

# **THE CRISIS OF NATIONHOOD IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN L. K. YEW'S *FROM THIRD WORLD TO FIRST***

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## **Abstract**

*Since 1914 when the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria were amalgamated by the erstwhile Governor General, Lord Lugard, and down to the 1960 independence, the situation, and the question of our Nationhood has remained not only questionable, but at the same time uncertain owing to the pernicious patronization and the imposition of imperial policies by the West and found our past and present leaders naïve to conceding to their demands. In the colonial period, Nigeria, amongst other African countries provided raw-materials for the industrialization of the West, while in the post colonial era, Nigeria ranks tops in the countries in Africa, serving as dumping ground for the marketing of goods, many of which are sub-standard products, manufactured in Europe, America and Asia. Nigeria is widely known for the marketing and consumption of goods and services produced in the West, but do not consume nor patronize locally manufactured goods. Collapse economy, poverty, low standard of education, insecurity, outright disregard for rule of law, tribalism, political instability, and imperialism, amongst others are usually attributed to Nigeria in the comity of nations. It is against this background, that this work, hermeneutically explores the idea of self-determination in Lee Kuan Yew's **From Third World to First** and thus, proposes it as the bane of the crisis of nationhood and development in Nigeria. In the 727 pages of his masterpiece, Lee, the father of Singapore's emergence as a nation state, x-rayed the factors behind Singapore's sudden economic and political boom, hence moving from a third world country to a first world country in spite of the circumstances surrounding the Singaporean independence in 1965. It is the finding of this work that the substitute of natural resources with self-determination, superior intelligence, discipline, ingenuity, nurturing and attracting talents, multiple tongues and languages amongst others are the steps to be taken towards solving the crisis of nationhood in Nigeria. This work concludes that, unless this position is taken, Nigeria would keep groping in the crisis of nationhood that presently bedevils it.*

**Key Words:** *Crisis, Nationhood, Self-Determination, Independence, Colonialism*

## **Introduction**

The reality of the crisis of nationhood in Nigeria has over the years gained dominance and wide currency in the analysis of Nigerian development discourses. Its antecedents in the contemporary Nigerian experience have led to insecurity, perpetual conflicts and most inclusively, underdevelopment. It is however worthy to note, that Nigeria, a country, once seen and internationally acclaimed as the giant of Africa, the hope and indeed the beacon of liberation for the African people (continent), has suddenly become a laughing stock

across board- the Americas, Europe, Asia and even within the continent of Africa owing to her sudden and immediate lose of grip of the ideal democratic tenets, growing poverty, election rigging and indeed crippled economy as she recently came out from recession.

Thus, the political and economic dilemmas that presently bedevil the country have led very many scholars to argue from different perspective as to the possible cause and the way out of the crisis of nationhood in Nigeria. Notable among them is the principle of self-determination as contained in the United Nations' Charter. The United Nations and other international organizations have steadfastly defended and laid credence to this principle of states. However, the self-determination principle has been interpreted differently at different times and as a result has been inconsistently applied. In the wake of the poor political and economic conditions and the marginalization of individual ethnic groups by other groups in the Nigerian state, different national groups have pushed demands for their own states. This at present dominates the Nigeria's political discourse.

Consequently, this paper explores and assesses Lee Kuan Yew's *From Third World to First*; that is the Singaporean Self-determination from the then Malays as a *sine qua non* condition in ameliorating the N\ationhood crisis in Nigeria.

### **Conceptualizing Self-determination**

Primarily, the concern for right to self-determination is embedded in the idea of human rights. Of course, human rights are rights held by individuals simply because they are part of the human species. They are rights enjoyed equally by everyone regardless of language, race, sex and nationality. They are universal in content. The purpose of the protection of these rights is to enable the ethnic nationality (ies) to prosper and transmit their culture as well as participate fully in the political, economic and social processes, thus allowing the distinct character of the community, and most inclusively to have this character reflected in the institutions of government under which they live. Perhaps, this is why Herbst, (2000: 17) observes that "...the rights protect people from being subject to oppression by subjugation, domination or exploitation because, as the African Charter makes clear, nothing shall justify the domination of a people by another". It is also referred to as a right of dominated people to achieve equality in relation to those who dominate them.

The right to self-determination is undoubtedly an important passage into the highest rules of international law and of course regarded and taken to be sacrosanct. Mamdani, (2003: 117) opines that, "the rest of the international community is under a mandatory duty to respect it in all circumstances in their relations with each other". Furthermore, Mamdani stressed that, "the right to self-determination is considered *jus cogens*, and a part of customary international law that imposes binding obligations on all nation states" (2003: 117). In effect however, it is considered not simply a principle of international law, but 'sacrosanctly', an affirmative right of all people, no matter the ethnic or religious affiliation.

Surprisingly, notwithstanding the several and erudite recognition of the principle or the affirmative of self-determination, there is still no modicum of consensus among nations as to what, scope and parameters of the affirmative self-determination, as well as who grants and how such rights are to be granted. It has been estimated though, that there are

about five thousand (5,000) discrete ethnic or national groupings in the world and most of the armed conflicts at the moment are between groups in a state. This led McCorquodale (1994) to hold thus:

Resolution of this armed conflicts- and those who are yet not armed conflicts-may depend on concerning the right of self-determination. While every state has the obligation to promote the realization of the right of self-determination and the duty to respect these rights in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations' Charter, there is concern about international peace and security if the right of self-determination is exercised by all who claimed it (10).

The import of the idea of the right to self-determination mainly ascended after the formation of nation-states cum the French Revolution, which led to the spread of the idea that the nation has the right and identity of its own. The rise of sovereignty and nationalism coincided and consequently became the by-products of the world's major critical junctures.

It follows at this juncture to note that an important and most influential factor with respect to the emergence and historical development of the concept of self-determination is formed by the trend of ethnic nationalities refusing to consent to the exercise of power, political and economic dominance over them by the leadership of government where they live. These ethnic nationalities repudiate the rights of the elites to decide for them and without their consultations, their fate, destiny, political, economic, social and cultural future. To buttress this claim above, Raic as cited in B. C. Smith (2009: 10) writes that "...it is this claim of people to govern themselves which find expression in both the American and French Revolutions. These Revolutions were based on natural law theory insofar as they reflected a rejection of the Divine Rights of Kings".

Consequently, as by-products of these Revolutions, the Divine Rights of Kings which was the bane of early political gospel, received a mortal blow and burial as it was immediately replaced with popular sovereignty advocated by the famous political philosopher of the modern time and beyond, J. J. Rousseau in his celebrated book, *The Social Contract*; the revolutionary theory that a people had the right to decide whether to attach itself to one state or constitute a sovereign state by itself. The effect of this revolutionary trends however, was to transfer the initiatives of state making from the government to the people. Nation-states had formerly been built up, in the course of centuries, from above, the influence of government. Thus, the consequential effect of these processes was the institutionalization of the idea of the state by the revolutionaries.

The idea of self-determination *ab initio* took its strong hold throughout Europe and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In effect, it is understood to occur whenever ethnic nationality determines its own political and economic status. In Western Europe and the United States, the right to self-determination drew her inspiration primarily from enlightenment ideas of popular sovereignty and representative government as explained above. Because it was based upon these principles, the context of self-determination in Western Europe was democratic and universal in nature. This

means that in Western Europe and United States the concept had a political orientation which generally did not take ethnic nationalities into cognizance as is the case in most of Africa and Nigeria in particular.

The consequential influence of the ideas underpinning these two critical junctures has been significant with regard to the development of the concept of self-determination. The import that the people are the source of all legitimate governmental power and that to be legitimate therefore, state authority must hitherto, be anchored on the will of the people, clearly has a nexus with the concept that people have the right to freely determine her political status. The French Revolution led to overthrow of the feudal social and political order; monarchical authority was replaced by the doctrine of popular sovereignty. The critical juncture claimed that the divine rights of kings be replaced by the will of the people.

Worthy of note here, is the fact that the idea of self-determination is applicable to the collective and not individual as Lenin (1914) puts it thus:

Self-determination of nations exclusively meant the right of oppressed nations to political separation. That is, secession from alien oppressor bodies, nations and the formation of an independent national state. It is a concept that was applicable to collectives only and not to individuals; it was a collective right. Oppression as a result of bourgeois nationalism was the principal constitutive factor for the right to self-determination.

Lenin (1914) further made a sharp distinction between a right to secession and resort to secession. When national oppression and national friction make joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse. In that the interest of capitalist development and the freedom of class struggle will be best served by secession. The idea of self-determination is a right to secession that could be invoked by oppressed nations for the determination of their political destiny. Again, it was considered to be that which the nations of all colonial countries were entitled to invoke against the imperialist powers. And also, a concept that should be invoked with regard to territorial disputes between states.

The United Nations during her 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary recognizes the right of all people to self-determination. The Declaration was seen as a significant step in the codification and progressive development of this principle (self-determination). This approach was endorsed by Africa during the peak decade of decolonization, the 1960s, via the Organization of African Unity (OAU), with Nigeria not being an exception. Subsequently, 1964, the organization agreed that colonial frontiers, even if arbitrary and unjust, were to provide the only acceptable basis for delimiting sovereign states in Africa. In essence, the African consensus on self-determination was anchored perhaps, to deny ethnic nationalities any rights of secession in the midst of post independence struggle. Osaghae (2010: 371) laments that “this stand was geared towards the Organization of African Union's fear that the moment of independence would open up the continent to devastating civil unrests, possibly producing a pattern of ethnically oriented states that

had little chance of surviving.”

At this point however, all said and done, it is important we draw a sharp distinction between internal self-determination and external self-determination. While the internal refers to the movement for cultural and political autonomy for distinct people in a state, it emphasizes the relationship of an ethnic nationality and its own state and particularly to the implementation or realization of self-determination of the group within the state in which they live. To this effect however, Smith (2009), writes “...an important feature of internal self-determination is that this mode of implementation does not lead to the change of the external or internal boundaries of the state as it does in the case of external self-determination.” While external self-determination is the right of the people to be independent and free from external interference. This right stems from the United Nations' Charter, which forbid nations from interfering with the territorial integrity of other nations. To this, Herbst (2000) writes that:

...external self-determination is a mode of implementation of the right of self-determination through the formation of an independent state, the integration in, or association with a third state. This mode of implementation of self-determination by a people, thus lead to a modification of the external boundaries of the state in which the people resides. It is this feature of external self-determination which forms an important distinction with respect to internal self-determination.

In other words, external self-determination is synonymous with the revolt against imperialism and decolonization. And this gained wide currency in Africa in the early 1960s as many African nations rose against the erstwhile colonialists and subsequently gained her independence. While that of the internal played out in Nigeria in the 1967 civil war which still lingers till date with the present clamour for self-determination by the Nnamdi Kalu led IPOB.

Thus, at this point, we shall focus on the place of self-determination as a *sine quanon* condition in salvaging the crisis of nationhood in Nigeria, using the Singaporean experience in Yew's *From Third World to First* as a rider.

### **The Principle of Self-determination in L. K. Yew: A Pointer to the Crisis of Nationhood in Nigeria**

The reality of nationhood crisis in Nigeria stem from pluralism and multiculturalism and that is because there is no cohesive state to mediate this unhealthy competition arising from these multicultural and ethnic nationalities lumped together by the erstwhile colonial leaders without proper and due consultations of the peoples that were to be married together. The consequences of this however, generates multicultural and plural structures and institutions which in turn hatch an unhealthy competition and thus creates ugly impressions in the minds of the citizens not to be loyal and not to pay true allegiance to the state. In other words, since most of these ethnic nationalities, are not with hegemonic leadership, it thus, creates sectarian identities in form of religious, language,

ethnic or even regional exclusive identities. Consequently, these sub-set groups take precedence over the country as primary object of identity and allegiance, which seek to contest political space within the state and hence underdevelopment and nationhood crisis.

Thus, the grave effect of this is the apparent lack of hegemonic process that ought to transform the post-colonial state into a nation-state, the failure of which throws the crisis of citizenship as each nationality consistently and notoriously maintains her own particular identity to the detriment of the growth of the post-colonial state- Nigeria. Adejumobi (2001: 81), made allusion to this when he observed that: "...it is the primordial that serves as the functional basis of defining citizenship especially in the distribution of public goods and constitutional issues." Almost all the Nigerian leaders both past and present failed to develop a persistent and enduring platform for nationalism because most of the political institutions and political parties that have been instituted were all ethnic, tribal and religiously driven and thus bereft of the required sophistication that will be all encompassing in the actualization of nationhood- Nigeria. Adebani (2010: 25), added his voice to this when he observes that: "...although nationalism is critical to the realization of nationhood, Nigerian leaders did nothing and are doing nothing to promote the values of nationhood because they are mostly tribal chiefs rather than national leaders in their political, economic and social calculations." Moreso, the leaders are bereft of nationalist-hegemonic tendencies and body language which ought and should serve as a springboard that will instill in the rest of the citizenry the spirit of nationalism. A. J. Hall (1994: 47), opines, that "there had been more conflicts generated by this artificial nature of the country, the absence of any colonial effort to lay the required foundation and inculcate some semblance of nationhood in Nigeria and this has become almost an impossibility after independence which has continued to work against national peace, security, development and continuity."

Accordingly, P. F. Wilmot (1997: 7), "the three components of state- people, government and territory, the first two are largely denied of all meaning as functional entities. As a result, they are divorced and alienated from the state as the people exist not as citizens with a claim against the state to be matched by reciprocal duties to it but as individuals struggling for survival."

Consequently, post-colonial state- Nigeria, is mashed in weak institutions, capitalist formations, and most inclusively, tribal, ethnic and religiously driven leaders, eroding any attempt to create a hegemonic atmosphere that would unite the diverse and warring ethnic nationalities, and thus has continued to witness civil unrest, militia movements, herdsman killing, cleavages of inter and intra tribal nature, and religious and ethnic strives amongst the diverse nationalities which in countless occasions have questioned the unity and continuity of the post-colonial state- Nigeria; asking for a re-negotiation.

Interestingly, in spite of this obvious and pernicious situation which the post-colonial state called Nigeria finds herself, the question apposite here, is; how can we solve the crisis of nationhood in Nigeria, with inspiration and lessons from L. K. Yew's *From Third World to First*; that is, the exit of Singapore from the then Malay now known as the Malaysian State? The truth and the answer to this question is however, not far-fetched.

History is replete with instances pointing to the fact that ordinary and difficult situations, through prudent measures, could be overturned by extraordinary personalities. In the case of Lee Kuan Yew, the father of Singapore's emergence as a nation-state, the argument whether circumstances or personalities shape events, is answered and settled obviously in favour of the later.

Conceived and located on a sand-bar with nary a natural resources, Singapore had in the 1950s a polyglot population of slightly over a million (today over 4 million), of which about 75 percent are Chinese, 13 percent were Malay and the remaining 8 percent are Indians. It adjoins in the south with Indonesia, with a population of over 100 million people, and in the north with Malay, now known as Malaysia, with 6 million people. Obviously, by far, the smallest in the Eastern part of the Asian world, she seems destined to become a client state of more powerful and populated neighbours, if and only if she could afford to gain independence and preserve it. This persistent strives continued as Singaporeans were still together with the then Malay until the year 1965, they exited from Malay through the logic of the principles of self-determination.

Arriving at independence with almost nothing, many of the Malays were not ready to join the new nation-state of Singapore on grounds of apparent lack and scarcity. Nation building at this point seemed almost impossible to majority of the Singaporeans, but fortunately, the country had a post independence leader (L. K. Yew) who not only had the will-power, but at the same time was already prepared for leadership. In spite of the doom predicted by the international press about the Singaporean state, Yew (2000) saw in it, an opportunity to prosper and excel. He holds that, "every great achievement is a dream before it becomes reality, and my vision was a state that would not simply survive but prevail by excelling. Superior intelligence, discipline and ingenuity would substitute for resources" (8). Lee summoned his compatriots to a duty they had never previously perceived: First to clean up their city, then to dedicate it to overcome the initial hostility of their neighbours and even their ethnic divisions by superior performance. They were a multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious people, but that never deterred him and his crew from actualizing their dream of making the country the envy of all. Lee laying credence to this has this to say:

It was crucial to keep united Singapore's multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious society, and make it rugged and dynamic enough to compete in world market. But how to get into this market? I did not know the answer. Nobody had asked us to push the British out. Driven by our visceral urges, we had to do so. Now it was our responsibility to provide for the society and the livelihood of the 2 million people under our care. We had to succeed, for if we failed, our only survival option would be a remerger, but on Malaysian terms, as a state like Malacca or Penang (8-9).

Consequently, there were several of international comments and concerns that Singapore would not succeed, but Lee being a young man in his forties was vigorous and was no

doubt prepared for leadership, as he replied one of those concerns expressed by Harold Willson, the British Prime Minister. He responds to this saying, "...do not worry about Singapore. My colleagues and I are sane, rational people, even in our moment of anguish. We weigh all possible consequences before we make any move on the political chessboard... Our people have the will to fight and the stuff that makes for survival" (9).

Importantly, the rest of what Lee did to move his country from third world status to first is history as Singapore of today is his testimony and it is politically and economically viable today when compared with the Malaysia which they exited from. Singapore's annual per capita income has grown from less than \$1,000 at the 1965 independence to \$30,000 today. It may also interest us to know that Singapore has moved from a third world country status to a first and it is among the technologically driven states in East Asia. Lee opines that, "...it is the high-tech leader of Southeast Asia, the commercial entry port, the scientific centre. Singapore plays an important role in the politics and economics of Southeast Asia and beyond" (10).

However, an indebt analysis and navigation into the circumstances of Singapore in the then Malaysia would reveal the scenario in the present day Nigerian State, yet there is no possible remedy forthcoming. The question of Nigeria, to be or not to be, has been on since the 1967 Biafra civil war and till date. We argue that the seemingly and protracted crisis of nationhood would be aided by the principle of self-determination taking lessons from Lee Kuan Yew's Singaporean experience.

## **Conclusion**

It is instructive to conclude this piece by observing that the post-colonial Nigeria has not made any considerable progress since independence as her attempts at self-governance has been a monumental failure. It has had no meaningful development and improved conditions of lives to show for her 60 years of independence except incessant dictatorships, failed health care system, fraud and corruption in high and low places, failed economy, and political instability, and tribal and ethnically driven strives. Indeed, the litany of the countries woes is countless and inexhaustible. As a result, the post-colonial state is subjugated to primordial and ethnic civil unrest across the country. The cohesive institutions and interconnectedness that are pertinent towards nation-building in terms of cultural and historical ties are obviously and undoubtedly lacking in all the different parts of the post-colonial state- Nigeria.

More so, the 1914 amalgamation of the various ethnic nationalities makes crisis of nationhood obviously inevitable in Nigeria. Colonialism created a state that forcefully lumped and married many ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, post-colonial Nigeria has since, as a matter of fact, not known any peace and have lacked a common ground for peaceful negotiation as to a way forward. To solve this problem, we conclude that, there will only be peace and development when and only if all the ethnic nationalities are reasonably, constitutionally and rationally given the rights for self-determination. Only then can we make considerable progress. Otherwise, the country will continue to grope and wallow in the crisis of nationhood which its resultant effects are enormous. The Singaporean



experience presents an accurate scenario and ideals of self-determination in a post-colonial state like Nigeria bedeviled with strives arising from opposing and warring ethnic nationalities.

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