

Ethnic-Politics, Class Identity and the Crisis of Nation-Building in Nigeria, 1914-1970

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Abstract. It is quite disturbing to note that in Africa today, there is no country that is not prone to chaos and anarchy due to the bogey of ethnicity, and Nigeria is no exception. By January 1st 2014, Nigeria will roll out drums for a centennial celebration with little or nothing to show for this milestone in a life of a 'nation.' This near-absolute failure of the Nigerian State is due mostly to the perfidious ethnic-politics often shrouded in class identity and flaunted by the political elite during their bitter struggle for political offices. As it will be demonstrated in this essay, ethnicity in Nigeria (like in many other African countries), with attendant difficulties, is not as a result of 'ancient hatred' among the people. But rather became so dominant in the domestic politics due to the deliberate policy of the British colonialists and the most heinous adoption of this colonial legacy by various Nigerian leaders in the political arena right from the period of decolonization. This essay primarily intends to re-examine the intricacies of the amalgamation of 1914; expose some of the ways through which the colonialists actually entrenched fissiparous tendencies into the Nigerian polity; analyses how the early nationalists built on this atrocious colonial legacy in their quest for political independence and continue to spread the virus up till date in their quest for political power and influence; evaluate the role of ethnic-politics during the Nigerian Civil War. The essay concludes by suggesting some ways out of the quagmire.

1. Introduction: The Colonial Antecedence

Nigeria in many respects was a colonial creation. Nevertheless, the various peoples occupying the area today known as Nigeria were said to have been in close contacts for centuries before the rude intrusion of the colonialists. The British were largely responsible for the drawing of these divergent indigenes of the country together under what Prof.

Jide Osuntokun called "an over-arching political architecture" (Osuntokun, 2003). At the time of amalgamation in 1914, Nigeria may have evolved a number of nations if the British so wished; but for administrative convenience and to ensure maximum economic exploitation – the people were forced into an 'un-negotiated commune'. This as a matter of fact set terrible precedence for the pandemic problem of inter-ethnic conflicts that have been dominating the polity. It now becomes very clear that "European rule was imposed like a great steel grid over the amorphous cellular tissue of tribal Africa and the hundreds and often hostile communities (Perham, 1950: 10).

To many scholars of Nigerian history, all the incessant and virulent societal maladies especially ethnic conflagrations that are ravaging the Nigerian polity are not only traceable to the colonial rule but were institutionalized by the foreign pillagers. It is their common belief that the present disunity in Nigeria is in part a reflection of the divisive and deceptive form of common government adopted by the British since 1900 (Kirk-Green, 1951; 19). It was John Hatch's (1971; 10) contention that the troubles the country experienced during the First Republic and even the Civil War were traceable to the amalgamation of 1914.

The British who ought to bring the people together preferred to rule them distinctively. Rather than generating unity, they engendered disunity. In preparing for the amalgamation, which was finalized on 1st January, 1914, Lord Lugard (the pioneer Governor General) took a number of decisions that were to influence the whole future of Nigeria (Crowder, 1962; 212). Lugard from his own impulse chose to maintain the distinction between North and South even though the two territories were to be fused! Indeed, as Michael Crowder contended, the

current catastrophic nature of the Nigerian polity would have been averted from 1914 had Lugard listened to “*wise counsel*”. As he argued:

It is essential to take careful note of the schemes proposed to Lugard for much of recent Nigerian politics has been coloured by dissatisfaction with the present political division of the country; if Lugard had listened to E.D. Morel (at that time editor of the African Mail and persistent critic of colonial policies) and Charles Temple, the then Lt. Governor of the Northern Provinces (Crowder; 1962; 21).

Morel advocated the division of the country into four large provinces: a northern province, consisting of Kotangora, Sokoto, Kastina, Kano, Zaria Emirate and Bornu; a central province corresponding roughly with the Middle Belt state advocated by the Action Group party, consisting of Bauchi, Plateau, Adamawa and parts of Niger and Benue provinces; a Western province consisting of the old Western region, Ilorin and Borgu; Eastern Province that would take in Benue province as far as the Benue River as well as the whole of the old Eastern region. Temple also suggested the division of the country into seven provinces (Crowder; 1962; 213). Lugard rather preferred his own division partly because he really did not want the break-up of the administration he had devised for the North, largely because he did not want too great an administrative burden thrown on himself (Crowder; 1962; 213).

This was further aggravated by the deliberate isolation of northerners from modernization until a remarkable gulf appeared between them and Southern Nigerians. The British weaved a theory around the system of indirect rule and the form of amalgamation that accompanied it. Apart from the fact that application of two systems was unsatisfactory – they lit a set of focuses that only resulted in series of explosions that would deteriorate not only in the accumulation of protests against the British rule, but also the growing suspicious, frustrations and antagonisms of African Community against African community. Kirk Green (1971; 20) also considered the amalgamation of 1914 as a serious mistake because of what he called “the oil and water” incompatibility of the North and the South and went further by recognizing the role played by the ethnic factor in the course of Nigeria’s history as a nation.

Indeed, by 1914, there was amalgamation but no unification because there was no Nigerian Consciousness. The British developed what Prof. Jide Osuntokun (2003) called *cordon sanitaire* (keep the people separated) as a consolidation of their

infamous policy of *divide et imperia* (divide and rule). And this gave the perilous impetus to the emanation of hitherto unknown ethnic tension among the composite regions of Nigerian Polity.

At the level of ideology, indirect rule as a colonial machination was anchored in white racism. And one of the most effective methods adopted by the British to keep ‘Nigerians’ permanently divided was by ‘manufacturing’ ‘local racism’. For example, Charles Temple claimed that the British must protect the Fulani, as they were Caucasian like themselves (Crowder; 1962; 214). Also, in the North, special residential areas called ‘Sabo Garis’ (strange ghetto) were created for non-Northerners. Consequently, among Nigerians ethnicity become closely associated with a strong belief in a perceived cultural and linguistic diversity of the country. It is often regarded as the inevitable consequence of socio-cultural differences.

Apart from this invention of divisive tradition that tends to nullify any factor of unity among the people and create new tension where it did not exist; colonial situation in most of the urban centers forced the people to resort to ethnicity. For instance, the four British Colonial policies – Forced labour, alien currency, taxation and artificial scarcity – forced many members of the local population to migrate to areas of new colonial activity for longer or shorter periods to work or trade. Increasingly fewer Nigerians could subsist by performing their pre-colonial activities (Nnoli, 1980; 35). Generally, this migration led to a significant alteration of Nigerian colonial economy as well as evolution of new urban centers and development of the old ones.

In Nigeria, the colonial urban setting constituted the cradle of contemporary ethnicity because it was there that what we refer to as ethnic groups first acquired a common consciousness (Nnoli, 1980; 35). It is noteworthy that the major violence in the history of the country have either occurred in these towns or originated from them. For examples: in 1932, ethnic tension in Jos was so high that a riot nearly occurred there. In 1945, the smouldering ethnic hostility in the city erupted into violence causing death and damage to property. In Lagos in 1948, an interethnic cold war raged between the Yoruba and Igbo residents causing a great deal of insecurity to life and property. The Kano riots of 1953 also had an essential ethnic character (Nnoli, 1980; 35). The relatively insignificant participation of the rural population in these cases is a clear demonstration of the urban/elitist nature of the contemporary ethnicity.

Furthermore, the British equally entrenched everlasting discord among various groups in Nigeria by maintaining varying degrees of educational development in the regions. Educationally, therefore, the one section of the country differed from the other. The North was almost entirely insulated against the revolutionary effects of education by Lugard's promise that missionaries would not be allowed in the Moslem emirates without the Emirs consent (Hatch, 1971; 11). It must however be stated that initially, all education in the country was under the direct control of the missionaries but due to the hostility of the Muslim rulers in the area, they found it laborious to continue their programmes since the government was neither interested nor had the money to provide education, Lugard's Official Policy thus excluded these Christian Missionaries from the North (Crowdr, 1962).

Although, in 1903, Christians opened a school in Nupeland at the invitation of the Emir of Zaria, the missionaries were only permitted to work in the non-muslim Middle Belt. Thus, in 1947, the total number of secondary schools in the North constituted only 2-5 percent of the total for the country, although the area officially contained 54 percent of the population (Coleman, 1958; 125). By 1937, there was only one Northerner in Yaba Higher College, and as late as 1951, the 16 million people of the North had produced only one person with full university degree (Coleman, 1958; 125). In 1953, primary school enrolment in the North was only one-eighth that of the South (Crowder, 1962; 217). In 1952 only 8.5 percent of the total population of those over seven years were literate in Western script in Nigeria. Out of these, sixteen percent came from the East, eighteen percent from the West and only two percent from the North (Coleman, 1958; 126).

The apparent educational imbalance between the North and the South stated above was the most fundamental root of the destructive North/South dichotomy in Nigeria. This became evident especially during the march towards independence – an era characterized by mutual suspicion, total group mistrust and social acrimony which stemmed from the fear of domination of the South by the North and vice-versa. Therefore, when independence was fast approaching, the Northerners quickly realized their backwardness in western education and acculturation. They became aware that in an independent Nigeria they did not possess the manpower needed for administration. As it will be shown later ever since ethnic consideration has become dominant in the national polity.

Apart from the colonial educational discrimination that elevated ethnic discord; the colonialists purposely utilized ethnicity as a mechanism to divide the colonized and therefore maintain domination over them. They used ethnicity to curb African nationalism and ensure their power. For example in 1920 when the National Congress of British West Africa was organized and demanded reforms in the British West African Colonies, Sir Hugh Clifford, the then Governor immediately sought to divide the nationalist by arguing that “the peoples of West Africa do not belong to the same Stock and are not of common descent” (Nnoli, 1980; 16). He further contended that any suggestions of possible future West African nations were ‘mischievous’ because it is the consistent policy of the government of Nigeria to maintain and support the local tribal institutions and the indigenous forms of Government, which are to be regarded as the natural expressions of (African) political genius (Nnoli, 1980;; 17). Thus to the colonial government not only was the idea of West African nation an anathema, that of a Nigerian nation was inconceivable; as according to them “*true patriotism and nationalism were attributes that must be associated with the natural and self contained*” tribal homelands (Nnoli, 1980; 18).

The afore stated submission clearly demonstrates the paradoxical nature of the Nigerian State – created by the British without the faith that it could survive as ‘a genuine and viable entity’. This is not surprising as Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated in 1914 to form Nigeria just for easier exploitation and convenient colonial administration. As I have argued earlier in this essay, part of the problems of governing Nigeria today derives from policies adopted during colonial period, which infused ethnic cleavages into Nigerian System. Uma Eleazu (1989; 11) was particularly forthright when he stated that:

Although, amalgamation of North and South took place in 1914, the North was not represented in Lagos until 1946; dual systems of law; Christian Missionary activities and Western education were shut out of the North.

In fact, the people were proposed to belong to the same nation.

From the foregoing, one could see that British colonial policy which were conflicting in the different parts of the country actually condemned Nigeria to the seemingly inescapable crypt of ethnic rivalry; Lugard's policy of indirect rule in the North which led to ethnic parochialism. Under colonialism in the words of Pita O. Agbese (2001; 125):

Administrative exigencies warranted the inventions of traditions and the nurturing and exacerbation of an 'us' and 'them'; Muslim versus Christian; Northerner versus Southerner; Hausa-Fulani versus Yoruba versus Igbo and so on.

With the adoption of indirect rule system of colonial administration by the British in Nigeria; religious, regional and ethnic differences were given prominence in conceiving and implementing of social, educational and economic development projects.

Thus the differential impact of colonialism as reflected in the differential treatment of ethnic groups by the British set the context of the regional, educational, economic and political imbalances. This later became significant in the mobilization or manipulation of identity consciousness in order to effectively divide and rule as well as in the politics of de-colonization and in arena of competitive politics in the post-colonial era (Pita O. Agbase 2001:127).

2. The Process of Decolonization and Problem of Ethnic Politics

The creation of the colonial state of Nigeria and the erection by the colonial rulers of new administrative structures meant a new twist in inter group relations. As the people lived within these new units, they were forced to adjust their relations with other groups. The adjustment created both new affinities and new hostilities as colonial rule was:

"Something of a paradox: on the one hand, it brought Nigerian Peoples together in new grouping and for new purposes; on the other, it emphasized already existing differences and introduced new ones" (Pita O. Agbase 2001:125). And if the problems associated with co-existing in the colonial state resulted in the creation of new hostilities, the politics of de-colonization intensified such hostilities, especially among the three regions (West, East and North).

The explanation for the intensification of regional suspicion and animosity is not far-fetched. As Nigerians were preparing for independence, so the leaders of each region began to seek arrangements that would guarantee them particulars advantage. Competition for advantage produced heat and differences, which worsened ethnic rivalry. Thus at a time when the political leaders should have laid the foundation for the unity of the future Nigerian nation state, they found themselves embroiled instead in seeking regional advantages, which often meant advantages for the three giant ethnic groups that dominate the Nigerian scene Obaro Ikime,(1985:17). In the process, ethnic politics became prominent

which meant total hindrance for any attempt at nation building process. As a result of this, more than four decades after independence, no sure foundation for a truly united nation is yet to be put in place.

The ethnic and regional base of political parties, which emerged as part of the de-colonization process also hardened regional and ethnic lines. The three political parties that were established around this time took step to entrench themselves in their predominant cultural regions – the Northern People's Congress (NPC) for the Northerners (Hausa-Fulani); Action Group (AG) for the Yoruba who dominated Western Nigeria and the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) for Eastern Nigeria. This development to political analysts was not surprising as the three parties in question emanated from cultural associations of these regions: NPC from Jamiyyar Mutanem Arewa; AG from Egbe Omo Oduduwa and NCNC from Igbo State Union .(Osthaimer: 1973:20).

This stemmed from the mutual group suspicious as the three main ethnic groups usually dread the domination of one another. Consequently, the Yoruba feared Igbo, Igbo feared the Yoruba, the Yoruba and Igbo who constituted the Southerners were feared by the Northerners and vice versa. It must however be stated at this juncture that the display of 'zero statecraftness' by the Nigerian nationalist at this period further authenticate this fear of domination.

Therefore, it won't be out of point if one adduces that the intemperate utterances of some Nigerian aspirants to leadership position (during the temptuous period of de-colonization), arising from personal ambitions, have contributed in no small measure to the growth of inter-ethnic hostility in Nigeria. In this regard as reflected in the thought of J.S. Coleman, the early political activities of Nnamdi Azikwe generated much of such virulent, charismatic and ethnically loaded remarks. He was deeply resented by some Yoruba and Hausa leaders, not only because they were threatened but also because he used his journalistic enterprises to portray them in very unfavourable light to the public. He scathingly referred to them as "misleaders" and their leadership as "Uncle Tom Leadership" accusing them of being lackeys of imperialism who cringed to curry favours from their colonial master (Bretton, 1962:28). His opponents were frightened about his power to run them not only politically but also financially by branding them stooges of imperialism.

Riding the crest of the new wave of ethnic chauvinism at the first Igbo State Conference in 1949, Azikwe made a very dangerous ethnic remark: *It would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of Ages ... The martial prowess of the Ibo nation at all stages of human history has conquer others but also to adapt themselves to the role of preserver ... The Igbo cannot shirk its responsibility.*

More than any other factor, this ill-advised statement severely damaged Azikwe's credibility as a pan-Nigerian. Its inevitable consequence was the growth in the fears of Igbo domination on the part of other groups created by the propaganda of their leaders that capitalized on the statement.

Chief Obafemi Awolowo who also saw his role as essentially that of the Yoruba leader while reacting to various attempt made by Dr. Azikwe to present the Igbo as the most superior ethnic group in Nigeria noted: "It seemed clear to me that (Azikwe's) policy was to corrode the self-respect of the Yoruba as a group and build up Igbo as the master-race", and pledged to ensure the evolution of a formidable ethnic front among the Yoruba just as the Ibiobio and the Ibo had done. The aftermath of this was the ensuing bitter contest between the Igbo nationalism and Yoruba fraternity. Most keen observers of the Nigerian political scene would recall the circumstances in which Nnamdi Azikwe, having won elections in Lagos, was frustrated by the Yoruba dominated Western House of Assembly from going on to the central legislature due to ethnic sentimentalism. In fact, the politics of the years 1952-1960 gave insight to the problems of inter-ethnic, inter-regional, inter-party relations that independent Nigeria might likely battled with.

In relations between the North and South of the country, a similar disregard for the social consequences of their utterances on the part the Nigerian leaders has also contributed to the growth of ethnicity. The attitude of the western educated Southerners toward the less educated Northerners was usually and essentially negative and uncomplimentary. The Southern press ridiculed the Northerners and made disrespectful remarks about their leaders. In Abubakar Imam view of the relations:

We despise each other ...we call each other ignorant; the South is proud of western knowledge and culture. We are proud of eastern (culture) ... To tell you the plain truth, the common people of the North put more confidence in the white man than in

their black Southern brothers or educated Northerners (J.S. Coleman 1958: 347).

In his speech at the Nigerian legislative council of 24th March 1948, Balewa had made an even more vocative remark: *"I should like to make it clear to you that if the British quitted Nigeria now at this stage, the Northern people would continue their interrupted conquest to the sea"*.

The following year, he equally observed that the Northerners looked upon the Southerners living in the North as invaders who did not mix with the Northern people. These chauvinistic, provocative and threatening remarks by Northern political leaders were usually accomplished by expressions of genuine fear of Southern domination in a self-governing Nigeria. They alleged that Southern clerks in the North discriminated against Northerners in government offices, in railroad ticket offices, and in commercial firms. They also posited that Southerners tended to take Northerners for granted and therefore, assumed that in self-ruling Nigeria, the North would, in effect, be a backward protectorate governed by Southerners and that in united Nigeria, the Northerners would only end up as mere labourers.(Olawale Albert, 1998:52).

The flagrant usage of unguarded statements by the over ambitious Nigerian nationalists during de-colonization aided the prominence of ethnic politics at this time in various respects. First, for those on behalf of whom they made the utterances create a feeling of pride and solidarity in their membership of the particular ethnic group, and they create and reinforce a feeling of injustice to the collectivity of which these people are members thereby imbuing them with a missionary zeal on behalf of their ethnic community. In either case, the ethnocentric component of ethnicity is reinforced, leading to a greater identification with and exclusiveness of the ethnic groups; second, with regard to the victims of such remarks, the utterances inculcate a collective sense of fear, danger and insecurity which, as during the formative stages of ethnicity, are ameliorated by greater solidarity and identification with the ethnic-in-group. These fears in turn lead to an intensification of ethnicity.

Third, such remarks provide the various regional factors of privileged classes with saver opportunities for manipulating mass ethnic support on behalf of their socio-economic competition. The competition however lies at the roots of ethnicity. Finally, the remarks create possibility for the emergency of

conflict spirals capable of escalating interethnic hostility into violence.

The violence actually broke out during the 1953 sectarian crisis. Chief Anthony Enahoro, an Action Group member, moved a motion on the floor of the House of Representatives in Lagos asking that British should disengage from their colonial enterprise in Nigeria by granting the country her independence in 1956. The Northern leaders who rather wanted the self-rule “as soon as practicable” instead of 1956 opposed this motion. This opposition as reflected in the thought of Sir Ahmadu Bello- the Sardauna of Sokoto was due to the backwardness of the North in western acculturation and education, the need to “catch up” with other regions and the need to build their development “on sound and lasting foundations” so that it would be lasting. In fact, he considered the call as it affected the North as “an invitation to commit suicide” (Ahmadu Bello,1953).

The vituperations from the Southerners that followed this Northern opposition led to the infamous Kano riot of May 15, 1953 – which was arguably the first bloody interethnic clash in the area known as Nigeria. Then opposition obviously angered Southern Nigerian members of AG and NCNC resorted to calling the Northerners ”slaves of the white man”, “kolanut men”, “His master’s voice”, etc. To worsen the situation, after the proceedings of the day, groups of Ibo and Yoruba surrounded them and called the “thieves”, “stupid Hausas”, “the men who have no minds of their own”(Olawale Albert,1998:55). Indeed, the humiliation suffered by the Northerner was beyond imagination.

In the North, the people saw the Lagos incident by the Igbo-Yoruba Southern Nigerian coalition as an open hostility against the Northerners. As the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello later commented:

We were not only angry at our treatment but also indignant that people who were full of fine phrases about unity of Nigeria should have set their people against the chosen representatives of another region passing through their territories (Olawale Albert, 1998:55).

The leaders of the NPC on getting back to their constituency not only went round to educate the people on why they objected to the self-government motion of the AG but also narrated their ordeal. With this, stage has been set for the ethnic conflagration that almost derailed Nigerian de-colonization process.

It was at this tension ridden moment that the leaders of the AG too decided to carry their 1956 independence campaign to Kano – a city described as “the primary repository of Northern values” and identities. Members of the NPC decided immediately to use all possible options to prevent the AG visit and equally vowed to use the occasion to avenge their humiliation should the AG leaders insist.

As Mallam Guwa Wada submitted:

...Having abused us in the South, these very Southerners have decided to come over to the North to abuse us, but we have determined to retaliate the treatment given to us in the South. We have therefore organized 1,000 men ready in the city to meet force with force ... (John C. Hatch, 1971:10)

Wada in fact declared a sort of ‘Jihad’ as he affirmed the readiness of the protesters to die for their cause when he stated that:

... We are not like the Southerners who brew trouble and allow their followers to go prison or suffer what they have done; we are prepared to go prison or die (John C. Hatch, 1971:10)

The Action Group fatally ignored this threat and resolved to the use of press for the publication of series of inflammatory articles against the North. This press war further reinforced the resolution of the Northerners to prevent the AG from successfully touring Kano. Consequently, as early as 8.30 a.m. on Friday, May 15, 1953 about 3,000 demonstrators, largely consisting of native administration staff were mobilized for action between this first day and May 18, 1953, violence was a daily ritual in Kano. At the end of the civil disorder, thirty-six people were officially declared killed. Two hundred and forty-six were wounded. Most of them were treated for gunshots

The 1953 riots led to greater mutual distrust between Northern and Southern Nigerians. Shortly after the incident, the Northerner House of Chiefs and House of Assembly passed a motion, which in effect would have led to the dissolution of the Nigerian Federations. The demand by the two Houses for regional autonomy led to the July-August 1953 London Conference which representatives of different regions attended. And to achieve the much desired autonomy, the Northerners began an aggressive ‘Northernization’ policy as a result of which many Southern Nigerians lost their jobs in the Northern public service and were replaced by Northerners. Between January 1954 and August 1958, a total of 2,148 Southerners were dismissed from Northern Public Service. (Olawale Albert, 1998:55).This was actually the follow up to the

Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, which supported regional autonomy.

Although, the governments of Western and Eastern parts of Nigeria also seek to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new constitution by pursuing aggressive policies of educational and economic advancement – no equivalence of 'Northernization' policy was pursued. They only established more schools and offered scholarship to students and Nigerianised their Civil Service. The major reason for the hyper-aggressive policy in the North was the desperation of the people to 'catch up' with the level of development in the South. This further heightened hostility between the North and South.

As reflected in the above analysis, inter-regional, interethnic suspicious and hostility dominated the politics of decolonization in Nigeria. Thus, on the eve of Nigerian independence, the Nigerian leaders were with no clear vision of the nation. It was a problem arising from the plurality of cultures in pre-colonial Nigeria; partly due to colonial intrusion and; majorly from the insincerity of the leaders. With this national contradiction rather than national cohesion becomes the lot of the country. Even more, this also heightened problem of nation building right from the first republic. The role played by ethnic cleavages in the turbulent years of the Nigerian civil war will be the next focus of this essay.

3. Ethnic Factor in the Nigerian Civil War

Though, the Nigerian Civil War as it has been argued earlier had its culminating roots in the deliberate policy of the British to promote ethnic division among the differing people of Nigeria and the senseless interethnic struggle for political power among the Nigerian elites especially during the First Republic, the bloody coup of January 15, 1966 actually made the war almost inevitable. This is because as Nnoli (1980:35) puts it "by this time, ethnicity had become militarized" which of course was unprecedented. This militarization under conditions in which ethnicity had been politicized contributed significantly to the politicization of the military; as was the case of with the public service, this marked the intrusion of ethnic politics into the armed forces with the Nigerianisation of the military institution. At the time of independence in 1960, the only major national institution free from ethnic political virus was the army. The colonialists dominated this ultimate state power until the end of colonial rule. It was therefore the last to be Nigerianised. For example, in 1960 only 17 percent

of its officer corps were Nigerians; and the British dominated the top command.

With the end to colonial rule, a programmed of indigenisation of the armed forces was embarked upon. Expectedly, the politicians who formulated the programme with their deep indulgence in ethnic politics rather than basing it on merit relied solely on ethnicity. They were also quite aware of the critical role of the army in the political process especially the final instrument of coercion. This consciousness is reflected in the efforts of the various ethnic political leaders to encourage members of their respective ethnic groups to join the army, as well as their desire to maintain communications with those already in service. For example, W.F. Gutteridge (1969:64-65) reported a case in which an emir in his campaign for his subjects to join the army especially rules irrespective of their physical conditions. He also noted the intimate relations that existed between Aguiyi Ironsi and Emeka Ojukwu of the army and Igbo political leaders. At the 1963 treason trial as L.K. Jakande (1966:59) submitted, the AG was not only accused of seeking to infiltrate the army with some of its party agents, it was shown to have attempted to suborn army personnel.

The above accusations and recriminations actually led to the injection of ethnic politics and the eventual politicization of the military. By this singular act, the Nigerian Military became tribalised and thus destabilized its neutral spirit and this unfortunate developments according to Ahmed R. Mohammed (1983), worsened the slippery road to the abyss of civil war. The politicization was achieved by introducing quota system in the army in order to eradicate any possibility of one tribe dominating the army. Among other factors, the over dependence of the political leaders on the military to keep and enforce the peace tended to foster among the military an image of being the custodian of the nation's constitution.

Such opportunity came in January 1966 after three months of near anarchy and extreme uncertainty following the regional election in the West in October 1965, and the widespread rumour about one party or another, plotting to use the army against the other. The coup de'tat could have been a great step at preventing the outbreak of the civil war, but for the apparent sectional and partisan nature of its execution, which demonstrated vividly that tribal politics of the country had permeated the army.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the military putsch of 1966 had an ethnic character. In the first place,

apart from the fact that the coupists (of Jan. 15 1966) were predominantly Igbos; the pattern of the killings during the coup had definite ethnic character. As Robin Luckham's investigation revealed:

Among the civilians killed, none was Igbo of from the East. They included the Premier of the North, the controversial Premier of the West, and the Federal Prime Minister. No harm come to M.I. Okpara and D.C. Osadebe the Igbo Premiers of the East and Mid-West respectively. Within the Military, 4 out of 5 Northern Officers of the ranks of Lt. Colonel and above were killed, 2 out of 5 the West, none out of 7 from East and 1 out of 4 from the Mid-West ... (Robin Luckham 1971:43)

The picture that emerges from this objective empirical situation is clear: an attempt to limit ethnic competition through the use of pre-emptive violence.

The allegation of the January 15, 1966 coup leader, Kaduna Nzeogwu that the coup was planned and executed to "gun down all the big wigs, both politicians and military" contradicted the outcome and led many to ask the costly question of whether the victims were only corrupt leaders and whether the Igbo leaders (politicians and military) were not equally guilty. And as Ahmed R. Mohammed (1983) once reasonably posited, had the coup planners brought to book all the parties involved in creating the political instability, the civil war might have been averted.

With the execution of the so called 'Igbo coup' and the promulgation of the infamous Decree 34 of General Aguiyi Ironsi stipulating the re-introduction of Unitary System of government in the country, the situation became so aggravated; as the Northerners interpreted this as a deliberate plan to exterminate their leaders to pave way for Igbo colonization of the North. Hence, the young military officers of Northern extraction launched what Dudley (1973:90) tagged 'the return march' on July 29, 1966 which produced Yakubu Gowon as the new helmsman.

Apart from eliminating General Ironsi, they also descended with ethnic vengeance on Igbo officers and men, killing them en masse and compelling them to go into hiding. As submitted by Balogun (1973:25), this July massacre of the Igbo within the armed forces which was carried to end what the Northerners called Igbo supremacy in the military and the federation was to climaxed May 1966 killings in which over 3,000 Igbo were killed or wounded. He claimed further that by August 9, when the killing virtually ceased, 27 Igbo Officers, 12 non-Igbo Officers, 154 men of "other ranks" from the East and

17 from the West and Mid-West had been killed and many others injured.

One of the major consequences of this massacre was the regionalisation of the army. Igbo soldiers in hiding outside the Eastern region were allowed to return to their ethnic homeland in exchange for Northern soldiers in the East to return to the North. With the exception of the Northern troops who remained in the West and Lagos, the regions had become military homogenous and exclusive similar to their previously acquired political, economic and bureaucratic homogeneity and exclusiveness. In practice, the country remained a federation of four regions. In practice, it consisted of two units, which were culturally, socially and militarily impermeable, the East on the one hand and the rest of the country on the other. At that point in time, it has become crystal clear that only a tenuous tradition of association held the country together.

Even before the country could recover from the devastating effects of the July massacre, a most repulsive pogrom ensued in the North against Igbo residents there. The scale and spread of violence, together with the participation of the mutinous soldiers was unprecedented particularly the casualties suffered by the Easterners. According to Nnoli (1980:245)

Between 29 September and the end of November 1966, over 50,000 Igbo were gruesomely murdered, usually under inhuman conditions, maimed or horribly mutilated, over 2 million others who survived the maiming and killing became refugees in their ethnic homeland.

The sad and morally painfully fact about the killings was the criminal indifference of non-Easterners. None of the other groups saw the massacres as posing a serious national problem, or if they did, were not courageous enough to say no. Each ethnic group retreated into a womb-like isolation as if indifference and passage of time would solve the whole problem. The few non-Eastern intellectuals who dared to appeal to the nation's conscience were either jailed or hounded to exile. The Federal military regime rendered no apology for failing to protect lives, took no concrete steps to reassure the Igbo of their security and gave no meaningful assistance to the massive refugee crisis. In the opinion of Campbell (1977:178) the Aburi agreements, which were later designed to correct this poor statesmanship, were later disregarded by the Lagos regime.

Under these circumstances, the social fabric of the federation was destroyed as the return of the Igbo to

East on a massive scale and in a volatile and increasingly xenophobic state compelled the military governor of the region to expel non-Easterners from the East. The inter-human network that cut across regional boundaries was severed and with it, the lingering sense and feeling of unity between the Igbo and the rest of Nigerians. It must however be stated that in spite of this glaring injustice against the Igbos, it still took months of further systematic harassment to turn the demoralized Igbos from 'unitary state' supporters into Biafran secessionists. Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu (the then Eastern military Governor expressed the extent of that demoralization when he addressed an abortive OAU peace conference in Addis Ababa in August 1968:

Year after year, we made concessions and compromises to ward off the secessionist threat of the Northern Nigerians and save the unity of the federation. The pogrom of 1966 ended all that, because it killed the will to maintain this precarious and inhuman association called Nigeria.

With the above analysis, one can conveniently and correctly conclude that the root causes of the Nigerian civil war hinged on the socio-cultural, political and economic differences of the people the British colonial government brought together under one political yoke for administrative convenience. As a corollary, ethnic-politics dominated the Nigerian polity and ate deep into the social fabric of the nation. This led to inter-ethnic mistrust, mutual fear of domination, corruption and nepotism – all culminating in the constitutional crisis that snowballed into the January 1966 coups, the counter coup of July 29, 1966 and the subsequent civil war (1967 – 1970).

4. Conclusion: The Way Forward

Yes, it is true that, ethnicisation of politics or politicisation of ethnicity has been dominating Nigerian polity since the period of decolonisation and somehow, has overshadowed the genuine agitation for equality and paved way for sheer criminality- which has spread to every parts of Nigeria (Oyeranmi,2013: 167-188). Yes, it is true that many have always assumed that the road map to the real emancipation of the massively impoverished Nigerians is almost among the promoters/profiteers of ethnic-politics. Yes, it is true that, political patronage kept ethnic militancy alive in the country more than any factor. But it is also a stark reality that, human conditions among millions of downtrodden Nigerians remained among the worst in the world. And if ethnic militancy has achieved anything for the

generality of suffering masses; it is the global awareness generated which was clearly unprecedented in annals of the country. But this is far from the fulfilling the yearning of the people. So, the onerous really lie with government at all levels in Nigeria and other stakeholders especially the organised Private Sector and the International Community to find common ground to move the generality of the people away from daily despondency and all pervasive penury of body and soul. Focus should now be on a just and sustainable political and economic order which can only be achieved by giving due attention to the fears, needs, and aspirations of the various social and interest groups in the country.

Furthermore, the government rather than applying wait and see measure, as it is often the case in the previous handlings of ethnic conflicts, should be pre-emptive and always take prompt preventive action. In other words, there is a need for government in Nigeria to always be determined in its effort to seek and identify at the earliest possible stage, situations that could produce ethnic conflict and take corrective policy measure to remove the sources of rancor. Also instead of the frequent resort to settings up judicial commissions and tribunals and coercive responses, which are the features of conflict management in Nigeria – there should be standard techniques to ensure lasting solutions to ethnic conflicts.

Like many of its advocates, I also believe that for the issue of ethnicity to be properly addressed in Nigeria, there is a serious need for a constitutional conference by whatever names it is called. More than ever before, there is a need for a well-structured forum; where Nigerians can air their grievances and fears; where Nigerians can resolve their differences, trade concessions, agree on the rules and structure under which they wish to co-exist; where a binding constitution will emerge, representing the wishes of Nigerian, unimpeded by any authority. No authority can be higher than the will of the people. That is what will make a constitutional national or supreme. And as Rev. Father Hassan Kukah once remarked "... Only a sincere dialogue and genuine political will can change the course of events ..."

To take adequate care of the resource control saga, Nigeria should return to true Federalism as practised before the military intervention. What the country is practicing now is nothing short of a unitary form of government. Unitarism in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment is a recipe for disaster. It exacerbates friction and tension between and among groups. What nation groups need in Nigeria is space

to breath, autonomy in handling basically local issues and adequate space not to step on each other's toes. Nigeria is not an island unto itself. There nothing uniquely Nigerian. The world is full of multinational states, which have been huge successes such as Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany, and Britain and so on due to the practice of true Federalism and those multinational states such as Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia who have failed because of their refusal to practice true Federalism⁶⁰. And if the Niger Delta issue is not handled seriously, then Nigeria is doomed to fail.

Finally, the struggle against ethnic chauvinism should be the responsibility of the vast majority of Nigerians who have remained largely silent, remote from the political and economic seats of power and merely marginal to the realm of income distribution. It should not be waged under the leadership of that segment of the population, which benefits from contemporary inter-ethnic situation. Such leadership includes: the Nigerian businessmen, rural potables, the top echelons of the civil and the military bureaucrats, landlords who in connivance with the advanced capitalist nations, notably-Britain are feasting fast and fat from Nigeria's bad situation to the detriment of the Nigerian masses.

It is instructive to close this discussion with the immortal words of Obafemi Awolowo that:

I say unto you, that there will be no genuine peace in this country, unless, in the main, the war against grinding poverty, hunger, preventable diseases, squalor, and ignorance among the masses of our people, is waged throughout the land, with the same united purpose, patriotism, and grim determination as we had waged the war against secession. It is, perhaps, not generally realised that, in all history, the root causes of rebellion and violent discontent are evils which I have enumerated. We have won the civil war. Yes, Indeed. But to win the war for peace, we must recognise the real enemies. Otherwise, all our efforts would be totally misdirected and dissipated. As far as I can discern, the aggressors against peace and stability in Nigeria are abject poverty, hunger, diseases, squalor, and ignorance. They are more devastating in their ravages, more insidious ,more thorough, and more resistant in their operations, than any armed rebellion. They are the enemies which must now be crushed, and crushed totally....

___Obafemi Awolowo,(public lecture, May 1970 in Ibadan)

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