

NIGERIA IN THE QUEST FOR A NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper examined the issue of Nigeria's national identity. The paper identified the problem of the lack of a positive national identity for Nigeria and Nigerians. This lack of a positive national identity is the product of a derailed national agenda for development. National identity is a very important factor in the development of any nation and in the way outsiders perceive the nation and her people. This national identity could be developed from such things as national symbols and anthems. However, the problem remains that Nigeria as a country has failed to leverage a number of her natural and nurtured features, to develop a positive self-image that would give rise to a positive national identity. Adopting the method of content analysis, the paper concludes that the present image of Nigeria is one drawn from some negative narratives; narratives that are the products of failed aspirations. For the country to be able to develop a positive national identity, the narratives must change.

Keywords: Nigeria, National Identity, National Narratives, National Development

Introduction

For everything that is, there is an identity. One of the first principles of philosophy, the principle of identity, states that everything that is, has an identity because it is one with itself, determined by itself and consistent with itself. For anything to be known, it must be identifiable and it is identifiable because it must carry such essential characteristics that makes it identifiable. These essential characteristics are peculiar factors that single out a particular entity. This is also the case with human beings and human groups. In every part of the world, individuals and groups of people have a background to their ontology, behaviour and their general dispositions. Okonkwo (2012: p.20) states that for groups of people, there are attitudes, blue-prints, traits, skills and others that register on people's collective identity, institutions, organisations, social roles, and group management strategies for social action and adjustments. Thus, identity speaks of indelible and inescapable features that stand an individual or people out.

In as much as every people, nation or state has to carry an identity, it must also be stated clearly here that the quest for national identity is a complex and multifaceted engagement that nations and their citizens must undertake in order to understand and define who they are as a collective entity. National identity encompasses such elements as a shared sense of belonging, common values, cultural heritage, historical narratives and a feeling of oneness and unity among the people of the particular nation. Although, it is the individual who acquires identity first, identity is related to social groups to which the individual belongs and with which they identify (Kuna, 1998). Thus, identity is inherent in all levels of human organizations namely personal, family, community, ethnic group, the local government, the state and the entire country as a whole. In this context of identity, everybody sees one another as brothers and sisters and therefore does almost everything in common. The people structure and organize their lives to conform to the

society's way of life and cooperate to ensure group progress. When this happens, they are seen to be identifying with their society. When one talks of national identity, emphasis is no longer on identifying with the family, ethnic or religion, but on national identity as a belief in membership of a nation state. People no longer look at themselves as belonging to any component unit within the country but as belonging to the country, for instance, Nigeria (Onyibor, 2016).

Nigeria as a country has been variously described as an external contrivance by the British colonialists. This is informed by the fact that, the nation that is Nigeria today, was originally inhabited by numerous indigenous nationalities, all of whom were welded together first, by the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 and then the amalgamation of 1914. These ethnic nationalities had their individual and unique identities, however, since the amalgamation of 1914 and the coming of political independence in 1960, Nigeria has been engrossed in a struggle for a national identity. This paper is an attempt to appraise the situation so as to see whether Nigeria as a country can actually boast of a national identity or not.

The Country Nigeria: A Brief Historical Excursus

Nigeria's history is rich and complex at the same time. Nigeria's history reflects the complexities of a diverse nation with a rich cultural diversity. The country Nigeria as she is today, is made up of numerous indigenous ethnic nationalities, some of which have a long history of ancient civilizations. These ethnic nationalities include the Nok civilization, known for its terracotta sculptures, which existed around 1000BEC to 300CE; the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Hausa kingdoms that flourished under Islamic influence and engaged in trade in the northern region; the Benin empire, located in what is today, southern part of the country and widely known for her history of sophisticated art and bronze casting; among others (Adeniran, 1985).

The territories under Nigeria today, played a significant role in sustaining trans-Saharan trade, providing routes and facilitating the spread of Islam. Christianity, on the hand, came with Portuguese explorers who were among the first Europeans to reach the coast of the River Niger in the late 15th century (Chukwuma, 1967). European powers, including the British, the Dutch and the French later joined the transatlantic slave trade. The scramble for Africa led to the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, at which place Britain consolidated territories in what later became Nigeria.

Nigeria as a country was birthed by the Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. At inception, the country was divided along ethnic and religious lines, with the north predominantly Muslim, the West, that is the Yoruba, mainly Christian and the East populated by the Igbo who were also predominantly Christian. The amalgamation of 1914 changed the political climate of Nigeria. This wedding of the Northern and Southern British colonies had no real justification except for the political pride of the British to produce the most powerful and greatest African nation. They wanted their colony to become an empire. One of their remote reasons may be to make controlling their colony easy. Odeyemi (2014: p.9) writes that the inability of the various ethnic nationalities that make up what is today Nigeria to negotiate their part in the Amalgamation is the root cause of many tribal wrangling and agitations in Nigeria today.

Nigeria gained independence from the British on the 1st of October, 1960 and became a Republic in 1963. Nigeria has faced enormous challenges in its progress as a nation with political instability, mostly coming from incessant military interventions of the recent past; ethnic tensions and religious upheavals. The height of the crises, the country has faced as a nation came with the Civil War of 1967 – 1970. The Civil War occurred when the southeastern region, predominantly Igbo, seceded from the rest of the country leading to grave military confrontation.

Politics has been the bane of the Nigerian nation. The political terrain of Nigeria is neither from the nature of the people nor from the environment or what is popularly regarded as the Nigerian factor. The Nigerian political terrain is a Western contraption. The three major tribes, The Igbo, the Yoruba and Hausa dominate the political scene leaving the greater number of the minor tribes like the Efiks, Urhobo, Tiv, Anang etc, at the periphery of the nations' political circle. The amalgamation introduced classism along tribal lines and not along social status. The result is that the poor in Nigeria do not see the billionaire politician from his tribe as part of his poor condition but look at the other tribes as part of their problem (Anugwom, 2000).

As a result of the incessant military interventions in governance, the country experienced extended periods of military rule that ended only with the democratic transition of 1999 with the election of Olusegun Obasanjo as president. Subsequent elections marked some sought of progress as the country has continued on the democratic trajectory, however, the country has also faced increased challenges ranging from a near-regressive economy, corruption, poor governance, poverty, insecurity, terrorism, weakened institutions, poor infrastructure and near-dead citizen morale.

Nigeria's economy is struggling to leverage the country's vast wealth in fossil fuels in order to displace the crushing poverty that affects about 57% of its population. Economists refer to the coexistence of vast wealth in natural resources and extreme personal poverty in developing countries like Nigeria as the "resource curse". Although "resource curse" is more widely understood to mean an abundance of natural resources, these fuels official corruption resulting in a violent competition for the resource by the citizens of the nation. The economic growth has not cut poverty nor created necessary jobs. There is a growing Nigerian consensus that foreign investment is essential to realizing Nigeria's vast but squandered potential (Lyman, 2004).

The Promise of a Nation

The thrust of Nigeria's current development policy is as enunciated in the VISION 2010 Report which reads:

To make Nigeria a major industrialized nation and economic power that continually strives for sustained economic growth and development towards improving the quality of life for all Nigerians (Vision 2010).

The vision could be said to have been drawn from the five key principles of Nigeria's national development plan as adduced by the founding fathers of the country, namely:

- A free and democratic society.
- A just and egalitarian society.
- A united, strong and self-reliant nation.
- A great and dynamic economy.
- A land full of bright opportunities for all citizens.

The nationalists of Nigeria's independence in 1960, had articulated certain national ideals and guiding principles as reflecting her aspirations, values and goals. These ideals or philosophies of the Nigerian nation are often enshrined in official documents, speeches and policies of the country including the national policy on education. Nigeria is known for its ethnic and cultural diversity with over 250 ethnic groups.

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has aspired to be a democratic nation. The Nigerian Constitution, particularly since the return to civilian rule in 1999, emphasizes democratic principles, including the rule of law, respect for human rights, and regular elections. Democracy was seen by the founding fathers as a means of ensuring political participation, representation, and accountability. The dream of Nigeria to be a free and democratic society is rooted in the desire of the founding fathers for the country to uphold democratic principles, protect individual freedoms and promote good governance. A free and democratic Nigeria would experience political stability, with peaceful transitions of power through regular, free and fair elections. The stability is crucial for sustainable development and the well-being of her citizens. This dream of the founding fathers involves a commitment by political leaders to the rule of law. A situation where individuals, including government officials are held accountable for their actions. It will entail a strong and independent judiciary playing a vital role in upholding the rule of law. In a free and democratic society, there is a strong commitment to protecting and promoting human rights. This includes ensuring freedom of expression, association, and assembly as well as promoting the right of minority groups. The country as at today seem to have derailed from this ideal (MAMSER (1989).

As a just and egalitarian society, it was the dream of the founding fathers of Nigeria to envision a nation where fairness, equality, and justice prevail across all aspects of life. A just and egalitarian Nigeria would strive to eliminate social injustices, discrimination, and disparities based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, social class, religion and others. Policies and practices would be geared towards creating equal opportunities for all citizens. This involves reducing economic inequalities by implementing policies that address poverty, promote equality and inclusive economic growth, and ensure equitable distribution of resources. A free and egalitarian state would provide access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities for all citizens. Achieving this dream of a free and egalitarian society required Nigeria leaders to be committed to implementing and enforcing laws and policies that promote equality, as well as fostering a cultural shift towards inclusivity and respect for human rights (Anugwom, 2000).

A united, strong and self-reliant Nigeria encompasses several aspirations aimed at fostering national cohesion, resilience and complete independent. The dream of a united and strong Nigeria envisions a place where citizens, regardless of their ethnic, religious or regional backgrounds, are united in a shared sense of national identity. It promotes the idea that diversity is a source of strength and unity. It is true that a united and strong nation requires, political stability, Nigeria should be a political space characterized by peaceful transitions of power, a

commitment to democratic ideals and the effective functioning of political institutions. To be a strong and self-reliant nation, Nigeria would need well-developed infrastructure, including reliable transportation, communication networks, and energy sources (Nwachukwu, 2011). A self-reliant nation would place a strong emphasis on education and the development of a knowledge-based economy. Achieving this dream required coordinated efforts from the government and citizens in making long-term commitment to planning, strategic investment and national development goals (Lyman, Princeton, 2004).

As a great and dynamic economy, Nigeria should be a nation with a strong diversified and rapidly growing economy. The dream of Nigeria as a great and dynamic economy includes sustained and robust economic growth, where the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) consistently expands, creating wealth and improving the standard of living of citizens. A great and dynamic economy seeks to diversify beyond traditional sectors, reducing dependence on a single source of revenue such as oil (Lyman, Princeton, 2004). A great and dynamic economy would promote industries such as manufacturing, technology, agriculture and services. There should be a focus on innovation and technology as drivers of economic growth. This involves investing in research and development, fostering a culture of innovation and leveraging technology to enhance productivity. A great and dynamic economy fosters a conducive environment for business and investment to thrive. It requires focusing on sectors that create jobs and empower entrepreneurs and small businesses. Achieving the dream of to a great and dynamic economy requires strategic planning, effective governance and commitment to economic reforms. It leaves a doubt as to whether the country has progressed in that direction (MAMSER, 1989).

A land full of bright opportunities for all citizens projects a Nigeria full of bright opportunities for all citizens, regardless of background, to have access to a wide range of opportunities for personal and collective growth. This ideal includes a commitment to providing quality education for all citizens, ensuring that every child has access to schooling and that educational opportunities are not limited by any factors whatsoever. A land of opportunities is characterized by a thriving economy, boisterous job market where individuals can pursue fulfilling careers (Lyman, Princeton, 2004). The dream of a land full of bright opportunities would involve policies and initiatives that encourage job creation, support entrepreneurship, and empower individuals to contribute to the workforce. It should include fostering an environment that encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, providing support mechanisms such as access to capital, business training and a regulatory framework that facilitates business growth. Whether Nigeria is such a nation today is still to be contested (MAMSER, 1989).

Had Nigeria, as a nation lived out these worthy ideals, it would have surely created a strong national identity that citizens can reckon with. The realisation of these aspirations, had informed the radical and pragmatic political economic and social reforms introduced since independence. However, every evidence on ground goes to show that much still needs to be done to give the country a positive national identity.

Derailment of the National Aspirations

The development experience in Nigeria since independence has been that of a blighted development on a knife-edge: one of hope and despair, dreams and frustrations, expectations

and disappointments, pains and sufferings, poverty and hunger, opportunities and setbacks, recession and depression, inflation and stagflation, corruption and oppression, promises and failures, with the resultant deepening, widespread poverty, ever growing anger, dissatisfaction and discontent among the populace. What is being experienced in Nigeria today is “Paradox of growth without development”. This is because despite the claim of rapid economic growth by the government, there has not been a commensurate visible impact on the well-being, quality of life and standard of living of ordinary Nigerians. Majority of Nigerians still live below the poverty level. In spite of its endowed riches, Nigeria remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

As a result of failed expectations, the kind of narratives that come out of Nigeria today are very negative narratives. Narratives that describe poverty in the midst of plenty, corrupt politicians and the abuse of the electoral process, an ailing economy that seems to be perpetually depressed, dilapidated infrastructure and general failure of leadership. These are the narratives that are fuelling the ongoing massive emigration of Nigerians to foreign countries where their potentials are being recognized and utilized. Considering the dire situation in Nigeria and the suffering the citizens are going through; nobody seems to be willing to be identified as a Nigerian. This situation has made it difficult for the country to fashion out an acceptable national identity derived from an image of the good.

The Struggle for a National Identity

Nigeria has faced enormous challenges related to the establishment and implementation of a comprehensive national identity system. At inception, the country had several national symbols and assets on which, solid national identity would have been built. But, owing to the difficulties and challenges already identified above, the country has not been able to fashion out a reliable and marketable national identity. In an attempt to develop formal identification for Nigerians, the country had adopted various identification systems in the past, including the National identification Number (NIN) voter, ID Card, driver’s license, and others. The lack of a unified system has led to difficulties in accurately identifying and verifying individuals. Today, in the absence of a strong positive national identity for Nigerians, citizens only carry about a negative identity as drawn from the many negative narratives that emanate from the country.

From a more ontological or epistemological dimension, Nigeria has failed to build a national identity from within. The whole country has not been able to project a national language that could be attractive to the citizens. The English language that holds sway in the country is only a colonial heritage. Nigerian politicians have not been able to unify the people by the kind of politics they practice which is hinged on nepotism and ethnicity. As a result of this failure to unify the different ethnic nationalities that make up the country, Nigeria lacks a national ethic and a national consciousness. Heroes and historical events that should give Nigeria an identity are given ethnic colorations. Thus, the heroes have remained only tribal heroes and the accompanying histories have been skewed to create more divisions in the country. The beautiful geography of different parts of Nigeria that enticed Nigerians to travel around the country and feel part of the country has been tethered by the scares of violence that exist everywhere one goes to in the country. Thus, Nigeria seems to have lost every opportunity she had to build a marketable national identity.

National identity speaks of a sense of a nation as a cohesive unit and as represented by traditions, culture, language, as well as a shared history. National identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that also involves the way individuals within a country perceive and identify with the collective identity of that nation. A common language plays a crucial role in building the collective identity and in fostering a sense of unity, in addition to serving as a means of communication and expression of values. National identity also involves a common understanding of historical events and shared narratives. Thus, historical events, heroes and milestones shape the collective memory of a nation. National symbols such as flags, anthems and emblems serve as visual and auditory representations of a nation. They are often imbued with historical and cultural significance.

Nwadike (1999) writes that Nigeria is not simply a product of the twentieth century, neither is it an arbitrary creation of Britain as has been claimed by Milverton (1948) and Awolowo (1948). Nwadike (1999) maintains that there is therefore the need for Nigerians to know and appreciate the journey that has brought them to where they are today. This is necessary because the present is the child of the past and nothing is understandable except as seen through time. Nigeria as a country is not a human being and so cannot brandish an identity card just like an individual, however, certain disciplines and symbols serve to provide the country identity marks that help them to identify themselves. Some of these national symbols include the national flag, the coat of arms, the national anthem, the pledge, among others.

Common values such as democracy, freedom and equality contribute to a share identity. These values often find expression in the aforementioned national symbols, anthems and mottos. Citizenship and civic participation are essential elements of national identity. In this sense, inclusive citizenship fosters a sense of belonging among diverse populations. In this era of increased globalization, societies may grapple with the influences of global culture, which can impact traditional identities. Again, nations with diverse populations may face challenges in forging a cohesive national identity that accommodates all the shades of interests and the various ethnic, religious and cultural groups. The irony however, is that because of the hardship in the country that has resulted from decades of misrule and mismanagement of resources, none of these seems to be able to inspire the people any longer.

Conclusion

The quest for a national identity is an ongoing process that evolves over time. It is a process that should involve negotiation and adaptable, although, sometimes, it can also be contentious as societies grapple with changing circumstances and the complexities of a globalized world. A national identity could be drawn from a number of things. For instance, language is a crucial component of national identity because it often serves as a unifying factor that connects and reinforces a sense of belong. Shared cultural traditions and customs contribute to a sense of continuity and identity. In the same way, festivals, rituals and other cultural practices are often integral to the issue of national identity. According to Nwadike (1999) the interpretation and collective memory of historical events play a significant role in shaping national identity. In this, nations often construct narratives that highlight key moments in their history. In the same vein, national heroes and symbols can serve as powerful anchors for national identity. These figures represent ideals and values that the people aspire to uphold, just as the physical landscape and geographical features of a nation can contribute to its identity.

Unfortunately, Nigeria as a country has not been able to leverage on these elements to be able to develop subsisting and attractive national image that could be the required identity for her citizens. Following the derailment of the pursuit of her developmental, only negative narratives seem to be the order of the day. Discussions on Nigeria in recent times, are mainly discussions on paradoxes of what could have been. Today in and from Nigeria, the narratives include: poverty in the midst of enormous resources, energy scarcity despite having one of the largest crude oil reserves in the world, electoral fraud after huge investments in the electoral process, insecurity, terrorism and crime, among others. From these narratives no positive national image can emerge. This may account for why, Nigeria's march towards national development may have remained a mirage and her citizens continue to struggle with a negative image wherever they find themselves all around the world.

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