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HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND NATION BUILDING: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The historiography on state system, till date, is replete with varied interpretations. For some scholars, state system is deeply rooted in every society; it emanates from the biological idea of a father- figure writ large. For our present discourse, two shades of opinion are discernible from the debate on the emergence of state system. The first believes in artificial creation of states while the second argues that state systems emerged out of its history. Using the Nigerian experience, this paper argues that national Integration was achieved through the astonishing level of sacrifice, team work, harmonisations, reconciliations and assimilations that took place in the pre-colonial period. The paper posits that, national integration was fostered by the existence of several cultural units in close geographical areas, migrations and settlements; social interaction and bilingualism, among other factors which served as bridges for national integration. These historical antecedents were strengthened in the 19th century by the introduction of Islam and Christianity both of which acted as cohesive factors by breaking down ethnic boundaries.

Keywords: State System, Change- Inducing Forces, Cultural Interactions and Diffusion and National Integration and National Consciousness.

History (especially Nigerian history) is a strategic device or method which can be placed at the disposal of statesmen to help them in bringing Nigeria and Nigerians together as well as in developing and sustaining them.

Adiele E. Afigbo

“When the past is forgotten, its power over the present is hidden from us, and our capacity to influence the future is severely restricted”.

Jeneth Keightley.

There are two contrasting views on the emergence of state-systems on the international scene (Erim, 1981:89-121). While some scholars insist on the artificiality of state systems, others argue that national unity has not always been a product of national growth but invariably, a product of its history. This paper takes the view that several arguments on the state system the world over hinge on lack of proper grasp of the antecedents or history and culture of any given state system. Indeed this paper contends that unity of the state system, people and culture is an attribute that requires to be deliberately cultivated and nurtured and be property rooted in the

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people's history and culture. The rest of the paper will examine the argument that national unity is a product of history. Again, it will so briefly look at the position of state apologists who refuse to situate the emergence of Nigeria, for example, within the wider historical context of world history.

A close analysis of the emergence of multi-ethnic states on the international scene shows that their founding fathers forged ahead in the task of uniting the different cultures, peoples, values, positively without being tied down by destructive ignorance of their past. The unity of the United States of America shows clearly, how immigrants with diverse origins and cultural differences emerged, at the end of the nineteenth century, united into one indivisible nation. This feat was achieved largely because these immigrants were able to exploit the similarity of their pre-American historical antecedents.

The experience of modern European states is no less different from that of the United States of America. The speed at which European unity is progressing shows that it is evolving on their past experience and culture. Historically speaking, Europe is a cultural expression although some scholars consider it a distinct geographical unit. For example, European conception of social life, religion, and government as well as science has a certain resemblance which may be difficult to define but it appears unquestionable when compared with the ideas of old civilization. This is more the result of a common historical development. Understanding this historical development in Europe is the only way the interested scholar can understand why America has a special relationship with Europe. The relationship or alliance is writ large in history. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is certainly an extension of the traditional boundaries. Thus, in 1947, all the European countries were invited to closely examine that problem in concert with the United States. General Marshall, the US Secretary of State was one step in drawing world attention to the realities of history. In Eastern Europe, events after World War II were certainly a translation of the historical antecedents. In other words, the dream of the century Russian Pan-slav became a reality in 1945 in the post-war reorganization (Craig, 1961:726-759).

The Japanese experienced no less poignant. Its history shows that the leadership led the people from feudalism to capitalism and from then to advanced form of capitalism within a space of one hundred years. In effect what the leadership did was to transform a traditional Asian culture into a modern and predominantly western culture. Many observers have not been able to understand the spirit behind Japanese transformation.

However, a little familiarity with Japanese history, particularly, during the Tokugawa era after 1867 will better illustrate the issue at stake. Modern Japanese inherited from her past certain political and economic institutions that were easily adopted in sustaining the nation. Her solid organization rooted in a kind of family system and the long centuries of feudal discipline helped produce a capacity for extreme self-abnegation on the part of the individuals, and an aptitude for cooperative effort which served the nation well in time of rapid socio-economic change. In effect, Japan entered upon her course as a great power with an inheritance of political ideals as well as an emotional disposition well-fitted to supply driving force and unifying power in the task of nation building. Today, Japan has emerged as one of the strongest nations of the 21st century.

The above analysis paints a picture of international system, that is, the emergence of such powerful nations in the world, which include the United States of America, Europe and Japan to mention but a few, and how Nigerian leadership could be made to believe that although Nigeria is an amalgam from the vagaries of international diplomacy, unity could still be achieved at the national level. Over the years apologists of national unity have persistently argued that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation. In other words, Nigeria is a commonwealth of separate and diverse autonomous ethnic nations, and since their ancestors had lived separately and developed various cultural, linguistic and political differences for over a long period of

time before the advent of the British colonial government that national unity is an impossible task in this circumstance (Ikime, 1984:4).

The establishment of British colonialism in the Nigerian region did not help matters. Rather, from the beginning, issues of national unity were not in the front burner. In 1960, the independence constitution was promulgated. Three years later, another constitution was put into force which gave the country a republican status. These two major constitutions, especially that of 1963, was later suspended by the military when they staged a coup d'état against the civilian administration under Alhaji Sir, Abubakar Tafawa Belewa in 1966. Thereafter, the country never knew peace and has continued in its quest to achieve both stability and unity. This research has brought in its wake many changes, especially in 1979 and 1989 in which the British parliamentary system was changed into the American style presidential democracy.

Clearly, the drift in our political course indicate symptoms and weakness of very serious malaise in the country. Indeed, there is a pervasive feeling of alienation among most Nigerians, orchestrated more by the negative sentiments often expressed by the apologist of our present dilemma. The net effect of that drift is reflected in the citizens not being sure how they belong to the, "modern" post colonial Nigerian nation state or whether they are expected to have any state, commitment or obligations to the state. This feeling of insecurity was aptly captured by a perceptive Nigerian scholar who opined that (it) manifested itself in the mindless corruption and the insensitivity to social injustice among the bureaucrats and the so-called leaders as in the unconceivable vandalism and wanton criminality of some of the citizens (Maboungunje, 1988:2).

Secondly, European writers on the Nigerian past made constant reference to the negative aspect of our plural ethnic character. Subsequent British and some indigenous historians wrote on the Nigerian past. They also amplified the impossibility of integrating what looked to them like a collection of disparate groups of people to form an enduring nation state. The colonial government itself administered the country as if it were two autonomous communities, (North-South) with one central government in Lagos.

It is the above background which gave the inescapable impression both in and outside the country that Nigeria is an artificial creation of the British colonial government. The contention is that if the artificiality of our creation continues to militate against efforts at achieving national unity, the very colonial experience which laid the foundation for the artificial creation has left a heritage of ethnocentricity and divisiveness which constitute veritable obstacles in the search for national unity.

It is the view of this paper that the argument for the artificiality of our nation-state forms a larger part of the misconception which is an obstacle to knowing the real people with whom we must live and work for our national unity. The arguments of the apologists invariably inhibit effective inter- personal and inter-group relations. The leadership, as well as the followership will be content to do with stereotypes because of the pervasive and massive ignorance about their cultural history of the various constituent political units in the nation-state. The contention then is if national unity should mean anything to anybody it must, among other things mean that the component units of the nation-state know about themselves as well as respect their varying cultures and susceptibilities. It is sad to say that from the experience of this writer, few Nigerian elites have bothered to read any history of the country.

History teaches that at work in the life of every society are change-inducing forces, which tie the past to the present. Indeed, history has been defined in some quarters as relations and interactions among people, organized societies and nation-states. One of the proponents of this thesis, Olatunji Oloruntimehin, posits:

In important ways, history helps our understanding of the interlocking nature of societies across cultural regions of the world. History of different societies dovetails into what becomes history of the world. What we call progress

throughout human history is a product of contacts and cross fertilization of ideas and techniques or skills among the different societies (2008:8).

We shall now briefly examine such salient historical antecedents which make for national unity in Nigeria. In the first place, the existence of different cultural units within one geographical area does not argue for isolation of these various groups and the implied lack of interaction all of which could have been in favour of the emergence of a national state. Indeed, the various people which claim various specific areas of Nigeria were simply amalgam of different earlier group. Indeed, the history of Nigeria is replete with waves of human movements, which justify the apt assertion of Emmanuel Ayandele that "from the earliest times Nigerian peoples have been neither incorrigibly insular, nor irrationally impervious to internal ideas and influences... nor have they been amateurishly unpractised in the act of neighbourliness (2000:367). Similarly, Okon Uya posits that "the institutions and cultures which eventually developed in the Nigerian region in the pre-colonial period were the products of long process of accommodation and fusion of different strands brought in by different groups (2009:120).

With the advent of colonialism there emerged a unification of the cultures and the people came to know themselves better than it is sometimes assumed and were therefore expected, under proper guidance, to operate as a meaningful geopolitical entity as the traditions of origin reveal (Elaigwu, 1988:175). Adiele Afigbo observed that colonial rule meant among other things that people now had to take into account ideals and institutions arising not only from their indigenous experience and sanctioned by their traditions and usages, but also others introduced and imposed by the new rulers (1987:79).

Taken together, traditions of origin, migration and settlement of the diverse cultural units point to the fact that our ancestors were not isolated. For example, the population of the northern parts of Nigeria *as* today constituted is *a* hybrid of several stocks of ethnic groups that emerged over the years from the 12th century onwards. The Fulani, another example, moved into their present abode from the 12th century onwards, and moved among an accommodating population of the Hausa-speaking group. Both the Hausa and the Kanuri have ancestral connections epitomized in the Bayajideh legend (Ikime, 1984).

Among the Yoruba, the ebi system in handling the origins of the various Yoruba kingdoms, we discover that sons of a common father each founded settlements that later constituted a clan, a chieftain or even kingdom. Indeed, the stories of origin and migration of myriads of people including the Idoma, Igala, Bassa Koma, Baba Nge and so on have a series of complex traditions of ancestral migrations which indicate ethnic interactions (Erim, 1981).

Equally, the foundation of both the Benin dynasty and the Yoruba goes a long way to substantiate assertions that our people are not as isolated as we are made to believe. For example, after founding the Benin dynasty, Oramiyan left Benin to found old Oyo on the outskirts of Nupe and Borgu. In other words, these long processes of adventure and interaction also implied years of admixture of population and despite the hybrid nature of their origin, nothing prevented the people of old Oyo Empire from becoming identified as Oyo Yoruba, and it was with the very patriotic spirit of Oyo Yoruba that they fought against Nupe and Borgu.

Furthermore, cultural affinities and a heritage of common sojourning in the Kisra legend connect people from the Lake Chad region in the middle Niger. This is a chain of migrations which does not imply physical migration but might be referring to diffusion of cultural traits over wide areas. Such traits, together with voluntary migrations and settlements were clearly visible of northern Igbo and the people of Igala kingdom. It has also been observed that several ethnic groups in Nigeria have myths of ancestral migration from the north or east, the historicity of which can be rightly questioned but which can be taken as indicative of the similarities of their socio-political culture.

Furthermore, linguistic factor between various ethnic groups are also indicative of the fact that in the dim past, their ancestors were geographically contiguous or had a considerable degree of social interaction. Indeed, glottochronology has also indicated that several of the ethnic groups were quite closely related in the past than hitherto realized. Indeed, their emergence involved a fusion of different peoples as well as accommodation of foreigners. Kanuri state from Borno comprised Hausa, Jukun, Shuwa, Arab, Bulala. Old Oyo accommodated Nupe and Borgu. Edo Empire of Benin accommodated part of western Igbo, Yoruba as well as western Niger Delta. It is now known that almost all these states adopted deliberate policies which promoted ethnic integration and their efforts at significant cultural accommodation all of which were bolstered by inter-marriages which were major cementing factors in inter-personal and inter-group relations.

Another significant factor promoting inter-ethnic unity in Nigeria is bilingualism. For example, the Hausa hegemony created a pax within which constitutes today as a modern Northern Nigeria. In the South east of Nigeria are the Aro whose hegemony also created such a pax east of the Niger as the Igbo made attempts to integrate various communities within their base and the process was facilitated by a lingua franca.

Archeological evidence also points to the pristine spread of our people. Evidence from work so far carried out within the middle belt region of Nigeria ties in favourably from those from other zones. For example, the Nok culture finds found elsewhere within the Benue valley in this regard is quite significant. It is thus clear that some people in the Benue valley participated in this ancient culture whose distribution implies a widespread phenomenon in the early history of our people.

Revolutionary developments in the 19th century fortified the various historical antecedents enumerated above. In the period, this region came under heavy pressures from within and outside the region. The Sokoto jihads of 1804 as well as the Yoruba civil wars were clear examples of the type of pressure which impacted heavily on different Nigerian societies in the 19th century. Each of these major events released in its wake new philosophies which aided national integration. For example, the Sokoto jihad created a new pad using Islam as cohesive factor, striving to integrate various communities. Equally, as from the mid 19th century Christianity actually broke down ethnic boundaries and instead, provided a focus of unity in the southern area in the same way, that the jihadists did in the north. With the advent of colonialism, British government had the will to establish new structures as districts, divisions, provinces and regions. Around these structures, Nigerians built up strong loyalties. This paper believes that, given the right leadership as well as ideological orientation, our people could develop strong loyalty to the larger British structure called Nigeria.

In summary, the following salient points emerge. As a people, Nigerians must diligently seek knowledge about its multifarious peoples. Other nations with similar problems and near experience in national life and history have managed to achieve national cohesion. Nigeria can achieve the same feat. Undoubtedly, history as statecraft has helped to legitimize the country's boundaries which otherwise would have been artificial lines on the map. By so doing history has helped to hold up and nurse the hope that a unified nation-state could evolve out of what once may have looked as disorganized as a haystack.

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