IN SEARCH OF THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN HER FOREIGN POLICY: A CONSTRUCTIVE THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Historically, attempts to study the foreign policy of third world nations in general and Nigeria in particular have been fraught with problems. These problems arose essentially from the lack of internal harmony amongst the various ethnic and religious groups that constitute the nation. This, in turn, has fuelled inconsistency in regimes' ideological orientations, which has been the bane of pragmatic foreign policy. This paper seeks to examine the issue of national identity in Nigeria's foreign policy. It implores the constructive theoretical model proposed by Alexander Wendt, which seems to provide the most appropriate explanation for a formidable Nigerian foreign policy in the 21st century. Secondary sources are used to supply historical perspective and to point out the connotations of facts in regards to the wider debate about Nigeria's foreign policy. In all, the study concludes that the social relations of hostility amongst the various ethnic groups in Nigeria account for the lack of coherent national identity in the nation's foreign policy. Furthermore, the study is of the opinion that if the same ideas and beliefs that are responsible for hostilities are re-oriented, the social relationship can change to one of friendship that could birth national identity in the nation's foreign policy.

Keywords: National Identity, Nigeria, Culture and Foreign policy

Introduction

Foreign policy tends to be the most effective weapon through which a state strives to manage its external image, primarily to maximize its strategic interests. When taking on this difficult endeavour, nations must maintain their national identities as much as possible. National identity serves as the fulcrum of

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interpersonal relationships and solidarity, which in turn drives the ideological foundation of a country's existence in the international system. One important characteristic that distinguishes the great powers in international politics, is the degree to which their ideologies are relatively consistent. However, a critical study of third-world countries, including Nigeria, revealed the absence of a strong sense of national identity, which appeared to be a stumbling obstacle in the way of a proactive foreign policy.

At independence in 1960, with a population of 63 million and an area of 357,000 sq. miles, Nigeria was said to have been the beacon of hope for the black world.[1] However, six decades after independence, the nation's foreign policy is aptly described as "complacent, motionless, and largely unable to deliver sound returns to the national aggregates".[2] The foreign policy of a nation is only effective to the point where its core national interests, adequately infused with visible growth in national aggregates of power, wealth, and influence. Nevertheless, these have not been the lot of the nation since independence. The question then is, what and who is responsible for these setbacks? Reuben Abati cited in Okpoko[3], ascribed this to Nigeria being "extraordinarily naive by restricting its foreign policy to Africa as its cornerstone", while, Enuka and Ojukwu blamed political leadership irresponsibility as the bane of dynamic foreign policy.[4] Despite the aforementioned contradictions and many others in Nigeria's foreign policy, there is hardly any reference to the impact of national identity on the conduct of her external engagements. In this paper, therefore, an attempt will be made to fill this lacuna.

The Concepts of National Identity and Foreign Policy

According to Chafetz, Spirtas, and Frankel, "identity is a psychological construct that both explains and prescribes how an actor should think, feel, assess, and, ultimately, conduct in group-relevant circumstances".[5] In light of the above, an identity is the process that endows people with a feeling of self and the capacity

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[1] (Ihonvbere, 1982:165)

[2] Charles Onunaiju, 'Re-Thinking Nigeria's Foreign Policy', 2019 <https://guardian.ng/news/re-thinking-nigerias-foreign-policy/> [accessed 13 December 2019].

[3] Ebenezer Okpokpo, 'The Challenges Facing Nigeria's Foreign Policy in the Next Millennium', *African Studies Quarterly*, 3.3 (2000).

[4] Emmanuel Enuka, Chuka & Ojukwu, 'Challenges of Nigeria's Foreign Policy', *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 5.17 (2016), 52–66.

[5] B. Chafetz, G., Spirtas, M., & Frankel, '"'Introduction: Tracing the Influence of Identity on Foreign Policy'"', *Security Studies*, 8.2–3 (1998), 7–22 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419808429372>.

to understand their relationship to their external environment. The process of establishing one's identity entails the establishment of boundaries between self and other. Barret bridges the two concepts by defining national identity as an awareness of and willingness to absorb national traditions and ideals in order to establish a country's behavioural patterns.[6] Gilroy reinforced this point by stating that "national identity is structured through a concept of citizenship and patriotism that subordinates ethnic, racial, and cultural differences to the assimilating logic of a common culture, or, more bluntly, the 'melting pot'.[7] To have a collective identity, every social grouping must have a common interpretation of the events and experiences that have shaped the group through time. This may involve an accepted view about the group's origin, as is the case with many nation states. Thus, national identity encapsulates who we are and what we represent in the community of nations. Furthermore, national identity shapes a country's belief system, which affects the development and execution of foreign policy via a set of principles that guides foreign policy doctrine.

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is the interaction of a country with the rest of the world. It includes contacts and transactions between nations, as well as high diplomacy aimed only at accomplishing specific national goals.[8] To Adeniji, foreign policy refers to the "projection of a country's national interest into the transnational arena and the resulting interaction of one with the other."[9] According to Wallace's "grand strategy" definition, foreign policy is about "national identity itself: about the sources of national pride, the characteristics that differentiate a country from its neighbours, the core elements of sovereignty it seeks to defend, and the values it stands for and seeks to promote abroad".[10] Nations identities are essential mythologies that serve as the bedrock of their foreign policy. They establish a difference between the 'national community' that the government represents abroad and the foreigners with whom it does business; furthermore, they justify the government's actions in defence of the 'national' interest.[11]

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[6] M Barrett, *National Identities in Children and Young People*, ed. by K Ding, S & Littleton (Milton Keynes: The Open University/Blackwell, 2005).
[7] (Hüsamettin, İnaç and Feyzullah, 2013:230)
[8] (Ajayi, 2006:10)
[9] (Adeniji, 2000:15)
[10] (Wallace, 1991:65)
[11] (Wallace, 1991:67)

The Context and Origin of Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Prior to the Europeans' 1884/85 Berlin Conference in Germany, Africa was organized into major kingdoms with established economic, religious, and educational institutions. Africa was unilaterally balkanized in Berlin, with complete disrespect for African cultural identity. According to Okpeh, "this land had its boundaries and limitations, which, in addition to providing a necessary social idiom for cohesion among its members, endows them with identity and therefore relative autonomy from outsiders".[12] Despite what seems to be an apparent situation above, these different ethnic groups had achieved a certain degree of integration prior to the colonial rulers' subjugation of this area. Long-distance trade, migratory movements, and socioeconomic intergroup relations all contributed to the development of ethnic and cultural integration. Overall, it is critical to realize that the many ethnic groups that comprise Nigeria today experienced 'fluidity' in the historical and political processes that shaped their sense of a shared identity that differentiates 'them' from 'others'.[13]

However, the arrival of British imperialists altered the indigenous narrative of the people's socioeconomic cohesiveness. At inception, the British were more interested in trading with the people rather than state formations. As a result, when choices had to be made, they were done hastily and without due regard for the reality on the ground. Thus, by 1900, the British had created three distinct blocks of colonial territory, each of which was administered independently and dealt with directly by the colonial administration, even though they occasionally cooperated, particularly when the need arose to galvanize troops to conquer any Nigerian state or community. These three colonial administrative entities, with some unfavourable boundary modifications in the case of the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, were the fundamental building blocks of the Nigerian federal system. Each of these three colonial administrations was established only for administrative convenience, rather than out of concern for the preservation of geographic, cultural, and/or linguistic integrity.[14]

  No wonder, at independence in 1960, the nation's anthem of deliverance was the sole prerogative of a stranger, a British woman who had no knowledge of our historical existence but nevertheless emphasized how divided we were, as the

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[12] (Okpeh, 2006:14)
[13] (Gatawa, 2013:171-172)
[14] (Afigbo, 1991:15-17)

song's lyrics stated: "Though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand!".[15] Unfortunately, the brotherhood was never born; rather, within six years, a catastrophic civil war altered the political landscape and remains a resounding denominator in national debates. At the onset, the Nigerian state was a contrived federal balance of three ethnically and politically fragmented federal states[16]. Additionally, Nigeria's pre- and post-independence political parties worsened this situation by aligning with the pre-existing primordial order of religion, ethnicity, and regionalism. On this basis, the NPC (Nigerian People's Congress) controlled the Northern Region, representing conservative, Muslim, mostly Hausa interests. The NCNC (National Convention of Nigerian Citizens) was mostly Igbo and Christian, controlling the Eastern Region, whereas the AG (Action Group) was a leftist party that ruled the Yoruba west.[17]

Thus, national interest is intimately linked to a nation's leadership and seems to be contingent on the collective needs, disposition, ideology, and views of the incumbents' administration'.[18] As a consequence, successive heads of state seem to have excessively personalised the foreign policy process. The above situation was largely responsible for the failure of "Nigerian ideology or doctrine" and, by extension, the "voice of Nigeria" in the nation's foreign policy. In this case, the ruling elites were in a dilemma as to what constitutes a broader concept of "Nigerianism." In its place, the political leadership, then, projected a utopian pan-Africanist framework.[19] This, more than any other factor, was majorly responsible for the misdirection of Nigeria's national interests in her foreign policy engagements. As Kissinger observed, when domestic institutions are founded on fundamentally divergent views of what is fair, international policy becomes more complicated.[20] In this scenario, a country's foreign policy is inextricably linked to its domestic politics. The thrust of this paper underscores the lack of single purpose of national identity in Nigeria's foreign policy since independence. In this wise, what came as aftermath of Nigeria's independence national interest was a fiasco which negates Osgood's understanding of ''national interests' which he refers ''to mean a state of affairs valued solely for its benefit to the nation. The motive of national egoism, which leads men to seek this end, is

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[15] (Achebe, 1984:6)

[16] Micheal Sinclair, *An Analysis of Nigerian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Political Paranoia* (Braamfontein: The South African Institute of International Affairs, 2017).

[17] (Abraham, el tal, 2019)

[18] (Eze, 2010:18)

[19] (Sinclair, 2017:1)

[20] (Kissinger, 1966:503)

marked by the disposition to concern oneself with the welfare of one's own nation; it is self-love transferred to the national group".[21]

In a nutshell, Nigeria's foreign policy has lacked national consciousness since independence. Associated with the above is the issue of primordialism and a lack of tradition in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and implementation. Nigeria's foreign policy during the Tafawa Balewa period reflected the personality of the leader, which was ascribed to his Islamic religious beliefs and background, rather than the Nigerian state.[22] Unfortunately, succeeding administrations have maintained a personalization of foreign policy based on the incumbent's whims and caprices.

The Relevance of National Identity in Nigeria's foreign policy

Historically, the significance of national identity in foreign policy was largely overlooked, owing to the predominance of Idealism and Realism viewpoints in interpretations of international relations. For example, Morgenthau [23] and Waltz [24], explicitly deny the link between a country's national identity and foreign policy. However, identity component found its place in international relations with the emergence of constructivism approach. The constructivism understanding places emphasis on the immaterial attitudes, ideas and elements.[25] In the constructivist vein of International Relations conjecture, it emphasized the crucial role of national identity, as a pivotal for explaining foreign policy behaviour at the level of international engagements. Scholars have long debated a plethora of identities that are explained using approaches that range from primordialism to instrumentalism.[26] Apologists for primordial perspective argues that identifiable identity groups should be defined in terms of common biological descent, while the proponents of instrumentalism define identity groups 'as largely constructed, deployed to advance the interests and claims of the collectivity banded and mobilized as a pressure group'[27]. For the instrumentalist, group interests are defined from above, by crafty leadership that

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[21] (Osgood, 1953:4)

[22] (Olayiwola, 1988:358)

[23] (1948)

[24] (2001)

[25] (Karimifard, 2012)

[26] (Wilmsen and McAllister, 1996)

[27] (Tambiah, 1996:136)

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moulds group interests in a way that resonates with a pre-defined collectivity while addressing their own political concerns.

According to Wendt, a basic premise of constructivist social theory is that individuals behave toward things, including other actors, based on the meanings assigned to them by the objects. Collective meanings are the basic components of the structures that guide our behaviors. It is in this sense that Adler, believes constructivism represents "the dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world that form and are modified by human action and interaction" .[28] According to constructivism, foreign policy analysis should begin with national identity. In this sense, our idea of "who we are" is the result of a mental image developed through time.[29] To constructivists, identities are not predetermined but are created, maintained, and changed through interactions. Nonetheless, as Wendt puts it, "identities may be difficult to change, but they are not immutable." This also implies that reality is always being constructed, which creates the possibility of change. In other words, meanings are not static but may evolve and change in response to the actors' ideas and beliefs.[30] The cultural make up of any given society remains the basis in which her foreign policy is determines. In other words, culture can be said to be a foundation of foreign policy.[31] Culture is here treated as national identity. Huntington, in discussing the United States' foreign policy noted that, American national identity has been "visions of national greatness" that have been clearly visible in American foreign policy.[32] Ikenberry, buttressed this point when he noted that

> ...United States certainly has distinctive ideologies and beliefs -- rooted in its
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> founding, political development, and world-historical trajectory – that have
>
> influenced the ways in which American leaders have pursued foreign
policy.

> The United States likes to live in a world where other states are tied to
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> American-style global rules and institutions while it remains relatively free
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> and unbound.[33]

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[28] (Adler, 1997:322)

[29] (Ngugi Wa, 1986:15)

[30] Sarina Theys, *'"Constructivism"' in (Eds), International Relations Theory,* ed. by C McMlinchey, S Walter, R and Scheinpflug (Briston: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018).

[31] Frode Liland, ''Culture and Foreign Policy: An Introduction to Approaches and Theory", *IFS Info*, 1 (1993), 5.

[32] (Huntington, 2004:15)

[33] (Ikenberry, 2014:1)

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In international relations, a country's national perspective is determined by its people, and the view of its people is partially determined by the acts and character of its political leaders. Thus, Nigeria's foreign policy has been grossly undermined and weakened over the years by nepotism, a leadership deficit, and a lack of democratic credentials, all of which have undermined the country's international image.[34] As Adeniji explains, any meaningful Nigeria foreign policy must be that, which is "constructive and beneficial", and that "the focus of a constructive and beneficial foreign policy should, first of all, be the Nigerian people".[35] He went further to state that:

> Nigerian has not really been made the main focus of our policy. Emphasis is placed on law but not on the man himself... the law cannot be more important than the man who made it and defending and protecting a nation whose people are valueless is at best also meaningless. Foreign policy successes in which the Nigerians are not direct beneficiaries are not likely to impact on, or enjoy the support of, the people... constructive and beneficial concentricism therefore, fills this gap in foreign policy thrust....[36]

Since independence, successive Nigerian governments have been linked in some ways to parochial sentimental devotion to ethnic, religious, and other chauvinistic leanings. A critical look at successive administrations since Balewa, Ironsi, Gowon, Muritala, Obasanjo, Shagari, Buhari, Babangida, Shonekan, Abacha, Abubakar, and Obasanjo, as well as Yar' Adua, Jonathan, and Buhari, revealed less of the spirit of oneness. Furthermore, despite their disparate orientations and leadership styles, they seem to have pursued foreign policy with an emphasis on Africa to the cost of "Nigerianness". No thanks to the country's leading nationalists, who planted the seed of conflict with their careless remarks, which has become a recurring decimal in the nation's political history. However, as Wendt correctly observes, "anarchy is what states make of it '.[37] Therefore, disunity among groups of individuals is their general perception, and through their concerted effort, what accounts for differences within a society can be channeled right to form the basis of national identity.

In Nigeria, for instance, many of the reasons adduced for disunity, such as ethnicity, colonialism, and religion, have run their course. Historically, nations

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[34] L. A. Fayomi, O. O., Chidozie, F. C., & Ajayi, 'Nigeria's National Image and Her Foreign Policy: An Exploratory Approach', *Open Journal of Political Science*, 5 (2015), 180–92.
[35] (Adeniji, 2000:423)
[36] (Adeniji, 2000:423)
[37] (Wendt, 1992:395)

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emerged from diversity and continued to adjust to historical and political processes. For instance, Kazah-Toure cited in Gatawa, states that 'the English speaking people in Britain, apart from the Scots, Welsh, Irish and the numerous minorities, are not all of the same origin and do not draw from a single history'.[38] This is more so because countries with similar experiences, have, by sheer determination and forthrightness, outgrown these inclinations. The American colonies prior to the Constitution and the German alliance before unification are cases in point. It is imperative to understand that a homogeneous society in terms of religion and ethnicity is not necessarily a prerequisite for oneness. For example, Somalia is aptly described as a homogeneous country in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and culture but yet remains one of the most divided countries in the world.[39] In this sense, it simply means that if there is a concerted effort by both the political office holders and the led in Nigeria to chart a new course of national identity, this will guarantee a better future for the nation and its foreign policy. [40]

In a nutshell, it simply means that the social relations of enmity amongst the various ethnic and religious divides in Nigeria, which account for the lack of coherent national identity, represent the shared ideas and beliefs. As noted by Julius Nyerere, although heavily remixed to suit the Nigeria situation, when he famously said: "The future of Africa, [the future of Nigeria, and by implication her foreign policy] the modernization of Africa will have a place in the 21st century if only that future is linked with the process of decolonization and its detribalization. Henceforth, we must reject the nonsense of dividing the African peoples into Anglophones, Francophones, and Lusophones (Arabophones and Sinophones) [Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Esan Ijaw, Itsekiri, etc].[41] Thus, we must transcend the attempt to divide our people according to the languages of their colonial masters".[42] " In other words, if these beliefs and ideas change, the social relationship can change to one of friendship. National identity, according to constructivism, is a representation of an understanding of who we are, which in turn signals our interests. As quoted by Hayford cited in Ngamen and Metuono, "For too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others. Now, what I have called an African personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it

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[38] Gatawa.

[39] Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

[40] (Adetoro, and Omiyela, 2013)

[41] (Heilmanand Kaiser, 2002:700)

[42] Arikana Chihombori-Quao, *Africa 101: Wake Call*, Kindle Edi (California: BestsellerGuild.com, 2020).

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through the voices of Africa's own sons"[43] by extension Nigeria voice. The panacea to the nation's historical miscalculation is to go back to our basis, because the ignorance of Nigeria's history is the bane of the nation's foreign policy. The only cure for this disease is knowledge and understanding of our history.[44]

Conclusion

Nigeria has, on the whole, been unsuccessful in exporting its national identity when it comes to foreign policy engagements. Rather, the nation has experienced increased external pressure, which has necessitated a continuous assessment and adjustment of its foreign policy. To be successful, all hands must be on deck to implement a comprehensive national foreign strategy that prioritizes the elements that unite the nation rather than those that divide them. In this case, national identity is determined by subjective affiliation with the territory rather than ethnic and religious backgrounds. In addition, political leaders should properly return to the fundamentals in order to redefine national identity, drawing inspiration from the redefinitions that came out of the experiences of the nation's different ethnic groups. One significant method of anchoring this knowledge is to establish a national history curriculum that takes into account the national traditions of different ethnic groups prior to colonization and transforms them into principles that support an appropriate foreign policy. This is crucial given the intricate link between a nation's domestic activities and her foreign entanglements. The current style of engagement, which is rooted in a divided domestic front, reflects the apparent and present threat to the nation's foundation.

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[43] (Ngamen and Metuonu, 2016)
[44] Chihombori-Quao.

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