

## Interrogating Ethnicity and Democratic Politics in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

For a considerable period, ethnicity and democratic politics in Nigeria have produced a diverging set of analytical explanations with particular reference to whether or not it has significance consequences on the democratic process. As a contribution to the various literature and narratives, this study reflects on the complex nature of ethnicity in the body polity of the Nigerian state with an objective of de-emphasizing its application on Nigeria democratic politics. Data collection was mainly on secondary sources and content analysis applied. The findings of this work among others are that ethnicity is Politicized, Manipulated and Mobilized in Nigeria to enhance the position of the ruling class. Consequently, the paper recommended among others that the political elites in Nigeria should have an attitudinal change in the manipulation and politicization of ethnicity in their bid to gain access to political power.

**Key words:** Ethnicity, Democracy, ethnic politics, political culture, political elite.



### INTRODUCTION

From the words of Nnoli (1981), it is common to interpret African politics in tribal terms. He notes that tribalism is the central unifying concept for the analysis of African life. Tribalism or ethnicity is internalized to such an extent that even Africans now think of the dynamics of their societies as being dominated by the phenomenon. Nigeria, unlike the pre-colonial epoch is marked by intense rivalries among the three major ethnic groups, namely the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. More recently, the minorities of the Niger Delta have joined in the rivalry.

Ethnicity have been observed as a key concept ever present in most intellectual, social and political discourse in Nigeria. This seeming frequency of use have become a factor notable in Nigeria politics. It is therefore, imperative to state that ethnic politics to a large extent shapes or determine citizen's behaviour and voting patterns during elections in Nigeria. Arising from the above, this academic exercise is out to interrogate the role of ethnicity in Nigeria's democratic process with the objective of de-emphasizing its application in Nigeria's political democracy.

### CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

#### Ethnicity

A consensus appears to be reached among scholars,

specifically those of African origin that the different social formations which Europeans called tribes ought to and therefore should be called properly as ethnic.

Ethnicity as a concept is principally a social phenomenon. This is informed by the believe that it is rooted in a people's persistent culture, way of life – particularly their shared long traditions such as religion, customs, common ancestry, attitudes, beliefs that have existed for a long time among a particular group of people. Macionis (2010) opined that a people who shared cultural heritage such as common ancestry, language, or religion which give that group a distinctive social identity makes that group or ethnic group. According to Mezieobi (2014), ethnicity can be defined as a collectivity of persons who are held together by shared cultural traditions or heritage pivoting on common ancestry, mother-tongue (or language), religion etc. which traditions are tenaciously held to form time immemorial, not disorganized outrightly by acculturation process, and which are not only a given groups identifier, but also distinguishes a given group from the others outside the group who also recognized them as such.

Sociologists define ethnicity as feelings of affiliation among people who share a language race, nationality or place of origin, religion and other cultural traits. It could also be understood as differences in socially acquired characteristics such as language, religion,

national origin and culture. A people could be regarded as an ethnic by these socially acquired characteristics. It is common place to note that ethnicity is apparent in political society consisting of diverse ethnic groups where there is competition for economic, political and natural resources, e.g., Ghana, India, Uganda and Nigeria. According to the African center for Applied Research and Training in socio-economic development (1990) ethnicity is

***a phenomenon associated with interaction among ethnic groups, group exclusiveness and discrimination, including a consciousness of difference resulting from the interaction of ethnic groups.***

It reveals that there is an economic dimension of inter-group relationship which results in ethnicity, as economic factor can be said to play a significant role in generating, sustaining and intensifying ethnicity. Going by this position, an economic system which places emphasis on competition will under certain circumstances generate ethnicity. This for instance reveals that, an economy which thrives on marginalization or inequality between and among social groups, ethnicity will thrive. In the view of Nnoli (1989), ethnicity is not displayed in a pure form as it is intermingled with political, judicial, religion and social elements and this reality constitutes its important ingredients. He concludes thus, that it is not possible to fully understand the ethnic phenomenon in Africa without an adequate understanding of its historical origin and class character.

### **Democracy**

The word democracy is derived from the Greek Words: "demos" for 'people' and "cratis" 'to rule'. But the Greek paradigm was direct democracy, a scenario where all the citizens took part in law making and policy formulation. This was possible because the Greek city states were small. It is important to note that modern states as a result of their large population and territorial landmass have moved from the Greek city states model to representative democracy. The form, not-minding, the basic emphasis of a democracy is that the people exercise the governing power. This could be direct or through their representatives.

Overtime, scholars of democratic studies and political science in general have attempted to define democracy. The aim remains the promotion of good governance and national development. Perhaps this is

why democracy appears to be the most cherished or desired system of government. Held (1987), reveals that democracy is a form of government which is in contradiction to Monarchy and Aristocracy, hence it is the people's rule. He further avers that democracy entails the existence of a state system in which there exists some kind of political equality, a system he traced to the ancient Greek city states. Held maintains that the Greek system of democracy offered individuals the opportunity to express their choices and views. According to Dahl (1983:11) democracy is a system of elected representative government operated under the rule of law, where the most significant groups in the population participate in the political process and have access to effective representation in the practice of making governmental decisions, that is, of allocation of scarce resources. In the view of Appadorai (1975) democracy is described as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves.

Political participation as a pre-requisite of democracy lay emphasis on popular sovereignty and active participation by the citizenry. Deducing from the foregoing, it is believed that virtually all democratic states of the world, the ruler's rule with the people's mandate. Ntalaja (2005) views democracy as a universal form of rule with specific manifestations in time and space. While Abraham Lincoln, a former American president, in his 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1863, address, describes democracy as "government of the people, by the people and for the people". This underscores the need that democracy is both representative and participatory hence, its emphasis is on the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Put differently it is for the general welfare of the people.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Ethnicity and democracy are inseparable concepts in African political debate. It is almost impossible to explain African situation outside the primacy of matter, especially economic conditions. An understanding of the neo-colonial and dependent character of the Nigerian state enables us to explain the existing impediments to true democratic politics and by extension, good governance. The political economy approach is therefore considered as the most appropriate methodological framework in our analysis of this paper. The theory according to Ake, 1981 cited in (Amos 2022), helps us to understand both the development of society and the analysis of the dynamics within it. The emphasis of the political

economy approach is anchored on the dynamic character of reality and the relatedness of different elements of society.

### **Ethnicity and Democratic Politics in Nigeria**

This section will bring to relief how ethnicity has characterized democratic politics in Nigeria. The application of ethnic consciousness in the political space of Nigeria have had deleterious effects on democracy. Alapiki (2010) tends to agree when he asserts that these adverse effects led to political instability in the First Republic and the termination of at least two attempts at transition to civil rule by the military in Nigeria.

The complexity of elections in Nigeria have made the conceptualization of electoral behaviour in the country a complex endeavour. Worst still, the politicization of ethnicity and the division corresponding with the three majority ethnic groups has influenced not only ethnic based political parties, but including the political behaviour of the electorates. Evidence abound to support the argument that electoral behaviour in Nigeria is mostly guided by ethnic politics rather than party manifesto, ideology or quality of candidates. The 1951 election is a pointer to the above position. The major political parties – the Action Group (AG), for the West, National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon's (NCNC) for the East, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) for the North – all secured an unchallenged position in their region or stronghold. Going further Alapiki (2010) notes that each of the parties use its majority in the regional House to determine who should represent that region in the central legislature and Council of Ministers.

In line with the above reasoning Awa (1964) observed that:

***O n t h e e v e o f  
i n d e p e n d e n c e , t h e***

***leaders naturally made  
their appeal to kinship,  
the clan or ethnic  
competition tended to  
assume a pathological  
character. (p93)***

Falola and Ihonvbere (1985) tends to agree with this submission when they posit that political parties of the Second Republic were reincarnation of those of the First Republic. Each of these parties according to them had members from other ethnic groups to satisfy the provisions of the constitution for a national outlook but the impression of the past remained indelible. The persistence of ethnic forces in the political life of Nigeria democracy has not transcended the threshold towards broader state identities. Unfortunately, democratic politics in Nigeria is characterized by ethnic-regional forces through which political parties enjoy hegemony within primordial enclaves. The Nigerian political elites are rooted in ethnicity which is transformed into ethnic mobilization, for the capture and retention of state power. The propensity of political leaders to use this control of state power to transfer state resources to their ethnic homeland, thus, exacerbating the unity, ethnic solidarity and ethnic consciousness between and among both beneficiary and non-beneficiary groups.

In spite, of the search for political unity and the constitutional provision that requires political parties in Nigeria to wear a nationalistic outlook, democratic politics continues to be rooted in ethnicity as demonstrated by pattern of voting during elections. Thus, election results have consistently toed the lines of ethnic affiliations. An example of the position made above is the 2015 general election, particularly the presidential election that had Goodluck Jonathan and Mohammed Buhari of the People's Democratic Party and All Progressive Congress respectively.

**Table 1:** Showing voting pattern during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria.

S/N	STATE	PDP	APC
1.	Abia	368,303	13,394
2.	Adamawa	251,664	374,701
3.	Akwa-Ibom	953,304	58,411
4.	Anambra	660,762	17,926
5.	Bauchi	86,058	931,598
6.	Bayelsa	361,209	5,194
7.	Benue	253,134	293,296
8.	Borno	25,640	473,543
9.	Cross Rivers	414,863	28,368
10.	Delta	1,211,405	48,910
11.	Ebonyi	323,653	19,518
12.	Edo	286,869	208,489
13.	Ekiti	176,466	120,331
14.	Enugu	553,003	14,157
15.	FCT	157,195	146,399
16.	Gombe	96,873	361,245
17.	Imo	559,185	133,253
18.	Jigawa	142,904	885,988
19.	Kaduna	484,085	1,127,780
20.	Kano	215,779	1,903,999
21.	Kastina	98,937	1,345,441
22.	Kebbi	100,972	567,883
23.	Kogi	149,987	264,851
24.	Kwara	132,602	302,146
25.	Lagos	632,327	792,460
26.	Nasarawa	273,460	236,838
27.	Niger	149,222	657,678
28.	Ogun	207,950	308,290
29.	Ondo	251,368	299,889
30.	Osun	249,929	383,603
31.	Oyo	303,376	528,620
32.	Plateau	549,615	429,140
33.	Rivers	1,487,075	69,238
34.	Sokoto	152,199	671,926
35.	Taraba	310,800	261,326
36.	Yobe	25,526	446,265
37.	Zamfara	144,833	612,202

**Source:** The Punch, April 1, 2015. P.1

The table above reveals that the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won in the South-South and South Eastern States, while the All Progressive Congress (APC) won in the North-East, North-West and North-Central except states like Nasarawa, Abuja, Plateau and Taraba where the PDP won.

The picture painted above, no doubt, shows that ethnicity has been part of the Nigerian state politics and has constantly played the role of mobilizing support for candidates with ethnic affinity.

**CONCLUSION**

Democratic politics cannot flourish in the presence of ethnicity. Most scholars attribute specifically the lack of democratic consolidation in Nigeria to ethnicity Azeez (2019) posit that, the ethnicization of politics in Nigeria has not address the fundamental goal of democracy, which is the creation of national socio-economic and political development. We noted in the forgoing discussion that, as a means of furthering ethnic chauvinism the Nigerian masses especially the Lumpen

proletariat have become vulnerable to political manipulations by the Nigerian political class. It is imperative to note that ethnicity is a scourge which has hindered Nigeria from achieving democracy and political party development. It is in this view that we make the following recommendations.

1. For Nigeria to make progress in her democratic experiment it must develop a political culture that will promote inclusivity for all Nigerians irrespective of ethnic origin.
2. We call on the Nigeria political elites to have an attitudinal change in their manipulation of ethnicity for the retention of political power as it has not address the fundamental goals of democracy.
3. For the survival of democracy to be guaranteed in Nigeria, political parties must be democratic in their form and substance. They must be People and Public service oriented.

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