

## **Culture, Religion and National Identity Question in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

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**N**igeria is an independent nation that experienced violent conflicts emanating from multi-cultural and religious diversified nomenclature. The nexus between culture, religion, and national identity were examined and the paper presented the historical background that caused imbalances created by the marriage between different sections that formed Nigeria. The study revealed that national identity in Nigerian was an attempt to produce unity in diversity despite the socio-cultural differences. Moreover, this created more conflicts and presented difficulties to national unity and peaceful co-existence through the lens of religious sentiments and culturally motivated identities. However, the paper recommended that national identity can be realized through an improved civic culture; understanding, respecting, and accepting differences occasioned by socio-cultural and religious diversity, constitutional amendment to adopt single citizenship and the development of institutions and mechanisms that address poverty, economic equity, political inclusiveness, national above sectional attitudes and nationalism.

**Keywords:** *Culture, Religion, Colonialism, Ethnic group, National identity*

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### **Background to the Study**

Before the advent of British colonialism, what constitute Nigeria today were over 300 independent ethnic groups, having their own culture, religion and socio-political identities. However, colonialists brought together these different cultural groups under one political arrangement and named it “Nigeria” (Osimen, Akinyemi and Samuel, 2013). Colonialists attempt to integrate Nigeria between 1946 and 1954 created ethnic and sectional disputes, strife, fears and doubts which threw a shadow of protracted complications into post-colonial Nigeria. In order to achieve its purpose and make them reside in harmony, the colonialists presented and gave them a different culture and social values and painted what they met as outdated or obsolete, which must be rejected and substituted with western “cultural philosophy”. This action by the colonialists particularly from 1914-1954 initiated ethnic and sectional disharmony and creates doubts which launched a line of prolonged uncertainties into post-colonial Nigeria. In order to attain its objectives and make them cohabit peacefully and in unity, the colonialist entrusted them with different cultures and social values. They gave them the impression that what they had was obsolete and must be replaced with European “Ethnic Philosophy”.

The Federal Constitution of Nigeria between 1954 and 1966 also failed to create a stable, just and participatory socio-political order such as the structural imbalances and inequalities among the diverse ethnic-religious groups. Essentially, the lopsided nature of Nigeria's federal set-up generated and ignored the question of unequal cultural representation and resultant effect was that the colonialists not only set the stage for future developmental inequalities, but they also nurtured religious resentments and hindered open and honest conversations that could have dealt with conflict hotbeds long before independence (Ijagbemi, 1992; Sulaiman, 2016; Turaki, 2014).

Since independence, however, one of the most challenging tasks confronting the Nigerian state is the issue of national identity. Rather than cooperating and uniting, the over 300 ethnic identity nationalities in Nigeria have found themselves in unhealthy competition and rivalry for most of their post-independence life (Gbemisola, 2012). The relationship between the different nationalities that constitute Nigeria have tilted more on religious sentiments, sectional interest and cultural identity than national cooperation; each cultural nationality strife to have its belief and dominance over others and where this was not possible, religious sentiment is employed to consolidate on political disparity.

Generations appear to differ sharply over the importance of national customs and traditions. Although, the experiences of both the old and new generations of people now known as Nigeria does not seem to sustain history claim that Nigeria has been a nation but the country's history, perhaps, may be understood in the context of its ethno-sectional, cultural, and religious diversities, features that associate with sectional subdivisions within societies of which Nigeria is among. Moreover, there is one critical task faced while trying to promote Nigeria's national identity. Many founding fathers such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikwe, and scholars believe that Nigeria is yet to be a nation, but a nation in the making (Bamidele, 2015). Awolowo in 1947 once said Nigeria was not a nation but an

expression; Tafawa Balewa in 1948 said it was never the intention of Nigerians to be one because they have different history, religious beliefs, culture and do not show any sign of willingness to become one but it is a British ideology to make them one; Ahmadu Bello, when the motion for independence was moved, said there was never a Nigeria but a collection of different communities different in outlook and mode of life. What perhaps looks to have passed for nationalism in the days of the anti-colonial struggle appears to be no more than a desire for self-determination by many sub national groups.

This study moreover captures a foundational misalignment that raised questions about having a national identity in Nigeria. The concepts of culture and religion, perhaps, ought to be used to empower, defend and protect disenfranchised voices, a situation that should have the potential for national consciousness to shift the discourse away from marginalized people as subjects, but instead the narrators of their own story. The challenge posed by the subject matter is the manner at which extreme narratives on various religious and cultural biases are being perpetuated to further create division in the country. Nigeria may not have been a nation created with a collective identity, but as a nation, Nigerians are brought together by fate. Therefore, there is a need to fashion out a way to bring different cultures and religions together for the good of the majority. It appears it would be difficult to satisfy everybody but as the saying goes, “few would have their say but the majority would and should have their way”.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted historical, analytical, expository and critical methods. Concepts related to culture, religion and national identity are explained and analyzed in order to sharpen their meanings for better understanding. The paper also used historical and expository methods, which enabled the study to look back, compare, evaluate and synthesize both the old and new Nigeria cultures. Therefore, a theory was adopted to give more direction to the subject matter under consideration.

### **Statement of the Problem**

National identity is a philosophical perception that unites and promotes cultural values, disposition and beliefs that fortifies religious cohesion and tolerance among the citizen of a nation. It is meant to be a universal unifying entity to propagate and connect ideas of different backgrounds, personalities and socio-political groups and orientation for the advancement and peaceful coexistence of the people in a nation.

However, Nigeria does not seem to have an identity that is national; rather the different regions that the colonialists amalgamated as one country continued to sustain their different sectional identities which were a catalyst to negative biases through the machinery of differences in cultural backgrounds, beliefs and religious sentiments. This redefined the county's purported national identity into one that had turned to ethno-religious compartmentalization.

Therefore, Nigeria needs to do more as a nation to achieve national rebirth of a collective identity. It might be devastating should the country fail to have a sincere and an all-inclusive national identity, especially if Nigeria would have to address its nationhood from the mirage

of forced-identity and many cultural and religious sentiments that threatens the peaceful co-existence of its citizens.

### **Cultural and Religious Schism and National Identity**

National identity in Nigeria is addressed with its accompanying challenges by different scholars. Okenyi, Ibenwa, & Ngele (2018) for instance see colonialism as the factor for the challenge of having a National Identity in Nigeria. To them, colonialism has through the inconvenience of indirect rule, brought discrete and minor communities under the rulership of the dominant groups and accordingly, created different identity and absence of a national feeling. The various identities and cultures of these ethnic groups become apparent from this reaction against domination. As argued by Onyibor (2016), ethnic and regional clashes will in generally arise the moment a group see that they are being marginalized from access to what they consider to be their right, be they power, economic, political, financial, managerial, religion etc. Each ethnic group in Nigeria, as opined by Onyibor feels dissatisfied and struggle for an identity of its own.

Moreover, the subjugation of the minor ethnic groups in 1914 amalgamation now became a challenge in managing the politics of inclusion in access to public appointments and the control of valued resources and wealth. These excluded ethnic groups subsumed under regions immediately after Nigeria's independence and began to agitate for their own identity. These agitations were linked with political representation as well as access to and control of resources. These struggle for instance in the Niger Delta communities often take on the materialist interpretation in terms of control over oil revenue. Other identities and self-determination struggles are over land, state control, power etc. All these, obviously, affect the Nigeria's national identity with further complications in the practice where minorities at the centre (federal level) are sometimes majority at the regional (state and local) levels. Therefore, this similar struggles at the center over the fear of domination by small but dominant groups and denial of self-determination from the regional and local identities has further widens the disparities between the different sections in the nation; a situation that threatens social stability in Nigeria particularly between the north and south.

More so, Nigeria is bedevilled with enormous challenges of cultural differences, ethnicity, and religious extremism. The security situation in the country threatens social stability and brought to fore the question of national identity more significantly since the return to democracy in May 1999. The period from 1999 to 2018 provided a good path for more challenges of having a national identity because of the manifestation of religious contestations and consciousness in the control of the machinery of government. This scenario has brought a high spate of violence and disturbances through different patterns of exclusive and domination of few major ethnic groups over large minority groups who have consolidated their grip on state institutions to the exclusion of others (Osimen, Akinyemi, & Samuel, 2013). The manifestation of ethnic identity instead of national identity is articulated in all aspects of democratic practice in Nigeria beginning from elections to appointments and location of projects where some ethnic/cultural groups are placed on the advantage against others.

Obviously, various ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria often than not group and regroup under religious or cultural platforms and invariably pose a threat to the social stability of the country because any favouritism to a group of any stand draws large resistance from other groups. Looking at the violent dimensions to the challenges of national identity, Mavalla (2014) observed that issues of violence were resurfacing with terrible consequences where conflicts related to religion, communal, and ethnicity have been on the increase with a challenge to social stability. The central argument in some of these conflicts is allegations of state support or favour to further support the hegemonic advantage of some cultural groups over others. The frequent outbreak of sectional violence is a function of the fear of domination, where the security of one cultural or religious group is the destruction of the other. Thus, fear in cultural interactions has even produced at different periods paramilitary units such as the O' dua People's Congress, which is the youth wing of Afenifere, the Bakasi Boys in the Eastern States, and Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta. These militia groups are not too unconnected with religious and cultural conscious groups like Afenifere Campaign of the Yoruba nation, the Arewa People's Congress and Arewa Consultative Forum for the old north, the Ohanze of Ibos, the Niger Delta Forum, and the Middle Belt Forum. These identities further marked the varied cultural definition of Nigeria long after the amalgamation of 1914.

The persistence of these centrifugal forces continued to challenge the national unity in the country. The phenomenon of militias accompanying ethnocultural identities has sometimes precipitated violent conflicts and the state of socio-political instability. They are often used in open violence at the slightest opportunity to having dominance, economic gain or political advantage during elections where contending political candidates employ their services to advance their quest for culturally sentimental political control. Generally, ethnocultural competitions in Nigeria are patent with the struggle for more participation in national affairs, economic prospects, and socio-political resources.

### **Challenges to Having National Identity**

Nigeria is undoubtedly in need of a national rebirth that would give room for all section of the country to have a broad and unique national consciousness towards a liberalized society. The nation is gasping for a breath of nationhood and togetherness in the space of the lingering effect of "mixed" cultural and religious sectionalism that have beleaguered Nigeria's psychological orientation towards national development. However, how would the county remedy or rescue the Nigerian state from this cultural onslaught which has debased and made her a stranger in her own sphere? There are explicit traits or value systems peculiar to Nigeria, which could be found in every part of the country prior to the arrival of the Europeans. However, it is expected that the country lifts any of these traits or value systems, and inculcate them to align with the Nigerian traditional psyche and cultural beliefs.

Nigeria at best was a creation of the European colonialists and it was made up of over 300 different groups before European colonialism. Each of these groups, despite being semi-independent had its language, marriage structure, the pattern of name-giving and initiation into adulthood. Also, they had their unique festivals, burial rites, customs, and religious

beliefs. Then came Islam, the religion of the Arabs, which through conquest, had entrenched itself in most northern parts of the country, and thereby displaced some local customs. The European colonialism on its part introduced Christianity to the country together with its social customs, beliefs, and ethical system and forced them on the people (Ijagbemi, 1992; Sulaiman, 2016; Turaki, 2014)

In effect, there are, at present, in Nigeria, three unique strands of societies battling for the ownership of the Nigeria soul. These are the customary African communalist, which is now neither indigenous nor foreign; the religious Arab/Muslim culture, particularly in most northern parts of the country; and the dynamic independent Europe Christian. At best, none of these cultural and religious components could be viewed as the credible and authentic religious-culture of Nigeria and thus it is practically inconceivable to lift any of them and adjust to the current Nigerian circumstances as an authentic national religious-identity.

Initially, the theoretical independence of Europe Christian can scarcely fit in with Nigeria's socio-cultural course of action because of inherent communal and kinship ties among the general population. Similarly, it will be hard for the religious and political arrangement of Arab-Muslim culture to fit into the mainstream secular and democratic institutions prevailing throughout the nation. Furthermore, it will be hard to return Nigeria to her pre-colonial social setting since a large portion of the sections that make up that society is no longer there, for example, the close-knit social arrangements and human relations just as a non-specialized and mechanical social and economic structure.

Nowadays, a human culture involves not simply somewhere in the range of a couple of people inside a particular geographical land area, but in addition, it contains a huge number of people or groups from both far and near, who might be associated distinctly by a system of optic strands. This implies that instead of a homogenous or mono-cultural system of the traditional society, we currently have a decent variety of people groups with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds all influencing and impacting one another.

How then or at what point can Nigeria return to her original root? For a certain school of thought, the main route is for the nation to close the entirety of its entryways and windows and not permit any western influence from outside to taint or foul it. At the end of the day, it is for Nigeria to turn its back totally on everything foreign. This position was amplified by a former Nigerian Minister, Mazi Mbonu Ojike, who preached on the representation of a complete dismissal of outside societies (Njoku, 2013). He was a crusader against copying the European lifestyle, the omnipresent nearness in Africa, and demanded that Africans should placate themselves with what they have. As a down to earth showing of his pledge to indigenous culture, Ojike, like some other African nationalists, discarded their foreign names and would not wear foreign fabrics, and directed against worshipping any foreign God.

The real expectation of these commendations is aimed at driving Africa to the Promised Land, despite any inadequacies, it might be appropriate to alert against the danger of detaining Africa to her past for the sake of cultural or spiritual restoration. As it was, while

dismissing foreign cultural obligations, Nigerians should at the same time resist the temptation of throwing away the baby with the bathwater. We as a nation ought to perceive the shortcomings or constraints of the common society, its cleavages and separations. For example, the cultural and religious diversities that is so deep and has become the country's heritage by commission or omission must be diffused into national religion-cultural development. Accordingly, while declining to be sandwiched by foreign cultures, Nigerians should realize that it is not everything that originates from inside that is great, while it is not everything that originates from outside that is awful or bad. It is to their greatest advantage hence, to be sufficiently shrewd to making the right judgment at what is best for the majority of the populace.

### **Channeling a Way Forward**

Nigeria State should as a matter of national emergency go back to the drawing board to propose policies and ideas that would drive national ethos and thus make it a pride for the majority of her populace to imbibe as one indivisible whole. What should constitute the way forward must be seen to be nationalistic and without prejudice. For instance, the country must have traditional and foreign cultural values in relations with the exigencies of the day. The adjustment of these values will yield an arrangement of cultural and social qualities that are peculiar but incongruent with other climes. In like manner, citizens of Nigeria must dispose of or kick against cultures or religious standards or practices that could render them progressively frail. The country should, however, be able to draw strength from the tradition of his ancestors, provided he does so within the ambit of the new dynamics.

In this way, Nigeria should not see herself as operating on an island, nor a means, but an end. Therefore, she should absorb parts of western cultural qualities which are dynamic in nature. However, Nigeria in this manner needs to strike a necessary balance between her indigenous cultures and borrowed culture to stand with current global realities. Nigeria and at best every sectional cleavage need not placate herself with her brilliant past and wonderful culture. While it is a true submission, the continent should move from such notions that it was a section that moves for the independence or that a particular region is best known for her educational attainments while another is known for crafting and business. These are lovely stories; however, they are insufficient to take Nigeria to its desired developmental stage. What Nigeria and particularly many ethnic groups in the country need are to empower the most of the teaming populace and address the issues of national consciousness. In a study of Negritude, for instance, Frantz Fanon in Prior (2007) contends that a national culture is not an old stories, nor a theoretical populism that trusts it can find the general population's actual nature. A national culture is the entire group of endeavours made by the people in the circle of thought to depict, legitimize, and acclaim the activity through which that individual has made itself and keeps itself in presence.

Therefore, Nigeria's national identity was not subjugated in light of the fact that her history, language, religion, culture were not inferior but Nigeria was dominated on the grounds that she had predominantly aligned too much to “divisibility syndrome” without recourse to her past and rich cultural heritage. To be free from this remote mastery, Nigeria needs to create

proper innovation fit to her cultural and religious conditions. For instance, Nigeria's traditional societies have for long operated a system of thoughts largely based on religious and mystical underpinnings. It was a system of thoughts, where every causation, every occurrence, was linked to one superior spirit or the other. Nothing occurred by some coincidence or accident. There was no evident method, laws, or hypothesis, establishing why certain events occurred in one way or the other. In such a spiritualist religious circumstance or lack of elucidation of the real world, it turned out to be incredibly troublesome, if not impossible, to build up a logical idea or levelheaded endeavour that is fundamental for the present improvement or advancement. All things considered, Nigeria was relegated to the dustbin of history as an underdeveloped nation whose people were to a great extent dependent on other nations for their very own survival and presence. Therefore, what kinds of cultural and religious improvement should Nigeria then have? Since no two cultural environments are the same, Nigeria should develop her own indigenous, national cultural and religious traditions that will drive home emancipation of national identity consciousness and development.

In other words, Nigeria should develop a national identity and orientation detached from sectional or divisive religious and cultural rascality but one that suits her philosophical viewpoint as a nation. For example, traditional Nigeria perceives itself not distinct or in contradiction with nature. It considers itself as part of the totality of nature that is in the dynamic process of the movement, though on a higher plane. In other words, religion and culture in Nigeria must be used to serve man. It must be used to improve the welfare of man and his environment. Culture and religion must be in harmony in identifying with the national pride, and so it must enhance, improve, and develop Nigeria's national identity. Lack of national identity has not only caused social disintegration of our culture and our tradition; it has introduced foreign "religion" and the eradication of our cultural ethos. Besides, our religion, be it foreign or adopted should recognize the corporate existence of Nigeria, the bond of filial relationship that ties them together, and ensure that no one is left behind in the national enterprise. For Nigerian citizens, the universe is never an outside phenomenon. It is "inherent", inside, an integral part of the system. Accordingly, cultural and religious tenets must not be imposed from outside because an acquired culture or religion resembles a borrowed article of clothing. It will never fit the borrower. It will either be curiously large or under-sized. In this way, in the walk towards national identity rebirth, the religion appropriate to Nigeria must, therefore, take expression or develop out of the people's cultural milieu. It must spring from inside. It must be a spiritual endeavour that is indigenous and which recognizes the realities of its history as well as its present environment.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The greatest challenge confronting the Nigerian nation today is the lack of national identity occasioned by the desire for cultural domination as well as the introduction of religious cleavages that berates national consciousness. Since independence, Nigeria has been battling with having a national identity, and despite efforts made by subsequent administrations in addressing this phenomenon caused by the amalgamation of a different culture to form one indivisible country by the colonialists, it has been a recurrent religious conflict and socio-



political ills that have constantly dragged the developmental drive of Nigeria. Obviously, the resulting effect has been a dysfunctional system that is far below targeted expectations, as cultural biases and religious connotations still most of our national life.

The study therefore recommended that national identity should be realized with the improvement of a supportive civic culture: understanding, respecting, and tolerating differences occasioned by socio-cultural and religious diversity. Unity is possible when components of civility consolidate with a balanced, harmonious, and tolerant society. Unity is another of those hard-to-describe civil culture but our protected and formative key decisions lie between the accompanying pair of ideas, among which we need to settle on the correct decision, or get the correct blend when it is present. It is true that we are a nation that was created to fail from inception, (it is apparent that the tenets of Nigeria's creation as a nation state was quite faulty and cannot thrive,) but this paper further recommends that we should as a nation imbibe civility in our national philosophical ethos to cultivate and focus on center-state relations and not power sharing. We must reject the notion of being a regional driven state to that of the nation-state (patriotism). Also, we should focus as a nation less on promoting ethnicity but have a positive attitude as one indivisible people with loyalty to the center. The citizens should also be Nigerian in our orientation rather than being indigenes without citizenship rights; have efficient representativeness at the Federal level; cultivate the spirit of nation- building that would foster cohesive national development rather than leveraging on the freedom to religion to propagate disruptive religious sentiments.

Furthermore, the study recommended that a Nigerian citizen must transfer their loyalty from sectional autonomy to state institutions to govern, direct, and drive their collective national growth. The constitution must be amended for the citizenship rights in places of residence rather than citizenship rights only in the state of birth. This must be made justifiable to effectively reflect this proposal which recommends that the state of origin concept be abolished and everybody automatically becomes the indigene of the State he is now staying and earning his livelihood.

Finally, the paper recommended that development of institutions and mechanisms that address poverty, economic equity, and the doctrine of sincere political inclusiveness must be encouraged to promote national attitudinal consciousness and a change towards national culture instead of sectional-driven identity. Furthermore, minorities and other oppressed groups in the society must be allowed and encouraged to promote their interests through hands-on participation in national and grassroots engagements within the limits of democratic standards.

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