

## **Nigerian Federalism, Boundaries across Ethnic Lines: Trapped Majority and Stranded Minority Since 1960**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 which partitioned Africa among the European imperial powers; hitherto configured Africa internal and international boundaries to suit the burgeoning interest of the European imperialists. The paper attempts to trace the evolution of Nigeria's territorially delineated cleavages and examines whether the incessant ethnic feud was a colonial creation or a post independent failure of the three major ethnic group to foster unity and integration in Nigeria. The paper adopts conceptual approach, utilized secondary sources of data for analysis.

**Keywords:** *Federalism, Boundary, Trapped Majority and Stranded Minority*

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## Background to the Study

Nigeria may not have been the only nation-state with multi ethnicity, linguistic and cultural differences in the world. In some other countries like United States and United Kingdom, it cut across biological distinction of men, i.e. race and racialism; others like Italy, Russia and Germany are irredentists, having their ethnic affinities across its borders. The United States is the strongest irrespective of 'melting pot' nature of its peopling and composition of its society.

According to Afigbo, given the territorially delineated cleavages abounding in Nigeria and the historical legacy of divisions among ethnic groups, regions, and sections, the federal imperatives was so fundamental that even military governments; characteristically Unitarian, hierarchical, and centralist- attached importance to the continuation of a federal system of government. <sup>1</sup>Tamuno, T. N. (1972), asserts that the Nigeria Federalism can be said to have started with the appointment of Consul Beecroft over the Calabar area in 1849; this was followed by the annexation of Lagos in 1851; establishment of Lagos colony in 1861; creation of the oil Rivers Protectorate 1893, the invasion of Benin in 1897; the conquest of Yoruba land 1861-1893. The establishment of Southern Protectorate less Lagos Colony 1900, the conquest of Sokoto Caliphate and Borno, 1903; the colonial subjugation of the Middle Belt area, 1900-1902; the amalgamation of the of Northern and Southern Protectorate in 1914. The creation of three regions in 1947; the creation of Middle West Region out of the former West Region in 1965; the creation of twelve states structure in 1967; nineteen states in 1975, twenty one states, 1987, thirty states in 1991; and thirty six states in 1996<sup>2</sup>.

Nigeria is one of the most diverse and pluralize country in the world with over 300 ethnic groups, (Onwuejogwu, 1978, NES, 1993:79; Mahadi, 1994:435)<sup>3</sup>. This pluralism constitutes some of contending issues that almost always wants to pull the fabric of the Nigerian state, especially in areas of boundary, ethnicity, religion and cultural diversity.

## Framework for Analysis

**Federalism:** This concept is embroiled with several ambiguities, as some scholars defined it as integrated units of a nation-state joining to an all-inclusive government; other school of thought consider irredentism as a constituent part of federalism even though it does not share same territorial boundary. A very recent example is Russia intervention in Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine, claiming that they are ethnic Russia. The concept is relative observed (Livingstone, 1953:23)<sup>4</sup>, with some form of variants from country to country. As succinctly observed by Nchi;

Federalism<sup>5</sup> is intended to be a solution to problems of domination that may arise in a plural society of diverse groups segregated by race, culture, language, religion etc. It is aimed at allowing each group to govern itself on local issues leaving national issues to the federal government. There is thus a centralization or devolution of powers from the centre to the regions and local authorities.

The more minority question federalism tends to solve in Nigeria, the more new minority problem it creates with new agitations and ethnic consciousness. The foundation of Nigeria political structure is highly ethnicized, corrupt and biased to minority groups, creating cabal and ethnic god-father to advance their *majority rule and majority interest*. An intolerable incitement for the minority to press home their right to self-determination as advocated by Atlantic Charter of 1941. Furthermore; ethnic killings of the minority by the majority with impunity

<sup>1</sup>Afigbo, A. *The Ropes of Sand in Igbo History and Culture*, Ibadan: Oxford University Press. 1981

<sup>2</sup>Tamuno, T. M. *The Evolution of Nigerian State: The Southern Phase, 1898-1914*, Ibadan: Longman, 1972 p 2

has often led to reprisal attacks and further call for secession as observed in the recent Southern Kaduna impasse that some religious leaders seek members of their faith to avenge.

**Boundaries:** A boundary is considered to be the line that separates or delineates one administrative jurisdiction or one territorial space with another. The study of boundary had been quite recent in academic discourse, but its impact is as old as human existence itself, since men moved from the bounties of nature to sedentary living, that is from primitive phase of development, into settled live with define territorial space. Even at the bounds of hunting and gathering, up to Neolithicera, presumably, they would been some point or limit to accessing these natural space.

There are two major approaches to boundary studies; the *state - centric* and the *grassroot level of analysis*. The State –Centric deals with relationship between states or studies in international relation and diplomacy. This approach does not consider divided and related group since it emphasized traditional barrier function of boundaries. Gary Goertz and Paul Diehi<sup>6</sup>, and John Vasquez maintain that “territorial issues are one of the most frequent sources of war between states and competing governments are less likely to resolve disagreement over territory than any other issue”. Similarly, Paul Hensel found that<sup>7</sup> “territorial disputes between states are more likely escalated to produce a greater number of fatalities, and to be more conflictual than non-territorial confrontations”. Barabara<sup>8</sup> on her part observes that “unlike most other issues, governments show a surprising unwillingness to negotiate over land in order to avoid or end otherwise costly conflicts. Celestine Bassey opined that border security issues have presented international community with complex problems of governance. This is presented in terms of the intractable challenges of conflict management – “the structural and processual dimensions which deal with issues of conflict” – as a core objective of multilateral institutions and non-governmental agencies in global governance.

The grassroots level of analysis focuses on coherent cultural area that have divided related group and the impact of boundaries on their daily live including boundary conflict. This approach has been adopted in this article because it focuses on the Nigerian state.

### **Types of Boundary**

According to Krist of, boundary<sup>9</sup> does not exist in abstraction, it owes its existence to man. That is all boundaries are man made. There two types of boundaries; *artificial and natural*.

**Artificial boundary** sometimes arbitrarily drawn to conform with lines of latitude and longitude without regards to ethno- cultural or political affiliations. African states after European partition represents some copious examples in its internal and international boundaries. For instance, Ejagham nation had been divided to the west for British (Nigeria); and to the east France Cameroon); The Hausa of Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad are also being affected by these artificial configuration. At the internal level, part of Igbo and Yoruba extraction are found in present day Kogi state; of which numerous example abound.

<sup>3</sup>Onwuejogwu, M. A. “Indigenous Socio-Economic and Political Organization and their Relevance to Development in Contemporary Nigeria” Paper Presented on the Annual Conference of the Nigeria *Sociological and Anthropological Association*, Nov 2<sup>nd</sup> – Dec. 1987

<sup>4</sup>Livingstone, W. S.(1952) “A Note on Federalism”,*Political Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No 2 cited in Okpoh O. Okpoh (ed) *The Sovereign National Conference*, Markurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2003

<sup>5</sup>Nchi, S. I. *Separation of Power Under the Nigerian Constitution*, Jos: Greenworld, 2003, p 38

**Natural Boundaries** are drawn deliberately to conform with natural physical features such as mountain, lake, river, ranges, valley etc.

### **Ethnicity**

The only working definition of ethnicity is that it involves the common consciousness of shared origin, culture, tradition, linguistic and historical heritage. It has its root origin from a Greek word *ethnos*, variously translated as 'tribe' or 'nation'; and its meaning can be taken as being some way between the two. Ethnic groups are not races since they are more precisely defined. For instance, the white skinned Fulani have absorbed into the Hausa ethnic group. Some writers used the term Hausa-Fulani for specific emphasis. Also, in Croatia, Serbs and Croats are Slavs; or a Jew might be black or white. This perceived common consciousness sometime incite violence on other ethnic nationalities that may result to *ethnic cleansing*. Ethnic conflict can be inter or intra in nature, example, Ife and Modakeke, Hausa and Yoruba in mile 2, Lagos; Protestant and Catholic, Christians and Muslims *inter alia*.

### **Trapped Majority**

The three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are trapped, as no one of them is ready to initiate a succession plan, for fear of joint forces against it. The clamor for Biafra would not hold water without support from major ethnic groups among the minority like the Ijaw, Ibibio; Efik, ogoja and Ejagham. Because the Ibos have not been able to carve an empire in the time past due to the nature of their political organization before them. The Hausa- Fulani did so through Dan Fodio who desirously needed an empire for himself; or the Yoruba whose suzerainty exceeded the fringes of Dahomey. Even as that, the Hausa do not have the muscle to secede due to some identity question springing up from the North Central of which numerous minority groups of the region abound; also, incessant hostilities between Christians and Muslims more often than not call for dichotomy among the Christians of the North. As major as Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria, they are more nervous in terms separating Nigeria than the minorities. They are the failure of Nigerian state, furthering their various ethnic agenda, leaving the minority to be stranded. If all the minority aggregate themselves into united political force, they may win the Presidential seat.

### **Stranded Minority**

Whether the policy by the majority favours the minority or not, they support because they do not know where to go. The minority ethnic groups are stranded in Nigeria since independence; they are never accommodated in the mainstream of scheme in Nigeria. They are either sub change or not even appointed. For instance, since 30 years, the Chief Justice of Nigeria had always come from the north, recently with the appointment of Justice Samuel Oneghen as the CJN the goal post shifted a little; although, yet to be confirmed by the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria up the time of writing this article. Nigerian federalism is like a chicken standing on one leg; or like a limping old man. Is the minority groups perceived as less human or inferior given their status as such? Nor the rights and privileges conferred on the citizens of the majority groups differs constitutionally?

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<sup>6</sup>Vasquez, J. *The War Puzzle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 p 11

<sup>7</sup>Hansel, P. "Charting a Course of Conflict: Territorial Issues and Inter-State Conflicts, 1816 – 1992". *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, London: Routledge, 1996. p 46 - 49.

<sup>8</sup>Babara, H. (eds), *The New Regionalism Implication for Global Development and International Security*. Helsinki:: UNU, World Institute for Development Research, 1994 p 8

<sup>9</sup>Kristof, Ladis K. C, "The nature of Frontiers and Boundaries" *Annals of Association of American Geographers (AAAG)*, Vol. 49, 1959 p 278

Apart from GoodLuck Jonathan who became President either covertly or overtly from the minority, such exalted seat have not been man by a Southern minority, an injustice perpetrated on the minority.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Nigeria would have been one of the greatest country in the world, but for ethnic rulers who call themselves leaders. If the issue of marginalization of the minority is not address quickly, then the country is putting its finger in its anus to smell. Minority are the blessing of Nigeria, as such should be treated as the goose that lay the golden egg. Communication revolution has unearth so much that had been hidden from the masses in the time past. Social media have turn the globe into a network of gossip and information stream.

Quality leader is the answer to this imbalance and lopsided political practice. A good leader would mold, galvanize and organize the Nigerian state into master piece that would not know Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Ijaw or Ibibio; but the citizen of Nigeria. Good leadership emphasis citizenship as against indiginship; sees Nigeria as a collective entity, not as a personal empire to milk fortunes; view ethic relationship with some level of mutual respect and attitude of 'live and let live'.

The ethnic composition is not the problem of Nigeria, but the inability of the leadership to cement and unite those considered to kith and kin; for instance, Modakeke versus Ife, Aguleri versus Umeleri, Ebom versus Ebijakara, Ediba versus Usumutong; Ugep versus Idomi, and Nko versus Mkpani etc. As Father Mathew succinctly observed, why do people place more emphasis on “indiginship rather citizenship”? The answer to this question would affirm the earlier probing of presumptions that leadership failure is responsible for this fragility of Nigeria. Arising from the foregoing, Father Kuka submit as thus:

Federal character and quota systems know the face of the indigene. They don't know the citizen. It is one of the contradiction of the Nigerian situation<sup>10</sup>.

And;

Effort towards nation building need to be propped up through legislation and people oriented programmes aimed at reducing or narrowing friction between groups and ensuring that all citizens have equal right as well as equal opportunity.

Nigerian federalism is nothing more than a laboratory test run that may succeed or fail. As a trained historian, the evidences that abound from inter group relations in Nigeria, since its emergence as a nation-state state in October 1, 1960. The resonance of ethnic consciousness, agitations for self-determination is a recurring decimal in recent times than any other since the Nigerian Civil War.

Finally, convocation of National Sovereign Conference would answer some of the national questions bothering the Nigerian State.

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<sup>10</sup>Sa'ad Abubakar “The Challenges of Nation Building: Which Way Nigeria? Op. cit. Ochereome, Nnanna, People and Politics (oputa: Who's an indigene) Vanguard, October 29, 2001, p. 25