



## Ethnicity Challenges in the Nigeria Federal System of Government

*Sule Abiodun*

*Research Scholar, Niomr Research Lagos, Nigeria*

---

### Abstract

Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world with over 150 million populations; it is located in the western region of sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with over 400 ethnic nationalities, 250 languages, 3 major religions, many cultural beliefs and practices, and blessed with many natural resources among which is petroleum that has drawn the world's attention to the country. Like many other African countries, colonization has adverse effects on the structure, cultural belief, language, and autonomy of the various ethnic nationalities that constitute the Nigerian state.

---

---

### 1 Ethnicity

It is characteristic for ethnic groups that they differ genetically from each other to some extent. It is an inevitable consequence of the fact that ethnic groups have usually been more or less strictly endogamous groups over many generations, sometimes hundreds of years. Cross-group marriages have been and are still rare. In many cases, cross-group marriages are strongly discouraged or even forbidden. In fact, endogamy is necessary for the survival of an ethnic group. It is easy for geographically separated ethnic groups to remain endogamous, but many geographically overlapping groups have also succeeded to remain endogamous. This concerns equally linguistic, religious, caste, racial, and tribal groups.

Genetic differences between groups, even relatively small differences, may affect the social behavior of such groups. According to a sociobiological theory of kin selection, it is genetically rational to behave altruistically toward relatives because one shares more genes with his/her relatives than with outsiders. The idea of kin selection helps to explain the evolution of nepotism among animals and people. The individuals who behaved nepotistically were reproductively more successful than less nepotistically behaved individuals. In this way the disposition to nepotism became engrained into human nature by natural selection.

The disposition to nepotism is not limited to the level of individuals and families, it seems to extend to the level of large ethnic groups, too. Berghe, Pierre L. van den (1981, 2004) applied the sociobiological theory of kin selection to the study of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts. He used nepotism to explain ethnicity and constructed the concept of "ethnic nepotism", which refers to nepotism at the level of ethnic groups.

Ethnic groups can be perceived as extended kin groups. Their members are tended to support each other in conflict situations. Consequently, many types of interest conflicts tend to become canalized along ethnic cleavages in ethnically heterogeneous countries. From the perspective of ethnic nepotism, it does not matter what kinds of kin groups are in question. The crucial characteristic of an ethnic group is that its members are genetically more closely related to each other than to the members of other groups (Vanhanen 1999a: 11-13).

---

### 2 Concept of federalism

Federalism as a concept lacks a generally agreed definition. The fact remains that environment factors and origin of the system in the various states practicing federalism as their system of government might be similar but are totally different (Abegunde, 2013: 3). The further submits that environmental factor; proximity of the units, available natural resources plays crucial role in determining the practicability of federalism in any society. Based on the difficulty in having a consensus definition, Elazer (1965: 354) submits that the problem of having a general definition is because of the difficulties in relating theoretical formulations to the evidence gathered from observing the actual operations of federal systems.

Federalism as a concept can be viewed from a complex system of government that strives for unity and equality among the various autonomous federating states bound together by a central government for the promotion of their common good such as political, socioeconomic and security of all the federating units (Abegunde, 2013: 3). The awareness of the discussion of contemporary federalism starts with K.C. Wheare's who submits that "federal government divides law making powers and functions between two levels of government". He further argues that, the constitutional form of federalism is brought about by circumstances where people are prepared to give up only certain limited powers and wish to retain other limited powers, both sets of powers to be exercised by coordinate authorities.

In Wheare's view of federalism the federal principle includes: (a) division of powers among levels of government (b) written constitution showing the division of powers (Wheare, 1943: 34). The institutionalization of this two will guide the operations and interactions of the levels of governments while performing their roles as stipulated in the constitution for peaceful co-existence. According to Hague and Harrop (2004: 228) "federalism is a method for sharing sovereignty and not just power between governments within a single state. It is a constitutional device, presupposing a formal political agreement establishing both the levels of government and their spheres of authority".

Federalism can also be viewed as a system of government that consists of autonomous units that are tied together within one sovereignty that is politically organized in a way that the activities of government are divided between state governments and central government or among local governments, state governments and central government as the case may be in a way that each level of government will have some jurisdictions on which it makes final decisions. Devolution of powers in a federal system of government is necessary for all the federating units to have input in all issues that directly or indirectly affect them as a people; it will also allow people of the same fate to consistently retain their common bond for common identity as a people of the same history.

---

### 3 Factors that necessitated the Nigerian federal system of government

Oyediran (2008) and Oneyeye (2001) summarized the factors that necessitated the adoption of federalism in Nigeria as follows:

**Heterogeneity/cultural differences:** Nigeria is made up of diverse ethnic groups, religions, customs, traditions and languages. These diversities are a problem to the operation of a unitary system. The peoples therefore opted for federalism to retain as much as possible their identity.

**Size and Population:** The country is too large both territorially (size) and in population for a unitary system of government, and federalism became inevitable for administrative convenience.

**Historical /Colonial factor:** The different ethnic groups in Nigeria had developed different administrative structures. The colonial principle of indirect rule allowed each region to preserve its cultural and traditional practices different from those of other regions.

**Economic factor:** In Nigeria, natural resources are scattered, therefore component units must unite as a federation to harness the resources for their overall benefit in addition to even and rapid economic development.

**Fear of Domination:** There has been suspicion among the various ethnic groups, particularly the major ones like the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa-Fulani. There was also fear by the minority groups that they would be dominated by the majority ones. Federalism therefore offers opportunity for self-preservation by different groups.

#### The Features of Nigerian federal system of government

Oyediran, et al (2008) gave the general features of Nigerian federalism in summary as follows:

1. Division and sharing of governmental powers between the federal and the regional or state governments;
2. The derivation of the powers of the different levels of government from the constitution.
3. Adoption of a written and rigid constitution.
4. The supremacy of the federal government.
5. The existence of a supreme court for judicial interpretation and review.
6. Unified police force
7. Decentralization of the public service and the judiciary.
8. The existence of a bicameral legislature at the federal level.
9. The principle of the federal character; and
10. A three tier system of government.

---

#### **4 Power sharing in Nigeria federal system of government (1954 to 2013).**

The government of Nigeria adopted a federal structure with the enactment of 1954 constitution. The constitution represents a union of individual regions as at then created by British colonial government for administrative conveniences. The constitution recognized the sovereignty of a central authority, while retaining certain powers of self-rule for the regions. Under federal arrangement, sovereign power was divided between a central authority (the Nigerian federal government) and a number of other units, as at 1954 three regions namely; North, West and Eastern regions. The power of each structure (level of government) was measured in terms of functions performed by it as provided in the constitution. In 1954 constitution, there existed greater autonomy to the regions. The power of government were grouped under three headings: the Enumerated or Exclusive Federal List, the Concurrent List and the Residual List. The enumerated list contained such subjects like foreign relations, currency, defense, immigration, citizenship and aviation. The federal level was the sole authority here to legislate. The concurrent list includes such matters like education, health and industrial development, in which both regional and federal legislated where there was inconsistent with federal legislation, the federal legislation would prevail and regional legislation would be void to the extent of the inconsistency.

The regional government held exclusive power to legislate on Residual list. Subsequent constitutions notably the 1960 independence constitution maintain the federal system of government with the independence status, while the 1963 Republican constitution was on the same federal principle, but with overall power of the state removed. Another distinctive element of 1963 constitution was the creation of one additional region (Mid-West Region). Though federal principles were enshrined in the constitution, remarkable imbalance existed. Such include unification of northern Nigeria as one region and bulcanisation of south Nigeria to 3 regions creating distrust among southerners of ethnic line, while stimulating agitation for region among minority groups in the north. This marked genesis of imbalance in Nigerian federalism.

The problem of ethnic distrust and fear of domination promoted anti-federal policies at the regions like the northernisation policy. Party crises and sectarian killing emerged, which culminated in military intervention that led to the suspension of the 1963 Republican constitution that tended to tear the federation apart. The situation was worsened by the civil war and the operation of federal might to bring the units together. Once the constitution was suspended, the military took over. Military rule is unitary and not in line with the principle of federalism because of unitary command structure of military government. Democracy set in again with the promulgation of the 1979 constitution, designed in line with the military 19 states (1976) federal structure as against regionalism. The 1979 constitution was very unique in the sense that it departed from the parliamentary system of previous constitutions and adopted the

presidential system as practiced in the United States of America. It was the first constitution to recognize the third tier of government (local government) formally, with functional power in the Residual Legislative List (Amuwo, 1998). Inter-party conflict, corruption and ethnic crises that affected previous constitutions also affected 1979 constitution, leading to another military intervention in 1983. Considering constitutionalism as a cardinal element of federal balance, basic areas of strategic concern were vested in the hand of federal government in the exclusive list. The termination of military rule and re-democratization in 1999 presented us with the 1999 constitution which follows the same trend in function distribution, except increase of federating units in terms of states (36) and local government areas (789). Strategic assignment of defense, immigration, police, mining and extraction concentrates power and wealth of the nation in federal government at the expense of state.

---

#### **5 Revenue allocation and federal balance**

Prior to the early 70's, Nigeria depended on export of primary products as a major source of government revenue. The regions and states depended greatly on locally (internally) generated revenue through the activities of marketing boards. But, with advent of petroleum economy, emphasis on internally generated revenue by the regions, shifted to the federal government allocation. This was because petroleum as a major component of extractive industry was controlled by federal government exclusively. As fund accruing as oil royalty and license fee goes to federation account, it has to be redistributed to states. Various guidelines were invented to share the fund vertically between the three-tier levels of government and horizontally among the various sub-national units in different levels, for example different states and different local government areas.

Allocatory imbalance presents another dimension in the development of inter-governmental fiscal relations in Nigeria. Olowononi (1998) expressed strong fiscal dependence of sub-national governments on the federal government in Nigeria. The relationship is marked by crisis concerning an appropriate criteria for allocation between the federal, state and local governments. Such criteria as; derivation, population, landmark, equality, development need and social commitment, were used and units that were not favoured strongly criticized the process, calling

for change of criteria. On the other hand, states that sources of revenue were located therein agitated for their direct control of such revenue from the federal government. Revenue allocation in Nigeria is marked by friction between the central and state governments and among state governments. Fiscal federalism (Revenue Allocation) in Nigeria is a major area of federal imbalance as the federal government controls the fundamental sources of revenue, causing states and local governments to depend solely on federal government for revenue allocation.

---

## **6 Challenges of Nigeria's federal system of government.**

The emergence of Nigerian federalism is not without challenges. B. O. Nwabueze in his book, 'A Constitutional History of Nigeria' has identified the greatest problem of federalism in Nigeria today as the lack of proper understanding among the leaders and the general public of the nature of federal relationship as manifested between the federal and state governments. He has noted that in the Nigerian experience, the autonomy of each tier of government is misconstrued to mean competition and confrontation with each trying to frustrate the other whereas the conception underlying the system is that the federal and state governments are mutually complementary parts of a governance mechanism. To him, federalism demands cooperation between each level of government in order to promote the welfare of the people through their combined powers (Nwabueze, 1982). Nwabueze goes further to examine what he calls the six different principles involved in his definition of federalism namely: separateness and independence of each government, mutual non-interference of inter-government immunities, the question of equality between the regional/state governments, the number of regional/state governments whom a federal government can meaningfully exist, techniques for division of powers and a supreme constitution.

One can say that the problem of Nigeria's federalism is associated with the creation of economically unviable states especially from the North. This has become a burden to the federal government which spends huge revenue to sustain the unviable states. Related to this is the question of overbearing powerful center, politicization of population census, neglect of minority fears and agitations, bitter ethnic rivalry, corruption and poor leadership, lopsided revenue allocation and demand for fiscal federalism, federal character and military intervention in politics. The advent of military intervention in the political process of Nigeria was a major problem to Nigeria's federalism. The military sacrificed Nigeria's federalism on the altar of centralization. (Ebegbulem, 2010).

---

## **7 Ethnicity inclusion in Nigeria governance**

Africa particularly the multi-ethnic states no doubt has contributed to the waves of its governance with a variety of power-sharing, unity governments and other instruments of governance since 1990. Eritrea, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria are examples. Nigeria under the government of late Umaru Yar'Adua in 2007 declared a government of national unity. Under this political arrangement all the political parties would be represented in the executive arm of government. As noticed by Aiyar and Tiwari (2009), the key component of progressive socio-economic and political growth can be located in all-encompassing governance as the means of empowering the disadvantaged, with the aim of enabling them to overcome socio-political and economic deprivation. Therefore for accelerated socio-political development that breeds national cohesion in a multi-ethnic state, it is significantly important to hitch the horse of political system to the wagon of its governance.

Put in another word the political mobilization of ethnicity claims, significantly is a threat to national integration and emergence of corporate identity in a multi-ethnic state. National integration is the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It connotes that though we belong to different social group, religions and regions and speak different languages we recognize the fact that we are all one. This kind of integration is very important in the building of a strong and prosperous nation. Therefore considering the implication of ethnicity as against socio-political stability efforts must be made to create a political atmosphere that will boost the confidence of every ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state.

Good governance is the critical variable in the mobilization and utilization of societal socio-political and economic resources for the satisfaction of popular expectations and fundamental needs, protection and promotion of citizen's rights observes Jega (2007). It should however be noted that governance can either be good or bad. This is related to the extent to which government address the socio-political and economic needs of the people. Good governance therefore has to do with the process of managing public affairs across all tiers of government; which is seen to be responsible and responsive to the basic socio-political and economic needs as well as aspirations of the people. On the other hand, bad governance is associated with impassive, irresponsible, corrupt, authoritarian, indecent, crude and exclusive process of management of public affairs (Jega, 2007). The political mobilization of ethnicity, exclusive claims, significantly is a threat to national integration and emergence of

corporate identity in a multi-ethnic state. Therefore considering the implication of ethnicity as against socio-political stability; the implication is that for real socio-political development to take place in a multi-ethnic state/political system, efforts must be made to create a political atmosphere that will boost the confidence of every group in the political system, hence the adoption of an inclusive socio-political system that will guarantee the inclusion of the views of every group in the national debate as well as political representation. Nigeria is no doubt a country with a multi-ethnic complexity; a complex one in terms of socio-political administration. Therefore several political and economic policies have been adopted to manage its ethnic cleavages such as the structural division of the country into 36 states to prevent one ethnic group from dominating others and to ensure the socio-political and economic protection of the smaller ethnic groups. Apart from the structural division of the country into states, other mechanism adopted to ensure the participation of all ethnic groups in the decision making process is the principle of federal character and power sharing.

---

## 8 Conclusion

While it is conceded that federalism is not synonymous with good and effective governance, the fact that Nigeria is a federal system suggests that we consider the properties of federalism as pre-requisites for good governance in a federal polity. In restructuring Nigerian federalism thought must be given to the idea of basing it on ethnic nationalities. This, in a nutshell, is the kernel of yo devise an alternative to the present system of sharing power so that the country can be at peace with itself, avert crisis associated with unequal distribution of power and resources and still remain as a Federal Republic, upholding the cardinal principles of federalism. It is also hoped that the power sharing agreement, which appears to be the most conscious effort on the part of government to share power evenly among the various segments of the population will bring about the much needed stability to the system. Consequently, domiciliary policy is recommended as a proactive government policy and strategy to ensure Nigerian unity and equity in the distribution, allocation and redistribution of power, resources and opportunities. This policy direction will ameliorate, if not eradicate, imbalance and thus ensure federal balance in Nigeria polity. Such institutions like the National Orientation Agency should be revitalized to champion ethno-cultural integration and preservation of cultural heritage in view of the diffusion and assimilation which natu-centric principles will produce when a domicile policy is fully implemented. For most Nigerians however, the pressing problems of everyday survival remain the highest immediate priority.

---

## References

- Abegunde, O. (2013) "Varianti E Difficolta' Del Federalismo in Nigeria" in *Il Federalista Rivista Di Politica*. Anno LV, Numero 1
- Amuwo L (1998) Beyond the orthodox of political restructuring: The Abacha Junta and the political economy of force. In: Kunle Amuwo et al. (eds) *Federation and political restructuring in Nigeria*. Spectrum Books, Ibadan.
- Berghe, Pierre L. van den. 1981/1987. *The Ethnic Phenomenon*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- Berghe, Pierre L. van den. 2004. "Affirmative Action: Towards a Sociobiologically Informed Social Policy," in Frank Kemp Salter (ed.), *Welfare, Ethnicity, and Altruism: New Findings and Evolutionary Theory*. London: Frank Cass.
- EBEGBULEMJOSEPH C. (2010); Federalism and the politics of resource control in Nigeria: a critical analysis of the Niger delta crisis
- Elazer, D. (1965); *The Shaping Of Intergovernmental Relations In The Twentieth Century* in *The Annals Of The American Academy Of Social And Political Science* Vol 359
- Harrop, M. And Hague, R (2004); *Comparative Government And Politics: An Introduction*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Jega A M (2007). Nigeria after the 2007 Elections: The task ahead. Conference paper presented at an International Conference on Nigeria: Too Rich for Dignity and the Law: Perspectives after the 2007 Elections. June 15-17. Berlin. Germany, available at [www.loccum.de/materials/interpol/nigeria/jega/pdf](http://www.loccum.de/materials/interpol/nigeria/jega/pdf)
- Nwabueze, B. (1982) *Constitutional History of Nigeria*. Lagos: Longman
- Olowononi G (1998) Revenue allocation and economics of federalism. In: Kunle Amuwo et al. (eds) *Federation and political restructuring in Nigeria*. Spectrum Books, Ibadan.
- Oyediran, O., Nwosu, Takaya, B., Anifowose, R. Badejo, Ogboghodo and Agbaje, A. (2008) (eds) *New Approach to Government*. Ikeja: Longman Nigeria Plc.

Oyeneye, I. et al (2001) Government: A Complete Guide. Lagos: Longman Publishers.

Vanhanen, Tatu. 1991. Politics of Ethnic Nepotism: India as an Example. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

Wheare, K.C (1963):The Green Political Foundation. Federal Government. London, Oxford University Press.