



Students and Nation Building in Nigeria

B.A.C. Obiefuna

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

GSM - +2348033920835

E-mail: nwaozoaku@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Looking at nation building as “the desire and effort to achieve unity among multi-ethnic groups that make up a state”; the youth have a lot to contribute in Nigeria nation state. This paper examines and highlights Nigeria’s variegated character of linguistic, religious, traditional, and cultural pluralism and the need for and possibility of nation building with the proposal that the students have some contributions to make. The paper recommends that tertiary institutions’ students, who are in the prime of their youth can contribute to nation building through observation, reading, listening to news, formal and informal dialogue, being part of the National Youth Service Corps and other civic and responsible organizations among others.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria belongs to Nigerians; Nigerian belongs to Nigeria. Nigeria makes Nigerians; Nigerians make Nigeria. What Nigerians make Nigeria, it becomes, and what Nigeria makes Nigerians they become. This means that Nigeria is Nigerians and Nigerians collectively is Nigeria. But there was no Nigeria and there were no Nigerians. Both Nigeria and Nigerians are fabrications of history. Nigeria is a concept coined by the colonial British administrators that followed the 1885 Treaty for the Partition of Africa to expand their sphere of influence. Before the advent of colonialism, the component parts of today's Nigeria existed independently. They were basic communities that were basically united in culture: language, religion, economy and politics. They possibly related with one another in marriage, trade or even war. In fact Burns (1978) has it that:

Nigeria came into being as a single political unit on January 1, 1914, when the former Colony and Protectorate of Southern

Students and Nation Building in Nigeria

Nigeria (which included Lagos) was amalgamated with the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria to form the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. (p. 16).

Without going into the problem of the person that coined the name, Nigeria, it has to be pointed out that the coinage was neither from nor to the advantage of those who inhabited the geographical space called Nigeria. It was clearly from and to the advantage of the colonizers especially their exploitative arm, the Royal Niger Company, which made the political economy of Nigeria to be peripheral, capitalist, dependent, and tied to the apron string of the core capitalist economy of the colonizers. Of course a people's economy and their politics go together. To the level they are economically independent, to that level they are politically independent and vice versa. Many African countries, including Nigeria, were not economically independent as at the time of their so-called Independence, as Nigeria had on October 1, 1960. it was only a change of flag. It was flag independence, one may be right to say.

Coleman (1958) noted that "until the turn of the nineteenth century the areas embraced in whole or in part by the then geographical expression now named "Nigeria" were referred to by a variety of names" (p. 44). Some of such names indicate a section of Nigeria or the kind of trade going on there or the kind of colonial occupation in the area. They include Colony of Lagos, the Niger Coast Proectorate, "Sudan or Nigritia", "Hausa" states, Slave coast, Niger Empire, Central Sudan, Guinea Coast, Niger Sudan and so on. Coleman says that "the first official recognition of the name "Nigeria" appeared in the debate in the Rouse of Commons on the Royal Niger Company Bill in July, 1899" (p. 44). Two years earlier, the name appeared for the first time in the January 8, 1897 issue of the London Times. Kirk-Greene (cited by Coleman, 1958) gives relevant section of that publication that gave the argument to the economic interest of Royal Niger Company, and by extension, British government back home in far away Britain and wherever their sphere of influence extended. The Times argued that:

As the title "Royal Niger Company's Territories" is not only inconvenient to use but to some extent is misleading, it may be permissible to pagan and Mohammedan states which have been brought, by the exertions of the Royal Niger Company, within the confines of a British Protectorate, and thus need for the first time in their history to be described as an entity by some general name. to speak of them as the Central Sudan, which is the title accorded by some geographers and travelers, has the disadvantage of ignoring political frontier lines... The name "Nigeria", applying to no other portion of Africa, may, without offence to any neighbours, be accepted as co-British influence, and may serve to differentiate them equally from the British colonies of Lagos and the Niger Protectorate on the coast, and from the French territory of the Upper Niger. (p. 44).

B.A.C. Obiefuna

The above extract clearly shows that there was never a time when those who brought the peoples of Nigeria into an "agglomeration" put the interest of the people into consideration. It was an "agglomeration" of "pagan and Mohammedan" states, who, to avoid "inconvenience" and "misleading", "need for the first time in their history to be described as an entity by some general name" (that is, respecting the 1885 Treaty for the Partition of Africa), so as not to jeopardize the economic gains of the Royal Niger Company which has also politically "extended British influence" in such a way that no other interest, non-British, could encroach upon. Nigeria, therefore, is a creation of British colonial interest. The interest of the variegated character of the component parts in terms of culture, religion, language and political systems were completely ignored. That is the problem Nigeria has and will continue to have if nothing is done about it. The conglomerate that is Nigeria today was not properly prepared to be a nation. All the crises - religious, economic and political, that Nigeria has experienced and still experience for some time to come - rest on this. Hence, Patriotic/well-meaning Nigerians should strive towards building a peaceful and unified Nigeria. Students are not left out in this race. In fact, it is necessary to emphasize that the burden of nation-building lies mainly on students, students of higher and tertiary institutions precisely. That is the main thrust of this paper. But before that, it is important to look at the concepts, "Nation" and "Nation-building".

Nation and Nation-building

Nation-building rests on clear understanding of what a nation means. Like many other concepts in political analysis, it does not enjoy unanimous definition but has acceptable basic characteristics. Nanda (1989) defines a nation as:

A body of people who see part at least of their identity in terms of a single communal identity with some considerable historical continuity of union, with major elements of common culture, and with a sense of geographical location at least for a good part of those who make up the nation. (p. 225).

A little earlier than Nanda, however, Barker (cited by Palmer and Perkins, 1985) is said to have advanced the most satisfactory definition of a nation. According to him:

A nation is a body of men (and women), inhabiting a definite territory, who normally are drawn from different races, but possess a common stock of thoughts and feelings acquired and transmitted during the course of a common history; who on the whole and in the main, though more in the past than in the present, include in that common stock a common religious belief; who generally and in a rule use a common language as the vehicle of their thoughts and feelings, also cherish a common will, and accordingly form,

Students and Nation Building in Nigeria

or tend to form a separate state for the expression and realization of that will. (p. 19).

Barker must have been a strong colonialist that he talks of different races coming together to form a nation. To accommodate the elements of common religion, common language and common culture, he says they belong more to the past than the present. Be that as it may, his definition does not qualify Nigeria as a nation since no right-thinking Nigerian can say there is common expression of "thoughts and feelings" in Nigeria, neither is there any "common will". Nigeria is a conglomerate of peoples without at least one common will. If anything, it is an aggregate of entities than one single harmonious entity. Nwankwo (1992) was therefore convinced that Nigeria is not a nation but contains many nations. For him, "a nation is a group of people with common history, language, ancestors, customs, traditions, culture and decent" (p. 7). This definition is more emphatic on the commonality of life experiences that weave a people together in some form of shared thoughts and feelings that can make them have one will. He did not mince words to say that "in Nigeria we have three nations - Igbo nation, Yoruba nation and Hausa-Fulani nation" and consequently concluded that "Nigeria is a multi-nation state" (p.7). Nwankwo appears to rest his view on the arguments of Coleman (1986) in his treatment of ethnic strands in Nigerian nationalism. Obi (2001) shares the same idea. It would, however, be fallacious to think that a multi-nation character of Nigeria would limit the nations to only three. Each of these so-called nations do not, in the main, have "common history, language, ancestors, customs, traditions, culture and decent", the major qualifiers for Nwankwo's definition of a nation. To adhere to this would not give any room to work towards nation-building in Nigeria by Nigerians. It sends the signal of ethnocentrism and secession than nationalism and togetherness as peoples forming a people.

Iwaloye and Ibeanu (1997) made a study of the peoples of Nigeria and came up with a result that there are clearly fifty-six ethnic groups (that they called ethnic nations) in Nigeria. Principally, each of these has more than one language unit contained within its space. Nnoli (1980) already said that "the members of a group are ethnocentric when they are proud of it and consequently, are inward-looking. Their attachment to and pride in the group reflect their ethnocentrism. Its' attributes are limited to beliefs, group identity, parochial orientation, and group pride" (p. 6). Ethnocentrism, therefore could be said to mean "mine consciousness". It arouses mutual suspicion, distrust and crises. The experiences of Nigeria's political history testify to this. When a "nation" is understood "ethnocentrism", it makes nation-building difficult. That, exactly, is what the colonizers bequeathed Nigerians. But it is possible to consciously melt down the walls of ethnocentrism to build a nation for Nigeria. This seeming optimism rests on the view of Johnson (1971) that "although a common language, a common religion, or a common "racial" origin undoubtedly helps to produce and cement the sentiment of nationhood, these things, individually or together, are not sufficient or necessary ... The

experience of a nation does, however, presuppose some common historical experience". (p. 315). There are basic historical experiences to stand on to build a Nigerian nation: colonialism and the Biafra-Nigerian war of 1967 to 1970.

If Nigerians do not hand down the bitterness and revengeful traits consequent on these historical facts but see them as "common experience" for common destiny, then nation-building would be a lot easier in Nigeria. No one, including students should ignore these landmarks in Nigerian history. Aware of this, some scholars published a volume on Nnamdi Azikiwe, generally regarded as the foremost nationalist in Nigeria, to mark his eighty-fifth birthday in 1989 in line with other contributors, Eboh (1989) indicated that Azikiwe's formal education prepared him for the intellectual battle with the colonialists; while Ejiofor (1989) critically examined the involvement of Azikiwe in the civil war especially his paradoxical posture of being with Biafra at a time and then, later in 1969, identifying himself with Nigeria. If Azikiwe, as a student learnt to work for the oneness of Nigeria in spite of the forced amalgamation of Lord Lugard, it means that students at whatever time in Nigeria could contribute to Nigeria's nation-building. Here, nation-building must be understood, as Igwe (2001) rightly defined it, as "the desire and effort to achieve unity among multi-ethnic groups that make up a state" (p. 239). It is nation integration at work. It is pulling the various otherwise independent entities of a state to such a fusion that, though specific identities are internally respected, they are judged to have one thought and feeling by the outsider. It is more of a function of the intellect than of muscle. It is achieved more by 'jaw-jaw' (dialogue) than by war-war (conflicts). It is the game of intellectuals like students. It is using the intellect to pull parts together. Agi (1989) is correct that "nation building is the process of creating unity and a sense of belonging among heterogeneous groups in the state" (. 256). Nation-building is, therefore, a continuous process that follows the law of dynamism. Not to work towards nation-building is to stop building the nation.

Students and Nation-building in Nigeria

Having seen Nigeria and its variegated character of linguistic, religious, traditional, and cultural pluralism and the need for and possibility of nation building with the proposal that the students have some contributions to make, it becomes necessary to indicate the caliber of students that can engage in this enormous task. A student is to be understood, according to Webster's new world large print dictionary (1989), as "one who is enrolled for study at a school, college, etc" (p. 975). The concern here is with students of tertiary institutions such as colleges of education, polytechnics, and universities. They are believed to be more knowledgeable than those in secondary schools. They are at the prime of their youth with sharp investigative minds. They are expected to make judgments concerning national issues, and as such, contribute their individual and collective quota to the overall

Students and Nation Building in Nigeria

integration of Nigeria. Truth and love are important in this enterprise. Truth is a function of the intellect and love is the function of the heart. Both are needed for patriotism that is the underpinning factor in nation-building. This means that students do not end up in just learning; character formation is vital equally important. Teacher lecturers ought to bear this in mind. Studentship is not simply the effort at developing the intellect; it is the development of total human person. It is an integral enterprise - the fusion of spirit and body. Any neglect of one dimension is to produce one-dimensional and psychotic human beings. Students who can positively engage in the effort at nation building in Nigeria are those that have psycho-somatic' integration, those that are level-headed and those who respect human dignity. This is because nation-building is an internal spiritual force and not external physical force. In the Biblical model, those that wanted to build Babel (Gen. 11) by erecting a physical tower structure saw that it never worked. At Pentecost (Acts 2), however, the spirit that touched human heart. If it borne in mind that nation - building is human-oriented and not physical or structural development, which can, nevertheless, follow human development, then students would know how to contribute to building Nigeria. This could be actualized in the following ways:

1. Observation: Students should be able to observe what is happening around them; investigate and analyze them critically with the sole decision of standing on the truth all the time. Truth is everlasting and unites nations.
2. Reading: It is said that reading makes a man. To stop reading is to atop growing. It helps one know what is happening in other places. It equally helps in addressing some possible obstacles to nation-building. For instance, Obi (2001) has said that:

The various obstacles to nation-building in Nigeria since independence include: multi-party system, religious intolerance, census controversies, undefined ideology, ethnicity and national identity, policy of equal representation, attitude and caliber of Nigerian leadership, the Nigerian society and military administration. (p. 280).

There are other factors, aside the ones enumerated by Obi (2001), which hinder nation-building in Nigeria. These include: zoning system in politics, federal character, Niger Delta issues, electoral reforms, creation of more states and local government areas, oil refining and storage, and so on. These and many more call for attention. Students are encouraged to read the "histories" of Nigeria as presented by scholars.

3. Listening to News: This entails listening to local, national and international news. Every student is expected to have at least one small radio to know what is happening in the globalizing world.
4. Formal and Informal Dialogue: Experts on some issues that hinder nation-building could be called upon to openly discuss such issues.

B.A.C. Obiefuna

Examples include religious teachings and observances, ethnic bigotry, conflict generation and management, and revenue allocation. At the informal level, students from different cultural backgrounds could meet and informally begin to share the values of their different cultures. Of course the bottom line of every dialogue is internal disposition to listen and understand the other party. Roommates and classmates provide this platform.

5. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme: One would think that the philosophy behind the establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in Nigeria is to expose students in their youthful age to other cultural and sub-cultural areas in Nigeria for the purposes of mutual understanding and respect. To the extent this is achieved after roughly thirty-eight years of the scheme is a matter for project topic. Be that as it may, students should use the service year to observe, listen and come to terms with the culture of the people of their places of primary assignment. Except for married ones, it is not advisable to personally choose a place of service. As a student, meaningful traveling equally increases level of knowledge. Of course, no one is a definitive graduate without a discharge certificate from NYSC!
6. Civil Education: Students in their various students' groups should organize educative programmes to enlighten, re-orient, empower, and educate themselves on the need to accept and appreciate one another irrespective of religion, ethnic group, geographical placements, and so on. People are to be taught to accept Nigeria as their own based on the common historical experience of colonialism and the civil war. Civil education also includes raising questions with state governments with regard to disparity in fees for formal education between natives and non-natives of a state, as well as in employment. For students, the disparity is sometimes in the proportion of one is to three while employment is zero. Those who were 'mistakenly' employed were sacked while young graduates from one office to another submitting application for employment that never comes. It is heart breaking to discover that there are vacancies yet people remain unemployed solely because of cultural differences, or to see inferiors and mediocre taking decision on what happens to intellectuals.
7. Project Topics: Topical issues should guide students in their choice of project topics. The time of "Traditional marriage in my Town" or "The smelling effect of hibiscus flower" or "Managing the managers" should be over. Significance of project study should focus on national issues. There is no department in any tertiary institution that is not human-oriented. Topics that are human-oriented are nation-building oriented.
8. Joining National Associations/Organizations: A person reasons only to the level of available information. There is constant flow of information in organizations of national status. Students should, even from their student days, join such bodies. They are very relevant in national awareness, calculation, and distribution of resources. No student should

Students and Nation Building in Nigeria

neglect any opportunity of getting affiliated to a professional body relevant to their area of study. Some of such professional bodies are the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), the Nigerian Institute of Management (NIM), the Nigerian Society of Engineers, The Nigerian Philosophical Association, to mention but a few. Such bodies can build or destroy a nation; it depends on who they are comprised of. Level headed students should be part of them and work towards uniting the nation. Thrown overboard simply because of ethnocentrism. Civil education encourages cultural relativity which teaches that not culture is superior to the other. Cultural superiority is detrimental to nation building.

The Way Out: Students can eminently contribute to nation-building in Nigeria by coming out of their cocoons and launching themselves into the orbit of national grill. It makes them part and parcel of the dynamism of national vital force. This can be done individually and collectively. If a person does not say "I am", nobody will say "Thou art". Students should, therefore not be shy to participate in meaningful and educative extra-curricular activities on campus. The national Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) is a good organ for students' voice in Nigeria's nation-building. The fear, however, is that the leadership is sometimes colonized by the powers that be that the Association is reduced to shamelessly chanting her mater's praise. It is hoped that Nigerian students should shout NO to such leadership if they intend not to sacrifice their independence on the altar of dependency occasioned by possible gratification. To achieve this, the students should be disciplined and sincere, avoid all forms of examination misconduct including sorting; and also say NO to cultism which jeopardizes one's bright future.

Where to Begin: Every tertiary institution is like the Nigeria State one institution but many faculties, departments, units, directorates and the like. Students often regard some courses as superior to others. Those who belong to such claimed "superior" departments regard other as inferior. This is superiority complex and it is a big hindrance to nation-building. Let it be clear that every form of learning is from or towards one thing: BEING. It is at the centre. Every form of learning is therefore a matter of choice and/or opportunity. Based on this, no student should be discriminated against. Every student from every department who feels qualified should be free to vie for any post in student's union government unless security reports say otherwise. Distribution of amenities should be based on distributive justice whereby one gets what one ought to get. This prepares on for equitable allocation of resources at the national level. It is a good thing to have inter-departmental and inter-faculty events. They help to build bridges among students on campus. If corrupt and immoral practices are perpetrated on campuses then there is every possibility that they would extend to the wider society. As such, students should begin on time to distance and disengage themselves

from such practices. It is generally believed that if the family is good, then society is good, and if the family is bad, society is bad. In the same vein, a tertiary institution is viewed as a microcosm of a nation. Students are the major human elements in it. They have potentials of making it good or bad, that is, the ability to build it or destroy it. It is hoped that students would build with their bustling energy than destroy. This is a principal step to students' contribution to nation-building in Nigeria. That is the way Nigeria becomes Nigerians and Nigerians become Nigeria. That is' the only way Nigerians can work their way towards one thought, one feeling, and one will. That is the way to use the lessons of common history of colonialism and Biafra-Nigeria (Nigerian civil) war to forge a common front for one Nigerian nation.

CONCLUSION

It is not presumptuous to assert that students in Nigeria can contribute to forging a Nigerian nation. As it is now, Nigeria cannot pride itself as a nation in the sense explained here. If anything, it is a country, a nation-state. But nationhood is indispensable for its continued existence. Nationhood is a result of integration and the basis of patriotism which again gives unction to nationhood.

Institutions of higher learning with various faculties and departments resemble the Nigerian state. Each higher institution has its history. That history informs its tradition and harmony. Students learn the tradition during their orientation as first years and imbibe it in the course of their studentship. They are then able to function at the departmental, faculty, and university-wide levels. It is the conviction of this paper that if students are proud of their institutions as students and thereafter associate with these institutions through various Alumni Associations they can, in that spirit contribute to nation-building in Nigeria. The steps given above will be useful. The problem, however, is that many students in Nigeria are not comfortable wit Nigeria's political actors for uncertain environments under which they study. As such, Nigerian students may not have the will, though they have the capability, to contribute to nation-building in Nigeria.

REFERENCES

- Agi, S.P.I. (1989). A historical analysis of nation-building. Inc. Ofuebe (Ed.). Dynamics of social studies (pp. 253-278). Enugu: New Generation.
- Burns, A. (1978). History of Nigeria. Boston: George Allen & Unwin
- Coleman, J.S. (1958). Nigeria: Background to nationalism. Benin City: Broburg & Wistrom.
- Ebo, C. (1989). Formal education: The British and American Alternative. In

Students and Nation Building in Nigeria

- M.S.O. Olisa and O.M. Ikejiani-Clark (Eds.). *Azikiwe and the African revolution* (pp. 28-52). Onitsha: Africana-Fep.
- Ejiofor, L. (1989). *Azikiwe and the Nigerian civil war*. In M.S.O. Olisa and O.M. Ikejiani-Clark (Eds.). *Azikiwe and the African revolution* (pp. 265-287). Onitsha: Africana-Fep.
- Johnson, H.M. (1971). *Sociology: A systematic introduction*. London: Routledge. & Kegan Paul.
- Igwe, LN. (2001). *Nation building in Nigeria: Issues and problems*. Inc. Ofuebe (Ed.) *Dynamics of social studies* (pp. 235-252). Enugu: New Generation.
- Iwaloye, L.B. & Ibeanu, A. (1997). *The peoples of Nigeria*. In F.D. Okafor (Ed.). *New strategies for curbing ethnic and religious conflicts in Nigeria* (pp. 41-68). Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Obi, M.A.O. (2001). *Obstacles to nation-building in post-independent Nigeria*. In C. Ofuebe (Ed.) *Dynamics of social studies* (pp. 235-252). Enugu. New Generation.
- Palmer, N.D. & Perkins, H.C. (1985). *International relations*. (3rd ed.). Shahdara: CBS.
- Webster's new world large print dictionary (1989). Cleveland: Webster's New World.