

Chapter Three

HOW ETHNICITY DEFINES NIGERIA'S CHARACTER

*I am an individual before I am a member of an
ethnic group before I am a citizen of a country*

Nigeria as many would prefer to think of it is neither an aberration nor a mishap. It is the handiwork of Britain, a colonial master whose only objective in the dark days of colonialism was to maintain its self-serving interests in the African continent.

Nigeria was thus a creation of opportunity and necessity. It was not formed by compromise. The 250 plus ethnic nationalities that inhabit the country today did not come to a table to form a union. They were neither agreeable nor willingly submissive to being mashed together.

In reality though, not many countries of the world were formed willingly or by agreement or as a matter of compromise between its sundry parts.

The notion therefore that people have to be a willing part of a whole before harmony and progress can be achieved is misguided.

The simple fact is that most successful countries have been successful because there were people of foresight who were willing to make the most out of their given situation.

What happened in Nigeria in 1914 under the auspices of Lord Lugard the British overlord in the region at that time was an expansion of the opportunistic pursuits of a colonial power desperate to maintain effective control over a cohesive geographic entity in order to better milk its resources.

Thus, Lord Lugard's priority was not whether the mash up will sustain; rather it was whether it would make for more effective management.

Here in the 21st century many Nigerians are still quibbling about whether the amalgamation was the proper thing to do and whether their country was meant to be.

Many are still struggling to gulp down the bitter truth that even if there were many flaws in the amalgamation process, Nigeria was a viable political entity when it was created.

At the heart of Nigeria's many intractable problems is the fact that in the minds of many Nigerians, accepting the undoable reality that Nigeria is here to stay has proved difficult and this manifests not only in their pronouncements but also in the way most Nigerians treat their country.

Whether Nigerians like it or not, the country is here to stay and the sooner that fact is reflected in deeds and in spirit, the sooner we would all work in concert to raise the country from the doldrums of economic and political rot and begin the arduous task of building a nation of which every Nigerian would be truly proud.

If the amalgamation of 1914 was a mistake, it has already been made.

If it was ill-informed, it is too late to undo.

We have no choice now.

We have no other country but Nigeria.

Whether we like it or not, Nigeria is one indivisible country consisting of 250 plus ethnic nationalities carved up into 36 States.

There is nothing wrong with the geopolitical structure in place today because it puts us in the best position to harness our resources effectively and redefine our objectives in order to build a truly prosperous nation.

Any suggestion about going back in time to question the validity of the creation of the country in 1914 is foolhardy and is a fruitless venture which would only re-ignite a sentiment of disintegration that should be well behind us.

It would definitely re-instigate an agitation for disgorgement and dismemberment which has plagued us till this day.

Any question about whether Nigeria is sustainable as one country is a recipe for disaster. We can only work with what providence has hefted unto our shoulders.

The real question is how to make what we have work for us while taking into consideration the peculiarities of our multi-ethnic component parts.

Against the projections of many contrary opinions, Nigeria is better off, more viable, and more sustainable as one country.

Nigeria's present political system operates on a false assumption that the differences among its diverse ethnic parts are mere paper classifications that can be worked over by simplistic notions of quota distribution, rotational political office agreements and federal character-reflecting public sector appointments.

It is this false sense of power and resource sharing between imagined cohesive ethnic blocs that is at the heart of Nigeria's problems.

It has engendered a lack of sense of country and fostered a sense of self-centered individual pursuit rather than a patriotic sense of collective aspiration.

Any meaningful effort to reform Nigeria must therefore first address the issue of Nigeria's nationhood not by questioning the propriety of the amalgamation of 1914, not by rationalizing whether Nigeria should be one country of mutually agreeable partners, but by keying in the fact of the country's multi-ethnicity into the boilerplate of fashioning a socio-political system that works for every one of its ethnic groupings and by extension, every Nigerian.

The questions to ask and answer are; how do we redefine the prevalent sense of unwillingness within the various ethnic components to be part of a whole into a mutually-inclusive and agreeable sense of country?

How do we convert the pervading ethnocentrism into national patriotism?

How do we make our heterogeneity work for us rather than against us?

How do we redirect the me-first mentality of the average Nigerian that makes him see the country as a pillaging ground for self aggrandizement to a we-first mentality of collective aspiration and endeavor?

How do we convert the sense of self-opportunism in the political office holder to a sense of service for national good?

A realistic starting point for answering the foregoing questions is to debunk and disavow many of the assumptions and notions of ethnocentrism which have tended to divide and weaken rather than unite and strengthen.

For instance, there is a well-entrenched false notion that to thrive, each of the three major ethnic groups as well as the other two hundred and forty-seven or so minor ethnic centers must organize to scheme for their interests as a group.

There is an assumption that each group must of necessity articulate their respective demands and standpoints in order to secure their interest in the nation.

It has become fashionable these days to hear and see the agitations of progressive unions and ethnic associations from every nook and cranny of Nigeria, each positioned to gain an advantage in the national scheme of things, each demanding their fair shake in the national arena.

Whereas ethnic associations ought to primarily organize to promote intra-ethnic cultural and social causes, these days, it has become the only avenue by which members could realize personal economic sustenance and political relevance.

However, while many people speak in terms of ethnic agenda, beyond the projected notions of ethnic common-cause is the prioritization of individual pursuit firstly for the individual and his immediate family, secondly for his immediate community and thirdly for his ethnic identity.

In other words, a person is a person first before he is part of an ethnic group and before he is part of a nation.

The notion that there is or should be an Igbo common-agenda or a Yoruba common-agenda or an Hausa-Fulani common-agenda or the common-agendas of other smaller ethnic or tribal classifications is a misnomer and is perhaps one of the biggest stumbling blocks to Nigeria's unity and sustainability.

It has tended to pit one ethnic group against the other in a perpetual struggle and demeaned any sense of national center.

It has dogged every sphere and stage of Nigeria's existence since Independence and has proven to be more of an exacerbating factor for disunity and mutual distrust.

The idea of ethnic agenda within the subparts presupposes that there is an adversarial national center with which each ethnic group must contend and against which each must wage a battle in order to ensure group survival.

Sadly, the nationalistic zeal and struggle of the colonial days when great Nigerians of every stripe banded together to wrest control from a colonial power has transmogrified into an adversarial zeal defined by tribal affinity.

While colonialism lasted, it was easy to define a common enemy and to define a common cause. Nigerians were joined at the hip in their common quest for emancipation. However as soon as we chased the colonial common-foe out and tasted the forbidden fruit of independence, we turned around and found new enemies amongst our ranks.

From common friends with identical stakes, we became common enemies with divergent aspirations.

From sweetheart compatriots with mutual interests we became bitter rivalries scheming against one another.

Unfortunately, the feeling of inter-ethnic distrust and suspicion caused Nigeria's first failures as an infant nation and has persisted until this day.

Today, we are left with a scenario in which one ethnic group sees itself as an adversary of the other in a full-fisted contest to secure control of the national machinery.

Each ethnic group sees itself in competition with the other, aiming only to satisfy the yearning of its ethnocentric core thereby promoting a situation where ethnic predilection is paramount while the interests of the nation is secondary or inconsequential.

Today Nigeria as a nation is a no-man's-land of competing ethnic interests where people care more for personal and ethnic satisfaction rather than a national sense of pride.

While we dwell in the falsehood that we have forged a country of one people and one culture united for a common purpose, we are in reality a nation of many distinct peoples and many cultures each with its distinct objectives.

While we assume that we are a country of similar people with similar causes willing to uphold a common promise we are in reality a conglomerate of dissimilar people with divergent agendas willing to pursue personal or narrow group promise.

However, the notion of ethnic nationalism as propounded by the so-called ethnic unions and organizations in Nigeria and abroad is actually a farce.

Each ethnic association or progressive union with its grandiose agendas and rabble-dousing inflections has not particularly augured well for a great majority of the people within the ethnic group for whom they purport to organize.

Most have merely pursued narrow interests that benefit their elite classes of organizers and benefactors.

In other words, ethnic nationalism in Nigeria is a perverse pyramid scheme where only the people at the top echelons of the ethnic association enjoy the benefits of organizing.

In reality, ethnic affinity and the will to organize is strongest only when people are outside their ethnic enclaves. Each ethnic group appears like a monolithic entity on the national and international stages but within their ethnic enclaves, minor divisions and mini classifications quickly manifest and people immediately identify with sub groups.

Outside their ethnic enclaves, each association gives the impression that it is a formidable front for collective aspiration but back in their home turf their differences and sub-tribal divisions come to the fore.

For this reason, the ordinary people within each ethnic group feel left out of any supposedly common agenda.

In other words, when the organizers of an ethnic association claim that they are organizing so that they can bring goodies from the national coffers to their people they are only doing so as a front for personal promotion.

This is borne out by the fact that across Nigeria, none of these ethnic associations have attracted any real benefits to their people.

Rather, their helmsmen have received political appointments and contracts and have enriched themselves personally in the guise of lobbying for ethnic interests.

It is obvious that a Nigerian body politic that focuses on cohesive or monolithic ethnic fronts as the basis for individual aspiration without taking into consideration the reality that people are first and foremost individuals before they are part of an ethnic group has not worked and will never work for Nigeria.

In order to achieve a balanced and more just nation, the new focus must center on individual identity rather than on a false notion of ethnic groupings and collective common-fronts.

In essence, Nigeria must be redefined first and foremost as a nation of individuals before it considers itself as a nation of multiple ethnicities.

Again, a person is first and foremost an individual before he is a member of a group and before he is a member of a nation.

The notion that one should first and foremost figure out what part of Nigeria another comes from before he sees what he has to offer is misplaced and accounts for many of the foibles of Nigeria.

People should not be judged by their ethnic affiliation but by their individual worth.

The point ultimately is not to ignore the fact of Nigeria's ethnic variety, but to appreciate the fact that overplaying the hand of ethnicity divides more than it unites; it weakens more than it strengthens; it creates a condition of distrust rather than engender mutual tolerance, it promotes unhealthy rivalry rather than inspiring mutual coexistence.

For Nigeria to thrive, each individual within each ethnic group must be empowered and given an opportunity to pursue his life's ambitions to the fullest extent possible.

The best way to achieve this is to empower the individual's local community and create opportunities within the smallest ethnic community so that the individual will once more have a sense of belonging and worth first in his smaller tribal community, second in his larger ethnic affiliation and thirdly in his nation.

To summarize, Nigeria's biggest problem lies in the fact that not many Nigerians have any sense of country.

The lack of sense of country promotes a situation where most Nigerians see their country as a no man's land good only for taking from rather than giving to.

Unfortunately, most of the solutions that have been proffered about combating Nigeria's woes have tended to revolve around the concept of ethnic balancing which presupposes that the yearnings of each member of an ethnic group can be assuaged by appointing a person from his ethnicity to a political office in the hope that that alone will make him feel that he is relevant.

However, because of the culture of ethnic balancing there is a lack of interest in building a national common front and because there is a lack of interest in building a national common front, the teeming millions of ordinary Nigerians whose best hope lie in a truly prosperous nation suffer untold bitter consequences.

Whether we like it or not, we can no longer sustain a culture in which the national center feels that it has done enough for a person just because someone from his ethnic group has been appointed to an important political office.

We cannot continue a system that dwells on a foolhardy notion that the president of Nigeria must come from my ethnicity before I can feel at home in Nigeria or before I can love it and contribute to its improvement.

We cannot continue a system that gives a false impression that if the president of Nigeria comes from my ethnicity he would use his powers to bring goodies and economic and infrastructure benefits to me and my community and if a person from another ethnicity becomes president, my community would suffer neglect.

Why should I care who the president of Nigeria is and what ethnicity he or she comes from as long as I enjoy the

full benefits and privileges of a stable and prosperous nation?

Why should I care what ethnicity the minister for works comes from when I have good roads to travel on and uninterrupted supply of electricity and water?

Why should I care what ethnicity the minister of education comes from when there is a sound education policy in place and good schools for my children to attend?

We certainly cannot continue a culture of winner-take-all in which a person takes political office and awards contracts only to his ilk and friends.

Why should it be up to one person to decide who gets contracts and who does not? Why should absolute power be reposed in one office and in one person that make securing control of that office a do-or-die affair?

Sadly, these notions are deeply entrenched in and have pervaded Nigeria's socio-political and economic landscapes since independence and unless something urgent and drastic is done we would have no country to call our own.