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ISSUES IN NIGERIAN POLITICAL RECONSTRUCTION
A CASE STUDY OF ETHNICITY & REGIONALISM

BY

DR. OFFIONG TIMOTHY ABIA
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the issue of politics of ethnicity and regionalism as it affects political leadership in Nigeria. Ethnic tensions do exist in Nigeria and has been growing since independence in 1960. The argument here is that Nigerian ethnicity and regionalism has assumed a class basis (albeit an all too hidden one) and are used rather manipulatively as social and political ideologies by those - most often the bourgeoisie and or petit bourgeoisie - who advocate them and seek thereby to advance their own interest. This paper seeks to establish the fact that regionalist and ethnic politics in Nigeria are almost always played in the state field in the pursuit of social, political, or economic advantages.

The area now known and referred to as Nigeria emerged as a result of European ambitions and rivalries. In the remote past the area contained people of diverse origins living in several kingdoms, chieftains and tribal groups or communities, most of which were quite sophisticated and civilized, others rather rudimentary and primitive. Such kingdoms as the Bini, Nupe and Borno were known to have long established traditions of sophisticated monarchical government,¹ while the Igbos, Efiks, Ibibios, Tivs, Gwaris and the Ijaws, practiced some sort of village democracy. The British on arrival coalesced and organised these hostile and warring tribes and multiple kingdoms into a politically manageable and economically viable whole with little or no regards to their differences in language and culture.

A number of factors notably economic, evangelization and christianity have been advanced as reasons for the coming of the Europeans; however, it has recently been asserted that their primary motive was economic.² But to mellow down the so called hostility of the inhabitants, it was diluted with an over-dose ^{of} religious indoctrination.³

The task of administering the newly acquired territory was onerous and challenging that by the beginning of the century i.e. 1900, even though the colonization exercise started two decades previously, Nigeria was organised and administered

in three units, undoubtedly on the basis of homogeneity, agreeability and proximity; thus the predominantly stranger elements in Lagos were constituted into an administrative block - colony of Lagos - under the Governorship of Sir Walter Egerton. The more indiginous communities and kingdoms in the interior were lumped together in the two administrative units known as the Southern and Northern protectorates under Sir Ralph Moor and Sir Frederick Lugard respectively as High Commissioners. In 1906, the colony of Lagos was absorbed and assimilated into the Southern protectorate in order to establish and consolidate the colony of Southern Nigeria with Sir Walter Egerton as Governor.⁴ Finally, on January 1st, 1914, the protectorates of Southern and Northern Nigeria were amalgamated under Frederick Lugard as the Governor.

From the union of 1914 to independence, Nigeria witnessed many constitutional and administrative changes concerned with the problem of reconciling in one whole the diverse elements which made up the country.⁵ For instance, immediately after the union of 1914, the south and the north remained under different forms of administration - Southern Nigeria was governed with the aid of a partially

elected legislative council, while the north remained under the jurisdiction of a governor. In 1939, the south was further divided into Eastern and Western regions. It was not until 1946/47 before real steps were taken in the creation of a modern political framework with the establishment of a legislative council to deal with the whole of Nigeria. Regional legislatures and Governments were also formed for the Northern and Western and Eastern regions.

ETHNICITY AND REGIONALISM

Ultimately, throughout the colonial era, Nigeria rather than produce one nationalist movement, produced three of such movements each based on one of the three regions. It was these nationalist movements that later produced the major political parties. The NPC emerged as a Northern party, the NCNC had a strong base in the South-East, while the Action Group thrived in the South-West. Whereas the NPC was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani, the NCNC was dominated by the Igbo and the Action Group by the Yoruba. Thus, political development in Nigeria during the struggle for independence, took the shape of compromise between the various political parties which were different in their outlook and programmes

and also regionally entrenched;⁶ the struggle for independence was the only common factor that united them.

At the constitutional conference of 1953, it was decided, after long discussion, that the country should be a federation of three regions and the small federal territory of Lagos; residual powers rested with the regions. That decision was reluctantly accepted by the NCNC which had previously advocated a strong centre and a larger number of constituent states, smaller and with lesser powers than the existing regions.⁷ By 1959, Nigerians were clamouring for self-rule and in their common desire to be independent, many vital problems were left unsolved. One of such outstanding problems was the creation of more states, at least, to provide a more lasting foundation for the stability of the nation.⁸

THE RISE OF THE BOURGEOISIE/FETIT BOURGEOISIE IN NIGERIA

In the history of the western world, bourgeoisie is a term that connotes primarily entrepreneurs - whether merchants or industrialists - who have no legally or customarily established privileged status: i.e., they are not nobility.⁹

It is the bourgeoisie who were the progenitors of capitalist enterprise and presumably the economic makers of the modern world. In Africa, the term Bourgeoisie came to be applied to the early merchants who were involved in the early trade with the western world. Up to the nineteenth century, this class of people prospered, particularly in the coastal regions. But one of the most significant consequences of the imposition of colonial rule throughout the continent in the late nineteenth century, was the destruction of these indigenous merchant class given the structural discriminations of a colonial society.

On the other hand, the introduction of western education brought about the birth of a new group of Bourgeoisie, this time, the educated elites, who came to dominate both the private and the public sector of the economy. In Nigeria for instance, western education was first introduced by the missionaries long before colonial conquest. With the imposition of colonial rule more schools were established by the colonial masters. Some communities and native associations also built schools for the benefit of their people; the Ibibio State Union, for instance, established a secondary school and also awarded scholarship to Ibibio sons to study in Britain.

Consequent upon these, the nationalist leadership in Nigeria after 1940 arose from among this middle class elements most familiar with the vulnerabilities of the colonial regimes. In the scene were men like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Anthony Enaharo, Eyo Ita, Tafewa Balewa, Ahamadu Bello etc.

In their private lives, some of these bourgeoisie alternated between entrepreneurial activity and nationalist agitation some managed to make their entrepreneurial activity itself a form of nationalist agitation e.g. the establishment of local Bank in the 1950's by Azikiwe who later became the country's first president. As a matter of fact, independence in Nigeria meant the placement of nearly all top managerial positions, both in and out of government, in the hands of the elites/ bourgeoisie who received for their work, high remuneration, especially high in relation to the standard of living of the vast majority of the indigenous population. Furthermore, most of these bourgeoisie politicians supplemented their incomes by establishing, either in their own name or that of their spouses, a series of small enterprises which increased their real income and frequently created conflicts of interests in relation to their responsibilities

as ministers etc.

In addition, the bourgeoisie maintained significant ties with the rural areas which served as their homeland. They regarded themselves as the mouth piece of the people in their claims to the largesse of the National cake, notably in the form of schools, hospitals, roads, access to jobs, contracts etc. The rural people in the regions inturn, gave the bourgeoisie a political base.

All through the decades after independence, Nigerian leaders (both civilian and military) are drawn from the bourgeois and petit bourgeois class i.e. business owners, educated lawyers, academics clergymen and military men all of them with regional following who, often than not, appeal to regional and ethnic sentiments thereby creating room for ethnicity and regionalism. This appeal to ethnicity and regionalism is nothing more than an ideological struggle between factions of the country's bourgeoisie and or petit bourgeoisie to innerit the state as a class for the purpose of accomulating political power and economic resources.

Surprisingly, the establishment of multi-party democracy in the country has ushered in a new wave of parochial identities

that are used manipulatively by factions of the country's bourgeoisie and/or petit bourgeoisie in their competition for political power and economic resources. Else how can one explain the activities of the Northern Elders forum, the Arewa Consultative Forum and more recently, the 'association of past heads of state' made up notably of Shaghari, Buhari, and Babangida. It should be remembered that Buhari through a military coup, terminated the corrupt regime of Shaghari. In 1983 while a few months later, his own regime was also ousted by Babangida; what then could be the reason behind their coming together except to advance their own interest as a class.

Of recent too, the country has witnessed micro conferences by different ethnic groups - from the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba to the middle Belt, south-south peoples etc. Most of these conferences are either regionally based or ethnic oriented. That notwithstanding most of the conferences have taken publicly expressed positions on some burning issues in the country such as equity, fairness, and justice in the treatment of each ethnic or regional group. This is what is often politically couched as marginalization. Other issues are the need for a restructured Nigeria along true federalist lines, a sovereign national conference etc.¹¹ In Lagos

recently, the seventeen Governors of the southern states agreed to fight jointly for a new revenue allocation arrangement that will enhance autonomy and resource control by the constituent units of the federation.¹²

As a matter of fact, ethnicity and regionalism are useful in mobilizing support from the populace who are often manipulated by the bourgeoisie. However, the amount of ethnic manipulation also depend on the degree of political insecurity and economic deprivation. In fact insecure and deprived people are potential candidates for ethnic manipulation, ready combatants for ethnic conflicts. Here, one sees the various crisis between irate youths and oil firms in the Niger-Delta as ^{the} manipulation of the people by the bourgeoisie who stand to benefit most. However, this does not mean that the underprivileged people are passive victims of manipulation by the bourgeois politicians. There are instances where the elite act under pressure from the masses and succumb to being used by the masses to further their goals.¹³ This was the case in Eket in 1998 when the people mobilized against Mobil Producing Nigeria in a fracas that led to the attack and molestation of Adewusi, the then Akwa Ibom State Governor, by the people.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

So far, this paper has discussed the issue of 'ethnicity and regionalism' in Nigeria. The argument presented here is by no means complete, but it does try to establish and explore a framework of analysis which it is hoped will lead to a more detailed research.

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- ¹L. K. Jakande, (ed). West African Annuals (Lagos: Daily Times, 1979) P. 374.
- ²C. C. Newbury, British Policy Towards West Africa (Oxford: O. U. P., 1965) P. 374.
- ³C. C. Njeze 'The Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects' unpublished work, P. 3.
- ⁴Ibid
- ⁵H. Willink et al. Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire Into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying them (London: Her Majesty's Office, 1958) P.
- ⁶'The Struggle for one Nigeria' Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos.
- ⁷H. Willink et al. Report of Enquiry, P. I.
- ⁸
 - (i) At the Constitutional Conference of 1953, NCNC only Abandoned their Position in Regards to State Creation, when it became clear that continued disagreement would bar advance towards independence.
 - (ii) The British Government After Setting Up a Commission of Inquiry on State Creation ~~stated~~ that if new states were to be created, the new states must be given, at least, 2 years to settle down before independence could be granted.

⁹B. Lyon et al. A History of the Western World (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969) Pp. 207-209.

¹⁰These men and a host of others not mentioned were in the forefront of Nationalist agitation.

¹¹Tempo (19th October, 2000) Vol. 15 No. 15, P. 8.

¹²The Guardian (Tuesday, October, 17, 2000) P. 20.

¹³E. Osaghae, 'Towards a fuller understanding of Ethnicity in Africa: Bringing Rural Ethnicity Back' E. Osaghae, (ed) In Between State and Rural Society in Africa (Dakar: Codesria, 1994) P. 225.