

USED AND DUMPED: THE CHALLENGES OF THE NIGERIAN YOUTH AND NATION BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study on the challenges of the Nigerian youth and her exclusion in the processes of nation building in post-colonial Nigeria. The youth form a significant part of the demographic structure of the country; therefore, serious attention should be paid to their role in nation building. Once they are excluded in efforts that are made to foster growth and development, lasting national cohesion becomes a daunting task. Sadly, the exclusion of the Nigerian youth in all the efforts targeted at nation building has resulted to a tale of woes such as unemployment, violence and thuggery. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation, with over 250 ethnic nationalities of divergent historical trajectories, and of course the most populous country in Africa which has been united by compelling historical forces of change and continuity. These nations are bound by a common government and also occupy a common national location with a myriad of issues that confront the youth of the nation. The paper tries to lend a voice to a body of scholarly works that captured the youth as one of the greatest agencies of building Nigeria into a virile nation. The paper will among other things consider the challenges of the Nigerian youth vis-a-vis nation building. It will also address various factors which act as pull-factors and how the youth population could be



co-opted and integrated into this building process for the actualisation of nationhood. The paper concludes that the youth should not just be used and dumped, but integrated into the holistic nation building process else nation building in Nigeria would remain a far cry.

Key words: Nation building, Statehood, Youth, Multi-ethnicity. Clientelism

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria after the attainment of independence has continued for about six decades to battle with issues of nation building. This is mainly due to how the erstwhile independent nationalities were fused into one by the British. The amalgamation co-opted peoples of diverse historical, cultural, religious, and ethnic origins, and this has continued to plague the common national consciousness of these peoples. The paper does not intend to question the rationale behind the amalgamation of Nigeria after over a century of collective existence; on the contrary, it intends to establish that despite these differences, there could be a point of convergence which could lead to a peaceful co-existence and ultimately ensure that a stable Nigerian nation is built. It should be noted here that the national instability of the Nigerian state should not be blamed on her heterogeneous ethnic make-up. Other nations like Haiti and Somalia where her citizens share common identities suffer almost the same problems of national incongruence vindicates the above stance¹. Isawa, Eliagwu noted that the twin problems of newly independent nations are often the striving for greater coherence to nationhood and the striving for greater stability of statehood². These crises are the crisis of nationhood and the crisis of statehood, which he termed, “flawed collective identity and unstable authority” respectively³. These twin problems are not just peculiar to the Nigerian state, but is almost visible in the historical trajectories of nations especially in their nascent stages. A glance at the histories



of post independent African states authenticates the verity of the above fact. The acceptance of one another as being part of a unified nation and the acceptance of the supreme authority and legitimacy of the constituted leadership of the state has continued to bedevil their collective existence.

Over the years, the youth population of the Nigerian state have been sidelined and worst still, they have often been used as a means of achieving the selfish political ends of the Nigerian political actors and thereafter dumped. Also, they have not being properly integrated into the decision making and implementation organs of the Nigerian state. The present work therefore advance that so long as the youth remained sidelined, nation building and national integration will remain a mirage.

And so long as this remains the Nigerian story, nation building and national integration will remain a mirage.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The understanding of the concept 'youth' is one which has been plagued by some remarkable inconsistencies. For the purpose of this work one of the myriads of conceptualizations of the word 'youth' shall be adopted. It should be noted that the understanding of the concept varies one from another in different geographical climes and societies. According to Deborah Durham, youths have rarely been studied or attention to them has been sporadic or too secondary despite the fact that they are central to negotiating changes and continuities in any context⁴.

The term youth is a blanket term and the conceptualization of the term is not one that can be tied to a specific age because it is not defined chronologically nor can it be linked to specific activities. Thus, in paper, it is conceptualized as a period or stage in one's biological development or simply put a social position. The state of being young (youthhood) in many African societies is a complex and daunting one. This is because individuals during youthhood period are confronted with personal choices within the context of



social transformations that characterize their societies. Thus, youthfulness which deals with the behaviours and characteristics of youth within a social setting is given due consideration by members of the community. There are usually expected norms that the youth are expected to conform to and failure to do so attract negative sanctions.

The United Nations conceptualizes the youth as an individual between age 15 and 24⁵. According to the World Youth Report, 2018, there are about 1.2 billion young people between the named age brackets which accounts for 16 percent of the global population. However, the UN concedes that the concept of being youth is a fluid one as it varies across the world between nations and regions⁶. The UN is aware of the variations that exist in conceptualizing the youth, hence children are seen as those under the age of 14, but according to the 1979 Convention of The Rights of The Child, individuals under the age of 18 are recognized as children⁷.

Juan Anthonio in his work *El concepto de juventud* refutes the traditional age range of conceptualization of youth definition. He considered two axes; the self-constructed youth and the adult constructed youths. He divided the self-constructed youth into three; one as a form refers to youth as a of rebellion against adult institutions, the second sees youth as a sub-culture opposing dominant culture, and the third to establish the consequences for the society of a self-constructed youth⁸.

The youth dictionary conceptualizes it as the period in which one is young. This involves a period between childhood and adulthood⁹. Here no specific age is mentioned.

In Nigeria, according to the National Youth Policy, the youth is considered to be an individual between the ages 18 and 35¹⁰. This work shall define youth as an age categorization, biostatus or a life stage; that is, the youth is considered as individuals between ages 18 and 30. The choice of both age limits is because at age 18, an individual is considered fit to vote in an election and an active adult



citizen of the country while the choice of 30 is because the edict that established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) stipulates that an individual above 30 is ineligible to partake in the national programme for Nigerian youth graduates which was enacted by the General Gowon's administration as part of the post-civil war reconstruction programmes.

On the concept of nation, three definitions are considered here; first, a nation refers to a people within a specific territorial boundary with a homogenous economy, culture, historical origin and language. Examples include the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Ijaw, Igala, Ibibio all in Nigeria, Mandinka in The Gambia, Akan people in Ghana, Kabye in Togo, Darod in Somalia, among others. Secondly, a nation may refer to a people or tribe. Thirdly and lastly, a nation refers to the people of a territory united by a single government, constitution and perhaps a common colonial history and experience¹¹. These people may have divergent historical origins, languages, cultures, economies. Here, nation is same as a country or state like Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia, Togo among others. The point of emphasis is the fact that Nigeria has about 250 ethnic groups under the same government and this does not invalidate its status as a nation provided it is under a single national government. To this end, statehood and nationhood are concepts that could be used interchangeably.

The coming together of these different ethnic groups under a single government is not the highest point in nation-building. It should be noted that these erstwhile nations were independent peoples having their cultures, languages within the same territories that merely submitted or perhaps like most ethnic groups in Africa were colonially merged under a single political unit for some administrative convenience without the colonizers paying some attention to their marked differences. The above fact therefore necessitates the building of the nation. The point being stated here is the fact that the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, Ibibio, Igala, etc of Nigeria were amalgamated into one by the British does not imply



that they have forgotten or should jettison their differences, peculiarities and cultural backgrounds, however, it does imply that they could despite these differences co-existence peacefully under a single government which is the basic thrust of nation building. Eliagwu¹² states that nation building involves the widening rather than transfer of identity of parochial unit to include larger units like the state. For the purpose of this work, nation building involves the citizens of the state at different levels and strata giving priority and precedence to matters that affect the state before that which affects the sub-units or ethnic groups and in event of a clash in loyalty; that to the state should utmost. For example the paper does not assume that it is possible to make a Hausa man believe that he is no longer a Hausa man, but a Nigerian. Equally, it is the contention that while he retains his Hausa identity, his loyalty to the Nigerian state should take precedence over his ethnic and linguistic affiliations. The argument being advanced here is that citizens of the state should transfer their loyalties and allegiances from their ethnic feelings to the state thereby promoting nation building efforts for a collective interest. This loyalty to the state and the acceptance of the legitimacy of the government is what Eliagwu refers to as Vertical dimension of national building while the acceptance of other members of the state a members of the same state with equal rights and privileges he referred to as Horizontal dimension of nation-building.

While it has been noted elsewhere in this paper that states and nations could be used interchangeably, state-building and nation-building may slightly not be so used. By virtue of the independence of a people, a state has been built, however, the deliberate attempts made to ensure a peaceful co-existence is what is meant by nation-building. For instance, Nigeria's regaining of independence in 1960 implies that a nation was built. However, from that period, all the attempts at keeping the sub-ethnic units that make up the Nigerian state together peacefully is what is meant by nation-building as is the thrust of this paper.



Youth in the Pre-colonial Nigeria: A Case Study of the Igbo Society

It is necessary to consider the state of the youth's involvement in the pre-colonial of an African nation and an appropriate case study is the Igbo society. The justification for the choice of the Igbo is because the Igbo society is the only ethnic group among other ethnic groups of its size that had a republican or a direct democratic system of administration in the pre-colonial era.

While it is true that the Igbo never evolved a centralized state system and structure of governance, it was a republican society fashioned like that of the ancient Greet City states. This does not imply that system of the ancient Greek predates that of the Igbo and/or vice versa. The absence of a centralized monarchical state system allowed for the participation of all social positions in the Igbo society which ensured that order and stability was maintained.

Chiefly among these institutions that integrated the youth population in the pre-colonial Igbo society was the age grade association. This was an association of individuals who belonged to the same age group and were selected by virtue of being born around the same period¹³. This resulted to a stable governance and government where gerontocratic relationship was upheld¹⁴. These age grade groups performed public services like clearing of bush paths, involved in the village administrations where they had the right to partake in the decision making process, served as the armed forces and defense against external aggression, acted as the police for the maintenance of law and order, checked the abuse of power by the council of elders and title holders, performed ceremonial functions during important ceremonies in the village or town. This was a system that manifested the republican and democratic way of life of the Igbo through their popular village democracy. This gave room to the general involvement of every member of the community, thereby strengthening the democratic system and creating a stable society. Membership of this group was quite optional, yet by social pressure was mandatory. The point being



stressed from the foregoing is that the pre-colonial Igbo Society did not relegate her youth population in her system of administration but on the contrary integrated her youth population into her democratic administrative system.

The Youth in the Immediate Post-Colonial Nigeria

The early stage of the Nigerian politics and the immediate take over by the military with nature of the military administrations during the regimes may not allow for an objective study of the manner and level of youth involvement in the nation building process. The reason for the above is because virtually all efforts were directed towards state-building during this period; that is to ensure that all the ethnic make-ups of the state remained under the political umbrella of the state and the state's authority, while each of the military regimes were concerned especially with ensuring that it consolidated its power to prevent a counter coup than with building a nation out of the state. Isawa Eliagwu lends his voice to this when he stated that military regimes generally have been more effective in state-building than in nation-building in Africa. They are better at asserting authority than consolidating identity¹⁵. Hence, there was no freedom of participation during this era, except one was a member of the military. This point notwithstanding, Nigeria recorded her youngest crop of leadership during this period. For instance, General Gowon was thirty-one when he assumed leadership 1966, General Muritala Muhammed took over power at thirty-seven in 1975, General Olusegun Obasanjo assumed leadership at thirty-nine in 1976, General Muhammed Buhari took over power at forty-one in 1983 and General Aguiyi Ironsi took over power at forty-two in 1966¹⁶. The above is believed to have birthed the NOT TOO YOUNG TO RUN CAMPAIGN bill which was passed into law by the senate in 2018, thus reducing the age limits of public office holders so that the youth population could be integrated into the decision making and implementation process. There was a significant transformation in youth participation as this served as a



pull factor for youth involvement in every facet of nation development especially direct involvement in politics.

Youth and Nation Building since the Return to Civil Rule

In 1999, Nigeria returned to stable civilian rule. It has been about 20 years since the return, and there are yet questions begging for answers regarding the youth and the nation building process in Nigeria. These include; does the Nigerian youth feel a sense of belonging in country's nation building process? How inclusive has the polity been to the Nigerian youth? The Nigerian youth has often expressed her displeasure and feelings of marginalization and political exclusion through violence¹⁷, which on its own has been a cog in the machine of progress of nation building. Worst still is the fact that the educational system in which the youth is trapped was initiated with the aim of reducing poverty, bridging inequality and increasing economic growth¹⁸. While this may sound so wonderful a package to the Nigerian youth, how has this system of education allow for the integration and participation of the youth in the country's nation building project?

Nigeria's school system consists of the 6-3-3-4 system of education. This includes six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, three years of senior secondary education and four years of university of education¹⁹, and a mandatory one year of national service. Some sources estimate that Nigerian universities produce up to 500, 000 graduates annually excluding foreign graduates who return to compete for unavailable jobs with them after the national service as well²⁰. According to National Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) analysis in 2013, graduates of university are badly hit by unemployment and often remain unemployed for up to five years after graduation²¹. This makes it impossible for the youth population in Nigeria to remain sidelined and barred from an active participation in the country's nation building process given the costly nature of the Nigerian electoral system at all levels. The point

being made is that the Nigeria's school system and the glaring harsh economic realities sink the voices of the youth and make them unheard except only on the social media platforms. It should be noted that money is a critical factor for an active participation in Nigeria's democratic system. For instance, the 2010 Electoral Act stipulated the ceiling of expenses by candidates and political parties for specific positions. The maximum limit are pegged at 1 billion naira for presidential candidates, 200 million naira for governorship candidates, 40 million for senatorial candidates, 20 million naira for the house of representatives, 10 million naira for the state houses, 10 million naira for the local government chairmen, and 1 million for councilors²². Officially the amount required candidates to signify interest in contesting for positions in election has continually been on the increase. In 2007, presidential candidates paid 10 thousand naira to express interest and 5 million naira for nomination forms. However, in 2015 general elections, presidential candidates paid 2 million for the expression of interest and 20 million for nomination forms and governorship candidates paid 500 thousand naira for expression of interest and 2 million for nomination forms²³. This shows the rising nature of participation in Nigeria's politics. It should be noted that the All Progressive Congress (APC) sold their presidential forms at 45 million naira²⁴, while that of the governorship candidate was sold at 22.5 million naira for the 2019 general elections²⁵. The opposition party People's Democratic Party (PDP) sold theirs at 10 million naira and 2 million for the expression of interest for the presidential candidates while governorship candidates paid 5 million for the forms and 1 million for the expression of interest²⁶. This has continued to show an upward trend making the possibility of contesting and having a chance to winning dependent on how much naira a candidate is able to spend. How then would the youth who are mainly unemployed or underemployed participate in this process? Thus they are consciously or unconsciously made card carrying voters alone whose voter's cards are almost only relevant for bank transactions



alone. The net effect is that the nation has continued the process of leadership recycling among the privileged aristocratic few. The almost available means of active participation for the Nigerian youth is to act as political thugs and ballot box snatchers during elections, making them tools for engendering political violence. The more naira a candidate spends, the more youths he could hire as thugs, then again the question comes as to whether the Nigerian youth is a part of nation builder or otherwise? This continues to cause cleavages in the nation building process of Nigeria. Others who are too civil to engage in political violence have developed thick political skins or have developed political apathy and this is visibly manifested on the social media platforms. Equally, during elections, a good number of them remain in their houses or flood the streets playing football and do not see the need to spend long times on queues waiting to cast their votes. This is because of the assumption that 'our votes won't count.' It is true that many Nigerian youth make significant strides in the public service, academia, business and sports, the major focus of this paper is to interrogate how the youth are manipulated, used and dumped by the powers that be in the country's political sphere.

Those who were used in elections as thugs to the big-winged political actors are often dumped after elections for four years until they are needed again during the next election. The saying that the youth are the leaders of tomorrow is fallacious given the fact that erstwhile living political actors of the military regimes are yet relevant in the Nigerian political sphere up till today And they have held fist tight the instruments of power which they rotate among themselves, and until due homage is paid to them; no meaningful results may come out one's political ambitions. The youth continue to be marginalized in terms of political leadership and involvement.

Clientelism/Godfatherism and the Nigerian Youth

Clientelism or godfatherism is a relationship between individuals with an unequal economic status (the boss and his protégés).

Usually, those with capital are seen as patrons who could determine or influence the political and economic fortunes of subordinates. It usually leads to dependency on a patron who has the social connections and financial muscles to make things happen in a specific way. This has occurred in many social contexts; between patricians and henchmen in ancient Rome, lords and their serfs in feudal systems or between large landowners and peasants in numerous rural communities²⁷. This same phenomenon is operational in the Nigerian political sphere where economic power of the political lords has metamorphosed into political power, and so political aspirants must have to serve them to rise as well. This is obviously the undoing of the Nigerian youth vis-à-vis nation building. The point is that the socio-political situation in Nigeria does not allow for an independent youth participation and ascent to positions of authority until he or she is anointed by these political godfathers. The endorsement by these godfathers almost assures an aspirant of success. This homage is not just paid during elections but continues even after elections, as the endorsed continues to maintain the good relationship with his boss. This makes nation building process a closed system to the youth has got no means to appease these godfathers that have assumed the positions of political deities. The effect of this on the youth is the endurance of her of political exclusion and marginalization, engagement in political violence or becoming indifferent to the processes of nation building. Although this is the Nigerian situation, it is however antithetical to sound democratic ideals that Nigeria tends to uphold. The youth population have continued to struggle with political exclusion , and it looked like a point was scored in 2018 when the NOT TOO YOUNG TO RUN bill was passed into law, however, godfatherism remains one of the political leviathans that must necessarily be conquered for a complete political inclusion to be achieved.

CONCLUSION

This paper, “Used and Dumped: The Challenges of the Nigerian Youth and Nation Building” has established a fact nation building can only be judged to be only right track if the various aspects of it are taken into consideration. It argues that the youth population of the nation is a critical aspect of the nation building process and which if excluded in the processes of nation building would remain a cog in the machine of progress in Nigeria. It goes through historical lane to establish that in the pre-colonial Nigeria, specifically the in the Igbo society that the youth population was well integrated in the various administrative process that ensured stability and virility of the Igbo nation which was devoid of a central monarchical administrative system. This paper argues that this is quite unlike the Nigerian case where the youths are plagued with problems associated with the educational system, the costly nature of political participation in Nigeria and the worst evil of godfatherism. Only and only if these issues are addressed, the inclusion of the Nigerian youth in nation building process may well be adjudged more strenuous than a camel going through the eye of a needle, and so the use and dump process has no hope of being abated.

END NOTES

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