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Colonialism, Post-Colonialism and Ethnic Cleavages in Africa: Nigeria since Independence

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Abstract

This paper analyses ethnic cleavages in Africa and the challenges of integration and unity in the continent. The choice of Nigeria as a case study is determined by the nature of the country as the most diverse in terms of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious differences, just as it is the most populous in Africa.Nigeria embodies all the challenges which ethnic cleavages pose to post-colonial societies anywhere in the world. The article traces the problem of cleavage to the process of colonization in which it is argued that the institutions and systems bequeathed by colonialism are ill-suited to accommodate or address the diverse nature of the emerging post-colonial societies of Africa. Thus, no sooner had the colonialists departed than these societies started to confront the challenges of ethnic division, which fifty years after decolonization, are probably the greatest threats to their stability and progress.

Key words: Africa, colonialism, cleavage, ethnicity, integration, Nigeria, post-colonialism.

Introduction

This paper analyses colonialism and its aftermath in post-colonial Africa. It argues that ethnic cleavages that characterize most African countries today resulted from colonial policies of divide and rule, arbitrary boundaries, and other related, but often less explicit socio-political institutions and values that entrench ethnic divisions and hamper genuine national integration. The paper answers these questions: what are the reasons for the continued absence of unity and integration in African states fifty years after decolonization; what are the reasons that politics in these countries are still dominated by ethno-tribal sentiments? The choice of Nigeria as a case study is deliberate and informed by multiple considerations. Prominent among these considerations are the fact that Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. Secondly, Nigeria being the most ethnically and linguistically diverse entity represents issues and challenges which ethnic cleavages pose to post-colonial Africa. Recalling that the country survived a thirty months bloody civil war in which nearly two million people lost their lives, demonstrateshow cleavages tear African countries apart. Today, Nigeria faces divisive tendencies from its over three hundred ethnic groups that challenge any serious effort towards national integration and unity (Mustapha, 2006). In essence, Nigeria provides a prototype of challenges to integration and unity that have kept many groups as isolated as ever within their political communities (Maier, 2000).

The paper is organized into sections. The first section deals withgeneral background of Nigeria as a plural society. The second section provides a survey of perspectives and views on colonialism in Africa, while the third section provides conceptual and operational clarifications on the terms colonialism and ethnic cleavages. Subsequent sections review

socio-political institutions in pre-colonial Africa, imposition of colonialism on these societies, and the transformation that resulted from colonial experience and which is today part of the larger colonial legacy in post-colonial Nigeria. Ultimately, it is shown at this stage that ethnic cleavages and problems of integration that have bedeviled Nigeria since independence are as a result of colonialism.

Nigeria: An anatomy of a pluralistic society

Nigeria's ethnic, linguistic and religious plurality is remarkable not only in Africa. It is one of the most socially diverse countries in the world. Although accurate and reliable statistics are not available, yet it is generally agreed that there are around 300-350 identified ethnic and linguistic groups in the country (Mustapha, 2006). Many of these are no more than small insignificant groups that are on the verge of losing their ethnic identities and being consumed by some of the larger groupings. Three of these larger groupings, Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, and Yoruba dominate socio-political life and between them alternate both political and economic control of the country. This by no means implies that other smaller groups, the so-called minorities, have no influence. Far from this supposition, they have considerable clout in many important socio-political spheres in the country.Many students of Nigerian politics like to point to the sectional concentration of tribes and religion with the western parts of the country populated by Christians and Yoruba, the eastern part by Igbo and Christians, and the north by MuslimHausa-Fulani (Badmus, 2009). Butthe truth is that this is a simplistic portrayal of Nigeria's ethno religious boundaries. In reality, none of these regions or parts is ethno-religiously homogenous. For instance, although mostly populated by the Yorubaspeaking people, the western parts of Nigeria are religiously pluralistic with elements of Christianity, Islam and traditional religions (Salamone, 1997). Similarly, in the northern parts of the country while the dominant lingua franca is Hausa, ethnic and religious diversity is highly pronounced with as many as over two hundred ethnic groups in the region (Mustapha, 2006). Thus, the diversity of Nigeria cuts across sectional and geographic boundaries.

The country is an agglomeration of hitherto autonomous and semi-autonomous kingdoms, emirates, city-states, and even village republics (Mustapha, 2006). This disparate character was however cobbledtogether by the British colonizers through subterfuge, violent pacification and conquests. The end result of this colonial adventure became by October 1960known as the independent republic of Nigeria. Even today, it is a subject of intense and heated debate especially among historians whether without this colonial influence, Nigeria as we know it today could have emerged. While this is a difficult question to answer it is really not difficult to see how some of those societies and communities were in the process of transformation before they were disrupted by the colonial masters.Dudley (1973, p. 23-24) opines that an accurate description of the British role in the formation and emergence of the Nigerian state "would be that far from 'creating' Nigeria, the boundaries of that community were delimited by the colonial administration only after the gross patterns of the indigenous cultural geography had already been established". Fage and Alabi (2003, p. 4) subscribe to this argument that: "due to trade, inter-tribal marriages, the spread of Islam etc., many of the component ethnic groups in the country were already in close contact with one another and a measure of unity and integration was already crystallizing among them".Oyovbaire (1984, pp. 136-137) however rejects the argument of Dudley and others, because they:

> …did not provide evidence for the argument, for example, we are not told
> which culture was assimilating the others and of the structures and diffusion or

exercise of power (if any) covering the Nigerian area. In any case, even if the growth of a latent community could be discerned at the beginning of this century, it is extremely difficult to argue for it or locate the structures of that community for the period before the 1880s… The point should be emphasised that until Britain had established and consolidated its structures of governance over the contemporary boundaries of the country from 1914, no ruler or set of rulers, social class or regime had any claims… over all the pre-colonial state-systems.

Olusanya (in Ikime, 1999, p. 545) balances this argument thus: "[t]he Sokoto jihad had led to the establishment of a caliphate made up of fifteen emirates about half the present day Nigeria. By bringing together such a large area under one political unit, the jihad paved the way for the emergence of a greater Nigeria". Since colonial Nigeria was created to serve Britain (Maier, 2000,p. xxiii), the political and security structures instituted by the colonizers were concordant with the British interest and not of the emerging Nigerian state (Ake, 1978, p. 83).

By 1960 when Nigeria was proclaimed an independent republic, there was a sufficient basis to appreciate the heterogeneous nature of the country which made it imperative to adoptconstitutional and other institutional arrangements to ensure inclusiveness while maintaining its corporate existence as a united republic. The most important of these steps taken and which more than any other, underscored the ethnic and religious dynamics of the country was the introduction of federalism and its adoption as a structural system of government (Osadolor, 2010). Through the decades since independence, it is remarkable to note that although the character of Nigeria's federalism has undergone various forms of changes and alterations, probably to reflect new political circumstances, the basic federal character of the country remain essentially unchanged. Thus, from the first republic when the country had a federal system of weak central government and powerful regional government, today we see a strong central government and weak federating units (Suberu, 2001, p. 19).

In terms of political and economic distribution of values, few observations could be made here. The first important observation is that in order to accommodate Nigeria's diverse nature, the principle of federal character was introduced to guard against marginalization of some ethnic groups in all federal establishments while ensuring equitable representation (Suberu, 2001, p. 79). Another of the informal safeguard adopted was an informal form of elite consensus that allows power to rotate among the regions. Thus, since 1999 when the fourth republic was inaugurated, the office of the president has alternated between the so-called Muslim north and the so-called Christian south.

Notwithstanding these formal and informal arrangements, the country remains entangled in dangerous waves of ethno-religious and sectarian strife (Badmus, 2009). Beginning with the January 1966 Igbo executed military coup in which majority of those killed were top military and political leaders from the northern parts of the country, the Isaac Borosecession attempt, to the July 1966 counter coup in which officers mainly from the north avenged the January coup, to the violent civil war that lasted thirty months and cost nearly two million lives, the socio political history of Nigeria is full of sectarian antagonism, suspicion and violence. Today, some fifty years after independence, sectarian cleavages have remained very much part of the major challenges facing the progress, peace and stability of the country. So wide are the feelings of alienation, marginalization and antagonism among these ethnic groups that calls for dismembering of Nigeria are never louder and more strident.

Accusations and counter accusations, killings and reprisal killings have remained some of the hallmark of Nigerian state these last fifty years.

Perspectives on colonialism and ethnic cleavage

Colonialism is seen here as referring to the historical period that began with the Berlin Conference where European imperialist powers arbitrarily partitioned African territory and its people among themselves. This act is now known as the scramble and partition of Africa (Lange, Mahoney, and von Hau, 2006; Asante, 2010). Ethnic cleavage in this respect is seen as the entire attendant challenges to socio-political unity in the newly decolonized states of Africa occasioned by inchoate nature of ethnic diversity and sectarian differences. Ethnic cleavages occur when resort is made to ethnic or racial identity for political purpose (Eriksen, 1991; Chandra and Boulet, 2001; Brubaker, 2009; Cederman, Wimmer, and Min, 2010).

Cleavages are not peculiar to Africa or to post-colonial societies only, although they seem to be more pronounced in those societies. There exists strong evidence to suggest that cleavages exist nearly in all homogenous societies whether developed or undeveloped (Barmeo, 2002). Thus, societies as developed as Canada grapples with separatist movements in Quebec, Great Britain contends with the Irish, and the Chinese grapples with Tibet and Uighur separatists' movements. What sets African cleavages apart is the degree of intensity with which it is always expressed often in violent terms. Perhaps, this is as a result of weak political institutions capable of accommodating various interests. Another possible explanation maybe because of greedy and avaricious political elites that always benefits from fanning embers of division and sectarianism in their countries (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Oyeniyi, 2010). Whatever the explanation maybe, one thing which is incontrovertible is that colonialism, more than any other factor is wholly responsible for creating those pluralist societies, without the corresponding structures to sustain these pluralisms, in which cleavages including its violent manifestations are most evident (Ikwenobe, 1998; Yoon, 2009). In Africa, very few countries escaped the dangers of ethnic cleavages. In fact, an objective analysis of all forms of civil conflicts and wars in Africa would reveal elements of ethnic and sectarian antagonism. Examples range from past conflicts such as in Angola, Congo, Chad to more recent ones including in Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan (Meredith, 2006).

This situation leads to continued debates on the impacts, political and otherwise, of colonialism in Africa and elsewhere (Yoon, 2009). As students of African history and politics, wecan discern three distinctive views and perspectives about colonialism on the continent. None of which implies a systematically agreed consensus among its adherents. At best, there exist some shared broad assumptions among these three currents. The first view is that of the colonizer and his apologists. In this view, strenuous efforts are made and all manner of justifications are invoked explaining the necessity, and in fact, the desirability of colonial adventure in Africa and elsewhere, especially in Asia. Chief among these justifications that were often cited was the need to bring Western Christian civilization to the uncivilized, barbaric peoples of Africa. Actually, the motive was seen as being informed by some form of divine mandate in which the civilized Europeans saw it as binding on them to transmit their civilization to the uncultured natives. Here we need to recall that Africans were, prior to colonialism, seen not only as uncultured, barbaric heathens, but most importantly, incapable of attaining any form of socio-economic and political development without the light and ideas which the colonizer brought to the colonized.

Historical dialectical materialists rejected this view of colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Beginning with Lenin (1963) and his depiction of colonialism as being the violent

arm of imperialism which he described as the highest stage of capitalism, Marxists in Africa and elsewhere saw in colonialism successful attempts by imperialists' capitalists' powers to export capital, build monopolies and contain the contradictions inherent in capitalism. Viewing colonialism from this angle we are confronted not with altruistic motives as imputed by the colonizer but by economic considerations where, pressed by need to satisfy their growing industries and to find markets for finished products from those industries, the capitalists embarked on colonial acquisition in Africa and Asia. One interesting thing about viewing colonialism from this perspective is that even today we can appreciate the violence with which resistance to colonialism was met and how the colonial edifice was maintained by violence.Rodney (1972), Ake (1978), and Nabudere (1980) were among the prominent scholars who espoused a Marxist interpretation of colonialism in Africa.

There are other African scholars who rather than accepting this wholly ideological cum historical interpretation of colonialism as given by the Marxists, preferred a more indigenous explanation. In this view, colonialism was not considered a manifestation of some form of epochal historical struggle but rather borne out of the cruel desire innate in all strong beings to overpower, subjugate, and control those that are weaker to them. The Europeans were compelled by a natural disposition, because of their military superiority, to seek and conquer new territories for prestige purpose. The danger according to this view was in the total disregard and in fact, disdain, shown to the native's culture, religion and institutions. As a result, those traditional institutions, values and norms that had served Africans for centuries were uprooted and destroyed. And in their place, alien cultures, values, and institutions were imposed. This imposition, always by force, explains the post-colonial character of African states as well as their ruling classes. Fanon (1978) was at the front of this school of thought.

Inherent in all the three broad views is the recognition of the profound cultural and institutional changes which colonialism brought on African people, the character of their post-colonial states, as well as their continued coexistence harmoniously in these states. Most dramatic of these institutional changes and transformations is the idea of modern states which in its modern connotation can be described as alien to an African (Lange, Mahoney, and von Hau, 2006; Yoon, 2009). Consequently, this paper considers as an apt theoretical interpretation in helping us decipher the challenges which various cleavages pose to integration in Nigeria, the postulations of post-colonial theory. But before we proceed with a more extensive analysis of these transformations and how they affect harmonious coexistence among Africans which is the object of this paper, it is apt to review socio-political conditions in pre-colonial African societies. The aim is to provide a broader framework within which those transformations which are considered responsible for creating and sustaining cleavages in Africa generally and in Nigeria particularly are highlighted and discussed in their proper context.

Socio-political and cultural institutions in pre-colonial Nigeria

Some certain assumptions regarding pre-colonial African societies especially as they relate to their history, politics, economies and cultures which are still peddled around are simply wrong in the face of historical evidence. It is assumed that pre-colonial Africa was characterized by uncultured tribes perpetually engaged in internecine warfare. In this view, Africa and Africans arepresented as locked in the state of nature where might is right. Clearly, Africans had evolved different forms of political systems, structures and institutions appropriate for their various levels of socio-political development (Asante, 2010). It is, therefore, not surprising to find in pre-colonial Africa political systems as highly developed and centralized as Zanzibar and Buganda in East Africa, Songhai, Mali, Ghana, Oyo Empire,

Kanem-Bornu, and Sokoto Caliphate in the West. Alongside these vast and highly developed political communities, prospered other smaller less centralized, but no less organized, political communities and city states such as Jukun and Nupe, in the Central Plateau of modern Nigeria, and the Igbo acephalous societies. What was remarkable about those political organizations was their nature of evolution. Evolving over generations, their process of development was neither abrupt nor accidental, but a deliberate process of fusion in which many smaller and weaker communities were co-opted into the stronger ones through alliances and conquests.

Together with this nature of their political evolution and development, their economies revolved around three main activities. These were trading, farming, and to a certain extent, raids and conquests. But as the latter was not quite as often as the rulers would like it, emphasis was on developing the necessary policies and institutions that promoted the former. The influence of trade in pre-colonial Africa in the spread of new ideas, bringing development, and the spread of Islam has been widely surveyed and acknowledged. It is a well-known fact that major trade routes linking north and central Africa on one hand, and north, east and westernAfrica on the other hand facilitated great flow of traders and goods across most of Africa especially by Arab and Barber traders beginning from the 10th Century CE. Among the greater benefits of those trading activities were the spread of literacy among large sections of Africans, as well as the spread of Islam notably in east, west and central Africa.

Part of the remarkable story of pre-colonial African societies was that membership into a political community was characterized by greater level of "fluidity" (Yoon, 2009). One of the common assumptions especially among the colonialists was that Africans defined their sense of belonging exclusively in terms of ethnic identity. This was influenced by the Europeans' own sense of ethnic identity in which membership into their communities was defined almost exclusively in terms of descent (Yoon, 2009). In Africa, not all communities defined their membership in terms of ethnic identity. In fact, for many of those communities, membership was defined in terms of shared values and outlook among members. Thus, in societies that have achieved a greater level of metropolitan outlook such as Kano and Katsina, people of various ethnic and even religious orientations were welcomed and accorded appropriate political and legal rights without any form of marginalization. Actually, the composition of the Sokoto Caliphate was an interesting pointer to how most of the advanced political systems in the pre-colonial Africa were constituted. The caliphate was an agglomeration of various ethnic and linguistic groups with some dialectical variations even within similar linguistic groups.Clearly therefore, the politics and institutions that sustained the socio-cultural practices of pre-colonial societies in Africa were conceived and designed with the view of accommodating the peculiar circumstances of their evolutionary process. As a result, many, if not all of them, were able to accommodate their differences, ensure equity, guard against alienation and ultimately live in peace with each other. The process of colonization that engulfed nearly all of Africa from the 18th century led to momentous socio-political and economic transformations that left mixed blessings in the continent.

Colonialism and the birth of the Nigerian state

Officially, colonialism as an era in African history started in 1884-1884 with the Berlin Conference. For most African communities however, the Berlin Conference merely sanctioned their subjugation and exploitation (Asante, 2010). Colonialism had begun much earlier. In what was to become the Nigerian state after 1960, colonization began in stages. Hitherto autonomous communities were gradually, but steadily, swallowed one after the other

beginning with the invasion and subjugation of Badagry in present day Lagos state around 1889 by forces of the Royal Niger Company. By 1900, all the riverine areas south of present Nigeria have been effectively pacified and were under the Union Jack. And by 1913, practically all of the communities that were later cobbled together and formed the Nigerian state were effectively under the British suzerainty. In fact, by January of 1914, the colonial administration was confident enough with its conquests that it proclaimed the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates into the protectorate of Nigeria (Mustapha, 2006). This singular decision was the most momentous in Nigeria's history, and has remained even today one of the most heated topics of discussion among its citizens. Variously described as the mistake of 1914, Nigeria's unity has been reduced today to a heated debate between the protagonists and antagonists of this union.

In any case, British colonial impact on Nigeria was not limited to the 1914 amalgamation. With the effective subjugation of those communities that presently formed the Nigerian federation, their entire political institutions and structures that had served them well for centuries were conveniently uprooted and destroyed by the colonial masters. In their place, new structures and institutions, principally designed to serve and protect the colonizer's interests, were introduced. It is, however, interesting to note that this policy was not pursued with proportionate zeal among the colonial powers. Thus, even during the colonial period, different systems and approaches were adopted to suit political expediencies and local peculiarities (Lange, Mahoney, and von Hau, 2006). In those communities were Britain found well entrenched and highly developed and organized political systems such as the Sokoto Caliphate, little changes were made to the administrative structure. However, in those societies that lacked this centralized political structure such as the Igbo communities in the present eastern Nigeria new administrative arrangements were made in which the colonialists directly ruled those communities. This gave birth to the two systems of colonial rule that were known as direct and indirect system (Stein, 2000). In the north where owing to the existence of a highly developed and sophisticated administrative system, the colonial masters left the system intact, and opted instead to rule indirectly through the caliph and the emirs.

Other far-reaching effects of colonialism on Nigeria included the political institutions, structure, and system put in place towards independence. Most notable of those was the adoption of federalism as the structural principle of governance in which constituent units were given autonomous powers, while the central government was left with residual powers (Osaldor, 2010). Patterned along the British Westminster parliamentary model of democracy, the first general elections were held in the country in 1957 preparatory to independence in October 1960. Those elections, flawed as they were, first revealed the nature of the cleavage issues which a post-independence Nigeria would contend with. Another issue that was not sufficiently resolved before independence was the status of the minority groups of Niger-Delta and elsewhere (Badmus, 2009). This issue was to later haunt Nigeria with greater violence, first under Aguiyi Ironsi regime when Isaac Boroand his band in 1966 declared their own independent republic (Barmeo, 2002). The second time was when Saro-Wiwa under Sani Abacha demanded for greater share of the revenues from oil extracted from their soil and which extended to the present.

Post-colonialism: Ethnic cleavages and the challenges of integration

John Paden in his biography of the Late Ahmadu Bello, the first Premier of the Northern region narrated a conversation between the late Ahmadu Bello and Nnamdi Azikwe, Nigeria's first president, sometime after independence. Paden narrated how Azikwe

approached Bello and said to him "let us forget our differences so that we can make Nigeria great". To this, Bello responded by saying "No, let us understand our differences: you are a Southerner and a Christian, and I am a Northerner and a Muslim. By understanding our differences, we can make Nigeria great" (Paden, 1986, p. 1). This exchange between the leaders of the two dominant political parties in the country after independence was instructive in two ways. First, it revealed the level of anxiety among the political class for the unity, progress, and development of the country. Secondly, it revealed in the strongest sense possible the challenges of diversity which the country contended with since its infancy, and which were crucial then, as they are today, towards forging the required tolerance and understanding necessary for nation-building, progress and development.

The first days of independence were in this regard crucial. The newly independent country faced quite a number of important challenges. At the domestic front, the challenges were mainly political and economic. There were the challenges of consolidating the gains of independence and launching the country on the pedestal of political stability and economic development. To achieve these, there was the need to address issues that were left unresolved by the departing colonial masters. The most important of these issues concerned finding a pragmatic and agreeable solution to the simmering minority problem in the Delta region. This problem that first came to the public attention in the 1950s was not effectively addressed before independence (Badmus, 2009). Another important issue was designing a mechanism that would ensure equitable representation of the regions in all federal appointments. The third, and probably the most important issue was how to bridge the wide educational gap between the predominantly Christian south and the predominantly Muslim north of the country (Mustapha, 2006). Lagging behind in terms of educational development, the northern region appeared in the colonial days not particularly keen on independence out of fear of domination by the educationally more developed southern region. There were also issues related to the vast size and large population of the northern region that put it ahead of the two other regions in terms of federal constituencies. This gave it an edge in control of political power at the federal level.

Attempts were made at various times especially in the early days of the first republic to address some of these challenges. A fourth region, Mid-West, was later created out of the Eastern and Western regions by the federal government in a move to allay the fears of the Delta minorities. Again, in its early days, there was an indication that federal character system was adopted as the guiding principle in all appointments into the federal service to ensure that none of the regions had more placements than the others (Suberu, 2001, p. 79). This was meant to ensure equitable distribution of administrative and other career appointments in the federal public service.

Problems that could not however readily be addressed through formal institutional mechanisms especially fierce elite competition and rivalry were in effect responsible for most of the failure to build enduring institutions that would promote and sustain national integration (Nicholas and Ford, 2007). One dominant feature of all heterogeneous sstates in the post-colonial period was that politics were not issue-driven. Probably, this was because they were as yet to develop the necessary counter-balancing forces and institutions to ethnic and sectional politics. In any case, these societies pursued what could be described as ethnically and sectionally-driven politics in which resort was always made to primordial sentiments to garner cheap political support. In this kind of political space, politics is not defined in terms of what people could get out of their leaders, but rather is seen as a vast field that is sharply divided and fitted neatly into ethnic dichotomy of "us" against "them".Nigeria, from its early days, was dodged by this kind of sectarian-view of politics where the political

elites defined it as a struggle for dominance and hegemony between "us" and the "others". Because of this dangerous competition for power among the political elites, politics soon went out of control and political interaction became characterized by friction and ethnic antagonism between the various ethnic groups in the federation (Mustapha, 2006).

January and July coup d'états of 1966

The low point of this transformation was the January 15, 1966 violent coup d'état in which killings of political and military leaders took ethnic and regional lines. This was to be the first military coup in Nigeria. It later transpired that this coup was tribally inspired (Salamone, 1997). Practically the entire top political and military class from the northern region including the prime minister and the premiers of the northern and western regions, and some top military leaders from western region considered too close to the NPC led federal government, were either killed in front of their families or abducted and brutally gunned down by the plotters mostly from the eastern region. It also transpired that none of the victims of January 15 rampage were Igbos from the eastern region. The government that emerged in the aftermath of the coup under Major General Ironsi, an Igbo officer from eastern Nigeria, pursued policies that reinforced the view that the coup was designed and hatched as part of an ethnic agenda to cripple the north of its political and military leadership in the federation. The most notorious of those policies was the introduction of Decree 34 which centralized public administration of the country (Salamone, 1997). In a country which practiced federalism, and with a region which was suspicious of the government, and even at the best of circumstances was suspicious of any move aimed at centralization owing to its backwardness in education, this decree triggered massive protests and backlash against the Igbo residents in the region.

Another problem that erupted at this time was the Niger-Delta secession and its declaration of independence under Isaac A. Boro. It has been already noted how the failure of the colonial government to address the minorities' problem left boiling beneath the political surface, anger, feelings of marginalization, and frustrations. The collapse of the first republic proved to be the linchpin that triggered the eruption of the Boro rebellion in 1966. Although it was promptly quashed by the military, repeated failure by successive administrations in the country allowed it to become one of the sore points betraying the huge cleavage in Nigeria. By July 1966, Ironsi's failure to prosecute the January coup plotters and the corresponding ascendance of Igbos in top administrative and political positions in the country, led to a violent counter-coup organized by a section of the northern officers. In this counter-coup, Ironsi lost his life and scores of other military officers mostly Igbos were killed.

The civil war: 1967-1970 and beyond

On March 1967, the first shot was fired across the Niger Bridge heralding the commencement of an avoidable human catastrophe which is known in Nigerian history as the civil war. A month before that fateful day, the eastern region under the leadership of Colonel Ojukwu seceded from the Nigerian federation and declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra (De St. Jorre, 1975, p. 122). The civil war lasted exactly thirty months and its cost in terms of human lives was estimated to be around two million(Diamond, 2007). The events that preceded the civil war have been given various interpretations. The most accurate however was that the conflict could have been avoided if not for the uncompromising stance of OdumeguOjukwu, the Igbo military governor of the eastern region, and later the rebel chief and leader of Biafra. At a time when national understanding and reconciliation was needed, Ojukwu assumed moral higher horse and refused to either accept the leadership of General

Gowon or the twelve state structure proposed by the federal military government (Garba, 1982, p. 77).

The war, its causes, how it was fought and resolved, and the ensuing peace has become a classic case study on the challenges of unity and integration posed by ethnic and sectarian cleavages in Africa. After the cessation of hostilities and the surrender of the Biafran forces in January 1970, the federal government in a remarkably magnanimous gesture declared a policy of "no victor, no vanquished". Igbos who fled the country during the war were reinstated in their former positions and abandoned properties were inventoried and compensations paid by the federal government. It is remarkable feat of reconciliation and unity that less than a decade later, an Igbo was able to emerge a vice president of the country in a democratically conducted election.

From 1970 when the civil war ended to 1999 when the present fourth republic was inaugurated, Nigeria had contended with other low-key conflicts and crises that once again brought to the fore, the unresolved nature of ethnic cleavagesin the country (Uwazurike, 1997). While many of these were low-key and basically had economic antecedents such as the Fulani-Sayawa crisis in Tafawa Balewa in 1988 and the Hausa/Fulani-Kataf crisis of 1991, the fact remained that repeated failure by successive administrations to address structural and systemic injustices contributed more than any other factor in fuelling these antagonisms. For example, the Niger-Delta crisis which assumed an international dimension in the 1990s under the Abacha regime could appropriately be considered as fuelled by struggle for economic and environmental justice before it became hijacked in the 2000s by criminal elements (Badmus, 2009). Between the end of the civil war, the collapse of the second and the ill-fated third republics, and the restoration of democracy in 1999, the most serious of all the challenges to national unity however remained the June 12 saga (Uwazurike, 1997; Salamone, 1997). The annulment of the June 12 presidential elections won by Chief MKO Abiola by the Babangida military administration triggered a sectional backlash from the western part of Nigeria where Abiola hailed from. Suspecting that the annulment by Babangida, a northerner, was calculated to deprive the Yoruba their "turn" to enjoy the "national cake", the Yoruba commenced systematic and organized campaigns aimed at undermining Nigerian unity and its peaceful co-existence. So virulent were the campaigns in those days that bombs and political assassinations were introduced for the first time into the political discourse of the country.

Democratization in 1999 and beyond

Often it is said that the British and other colonial powers paid little attention to ethnic and religious homogeneity when drawing the boundaries of new states in Africa; a situation which it is believed by many not only saw arbitrary boundaries but also the fusion of different cultures, values, norms, and religions in incompatible agglomerations (Yoon, 2009). Ordinarily, these kinds of creations ought not to be problematic at all, for sufficient evidences do exist from other climes that have been able to accommodate these forces and forge the required national spirit. Problems, we note, begin with the kind of political institutions, political values, and political class that emerged after decolonization (Ake, 1978, p. 83). The greatest culpability of colonialism in this regard however lies in the creation of a peculiar political class in Africa whose sole motive for pursuing power is political aggrandizement. This political class has been irredeemably responsible for the woes that befall most African countries since independence. In Nigeria, this class was at the center of truncating all efforts designed to forge national cohesion and progress.

The death of Abacha in June 1997 and that of Abiola a little later mercifully allowed for breath of fresh air in the political space. This meant that the country could move away from the belligerent posture of Abacha, and the difficulty of deciding what to do with Abiola's mandate, towards a new democratic transition program (Egwaikhide and Isumonah, 2001). Through some form of informal elite consensus that had served the country often well in difficult times, it was resolved that the presidency would go to the south west, the region from where Abiola hailed. This informal consensus, known in the Nigerian parlance as "power rotation" was intended to be a goodwill gesture of national reconciliation with the militant Yoruba who had since the annulment of June 12 assumed a rebellious posture towards the federation (Uwazurike, 1997). In this sense, all the candidates that contested for the office of the president were Yoruba with their running mates from other ethnic groups.

However, that was not enough to calm the various ethnic groups who rightly or wrongly felt excluded from the "national cake". While the Yoruba were pacified with one of their "own" as president, other ethnic groups took up the belligerence. In fact, it appeared like ethnic and sectarian tendencies were waiting for the military to depart from the corridors of power before they exploded practically in all parts of the country. It could be said that unlike other climes where democracy comes with incentives for reconciliation and national healing such as South Africa, in Nigeria it opened the floodgates of sectarian conflicts, inter and intra-communal violence and counter-violence(Badmus, 2009). Beginning with the south west where the militant organization, Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), went on a killing spree of Hausa-Fulani traders residing there, to the Sharia riots in the north where both thousands of lives were maimed and killed, it appeared as if the country was on a match to self-destruction (Mustapha, 2006). In the Niger-Delta region, youths formed militant organizations and started destroying oil pipelines, disrupting production and supply, killing security personnel, and abducting expatriate oil workers in the region. In the north central part of the country, neighbors who have lived together for generations suddenly found reasons to kill each other (Badmus, 2009). Starting with the Tiv against the Jukuns to the most persisting in Plateau state where a dangerous dichotomy was created between the "indigenous" population and the "settlers". Today, sectarian violence in Plateau state has remained one of the most endemic of all forms of ethnic cleavages in the country.

One other dimension to this cleavage though not really tribally-induced but has significance on the question of national unity of Nigeria is Boko Haram and its activities since 2009. Boko Haram originally started as a peaceful, albeit with a literalist orientation, Islamic sect around 2002. Unprovoked violence that included massacres, rape, and destruction of their properties by federal security agencies, however, transformed them into the most deadly threat to Nigeria's peace and unity today. Based in the north eastern part of Nigeria, the group espoused a puritanical version of Islam modeled on the *Wahabi* teachings and Taliban orientation. Part of their stated mission is to abolish all forms of western education, and the abrogation of the Nigerian constitution and democracy. In a multi-religious country such as Nigeria where the constitution upholds the principle of secularism this no doubt is a dangerous mission (Sani, 2011). The greatest danger posed by the group, however, is in how it kills its perceived enemies and anyone who disagrees with its teachings whether a Muslim or a Christian (Stroehlein, 2012). In their attacks which usually relied on suicide bombings and targeted assassinations, they often make no distinction between a mosque and a church.

Other challenges that need to be pointed here include the nature of the political elite and the national leadership (Badmus, 2009). While the former cares less about the national unity and more about its continuing relevance in the politics of the country, the inept and

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weak nature of the leadership confound Nigeria's tense situation today. Thus, the picture of Nigeria today can be presented as fractured than ever before in its political history. Already strident calls for sovereign national conference and restructuring of the federation are getting louder by the day. However, this should not be construed as the absence of silver lining in the horizon. Far from that, there are indications that Nigerians have started exhibiting awareness about the implications of ethnicity to their well-being. The most remarkable examples of these include the subsidy protests in many parts of January 2012 and the overwhelming support which MuhammaduBuhari garnered during the 2015 general elections. In those instances, it seems that Nigerians forgot about their ethnic and religious differences and put national interest above primordial interests.

Conclusion

The objectives which this paper sought to achieve were to show that challenges of ethnic cleavages in Africa could be traced back to the colonial policies which were designed to promote the interests of the colonial masters. Consequently, the rise of a new political class which is impervious to issue-driven politics, and which this paper argued was facilitated by the colonial policies and socio-political institutions made any significant effort towards nation building in Africa a herculean task. The case of Nigeria which is a microcosm of Africa both in terms of its heterogeneity and challenges to unity which this heterogeneity poses, was investigated since independence. The view remained that while these ethnic cleavages are surmountable, it is not likely that they will be surmounted any time soon simply because the political class needs to exploit these cleavages in order to remain in power. Without this view of "us" against "them" and "we" and "others", it is doubtful whether the present set of political leadership would be able to sustain its hold on power for any extended period. The challenge to the integration and unity in Nigeria just as in other African countries is not how these cleavages are exploited by a corrupt and intellectually bankrupt political class, but in how awareness is created, and knowledge disseminated to the public about the insidious nature of ethnic cleavages to their cohesion, unity, and prosperity. Elsewhere, other countries have succeeded in either completely addressing problems associated with ethnicity and sectarianism or have reduced them to a tolerable extent (Barmeo, 2002). They could, therefore, serve as inspirations and provide interesting lessons on how Nigerians and other Africans could appreciate their diversities, learn to live with each other in peace, and work towards building strong and prosperous economies.

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