

Implication of Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7 to the Problem of Ethnicity and National Integration in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with over 250 ethnic groups, with about 720 indigenous languages and 3 major religious groups. The issue of peaceful co-existence among these groups has been a challenge to the government of the Federation. Notwithstanding the various attempts made to ensure peace and national integration, Nigeria socio-political scene has been decimated with plethora of crisis with devastating consequences, especially on the basis of ethnic identification or ethnicity. Just like the Nigerian State, the early church faced the problem of group identity and intergroup bias, which posed a threat to the unity, progress and its evangelical mandate. However, the community rose up to the challenge and peace was ensued. This work therefore explores the implication of Acts 6: 1-7 to the challenges of ethnicity and national integration in Nigeria using Historical-Critical Method. From the text, we discovered that the problem of ethnicity and national integration in Nigeria is not in its heterogeneous nature but in its leadership. The quest for national integration must begin with the willingness of the leadership to address the issues of social injustice and discrimination through a call for national dialogue, to harness opinions that will make for national integration.

Keywords: Acts 6:1-7, Ethnicity, Marginalization, Integration, Intergroup conflicts.

Introduction:

Unarguably, no discourse in Nigeria socio-political scene has attracted great interest and sentiment like issue of ethnicity. Heightened interest in this topic is ever-increasing phenomena of ethnic prejudice manifesting in ethnic conflicts, ethnic polarization, cries of ethnic marginalization, emergence of ethnic militias and agitations for resource control etc. Ethnicity is a fundamental issue in Nigeria; it constitutes one of the problems of intergroup relations that threaten the unity, peace and progress of the State

In Nigeria, ethnic-nationalism is politicized to the detriment of state-nationalism. It has eaten so deep into the sub-consciousness of Nigerians that the citizens primarily identify themselves with their ethnic origins (such as Igbo, Hausa/Fulani,

Yoruba, Tiv, Ijaw, etc) rather than with the Nigerian identity, and thus issues of national interest are often bargained and contested along the lines of ethnic origins. This vice apparently evident in all facet of the national life; be it politics, religion, education, economy, social relations etc, is the underlying force behind most of the ethno-religious cum socio-political conflicts in Nigeria today.

Notwithstanding the various attempts made by the government of the federation to checkmate the challenges of ethnic prejudice and ensure peace, unity and oneness of the people, such as adoption of the federal system of government, multiple state creation, federal character and quota system, national youth service corps, unity schools, change of national anthem, relocation of federal capital territory etc., the problem of ethnicity and its concomitant in Nigeria has become like the proverbial wound of the people of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah Chapter 8 that defile all therapy.

Khalid (2000) therefore remarks that the perennial occurrences of the problems do suggest the inadequacies of the remedies proposed and tried so far. On this premise, this study explore the implications Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7 to the problem of ethnicity and national integration in Nigeria, and the relevance of the intervention strategies deployed by the early church in tackling the problem of group identity and discrimination to the Nigeria situation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Ethnicity is one of the words that lack a general accepted definition. It has so many definitions as there are many textbooks on the theme. However, the term is use to identify a group of people with common features that tend to distinguish the members from those of other groups. Etymologically, ethnicity is from the Greek root word *ethnos*, (and more precisely from the adjective *ethnikos*), which means nation or people (Vine, 1996, p. 720; Trimble and Dickson, 2005, pp. 415-20; Bacik, 2002, pp. 26-29). Ethnicity thus refers to *a nation*; not in the sense of political state, but a group of people who share common ancestral background and distinctive cultural elements like names, language, religion, custom, belief etc (See Gen. 10: 20; 31,32).

Ethnicity, according to Kellas, (1998) is the “state of being ethnic or belonging to an ethnic group” (p.5). An ethnic group is a group of people who share the conviction, and are so-regarded by others, to have a common social identity, based on shared cultural and social distinctiveness. Schermerhorn (1970), and Hutchinson & Smith (1996) respectively identifies such cultural and social distinctiveness as a collective proper names, a myth of common ancestry, a shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with specific homeland and a sense of solidarity for significant sector of the population. These attributes gives a group of people an identity and form its distinguishing features from other groups with whom they are in contact.

In Nigeria, ethnicity and tribalism are interchangeably used. However, the two concepts are not the same. Tribe is a term used to describe a small and isolated group that has little or no involvement with the development of a state. Okpu (1990) noted that “the term is largely a racist terms, which is exclusively and differently applied to people of native America or African origin. It is a label which emerged with imperialism in its application to those who were not European and live in a colonial or semi colonial

dependency.” The pejorative connotation of the term as it is used to categorize people seen as ‘uncivilized’ or ‘undeveloped’ has led many contemporary writers on African society to prefer the ethnicity to tribalism in discussing group affiliation identity.

Ethnicity is a type of social identity. It refers to a sense of relatedness that exists among members of an ethnic group, which defines the individuals’ self-concept and social behavior together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership. This applies to “the consciousness of belonging to, identifying with and being loyal to a social group distinguished by shared cultural traditions, a common language, in group sentiment and self identity” (Omu 1999, p. 3). Ethnicity is rooted in cultural distinctiveness. It is an identity that consists of the subjective, symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of culture by a group of people to differentiate themselves from the others.

The Origin of Ethnicity in Nigeria

Nigeria as a nation is the brainchild of the British colonist. She was born on January 14, 1914 with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate into one ‘united’ nation. Prior to 1914, there was no Nigeria but the people within the geographical territory known as Nigeria today existed as tribal groups in the name of Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Urhobo, Tiv, Kanuri etc, with distinct culture, political system and social and religious value distinct from each other (Okafor, 1997; Akinyemi, 2001). Although these groups existed as independent nations with distinct territorial boundaries, cultural lifestyle and leadership structure, there were considerable harmonious social contacts and interactions among the groups, evidenced in linguistic and cultural diffusion.

Nigeria then came into existence when these varied people groups were brought together into a marriage of convenience under a unitary structure by the British Colonist. In the creation of the Nigerian State, the British paid little or no attention to the ethnic lines or cultural differences of the people. They were more interested in exploring and exploiting the deep natural and human resources of the people for their own economic and political benefits (Onwu, 1996; Uka, 2008). Thus, through superior firepower, they lumped together people and nations who see no reason for their common existence as members of the same society.

The forceful cobbling of different ethnic and cultural groups into a single political economy ruptured the relative harmonious intergroup relationship that once existed among the people before colonization. In an attempt to overcome the challenges of the amalgamation, the British introduced policies that invariably accentuated and sustained the difference among the people, which have made issue of national integration a hurricane task. For instance, notwithstanding the amalgamation, the British colonialist still administered the amalgamated Protectorates as separate entities. Under the separate administrations, with the policy of divide and rule through the indirect rule system of government, each cultural grouping maintained its identity, its individuality and its nationality.

This sharpened a sense of social identity among the people and thus inspired intergroup competitions, which inevitably led to ethnic prejudice and inter-ethnic conflicts as each group tried to out-scheme the others. This system subtly manipulated

and craftily utilized by the colonial masters to gain the cooperation of the major ethnic groups institutionalized ethnicity as a ticket for national mobilization, which robbed Nigeria the common front for national integration.

Ethnicity became a force to reckon with in Nigeria socio-political economy, notably from the late 1930s and 1940s when ethnic based political groupings such as the Igbo Federation Union of 1953 and Egbe Omo Oduduwa became prominent. Initially, the movements were instruments in the hands of the nationalists for fighting the colonialists but at the heels of the retreating of the colonialists, they became potent force in the hands of the nationalists, who became heirs apparent to the colonial stool, for advancing group interest of their ethnic groups.

Hence, the problem of ethnicity in Nigeria is not a natural outcome of the existence of many ethnic groups within her borders but an inter-subjective social construct produced as human response to particular circumstances, especially asymmetrical relations closely related to the state formation, expansion and maintenance.

The Phenomenology of Ethnicity in Nigeria

The issue of ethnic identities underlies Nigeria experience like nothing else since her inception. According to Achebe (1984, p. 4) “Nothing in Nigeria’s political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word ‘tribe’ in her dictionary.” Ethnic prejudice has eaten deep into the very fiber of Nigerians. This has affected the way the citizens interacted and related with one another; be it in politics, economy, education, religion, social relations, or sports, ethnic chauvinism is conspicuously manifested.

One basic characteristic of ethnicity in Nigeria is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is a type of identity prejudice, which holds that one’s own ethnic group or culture is superior to other ethnic groups or cultures. According to Sumner (1906), it is “the view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled or rated with reference to it.” (p.13). It entails an attitude of cultural exclusiveness, which holds the feeling of one’s cultural superiority to others; manifesting in preference for ingroup characteristics, tribalism, racism, xenophobia and “those ideologies and social processes leading to negative evaluations and discriminations of out-groups on the basis of their putatively different ethnic membership” (Solomon, 2008, p. 169).

Ethnocentrism goes with strong identification with one’s ethnic group and a great sense of loyalty to it, which often genders in-group favouritism that inevitably leads to the marginalization of the out-group and its members. Marginalization is an act of discrimination, which Cashmore (1996) noted “is the unfavourable treatment of all persons socially assigned to a particular category” (p. 201). It is a voluntary acts meant to disadvantage a group of people or individual. It consist of negative stereotype of the out-group, deliberate avoidance of contact with them, the exclusion of out-group members from social institutions, segregation and at its extreme extermination.

In Nigeria, ethnic identity is a fundamental element in determining and delimiting what the people get. In employment, political appointment, university admission, distribution of social amenities, elections and even marriage, the interest is narrowed down to ‘where is he or she from?’ Of what tribe or ethnic group is it their

turn? Is he/she an indigene or a non-indigene (sojourner)? It is therefore extremely difficult to get anything in Nigeria on the basis of merit, unless one's 'tribal man' is there. Thus Iredia (n.d) captured the scenario:

The state of (ethnic) origin of every Nigerian remains the most important ticket for getting anything at any level. Many Nigerians have been favoured unduly and others deprived of what they are due because of quota system or federal character. But not for the same overall important ethnicity, zoning would not have assumed its important status in our political structure. Abia state would not have disengaged from its public service more than 1800 worker from Anambra state origin because they are not indigenes. The indigene-settlers imbroglio of Jos, Plateau, state would not been fatal as it has become. Ethnicity is the decider of all matter in Nigeria.

Ethnic discrimination is one of the basic problems of ethnicity in Nigeria. It has provoked a form of an entrenched system of unjust and marginalization practices in which non indigene, immigrant, or settler are shunted out or denied equal access to the resources, right and privileges of the local, community, town, state to which sons and daughters of the soil have first or exclusively access. By it, people are frozen out of school, out of neighbourhood, disengaged from work, and deny appointment because they 'are not of our kith and kin'. This system produces and sustains hierarchal, unequal and ranked system of citizenship that has provoked violence all over the country and goes ahead to the very heart of the national question.

The politic of marginalization has offered a fertile ground for intergroup conflicts in Nigeria. It has become a leading factor in the struggle for power and resource control. When a group feels cheated, excluded, victimized, neglected or marginalized, and for fear or shame of being stuck at the last rung of the ladder, they antagonized other groups. The multiple effects of this include unhealthy ethnic competition, hatred, insecurity accusation and counter-accusation, ethno-religious conflicts, political instability, land dispute, indigene and non-indigene palaver and the emergence of ethnic militia who seek for a fair share of the natural cake or outright balkanization of Nigeria.

Ethnicity hardly exists in pure form. In Nigeria, it interacts closely with other social cleavages such as class, politics and religion. The link between ethnicity, religion and politics holds serious implications for national integration. For instance, an Hausa man who is a Christian is viewed less an Hausa person than one who is a Muslim. Likewise, an Igbo man who identifies with Islamic religion is seen as an 'outsider' or 'betrayed' by his kinsman. This often times delimits individuals' access to opportunity, entitlement, and participation. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) noted that "member of the Hausa-Fulani majority group in the North who is a Christian is as much as a minority in overall scheme of things as say an Idoma or Igala (both of which are northern minority group) and is actually likely to enjoy lesser privilege than ethnic minority who is a Muslim" (p. 7).

In the same vein, ethnicity is an intrinsic part of the national politics. The inseparable link between it and politics in Nigeria creates deep suspicion when it is perceived that one ethnic group is dominating the political affair of the country. Members of different ethnic groups want their own to dominate the affairs of the country, which enhances their self-esteem. This inter alia, explains why election and political appointment are areas where the interplay between group members and social behaviour comes to the fore in Nigeria. Adherent of ethnic group strongly canvass for their kin to be

elected in political office. It paved way for the emergence of regional leaders and ethnic-based political parties whose manifestos were designed along ethnically determined interest. This culminated in a pattern of political rivalry among the regions; with an increasing struggle for political and economical dominance among the ethnic groups in the country, most especially the Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba.

The quest for ethnic and religious group relevance through the control of state resources and political apparatus in response to the pluralistic realities of the Nigeria state has continued to impose great challenge to intergroup relations and national integrations. It has triggered of cries marginalization, nepotism, in-group favouritism, discrimination against the out-group and intergroup conflicts, which has led to the emergence ethnic and religious militia activities across the nation, such as APC, OPC, MEND, IPOB, NDA, *Maitatsine* religious group and *Boko Haran*. The activities of these groupshave been characterized by violence and the use of small arms and light weapons in violent pursuit of their objective, resulting to thousands of death and the destruction of prosperity, population displacement, community dissolution as well as injuries.

A Hermeneutic of Acts 6: 1-7

In Acts of the Apostles 6: 1-7, Luke discussed a significant inter-group process that took place in the early church- the inter-group conflict between the two major cultural groups in the early church-the Hellenists and the Hebrews. The early church, therefore was a heterogeneous society. It comprised people from different cultural backgrounds, with different languages and religious orientations. In the process of growth, development and expansions, there arose conflict between the members of the groups. The Hellenists accused the Hebrews of marginalization of their widows in the distribution of the common resources. This threatened the peaceful co-existence of the people, and their evangelistic mission.

However, the leadership of the church responded promptly to the challenges of group sentiment, and the impending threat to the unity and peace of the early Christian community. They called the people together and ask of them to choose from among them seven men whom they will put in charge of the business as they themselves devote to the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6:3-4). And the saying was pleasing to the entire congregation, not only the Hellenists who felt marginalized but also the Hebrews, who were accused of favouritism. Thus, they chose 'The Seven', which by their names appeared to be from the Hellenists extract. With this peace was restored and the church increased in number and strength.

The proposed solution reveals great value for handling intergroup conflicts: commitment to unity, to equity and growth. The decision-making process reflects equally important values for social order. It was participatory. It involves distinct roles for leaders and congregation. The leadership proposed a solution and the criteria for implementing it. The congregation took ownership of the proposal and worked their assigned part. The Twelve instructed the congregation to find men with a good reputation. The congregation brought forward names of seven men to the apostles. The leadership confirmed the congregation's work by praying and laying hands on these men. Thus, peace was restored.

The calling of the people together for dialogue was a proactive attempt made by the apostles to bring about social contact. Group contact under appropriate conditions, can improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Sheriff 1966). However, many people avoid intergroup contact, an affect likely to be exacerbated in the context of conflict, where any dealing with the 'other side' may be proscribed and violation severely sanctioned. Absence of contact is likely to reduce the likelihood of dialogue, strengthens the assumption that the two groups are different (even irreconcilable), maintain intergroup anxiety and reinforce the boundary between the groups.

The call of the apostles for the people to choose seven men, whom they will put in charge of the business of daily distribution, was an attempt to change the social structure of the church leadership. It was aimed towards reducing group bias through re-categorization of social identities, which establishes a higher level of identity that is inclusive of both in-group and out-group. According to Gaertner et al. (1993), intergroup bias can be reduced by factors that transform members' perception of group boundaries from 'us' and 'them' to more inclusive 'we'. Thus, the new group identity in the leadership increased the attractiveness of former out-group members, as they are now among the 'we' within the super-ordinate group.

Finally, the apostle recognized that resolution of social identity conflict involves more than changing negative stereotypes and improving intergroup attitude. "Conflict resolution must go beyond change in perceptions, attitudes, (and contact), to the creation of enduring structures that institutionalized equity, autonomy and respect among different groups" (Fisher, 1994, p. 61). When there is a relative balance in the social and economic status of the people, there appear to be a reduction in the level of prejudice and conflict among the people.

Thus, the apostles addressed the seemingly problem of power imbalance and social injustice in the daily distribution. With a fair democratic system that ensured fairness, equity and justice in leadership structure and revenue allocation, peace was restored in the community, and growth and increase were inevitable. The equal-status system reduces social conflicts by restricting the range of meaningful social comparison available in the society. This hypothesis is a useful tool to account for some of the determinant of social stability and peaceful co-existence in multicultural society.

Implication of Acts of the Apostle 6:1-7 to the Problem of Ethnicity and National Integration in Nigeria

The early church like every multicultural society faced the challenges of social identity and intergroup relations. As with Nigerian state, the process of growth, development and expansion generated condition of cries of marginalization and intergroup conflict between the Hebrew and the Hellenists as the fruits of development processes were unevenly shared, which posed a threat to peace and unity of the community. However, the church had a proactive and pragmatic leadership, with zero tolerance for corruption, who responded promptly to the challenge group sentiment and supported by people who were willing to listen and accommodate one another with open mind and goodwill for the common good of the community.

Thus, one fundamental reason for the continuance of the challenge of ethnicity in Nigeria is pivotal to the nations' lack of true national leadership with character, vision and purpose. According to Achebe (1984:1),
The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with Nigeria land, climate, water, air, or anything else. The Nigeria problem is the unwillingness and inability of its leaders to arise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is hallmark of true leadership.

Nigeria has been unfortunate in leadership. According to Achebe (1983), if other countries are affected with natural disaster, Nigerian own disaster is leadership failure. From inception, Nigeria lacked leaders with strong moral character like the apostle, who have the ability to lead, inspire and motivate to rise against the challenges of ethnic and religious bias. Nigeria is plagued with primordial leaders with strong ethnic and religious sentiment and bias, which has contributed in no small way to undermine the quest for national integration.

Nigeria needs true nationalists with vision and character who can implement the prototypical solution of the leadership of the early church to the challenges of ethnicity in Nigeria. The leadership of the early church respondent to the challenges of group prejudice by calling the people together in a round table conference, where they discussed their differences and grievances and proffer solution to them. Not only that, the leadership upheld the opinion of the people as reach in the dialogue. Through the collaborative efforts of the leaders and the people, which is commendable and most appropriate method to obtaining satisfactory and long-term result, peace was restored to the community.

Thus, the backbones of ethnicity in Nigeria will not be weakened until the leaders are willing to call the various ethnic and religious groups to a national dialogue, where the people would collectively decide on the issue of oneness and peaceful co-existence, and consequently come up with a constitution on how they must be governed. The quest for national integration must begin with social and political consensus, which recognizes the multicultural characteristic of the Nigeria society, and the people's acceptance of co-existence, mutual tolerance, social justice as sine qua non for peace and development. It is only through collective willingness to accommodate, tolerate and develop a sense of respect, flexibility, inclusion and relatedness that we can produce the true spirit of oneness and unity in Nigerian multi-diversified polity.

Furthermore, related to the use of leadership is the challenge of social injustice, lack of fairness, and inequality. Nation is build by exemplary men and women in leadership but sustained by institution that promote as social justice, equality and fairness, which is the bedrock for good governance, social development, economic wellbeing of any society.

The leadership of the early church addressed the issue of marginalization and social injustice and inequity by addressing the issue of power in balance in the leadership structure of the church. Before now, the leadership of the church was demographically disproportionate comprising only of the Hebrew. However, with the complaint of the Hellenists, the apostles were willing to re-structure and expand the leadership herby to accommodate the marginalized community, and hence ensured justice, equity and fairness to all.

In the same vein, the leadership of Nigeria must sincerely address the issue of social injustice and inequality through restructuring, if true peace and reconciliation is to be achieved. In Nigeria, not only are many of the citizen deny their basic right, but there is also serious variations in the enjoyment of these rights across the nation. Social-economic inequalities across the nation fuels fear and suspicion, which keeps the nation divided. Consequently, the citizen is not interested to support the state, because they do not feel the society is adequately concerned about their welfare. Nkom cited in Okpeh (2004: 246) therefore noted:

The problem of national integration (...if you like intergroup relations...emphasis added) resolves around the issue of building a just democratic social order which gives every individual a sense of belonging, which guarantee each person a satisfactory level of participation and development and which ensure for a people a share of resources of society commensurate with descent acceptable living.

An integral application of justice and equality is the building of a common citizen status {beyond ethnic and religious identity}, which ensure a base line of social and economical status and equal opportunities for all. Instead of resorting to the primordial identity of ethnic origin (or state of origin) as a means of accessing national resources, a general citizenship model of identification, such as place of residence, should be put in place. This will create a civic structure of right that will unite people around shared right and goals. Nigeria therefore must strengthen its institution, policies and practice to reduce the predominance of ethnicity and religion in local, state, and national politics. Lasting peace and stability in Nigeria can only be achieved when solution are based on the rule of law or respect for human right of all Nigeria.

In addition, in the search for peace, fairness and social justice, the leadership of the church call for the nomination men of good reputation, full of the spirit and wisdom, who they we entrust the task of the distribution of common goods. Not minding that the Hellenists are in the minority, the Hebrews were willing to select from them men of skills and character, who they entrust with the administrative responsibility of the community.

Power should not only be in the hand of the ethnic majority or else we risk magnetization of the ethnic minority. The minority should collectively be given opportunities to be at the corridor of power. Election, admission, appointed of people into public office should be the basis of personal integrity and competence, and not on ethnic or religious identity. Status equality in social-political and economic structure will bring to a minimal decimal the cry of marginalization and inequity. This will enhance national integration and bring to an end current mutual mistrust that is sliding the foundation of the nation's existence.

The apostles showed commitment towards evolving a just and humane society, which is particularly illustrated by their acute sense of concern for the need of common man, their strong desire for promotion the principle of justice, equity, fairness, their high sense of responsibility and dedication to duty in the conduct of public affairs, and judicious use of public resources. The government of Nigeria must put meeting the need of the disadvantaged as a key objective of public policy. Such an approach can make possible a common experience of life by Nigerians living in different part of the country, and elicit their commitment to the national unity. Instead of resorting to the divisive politics of indigene against settlers as a means of accessing resources, a general

commitment to social citizenship will create a civic structure of right that will unite people around shared right and goals.

Conclusion

Ethnicity is one of the most social identity variables in Nigeria that exert profound influence in the socio-political environment of the nation. The problem of ethnicity in Nigeria is not a natural outcome of multi-ethnicity of Nigerian State but in the politicization of ethnic identity but her citizens, especially the leaders. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure harmonious intergroup relations and national integration in Nigerian, it is essential that intervention strategies are developed to tackle primordial identities prejudice and intergroup discrimination through an inclusive citizenship identity modality that recognizes, accommodate, and promotes the equality of all Nigerians, irrespective of ethnic origin, religious affiliation or place of residence. This can only be achieved through the willingness of the leadership to call for a national dialogue, where the people would collectively decide on the issue of oneness and peaceful co-existence, and consequently come up with a constitution on how they must be governed. With the collaborative effort of the leadership and the people's willingness to co-exist and accept one another with open mind and work for the common good of all, the challenge of ethnic and religious identity in intergroup relations will be brought to the barest minimal, if not to an end, and thus national development will be inevitable.

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