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ETHNIC NATIONALISM & DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Perspectives from Nigeria and the United States of America

Edited by Jonah Onubha
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INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND ETHNIC CRISSES IN NIGERIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

Most students of African political scene are agreed on the fact that ethnicity is one of the most dangerous threats to the attainment of democracy in Africa. This situation is particularly true in Nigeria considering the spate of ethnically driven events in the political field. Such as looting, killings, arson, burnfires, and in extreme cases wide-spread crises. From west to east and from north to south examples abound of ethnic crises following elections, boundary adjustments; creation of new local governments; siting of infrastructures etc; unfortunately this trend had trailed both the military regimes and the republics. It also has the promise of characterizing our current republic (which started this year) if sufficient measures are not taken to address the problem. After a critical look at the information component in the management as a strong factor in the management of ethnic crises in Nigeria. In fact, it is the central message of the paper that most ethnic crises in Nigeria are traceable to poor information management. If the role of information in ethnic crises management is repositioned properly, ethnic crises which can ruin the gains of democracy will be reduced significantly. Consequently, to strengthen the management of ethnic crises in Nigeria, the paper puts up an information communication package that has the potency of laying the true foundation of strong inter-ethnic communications for better understanding and mutual development of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the strong threats to democracy in Nigeria is ethnic crisis. No time in the history of Nigeria has this phenomenon been so prominent as the present democratic dispensation. Ethnic crises has the promise of even shattering Nigeria’s dream for the 4th republic starting from the year 2003. Nigeria, a forty-one year old multi-ethnic society has made several constitutional efforts in its checkered match to becoming a nation state in order to resolve once and for all, the many problems of ethnicity and national development. But unfortunately, most of the provisions of the constitutions meant to address the negative effects of ethnicity are not motivated by any philosophy of common identity and community; and so exists the potential galore for a Nigerian citizen to continue to see himself first as a member of a clan, and more interestingly as a member of an ethnic nationality. As Nnonyelu (2001:1) puts it, rarely does he regard himself as a Nigerian, except if the sharing of the national cake occupying prime position in the agenda of discourse. Even then, his greatest qualification is his ethnic identity.
ABSTRACT

Most students of African political scene are agreed on the fact that ethnicity is one of the most dangerous threats to the attainment of democracy in Africa. This situation is particularly true in Nigeria considering the spate of ethnically driven events in the political field. Such as looting, killings, arson, burnfires, and in extreme cases wide-spread crises. From west to east and from north to south examples abound of ethnic crises following elections, boundary adjustments, creation of new local governments, siting of infrastructures etc; unfortunately this trend had trailed both the military regimes and the republics. It also has the promise of characterizing our current republic (which started this year) if sufficient measures are not taken to address the problem. After a critical look at the information component in the management as a strong factor in the management of ethnic crises in Nigeria. Infact, it is the central message of the paper that most ethnic crises in Nigeria are traceable to poor information management. If the role of information in ethnic crises management is repositioned properly, ethnic crises which can ruin the gains of democracy will be reduced significantly. Consequently, to strengthen the management of ethnic crises in Nigeria, the paper puts up an information communication package that has the potency of laying the true foundation of strong inter-ethnic communications for better understanding and mutual development of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

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Nigeria emerged from British colonial rule as an unbalanced multi-ethnic federal state, the cultural diversity of whose component units has made political stability rather elusive. Unfortunately, according to Owunwa (1995), the colonial rulership made no serious attempts at integrating primordial ethnic groups into a coherent political entity. Rather, realizing that each group was (and still is) a basic social unit commanding enormous political force, it chose to accentuate their ethno-cultural consciousness through its policy of “divide and rule”. Moreover, the alien political institutions superimposed on the discordant ethnic units did not operate long enough before independence to pretend to catalyse movements towards national unity.

It is, therefore, not surprising that after exhibiting some semblance of unity in order to rid themselves of the yoke of British colonial rule, the different nationalities later gave vent to inter-ethnic animosities and ethno-cultural grievances in the struggle for power in Nigeria, resulting in several political crises, each of which seriously threatened the country's corporate existence.

Experience in other lands have shown that, if the multiple effects of ethnicity are not carefully handled, Nigeria may well be heading for another catastrophe after the disastrous civil war of 1967-1970. In Rwanda, about 2 million people, including women and children, have been killed in what is euphemistically called ethnic cleansing. The situation in Bosnia – Herzegovina is no less different. Where you come from today in Nigeria determines your life chances and also your position in the social relations of production. Merit has been jettisoned on the altar of mediocrity, federal character, quota system and others.

For Nigeria to exist and for democracy to thrive, Nigerians must understand themselves, their history, the justification for some actions and have no reason to doubt the sincerity of government in taking care of everybody. What this calls for is adequate information and appropriate information management. Being our view that some of the ethnic crises in Nigeria are traceable to lack of information, it is the objective of this paper to relate information management to ethnic crises in Nigeria, and also determine how the information system can be improved towards reducing ethnic crises in Nigeria.
2.0 Notes on Information and Information Management

By information we mean data that affect our behaviour, beliefs or attitudes, information is communicated through various means: from person to person; person to appliances eg computer; through records etc.

Information management is the process of collecting, processing, analyzing, storing, utilizing and disseminating information for achievement of goals and objectives. The primary objective of information management is the control of information system towards achieving the collection of desired information need and circulation of such within the system. Consequently, information management is an integral part of information system. Indeed the success of management depends on the information system applicable in the environment. In Nigeria, it is still basically the mechanical system that is being employed. Only few organizations have completely, computerized their information system to meet the management information system (MIS) standards.

Additionally, information management is affected by the quality of information as follows:

(i) Reliability or trustworthiness: To ensure reliability and trustworthiness, some theorists have suggested the selling of paralleled and competing channels of communication so that one can always act as a check on the other.

(ii) Precision or the range of possible error: Overloading the system with unnecessary data may aggravate errors, and so diminish precision.

(iii) Accuracy of what is communicated and the truth: Frequently, the accuracy of information is affected by such factors as stereotypes. This aspect is particularly true in Nigeria considering the diverse ethnic groups who have mutual distrust for one another. The Ibo man does not trust the Yoruba man neither does the Yoruba man trust an Ibo man. The same is the case between Hausa and Yoruba or Hausa and Ibo, Tiv and Idoma. Of course, the combination is endless. That inherent distrust affects the accuracy of information sought and stored.

(iv) Bias or consistent attempt to distort facts for personal or group advantage. This relates well with (iii) above.

(v) Validity or the degree to which a statement represents what it is said to represent. For example, has a personnel selection test actually measured
what it is called to measure particularly in our present circumstance, where preferences are given to people under the guise of quota system; federal character principle, gender equality, and of course, religious affiliation etc.

(vi) Currency or up-to-dateness of information: This is very important because outdated information can be detrimental to a course.

(vii) Freedom of “Noise”: This can be in the form of either extraneous data in the message or in the communication process.

As Okoli (1988) aptly observes, appropriate information effectively and efficiently communicated assists in the following activities.

(i) Coordination: Inter-personal communication is required to relate to the efforts of individuals in action and timing so as to achieve common objectives.

(ii) Problem-solving and innovating: Innovative solutions are stimulated by communication among members of work groups. This communication will range from the complex and formal to informal and interpersonal.

(iii) Leading: To inform and influence subordinates, peers and superiors and the public, leaders must have good communication skill. They must be able to present situation in a light which inspires others.

Moreover, effective and efficient communication of information depends largely on the selection of appropriate media of information. So many factors which characterize the Nigerian society can inhibit communication process. Such factors include illiteracy, poverty, cultural and traditional practices and technological backwardness. Care must, therefore, be taken to ensure that these factors are considered when information is being communicated.

3.0 Ethnic Crises: Some Theoretical Underpinnings.

In all human societies conflicts and indeed crises are inherent and ubiquitous. Human societies are basically dynamic historical entities. And because of this, they require the force of conflict. Indeed there cannot be any change without conflict. The challenge of modern societies is to reduce the number of conflicts, especially violent conflicts since if not properly managed will escalate into crises.

According to Dahrendorf (1959) conflicts and crises including ethnic crises are intimately generated by relations of authority, ie by differentiation of dominating and
subjected groups. The conflict theory, therefore uses the existence of opposing interests arising out of the scarcity of valued socio-economic, political and psychological resources to explain the persistence of ethnic cleavages and crises in multi-ethnic societies. It is the scarcity of cherished values and the differential opportunities, or rather, access to the acquisition of these resources among competing groups in a plural society that intensify the ethnic question (Nnonyelu, 1997). Obiajulu (1997:6) captures the multiple effect of ethnicity in these words:

It distorts socially, the anthropological fact that all men are the same in the animal kingdom. It invests its architects and victims where it thrives with the interactional ascend, raison d'être for relating on the logic of superiority and inferiority basis. The ethnic question has the potency of influencing social actors' self concept perception of others and relationship with the same. It has the potency of influencing man's access to life chances and even life itself.

In Nigeria, and other underdeveloped countries, the tendency is for ethnic struggle and acrimony to become more acute because of the peculiar nature of our dependent mode of production, the fragile nature of the state or of our federalism where the constituent units depend almost exclusively on subventories or grants from the national government for survival. The conflict theory contends that it is the aforementioned reason more than anything else, that explains the persistence of ethnicity.

On the other hand, as Nnonyelu (2001) says, some other theoretical persuasions as evident in the thinking of prominent sociologists like Parson (1950) Merton (1940) with their primary interest social order or stability and its determinants contend that societies cohere because of the existence of common values and norms that regulate the conduct of its inhabitants. They perceive societies as stable entities or system that are composed of different parts, where all these parts act or are motivated to function primarily for the achievement of equilibrium. However, some of the time these parts coexist, not because they are motivated to stay together but because they are forced to stay together against their will.

This is the case in Nigeria. The military having ruled for a greater part of the period forged an unnatural bond of the ethnic groups. These groups have been perceiving the injustice and unfair distribution of resources among the groups but
have not been able to voice their anger out because of fear. But now that there appear to be a relative freedom owing to the democratic experiment, the tendency is to right the wrong of the past and present, through various means including violent conflicts and crises. The case of the Niger Delta is a typical example. Niger Delta is a case of, as the Ibo people say, “staying in the river and allowing soap to enter your eye”. This scenario appears odd. For now, the Niger Delta is the revenue base of Nigeria, yet it is the most undeveloped, characterized by lack of amenities, infrastructural decay, poverty and deprivation. Why would the people in the area not react to address the inequity?

This brings to mind, the issue of information and its management. In a democratic dispensation where there is agitation and where there are claims about efforts to address the imbalance and unfairness in the distribution of resources, people should not be left in doubt about the sincerity of government. The information component must therefore be part of the efforts.

4.0 Ethnic Crises in Nigeria

In Agbonike’s (2001) view, the root causes of ethnic conflicts among the diverse peoples of Nigeria are many and various. In the first place, the different ethnic nationalities in the country remember, with bitterness and nostalgia, the history and memories of the wars, raids and other hostilities which were common place among them in the pre-colonial days. Besides these experiences, certain colonial policies and practices have helped to exacerbate the problem. For instance, the colonial policy of Indirect Rule and divide-and-rule helped in no small way to promote the spirit of political, socio-economic and educational dichotomy between the ethnic nationalities of the northern and southern sections of the country. The policy, too, helped to discourage horizontal interactions among the various peoples of the country.

Again, the colonial policy and practice of regionalism went a long way to transform the vague awareness of the differences among the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria into a conscious instrument of politics. With the regionalisation of the country, introduced under the Richard’s constitution of 1946, which structured the nation into a tri-national state, sectional loyalties were introduced into the politics of Nigeria which, according to Osagiea (1969:443), was built on the bogus theory that one should be loyal to and protect interest of one’s region to the exclusion of others.
In addition, the federal system of government introduced by the 1951 constitution (Macpherson’s constitution) to promote intergroup unity escalated mutual suspicions and intolerance among groups.

Consequently the periods, 1954 to 1960, and more-intensively 1960 to 1966, were known to have been marked by intense inter-ethnic, inter-regional and inter-party rivalries and hostilities. The 1954 and 1959 federal elections for example, were remarkably known to be an engagement in tribalism bordering on ethnic chauvinism during which the three major parties - the NPC, the NCNC and the AG-played on ethnic sentiments and used the tactic, not only to win support in the region of their control but also to lure the support of the ethnic minorities outside their regions (Okadigbo, 1985:529).

The 1965 elections in the Western Region of Nigeria was also fought as a do or die battle between the NNDP, the NCNC and the AC. This election was also characterized by a showmanship of ethnic jingoism which sparked off large scale hostilities that eventually led to the breakdown of law and order in the region in particular and the country as a whole. Eventually, the chaos generated by these elections culminated in the January 15, 1966 coup which led to the take-over of power by the military and the subsequent civil war of 1967-1970 in Nigeria.

During the post civil war general elections of 1979 and 1983 and even that of 1993 which was acclaimed to be free and fair, the trend continued. Primordial solidarity and politics of ethnicity, with its attendant inter and intra-ethnic political feuds continued. Tribal politics and politicized tribalism and hegemonic ethnicity reared their heads once more.

Ethnicism has also reared its ugly head in the inter-ethnic relations of the peoples of Nigeria in the economic affairs of the nation. For sure, resource allocation is so much at the root of the ethnic politics in Nigeria. Agreeing with this contention, Akintunde (1974:102) asserted that tribalism (or ethnicism) will know no end until the rewards of the modernizing sectors economic, political etc. are seen to be distributed fairly among all the sectors of the community. The economic rivalries become exacerbated as the party which controls and dominated the federal government, in concert with its allies, adopts a winner-takes-all attitude and channels appointment and promotions in the public service in a way that echoes the play of tribalism and favouritism.
The brazen-faced struggles to inflate the 1962/63 census figures in the various regions of Nigeria by various ethnic groups, were dictated by the fact that resource allocation was largely based on population. Hence each ethnic group struggled to inflate its population in order to attract increased budgetary allocations. In the end, the result of the 1962/63 census was unduly manipulated in favour of the North, to the chagrin of the peoples of the South. Therefore, the North insisted on revenue allocation based on population while the South wanted it done on the basis of derivation. The revenue allocation formula put in place in 1964, under Binn's Commission, did not improve the situation. It was seen as an elite game and was said to have an ethnic complexion.

The mischievous manipulation characteristic of the 1962/63 census exercise became an endemic ethnic practice which featured in the subsequent 1973 and other census exercises, including the 1991 census. And so, the ethnic hue and cry on resource allocation continued, thereby constituting a cog in the wheel of sustainable development and enduring efforts at nations building.

Over the years, especially in recent times, aggrieved ethnic groups in the Niger Delta and their counterparts in other oil producing areas of the country have complained bitterly about their apparent marginalization and neglect, in spite of the fact that the wealth of the nation is mainly derived from their areas. The Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) was set up in 1992 to address the peculiar problems of the oil producing areas. The commission was to provide the necessary infrastructural and physical development in the oil producing State of Rivers, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Akwa-ibom, Delta, Abia, Imo, Edo and Ondo. However, nine years after its establishment, OMPADEC failed to provide any remarkable developmental improvement in those areas. It was later replaced by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).

Ethnocentrism is also known to have largely influenced considerations in the siting of important projects like the Iron and Steel Industry, in the appointment and promotion of Nigerians into various positions in the federal civil and public service as well as in the Armed forces. Such ethnic influences and practices lead to frustration, sectional bickering and mutual distrust in the inter-ethnic relationship of the affected officers and their ethnically enraged supporters and sympathizers.

Thus, in recent times, starting from 1999, a wave of ethnic conflicts swept across Nigeria with their attendant conflagrations and devastations. Between
January and February, 1999, ethnic clashes were reported between the O’dua Peoples Congress (OPC) and the Police in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

Again, for two days, 22nd – 23rd May, 1999, the Jem’a natives clashed with the Hausa – Fulani in Kafanchan, Kaduna State, when one Mohammed Isa, an Hausa-Fulani, was about to be installed as the new emir of Jem’a emirate. Over 100 people were reported to have died during the fighting. Ethnic war also broke out in Warri on June 3, 1999, among the Itsekiri, the Urhobo and Ijaw, during which more than 300 persons were killed. Following the incident, a state of emergency was declared in the area by the federal government.

In Shagamu, in Ogun State, ethnic conflict erupted between the Hausa settlers in the area and their Yoruba hosts on 17th July 1999. The conflict began when a Hausa woman was killed during the Yoruba Oro Festival. In the ensuing clash, as reported in the Newswatch, January 3, 2000, P. 19, “more than 100 people were killed while more than 120 houses and vehicles were burnt”. The Shagamu incident triggered off a reprisal attack in Kano City, killing as many as 150 persons and rendering many people homeless. In the ensuing fracas in Kano, some 140 vehicles and 11 houses were also said to have been destroyed.

On October 29, 1999, and running for several days thereafter, O.P.C. militants and Ijaw youths clashed in Ajeunle area of Lagos resulting in the death of 15 persons. The cause of the O.P.C./Ijaw disturbances at Ajeunle was, according to Newswatch of November 15, 1999, p. 22, linked to the mysterious death of an Ijaw lady at a social function organized on October 28 by some Yoruba youths. Dissatisfied with the way the police handled the matter, concerned Ijaw youths, on November 1, 1999 made a retaliatory move.

Several other communal clashes with ethnic complexion were also reported at various places all over the country during the year, 1999. These ethnic disturbances were inimical and counter productive to the progress and development of the country. As Bola Tinubu, the executive governor of Lagos State has warned, following the Ajeunle crises, there can be no democracy (in Nigeria) without peace. Economic growth and development cannot take place in a violent environment. We cannot attract the much needed foreign investment through thuggery and bloodshed. (Newswatch, November 15, 1999, page 22).

It is our view that if these ethnically driven problems are not fully and indeed urgently addressed, future republics may not be realized. An indept look at these
crises bordering on elections, resource control, census, siting of important projects, marginalization, etc, shows that neither the government nor the aggrieved groups are working on the basis of correct and reliable information. In a situation where government accepts inflated statistics and goes ahead to work with them, there is bound to be suspicion. Census figures are not only highly inflated but also vicariously politicized. "Uptill now, the 1991 census figures are still classified. People are also worried that the data on which resource allocation is based is not publicly known and convincing. The inadequacies of the information management component in the affairs of the Nigerian state is, therefore, heavily indicated.

5.0 The Way Forward

(1) One of the characters of a democratic government is the fairness everybody enjoys when resource allocation is at issue. Afterall, democracy is not about oppressing the minority but respecting the minority. Democracy is also about equity and justice. These cannot be possible without adequate information system. Government should be liberal with information on every aspect of national life.

Therefore, the Ministry of information should go all out to source information from all parts of the country on demographic, ethnographic and other socio-physical profile of the Nigerian State; process, store and be prepared to disseminate such information freely. Our lack of knowledge of nations within the Nigerian State has created a lot of mistrust and hostilities. It is also the responsibility of the Ministry or any other relevant government outfit to cross-check data fed to it from ethnic groups, states and their agencies, so as not to work on wrong information.

2. Before the creation of any State or Local Government Area, there must be a thorough investigation. Indeed the contribution of the concerned people must be respected. This can be done through a mini referendum in the area concerned. Government should not act on the basis of the pressure mounted on it by influential people. There have been cases where some local governments were created for influential military officers or politicians. Crises do occur when some groups perceive themselves in such arrangements.

3. Census must be pursued with the seriousness it deserves. A situation where details of census figures are classified, indicates that there must have been a
foul play. The details of the 1991 population census has remained unpublished. Only States and Local Government figures were released in the National Population Commission (NPC) Newsletter – the Census News.

Besides, another census is due, but arrangements for it appear not to be the priority of government. Yet census figures are the bases on which resources are allocated, policies made and critical decisions taken.

4. From time to time, government programmes, policies and even problems should be made known to the people through other means apart form electronic and print media. Given the high level of poverty, ignorance and illiteracy in the country, it becomes instructive that other strategies of reaching the people be tried. These include community fora, the use of town unions and leaders of thought. At times information from these people and organs are believable than the ones communicated through radio, television and newspaper.

5. In practicing the so called quota system or federal character principles, efforts should be made to make the formula public and simplified for the benefit of everybody. The principles as practiced should not be to the detriment of any group as appears to be the case now. Data on the ground should not be taken for granted. For example, states that parade more qualified candidates looking for jobs or spaces in school should enjoy the bias of the quota and spaces should not be “reserved” for states which do not have candidates. The wrong application of the federal character principle or quota system is a veritable avenue for fermenting ethnic crises.

6. The Sovereign National Conference (SNC) should be convened to determine the nationhood of the Nigerian state. There is actually nothing wrong with the SNC. Most of Nigeria’s problems including ethnic crises have been traced to the artificial foundation given to it by the colonial masters through its divide – and – rule approach. The SNC will help to clear some of these matters, determine the relationship of the various nations in Nigeria, strengthen or revisit the version of federalism being practiced now and chart a future for Nigeria. It will also help to reduce the tension associated with elections.
6.0 Conclusion

One of the strongest threats to democracy in Nigeria is the spate of ethnic crises. Although ethnic crises have been with us even before independence, no time has the phenomenon been so prominent as the present third Republic. From west to east, north to south examples abound of ethnic crises. Ethnic crises occur for reasons such as creation of states, creation of local government, siting of infrastructure, elections, boundary adjustments etc.

An indepth investigation into all these crises indicate that most of the time people act out of ignorance, prejudice, deep rooted hatred for other ethnic groups, perceived marginalization and perceived unfairness in resource allocation etc. There is no doubt that some of these ills exist but the doubt is whether people or even the government really act based on correct information. This our doubt appears to be founded as it is evident that the management of information which includes collecting, processing, analyzing, storing, utilizing and disseminating data is not taken seriously by the government. The lacuna so-created by this poor management, creates room for mutual suspicions and for people to look more inward, becoming more attached to their ethnic groups and therefore, less patriotic.

Information plays a central role in a democracy and should, therefore, be handled with seriousness. Considering the character of the Nigerian state, the main feature of which is its multiple ethnic groups, efforts should be made to develop an information management system that will facilitate inter-ethnic communications for better understanding and mutual development of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.
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This book emerges in response to the current wave of democratization in Africa. It is the product of a multidisciplinary international conference designed to address the nagging issues of ethnicity and resource control and their attendant implications to sustainable democracy in Africa. It focuses on Africa and the United States of America and addresses a broad spectrum of socio-cultural issues that impact on democratization. The aim is to appreciate the lessons that can be learnt from the United States. Such lessons were critically appraised by the contributors to this volume. The book is therefore invaluable not only to teachers of nationalism and democratization, but also to students and other persons interested in these aspects of human behaviour.