

Nation Building in A Polarized Society: An Anatomy of Nigeria's Leadership Egoistic Tendencies

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Abstract

This study examines nation-building amidst polarisation in Nigeria. Nigeria's egoistic leadership style has further polarised the Nigerian state, which undermines nation-building. Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic nationalities, is confronted with the problem of cleavages, which has segmented the state due to its inherent political, religious and tribal complexities. The main objective of the study is to interrogate and ascertain whether Nigeria's leadership is responsible for the more polarised nature of the state, making it difficult for nation-building. The study also investigates the factors driving egoistic leadership within the socio-cultural and political praxis of the Nigerian federal system. Anchoring the analysis on the integration and nepotism theory. The study employed qualitative content analysis, based on secondary sources of data. The study analogy affirmed that leadership is a critical factor for nation-building; however, the nature and character of Nigeria's egoistic leadership negate nation-building and further deepens the country's polarisation. Egoistic leadership, as the study contends, is the form of leadership that privatises, personalises and uses ethno-religious sentiments for self-aggrandisement. The study recommends, among other things, discouraging ethnicity as a parameter in politics and thinking of commonality of Nigeria as an entity for speedy development.

Keywords: *Nation-building, Leadership, Polarization, Ethnic nationality, National development, Ethnocentrism*

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Background to the Study

Nation building in Nigeria began after independence in 1960, when Obafemi Awolowo expressed his fear that Nigeria was merely a geographical expression; however, the efforts of the founding fathers and contemporary leaders of Nigeria appear to be bleak. Gamber (2005) and Okeke, Ikeh and Oku (2022) see nation building as a very vital aspect that tends towards forming a political entity with some agreed rules, norms and principles of a state, with common citizenship and commonality. It is about building institutions that are symbols of a political entity, with such institutions as the civil service, bureaucratic institutions, the economy, the social system and the civil society organisation. Building a nation involves fostering a shared sense of purpose and destiny, creating a collective identity among its people.

The fear of the founding fathers who expressed that Nigeria is a mere geopolitical entity and requires that a nation be built, which has to do with bringing together tangible and intangible threads that can hold the political entity together, towards a determined purpose and goal. The drive and process of developing national consciousness among individuals and groups to cultivate a sense of love for their country and to accept their commitment to a nation-state has been frustrated by the political leaders intentionally and by omission, while the idea of a nation building has helped many nations and regions to become economically, socially and culturally viable and united, some countries have used nation building and nation integration mechanism to improve their social cohesion and deepen development, but Nigeria lags behind since independence, and has lived in a state of doubt and uncertainty, mistrust among groups, creating cleavages among ethnic and religious cliques.

Obiozo (2015) contends that the vital issue responsible for what has become a dream of nation-building and national development is that many countries have made massive progress and have influenced relatively reliable political, economic, and durable national identities. It is a fact that nation-building is seen by most groups, nations and leaders as a deliberate effort that is a long and challenging process, which requires leaders alongside the citizens. The Nigerian political and ethnic groups and leaders saw nation-building as an elite agenda and refused to achieve nation-building and national integration by uniting core fabrics and values. First, they have avoided a conscious socialisation process and cultivation of a national identity, that sense of oneness and belonging, based on shared values, tradition, history and aspiration. Secondly, the Nigerian elites have not been able to establish institutions and laws of governance, which requires moulding communal relationships between the leaders and citizens in a drive toward service delivery. Thirdly, the characteristics of the participation of Nigerian people in the governance process are tilted by choosing a system that serves them best, selecting their leaders and actively playing the functions of decision-making (Kagame, 2020).

Real nation-building necessitates economic transformation and acceleration, enabling citizens to anticipate significant improvements in their lives. As required, nation-building necessitates establishing the right climate and tools for economic development for the whole nation. It is also expected that nation-building can only be internally generated and driven. It cannot be achieved from outside. Hence, Gambari (2008) contends that nation-building does not originate by accident but rather from a deliberate effort by men and women with a focused vision and resolve.

Since 1914, the amalgamation of 250 ethnic nationalities, which was the midwife to the birth of a country, which cannot be easily divided, started the first step to nation-building by enshrining the federal character principle in our constitution, but this effort of nation-building has not deleted the mentality of separate ethnic nations into a strong single nation with an unquestionable loyalty to the nation.

A trace of the fact also shows that Nigeria's political elites, both in the military era and the civilian regimes, once in power, align and split along ethnic origin, religion and region. As a result, the Nigerian state is bedevilled with inter-elite rivalries, suspicion, hostility and conflict among elites to the detriment of building a sustainable national identity.

Nigeria truly is a mere geographical expression characterised by ethnicity, religion, region, insecurity, separatist agitation, constitutional problems, a call for political restructuring of the system, corruption and leadership problems. The hallmark of all these variables is poor political leadership and corruption (Okolo, 2025), which is also the main reason why nation-building and national integrity efforts are complex to achieve in Nigeria. The study focuses on nation-building in Nigeria in a polarised ethnocentric society, where leadership challenges align with cleavages and corruption, with the belief that a focused leadership free from corruption is capable of driving the Nigerian state towards a national identity outlook devoid of tribalism, religion or region.

Methodology and Scope

The study was based on secondary sources, such as textbooks, journals, internet materials on the review of literature, magazines, etc., through a systemic qualitative content analysis. The emphasis in this research is on building a polarised society. An anatomy of Nigeria's egoistic leadership tendencies.

Conceptual Clarification

It is important to clarify some of the terms used in this study such, as nation-building, leadership, corruption, ethnicity.

Nation/Nation-building

To comprehend nation-building, it is essential to define what constitutes a country. A country is a substantial collective of people residing in a relatively defined territory, with sufficient commonalities—such as language, ethnicity, religion, and shared history—to see themselves as unique (Johnson, 1966:79; Nein, 2018).

Nein (2018) proposed five fundamental features of a nation: a homogeneous cultural entity defined by unique traditions, social practices, moral beliefs, interpersonal relationships, language, culinary mythologies, and temperament traits. It is a group characterized by a distinct identity that shapes their personality, bound to a particular territory, their terrestrial abode, with members connected through blood relations, intermarriage, kinship, and common ancestry. The members possess a shared comprehension of their origins and historical development, along with a sense of collective belonging.

Consequently, Renan (1882, 1971) in Nein (2018), perceives a country as a soul, a spiritual essence; one aspect is rooted in the past, while the other exists in the present. The former pertains to a shared legacy of memories, while the latter signifies mutual consent, an aspiration for cohabitation, and the determination to sustain and optimise the collective inheritance. ... The motion, like the person, is the culmination of extensive labour, sacrifice, and dedication throughout history. Essential for nation formation is the existence of a community of shared meaning among its members, enabling effective understanding across many channels of communication. A shared language, although not essential, is undoubtedly beneficial for this purpose, and a common understanding is crucial and needed.

Nigeria has been referred to by many scholars as a mere geographical entity; especially Obafemi Awolowo saw the political boundaries of Nigeria as artificial, being the outcome of complex transactions with economic, commercial, and other motives expressed and pursued by European powers at the 1885 Berlin Conference and the subsequent legal statutes. Since Nigeria is not a nation but a geographical expression, the need to create and form a nation became imperative and relevant; hence, the nation-building agenda.

The concept of nation-building is of paramount importance due to its significance in the development of people and material resources. There are several definitions of nation-building. Nation-building is a deliberate endeavour to unite individuals inside a country to attain a shared goal (Mbakwem, 2009). Birabel and Ibekwe (2016) assert that nation-building is the robust and gradual sustainability of a nation that guarantees its functional lifespan for the collective benefit of its populace. Mezieobi (2016) asserts that nation-building is the collective endeavour of individuals within a substantial group, united by a dominant force or mutual accord, to reside in a defined territory or share a common solidarity or national consciousness. They are the driving force persistently working to unify diverse regions or countries within their communities, transitioning from a relatively comfortable level of development to an improved quality of life in all aspects.

It is agreed that nation-building is the process of moulding, constructing and structuring a national identity, involving the authority of the state. Therefore, nation-building is focused on the unification of the various sectors of people with the state to make it appear a political site, stable, viable and durable over time. Rokkan (1978) contends the state in Europe, where the traditional pre-modern states were isolated communities with naïve and parochial cultures at the grass roots of the society and far away from each other, with an aloof state structure at the top and centre, largely was lively with collecting revenue (taxes) and maintaining law and order. It was a nation-building drive in which the two spheres, the “bottom” and “top”, were brought together in intimate relations with other people.

Why Nation-Building in Nigeria?

The political boundaries of Nigeria are confirmed to be artificial due to long-standing and complex transactions with European powers, motivated by economic, commercial, and political interests during the 1885 Berlin Conference and subsequent legal and political statutes (Oтите, 2000). The artificiality of Nigeria's social boundaries is therefore accepted. The

cartographic exercise in carrying Nigeria's spatial boundaries did not allow natural socio-cultural boundaries; hence, Nigeria is partially artificial (Otite, 2000).

Otite argued for the most comprehensive account of ethnic pluralism in Nigeria. He argued that Hoffman (1974) enumerated Nigerian languages and, by this language criterion, indicated that there are just under 400 (about 394) ethnic linguistic groupings in Nigeria (Otite, 2000:30). An ethnically plural society such as Nigeria is, therefore, a sociological aggregate consisting of distinct cultures, groups and institutions which interact within and make claims on the resources of the wider encapsulating society (Otite, 2000).

Nigeria's tripolar ethnic characteristics Southern Nigeria is where the Yoruba and the Igbo live. Two of the major ethnic groups are based on the first to embrace Western education before the Hausa-Fulani, who, after long, drawn-out resistance, accepted Western education. A majority of the minority ethnic groups trailed behind these three major ethnic groups in Nigeria with regard to forward educational acceptance, which destabilised, even if for good, our cultural practices driven by Nigeria's indigenous education. Today, in Nigeria, despite the multiplicity of Nigerian mother tongues (languages), the emphasised areas of languages to be learnt in schools and used in business and official transactions are those of the three major ethnic groups known as “WAZOBIA”, in addition to a foreign language – English. The three major ethnic groups have excelled in politics in Nigeria; this is indisputable, even if that excellence is in ethnicised politics.

Consequently, the propensity of a good number of the minority ethnic groups to cluster politically (and) linguistically Around the majorly ethnic groups have given Nigeria a tripolar ethnic characteristic (Meziebi, 2014:12).

Ethnicity and Politics

Politics is intrinsically divisive; it is characterised by conflicts and confrontations as individuals and groups mobilise to obtain, wield, or exert power within a specific society (Otite, 2000:86). While ethnic groupings do not serve as the primary units for political governance in Nigeria, ethnicity still significantly influences the articulation and formation of interest groups, in conjunction with religion. This variation is mostly due to two main factors. Politics and government are considered mechanisms for distributing patronage, therefore fostering alliances and support from essential sectors of Nigerian society, as well as directly allocating jobs, development chances, and privileges. Secondly, access to political power and to governance is an insurance against dominance or tyranny of one ethnic group by another. It serves as a method for establishing individual and collective superiority in Nigeria (Otite, 2000:86).

Consequently, vested interests in the ethnic governance of that organisation are referred to as political parties, which are transparent and direct entities competing for prominent positions in national politics. The higher the number of ethnic members, the better the chances of having a place in the order of things. This point helps to explain the inflation of the census figure and the doubts about its accuracy and acceptability and the rejection of the 1964 and 1973 elections

and the scepticism and the crisis of the 1983 election based on the census. Smaller ethnic groups which are disadvantaged in terms of numbers and lack of important national elites and political protections (Otite, 2000:86).

Hence, religion and ethnic conflict are the basis of Nigerian society, making it difficult for nation-building for better public administration. Political integration and national identity are the dual facets of nation-building in nations. To achieve this, it is essential to establish political connections between individuals and the state that transcend ethnic divisions and include both ethnic majorities and minorities in a comprehensive power structure. When people are linked to the government via authority and support, it cultivates a national community with a cohesive identity that promotes nation-building.

Okibe (2022) argued that Nigeria is seen with various cleavages; diverse culture, religion, and ethnicity. Language, climate, occupation and education. Though this diversity was seen as a strength, it is now faced with ethno-religious upheavals that are now a threat to our unity and peaceful existence. The very common phenomenon now is that religion and ethnicity are invoked to curry favour or to outwit one another in politics. To discuss nation building or national integration, there is a need to downplay religion in politics and governance. Recently, different groups and sects infighting is common and occurs among the ranks of Muslims and Christians. As a result, ethno-religious diversity is more and more polarised in Nigerian political recruitment and selection. Okibe saw that allowing the dominance of one particular religion in national leadership has created a type of politics that encourages indignation and segregation (Okibe, 2022). McCoy (2018). Posits that heavily polarised societies make democracies vulnerable. In such societies opposers are aligned to be political adversaries and also act as competitors against each other, at certain times negotiating, while in some cases they are seen as an enemy needed to be crushed, such as in the case of Nigeria.

A study on polarised democracies in some parts of the world saw polarised societies divided into political tribes, affecting democratic ethics and transparencies, and this harms democracies by creating in- and out-groups in the society. (McCoy, 2018).

In this tribal dynamic, such as in Nigeria, all the sides see other groups as outgroups with very serious distrust, bias and enmity, making it appear winner takes it all or a perception of 'if you win, I lose', growing, seeing other political parties and supporters as a threat and making it difficult for nation building in the case of Nigeria (McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The study employs two theories as tool of analysis; The national integration theory and nepotism theory

Baky (2015) elucidated the theoretical framework of national integration via a perspective centred on the "national integration school of thought regarding nation-building". The fundamental premise of this school is that the objective of nation-building is the unity of the populace. This entails unifying the Nigerian populace, regardless of their ethnicities, languages, historical contexts, gender, and other distinctions, under a single identity,

proclaiming, 'I am a Nigerian,' rather than identifying as Yoruba, Hausa, or Izon. The proponent perceives this integration as nation-building and aligns it with the concept of national integration. This ideology sees unity as an essential need for nation-building, particularly in Nigeria and other African nations. The primary concern is national interest, rather than ethnic, personal, or cultural interests.

The second theoretical framework to guide this study is on the theory of ethnicity, the nepotism theory by Bangura (1994), when he argued that people align more on ethnic identities and are not pleased with imposed classifications and identities of other groups. This has been the way man is from the time of antiquity, being linked to language, customs, religion, race and territory. Religion or ethnic awareness, which is an expression of belongingness mainly rooted in human sentiments. In another vein, ethnic or religious cleavages are more important to individuals or groups, and this makes disputes unavoidable in plural societies. Bangura posts that identity is one of the bases of human behaviours that encourage nepotism when groups are already conscious of their identity and feel the need to protect it. Though, there is a major weakness of this argument: it cannot account for the difficulties of nepotism and ethnic consciousness but the concept of nepotism and ethnic and religious consciousness. As it does not explain how such consciousness is created, however, it changes over time. Bangura contends why it changes in intensity among cleavages or groups of folks of regular clusters. And the reason why folks build and defend relationships that cut across ethnic boundaries. On the whole, the theory of nepotism is suitable for nation building in a polarised society like Nigeria. Since Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with a high level of ethnocentrism and sees cleavages formed along religious and ethnic identities, nation building becomes complex.

Nation Building and the Polarised Nigeria: The Plethora of Diversity.

Mezieobi (2014) argued that with 619 ethnic groups in Nigeria, there are bound to be an upsurge of diversities relating to the diverse ethnic groups (Mezieobi, 2014). The diversities include geographical differences, variations in climate and settlement patterns, mother-tongue and dialectical differences, religious differences, political differences, and variations in ancestral history, which create social cleavages.

In the view of Wokocha (1990), in Mezieobi,(2013), the effect of ethnic diversities in Nigeria is necessary and essentially relevant and positive, and the relevant potentials built into them can be utilised to contribute positively to the entire national development of Nigeria but have not materialised in the reality of the Nigeria nation-building project. In the actual contradiction, this array of ethnic differences in Nigeria has continued to be a cog in the wheel of Nigeria's nation-building. In actual fact, the envisaged "unity in diversity" has boomeranged due to strong ethnocentrism in Nigeria's religious and political life. Ethnocentrism is a bane to Nigeria's nation-building and national integration. Ethnic diversities in Nigeria, if positively harnessed, would have made Nigeria a role model, but ethnocentrism is tenaciously held as an inclination of all Nigerians, individual or ethnic groups, to the effect that they see their ways of life as superior to all others that are inferior. This has made it possible for all ethnic groups not to sacrifice their reversed way of life on the altars of nation building and nation integration.

There is the lack or absence of the political leadership's will to ethnicise Nigeria. The syndrome of ethnocentrism and political leadership cadre since independence is busy and composed of people from one ethnic group or the other. The political leadership refused to reason to play down its selfish ethnic interest in the overall bid and need to enthrone nation-building, national integration and commonality in reality. This laid to rest the total commitment to patriotism and the pursuit of nation-building and national integration, which is the main constituent itself, and turned it into a detractor factor for a series of governments and regimes in Nigeria for good governance and efficient public administration and the public goods.

Otite (2000) contends that fear gives rise to ethnicity in plural societies (Otite, 2000). A cursory retrospective assessment into the antecedent of Nigeria shows a preponderance of disintegrative aspects, efforts, inclinations and practices which have lasted till today and have given the feeling that disintegration is a natural endowment but perpetuated by Nigerians themselves after the exit of colonialism. For now, whether we agree or not, disintegration is a fact of life in Nigeria; hence, the idea of nation-building and national integration has become quite elusive at this stage of our nation-building.

Lawal, Akerels and Uthma-Akinhammi (2021) have attributed symbols, language, norms, rituals, values, work ethics and artefacts as major problems of nation-building in Nigeria. Oyelami (2016) noted that there's no one single culture in Nigeria, and the multiplicity of cultures is termed negative, such as creating problems of fear in the community, including loss of empathy, backstabbing, belittling people and sheer anger.

Ukpabi, Unya, and Adaeze (2018) contend that Nigeria has been unfortunate in its leadership, attributing this to a fundamental lack of intellectual rigour in the political ideologies of the nation's founding fathers. Leadership and nation-building have consistently been prioritised both prior to and following independence; however, the unfortunate reality is that Nigeria has yet to attain significant success. This issue is attributable to the fact that governmental regimes have repeatedly succumbed to self-serving political leaders and factions more concerned with private or ethnic interests than the collective welfare of the Nigerian populace.

Corruption exemplifies the failure of leadership in the nation-building of Nigeria. According to Owoye and Bissessai (2012), the resource allocation model of corruption perceives it as the rent-seeking behaviour of businesses attempting to evade the market system, seeing this conduct as a normative aspect of economic activity. The approach entails a dynamic interaction between a government official pursuing rent and a corporate representative.

The obstacles to nation-building in Nigeria mostly stem from the historical legacies of colonial control, which have complicated the process. Colonial governance used a divide-and-rule strategy, partitioning Nigeria into Northern and Southern regions, each with distinct land tenure systems, local government structures, educational frameworks, and judicial systems. The difficulty of socio-economic disparities, a crucial aspect of nation-building, is a need for the average citizen, although it is mostly lacking in Nigeria owing to religious and ethnic divisions.

Moreover, there exists the difficulty of establishing institutions for sustainable democracy and growth. The fundamental elements of institution building include establishing regulations, recruiting individuals with requisite technical proficiency and ethical integrity to assimilate the regulations and execute the organisation's objectives, and guaranteeing that the institution fosters public trust through transparency, equity, and consistency. Nigeria must establish or enhance institutions to attain the national objectives of democratic government and sustainable development. The aforementioned pertains to leadership as a pivotal factor in nation-building, including the human attributes of integrity, honesty, devotion, and competency of the individual leader in a prominent position. The recruiting and performance criteria of our leaders have been inadequate throughout the years, and we do not need leaders who see themselves as advocates for just certain segments of our community. Such an attitude poses a problem to nation-building.

Conclusion

This study on nation-building in a polarised society: An anatomy of Nigeria's egoistic leadership tendencies. The leadership of Nigeria has been striving towards groups and cleavages, thereby making it difficult for nation-building, which has been the drive for nationhood and commonality by the founding fathers, to give room for national consciousness among groups and individuals in the state. Since the efforts at nation-building in 1900, 1914, and 1960 to date, it appears that there is little or no wilful solution to nation-building strides due to poor leadership, corruption, and ethnocentrism in Nigeria. As a result, integration and commonality have failed, giving room to nepotism. This is the reason why Nigeria is dwindling: instead of unity in diversity, a necessary condition for development.

Recommendations

The following recommendations give this study as feasible solutions.

1. For Nigeria to achieve success in nation-building, it is imperative to foster leadership that is dedicated to the rule of law and exemplifies equity and democratic tolerance.
2. A comprehensive shift in mentality is necessary for the Nigerian political elite. The political leadership must demonstrate the will to uphold accountability and combat corruption in the nation; otherwise, all efforts will be futile.
3. There should be conscious and deliberate re-engineering and socialization process of attitude and cultivation of a national identity to create commonality with the aim to evolve oneness and belongingness by the leaders in Nigeria.
4. The leaders and elites should be able to put in place institutions and laws of governance to mould communal relationship among leaders and groups to boost the idea of Nigeria first.
5. The apathy characteristics of participation of Nigerian in governance process should be amended and focus on choosing a system and leaders that are active and interested in the fabrics of Nigeria.

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