

Rethinking Apartheid, Xenophobia and Identity Politics in the Nigerian Context

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Abstract

Apartheid, racism and xenophobia are pejorative terms that express discrimination between the white and the black race. Segregation between the white and black is obviously well-pronounced whereas segregation among the black race despite its dissension and divisiveness is subtly acknowledged. While white-black segregation creates visible tension, conflict and contentions over rights and privileges overtly; the segregation among the black race internalizes hatred, unhealthy competitions and covert contentions over rights. In Nigeria, issues of federal character, state of origin, quota system, indigene/settler citizenship and primitive land tenure system are instituted systems tantamount to apartheid which have exacerbated discrimination, xenophobic and identity politics in Nigeria. Others are informal but social prejudices like ridiculing of speech ascent and facial marks and derogatory name-calling among the various ethnic groups. The paper adopts qualitative research methodology and uses primordial, constructivist and instrumentalist theories of ethnicity to explicate how identities have been constructed along racial, linguistic, ethnic and cultural affiliations which has created xenophobic and prejudiced relations akin to apartheid in Nigeria. Considering the Nigerian motto, "unity and faith, peace and progress" the position of the paper is that xenophobic, segregation, discrimination and identity politics have severely undermined the faith of Nigerians hence unity, peace and progress remain unfeasible.

Keywords: *Apartheid, Identity Politics, Racism, Segregation, Xenophobia*

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations charter introduction declares that "all men are born free and have equal rights". An ancient witticism has it that "all fingers are not equal". Many people believe that the inequality of the fingers represent the inequality among men, though it seems that the UN declaration attempts to underplay the reality of this ancient phraseology. Be it as it may, it is a social reality that men are not equal yet, they may be born equal. Therefore, at various times in history, in some societies across the world, the status of kings and slaves, landlords and tenants, serfs and lords, patricians and plebeians, which depicted unequal status in political, economic and social life, was acceptable. With this, the society became stratified into social and economic classes and political rankings as one class dominated over the other. This truth is revealed in the sociological philosophy of Karl Marx that the hitherto existing history of man has been the history of class struggle.¹ The emergence of social classes brought the sense of identity which culminated into discrimination and segregation by one class against the other. Such segregations and discriminations have been referred to as racism, racialism, jingoism, apartheid and xenophobia.

In South Africa, the class struggle took racial stance between the whites and the blacks which has been referred to as apartheid. The violence of expropriation in colonial South Africa² was ostensibly pronounced and visible because it involved the white foreigners and the indigenous black race. In Rwanda, the xenophobic discrimination and hatred between the Hutus and Tutsis ethnic groups was never acknowledged until it climaxed and degenerated into genocide in 1994. The less attention that the Rwandan situation received unlike the South African apartheid that gained global condemnation was largely because the identity groups, the Hutu and Tutsi were both black races. In many African societies, situations worse than apartheid exist but have remained unnoticeable to scholarship because they involve identity groups of the same African descent and found within one sovereign state.

However, instead of categorizing these trends of racism and xenophobia as apartheid, other terms have been subtly used which do not relate to apartheid in semantics. This is obtainable to many countries of Africa and in Nigeria; situations akin to apartheid have been institutionalized in such terms as federal character, quota system, state of origin, indigene/settler citizenship dichotomy, and primitive land tenure system and land acquisition system. The implementation of these systems in Nigeria reinforces primordial affiliation to group identities and undermines affiliation to Nigeria as a nation, which exacerbates xenophobic hatred and discrimination among the competing groups. Even within the informal social setting, name-calling among the ethnic groups is becoming a norm and has degenerated into violence among different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The ill-feeling of “we” and “them” is gradually building up as the trend is growing, but it has not reached the level of dehumanization that was the situation in Rwanda before the outbreak of the genocide.

The thrust of this paper is to deep down and unveil some of the systems that are akin to apartheid in Nigeria which undermine the development of Nigeria as one united country. It interrogates the contribution of these systems in the process off Nigeria’s transformation into nationhood. To achieve the above objective, the paper adopts qualitative research methodology and garners its data from primary and secondary sources. It also uses primordial, constructivist and instrumentalist theories of ethnicity to explicate how these systems have exacerbated the consciousness of the identity groups leading to chauvinistic and xenophobic expressions. Following this introduction is the conceptual clarification while the third section presents the theoretical framework underpinning the work. The fourth section discusses some of the systems whose practice exacerbates discrimination and xenophobic hatred. The fifth section highlights how identity politics has transformed over the years in Nigeria and its resurgence since the fourth republic while the final section concludes the work.

Conceptual Clarification

Xenophobia

According to the Oxford Learners Dictionary, xenophobia is a strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other countries.³ In a more loose sense, it is used to connote a “dislike for foreigners”. Thus, xenophobia is characterized by a negative attitude towards foreigners, a dislike, a fear, or hatred or disgust. It is an outburst of collective and negative ideas, social stereotypes and prejudices often disguised with the phenomenon of nationalism. But the radical aggressive manifestation of nationalism is a common type of xenophobia. Very often the manifest expression of xenophobia is characterized with violence and physical attacks.⁴The problem of xenophobia is that it is a constructed prejudice that is radically expressed among social groups in every society. In Nigeria the radical expression is unique especially with the current attacks which has been exclusively targeted at immigrants, derogatively labelled as “nyamiri” people in the northern region.⁵

Xenophobia has also been defined as one among several possible forms of reaction generated by anomic situations in the societies of modern states.⁶In this conceptualization, fear, prejudice, hatred and violent attacks are common distinguishing feature. Therefore, xenophobic disposition is social and psychological anomie that negates the principle of accommodation and tolerance, fragmenting society into “we” and “them”, creating a model of social division upon which all forms of contestations are based. The aggregate psychological misgivings are often expressed as outburst of nationalistic expression, upon which sympathetic spirit is built within a group and competitive spirit against the other. The political and socio-economic divide among the ethnic groups in Nigeria emerge from xenophobic disposition that one group is better than the good as well as that one group is marginalizing the other. Thus every contestation is based on your state of origin which has been institutionalized in the principle of federal character and quota system.

Apartheid

Apartheid is a policy that governed relations between South Africa’s white minority and non-white population including indigenous black Africans and others labelled as coloured people. The apartheid regime was characterized by severe racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-whites. The implementation of apartheid often called “separate development” since the 1960 was instituted through many legal promulgations and Acts.The policy was instituted as racial discrimination between the whites and the non-whites in South Africa. The racial discrimination was very severe that political rights were exclusively the preserve of the whites. Economically, the discrimination enthrone poverty among the non-whites while the whites prospered because they possessed the best lands and capital needed for industrial production. The height of apartheid generated tension, strife and violence in which many people especially non-whites lost their lives. The apartheid situation in South Africa is similar to some systems in Nigeria that generate discrimination, segregation and xenophobic hatred. The difference is that while the apartheid policy in South Africa was legally operative, these systems in Nigeria o not legal provisions for discriminatory purpose but in practice, they engender and promote discrimination along ethnic lines.

Theoretical Framework

Primordialist/Essentialist Theory

The development of a primordial phenomenon is based on the perspectives derived from sociological, anthropological, economic, and psychological variables which include regional areas, means of livelihood, kinship, customs or ways of life, religion, language and literature, and organization.⁷In the opinion of Ajala⁸, whether a nation is imagined, constructed or invented, it is an imagination that is based on some materials real enough to bind a particular group of people together in an expression of certain commonly expressed cultural contents such as imagined space, spiritual link, history, ethnicity, ancestry, language, and political aspiration among others.

Proponents of this theory claimed that ethnic group identities are stable overtime and result from differences in shared identity markers such as clan, community, faith (i.e., religion/belief system), language, regional provenance, race, sect or tribe and complexion or other physical appearance. Fearon and Latin, say there is no fixed set or number of such “objective” differences; they went further to say that sometimes many of these different identity markers are present, but often they are not.⁹

The Constructivist Theory

They contrarily argued that ethnic identity can change over time and, at the end of the day, it is the result of self-ascription and/or ascription by others. Some scholars¹⁰ agree that ethnicity is socially constructed. According to Jina¹¹ ethnicity is a social construct which mobilisation for competitive purposes includes political parties, public intellectuals, and university students, the military, public bureaucracies, trade unions etc. Yet it does not seem plausible that ethnic identity changes on a daily or arbitrary basis and is completely independent from “objective” identity markers, though their number and importance may differ from case to case. This school of thought strongly believe that ethnicity is constructed and therefore, not natural. Based on this, Benedict Anderson wrote a book which he referred to as “Imagined Community”. In a like manner, Ranger T. supported Anderson by writing a book known as “Imagined Tradition”. In this book, he noted that culture and tradition can be constructed. In the case of Hutus and Tutsi in the Great Lake Region, for instance, there are very few objective differences. Language, religion and regional settlements are identical, yet the colonialist constructed Hutu and Tutsi to be two different ethnic groups.

The Instrumentalist Theory

Scholars in this school of thought opine that ethnicity; either being constructed or primordial does not pose a problem but see ethnicity as an instrument for class struggle. Prominent among this school of thought is Sklar, who says ethnicity is “a mask for class struggle”. That is, an instrument to achieve an end or a goal. It therefore stands to reason here that in every sphere of life in Nigeria, ethnicity strongly becomes an instrument that influences who gets one benefit or the other. It will then be correct to say that this norm has resulted into the present fragmentation of the country along political, economic, social, religious and linguistic lines. This is because Nigerians have expressed ethnicity in an unreasonable and exploitative way.

Ethnicity is sometimes “disaggregated” and only certain elements in ethnic identification may become important and sufficient in bringing it about. For instance, religion maybe the catalytic factor in causing inter-ethnic discriminations and strife, such as Islam among the Hausa or Christianity among the Nigerian Middle Belt people, as in Catholicism or Protestantism among the people of Northern Ireland, or as in language differences among the Anglophone and francophone Cameroonians, or facial marks. Yet, in other cases, as among the Walloons and Flemish in Belgium, both of whom are Catholics (Christian), language has been the critical factor. Ethnicity thus provides some basis for collective but fluid action, and the problem or stake at hand determines whether the whole much of socio-cultural criteria, or a critical section of it, will be mobilised in the ensuing discriminatory relationships. Thus, ethnicity does not exist in a pure form.¹² It is always closely associated with political, judicial, religious and other social views, which constitute its important ingredients as well. The above points suggest that there could be dormant or latent bases and causal elements in ethnicity.

SOME SYSTEMS THAT ABET APARTHEID IN NIGERIA

Federal Character and Quota System

Has the federal character principle promoted national unity, national loyalty, national integration and stability as its policy objective in Nigeria? Or has the federal character provided constitutional opportunity to promote xenophobic discrimination, hatred and apartheid-like segregation among the ethnic groups in Nigeria through primordial sentiments?

Before this section proceeds, may it be categorically stated that the aim of introducing the federal character was to attain effective nation-building in the light of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural identity groups in Nigeria. However, this aim poses another question: has nation-building been achieved in Nigeria and what has been the contribution of federal character towards its attainment? Historically, quota system predated federal character in Nigeria and was purposed at facilitating equal representation of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria’s public service.¹³ Federal character officially gained entrance into the Nigerian polity in the provisions of the 1979 constitution and has seen then generated controversies and scholarly debates. Although a system on its own, federal character is a reaction to practices of the past, especially in the conduct of public management which tended to negatively exploit the diversities of the nation. Such past practices were full of parochial considerations, primordial sentiments, self-centredness which polluted and overrode national interest. Thus, federal character principle though conceived to enthrone fairness and justice has been under criticisms because of the many challenges at its practical implementation.

Many scholars¹⁴ on federal character have dwelled on how it has compromised meritocracy and effectiveness in Nigeria's public administration sector. Acquiescing to a great extent to them, the paper looks beyond their argument to postulate that federal character has not only undermined meritocracy in public administration but has also exacerbated xenophobic hatred, marginalization, and discrimination, and created unhealthy rivalry and competition among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The marginal discrimination is tantamount to apartheid because a system that was designed to ensure justice, fairness and equality has abetted injustice, unfairness and segregation. In government agencies, the implementation of federal character is a tool to keep some ethnic groups away while recruiting others often at the directives of the head of the agency an explanation for the lopsidedness we have in ethnic proportions in all the government agencies in Nigeria. Such application enhances alienation, exclusive and a deep feeling of segregation as Onyeoziri aptly wrote:

The application of federal character principle rather than ameliorate, provokes ethno-regional division, a fundamental contradiction as a policy option for managing the national question in Nigeria. rather than the principle to treat the Nigerian citizen as an individual in his/her own rights, it considers the individual as a member of an ethno-linguistic group within the state, thus reinforcing the integrity of those sub-structures instead of the general structure (nation). It is logically inconsistent that a policy directed at strengthening loyalty to the nation-state is anchored on primordial sentiments and cleavages as basis for recognition.¹⁵

In an effort to distinguish quota system and federal character, Ekeh argues that federal character principle demands far more than the quota system in the sense that, it switches emphasis from opportunities to privileges and benefits. This distinction points out that federal character bestows privileges, benefits and honours in which case there is determining guideline or yardstick for implementation. Therefore, much corrupt actions, undue promotions and appointments, compromising civil service ethics because of same ethnic affiliation as well as discriminating and issuing severe punishment to rival ethnic groups have all been perpetrated under the cover of federal character. It is pertinent to note that these kinds of situations are common in all the sectors of public service in Nigeria including the army, police, immigration, customs, other government parasatals as well as the educational sector. After examining the inadequacies of federal character and quota system, one scholar stated that "there is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequals".¹⁶

The issue of contention is that we are all Nigerians and the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria provides equal opportunities, privileges and treatment for all citizens irrespective of ethnic, religious, linguistic and political disposition. But the federal character and the quota system tend to restrict some citizens from achieving their full life potentials because of discrimination based on ethnic origin or state of origin. This situation is a classic example of structural violence.¹⁷ The federal character as practiced in Nigeria is not only elitist and class biased, but it has created inadvertently a multiple system of citizenship in the polity where discrimination in appointment and promotion thrive. The education section is one of the worst areas where federal character has compromised efficiency, and through discrimination hindered the best brains to achieve their life goal. Within the Nigerian educational system, criteria for admission of students into higher institutions and unity colleges are based on the discriminatory requirement each according to your state of origin. In some states, there is discrimination between male and female candidates. The table below shows the minimum required score to gain admission into unity schools in Nigeria based on state of origin.

REGION	GEO-POLITICAL ZONE	STATES	NCEE CUT OFF MARKS	
			Male	Female
NORTHERN REGION	NORTH CENTRAL	Benue	111	111
		Kogi	119	119
		Kwara	123	123
		Nasarawa	75	75
		Niger	93	93
		Plateau	90	90
	NORTH EAST	Adamawa	62	62
		Bauchi	35	35
		Gombe	58	58
		Borno	45	45
		Taraba	3	11
		Yobe	2	27

	NORTH WEST	Sokoto	9	13
		Zamfara	4	2
		Kebbi	9	20
		Kaduna	91	91
		Jigawa	44	44
		Katsina	60	60
		Kano	15	15
SOUTHERN REGION	SOUTH EAST	Anambra	139	139
		Enugu	134	134
		Ebonyi	112	112
		Imo	138	138
		Abia	130	130
	SOUTH WEST	Lagos	133	133
		Ogun	131	131
		Oyo	127	127
		Osun	127	127
		Ondo	126	126
		Ekiti	119	119
	SOUTH SOUTH	Edo	127	127
		Delta	131	131
		Rivers	118	118
Bayelsa		72	72	
Cross River		97	97	
		Akwa-Ibom	123	123

55

Source: ¹⁸

State of Origin, Citizenship Question, Indigene/Settler Question

The question of citizenship in Nigeria is a delicate matter and an issue that has greatly generated political consciousness, political and social conflicts as well as discrimination. Conceptually, a citizenship according to T. H. Marshal, is the statue conferred on an individual as a member of a country. In international relations discourse, citizenship is synonymous to nationality denoting a link between an individual and the state.¹⁹ However, in Nigeria the constitution is clear on who a citizen is and about the ways in which Nigerian citizenship can be acquired. Despite these provisions, there exist discrimination among Nigerians based on the categorization of citizenship with the terms of indigene or native and settlers. The core problem of citizenship in Nigeria is the promotion of indigeneity over citizenship. Indigeneity is simply a segregationally term distinguishes between the indigenous or native of a state or locality and those referred to as non-indigenes or settlers. It is a justification for being hostile to strangers, alienating, discriminating and marginalizing from certain privileges and even constitutional rights. The prevalent situation is what has been described as “the narcissism of minor differences”.²⁰

Within the social sphere, the issues of citizenship and indigene/settler have caused violent conflicts in different communities because of resistance from minority group against apartheid-like treatments. Even in marriages, the expected requirement from an indigene is from what an “outsider” is required to bring. This does not only discourage inter-communal marriage but sometimes creates an unhealthy relationship between the in-laws who feel they sold their daughter and those that feel they have purchased a commodity and paid all front. In the case of land acquisition, many discriminatory prejudices arise against the non-indigenes who often end up paying for a particular piece of land for many times. Acquiring land in place outside ones place of birth is very cumbersome if not forbidden, just like black South Africans were forbidden to acquire and own lands outside the reserves. A trivial but very worrisome aspect of discriminatory attitudes and rude behaviour among Nigerians is derogatory name-calling. Ezemenaka and Prouz captured it vividly thus:

In other words, there exist “deep seated xenophobic attitudes” among different ethnic groups in Nigeria. These xenophobic attitudes are noticeable in stereotyping with derogatory generalizations present throughout Nigeria, such as the following between the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa... The Yoruba call the Igbo ‘a je okuta ma u omi’ which means a person with a stone heart, or probably, dangerous and unforgiving. The Igbo, in return, call the Yoruba, ‘ndi ofe ma nu’ which means those who use excessive oil for cooking and the Hausa call the Igbo ‘yanmiri do do’n doya’ – ‘he who eats yam’ while the Igbo, on the other hand, call the Hausas, ‘Onye Ugu’ which means someone from the hilly region. It is worth noting that there are deeper meanings attached to these stereotypic terms aforementioned.²¹

Unfortunately, the Nigerian state is found culpable in encouraging apartheid practices and discriminatory hatred among its citizens. Throughout all the institutions and agencies of the government, “surname” and “state of origin” are two most essential and compulsory requirement when filling any document. The same state of origin is what comes to mind when quota system and federal character is looking for victims to discriminate. Unfortunately the federal character which is designed to ensure proportion of ethnic representation has been reduced to state of origin level. In states where there are more than one ethnic group as is the case, the dominate group takes all the opportunities coming to the state in the name of federal character. The minority groups are discriminated. Many people have lost privileges and opportunities because of state of origin. It is possible that a government policy can make it compulsory for national identity cards to indicate state of origin for every Nigerian just like was the case in Rwanda before the outbreak of the genocide. It is highly regrettable that citizenship question in Nigeria is a source of division, discrimination and unhealthy competition providing opportunity for the marginalization of some as second class citizens.

The Transformation and Resurgence of Identity Politics in Nigeria

As a socio-political concept, “identity” has both an individualistic and a collective meaning. Put simply, it is a person’s sense of belonging to a group which influences his reasoning and behaviour defined by common understanding and mutual interest. Its distinguishing features include, love and trust for a group, emotional tie to a group, commitment to a common group cause, as well as obligations often given voluntarily. Identity politics encompasses the mobilization of identity consciousness in order to build large support base in the political struggle of resource allocation. Thus, it is the construction of an identity which serves as instrument in political struggles. This is a phenomenal feature that characterizes Nigerian politics. Right from the colonial days, the major ethnic groups have been scheming to outdo each other in a bid to capture, wield and control political power. Each was very much concerned about the developments that will profit them as an ethnic group rather than the mutual benefit for all. This vicious politics of identity played out well in the May 1953 Conference and the 1954 Lagos Constitutional Conference.²² At this first phase of identity politics in Nigeria, the elites conceived the primary objective of access to the country’s political echelon was primordial and personal interests rather than “nation-building”. To be successful, ethnic identity had to be politicized.

Identity politics in the political landscape of Nigeria took another dimension with the unharmonious events that occurred in the early years of independence in 1960. While the political machinery in all practical sensed domiciled in the hands of northern elites, the division of the southern region into south west and south east complicated the already complex issue and the rivalry became tenser. In promotion of ethnic bias, the south could not agree on a common front to gain access and control of the power at the centre and they became pawn for the north in the form of forming coalition. Therefore either the south west was in coalition with the north against the south east or the south east was in coalition against the south west. In utilizing ethnic identity the south east appealed to ethnic consciousness and embarked on the politics of secession. Secession became the second express of politics that rely on ethnic identity in the political intercourse among the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. This stance became too appealing because of the exploitation of primordial sentiments and the emphasizing of existing differences between the ethnic groups.

However, with the return of democracy in 1999, there has been resurgence of ethnic identity in form of the two dimensions. Each ethnic group has relied heavily on ethnic bias accompanied with religious sentiments in the politicking within the country. The condition became informally institutionalized with the zoning formula arrangement of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) which was the ruling party in Nigeria between 1999 and 2015. The zoning formula rekindled the consciousness of the divide between the north and the south and moreover, increased the suspicion between south west and south east, who perceive each other first as primary competitors. The resurgence of identity politics has taken the two dimensions and the ethnic groups are exploiting each depending on the position they are occupying in the government at the centre. The resurgence is what is responsible for the incessant violence being experienced in different parts of Nigeria.

The politics of identity in Nigeria today is based on either you possess and control the power at the centre and appropriate the resources marginally for your self-benefit or you exploit primordial sentiments by agitating for secession and causing violence. Violence and call for secession becomes very attractive for the ethnic group that is underrepresented in the government. Some scholars propose that the Boko Haram became

extremely violent because the then President Goodluck Jonathan is an Ijaw ethnic group from the south, therefore, the northern used Boko Haram for political bargaining. The current waves of IPOB in south east Nigeria is also believed to gather consciousness and seriousness because a Northern has become president. Though, some scholars may argue against this proposition but the fact is that the resurgence of identity politics in Nigeria has expanded that the two dimensions are being exploited simultaneously. The scenario has been referred to elsewhere as the politicization of terror along ethnic and regional line.

II. Conclusion

The paper revealed that there exist systems and institutional arrangements within many African countries that promote discrimination, xenophobic hatred and segregation that is tantamount to apartheid and can be ascribed to as apartheid. Apartheid was globally dominant because the discrimination was exerted by the white against the blacks in South Africa but these systems in modern African states are too latent that their negative impacts seem unnoticeable. In Nigeria, politics is characterized by primordial ethnic sentiments that ethnicity has been an instrument of politics. Because of identity politics some systems has been instituted in Nigeria which deepen the divide among the ethnic groups enabling an apartheid situation. Some of these systems include federal character, state of origin, quota system, indigene/settler citizenship and primitive land tenure system which have concomitantly connived to exacerbate discrimination and xenophobic hatred. There is need for the Nigerian state to carefully review these systems in the light of introducing alternative systems that will promote sense of nationhood among Nigerians. This should form part of the issue in the recent call for the restructuring of the Nigerian state.

End Notes

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