state levels.

Religious conflict emerges
Religion had not been a serious source of conflict until the late 1970s. At the Constitution Drafting Committee in 1976 and 1977, and during the Constituent Assembly sessions of 1978 and 1979, the Sharia law debate opened sectarian schisms. Suddenly, religion took a front seat in political discourse. The attempt by Muslims to extend Sharia beyond personal and inheritance matters, and to establish a federal Sharia Court of Appeal, was resisted by Christians. As a compromise, Sharia and customary courts were to be introduced only in states that so desired. At the federal level, the Court of Appeal was to have three judges learned in Sharia and customary law sitting with common-law judges. Such a compromise would have been more difficult in a unitary system.

Yet in 1986, the news of Nigeria’s joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) stirred up another religious crisis, especially between Christians and Muslims. While reassurances were given, there was no withdrawal from OIC. Between 1980 and 2005, there were over 45 violent religious conflicts in which lives and property were lost, conflict intensified in par-