

# ETHNICITY AND NIGERIA'S UNDERDEVELOPMENT

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v9i1.11>

## Introduction

Nigeria and many African countries are regarded as failed states. This is because nothing seems to be working in them. In spite of the existing favorable conditions for development these countries appear to be drifting back into the dark centuries of the past. Many thinkers have attributed the failure of these states to a number of factors. They include culture, moral decadence, traditional religion, belief in occult powers, technological backwardness, colonialism, geography, biogeography, leadership, ethnicity etc. Recently Ejiogu E. Amaku has argued that the problem of Africa's underdevelopment lies on the issue of temporality, the lack of proper use of time. According to him, "If Africa is developmentally backward, it entails that the ontological significance of time has not been properly comprehended and addressed"<sup>1</sup>.

Reasons for Africa's problem will continue to multiply. Chukwuokolo believes that what accounts for differences in the tempo of development among societies is the proper application of reason<sup>2</sup>. He buttresses this position with China, Byzantine and Tibet. China discovered gun powder, printing and mariner's compass, Byzantine the clockwork and Tibet the turbines. But they applied their respective discoveries to other uses other than development purposes. The Europeans

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<sup>1</sup> Ejiogu E. Amaku, Africa and Temporality Mismanagement, paper presented at the 2011 Bigard Monthly Lecture, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> J. Chidozie Chukwuokolo, Reason in Development: Examining Hegel's Dialectical Rationality as the Basis for the Development Differences among Societies, paper presented at the 2011 Bigard Monthly Lecture.

appropriated these discoveries from them. They applied their reason in their use. And because of this they harvested monumental development dividends. The ineluctable conclusion to be drawn from Chukwuokolo's illustration is that if Africa is underdeveloped it must be due to inappropriate application of reason.

Some of the reasons mostly bandied around for Africa's underdevelopment have run their course. The reasons, for instance, adduced for colonialism, have since expired. Like African countries, China and Korea were colonized. But after their independence, by sheer determination and forthrightness, they have grown a shade better. Like colonialism, culture as a reason for Africa's backwardness is no longer tenable. Alexander the Great destroyed the Greek culture and other cultures under his empire in his ambitious attempt to form a united empire. It was an enterprise that irked the Greeks. The anger was such that Aristotle who was the tutor of this great emperor would have paid dearly for it if he had not absconded. He refused to allow the Athenians to sin against philosophy twice. However, the Greeks had rebuilt their culture after their liberation and forged ahead.

However, of all the reasons adumbrated above as why Africa is the world's underdog, this paper argues that the greatest of them which militates against the development efforts of Nigeria as a nation is ethnicity. Unless the problem is addressed properly, meaningful development will remain elusive and an illusion. Nigeria is a mishmash of more than 250 ethnic groups, each of which is jostling for recognition and relevance in the political arena; each has terrible angst of being dominated by others; each is crying of political marginalization. The hue and cry appear to be getting louder as the years roll by and even seem to threaten the corporate existence of the nation. The situation should not be dismissed as huffing and puffing. Unless aggressive efforts are made the

prediction of CIA that Nigeria would disintegrate by the year 2015 may become a reality. In this paper we examine how ethnicity is the cause of Nigeria's underdevelopment and how it can also be utilized to make her develop faster. We begin the excursus by examining what makes ethnic affiliation strong.

### **Ethnic Affiliation**

An Ethnic group is one which ascribes to itself the common blood or common ancestry. The group may be numerically or geographically big or small. But the common feature shared by all ethnic groups is the claim to a common ancestor whether imaginary or real. The psychological feeling that accompanies the awareness of this common origin engenders togetherness and solidarity among the members. We can appreciate why this is so if we consider what Aristotle says on family relationships.<sup>3</sup> According to him, in the parents/children relationship there is strong love on the part of parents for their children. This love emanates from the fact that they know that they belong to them biologically.

This parental love is said to be more on the part of the mother than the father because she more than the latter knows that the children belong to them. In addition she suffered more for their coming into existence. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the biological relationship and the suffering undergone whether more or less on the part of either of the parents is responsible for the love which they have for their children. They love them and attach themselves to them more than a poet loves his own poem<sup>4</sup>. The children, on their part, show filial love to their parents as soon as they become aware that they are indeed their parents. In this way a strong bond of love is established between the parents and their children.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics,

Strong love exists between the children of the same parents as well. This happens when they realize that they share the same being. For Aristotle, the extent to which people share things in common is the extent to which they love themselves. On the strength of this logic, the bond of love in the parents/children relationship is more than that between the children of the same parents. The love which exists among the extended family members is less than that in the nuclear family. The love decreases in intensity as what the people share in common become less. According to Cicero the degree of fellowship between men “varies according to the degree of relationship between them. Thus it is stronger between citizen and citizen than between citizen and foreigner, between those who are related by blood than between those who are not”.<sup>5</sup> The ethnic group is the limit of this kind of love which begins from the claim to a common ancestor. All within this common ancestry identify themselves as one and regard others as outsiders.

It is not only the awareness of the biological relationship that makes members of an ethnic group to be united. A number of other factors are also significant. They include geographical location, culture, religion, tradition, morality, language etc. These are integrative factors. Because of these factors ethnic identity has been defined as “a feeling of belonging and continuity in being (staying at the same person (s) through time), resulting from an act of self-ascription and/or ascription by others to a group of people who claim both common ancestry and a common cultural tradition”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cicero, *De Amicitia*, v, 19 in *Other Selves: philosophers on Friendship*, ed. by M. Pakaluk, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, p.86.

<sup>6</sup> Roosens, E., “Interest Groups with a Noble Face” in *Marketing in a Multicultural World: Ethnicity, Nationalism and cultural Identity* ed. J.A. Costa and G.J. Bamossy, California: Sage Publications, 1949, p.129.

By its nature, an ethnic group maintains relative peace and less internal contradictions. When there is internal conflict, the terms of war and peace are known and applied. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe narrated the story of the rift between Mbaino and Umuofia. The tension was generated when the wife of Ogbuefi Udo of Umuofia was murdered at Mbaino when she went to the market there. The Umuofia people who were known to be strong in war could have immediately pounced on Mbaino people for retaliation. But they did not. They chose to follow due process in seeking redress. They decided “to follow the normal course of action. An ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between of war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation”.<sup>7</sup> The Mbaino who felt that the murder was unjust, chose to offer a young man Ikemefuna and a virgin to assuage the anger of Umuofia. But what is interesting is that the rule for seeking redress was there and was well known and followed. They would have acted in the same way, if the option of war had been chosen. They could not have fought arbitrarily. War was guided by the principle of “an eye for an eye”.<sup>8</sup> And for this reason each warring faction at the time war tried to minimize the loss of lives and property to avoid making compensations at the end of the war.

The real problem associated with ethnic group rears its ugly head when it comes into contact with other ethnic groups. The hell is let loose. The desire to dominate or the fear of being dominated by other ethnic groups reigns supreme. This often leads to outright declaration of hostilities resulting inexorably in loss of lives and property. Nigeria was engulfed in 30 months civil war as a result of ethnic tension that had

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<sup>7</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, New York: Ancor Books, 1994, p.11.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976, p.79

brewed for a long period of time. The war was fought, won and lost but the ethnic suspicions and hatred still remain unabated. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was caused by ethnic rivalry between the Hutus and the Tutsis. The conflict brought the country to a halt. More than 800,000 people lost their lives in the imbroglio. In Kosovo, it was ethnic cleansing. The Serbian forces engaged themselves in the sinister project of decimating the Kosovar Albanians. Other countries that have experienced ethnic or sub-ethnic conflicts are Somalia, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Ethiopia and Uganda.<sup>9</sup> Ethnic factor is still having its toll in these countries. At this juncture we look at the negative impacts of ethnicity with particular reference to Nigeria.

### **The negative impacts of ethnicity in Nigeria**

The question of whether Nigeria is underdeveloped is not disputed. The facts are there for everyone to see. At present, however, the country is cogitating and nursing the idea of becoming one of the 20 largest economies of the world by the year 2020. This is a wishful thinking, an idea that is ill conceived, a wild goose chase. According to 1 July 2011 World Bank calculation the following are the 20 World largest economies: "United States, China, Japan, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Brazil, Italy, India, Canada, Russian Federation, Spain, Mexico, Korea, Rep., Australia, Netherlands, Turkey, Indonesia, Switzerland and Poland".<sup>10</sup> Which of these is Nigeria preparing herself to replace? The country has first to put her house in order before embarking on the ambitious program of becoming one of the 20 largest economies of the world by 2020. How can this dream be

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<sup>9</sup> N. Chasan, R. Mortimer, J. Ravenhill and D. Rothchild, *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992, p. 198.

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<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP.pdf>

realized when foreign investments into the country is dwindling fast? According to Charles Soludo the UNCTAD report released in Geneva on January 17, 2011 says that “foreign direct investment (FDI) into Nigeria dropped by 62% in 2010 (from \$6 billion in 2009 to \$2.3 billion in 2010)—again the worst in many years, and even worse than during the global crisis. While developing and transition economies increased their FDI inflows by 10% in 2010, Nigeria’s FDI fell by a whopping 62%.”<sup>11</sup>. The investors are scared away by the unfriendly and unstable business environment. Nigeria has a basic problem to contend with. This is the problem of ethnicity. Ethnicity is albatross, a cog in the wheel of progress. This problem ought to be solved in order for the country to join the comity of progressive nations.

The level of ethnic rivalry in Nigeria has made it impossible for her to produce the right leaders who live above boards, who exude impeccable and predictable character, and who are ready to spend themselves for the development of the nation. Ethnic affiliation has not allowed such leaders to emerge. At each election, the emphasis has always been on where the candidates came from rather than on the right candidates for the election. This explains why the National Assembly is replete with many people who are there neither for the interest of the nation nor for their own ethnic groups. They shot themselves up into the National Assembly by weeping ethnic sentiments. They described themselves as best candidates to fight for the rights of their respective ethnic groups. The suitability of their character was hardly called to question. As soon as they were elected they went into self serving.

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<sup>11</sup> C. Soludo, “My Case in Nigeria’s economy”, in *The Guardian*, 1 February, 2011

The lid of this self serving was thrown up in 2010 by the governor of the Central Bank Mr Sanusi Lamido during his Convocation Lecture at Igbinedion University, Okada. According to him, "25 per cent of overhead of the federal government goes to the National Assembly". His revelation opened up a can of worms. He stood his ground, however, as the members of the National Assembly at that time tried to cow him down with the aim of making him reconsider his claim. But before Sanusi's historic lecture, Itse Sagay had reported that the annual salary and allowances of a Nigerian senator stood at 240 million Naira.<sup>12</sup> This jumbo pay was possible because the electorate did not elect people with conscience and credible character. Even when these revelations on the jumbo pay were made public, no attempt was made by any ethnic group to recall her members.

If one converts that jumbo pay of N240 million into dollars at the conservative exchange rate of N150 per dollar, it means that the Nigerian senator was taking home annually 1.6 million dollars as salaries and allowances at least at the time that Itse Sagay made his report. This amount is bigger than the annual salaries of the American President, Vice President, the Majority Leader in the Senate, the Minority Leader in the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Majority Leader in the House of Representatives all put together. The annual salaries of these American officials are as follows: The President-\$400,000, Vice President-\$230,700, Senate Majority Leader-\$193,400, Senate Minority Leader-\$193,400, Speaker of the House of Representative-\$223,500, Majority Leader house of Representative-\$193,400.<sup>13</sup>

Another effect of ethnicity which will continue to hamstring the development of the country unless the problem

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<sup>12</sup> Tonnie Iredia, "Sanusi Lamido: Mischievous CBN Governor?", Nigeria Today, Dec. 5, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0875856.html>



of ethnicity is properly addressed is the issue of federal character. This is an attempt made to pacify the ethnic groups. The federal character arrangement is enshrined in the constitution. The reason behind it may appear plausible. It is to ensure greater unity of the country. But the underlying politics that gave rise to it breeds mediocre in the running of government. The members of the Constituent Assembly for the 1989 Constitution wanted to include merit on the existing federal character arrangement. What some members wanted to add to the federal character clause in the constitution was: "Nothing in this sub-section shall preclude the employment of merit and excellence and federal character means as much as practical, representation of all the states of the federation"<sup>14</sup>. This was put to vote. It was defeated by 81 to 186<sup>15</sup>. The ethnic groups that were lagging behind educationally canvassed for its defeat. There was the fear that the question of merit would put them in disadvantage position in the federal character clause.

Since merit has been rejected as a criterion for serving the nation all manners of people have been appointed to hold public offices in which they had neither the training nor the experience. How can the nation progress when those who drive her economy are not qualified to do so? This is a tragic situation. The ministries, parastatals and government agencies are now filled with incompetent officials. And since their entry into these offices was not based on merit, they do not make any positive impact in their various ministries. *Nemo dat quod non habet*. They spend their time on what they know how to do best, namely, to defraud the nation. The former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Hon. Bankole told the nation in 2010 during his Convocation Lecture at the University of

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<sup>14</sup> Aniagolu, A.N., *The Making of the 1989 Constitution of Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1993, p.162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.

Benin that the National Assembly had, within two years from its oversight function, recovered from Government ministries and agencies the whopping sum of 750 Naira Billion as unspent money. What could have happened to the money if the oversight function was not done is anybody's guess. But the point is that such a huge sum of money which was not used for the projects for which it was earmarked is an eloquent epiphany of how ethnic rivalry weakens development.

Ethnic rivalry shows its hydra in Presidential election; it leads to the emergence of incompetent president. To defuse ethnic tension some have adopted the rotational idea of the presidency among the six geopolitical zones. But then the implication of this is the same as that of federal character clause. The implication is that the president is elected not on the basis of merit but rather on the basis of where he comes from. The zoning of the presidency, though it is not a constitutional matter is threatening the corporate existence of the country. The altercations and noises from different ethnic groups are distractions in the running of government. In the 2011 presidential election, there was loss of lives and property in the Northern part of the country as a result of agitation against the outcome of the election.

The negative impact of ethnic rivalry appears also in the formation of political parties. The parties are formed along ethnic lines with ethnic interest at the base. Nigeria has about 63 political parties with no clear manifestoes. Each party says it will build roads, hospitals, improve power generation, quality of life and indeed all sectors of the economy. The details of how the money will be generated for the execution of these projects are not addressed. And that is why in Nigeria one does not hear such political ideologies as Conservative Party (Right Wing Party), Liberal Party (Left Wing Party), a little to the Right, a little to the Left, etc. In Nigeria, none of the existing political parties can be associated with any of

these party ideologies. The parties are much concerned with ethnic interests. And because they do so, they cannot come together to form a meaningful opposition against the party in government. Opposition is necessary in a democratic system. It puts the ruling party on its feet. Where there is no opposition or the opposition is weak, the ruling party is not challenged to initiate programs and ideas that are beneficial to the masses. So, the fact that the parties are oriented towards ethnic interest is doing a disservice to the nation.

The divisive nature of ethnicity does not allow Nigerians to call their past presidents to give account of their stewardship. Many of them did a great harm to the nation. No one dares to question them. They are untouchables. Some of them go about freely and make even inflammatory and incisive statements unhindered. If any of them is arrested and detained for questioning, the ethnic group to which he belongs will be up in arms.

In Nigeria, there are many associations formed along ethnic lines – Arewa consultative forum, Afenifere, Ohaneze Ndi Igbo etc. Among the governors, we have South East governors forum, Northern governors forum etc. Each is formed with an aim of gaining political advantage over the rest. The unity and progress of Nigeria as a Nation is secondary. MASSOB is gunning for something different, that is, complete secession from Nigerian project. All these are indications pointing to the destructive impact of ethnicity in Nigeria. With all these groups around it will be very difficult to organize a popular uprising against the government as witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, etc.

### **Solution to Ethnic problem in Nigeria**

Aware of the negative effects of ethnic rivalry in Nigeria some suggestions have been made on how to defuse it in order to make room for development and peaceful co-existence.

Ojukwu says that the place of birth ought to be recognized as a condition for belonging to an ethnic group. And "children of mixed ethnic marriages should have full rights in each ethnic area of the parents".<sup>16</sup> In his own contribution Aniagolu says:

"the spectre of domination of one part of Nigeria by another; of one ethnic group by another, of one language group by another, and of one cultural group by another, must be permanently and effectively removed from the body politic of the Nigeria nation. Appointments to important government posts... must receive and be seen to receive, the even handed justice of the government in power. By this, every Nigerian will have a feeling of a sense of belonging. He or she will look upon the government as his or her own, with no feeling of alienation, jealousy, or rancor".<sup>17</sup>

But the point is that the ethnic rivalry is so strong in Nigeria that neither Ojukwu's proposal nor that of Aniagolu will ever be possible in Nigeria. Each of the proposals is will-o'-the-wisp. It is fruitless trying to actualize any of them. The ethnicity is so strong in Nigeria for it is based on natural affinity. It is stronger than the artificial ethnicity found in countries such as US. So it will be effort in futility to engage in any attempt to enfeeble it. In Nigerian context, therefore, what is necessary is to get the members of an ethnic group to be united more than ever to embark on the development of its areas. When this is done it will ultimately be for the progress of the nation.

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<sup>16</sup> E. Odumegwu-Ojukwu, *Because I am Involved*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1989, p.21.

<sup>17</sup> Aniagolu, A.N., *The Making of the 1989 Constitution of Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1993, p.255.

For the above proposition to be possible there is need to decentralize authority in Nigeria. Authority at the federal level should be economically less attractive. Where then should authority in Nigeria reside? It should not certainly reside in the regions as was the case in the past. Regional authority failed in past and is not most likely to work now. The regions were not ethnically homogenous. So the ethnic rivalry that bedeviled Nigeria as a whole was also found in them though in a lesser degree. In the same vein authority should not be handed over to the new geopolitical zones. Some of the zones are ethnically heterogeneous while others are not.

Authority in Nigeria should reside in the states. By this is meant that the states should have the authority to generate their own funds for the execution of their projects. From the funds generated, they pay tax to the Federal government. The mineral oils ought to belong to the states in which they are found. But these states have to pay tax as well to the federal government. In this arrangement, the states are challenged to take their own destiny in their hands. They will look for other sources of revenue apart from oil. In doing so, they improve their economic base and ultimately enrich the Nigerian government.

This arrangement will force the electorate to seek and vote for people who deserve it as governors and state legislators. They will go for the people who deserve to work for them. Similarly, appointments will be offered according to merit. The people will know that they have everything to lose politically, economically and socially if they allow people who are not qualified into office. They will look after the state as if it is their own private property. People tend to take more care of what belongs to them than that which belongs to all. According to Aristotle “there are two motives that most cause men to care for things and be fond of them, the sense of

ownership and the sense of preciousness.”<sup>18</sup> When the people decide to develop their state because it belongs to them and is precious to them, they will articulate virtues necessary for them to achieve this purpose. They will encourage their people to cultivate these virtues; they will enforce their practice if it becomes necessary.

Oguejiofor believed there should be the revaluation of Nigerian virtues if she is to develop. Such virtues that need to be revalued include wealth, power, solidarity, religiosity, leadership and accountability.<sup>19</sup> These values have been tainted, dented and abused, hence the call for their revaluation. The necessary virtues, according to Oguejiofor, which Nigeria needs to cultivate are “Honesty, Justice, Egalitarianism, Efficiency, Fair-play, Hard work”<sup>20</sup> But I believe that the direct cultivation of these virtues on the national level will be hard to come by as experience of many years shows. But they can easily be developed and enforced in the states because people know that their progress depends on them.

The advantages to be derived from handing over authority to the states are enormous. They include:

1. The removal of the negative effects of federal character clause in Nigerian politics
2. The removal of the problems associated with federal allocation formula
3. The removal of mediocrity in government
4. The discouragement of jumbo pay
5. Encouragement of hard work
6. The cultivation of necessary virtues
7. The reduction of strikes by all categories of workers due to unjust wages

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, II, I, 1262<sup>b</sup>, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Oguejiofor, J.O. The Need for Reevaluation of Nigerian Values, in *Bigard Theological Studies* (BTS), vol.24, no 2, p.12-19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnicity in Nigeria is based on natural affinity. It is a given from nature. It is therefore good in itself. Like every other natural phenomenon, it can be gainfully employed for the wellbeing of man. It is useless trying to stamp it out completely in the society. It will not even be possible. Efforts made in the past in various countries in this direction did not yield any positive result. Attempts should rather be geared towards making every ethnic group in Nigeria to be very united. When unity is achieved, economic, social and political development will follow inexorably.

In Nigeria the big ethnic groups have been divided into states. But whether an ethnic group is found in one or several states, the effort should be to allow every state to generate its funds for developmental purposes. Of course the allowance is not enough to make things happen. A number of virtues are naturally important if the state is to achieve unity and progress. An effective system of education should be put in place to inculcate the state policies as well as necessary virtues needed in the state.

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