

Ethnic Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria: The Marginalisation Question

EDLYNE E ANUGWOM*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of ethnic conflicts and their implications for democracy in Nigeria. Ethnic conflict and distrust is identified as the bane of former democratic experiments in Nigeria. Moreover, since the late 1980s, ethnicity in Nigeria has assumed disturbing new dimensions. The most crucial of these are the issues of marginalisation and agitations by ethnic minorities. Marginalisation breeds suspicion, distrust, heightens ethnic tensions and may eventually lead to conflict over the sharing and allocation of power and national resources. Democratic tradition, which is imperative for development, cannot blossom in the context of ethnic conflict. Thus, marginalisation, whether apparent or real, has the potential for disrupting the drive towards democracy. With cries for marginalisation so rife among ethnic groups, a need arises to address the issue squarely. This is particularly important given that Nigeria is presently engaged in another attempt at democracy. Ethnic conflicts in whatever form need to be resolved in order to allow for democracy to thrive. This paper examines ways in which ethnic problems in Nigeria may be resolved through the creation of a realistic and workable federalism modelled largely on the American model.

Introduction

Ethnic conflict has been rightly defined as one of the greatest obstacles to meaningful development in Africa (see *The Courier* 1993). In Nigeria, this sort of competition and rivalry among various ethnic groups is seen as a product of colonial contact. The ethnic factor, however, did not diminish with the advent of independence; rather, it became a yardstick for measuring contribution to the national development effort and especially for allocating and distributing power and national resources. As Nigeria is currently engaged in another exercise aimed at establishing a sustainable form of democracy, there is urgent need to address

*Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria; email: misum@aol.com.

perceived factors that may militate against the success of this endeavour. In certain quarters, the annulment of the democratic transition programme by the military in 1993 at the conclusion of the presidential polls, is believed to have been motivated by ethnic sentiments.

On a similar note, the 30-month senseless slaughter occasioned by the Nigerian civil war from 1967 to 1970 was anchored on ethnic rivalry. This was due to the efforts on the part of the predominantly Igbo peoples in the south-eastern region to carve out an independent nation for themselves. In fact, the history of present-day Nigeria is prevalent with cases of ethno-religious conflicts. Since the annulment of the 1993 elections, there have been increased demands and counter-demands for marginalisation by various ethnic groups in the country (see *The Nsukka Analyst* 1994). These allegations have worsened because the various ethnic groups see themselves as the victims and point accusing fingers at one another.

In view of this, as well as the implications of pronounced conflict over power-sharing and resource allocation, the ethnic question demands continuous examination if efforts to achieve a better Nigeria are to succeed. In addition, this type of analysis may go a long way in preventing ethnic conflict, since it proffers suggestions on how to lessen ethnic tensions and resolve contentious issues.

Feasible solutions to ethnic problems can only emanate from well-grounded examinations of the phenomenon itself. Ethnic conflict obviously affects the development of a society, since this can only take place within a peaceful and democratic context that is devoid of rancour.

There is a dire need for effective development in Nigeria and Africa in general. And as Kankwenda (1994) has posited, African nations are currently engaged in what may be considered 'trafficking' in development ideologies. This scenario evolved from the realisation that despite several decades of independence, African nations are still faced with severe problems of underdevelopment.

Olukoshi (1996) contends, therefore, that it is high time efforts were made to resolve the lingering political and social crisis in Nigeria by groups and individuals inside and outside the country.

This paper examines the nature of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, as well as its implications for democracy, particularly with regards to perceptions of marginalisation by ethnic groups. In this way, suggestions on how to ameliorate ethnic conflicts in the emerging democratic tradition in Nigeria are proffered.

Ethnicity in Perspective

A seminal work on ethnicity in Nigeria has been done by Nnoli (1978). In his

work, Nnoli views ethnic rivalry as a product of the colonial contact situation. Ethnicity may be seen as the latter-day version of the concept of tribalism in Africa. The term "tribalism" has its roots in the colonial experience and was used pejoratively to denigrate Africans and things African. The use of this term lacked intellectual purpose and scientific leaning. Its main purpose was to represent African people in the colonial myth as primitive and barbaric, needing the "redeeming" influence of colonial experience to embrace civilisation.

The intellectual sterility imbued in the concept of tribalism was succinctly unmasked by Mafeje (1971). He sees it as an anachronistic misnomer which impedes cross-cultural analysis by drawing invidious and highly suspect distinctions between Africans and other peoples. Therefore, it over-simplifies and obscures the very nature of economic and power consolidation among Africans and between Africans and others. Tribalism, as it were, referred to distinct socio-cultural groups in pre-independent Africa, but also implied that these groups were living a brutish, short, nasty and barbarous existence reminiscent of the dark ages. In this light, Magubane's (1969) assertion that because tribalism is rooted in human nature and primordial identities, African societies will always be wrecked by irremediable, internal conflicts; becomes suspect. Such an assertion is not only illogical, but it may stifle academic attempts to ameliorate ethnic conflicts in Africa.

The use of the term "tribalism" is now considered to be unacademic and as implying neo-imperialistic revisionist tendencies. The term "ethnicity", on the other hand, tends to cut across continental boundaries and capture contemporary African realities and socio-cultural processes. The concept of ethnicity is therefore preferred in any attempt to capture the nature of differences and conflicts among socio-culturally distinct groups in Nigeria.

Ethnicity should be regarded as a complex phenomenon and extremely fluid reality. Nnoli (1978) defines ethnicity as a social phenomenon that is associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups, from his perspective, are social formations distinguished by the communal nature of their boundaries. Such groups may be distinct in terms of language, culture, or both. According to Nnoli, language has clearly been the most crucial dividing factor in Africa. Although in Nigeria, the present ethnic conflicts may be seen as lying also in what Nnoli called the sub-ethnic group or the so-called ethnic minorities, which are groups with minor linguistic and cultural differences, yet are members of one big geographic group. The Ogoni problem in Nigeria, therefore, is basically an ethnic issue, due to similar cultural and linguistic patterns with other groups in the south-eastern riverine area. However, one may not easily perceive it as thus. There is often a tendency to classify all minor ethnic groups as one, in the process forgetting that there are significant differences between

them.

The definition of ethnicity according to the three main ethnic and geographic groups in Nigeria *viz* the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo, or North, South-West and South-East; may be one of the reasons why the Ogoni problem has remained intractable.

Ethnicity should be seen as arising in any situation where a group of people, no matter how small, with different cultural and linguistic attributes from those of its neighbours; uses this as the basis of solidarity and interaction with others. In so doing, the group sees itself not only as distinct, but as a "group in itself and for itself". In other words, socio-cultural consciousness of oneness develops and forms the basis of interaction with and participation in other socio-cultural processes, especially in power and resource allocation, within a larger social group or state. And this consciousness is most crucial in the definition of an ethnic group.

Ethnicity implies the fact that the group feels ethnocentric towards others; that is, it sees other groups as relatively inferior and more or less as rivals. This feeling brings about certain attitudes, which distort reality and breed subjectivity in the evaluation and perception of events.

Ethnicity is also characterised by a common consciousness of being. And this factor, more than any other, defines the boundary of the group that is relevant for understanding ethnicity at any point in time (Nnoli 1978: 6). Ethnicity, in addition, often contains an obscured class component. In this sense, it becomes a tool for the elite members of society to hold on to their privileges.

The class bias often imbued in ethnicity has been well articulated by Sklar (1967). Sklar views ethnicity as implying the fact that in Africa, ethnic movements may be created and instigated to action by privileged men in a bid to further their own interests. Such men of power may be seen as the emerging elites of society who may use ethnic sentiments to consolidate their power base and further their own selfish interests.

In fact, Nnoli (1978) sees ethnicity as a class phenomenon, which emerged from the desire of the colonisers to exploit the colonised. In Nnoli's words, "ethnicity in Africa emerged and persisted either as a mechanism for adaptation to the imperialist system or as an instrument for ensuring a facile and more effective domination and exploitation of the colonised." (1978: 5) Thus Ibrahim and Pereira (1993) see this form of ethnic control as having repercussions in terms of distribution of national resources, ultimately leading to ethnic tension.

The end of the colonial era, however, does not mean that the objective realities upon which ethnicity was built have disappeared. The selfish need for the privileged classes to further their interests and subjugate the underprivileged by instigating and intensifying ethnic sentiments, still abounds. At best, one privi-

leged group, the white colonisers, has been replaced by another privileged group, the indigenous agents of neo-imperialism. A brief examination of colonial administrative processes, would have made this occurrence easily predictable. In fact, the selective access to education which colonialism favoured, created an elite which was able to collude with the colonial power (see Drayton 1995) even after colonial rule. And this may be the case in many African nations now.

When colonial rule ended in 1960, this elite group took charge of affairs and ensured the maintenance of the *status quo*. This explains why, in spite of the negative consequences of ethnicity in Nigeria, the ruling class has not seriously confronted the factors that create and deepen ethnic cleavages. One of these is the issue of marginalisation.

Marginalisation, whether apparent or real, has the potential for disrupting the socio-cultural fabric of a society, particularly when several ethnic groups single out one group alone as the perpetrator.

The Ethnic Composition of Nigeria

Any effort at unravelling the precise ethnic composition of Nigeria, is inevitably fraught with the problem of what to take into account and what to exclude. In fact, it was during the colonial era that the British introduced some measure of "order" by amalgamating the various ethnic and social groups in Nigeria under one umbrella. Before this, however, the various socio-ethnic groups in Nigeria were engaged in one form of exchange or the other. This exchange facilitated interaction. In addition, the virtual non-existence of unsurmountable natural barriers boosted inter-group migration. Olukoju (1997), however, sees the mistake of the colonial masters as lying in the fact that their unification exercise took no cognizance of the existing pattern of inter-group relations.

In other words, this unification was not only externally imposed, but introduced some discontinuity in the hitherto existing inter-group dynamics. This discontinuity not only introduced new elements, but ironically, sharpened the distinctions between these groups. Thus, the British exercise at unification was over-ambitious and showed little regard for the so-called natural boundaries. This has led to the popular belief among Nigerians that Nigeria is no less than a geographical expression created by colonialism. This opinion has received various forms of intellectual endorsement (see Adejuyibe 1983).

In view of the fact that new ethnic groups are still being "discovered" in Nigeria, the British attempt at unification may be seen as a genuine effort to use constitutional power to overcome a socio-linguistic problem. Nigeria's diversity, both in "tongue" and "tribe" makes it a very difficult region to subject to precise

classification.

This has led to the tendency among many scholars to focus on the three major ethnic or geographic zones in the country *viz* the Hausa-Fulani (Northern Nigeria), the Yoruba (Western Nigeria) and the Igbo (Eastern Nigeria).

These geographic zones are not in any way solely occupied by the three ethnic groups. A plethora of smaller socio-ethnic groups may be located in these zones. The persistent problems of the minority ethnic groups indicate the futility of this type of scholarship, as the focus on the three major ethnic groups leads to the neglect of other ethnic minorities.

All the same, no authentic claim can be made for complete documentation of ethnic groups in Nigeria. The fact that over three hundred identified language groups exist in Nigeria, has created some confusion as one may equate each language group with an ethnic group (see Adejuyibe 1983) and thereby arrive at over three hundred ethnic groups.

As Iwaloye and Ibeanu (1997) and Anugwom (1997) have argued, however, languages and ethnic groups do not necessarily coincide. One language may be spoken by more than one ethnic group and one ethnic group may have linguistic variations of the same root language.

Moreover, while language may be one of the important factors for defining an ethnic group, some ethnic groups in Nigeria may have lost their original linguistic roots, while retaining their identity, as a result of intense interaction with larger socio-ethnic groups. And in the same vein, many ethnic groups may use the same language to ease communication, as is the case of the smaller ethnic groups in the North of Nigeria, where Hausa has become more or less a *lingua franca*. Therefore, there is no direct relationship between language and ethnic group in Nigeria.

With this in mind, the 56 ethnic groups identified by Iwaloye and Ibeanu (1997) as the existing ethnic groups in contemporary Nigeria are adopted. It is important to point out, however, that the ethnic groups in Nigeria may exceed this number by far, though these 56 groups are both visible and easily identifiable. The 56 ethnic groups are presented in the table below.

As the table shows, quite a number of minority ethnic groups exist in Nigeria. However at a rough estimate, one may regard the Hausa-Fulani as making up approximately 35% of the population, the Yoruba and the Igbo, 25% and 20% respectively, while the remaining 20% is made up of the minorities spread all over the country. This is only an informed estimate as mentioned above.

1. Yoruba	15. Dulawa	29. Buri	43. Migili
2. Ora	16. Kamaku	30. Batta	44. Eggon
3. Yekhee	17. Ebira	31. Kanuri	45. Bokyi
4. Edo	18. Nupe	32. Margi	46. Ekon
5. Bassawa	19. Gwari	33. Delta Minorities	47. Agoi
6. Igala	20. Tiv	34. Gwadara	48. Efik
7. Idoma	21. Jukun	35. Chamba-Daka	49. Ibibio
8. Igbo	22. Chomo-karim	36. Mambila	50. Annang
9. Ijo	23. Jarwa	37. Katang	51. Mumuye
10. Isoko	24. Angas	38. Berom	52. Waja
11. Urhobo	25. Hausa-Fulani	39. Kadara	53. Busa
12. Itshekiri	26. Karekare	40. Kurama	54. Dendi
13. Baatonum	27. Eloyi	41. Mada	55. Buduma
14. Kambari	28. Gade	42. Alago	56. Shuwa

Adopted from Iwaloye and Ibeanu (1997)

Ethnic Conflict and Democracy

According to Nnoli (1978), conflict as an aspect of ethnicity is more pronounced in societies where the inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources is the rule, particularly when inequality is accepted as a given and wealth is greatly esteemed. In this type of set-up, no group wants to be consigned to the bottom of the ladder. Hence groups exploit every means in a bid to remain at the top. In a democratic society, where the right to choose is a guiding principle, ethnic groups may show undue interest in who gets what, how and when. In other words, democratic traditions in ethnically plural societies may be influenced by keen competition, ethnic rivalries and jostling for power and resources. These societies, therefore, may witness social protest which often takes the form of ethnic conflicts (see Ismagilova 1978). While the spirit of competition may be seen as healthy for democracy, anchoring this competition on ethnicity or ethnic factors may be counterproductive to the move towards democracy.

The expansion of democracy began in the mid 1970s in Southern Europe (see Lipset 1994). This wave of change reached the African continent for the most part in the late 1980s, although many of these early attempts came to a standstill. Authoritarian one-party rule and military juntas replaced such movements. Since

the early 1990s, however, democracy and strong democratic sentiments have emerged across the globe. And this has greatly influenced the African continent, which along with Latin America, has been a late starter in popular democracy. In fact, Nnoli (1994) argues that the historical struggle of African people for democracy reached a critical stage in 1989.

It may be correct to argue that one of the greatest appeals of democracy is the prospect it offers for guaranteeing individual and group rights. This can only occur, however, where democracy is not burdened with negative influences such as conflict. Neither can it be achieved where largely primordial ethnic sentiments are placed above the ideals of democracy. Such situations debilitate any attempts at creating a democracy and furthering the development of society. Democracy, in the opinion of Schumpeter (1950), is the institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions, in which individuals acquire the power to decide, by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. While this definition may be considered broad, it emphasises one salient fact about democracy. It involves keen competition. In this type of competition, individuals can exploit whatever loopholes they perceive in their opponents' political strategy and thereby rise to power. Despite this, democracy can be perceived as government by the people, in which supreme power is retained and exercised by them, either directly, as in pure or absolute democracy of the Greek city states, or indirectly, as in representative democracy of modern times. Thus Blair (1972) argues that democracy should be based on four basic principles *viz* majority rule, minority rights, political equality and regular elections.

In other words, democracy provides constitutional opportunities for the people to freely exercise their franchise in the selection of their representatives and leaders. In this type of exercise, no group or individual is singled out for exclusion by undue manipulation of socio-cultural and biological factors. Generally speaking, democracy in its orthodox and original Greek or pure version is no longer feasible. Hence the ideal nowadays is representative democracy. In representative democracy, the people do not gather every day to make decisions by casting votes on matters of state, but delegate this power to representatives who exercise it overtly in the interest of the people. According to Elekwa (1995: 56) "representation is a workable compromise that avoids both the dangers of self-perpetuating leaders and the difficulties of participatory democracy." Obviously, as he aptly argued, in a plural society or any modern society at that, it may be impossible for all citizens to come together in order to make important political decisions.

As a result of the imperative of representation, any democracy must meet three basic requisites or conditions. These are free and extensive competition among individuals and groups for power and positions (group as used here refers to a political party); exhaustive participation of citizens in the process of leader

selection and policy options, mainly through the ballot box which should be free, fair and regular; and a significant level of political liberties and civil rights (see Woolley and Keller 1994, Diamond *et al.* 1988).

The link between ethnic conflict and democracy is especially crucial in view of the popular assumption that democracy engenders development. Much historical evidence shows, however, that development has not been possible where there are marked divisions or intense conflicts between groups in a given society. Therefore, ethnic conflicts negate the developmental function of democracy and may ultimately attack the roots of democracy in a society. Ethnic conflicts, according to Osaghae (1994), are conflicts arising from situations in which people from varying ethnic groups decide to employ their differences in the pursuit of competing interests. Osaghae sees the crucial word in the above definition as "decide". This is because ethnicity comes into play as a conscious ploy by the actors. In as much as the above argument is plausible, it obscures the fact that it may be more characteristic of the major ethnic groups, who might use the advantage of numbers to exploit others. But in the case of minor ethnic groups, ethnicity may be deliberately brought into play, in order to ensure fair treatment in the ensuing distribution of resources and allocation of power. The Ogoni dilemma in Nigeria may be interpreted in part from this perspective.

One could, however, regard ethnic conflicts as existing in a continuum, in which minimal ethnic rivalry may be considered as healthy for the development of the society. From such a perspective, ethnic rivalry could be seen as prevalent throughout the sociopolitical history of even the most developed nations of the world. But when this conflict goes beyond the minimal level, it becomes a threat to the survival of the social entity concerned. In this sense, the kind of ethnic conflict ravaging African countries can be appropriately situated at an extreme position in the continuum. Ethnicity, as experience has shown, is not a phenomenon that can be totally eradicated. As Osaghae (1994) pointed out, it may be delusive to expect ethnicity to die out: ethnic cleavages simply do not die out in this way.

Hence the existence of at least minimal ethnic conflicts or rivalry in ethnically plural societies is to be expected. When these conflicts are minimal or dissociated, they may be regarded as dynamic forces which help to propel the development of a society. Dahrendorf (1976) identified such conflicts as one of the principal variables for explaining social change in society. On the other hand, when these ethnic conflicts become extreme, either as a factor for impeding democracy like in Nigeria, or as the basis for senseless violence as in Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, etc.; it becomes a major disintegrating force in society.

Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria

Since independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria has experimented three times with democracy and is presently engaged in the fourth attempt. The first two democracies were derailed by *coup d' etats*, while the third one hardly got off the ground before it was again overruled by the military. According to Ungar (1989), the first five years of Nigeria's post-independence were chaotic and bloody, ending with two coups in 1966 which eventually brought Yakubu Gowon to power.

The bitterness and infighting which characterised these five years, was due to the fact that Nigeria had been a federation of three large regions before independence; so when this all changed, ethnic rivalries became exacerbated. The democratic experience of the 1960s was not only derailed by the military, there were severe ethnic rivalries due to competition for power and national resources. A strong sense of ethnic consciousness, resulting often in unhealthy competition had also been deliberately machinated by British colonial rule before the 1960s.

As Ibrahim and Pereira (1993) have argued, during the colonial period, linguistic groups were categorised as tribes and differences between them were emphasised. Hence severe ethnic rivalry, distrust and fierce competition for power and resources, could be regarded as a colonial carryover. This eventually corroded the first attempt at democracy in the country.

Falola (1986) pointed out, for example, that the Yoruba speaking people never perceived themselves to be a single sociopolitical unit during the precolonial era. According to Falola, the consciousness and manipulation of a pan-Yoruba identity only began in the 19th century. This was heightened and intensified in the 20th century through colonial politics and the politicisation of ethnicity following Nigeria's independence. This argument has also been put forward by Nnoli (1978). Historical evidence points to the fact that precolonial Yorubaland was made up of different kingdoms, which were involved in internecine wars and boundary skirmishes with one another.

The same can be said of the Igbo, who never achieved any significant measure of unity or exclusiveness. The Hausa-Fulani group did not consider itself to be a distinct ethnic group either, before the advent of colonial rule. As a matter of fact, the Fulanis were originally a religious group led by Othman Dan Fodio in an Islamic evangelisation of pagan Hausaland. Even after the Jihad, which enabled Islam to become a state religion, the Hausa-Fulani kingdoms were not united as one until the era of colonialism.

The First Republic

Ethnic factors may be seen as responsible for the confusion and distrust that marked this first attempt at democracy, especially towards the end of 1965. Given the intensity of ethnic sentiments and sectionalism, the first republic was destined to a brief life. In fact, the first republic was based mainly on ethnic considerations. The three main political parties: Nigeria Peoples' Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), and the Action Group (AG), were all ethnically based, as were their leaders. In effect, no single party was broadly based or cut across ethnic lines. In this way, ethnicity soon became the bane of the first republic (see Ismagilova 1978). The alliance between the NPC and the NCNC following independence, was merely a marriage of convenience, lacking in any significant political cohesiveness. Meanwhile, the AG consolidated its ethnic ground, i.e., Yorubaland, and became the official opposition, viewing all government actions and policies through an ethnic prism. It is not surprising that less than twenty-four months after the NPC/NCNC central alliance, the two parties resorted to intensifying their own ethnic hold to power. The NPC was fully aware of its large basis of support in the Hausa-Fulani in the North and had deliberately formed an alliance with the NCNC, in order to completely dominate the central legislature. The same ethno-regionalism informed the NCNC's unassailable position in the Eastern region. Against this background, the events of 1966 and 1967 can be regarded as off-shoots of the ethnic basis of partisan politics in Nigeria. The next attempt at partisan politics did not escape either what Joseph (1981) called the "ethnic trap".

The Second Republic

During the next republic (1979-83), one would have hoped that the politicians had learnt a few lessons from the errors made in the 1960s. This was not to be, for the second republic was also debilitated by ethno-regional conflict (see Joseph 1987). The three major political parties: National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), and Nigeria Peoples' Party (NPP), were all ethnic and regional in outlook. They were ethno-regional in nature first and foremost, rather than central or national political parties. As a result, the ultimate decay of the second republic was not hard to foresee. While ethnicity mired the policies of both the first and second republics; the second republic was characterised, in addition, by the immaturity of its politicians and the absurdity of their politics. This became so bad, that in the end, the politicians themselves were calling upon the military to take control.

Other factors such as widespread corruption, mismanagement of the economy, worsening social infrastructure, etc., certainly added to the predictable demise of

the republic. As the military junta who took over were to argue, the corruption, the deplorable state of the economy and mass unemployment featuring the Shagari-led second republic were too high a price to pay for democracy. All the same, the ethnic factor and its twin evil of "do or die politics" can arguably be considered as the basis upon which all other negative elements rested.

The Third Republic

The Buhari-Idiagbon junta, needless to say, heeded the calls of the politicians and annexed the government in a bloodless *coup d'état*. Another attempt at democracy that was to be the third republic, thus never came to fruition. This was preceded with the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections by a military order. Prior to this, the official results so far released and others predicted by competent observers, indicated that Moshood Abiola was easily in the lead. Moshood Abiola would have been the first Southerner to win a presidential election in Nigeria. Incidentally, the military junta that annulled the election process was headed by a Hausa-Fulani, Ibrahim Babangida. Moreover, international observers monitoring the election, saw it as the fairest and most free election ever conducted in Nigeria. In this context, it was felt in certain quarters that the annulment was nothing but an attempt to ensure the perpetuation of the Hausa-Fulani hegemony in power, and hence ethnically motivated.

While a lot of dissension has been expressed by the Northerners or the Hausa-Fulani over the annulment, the plausibility of an ethnic rationale behind it still appears to be strong. Once more, Nigeria is currently on its way towards a sustainable form of democracy, yet the ethnic factor is still rearing its ugly head. This time the catch-phrase is "marginalisation" of ethnic groups in the power process and allocation of resources. The fear of marginalisation, whether real or perceived, is anchored in the belief that ethnic orientation determines one's access to crucial resources and power.

Marginalisation and Democracy in Nigeria

The new men created seven new states, most of them in the ethnic majority areas of the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, increasing thereby their access to the oil revenue while exacerbating ethnic tension. They went further to revise the oil revenue allocation formula agreed before independence, so as to give the ethnic majorities an even greater share. The regions involved in oil extraction were now forced to accept twenty percent instead of fifty percent of the proceeds of mining rents and royalties (Saro-Wiwa 1992:85).

The above contention made by Saro-Wiwa clearly captures the increasing

complexity of the ethnic phenomenon in Nigeria. Whereas ethnic rivalry and schism had previously been between the three dominant ethnic groups; since the late eighties, the minority ethnic groups have started to redefine the ethnic terrain of Nigeria. What emerges from this is that even after the bitter civil war, the ethnic question remains a crucial one in the development scheme of the nation. In this context of ethnicity, feelings of marginalisation arise and become strong among a given group.

Marginalisation, which stems from a people's perception of their treatment in the allocation or distribution of power and resources, may be real and apparent. For instance, a case of marginalisation may be made for the Ogoni, who despite "having provided the nation with an estimated \$30,000 million in oil revenues, their people had no pipe borne water or electricity, and lacked education, health and other social facilities: it is intolerable that one of the richest areas of Nigeria should wallow in abject poverty and destitution" (Saro-Wiwa 1992:97). In this light, the Ogoni ethnic group has concrete reasons to consider itself marginalised, especially since these facilities can be found in other ethno-regional areas of Nigeria. However, some cases of marginality may result from the shortcomings of the in-group and are not due to acts of deliberate aggression on the part of other groups. Thus, the case of fewer people from Northern Nigeria than those from the South gaining admission to tertiary institutions, based on examinations conducted by a central examination body (see *The Sentinel* 1994), may be seen as a case of marginality. This kind of disadvantage occurs, as it were, from the inability of these students from the North to meet the requirements of the examination board.

Adedeji (1993) sees marginality as the relative or absolute lack of power to influence a defined social entity, while being a recipient of the exercise of power by other parts of that entity. In this sense, the sub-social entity lacks the sociopolitical or natural ability to influence significant others, who are in charge of the allocation of power and resources in the larger social entity. According to *The Nsukka Analyst* (1994:1), "marginalisation is the deliberate disempowerment of a group of people in a federation politically, economically, socially and militarily by another group or groups which during the relevant time frame wield power and control the allocation of materials and financial resources at the centre of the federation". In as much as one may acknowledge the insightful nature of the above definition, it may also be necessary to add that marginalisation is usually more apparent than real. Therefore, it hinges more on feelings, perceptions (which may be selective) and attitudinal orientations. In fact, it is these features that confuse marginalisation with marginality. Marginalisation exists when an ethnic group or any other kind of group feels disenchanting with the working of things in a society of which it is a constituent part. There is a sense that the status *quo ante* is imbued with obvious disadvantages to it as a group, resulting from the exercise

of crucial privileges by an external group.

The group feels that it occupies an inferior or disadvantageous position in the process of power allocation, distribution of amenities, and access to societal resources. These valuable resources, access to power and amenities are perceived as being unfairly used by some other group in control. Such feelings, especially within ethnic groups, tend to lead to various forms of protest, agitation and conflict with other groups or the group that is seen to be the perpetrator. As *The Nsukka Analyst* (1994) points out, marginalisation presupposes the existence of an agent, group or groups with the capacity to disempower or disadvantage others. Therefore, it sees marginalisation as "exogenously" imposed, while marginality is "endogenously" imposed. In Nigeria today, feelings of marginalisation are rife in the society. Almost all the ethnic groups have accused one another of acts of marginalisation. After the June 12, 1993 presidential election annulment, however, most ethnic groups now regard the Hausa-Fulani, who have wielded central power for most of Nigeria's independent existence, as the main perpetrator of marginalisation against others.

The Nsukka Analyst (1994), in fact, has made use of some interesting statistics to make a case of marginalisation against the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. It argues that since 1970, the Igbo have been jointly marginalised by the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba ethnic groups. To prove this, it states that in 1989, out of 154 officers of the rank of Brigadier and above in the army, only 8 were Igbo, while 37 and 51 were Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani respectively. This is a disproportionate representation even if one argues that the North is equal to the West added to the East. However, it is particularly skewed against the Igbo, who, despite their considerable numbers in the army, have only eight high-ranking officers to show for it. Protests against marginalisation have also been taken up by the Yoruba, who see the annulment of the 1993 election, which was won by a Yoruba, as a move by the Hausa-Fulani militocracy to maintain power at all cost. Even minor ethnic groups, particularly the Ogoni, have cried out against marginalisation. In fact, the "supposed" plight of the Ogoni has attracted international attention. As a result, the hanging of the prominent Ogoni activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, for alleged involvement in the murder of four of his kinsmen, attracted severe international reprisals in the last three years.

Even the supposedly "privileged" Hausa-Fulani have raised questions of marginalisation in the areas of education and the private sector economy, although their "disadvantages" in these areas have been seen by the other groups as self-inflicted or a case of marginality (see *The Nsukka Analyst* 1994). The serious threat of marginalisation to the survival of democracy in Nigeria and the use of ethnicity as a class weapon remains a fact, as expressed by Musa (1994:24), "the clique from the North which dominated and still dominates political power, is

selfish, shortsighted, unpatriotic and corrupt, just like its counterpart in the South."

Conclusion: Towards a Resolution

It is clear that democracy in Nigeria can only endure if perceptions of marginalisation and acts portending the marginalisation of ethnic groups are directly confronted. In this sense, the present attempts at democracy as a form of sustainable socio-cultural formation in Nigeria, can only be attained if fears of ethnic marginalisation are erased. While ethnic cleavages may endure, practices and actions that give the impression that an ethnic group is being marginalised or singled out for discrimination should be curbed. It is in this vein, that means and ways of doing this need to be examined.

One way of tackling ethnic conflict is by adopting a political culture that makes adequate provision for all the interests and groups in a given society. Nigeria should therefore learn from the experiences of multi-ethnic developed nations. As Woolley and Keller (1994) rightly pointed out, African countries should emulate one of the fundamental principles of American democracy, which is the notion of majority rule and its complementary precept of minority rights. Federalism as a form of government and political arrangement is a viable way of achieving the above. Federalism may help to ameliorate ethnic rivalry where it is implemented to the letter. In this sense, federalism in Nigeria should be geared towards the American system. Woolley and Keller view federalism as ideal for the multi-ethnic and religious character of most African states, where certain national rights are established for all citizens, while at the same time allowing regional governments to make laws, rules and regulations that do not conflict with national codes.

This kind of thinking must have informed the provision made in the new draft constitution in Nigeria for a representation formula, addressing the core ethno-geographical zones in the country. It recommends that the six most powerful and prestigious positions in central government should be zoned towards the six different geographical regions of the country. While this is a step in the right direction, it nevertheless falls short of matching the representational formula through strict rotation. In this case, it would be illegal for any region to corner one position indefinitely for itself, such as the presidency.

Another way of confronting the ethnic question, is through the elimination of hitherto accepted practices which invariably reinforce ethnic differences. One of these, is the so-called federal character principle or quota system. Ironically, the federal character principle emerged as an ethnicity management method. According to Ekeh and Osaghae (1989), it is a distributive principle which is aimed at

preventing the domination of government and its resources by one group or a few groups, thereby guaranteeing every group access to power and resources. Undoubtedly, this principle was not without its merits, particularly in the early days of independence. Up until now, however, its implementation has bred mediocrity and heightened ethnic competition. The quota system should be discarded in favour of meritocracy, or it may be modified to tackle issues of ethnic rivalry. In fact, its perverse nature was aptly captured by Osifeso (1997:9) when he argued that, "ethnic purity under the guise of the obnoxious federal character clause has become the hackneyed word in education, employment and housing."

In addition, there is urgent need to confront the realities of ethnic minorities, who have thus far been neglected in the dynamics of the Nigerian power and resource game. Ethnic minorities are full members of the Nigerian federation and should be treated as such. The Ogoni debacle brought to the fore, that minority geographical areas often form the basis of the Nigerian economy. Hence in allocating power and resources, they should be treated as equally important. In this era of Nigeria's almost total dependence on petrodollars, it may be wise to treat fairly the people from whose soil oil flows. This makes it necessary to redefine the revenue allocation system in such a way that a reasonable percentage is allocated for the purpose of tackling environmental problems, which oil exploitation causes in these areas, as well as improving general living conditions.

In addition to the above, other elements of the sociopolitical system reinforcing the ethnic divide, need to be addressed. The use of forms for employment, university admission, contract bids/tender, lease applications, election, etc., with unnecessary questions as to the state of origin rather than residence should be minimised. While some of these may well be innocuous in themselves, they are often utilised by ethnically parochial bureaucrats and government functionaries in perpetuating ethnic cleavages and marginalisation in Nigerian society. Only proof and length of residence in a state should be made crucial, especially for the purpose of politics and electoral privileges. Even though the solutions given above are by no means exhaustive, we may rest our case at this point with the following insightful comment made by Ismagilova (1978:178):

"The objective circumstances for solving ethnic problems will seemingly be more favourable in those states that have adopted the objective of reconstructing African society by democratic methods relying on the broad popular masses. And in which the movement for economic independence and social progress is led by national democratic parties and organisations."

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