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## Subjectivity and Ethnocentric Leadership Approaches in Tackling the Nigerian Question

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### Abstract

Subjectivity has been an all-important concept for academic research, as well as used as a tool for intervening in social and political life of a people, since the 1960s and 1970s. The idea of subjectivity had a catalytic impact in changing the terms of the debate in History and Social Sciences, postcolonial theory, gender studies, cultural and media studies, social theory, and the other disciplines in the humanities. Subjectivity which relates to the quality of possessing perspectives and experiences, feelings, beliefs, desires, and power employed in the attempt at explanation for what influences, and informs people's judgment about truth or reality. In this paper, we shall attempt to examine the role of leaders of the Nigerian state in tackling the challenges/problems faced by the various sections of the Nigerian polity. These problems include, religious crisis, marginalization, resource equity, among others, and they constitute the National question. The paper concludes that the difficulty in answering the Nigerian question, to a large extent, result from the influence of subjectivity in viewing and tackling these problems by successive leaders emerging mainly from the majority tribes of the country.

**Key Words:** Subjectivity, Leadership, Nigerian Question, Ethnocentrism.

### Introduction

Subjectivity is the flip side of objectivity, which relates to state of interpreting and addressing issues from an impartial viewpoint and devoid of personal, group or sectional idiosyncrasies, feelings and interest. It is a concept and practice that engender advancement and protection of personal, sectional and group views and interest in interpretation and addressing the issues of development in human society.

In the academic realm, subjectivity has been a thorny, controversial and indeed a difficult subject, as it has been rightly observed that no researcher goes about the selection, handling and interpretation of the sources and materials with a blank mind. In addressing the Nigerian question, subjectivity has been the bane of sincere analysis and approach in tackling the problems of disunity, religious intolerance,

impaired development and lack of national socio-economic advancement in spite of the huge human and material resources nature has inhumed in the country.

In this paper, we shall offer a conceptual clarification of the subject of subjectivity, leadership and the concept of the National question. We shall thereafter examine the issues of subjective approaches of some leaders of different sections of the country in tackling the national question and thereafter draw our conclusions.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Subjectivity:** Solomon Robert (2005), has defined subjectivity as the condition of being a subject: that is the quality of possessing perspectives, experiences, feelings beliefs, desires and power. Furthermore, subjectivity has been used as an explanation for what influences and informs people's judgments about truth or reality. The concept of subjectivity equally has to do with the collection of the perceptions, experiences, expectations, personal or cultural understanding and beliefs specific to a person, or group. In most instances it is used in contrast to the concept of objectivity which borders on truth or reality, which is free of any individual or group influence.

According to Walsh (1967) objective knowledge comes as a result of a method that does not depend on the personal idiosyncrasies and private personal feeling of those engaged in the production of such knowledge. This presupposes that subjective knowledge comes from a method in which the personal feeling and perhaps interest are predominant.

Subjectivity is said to be inherent in research and interpretation because according to Passmore (1974), whenever an academic enquiry begins, the inquirer certainly has beliefs, expectations, and interests. Furthermore, subjectivity in sources and accounts is evident solely because they only record such facts as appeared sufficiently interesting to record, so that sources will certainly contain only facts that fit in with a preconceived theory.

Almost in all the fields in history and social sciences, there are elements of subjectivity in the sources researchers handle and even in the way they interpret the materials they have so selected. A researcher, conducting research on subjects of socio-economic or political development of a society, who has to select from a mass of materials confronting him, is necessarily committed to having judgments and ascribing relative importance and significance to them according to perceptions and preconceived convictions.

No wonder Gardiner (1972), has argued that there can be no such thing as a purely "value free" account in history and general social discourse, since language that is adapted to the description of what people feel, think, and do necessarily reflects the element of evaluation and appraisal that pervades the whole texture of human life and experience (p. 433).

Given the above conceptual reality, tackling national issues that relate to the Nigerian question has indeed been a difficult task for the Nigerian leadership since independence. The various leaders that have steered the affairs of the country seem to have been driven by subjective sectional pursuits and priorities, thereby jeopardizing the unity and socio-economic advancement of the country.

**Leadership:** There abound different definitions of leadership. However, leadership could be said to be an accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistance as well as a combination of strategy and character. In this regard the importance of character over strategy for leadership cannot be overemphasized. It is a process of social influence by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organisation in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent. Consequently, a leader is expected to demonstrate qualities, which embrace but not limited to good character, vision, tact, prudence, and ability to lead by example. This is because people basically ascribe leadership to those who they feel can most enable them achieve important goals or objectives (Ogeidi,

2012). Leadership therefore, is a body of people who lead and direct the activities of a group towards a shared goal.

History has shown that no nation of the world grew and enjoyed steady development in virtually all spheres of its national life without experiencing good and selfless political leadership. This is largely because qualitative growth and development has always been an outcome of good governance.

Achebe (1984), contended that the root cause of the Nigerian predicament should be laid squarely at the foot of bad leadership. *The trouble with Nigeria*, Achebe argued, is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. Achebe posits that there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character, the Nigerian land, climate, water, air, or anything else, rather the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to their responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership. Similarly, Ihonvbere (n.d.) averred that African leaders have thrown good governance over-board as they busied themselves with the construction of dubious ideologies, personality cults and looting the treasury. This according to him, is coupled with economic mismanagement, rabid corruption, irresponsible political behaviour and squander mania, the near abandonment of the state by its very custodians weakened it and made it largely irrelevant to the daily lives of the people. Such a state Ihonvbere further posited has no room for the rule of law, social justice, human rights, and constitutionalism. All these were sacrificed on the altar of political expediency, the hunger for power and the arrogance of a political elite with only a tenuous relationship to real production.

Consequently, the state of Nigeria's contemptible socio-economic development has been a direct consequence of the actions and inactions of the leadership class that has managed the affairs and wealth of the country since independence. As it were the development of Nigeria since independence has always been in the hands of a political leadership class that showed more interest in private, group or ethnic gains than in the general wellbeing of the Nigerian state.

### **The National Question**

According to the Marxist-Leninist theory the national question crises with the struggle of nations and peoples for national liberation and for the most favourable conditions possible for their social development. This is viewed against the backdrop that the most important aspect of the national question is the unification of the working people, regardless of their nationality, in the struggle against all forms of opposition and for a progressive social system. However, Stalin notes that the solution of the national question is possible only in connection with the historical conditions taken in their development.

As it were, the national question in Nigeria arose from the diverse characters of Nigeria as a plural and multi-ethnic society. This is as a result of the imbalance created by the amalgamation in 1914 of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria by the British Colonial administration for their economic gains. The accompanying challenges is manifest as the few political elites that have access to the privileges of the state manipulate the structure at the expense of the larger population. The inability of the elites to meet the needs of the citizens, made manifest in the exclusion, domination, lack of development, marginalization, inequality, injustice and insecurity and protecting the lives and welfare of the various ethnic groups in the country have exacerbated and deepened the national question.

The heightened and continual political and ethnic crises have raised the questions of whether Nigeria should continue as a country or disintegrate. Nigerian nationalist and early political leaders from the country's inception had expressed their resentment for bringing the different ethnic groups under one umbrella to be called Nigeria. For example, late Obafemi Awolowo has said that "Nigeria is not a nation: it is a mere geographical expression" (Awolowo, 1947:47). In the same vein, Abubakar Tafawa Bewlewa re-echoed the same feeling when he asserted that "since the amalgamation . . . in 1914, Nigeria

has existed as one country only on paper . . . it is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only the British intention for it" (Belewa, 1947, p. 208).

This feeling of doubt about the unity of Nigeria, was not only expressed by Nigerian early nationalist and political leaders, some British colonial officials shared the same sentiments (Chimee, 2008). For instance, Alan Burns (1954), stated that there is no Nigerian nation, no Nigerian language, and no Nigerian tradition and that the very name was invented by the British to describe a country inhabited by a medley of formally warring tribes having no common culture and only united when they are governed by a single power.

The dictionary meaning of the word or concept of nation underscores the positions and arguments of the aforementioned Nigerian leaders and foreigners. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines nation as "a country considered as a group of people with same language, culture and history, who live in a particular area under one government: an independent nation". Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus, equally defines nation, as "a people of common territory, descent, culture, language or history; people united under a single government" Going by the foregoing definitions, Nigeria do not qualify or fit into the concept of a nation, given the fact that Nigeria has divergent cultures, languages, descent and history among the different ethnic groups subsumed in Nigeria.

#### **Historical Antecedents: The British Role**

The British has been implicated in creating the conglomeration of the divergent entities that make up Nigeria, especially in the events that led to the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, and after. The varied peoples were brought together to serve the imperial interest of the British by sheer force and not necessarily as a result of the desire of the people to develop existing linkages of pre-colonial inter-group relations. The different groups and tribes were not made to embrace one another as a people having a common interest and destiny.

Ademoyega (1981) blamed the British for the Nigeria's political problems. He notes that it stems from the carefree manner in which they took over, administered and abandoned the government and the peoples of Nigeria. He also sees the unwillingness of the British administration to make efforts to bind the country together and unite the heterogeneous groups of people as part of the problems that bedeviled the country at independence. He further notes that the evil that outlived British administration was political non-advancement, whereby they forcibly grouped the political state of Nigeria along ethnic groups.

For Kirk-Greene (1974), the British colonial masters were responsible because of their political and fiscal policies aimed at satisfying their administrative and economic desires without regard to the people. Thus Madiebo (1980), noted the determination of the colonial masters to ensure an uninterrupted economic exploitation of the country even after independence. This they achieved only by ensuring that the effective political and military powers were left in the hands of that part of the country they could trust.

Consequently, Richard's constitution of 1946 divided the country into unequal three regions in line with the constitutional provision of the Federal system of government. It consisted of the Northern Region with the Hausa/Fulani majority, the Eastern Region with the Igbo and the Yoruba in the Western Region. These were the three major ethnic groups that dominated the political scene of Nigeria, an indication that the Colonial Government did not work against ethnicity in the country.

Shortly after independence, the struggle to consolidate the legacy of political and military dominance of a section of Nigeria over the rest of the Federation began with increased intensity. Madiebo (1980) also asserted that the political struggle and the consequent drifting apart of the various people of Nigeria went on over the years unchecked to an extent that the Federal Parliament was reduced to an inter-tribal

battle field. For him, the three major tribes in Nigeria; Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa were fraught with intolerance, ethnicity and suspicion. These factors were to further polarize the country, especially as issues of national interest were given sectional interpretation. Apparently, Nigeria's problem was derived from the tension which arose as a result of competition and hostilities of the larger ethnic groups.

With the granting of independence Nigeria was now beset by settlements of political problems which stemmed from the lop-sided nature of the political divisions of the country and the type of the lasting Federal Constitution and the spirit in which it operated. These factors were, however, proved to be strong factors of disunity largely because of the British divisive role in the colonial era and the inability of Nigerian leadership during the post-colonial era to stem the tide of disunity. The anxiety and struggle for power and concerns for the distribution of resources brought about misunderstanding and strained working relationship among the ethnic groups. The country was engrossed with different types of problems, following the marginalization and domination of the minority group, by the majority and the agitations that arose therefrom. The regimes in the regions brought corruption, nepotism and ethnic sentiments into the country. With these, came thuggery, killing and rigging of elections to the Federal Legislature in 1964 and into the Western House in 1965. The Tiv war against the oppressive Sarduana's Government of Northern Nigerian showed no sign of abating (Ademoyega, 1981).

One of the acts of the British in achieving their agenda was the creation of the Sabon Gari, a phenomenon targeted at separating the Southern visitors from their Northern hosts, all in an effort to further isolate the two groups. This deepened the division between the two groups and engendered distrust and mutual suspicion, making integration difficult. In the area of education, the colonial educational policy of the colonial administration ensured divergence and no form of commonality. This was to shield the north from the Southern rapid western educational exposure (Olusanya, 1967).

These policies and deliberate efforts at accentuating the primordial divergence among the different ethnic groups, especially between the northern and southern tribes mid-wived a crop of nationalist leaders from different backgrounds, fighting different causes while pretending to fight for a common agenda, or build a United Nation State. The British has therefore structured the country in a skewed way that has created political domination, disunity, minority fears, religious intolerance, unfavourable fiscal policies and lack of development. This situation has given rise to crisis of state and therefore the national question.

### **National Problems Arising from the National Question**

From the inception of the country, myriad hydra-headed problems have arisen, threatening the existence of Nigeria and hampering the peace and overall development of the country, this is in spite of the enormous human and material resources and potentials of the country. These problems include, fears of the minority groups, fiscal policy crises, tribal favouritism and nepotism, religious uprisings, and emergence of ethnic protests, movements and militias.

At the verge of independence, the people of the Niger Delta had raised serious fears of their minority status and possible marginalization and exploitation in a Nigerian state. These avid fears of the Niger Delta led to the inauguration of the Willink's Commission of 1958, whose unsatisfactory report of 1959 made the people more apprehensive in the Nigerian state that emerged in 1960. The people's apprehension became accentuated following the coup d'etat of 1966. The region's people feared the possibility of their oil potentials being hijacked by the majority tribes, leading to Isaac Boro's insurgency and declaration of a Niger Delta Republic in 1966. In the Middle belt of Nigeria, the minority tribes of that region embarked on several riots, like the Tiv riots, all in protest of marginalization in a Nigerian State.

The fiscal policy of Nigerian state has been source of discontent among the different sections of the country. Oyovbaire (1985) has argued that fiscal policies had been a recurring and topical question that has generated political strain in the history of Nigeria. Fiscal and financial operations had largely fuelled the conduct of debate on the Nigerian question. Fiscal formulas of the Nigerian State which feature fiscal centralism in a federation has been the underlying fiscal instrument of the Nigerian state for the marginalization and exploitation of the oil producing minorities, leading to the agitation for resource control and the attendant crises.

The structure of the country that divided the country into three unequal parts along tribal lines of three major tribes, leaving other numerous tribes as minorities underlie the rivalry, mutual distrust among the majority tribes and fears of the minorities. While the major tribes engage in mutual rivalry and fear of domination, the minorities are left with fears of marginalization and exploitation, as well as, agitation for attention and equity. Pilkington (1958) had offered that “the colonial division of Nigeria into regions and each with a separate ethnic group dominating all others was a slant to unit” (p.219). It was the fear of domination of the North by the South after the January 15, 1966 coup d’état in which Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, a southern Igbo emerged as Head of State that exacerbated the fears of the north. This development brought about the counter coup and the events that led to the Nigerian civil war.

This has heightened the state of ethnic and religious intolerance, insecurity and strife, class division, lack of trust, political crisis, amongst others. According to Adejo (2004) between 1953 and 1972 over 17 major religious conflicts took place between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. In 1982, there were the Jos Crisis, the Reinhard Bornke riot of 1991 in Kano, the Gideon Akaluka crisis in 1994, among others. The carnage was so devastating that it prompted reprisal attacks in the southern parts of the country. Among the Muslims, there have been conflicts between different sects of Islamic movement. In 1980, the country witnessed the maitatsine crisis, and the Shiite attacks of 1996 and 1997. This conflict started in Kano and gradually spilled over to other northern states like Kaduna, Bauchi and Katsina. Other religious disturbances experienced in the country especially in the Northern part include, the Sharia violence, Bin Ladin fanatics, Boko Haram and Jihad threats.

These fears have led to ethnic formations such as Afenifere, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Arewa Consultative Forum. The deep lines of division are equally seen in the Nigerian legal system. The declaration of Sharia law and the insistence of its practice and implementation in most Northern States means operation of two legal systems in one country. Furthermore, the national question has become most manifest in the emergence of contemporary protest movements and rebellion against the Nigerian state. At the inception of Nigeria, beginning from Isaac Boro’s protest and insurgency, Nigeria has witnessed various protest movements. Such protest movements and rebellions include the Biafran secession, Tiv riots of 1960s, the OPC of the Yoruba, MASSOB/IPOB of the Igbos, MOSSOP of the Ogoni, MEND and Militancy of the Niger Deltas, to current Boko Haram insurgency and killer herdsmen. The Nigerian State has not known peace, unity and true development. These protest movements are expression of deep discontent, and mistrust arising from the obvious differences among the different sections, groups and tribes that have been forced by history to co-exist under the umbrella of the Nigerian State. These problems and realities of the Nigerian State are what have kept the national question unanswered.

### **Attempts at Addressing the National Question**

It is the view of this paper that, the national question has remained unanswered and unresolved as a result of the subjective interpretation of the question and the parochial approaches adopted by leaders of the different sections of the Nigerian State, in addressing the National question.

During the first republic, the founding fathers, with the British who laid the foundation of the Nigerian polity, seeing the diverse nature of the state, fostered unity in diversity through the regional arrangement. This period saw some genuine development at the regional levels before the corruption at

the centre, tribalism and religious sensitivity marred the first regime. The various regions pursued the development of their natural endowments and potentials. The Northern region became producers and exporters of groundnut, as well as, hides and skin. The Western region concentrated in the production and exportation of cocoa while the Eastern region engaged in production and exportation of palm produce (palm oil and kernel). Through these huge agricultural activities, the various regions recorded great strides in physical and social infrastructural development of their various regions. For instance, in the Western region, the great Cocoa house was built, as well as the establishment of the first television station in Africa and introduction of free education.

The politics of the centre which was fraught with corruption, nepotism, tribalism, religious insensitivity brought tension in the polity and marred the peace and progress of the state. The subjective interpretation of the January 1966 group and counter coup by the leaders of the north, South and eastern sections plunged the country into 30 months of a bloody civil war in which the Igbos were nearly exterminated. Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi emerged as the first military head of state and introduced a unitary system through decree 34. The move was interpreted by the North as an agenda of the Igbos to control the civil service and Nigerian polity which elicited reactions of up-rising in North that led to the pogrom of the Igbos and the counter-coup that led to death of Major General Ironsi. It was the events that followed, which eventually led to the Nigerian Civil War.

Tocqueville (1964) had offered that “a long war always almost reduces nations to the wretched alternative of being abandoned to ruin by defeat or to despotism by success” (p.86). This was true of the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War as both sides experienced the import of this averment. The Igbos are yet to recover fully from the effects of the war. The long period of military rule in Nigeria, headed mostly by the north witnessed entrenchment of unitary institutions, especially in fiscal policies, while paying lip service to federal arrangement and practice in the drive to control the oil resources of Southern Niger Delta. The military intervention in the Nigerian politics from 1966 brought the expansion of the financial hegemony of the central government in Nigeria.

Adaleje cited in (Azaiki, 2003) observes that; “the centralizing imperatives of military rule, the fragmentation and proliferation of states; the exigencies created by 1967-1970 civil war, the federal government control of the huge revenue from the oil industry, all combine to entrench and ensure financial supremacy of the central government”. The short lived second republic under Alhaji Shehu Shagari of northern extraction adopted completely the structure and policies of the British and military without any attempt at restructuring the country, or changing the national policies that gave rise to the national question. The military leaders who took over from Alhaji Shehu Shagari, are from Northern Nigeria. They pursued policies based on ‘even’ development of the states and local governments they created to be sustained with the oil resources of the minorities of the Niger Delta. This policy is antithetical to the practice of true federalism and only a subjective approach of the Northern military leaders in answering the national question.

At the end of the military rule in 1999, the military had drafted and handed a constitution over to the civilian regime containing their views and decisions as to how the country should be run. The military leaders’ views and interpretation of the national question is therefore subsisting in running the affairs of this country to date. The eight years of rule of civilian administration under General Olusegun Obasanjo merely towed the lines and structures set down by the military. Fiscal federalism which would have firmly made Nigeria a true Federal State was jettisoned, still leaving the national question unanswered.

Dr Goodluck Jonathan from the Niger Delta South-South Nigeria who ruled the country for six years did not equally record much achievement, in the issue of answering the national question. The over bearing nature of the people who brought him to power in “cage” and the nature of the constitution of the National Assembly did not enable him to effect any significant changes in the polity. The report of

the National Conference he convoked even with the “no go area” that would have made some difference has been jettisoned by the present administration of the country led by President Muhammadu Buhari. These situations are responsible for the state of affairs in the country where disunity, lack of true development, religious unrest, frequent mass protests, heightened insecurity, militancy and ethnic protest movements and militias, has become the order of our days.

### Conclusion

The foregoing has shown clearly that the faulty foundation of Nigerian state structured by the British colonial masters for their imperial interest, and without consideration of the diverse nature and history of various ethnic entities they constituted into a country, engendered the national question, in the drive to develop their sections of the country with the oil money without any sincere attempt of answering the nagging national question. It has also been shown that the national leaders after independence, especially, the military had pursued sectional interests in the interpretation and tackling of the national question.

It is our considered opinion that tackling the problems associated with the national question such as disunity, minority fears, problem of fiscal policy, religious intolerance, insecurity, official corruption and ethnic protests, movements, and insurgency can only succeed if the leaders and the people of the different sections or ethnic nationalities of the country come together in true sovereign national conference and agree on how to live together with a new constitution. Only a truly consultative and participatory process can put the national question up for democratic debate and negotiation without resort to violence. Such a consultative process could be utilized to mobilize and educate the people politically, establish new rules of politics, reconstruct institutions, and redefine the foundations of governance.

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