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## **Federal character and citizenship crisis: a sociological anatomy of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Over the years Nigeria has been engulfed in series of conflicts resulting in deaths of thousands of lives and lost in property. Notable among these conflicts in recent times include the clashes between the Hausa-Kataf in Kaduna State, the Tiv and Jukun conflict in Wukari, the Ife/Modekeke, the Chamba and Kuteb in Taraba State etc. Most of these conflicts are rooted in discriminatory practices between indigene and settlers - the issues around which these violent conflicts occurred relate to citizenship rights. Scholars argued that the problem started since the imposition of colonial rule. However, little is done to examine postcolonial policies put in place by various governments to address the problem of citizenship crisis in Nigeria. The federal character is one of such policies. The background to the adoption of the federal character doctrine in Nigeria could be traced partly to the inability of Nigerian leaders to evolve an effective means of holding the units together towards a national goal. Against this backdrop the paper seeks to critically appraise the Federal character doctrine in either prompting or mitigating ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** federal character, citizenship, horizontal inequalities, ethnicity and conflict.

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### **1. Introduction**

Nigeria can be rightly described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa. (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005:4) Nigeria is a country characterized by intense ethnic polarization and conflict. It has been argued that 'inter-ethnic, rivalry for domination is a fatal affliction of the Nigerian political process. (Mustapha, 2005:4)

Conflict in Nigeria takes various forms but this paper focuses on ethno-religious conflicts. This form of conflicts has proved to be the most violent instances of inter-group crisis in Nigeria. The major examples of violent ethno-religious conflict have included the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises in 1987 and 1999, Zangon Kataf riots of 1992, Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2000, the Kaduna Shariah riots of 2000, and the Jos riots of 2001. Most of these crises are rooted in discriminatory practices between indigenes and settlers right from colonial days to the present day situation (Kuna 1998, Eguwu 2004, Alubo 2004, Elaigwu 2005, Kuna 2005, Alubo, 2006).

The issue of citizenship or settler/indigene syndrome has in recent years become a very serious threat to the peaceful co-existence of some communities in Nigeria (Shariff, 2005: 327). Even though sections 25 – 30 and 41 – 44 of the 1999 Constitution among others are very clear on the rights of Nigerian to work and settle in any part of Nigeria, the reality is not the case due to the notorious indigene/settler dichotomy.

Current thinking about development places individuals firmly at the centre of concern for analysis and policy ...

horizontal inequalities <sup>[1]</sup> is very important but neglected dimension of development ... group's relative performance in economic, social and political dimensions is an important source of individual welfare and can cause serious political instability <sup>[2]</sup>.

This dichotomy has led to clashes between the indigenes and settler. To buttress this point, Alubo argued that no geo-political zone in Nigeria has been spared the orgy of violence and bloodletting, all of them emanating from citizenship crisis and contestation.

The questions around which the analysis is organized are: what is the nature of conflicts that have ensured from citizenship contestation? And how has the federal character promoted or mitigated the conflicts?

In order to answer these questions, this paper is organized into further five sections. The following section (2) examines the analytical framework providing discussion on theoretical framework. Section (3) examines the historical foundation of ethno-religious conflicts based on citizenship contestation. Section (4) draws our attention to the appraisal of the federal character principle. The final section (5) will draw some conclusions and recommendations.

### **2. Analytical Framework <sup>[3]</sup>**

Considering the complex nature of ethno-religious conflicts based on citizenship contestation, it would be difficult to outline

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<sup>1</sup> Horizontal inequality refers to inequalities between culturally formed groups.

<sup>2</sup> The opening quotation is the words of Frances Stewart of the Center for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford in his Paper entitled: Horizontal inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development. The Paper was prepared for WIDER for the 2001 Annual Development lecture.

<sup>3</sup> This Framework is adopted from the Theoretical Framework being used by M. T. Dansabo (2006) in a research on Indigene settler relations in Sokoto Metropolis, Funded by CRISE.

a single straightjacket approach. This is because there are numerous theories put in place by scholars in their attempt to give explanations on the cause, course and etiology of conflicts. Notable among these theories include: Relative deprivation, rising expectations and frustration aggression hypotheses and closure theory.

However, the paper will use the two most relevant approaches i.e. relative deprivation and closure theory. The use of these approaches is due to the fact that the problems could be located within horizontal inequality. Almost all the ethno-religious conflicts of Nigeria are propelled by the feeling of one group of deprivation and an unequal distribution of society's approved value (scarce goods and services). This is evident in the colonial divide-and-rule policy that entrenched systems of ethnic segmentation and polarization. The policy brought about the exclusion of Christians and southerners to the core north and their restriction to strangers' quarters. The Sabon-Gari settlement in most northern states cities is a settlement meant to segregate the non-indigenes, hence the genesis of citizenship crisis in Nigeria. Relative deprivation theory is an explanation of reasons for people's reaction to situations. The theory is of the assumption that people's reaction to situation is determined by making reference to others in similar situation. It helps us to determine

the occurrence of civil violence as well as explaining variation in attitude amongst different categories of people.

Relative deprivation suggests that social and psychological experience of people are never absolute but relative i.e. the justice or injustice in what one expects to get as compared to what other in the same situation gets. The condition in which relative deprivation is felt includes:

1. A person or group does not possess something of value.
2. The individual or group sees other possess or have what he values.

To buttress these points, Stewart posed some important questions in which His <sup>[4]</sup> give rise to resentment and dissatisfaction and violence.

- The time dimension: it seems plausible that the HIs will more of a source of resentment and an agent of mobilization where HIs are widening over time;
- The consistency issue, i.e. whether one can expect more negative consequences where HIs are consistent across categories than where they are inconsistent (for example, where one group has dominance but is economically deprived).
- The effects of intra-group inequality: Can we expect greater intra group inequalities to reduce group cohesiveness?

**Table 1:** Sources of Differentiation among Groups Economic

Categories of Differentiation	Political Participation	Assets	Employment and Income	Social Access and Situation
Elements of Categories	Government Ministry	Land	Incomes/Gov't Employment	Education
	Parliament	Human capital	Private employment	Health services
	Civil Services Various levels	Communal resources inc. water	> Elite = employment	Safe water
	Army	Minerals	> Rents =	Housing
	Police	Privately owned capital credit	Skilled	Unemployment
	Local government	Gov't infrastructure	Unskilled	Poverty
	Respect for human right	Security assets against theft and destruction	Informal sector opportunities	Personal and household security

Source: Adapted from Stewart, 2001

If these conditions are present, the individual or group feel(s) deprived. Violence occurs when relative deprivation is severe i.e. a large proportion feel deprived. These conditions can be likened for example to the conflict between the Hausas and Kataf in Kaduna state. The representation made by the Kataf following the violence of February 1992 is largely hinged on the claim that they are the original owners of the land and they generously accommodated the Hausas. However, this claim is counteracted by the position of the Hausa community who claimed centuries of affective residency, hence entitled to own land. The Katafs complain of injustice, socio-economic deprivation and cultural suppression. This led to the chain of violent outburst targeted at the Hausas in 1992. The ultimate goal of the Katafs was to reclaim their land, hence wiping out the Hausa community in Zango-Kataf. The same conditions led to the clash between the Tiv and Jukun and other ethno-religious conflicts in the country. Weber's Closure theory can also be used to buttress the above conditions. Social closure suggests that the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of

eligible. This entails the singling out of certain social or physical attributes as the justificatory base of exclusion. Virtually any group's attribute (race, language, social origin, religion etc) may be sized upon provided it can be used for the monopolization of specific, usually economic opportunities. This monopolization is direct against competitors who share some positive or closure of social and economic opportunities to outsiders (Frank, 2004:7).

In some contexts in Nigeria certain public goods are made exclusive to particular groups. This is indeed of radical and detrimental effects to the unity of Nigeria because physical infrastructures are unequally distributed across areas and communities, which are clustered in these areas.

Having discussed the analytical framework, in what follows emphasis would be laid on an historical account of the emergence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

### 3. Historical Foundation of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

It is widely agreed (Anifowose 1982, Nnoli 1980, Kuna 2002, Ehagwu 2005, Kuna 2005, Suberu 2005) that many tribal

<sup>4</sup> HIs means Horizontal Inequalities.

distinctions in Nigeria were invented by colonial powers. It is a known fact that the colonial administration was created for the major purpose of exploiting the colonies. The people therefore held no stake in the colonial states. The root causes of Nigeria's conflict according to Elaigwu (2005) were multi-dimensional and emanated from state building and federation. His contention was that the period 1914 to 1946 witnessed the mere co-existence of Nigerian groups who hardly knew of one another nor interacted in any substantial way horizontally. Like most colonial authorities, the British administration encouraged vertical relations between the individual communities and their administrators. Elaigwu argued that close horizontal relations among Nigerian groups would have nailed the colonial Coffin earlier than the British would have wished, assuming they had any intentions of leaving.

Nigeria evolved in the context of British colonial policies in West Africa, in piecemeal fashion. As Chief Obafemi Awolowo noted: Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English" "Welsh". The word "Nigerian" is a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not. (cf. Elaigwu, 2005).

In line with the above, Osaghae and Suberu (2005) asserts that colonialism was the single most important factor in crystallization of contemporary identity and identity conflicts. It is generally agreed that colonialism is the 'cradle' of ethnicity<sup>5</sup> in Nigeria. For example, the contemporary ethno religious turbulence in Kaduna state, including the February – May 2002 Sharia mayhem, can be traced back to at least the mid-nineteenth century when Kaduna's Southern non-Muslim communities were raided, enslaved and eventually incorporated into the emirate structure by the Hausa-Fulani Muslims (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005:15)

They went further to argue that:

The advent of colonialism in the late nineteenth century and the subsequent amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria witnessed more migration in response largely to modern economic opportunities in emerging colonial urban centers.... The British response was basically to preserve the Islamic Puritanism of the north and avoid potential inter-group tensions by discouraging movement of non-Muslims migrants into the core Muslim areas, and to 'quarantine', as it were, the migrants in Sabon-gari or Strangers' quarters. This territorial demarcation, which was to be extended to most Northern cities and southern cities like Ibadan and Lagos where Sabon-gari were also created (in the south to house Northern migrants who were mostly Muslim) become one of the strong bases for conflictual identity formation and discriminatory practices.

This goes to show that socio-economic segregation we see today in Nigeria in terms of exclusion of some groups from scarce societal resources such as housing, educational opportunities, ownership of economic assets-land and political participation are

rooted right from colonial days and are bases for most of the ethno-religious conflicts experienced in Nigeria. It is thus obvious from the previous works, there existed the predominance of remarks and debates of social context by different commentators, which invariably presented various perspectives, but mostly revealed the devastating nature of colonial policy in terms of artificially created segregation, which served as the foundation for citizenship crisis in Nigeria.

The preceding sections of the paper dealt with historical and theoretical issues relating to the topic of discussion. The next section will focus on the spine of the paper, which is devoted to a critical appraisal of the federal character principle.

#### **4. An Appraisal of the Federal Character Principle**

As stated elsewhere, the background of the federal character doctrine in Nigeria could be traced partly to the inability of Nigerian leaders to evolve an effective means of holding the units together towards a national goal. There was also absence of consensus among Nigerians on vital issues. Such issues related to educational development, income structure, occupation, ethnic values, religion, language, economic structure, social welfare and government structure. The concept of federal character emerged from the efforts of the constitution drafting committee (CDC) inaugurated by the late General Murtala Mohammed on the 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1975 (Kanoma, 2005).

Following the CDC recommendation, the 1979 constitution legitimized the principle in chapter II section 14, sub-section (3) and (4). Sub-section (3) states that: "The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby, ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic group or other section groups in that government or any of its agencies.

Sub-section (4) further states that: "The composition of the government of a state, a local government council or any of the agencies of such government or council or the conduct of the affairs of the government or council or such agencies shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognize the diversity of the peoples within its area of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the federation.

The federal character principle is best exemplified in the "quota system". Each state of the federation is allocated some portions of federal establishment and it is expected to fill such allocation with its "indigenes". Quota system was introduced in the placement of students in federal educational institutions, in scholarship awards, and in recruitment into federal public service, statutory corporations and government owned companies.

The pertinent question to ask at this juncture is, how has the federal character principle been able to resolve the problem of citizenship in Nigeria? The application of Federal character principle has generated hot debates among Nigerians - both academics and the ordinary people. Some criticisms leveled

<sup>5</sup> Nnoli defined Ethnicity as a social phenomenon association with interactions among members of different Ethnic Groups.

against the application of the doctrine and their operational strategies of quota system are the following:

1. It tends to emphasize the differences of Nigerians to the detriment of the unifying force of the country.
2. It tends to enthrone 'mediocrity' and inexperience in the public services with the consequences of lowering efficiency and morale of the highly qualified people. It encourages incompetence and unprofessionalism.
3. It contradicts section 17 of the constitution under social objectives, sub-section 3(a) which, states that "All citizens without discrimination on any ground whatsoever have the opportunity of securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunities to secure suitable employment.
4. By these discriminatory tendencies, it does not allow for healthy competition while some may become complacent and assured others may become disenchanting.
5. The quota system in admission tends to deny more qualified students access to educational opportunities (NTI, 2000).

To buttress the above points, Alubo (2006) argued that the federal government uses 'indigeneity' as the bases for determining federal character, a policy which among others, provides that employment and other opportunities should reflect the diverse origins and in practice, gives opportunities to people who may have lower qualifications but are from educationally less developed states. In a nutshell, the operation of quota system is based on consideration of 'indigeneity'.

There is thus contradiction in the Nigerian constitution. Section 30 of the 1999 constitution provides that a non-Nigerian who has stayed in Nigeria for a continuous 15 years is eligible to be granted Nigerian citizenship. However, the constitution of Nigeria is silent on when 'a settler'<sup>[6]</sup> becomes 'an indigene'? In his critique of this provision, Usman (cf. Nnoli, 1978) argued that it is quite difficult in Nigeria to decide what exactly constitutes a community indigeneous to a state. It is not clear the number of generations a family is expected to stay before its members become indigeneous. To support his points Usman posed some critical questions, which include: "who are the indigenes of Gongola<sup>[7]</sup> state for example? Is it from the Bachama who somebody will say claim to come from Gobia? Or the Jukun who somebody will claim to come from Egypt? Or the Fulani who somebody will say claim to come from Senegal? Based on these contradictions, Usman predicted that such an exercise would make 'indigeneity' a permanent political issue and would also grossly contradict provision of the constitution regarding residency rights, and completely undermine the development of a national citizenship, a basic requirement for national cohesion (cf Nnoli, 1978).

The Nigeria's policy of official discrimination<sup>[8]</sup> is indeed unhealthy of 'Nigeria's nationhood' and 'Nigerian project'. The issue of citizenship or settler/indigene syndrome (the notorious indigene settler dichotomy) has in recent years posed as a very serious threat to the peaceful coexistence of some communities in Nigeria. Even though sections 25 – 30 and 41 – 44 of the 1999

constitution among others are very clear on the right of Nigerians to work and settle in any part of Nigeria, the reality is not the case (Shariff, 2005).

Alubo (2004) asserts that:

... The current practice of citizenship thus has a telling effect on the nature of national integration ... all Nigerians are invited to rally round the flag, "make Nigeria Great", or support the super Eagles ... while on the other, the operation of indigene-settler divide circumscribes the nature of such participation. Such calls to "one Nigeria" are often for the more vacuous and symbolic purposes as material advantages and opportunities (such as federal character, quota systems) are based on particularities criteria like indigeneity. In the end, ethnicity and to some extent gender and religion is introduced to define who is a citizen and who is not; as well as for what purposes and where. (Pp. 18 – 19).

This is indeed unfortunate and detrimental to the development of Nigeria as a united political entity. Citizenship crisis has in the recent times led to the proliferation of ethno-religious groups such as the OPC in the South-West, Arewa People's Congress (APC) in the North and Igbo People's Congress (IPC) in the West.

In the political scene today, Federal Character Principle has led to the re-emergence of ethno-regional politics through the clamour for power shift. During the 2011 presidential elections campaigns, instead of the politicians to devote time to programmes that would better the lots of Nigerians, they were busy and shamelessly agitating for power shift. Most of the politicians do not have Nigeria as their constituency; they instead, strive to promote their primordial sentiments of ethnicity and regionalism.

The power shift syndrome is indeed laying foundation for disintegration. Rahaman Raheem asserts that:

There is no need for these entire regional groups for they are polarizing the nation along ethnic lines. All these groups should be dissolved in a bid to form National groups that can give the country a candidate with nation appeal. (Weekly Trust, August 12- 18, 2006)

Raheem went ahead to argue that the craze for power shift is another betrayal of the masses by the political leaders. Instead of focusing attention on issues, instead of putting structures in place to guarantee credible polls, instead of working relentlessly to make sure a credible candidate who can give us better life, instead of helping us to choose the best candidate that will pull support from all socio-economic strata and all regions and tribes in the country. A candidate who has no iota of ethnic or regional coloration and who will consider the entire nation as his/her own

<sup>6</sup> Alubo argued that anyone born outside the native home of the Ethnic Group is regarded as a settler with no provision for converting to an Indigene ... in most states in Nigeria certificate of Indigene are issued to give indigenes privileges and opportunities (such as Scholarship, employment) which are denied others.

<sup>7</sup> Adamawa State now represents the former Gongola State. The State was renamed when Taraba State,

was carved out of it. Usman posed this question in the 70s before the State was reconfigured.

<sup>8</sup> Official discrimination in this context is referred to the Federal Character Principle.

constituency, the present political leaders are busy and shamelessly playing ethnic cards.

### 5. Conclusion/Recommendations

There is a popular saying by the sociologists that 'a society deserves the problems it has' ( Dansabo, 2005). In this context it is our contention that Nigeria deserve to have ethno-religious conflicts. This is because the structure of the Nigerian society encourages citizenship contestation. In the first instance, the colonialists separated linguistic groups from one another, particularly in residential areas. For example, in the Northern Nigeria it was the official British policy to separate the Hausa-Fulani from the southerners. At first Southern and Northern migrants to Northern cities lived together in harmony with their hosts in the native city. Hence, the migrants were forced to set up abode in Sabon Garis. This situation continues even after independence. The postcolonial policies most especially (the federal character Principle) did little to redress this imbalance.

It should be noted that diversity in itself is not a sufficient condition for conflicts as many thought. Some countries are diverse and yet are living peacefully. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) noted that empirical evidence shows that division and conflict are not dependant on the degree of diversity, as some of the most diverse countries (for example, Switzerland, Belgium and Tanzania) enjoy relative peace and stability, while some of the least diverse are the most unstable or violent (for example, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and perhaps, Sri-Lanka).

The nature of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is so complex. No Sociologist can claim to have a ready-made answer to the problem. The proper task of a Sociologist is to give theoretical explanation of the problem with particular reference to actors involved in the conflict.

The solution to the perpetual ethno-religious conflicts based on citizenship contestation has to come from multi-dimensional points of view. All stakeholders (the administrators, law makers, law enforcement agents, traditional rulers, religious leaders and academics) would have to work jointly with a view to come up with a lasting solution to the problem.

Fundamentally, the development policy in Nigeria ought to monitor and correct horizontal inequalities. This is not part of the current development agenda.

To solve ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria, there is the need for concerted efforts to address the issue of citizenship. The effective workability of the principle of federal character can be enhanced if the issue of indigene-settler dichotomy is addressed. In as much as the constitution of Nigeria provides that an alien can become citizen of Nigeria by either naturalization or marriage. There is thus, no reason whatsoever, for denying any Nigerian who chooses to change his indigeneship permanently. There should be provision in the Nigerian Constitution to cater for his need.

Nigerians should not to allow corrupt politicians to lure them into ungodly crisis (political violence). The region or ethnic affiliation of a candidate is immaterial what matters most is *what the candidate will be able to offer to better the lots of Nigerians*. In a situation whereby the Ibos think they should be president, the Northerners are claiming it and the South-South people too think it is their turn; we will end up with the wrong person if any of the regions now succeeds with their own ethnic candidate.

If the country must make progress, regional groups should be disbanded for they have no function to the progress of the Nigerian nation.

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