

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA EDUCATION AND NATION BUILDING: 1970-1980

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Abstract

The end of the Nigerian Civil war in 1970 and the unprecedented financial revenue that accrued to Nigeria from the sales of her crude oil would have helped in correcting the imbalance in the spread of Western education, but reverse was the case. Therefore one of the major challenges which threatened Nigeria unity after independence which was disparity in the spread of Western education continued to constitute a challenge to Nigeria nation building. There was no massive unified policy towards the spread of Western education, rather the Federal Government adopted what may be termed experimental posture as exemplified in the then East Central State by allowing for the State Government “takeover of schools”. It was not until 1973 when General Gowon declared the intension of his administration to help in the development of primary and secondary education signifying the Federal Government intension to adopt a proactive policy towards the spread of Western education. This paper seeks to study the attempts made by the Federal Government from 1970-1980. To ensure an even spread of Western education among the ethnic groups and, the response from these ethnic groups. This is done with the aim of establishing that nation building efforts have been impeded to a greater extent by uneven spread of Western education in Nigeria. The Historical Methodology was adopted and findings show that there were continuous imbalance in the spread of Western Education.

Introduction

Western education brought by the missionaries, pre-dated colonialism in Nigeria. The way and manner it was embraced by Nigerians made some ethnic groups seem to have benefited more from it than the others. This manifested itself immediately after the Nigerian political independence. The Nigerian state is made up of many ethnic groups such as Hausa, Ibo, Edo, Efik, (Tiv) and others¹. Members of those ethnic groups that embraced Western education without reservation were only those who had qualified individuals to fill the vacant positions left by our erstwhile colonial masters, especially in the area of civil service.

Those ethnic groups that did not embraced the introduction of Western education or embraced it with reservation, which was consolidated by the colonial divide and rule principles, saw themselves marginalized and un-equal to other Nigerians. To correct this situation by introducing a unified policy to cause even spread of Western education was a big challenge to Nigerian leaders entrusted with the responsibility of nation building.

However and unfortunately, while some Nigerian leaders of pre and post independence era especially at the regional levels introduced universal primary education, the government at the centre after independence did nothing to see that at least, Western education at primary level was free and compulsory for all Nigerians. This would have facilitated a massive enrolment by those ethnic groups who were lagging behind as well as bridge the gap existing in the spread of Western education in Nigeria.

The result of this has continued to widen the gap existing in the spread of Western education among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. This situation continued unabated even after the military dabbled into the Nigeria politics and introduced unitary system of government. However, the military may advance the prosecution of the Nigeria civil war as a reason why it could not see to even spread of western education among the Nigerian ethnic groups; especially from 1966-1970.

By the end of the war in 1970, the Federal Military Government adopted what may be termed experimental posture to boost even spread of western education. The East Central State was used as the “guinea-pig” as the Federal Military Government ordered the East Central State government to take over the running and management of primary and secondary schools in the state. These schools were prior to the civil war, managed and owned by the missionaries, private individuals, organizations and communities.

With the co-operation of the Igbo who constitute the East Central State, the experiment was very successful. Regrettably, upon the success of the experiment, the military government did not introduce a unified policy that would have enhanced the even spread of western education in Nigeria, not until 1976. Even after its introduction, the policy could not last much longer than three (3) years, upon the facts that by the end of Nigerian civil war in 1970, she witnessed unprecedented financial revenue that accrued to her from the sales of crude oil.

Concept of Nation and Nation Building

The word nation has many meaning to many people in recent times, it has been used in several senses on the basis of different theories and interpretations. This view is also held by Louis Synder who stated that “..... the word nation has been used in several senses on the basis of different theories and interpretatio²”.

C.J Nwanegbo sees nation as a community of people who owe an unquestioned and unquestionable allegiance to some hardly defined mental image that makes them think of themselves as one and would make them fight together for the preservation or promotion of their common interest of wee-being³. For La Palombara, the idea of nation refers to ethnicity which implies a commonality of language, mores, culture and heritage⁴. Ifidion sees nation as:

an aggregate of persons that have history, language and culture in common, are aware that they indeed have these features in common and act toward other aggregate on the basis of these commonalities that place positive values on them⁵.

However, one of the most acclaimed satisfactory definitions according to Norman, D.Palmer and Howard, C. Perkins was given by Ernest Barker who says that:

A nation is a body of men inhabiting a definite territory, who normally are drawn from different races, but posses a common stock of thoughts and feelings acquired and transmitted during the course of common historywho beside common thoughts and feelings also cherish a common will.....⁶

From these definitions, it can be adduced that a nation may consist of different ethnic groups bound together by history and also cherish a common will. This stand no doubt holds if we take Norman, D. Palmer et al who quoted Ernest Renan to have emphasized in 1882 while delivering his famous lecture at the Sorbonne that what constitutes a nation is not speaking the same tongue or belonging to the same ethnic group, but having accomplished great things in common in the past and wish to accomplish them in the future⁷.

Corresponding nation building has also generated so many definitions from many angels. Historically, to a culturally homogeneous system with visible class division, or a core cultural group dominated system, nation building entailed the breaking down of walls of difference in favour of the marginal subject class or cultural groups⁸. According to Nwanegbo, nation building is the development of the disposition in minds of the (ethnic groups), the feelings of nationhood. It entails development of unique attributes that may unify them and manifest most of those characteristics of a nation⁹.

However, Ifidion observed that nation building in the strong sense... Simply means the process of reduction of diverse groups within a state into one¹⁰. By extension and for the purpose of this study,

nation building is conceived to mean the process by which every citizen of a state is accorded equal rights and opportunities to social, political and economic life of the state.

To accord equal right and opportunity to all the ethnic groups entails among other things, the adoption of a unified policy in social, economic and political endeavour of the state. The accordance of equal opportunity and right in the spread of western education to all the Nigeria ethnic groups from 1970-80 was an illusion. No doubt the agreement among the scholars that Nigerian leaders appeared not to be genuinely interested in nation building¹¹. The uneven spread of western education among the numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria was an aberration to nation building.

Government Spread of Western Education in Nigeria (1953-69)

The spread of Western education among the ethnic groups in Nigeria as from 1953 was carried out by the regional governments. The McPherson's constitution of 1951 which granted some degree of internal self-government to the regions encouraged the governmental policy of regional education. The constitution has no serious element of nation building as it was fashioned mostly for the interest of the colonial masters.

The first massive move in the spread of western education was carried out in the western region under the premiership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. In his first budget speech as the premier of western region, he presented a proposal aimed at providing free, universal and compulsory education called UPE¹². This took off in 1955 and, it included among other things "a massive teacher training programme...."¹³

In 1957, Universal Basic Education was launched in Lagos by the Federal Government for the Federal Territory. The scheme was no doubt to imitate the western region government. The programme was more successful as "it provided an ideal free universal primary education as it covered not only non-payment of school fees, but also supply of textbooks and some other expenses"¹⁴

The Eastern Region muted her own proposal in 1953 and, it fully took off in 1957¹⁵. In the Northern Region, "there was no formal scheme on such.... as obtained in the West and East"¹⁶. The "skeptical attitude"¹⁷ displayed by the Northerners towards Western education had continued even as education was free in NA schools which were dominant in the region and was guaranteed by the generous support of the regional government¹⁸.

From the above situation, it is clear that there was no massive unified policy in the spread of Western education among the ethnic groups in Nigeria from early 1950s and beyond.

The number of graduates from the primary schools in the Western Region must be greater if compared with the Eastern and the Northern Regions. This must no doubt have affected the manner of and the establishment of secondary schools. This becomes correct judging from the primary school enrolment figures of the regions from 1957-1958. It was observed of the Western Region that primary school enrolment (excluding Lagos) in 1958 hit 1,000,000¹⁹, while the primary school enrolment figure for Eastern Region in 1957 (in which free universal primary education took off) was, 1,209,167²⁰, that of the then Northern region which did not introduce the scheme stood at 250,912 in 1958²¹.

By 1959, without much doubt, the pressure from the regional governments with regard to development of education in Nigeria must have encouraged the appointment of Eric Ashby commission to conduct investigation into Nigeria's needs in the field of post-secondary school certificate and higher education²². Among the Commission's remarks as contained in its report was "Higher education must build on the foundation laid by the primary and secondary school; that the quality and stability, the strength and size of higher education depended on the strength of the foundation at the primary and secondary school level"²³.

The import of this remark, positively favored that Western Region should have more universities established in it than other regions. The higher institutions were to cater for the graduates from the secondary schools who wished to obtain university and other tertiary education. Again, the remarks

must have aroused in the Northern Region, the spirit and desire to massively spread western education at the primary and secondary school levels among its ethnic groups. This at least would prepare and lay a solid foundation for the supply of candidates for any higher education institution that might be established in the area.

This actually, was the situation as an observation had it that:

The development of primary education after independence was based on the Ashby recommendations. The government of the northern region felt that the greatest need was to accelerate the expansion of the primary schools. Its aim was to attain the Ashby report target of 25% of children of school age to be in school.... The government also designed a programme that was to advance the region into universal primary education as soon as possible. At the same time infrastructure were to be laid in terms of post primary facilities in order to ensure a balance educational development²⁴.

Furthermore, the Ashby commission among others, recommended that,

- a. The Federal Government should give support for the development of a new university planned for 1955 (University of Nigeria, Nsukka).
- b. A University should be established in the North using the old site of the Nigeria College Zaria as its base.
- c. A University should be established in Lagos....
- d. University College Ibadan should move from its conservative position, widen its curriculum and develop into a full University²⁵.

It was not surprising that in the long last, three universities, University of Ibadan, University of Lagos and University of Ile-ife sprang up in the Western region. While in the Eastern Region was established the university of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1960 and, in the North Region was established Ahmed Bello University Zaria.

There was no visible change in the pattern of spreading of western education in Nigeria up to 1966, rather a substantial increase in the enrolment of school children in the Northern Region and fluctuation in the west and the apparent fall in the Eastern Region. Anene Nwuzor et al observed as follows,

The overall picture of primary education in the country in the 1960s showed as follows, in the Northern Region there was a substantial increase in enrolment from 282,848 in 1960 to 534,200 in 1965, about 300% rise in the West (including Mid Western Region carved out of Western Region in 1963) enrolment rather fluctuated between 1,124,785 in 1960 and 1,128,127 in 1966. For the East there was an apparent fall in enrolment from 1,438,314 down to 1,236,872 between 1960 and 1966²⁶.

Nonetheless, the Eastern Region suffered a devastating setback in the spread of Western education from 1967 to 1970. This was the period in which the Federal Military Government was prosecuting the Nigeria Civil War. Eastern Region was the theatre of the war, school age children could not enroll into schools. They were either mowed down by bullets or were killed subtly by *kwa-shi-or-kor* which was caused by hunger and starvation. Hence from the primary level, the school activities were at a standstill.

Spread of Western Education from Early 1970s in Nigeria

Nigeria was involved in a very devastating civil war which lasted for 30 months. Among causes of war was the perceived dominance of some ethnic groups over others in the social, economic and political affairs of Nigeria. For instance, the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups were ubiquitous in every facet of western development in Nigeria immediately after political independence. This was tenable because Western education had spread to a very reasonable degree within them. The Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups threw up individuals who fitted into the various facets of western development which Western education constitutes the major prerequisite²⁷.

To tackle this glaring imbalance, pushed the Federal Military Government to look in the direction of fashioning out a national education policy, intended to facilitate to even spread of western education as one of the ways of nation building. The Federal Military Government started this moved by convoking a national curriculum conference in 1969. Anene Nwuzor et al said this of the conference:

Towards the close of the 1960s, social, economic and especially political developments culminating in the traumatic civil war created the unmistakable impression that the national education system was no longer satisfying the needs of the nation. Conscious of this gap, the Federal Government, through the Nigeria Education Research Council (NERC) sponsored a national conference on curriculum Development which was held in Lagos from 18th-12th September 1969²⁸.

The conference whose participants were members of trade unions, business men and women, youth clubs, farmers, religious organizations, administrators and university lecturers did not come up with new curriculum²⁹. They instead reviewed the old curriculum and identified new national goals for Nigeria education, bearing in mind the needs of youths and adults in the task of nation building and national reconstruction³⁰. The report of proceeding and recommendations of the conference gave birth to philosophy for Nigerian education at long last following other developments led to the emergence of another document-National Policy on Education.

The reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation programme declared at the end of the civil war on the defunct Biafra, gave the Federal Military Government a variable ground to experiment the newly draft National Policy on Education. The Federal Military Government ordered the East Central State Government to take over the ownership and running of all the schools in the area. These schools hitherto were owned and managed by the Eastern Region Government, Missionaries and private individuals.

The Federal Government experiment was successful. The Igbo's cooperation and resilience threw up new school buildings, erected by the various communities and handed over to the government. They could not mind that they were paying school fees but they continued erecting and donating school buildings. With this situation, the government was left with supervision and supply of teaching personnel and other ancillary staff. On this, Obi-ani, P. observes "the Igbo people made strident effort towards giving their children education despite their poor financial position at the end of the civil war"³¹. Igbo ethnic group did not stop at erecting and donating school building to the government. They went a step further, contributed money communally to pay the school fees of their children. Obi-ani also noted that:

Many towns and villages, upon realizing that individually they could not afford to train their children and wards even in primary schools decided to pay school fees by communal efforts. Thus more than 3000,000 pupils in primary schools from over 300 towns and villages benefited from this free education scheme in some Igbo communities³².

However, upon the success of this programme, the Federal Military Government that seemingly tried to surmount the imbalance in the spread of Western education among the ethnic groups did not deem it important to extend the government takeover of schools to all parts of Nigeria. For instance, had the Federal Military Government extended the policy to the North by taking over all the established Koranic schools, at least the spread of Western education at primary level would have witnessed some leverage.

The Federal Military Government's lukewarm posture must have prompted the Daily Times newspaper in one of its editorial to posit "state take-over of schools was necessary hurdle for government to surmount as the takeover of schools would ensure uniformity of standard and the spread of (Western) educational opportunity more evenly"³³.

Universal Primary Education

The editorial of the Daily Times newspaper cited above no doubt evoked serious reactions from individuals and governments as to control and spread of western education. The Federal Military Government reacted by its assumption of increasing responsibility through various pronouncement and

actions, especially its policy of establishing and running Federal Government Colleges (Unity Schools) at the secondary school level. The higher institutions were not left out. But primary education, the foundation of secondary and tertiary education was not given paramount attention. However, in his 1973 budget, the Military Head of the Federal Government, General Yakubu Gowon, declared the intension of his administration to help in the development of primary and secondary education. Also in 1974, he announced that the Federal Military Government was to introduce nationwide free and universal primary education in 1976³⁴.

It is pertinent to note that by the end of civil war in 1970, Nigeria was swimming in petrochemical dollars and ponds. Financial wise, the Federal Military Government had the financial muscle to carry out the policy of free universal education earlier than 1976. The delay however could be attributed more to the recklessness and corruption which marked the administration starting some few years after the civil war. The recklessness and corruption were among the reasons why General Murtalla Mohammed and his group toppled Gowon's administration in bloodless coup d'état in 1975 just a year to the proposed take off of the universal primary education. The coup d'état however, did not stop the proposal to commence as scheduled. Though it was implemented by General Olusegun Obasanjo who took over the mantle of leadership at the brutal murder of Murtalla Mohammed by Col. Dimka in an abortive coup d'état on 13th, Feb. 1976.

Regrettably, the programme crumbled like a pack of cards just about 3 years of its introduction. Bulk of school age children and illiterate adults made up of almajiris, normads, fishermen and traders could not benefit from the programme. The failure of the programme was attributed to among other things, lack of sustained political will. Speaking recently on the defunct UPE programme, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the Vice President of Nigeria in the fourth republic remarked,

Let me invite your attention to the experiences this nation has gathered since first national attempt at UPE in 1976..... it soon becomes clear that UPE was hamstrung with inadequate baseline date. Several unanticipated variables emerged in the early stage of implementation. Notable among these was the emergence of special interest groups, which were not initially provided for. There were problems of funding and management and consequently the lack of sustained political will ³⁵.

Unfortunately, the last nail in the coffin of the unified programme in the even spread of Western education (UPE) in Nigeria from 1970-80 was forced in by the Ibrahim Dasuki Committee report on Local Government reform and the inaugurated civilian rule of 1979. State Primary Education Board Kano has this to say of the Ibrahim Dasuki Committee report,

As a result of 1976 Ibrahim Dasuki Committee report on Local Government reforms, coupled with the transfer of power to civilian government in 1979, the responsibility of shouldering primary education was rested with the Local Government Councils and the Federal Government shielded the responsibility ³⁶.

From 1979, the Federal controlled government of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was adamant at continuing with the universal primary education programme, hence the return to status quo- the uneven pattern of spread of Western education. This situation came to fore in 1980 when the states of the South Western Nigeria under the control of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), re-introduced free primary education in their respective states. These states were Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Bendel and Oyo (all from the defunct Western and Mid Western Regions), and unfortunately other states in Nigeria were unable to reintroduce free primary education. Thus the imbalance continued with all the challenges.

Conclusion

The pattern of the spread of western education in Nigeria from 1970-80 remained basically the same with the pre and post independence era. The Federal Military Government experiment to a change was successful. The success was due to the co-operation and resilience of the Igbo ethnic group (Eastern Central People) with who the experiment was carried out. The Federal Military Government's delay at

introducing the findings of the experiment immediately in the other parts of the country did not help matters.

The eventual introduction of a unified policy in the spread of western education (UPE) in 1976 was fraught with problems such as lack of baseline data, funding, management, lack of sustained political will and others. This snow-balled into the abandonment of the programme just three years after its inception. Hence the gap was not bridged as the bulk of the people who supposed to benefit from it were not budgeted for.

Also the Ibrahim Dasuki commission's report on the Local Government reform of 1976 and the civilian takeover of government in 1979 became the last straw that broke the camel's back. Finally the return to the regional system of spread western education in 1980 by the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which controlled Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Bendel, and Oyo States, carved out from the former Western and Mid Western Regions dashed every hope.

In aggregate, the North, South and East could not leverage. Then going by the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, there was a glaring imbalance in the spread of Western education. It was this glaring imbalance that prompted our Constitution Drafting Committee inaugurated in 1975, to come up with the term Federal character (quota system) in their draft which eventually has become part and parcel of Nigeria. Nigerians were not given equal opportunity in terms of spread of Western education hence an aberration to nation building.

End Notes

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