

**Africa: Diversity and Development**

**The postcolonial state and ethno-politics in Nigeria**

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**Introduction: Historicizing Ethno-tribalism in Nigeria**

Anyone familiar with Nigeria's socio-political story will not disagree that the country is a hotchpotch of ethnicities in conflict. Fact is most of contemporary Nigeria has been thrown into the abyss of a ferocious web of ethno-tribal identity politics. Ethno-tribalism, as this article refers to this Nigerian scenario, is the use of ethnic or tribal categorizations to achieve social, economic or political ends. The popular view is that the ethnogenesis of Nigeria's combative identity question lies in autocratic colonial policies. This is the background to the adoption of federalism – particularly consociational ethnofederalism – as a solution to the colonial legacy of disunity in the postcolonial Nigerian state. In pluralist societies, ethnofederalism is usually founded on the real or perceived right of ethnic groups to autonomously co-exist within a state (Amuwo, 1998; Jinadu, 1985; Lijphart, 1979). Thus, in Nigeria, ethno-federalism was to be a solution to ethno-tribalism. However, after over half a century the country is still cast under the shadows of the intransigencies associated with ethno-tribal politics. So much so that Ukoha Ukiwo notes that in Nigeria “no work is deemed ‘scholarly’ that does not consider the salience or irrelevance of ethnicity in its analysis and conclusions” (Ukiwo, 2005, p. 4). Given that Nigeria's colonial experience is located within Africa's, this irony may be said to be a test case of the broader African milieu. Yet looked through the socio-historical prism, this ethno-tribal hydra-headedness may be said to be uniquely Nigerian. The objective of this article is to provide a fresh perspective on Nigeria's protracted identity challenge, and I start by historicizing – or problematizing – the contemporary Nigerian state.

The first phase of the making of contemporary Nigeria, that is the era before 1914, saw a land peopled by ethnically and politically distinct empires (Nicolson, 1969; Niven,

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1965). From 1885 when European nations recognised Britain's spheres of influence in West Africa, Nigeria went through a number of stages (Touval, 1966). It moved from its empires fighting wars of resistance with the British into a period in which the region came under the administration of the Royal Niger Company. It then became a designated British protectorate in 1901 and then was finally "united" into one colony in 1914 (Tamuno, 1970). In the end, a number of previously distinct political and cultural groups were brought together under one colonial power. The second phase of the history of modern Nigeria – from 1914 to 1960 – was an era of autocratic manipulation and sociopolitical transformations as British colonialism rolled out a number of policies in order to control the colonised African "native" (Afigbo, 1971, 1974, 1989, 1991; Ake, 1985, 1993; Ekeh, 1975, 1990, 1994).

Nationalist struggles across Africa in the immediate post-Second World War period also ushered in the beginning of the third and final phase in the making of contemporary Nigeria: the postcolonial era. Post-independent Nigeria was just as decisive as the previous phases, if not even more. As was the mandate of African nationalist leaders, decolonization and political independence was to promise a new Africa on the social, political and cultural fronts. Kwame Nkrumah stated, "seek ye first the political kingdom and all else shall be added unto you" (Cooper, 2002, p. 183). At least in the case of Nigeria, to paraphrase Ali Mazrui, political independence (the political kingdom) was sought; but everything else (the promise of a new Nigeria on the socio-economic and politico-cultural fronts) was taken away instead (Mazrui, 2004). In much the same degree as other national problems, the issue of ethno-tribalism has been, perhaps justifiably, traced to the immediate post-independent era.

From this background, the question arises whether identity formation in contemporary Africanity is seen not only as representing the vagaries of colonialism – reminiscent of the first and second phases of the making of Nigeria, but also, crucially, of the challenge borne out of the inability to manage the legacies of autocratic colonial policies in the third phase. I argue further that whilst, to a significant extent, post-independent Nigeria represents a colonial invention, the problems associated with ethno-tribalism have arisen out of the inability to problematize colonial legacies, and to offer Nigeria-specific solutions. I use the socio-legal structure of consociational ethnofederalism to demonstrate how the postcolonial Nigerian state is a machine for making, accentuating and essentialising ethnicities and ethno-tribal categorizations on the lower levels of Nigerian society. On this count, I also present postcoloniality not

merely as a theory applicable to Africa but also as an overarching concept applicable to national policy.

### **Contemporary Africanity: A rethink of postcolonialism**

The above hypotheses, needless to say, require a discussion of the relevance of postcolonialism in contemporary Africanity. In this article, postcoloniality is, in the words of Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, the “contemporary state of ex-imperial societies in Africa... and also the attempts being made to describe them in ways which have meaning” (Werbner & Ranger, 1996, p. 272). In contemporary Africa this exercise has been led by academics and pan-Africanists alike. Africanism thus encapsulates the notion of African self-assertion on the social, political and cultural fronts, free from the autocratic legacies of colonialism. Whilst postcolonialism has been confined to the realms of theory, the Africanist mandate has been thought of as an esoteric and idyllic concept; excellent at imagining socio-political niceties but weak at dealing with real issues (Duffield, 1977; Hayes & Railroad, 2012). From what we know of the historical African colony using the Nigerian example, and the extent of the social and political impact of colonial legacies, emerge an important point: situating the continent's colonial experience within the legitimate agenda of redeeming the “African condition” is much more a question of policy than that of theory. To confront contemporary problems with colonial origins it is imperative to configure “the political agency of colonialism...the colonial state as a legal/institutional complex that produced particular political identities” (Mamdani, 2001, p. 651). Doing so would be expected to depart from the very nature of the mutually reinforcing character of postcolonialism and the Africanist mandate.

Postcolonialism, that version led by Edward Said (1978), interrogates the “lines of thought that made the non-European world available for explanation and [supposed] objective description as a problem in its own right” (Krishnan, 2012, p. 821). A conception of postcolonialism as a study of how colonialism has shaped the former colonial world establishes a bond between postcolonialism and Africanism. The question regarding how African identity was constructed during colonialism has led to critical approaches by Africanists across the disciplines. Since the turn of the last century, debates have witnessed emancipatory themes led by such intellectuals as Frantz Fanon (1965, 1967) and George Padmore (1969a, 1969b), and culturist concepts like those upheld by philosophers such as Valentine Y Mudimbe (1988, 1994) and Anthony Appiah (1992, 2010), former revolutionary leaders as Kwame Nkrumah (1961, 1970, 1980) and even novelists such as Chinua Achebe (1977, 1988, 1999).

Conjointly, these figures argue that African identity and society is ideologically misconceived and misinformed and have sought to unpick such misconceptions and misrepresentations.

It is important, to these individuals, that the “post” in “post-colonial” is not synonymous with the “post” in, for example, “post-independence” (Appiah, 1991). For defining the postcolonial merely as “after the colonial period”, constitutes a disservice to a more progressive and active definition: postcolonial as the sociopolitical “aftermath of the colonial” (Ahluwalia, 2012; Young, 2009, p. 13). This way postcoloniality, as noted by Robert Young, rightly becomes the economic, material and cultural indices that create the conditions that post-independence states operate in (Young, 2003). Rita Abrahamsen makes a relevant and strong argument that a constructive engagement between Africanity and postcoloniality would be helpful since the “postcolonial perspective can...benefit from the encounter with African studies, as a more empirical focus can help give postcolonialism more contemporary relevance through investigations of current relationship between power, discourse and political institutions and practices” (Abrahamsen, 2003, p. 210). From this, one can assert that in order to “understand the varied legacies of colonialism in Africa with any measure of depth, we must specify the particular nature of colonialism experienced by the continent” (Olaniyan, 2008, p. 270). Similarly, to understand Nigeria’s enduring ethno-tribal identity question, we must particularize how colonialism fashioned the postcolonial Nigerian state.

### **The Invention of Nigerian Identity**

The argument that colonialism shaped every facet – especially ethnic and national identities – of former colonies has almost become a norm in ethnogenesis (Berman & Lonsdale, 1992, p. 65). An example of this constructivist understanding of identity is given by Paul Nugent who asserts that “particular ethnic groups were indeed the product of an interplay between European interventions – by administrators, missionaries, employers, and colonial ethnographers and selective African appropriations – through the agency of Christian converts, educated elites, urban migrants, and rural patriarchs” (Nugent, 2008, p. 921). Activities of British colonialism such as these led to two sets of legacies in postcolonial Nigeria. The first are those legacies that originate directly from autocratic policies of colonialism such as indirect rule and native authority. An illustration of this in northern Nigeria under Sir Frederick Lugard is his act of “co-opting local rulers,” as the formal policy of indirect rule (Pierce, 2006, p. 901). Indirect rule and the institution of native authority, as noted by Sir Donald

Cameron, also “altered” tradition by ignoring the need to find the true leaders of the people, instead using any willing African collaborator to the colonial course (Cameron, 1937). The locus of the agency of these legacies was the first two phases of the making of contemporary Nigeria. The second set of legacies arises out of the perpetuation of colonial traditions in the postcolonial era. In this instance, the agency was the beneficiaries of the colonial system. In this context, the relevant factor was how those colonial inventions or imaginations of colonial origins facilitated a sudden resurgence of ethnic and tribal affiliations in the post colony in relation to the politics of “who gets what” (Lasswell, 1950). Those individuals selected, empowered and imposed on native communities by autocratic policies “were tolerated and indeed fostered by... post-colonial governments” (Pierce, 2006, p. 909). From these categorization of colonial legacies emerged a colonially invented Nigerian state. The policies of colonialism invented the federal state structure, whilst the socio-legal basis of federalism, also became a colonial invention; but this time not through direct colonialism but through the appropriation and glorification of colonial policies by the postcolonial state.

Hobsbawm and Ranger's *Invention of Tradition* (1983) and Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) provide the trajectories of colonial machinations and how the colonial architecture fashioned and sustained the ensuing political traditions. Ranger asserts that:

Since so few connections could be made between British and African political, social and legal systems, British administrators set out about inventing African traditions for Africans...They set out to codify and promulgate these traditions, thereby transforming flexible custom into hard prescription (1983, p. 598).

From this, Africa's political tradition was, over time, to become synonymous with how colonialism conceived it to be (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 1). In addition to this, Anderson states that an “invention” of traditions is not the only legacy of Europe's colonial dominance. The nation itself is a socially constructed entity: “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity-genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Other authors have also offered similar characterisations of Africa's ethnic and national identities (Berman, 1984, 2004, 2010; Berman & Lonsdale, 1992; Hydén, 1983, 2006; Iliffe, 1979; Mamdani, 1996). Kenyan literary critic and post-colonialist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o rightly asserts that “tribe, tribalism, and tribal wars, the terms so often used to explain conflict in Africa, were colonial

inventions” (wa Thiong'o, 2009, p. 20). The British colonial system of indirect rule, according to Mahmood Mamdani, also transposed on Africa the misapplied logic that just like every "historical" nation in Europe had its own state, every “tribe” in Africa had to have its own native authority to be part of history (Mamdani, 2001, p. 665). This led to a scenario evidenced by John Iliffe’s popular observation that the “British wrongly believed that Tanganyikans belonged to tribes; Tanganyikans created tribes to function within the colonial framework” (Iliffe, 1979, p. 318). Those who “created tribes” were to be the same individuals who benefitted from the colonial infrastructure, either as willing collaborators of the colonialist or as a results of belonging to the more privileged segment of the dualist dichotomies of what Mamdani calls the “bifurcated colonial state”; civil-customary, urban-rural or citizen-subject (Mamdani, 1996).

Since these African leaders were the same individuals who would take over the mantle of leadership after colonialism, the invented traditions came to be deified by many postcolonial elites of the continent. In the end, they succeeded in translating “their colonial power-bases into a quite profound authoritarianism” in the postcolonial era (Pierce, 2006, p. 908). This way, nationalism also became an essential product of the political history transposed onto Africa. The point here is that if tradition is an amorphous concept, nationalism came to represent its more concrete manifestation in the African post colony. The African nationalism that emerged from colonialism did so as elites imagined, and subsequently formed, nations (Anderson, 1991, p. 215).

Nationalism in the immediate pre- and post-independent Nigeria is a classic example. In the lead up to Nigerian independence, three leaders emerged to champion the cause of their respective ethno-regions. In the northern protectorate emerged the Sardauna of Sokoto Ahmadu Bello whilst Chiefs Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe rose to lead the interests of the southwest and southeast respectively. The subsequent ethno state divisions that followed the original three-state tradition also represented the vision, campaigns and imaginations of these traditional cum political, and colonially baptized leaders. This is the background and the political institutional foundation upon which Nigeria’s postcolonial political framework stands.

The aim of consociational federalism was to negotiate the disunity reminiscent of Nigeria’s colonial experience in the first and second phases of contemporary Nigeria. This was not to materialize because the postcolonial state still operated within, and glorified, colonial traditions. The socio-legal foundation of Nigeria’s federal arrangement was colonially defined indigeneity and ethnically based quota-system.

Mamdani notes that the “dilemma of indigeneity as the legal basis for entitlement [under the federation] is perhaps best illustrated by the Nigerian case” (Mamdani, 2001, p. 660). The fact, as explained by Obi Igwara, that the above character of the Nigerian federation was enshrined in the constitution as its legal basis, created an ever-evolving tendency for indigeneity to become the litmus test for rights under the post-colonial state, as it had under its colonial counterpart (Igwara, 2001, p. 101). Thus, though rooted in colonialism, this legacy is not orchestrated by direct colonial invention of tradition, as was the case with the ethnofederalism itself, but through indirect colonialism: the glorification and appropriation of colonial legacies by the postcolonial state through a conscious and opportunistic usage of colonially fashioned socio-legal foundations.

### **The Limit of Ethno-federalism**

Whilst ethnofederalism was meant to negotiate the ethno-tribal legacies of colonialism by granting ethnically defined autonomous political entities, its socio-legal basis has resisted de-ethnicization and de-tribalization in the postcolonial Nigerian state. That is, the postcolonial Nigerian state, in responding to its colonial heritage of combative ethnicity with consociational ethnofederalism, did not only misdiagnose the consequential extent of the legacies of British colonialism. It also raised ethnofederalism on a distorted socio-legal foundation. The contention here is seen in the fact that since colonially fashioned indigeneity and quota-driven resource allocation are the foundation of Nigerian federalism there was always the possibility of negative identity-based ramifications arising. Federalism has therefore come to stand for a postcolonial reincarnation and an overflow of colonial policies. The above character of federalism meant that it failed in taking into account the implications of political institutions and arrangements on the everyday levels of society. Mahmood Mamdani summarizes this when he wrote:

In assuming that only those ethnicities are real which have always existed, they presume ethnicities to be transhistorical phenomena and thereby miss the fact that ethnicities have a social history. This is why, rather than conceiving of an ethnic identity as simply ‘invented’ by statecraft or ‘imagined’ by intellectuals, it would make more sense to speak of the ‘making’ of ethnicity (Mamdani, 1996, p. 185).

Federalism was based on “invented” colonial political tradition in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s understanding, and fashioned by the “imagined” communities of tribal elites

as in Anderson's theory, but it failed to account for how such political institutions would affect identity creation or making on the lower levels of society as in the theory of Mamdani. The "making of ethnicity" here refers not to kin-based or even to identities that existed during colonial rule but to ethno-tribal interest-based categorisations in the postcolonial era. In assuming that the major ethnics groups – the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo-Ibibio – are the real components of the federal solution, Nigeria missed other manifestations of ethnicity that could arise from this ethnic make-up. The socio-historical dimension of ethnicities, which in the words of Thomas Spear, allows "dynamic historical processes that [reconstitute] the heritage of the past to meet the needs of the present" was overlooked (Spear, 2003, p. 25). The nagging problems of ethno-tribalism is the result therefore of the presence in contemporary Nigerian society of a more active, participating and processual cases of ethnic resurgence borne out of the negative implications of postcolonial institutions.

The limit of the Nigerian response is illustrated by the inability to appreciate that to reclaim postcolonial societies from negative implications of autocratic colonial policies also requires a focus on the socio-legal basis of postcolonial institutions, especially those that make it possible for ethnicities to be formed on the lower and participating spheres of society. This failure turned federalism into a platform for engagements that defeated its purpose. Igwara again notes that the legal basis of federalism:

Provides a scale against which political actions, decisions and motives are popularly assessed. It influences political appointments, the formation of political parties, the election of the president, the allocation of senatorial seats, the recruitment and promotion of personnel into the armed forces, the police, the bureaucracy and state agencies, the location of universities and institutions of higher learning, admission into universities and federal secondary schools, share-out of federated revenues, the siting of industries and economic ventures (Igwara, 2001, p. 101).

To J. O Akande, linking ethnicity and indigeneity to political actualization and resources allocation, as the Nigerian federation does, entrenches the culture of "hankering after power and high federal offices" and "inordinate and aggressive identification with the ethnic group to the detriment of higher loyalty to the nation" (Akande, 1982, p. 15). The use of indigeneity also allows the history and culture of ethnic groups in Nigeria to tolerate a distinction between natives and settlers (Akanji, 2011). For this reason, Joseph Aryeh argues, "the emergence of politicized ethnic groups in Nigeria is intimately tied to logic of government in which politicians are expected to deliver goods

to their increasingly ethnicized constituencies” (Pierce, 2006, p. 895; Richard, 1987). In the end, this brings Nigerians or ethnic groups against one another in a feud of survival under the federation.

## **Conclusion**

Ethno-tribal politics in Nigeria represent a unique case of postcolonial reconstructions (or making) of belligerent and competitive ethnicities based on autocratic colonial foundations. Whilst ethnofederalism was meant to negotiate the ethno-tribal legacies of colonialism by granting ethnically defined autonomous political entities, its socio-legal makeup allows for a more combative manifestation of identity politics, usually on the lower levels of society through the utilization of indigeneity and ethnically defined quota. It is conceivable therefore that the most enduring hindrance to national unity in Nigeria is not only the result of the existence of colonially created ethnicities and traditions per se but also of the negative implications of postcolonial policies. In the view of this argument, colonialism cannot be responsible for as much as critics claim. The limit of consociational ethnofederalism is therefore not only situated in the activities of colonialism in the first two phases of the making of modern Nigeria, but also located, crucially, in the third: the postcolonial state.

With persistent national disunity, ethno-tribal riots, violent conflicts and indeed economic and religious insurgencies, Nigeria has thus far failed in its mandate; to promise a new Nigeria after colonialism. In a postcolonial society that has carried its colonial legacies for more than half a century, there is the need “to historicise the political agency of colonialism” in order to address problems associated with it (Mamdani, 2001, p. 651). This said, might Nigeria then, in problematizing the “colonial state as a legal/institutional complex that produced particular political identities” (Mamdani, 2001, p. 651), see postcoloniality as policy-relevant? Looked from Rita Abrahamsen’s argument, this question rather attracts an answer in the affirmative (2003). A constructive engagement between Africanity and postcoloniality would be helpful since postcolonialism can give more contemporary relevance to African issues “through investigations of current relationship between power, discourse and political institutions and practices” (Abrahamsen, 2003, p. 210). In this sense, postcoloniality must not reflect just the indices of Nigerian society after independence, but particularly of how colonialism shaped the postcolonial Nigerian state. This allows for critiquing and tracing of the trajectories of imperialism in order to provide practical Nigeria-specific solutions to the challenges of ethno-tribalism. In utilizing postcoloniality this way, there is also the need to focus on the dual domains of political action and

interactions. Patrick Chabal has stated that political analyses in Africa “is singularly ill-informed about anything other than the overt, explicit discourse of high politics” which is “necessarily at the expense of the examination of ‘low’ politics, the politics of everyday life (Chabal, 1996, p. 52). A vigorous Nigerian endeavour to reverse this trend is also instructive.

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