

## **THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN NATIONAL INTEGRATION: A STUDY OF NIGERIA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Nigeria is heterogeneous with verifiable evidence of extensive inter-group relations predating colonial rule. One of the lingering shadows cast by colonial rule is the issue of national integration. The attainment of political independence was followed with the challenge of achieving unity in diversity as the nationalists almost immediately relapsed into ethno-religious bigotry. The elitist activities of the ethno-religious bigots who manipulate their followers, have been divisive and a crass aberration of the extensive inter-group intercourse. This paper examines the role of History in addressing the teething issue of national integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**KEYWORDS:** **history, historical consciousness, integration, disintegration**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps, one reason why there is so much violence, aggression and instability in our day to day life is that we have so little consciousness of a time perspective. We act and react as if there is only today, no yesterday, no tomorrow... Not surprisingly, we hardly ever consider what kind of a future we are building for our children and children's children... The nation suffers which has no sense of history...<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, a nation without a sense of history suffers. Given the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria, a nation endowed with both human and material resources; cerebral heavyweights in historical scholarship with international acclaim, unfortunately has no consciousness of history. She has obliterated the pioneering works of the Dikes; and defaced and incinerated with the ashes blown into oblivion the Ade-Ajayis, Biobakus, and the Ayandeles. This is in line with the thought of Milan Kundera, a Czech dissident and writer who gave the importance of history in the context of his experience that: "the struggle of [people] against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."<sup>2</sup> The implication of this statement is that, those in power consider the past as an albatross round their neck, the only way to survive is to manipulate and distort the past to suit their whims and caprices. This explains why in Nigeria like in some climes where strongmen instead of statesmen are visibly around, records of the past are deliberately not kept or brazenly distorted.

There is strength in diversity. The heterogeneity of Nigeria is a source of strength since pre-colonial times. The over 360 ethnic groups that were woven together by the Lugardian craftsmanship and to bear a nomenclature assigned to them by the taxonomist, Flora Shaw were never in isolation or made to interact by the Europeans. These people evolved extensive inter-group relations among themselves in the form of migration; socio-cultural exchanges, like exogamous marriages; trade; and wars. Adiele Afigbo dispelled the misleading darkness of the isolated nature of the various groups that make up Nigeria using trade in the case of the Southeast Nigeria, stating that the area was not exclusively an economic and cultural island to itself but was able to strike the rightful trading links with her neighbours.<sup>3</sup> Afigbo was not alone on that point. One of his contemporaries, Okon Uya averred that the ethnic exclusivity and incompatibility prevalent today was one of the relics of the deliberate administrative policies of the colonialists to exercise perpetual control over the colonized. Africans were never isolated from one another; because in the course of their migrations, they interacted with one another, intermarried, traded, and had cultural exchanges. These instances of interactions have left no group identity to be substantially exclusive.<sup>4</sup> Mike Odey's study in the Benue area of Central Nigeria, used migration to explain the scintilla of the Igede group, the Itekpa and Gabu Clans in present day Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State and the remaining eleven Clans in present day Benue State.<sup>5</sup> The affinities between these people are eloquent testimonies that indeed, splendid isolationism was a Eurocentric propaganda to justify colonial rule. Tangban Ojong argues that the Ejagham deployed diplomacy, warfare diluted with cordial socio-economic and cultural dynamics in relating with their neighbours.<sup>6</sup> Debunking the claim of savagery among African groups by colonial apologists, Wilfred Uji's asserted in recognition of war as a form of interaction that African societies were mutually interdependent and co-existed as a whole predating colonial rule, debunked the description of African societies as "tribes" which were both isolated and antagonistic to each other.<sup>7</sup> To further show how gregarious Nigerians and other Africans were before colonialism and are today, some *Gbanja* kolanut and slave traders from Kano had interacted with Akan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

How can a group be in isolation and at the same time being antagonistic? Group antagonism at this period was majorly expressed in warfare. Is war no longer a means of group interaction? Also, if these groups were in isolation what formed the foundation for the reconfiguration of the same isolated groups linguistically? This is because the interacted cordially to have successfully exchanged cultural traits. Every individual belongs to a family situated within a community. This individual does not exist in isolation or scared of interacting because like Obaro Ikime will remind us of our forebears:

When they found themselves thrown together by historical circumstances, found a way out of their differences by deliberately forging new alliances and amalgamations. The process was not always necessarily peaceful. The undeniable fact is that ultimately statesmanship triumphed and a meaningful and acceptable relationship triumphed, and a meaningful and acceptable relationship was established.<sup>9</sup>

This reminder brings to the fore the fact that variety spices life. As people of varied psychological, socio-economic compositions inhabiting the same locale, they will necessarily have a meeting

point since societal development is paramount. On this note, Ikime admonishes Nigerian leaders (better described as rulers) to recourse to the past- the activities of their forebears: Those who parade themselves as leaders of Nigeria's multifarious peoples today need to go to the ancestors, learn their ways and be wise: to call into play such statesmanship as can help forge a truly united Nigeria, in spite of the differences that will always exist between Nigeria's component parts.<sup>10</sup>

The same admonishment came from Nembe, a Niger Delta community through an age long adage: *Noin nengiya, bere nengiya* (The abundance of the days of a man are reflected in the wisdom of his discourse).<sup>11</sup>

Very debilitating is the speed at which the same nationalists who coalesce beyond parochialism relapsed after the attainment of political independence, albeit not without the covert promptings of the colonialist. From that time, it became almost impossible for these people to be Nigerians; indigenship preceded citizenship, over five decades and a half. How long does it take to relate cordially with one another in the neighbourhoods? A couple of days in the minimum. This means that the threat to the unity of this country since independence (or from 1945) has been the political elite who compete for political and economic relevance at the centre, outflanked, recourse to fanning the embers of ethno-religious bigotry with the peasants especially the unemployed youths as ready tools to prosecute their heinous and divisive agenda. This point made, we will consider some of the challenges to national integration in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Challenges to National Integration in Nigeria 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The challenges to national integration will be examined in some aspects of the majority-minority conundrum. The minority conundrum has remained a bane to national integration. Minority status does not necessarily mean numerical inferiority, because the Fulani are not numerically superior in their sphere of influence. Samuel Egwu leant a voice in defining a minority group; a group of people distinguished on the basis of race, age, sexuality, nationality, religion and language, whose members see themselves and are by others as a differentiated group, relatively lacking in power constitute a minority.<sup>12</sup> Nigeria like others in the continent was a colonial creation with reference to her composition since 1914 were independent but co-existed and even when conquered, allowed some latitude of independence while tributes were paid to the conqueror groups. The reconfiguration of the country along linguistic lines started the ethnic minority conundrum which ossified with the constitutional backings of the 1945 Richard Constitution. This arrangement made Nigeria a tripolar regional country: East, North, and West; with the following nationalities superintending- Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba respectively. If the figure of nationalities is 360, and only 3 are major groups, would the preponderance of these over the 357 minority groups not be obvious? This situation which has caused Nigerians to live in mutual suspicion can best describe colonialism as a Pandora's Box.<sup>13</sup> Enunciating the evils of ethnic politics, Theo Vincent stated has become obvious realities and pervaded the entire social sphere of the nation. It was responsible for the failure of the First Republic, caused the atrocious civil war, collapsed the Second Republic, the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election, and the 1994 constitutional conference.<sup>14</sup>

The political parties that emerged at this period were conduits for ethnic nationalism. The Action Group (AG) was for the Yoruba-controlled Western Region; the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Igbo-controlled Eastern Region; and the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), Hausa/Fulani-controlled Northern Region. The NPC, Billy Dudley wrote, "is not a political party

as we know in the South (i.e of Nigeria); it is merely a political expression for an existing system of administration dyed in religion and innate tradition.”<sup>15</sup>The hopelessness of the minority groups under the stifling grip of the majority groups was heightened in the power play in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly between the then Premier, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Eyo Ita. The former was an Igbo politician schemed out of political relevance in the Western Region by Obafemi Awolowo and his forced return to his ethnic fortress anathematized the latter; a minority with ignominy was a dangerous precedence set. Kingsley Ozumba Mbadiwe described the situation as the “beginning of the dent to the continuous stream of one Nigeria, one people, one destiny. This marked the genesis of tribal consciousness and the demand for more States.<sup>16</sup> The immediate consequence to the Zik-Eyo Ita Igbo-and other minorities of Eastern Nigeria feud was the resignation of the Dr. Udo Udoma, the President of the Ibibio State Union from the NCNC and the formation of a minority party; the United National Independence Party (UNIP), a precursor to the agitation for a Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) State. Other minority groups formed political parties too with the hope of realizing independent statehood. Joseph S. Tarka founded the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) for the Northern minorities in the Middle-Belt, and agitated for a Middle-Belt State; The Borno Youth Movement, for the creation of Borno State. The Rivers Peoples’ Congress and Conference of Rivers Chiefs and People canvassed for the conversion of the Rivers Province into a region. The Ilorin Talaka Parapo wanted Ilorin Province to be transferred to the Western Region. There was also the Otu Edo and Mid-West State Movement which campaigned for the creation of Benin and Delta Provinces into a Region.<sup>17</sup> The situation has deteriorated to the point that even some academics at best could pass for ethnic jingoists. There was an encounter during a presentation on the minority discontent using a minority lenses. The presenter blamed the bane to national unity on the ethno-religious bigotry of the triumvirate: Awo, Bello, and Zik. Probably, instinctive, an ethnic reaction was elicited by one of the discussants, incidentally, a professor.

The minority issue has resonated in the agitations for resource control in the Niger Delta since the discovery of oil and its major source of foreign earning. The Niger Delta is located in the South-South and intolerably one of the richest areas of Nigeria but allowed to wallow in abject poverty and destitution.<sup>18</sup> The marginalization is a deliberate policy of government in pursuance of the majority-minority debacle. Successive administrations have looked the other way while region that lay the golden egg of the nation’s economy is exterminated through the ecological and economic genocide waged by the multinational corporations abated by indigenous collaborators in high places. Until the Niger Delta issue degenerated to full blown militancy and the economy of the nation was threatened, attention was never attracted and even when attracted symbolic and consigned to political rhetoric. The guns are still roaring just as the bombs are exploding on strategic oil installations of Chevron and the NNPC. The scrapping of the Amnesty programme of the Yaradua/Jonathan administration by the Buhari’s Administration and other politics of exclusion by a section of the country, especially the North has led to the recent emergence of the fiercely Niger Delta Avengers (NDA). The distributive formula of the resources has being a grave concern to the people and government of the region. The 1999 Constitution reserves a meagre 13% for oil producing states. The northerners dominated ownership of oil blocks which the NDA asked if the North will allow the Southerners or Niger Delta appropriate the distribution of oil blocks in

the reckless manner it is been done. One of the conditions of the new militant group, the NDA is the redistribution of oil blocks: 60% for oil producing States and 40% for others.<sup>19</sup>

There is expression of the minority issue in the electoral process. Since 1945, the minority groups have been marginalized politically: in terms of appointive and elective positions. We recall the events that heralded the emergence of a minority president, Goodluck Jonathan in 2010 and the turbulence experienced in his presidency. The voting pattern has not failed to reflect this evil. Every candidate wins or is expected to win in his regional enclave. For instance there were ethnic campaigns for regional/sectional presidency in the 2011 and 2015 general elections. These elections saw the ethnic and regional cards played by the politicians. The ethno-religious sentiments were stirred to impact on the electoral outcome. While the PDP accuses the APC of being a Muslim party due to its composition and pursuing an Islamic agenda the APC will slam the PDP of running the economy aground with excessive corruption.

In an attempt to keep the north intact, the colonialist allowed the north undiluted socio-culturally and politically for a very long time. The language and religion (Hausa/Fulani and Islam) remained unifying factors in northern Nigeria, a unity they exploit to exercise preponderance over Nigeria. What would have triggered the senseless killings in the North if not the elite manipulation of the vulnerable youths? During the period of the Ramadan Fast, a Christian septuagenarian Mrs. Bridget Agbahime in Kano for alleged blasphemy because she refused a male co-trader use the front of her shop for ablution against the landlord's instruction that the Muslim trader be confined to his shop space.<sup>20</sup> A carpenter in Kaduna South Local Government Area, Francis Emmanuel Francis, a Christian was attacked for not observing a Ramadan Fast barely a week after the septuagenarian was stabbed and beheaded in Kano.<sup>21</sup> The Hausa Muslim boys, six in number wielding dangerous weapons beat this Christian carpenter to the point of almost losing an eye.<sup>22</sup> In Kubwa, a satellite town in the nation's capital, Eunice Elisha, a Deaconess at the Divine Touch Parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) was murdered on Saturday, July 9, 2016 during her routine morning preaching (Morning Cry).<sup>23</sup> These are only very few cases in only a month's period. Did Section 42(1) of the 1999 Constitution (as Amended) not shield Nigerians from discriminatory practices on the grounds of ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion? The activities of these irate youths and their principals in utter disregard to the Constitution can be interpreted to be a fulfilment of the mandate handed down to them by their forebears. Responding to the letter from the West African Students' Union (WASU) canvassing northern support for a constitutional evolution for Nigeria in 1942, the northern chiefs replied: "Holding this country together is not possible except by means of the religion of the Prophet. If they want political unity let them follow our religion."<sup>24</sup> The 1957 statement credited to Ahmadu Bello, the Sauruana of Sokoto further illuminate the historical antecedence of ethno-religious bigotry as prosecuted by the northern Muslims: "We the people of the North will continue our stated intention to conquer the South and to dip the Koran in the Atlantic Ocean after the British leave our shores."<sup>25</sup> The 1804 Muslim conquistador is heard loudly in the sustained Islamization pursuit of his grandson. Everything particularly bloodletting is claimed to be done in the name of Allah and his Prophet Muhammed. Nigeria had witnessed the Mait sine crisis in the 1980s and the current Boko Haram terrorist attacks since 2009. The senseless killings through suicide bombing; destruction of villages and churches; and kidnapping of people especially the over two hundred

Chibok secondary school teenage girls who are Christians from their school on April 14, 2014; the heinous activities of Fulani herders men; and the abduction of a Christian minor, Ese Oruru from Bayelsa State to Kano where she was unlawfully converted to Islam, married, impregnated. The Police and religious leaders in Kano State did nothing until social media activism was activated. The 2016 Eid-el-Fitr public holiday earlier announced to be Tuesday and Wednesday (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> July) was extended to Thursday (7<sup>th</sup> July) on the express directive of the President General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III, Sultan of Sokoto due to non-sighting of the moon. This development piqued a number of Nigerian especially Christians. To this end, the secularity of Nigeria is been questioned by series of events suggesting an Islamization agenda of the Buhari's Administration; a notorious novelty which a coalition of 16 Christian organizations expressed grave concerns over.<sup>26</sup> The question is, has Nigeria ceased being a secular state?

While there is the majority-minority issue, overtime, the creation of states and local government areas created new sets of majority and minority groups; it was a vicious circle. There is therefore a transition from cooperation due to their commonality in minority experience to domination. For instance, in the COR State arrangement, the Ogoja Province was a minority, a status she still wear and has informed her resilience in the agitation for an Ogoja State even in the present day Calabar Province-dominated Cross River State.<sup>27</sup> The people of present day Delta State constituted one of the minorities in the Western Region and later Mid-Western Region. The excision of Delta State from Bendel/Edo State where they were dominated by the Edo people in 1991, recreated a new political order with the preponderance of the Urhobo group over other nationalities- Igbo, Ijaw, Itshekiri, and Isoko. The emergence of new majority displaying unbridled partisanship has aggravated inter-ethnic friction between the Western Igbo and other groups particularly the Urhobo.<sup>28</sup> National integration engendered by inter-group relations has become threatened by a constellation of instances of majority-minority conundrum since the regionalization of Nigeria. The trepidation of this threat to national unity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has informed recourse to the role of history in promoting national integration.

### **The Role of History in Promoting National Integration**

The challenges of national integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand a *Macedonian Call* on History and historians to do the needful at this critical moment of our nation's history. In his inaugural, Anthony Nwagbughuogu ventilated A. G. Hopkin's perception of History as not merely a background to the present but shapes the current events in their proper perspective and insisting that those who are ignorant of the past are as condemned as well as the innocent others who are served the results of unhistorical recommendations.<sup>29</sup> The oft reference to our diversity implying separateness falls into the mould of a distortion, mutilation and faking of our history by "force of circumstance" through ignorance or self-interest.<sup>30</sup> To Ki-Zerbo, History is a human science. It emerges red-hot from the busy sometimes tumultuous, forge of the nations. History fashioned physically by man in the workshop of life itself, constructed mentally by man in laboratories, libraries and on excavation sites, is also made for man, for the people, to illuminate and motivate their awareness.<sup>31</sup> Sa' ad Abubakar shares this sentiment of some Nigerians' ignorance of history as a scientific account of human activities within a defined locale and time, but perceives it as an

old-fashioned subject that serves no useful purpose except as stories for leisure.<sup>32</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm conceives that:

Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market. Nations without a past are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it.<sup>33</sup>

History is life and problem-solving. It's an aggregation of the collective experiences of man in society. A historian is duty-bound to weave these experiences toward solving the problems of the present and setting the path for the future. The historian is by no means alienated from the society because of the fantasy of objectivity; an ambition that has derailed most Nigerian historians from their responsibility to the nation. Ki-Zerbo posed a rhetorical teaser:

But is not ignorance of one's own past, in other words of a large part of oneself, even more alienating? All the evils that afflict Africa today, as well as all the possibilities for the future, are the result of countless forces transmitted by history. Unless one chooses to live in a state of unconsciousness and alienation, one cannot live without memory, or with a memory that belongs to someone else. And history is the memory of nations.<sup>34</sup>

The distorted version of our history transmitted to these historians who were products of colonial education or western ivory towers erode their indigenous memories and the vacuum filled with European history or memory. This European idealism transferred to Nigerian (or African) history by these hybrids makes them dispassionate, cold, unemotional and detached in their approach to their subject.<sup>35</sup> The importance of indigenous history will make patriots and not hybrids. An exhumation of the thoughts of Hugh Clifford on the elective principles of 1922 read:

It can only be described as farcical to suppose that...continental Nigeria can be represented by a handful of gentlemen drawn from a half-dozen coastal towns- men born and bred in British-administered towns situated in the seashore who in the safety of British protection have peacefully pursued their studies under British teachers, in British schools, in order to enable them become ministers of the Christian religion or learned in the laws of England, whose eyes are fixed, not upon African native history or tradition or policy, nor their own tribal obligations and duties to their Natural Rulers which immemorial custom should impose on them, but upon political theories evolved by Europeans to fit a wholly different set circumstances...<sup>36</sup>

Nigerian historians must come out of their ethnic cocoons with a renewed commitment o the Nigerian project. Some historians have plied their craft in tandem with the divisive politics of the political elite. These elite rely on the intellectual wing of their fiefdom to perpetrate "historical parochialism,"<sup>37</sup> an appalling sentiment which stokes disintegration rather than 'historical patriotism.' Just like the nationalists who immediately relapsed into bigotry, most Nigerian historians have rested on their oars as if the victory won during the period of defensive history-cerebral duel with the Europeans, that Nigerians like other Africans had a history. A resuscitated commitment from Nigerian historians in tackling the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities is needed. While it is

advised to adopt an indigenous perspective in reconstructing the past of the various groups-centralized or decentralized, the integrative realities of our collective pasts should not be sacrificed on the profane altar of parochialism.

An indigenous perspective will reverse the top-bottom approach to national integration to the natural bottom-top approach. In the context of this paper, the former approach has to do with the failed attempts by the elite to foster national unity when they are the ones fanning the ambers of disunity; hence, national integration remains a slogan. The latter lays emphasis on the extensive inter-group relations that predated colonialism and still subsist among the masses; expressed in trade and socio-cultural borrowings. Adopting this bottom-top approach demands the elevation of history from the abyss of relegation in Nigeria. From the family, the cradle of socialization; through the school; to other spheres of the society, Nigerian history should be taught. At the school level- primary to tertiary, a refined curriculum of history should be designed and taught by qualified manpower with the hindsight of our history. Traditional and religious institutions have roles to play in repositioning the importance of history to national integration. Traditional leaders and elders should be encourage the preservation of historical evidences and transmit same to the younger generations and scholars. It was a combination of oral, linguistic, and archaeological materials supplemented by archival material that African historians were able to puncture the Eurocentric assertion about African history<sup>38</sup> as a by-product of European history. These historical writings too, complemented the efforts of the nationalists during the twilight of colonialism and addressed the post-independent challenges, before the deliberate relegation of history by the government. Traditional leaders should maintain their integrity as nature rulers in order not to be fastened to the whims and caprices of the political elite. Most of the inter and intra-ethnic frictions, some of these leaders are found culpable of stoking crisis for pecuniary or other favours from the elite beneficiaries of the crisis. Religious leaders too should endeavour to apprise historical consciousness themselves and encourage their adherents to do same. For instance, adherents of the two major religions in Nigeria will gleefully recount religious events contained in the Holy Books but with little or no knowledge of his culture and how to relate with a neighbour of the other religion or sect. They live in heterogeneous societies and must learn from history how their forebears interacted before the foreign faiths.

The Historical Society of Nigeria should establish an institute for historical studies to provide a post-school opportunity for political elite. For decades, history has been distorted, mutilated and relegated. The institute of historical studies educate these elite who had or have the propensity to incense the polity with their divisive politics. Knowledge is a veritable tool in the hand of any leader lead his people aright and even governs ignorance in perpetuity. The right knowledge for governance in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria is provided in history. Awolowo was quoted to have said: I have never regarded myself as having a monopoly of wisdom. The trouble is that when most people in public life and in the position of leadership and rulership are spending whole days and nights carousing in clubs or in the company of men of shady character and women of easy virtue, I, like few others, am always at my post working hard at the country's problems and trying to find solutions to them.<sup>39</sup>



The challenges of national integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century require knowledgeable leaders equipped with historical consciousness. It is only through history that the decay in leadership can be corrected. Traditional societies predating warrant chiefs had men and women who distinguished themselves in their respective callings and were commensurately rewarded with titles like the *Alohi* of the Yala speaking group of Cross River State among others, will provide reflection on the type of leadership Nigerians want and the quality of those aspiring to be leaders.

## CONCLUSION

The over 360 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria interacted beyond their defined frontiers in the form of trade, socio-cultural exchanges, migration, and war. These interactions formed the basis for the configuration of these people along linguistics lines. The elite pursuit of personal interest in view of scarce economic resources and political spaces caused a relapse into bigotry immediately after independence in 1960. Ever since, the problem of national integration has been potent threat to our continued existence as Nigerians. History that was once the weapon of emancipation from colonial rule and a compulsory subject took a southward dive into oblivion; no thanks to the deliberate policy of government.

With the teething problem of national integration, if Nigerians recourse to historical consciousness, this national plague will be surmounted when historians practice their craft as patriots and history is given its rightful position in nation-building. Thus, twenty-first century Nigeria is a product of history and deservedly needs a Nigerian history that reflects the richness of our diversities.

## Endnotes

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