

## **Religion, Politics and Ethnicity: Challenges of Pluralism in Nigerian Development**

Omaka Kalu Ngele

### **Abstract**

The interdependence of Religion, Politics and Ethnicity as social dynamics in fostering the development of a nation has become quite a concern across the globe. Nigeria is a highly heterogeneous nation with diversity in terms of multi-tribal, cultural, religious and political sphere. It is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria as a nation had been kept below the level of development expected of her by the indices of a pluralistic state mentioned above. Nigerian heterogeneous nature with reference to Religion, politics and ethnic pluralism had besieged Nigeria and kept her running round the vicious circle in terms of sustainable development. The emphasis on this paper is a clarion call for the entire citizenry to see this diversity from positive dimension. This paper is aimed at verifying the extent at which religion, politics and ethnicity had dealt devastating blow on Nigerian sustainable development and proffer a way forward towards harnessing our pluralistic indices as a nation for national development.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria emerged as a nation in 1914 when Sir Frederick Lord Lugard brought together what was then the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria under a single administrative system. Prior to this date, the political entity called Nigeria today was administered in separate smaller units: the Northern Nigeria, the colony of Lagos and the Southern Nigeria (Ademoyega: 1981:2).

Nigeria covers an area of about 924sq Km with three major ethnic groups the Hausa/Fulani, the Ibos and the Yorubas and about three hundred others (Bamgbose; 2004:119). The British brought these groups together for administrative convenience not minding their differences in Culture, Religion and Politics. Today, Nigeria's political problems argued major Ademoyega (1981:3) "Sprang from the carefree manner in which the British took over, administered and abandoned the government and people of Nigeria".

When the British came to Nigeria as an imperial nation to take over ruler ship of the country, they met the people of the South free, only observing and regulating their own monarchs and institutions. In the North, they met the Fulani in the process of establishing their ruler ship over other ethnic minorities. In order to administer Nigeria to their own advantage, the British introduced the indirect rule system of government, thereby rubberstamping the political state of the ethnic nationalities of Nigeria. This according to Bamgbose (2004:120) was one evil that outlived British administration.

The three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria prior to colonial rule had distinct forms of government, the feudalistic Oligarchy in the North, the centralized monarchical democracy in the West among Yoruba and the decentralized democracy in the East among Ibos. From the religions perspective, the Hausas were pagans before they were conquered by the Fulanis who subsequently introduced Islam. The Emir doubles as both political and religious head of his people. The Yorubas and the Ibos practiced traditional religion before Christianity was introduced among them.

The wake of early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth and rise of Pan-African movement- a Universal Negro Association with the aim of liberation Africa from alien rule. Nationalist leaders emerged from different nations of Africa including Nigeria.

Prior to independence, three power blocs were established Kaduna in the North where Sir Ahamdu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto emerged as leader, Ibadan in the West where Obafemi Awolowo, a renowned lawyer, was the leader, Enugu in the East where Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, an accomplished journalist was the leader. This was the pattern that was the prelude to the independence of Nigeria.

With the calling forth of regional representative to the constitutional conferences that brought independence, the political leadership of the country was born and nurtured along ethnic lines. That today we still talk

about under developed Nigeria is as a result the challenges posed by the indices of pluralism. This paper shall attempt to highlight these challenges of pluralism and how they have contributed to the underdevelopment of Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Analysis of Terms**

These operational terms, Politics, Religion, Ethnicity and pluralism have been defined for the purpose of clarity.

### **Religion**

The definition of Religion as a social Phenomenon had been considered a difficult job in that no single definition suffices for us. This is because Religion has several segments from which people approach it. Religion as the oldest discipline in human society is the most difficult world to define. This is based on the fact that many people have different perspectives according to their disciplines. The researcher tended to give some definition on religion and tailored the definition to the subject matter in order to achieve the purpose of this work.

According to Glenn M. Vernon, a sociologist (1962:55), he defined it as:

... that part of culture composed of share beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural and the sacred and man's relationship thereto, but which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as to what is good (in harmony with or approved by the supernatural) and what is bad (contrary to out of harmony with the Supernatural).

Glenn defined religion based on the operational and interactive element of the society. He also took recognition of the group emotional response to the Supernatural and the sacred. It also involves individual participation in a group.

Another Sociologist M. J. Yinger in a book entitled the Scientific Study of Religion (1970:7) defined religion:

...as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human association...

Yinger stated that men need some absolute values to enable them live harmoniously in this problematic world of suffering. He emphasized that science had been unable to solve human problems which only religion can supply meaning in moments of serious crises and uncertainties.

A theological definition of Religion was given by Ekwunife (1992:1) in his book Politics and Religious Intolerance as, man's awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a transcendent Being-the Wholly Order, expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethnical or moral behaviour. Here, the Clergy recognized or appreciated man's knowledge of a higher Being more than him which is the origin of faith in religion. Experience has shown that every religion in relation to politics functions as a catalyst to man's ultimate problems.

### **Politics**

Hornby (2000:657) defined Politics as "*The Science and Art of Government*". It is the Science dealing with terms, organization and administration of State or part of one and with the regulation of its relation with other State. Politics is one of the oldest social sciences, in fact, second to religion. The world was derived from two Greek words, 'Polis' meaning 'City State' or 'Politics meaning 'a free born'. According to a Greek Philosopher Aristotle who coined these words, in Markle (1967:32) he saw man as a political animal. He stated the three guiding principles to politics, thus:

1. It involve a state
2. It requires entering into relationship with other people as a way of satisfying man's unlimited wants.
3. It involves rival groups as to make it competitive.

Leshe (1970:6) defined it as "...a sphere of purposeful behaviour through which we seek to live better than we do now, while Markle (1967:12) defined it from two perspectives. Positively he said, "Politics is a noble

quest for good order and justice” while negatively he said, “Politics is a selfish grab for power glory and riches.”

As a science or art of governing through legitimized government which means indispensable social organization established in every society for the purpose of formerly enacting, codifying and enforcing the laws and values of a particular society. Glenn M. Vernon (1962:52) asserts that: Government is unique among social institutions in that it typically has society compliance with its laws. According to Uju (1987:6) Government operates on three levels, with respect to Nigeria. These include:

1. **The Executive Arm.** This is the arm that implements policies made by the Legislatures: The Army, the Police, the Prisons and the Civil Service are here.
2. **The Legislative Arm:** This organ is responsible for making laws in the land. These include the National Assembly and various state House of Assembly.
3. **The Judiciary:** This organ of government has the sole responsibility of interpreting laws.

### **Ethnicity**

A definition of ethnicity the researcher considered more appropriate in the context of this paper is that which was propounded by Chinua Achebe. According to Achebe(1983:8) “Ethnicity is discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth” In Nigeria the word ethnicity and tribalism are used interchangeably.

### **Pluralism**

The term pluralism has come to stay and had gained prominence in social sciences. It is a term that tended to replace dualism in sociological discourse. Literarily, pluralism derives from the word ‘plural’ meaning more than one (Ngele,2008:44). Hornby(2000:88) sees pluralism as depicting the existence of one society of a number of groups that belong to different races of different political or religious belief. Kalu (2000:133) threw more light on indices of a pluralistic society when he alluded to the fact that pluralism has many dimensions viz: the sociological level, the cultural values, so that the consistent part of the nation-state may have competing visions about life and the good of the nation. The

heterogeneous nature of Nigeria in terms of diverse Religious, ethnic and political affinity had made her a veritable pluralistic society.

### **The Challenge of Politics in National Development**

Politically, Nigeria did not have a strong institution that could enable the political system to face challenge of governance in a systematic way. The success of democratic experiment in a country can be attributed to a political party that has a strong mass support and leaders that have interest of the nation at heart. Nigeria had political parties built along religions and leaders that were naïve and selfish (Achebe: 1964:13).

In the 1964 elections the two main alliances for the election were Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) comprising the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and its client parties NNDP, NDC, MWDF, the other alliance was the United Progress Grand Alliance (UPGA) formed by the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) and Action Group (AG), NEPU and UMBC.

In spite of the national cross regional appearances of the alliances, the two camps presented a North and South constellation of forces. The mainstay of the NNA was NPC whose motive was the consolidation of Northern hegemony. The UPGA on the other hand was a Southern coalition whose primary objective was to halt hegemony. These forces have produced *Awoists*, *Zikists* and *Sardaunas* and the trend continues today.

The other feature that the party politics exhibited and which affected the smooth functioning of democracy was the increasing use of violence. The parties employed violent tactics which sometimes involved the physical elimination of opposition candidates. This was well seen during the 1964 elections when opposition candidates were harassed, prevented from campaigning and even the filling of nomination papers was made impossible (Osaghae 1998:45). Electoral violence has been a culture par excellence from the post- independence era to the present day new democratic experience, which commenced with President Obasanjo administration 1999 till the present administration of Alhaji Umaru Musa Ya'adua.

Apart from using violence, there is also an absence of existence of free and fair electoral body. All the electoral umpire set up by the leadership of this nation had not been able to conduct a free and fair election. Two factors could be said to be responsible for this ineptitude: firstly the appointment of Electoral commission chairman had been the

prerogative of the President. This therefore lends credence to the charade Nigeria has had all this years, as he (the president) who pays the piper (NEC/FEDECO/NECON/INEC Chairman) detects the tune. Secondly, ethnicity factor is another cog in the wheel of progress in terms of the nation achieving a free and fair election where the electorates exercise their constitutional right through the ballot. During the first Republic, it was brought out that the members of the Electoral Commission regarded themselves as representatives of their regions whose duties were primarily to defend and protect regional interests (Eke, Dele Cole and Olasanya: 1969:116). This was the earliest foundation to Nigerian ethnic oriented politics that had like an ill wind blow the nation no good.

### **The Challenge of Ethnicity in Nigerian Development**

Socially one finds heterogeneity prevailing for there are more than 250 ethnic groups that exist in Nigeria. Out of these, the predominant ones are the Hausa-Fulani, Ibos and the Yorubas. Each of these dominates a specific region of the country. The Hausa-Fulani dominates the northern parts, the Ibos dominate the Eastern part and the Yorubas inhabit the Western part. Among these three predominant groups, as well as the minorities hostilities have been rife as skirmishes of war are very much obvious. The roots of this hostility can be traced back to the colonial period when the British pursued the policy of divide and rule (Ademoyega, 1981:3). Commenting on this, Achebe (1983:5) says:

...Nigeria was called a mere geographical expression not only by the British who had an interest in keeping it so, but even by our nationalists when it suited them to retreat into tribe to check their more successful rivals from other parts of the country. Nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more than the chequered fortune of tribe in her vocabulary. At our independence in 1960 our national anthem which is our Hymn of deliverance from British colonial bondage has these lines: "Though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand".

This was in the opinion of Achebe (1983:7) “a most ominous beginning” and not surprisingly, this brotherhood lasted only six years. And ever since then, a Nigerian child seeking admission into a federal school; a student wishing to enter a university; a graduate seeking employment in the public service; a businessmen tendering for contract will fill a form which requires him to confess his tribe.

### **Challenge of Religion in National Development**

When the nation Nigeria was born, there existed different regions dominated by ethnic groups following a different religion of a type. In its simplest form, while the Northern Nigerians are predominately Hausa/Fulani and Muslims, the Southern Nigerians are largely Yoruba/Ibos and Christian. Nigerian colonial master sowed seeds of discord between Christianity and Islam-the two major religious bodies that held sway in the socio-political scene of her national life. Kalu (2000) painted a true picture of the scenario created by British imperialism which laid the foundation to suspicion and rivalry among the ethnic nationalities and religious groups in Nigeria when he posited:

Meanwhile a contrary wind blew in the north as the root of Islamic fundamentalism was sowed. This veritable religions and political challenge to Christianity was nursed in the early days of independence. The conflict between Christianity and Islam was at first an aspect of regional rivalry and development.

This ethno-religious plurality has not been for the best interests of Nigeria as it has been the basis for many conflicts, Nigeria as a nation-state has “witnessed the most perturbing and unprecedented upsurge of ...religious disturbance...” (Anugwom and Oji: 2003:143). Religious riot has remained a constant threat to peace in Nigeria and has continued to threaten the continued coexistence and habitation of the different ethnic nationalities that make up the country. One of the major religious crises ever witnessed in Nigeria on a large disturbing scale is the *Maitasine* religious riot which took place in Kano in 1980 (Okwueze: 2003:143), in Jimets Yola in 1984, in Gombe, former Bauchi State in 1985. These were followed by religious disturbances in Illorin in 1986, in Bauchi town in 1991, Kano (1991), Zango-Kataf (1992) and recently in 2000 the *Sharia*

riots in the Northern states of Zanzara, Kaduna, Kano and the reprisal attack in the East. For the first time in the history of Nigeria's religions riots occurred in Aba, Umuahia and Owerri (Anugwom and Oji: 2003:9) and Uyo in Akwa Ibom State.

Religion in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fuelling ethnic consciousness, and solidarity, acquisition of political power and socio-economic gains, massive killings and the wanton destruction of lives and vandalising of property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions. This is traced to the acrimony between, the two dominant religions- Islam and Christianity which had often resulted in the struggle for power and supremacy, bitter feud and wanton destruction of life and property. This religious madness had like a cataclysmic vortex devastated the ground for sustainable socio-economic development of Nigerian.

### **Building A New Nigeria: The Way Forward**

#### **Religion and Peace Building: Pathway to Sustainable Development in Nigerian**

Every Religion preaches peace-peace with others, and peace with God (Okwueze 2003:98) Religion is often regarded as "a living thing" by scholars (Ilogu 1985:6) Any living thing is always very much interested in what is happening in the environment. Any living religion must therefore not only make pronouncement on current human and social problems but must provide solutions as well.

We shall here examine the roles played by the church in Nigeria in the pursuit of peace as an example of what religion has done and is doing to bringing out peace. When in July 6, 1967, a revolutionary gunshot was heard, beyond public pronouncement in condemnation of the civil war, the church made concerted efforts to bring succour to the embattled Biafrans.

The church embarked upon campaigns of mediation. She made several trips abroad to appeal to international humanitarian agencies to come to the rescues of the war-torn Biafrans. Consequently food items, clothing's and drugs were donated in large quantity by WCC, UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO, RED CROSS SOCIETY.

One of the ways through which Christianity and other world religions could help in securing world peace even the peace of the Nigeria is by appealing to the conscience of the people through her ethical teachings found in the Holy Scriptures. Conscience is seen as a practical

judgment concerning the morality of a concluded action. Hence conscience is judge of guide, “the science of moral conduct” (Agogurin 1986:2). We therefore appeal to religious leaders most especially Islamic religion and Christians to embark upon dialogue and embrace peace which has been the traditional role of every religion.

On the other hand Islamic Religion protagonist must teach adherents of Islam that Islam is a religion of Peace and that this tenet should not only be in theory but should be practicalized. It is a high sense of irony for Muslims to come out of their *Jumat* Friday Prayer and shout songs of war, there and then what follows would be destruction of lives and properties Christians and other perceived ‘infidels’. Northern Political elites should not use protagonist of Islam for political thuggery. This had been identified as one of the reasons for religious riots in Nigeria. Inter religious or faith dialogue as well as interaction between the different religious groups could go along way to reduce the necessary frictions and bigotry arising from misunderstanding of the tenets of the other religious groups.

### **The Quest For Formidable Political Structure**

In a democracy the existence of political party is very essential owing to the important role played by them. They are essential instrument for representing political constituencies and interests, aggregating demands and preferences, reuniting and socializing new candidates for office, organize the electoral competition for power, crafting policy alternative, setting the policy making agenda, forming effective governments and integrating groups and individuals into the democratic process.

To play these roles effectively what is needed is a strong mass base, which by extending its support helps the party to legitimize its existence. This is made possible when the party’s has place in a slow and systematic way and when it has the presence of leaders. This according to Achebe (1983:13) is lacking in Nigeria.

The national movement that was spearheaded by the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) was torn apart along tribal lines. The split in the rank and file of the movement doomed not only the chances of a unified force against imperialism but also created ground for the emergence of issues of ethnicity and produced *Zikists*, *Awoist* and *Sardaunas* as leaders instead of Nigerian. In a nut shell Nigerian political structure has over the years been fraught with number of problems stemming from about three decades of military gerontocracy .In their search for power through the barrel of gun the military destroyed the psyche of Nigerian politics. Ethno-religious

rivalry strived during the successive military regimes than civilian era. *Hausa-fulani* oligarchy and northern hegemonic politics characterized Nigerian political culture until recent time when there was devolution of power to a southerner.

No Government from the first republic has been able to establish a transparent political culture that is sustainable as a result of these indices pluralism vis religion, politics and ethnicity which had been a veritable vehicle for governance. Successive Nigerian Government whether civilian or military from the first republic till the present People Democratic Party (PDP) led Nigerian government had not found it necessary to put in place a political culture that would enable the people elect their leaders democratically. President Yar'Adua promised to give Nigerians electoral reforms as part of his seven-point agenda. It should be noted that his disposition on Justice Uwais report with special emphasis on his recommendation that would remove from the President the prerogative to choose electoral commission Chairman reveals that President Yar'Adua is not serious with his slogan on electoral reform.

### **Ethnic Nationality and the Quest for National Unity**

Nigeria is a conglomerate nicknamed by Flora Shaw, the girl Friend of Luggard, Nigeria's erstwhile imperial Master during the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate of Nigeria. By the divine design, the ethnic nationalities within the Six recognized geo-political zones had found themselves together. Our cultural, tribal, religion and political diversity notwithstanding, we should see ourselves as brothers. Let us not be too quick to forget our former National Anthem "... *though tribes and tongues may differ in brotherhood we stand*"

Nigeria ethnic nationalities should resolve their indifference and come together and relate peacefully than ever. The factor of marriage, living together wherever one finds him/herself in the country is a good case in point. We should appreciate what is in other tribes' culture not found in ours. The Nigerian National interest and unity must be supreme whenever there is a need. Lopsided appointment into offices, as a result of one's, religion and political affinity must be stopped. Our federal character stipulation in the constitution under one strong federalism must be respected in all ramifications of our political economic and socio-cultural life. Only when these are put into consideration shall we harness the potentials in our Religion, Politics, and Ethnic life to develop our nation.

## Recommendation

Thus far, we have shown the Nigerian experience of the challenges of pluralism to development. Politics, Religion and Ethnicity have placed Nigeria on the path of underdeveloped countries. The recommendations we make can help Nigeria utilize these three social dynamic factors to her advantage:

1. The word tribe or state of origin should be expunged from our vocabulary and should not be used in matters of national interest such as appointment into offices, employment, and giving other privileges to Nigeria citizens.
2. There is the need to address the leadership crisis. Attempt should be made to discourage the idea of choosing a leader because of his ethnic group, religion and political affinity. Whoever would serve to the best interest and *sonum bonum* (general good) of Nigerians should be given opportunity to serve Nigeria especially at the highest seat-president irrespective of his or her tribe, religion or political affinity.
3. Religious leaders should give proper orientation to their followers and should emphasize that religion pursues peace and not violence.
4. The emphasis on the political parties and ethnicity or religion in dealing with Nigerians is not to the best interest of the Nigerians.
5. The leadership needs to undertake steps that would provide solution to socio-economic problems like poverty, unemployment. Power imbalance, inequitable distribution of resources, and The Niger Delta quest for justice in her God-given mineral resources.
6. Nigeria ethnic Nationalities should resolve their bitterness as well as sordid past and embrace themselves in love and live in harmony having fought together for a strong, indivisible and United State of Nigeria.
7. Nigerians should see their pluralism in terms of diverse religion, political and ethnic affinities as a blessing that would make her a multi-coloured nation with diverse potentialities to give leadership to Africa, the third world and the globe at large.
8. The leadership of Nigeria headed by Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'dua should as a matter of fairness keep to their electoral promise by putting in place electoral reforms that would enable Nigerians have free and election that had eluded her over the decades. The president Would do well if he assents to, among others the recommendation of Justice Uwais - led electoral reform commission on the removal of the prerogative as well as the power to appoint the chairman of electoral commission from the president of Nigeria.

## Conclusion

The process of development in Nigeria has faced challenges from Politics, Religion and Ethnicity. These social dynamics have weakened and hampered the development of institutions necessary for building a nation. Even in situations where the leadership as well as institutions responded by initiating some pro active measures, such measures have always been aimed at promoting ethnic, religious and political interest of favoured region or clique and not the general or national interests of Nigerians. This is sequel to the hormone of Religious bigotry, ethnic sentiment and political disorientation that flows through our veins. The salient suggestions proffered in this work would be a formidable panacea to our ailing underdevelopment situation resulting from the challenges of religion, politics and ethnicity pulsating our national psyche as a nation.

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