

ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND ITS ATTENDANT 'SON OF THE SOIL' SYNDROME: AN INQUEST INTO THE TRAJECTORIES OF NATION-BUILDING IN POST-INDEPENDENCE NIGERIA

ASAJU OLASUNKANMI VICTOR

Department of History and International Studies,

Prince Abubakar University, Anyigba

asaju.ov@ksu.edu.ng

08060514609

Abstract

Ethno-religious and political sentiments coupled with centrifugal forces of tribal entitlement known as the 'son of the soil' syndrome have made the process of nation-building so tasking in Nigeria. This barbaric entitlement mentality has continued to dominate Nigerians' daily life experience of their coexistence through the dark lenses of parochialism and sectionalism. By so doing they demonstrate their allegiance first to their community at the expense of the primordial state. Hence, ethnicity has been weaponised and constitutes a major prerequisite for getting enlisted in school and, civil service and even recently became an alibi for voting people into elective positions with little or no regard for merit and competence. The implication is that this unbridled chauvinism negates the philosophy of 'one people great nation' and becomes an obstacle to the process of nomination-buildings study, therefore, adopts historical research methodology using both primary sources which comprise oral interviews with the relevant stakeholders across Nigeria and secondary sources such as books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers, and other unpublished works. Findings reveal that nation-building can only be achieved if certain beliefs and practices that give undue advantages and preferences to the so-called 'Son of the Soil' be abolished, as this will create equal opportunity for Nigerians irrespective of place of birth, ethnic affiliation, religion inclination, political leanings as well as promoting a sense of belonging and ensuring quality delivery at all levels of governance.

Keywords: Ethnic Nationalism, Trajectory, Nation Building, Post-Independence, and Nigeria

Introduction

Generally in Africa, colonial conquest resulted in urban migration, in some cases, it led to the transformation of what Horowitz aptly described as "small, previously discrete ethnic groups into larger agglomerations, sometimes called

super-tribes.”¹ These emergent people were initially composed of fragments of kinship entities, towns, villages, or clans that had some initial historical ties, and were motivated by the desire to move into the political space as a platform that would enable them to compete with other groups for scarce resources.² Thus, as the political landscape of Africa enlarged, some of these groups became very strong, both materially and in terms of socio-political influence. However, the emergent groups were special and even though they derived from smaller kinship entities, they were more or less corporate people or at best federations of ethnic groups glued by political interests rather than by common descent. Subsequently, the transformation from kinship to ethnicity has its greatest manifestation among them and that was why there were inter-ethnic crises in countries like Nigeria, Rwanda, Burundi, etc. and these issues have continued to create unending competition among these groups.

According to, Eghosa, colonialism left a scar that is yet to heal³ and this has consistently trailed the country on the perpetual calls for nation-building with hopelessness and frustration. Indeed, the Colonial Administration was the period in which the British interfered and altered the indigenous socio-political setup of various groups that existed as an independent state in pre-colonial times. The aftermath of this alteration had far-reaching implications for the entire area and it eventually culminated in a geographical entity that is today called Nigeria.⁴ This artificial arrangement marked the beginning of an entirely different socio-cultural and political system in the history of Nigeria.

¹ D. L. Horowitz, “Ethnic Identity” in Glazer N. and Moynihan, D.P. (eds.) *Ethnicity: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975, 126.

² S. Godwin, Historical and Cultural Dimensions of Social Conflicts in Nigeria, *The Journal of Society for Peace Studies and Practice*, No: 7, 2017, 6

³ E. Osaghae, “Towards a fuller Understanding of Ethnicity in Africa: Bringing Rural Ethnicity Back” in”, in E. Osaghae (ed.) *Between State and Civil Society in Africa*, Darkar: Published by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research (CODESRIA) 1994.

⁴ B. Uchebue, “Ethnic Nationalities and the Challenges of National Integration: An Analysis of the Political Structure of Nigerian State” *Journal of South East Political Science Review*, Vol. 1, No: 2017, 217

Consequent to these structural changes and the creation of new boundaries was the sudden emergence of an unfettered lack of trust among this newly created entity, hence, policymakers and academics through their research have been making efforts to proffer lasting solutions to the challenge of nation-building.⁵ However, this amalgamation thus became a source of dissatisfaction that engulfed Nigeria's body politics since independence.⁶ Nigeria's search for unity had passed through several stages of constitutional development, through reviews and amendments (about eight in number) of the constitution between the period of amalgamation and independence.⁷ The objective of these processes was to find out what could make Nige stay together as one indivisible political entity where all people could happily live as one without being subjected to any form of prejudice., apart from the abovementioned colonial interference which led to the 'force marriage,' introduction of policies such as quote a system and the principle of federal character that was put in place to ensure no particular ethnic group dominates the other especially the smaller ones in all government agencies like military, police, and civil service but unfortunately, these policies have been more of albatross than a solution to the process of nation building.⁸

For over sixty years of political freedom from colonial entanglements, the country has remained like a multinational leviathan compromising disparate ethnic nationalities associating involuntarily in the pursuit of, not the national agenda, but ethnic primordial sentiment.⁹ However, after a long walk down to this day it is quite unfortunate that Nigerian citizens are still called upon to identify themselves in terms of place of origin instead of addressing individuals as a citizen of one nation People see themselves as indigenes, natives, and son of the soil of a particular state

⁵ B. Uchegbue, "Ethnic Nationalities and the Challenges of National Integration: An Analysis of the Political Structure of Nigerian State"218

⁶ N. Tanumo, *Proceedings of the National Conference on Nigerian since Independence*, Vol. 111: Civil War Years, Zaria, 1983.

⁷ E. Ina, "State Creation and Minority Agitations in Nigeria 1954-1999", *Benue Valley Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 6, No: 2, December, 2005, 1

⁸ Y. Abdullahi, "The Federal Character Principle in Nigeria: Assessing Its Relevance" *North Central Journal of Political and Societal Studies* Vol. 1, No: 1, 2016.

⁹ Y. Abdullahi, 26

of origin and communities where they were born. No doubt, such demands for local or ethnic identification are not normal for a plural nation. Hence, this has continued to portend dangers on this long journey of nationhood. Therefore, this paper interrogates the unhealthy circumstances that surround the process of nation-building and why it has continued to remain intractable despite several attempts that have been made from the past to the present.

Conceptual Discourse

This section discusses the two key concepts and components that are relevant in this study to give room for a proper grasp and detailed explanation of the subject matter. Thus, these include; ethnic identity and nation-building whose importance in this study cannot be overemphasized. Ethnic identity has become rife in the history of Nigeria. The latest manifestation and most conspicuous was the situation that played out between the Igbo and Yoruba during the just concluded 2023 general elections in Lagos State where some saw themselves as son of the soil and profiled others as settlers who have no right to meddle in the political affairs of the state. This is an identity that many observers and scholars alike have dismissed in the past as primordial sentiments are fast becoming a significant element of political institutions in contemporary Nigeria.¹⁰ Ethnic identity, although lacking unanimity of conceptualization has received extensive conceptual and theoretical treatment by scholars of various intellectual learning in both social sciences and humanities.¹¹

The dominant class uses sentiment to foster the advantage of their class within the context of the multi-ethnic society as we frequently witness in every part of Nigeria. That is why some scholars have established that they both have a dialectical relationship.¹² The policy of divide and rule which was admitted by the

¹⁰ O. Ogaba "Threats to Nigeria's Unity and Territorial Integrity" *Journal of Political Science Review*, Vol. 6, No: 2, 2015, 1

¹¹ M. King, *Localism and Nation Building*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1988, 4

¹² Muhammad I, "Identity Politics and National Security Challenges in Nigeria: The Challenges of Islamic Sharia as a Religious Revivalism and/or Politics of Masquerading in Kaduna" *Journal of*

colonial authority made various groups create a new sense of belonging within their immediate community and provided a new symbolic ethnocentric focus.¹³ Be that as it may, ethnic identity, therefore, implies the fact that the group feels ethnocentric towards others; that is, it sees other groups as relatively inferior and more or less as rivals.¹⁴

The term nation-building covers a wide range of political discourse that undertakes the responsibility to explicate its various usages and to show their interrelatedness. Specifically, nation-building refers to a way of creating a sense of territorial nationality that eliminates subordinates' parochial loyalties. In this sense, it is generally presumed that there exists an ethnically plural society in which each group is characterised by its language or other self-conscious cultural attributes.¹⁵ According to Uchegbue, "Nation-building can be viewed from two perspectives; as a derivation of a country's national interest and a statutory framework to unite all and sundry for mutual and proper co-existence."¹⁶ However, nation-building began in the early 14th century when the great Roman Empire, articulated the benefits of national integration after her defeat as a result of disunity within the kingdom.¹⁷

Many academics, and policy commentators have recently used the term "nation-building" in place of what the U.S. Department of Defense calls "stability operations."¹⁸ In other words, by "nation-building" they mean "third-party state-

Political Science, Vo. 3 No: 1, Department of Political Science Kaduna State University, June 2016, 138

¹³ F. Agaigbe, "Identity Issues and the Challenge of National Integration and Development in Nigeria. North Central" *Journal of Political and Societal Studies*, Vol. 1 No: 1 February, 2016, 266

¹⁴ O. Alubo, "Citizenship and Identity Politics in Nigeria", *Conference Proceedings*, Cleen Foundations, Lagos, 2009

¹⁵ T. Abduwahab, "Ethnic Identity and the National Question in Nigeria, 1960 to 1970" *Journal of Issues on African Development*, Vol. 1, 2008, 128

¹⁶ T. Ebijura. "Ethnicity, Public Morality and the Quest for Community in Africa" *Indian Journal of Politics*, Vol. XL No: 3 & 4, 1997, 89

¹⁷ Enaruma E, and Feremo E, "Ethnicity and Electoral Behaviour in Nigeria's Federal Elections, 1959-2011" *Nigeria Journal of Public Administration and Local Government*, Vol. 13, No: UNN, June, 2016, 139

¹⁸ M. Harris, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012

building.” They use the term to describe efforts to build roads and railways, enforce the rule of law, and improve the infrastructure of a state. I part ways with this recent usage and I use the term “nation-building” as it has been used in the political science literature for the past decades. Nation-building, sometimes used interchangeably with national integration, is the process through which governing elites make the boundaries of the state and the nation coincide. In my framework, state elites employ three nation-building policies: accommodation, assimilation, and exclusion.¹⁹

Building a nation must be done on the altar of patriotism and 'large-scale solidarity,²⁰ constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. This assertion underscores Renan's and Handler's ideas that the nation is a 'daily' plebiscite and a 'continuous' entity that 'constitutes a broad framework of interaction beyond specific sub-national identities'. However, as a process of reconstruction, nation-building takes a variety of forms depending on specific historical circumstances wherein broad national, in contradistinction to sub-national communities, emerge as the nuclei of solid political and economic organisation.²¹

Nation Building and the Struggle for Coexistence in the Nigerian State: A Historical Analysis

The colonial era of course wouldn't have been expected to have encouraged Nigerians to focus on the process of building a nation because from the outset they had no such intention to build and bring together diverse people as citizens.²² To think of the birth of a nation amid uncoordinated diversities showed how imperfectly the British understood their creation Hence, in pursuit of the colonial

¹⁹ M. Harris, 10.

²⁰ F. Agaigbe, *Identity Issues and the Challenge of National Integration and Development in Nigeria*, North Central", 270.

²¹ T. Taylor, *Nationalism and 21st Century*. (New Jersey: A.I Centre Inc. 2009), 54

²² M. Kuna, "Religion, Identity and National Integration in Nigeria", *Nigerian Journal of Policy and Strategy*, Vol. 15, Nos: 1 & 2, Kuru, 2005, 34

agenda, there was the outright exclusion of mutual participation between rulers and indigenous stakeholders.²³

At this point, it is necessary to further emphasize some historical events that launched the country into the long and tortoise journey of nationhood.²⁴ To begin with, after the 1914 unification, in 1939,²⁵ Nigeria was divided into the colony of Lagos and Northern, Eastern, and Western groups of provinces, with each having a Chief Commissioner who was responsible to the Governor, in Lagos.²⁶ No doubt, this was the early antecedent that laid the foundation for Nigeria's ethnic struggles for power and economic control. Consequently, the colonial government actively encouraged the development of new ethnic identity and consciousness through various policies that further polarised the nation. Thus, Walter Rodney captures this: "The colonial power sometimes saw the value of stimulating the internal 'tribal' jealousies to keep the colonies from dealing with their principal contradiction with European overlords"²⁷

Therefore, the last straw that broke the camel's back was the country's infamous political imbroglio that almost set the nation on fire in the first Republic but later ended in the 1970s with so much energy being put into it by the then Heads of State General Yakubu Gowon who promulgated several Decrees to that ameliorated the post-civil war experience. Thus, one such beautiful idea was the current National Youth Service Corps which recently clocked fifty years. This situation of high competition is still rife, and even up to this day all efforts to salvage the country have proved unsuccessful due to the prioritisation of ethnic interest over national interest. For instance, before now, several groups have called for secession. No group can be said to be exempted from making such a derogatory

²³ M. Kuna, "Religion, Identity and National Integration in Nigeria", 35

²⁴ B. Ijoma, *Nigerian Nationalism and the Problems of Social Political Integration*, (Nigeria: Oluluben Publishers, 2011), 35

²⁵ A. Chukwu, *Amalgamation and Co-existence*, (Onitsha: Atlantic Printing Press, 1995), 26

²⁶ I. Elaigwu, "The Challenges of Nation-Building in the Twenty-First Century: The Nigerian Experience" *Being an IPPA Lecture Delivered at the University of Calabar*, May 13th, 2004.

²⁷ B. Ahmadu, *My Life*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 135

statement which showed great contempt for unity. In 1950, the North challenged the perceived dominance of the Yoruba in the Southwest and called for the disintegration of Nigeria because the former wanted equal representation with the latter region in the central legislature.²⁸ In return, the Western part countered this agitation and also displayed her unpatriotic ego by saying that if the revenue allocation formula did not weigh overwhelmingly in favour of the principle of derivation she would break up from Nigeria.²⁹ Thus, in the context of aggressive ethno-regionalism between 1951 and 1959, there was a false impression created of homogenous regions. It took the prospects of independence to expose these fallacies and douse the tension.

Following these calls for secession, the minority groups in the regions expressed their fears of discrimination and domination by the bigger ethnic groups in the various regions so that their interest would not always be swallowed up.³⁰ These fears derived mainly from the multi-ethnicity of Nigeria, the size, nature, and composition of subnational political units, and the desire by each group to protect its interest as power passed to Nigerians from the British to the indigenous political elite. However, towards independence the two basic but interrelated issues remained unresolved: the fundamental imbalance in Nigeria's political structure which fanned the embers of suspicion, fear, and aggressive ethno-regionalism have continued to date even so many years after.³¹ These and many more were the intrigues that greeted the struggles for nationhood in the Nigerian state.

²⁸ N. Tanumo, "Separatist Agitations in Nigeria since 1914", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 8, No: 4, 1970.

²⁹ E. Kalu, *Constitutional Development in Nigeria*, 2nd Edition (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 187

³⁰ T. Imobighe, *Introduction: Civil Society, Ethnic Nationalism and Nation Building in Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd. 2003), 3

³¹ J. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Benin City & Brobury Winston, 1986), 319

‘Son of the Soil’ Syndrome and its Implication for Coexistence in the Post-Independence Era

It behooves me to start this section of this paper by sharing my personal experience. I had an unforgettable memory of this cancerous “son of the soil” syndrome in my formative years and that has spurred me into writing this paper with the hope that it will communicate a better message to the larger society and also contribute to knowledge in a way that policymakers as well as academics may further build on whatever foundation the study has intended to lay. My unforgettable ordeal was in the hands of a prejudiced Lecturer while seeking admission into one of the Federal Universities in Northern Nigeria while seeking admission worth sharing in this study. In 2006, I had an aggregate score of 233 in my Joint Admission Matriculation Board Examination which according to the standard qualified me for admission to any Nigerian University. Thus, having made the said university my first-choice institution I traveled to the school to officially enquire about the process leading to my admission into the program I had chosen to study.

On my arrival at the University, the first person I met was a lecturer who after I had discussed it with him responded in a discordant tone and reluctantly said that the possibility of admitting me was slim because the University management had decided to restrict admission to some states which my state fall within those states. Thus, this ugly incident made me know that we are only indigenes of our various states of origin and not citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This is to point out that prejudice is endemic in Nigeria and it has further torn the country apart to the point that nobody can claim to be a Nigerian outside his or her state of origin because of the so-called ‘son of the soil’ mentality that is strongly entrenched in Nigeria.

One could be worried, however, why nation-building has remained an intractable process that seems unachievable despite all efforts being deployed by

academics in recent times.³² The trend of chauvinism has continued and even recently events took a different dimension and subsequently resulted in what James Coleman described as the "regionalisation of Nigerian Nationalism."³³ Instead of cultivating the feeling of national consciousness, the constituent ethnic groups remained the primary units or entities with which the people of Nigeria identified. Hence the big problem persists and the struggle to build a one and indivisible viable nation has become a mirage. Even up to this moment all efforts to create a just and egalitarian society where everyone can become somebody without any attachment to his or her place of origin have proven so difficult.³⁴

Moreover, the process of state and nation-building ran concurrently. The problems which pestered the process of state-building also provided obstacles for nation-building.³⁵ Thus, the imbalance in Nigeria's federal structure was one of the most potent causes of Nigeria's differences. Although, Federalism had earlier been adopted as a compromise formula to deal with problems of national and subnational self-determination.³⁶ Yet the very structure of federalism despite the principle of federal character has escalated mutual suspicions among groups rather than dampened them.³⁷

Thus, Nigeria still suffers from divisive factors like primordial sentiment and the prevalence of 'dual citizenship'.³⁸ The ethnic problem in Nigeria is indeed the national question, around which a great deal of our national lives are revealed and in the name of which all sorts of crimes have been perpetrated against the

³² Interview with Gambo Joseph, Lafia, Nasarawa State, 30th August, 2022

³³ E. Edosa, "Issues in National Integration and the Quest for Stable Democracy in Nigeria" *Nigerian Journal of Public Administration and Local Government*, Vol. 13, No: 1 University of Nigeria, Nsukka, June 2016, 139

³⁴ A. Ajayi, "Nigeria and the Search for National Integration: Tapping from the Pre-colonial Inter-Group Relations", *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol.16, 2005/2006, 90

³⁵ A. Ajayi, 91

³⁶ Z. Umaru and Usman K, "National Unity: A Catalyst for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria" *African Journal of International Politics and Diplomacy*, Vol. 5, No: 1& 2, 2014, Akwa Ibom, 63

³⁷ Z. Umaru and K. Usman, 63

³⁸ C. Mbaeze, R. Okoli, and W. Okonkwo, "Civil Society Organisations and the Paradox of Nation-building in Nigeria", *Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 2, NO: 2, Nigerian Political Science Association, South East Zone, July- December, 2016, 188

nation. Therefore, it is this issue that has produced the tribal entitlement "son of the soil syndrome" that we need to deal with before it further leads the country into another period of war.³⁹ The country's identity configuration in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, class youth, regionalism, and political party identification is said to be at the center of the challenge of nation-building.

Therefore, it is significant to bear in mind that, a strong attachment to a place of birth can be both an asset and a liability for a country that is clamouring for nation-building.⁴⁰ The great task of Nigeria now was that of establishing and developing political institutions which were capable of facilitating national integration, without depriving the diverse groups of their social and economic security.⁴¹ A telling characteristic of Nigerian democracy is the incidence of bigotry constantly propelled by contestations among the politicians and their cronies. Central to this argument of violent discrimination is entitlement politics being flaunted by some political gimmicks and how different forms of sentiments and biases are being used to define and redefine people who do not share their political ideology. Similarly, those who live outside their birthplace should not be seen as settlers and non-indigenes. In another dimension, sometimes the perpetrators of these acts hide under religion, but more often, it is ethnicity, which is further broken down into the so-called "Son-of the soil" versus "settlers" or "strangers."⁴²

In light of the foregoing analysis, one may agree that states and local government are the major factors that weaponised⁴³ this unbridled discrimination against Nigerians who do not hail from within their boundaries and might have probably lived there for so many years. For instance, in the northern part of Nigeria, as it is well known, southerners are only employed in the civil service only an on-

³⁹ C. Mbaeze, R. Okoli, and W. Okonkwo, 189

⁴⁰ S. Zamare, and U. Karofi, "National Unity: A Catalyst for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria" *African Journal of International Politics and Diplomacy*, Vol. 5, NO: 1&2, Akwa Ibom State, 188

⁴¹ C. Mbaeze, R. Okoli, and W. Okonkwo, 187

⁴² M. Crowther, *The Story of Nigeria*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 12

⁴³ M. Crowther, 12

pensionable basis.⁴⁴This is a clear discrimination of citizenship status. Also, in that region, no Southerner can become Principal or Headmaster in any state government-owned school. How then can we build a nation amidst such a brazen exhibition of sentiments against individuals in their own country? The situation is not too different in the Southern part of Nigeria.⁴⁵ In 2011, Abia State sacked non-indigenes including other Igbo in the neighboring states due to the paucity of resources to pay the salaries of the civil servants. In addition, virtually all state universities charge discriminatory school fees which shows that every part of Nigeria is guilty of this “son of the soil” syndrome. This development threatens the corporate existence of the country in the sense that it has continued to breed hatred and acrimony among different groups. In this regard, therefore, efforts should be made through appropriate legislation to remove the "indigenship" factor which has further popularised the “son of the soil” syndrome" engendered by the State and Local Governments. Also, the discriminative policies, rules, and regulations which have legalised its operation should be reviewed so that every Nigerian will be free to reside, vote, and also be voted for irrespective of his or her ethnic and religious inclination.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how primordial sentiment and its attendant “son of the soil” syndrome have constituted major impediments to nation building process in Nigeria. The study argues that in the precolonial era, there was an organic union that cemented the various segments of a tribe together which made the society operate smoothly and peacefully without any accusation of ethnic prejudice. Also, the artificial boundary creation which came in the aftermath of colonialism altered the nuances and created a situation that led to struggles for scarce resources among the different ethnic groups. Hence, they began to see

⁴⁴ O. Alubo, "Understanding the Issues in the Citizenship-Indigeneship Crisis in Nigeria" in Golwa J, & Ojiji O, (eds.) *Dialogue on Citizenship in Nigeria*, (Abuja: IPCR, 2008), 7

⁴⁵ Interview with M. Tolorunju, 75+, Retired Police, Ilorin Kwara State on 6th September, 2022

themselves as indigenes and non-indigenes, natives and non-natives, instead of citizens in the same country where their ancestors had bequeathed to them.

Arising from the foregoing, this study concludes that for Nigeria to attain nationhood, certain beliefs and practices that usually give undue preferences to the so-called indigenes or “son of the soil” must be urgently abrogated. In addition, policies that can effectively address the cancerous notion of ‘son of the soil’ in Nigerian society must be put in place so that no Nigerian would be seen or tagged as non-indigenous outside his or her place of birth. Similarly, discrimination as per the issue of admission into higher institutions as well as charging separate school fees for the so-called non-indigenes in state universities should be abolished so that everyone can choose to school outside his or her state without being subjected to prejudice in any form. On the whole, Nigeria is a diverse nation with different cultures and languages as well as beliefs, but we are all one at heart and in blood. Hence, let us put our differences aside embrace our diversity, and work together for a prosperous nation.

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