

## ETHNIC PLURALISM AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: A STUDY IN HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

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### **Abstract**

*This work examines historical explanation of ethnic pluralism and political development in Africa, using some African states as examples. Historical analytical method is used to address the crux of the research. The work submits that the politicization of ethnic pluralism brought about the evil of ethnicity with its attendant political effects. The work suggests a serious detribalized leadership that has political will as well as ethnic management skills within the context of well-entrenched structural mechanism in different countries for tracking the menace of ethnicity in African continent.*

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### **Introduction**

The universe is dominated by varieties of individual groups who have peculiar but not negative variations from one another. They are distinct and unique variations that are meant to complement one another towards building a peaceful cosmos for mutual interaction, relationship and maximum fulfillment of all. It suffices to state that the unhistoric Hobbesian state of nature does not exist in this situation of complementarity. The variations are not necessarily the ones that could bring contradictions that could warrant application of brute force as a way of galvanizing inter connectedness of variant groups. The ethnic group, no more than 'race' or any other 'non-reality' invented in the contemporary age was not the basis of social organization of the pre-capitalist world.

Ethnic group had no essential place. There are in fact people that do not imply a priori precise qualification (Otite, 2000). These people are organized in spaces that do not always coincide with,

for example, space for matrimonial exchanges, for long – distance trade, for eventual centralization of surplus, for political organization, for the eventual centralized states, for mythologies of kinship and origin, for religious beliefs, and space for linguistic communications etc.(Berghe,1974)

Ethnic group, by critical consideration, did not have any space in this multiple reality. There was rarely importance attached to ethnic consciousness in the primordial African communities and even in Asia. The idea of ethnicity and its attendant evils came with capitalism, irrational urge for material accumulation and inordinate tendency for self esteem (Nnoli, 1980). The progress and devastations that have been recorded through the sentiment of ethnic affiliations call for constant talk on the phenomenon. Ethnic pluralism which is supposed to be a veritable instrument for national construction has in most cases turned to become a weapon of mass destruction most especially in Third World countries, African countries in particular, and this continues to cause a 'go-slow' in the wheel of progress of world civilization. This

instrument, in the hands of its manipulators, has been adversely used on various occasions to inflict catastrophes of no mean effect.

Therefore, this paper maintains that human beings as individuals or community of people should come to term with the issue of ethnic pluralism and notes that it could be exploited for the good of human society towards national development.

### **Conceptualising Ethnic Pluralism and Ethnicity**

The term plural society has been used since the early 1960s to describe societies, usually at the level of independent states or colonial territories, characterized by sharp internal cleavages between ethnic, racial, religious or linguistic groups (Sanda, 1976). Many liberal scholars, when examining bourgeois democracies of Western Europe and North America have dealt with pluralism as a condition of the political give-and-take of competition and conflict between contending interest groups (Kornhauser, 1960). By pluralism, however, they have meant not so much ethnic or racial cleavages. They referred specifically to the diversity of political views and of specialized interest groups competing for resources in the political area of parliamentary democracies. (Nnoli, 1980,)

Closely associated with the label plural society is a group of social scientists who have studied principally the highly fragmented societies of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. The societies generally characterized by a history of violent conquest, followed by colonialism, slavery, indenture and other forms of highly institutionalized segmentation and inequality between ethnic or racial groups (Berghe, 1974).

These scholars emphasize conflict and the coercive role of the state in maintaining a system of social inequality and economic exploitation. They stress cultural and racial lines of cleavage more than class divides, and to ascribe causal priority to political relations over economic interactions. That is, they tend to regard unequal relations to the means of production as derivative of asymmetric power relations, rather than vice versa. They also generally insist on treating class and ethnicity as two distinct bases of social organization which in practice overlap, but which can also vary independently. (Berghe, 1974).

Kuper and Smith (1971) clearly state that varieties of pluralism – racial, religious, ethnic, language, cultural, institutional etc, do feature in most, if not, in all societies. It may however be generally accepted, despite the problems of ethnic identity, that the basic determinant of the structure of plural societies is culture with language as a fundamental element.

According to Otite (2000), an ethnically plural society such as Nigeria is, therefore, a sociological aggregate consisting of distinct cultural groups and institutions which interact within and make claims on the resources of the wider encapsulating society. Smith, in one of his works argued ostensibly that the monopoly of power by one cultural section is the essential precondition for the maintenance of the total (plural) society in its current form (Otite, 2000). This postulation has its clear explanation and episteme in what transpired in South Africa apartheid regimes, where minority Whites controlled the affairs of government to the exclusion of the majority Blacks (Ayandele, Omer-Cooper, Gavin & Afigbo 1971). It is pertinent to state that the idea still lingers on in some parts, if not in all parts of Africa. It has reared itself in the context of marginalization. This comes up when ethnic pluralism was exploited by dominant ethnic group for political reasons, hence the consequence of (political) ethnicity.

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Ethnicity is a concept that is coming from the reality of ethnic relations. It is a fundamental category of social organization that is based on membership defined by a sense of common, historical origins and which may also include shared culture, religion or language. (Kupper & Kupper, 1996). They describe ethnic groups as human groups (other than kinship groups) which cherish a belief in their common origin of such a kind that it provides a basis for the creation of a community. An ethnic group, according to Sills (1996), is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be, bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture.

The nature of an ethnic group relationship with the society as a whole and with other groups in it, constitutes one of the main problems in describing and analyzing such societies. Otite (1975) posits that ethnic pluralism, the mere fact of a multi – ethnic group feature of large society, would be of little significance most especially for the social scientist if not for the relationships generated between the groups. Ethnic groups, according to him, are like human biological units in a society where the relationships between them constitute more vital problems for sociological investigation. He states that ethnic groups would be less important in themselves in Nigeria, for instance, if there were no actors who draw attention to, and manipulate their differences in the contexts of competition over access to local and national resources. He sums it up by saying that ethnicity captures the various forms of consensual and conflictual relationships between ethnic

groups. He therefore arrived at the following definition of ethnicity as the contextual discrimination by members of one group against others in the basis of differentiated systems of socio- cultural symbols. It could be inferred from the definition that ethnicity describes a group possessing some degree of coherence, loyalty, unity and solidarity composed of people who are aware, perhaps only latently, of having common origin and interest and is ready to protect their interest at all cost even if they have to embark on war of attrition against the other rival and dangerous ethnic group.

Thus, it could be agreed that Rupesinghe (1996) was right to state that “an ethnic group is not a mere aggregate of people but a self – conscious collection of people united or closely related shared experiences and a common history” fully combat ready to prevent distortional and destructive influences. So, ethnicity is seen as having the properties of common group consciousness and identity and also group exclusiveness or the basis of which social discriminations are made. It entails a consciousness of disparity derivable from subjective and objective elements as members of different socio-cultural groups interact in a plural society (Kornhauser, 1960).

### **Ethnic Pluralism and Political Development in Africa**

The reality, of ethnic pluralism is very germane to the understanding of political dynamics in the continent of Africa today. Africa is a continent of about fifty four states (countries) and these states or countries have multi – various ethnic groups scrambling perpetually to get political recognition. Nigeria according to Otite (2000), has about four hundred ethnic groups and these different ethnic groups have consistently clamoured for their share of national cake in their respective countries. It seems nature had created the

continent as such and these ethnic divides had gone a long way to determine power relations and diplomacy in the contemporary African continent.

Ethnic pluralism, which is supposed to be a veritable instrument of sustainable development for a country which is naturally blessed with it, has however turned to become a thorn in the flesh of many African nations and has constantly threatened their cooperate existence. History has it that different ethnic groups existed in Africa before now. These different ethnic groups in the primordial era interacted among one – another with little or no conflict of the present nature. The Negroid of the western Sudan maintained favourable commercial relations with the Caucasoid from the North. The trans– Saharan trade was carried out without any ethnic sentiment, despite the involvement of many communities. The relations among and between the Niloths, the Masai, the Kikuyu etc were of unique and wonderful effect. Even in the occasion of adversarial relationship Africans have constructive and sustainable mechanisms of settling their differences (Ajayi, 1989).

For instance the Ubuntu conflict resolution strategy in South Africa. Ubuntu as a concept permeates the whole fabric of society. According to Masina (2000), it is an indigenous social perspective or philosophy of all African communities of South Africa. Ubuntu is literally translated to mean collective “person – hood” of “the art or virtue of being human”. The fundamental features of Ubuntu are caring, compassion, unity, tolerance, respect, closeness, generosity, genuineness, empathy, consultation, compromise and hospitality. These formed the characteristics of inter and intra – personal social relations among the indigenous African societies and part of

political culture of the contemporary South African politics. Peaceful coexistence was very valuable to the traditional African political system. In the traditional African view, human existence was seen as unified, inter – connected and integrated. This view recognizes the dialectics in any given system (union of opposites – i.e, the good and the bad). To be out of harmony, according to traditional African worldview, was regarded as harmful to the well – being and survival of the whole, they therefore tried hard to prevent disharmony and prevent its escalation in the occasion of occurrence to resolve and transform it towards positive national development (Amin,1990).

Over many centuries, they had been developing social forms and cultural traditions that colonialism, capitalism and apartheid have assaulted, abused and modified but never eradicated. One cannot understand how Africans have endured the fragmentation of their family life by migrant labour unless one has knowledge of their customary social values and network. Only a rudimentary common consciousness based on a myth of common descent existed among some of the pre – colonial linguistic groups(Ajayi, 1989). For instance, the Yoruba traced their ancestor to Oduduwa, and the Edo to Eweka the son of Oranmiyan – one of the grand sons of Oduduwa. The Hausa – Fulani have the myth of Daura legend.(Ajayi,1989) So African traditions and philosophical approaches have continued to exist despite all the centri – petal forces of colonialism, Christianity, Islam, capitalism and globalization.

The philosophy of ebi – consanguinity among the Yoruba of the Southwest Nigeria is a living proof of the survival and existence of these indigenous African philosophical cum political ideologies. The evolution of Action Group (AG) a political party of note, during decolonization era from egbe Omo Oduduwa was a clear manifestation of the interface between ethnic sentiment and political development in Nigeria. (Olawale, 1980)

Worth of mention is also the political role played by Mau- Mau ethnic militia founded by Kenyatta, in Kenya during colonial era. The group in collaboration with other ethnic groups fought tooth and nail to ensure the independence of Kenya. (Adams, 2007).

### **Political Effects of Ethnicity in Africa**

Ethnicity in Africa has its origin in the ideology of colonialism (Nnoli,1980). Embedded in colonial ideology was the notion that the pre – colonial African society was barbaric, primitive, and lacked development and needed to be civilized so that it would not constitute clog in the wheel of the world progress. (Amin1990).The colonizer, therefore, created the myth of the inferior native. This was accomplished gradually through the process of his alienation from his culture and tradition, which involved self-rejection and inferiority complex. The rejection of self came as a result of identification with the colonizer and as a result of the acceptance of the latter's image of one's inferior status (Rodney, 1976).

In a nutshell, the racism of colonial ideology reflected a Eurocentric devaluation of African culture and a corresponding glorification of the European values and ethos which consequently resulted in African negative ethnic sentiment (Cohen,1989). This Eurocentricism corrupted African sensibilities such that principle of individualism crept into African society as against communalistic ways of life that primordial African society was noted for. It developed to the point of ethnic consciousness of the various African societies such that the history of Africa at a point could be easily described as a running tale of ethnic struggle.

The decolonization process in Africa particularly in Nigeria was fraught with element of ethnicity. This became expedient when Nigeria was forced to adopt regionalism in 1946 (Olawale,1980). Nigeria was broken into three unequal regions and the subsequent elections, political practices, economic engagements and social relations tolled the lines of ethnic sentiment. For instance the Action Group (AG) political party became the party of the West because it had a Yoruba man as its leader likewise the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) National Convention of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) headed by Ahmadu Bello and Nnamdi Azikwe of Hausa and Igbo extractions respectively.(Olawale,1980). Also in Kenya, in 2000, a threat was sent to opposition Mwai Kibaki that he would face serious consequence if he dare visited the Western part of the country (a place that does not belong to his tribe) during his campaign tour. This shows how tribalistic and self-serving politics can be on the continent. Any discussion of potential candidates for the presidency in 2002 in Kenya, when Moi was due to retire, according to Omuabor (2000), will focus on the ethnic origin of the aspirant. People will tell you it is time for our tribe to eat.” Kenyans were obsessed with ethnicity. Their inability to think themselves as Kenyans before identifying themselves as Kikuyu or Luo was another clear indication of political ethnic bias that is capable of disrupting the continent's progress.

The extent of catastrophes an ethnic sentiment can cause was manifested in the Rwanda genocide of 1994 where about 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred within just 100 days (Nduru,2000). Another example could be found in Nigeria where ethnic violence has become recurrent decimal, a classical example is that of Jos crisis of 2013 which is a result of ethnic problem masquerading in the name of “indigenship”.

However, it should be made clear at this juncture that the whole of the blame of ethnic problem could not be absolutely placed at the doorstep of the colonial powers. Africans are to, also, share in the blames, because Ethnicity has been politicized in Africa. The African politicians are vast and versed in ethnic manipulation to score political point. It is a common place idea in many African countries for political and electioneering processes to be systematically carried out with ethnic undertones. For instance, a critical perusal of the electioneering process in Nigeria in 2011 saw the highest number of votes polled by each presidential candidate coming from their respective ethnic group. Also, the government of Arap Moi of Kenya was alleged of state- sponsoring ethnic cleaning in the run-up to national elections in 1991 and 1997. Nnoli (1980), talking about the politicization of ethnicity, states that: as the communal associations proliferated and urban dwellers increasingly flocked to them, intra class and inter-individual socio-economic competition among communal unions...inevitably, therefore, inter group dynamics intruded into the ethnic scene.(140)

Omuabor, (2000) states that democratization, political liberalization or even the prospect of peace uncannily transform into a reign of tension, uncertainty and violence in some parts of the continent. He posited that where ethnic clashes have occurred in the wake of democratization, it is always blamed on the manipulation by regimes trying to play off opponents against one another. The evidence from Congo in the 1990s, according to him, break of ethnic violence in Katanga and the Kivus. He went further to state that even as ethnic groups press for

the control of state power, it is obvious that the ethnicisation of central power is what has spelt tragedy for many African states.

### **Conclusion**

The primacy of class and the materialist conception of history seem to have left room for vertical divisions of society on the basis of ethnic identity, colour or religion. However, the objective reality of nationalism as a continuing force in the world is so evident since the end of the cold war, suggests the importance of not ignoring the problem associated with ethnicity.

The ethnic groups, as well as the sub-cultural units represent the totality of the history and culture of different people in Africa and the entire world at large. What is necessary in the Africa situation is the reconstruction of the structure in totality. In spite of the usual charge that ethnicity and tribalism are completely negative forces, the trend in Africa has shown that historical consciousness is powerful force of integration.

### **Recommendations**

African society should note that ethnic pluralism can bring about positive and sustainable development if properly managed. Every country of Africa should learn from other plural nations where their plurality was not an albatross that precludes proper growth and development. Africa can learn from United States of America, Canada even defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). For instance, Canada is a republic of plural society, where the true federalism is being exploited towards sustainable development.

Reasons for a state to adopt a federal system include the need to reflect linguistic, economic and cultural differences of a population, especially one that is concentrated geographically. This need made Canada to adopt federalism. Hence, the fundamental basis for federalism in Canada was and

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remains the need to reconcile, balance and accommodate diversity. The province of Canada was established in 1841 following the Act of Union which amalgamated two hitherto separate colonies, Lower Canada (majority Francophone) and Upper Canada (Anglophone), which had their own elected legislative assemblies that enabled them to make certain respective domestic political choices. After the Union of 1841, it proved virtually impossible for a single government to ensure political stability, despite measures designed to preserve the specificity of each of the communities. It was eventually proposed that the province of Canada be divided into two entities

having control over their resources and the inclusion of the other British North American colonies within a federation bearing in mind the advantages of unity in diversity such would bring to the development of the republic.

The issue of leadership that has political will to manage plural society towards achieving a national goal cannot be over-emphasized. The roles played by Otto Von Bismarck in the German unification, and the one played by Cavour, Mazzini and Garibaldi to effect Italian unification are classical examples of leadership importance in the exploitation of pluralism as a means to achieving national goal.

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