

A Critical Appraisal of Ethnicity and Religion: It's Implications on Development in Nigeria 2017-2021

by

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Abstract

The Nigeria Political System over the years has suffered serious and unbearable setbacks arising from ethnic and religious prejudice. Consequently, development has retrogressed abysmally. The study examined the link between ethnicity, religion and its implications on development in Nigeria. The study addressed the following objectives: to show the nexus between ethnicity, religion and development in Nigeria, to examine the nature and activities of ethnic/religion politics in Nigeria, to identify the implications of ethnicity and religion on development in Nigeria and to identify the consequences of ethnicity/religion on development in Nigeria. The study adopted the Elite theory as theoretical framework and the qualitative mode of inquiry and analysis was used. This enabled the researcher to be involved in critical observations. The findings of the study were that ethnic politics/religion resulted in underdevelopment in Nigeria, ethnicity and religion created division and disunity among the people of Nigeria. The study concluded that ethnicity and religion have retarded development. It was recommended that ethnicity and religion should not be seen as a basis for elections as it has destroyed development. Good and sustainable education should be given to the electorates to see the implications of ethnicity and religion on the development of our society.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Religion, Development, Implication.*

Introduction

There is abundant and unprecedented joy in working as a team towards the actualization and meaningful achievement of a goal when a group of people who believe in themselves love one another share things in common and more importantly agree to live together as one. The essence of this symbolic relationship is to promote national unity among themselves and sustain some levels of egalitarianism. I think this is the beauty or the idea behind the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorate in 1914 by Fredrick Lugard. Unfortunately, this supposed marriage of convenience seems not to be working for the generality of the people of Nigeria. This



unpleasant development no doubt is born out of the unending ethnic and religions, schism experienced by the people of Nigeria since the first republic till date. “In short, before 1947 there was little opportunity for a Nigerian to feel that he was under a common government which commanded his obedience, allegiance and royalty. The situation was further aggravated by the educational system which aimed at cultivating a “love of tribe” as well as by the system of native administration” (Coleman, 1986).

So, given the postulations of Coleman above, it is not surprising that the situation since independence till date has been one ethnic crisis, religious crisis or even political crisis. This is obviously because although we may have shared the same historical destiny, we were never meant to live as one. “Historically, the ethno-religious conflict and the militant insurgencies have broken out for reasons which include but are not limited to ideological concerns for instance, the pursuit of vendetta, religious intolerance, asserting political dominance or exclusively and the emergence of scriptural matters (Egwu, 1993, Babangida, 2002; Eberteiu, 2009).

It is this high-level of distrust orchestrated by religious and ethnic bigots that has ceaselessly created this dichotomy and high degree of disillusionment that made the Nigeria society ungovernable and crisis laden.

Until the Nigeria populace agree to see themselves as one despite the compulsory unity, we may just be fighting, killing ourselves over very trivial and immaterial things. Therefore, the paper is set out to interrogate the seeming ethnic and religious forces among other existing factors that have threatened the peaceful co-existence and nationhood of the Nigerian society and development in particular.

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethnicity: This is a concept that reflects a group of people belonging to a particular ethnic nationality. Ethnicity is synonymous to tribe. It connotes a particular group known for its tribe, culture and value in a nation. Ethnicity is conceptualized to mean “a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology (Osaghae, 1992; Daka et al., 2020). Furthermore, Nnoli (1978) noted that “ethnicity refers to a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups distinguished by communal character (language and culture) of their boundaries. In his opinion, Jinadu (1979) regard ethnicity as categories of people characterized by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value, systems and normative behaviour, and whose members are anchored in a particular part of the new state territory.

Religions: Religion is a belief that recognizes the worship of God. It is a belief system that requires man personal or group relationship/worship with his creator. However, there are two main types of Religions. These are the Islam and Christian religion. Another type that is not well known because of the overwhelming influence of Western culture is traditional religion. According to Kukah (1999), the two most dominant religions are Islam and Christianity and with their arrival asserted themselves by dislodging the traditional religion of the various tribes and communities, thereby imposing their ways on the indigenous peoples. Marx (1967) sees religion as the sob of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of conditions utterly unspiritual. It is the opium of the poor. The idea of God is the key note of a perverted civilization. To suppress religion which provides an illusory happiness is to establish the claims of real happiness. According to Idowu (1973), Religion results from man's spontaneous reaction to his immediate awareness of living power, wholly other and infinitely greater than himself, a power mysterious because unseen yet a present and urgent reality seeking to bring man into communion with himself. Further to it is the fact that Nabofa (1988:43) opined that "religion is a man's effort in satisfying certain emotional needs by establishing and maintaining cordial relations between himself and the suprasensible world and his fellow man." Omoregbe (1999) also defined religion as a "interpersonal relational between a man and a transcendent personal being believed to exists".

Development: Development connotes the economic, social and political transformation of the people within a specified period of time. It is a change/transformation that has reflected in the life of a people over times. Rodney (1970) sees development as increase in skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Again, Okowa (1996) view development as that which comes from hard-work, discipline, commitment, skills and the intelligent utilization of the above faculties of man in a sustained manner over a fairly long period of time. Development can equally be seen as a social type of change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per capital income and levels of living through modern production methods and improved social organization (Obi, 2006). There is development when there are comparative changes that economically, politically and culturally radiate the peoples life.

In the words of Akinjaye (1997), it implies increased social skill and capacity to interact efficiently with one's environment. For Ake (2001), it is the process by which people create and reorient themselves and their lives and circumstances to realize high levels of civilization in



accordance with their own choice and values. Development encompasses all gamuts of human endeavour. It could be sports, education, agriculture, and so on. Seer (1977) provided an illuminating insight when he said that the questions to ask about a country's development should include; What is happening to poverty? What is happening to unemployment? What is happening to inequality? If all three of them have declined from high levels beyond doubts this can be adjudged as a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central issues have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. However, if non has declined, definitely development has not taken place.

Implication: This refers to the effect on something. The effect could be positive or negative depending on the issue being examined. According to Longman, Implication mean possible future effect or result of a plan, action or event which must be considered or discussed.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to study the unending conflict and violent disagreements born out of ethnic and religious schism in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- (i) To show the nexus between ethnicity, religion, and development in Nigeria
- (ii) To examine the nature and activities of ethnic/religion politics in Nigeria
- (iii) To identify the implication of ethnicity and religion on development in Nigeria.
- (iv) To identify the consequences of ethnicity and religion on development in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's socio-economic, political activities as well as the development of Nigeria have been severally and uncontrollably affected by the overwhelming presence of ethnic and religious issues. There is hardly any sphere of the Nigeria development that is not retarded by politics, religion and ethnicity. According to Asike (2017) "The dimension of religion is often captured in the political game of Nigerian politics, and it has led to the polarization of the country. The country that had been partly integrated because of the attainments of political independence in 1960 had completely gone down the drain because of religious politics." By extension Suberu (1996) recognized that "Although the polarization of religious cleavages in national politics is a relatively recent phenomenon in Nigeria, dating back perhaps only to the late 1970's, religious divisions are an important element in Nigeria's complex pluralism, and political arena."

The paper's central thesis is anchored on the pervasive and recalcitrant display of ethnicity and religion by members of the ruling elite in our national polity. Consequently, this has polarized the country into different divisions. It is more regrettable that development has become the victims of ethnic and religious politics. Decisions taken, politics and programmes amongst others are persuasively done based on ethnicity and religion. No nation can develop with this mind set. It is retrogression and unending political crisis just as we are currently witnessing now to imagine that development will be achieved in a situation that is very volatile. According to Ekekwe (2015) "the situation especially in Nigeria speaks to us of disappointed hopes and squandered opportunities and of a state that has been fostering on the edge of a cliff."

To further exasperate the situation is the alter neglect of some sections of our national polity arising from the fact that those set of persons may not have exercised their franchise during a particular election in favour of a particular candidate. Consequently, the rest of such community is left to suffer the consequences of their action. It is painfully wrong. In the words of Alapiki (2012), "This is the character of the state in Nigeria; it is the character of politics in our society. It is a state where governors act with impunity and remain above the law; a state where senators and Assembly men do not represent any constituents but themselves; a state where police brutality is common place. A state where thruggery and gangsterism have become attractive ways of life."

A corollary to this is the level of disenchantment and political apathy witnessed during elections since in most cases, the winning candidate is sometime not the choice of the majority. This is obviously because the emergence of such candidate is borne out of ethno-religious and "money change hand politics" amongst other variables. These are the seeming identified problems that this paper seeks solution to.

Theoretical Framework

The Elite theory is the theoretical framework considered for this work for proper and sustainable guidance. According to Egonmwan, (2000) "The elite are made up largely of middle and upper class people in Western societies who have more of the skills and qualities required for leadership and who tend to share certain values about politics, mobility and leadership requirements that made the difference between them and others. The hallmark of distinction between them and others in the community is their class status and leadership resources rather than their attitudinal differences." Some of the proponents of the theory were Thomas Dye and Harmon Zeigler. The relevance of this theory to the paper is its weakness towards fanning the

embers of disunity by the elites. The policies and programmes of the elite incite and triggers religious, political as well as ethnic crisis in our national polity. Consequently, national integration is in jeopardy. It is this elite theory that manifest itself in ethnic politics and religion that make election done along religious and ethnic lines. For instance, it was in this country President Buhari, when he was aspiring to contest for the office of the President he unguardedly said Muslims should not vote for Christians. Elite theory has revealed instances where people with strong inclinations for their religion/ethnic origin make hate speeches and give quite notices in different parts of the country. As Asike (2017) fervently believe “Now the centre cannot hold as there are rampant ethnic religious conflicts between the Christians in the South and Muslim in the North. There is also a conflict of interests within the same religions that are aspiring and competing to control the state hegemony.”

By extension, programmes and political interests have been deliberately and consciously tilted along ethno-religious lines in our national politics. There are some deliberate victimizations of electorates who may not have voted for a particular candidate. More often than not, development as well as political appointments are completely denied the areas that may not have voted for such candidates. All these are the adverse effects of ethnic manifestation that is anchored on a highly conscious elites that are prejudice, towards national development. Thus, in the words of Alapiki (2010), “in the era preceding independence, and mainly in the post independence era, there is enough evidence to support the argument that electoral behaviour in Nigeria was not guided by ideology, party programme or quality of candidates, but by a political calculus based on ethnic geopolitics.”

Therefore, it is not surprising to see that politics in Nigeria have always from time immemorial assumed the shape and look of ethnic and religious divide. A realistic situation that has exposed the country to endless political division as well as religious bias. Consequently, there is high-level of distrust among the people that are supposed to see themselves as one. By implication, it has created unending divide, distrust and distorted development.

Significance of the Study

The study is fundamental to researchers, students, policy experts amongst others. The findings of the study would effectively enhance the development of ministry of information, ministry of agriculture and other related ministries centred on development studies to come up with better and sustainable policies on development devoid of ethnic and religious bias in our national polity. The study further pointed out some of the negative effects of ethnicity and religion



in our country. The idea is to make Nigerians know that the country can do far better if we eschew religion and ethnicity in the pursuit of national development and integration. Therefore, policy makers were better informed on how sustainable policies devoid of ethnic and religious prejudice can comparatively improve our economy. And more importantly, attract foreign investors to promote development.

Scope of the Study

The paper focused specifically on the period between 2017 to 2021. The idea is to comprehensively mention and point out instances where ethnicity/religion has had negative and damaging effects on development in Nigeria.

Sources of Data

Data collection for this study was mainly from secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers, magazines, documentaries and internet sources and the methods of analysis adopted were essentially qualitative, normative, analytical, conceptual and historical.

Methodology

The historical design is the method adopted in this study. The choice of this design was informed by the compelling desire to delve into the past, particularly as it regards the volatile and sensitive nature of the topic. The idea again is to unravel situations in the past that would help proffer solution borne of altruistic motive to deal with the present and future situation of the country, it was observed that the ugly part of development is traced to the past arising from an elite whose primordial interest is far and above the society he has either be appointed, recruited or even elected to lead. The situation is bad to the extent that nothing meaningful attract him to an area that does not in any way relates to his place of birth or religion. So, this design help fundamentally to historically peruse the way and manner the elites have been mismanaging the country's development borne out of religion and ethnic prejudice. Therefore, the method adopted was essentially qualitative, normative, analytical and historical.

Ethnicity/Religion and Development in Nigeria

The pace of Nigeria's progress viz-a-viz development has been very epileptic not because she does not have the resources like other developing countries to achieve her anticipated goals but because her efforts has been retrogressed and hindered by the internal forces of ethnicity and religion. Ethnicity in Nigeria has become the barometer for assessing and getting what merit



should give to you. The moment the existing stakeholders finds out that what you desires is not connected to their areas of origin or religion you are immediately denied such opportunity. Consequently, the idea and anticipated programme such individual would have brought to his area in the name of development suffers abysmally.

As rightly noted by Nnoli (1978) "This ethnicity in Africa has a class character. Its understanding cannot be achieved in isolation from the general class struggles in the society. No meaningful solution of the ethnic problems of Africa, including ethnic balancing can succeed without a fundamental change in the nature of the national leaderships in Africa. Above all, the struggle against ethnic chauvinism cannot be successfully waged under the leadership of that segment of the population which benefits most substantially and concretely from the prevailing inter-ethnic situation."

Unfortunately, this has been the defining variable in virtually almost all facets of human endeavour such as politics, employment opportunities and even religion, to mention a few. Consequently, national integration and development suffers as a result of this undue manipulation. In some of our institutions of learning now, ethnicity/religion are determining variables for seeking admission into the university. In most cases, what the candidate scores does not matter. Quite regrettably there are instances where ethnicity is pride far and above meritocracy during admission process. "This implies that ethnicity is the only major basis for the "authoritative allocation of values" (Oronsanye, 1996). Supporting the above, Davis & Nwaiwu, (2001) says that since independence, Nigeria has made little progress in forging and consolidating a sense of oneness among its diverse and often mutually antagonistic ethnic groups. Despite efforts by successive Nigerian governments to instill a sense of national identify the allegiance of most Nigerians to their various ethnic groups still surpass their allegiance to the Nigerian nation.

By extension, Geertz (1965: 139) maintained that "the network of primordial alliance and opposition is a dense, intricate, but yet precisely articulated one, the product, in most cases, of centuries of gradual crystallization. The unfamiliar civil state, born yesterday from the merger remains of an exhausted colonial regime, is superimposed from this fine spun and living conserved texture of pride and suspicion and must somehow contrive to weave into the fabric of modern politics." Efforts therefore must be consistently made to disabuse the minds of the ruling elite from this seeming policy decision and activities that seems to be retarding and stagnating development in Nigeria. The inability of Nigeria to have risen above certain level economically and politically is the strong force and hegemonic tendencies of both ethnic and religious powers

towards the pursuit of development. As aptly noted by Ekekwe (2020), “How can we begin to explain these contradictions, confusion and unrelenting tensions that have come to characterize Nigeria? Under what circumstances can the country move from more potential to positive reality, and turn its vast resources into wealth for the growing population? Nigerians have been reeling in the agony of increasing unemployment, inequality, poverty and inflation.”

Consequently, because issues of life that bother on politics and economy are viewed from the prism of ethnic and religious politics, it adversely hinders development and promotes massive unemployment which creates brigandage, gangsters, bandits and thuggery, that have very thorny issues in the life of many Nigerians today. This is because some of these bad boys joined these deadly group born out of the frustration they suffered in the hands of those who are the crusaders of ethnic/religious politics. The resultant effect is the underdevelopment of the economy, arising from kidnapping robbery, terrorism amongst others. Suffice to say that intellectuals like Nnoli (1978), Ojo (2009), Chineye (2014), Akinola (2015), and so on have succinctly and distinctive evaluated issues of ethnicity, religion and their effects on national integration in Nigeria. Nnoli (1978) argued that the failure of the various tribal groups to negotiate their amalgamation is the root of many tribal wrangling and agitations as well as religious machinations that have stagnated economic growth and nepotism in Nigeria. Also, scholars such as Imobighe (2003), Imaekhai, (2010), and Isiramen (2010) have talked about issues on national integration and national question in Nigeria.

Implications of Ethnicity/Religion on Development in Nigeria

No doubt, the overwhelming presence of ethnicity and religion has some terrible effects on the development of Nigeria. The existing implications of ethnicity/Religion on development in Nigeria are discussed below:

Ethnicity/Religion brings about disunity which consequently retards development. More often than not issues that require genuine moral efforts towards the upliftment and development of Nigeria take ethnic and religion dimension. For instance, it takes religion as well as ethnic bias to formulate policies that will favour a particular ethnic nationality. Since Buhari emerged as the President of the country, appointments made by him are always ethnic and religious based. Consequently, development is slowed down in areas where appointments were not given or made as there will be no representative or political appointee that will formulate policies that will enhance the living standard of the people from such areas.

Again, ethnic and religious politics promote hatred and prejudice. Very recently, issues of disagreements among the different geopolitical zones that makes up the country resulted in hate speeches and quit notices because of the high degree of the promoters of ethnic and religious politics. The implications of crusaders of ethnicity is to kill personal initiative which is sine quanon to development. Someone from the East for instance, who would have spent his time in the far away North with all the resources in place to be given quit notice would have had his business empire hindered or destroyed .

Ethnic/Religious politics creates unending acrimony and uncertainty. A society such as ours that is recklessly enmeshed in ethnic and religious squabbles is bound to live in fear and consistent disagreements. The painful experience in contemporary time is the escalation of ethnicity and religion arising from very mirror skirmishes that will trigger a violence situation that may consequently result in death and destruction of property. It is a known and incontestable fact that where people of different ethnic background congregate there is bound to be some level of disagreements. Unfortunately, the consciousness of ethnicity and religion makes the whole disagreement to be over stretched. At the end, property that have been acquired overtime are turned to ashes within a twinkle of an eye because of fight that is borne out of ethnic jingoism. The recent Igbide versus Emede crisis in Isoko South local government Area of Delta State that took the lives and property of many people would have been avoided if not for the intra ethnic differences that have always been there from time immemorial. The implication of this is slow pace of development since it will require government and community effort to raise money to buy and replace property that have been consciously and deliberately destroyed by ethnic and religious bigots. To allow symbolic radicalism and mindless disruptive tendencies to dominate their thinking and action is not only self-defeating but also counterproductive (Akinsanya, 2005).

Findings

The findings revealed that Nigeria's problem is borne out of the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates by Lugard's administration of 1914. This supposed marriage of convenience, perhaps to ease administration and promote oneness turned out to be the major problem hindering development in Nigeria as the problem of ethnicity and religion were seen to be doing more damages to development. This is because policies, programmes formulated and executed respectively overtime have ethnic and religious coloration. The consequences of this is retrogression, impoverish above are, underdevelopment.

So, the study further revealed that until ethnicity and religion are jettisoned in the pursuit of development, the Nigerian society will keep turning around in one spot like a pendulum. The findings, further shows that hate speeches, quit notices were the outcome of a country that has been severely and uncontrollably enmeshed in both religion and ethnic squabbles. Therefore, every existing effort must be made to discourage this negative and dangerous phenomenon call ethnicity/religion in order to promote development and egalitarianism.

Conclusion

No doubt, development in Nigeria has suffered a lot of mishap and setback arising from ethnic and religious politics in Nigeria. The degree of disagreement anchored on hate speeches and quit notices have in many ways distorted the pace of development in Nigeria. The unending wickedness of man to man, man's exploitation against amongst others is strongly rooted in ethnic and religious politics. Until people start seeing themselves as one irrespective of the ethnic and religious divide in our everyday life, development in Nigeria will keep taking the retrogressive and slow pace it has always assumed. It is an abuse of process for a country that has common historical destiny to see killing of one another and even making derogatory remarks against each other as a way of life as if we started living together only yesterday. In fairness, the pace of development is supposed to have gone further than this. The nationalists who fought for the political and economic emancipation of Nigeria from the grip of the colonial masters had development in focus when independence was fought for more than fifty nine years ago. If we must achieve development and witness some level of progress in virtually all facets of human endeavour, then we must all effectively play down on ethnicity and religious prejudice. According to Eregha (2005), "in Nigeria at present, policies are still developed along ethnic/communal lines in the following areas; job opportunities, award of contracts, revenue allocation, structural and infrastructural development, admission into federal institutions of learning, all these policy areas are based on quota system whereas infrastructural and structural development are just concentrated in some parts of the country of the rulers; to the neglect of those areas where the wealth of the nation comes from. The most disastrous effect of this type of favouritism along communal line is that it imprisons talents required for nation-building; since some segments of the country have to wait for others to catch up.

Recommendations



In the light of the above discussion, the following are considered as recommendation to escape from these ethnic and religious factors that have endlessly distorted development in Nigeria.

- (i) Nigerians must see themselves as one-irrespective of ethnic and religious affiliation.
- (ii) Development must be the focus of every Nigerian.
- (iii) Government should come up with policies and programme that should be development centred.
- (iv) Hate speeches and quit notices should as a matter of urgency be expunged from our everyday speech.
- (v) There should be religious and Muslim programmes encouraging oneness, preaching love amongst others on a regular basis.

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