

## **Ethnocentrism in Multicultural Society: Intrigues, Challenges and Way Forward in the Nigerian Society**

**Confidence Chikwe Anele**

Department of Educational Foundations  
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria  
anelechiwe@gmail.com +2348072541984

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the challenges of ethnocentrism in a multicultural Nigerian society with the view to proffering solutions to the exacerbated issues orchestrated by the ethnocentric disposition. The paper adopted qualitative approach where seminar papers, articles, documents; interviews were all examined in relation to the issues of ethnocentrism and multiculturalism in Nigeria. The paper, therefore affirms that ethnocentrism poses a serious concern to national development and unity in Nigeria, hence, recommends the adoption of salad bowl model which promotes social relationship in the society. The study further recommends that prominent cultural traits of individual cultures in Nigeria should be adopted and adapted into the school curriculum in the school system.

*Keywords:* challenges, ethnocentrism, intrigues, multicultural, society

### **INTRODUCTION**

In every human race, there are divers people with different beliefs, cultures, norms, values, folkways, languages etc. that tend to distinguished them from others. The totality of ways of life is commonly referred to as culture. For instance, in Nigeria, there are three major ethnic groups with distinct cultural heritage. These ethnic groups are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Apart from these three major ethnic groups, there are also other minor ethnic groups in Nigeria with distinct cultural traits. The distinctiveness of the varied cultural groups sometimes creates a feeling of superiority among these groups, some, believing that their cultural values are superlative or important than others. This disposition and worldview towards others have led to the practice of “Ethnocentrism”, which has continued to set a center stage for acrimony, spirit of secession, religious intolerance, divisiveness, conflict, or war in Nigerian society. The cultural variations and intermixing commonly referred to as multiculturalism or cultural pluralism and the concept of ethnocentrism in no small measure have continued to be a bane or cog in the wheel of developmental progress of any multicultural society, Nigeria not exempted.

Hence, this paper therefore seeks to examine the issues and challenges of ethnocentrism in multiculturalism with particular reference to the Nigerian society, with the view to proffering solutions to its exacerbated issues bedeviling cultural pluralistic society such as Nigeria. The study adopted qualitative research approach where secondary data were used as the main sources of data collection. The secondary data were collected from published journals, articles, seminar papers, interview, documents and periodicals. The data collected from secondary sources were used to confirm and support the findings.

### **Concept of Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism, a concept derived from cultural lexicon has been viewed differently by different scholars of cultural studies. The concept was advanced by Williams Graham Sumner (Thomas, 2005). According to Levine (2015), the term moved from Social Science

Theory into common English usage during the 20th Century. Levine agreed that the term was invented in 1906 by an American Sociologist Williams Graham Sumner who conceptualized the word as a means of promoting solidarity within what he called “ingroup and antagonism toward “out groups” Graham introduced the concept in his book entitled “Folkways” Published in 1906. Uriah (2019) explaining the concept asserts that “ethno” means race, nation or people while “centric” means centre, hence, ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own race, nation or group is the best. It is a person's belief that his own group or culture is superior to all others and treats other people's culture with suspicion and some degree of hatred, hostilities or disdain.

In the view of Benjamin (2008), ethnocentrism is the habit of seeing from the point of view of one's own group, and that it is sometimes, described as the “Cardinal Sin of Comparative Method” It is the habit of studying and making judgments about other societies in terms of one's cultural assumptions or bias. Ethnocentric habit can be expressed in such phrases as “Chosen People” “Progressive” “Superior Race” “True Believer” and by epithets like “Foreign Devils” “Infidels” “Heathen” “Backward People” “Barbarians” “Savages” “Underdeveloped” Etc. (Benjamin, 2008). Ethnocentrist often believes that their culture is the best in all aspects even in the face of contradictory evidences. This prejudice often brings about conflict, confusion, hatred and suspicion in the society.

Ethnocentrism is a type of prejudice which makes one believe and behave in a way that one's own culture is right and better than others. It is a tendency of judging the goodness or badness of other people's cultures. Virtually, all cultures often believe that their culture is the best in all aspect (Ahamfula, 2008). This has resulted to so many violent crises in a multicultural society.

**Multiculturalism:** The concept of multiculturalism is a compound word, consisting of multi (many) and cultural pluralism (many culture). Multiculturalism is the way in which a society deals with cultural diversity both at the national and at the community level.

Sociologically, multiculturalism assumes that society as a whole benefits from increased diversity through the harmonious co-existence of different cultures. Multiculturalism can take place on a nation-wide scale or within a nation or communities. It may occur naturally through immigrations or artificially when jurisdictions of different cultures are combined through legislative decree as in the case of Nigeria where the various ethnic groups, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other minor groups were amalgamated in 1914 by their colonial masters (British). The proponents of multiculturalism believe that people should retain at least some features of their traditional cultures while the opponent said that multiculturalism threatens the social orders by diminishing the identity and influence of the predominant culture. These are issues embedded in the concept of multiculturalism.

### **Types of Ethnocentrism**

According to Thomas (2005) recent cross-cultural measurement of ethnocentrism has suggested that there are two kinds of ethnocentrism

- Intra Group Ethnocentrism
- Inter Group Ethnocentrism

The Intra Group Ethnocentrism occurs when there is strong belief that an individual culture is better and should be preferred to other culture within multicultural society. For instance, in Nigeria as a nation, there are various cultural groups such as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, etc. When any of these groups preferred their individual cultures within the group, it is referred to as intra-group ethnocentrism.

On the other hands, when a group has a strong devotion and preference for its own group and hatred against members of the out group, for example, if Nigeria and India have a strong hatred against each other due to cultural differences, it is referred to as Inter Group Ethnocentrism.

### **Characteristics of Multicultural Society**

- It is characterized by people of different races, ethnicities and nationalities living together in the same community.
- People share their unique cultural ways of life, languages, tradition and behaviour with others.
- Characteristics of multiculturalism often spread into the community public schools where curriculum is crafted to introduce young ones to the qualities and benefits of cultural diversity.

Robert (2020) in his article titled "*What is multiculturalism? Definition, Theories and Examples*" avers that multiculturalism describes the manner in which a given society deals with cultural diversity. It expresses the view that society is enriched by preserving, respecting and even encouraging cultural diversity.

### **Theories of Multiculturalism**

According to Robert (2020) the two primary theories or model of multiculturalism are:

- The Melting Pot Theory
- The Salad Bowl Theory

#### **The Melting Pot Theories**

This is a multiculturalism theory that emphasizes that immigrant groups will tend to "melt together" by abandoning their individual cultures and eventually becoming fully assimilated into the predominate society. For example, in 1782, French-American immigrant J. Hector St. John DeCrevecoeur wrote that in America "individuals of all nations are melting into a new race of men, whose labours and prosperity will one day cause great changes in the world"

However, the Melting Pot Model has been criticized for reducing diversity, causing people to lose their traditions and for having to be enforced through government policy. For examples, the US India reorganization Act of 1934 forced the assimilation of nearly 350, 000 indigenous people into American society without any regard for diversity of their heritage and lifestyles (Robert, 2020).

Also, the French assimilation policy introduced in French West African colony during the colonial period is a prime example of melting pot theory. In Nigeria today, many of the regions cultural heritage are shrinking into extinction due the obsession of foreign culture.

#### **The Salad Bowl Theory**

This Multiculturalism theory stresses that in a heterogeneous society, people can co-exist but retain at least some of their unique characteristics or their traditional culture rather than coalescing into a single homogenous culture. This implies that diversity can exist but individuals or group can still maintain their unique features that they are known for. The metaphor of salad bowl was coined in 1959 by historian Carl Degler who sought a better image of cultural change. For example, in the United States, New York city, with its many unique ethnic communities like "Little India" and even encourage cultural diversity :Little Odessa" and "China Town" is considered an example of a salad bowl society. The salad theory emphasizes that, it is not necessary for people to give up their cultural heritage in

order to be considered members of the dominant society. For example, African Americans do not need to stop observing Kwanzaa (a secular festival observed by many African Americans from 26 December to 1 January as a celebration of their cultural heritage and traditional values) and start celebrating Christmas in order to be considered Americans.

However, on the negative side, the cultural differences encourage by salad bowl model can divide a society resulting in prejudice and discrimination. In addition, critics point to a 2007 study conducted by American political scientist, Robert Putnam showing that people living in salad bowl multicultural communities were less likely to vote or volunteer for community improvement project. This is a case in Nigeria where general project meant for the public good are not taken seriously due to diversity in cultures and the question of who will benefit more among divers group.

### **Challenges of Ethnocentrism in a Multicultural Society: The Case of the Nigerian Society**

The challenges of ethnocentrism in a multicultural society cannot be overlooked. This is because ethnocentrism which is the feeling that ones cultural norms, values or way of life is better than others has continued to be a hotspot to many problems bedeviling any multicultural society. In Nigeria, naturally, every human being has that ambivalent mental tendency or consciousness to secure his interest first or to identify with his or her ethnic group (Etuk, 2022).The challenges of ethnocentrism in Nigeria as a multicultural society has continued to rear its ugly heads in all spheres of the nation's life ranging from politics, religion, economy, education inter alia. No wonder, Etuk (2020) laments that ethnocentrism has remained a festering sore manifesting its devastating impact on Nigeria socio-political and economic development. Thus, the challenges of ethnocentrism can be delineated as follows:

1. It leads to genocide
2. It promotes obnoxious policy of segregation( apartheid)
3. It engenders slavery
4. Promotion of Violent conflict/war
5. It leads to false assumptions
6. It serves as a hindrance to learning other culture
7. It promotes discrimination in employment, appointments, allocation of projects etc

### **Genocide**

Ethnocentric beliefs and action can lead to most detrimental effects such as genocide. Genocide is the intentional destruction of a people in whole or in part (Wikipedia). The term was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944.It is a deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying a group or a nation. Ethnocentrism can lead to mass killing of people (Genocide). For instance, the Nazi Germans under the leadership of Adolf Hitler were under the impression that the Jewish people were inferior and this led to Holocaust. (Genocide) in which about six million persons were killed ([www.annefrank.org.go-in-dept](http://www.annefrank.org.go-in-dept)). The motive of this mass killing is associated with Anti-Semitism, racism or ethnocentrism. This killing occurred around 30th January, 1933 – 8thMay, 1945 ([www.britanica.com](http://www.britanica.com)).In Nigeria, there are a lot of mass killings which stem from cultural differences. For instance, many lives have been lost through herdsmen and farmers clash. According to Sahara reporters, herdsmen have killed 4000 farmers in south west Nigeria since 2015 ([saharareporters.com](http://saharareporters.com)) Similarly, This Day live.com also reported that herdsmen killed 2,539 in 654 attacks between 2017 and May 2,2020.The author of the

report Jose Luis Bazan, an independent researcher and analyst based in Brussel, Belgium, said, Nigerians are suffering widespread and systemic terrorist attacks by mainly Boko Haram, the ISIL-aligned Islamic State West Africa province (ISWAP), Fulani militias, Ansaru. It is pertinent to note that most of the issues that cause conflict or violent crisis among various ethnic groups in Nigeria is directly or indirectly related to cultural ethnocentrism. It is in the nature of each cultural group to hold most of her cultural contents as superior and to repudiate those of others as inferior (O'Donohue in Chinwuba, 2020). This is the epicenter of Nigerian's case.

### **Policy of Segregation (Apartheid)**

This is a policy of racial segregation. The Apartheid (1948-1994) in South African was the racial segregation under the All-White government of South Africa which dictated that non-white South Africans were to live in separate areas from the Whites and use separate public facilities. This is orchestrated by ethnocentric disposition, because the White felt that their culture was superior to the Blacks, hence, the policy of segregation. The policy also dictated where South Africans could live, work, the type of education to acquire, whether they could vote or not, who they could associate with. They classified South Africans as Bantu (Black African). This policy continued until Nelson Mandela changed the narrative through his emergence as South Africa president.

In the same vein, there are a lot of segregations in Nigeria as a result of ethnic considerations. Chinwuba (2020) states that in Nigeria, states create social inequality that provokes conflict through its practices that recognize some ethnic cultural contents more than those of others. This disposition is more crystal in the area of project allocations, political appointments, distribution of resources all undertoned in cultural ethnocentrism and ethnic bias inter alien. According to Business day Report, (2017) the former President of Nigeria, Muhammed Buhari appointed 80 Northerners out of 100 members of his cabinet. This raises a question in the mind of all rational people of what need for the enunciation of the federal character principle, which stresses that appointment into government offices should be done based on the equal representation of the various regions of the country. This principle came into being in 1979 which the constitution then captured. It stands to reason that the appointment of personnel into any federal establishment or agency or as a minister is to be done to reflect federal colouration. The total neglect of this principle is tantamount to apartheid mentality exacerbated by ethnocentric disposition. Today, some languages viewed as major cultures are incorporated into the school curriculum while others seen as minor language group are neglected. This is ethnocentrism under the guise of common nation. No wonder Rotimi (1996) laments that the problems of Nigeria ethnic minorities have resulted directly from specific contradictions and tensions in the evolution and operation of the Nigeria federal system.

### **Slavery**

Ethnocentrism can also promote slavery. Many who believe that their own culture is better than others always take advantage of any opportunity to enslave those who may need their support and who is from the opposite culture. They see such people as second class citizens whose cultural heritage is inferior to theirs. For example, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, those who practice Caste System known as "OSU" are usually described as "Second Class" or "Half-Humans" or "impure humans" because of ethnocentric belief. Many of these people are turned into slavery to serve the village "gods" throughout their life. Ogbonda (2016) asserts that the Aros in South Eastern part of Nigeria are regarded as inferior, unclean, and are highly segregated even in marriages. This disposition is informed by the belief of the ethnocentrist

which hinges on the principle of cultural superiority, hence, leading to servitude of those perceived to possess inferior culture in a cross-cultural society.

### **Violent Conflict**

Ethnocentrism may lead to situations that are terrible like death and war in a given country. When communities view others from a negative perspective, it may lead to animosity that may cause ethnic or tribal clashes or violent conflict that may end up leading to several injury and death cases within the society. This is due to the fact that ethnocentrism closes the minds of individuals from understanding the way of life and cultures of other people (Ivypanda, 2022). In Nigeria, violent conflict has erupted several times in the areas of religious bigotry, politics, etc. due to the issue of ethnocentric beliefs occasioned or caused by cultural pluralism or multiculturalism. The case of herders-farmers clash has been observed by many to have an ethnocentric undertone. These conflicts resulted in over 800 deaths by 2015 ([www.en.m.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org))

### **False Assumption**

According to Ivypanda (2022), ethnocentrism is a bad practice because it leads to individuals making false assumptions about other cultures. Ethnocentrism leads people to make generalizations about the customs and cultures of other people that are not true. This leads to a false judgment of others using their own ethnic lens as a yardstick, as a result, individuals may end up making harmful judgments concerning other communities.

### **Secession**

Secession, which means the belief or tendency of breaking away from others, is one of the effects of ethnocentrism. When a group feels that their values, cultures, and ways of life are not in tandem with other groups, the desire to secede (breakaway) looms. This is the topical case of Nigeria's society where the three major ethnic groups—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—look at their amalgamations of 1914 by the colonial masters as a false marriage. This is orchestrated and romanced by cultural differences among the varied ethnic groups. This disposition has stimulated agitations from some groups to ask for secession as they feel that there is no correlation in terms of cultural heritage with the other groups. However, if sentiments and attitudes of cultural superiority will be stripped and common identity, aspirations, equality, justice, and a strong adherence to cultural relativism among groups resurface, the desire for secession may not arise.

### **Developmental Retardation**

This is another challenge that results from ethnocentric beliefs. When a group feels that their culture is superior to the other group that it co-exists with, it makes the minority group feel not obligated to contribute towards the developmental effort in the community. This is premised on the belief that the dominant groups are the people who should be in charge. This, to a large extent, retards development since development needs joint or collaborative effort. However, Ivypanda (2022) observes that despite the negative effects of ethnocentrism, it may be good for the society especially, if practised in the form of patriotism. For example, a person being proud of their own country may be ready to fight for their country, tribe, or nation. This was a case in Nigeria, during the colonial era when people like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, and other Nigerians' nationalists resisted the policy of assimilation brought by the colonialist which aimed at the imposition of western culture on Africans. This is a big lesson contrary to an ambivalent mentality of Nigerians of today in terms of cultural safeguard and intermixing.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnocentrism as a cultural terminology refers to the tendencies of people believing that their own race, culture or ethnic group is better than others. Such individuals measure and judge all the other culture or ethnic groups using their culture as a standard. Multiculturalism on the other hand refers to the presence of several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a given society. It is also referred to as cultural pluralism or pluralistic society. However, Ethnocentrism in multiculturalism has some challenges or effects, such as, facilitating violent conflict, retardation of development among others. Despite the effect of ethnocentrism, it can be good in promoting patriotism and solidarity among groups or nation. Suffice to say, that in Nigeria, as multicultural society, ethnocentrism has promoted dysfunctional tendency, developmental retardation, disunity amongst others.

## **Way Forward**

The following recommendations are suggested as a way to minimize cultural ethnocentrism among Nigerians as well as improve cultural tolerance within Nigeria context.

1. There should be an emphasis on the Salad Bowl Model which stresses that all groups should maintain their cultural heritage while having regard for others culture in intermixing associations. This will encourage cultural tolerance within multicultural society.
2. There should be adequate legislations to prohibit cultural intolerance as well as effective implementation mechanism, so as to discourage extreme ethnocentric attitude but enthroned relativist culture among the people.
3. The prominent cultural traits of various groups should be harness and synchronized into national culture which can be adopted and adapted into the school curriculum.
4. The national culture and individualistic culture of distinct groups should be allowed to co-exist in the atmosphere free from bitter rancor and acrimony.
5. Appointment of leaders should be strictly premised on the basis of cultural groupings to give all a sense of belonging in a multicultural society.
6. The government should invest in culture through training and retraining of cultural scholars and building of institute for cultural studies.

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