

Rethinking Ethnic Divide in Nigeria: The *Ubuntu* Approach to National Unity

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the *Ubuntu* philosophy could be harnessed to address the negative impact of ethnic rivalry in Nigeria. The paper observes that with over 250 ethnic groups with diverse cultural values and backgrounds, Nigeria has become a hotbed of ethnic-based and nepotistic tensions and rivalries, which are threatening the very existence of the nation as a single entity. The paper further opines that ethnic rivalry stunts national development, breeds suspicion, causes violence among contending ethnic groups and thus creates loss of confidence, trust and faith among members of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. The paper contends that if ethnic nationalities will adopt the *Ubuntu* philosophy of "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am", then peace and conflict management will be based on the understanding that the good of an ethnic group translates to the good of all. This paper therefore argues that the emotional bond of an individual citizen first to his/her ethnic group before Nigeria as a nation is detrimental to the country's unity, development and peaceful coexistence. To address this, the paper calls for a national rebirth and a re-orientation of the citizens towards a common national ideal.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ubuntu Philosophy, Nigeria, Unity, Diversity, Peaceful Co-existence.

Introduction

Ubuntu means people are people through other people - "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu". Ubuntu acknowledges both the right and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being. - **Nelson Mandela**

Nigeria as a country is a component of quite a lot of ethnic nationalities. Since her independence, there have been cases of ethnic violence ensuing from loyalty to one's ethnic group. This has not augured well for the development of the nation. Nigeria has several ethnic nationalities and she is regarded as the most populous nation in Africa and the world's largest concentration of black people. The Federal Republic of Nigeria was formed from the British Colony of Lagos and the protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria which formally came into existence on January 1, 1900. These protectorates were amalgamated on January 1, 1914 to form one single entity called Nigeria. It was declared independent by the British on October 1, 1960.

The current population of Nigeria is 188,259,036 as of Tuesday, October 11, 2016 based on the latest United Nations estimates. These population estimates are equivalent to 2.48% of the total world population, making Nigeria to rank number 7 in the list of countries by population (www.worldmeters.info). These great numbers of people belong to more than 250 different ethnic groups, each with its own language, history and customs. About half are members of four main ethnic groups - the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Efik/Ibibio. The Hausa/Fulani live mainly in the North, the Yorubas in the South-West, the Ibo in the South-East and the Efik/Ibibio in the South-South. Other groups include Kanuri, Edo, Nupe, Tiv, Chamba, Ekoi, and Ijaw, just to mention a few. The country is blessed with enormous natural resources as well as human resources.

But its major problem has been how to manage its many ethnic groups. The geographical entity that is today known as Nigeria was inhabited by people of varied and often conflicting traditional settings, cultural dispositions and socio-political and religious orientation prior to the coming of the colonialists. In their respective domain, according to Ezeanya (21), they cherished what they shared together as a people, and fared well among themselves. But the advent of colonialism and expatriate missionaries; divide and rule politics and religious hooliganism were used in destroying the socio-political, cultural and religious systems of the people. Although the different ethnic groups were brought together by the British colonialists without their consent and against their wish, it is extremely troubling that Nigerians have become slaves to their ethnic groups rather than employing these diversities towards the nation's unity, progress and development. It is for this reason that this paper attempts to examine the negative impact of ethnic rivalry as well as show how *Ubuntu* philosophy can help to bring about unity in diversity, development and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

The Concept of Ethnicity

It must be understood from the outset that ethnicity constitutes one of the major and virulent forms of social differentiation and structural inequality in any given society. It is as old as the strife that took place among the first human society that populated

the earth in the pre-historic times as captured in the book of Genesis chapter 11: 1 – 9 (the story of the Tower of Babel). Ethnicity results from inter-ethnic relations, that is, whenever two different groups or societies come into contact to establish various modes of spatial, political, economic, cultural and social relationship.

The concept of ethnicity has been diversely explained by scholars from either the negative sense or positive sense. For example, Heineck sees ethnicity as “a strained and exaggerated feeling of differences in relation to another ethnic group” (40). For Jacob, ethnicity involves “adherence or loyalty to a particular region or tribe, a sense of exclusivity and discrimination against people from other regions or tribes” (13). Similarly, Otite notes “ethnic groups are categories of people characterised by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value system and normative behaviour and whose members are anchored in a particular part of the new state territory” (10). On his part, Nnoli (3) asserts that ethnicity is a “social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups”. These negative views of ethnicity weaken sense of national unity and peaceful co-existence in many societies or nations. Different ethnic groups in such societies or nations will always struggle to outdo each other either for political, economic or religious gains or survival.

Writing about ethnicity from a positive perspective, Anugwom cited by Adegbami and Uche (59) avers:

Ethnicity should be seen as arising in any situation in which a group of people, no matter their size, with different cultural and linguistic attributes from those of its neighbours uses this as the basis of group solidarity and interaction with others. In so doing, the group sees itself not only as distinct, but as a “group in itself for itself”.

Corroborating this positive viewpoint of ethnicity, Imobighe envisages ethnicity “as the feeling of belonging to a distinctive cultural or linguistic group, or a manifestation of ethnic consciousness in relation to other group” (18). This point also finds corroboration from Nnoma who sees ethnicity “as fostering identity, solidarity, a sense of close relationship and loyalty among group members” (313). These positive views of ethnicity by Anugwom, Imobighe and Nnoma align with the Greek origin of the word *ethnos* meaning “a group of people who share a common and distinctive culture”.

The Origin of Ethnicity in Nigeria

Although ethnicity predates colonialism in Nigeria, it was surely intensified by the British conquest of Southern and Northern regions of the 'lower Niger area'. The British colonial administration from the outset regarded diversity as the major problem it had to tackle after the amalgamation of the two regions. The British had assumed certain ethnic groups to be more progressive and intelligent, and in order to

checkmate the activities of these ethnic groups, they introduced the system of 'divide and rule' and in disguise, pitted one ethnic group against the other in a cut-throat contest for survival. According to Rodney (277), the colonial power sometimes saw the value of stimulating the internal 'tribal' jealousies so as to keep the colonised from dealing with their principal contradiction with the European overlord, that is, the classic technique of divide and rule. The British therefore sowed the seed of ethnicity in Nigeria that blossomed after independence; ethnicity has caused Nigeria to be counted among the poorest countries of the world; it was the cause of the country's 30-month civil war and is one of the causes of the country's infrastructural and technological underdevelopment.

Like most African countries, Nigeria during the first half of the 20th century had a common enemy - European imperialism. To fight against this one enemy, some educated Nigerians from different ethnic groups came together to form a common and united front to confront the British imperialists. Among these nationalists were Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, from the Ibo ethnic group, Obafemi Awolowo from the Yoruba ethnic group and Sir Ahmadu Bello from the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group. We must at this juncture state unequivocally that the political activities of this trio gave ethnicity a firm root in the politics of the Nigerian State. In other words, they watered the seed of ethnicity that was planted by the British colonialists.

To fight for Nigeria's independence, a national movement called the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon's (NCNC) was formed with headquarters in Lagos. Its leader was Herbert Macaulay – a man of Yoruba extraction. This movement was later changed to National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC). Membership of this movement cut across ethnic lines. But following the death of Herbert Macaulay in 1947, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who was the party's Secretary took over the leadership of the party. In 1952, Obafemi Awolowo formed the Action Group (AG) from a Yoruba cultural organization called “Egbe Omo Oduduwa”. The formation of Action Group was largely believed to be due to the change of leadership from a Yoruba man to an Ibo man in NCNC. This was immediately followed by the formation of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) by Ahmadu Bello to (garner for) protect the interest of the Northern Hausa/Fulani ethnic group. With this political landscape, Nigeria's politics took ethnic coloration with ethnic dominancy as the driving force.

In 1956, due to the popularity of NCNC in the Western Region, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who took over leadership of NCNC vied for the premiership of the Region against Obafemi Awolowo – founder of Action Group (AG). It was widely reported that during the campaign, Awolowo invoked ethnic sentiments, telling his fellow Yoruba's “tiwani, tiwani” meaning “what is ours is ours” (Mbeke 5). When the result was released, Azikiwe who was expected to win the election lost to Awolowo. In a swift reaction to the election result, Azikiwe went back “home” to the Eastern Region where his fellow Ibos were the majority. From that moment on, the NCNC essentially ceased to be a national party. It became an Eastern Nigerian party. To claim control of

the East after losing the West to Awolowo, Dr. Eyo Ita - the Premier of the Eastern Region at the time from the Efik minority ethnic group was immediately removed from office by the Eastern House of Assembly and replaced with Azikiwe by the Ibo's who were the majority in the house.

A diagnosis of the facts of that sudden removal, shows that if Azikiwe could not head the Yoruba's West, he had to head the East where Ibos were majority. This action triggered the agitation for the creation of separate regions for the minorities who felt aggrieved at the unceremonious removal of Dr. Eyo Ita as the Premier of the Eastern Region. It should be noted that these political gerrymandering and ethnic politics initiated by Awolowo and practicalised by Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello has been the bane of Nigeria's quest for stable political and democratic development. Elections are not contested on the basis of ability and capacity but on the basis of ethnic affiliation.

Before the 1959 independence general elections, the three major political parties, that is, the Action Group (AG) for the West, the NCNC for the East and the NPC for the North, had secured unchallenged positions in their regions. But in 1959, the factors that have altered the character of election in Nigeria from a situation of fair play in the 1923-1947 eras to that of ethnic warfare had become dangerously manifest on the eve of independence; intimidation, thuggery and ethnicity had become the order of the day. According to Eme Awa, as cited in Alapiki (80), "on the eve of independence election, the leaders naturally made their appeal to kinship or the clan, ethnic competition tended to assume a pathological character".

The election results of 1959 reflected the North versus South dichotomy and created a framework in the politics of Nigeria in which each region fell under the control of the dominant party in the region. The parties were unable to find any stronghold in other regions making the NPC of the North and the NCNC of the East to form an alliance in order to form the central government with NPC playing the role of the senior partner. Thus, the NPC presented Tafawa Balewa as the Prime minister while Nnamdi Azikiwe became the President. Deep differences in party ideology, principles and regional interest plagued the first coalition government of NPC and NCNC and finally led to its collapse. The collapse of this alliance led to other crises in the country such as the national census figures of 1963. Politicians refused to accept the results, positing that the census figures were inflated to favour some ethnic groups. Also the election crises of 1964 that manifested in the breakdown of law and order in the Western Region finally led to the first military coup on January 15, 1966 thus bringing the first Nigerian Republic to a drastic end after just six years of independence.

Negative Consequences of Ethnicity

The first military coup in Nigeria was led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu on January 15, 1966. The coup was badly planned and executed. The failure of the coup caused

Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, who was the country's most senior military officer, to take charge of the country as Head of State. Nzeogwu and Ironsi were Ibo, so both the coup and the policies of Ironsi were interpreted as an attempt to achieve Ibo domination of the country. A counter coup was hatched in July 1966 leading to the death of Ironsi and the emergence of General Yakubu Gowon from the Hausa ethnic group as the Head of State. The overthrow of Ironsi's government gave impetus to the massacre of Ibo people living in the North and a secession attempt by the Eastern Region Governor – Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.

Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra in 1967. To halt the secession of the East, Gowon declared a Civil War against the East. The war lasted for 30 months with an estimated one million lives lost. Since the end of the war, ethnic rivalry has taken a different dimension with some ethnic groups claiming to have the divine right to run the affairs of the country. This has led to coups and counter coups. A good example was the Gideon Okar-led coup of April 22, 1990 against the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida. The coup broadcast states inter-alia:

Fellow Nigerian citizens, on behalf of the patriotic and well-meaning people of the middle belt and the Southern parts of the country, I, Major Gideon Okar wish to happily inform you of the successful ousting of the dictatorial, corrupt, drug baronish, evil men, sadistic, deceitful, homosexually-centered, prodigalistic, unpatriotic administration of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida.... Another major reason for the change is the need to stop intrigues, domination of the Nigerian State by the so-called chosen few... in the light of the above and in recognition of the negativeness of the aforementioned aristocratic factor... a temporary decision to excise the following states namely: Sokoto, Borno, Katsina, Kano and Bauchi from the Federal Republic of Nigeria ... (Uchenyi133-137).

This coup broadcast even though it did not succeed shows the extent of suspicion the different ethnic groups have for each other. There is lack of trust among the ethnic groups. Ethnicity is not only displayed in the country's politics but in all facets: economic, religious and social lives of the people. Securing a decent job depends on which part of the country you come from. Admission to any Federal tertiary institution depends on where your "catchment area" falls and so on.

The effects of these maladies are seen in the unwholesome underdevelopment of the country. Social and infrastructural amenities are not provided because of the struggle for which ethnic zone it should be located. Provided ones are not maintained because the man at the helm of affairs is from an ethnic group that is not well disposed to the other group where such facility is located and so on. Curiously, most ethnic key players do not see the country as a true reflection of the will of the federating ethnic groups. For example, Obafemi Awolowo sees Nigeria as a 'geographical expression'. According to him:

Nigeria is not a nation...it is a mere geographical expression. There are no “Nigerians” in the same sense as there are “Englishmen” or “Welsh” or “French. The word “Nigerian” is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within Nigeria from those who do not (14).

Chief Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu sums it up when he opines that “the struggle for independence gave the Nigerian people a togetherness but not unity. It gave Nigeria confidence but not strength” (8).

We have taken the time to trace the etymology, history and effect of ethnicity in Nigeria because history helps one to know the past and to understand how the present came to be. History equally helps one to learn from the mistakes of the past thereby taking control of the present and predicting and creating the future. The question then is: what should be done to reverse this state of affairs in Nigeria, how do we rethink ethnicity? The answer lies in a psychological transformation of the people that make up the different ethnic groups in Nigeria based on a philosophical framework that will entrench trust and believe in the strength that is inherent in the peculiarity and uniqueness of the different ethnic groups.

The Philosophy of Ubuntu

The word Ubuntu as a verbal expression means the philosophical character of the communities of Southern Africa. The word has its origin in the Bantu language of Southern Africa and in its simplest form - Ubuntu means “I am because we are, since we are therefore I am”. Ubuntu, according to Mangena, is “the ideal of being human, derived from a worldview based on the guiding injunction: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni/Zulu/Ndebele) which can be expressed in English 'as a person is a person among other persons' ” (66). Hence, Ubuntu is a humanistic African Philosophy that focuses on people's allegiances and relations with each other; the concerns, benefits, exigencies and welfare of the community are more important than individual interest. It considers the success of the group or community over that of the individual. Ubuntu is not a philosophy created by an individual, but it is a communal way of life as lived by the Bantu-speaking people of South Africa (Mangena 66). So, Ubuntu is not an individualistic or independent philosophy like Western philosophy

There are various descriptions and definitions of Ubuntu as a living philosophy. For instance, in Miller's view, Ubuntu is “considered to be a dispositional quality of human virtue based on connection, community, and mutual caring for each other. It is the belief that sharing a universal bond connects all of humanity” (192). Similarly, Mangaliso (24) defines Ubuntu “as humaneness – a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness – that individuals and groups display for one another”. Also, the South African Nobel Peace Laureate, Desmond Tutu avers:

Ubuntu speaks of the very essence of being human. When

we want to give high praise to someone we say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”, “Hey, he or she has Ubuntu”. This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life.... The common definition however follows: “We are because you are, and because you are, definitely I am” (34-35).

What stands out obviously in all these descriptions and definitions is that Ubuntu is relational. It speaks about our interconnectedness and there is emphasis on sharing, caring, concern and compassion for others. Put differently, Ubuntu can be defined as a philosophical principle that directs human action in order to sustain, preserve and uphold all human relational connections within Ubuntu worldview. What then, are Ubuntu philosophical principles?

Devi Dee Mucina in his article “Ubuntu Orality as a Living Philosophy”, discusses some Ubuntu philosophical principles as taught him by his family and community:

-We should treat a stranger like a god because we will never know when we may find ourselves in their territory. It is hoped by treating a stranger like a god, one will receive the same treatment when away from home.

-“*Umuntu ngumuntu ngubuntu*” – A person is a person through other people. Meaning all things know each other in relationship to each other.

- We come from the energy flux and are the energy flux. This is why the circle is important to the Ubuntu spirituality. The circle shows that we are one.

- We respect and give thanks for all of our relations because all elements are part of the energy flux that makes up life (18).

This implies that a person is who s/he is only because of the existence of others and because of his/her cohabitation with them. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We are human only through the humanity of others. Ubuntu teaches us that every life is connected by the cycle of mutual, equal, and communal connections; no affiliation or connection is greater than other. It should be noted that Ubuntu recognizes and respects the role and place of the individual within the ambit of communalism and mutual responsibility. Ubuntu principle informs the way we relate with each other as a people.

Ubuntu encapsulates the totality of our view in this paper, by applying and entrenching this philosophy in the mindset of individual members of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. This will greatly reduce the negative effect of the primordial attachment of Nigerians to their ethnic group first before Nigeria. The Ubuntu philosophy will cause Nigerians to realize that to 'affirm one's humanity is to

recognize the humanity of others and on that basis establish respectful human relations with them'.

Unity in Diversity: The Ubuntu Approach

It is a known fact that after corruption, the next major obstacle to development in Nigeria is the negative sense of ethnicity discussed earlier. Ethnic loyalty is stronger in Nigeria than national loyalty, as Nigerians see themselves first and foremost as Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Ibo, Igala, Bini, Egba, Ijebu, kalabari, Ijaw, Tiv, Ibibio, Oron, Annang to mention but a few before regarding or calling themselves Nigerians. In Nigeria, there are many associations formed along tribal and ethnic lines: Arewa Consultative Forum, Afenifere, Oduduwa People's Congress, Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, Ibibio Union and The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People among others. These groups are majorly formed to advance and protect the rights and interests of a particular ethnic group over the rest. The unity and development of Nigeria as a nation is minor. These are signals of detrimental effect of ethnic divisions in Nigeria. The affection of a Nigerian citizen first to his/her ethnic group before the country is unhealthy for the nation's unity.

To achieve sustainable unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, there will be need for every group to assert itself, that is, to realise that they are human beings first and live in a society and that no human being or ethnic group can live in isolation from other human beings; that no ethnic group can be self-sufficient. But this cannot be achieved without a deliberate effort to re-orientate the people; especially the political and religious leaders on the need to avoid the stoking of ethnic sentiments when addressing political or religious disagreements or conflicts.

It is very clear that ethnic diversity is not a problem; Nigerians from different ethnic groups have always lived together and mixed freely. Problems arise only when appeal is made to ethnic sentiments by political or religious leaders who hide under the toga of ethnicity to perpetuate selfish interest to the detriment of the unity of the nation. Ethnicity is an identity issue; therefore any effort to control the projection of who you are over and above others will definitely lead to conflict. This is a misuse of ethnicity. Ethnicity is not the problem but Nigerians who choose to misuse it for their own ethnic groups' interest over and above the interest of other ethnic groups. We believe that Nigeria as a nation can achieve a lot from her diversity if Ubuntu is embraced to harmonise our differences in order to generate progressive results for Nigeria. Ubuntu philosophy affirms the place of the individual in a group but places the group's interest over and above the individual. It symbolizes all-inclusiveness and the concern for the welfare of others.

To achieve unity in diversity in Nigeria, there has to be a philosophical framework that should serve as an ethnic integrator. In this case, the proposed philosophical framework should be the Ubuntu philosophy. This philosophy is in agreement with the whole concept of TEAM – [Together Everyone (Ethnic Group)

Achieve More] and how every member of the team should operate and behave in order to achieve the goal of the team. Nigeria needs every tribe/ethnic group to contribute to making the nation better and stronger. Nigerians need to imbibe the spirit of Ubuntu, so as to see themselves as one people, one nation brought together for a common purpose. Nigerians need to build relationships based on trust and respect needed for unity and togetherness. They have to consciously make a choice as Nigerians, not as an Ibo, Yoruba, or Hausa/Fulani, to make Nigeria great for the betterment of every ethnic group in the country.

Conclusion

That Nigeria is made up of diverse ethnic groups is a given and ethnicity is an issue that cannot be wished away in any heterogeneous society; but its management requires tact and intelligence. Intelligence based on a clear-cut knowledge of Ubuntu – the knowledge that one's ethnic group will exist and prosper because other ethnic groups exist. The mismanagement of ethnicity can be very catastrophic as its promotion leads to disregard for other group's interest and humanness. It is equally important to state that, ethnicity on its own cannot cause conflict; it is always the manipulation of it by individuals, especially religious and political leaders for selfish purposes that lead to ethnic conflict. Ubuntu advocates recognition of the fact that the 'other' is paramount to my being that “I am because we are”. The knowledge and acceptance of Ubuntu philosophy by Nigerians will surely neutralise the harmful and negative effects of ethnic divide in Nigeria.

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