

Ethnicity, Conflict and Instability: Nigeria's First Republic perspective

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ABSTRACT

Most of the conflicts which lead to violence and extensive destruction of lives and property, (especially in the first republic 1960-1966) in many parts of the country, can without exaggeration, be attributed to ethnic factors among other things. Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria therefore, had had far-reaching effect on the Nigerian body polity. It resulted in a series of conflicts and instabilities that has bedevilled Nigerians democratic experience since independence. There was escalating inter-ethnic politics of vandalism, cut-throat politics, lack of spirit of give and take, politics of winner takes it all, politics of rancour or acrimony perennial wrangling, antagonism, suspicion among different ethnic groups, accusations and counter-accusations, dog-eat-dog economy, discrimination, among other evils. It is on this background that this work examined the historical antecedent of ethnicity in Nigeria. The paper also highlights the instances of conflict and instability in Nigeria. The study also examined the ills of such conflicts and instabilities in Nigeria and finally, the conclusion. This paper is historical; hence, it adopts a qualitative method of analysis. Useful piece of information were obtained from important relevant documents, reports and array of secondary sources.

Key words, Ethnicity, Conflict, Instability, Nigeria, First Republic

Introduction

Nigeria is made up of different and differing ethnic groups. The heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state is not peculiar to Nigeria alone but also applicable to a host of other African countries. This diversity manifests as differences in culture, religion, beliefs, customs, traditions, values, norms, interest and orientations. Because what one ethnic group in a state wants could differ from what the other wants, conflict and violence could result.

According to Otite and Albert¹, Conflicts in most parts of the world including Nigeria are something abnormal, dysfunctional and therefore detestable. Yet no homogeneous or heterogeneous group can exist in any given social formation without conflict. It exists in all human society. This is because conflict plays both positive and negative roles in any human collectivism. Conflict arises from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and or groups in defined social and physical environment.

Nnoli, asserted that ethnicity developed from colonialism². Ekpekurede opined that, in Africa and Nigeria in particular, inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic communal clashes or conflicts are some of the legacies of colonialism³. There were carried over from the colonial era into the post-colonial setting. Colonialism exploited and compounded into ethnic inimitable relations, created artificial boundaries and left Africa and Nigeria in particular at the effect of bringing together many different ethnic people within a nation that did not reflect, nor have (in such a short period of time) the ability to accommodate or provide for the cultural and ethnic diversity.

Ethnic conflicts and instabilities had long, since the declaration of Nigeria as an independent nation, being a social evil eating deep into the social political and economic fabric of the nation⁴. Ethnic nationalism has been rearing its ugly head in different phases and areas of development in Nigeria since independence, and it is a factor, which has been barring Nigeria as a nation from attacking the patriotism of her citizenry. This has been a system in practice where an ethnic nationalist identifies with, and sees himself or herself first as a member of a particular ethnic nationality before identifying himself or herself with a nation (country), thus, has helped to explain the emergence and proliferation of ethnic associations and militias such as: Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE), Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC), Ohaneze Ndigbo, Egbesu Boys, Bakassi Boys, Middle Belt Forum (MBF), Movement for the Survival of Ogini People (MOSOP), South – South Peoples' Conference, Union of Niger Delta (UND), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND)⁵, among others.

The entrenchment and institutionalisation of ethnic nationalism in Nigeria has also meant that political parties are formed along ethnic lines. According to Ake, “the regime and political constituents tended to be homogenous in ethnicity. Thus to win an election, you had to win at ethnic group and if this happened to be large, a political base was guaranteed”⁶. It thus, became a norm for parties to be formed along ethnic lines in Nigeria. This was the trend in the first republic when the three predominant parties, Northern People Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC), stood for the three dominant ethnic nationalities – Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo respectively⁷.

These ethnic nationalities breed so much enmity among the diverse ethnic groups which led to conflicts and instabilities. Indigenes of each of the communities now take refuge outside their different communities. Many families have lost either the breadwinner of the house, the son or daughter and or the mother. The stress, bereavement, impoverishment, disruption of social life and insecurity caused by some of these conflicts is enormous and is inimical to the development of both the communities and the states concerned⁸ thereby, constituting a threat to national security. Apart from peace enforcement, the Nigerian state and the ruling class which controls it should do something tangible to prevent the re-occurrence of some of these communal clashes.

The paper is divided into five parts. The first part is introduction. This is followed by conceptual clarification. The third discusses Historical Antecedent of Ethnicity in Nigeria. The penultimate section is an analysis of the instances of conflict and instability in Nigeria. This section highlights those issues that distort the socio-political and economic balance of the nation. The last part is the conclusion. The argument tends to suggest that, inadequacies of both the state and the people have continued to retard meaningful socio-economic development in the contemporary Nigerian State. The paper argues that from 1960, patriotism as far as Nigerian is concerned, has been thrown into the river and ever since, it has been replaced by individualism, sectionalism, and parochialism. This paper exposes the underlying factors that contributed to conflict and instability by examining the nature of a typical Nigerian who thinks of self before others. And when he or she thinks of others, the thought is about both members and nuclear and extended families. From that level, a typical Nigerian thinks of people from his or her native town or village and then to the level of ethnic group.

Conceptual Clarifications

Conflict and Instability in Nigeria

Nigeria as we all know is essentially an artificial creation, which, like most other African States, is a product of Colonialism⁹. This fact is central to understanding the country's government and politics which have been conditioned several diversities: ethnic, linguistic (there are between 250 and 400 distinct languages), geo-political (there is a deepening cleavages between Christians and Moslems), and class.

Nigeria became politically independent on October 1, 1960, after a long period of colonial rule. Most of the groups that today make up the country were often distinguished by differences in history, culture, political development, and religion. It should not be assumed that the various population groups in pre-colonial Nigeria were completely separated from one another. Historians have established evidence of various forms of interactions among the peoples, the major ones being trade and super-ordinate – sub-ordinate relationships. There were some certain forms of disagreements in the pre-colonial Nigeria as a result; a pattern of conflicts and wars prevailed. On the balance there were pronounced differences among the people who later came to comprise Nigeria, especially when we consider the major regional groups but the British rule did much to accentuate these differences and, in some cases, created new divisive sentiments. Even the nature of British conquest and the process by which its rule was established encouraged separate identities¹⁰.

At the inauguration of Nigeria's independence the prospect of democracy in the new nation seemed promising. In spite of the fact that the various political parties were ethnical and regionally based, the political parties that contested with each other in the Federal elections for the independent parliament were somehow able to create a government that appealed to the majority of Nigerians. But unfortunately, the hope which attended Nigerian's independence did not sustain their grip on the country. According to the words of Levi A. Nwachukwu and G. N. Uzoigwe (eds), "As Nigeria grew older in independence, her political and economic fortunes began to decline"¹¹. In the first five years of independence, Nigeria experienced several crises, largely political in nature, which challenged the basis of her claim to a politically united nation.

Concept of Ethnicity

Ethnicity in its broad description implies the individual's identification with an ethnic group, its culture, interest and goals. It is also, the art of belonging and holding tenaciously to one's ethnic group. Ethnicity may further be defined as a set of beliefs about the superiority and differences of one's ethnic group and a defense of its interest above all others.

According to Okwudibe Nnoli, Ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups¹². Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The crucial communal factor may be language, culture or both. The most widely used marker according to Nnoli was that of language. In most cases, people who spoke a distinct language, having a separate term for the language and/or its speakers saw themselves, or are viewed by others, as ethnically different.

According to Hofstede, there is always a strong tendency for ethnic or linguistic group to fight for recognition of their own identity, if not for national independence¹³. This tendency has persistently been on the increase rather than decrease in the latter part of 20th century. Following the Hofstedian analysis, ethnic nationalism is not particularly a strong phenomenon.

Oseghae defined ethnicity as the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation¹⁴. This definition is preferred because it identifies two issues that are central to discussions on ethnicity. The first is that ethnicity is neither natural nor accidental, but is the product of a conscious effort by social actors. The second is that ethnicity is not only manifest in conflictive or competitive relation but, also, in the context of cooperation. A corollary to the second point is that ethnic conflict manifests itself in various forms, including voting, community service and violence. Thus, it needs not always have negative consequences.

Ethnicity also, encompasses the behaviour of ethnic group. Ethnic groups are groups with ascribed membership, usually, but not always based on claims or myths of common history, ancestry, language, race, religion, culture, and territory. While all these variables need not be present before a group is classified or categorised as having a common identity that distinguished it from others, it is this classification by powerful agencies such as state, religious institutions and the intelligentsia such as local ethnic historian that objectified the ethnic group, often setting in motion processes of self – identification or affirmation and recognition by others. Thus, ethnicity, according to Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov is not so much a matter of “shared traits or cultural commonalities”, but the result of the interplay between external categorization and self-identification¹⁵.

Historical Antecedent of Ethnicity in Nigeria

Ethnicity is one of the keys to understanding Nigeria’s pluralistic society. It distinguished groups of people who for historic reasons have come to be seen as distinctive by themselves and others on the basis of locational origins and series of other cultural markers.

According to Ukpo, the ethnicity of Nigeria is so varied that there is no definition of a Nigerian beyond that of the country¹⁶ the boundaries of the formerly English colony were drawn to serve commercial interest, largely without regards for the territorial claims of the indigenous people. As a result, about three hundred ethnic groups comprise the population of Nigeria, and the country’s unity has been consistently under siege eight attempts at secession threatened national unity between 1914 and 1970. The Biafra war was the last of the secessionist movements within this period.

The count of three hundred ethnic groups overwhelmingly enumerates ethnic minority of groups, those which do not comprise a majority in the region in which they live. These groups usually do not have a political voice, nor do they have access to resources or the technology needed to develop and modernize economically. They therefore often consider themselves discriminated against, neglected, or oppressed. There are only three ethnic groups which have attained “ethnic majority” status in their respective regions: the Hausa/Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest.

The first, the Hausa-Fulani are an example of fused ethnic groups, as they are actually made up of two groups, not surprisingly called the Hausa and the Fulani. The Hausa themselves are a fusion, a collection of Sudanese people that were assimilated, long ago, into the population inhabiting what is now considered, Hausa land. They believed in the religion of Islam. Their origin is a matter of disputes: legend trace them back to Canaan, Palestine, Libya, Mecca and Baghdad, while ethnologists hold them to be from the Sub-Saharan Africa or the Lake Chad Basin. Once they arrived in Hausa land they became known for setting up seven small states centred on “Bimi” or walled cities. In these states the Hausa developed techniques of efficient

government, including a carefully organised fiscal system and a highly learned judiciary, which gave them a reputation of integrity and ability in administrating Islamic laws.

The Fulani are also Muslims and like the Hausa their origin is more or less an open question. Once a nomadic people, they believed themselves to be descended from the gypsies, Roman soldiers who became lost in the desert, or other groups such as the relatives of the Tueregs, who inhabit the southern edge of the Sahara in Central Africa. Scholars claim that the Fulani are related to the Phoenicians or place their origin in Shepherds of Mauritania that were looking for new pastures. Whatever their origin the Fulani are known to have arrived in the Hausa states in the early 13th century. Since then, they have intermarried with the Hausa and they mostly adopted the latter's customs and language, although some Fulani decided to stay 'pure' by retaining a nomadic life and animist beliefs. The Fulani are most distinctively known for a dispute that developed between them and the local king Gobir, a dispute which developed into a religious war or Jihad, ending with a Fulani conquest of the Hausa states.

The second majority ethnic group is the Igbo, who like the Hausa-Fulani are a synthesis of smatter ethnic groups. In this case, the smaller groups are the Onitsha Igbo, the Western Igbo, the Cross river Igbo and the North – Eastern Igbo. Their origins are completely unknown, as they claim to be from about nineteen different places. They do maintain an 'indigenous home', however the belt of forest in the country to the East of the Niger valley.

The Igbo established a society that was fascinating in its decentralization. Their largest societal unit was the village where each extended family managed its own affairs without being dictated by any higher authority. Where chief existed, they held very restricted political power, and only local jurisdiction. The villages were democratic in nature, as the government of the community was the concern of all who lived in it.

The third ethnic majority group, the Yoruba, is like the others made up of numerous smaller collections of people. Those who are identified as Yoruba consider themselves to be members of Oyo, Egba, Ijebu, Ife, Illesha, Ekiti or Owu peoples. The Yoruba are united, however by their common belief in the town of Ife as their place of origin, and Ooni of Ife as their spiritual leader. Their mythology holds that "Oduduwa" created the earth, the royal houses of Yoruba Kingdoms trace their ancestry back to "Oduduwa", while members of the Yoruba kingdoms trace their ancestry (that is those of ordinary people) to his sons. Yoruba society is organised into kingdoms, the greatest of which was called Oyo and extended as far as Ghana in the west and the banks of the Niger to the east. The Oyo Empire collapsed in 1830 when Afonja, an ambitious governor of the state of Ilorin broke away but lost his territory to the hired mercenaries of the Fulani.

These three groups comprise only about fifty seven percent of the population of Nigeria. The remainder of the people are members of the ethnic minority group, which include such people as the Kanuri, the Nupe and the Tiv in the north, the Efik/Ibinio, and the Ekoi in the South East, and Edo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo and Isoko in the South South, along with hundreds of other groups that differ widely in language, culture and even physique. It is noteworthy that the specific groups mentioned above are distinct in that they were found in the 1953, 1962 - 1963 and later 2006 census, to have over one hundred thousands of numbers. As the population of Nigeria has doubled since then, it is safe to assume that these groups are now much larger.

One would therefore conclude with a comparism that attempts to portray the difficulties of successfully governing such an incredible variety of people tends to be difficult. You can imagine the ensuring chaos.

Okwudiba Nnoli's Ethnic politics in Nigeria represents the first comprehensive effort to investigate ethnicity in Nigeria. Unlike previous critics of modernisation who identified social changes as the cause of ethnicity, Nnoli, inspired by the Marxian class perspective of the dependency movement, clearly asserts that ethnicity developed from colonialism. The provenance of ethnicity according to Nnoli was the colonial urban setting where:

The exploited Africans soon experienced the colonizers racial prejudice and discrimination in the fields of jobs, remunerations, housing, sports and even Churches and burial grounds. Having been uprooted from the pre-colonial setting which had valid meaning to him, in which he had effectively and organically related him to his local environment and culture had produced salutary patterns of interactions with others, their African migrant found the door to the colonizer's glorified world securely barred to him. The resultant anomie and alienation affected his socio-economic and political activities¹⁷.

The exploitative tendency of the colonizer and the scarcity of socio-economic and political opportunities in the colonial period generated intense elite competition. Nnoli argues that the colonial administration deliberately promoted ethnicity through policies of indirect rule, categorization of Africans by "tribe" and promotion of separate settlements between natives and settlers of urban centres. The outcomes of the divide and rule oriented policies that led to rise, spread and consolidation of ethnicity include: socio-economic competition, regional inequalities, lack of economic unity, rivalry in provision of amenities, low class consciousness, intemperate utterances and factional politics, among others. Although, Nnoli acknowledges that some pre-colonial differences were relevant in inter-ethnic competition, he states that "cultural diversity was a myth because the colonised had been uprooted from the pre-colonial setting"¹⁸.

By emphasizing the colonial experience, Nnoli draws attention to role of the socio-economic system in the politicization of ethnicity. Ultimately therefore, he argues dependent capitalism pursued by colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, which promoted and exacerbated inequalities and placed emphasis on distribution instead of production, is the cause of ethnicity. It goes without saying according to Nnoli, that all projects such as the creation of the states within the Nigeria federation administered by the bourgeois elite, will fail.

Only a socialist revolution that rescues the country from dependent capitalism will promote the type of development that does not encourage ethnicity. Nnoli's seminal study is illuminated in several respects. It identifies materialist underpinning of ethnicity. It shows that inter-ethnic contact does not necessarily provoke violent conflicts especially where there is socio-economic division of labour and exchange. Worthy of mention also, is its inter-disciplinary perspective which derives from Nnoli's political economy approach, enabling him to combine evidence from historical anthropological, psycho-sociological economic and political studies to buttress his arguments on the origins crystallization and persistence of ethnicity. However, there is the tendency to exonerate the subordinate classes in privileging the role of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois classes leading to what Hodgkin aptly called the clever elite/dumb mass thesis. Moreover, history contests the view that ethnicity is a logical consequence of dependent capitalist countries have avoided violent ethnic conflicts. Obviously, this position was influenced by the attraction of the dependency movement in social science faculties across Africa in 1970s.

Instances of Conflict and Instability in Nigeria

After Nigeria was granted “independence” by the British government on October 1, 1960, the weather was then promising, as the then “independent” parliament were somehow able to create a government that appealed to the majority of Nigerians. But at a later stage, it became obvious that, the hopes which attended Nigeria’s independence did not sustain their grips on the country. As Nigeria grew older in independence, its political and economic fortunes began to decline.¹⁹ In the first ten years of independence, Nigeria experienced several conflicts and instabilities that were largely political in nature, which challenged the basis of its claim to a politically united nation.

Among such conflicts were, the Census crises of 1962 – 1963, party formation (that is, the formation of political parties along ethnic lines), the 1964 general election, the 1966 coup and counter coup, the pogrom (that is, the massacre of the Igbos in the North) and finally the civil war of 1967 – 1970 which claimed millions of lives.

1962 – 1963 Census

The Census exercise of 1962 was the first post independent national enumeration. The three major regions of Nigeria at the time, the North, the West and the East – recognised the importance of the census. This was because seats in the House of Representatives were apportioned on the basis of population. The North’s political domination depended largely on its large population. The northern region’s political strength marshalled by the NPC had arisen in large measure from the result of the 1962 – 1963 Census which had identified 54 per cent of the country’s population in that area. A national campaign early in 1962 addressed the significance of the forthcoming census. The southern parties, especially the embittered NCNC, had hoped that the regional power balance could be shifted if the 1962 Census favoured the South. The other regions felt that an accurate 1962 census would reject northern claims to a large population, and diminish the basis of the political power in the central government.

The importance of this census to the three major regions cannot be overemphasized. The reasons for this are not far-fetched. First and foremost, population determine the allocation of parliamentary seats on which power of every region was based. The population figures were also used in allocating revenue to the regions, and also, in determining the viability of any proposed new regions as a key contest for control of the federation. Walter Schwarz put it correctly, when he said “from the ... census was submerged in politics, with politicians and ‘tribal’ leaders out to win”.²⁰ This contest led to various illegalities: inflated figures, electoral violence, falsification of results, manipulation of population figures, and the likes.

Unfortunately, the census results were disrupted and there were allegations that the eastern and the northern regions had inflated their figures. J. J. Warren, the federal census officer, wrote the census off as false and inflated and the federal government did not publish the result. Had the result being accepted, the north would have lost its numerical dominance, since it had 22.5 million people as against 23 million in the southern regions, including Lagos.²¹

Because of its political strength in the parliament, it is reasonable to suggest that the north was instrumental in the invalidation of the 1962 census. The political mood of the south became one of disenchantment, bordering on an inclination towards political separation from the north, a precursor of the later Biafran conflict. Kalu Ezera, a member of parliament from the south described the mood “opinion in the south was rapidly and widely inclining to the dangerous view that secession of the south from the north would be the only answer to a continued northern domination”²². In 1963, a recount was undertaken. It gave the northerners numerical superiority over the other regions. The eastern region rejected the result, but was finally

accepted after a protracted legal battle by the NCNC, and the recount gave the northern region a population of 20, 750, 975 out of the total of 55, 620, 268²³. These figures eliminated whatever hope the southerners had of ruling the federation. The census had become a flash point for inter-regional conflict.

The coalition between the northern-led political party, the National Peoples' Congress (NPC) and the Eastern-led political party, National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC), weakened and finally dissolved in 1964. Perhaps of even greater significance, however is the revelation of the deepening schism, which developed between the Igbo of the East and the Hausa-Fulani of the North. During a Federal House of Representative debate on the 1963 census, a member from the East commented that since the publication of the preliminary figures, (census 1963) which the NCNC rejected, Nigeria unity seems to be in mortal peril²⁴. "Northern Minister of Land, on behalf of this government promised to dispossess the Igbos of their property as well as the early threat to remove them from the civil service of that region²⁵.

Replying to the comment, a northern member of parliament said, it is no concern of this parliament what they do in the North, let them (Igbos) let them go home. There was a crisis of disunity and disagreement within the governing parties. It was ominous sign of an impending fracture in the nation. Unfortunately, the parliament failed to collectively condemn statements that had the potentials to ignite the fire of inter-ethnic discord. At independence, Nigeria emerged as a federation of three regions: Northern, Western and Eastern.

Party Formation

For one to find out the root of the irregularities that marred the 1964 general election, and the subsequent collapse of the first republic, one would have to thoroughly examine the activities of the then formed political parties, their formation, their nature of existence, and their mode of operation. A proper analysis of their actions will help us to ascertain whether or not they had contributed directly or indirectly to the conflict and instability which suddenly brought the first republic to an abrupt end.

It is a known fact that political parties under a democratic setting form, the basis for election and enthronement of a peoples' representative government. But it was a different case in the Nigeria's first republic, where selfish regionalists and corrupt politicians hijacked the system and hid themselves under the auspices of political parties in order to fight antagonistically for their individual and regional interests. As Okwudiba Nnoli puts it, "In the process, these regionalists succeeded in creating the false impression that the various political parties were the champions of the interests of the various ethnic group"²⁶. This means that the struggle of those parties for political dominance in the country represented the struggle of the various ethnic groups for political ascendancy in the society. That was why the major political parties in the country, as early as 1953, had become aligned with the three major ethnic group. Thus, by 1953, the major political parties in the country, the NCNC, AG, and NPC, had become associated with the three regions of the country, East, West and North respectively²⁷.

Although, there were other minority political parties in the first republic, these major ethnic based political parties dominated the politics of Nigeria between the first and second republics. "Thus, the Northern People Congress (NPC) was dominant in the north, the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) controlled the East, while the Action Group (AG) had the West as its stronghold. Besides, leadership of the above political parties were also chosen along ethnic lines – Azikiwe (NCNC) for the Igbos, Awolowo (AG) for the Yoruba and Sarduana (NPC) for the Hausa-Fulani"²⁸.

As a result of the regionalisation of politics and in particular, of party politics made the Stability of the Republic dependent on each party retaining control of its regional base. And as long as this was so, there was bound to be a rough balance between the parties, as well as their respective regions. For the fact that these major ethnic groups had seen their ascendance into power as the only means of controlling the federation and as well, get the lion share of the national cake (in terms of revenue allocation), Eze, R. C. out rightly asserts that there was escalating inter-ethnic politics of vandalism, cut-throat politics, lack of spirit of give and take, politics of winner-takes-it all, politics of rancour or acrimony, perennial wrangling, antagonism, suspicions among different ethnic groups.²⁹

The 1964 General Election

The Federal parliamentary election campaign in December 1964 – the first since independence was contested by two political alliances incorporating all the major parties. The Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) was composed of the NPC, Akintola's Western based Nigeria's National Democratic Party (NNDP), and opposition parties representing ethnic minorities in the Mid – Western and Eastern regions. It was opposed by the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), which joined the NCNC and the remnants of the Action Group. The minority based Northern allies, the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) and United Middle – Belt Congress. Not surprisingly, the NNA, adopted a platform that reflected the Northern political elite, and hence was an attempt by the NPC to gain firmer control of federal politics through an alliance with the Western region. Its appeal to voters outside the North was based essentially on the advantage to be gained from associating with the party in power. The NNA played on Yoruba fears of Igbo domination of the federal government. The UPGA was employed in an attempt by the NCNC to use the two regional governments that it controlled as a spring-board to planned economy that endorsed increased public spending while also, encouraging private enterprise. The UPGA proposed to divide the country into states that reflected ethnicity. Its proposals were intended to undermine the existing regional basis of political power by creating a sufficient number of states in each region, so that none of the major ethnic groups – Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba or Igbo could dominate any region. The UPGA presented itself as an alternative to Northern and, more especially to Hausa-Fulani domination of the federal government. Convinced that it would win if the elections were held in atmosphere free from interference by ruling parties in the Northern region and the Western region, the UPGA spent most of its efforts denouncing what it regarded as NNA's intention to rig the election in those region.

The election was postponed for several weeks because of discrepancies between the number of names and voting rolls and on census returns. Even then, the UPGA was not satisfied and called on its supporters to boycott the election. The boycott was effective in the Eastern region where polling places did not open in fifty-one constituencies that had more than one candidates running for office in other constituencies in the region, UPGA candidate ran un-opposed. Nationwide, only four million voters cast ballots out of fifteen million who were eligible. The NNA elected 198 candidates of whom 162 represented the NPC, from 261 constituencies, returning results. After an embarrassing delay, president Azikiwe agreed to risk Balawa to form a government with the NNA majority. The boycott had failed to stop the election, and in March 1965, supplementary elections were held in those areas in Eastern region and in Lagos where the boycott had been honoured. UPGA candidates were elected in all these constituencies, bringing the NCNC – dominated coalition to a total of 108 seats in the House of Representatives. The UPGA became the official opposition.

The 1966 Coup and Counter Coup

Amid wide spread charges of voting irregularities, Akintola's NNDP, supported by its ally, scored an impressive victory in November. There were extensive protests, including considerable grumbling among senior Army officers, at the apparent perversion of the democratic process. Six months after the election an estimated two thousand people died in violence that erupted in the western region. In the face of the disorders, the beleaguered Balewa delegated extra ordinary powers to the regional government to deal with the situation

As the political conflicts in the western region continued to persist, Nigerians began to be disillusioned with their politicians whose self-centred activities were becoming irrelevant to the problems confronting the nation. Worst still, in the midst of these crises and instabilities, the nation was immersed in an orgy of corruption. Immediate post-independence high expectations were rapidly yielding to collective disappointment

Popular suspicion of the government reached an unprecedented height. It was at this juncture that the military intervened. In a well-co-ordinated action, the military, on January 15th 1966, ended the 1st republic, and the country faced a future of uncertainties. The coup claimed the lives of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in Lagos, Samuel Akintola in Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello in Kaduna, and Festus Okotiebo, as well as senior officers of Northern origin. In a public proclamation, the coup leaders pledged to establish a strong and efficient government committed to a progressive programme and eventually, to new elections. They vowed to stamp out corruption and to suppress violence. Many Nigerians felt that the army unpolluted by the corruption of politics, would be better able to lead the country into progress and stability. Despite the bloody and calculated character of the coup, these sentiments appealed directly to younger, educated Nigerians in all parts of the country

On the whole, there seemed to be a national feeling of joy, and a collective sigh relief. From January 17, 1966, Lagos University students carried placards reading "tyranny is ended. New era of peace and justice" but like I pointed out earlier, the coup did not end tyranny of usher in peace and justice, it, instead, would preside over the birth of a new Nigeria with an uncertain future.

It was for a little, over five months after the military coup enjoyed national approval, that two major misunderstanding expedited the evaporation of that jubilation. The first misunderstanding grew from the pattern of the killing during the coup. A national political leader from western Nigeria was assassinated, as was one such from the mid-western region. Two leaders from the northern region were also assassinated. However, no Igbo national political leader was killed, no Igbo political was a casualty of the coup. This made the regions that lost their leaders to start seeing the coup as an Igbo coup plot.

John de St Jorre wrote: "But for the federal government and many others, it was the tribal pattern of killings as much as the ethnic origins of the killers that provide the most damning evidence to support the Igbo conspiracy theory."³⁰

From the above statement, it would be "correct" to argue that the Northerners, as well as many Westerners, because they lost some of their political big wigs, sincerely believed that the coup was an Igbo design; that the Igbo were attempting to use military means to reverse what they (Igbo) perceived as the political hegemony of the north

Ironsi and his advisers favoured a unitary form of government, which they thought would eliminate the intransigent regionalism that had been the stumbling block to political and economic progress. This was the basis of the second misunderstanding. This came as a result of the emergence of Decree no.34, in a bid to ensure national unity, Ironsi issued this decree

no 34, which abolished the federal system in favour of unitary one. Although the decree contained a number of concessions to regional interest, including protection of northerners from southern competition in the civil service, Ironsi's action showed dangerous disregard for the nuances of regional politics and badly misjudged the intensity of ethnic sensitivities in the aftermath of the bloody coup. The failure of the military government to prosecute Igbo officers who were responsible for murdering northern leaders stirred animosities further. Igbo civil servants residing in the north made the situation even worse through their triumphant support for the coup. Furthermore, Ironsi was vulnerable to the accusations of favouritism towards the Igbo. The coup was not just perceived as an effort to impose a unitary government, but as a plot by the Igbo to dominate Nigeria. Likewise many Muslims who saw the military decrees as Christian inspired attempts to undermine emirate government.

As it happened, the January 15 coup was a prelude to Nigeria's disintegration. In July 29, 1966, northern officers and army units staged a counter coup, during which General Johnson T.U Aguiyi Ironsi who became the head of the Nigerian military government after the overthrow of the first Republic, was brutally assassinated along with Adekunle Fajuyi, his host in Ibadan. The manner in which these men were killed reveals the dark side of human nature. The killing was described thus;

... and Ironsi's A.D.C were now stripped and their hands tied behind their backs with wire. They were flogged, tortured and then put into separate police vans. The captives were ordered out and led along a footpath, off the right side of the road... beat and tortured the captives so badly that their bodies were swollen and bleeding profusely... the supreme commander and the Governor who were almost dead by now, were separately finished off by a few rounds of machine-gun fire³¹.

Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner, became the commander-in-chief of the Nigeria Army and the Head of the military government. The July coup d'état, generally seen as a 'return match', was a reaction of the Northerners, who as a result of the first coup had lost their political power at the federal level, a young and relatively obscure officer serving as army chief of staff, Gowon had not been involved in the coup, but he enjoyed wide support among northern troops who subsequently insisted that he be given a position in the ruling body,. His first act was to restore federalism which he achieved by repealing the Ironsi's decree, a step followed by the release of Awolowo and Enahoro from prison.

The Massacre of the Igbo in North.

The July coup d'état generally was seen as a return match and was a reaction of the northerners, who as a result of the first coup had lost their political power at the federal level. Most top ranking Igbo officers, including Ironsi, lost their lives; the "status quo" of northern dominance was restored. But relation between the federal government and the Eastern region, led by military Governor, Colonel Chuukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, were very strained³².

In addition to the elimination of many Igbo officers during the counter coup, a massive pogrom against the Igbos occurred in the northern region. The massacre ranged between 10,000 and 50,000 dead. Most of the victims were Igbos, the new military government claimed that it could not control the massacre and, therefore should not be blamed. The massacre in the north resulted in a mass exodus of Easterners, largely Igbos (and dead bodies) to their home land. At this juncture, Nigerian unity suffered its greatest setbacks.

Understandably, the program that took place before and after the second coup d'état strained the relation between the north and east. The inability of the military government to put an end

to the killings made the easterners fear that their general security could not be guaranteed by the new military government. Because of this, on 30 May, 1967, Colonel Chukwuemeka odumegwu Ojukwu, the then military governor of eastern Nigeria made the proclamation of secession, saying “aware that you (easterners) can no longer be protected in your lives and in your property by a government based outside Eastern Nigeria... I do declare that all political ties between us and the federal republic of Nigeria are hereby totally dissolved³³.”

Conclusion

One dimension of the problem with ethnic nationalism is that most Nigerians are not patriotic. Right from 1960, patriotism as far as Nigerian is concerned, has been thrown into the river and ever since, it has been replaced by individualism, sectionalism, and parochialism.

From the patriotism, allegiance and loyalty of a typical Nigerian illustrated below, one is able to see what an average Nigerian stands for, in his or her relationship with the Nigerian state. First, a typical Nigerian thinks of self before others. And when he or she thinks of others, the thought is about both members and nuclear and extended families. From that level, a typical Nigerian thinks of people from his or her native town or village and then to the level of ethnic group. From the level of ethnic group, the loyalty, allegiance and patriotism of a typical Nigerian move to that of religious group. This is because most Nigerians are very religious and have very strong emotional attachment to one religion or the other. This is why ethno-religious violence is common in Nigeria. Then, the final stage to be reached is that of a nation.

Everyone puts the nation (Nigeria) last in the scheme of things. Even some of our past Heads of States and highly placed Nigerians are not left out. They make parochial declarations and utterances all in the spirit of protecting their ethnic agenda and interests. All these again go further to lend credence to the assertion that most Nigerians have not imbibed the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Thus, it is not surprise to find people more patriotic at ethnic or sub-national levels than at the national levels.

From the discussion that was made in this work, it is evidently clear that the consolation of peace and stability in this country, Nigeria, is, and will always be on shaky grounds as long as the problem of ethnic nationalism remains in place.

In this work, effort was made towards understanding critically, the concept of ethnicity in the general aspect of it, as it affects Nigeria in particular, its origin in Nigeria, its negative impacts and how it led to the extinction of the then first republic and thrown the nation into civil war. The Nigeria state needs to find a lasting solution for arresting the ugly trend of ethnicity, which will go a long way towards creating a stable political and viable economic system for our dear country – Nigeria.

In conclusion, ethnicity has bedevilled our country which must be dealt with to ensure that, Nigeria’s intractable problems of ethnicity with its attendant socio-economic cum political retardation shall be greatly reduced if not totally eradicated.

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