Unity In Diversity in Nigeria's Nationhood – Which Way Forward?

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ABSTRACT

The Nigeria existence from 1914 till date (2013) has been bedeviled with crises. These include negative forces of fear of domination, ethnicity, indigenization crises, militancy, kidnapping, terrorism etc which have been tampering a new dawn of One Nation, One People and One Destiny. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to examine various issues and challenges bedeviling unity in diversity in Nigeria's nationhood. It critically reviews issues posed by national question with particular reference to the defective Nigerian constitution, federal structure, federal character issue, revenue allocation dislocation and Nigerian citizenship question. It further explores how to strengthen our common ideals in order to foster unity in diversity. The paper concludes by recommending among others that the issue of nationhood must be addressed within the context of true federalism, sovereign national conference, resource control and patriotic value system.

Introduction

Nigeria is a large country occupied by diverse people, with diverse languages and culture (Oputa, 2006). In other words, it is a multi – national state; a conglomeration of ethnic nations; an ethnic amalgamation of different people (over 400) each with its distinctive character and ethos. In 1914, Sir Frederick Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorate as a country while his wife gave it the name "Nigeria". The marriage between the North and the South resembles a pair of shears, so joined that they cannot be separated, often moving in opposite directions yet always maintaining their essential unity (Oputa, 2006).

As expected in a country with well-known ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, loud cries were frequently heard over discrimination, domination and neglect (Tamuno, 2004). In its more than two decades of nationhood, Nigeria is at a critical stage of discrimination after experiencing years of devastating coups, counter – coups and civil war. Turning a search light on this, the country is bedeviled by political, economic and social crises that undermine the future of the polity (Emeh, 2012).

Politically, Nigeria is pervaded by a miasma of tense and volatile atmosphere arising from dissonance and bitter rivalry among members of the political class, decline of clean hands in politics, leadership uncertainty, travesty of democratic values and deficiency of popular participation in governance. Economically, there is unease and disquietness in the country over harsh economic condition, official corruption, mismanagement, widening gap between the rich and the poor and deterioration of public infrastructure and social services. Socially, the gradual erosion of spiritual, moral, family and social values and the attendant loss of sense of compassion and solidarity are all threatening the foundation of the nationhood (Emeh, 2012).

The ripple effect of some of these political, economic and social crises is the unprecedented wave of violence, bloodshed and acts of impunity leading to insecurity, uncertainty and sense of vulnerability across the land. These are coupled with daily communal clashes, terrorism, armed robbery, assassination, kidnapping/hostage – taking, vandalism among others. In the face of this, many of our compatriots are day by day losing hope in the nationhood.

Indeed, it is evident in Nigeria's scenario that the sectional card is being played by almost every ethnic, religious and regional group in the country. This is not to gloss over the resurgence of the old North – South dichotomy, which is rearing its ugly head through series of contentions issues like presidential power shift, on - shore - offshore oil dichotomy, state police issues, revenue sharing formula, citizenship question or indigene/set- tler controversy, secularism, state creation agitation, federal restructuring campaign, Sovereign National Conference (SNC) and constitutional amendment agitations (Emeh, 2012).

Now the crucial poser is: is there any likelihood that the mounting political, economic and social crises in Nigeria would conspire to wreck the country through breakup, as feared in certain quarters? Consequently, this paper periscopes various factors that threatens unity and oneness of Nigeria vis a vis issues of national questions. The paper attempts to further explore way of fostering unity in diversity in Nigeria by strengthening its common ideals while debunking ethno – religious campaigns.

Conceptual Clarifications

The concept of unity implies 'oneness' 'alike', 'trust', 'mutual understanding' while diversity means 'great variety'. *Unity in diversity* means being one or united in spite of the various differences in the social, political, economic, geographical and cultural spheres. Unity in diversity therefore is reflected when people have started learning how to build a strong, virile nation out of the different tribes and issues. Specifically, Nigeria is a complex country united by a common colonial experience in spite of the various differences in her social, political, economic, geographical educational, religious and cultural spheres (Oputa, 2006; Tyokase, 2002).

Ethnicity and Tribalism however, are twin factors bedeviling national unity in Nigeria. Ethnicity captures the various forms of consensual and conflicting relationships between different ethnic groups. It involves "plural persons" expressing loyalty to their ethnic groups on the basis of which they relate to others in the wider society (Otite, 2006). It is profoundly characterized by the phenomenon of defensive denial and group's collective responsibility.

Federalism on the other hand is that doctrine and a form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a cooperative manner though the combined forces of ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity, among others, tend to pull their people apart (Tamuno, 2004; Asobie, 1998). Earlier, Wheare (1963) posited that federalism is a government where the powers of the government are divided substantially according to the principles that there is a single independent authority for the whole country irrespective of some matters and independent regional authorities being co-ordinate with and not subordinate to the other. Federalism is therefore a means not only of forging unity in diversity but also an attempt to allay fears of domination of one group by another. Tyokase (2002) and Akinyanju (2001) however observe that the cause of the national question debate in Nigeria is the defective federal structure that does not sup-

port the theory of unity in diversity.

Factors that Threatens Unity in Nigeria's Diversity and the National Questions

Unity in Nigeria is, or has been threatened by the followings:

· **The Nigerian/Biafra War:** The civil war fought between 1967 and 1970 witnessed bitterness at its peak, as well as destruction of lives and properties. The war almost led to the disintegration of the country into smaller units. This war led to abandoned properties saga with the slogan "No victor, No Vanquished", since the survivors went back to their former places of abode to re-posses their properties such as houses, factories, undeveloped pieces of land but some tribes were not allowed to re-possess such properties as a result of which the wounds of the war were re-opened and bitterness once more mounted.

· **Coups and Counter Coups:** Military coups in Nigeria can be traced back to the January 15th 1966 when Nzeogwu and his men struck leading to other counter coups where ethnic cleansing took place. In this exhibition of power and ambition, some ethnic groups felt decimated in the military and marginalized.

· **Election Rigging:** Nigerians hardly had any transparently successful elections. Evidently, each election in Nigeria ends up almost breaking – up the country. The election which brought Alhaji Shehu Shagari to power in 1979 was finally decided in the court of law with some ethnic groups feeling cheated by the others. The June 12 (1993) issue in which the result of a presidential election was annulled led to series of violent reactions as well as economic and political crises. Indeed, the election that brought Late Yar'adua into power in 2007 was attested to by the supposedly winner as fraudulent. Even the recent 2011 election that ushered in Goodluck Jonathan as the president resulted in series of post election violence, making the recent *Boko-Haram* crises to have political colourations.

· **Rotational Presidency Issue:** The call for national presidency started as a result of fear of marginalization of some ethnic groups by other(s). Some tribal groups believe that the only way to avert this is to rotate the leadership among the six geo-political zones instead of the lump sum North – South divide. This has continued to raise a lot of dust in the body polity (Tyokase, 2002).

· **Defective Nigerian Constitution:** The constitution is the supreme and fundamental document of the state (or nation) in which are enshrined the basic principles and laws of the state (or nation). In the cheered history of exploring models of governance and co-existence, Nigeria has tried a number of constitutions since independence (1960, 1963, 1979, 1989, 1995 and 1999). Some have suggested that the ephemerality (or instability) of our constitutions is because they are not the "people's constitution" (David – West, 2002). Accordingly, Tyokase (2002) submitted that Nigeria's recurring crisis had it root in the defect of the structure and operation of the Nigerian Federal Constitution since the country has never had a truly Nigerian constitution.

· **National Conference Agitation:** By far, the most popularly and well-articulated debate on how to address the national question is on the National/Sovereign conference controversy. The Sovereign National Conference (SNC) has gained prominence as a tool of political struggle in Africa. For example, it was used as political struggle in Republic of Benin (1990), Congo, Niger, Togo and Zaire (1991) among others (David – West, 2002; Akinyanju, 2001). A SNC is a form of revolution. It is a challenge seeking the replacement of the status quo. However, the ruling class in Nigeria usually considers it as an attempt to overthrow them or at the minimum, as a vote of no confidence in them. Thus, they are usually opposed to it and where the SNC is to be employed to undertake issues more fundamental and complicated than removing a despotic leader such as defining a nation, as in Nigeria, it convocation becomes a lot more difficult (Akinyanju, 2001).

· **Federal Character Issues:** Federal character was first introduced in the 1979 constitution as an attempt towards balanced federalism. It refers to how fair and effective representation can be given to the various component units and communal groups in the country's institutions, agencies and position of power, status and influence (Tyokase, 2002). A country like Nigeria with over 374 ethnic groups having about 400 distinct languages and at least three groups of belief systems (Christians, Muslims and Adherents of African Traditional Religions) with a variety of customs have sufficient reasons for concern over issues of pluralism and complexity. In this regard, Tamuno (2004) and Otite (1995) considered ethnicity and religion as the most devastating features of our contemporary Nigeria.

· **Revenue Allocation Dislocation:** Revenue allocation is broadly defined to include allocation/distribution of tax resources and the revenue sharing arrangements not only among the three levels of government but among the state governments as well (Olowononi, 2004). The basis of the revenue allocation controversy had been the unsteadiness that has characterized inter-regional, fiscal and political relations since the amalgamation of 1914. There is the problem of how to allocate revenue to the different tiers of government in relations to the constitutionally assigned functions. The discordance between fiscal capacity of the various tiers of government and their expenditure responsibilities, the non-disclosure of total revenue are striking features of the Nigerian federal finances. Several principles (like derivation, fiscal autonomy, national interest etc) adopted to date has attracted a number of criticisms from fiscal federalists, economist, among others (Adesina, 2004; Mbanefoh and Egwaikhide, 2004). Consequently, the states and local government are denied substantial amounts of revenue that should be distributed to enhance their performance.

· **Nigerian Citizenship Question:** A major threat to the attainment of Nigeria's nationhood is the dual reality of Nigerian citizenship. The Nigeria state made a fundamental distinction between two types of persons - those indigenous and those not indigenous, or the natives and immigrants or settlers. In the Nigerians opinion, some say citizens have the right to domicile in any given area while others hold contrary view. The consequences of the growing indigeneity question have become the test for rights, justice and entitlements under post – independent Nigeria which has been to divide the population ethnically. This therefore makes some people to be considered indigenous and others non-indigenous. This dialectic Tseayo (2001) as cited by Tyokase (2002) leads to more and more ethnic clashes about rights, particularly the right to land and to political institutions as being witnessed presently in Jos area of Nigeria.

Fostering Unity in Diversity in Nigeria as the Way Forward

The American mode of federalism which is greatly aided by a possession of common aspirations and common ideals (Oputa, 2006) is thereby recommended for Nigeria. The preamble to Nigeria's 1979 and 1999 constitutions which clearly stated Nigerians aspirations as to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state should be integrated into the country's national anthem with a resolve by all to continue to serve our "fatherland" with all "our heart and strength" as "One nation bound in freedom, peace and unity".

For the Nigerian democracy to continue to work, blossom and sustainable, political leadership should be based on merit and credible past records. While considering fair representations across all geo – political zones, merit and credibility for zonal selections should not be compromised. In this regard, strict observance to the rule of law to the leadership is imperative to make the leaders become good role models for the citizenry. This may have to be inculcated through political re-orientation from the presidency to the least political leadership.

Indeed, we can rebuild from our ruins considering that once there is a will there will be a way out of our difficult situations, which are not irredeemable. In view of this, both the political office holders and the led in Nigeria should demonstrate a resolve

to chart a new course that will guarantee a better future. After all, forward-looking countries like the United States of America, Britain, France, Russia, China, Germany, Japan and India had experienced tough challenges and upheavals in one time or the other without losing hope of recovery and are today in the forefront of global political and economic leadership. The same could be said of countries like South Africa, Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda which are reckoned as the promising face of African renaissance after passing through national adversities (Emeh, 2012). Therefore, the need for biometric electoral system to ensure credible elections should be adopted. There is the need for deliberate teaching of human rights in schools so that people can develop respect for human dignity and democratic attitudes. Equally, peace education for the promotion of 'culture of peace' is necessary in Nigerian schools and various communities.

However, the National Orientation Agencies need to intensify efforts at canvassing for national trust, tolerance, and cultural respect as well as unalloyed commitment to unity in diversity. To reinvent the lofty dreams of the country's founding fathers, those in the corridors of power at federal, state and local government levels are implored to eschew dishonesty, greed and personal aggrandizement in order to exercise leadership by examples for peace, stability, progress and common good in the country. They need to display strong political leadership to clear the swamps of relative economic deprivation, huge income gap between the rich and the poor, chronic unemployment, mass poverty leading to violent crimes and insecurity that are threatening Nigeria's unity.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a product of its history, culture, diversities, successes and failures which are all deeply engraved in her body politics (Alkali, 2012). The reality is that Nigeria is a country made up of many nations or nationalities, some historically marginalized and disadvantaged and existing in a situation of "stratified fulmination" with super ordinate and subordinate relationships (Oputa, 2006). Each generation of Nigerians continues to have their taste of these realities and challenges in different forms, nature and dimensions. Indeed, unity in diversity is one major stepping stone towards the attainment of nationhood in Nigeria and the need to promote it by good adaptation or adoption as dictated by true federalism and genuine federal restructuring should never be compromised for ethnic loyalties.

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