

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND NATIONAL UNITY: REIMAGINING SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

National unity remains a far cry in Nigeria. An ethno-cultural diversity which is supposed to be a blessing has unfortunately threatened the nation's unity. While it is convenient for most scholars to blame the nation's multi-ethnic nature for the current disunity in the country, this paper argues that the problem is not in the ethnic plurality of the most populous nation in Africa but the mismanagement of its diversity. To assess the ethnic chaos in the nation, this article looks at the ethnic situation through the lens of the Social Contract theory. It aims to examine how negatively ethnic diversity has influenced national unity. Recommendations include the launching, by government and other stakeholders, of a robust ethnic and cultural education.

Keywords: ethnic diversity, national unity, social contract theory

Introduction

One feature of modern states is that their constituent parts or sub-nationalities yield their sovereignty to the central government to achieve, among others, security and wellbeing (Adefolaju, 2016). These sub-nationalities are bound by a contract. Nigeria is ethnoculturally diverse. It is a collection of over 250 ethnic groups, over 500 languages with over a million dialects (Abraham 2017). There is enormous rivalry ongoing among the ethnic nationalities (Adenuga, 2022; Adefolaju, 2016). Though not a perfect union from the onset, Nigeria's national unity has been on a steady decline (Mbah et al, 2019). The nation's ethnic diversity has been blamed as being a source of chaos. This paper explores the challenges of ethnic diversity and its impact on national unity in Nigeria, analyzing how social contract theory can be reimagined to address these issues in the country's sociopolitical context.

Conceptual Issues

Ethnic diversity

On the surface, 'ethnic group' and 'tribe' may seem identical, they are, in fact, distinct. In 'A Re-examination of the History of Ethnic Groups in Nigeria', Rina Okonkwo (2020) drew a distinction between the terms. The author elucidated that 'tribe' refers to a group bound together by a common ancestor, descent, kinship, territory and language. 'Tribe' is now fading out of use as it is

inaccurate in its description of the history of cultural groups. Tribes evolved during the colonial era. In colonial times, people saw themselves as members of villages united by a common suspicion of strangers. They did not identify themselves as members of ethnic groups. The colonial government forged these tribal groups into ethnic groups by uniting villages into regions. This account by Okonkwo is verified by the history of ethnic groups all over.

Writing about the ethnic diversities and its attendant diverse aspirations of the different nationalities in Nigeria, Onifade & Imhonopi (2013:77) vent out their frustration at the forced marriage asking in a subheading, 'Is Nigeria an Accident of History or a Historical Accident?'

Ethnicity has been the rallying point over power contests in Nigeria since 1960. It was the basis for the 30-month long civil war. It was the basis for ethnic agitations for secession by various groups from MASSOB, MOSOP, IPOB, OPC and others (Udeuhele, 2014: 114-115). This has hurt national unity.

Nigeria's ethnic make-up is not without its advantages. Deekor and Maekae (2015) made a case for Nigeria's ethnic diversity and its role in achieving sustainable development in the country. The authors recommend a process they termed 'building culture into development' as the only remedy to the present chaos brewed by ethnic diversity. Ethnic diversity is an asset, not an omen. Nigeria's ethnic diversity works like the oral apparatus. The tongue and teeth may have conflicts, but they remain together to achieve the shared goal of chewing and digesting food. Nigeria's ethnic diversity is nature's gift to the nation. If properly managed, it becomes an asset, if poorly managed, it becomes an omen for disunity.

Onifade & Imhonopi (p. 75) believe that 'achieving national integration is contingent on jumping the hurdles of ethnicity'

National unity

National unity is phrased differently across the literature including as 'national integration', 'unity within the diversity' and so on. It refers to the process of forging together groups of people with different culture, ethnicity and so on under a single, larger entity or nation state for their common interests (Onyeakazi and Okoroafor, 2018: 53-54). National unity is possible when ethnic differences are blurred or erased and the people's primary allegiance is to their nation, not their ethnicity or other parochial interests.

Nigeria's national unity has been made challenging by ethnic diversity. Ethnicism and nepotism are strongly 'anti-national' (ibid. p.56). national unity

is not forced. It can only be achieved if there is understanding of the diversity, accepting the differences and a mutual consent to live in unity and harmony.

Social Contract Theory

At the heart of social contract is citizens' wellbeing and security. Enlightenment philosophers including Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau helped to make concrete the relationship between the state and its constituent parts under the notion of social contract and reciprocal relationship. Hobbes (as cited in Laskar, 2013) imagined the beginning of human civilization prior to the setting up of communities and societies. Humans lived in a state of nature, an era when there was no government. This period, the theorists hold, is marked by chaos. Life in the state of nature was akin to that found in the animal kingdom: it was brute, poor and short. Fear was second nature to all as there was insecurity. Life was unpleasant. Might was always right. The general tendency among humans is to run away from pain and towards gain. To escape this chaos, people entered into two agreements, namely 'pactum unionis' and 'pactum subjectionis'.

The first pact entailed the security of lives and property. Parties to the contract were bound to respect each other for harmonious living. In the second pact, they accept to be allegiant to an authority. They relinquish their rights to lead themselves to a higher, central authority. This pact created the position of a monarch, the mightiest authority to protect the subjects from external aggression. It was done in exchange for security. Whatever government or authority they subject themselves to got its legitimacy from the two agreements.

Hence, the government has the moral responsibility to keep to their side of the bargain. Since subjects relinquished their rights to be led by a ruler, it is implied that they trust the ruler's discretion to make laws that will promote, not hurt, their common interests. However, when government fail in their duty to give subjects the expected benefits of having a government -security and welfare- Locke and Rousseau state, citizens can withdraw support for the government. Locke adds that the state exists for the dispensation of justice. Distinction has been drawn between the state and government. Rousseau believes that the state cannot be overthrown, but the government can be (Laskar, 2013).

Democracy, as Nigeria practices, is one form of government. Nigeria's political elites came to a consensus that the best government that fits the ethnically diverse country is a democracy where the majority as well as the minority have a voice and a say in the government.

But how happy are the ethnic groups with the central government? There has been a loud and long cry of marginalization among a large cross section of

Nigerians about the social contract existing between government and the sub-nationalities.

It is common knowledge most Nigerians see themselves first as members of their ethnic group and secondly as Nigerians. This diversity and disunity is aptly captured by Awolowo's famous quote:

"Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. The word 'Nigerian' is merely a distinctive appellation used to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not. He went further to note that West and Eastern Nigeria are as different as Ireland from Germany. The North is as different from either as China" (Awolowo, 1947: 48).

The foregoing quotes point at the general tendency of most Nigerians. There's a common misconception among Nigerians. It is fueled by dominant ignorance of the make-up of the nation's ethnic landscape. To illustrate this claim, to most Igbos living outside Igboland and few others living outside Igboland, if one is a Nigerian and he is not Igbo, he must be either Hausa or Yoruba. Among Hausas, if one is not Hausa, he must be either Igbo or Yoruba. To a typical Lagosian, a Tiv man from Benue is Hausa. To a Sokoto man, an Urhobo man from Delta state is an Igbo man.

The ethnic colouration of national actions and activities has been documented. Asogwa & Nnamchi (2020:55). The 1914 amalgamation by Britain of the Northern and Southern protectorates into a single entity called 'Nigeria' was imposed upon the ethnic nationalities. (Ezinwa & Amugo 2021:216). This imposition has set Nigeria in a 'self-destruct mode' that need to be reversed (Isike & Olasupo 2022). The political parties formed at the wake of the 1960 Independence were very ethnic in nature. In the North, the Northern People's Congress held sway. The Action Congress dominated the West while in the East, the National Congress of the Nigeria and the Cameroon was the dominant party (Onyekachukwu and Oghogho 2018:74).

Social Contract Theory and Its Relevance to Nigeria's Multi-ethnicity

A broken or absent social contract between citizens and governments has been a recurring problem identified in researching developing nations, Nigeria inclusive (Cheeseman & Peiffer :1). Nigerians are yet to understand the cultural and ethnic terrain of the country. Appreciation comes by understanding. If one understands a culture, one's misconceptions or wrong perceptions are cleared.

The vigorous pursuit of ethnic or tribal interests rather than national ones makes the multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria to be a trigger for conflicts. This

diversity is at the bottom of the hate speech, ethnic bigotry especially during elections. In their 2019 article 'Contentious elections, political exclusion, and challenges of national integration in Nigeria', Mbah and collaborators elaborated that political appointments in Nigeria, especially since 2015, has been ethnicized. They pointed 30 key appointments given mostly to the North to the exclusion of others (Mbah et al, 17-18). Nigeria's current woes, Jiboku & Jiboku (2019), Ogbuze (2021: 205) and Nweke (2021:29) concluded in their articles, shows that the leaders have abandoned the social contract.

Conclusion and Recommendation

It was the objective of this article to reimagine social contract theory and its application to blur ethnic differences to boost national unity. The paper argued that national unity is best achieved when there is ethnic balancing among the nation's ethnic groups; when governance is not viewed from the parochial angle of ethnic triumphalism but as a responsibility to work for national interest. To stem the tide of impunity with which Nigerian political class rule, there is a growing need to reimagine Nigeria's ethnic diversity by revisiting the social contract existing between the ethnic sub-nationalities and the federal government. The article, like others (Asogwa & Nnamchi 2020; Alubabari 2012) hold that modern democracies are anchored on the mutual commitment and respect to the social contract between leaders and the led; between the ethnic constituents and the central government.

Social contract theory paves an important path for forging unity in an ethnically diverse nation as Nigeria. Admittedly, the SCT will not provide a magic wand that will suddenly cause ethnic bigotry to disappear. And this is partly due to the fact that SC, like all theories, is not without its shortcomings. However, the insights SCT offers, when wholly applied to the Nigerian context, promises to be transformative.

Education tends to blunt the sharp edges of ethnic bigotry. Most Nigerians are guided by, to use Weiner's phrase, 'parochial loyalties' (cited in Onyeakazi and Okoroafor, 2018) than by a commonly shared national interest. This, for the sake of national unity, must be discarded and replaced by broader and nobler goals including patriotism to the nation. This education is revolutionary in nature. 'The revolution of the mind' Emejulu & Adidi (2020) state, 'is a safer landing for the process of political stability'

If national unity is worth pursuing, Nigerians must give up their loyalties. They must shift from parochial interests of ethnic affiliations to national ones. That is the spirit of Hobbes' *Leviathan*. People must give up their rights to prioritize tribe above country. By so doing, it is for greater good. Until the social contract

is reviewed and respected, the cry of marginalization among Nigeria's ethnic nationalities will only grow louder, drowning the desired symphony of national unity.

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