

The Issue and Question of Ethnic Politics and Religious Dichotomy as Responsible for Nigerian Current Democratic Quagmires

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Abstract

This paper which is critical in nature, rationally examines the issue and question of ethnic politics and religious dichotomy in Nigeria. The idea behind this paper was driven, given the present challenges of ethnic and religious factors, which as identified, are barriers militating against the desired quest for an improved and viable democracy in Nigeria. The study discovered that the politics of ethnicity and religious divides within the Nigerian polity has been an aged long tradition. Although, not constitutionally backed, it has been argued by many Nigerians and opinion moulders that political parties in Nigeria should choose/select their presidential candidates for periodic general elections in consideration of these phenomena. By towering this way, governances in Nigeria are also patterned and guided along ethnic and religious embryo. Political parties in Nigeria therefore, are most often created along ethnic lines and religious affiliations. Despite the calls for national cohesion and true democracy by plethora of Nigerians, the quest towards this realization remains lacking, difficult, and most often if not seemly appear to be impossible to attain. The study argues that ethnic politics and religious dichotomy, amongst other factors are responsible for Nigerian democratic quagmires. This paper therefore concludes that the consideration of democratic arrangement along ethnic and religious bias is not a trajectory for national cohesion and devolution of power in Nigeria and as such should be redefined in order to achieve a better democratic experience.

Keywords: Democracy, Dichotomy, Ethnicity, Nigeria, Politics, Quagmires, Religion.

Introduction

The question of ethnic politics and religious dichotomy, amongst others, are one of the several phenomena hindering the desired to having democratic success in Nigeria. Nigeria, structurally and politically, seems to be formed and patterned on ethnic and religious differences. That being the case, in many parts of the world today, ethnicity and religion is essential part of people's social-cultural environment. These phenomena are part of the social determinants that have shaped notable countries towards the path to democratic progress and advancement. Sadly, on the contrary, here in Nigeria, ethnicity and religion have only thus played destructive, instead of constructive role in the development of democracy. This calls for sober and critical reflections.

This paper therefore, is intended to examine the extent to which the practice of ethnicity and religious dichotomy are responsible for the present Nigeria's democratic quagmires. It also aimed at surveying how the politics of ethnicity and religious discrimination have continuously hindered the quest for a realistic democratic development in Nigeria. The paper shall be engaging through a critical approach of analysis by x-raying historically how the effects of these phenomena militate against the desired for democratic dividends in Nigeria. To undertake this task, it is imperative to begin with conceptual clarifications of basic concepts. What then is ethnicity?

The Concept of Ethnicity Defined

Several scholars have offered variegated definitions into the meaning of the term "ethnicity", however, it is not the intention of this paper to cajole its readers with all the existing definitions of the concept but to look at it as it pertains to this particular research. Towards its clarification bid, it is imperative to situate that the concept of "ethnicity" and "tribalism" has often and always been a confused matter. These two terms are used in juxtaposed manner or used synonymously by some scholars. It is worrisome that many scholars use the two concepts as though they carry the some meaning and believe they are strongly inseparable. However, according to Uwaifo, "it is pertinent to note that there is a difference between ethnicity and tribalism even though the difference is water-tight." In his definition of the term "ethnicity", Nnoli (1978:5) for instance avers that ethnicity is a "social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of the largest possible competing communal groups (ethnic groups) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system."

According to Okemiri (2000), ethnicity is defined to mean "the consciousness of somebody, relative to the norms and the values of his or her culture, of which other peoples socio-cultural background may be deemed to be inferior". Ilechukwu noted that ethnicity is likened to a hydra-headed monster which breeds social chaos, and has had a pervasive influence on every aspect of Nigerian life and which calls for a multifaceted attack from all and sundry to combat it. Offiong (2001) submitted that ethnicity is a situation whereby people of a given territory shared a common belief, religion, culture, language, dressing, historical background,

which may be different from others. Offiong specifically tells us that; “If we accept the expressions of ethnic, religious and cultural preferences are a natural phenomenon and consistent with expression of individual liberty, then we realize that attempts to suppress such preferences are futile and cannot lead to peaceful coexistence” (30). Instead, we need to better understand the positive roles that ethnicity and other characteristics with which individuals strongly identify with can play in the organization of societies. A country harboring many ethnic groups as Nigeria is bound to have some level of ethnicity.

Towards a Clarification of the Concept of Religion

The concept of religion is one of the academic terms that have never enjoyed consensus definition/clarification. Even among various religious groups, studies have shown that each religious scholar differs on the meaning of the term. This informs why there are several interpretations of the term. Capturing this expression, Apuwabi, (2018) noted that; “A given religion is defined by specific elements of community of believers” (321). These ebullient scholar (Apuwabi) went further to define religion as “the set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relations between human being and sacred or divinity” (321). Urhiofe and Nwaokocha similarly agreed with this assertion as they state thus; “an outright definition of religion is almost an impossibility. Not just because it confuses issues but also because for the purposes our study, it will blurr and confound the concept of religion as it will make it impossible for the reader to have a proper grasp of the issues at hand when religion is mentioned” (2002:139). Urhiofe and Nwaokocha also buttressed that the term; “religion is a much-abused word as it has been used to apply to so many things that claim to be religious” (139). Williams James (1902) however, defines religion as; “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.”

More appealing and peculiar to this study, religion can be seen as a system of social unity commonly understood as a group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen or imaginary being, or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth, and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions, and rituals associated with such belief or system of thought. It is a structure within which specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued; usually among a community of like-minded believers. Religion can also be understood as that which came to give answer to emotional tension created by puzzling and mystifying environment. This points to the belief and argument that religion and its role is not limited to spirituality but also applies to the physical problems and challenges of mankind. Hence, Ugwu (1999) argues that, “Religion...seems likely to remain-an inevitable part of human life”. Accordingly therefore, religion is a means of tackling the problems of evil and suffering, (spiritual and physical) as well as the hostility of mankind. It is when religion is seen as useful to man; be it spiritual or physical, that it can then make meaning when it is applied even to Nigerian political environment.

Background Knowledge to Ethnic Politics and Religious Dichotomy in Nigeria

The present country called 'Nigeria' is claimed to be a Federal State, but illogically, deliberately arranged and patterned along ethnic and religious divide. This political construct, as evidenced in history of Nigeria's politics, dates back to its pre-independence days. These two phenomena have continued to be the basis upon which Nigerian politics is determined. In agreement with this assertion, Udoidem in his observation argues that since the creation of the present Nigerian State which was selfishly conceived and brought to limelight in an unholy way by the British imperialist, Nigerian unity only exists on ethnic and religious bigotries. He strongly affirms his position and argument that the ideology upon which Nigeria was contracted was based on deception and deliberate disregard for genuine unity of all parties involved. On this note, Udoidem (2004) declares:

As a country, Nigeria does not have a common ancestral or collective memory. Such a common or collective memory is necessary and essential for national identity and nationalism. This lack of common collective memory is what is responsible for the absence of patriotism. This is why people living in Nigeria would often say I am Yoruba before I am a Nigerian, I am Igbo before I am a Nigerian, I am Hausa before I am a Nigerian. There is no common memory (129).

Udoidem (2004) goes on to write that:

Because of this lack of political ethos or common political memory, the Northerners lapse into their religious memory and use it as the organizing principle for the achievement of their religio-political vision, while the Southerners lapse into their ethnic memory which occludes their national vision and instead throw them into internecine intra and inter-ethnic and tribal conflicts as it currently experienced in most of the oil belt zones of Nigeria. Everybody is thinking ethnic. No matter how long you live in Lagos as an Igbo man you can never be said to be a citizen (129).

As evident from the above, the amalgamation of the various ethnic groups into a single territory called "Nigeria" sowed the seed of disintegration, hatred, acrimony and lack of common ethos among the various ethnic nationalities. No wonder one can say Nigeria is united in diversity such that all efforts at bringing them together amid their diverse cultures, beliefs and religions differences have remained a difficult if not utopia challenge. Scholars like Post and Vickers (1973) would posit that; "From its inception as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial

crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability and economic transformation” (65). Soyinka (1997) had similar submission as highlighted thus; “The high point of the crisis seems to have been the civil war in the late 1960s, which ensued shortly after independence in 1960. However, rather than abate, conflicts have become more or less pervasive and intense in the post-civil war period, and disintegration continues to be contemplated by aggrieved segments of society as one of the possible ways of resolving the 'National Question'. The point to note here is that the issue of ethnic politics in Nigeria and the practice of governance in accordance to religious divides have been an age long practice in the Nigerian politics.

This is further agreed upon when Uwaifo also maintained that; “The origin of ethnicity in Nigeria is traceable to the nation’s colonial experience, particularly the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914.” According to Osadolor (1998), the act of amalgamation was not a federal idea. Lugard did not conceive a federal state for Nigeria. In the statement of the colonial office when Lugard submitted his proposals on 9 May, 1913, it was stated that ‘Sir Lugard’s proposals contemplate a state which is impossible to classify’ (Osadolor, 1998). This is because the colonial masters felt it was grossly impossible to administer such a state that was large and mixed with diverse ethnic groups. So for the purposes of administrative convenience, in order to control such people, therefore, the British colonial master hurriedly came up with amalgamation of the different ethnic nationalities without considering the imminent and undeniable difference in culture, religion, character and socio political traditions of these ethnic grouping. Uwaifo further identified that; “In the pre-colonial era and since the independence of Nigeria, ethnicity played and still playing manifest and latent roles in the body politics of Nigeria.”

In their research, Eghosa and Rotimi similarly submitted thus; “Like ethno-religious violence, recent inter-ethnic clashes in Nigeria have also been particularly combustible especially when they have involved relatively large groups like the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Urhobo or Ijaw” (19). These ebullient scholars Eghosa and Rotimi further adumbrated *inter alia*:

The major cases of inter-ethnic violence in Nigeria since the late eighties have included the Tiv-Jukun conflicts in Taraba and Benue states, the three-cornered Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri clashes in Warri, Delta state, the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba clashes in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Kano states, and the recurrent clashes between Hausa-Fulani and Igbo groups in Kano state, which have acquired an ethno-religious complexion since the Hausa-Fulani are Muslims and the Igbos are mainly Christians (19).

While the Tiv-Jukun, Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri, and Hausa/Fulani-Igbo, Eghosa and Rotimi noted “clashes are long-running conflicts that have erupted periodically during the eighties up until the present moment, the Hausa/Fulani-Yoruba clashes took place mainly in 1999-2000 in the

wake of the transition from northern-dominated military rule to a Yoruba-led civilian administration” (19-20).

Democratic Governance and the Challenges of Ethnic-Religious Politics in Nigeria

A careful look at the relationship between politics, ethnicity and religion in Nigeria, one could authoritatively confirm that ethnicity and religious dichotomies have continued to play setback roles in the determination of the day to day formulation of policies and decisions. It is unfortunate, in Nigeria, instead of religious leaders to bring about national integration and make supportive role towards the advancement of democracy, the case is a reversed. As Matthew Hassan Kukah (2007) would argue that “one of the commonest accusations which the clergy face today is that we are leaving our religious duties and poking our noses into the fire of politics”(3). What this means is that religious leaders are supposed to stay far away from political participations. However, Kukah would insist that those who made such assertion do not seem to understand the inseparability of religion from the society. Kukah recognizes that religion plays essential roles in governance. He also argues that the reason Nigeria in particular, and Africa, at large seems to be facing what might be termed as religious chauvinism lies in the fact that the main political participators (actors) have failed to make positive impact on the lives of the people. Kukah (2007) captures this argument thus: “in Africa, the situation has become rather precarious as the failure of statecraft and the inability of leaders to institutionalize fundamental changes has given rise to more serious problems of ethnicity and religious bigotry” (2). Kukah (2007) goes on to write:

Most of us in the non-Muslim community, especially in Nigeria, are still unable to address our minds very seriously to the real role of religion, tribalism, ethnicity, culture, etc, in politics. Despite the ubiquity of these categories of identity formation, we still refuse to confront them. We rather engage them negatively and dismissively wave them away by saying: Religion and politics do not mix, tribalism is killing African politics, ethnicity is the main obstacle to development and no place in a modern or modernizing state. We must strip ourselves culturally naked before we can worship on the altar of the new gods of democracy and globalization (152-153).

In Nigeria, one often hears the argument that politics and religion should be separated and kept on a distinct polemics. The most worrisome is that there appears to be some political conflicts in Nigeria which are said to be caused either by religious divide or ethnic bigotry. While there are several types of religious practices in the country today, it is however to be noted that the two major religions are Christianity and Islamic religions. While these two religions continue to be at each other’s throat (lock-ahead), the political class has continued to imbibe the culture of marrying the two warring religions into a united nationalism through the doctrine of the joint

tickets of elective positions, especially within the presidential contest. On the contrary, there are also indications that most of our political leaders sponsored religious and ethnics divide among the various ethnic groups prior, during and even after electioneering period. Nigeria has over the years suffered from many religious crises. This, no doubt, has done great disservice to the Nigerian political development. It is hard to believe that the tickets for the presidential position have always been a joint ticket between either a Christian and a Moslem or a Moslem and a Christian.

For instance, as the country returned to democracy in 1999, the ticket for the office of the President and Vice-President has been patterned in this religious mentality. From 1999-2007, it was a joint ticket between President Olusengun Obasanjo and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. Obasanjo a Christian was joined with Atiku of the Moslem faith. Again from 2007 to 2011, Nigeria witnessed a joint ticket between Umaru Musa Yar' Adua (late) and Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. The President Yar Adua's led government was of a Moslem background while Goodluck, the Vice, a Christian. In the same spirit, when Yar' Adua died, and Goodluck of the Christian background took over and was sworn in, the position for the vice was replaced with a Northern Moslem and this continued into their election in 2011 general elections. This time, it was another joint ticket between Goodluck and Alhaji Architect Namadi Sambo. In the same arrangement, in 2015, which saw the emergence of President Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) at the polls, it was A Muslims/Christian ticket; where the Vice President in person of Prof. Yemi Osinbanjo of the Southern Christian was on a joint ticket with Buhari of the Northern Muslims. Thus, from 1999 2011 to 2019, the major political parties have always filed in their candidates based on ethnic and religious clothing.

The joint tickets were that of the Muslims/Christians or Christian-Moslem dichotomy. This was/is another evident of the politics of religious-based arrangement. However, in 2023 Presidential election, there appears to be a new turning point in the Nigeria Fourth Republic, as the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), as a political party filed candidates for President and Vice President, respectively from the same faith background (Islam). While the assumed traditional Muslim/Christian Ticket was violated, the ideology of Northern/Southern arranged was still respected and sustained. During this period, there was much pandemonium and panic of fear of religious war in the Nigerian politics. Presidential Candidates from other political parties like Alh. Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Mr. Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) etc, who saw the structural arrangement of Senators Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima of same faith as a violation and a deviation from the assumed original political agreement and arrangement in Nigeria. There was tension everywhere; Churches were turned into grounds for political campaign by most of these presidential candidates, especially Obi who went about campaigning on religious sentiment, instead of issue-based campaigns. With the victory of Bola Tinubu/Shettima- of the same faith, history was for the second time repeated. This was a replayed of what took place in 1993 when Chief MKO Abiola of the Moslem background West also picked Babagana Kingibe from the North as his running mate. Though, that election was later annulled by the military, it was however, widely speculated to be one of the freest elections ever conducted in Nigerian history. It is

ironical that in spite of this political arrangement in consideration of ethnic and religious dichotomies, Nigeria has not fare well, democratically and politically as a nation. The country has not been able to get it right. Democracy in the country remains elusive. Thus, in the next phase, a looked at its effect becomes expedient.

Implication of Ethnic Politics and Religious Dichotomy on Nigerian Quest for Democracy

In Nigeria's democracy of today, one of the clarion calls has been the quest for powers rotation amongst the major ethnic and religious groups that constitute and spread across the length and breadth of the entire federation. It was upon this that, according to Kpodee (2023); "the Nigerian leaders in the early time tried to arrange the political system of the country in order to correct the deliberate imbalance, injustice, and the seeds of discord that were already planted amongst the people by the colonial masters. Political philosophers and one of the founding leaders of the Nigerian past politics like Nnamdi Azikiwe represented this class" (143). Kpodee continues; "Azikiwe's call for nationalism was, no doubt, a call for the consciousness of oneness and unity of purpose" (143). Kpodee further lamented that; "It is ironical and quite sad that this call by the founding fathers of the country are lacking in the Nigerian current democratic experience. The desired achievement for national unity and the call for power rotation will remain elusive if democracy as a system of government is not fully developed in principles and practices" (143).

Decrying against the wobbling democratic experience in Nigeria, Amieye-Ofori (2009:8) similarly noted that; "power has for too long resided with the wrong set of leaders. Their wrongheaded approach to governance, as could be discerned from the selfish policies they have initiated and implemented over the years, has been anything but patriotic." Many scholars have argued that the deliberate maintenance of a lop-sided federation, with a huge northern region that is greater in size and supposedly in population than the other regions put together was a sure recipe for political instability. The above demonstrates that decision and policy formulations in the National Assemblies suffers set back due to the present Northerners Representatives over the other Regions. Amieye-Ofori's (2009) further explicates on Nigerian democracy when he submits that "what was originally designed to be an ideal society providing equal opportunities for all eventually became a closed society in which might is considered right. This is akin to the story of Nigeria" (77). Similar thought is buttressed by O.B. Osadolor. While expressing his feelings on the Nigerian democratic experience and offered a chronological account of the problems of democracy in Nigeria, Osadolor (1998) writes thus:

Explanation for the present Nigerian problems lies in the course of the country's historical development. Along this course...the situation has been that of political intrigue and blood-shed-nationalist aspirations turned into inter-regional, inter-ethnic and inter-party antagonism and mutual distrust; collapse of the First Republic; Coup and Counter-coup; a bitter Civil War; Collapse

of the Second Republic, an unending barracks revolts or coup *d'état*; the aborted Third Republic; Confused political direction- of which there have been obvious signs of reverses in some, if not all aspects of national development(45).

Ake (2007) shares common view as he writes “the government in power cannot claim legitimacy. Political instability is endemic because of the normlessness and extremist pattern of political competition. Violence is endemic, anarchy lurks just below the surface and the political system is as disarticulated as the economy and as fragmented as the culture” (45). This shows that the Nigerian democratic experience is rooted in the activities of autocratic and inept leaders and their regimes. This assertion can also be gleaned from Mathew H. Kukah (2012)’s remarks that “political instability which military rule has brought is at the heart of all our violence and incoherence. The military by gaining legitimacy through violence have psychologically elevated and institutionalized violence on the altar of the quest for power”(3-4). If our democracy is characterized by violence maladministration, lack of accountability and other forms of social ills, how then we can redress it. Most analysis would believe that there is still hope for the country to get out of her present socio-political and economic quagmire. These theorists and analysts strongly maintain that Nigeria present predicament will go away if she effectively harness or utilize her immense human and natural resources.

On the contrary, Bello sees Nigeria’s democracy, differently. He was concerned the similar problems earlier sighted by Kukah in opposite direction. Bello in his observation argues that one of the problems of democratization stems partly from conceptual confusions. Bello (2005:52) argues; “these ambiguities can be removed and/or resolved by evaluating the concept of democratization with a view to proposing an acceptable definition.” Bello identifies five major conditions or requirements that must be met before any effort or claim of democratization of Nigeria would find practical experience. According to Bello (2005) they include:

Constitutional and legal reforms that will reflect and guarantee democracy; the autonomy and independence of the judiciary and electoral body to ensure free and fair elections and impartial trials and resolution of conflicts and/or disputes in the polity; freedom of speech and the press to ensure the existence of vibrant political parties and an active civil society to serve as alternative watch dogs or critics of the government; the need for a vigorous and comprehensive programme of education so that the principles, practices and institutions of democracy can be learnt, acquired, cultivated and practiced (53-54).

Lastly, Bello continues; “there is need for improvement in the overall social economic wellbeing of the people to ensure the flourishing and blossoming of democratic principles, institutions and attitudes in Nigeria” (54). So far, as observed in the words of Bello, one of the dominant problems militating against the practice of true democracy in Nigeria was/is the lack of common agreement among Nigerians.

Within a broader scope of Africa as a continent, and Nigeria in particular, as a nation, ethnicity, according to Kalu (2016); “is by implication considered and identified as one of the important issues affecting democratization and nation-building” (146). Nyuot Yoh, (2004) argues in similar vein that “ethnicity is believed to have had great impact, in fact more impact than other factors, on how politics and nation-building processes are pursued in Africa. It is practically obvious before us that the issues of religion and ethnic identity have dominated democratic politics in Nigeria. The complexities of ethnicity in Nigerian politics are to its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. In Nigeria, everybody is thinking about the self; not us. There is no common spirit of one people, one nation. There is lack of national conscious.

This ethnic and religious identity also translates into its larger body of politics, where each individual who finds his way to national politics is only there with the mindset that it is their turn to share and eat the national cake without any sense of moral obligations. Egoism, rather than altruism is the order of the day in Nigerian national politics. Muslims see non-Muslims, especially, Christians as alien. There is no common unity and love amongst them in national politics. These phenomena have adversely affected the desired quest for democratic progress in Nigeria. In summary, it is essential to state that the said issue of ethnic politics and religious dichotomy has resulted to amongst other problems, wobbling democracy, high rate of illiteracy, moral decadence, increased in unemployment, death of modern medical facilities, lack of motorable roads, deplorable state of communication facilities, increasing rate of population growth, lack of mechanized agriculture and poor healthcare-system etc. Nigerian democracy therefore leaves much to be desired.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be said that Nigerian political history and its democracy, today, has suffered and continued to suffer setback due to its creation and continuous existence on ethnics cum religious clothing. As a problem that was rationally, critically and normatively investigated, it is firmly believed and argued here that if Nigeria, can excuse itself politics of ethnicity and religious dichotomy, the present quagmires which the country’s democracy is facing can be addressed. Prescriptively, this is where socio-political philosophy can theoretically contribute, by calling to attention how to bring about or better still, help towards entrenching democratic practice in the country. This should be considered as a clarion call in order to better and improve the wellbeing of all Nigerian irrespective of tribe, religion or both. The paper therefore, concludes that the practice of ethnicity and religious divide should not be allowed to sentence Nigerian State to pernicious and precarious situations, rather, our ethnic diversity and religious affiliation should be redefined in order to bring about good governance and democratic dividends which will set Nigeria on the path of national integration.

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