

IDENTITY, DIVERSITY AND DEMOCRACY

The Nigerian Paradigm

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Alex I. Ekwueme**

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Although modern Nigeria dates back only to 1914, the year of amalgamation of the Northern Protectorate and the Southern Protectorate with the Colony of Lagos to form the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, some of the constituent parts of Nigeria had had civilizations dating back to one, two or three millennia before this date. Archaeological evidence has established the NOK civilization (in the Middle Belt of Nigeria) with excavated terracotta heads dating from the first millennium B.C., Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Benin bronzes dating back to the early part of the second millennium AD. Contact between the coastal areas of Nigeria and Western Europe had flourished to a degree where there was exchange of envoys between Warri Kingdom in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria and Portugal in the 15th century.

The European slave trade had, of course, opened up Nigeria to European contact from the coast from late 11th Century to mid-nineteenth century although the trade had been declared illegal by Britain in 1807. In the North the trade also flourished following the caravan routes of Northern Nigeria. And as Christian Missionaries penetrated Nigeria from the coast, so Islam came into Northern Nigeria through the Caravan trade routes. The jihad or holy war waged between 1804 and 1808 established the Sokoto Caliphate which celebrated its bicentenary earlier in the year. This jihad pushed Islam across the far Northern parts of Nigeria, and through parts of Nigeria's Middle Belt and even into South Western Nigeria.

The first formal evidence of British colonisation of Nigeria was the Treaty of Cession of the Colony of Lagos to the British crown in 1861. Thereafter colonial activities were haphazard until the Berlin Conferences of 1884/1885 which sought to regulate the uncoordinated "**Scramble for Africa**" and replace it with a planned demarcation of the continent into areas of influence of various European colonial powers. In 1886, the year after the Berlin Conference, Britain chartered the Royal Niger Company ostensibly for trading purposes but in reality as a vehicle for promoting British colonial interest in Nigeria. Over the next two decades up till 1900, by a series of one-sided treaties of protection, usually obtained through intimidation, bullying or deceit and subterfuge, and by outright conquest, Britain acquired suzerainty over what eventually became Southern Nigeria. By 1906 Britain had taken control of Northern Nigeria as well although the vast area was administered through a process known as "**Indirect Rule**" through the agency or instrumentality of local or traditional rulers. On January 1, 1914 Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated by British fiat to form Nigeria which makes Nigeria only 90 years old this year.

Within eight years of amalgamation, in 1922, Nigeria had a new constitution which created, for the first time, a Nigeria Legislative Council. Thereafter, constitutional development became rapid being especially accelerated by the Second World War, with new constitutions coming into force in 1946, 1951 and 1954, the last one ushering in a federal system of government of three regions, Eastern Nigeria, Northern Nigeria and Western Nigeria. This was the structure when Nigeria gained her independence from Britain on October 1, 1960 almost forty-four years ago after a century of formal colonisation (1861 – 1960). The political structure of Nigeria as a federation of three regions was faulty in at least two important respects, to wit: One of the regions, Northern Nigeria, had a much larger land area and was credited with a much larger population than the other two regions combined. This meant, as in the pre-independence parliamentary elections of 1959 and also in the 1964/65 federal parliamentary elections that it was possible for a political party to confine its activities to the Northern Region alone as did the Northern Peoples Congress, and if it controlled that region effectively, it would ipso facto also control the federal government without pretending to be a nation-wide party. This did not conduce to evolution of a true

Nigerian nation as distinct from a Nigerian "**geographical expression**" as a country.

The second fault was that within each of the three regions there was one "**majority**" ethnic group (Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, Hausa-Fulani in Northern Nigeria and Yoruba in Western Nigeria) and many other "**minority**" ethnic groups which felt threatened or insecure by the overbearing population and influence of the majority ethnic group resulting in the quest for regions or states of their own by "**minority**" ethnic groups in the three regions: COR state in the East, Middle Belt State in the North and Midwest State in the West. In the event only the Midwestern Region was created in 1963, the same year Nigeria became a Republic (on 01 October 1963).

Nigeria is an atypical example of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multilingual, plural construct with about 400 ethnic nationalities and as many languages and many more dialects with the far North being predominantly Moslem, the Middle Belt and the South-west having a mixture of Christianity and Islam and the East and the Niger Delta being predominantly Christian. Although the national swan song at independence was "**unity in diversity**", in reality there was more diversity than unity and greater identity of the constituent ethnic groups than a national Nigerian identity.

Within a few year of independence, it was obvious that things were falling apart in Nigeria and the centre could no longer hold. Census enumeration is a key ingredient in national planning, but it was also of political importance in Nigeria being the basis for delimitation of electoral constituencies which simply meant that the more population a region was assigned the more members that region had in Parliament and given the largely ethnic-based strength of the major Nigerian political parties, the census readily became an instrument for political power acquisition and control.

The 1962/63 National Census, the first conducted by an independent Nigerian government became very contentious and controversial. The fundmentum of democracy is representation of people in government though transparent and

credible electoral processes. If the electoral process is flawed then the democratic experiment itself would be resting on a very weak foundation indeed. The 1964/65 federal elections and the 1965 regional elections in Western Nigeria were so blatantly rigged that in Western Nigeria there was a total lack of confidence in the democratic experiment as a result of which there was widespread disturbance throughout the Region resulting in a state of near anarchy which made the Region almost ungovernable.

It was this state of affairs that gave the Nigerian military their first opportunity to venture into government when Nigeria's first coup d'etat was staged on 15 January 1966. This was followed by a counter-coup on July 29 of the same year and then followed by a civil war in July 1967 to contain Eastern Nigeria which had seceded and declared itself as the Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967. The civil war lasted 30 months, ending in January 1970 but it was not until October 1979 (almost 14 years since the first military take over) that a new civilian government under a new Presidential Constitution modelled after the U.S. constitution was put in place. This government lasted only 4 years and 3 months before it was toppled in another military coup d'etat and it was to be almost 16 years of military rule before a democratically elected government, the present one, came to power on 29 May 1999.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

In 1967 the Military Government, by decree, broke up Nigeria into twelve states in place of the four regions that existed in 1963. In 1976 the number of states was increased to 19; in 1989 the number was increased to 21, in 1991 to 30 and finally in 1997 to 36 which is the present configuration of Nigeria. The 1999 Constitution under which the present civilian administrations operate is not much different from the 1979 Constitution of the Second Republic. It is a presidential system and the President and Commander-in-Chief is the Chief Executive at the national (federal level). The Legislature is bicameral consisting of the National Assembly made up of the Senate with equal representation of the 36 states (3 senators per state) and the House of Representatives made up of 360 members, each member representing as nearly as possible equal population. At the federal level, the Judiciary is independent starting with the Federal High Court, thence to

the Court of Appeal and thence finally to the Supreme Court which is the apex court in Nigeria.

At the state level, the State Governor is the Chief Executive, the Legislature is a single chamber House of Assembly and the Judiciary is independent starting at the lower rung with the customary courts and sharia courts, up to the Customary Courts of Appeal, and Sharia Courts of Appeal then to the State High Court and from there to the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court as before.

Nearly 44 years of independent existence as a country have not succeeded in turning Nigeria into a nation. And although today, after half a century of Nigeria's first experiment with federalism (1954 to 2004) there are 36 states in place of the original three regions, it should be noted that during the last state creation exercise in 1996, there were requests for creation of 43 new states. Had all these requests been granted, there would still have been demands for creation of many more states as each exercise would have thrown up a new minority group within each state which would wish to have its own separate state. It follows, therefore, that states creation, while it may provide the constitutional and governmental framework that will give reasonable autonomy to various groups, cannot serve as a panacea for eradicating centrifugal forces and promoting centripetal forces. A conscious and deliberate effort must be made at nation building through education and promotion of institutions and policies that foster togetherness. A few examples will suffice.

UNITY SCHOOLS

Under Nigeria's Independence Constitution, secondary education was primarily the responsibility of the regional (state) governments. However, within five years of independence, the Federal government decided to build three "**unity secondary schools**", one in each of the three regions, to which bright young boys and girls would be admitted from all parts of the country. The schools were fully residential and provided the opportunity for future leaders from all over Nigeria as represented by these young boys and girls, to live and grow up together over a period of about seven years; perhaps the most formative years of their lives. After about ten years of experience with the unity schools, the

Federal government again decided to establish a Federal Government Girls' College, - a unity secondary school, - in every state of the Federation. The thinking was that this would have a two-fold impact: first to get very bright young girls from every part of the country, - the future mothers of Nigeria - to grow up together; and secondly, to tackle the problem of low female enrolment in secondary schools, especially among girls from Northern Nigeria. Although there has been no documented evaluation of the positive influence of "unity schools, in nation-building in Nigeria, it would be safe to assume, judging by the number of cross-ethnic marriages among our young men and women, products of these unity schools, that the influence could not have been negative.

NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE CORPS SCHEME

The National Youth Service Corps Scheme (NYSC) was established by decree in 1973 with a view to the proper encouragement and development of common ties among the youths of Nigeria and the promotion of national unity. Its main objectives were:

- (a) to inculcate discipline in Nigerian youths by instilling in them a tradition of industry at work, and, of patriotic and loyal service to the nation in any situation they may find themselves;
- (b) to develop in them attitudes of mind, acquired through shared experience and suitable training, which will make them more amenable to mobilisation in the national interest;
- (c) to develop common ties among them and promote national unity by ensuring that:
 - (i) as far as possible, youths are assigned to jobs in States other than their States of origin;
 - (ii) each group assigned to work together, is as representative of the country as possible;
 - (iii) the youths are exposed to the modes of living of the people in different parts of the country with a view to removing prejudices, eliminating ignorance, and confirming at first hand the many

similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups.

The decree made it mandatory for all Nigerians under 30 years of age graduating from tertiary institutions (Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education) in Nigeria and abroad to serve for one year under the scheme in states other than their own, (exception being made for married women who were allowed to serve in states of their husband's residence). The posting was done at random and ideally could not be influenced by the graduate's personal preference. The scheme has exposed many young Nigerians to life in other parts of the country which they probably would never have visited on their own. In particular, it has exposed many young Nigerian urban dwellers to life in the rural areas that produce the food we eat and carry the real burden of Nigeria's under-development. Most Nigerians accept that the influence of the NYSC scheme has been salutary.

LINGUA FRANCA

Nigeria's official language is English. This is a heritage from our colonial history. But Hausa is the unofficial lingua franca of the over 250 or so ethnic nationalities in the 19 states that have been created from what used to be Northern Nigeria. This again is a heritage from the colonial history of the region. A lingua franca is a veritable tool in nation building. It is not surprising therefore that there is a greater sense of togetherness among the states of Northern Nigeria than there is among the states of Southern Nigeria. Present educational policy favours the compulsory study of one or more of the three major indigenous Nigerian languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba in all Nigerian secondary schools. This is with a view to evolution, over time, of an indigenous lingua franca for Nigeria. Indeed the Nigerian Constitution provides that:

"The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefor".

ARMED FORCES OF THE FEDERATION

Nigeria had an elected civilian government for barely five years after independence before the military took over in January 1966. The military stayed

in power for almost fourteen years, that is up to September 30, 1979 before handing over to a civilian administration. Because of the crucial role the military had played and was then playing in Nigerian history, the framers of Nigeria's 1979 constitution decided that it would be in the interest of nation-building for the Armed Forces of the Federation to be representative of the entire Nigerian population. Accordingly, the following provisions were made in the Constitution:

"The Federation shall, subject to any Act of the National Assembly made in that behalf, establish, equip and maintain an Army, a Navy, an Air Force and.....other branches of the Armed Forces of the Federation....."

"The composition of the officer corps and other ranks of the Armed Forces of the Federation shall reflect the federal character of Nigeria....."

"The National Assembly shall..... by an Act, establish a body which shall comprise such members as the national Assembly may determine, and which shall have power to ensure that the composition of the armed forces of the Federation shall reflect the federal character of Nigeria in the manner prescribed....."

Although it is doubtful if the objective of these constitutional provisions have been achieved, the mere fact of their provision should ensure that efforts are intensified towards compliance under a civilian regime that is, of necessity, bound by the provisions of the Constitution.

FEDERAL CHARACTER

What is "the federal character of Nigeria" to which reference has been made? It is a veritable instrument for promotion of nation-building and refers to the need for all sections of Nigeria to have a sense of belonging and be seen to be participating in all aspects of social, political and economic activity. In relation to the composition of the various organs of government, the Constitution specifically provides that:

"The composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no

Provide adequate facilities for and encourage free mobility of people, goods and services throughout the Federation;

Secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the Federation;

Encourage intermarriage among persons from different places of origin, or of different religious, ethnic or linguistic association or ties; and

Promote or encourage the formation of associations that cut across ethnic, linguistic, religious or other sectional barriers

The State shall foster a feeling of belonging and of involvement among the various peoples of the Federation, to the end that loyalty to the nation shall override sectional loyalties.

In furtherance of the social order:

Every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law;

The sanctity of the human person shall be recognised and human dignity shall be maintained and enhanced;

Governmental actions shall be humane;

Exploitation of human or natural resources in any form whatsoever for reasons other than the good of the community shall be prevented; and

The independence, impartiality and integrity of courts of law and easy accessibility thereto shall be secured and maintained.

The task of realising the above political, economic and social objectives is the challenge that faces Nigeria as the country strives for true nationhood in the 21st century.