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EDUCATION AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY – RELEVANCE TO THE RESOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a country where ethnic differentiation is on the geometric rise – a country where questions abound as to whether Nigeria is a nation. There has also been a clear lack of a sense of affinity between the peoples of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the country as a result of which there has been occasional use of federal might to bludgeon into line members of some ethnic sections of the country who have sought to achieve self-determination. All these are issues of intimate relation to the national question in Nigeria. The paper relies on philosophical analysis to address these issues. One means to build a strong integrated nation where people – whatever their background – live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities is provided by education. A well-structured educational system can provide the means to address the inequalities and injustices holding Nigeria back from being a united nation and a prosperous country. It is therefore recommended that policy-makers should create an educational system that promotes the incorporation of diverse ethnic and cultural ingredients into the curriculum, and that fertilises the ground for growth in the assimilation of diverse groups within the society.

Keywords: National Question; Ethnicity; Diversity; Ethnic Diversity; Education; and Integration

Introduction

Few issues have been so passionately debated in Nigeria as those having to with the national question. The term "national question" may not be explicitly referred to when certain issues of national concern are debated, but the meaning of the term is what is clearly in view when these issues are brought up for debate. In recent times, the central themes of national discourses have focused on the insecurity happening before the naked eye across all corners of the country; on ethnic differentiation; on inflationary spirals with the consequent deterioration of living conditions; and on religious strife – all of which are being trumpeted by certain voices as the direct result of deficiencies in the structural configuration of the country (Ihonvbere, 2008).

The national question is not a question of national concern peculiar to Nigeria. There have been – in some cases there are still – the Adriatic Question, the Irish Question, the Jewish Question, the Aromanian Question, the German Question, the Eastern Question, the Karelian Question, the Macedonian Question, the Schleswig-Holstein Question, the Roman Question and the

Kurdish Question (a lengthy list) – all related to a variety of issues having to do with the principle that holds that the nation should be in harmony with the state. This, then, is the meaning of nationalism (Gellner, 1983; and Hechter, 2000) – an idea that also holds that each nation should be self-governing, free from external interference; that a nation is a natural and ideal base for a political regime; and that the nation is the only legitimate source of political power (Yack, 2012; and Smith, 2010).

In the early 19th century, Western Europe, then operating in the van of capitalist development, formed the first nations following the overthrow of feudal ideological and political systems. In the course of time, the flame of nation formation lit up in Eastern Europe. Later, with the development of capitalism, dominant nations, on one hand, and dependent nations, on the other, began to differentiate. After the formation of the first nation states, Western Europe carved up vast areas of the world, first through colonialism and then, towards the end of the 19th century, through imperialism (Perinçek, 1992). Individuals in some geographical quarters who had not yet entered or were on the brink of capitalist development were drawn into their exploitative relations. The national question, which was an internal problem of the state in the pre-imperialist period, became during the imperialist period an international question – that is, an inter-state problem. Through the use of their military might, a small number of large and financially powerful states brought vast areas of the world under their own jurisdictional control and engaged in a struggle for domination with each other, which sometimes even culminated in sanguinary conflicts. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century, humanity was divided into oppressor and oppressed nations (Perinçek, 1992). This is believed in some quarters in Nigeria to reflect the characteristic feature of society in the country, with the people being split into real or perceived oppressed groups resident in certain parts of the country and oppressor groups belonging to other parts – the latter believed to possess colossal wealth at the expense of the former. There is also the manifest reality of the division of the country between a large number of oppressed groups and a negligible number of oppressor groups, with the concomitant generation of discontent among the former. Thus, part of the national question is evident in the vociferous calls from dissatisfied and aggrieved ethnic groups for a just and equitable accommodation within the Nigerian nation-state or for a referendum that could lead to secession from the federation (Ayokhai & Peter, 2016).

Ethnic differentiation is geometrically on the rise in the country, and questions abound as to whether Nigeria is a nation, as definitive traits that should be regarded as uniquely Nigerian can hardly be found – or are perceived to be hardly found – as a common denominator for all the ethnic groups in the country. There has also been a clear lack of a sense of affinity between the peoples of the various ethnic groups in the country as a result of which there has been occasional federal use of force to whip into line some members of particular ethnic groups who have sought to achieve self-determination.

The clear lack of a feeling of affinity between the peoples of the various ethnic groups in the country and the entrenched mutual ethnic distrust constitute the problem of this article. The paper relies on philosophical analysis as part of the overall purpose to address the problem in the broader context of the national question.

The National Question In The Broader Perspective

All reasoning individuals inhabiting a national space must surely, at some moment or other, reflect on the significance or insignificance of their own identity as it relates to the existing, or historical, definitions of that space (Soyinka, 1996). It is on this reflection that the national question bears. Thus, the question of nationalities – that is to say the oppression of nations and national minorities – which, according to Woods and Grant (2000), has characterised capitalism from its birth to the present day, is at the heart of the national question. The national question concerns the set of political, economic, territorial, legal, ideological and cultural relations between nations, national groups and nationalities in various socio-economic formations.

The origins of the national question can be traced back to the national liberation struggles and the formation of the nations that dominated Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Mawbey, 2014).Treaties signed after World War I saw the break-up of three predominantly feudal empires: the Austro-Hungarian Habsburgs, the Russian Tsars, and the Ottoman Turks. In their place, a series of ethno-linguistic national states were created, in accordance with the then-dominant belief in the right of nations to self-determination. In class society considered in communist quarters to be exploitative, the national question arises with the struggle of nations and peoples for national liberation and for the conditions most favourable for their social development. After the victory of the socialist revolution and under the socialist society, the national question included the problems that arose in the relations between nations and peoples and were related to the establishment of friendships and voluntary unification, the consolidation of unity and union in every way on the basis of complete equality (National Question, n.d.).

According to Marxist-Leninist theory, the national question is subordinate to the general questio n of the social and political progress of society. Marxism-Leninism starts from the idea that the most important aspect of the national question is the unification of the working people, regardless of their nationality, in the struggle against all forms of oppression and for a progressive social system (National Question, n.d.). In developing and other countries, the "national question" was a term for the struggles against colonialism and imperialism, the indignities, violence, injustice and dispossession to which targeted racial and ethnic groups were subjected, the sacrifices and suffering embodied in movements for national liberation, and the visions of social and economic justice (Hart, 2013).

The National Question in Nigeria

The national question in Nigeria has become a kind of a code term employed in relation to the search for stability, legitimacy and development, common national identity, unity and integration. Essentially, the national question is a

question about the fundamental basis of our political existence – that is, our constitution as a basic law, which governs the co-existence of Nigerians as individuals and cultural groups within a political system or state (Ajayi, 2018). It is a question with a direct focus on the distribution of power and the management of access to, control and distribution of resources in the country.

The national question in Nigeria is multi-dimensional and, as such, it seeks to comprehensively contextualise religious and ideological conflicts, the fear of political domination by some sections of the country over other sections, the struggle for hegemony between the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo ethnic nationalities as well as ethnic minority struggles for national recognition and integration (Orji, 2005).

The question also draws attention to a perceived historical error on the part of the United Kingdom – the colonial master of Nigeria until 1960 – to merge the northern Nigeria Protectorate with the southern Nigeria Colony and Protectorate to form the Protectorate of Nigeria on the 1st of January, 1914. In fact, the national question in Nigeria has a history going back to the colonial era. In March 1947, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who would be Prime Minister of Nigeria from 1957 to 1966, in a statement to old Legislative Council in Lagos conveyed a personal view that:

> "Since 1914, the British government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs, and customs and do not show themselves any sign of willingness to unite… Nigerian unity is only a British invention" (Obi-Ani, Obi- Ani & Isiani, 2016, p. 29).

Going further, Sir Abubakar remarked:

> "I am sorry to say that this presence of unity is artificial and it ends outside this chamber, the Southern tribes who are now pouring into the North are more or less domiciled here and do not mix with the Northern people … and we in the North look upon them as invaders. Since the amalgamation of Southern and Northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper…it is still far from being united. Nigeria's unity is only a British intention for the country" (Blose, 2018, para. 19 &21).

Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who would later become one of the leading figures on the Nigerian political scene, in his book Path to Nigerian Freedom (1947), minced no words about Nigeria not being a nation:

> "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are

> 'English' or 'Welsh' or 'French'. The word "Nigeria"' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not" (Onwubi, 1975, p. 399).

With regards to the various ethnic groups in the country, Chief Awolowo opined that it "is a mistake to designate them 'tribes'. Each of them is a nation by itself... There is as much difference between them as there is between German English, Russians, and Turks... The fact that they have a common overlord does not destroy this fundamental difference" (Onwubi, 1975, p. 399).

The historical views expressing misgivings about Nigeria as a "nation" – in the case of Chief Awolowo – and as a "united nation" – as expressed by Sir Abubakar – still reverberate in the country and form the central theme of the national question.

Since – and even long before – the country broke free from the administration of its affairs by the United Kingdom, the average Nigerian has considered him- or herself first as a proud, patriotic, nationalistic member of his or her ethnic nationality before looking upon him- or herself as a Nigerian. Whereas Nigeria as a country has to rely on the provisions of the supreme law of the land to compel loyalty and obedience among its citizens, these same citizens of the country intrinsically demonstrate loyalty and obedience – (loyalty and obedience engrained in them from childhood) – to their respective ethnic nationalities. Each ethnic nationality is a cohesive whole, characterised by distinct tradition, culture, history, language and politics. The sentiment the average Nigerian person shares with his or her ethnic compatriots about their respective ethnic nationalities are real and more solid than the ones they share about Nigeria as a country (Kargbo, 2017). While the average Nigerian considers him- or herself an intrinsic member of his or her ethnic nationality, he or she sees him- or herself as an extrinsic member of the Nigerian state. Thus, national identity resides in the background relative to ethnic loyalty. The average citizen of the country primarily identifies him- or herself as Hausa-Fulani, Ibo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Tiv, for example. Their identity as Nigerians simply lies on the circumference of their tribal and parochial loyalties.

Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with a population of over 200 million people having nationalities spread along as many as 250 distinct ethnic lines. The more diverse the cultures become within a nation, the more resources they have for development (Fayemi, 2022). Homogeneity is not necessarily a blessing and diversity does not have to be a curse (Fayemi, 2022). Where Nigeria's diversity, if well managed, should be a source of strength for the country, the country is getting worse for it. Acrimonious co-existence among the people of diverse ethnic groups, competing ethnic interests, mutual ethnic distrust and suspicion and inter-communal conflicts are engrained in the socio-political configuration and operation of Nigeria. This state of affairs

has militated against the political stability of the country since its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960.

Ethnic Diversity and the National Question in Nigeria

Diversity means "variety" and "range", a significant degree of variation within a particular group of persons or within community across a range of characteristics. It is something having a lot to do with all aspects of identity and experience, including ethnicity, nationality, language, sexuality, socio-economic background, gender, value system, family structure, ability, age and academic background (Sanger, 2020). Ethnic diversity refers to the differences between groups of persons with particular reference to cultural and linguistic identities or backgrounds. The national question in Nigeria is in large measures tied to the presence of a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds or identities in the country – hence to ethnic issues, evident in high-profile instances of occasional violent tensions and apparent in the everyday low-key mistrust and prejudice with which many Nigerians look upon their fellow Nigerians of other ethnicities. The pervasive ethnic stereotyping and ethnic labelling occurring in the country are great in potentiality to destroy the very fabric of the Nigerian society. Many ethnic groups in Nigeria are victims to some stereotypes and have been the subjects of some dehumanising ethnic labels by people from other ethnic groups (Jato, Oloamiwe, Ezulofor & Aghaosa, 2022). A stereotype is a set, over-generalised assumption about a particular group of people. By stereotyping, the impression created is that the subject of the stereotype has a whole range of traits and characteristics assumed for all the people of the group the victim of the stereotype comes from. For example, a person that belongs to the northern part of the country, be it the middle-belt or the far north, is stereotyped as being of Hausa ethnic stock by some – but not all – groups in the south of the country. This brazenly and blatantly overlooks the fact that, as an example, the Tiv, Idoma and Igede people of Benue State, who are mainly Christians, have historically resisted the Hausa language and other Hausa influences on their culture, as they share more in common with the ethnic alchemies of southern Nigeria than they do with Hausa-phone northern Christians (Kperogi, 2020). The stereotype similarly ignores the fact that there "are Yoruba people who are native to Kwara and Kogi states" and the reality of "Igbo people—of the Ezza, Izzi and Effium sub-groups found in Ebonyi State—who are native to at least four of Benue State's 23 local governments" (Kperogi, 2020, para. 6)

Stereotypical representations of people by ethnic labels on the back of real or imagined traits associated with these groups are engrained in the cultural psyche of the country. Overtime, there have been such derogatory labels like "Yorubbers" or "Yorubastard"; "Biafraud"; "Terrorists" slapped on Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa respectively by other ethnic groups. Such labels, according to Bach (2012)...

- are applied randomly, irrespective of individual characteristics or traits;
- look at a negative evaluative property in connection with that group or category;

- are employed to express contempt, scorn, loathing, dismissiveness, hostility, condescension, hate, or, most viscerally, disgust or fear;
- are used to disparage, insult, belittle, demean, degrade or even dehumanise others (because they are ethnically, culturally or linguistically different);
- are offensive or obnoxious to their targets;
- are offensive or obnoxious to others (but generally not offensive or obnoxious to their users or in special contexts, like in jokes);
- are slang terms, not used in polite society and in some cases even tabooed;
- are built on stereotypes and based on prejudices; serve to direct attention to and minimise emotional reactivity to generic characteristics, which are held to be highly explanatory of stereotypical behaviour and character;
- are used to treat individual as primarily and essentially members of the group;
- may be used to express solidarity between people in the insulting or defamatory group;
- can be used "appropriately" to express solidarity within the insulted or slandered group..

Being up there with the use of stereotypes against people from certain groups is prejudicial to our collective humanity and to the vision of Nigeria as a country where “unity and faith, peace and progress” are expected to prevail (Jato et al, 2022). The polarisation between the people of the ethnic groups in Nigeria – and the resulting conflict between them in their struggle for resources, political and economic power – has created negative consequences of gargantuan proportions. There have been – and in many cases there are on-going – Tiv-Jukun clashes; Yelwa-Shendam conflict; Mangu-Bokoss crisis; Ife and Modakeke inter-communal conflict; Aguleri-Umuleri conflict; the clashes between the Itsekiri and the Ijaw; Itsekiri-Urhobo Warri conflict; clashes between Ile-Ife and Modakeke; Yoruba-Hausa clashes in Lagos, Ibadan, Ile-Ife, clashes between communities in Cross River and Ebonyi States (Osadola, 2012; and Oji, Eme, & Nwoba, 2014). There have also been ethnic-religious conflicts driven by actors who are mainly divided by cultural, ethnic or religious communities and identities. Looking at this, cases of religious violence between Christian and Muslim communities naturally come to mind. A good example is the protracted southern Kaduna crisis, which is linked to ethno-religiously motivated attacks by Fulani herdsmen against the indigenous peoples of southern Kaduna, as well as the rise in banditry and general insecurity in the north of Nigeria. There have also been protracted conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, and these have usually involved sanguinary clashes between Fulani nomads and farmers, particularly in the middle belt but also in southern parts of the country (Amaza, 2020). These violent ethnic and inter-community clashes have caused massive loss of life, gargantuan damage to material well-being and massive displacement of individuals – and lie at the heart of the national question.

Education and Ethnic Diversity – Relevance to the Resolution of the National Question in Nigeria

Diversity in society enriches human life in the light of conscious attempts to balance "harmony and difference". On the contrary, diversity, if not well-managed, could throw up many challenges prejudicial to national unity. In view of the threats that diversity is capable of posing to national unity, identity and loyalty, an ethnically and culturally plural society will seek to erect and solidify consensus around the values it holds dear. Even in instructional settings where diversity can shape relationships by creating opportunities for inter-group relations, students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds might not always form friendships that cut across ethnic lines. This is because, in any given social context, individuals are more inclined to treat others as members of "other social groups" if a multiplicity of categories are aligned, thereby creating clear differentiation between groups with reference to multiple categories (Grütter, Meyer, Philipp, Stegmann & van Dick, 2021). To act as an agent for integration, school systems in Nigeria must be structured to promote interaction between students of different ethnic groups within schools. Inter-ethnic friendships between students can translate into inter-ethnic relations in the wider society, which could further the interest of national integration. Respect for the creation of unity in diversity and diversity in unity are regarded as the ingredients basic for developing an integrated society capable of effectively responding to the challenges of national integration, which is a basic requirement for resolving the national question.

The conflictual sense of common national identity driven by historical hostilities between the ethnic groups agglomerated within Nigeria is one of the issues at the core of the national question. This much was earlier alluded to. The lack of progress towards forging common identity for Nigerians as a people is a factor among many driving the ethnic contentions among the peoples of the diverse ethnic nationalities in the country. Common national identity is of inextricable relation to national integration as a step in the direction of dismantling the colonial legacy of creating a country perceived as a motley crew of people, "each with their own separate ethnic loyalties and tradition" (Davis & Kalu-Nwiwu, 2001, p. 1). One means to build a strong integrated nation where people – whatever their background – live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities is provided by education. Education itself is influenced by the diversity present in a society and must therefore adapt to the dynamics of the diversity. Education and diversity are closely linked, one constantly affecting the other. Education can provide the means to address the inequalities and injustices holding Nigeria back from being a united and prosperous country – inequalities that act as impediments to integration and opportunity thereby preventing Nigerians from building a country where everyone has the chance to succeed in life.

Education provides a means for mitigating the ethnic and other disparities that threaten to tear a pluralistic nation like Nigeria apart, as each group in the nation clings to its own identity rather than sticking to a common national identity. Consequently, schools are recognised as important agents in the mitigation of ethnic group biases as they can provide

opportunities for positive cross-ethnic contact among students (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2006). Research findings show that such diverse opportunities can foster inter-ethnic friendships, which are strong predictors of better inter-group attitudes, mental health, and school adjustment (Grütter et al (2021).

The objective of education is not simply individualistic but includes making the individual acquire social efficiency. Education in Nigeria should create a sustainable awareness in students that they are all intrinsic members of one nation. Education should be structured around ethnic diversity in a way that systematically addresses cultural pluralism by examining the varying traits of different groups that distinguish one group from another. A fundamental principle of education in a free society is the recognition of ethnic pluralism as a national strength and not as an obstacle to be removed (Cohen, 1986). People of various ethnic groups should be able to maintain their ethnic identities while sharing a common culture with Nigerians of other ethnic backgrounds. Studies indicate that that the more children are exposed to knowledge about ethnic stereotyping, the less negativism they will have towards other ethnic groups (Cohen, 1986). By exposing students to knowledge about ethnic pluralism and the contributions of various ethnic groups to the evolution of modern Nigeria, teachers in Nigerian schools would be better placed to change negative ethnic group stereotypes, reduce intolerance, and enhance cooperation for the common good. Students educated in a diverse environment can develop higher overall skills and abilities and thus be more motivated and able to participate in the complex social life of the future.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The history of Nigeria is one whose pages have been filled with tension, suspicion, mistrust, and on many occasions, violent clashes among Nigerians as a result of real or imagined attempts by some ethnic or cultural groups to dominate or subjugate the "other" groups. It is a history of common national identity that has proved elusive for the diverse groups in the country that are distinguished by their own customs, history, language, or distinct identity. Hence, it is a history of constant search for the answer to the national question. An education system structured to be corrosive to the “us-and-them” syndrome is one area where the answer to the national question could be found. The perception of sameness or difference in Nigeria can spring from a host of real or imagined attributes. Region, religion, language and culture are such attributes. An ethnically diverse society struggling with the national question needs to evolve an educational system that reflects its socio-political configuration. The socio-political operation of such society needs to accept, respect and accommodate diversity by developing an educational system that promotes the incorporation of diverse ethnic and cultural ingredients into the curriculum, and that fertilises the ground for the assimilation of diverse groups within the society. Such an educational system is flexible and inclusive. It enables multi-lingual communication and operates basically as a reflection of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural ethos of the society itself.

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