

The place of anthropology for African Societies in the present global system

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Abstract

Across postcolonial Africa, ethnic-, region- or faith-based hostilities are common, consuming lives and resources. Added to these are the false starts that many African nation-states keep making with the received political and economic systems. Many Africans prefer to keep blaming Europeans for bringing disparate groupings under common plural set-ups, although the blames have not made the issues to go away. Illustrating with the Nigerian case, this piece shows that ethnology has been the tool for getting around issues of social plurality occasioned by the current internationalism. However, some purveyors of the poststructuralist and postmodernist formulations would hold that no veridical symbolic systems exist; and that the ethnographers' reports on social systems are only but representations of the reporters' own views. This argument that dissuades people from taking the ethnographer's report seriously renders such an inevitable option as ethnology useless. But why any society taking the advice of the *post- post-* formulations seriously cannot be excused is that Africa's history and even current experiences in Nigeria show that ethnology is the only known tool for forging successful social systems among diverse groups whom historical happenstance has pulled into closer contacts.

Introduction

Across postcolonial African states, from Nigeria, Sudan (now separated), Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Liberia, Central African Republic, Kenya, etc., violent conflicts of monumental proportions have raged time and gain, consuming human life and retarding progress. What is interesting is that almost all the hostilities are ethnic-, region- or faith-based. Added to the conflicts is that the political and economic plans borrowed to run the postcolonial multi-ethnic state structures have failed in most of the cases. The escape for many Africans has been to blame Europeans for bringing theretofore autonomous groupings, strange bed fellows, under common settings. However, heaping blames on colonialism has not made the issues to go away. But, like the colonial experience and current occurrences in other parts of the world have shown, there is already a way of getting around the plurality of the current social settings made inevitable by the current global system. This piece sets out to show, using the Nigerian case, that anthropology, with its arrowhead, ethnography, is the neglected solution to most of Africa's sectional hostilities and unworkable political economies.

Ethnography and the colonial rule in Nigeria

A 19th century English anthropologist, William Hallam Rivers, having long observed what troubles (including series of warfare) that British emissaries went through trying to establish colonial rule across divergent societies, suggested that the British empire risked being strained beyond its might should it continue annexing with frontal force instead of first understanding the groups in order to administer them more successfully (Evans-Pritchard, 1949). Frederick Lugard, the first Governor-General of the areas that later became Nigeria, did not miss this admonition. In his introduction to Sigfried Nadel's ethnography of the Nupe, he noted,

It has been said that modern anthropology is destined to be of great assistance to colonial governments in providing the knowledge of the social structure of native groups upon which a sound and harmonious Native Administration should be built. I for one... believe in the possibility of such a co-operation. (Lugard, 1942, p. vi, cited in Ezeh, 2010)

This conviction of Lugard's did not end in words. Experience in Nigeria showed that it was incorporated in Britain's colonial policy. Britain began to occupy the area that is now Nigeria in the 1850s and took formal colonial possession of it in 1900. In 1914, Lugard collected what were hitherto administered as Northern, Southern and Lagos protectorates into one country. However, the British Empire – in keeping with the advice to first strive to understand the disparate groups they wished to administer – had commissioned scores of ethnographies across many of the local groups. An example of such government-sponsored studies is Northcote Thomas' four-volume report on the Igbo that primarily focused on their language, first published in 1914. Before him, a British consul, William B. Baikie (the local rendering of whose name, *bekee*, the Igbo later began to use for the white person) had written an extensive travelogue after having observed the southern Igbo and Benue axes (Shelton, 1975). Professor Amaury Talbot also did a four-volume survey that touched on almost all communities in southern Nigeria, first published in 1926. Charles Meek (1936) surveyed the north of Nigeria. Those works have remained some of the most important reference materials on the pre-contact local life in these parts.

The British missionaries had also demonstrated an understanding of the importance of ethnography for the success of their mission. Basden is prominent among those who worked in this light. The churchman worked among the Igbo of the Anambra-Delta axis (in the southeast), reporting his observations in *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: an account of the curious and interesting habits, customs and beliefs of a little known African people* (1921/1962), among other reports of

his. He revealed that their study of the local peoples was motivated by the need to understand their cosmologies better (much like an army reconnoiters a possible target) so as to be able to supplant them more successfully. Prior to full British occupation, a couple of other missionaries, Bishop Shanahan for example (Jordan, 1949), had visited and kept elaborate travelogues, which the Christian groups were later to consult attentively. The success of their missionary efforts was thanks to their attention to such details about the social life and worldviews of their target groups.

For each of the authorities, colonial and church, it was a crisscrossing of required knowledge of the target groups for more effective expansion and annexation. Following Northcote Thomas, Amaury Talbot and Charles Meek, who were government ethnographers, other independent scholars whose purposes were mainly academic had also come to parts of Nigeria for fieldwork. Here, one may mention Nadel's Nupe study (1954), Hopen's Fulani study (1959), Forde's study of the Yarkö (1954/1964), John Bohannan's Tiv studies, William Bascom's Yoruba studies, John Boston, the Ottenbergs, and scores of other career anthropologists, many of whom were non-British, but whose reports the colonizer did not hesitate to use.

In any case, the attempt here is not to make this piece a collection of pre-colonial and colonial reports and ethnographies on Nigerian cultural groups; a paper of this nature cannot possibly be attempting that. Onwuejeogwu's attempt in what he entitled *The Social Anthropology of Africa* (1992) will be more like it. But, although he reviewed scores of ethnographic reports on different African groups, he did not get close to exhausting the list. Just making a bibliography of them can actually form the subject of a multi-volume publication. On the Igbo alone, Anafulu (1981) has made such an attempt that spanned from as far back as 1627 up to 1970, listing over 500 reports (including books, mimeographs and intelligence reports). All these show the great number of sources from which the colonizer could tap for more effective entrenchment of his empire. That British colonization succeeded as much as it did in Nigeria was thanks to the fact that they administered the groups that now make up the present Nigeria with knowledge of their cosmology and social life, biased as some of their perspectives might have been.

For instance, it was clear to them that foisting the British Common Law on hundreds of diverse autonomous groups who had administered themselves in their own ways for millennia would be an unworkable idea. Several native administrative offices, such as Lugard had suggested, were created to attend to cases peculiar to respective cultural groups. It was also thanks to their

knowledge of the terrain that the British ran the colonial administration in three regions of Northern, Southern and Western Nigeria.

The 'native' economic and political administrations that the colonialists ran in Nigeria were not perfect, but they were conscious not to introduce systems that would be completely divorced from what the 'natives' were familiar with. The knowledge about local systems that the British got from several ethnographic reports available showed them the diverseness of the local groups. And they were not naïve as to assume that those differences would disappear under the weight of an overarching modern state system. Aided by such knowledge, the economic systems the British were later to run in the different regions of Nigeria so blended with the local patterns that a survey conducted by the Michigan State University in 1963 ranked southeast Nigeria the fastest growing economy in the world, as Anya (1995, cited in Ekeh, 2016) recounts. That was the footing on which the early post-independence Nigeria was set. In the post-independence period, Nigeria continued with a structure that did not overlook the peculiarities of its different sections. The country, in that period, was described as "the model of British-inspired democracy in Africa" (Ekeh, 2016, p. 12, citing Epstein et al., 1976).

The postcolonial matrix

As already hinted, the British ran Nigeria on regional basis. This was informed by their awareness, informed by their ethnological awareness of the terrain, that the area was too diverse to be completely fused. There is evidence that things worked better that way than what later followed when regional-based federalism was jettisoned. A well known example is the 1963 Michigan State University report cited above. Three years afterwards, the military had intervened and collapsed the polity that recognized regional peculiarities into an entity whose headquarters became the centre of gravity, pulling all the sections to itself in a struggle to get hold of the power to run the common purse. The conflicts that began to attend the country, which culminated in a civil war that consumed millions of lives, have been attributed to this misinformed fiat.

Making a point that highlights the issue, Beals and Hoijer (1965, citing Linton, 1936) have long noted that "the most successful states are those in which the attitude of the individual toward the state most nearly approximates the attitude of the 'uncivilized' individual towards his 'tribe'". This makes sense in the Nigerian case: things began to collapse as governance and economy got withdrawn from the units where local people ran them with a sense of possession, and entrusted to

a remote state apparatus with which they could not identify. Daniel Jordan Smith has done ethnography of corruption in Nigeria in which he highlights the fact that failure to take personal possession of the state among Nigerians accounts for the mindlessness with which they plunder the commonwealth (Smith, 2007). Instances of this are numberless. It is so much that Nuhu Ribadu, the pioneer chairman of Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), soon after assuming duties in 2003, revealed that between 1960 and 2003, Nigeria's public officials had embezzled over \$400 billion, more than what it cost to rebuild the whole of Western Europe after WWII. This revelation was made before \$16 billion earmarked for electricity infrastructure was reported to have been frittered away during the reign of Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd); before some two trillion naira was found to have been laundered in the pretext of subsidizing petroleum products (*PremiumTimes*, editorial, 20 December 2013) that used to be locally refined in the regional set-up; before a former Education Minister in Nigeria, Dr Obiageli Ezekwesili, revealed that the sum of \$45 billion in foreign reserve account and another \$22 billion in the Excess Crude Account, being direct savings from increased earnings from oil, were squandered between 2007 and 2013 (Ezekwesili, 2013). She put all the misappropriated figures since independence to 2013 at about \$1 Trillion.

Achebe's (1998) position is that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." He, as scores of other writers have done, highlights how corruption and nepotism choke the polity. However, that successive generations have failed to get around the troubles suggests that the problem is structural. Nonetheless, the solution to the troubles seems so clear that its non-adoption is surprising to a trained mind. This is more so because the history of the country and experiences in other societies show such a solution to be the only resort for groups whom modern exigencies pull into a common plural setting. Examples will include the United States of America which had to negotiate a federalist system, given that the country was formed by a coming together of diverse groups; Belgium, Britain, China, Ethiopia, India, Switzerland, etc. are multi-ethnic nation-states that are thriving because they were forged based on the same federalist principles that guided the American state formation (Meredith, 2005; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Records already presented above show that things were run better under the regional set-up that got collapsed by the military in 1966 into a plural state that overlooked peculiarities of its diverse units. It might have been exigencies that led the Nigerian military rulers to do away with

a regional-based polity; but how badly the country has fared from that moment suggests that no other choice has been able to work better than the polity that was anchored on regional peculiarities.

In 2014, 492 delegates from different sections of Nigeria were gathered in Abuja, the country's headquarters, for the purpose of talking a more successful union out of Nigeria. The conference became necessary in the first place because of tensions of an ill-reconciled multi-ethnic union. Before this, a pre-civil war conference had been forced on the regime of General Yakubu Gowon (Rtd) in Aburi, Ghana in 1967; the opposing positions were ethnic-based. After the war, which was fought to pull back a seceding region, other similar forums had also been called for the same purpose of tinkering with the ill-adapted multi-ethnic union. Late General Sani Abacha convoked a Political Reform Conference that began in late 1994 and lapsed in 1995; General Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd) also convoked a similar conference in 2005. All these suggest that Nigeria has been evidently in need of tinkering since the collapse of a polity that accommodated peculiarities of the diverse sections. All the ethnic and religious hostilities that have set Nigeria boiling are sure results of lumping disparate groups into one ill-reconciled, overarching, supra-territorial structure.

Nigerian history and experiences in other societies (some of which are mentioned above) show that things would be different had Nigeria leveraged on the potentials of ethnology in running the country. The governments of China, Israel and South Africa maintain government anthropologists that tap into ethnological information to advise them on intra- and inter-group relations (Van Der Waal & Ward, 2006). Owing to its turbulent foreign relations over the years, the US currently requires its envoys, both military and civilian, to train in anthropology (Perkins, 2005). To forestall ill will deriving from racial and ethnic sentiments, threatening to tear its internal relations apart, the United Kingdom has commenced anthropology training for all its school children at the secondary level (Van Der Waal & Ward, 2006).

However, the idea among present Nigerian leaders that it is possible to run a multi-ethnic state, with certain uniform overarching institutions, without necessarily understanding the peculiarities of the different groups, seems to be inspired by the Western trumpeters of globalization who propose to them, even in the face of facts to the contrary, that it is possible to adopt extraneous systems and institutions with successes that will compare with those of their

original practitioners. But even non-anthropologists advise that such is unworkable. Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel-winning former Chief Economist at the World Bank, has noted that globalization has not worked because it ignores local peculiarities. He blamed the Bretton Woods institutions for striving to achieve a world in which all economies would run on the same principles. And he criticized them for basing their programmes for ‘developing’ countries on Western paradigms, informed by the quantitative data they acquire from the central banks and finance ministries of those countries. Emphasizing the point that anthropologists have long advised the world to take, he says, “one cannot learn about ... a nation unless one gets out to the countryside” (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 283). Soludo (2008, p. 60), another world acclaimed (Nigerian) economist, has also made an observation that is all too obvious: “No two economies are the same.” Of course, no two societies are the same, granted that groups may share certain resemblances. And this is the justification for ethnological knowledge about any two or more groups that will relate at any levels. Indeed, the exigency of increased inter-group relations in the present global system makes ethnography all the more necessary.

At any rate, having realized what ethnography could be used to achieve for Africa, the global North, in the postmodernist and poststructuralist arguments, then elects to push what is good about relativism to a level where ordered, field-based knowledge that can help diverse societies plan themselves is ridiculed as outmoded and rejected as untenable (Gilson et al., 2011). A major plank of postmodernism and poststructuralism is to deny the existence of a stable, veridical symbolic system that anchors the structure of society (Ritzer, 2012). The logical result of this is for the apologists of this viewpoint to jettison the motivation to understand those symbolic systems. And when this is taken, ethnography that holds the key to this understanding will then be rejected as unnecessary time wasting (Alvesson, 2002). In place of the resulting chaos, globalization (read westernization) will, from the back door, be offered as the only choice left for Africa and such other non-Western groups. The view that there can be a global culture has, in any case, been described as “preposterous” (Ezeh, 2011). Geyer (2004, p. 5) thus describes the *post- post-*formulations as “paradigms of disorder”.

This does not, however, mean that local ways should not be repackaged in the context of an internationalized world. The point of this paper is actually to the contrary, namely, that such a repackaging is inevitable in the present order of things. But this will be impossible without the knowledge of what is to be repackaged. It is ethnology that furnishes such knowledge. The point

is made clearly in what has been termed 'glocalisation'. Devisch (2008, cited in Ezeh, 2011) explains this as careful blending of the local and 'the global', and puts it forward as the most reasonable choice that human groups have made, and continue to make, as they face new extraneous systems and challenges. Ezeh (2011) argues this to the full: Going by its ethnic multiplicity, which has been placed in the neighborhood of 380, there are few countries that will need ethnology more than Nigeria does. Any other options will be papering over huge cracks.

Conclusion

The global system has made it necessary for different social systems to interface. But the option of forcing different societies to fall in line with one paradigm has made most of the world more difficult to inhabit. This is more real in the Nigerian case where diverse groups have been locked in an ill-reconciled plural set-up. But imperial Britain did not fall under such an illusion. They did not assume that distinct groups who had run themselves autonomously for millennia would suddenly be successfully administered as one aggregate. They, therefore, commissioned scores of ethnographies of the local groups to understand their diverse ways so as to run them more successfully. The regions on the basis of which they administered the different sections of Nigeria were informed by the information furnished by the numerous ethnographic reports on the local groups. The progress that Nigeria was making in the early independent periods was thanks to such a political economy, inherited from the British, which ran on regional basis. Although there is no excusing colonialism, it is however a fact that Nigeria began to take a retreat from the strides made in those times after an ill-advised attempt by the military to force an ill-adapted unitary polity out of different ethnic groups that the colonizer had seen reasons to administer separately. Experience in Nigeria and many other African countries is the continent's best advice that such a choice was not only bad but tragic. No plural polity will work that is not founded on knowledge of the interfacing groups. Ethnography holds the key to that knowledge.

But it is seen that the *post- post-* formulations would offer that no solid symbolic systems exist; and that attempts to report on such systems are only the reporters' own representations of their own views about reality. This argument then renders such an option as ethnography useless, dissuading people from taking the ethnographer's report seriously. But why any society or country taking such a line cannot be excused is that history and current experiences in different societies show that ethnography had worked in the past and still works in the present as the only option for

forging successful relations among diverse groups whom historical happenstance has pulled into closer contacts.

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