

# MULTICULTURALISM: STRATEGY FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract:

There is no doubt that the issue of national integration has been on the front burner in Nigeria's political discourse in the recent times. What gave vent to this situation are such notions being paraded by experts and dilettantes alike to the effect that Nigeria is an artificial creation of the British colonial government, and did not possess any underlying pre-colonial unity that could promote national unity and development. This is further buttressed by the fact that the country is an ethnic mosaic, that is, a conglomeration of peoples of diverse socio-economic, cultural and political backgrounds. But contrary to this climate of opinion, a variety of inter-ethnic mingling, beginning from the dim past and manifesting in a myriad of social, political, economic and cultural contacts, existed among the disparate moieties that make up modern Nigeria. It is evident that long before the birth of Nigeria, the indigenous peoples had interacted on a regular and continuing basis. Therefore, this paper argues that the multicultural nature of the Nigerian state is a blessing, and should be maximally exploited for purposes of national integration and the overall development of the country.

## Introduction

The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* defines multiculturalism as "the political accommodation by the state and/or a

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dominant group of all minority cultures defined first and foremost by reference to race or ethnicity; and more controversially, by reference to nationality, aboriginality or religion, the later being groups that tend to make larger claims and so tend to resist having their claims reduced to those of immigrants."<sup>1</sup> It therefore follows that multiculturalism is the practice of promoting multiple cultures in a country for the purpose of national integration and development. Accordingly, multiculturalists advocate extending equitable status to all the distinct ethnic groups prevalent in a country. It is seen as a fair system that is more tolerant and adapts better to social issues, and therefore allows individuals to truly express themselves within the society. This is against the backdrop that no one culture is based on one ethnic group or religion, but rather, every culture is the outcome of multiple internal and external factors that change as the world changes. Thus, no one ethnic group is pure and insulated from the interactions and influences of contiguous others. Every modern

ethnic group is a product of multi-ethnic community which the forces of history blended and harmonized into a common nationality over time.

It is evident that Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with over 350 identified ethnic groups. The ethnic and cultural diversity of the country, instead of serving as a springboard for national cohesion and development has been used by some politicians, even academics, to beat *ad nauseam* the drums of ethnic chauvinism, political wrangling, mindless statism, irredentism and separatism which are contrary to the philosophy of nation-building. Although, Nigeria is at the teething stage of nation-building, it is plausible to argue that all developed countries of the world whether in the Northern or Western hemisphere started by gradual adjustments and integration of several distinct cultural and historical entities into nation states.<sup>2</sup> This paper shall, therefore, examine certain aspects of the cultural heritage of the Nigerian peoples, up to the colonial epoch, and suggest approaches to national integration and sustainable development of the country. It maintains that Nigerian unity would further be enhanced if the multicultural nature of the country is emphasized by extending equitable status and opportunities to all groups in our political life; for the true transformation of the Nigerian state can only be realized when we change for the better, the way and manner we conduct our national affairs.

### **Nigeria's Cultural Heritage**

Although Nigeria became a modern nation state in 1914 by the British Act of Amalgamation, whereby the two distinct colonial territories of Northern and Southern Nigeria were joined together, this was the result of existing geographical, historical, socio-economic and cultural antecedents which characterized the peoples of the Nigerian region from the remote past. Therefore, Nigeria, in its present state, is the result of a gradual historical process which mirrors the historical experiences of the diverse ethnic groups and thus led to the emergence of what we now have as the Nigerian State. Put differently, modern Nigeria is an amalgam of the various pre-colonial states and civilizations which had existed in the area long before the advent of colonial rule. Among these polities and cultures include the Nupe, the Tiv, the Idoma, the Igala, the Jukun kingdom, the Hausa States, the Kanem-Bornu, the empires of Oyo and Benin and the numerous Igbo communities, among which a variety of inter-ethnic intercourse existed – relationship that included but not limited to marriage, the borrowing of cultural norms and ethos and techniques, diffusion of political ideas, war, enslavement, diplomacy, treaties and trade.<sup>3</sup>

Quite evidently, the unifying influence of geography was significant in the above linkages. Thus, Lord Lugard, in his Memorandum on the Amalgamation, noted the effect of geographical unity on Nigeria when he averred that geography had led to both economic and cultural contacts in the course of Nigerian history. This geographical unity is buttressed by the fact that human traffic traversed the lagoon between Benin and Ijebu, Ijebu and Lagos. The same was true along the lagoon from Porto Novo in the west to Calabar in the east. We know also that the Awka

blacksmiths frequented Benin and that doses of Edo culture percolated into the east particularly among the Igbo that today inhabit the banks of the Niger. This gave vent to the claim by the Igbo stock of Onitsha who traces their ancestry to the Edo From antiquity, the Niger had remained the principal route connecting the Delta in the south with the open savannah in the north. The point to emphasize is that before 1914, the Nigerian region existed as a geographical unit with significant historical and economic interpenetration. Against this backdrop, J. F. Ade Ajayi opined that “any one interested in the Bight of Benin and Biafra and interested in the well-framed emirates of the northern plains had pretty well described Nigeria.”<sup>4</sup>

In the forest and savannah belts of Nigeria, there is broad homogeneity of culture involving the Nok, Ife and Igbo-Ukwu cultural elements. The Nok culture complex of the Jos plateau extends over an area of nearly three hundred and fifty kilometres east to west and one hundred and fifty kilometres north to south. Long before the advent of colonialism in Africa, this culture complex covered a much wider region, and thus provided tremendous interconnections among Nigerian peoples.

A. E. Afigbo has noted that the ultimate basis for external relations is interdependence. And this quest arises from the conviction that no community, no matter how favoured by nature, can produce all it needs to attain self-sufficiency whether at the individual or group level. Therefore, to attain these goals, there should be maximum utilisation of the geographical, economic and other advantages provided by nature and history while the disadvantages are transcended through external relations with neighbouring regions. In the Cross River region, although political unity and group consciousness at the ethnic level was absent, there existed an intricate network of relationships amongst the village settlements and city-states, the net effect of which was to transform them into different social and cultural systems in the area. The Cross River and its tributaries constitute the dominant geographic feature of the region. The river and its immediate valley are linked organically to the plains of Igboland east of the Nsukka-Udi-Okigwe escarpment through the tributaries on its right bank. It is also true that the Cross River takes its rise from the Cameroon region to the east. Although the rainy season is also the farming period when very little or no travelling is done especially in the pre-colonial days, the dry season was the main travelling and trading period during which sections of the tributaries were easily navigated by means of native canoes. But throughout the year the main river is navigated by these crafts.<sup>5</sup>

The Ekoi groups on both banks of the Cross River developed the *nsibidi* script – a sign language reduced to writing and used in the *Ekpe*, *Ukpotio*, *Ukwa* and *Isong Esil* societies, and which diffused into the Igbo country as far west as Bende. *Nsibidi* was also found among the Efik and the Ibibio. The signs were usually tattooed on the bodies of women, on calabashes, drawn on walls, and placed on roads to convey instructions from a chief. Because the *nsibidi* was shrouded in secrecy the greater

body of its lore was preserved by members of the societies that used it, and this may be the reason it did not blossom into a proper script. Among the Ibibio, it would appear to have been used in a restricted manner, to keep records of past events.<sup>6</sup> By and large, the Cross River valley was a cultural watershed with the *nsibidi* serving as an effective tool of inter-group relations in pre-colonial Nigeria. As Afigbo observed,

... in the context of the pattern and cycle of life of the peoples of the culture area and their immediate neighbours, the Cross river with its tributaries supported the level and degrees of contact commensurate with the socio-economic needs and development of the time.<sup>7</sup>

From the foregoing, it is germane to state that before 1914, our ancestors and predecessors that inhabited the Nigerian region engaged in a series of dynamic interactions with their neighbours as well as their environment. Afigbo has further stated that “the movement of peoples, goods, services, and ideas...took place easily and virtually imperceptibly ...”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, according to Ajayi and Alagoa:

Nigeria is really the basin of the lower Niger south of the Bussa rapids with the Benue, their tributaries, and the enormous delta spreading out into several creeks and lagoons. The unity of these waterways encouraged a network of relationship within the basin. These river networks provided routes of contact between peoples cutting across the north and south axis and supplementing it. Accordingly, one must recognise east and west movements of peoples and ideas as well as north and south movements already suggested by the vegetation zones. It is because of this compactness that despite the fortuitous manner in which the political unity of Nigeria came to be achieved, culturally and economically, Nigeria was not really an arbitrary creation.<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on our pre-colonial history is to enable us better appreciate the links that tended to bind Nigerians together and thus free ourselves from the erroneous and dubious impression that Nigeria is a “mere geographical expression” of British creation. On the issue of Nigeria’s international boundaries being arbitrary, it is also true that “political boundaries, all over the world, and throughout history... are artificial because they are political demarcations of territory made by political authorities for political purposes, and not by natural or cultural processes.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Approaches to Multicultural Integration**

Admittedly, the British came to the shores of the Nigerian region as explorers, missionaries and traders ostensibly to study the area for the eventual take-over of the region by the metropole. In fact, they were agents of imperialism on espionage mission, and between 1900-1960, the British colonial government built Nigeria without conscientizing the Nigerians on the rudiments of political governance. Thus, the resultant constitutions – the 1914 Amalgamation Act, the Nigerian Council, the Clifford Constitution of 1922, the Richards Constitution of 1946, the Macpherson

Constitution of 1951, the Lyttleton Constitution, etc. were no more than 'cosmetic devices' designed to achieve the political and economic goals of the imperial power. Put differently, "all the constitutions that resulted from the colonial process evidently created structural imbalance and thus provided a conducive atmosphere under which anti-Nigerian values and attitudes were fostered and nurtured."<sup>11</sup>

However, it is important to note that the political destiny of Nigeria lies on the palms of its citizens. Concerning the Amalgamation of 1914, this has been perceived from different angles in different quarters based on the premise of a fundamental dichotomy between the two merged entities of North and South protectorates, each of which, it was assumed, was inhabited by distinct monolithic ethnic groups that had existed for several millennia. The marriage, therefore, it was argued, portended competition, crises and conflicts "because of hypothetical antipathy between the North and South and between Muslims and Christians."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, to a large extent, it is the perpetuation of this myth of incompatibility by adherents of the two religions that has been responsible for the unabating and seemingly insurmountable political and religious upheavals in Nigeria. It is common knowledge that the adherents of the two faiths cut across the two Protectorates as there had been a large population of Christians in the North just as there had been Muslims spread across the Southern Protectorate. In the Central Nigeria area, with particular reference to Kogi State, it is not uncommon to have some members of one family profess the Christian religion while the others practise Islam.

It was Ahmadu Bello who, in 1953, declared that the Amalgamation was a 'mistake'. This was after the Northern members of the House of Representatives were subjected to insults and embarrassments in Lagos, having declined to support the motion for Nigeria's self-government in 1956. Soon after, followed the Kano riots later that year, precipitated by a political tour by the Action Group party, during which many innocent people lost their lives.<sup>13</sup>

Even though it has been argued that the Amalgamation was a political device by the British, with the active connivance of Northern leaders – Emirs and chiefs – to secure an advantageous position for the North, it is now clear that the event was the culmination of a process that began in 1893, and which coalesced a number of contiguous territories under a single British colonial administration after they had been conquered. In 1893, the Niger Coast Protectorate, through amalgamation, replaced the Oil Rivers Protectorate, and in 1897 incorporated the Benin kingdom which had been conquered by the British. Again in 1900, the Yoruba hinterland was merged with the Niger Coast Protectorate to form the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, with the Colony of Lagos excluded. Similar situation occurred in the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria which came through piecemeal amalgamation of variegated polities as they consecutively fell to the British fire power; this began with Ilorin and Bida in the 1890s, Adamawa, Sokoto and Borno between 1901-1903. These were followed by other emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate and the States of the

Central Nigeria area and the Confluence region. Moreover, by 1914 many parts of the Northern region had come under the firm grip of the British as the maintenance of law and order or 'pacifications' were still going on.<sup>14</sup>

The point to emphasize is that Nigeria is not an arbitrary creation whose natives hitherto lived incompatibly, and that the Amalgamation of 1914 was not a Northern contraption to lord it over the South. Indeed, historians by their training and profession are in a vantage position to promote through their writings and teaching such forces as inter-group harmony, peace, and appreciation of one another's culture that would galvanise the populace towards the development of a truly and viable Nigerian nation. This, no doubt, will be one of the greatest contributions of contemporary historians to nation-building in Nigeria. Nation-building and national integration will remain an albatross if those entrusted with tremendous opportunities to shape the course of Nigeria's evolution still bemoan the Amalgamation of 1914.

It is true that the Amalgamation was unilaterally done by the British to serve their selfish interest, and without consultations with Nigerians. To that extent, therefore, it is not preposterous to say that the Amalgamation was forced on the people even though there was no challenge from any group within the two Protectorates. According to Sa'ad Abubakar:

Given the nature of Nigeria's physical features, human environment, and resource endowment, amalgamation was indeed inevitable in the light of the fact that the philosophy of the colonising power was to maximize economic exploitation of the dependency with very minimal cost. Therefore, while for the British the amalgamation was certainly not a mistake, for Nigerians, perhaps the mistake is to the extent that the opportunities amalgamation provided for us to build a strong, virile and united black nation had never been seized upon to make it a reality, nearly a century later.<sup>15</sup>

It is instructive that the constitutional framework that gave rise to amalgamated Nigeria stultified the development of an all-embracing political culture. The result was that the two Protectorates, each semi-autonomous, as it were, developed separately and by 1951 a tripartite regional structure that emerged conditioned the three major ethnic groups

in the country, the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East and the Yoruba in the West, to develop a cohesive political culture peculiar and congruent to it rather than evolving into a pan-Nigerian political culture.

National integration should be viewed in the context of a political framework that is able to cope with the stresses and strains generated by "a shifting relationship between various changing identities within the framework."<sup>16</sup> In other words, to attain a truly integrated nationhood, all the primordial groups, each a microcosm, must look beyond their immediate frontiers to the "nation" which represents the

whole society, the macrocosm. National unity implies the existence of durable bonds of unity within the State which further implies that identification with national principles supersedes in most situations, the more limited loyalties of the ethnic groups.

Elsewhere, one of the present writers has argued that the Nigerian crisis stems from the fact that the country has been operating alien political systems of government; and so, since independence in 1960, Nigeria had been a tottering polity. Indeed, we can sift and integrate into one workable whole the positive strands of the indigenous political systems of the various traditional societies that make up modern Nigeria within the prism of the present federal system, for a political system functions best if it is internally evolved and therefore congruent with the cultural milieu within which it will operate.<sup>17</sup>

Cultural nationalism is another potent means for ensuring national integration. On the other hand, it is an instrument for fighting cultural imperialism. It is disheartening to note that after more than 50 years of political independence, Nigeria is still dilly-dallying and lily-livered on the issue of adopting a *lingua franca* from its indigenous languages. The numerous Nigerian languages should serve as a springboard for corporate development instead of a breeding place for all manner of acrimonies, political and religious tension, as well as unabating mutual suspicion. Being a multilingual society, Nigeria should appreciate the overriding significance of language planning, as it is done in developed countries of the world. In this connection, the three major Nigerian languages – the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba – can serve the purpose of *lingua franca* and media of instruction based on the principles of population and wider acceptability. These three major Nigerian languages were used for deliberations in the National Assembly in the era of the Second Republic. The measure certainly enhanced the participation of members who had varying disabilities in English language.<sup>18</sup> Cultural nationalism is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria as it was prevalent during the colonial era.

Engrossed in this philosophy of cultural nationalism in the days of the struggle for Nigeria's independence, Mazi Mbonu Ojike developed the concept of "Boycott the Boycottable", for which he was widely known, and typified in his rejection of all forms of Western culture. Thus, his nationalist aspirations went beyond the confines of politics to culture and the arts.<sup>19</sup> A celebrated apostle of African tradition, Ojike wrote that the "names of persons and places hitherto spelled or called in English should be returned to their Nigerian identities."<sup>20</sup> Practically, Ojike generated much enthusiasm for Nigerian traditional clothes as opposed to Western styled ones.

Experience has shown that federalism is the best method of handling diversity as it implies the existence of differences in culture, history, language, socio-political institutions and levels of economic development. Therefore, the present federal system in Nigeria must recognise these disparities and differences and make provisions for them rather than suppressing them or sweeping them under the carpet,

if our efforts at nation-building and national integration are to succeed. Today, the United States of America, which started with the first thirteen colonies, is the strongest federal community in the world and truly manifests the unity in diversity which federalism represents. To that extent, the formation of any federal state system must embody the following features:

- 1) it must be anchored on the histories and cultures of the federating units;
- 2) it must adopt a patient and piecemeal approach, allowing the constituent groups to always ponder on the nature of their membership;
- 3) there must be provision for fair and equitable treatment of the component units within the framework of the core values of merit, justice, rule of law, and democratic tenets, for overall good and development of the federal state;
- 4) it must make room for amendments to be made on a continual basis through constitutional provisions;
- 5) spheres of autonomous action between the federating states and the centre must be carved out thereby allowing individual states to develop at their own pace and pursue development alternatives congruent and peculiar to their environments within that framework of the federal state.<sup>21</sup> The onus would lie on our political leaders and the Nigerian masses in general to ensure that these positive expectations which make for political growth and stability are realised in the Nigerian experiment as the country remains a work in progress.

## Conclusion

The task of building a stable multi-ethnic nation is tremendous. Peace and unity cannot be realized without adequate political representation of each ethnic group no matter its population, as well as the fair and equitable distribution of the national resources. Ethnic diversity should serve as a springboard for strengthening every facet of our national life. Societal harmony is a function of social justice and it is under the atmosphere of the two that political and economic development can thrive. Efforts should be geared toward eliminating, through moral re-orientation and institutional frameworks, the canker-worm of corruption that has eaten deep into the Nigerian system. These approaches when employed would go a long way to give every Nigerian a sense of belonging and contribute to our efforts at nation-building and national cohesion; for according to T. N. Tamuno:

... it is for us, a matter of pleasant surprise that Nigeria has lasted this long since the colonially-inspired 1914 amalgamation. In recent times, other multi-cultural states with serious and ancient nationality problems, such as the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, were not so lucky. There lie useful lessons for Nigeria concerning her political future. These lessons, if learned, plus timely reforms might give Nigerians little cause to fear concerning her future, political or otherwise.<sup>22</sup>



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I. McLean and A. McMillan Eds. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*. (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 354-355.

<sup>2</sup>A. I. Asiwaju, "History and National Awareness in Nigeria," in Erim O. Erim and Okon E. Uya, (Eds.), *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, 1984), 77-83.

<sup>3</sup>T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspective: An Historical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 2.

<sup>4</sup>See Lecture delivered by J. F. Ade Ajayi on "Towards Nationhood" at a Special Seminar to members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations, nd.

<sup>5</sup>A. E. Afigbo, "External Contacts and Relations: An Overview," in Monday B. Abasiattai, (Ed.), *A History of the Cross River Region of Nigeria* (Enugu: Harris Publishers, 1990, 126- 134.

<sup>6</sup>E. J. Alagoa, "Peoples of the Cross River Valley and Eastern Niger Delta," in Obaro Ikime (Ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980, 56-72.

<sup>7</sup>Afigbo, "External Contacts and Relations," 126.

<sup>8</sup>-----, "The Age of Innocence", Ahiajoku Lecture. (Owerri: Ministry of Information, 1981), 19-21.

<sup>9</sup>J. F. Ade Ajayi and E. J. Alagoa, "Nigeria before 1800: Aspects of Economic Development and Inter-Group Relations," in Obaro Ikime (Ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), 224-235.

<sup>10</sup>S. Abubakar, "The 'Challenges' of Nation-Building: Nigeria, which way Forward?," in C. B. N. Ogbogbo and O. O. Okpoh (Eds.), *Interrogating Contemporary Africa: Dike Memorial Lectures 1999-2007* (Ibadan: Historical Society of Nigeria, 2008), 26-60.

<sup>11</sup>E. O. Erim, "Constitution Making in Nigeria: An Historical Perspective," in Okon E. Uya and Victor C. Uchendu (Eds.), *Issues in the 1995 Nigerian Draft Constitution* (Calabar: CATS Publishers, 1999), 8-31.

<sup>12</sup>Abubakar, "The 'Challenges' of Nation-Building," 31.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>16</sup>A. R. Zolberg, "Patterns of National Integration," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 5, 4 (1967), 120-130.

<sup>17</sup>C. N. Ajaebili, "Ethnic Pluralism and the Challenge of Nation-Building in Nigeria," *Journal of Arts and Strategy Studies* 2, 1 (2009), 1-6.

<sup>18</sup>S. Akaan, "Adopting an Indigenous Language as a *Lingua Franca* for Nigeria." *Journal of African Politics and Society*. Vol. 1 No. 2, 2012, 189-202.

<sup>19</sup>C. N. Ajaebili, "America-Groomed Easterners in Politics of Nigeria, 1920 – 1966" (PhD Thesis, University of Calabar, 2010), 154.

<sup>20</sup>See Mbonu Ojike, *My Africa* (New York: John Day and Company, 1946), 26.

<sup>21</sup>M. Y. Mangvwat, "Federalism in Historical Perspective: A Curse or Blessing," in C. B. N. Ogbogbo and O. O. Okpoh (Eds.), *Interrogating Contemporary Africa: Dike Memorial Lectures 1999-2007* (Ibadan: Historical Society of Nigeria, 2008), 98-132.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.