



THE POLITICS AND CHALLENGES OF NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY: A THEORETICAL DISCUSS

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Abstract

The intricacies involved in nation building have developed various data on how best the Nigerian community should be governed to ensure its unity. To this extent, diverse measures and programmes have been put in place by government since 1999 to ensure that this is attained. However, studies have shown that there are differing opinions on what a 'nation' is, and what nation-building should entail. This article hopes to discuss some of these debates on nationalism by providing guidance in analyzing some of these perspectives as laid down by such scholars as Coleman, Sklar, among others. Next, it will explain the relevance of adopting a model or models in the journey to achieving a 'true nation' in a state like Nigeria and as well as to bring to bear the perspective that is best suited to the positive growth of Nigeria's democracy and suggest strategies that could assist the state in the actualization of nationhood.

Keywords: Democracy, Governance, Nation-Building, Nigeria, Politics

Introduction:

The concept *nation* and *nationhood* has gained ground in social science discourse recently. This is because of the dwindling feature of integration and the urgent need to increase a sense of belonging among people that live within a geographical area in the midst of the world becoming a global village. There is a need to therefore understand the idea of a nation. There is no general accepted ideology on what a nation is or how it originated. Scholars have proposed varying perspectives of how a nation emerged, what it constitutes and how it can be sustained.

Van Den Berghe (1987) and Geertz (1973), opined that nation emerged naturally and that is from blood relations. They say that it is as a result of nature that families and relatives which with time, grow into a large population, form groups, which metamorphosed into a nation. To them, nationhood is a product of socio-biological and cultural connection. This idea which is also referred to as the *primordial perspective* or *identity* of a nation is also





argued to be an identity of natural descent or given, an identity of ineffable relations but coercive, and an identity that deals essentially with sentiments and affection (Geertz, 1973).

This primordial ideology is linked to the socio-biological framework of the concept of a nation. As proposed by Van den Berghe (1981), he opined that a nation emerged from mechanism of biological relatedness which expresses itself in nepotistic behaviour and the likelihood of conflict or cooperation which could be predicted by reference to how closely people are related. In the absence of kinship ties, he believes that cooperation appears when all parties can profit from a transaction. As to coercion, which requires the potential or actual use of force, it is common to most human societies, but it escalates with the emergence of the state. In his discussion, Berghe (1981), tries to connect ethnicity to kinship (primordial). This connection, he explains, is the reason that people behave the way they do and makes them stay together, thereby creating a nation (Conev, 2019).

The above ideas of what a nation means are reflected in the medieval era where language, ethnic descent was necessary in the formation of a nation. One which is distinct from the two aforementioned is the perspective of the *perennialists* who see any group referred to as a nation, as one that has a historical link which is divided into two. The supporters of perennialism claim that nations, although have exist for an infinite long time, i.e. since there is both written and unwritten history of mankind, cannot be classified as natural or biological creatures. Thus, the Perennialists claim that all nations that existed or still exist, starting with Sumerians, Babylonians, Jews, or modern Germans, Russians, etc. are historical creations that have existed, evolved or assimilated throughout history, but cannot be defined as natural, biological and primordial groups alone as proposed by the primordial and socio-biological thinkers (Llobera, 1999). The two interpretations of the concept according to the perennialists. The first is continuous or constant. This includes nations that exist all the time while there is written history, such as the Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, and others. These nations are called by the perennialists as *permanent*. The second grouping of nation includes all other nations. This type of nations, which are unstable, is described by the perennialists as periodic or nations that appear at different time periods in history, have some development and growth, and then disappear again, until the period of reappearance, that is, until the change of the historical cycle (Babylonians, Macedonians). The second group in perennialism is called *repetitive, cyclic, or periodic group of nations* (Berlin, 1958).

The three aforementioned theories above of what a nation is can be grouped to the way of life in ancient societal organizations with little or no features of a state. These ways of nationhood were common in kingdoms, empires, etc. The attributes (nature, birth, blood relations, kinship, historical links etc.) which the primordial, socio-biological and perennialists scholars indicated, are similar to those that bonded most of these kingdoms and



empires together as a nation. As societies evolved and became more developed, the formation of state, elements which were responsible for the formation of a nation changed.

Modernist view is that nation emerged at the advent of the French Revolution. This revolution has led to a complex situation for the uniformity of the population within nation states, as well as for the common unifying elements of the nation's themselves (Smith, 1986). Thus, nation emerged as a result of modernity. However, this does not rule out some ancient features such as culture and ethnic affiliations. Furthermore, nation creation to the Modernists is explained more as resulting from migration from rural areas to urban which was because of industrial development.

Another idea of what a nation entails that is intricately linked to the Modernist idea of a nation is the Marxian theory. This is because the latter which entails struggle for world revolution in the bid of suppressing 'the state', also believe that nation emerged from the introduction of industrialization which became a system of the 'owners and workers'. Marxists have rejected the existence of nation and have accorded the notion of a 'nation' no importance. This is because Marxism sees 'nation' as a response to imperialism and colonialism like 'state'.

Summarily, the postulations discussed above, gives an understanding of the origin of most nations. Yet, Africanists opined that some Traditional concepts (state, nation, nationalism etc.) in the study of political science, cannot be given similar definition and explanation when applied to African societies (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Notwithstanding, the importance of lineage, clanship, kinship, the chieftain nature and the organization of power within the society and the concept of the formation of African nationalism, is distinctly 'Western' in its form and what it entails (Sklar, 1994). Therefore, irrespective of where or how a nation emerged, as well as the different notions and postulations given by scholars, there are certain universal attributes (such as similar history, culture and language in some instances) that makes a group to be called 'nation'. It is from this background that this paper hopes to discuss the theoretical aspects of nation and portray how it could assist in understanding nation-building in Nigeria's democracy

Conceptual Issues

Governance

The term 'governance' is essential in the discourse of nation-state because it is that mechanism the smooth running and the overall existence of the nation. The meaning is however controversial, but it will be explained here as it relates and influences nationhood. The World Bank defined governance as the 'exercise of political power and the use of institutional resources to solve societal problems and manage its affairs'(Srivastava, 2009;



Conev, 2019). This definition identifies the importance of legitimate authority in governing process. In most societies, the only organ which possesses such legitimacy is the state which is accepted by members of the society. Furthermore, solving societal problems as posited by the definition is important in promoting nation-building. This acceptance gives ‘the state’ the authority to govern with the help of other well-structured government institutions. It is to this extent that Saliu (2010), argued that it is unavoidable to determine that governance is linked with democracy because it focuses mainly on political authority which could only be attained through legitimacy.

Nation-Building in Nigeria

No literature has been able to conceptualize ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ distinctively, so also is the issue of explaining what ‘nation-building’ entails. This is because what one society may understand by a ‘nationhood’ may be entirely different to what the concept means in another society. When ‘nation’ is combined with ‘building’ and form “nation-building”, it literally means the machinery and process put in place with the effort of creating a sense of oneness among people who have similar history, culture, descent and language living in a particular society (Aidelokhai & Ahmed, 2012). However, the attributes of descent and language have been downplayed in contemporary times because from the political view, the place of nation is within the State. This realization was made from ‘the principle of state sovereignty’ connected in the ‘peace pact’ known as 1648 Peace of Westphalia which states that “the rights of states to govern themselves without external involvement is achieved” alongside ‘the principle of national sovereignty and national self-determination’ (Egwu, 2021). This encouraged more communities to form alliance of nation-state which exist in many parts of the world. These communities who do not have the features of the ancient or medieval nation but have agreed to form a sovereign state, therefore if they intend to continue to be a singular political entity, should implement necessary measures to maintain unity among its diversity. This is what nation-building demands which is the dire need in Nigerian state.

Democracy in Nigeria

It is no longer news that Nigeria has been practicing a democratic government for over two decades now. This has made scholars (Omotola, 2008, Ajayi & Fashagba, 2012) in the field of social science in their various works; to pose the question on how well democracy has fared as a system of government in Nigeria. This they have done by analyzing how the tenets of democracy (citizenship, protection of fundamental human rights, inclusiveness and equality, consent of the governed, periodic elections, among others) are adhered to within society. From this premise, it can be noticed that periodic elections as one of the tenets have been observed as at when due since 1999. This is where the citizens elect their preferred representatives to ensure their needs are met and their interests protected in the decision-making sphere of the society (Saliu, 2010). However, this is not enough because, without





periodic free and fair elections and a non-partisan electoral umpire, democracy will become a mirage. Although not enough, this seems to be one out of the many tenets which is strictly adhered to though, not without loopholes in its conduct as it has witnessed high level of electoral malpractices ranging from those perpetuated by political parties, and aspiring political candidates, down to the ones done by the voters themselves. Other tenets which are necessary for ensuring ‘oneness and unity among the people are lacking and has made nation building a difficult task to achieve.

Coleman’s Perspective on Nationalism in Africa

Earlier texts have noted certain ‘attributes or features’ that is necessary for group of persons living together to be termed as a ‘nation’. Some of which includes culture, ancestry common history, language etc. These, Anifowese (1999), identified as the requirements for pre-modern nation which was believed to have existed without a state but not enough to determine contemporary nation within states. Irrespective of the period, Coleman’s (1954) notion of nationalism in Africa as stated by Sklar (1994), is that the distinct nature of Africa’s nations has set it apart from other nations. For Coleman, it is difficult to place under the cover of “nationalism” all past and present societal organizations and set-ups in the continent. He suggested the following as the best way in understanding nationalism in Africa.

1. Traditionalist Movement

This is Coleman’s idea of the earliest move toward nationalism. This involved revolts and spontaneous resistance by indigenous people in traditional Africa against the invasion of the Europeans. The psychologically and emotionally frustrated natives used whatever means was available to them because of the external domination that was alien to them. The foreign rule introduced strange socio-economic inequalities they did not know existed. This can be seen in the weak resistance pre-colonial African societies exhibited when they were invaded by the western world

2. Syncretistic Movement

The next nationalist stage as proposed by Coleman was the revolt against the white man’s religion – Christianity. The natives made it expressly clear that they would maintain their traditional beliefs and religion. This was the struggle for ‘religious independence’ or that the European clerics could not tolerate African’s ‘barbaric’ custom as Thwaite (1936) suggested. This was followed by support from Africans who had acquired western education in collaboration with resident Africa traditionalists and felt the need to promote ‘tribal sentiment’ (nation-building ideas) in Africa against the whites. The stage grew from independent religious groups to kinship associations which graduate to tribal associations (Coleman, 1954)

3. Modernist Movements





This is the final stage of the emergence of nationalism in Africa. At this stage most of the agitators for a nationalist Africa in various African societies, had observed and noted that there is a need to improve the welfare of the Africa indigenous people and educate them towards national self-determination to achieve nation-building. Their major objectives were to:

- a. Create modern independent Africa nation-states possessing an internal state apparatus and external sovereignty and other attributes required of a recognised sovereign state in the international society.
- b. To achieve absolute social and political equality and local autonomy within a broader Euro-Africa grouping (French and Portuguese Africa) or within a visibly plural society (Cole, 1954).

Furthermore, Pan-Africanist movement was also organized and led by some westernized elites and comprised of American Negroes for the aim of creating a global black-race consciousness of African wherever they may be and to plan for future nationalist activities.

Coleman's Nationalism and Nation-Building in Nigeria

The foregoing has shown that the origin of nationalism in African societies, Nigeria inclusive, as argued by scholars, was on the framework of the agitation of freedom from external domination. Yet after this freedom was achieved, the 'actual' meaning of a 'nation' seem to have been eroded with colonialism. In the Nigerian context, there are however certain factors that have helped in further eroding any form of nationhood among its citizens or as argued by Egwu (2021), framed the country's notion of what a nation entail.

i. The Politics of Ethnic Identity and Antagonism

Unlike other nations which emerged because of the feeling of oneness, same tribe, language, or ethnic affiliation among group of people living together, Nigeria's 'definition of nationhood' as at the time, was meant as 'independence'. The preaching of self-government was louder than other messages of education and welfare of the masses. The singular agitation was the coming together of all and sundry to ensure that political freedom was attained and self-government was established. This pre-independence understanding of nationalism veiled the existence of multiple ethnic identities and the differences that has shown the lack of unity among them.

Though, Azikiwe (1969), believed Africans to be one in his earlier philosophy on which he formed his 'nationalist ideology'. However, he was quick to realise that though most Africa pre-colonial societies had similar history, there still exists inter and intra-tribal prejudice which could not be bridged. Even within Nigeria, the existence of the various





ethnic groupings and their struggle for dominance and relevance had made national integration a near mirage. Consequently, ‘ethnic political dealers’ who have profited from the struggle and differences of these ethnic groupings on different occasions, are not interested in curbing these struggles. For this reason, Egwu (2021), termed this association, “political ethnicity” because the ‘ethnic political dealers’ create temporal ethnic awareness among this ethnic groups on why their affiliations are superior and better than their counterparts. This derails national patriotism which poses as a major obstacle on the journey to nation-building.

Sklar (1979), therefore argued that, the creation of ‘ethnic political sense of nationality’ in Nigeria’s past and other African countries, only achieved self-government and little or no efforts were geared towards cultural and political unity in these ‘nation-states’. Consequently, this has impeded continually on any form of mechanisms in trying to make the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural citizens of Nigeria to see themselves as one nor can the spirit of oneness grow among them. Other underlying factors that have continued to widen the gap among these groupings, is the elite class in the society and those at the helms of affairs who from the onset rode on the back of the horse of this ethnic grouping’s clamour to gain political power. They have contributed almost nothing at all towards unifying these groups and where they claim to have, their efforts are weak and insignificant.

Furthermore, there is the issue of argument for the partial distribution of the country’s revenue. Though every government since independence have claimed to use their discretion in adopting a sharing formula, they feel should be accepted by all and sundry but that has not been the case. For instance, ethnic groups from the southern part of the country have always felt that with the general knowledge that their area is where the mainstay of the nation (crude oil) is acquired, they should be given preferential treatment in the floor of revenue sharing formula. They have argued that their land provides the proceeds which the whole country relies and benefits from. Summarily, for any form of nation-building to be attained, it is necessary for the ethnic identity to be tackled alongside the problems that comes with it.

ii. Religious Affiliation and the Game of Its Sensitivity

Like ethnicity, religion has been a major contending factor hindering national cohesion in Nigeria. It has over the years been an overly sensitive issue in Nigeria since its independence. This is because it was built along the lines of ethnic division, where the northern part is predominantly Muslims while the southerners are predominantly Christians. This is why some scholars (Egwu, 2021, Coleman, 1987 & Sklar, 1976) preferred to conceptualize it as *ethnic-religious identity* in a way of explaining the interconnectedness of these factors and their effects on nation-building. Although, the coming of Christianity in Nigeria is acclaimed to have heralded the colonialists, scholars like Kreamer, (1938) and Sklar, (1994) have argued that though division existed prior to colonialism, yet the western culture and its religion (Christianity), widened the gap among the people. Islam, another major religion, had also been introduced in some parts earlier and was embraced in the north





in the present-day Nigeria. The Europeans were conscious of this when they came and tried to penetrate the north with Christianity which yielded little results. However, more grounds were gained in the south which now formed the bases on which the parallel lines of religion were founded. It was also instrumental to the colonialists in their system of control and operation. They allowed the north practice its Islam because the westerners were quick to noticed that they could get the cooperation required from the north if the practiced of their religious beliefs were unhindered. While the south practiced Christianity and other indigenous traditional religions known to them while maintaining their indirect rule in different parts of the colony.

Even with the emergence of ‘political freedom’ in 1960, religion has continued to play a vital role, a dicey one at that in determining the ‘state of affairs’ in the country. ‘Political business-men’ have ridden on this religious difference to acquire political power, retain this power to the extent of causing societal conflicts for self-interests. This has prevailed because of the sentiments Nigerians attached to whatever faith they have. The attribute of tolerance which Azikiwe (1966), suggested which he believed will unite not only Nigeria, but the entire black continent was lacking even till date. None of the adherents of either religion can tolerate a negative statement or comments passed on their religious beliefs. In fact, the level of religious intolerance among the Nigerian people cannot be overemphasized and this has remained because most political aspirants have continued to use it as a campaign weapon. This further poses a challenge to nation-building and all the good that accompanies it especially for a country that is multi-religious in its formation.

iii. Insecurity and its Threat on Nation-Building

Within the increase and yearning of ethnic and religious identity, it is not unlikely for the level of insecurity to have risen to the level experienced in the country presently. These threats to human lives, properties, and freedom of any kind have shaken the core foundation of any form of national integration in the country.

As Ewetan and Urhie, (2014) argued, the conflicts that arises from the yearnings of the ethnic and religious groups to gain relevance has resulted inviolence in some parts of the country. Unfortunately, other miscreants and terrorists’ groups have taken advantage of the situation and are holding the nation hostage in the name of Boko Haram, Farmers-Herders crisis, Kidnappers and Armed bandits who have cornered the Nigerian state and portrayed its failure in recent times. This high level of insecurity seems to be overwhelming for the sitting government of the country. Despite efforts they claim to have put in place to control the menace of insecurity, such efforts have yielded little or no results. Instead, the rate of the death of security personnel is alarming because of the paucity of weapons as compared to their opponents.





This has bred fear, distrust, and suspicions in the minds of the citizens against their neighbours and people around them. This invariably makes it difficult for any kind of nation-building or 'spirit of oneness to be formed among them. In summary, the declining capacity of the Nigerian state to provide adequate security for its citizens and inability to maintain law and order in the society has like Ugwu (2021) opined, brought its own legitimacy into question by multiple existence of armed non-state actors.

The Nature of Democracy in Nigeria

It is well known that Nigeria has a typical history for walking in the footprints of the western countries, particularly the United States of America. In fact, the nature of its democracy is said to be a 'replica' of that of the U.S. However, because of its historical, cultural, behavioural differences and philosophical ideas of its people, it has not been able to replicate the United States' democracy (Ajayi 1961). This is because democracy among other forms of governance is expected to provide a peaceful and well-ordered society to encourage development. Sadly, since 1999, ethno-religious conflicts and electoral violence in the nation's periodic elections has continued to rise, hampering sustainable development and any kind of unity in the nation. Liberal democracy which is the type been practiced in most western countries in the world, is scarcely concerned about the yearnings of groups in the society as it is geared towards advancing the rights and freedom of individuals in any society (Ake, 1996, Ugwu, 2021).

Yet, when compared to other countries, the 'liberal democracy' of Nigeria is questionable. Despite normal periodic elections, governance transparency and accountability are fading, the people do not have any form of faith in the political institutions (arms of government, political parties etc.). They prefer to rely on their group affiliation (ethnic and religious) to get those social amenities which are to be provided by the government.

Recommendations

The reality of diversity is a nature that is similar to countries around the world and not unique to Nigeria. Listening to some of the nation's lawmakers, one will understand that they are aware of the urgent need for nation-building to prevent a total collapse of the Nigerian state. Measures that have been taken in the past has not yielded any results. This study will suggest the following;

- i. There is need for political leaders in the country at the federal and state levels to revamp their decisions and policies towards nation-building and be committed to it by ensuring that whatever measures formulated, are fulfilled to the latter.





- ii. The need to critically study Nigeria and the African state cannot be overstressed. The liberal democracy as a form of governance seems not to be working for its system. Perhaps there is an urgent need for the black continent to create its own form of governance (perhaps a mix government of democracy and autocracy; a bit of both) which will be best suited for it while borrowing ‘a leaf from that of the west and not the whole tree’ which is not working.
- iii. Political elites, particularly those with great influence and command respect within the society, need to also look beyond personal ambition political tenure in office and make concerted efforts to unite their people irrespective of ethnic or religious groupings. They must foster harmony among the people to remove the present animosity in their hearts towards each other.
- iv. Though it seems tasking and unachievable, constitutional review is paramount to add laws that will further promote nationalism and remove or reconstruct those that fuels sectionalism. One of the latter is the issue of ‘state of origin’ in filling forms which can be replaced with ‘state of residence.’
- v. There is a need to review Nigeria’s Federal structure by giving more decisive powers to the states and promote local government autonomy to release them from the clutches of state governors.’

Conclusion

Theoretically, the essence of a nation is rooted in the history of a country which Sklar (1994), stated in Coleman’s idea of Nationalism. This too is visible in the form of nationhood present in Nigeria today. Its traditional societal makeup, colonial heritage, and current political structure are responsible for the dearth in nation-building. The on-going advancement of ethnic and religious groupings is only widening the gap among the groups further eroding a sense of nationhood that exists. Therefore, the political leaders and elites must be determined to ensure inclusive governance, political transparency and accountability, complete adherence to the rule of law to promote a spirit of oneness and nationhood among its citizens.

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