

Review

From accommodation to discrimination and exclusion: The changing pattern of inter-group relations in Nigeria

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Accepted 24 September, 2008

Interactions amongst the various ethnic groups making up the Nigerian polity, pre and immediate post-independence, were seldom adversarial. They dwelt on respect, mutual understanding and accommodation of differences. Religious festivals were celebrated communally; inter-creed and inter-ethnic marriages were not so frowned against; residing outside ones ethnic locality was not packed with apprehensions. Also, such factors as religious and ethnic affiliations were not given utmost primacy in such issues as the choice of friendships, neighborliness, selection of who to employ or who to work with. There were fewer frictions in the interactions. However, from the late 70s, there have been gradual changes in this pattern. The spirit of accommodation and understanding that underlined the initial interaction is gradually changing to discrimination and exclusion. Discriminations and exclusions on the basis of religious affiliation, denomination and or ethnic background are now rife and social interactions often dictated by religious and ethnic sentiments. The thrust of this paper is to interrogate the contributing factors for this changing pattern and the possible solution. Specifically, it identifies such variables as religious revivalism, which breeds religious chauvinism, intemperate religious preaching, often anchored on re or misinterpretation of history and religious creeds, elite manipulation, state failure, poverty, frustration and globalization as responsible for such transformation. As a way out, the study suggests recourse to African values of brotherliness, elite responsibilities, state action and proper interpretation and observance of religious injunctions.

Key words: Ethnicity, discrimination, exclusion, changing pattern and conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Long before its incorporation into the nation-state system, the different ethnic groups making up the Nigerian state were far from being immured islands entirely to themselves. There are evidence of interactions in trade, culture and even linguistics between the people from the north and the south, people in the riverside areas and those in the hinterlands. The vestiges of linguistic interactions, for example, are found in extant languages across the land: "enu and onu" (mouth in Yoruba and Ibo languages), "imu and imi" (nose in Yoruba and Ibo languages); "lafia and alaafia" (good health in Hausa and Yoruba languages, respectively), "zamani and sanmani" (time in Hausa and Yoruba languages); "Al-barka" (blessing, in both Hausa and Yoruba languages).

Besides linguistic, there are evidences of long cohabitation amongst the various ethnic groups. For examples, there is long pre-amalgamation presence of Yoruba in

Kano, (Olaniyi, 2005), Hausa in Ibadan (Albert, 1993), Hausa in Lagos and Abeokuta (Adamu, 1978) among others. Festivals were celebrated jointly.

However, this relative cordiality was soon to give way to acrimony. In no small time, the Nigerian state started witnessing intra and inter-group tensions, strains, conflicts and violence, making the visions of the older generation to build a strong united nation out of the variegated nationalities perpetually stymied. Contrary to what is obtain in the time past; residing outside ones tribal base is packed with apprehension as riots could ensue at the slightest provocation. More than at any time, riots relating to religion and ethnicity are becoming regular occurrences, where people of different religion and ethnic groups are ready target. What are the factors responsible for this transition? What could be done? This study seeks to attempt an analysis of these posers.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

In explaining changing inter-group relations in Nigeria, three theories are dominant in the literature: strange bedfellow, the primordial and the construction/circumstantial theories.

The strange bedfellow string posits that the people that were brought together under the banner of the Nigerian state are unknown to one another. In that wise, they had nothing in common prior to their conjoining into an enclave called Nigeria, which Williams (2003) once described as "being closeted in a colonial cage". To the extent that they are completely strangers, even almost a century after the clobbering together, the Nigerian state is therefore sentenced to perpetual flux. This explains why the inhabitants are not only perpetually "clubbing and clawing at each other till death" the country they represent is also "stymied ab initio" (Williams, 2003). Many scholars have employed this perspective to explain why the Nigeria state is perpetually prostrate, especially in the area of inter-group relations.

The theory of strange bedfellow cannot stand in the face of historical evidence as adumbrated in the introductory part of this paper. The pre-colonial people that eventually formed the Nigerian people after colonialism actually interacted, even if to a limited extent. To this extent, the strange bedfellow is hollow in its explanation for the ferment in inter-group interactions in Nigeria. Dudley (1982) and Olusanya (1982) had earlier in their treaties punctured the theory of strange bedfellow in the making of Nigerian state. This is in the sense that to them, there were series of interactions already in motion before the coming of the colonialists and that at any rate; the amalgamation represented a finalization of a process already in motion (Olusanya, 1970, 1980: 545; Dudley, 1982). In other words, according to them, a state like Nigeria would have still emerged even without the coming of the colonialists. Although this position is under the realm of probability, yet, the fact of pre-colonial interactions cannot be disputed. However, the series of such interactions suggested that Nigerians are not strangers to themselves entirely.

The crux of the primordial tradition is that ethnicity is naturally given and essentially based on cultural affinity (Oberschall, 2000: 982). The argument here is that ethnic attachments and interactions are based on primordial sentiments and emotional feelings, often anchored on blood ties. Owing its origin to Shils (1957: 130-145), Geertz (1963) and later exposition to Isaacs (1975), Stack (1986), Grosby (1994) and others, the primordial perspective attributes permanency and fixed boundaries, with a tinge of impermeability to ethnicity in the sense that co-ethnics see themselves as bounded by history and culture (Gil-White, 1999: 803). To this perspective therefore, ethnic group is generally seen as a collectivity of people who share the same primordial characteristics

such as common language, custom, historical experience, culture and myth of common ancestry (Nnoli, 1978; Horowitz, 1985; Esman, 1985).

The strength of the primordial tradition is that it explains ethnicity as it is and by so doing, offers a simple explanation to a complex and confusing concept. This simple rationalization, regarded as the objective perspective (Gil-White, 1999: 803) in ethnic theorizing however, has been criticized as "unscientific" (Ellen and Coughlan, 1993: 805), the sense that it hinges its strength on the emotional, which is seldom explainable and, by implication, has no place in science. The tradition is also rigid. By attributing fixed boundaries to ethnicity, it removes itself away from the realm of practice because; the hallmark of the concept of ethnicity in practice is its fluidity, with changing boundaries (Jinadu, 2003: 3). Besides, the tradition offers a close-ended kind of analysis to the study of ethnicity basically in its description of ethnicity as a natural essence. In this wise, it sees something natural in ethnicity, which may not necessarily be testable (Jinadu, 2003: 3). The primordial theory is insufficient in explaining intra-group conflicts in Nigeria. If for example, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) claims to be fighting for the Yoruba people, what could have made it unleash terror on the same Yoruba people? OPC had killed more Yoruba people than it did the other ethnic group (Olaniyan, 2006; Fasehun, 2002). Yet, its often-chanted basic objective is to promote and defend Yoruba people. Or why has the Bakassi Boys unleashed terror on the same Ibo people it purported to be defending? Rather than given, ethnicity in Nigeria has been a matter of fixing, and this explains the reason why the primordial theory cannot be taken as an article of faith in explaining inter-group relations in Nigeria.

The constructionist or circumstantial or instrumentalist theory takes a radical departure from the primordialists. It sees ethnicity as a construct by rational actors for political ends (Rosens, 1989; Gil-White, 1999; Oberschall, 2000). The constructionist (also known as the circumstantial perspective) offers a subjective analysis of the concept of ethnicity by observing 'self-ascription', rather than 'cultural affinity' (Gil-White, 1999: 792) to the determination of ethnic groupings. Edmund (1977: 293-97) premised the constructionist tradition on the observation he made of the Highland Burmese that ethnic identities did not coincide neatly with cultural cleavages and by this logic, cannot be totally explained away as cultural given. This observation gave rise to the constructionist theory. The constructionist perspective is therefore anchored on the argument that ethnicity is neither a function of blood ties nor culturally given, but essentially a matter of labeling or manipulation by ethnic actors, who are usually the political and intellectual elites of the society (Rosens, 1989; Owolabi, 2004: 1-22).

The beauty of the construction tradition is that it offers a methodological shift from the narrow; near-final perspective of the primordialists, to a more accommodating per-

spective, which has become a veritable tool of analysing contemporary trends in ethnicity, which are, in most cases, seldom based on cultural affiliations. As argued by Kolawole Owolabi, Social groups of any kind are not primordial or natural. In fact, the so-called groups are composed of members who have at one time resented one another. The groups come into being only when certain sets of people begin to realize that their differences are not as natural or as fundamental as they earlier felt. The awareness of affinities rather than fundamental differences between members of in-group identity becomes a reality at the time the psychological and epistemological anxieties are fully addressed and members begin to see more of the affinities they share and less of their differences. But the social identity becomes fully operational only when the group comes in contact with another set of people who are considered different from them as a community and therefore, make the similarities of the members of the in-group more pronounced (Owolabi, 2003: 8).

In his analysis, Peter (1983) argues that the concept of ethnicity and its attendant variables are essentially an emergent social structure, that is, a vestige of colonialism. As aptly explained by him, By 1820, an Ekiti man would have been astounded if he were called a 'Yoruba man' whom he understood, if he was so knowledgeable, as a man from Oyo. In any case, an Ekiti man would probably need an interpreter in order to communicate effectively with a Yoruba man in 1820. Eluwa, the secretary of the Ibo State Union, confessed that by the early 1950s, he participated in persuading many 'Ibos' to accept that they were indeed Ibos. Hausa is a composition of several tribal organizations that found their common relevance in modern Nigeria (Ekeh, 1983: 20).

What we get from the above is the fact that ethnicity, which has increasingly become an albatross of cordial and mutual inter-group relations amongst Nigerians, is, after all, not natural. It is, instead, a construct.

The major point of argument, derivable from the foregoing is that ethnicity and its attendant problems in the country, which is defining inter-group relations have been constructed and not in any way, natural. Its recourse to discrimination and violence is therefore a product of its nature. The construction theory is therefore appropriate in analysing changing inter-group interaction in Nigeria.

Two contrasting interactions

The older generations displayed higher level of tolerance than the present generations in many areas. In the Yoruba land, especially in 1970s and early 1980s, festivals were celebrated communally irrespective of religious creed. Also, it was easy and mostly a thing of joy for people to move from their ethnic base to other places for residence. This explains the large presence of people from the southern part to the northern part and vice-versa. Although people still live outside their places

of origin today, but we hasten to say that it is always packed with a lot of trepidation as people feel relatively unsafe outside their ethnic base. Another noticeable dimension is the penchant for people while looking for whom to employ to seek for those sharing their religious beliefs for consideration. Even in giving out accommodation to people, it has become rife for people to consider religious affiliation before letting out houses. In the choice of where to live, people also consider religion. All these are new trend, which were not prevalent in the days of the older generation.

The point here is that the spirit of accommodation and understanding that underlined the initial interaction of the older generations is gradually changing to discrimination and exclusion among the younger ones. Discriminations and exclusions are now rife and almost a century after amalgamation and in spite of the fact that Nigerians are not entirely strange bedfellows, Nigerian people are not getting integrated. What could have been responsible for this? Specifically, answers to this could be located at the realms of politics, ethnicity and religion.

Sharpening of cleavages by politics

Fred Onyeoziri has dichotomized politics into the struggle for the distribution of societal resources and the struggle for 'who decides' what constitutes the resources at any point in time. The first he called the struggle for distribution and the second, the struggle for who decides and in ranking, the second is superior in the sense that "it is it that determines how the struggle for distribution should be carried out" (Onyeoziri, 1982: 2). Politics in Nigeria reflects the dichotomy with the southern part engrossed with struggle for distribution and or redistribution while the northern part struggling for "who decides". This contest has been played with a lot of propaganda and mud-slinging. In that wise, there is a mutual distrusts among the people inhabiting the two zones.

The Kano riot of 1953 was a watershed in the series of political violence to sharpen ethnic cleavages. When southerners were descended upon in the streets of Kano and maimed, it was actually laying the foundation for dichotomizing between "us" and "they", which undoubtedly strained inter-ethnic relations in the country. Again, the operation "wet'e" of the early 1960s in southwestern part of the country is an indication of politics being used to poison intra-group relations. Today's spate of intra and inter- group political violence would render that of the early 1960s insignificant. The situation is actually getting worse.

Ethnicity and the promotion of ethnocentrism

However, though ethnicity has been said to be constructed, it has become engraved in the psyche of the people and this explains why it has become not only pervasive but also pernicious. Increase in primordial attach-

attachments and considerations had its origin in the political realm, notably from the late 1930s and 1940s, when ethnic based political groupings such as the Ibo Federal Union of 1938 and Egbe Omo Oduduwa became prominent. These movements became a mobilisation instrument for advancing group interest and the internalization of “we” in contradistinction from the “other”. Initially, the movements were instruments in the hands of the nationalists for fighting the colonialist and also to advance their own political ambition. At the heels of the retreating colonialists, they became potent forces in the hands of the nationalist who became heir apparent to the colonial stool. The increased primordial attachment was carried to the early period of independence, which led to schisms among the various ethnic groups in their interactions, at the political, economic and social realms.

Religious revivalism and the promotion of exclusivity

By the turn of the 1980s, the spate of religious animosity started taking a central stage in inter-group interactions in the Nigerian socio-political landscape and subsequently added to the list of spoilers of cordial interactions of the Nigerian people. This was essentially a product of aggressive religious revivalism by the adherents of both Islam and Christianity beginning from the late 1970s (Ibrahim, 1989). Such revivalism has been based on aggressive and intemperate preaching, often anchored on re- or misinterpretation of history and religious creeds and membership drive. An awkward dimension to this has been the emergence of sundry sects and denominations, which more often than not preach exclusivity. The result of such has been strained relationship between and even among adherents of the two religions.

The various sects and denominations not only preach exclusivity, they promote it. They encourage choice of friends to be mostly determined by religious affiliations. The new generation religious sects and denominations have boldly perfected the art of exclusivity to the extent that they no longer see the goodness in the others who do not share their own version of beliefs.

Ethnic militia movements and the promotion of ethnic chauvinism

Beginning from the early 90s, the spate of ethnic militia movement, promoting ethnic chauvinism has added to the long list of spoilers of inter-group relations in the country. The appearance of the OPC has had a bandwagon effect. For example in justifying the launching of the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC), one of the chieftains argues, “Because there is OPC, there must be APC. If there is no APC, who will defend us?” (Quoted in the Christian Science Monitor, 2000). Today, the Nigerian political space is littered with sundry militia movements such as the OPC, which is the militant wing of the Yoruba self-determination group, Egbesu Boys of Africa, the re-

sistant wing of the Ijaw ethnic group as well as other groups like the Niger Delta People volunteers Force, Clansmen, Bush Boys, Islanders, which are all up in arms against the oil multinationals and the Nigerian state as a result of rip-off and neglect by the oil companies and the Nigerian state, respectively.

One basic feature of the militia movement is the promotion of ethnic chauvinism as a mobilisation strategy. In such wise, there is a toll on inter-ethnic relations. OPC has variously been involved in violence with non-Yoruba groups since its inception. Examples include:

1. 18 July, 1999, there was the involvement of OPC operatives in the Shagamu ethnic clash between Hausa and Yoruba that eventually resulted in reprisal attack in Kano. The clash started over issues pertaining to the visit of “ORO” festival to Sabo, a Hausa settlement in Shagamu town, which left between 50 and 100 people dead (Nolte, 2004: 61-89).
2. On 6 July, 2000, at Mile 12, Ketu Lagos, the OPC engaged in a battle with Hausa traders over the control of Ketu mile 12 markets that resulted in the death of about 40 people (Ikelegbe, 2001: 1-24).
3. On 27 December, 1999, members of the OPC clashed with Arewa Peoples Congress members in Ibadan and left about 50 people dead. The OPC members were protesting the planned launching of APC in Ibadan, a Yoruba land (Adegbamigbe, 2000).
4. On 30 October, 1999, there was a bloody clash between OPC members and Egbesu Boys, which led to the death of 12 people. The clash ensued when Egbesu boys crossed the path of OPC members during operation (Ejime, 1999: 3).
5. On 9 September, 1999, OPC in solidarity with Yoruba faction of the dockworkers union clashed with the Ijaw faction of the same union. The aim was to prevent the Ijaw faction that had won an election of the union from controlling the Lagos port, which is regarded as an establishment located in Yoruba land (Akinyele, 2001: 627).

With the OPC saga, it becomes evident that the emergence of ethnic militia movements has had a reverberating effect on inter-group relations in the country. The concept of ethnic militia was not part of the common features of the older generation. Perhaps, it could be rationalized on the fact that the contemporary Nigerian situation has thrown up new challenges and problems; yet, the fact that they could not be managed outside the use of force is one of the failures of the present generation.

State failure

Of all the problems besetting inter-group relations in the country, the Nigeria state has a role to play. This is especially in its failure to meet the basic duties expected of it. It has in the main, been found wanting in the discharge

of its basic duties. As a result, it has led to immiseration of the masses, who in turn have become frustrated, aggressive, desperate and despondent in their interactions. The people who had earlier lived together have suddenly found it easy to turn against their co-neighbors, who they had hitherto lived together peacefully.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the changing pattern of inter-group relations in Nigeria with the argument that it has moved from accommodation to exclusion. It has identified the reasons for such at the level of religion, politics, ethnicity and state failure. Specifically, it has argued that what seems to put the Nigerian people poles apart has been essentially constructed and not natural. In that wise, such problems could be surmounted. What could be done include an understanding that Nigerians are not patently strange bedfellows. They have come a long way and even in the not too distant past, they display a lot of tolerance and understanding amongst themselves. Included in what to be done is the need for interpretation of religious creeds and injunction in such a way that it will seldom breed religious exclusivity. Also, less emphasis should be paid on what separates the people, which, as explained in this work, are constructed and not natural. Recourse to African values of brotherliness would help in cementing the ties that bound Nigerians together. The older generations display more of these traits and this partly explains why they display a lot of accommodation and tolerance, at least to an appreciable level, to one another. The present generation has a lot to learn from them so as to live a life of peace and tranquility.

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