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Review paper

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## **IDENTITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA: A REFLECTION ON THE INDICATORS**

Nigeria is a nation with plural ethnic, religious, lingual and cultural identities that are constantly exploited by the political class to promote their selfish interest. Although not a determinant for conflict, diversity in Nigeria has unjustifiably sparked identity-based conflicts which necessitates separatism, insurgency and ethnic restiveness – among others, which threatens to drive the country to a perpetual state of fragility. This paper thence sought to assess Nigeria's tortuous experience with identity and identity politics with particular reference to ethnic, religious and lingual challenges. The paper furthers the discussion on identity politics in Nigeria to proffer practicable solutions. It argues that identity consciousness has overtaken national consciousness and engendered a relationship characterized by domination, superiority and hegemony by the various groups. It reveals that the currency of politics is an ethnic-hegemony-rivalry sentiment that threatens national integration. The paper reviews available literature on the subject matter from peer-reviewed journal articles, reports of reputable international organisations, working papers and newspaper articles. It concluded that identities have become powerful manipulative instruments in the hands of the political elites used to divide the Nigerian populace. It recommended the promotion of justice, equity and fairness in governance to ameliorate the chances of identity dissension and identity-based conflicts.

**Keywords:** conflict; diversity; ethnic; identity; identity politics; religion

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multicultural nation with diversities in ethnic, religious, cultural and lingual identity. The nation has been challenged by recurring ethnic and religious conflicts that have led to the wanton destruction of life and property. The political elite – in a bid to capture power – has reconstructed these identity groups to promote antagonism. The result of this political remodelling has been an ingrained ethnic identification that makes peaceful politics all but impossible. Resource allocation – among other issues – engenders violent contestation according to identity formation. The issues that create the most savage contentions are those viewed as fundamental to the legitimacy and continued existence of the state, over which contending groups espouse a winner-take-all strategy in their political relations (Osaghae & Suberu 2005). Canci & Odukoya (2016) observe that ethnic and religious conflict makes up the most constructed difference in identity in Africa. Akinyetun & Bakare (2020) corroborates that the spate of post-independence conflicts in African countries like DR Congo, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone attests to the differences of the various identity groups that make up most African states.

The conflicts arising from ethnic identification are centred on power contestation, unequal allocation of resources, economic decline, ethnoreligious differences and citizenship issues. The result is weak national cohesion, instability and underdevelopment. Uzodike & Whetho (2011) note that ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria has been incessant and permeates almost all the regions in the country, especially, the Middle belt, North west and the Niger Delta. Following the incidence of over five hundred cases of communal clashes, more than 11,000 lives were lost between 1999 and 2013.

Multiculturalism does not necessarily engender conflict. Instead, it is the fanaticism of identity groups that exasperate distress. Fearon & Laiton (2003) and Kwaja (2009) aver that identity-based conflicts are coterminous with preexisting conditions of communal clashes, uprising, widespread poverty, persistent unemployment, a weak economy, territorial disputes, electoral rivalry and the inability to manage diversity.

Turaki (2013) opines that the nature of Nigerian politics, social crises, clashes and ethnoreligious riots is occasioned principally by Nigeria's primordial orientation and sentiments. Nigerians have reconstructed tribal/ethnic myths to project their views, esteem and feelings about their origin, fate and value. Nigerians have utilized (1) tribalism/ethnicity, (2) culture (3) religion and (4) land, which are the essential human values, as instruments and weapons of conflict, violence and viciousness in the course

of relating with one another. Thus, it is the utilization of primordial identities and structures to promote personal interest, sustain an unfairly advantageous position, or maintain a negative political position that comprises a faulty logic. Turaki further observes that the pattern of relationship between the major ethnic groups in Nigeria is evidenced in one or more of the following:

- (1) there is a pattern of superiority-inferiority relationship between the groups as a result of ethnicity, culture and religion;
- (2) there is a configuration of the politics of disparity, domination or exclusion between the groups.

Religion and ethnicity cannot be isolated from the political discourse in Nigeria; they hardly exist or function separately. Instead, they function with each other in a multifaceted, yet opposing way. This informs the adoption of the term ethnoreligious identity to capture the borderline between ethnicity and religion, especially as it influences violence and conflict in Nigeria (Egwu 2001). Despite the positive relevance that religion holds in fostering development in a country, it has destructive tendencies when not cooperatively managed. The major religious groups in Nigeria; Christianity and Islam, have been used to influence politics negatively – creating a history filled with struggle as well as viciousness. This encompasses the war of words and doctrinal correctness engaged in by the various religious practitioners (Falola 2001).

Violence often starts with criticism, dehumanization and denigration of others. It happens in groups, which Falola categorizes as sidelined and self-reproachful groups - the Islamic majority, Christian minority, Christian Intelligentsia, Southern Northern Moslem scholars, Interreligious groups and State establishments. These groups are fairly permanent, and their fierceness could be of importance to the emancipation from oppression or perceived endangerment of their sociopolitical disposition (Falola 2001). This form of variation, stigmatization and dehumanization of one group by another are insidiously capable of entrenching fragility and instability. Bongmba (2006) and Caleb & Danjuma (2018) note that plurality in identity evidenced in a diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and lingual group increases the chances of conflict due to the internal contradictions among these groups. The consequent internal wrangling and conflicts arising from the hostile relationship between and among these groups are attributable to the heterogeneous formation of the country and the characterization of diversity as the currency of politics.

It is thus impracticable to engage in any sociopolitical discourse bothering Nigerian politics and the corollary of violence without recourse to the identity-based

components that ignite it. It is on this premise that this paper explores identity and identity politics with specific attention to its indicators and manifestation in Nigeria. Using a descriptive method and relying on secondary sources of data, the paper appraises primordialism as the theoretical framework and further reflects on identity and identity politics. It also assesses the various indicators of identity politics in Nigeria. The paper also suggests practicable solutions that will help douse the tension and scourge of identity and identity politics in Nigeria.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

### ***Primordialism***

The core argument of primordialism is the ascriptiveness of ethnicity which emphasizes the permanent assignment of membership and identity at birth. Primordialism presumes that an individual's ethnic characteristics are basic, fixed during childbirth and is therefore permanent; identity is attached to language, religion, race or location. This emerges because family relationship gatherings are commonly delimited by regular frontiers, for example, waterways, forests and mountains which separate people. This limitation characterizes the psyche of one or more ethnic groups. Primordialism posits that the membership of such grouping is fixed and is passed down from one generation to another. Therefore, ethnic membership and/or differences are ancestral just as the resultant ethnic conflicts are (Geertz 1973; Joireman 2003; Williams 2015). In this manner, primordialism speaks to the foundation of ethnic character and its vast implications for individuals; of ancient and modern times. Primordialists regard nations as primordial entities that are established in historical antiquity and human biology. Thus, ethnic or national identity is predetermined during childbirth by the ethnic characteristics of the parents which are unalterable.

Primordialism is one of the earliest and prominent thoughts for explaining identity, yet, it has become one of the most attacked theories in explaining ethnicity (Muro 2015). According to Coakley (2018), even though primordialism has been dismissed as inadequate in explaining ethnicity, the theory continues to offer a significant explanation of the phenomenon. The squeezing out of primordialism has given room for a massive subscription to the constructivist view of ethnicity. Yet, a recent overview of nationalism studies has continually recognized the significance of the primordial interpretation. Primordialism as reflected in the works of Pierre van den

Berghe, Clifford Geertz, Edward Shils, Richard Jenkins and Thomas Eriksen describes group accord which is derived from the cords that bind people together, either through hereditary traits or cultural affinities such as religion, language, kinship and territory. The most ideal theory that explains identity politics in Nigeria as perpetuated by the various ethnic groups is primordialism. It calls attention to the cultural features that bind a group together. For instance, the various identity groups in Nigeria are grouped according to religion (Christian, Muslim and African Traditional Religion), ethnic group (majorly, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani), and language (majorly Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa). These various groups command a high level of solidarity that makes politics of identity the norm – which forms the crux of the argument. The primordial perspective on ethnicity is associated with affinity or blood ties. One of the proponents of this theory, Edward Shils opine that social life hovers mainly around several kinds of ‘primary group’ relationships. For Shils, the feeling of attachment that one has for one’s kin is indescribably attributed to blood ties, and not just a function of social interaction (Shils 1957).

Geertz (1963) opines that a primordial attachment is that which bears root in an individual’s ‘givens’ or put differently, in the social existence of such individual. Givenness could be a result of the religion an individual is born into, the family ties, ethnic group, community, language, culture, or a shared social value. Geertz’s argument is hinged on the presumption that an individual’s blood ties, belief, attitude, language and customs are acquired at birth and therefore overpowering. The individual is bound to his group by an acquired or given attribute which surpasses the individual’s affection, interest or feeling of fulfilling an obligation. Weinreich et al. (2003) define primordialism as a sentiment-filled set of beliefs towards an ancestry, a group or a set of individuals in a particular geographical space. For Ozkırımlı (2017), primordialism generally describes the belief that identity is innate as is the sense of smell, sight or speech.

The primordialists argues that people support their kin in a way that embraces the wellness or survivability of the kinsfolk in hostility to other ethnic groups. At the point when people support their kinsfolk in social relationships, they make it versatile compared with other people who don’t have a place and it is just the strong family that is probably going to endure the procedure of natural selection. This is because it is kin groups that have advanced into ethnic groups. It gives us a biological clarification for the nearness of ethnocentrism. This explanation is key in understanding the hostility between the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. To be sure, such hostility has not had a preference for the status of the groups. Put differently, the ethnic

clashes between and among the major and minor ethnic groups in Nigeria can be seen from this lens. In other words, members of various ethnic groups tend to favour their kinsfolk in social relationships and exhibit social resilience towards others who do not belong to their group. Yet again, this form of social exclusion, apprehensiveness and resentment – rooted in identity – is capable of widening the crack between the various groups in Nigeria, increase the calls for secession, and invariably drive the country into an abyss of instability.

To grasp the potency of primordialism in explaining identity and identity politics in Nigeria, it is imperative to appraise its major strands i.e. cultural and lingual primordialism.

## **CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC PRIMORDIALISM**

The cultural primordialism viewpoint emphasizes culture as the basic tie that binds people together. As Eriksen (2001) argues, ethnicity accentuates cultural diversity by sharing a strong, yet complex bond. This view held by Geertz (1963), stresses that each person is naturally introduced to a specific culture that structures his convictions and his personality and it is peoples' claim to these structures that make it a fundamental identity. In this way, the association that ties more distant family people transcends ties of blood. Along these lines, different factors, such as custom, religion and language serve to motivate people into the formation of an ethnic group. It is this connection that gives people common interests and basic political goals sooner or later which can be pursued to the detriment of other people who do not impart these qualities to them. Geertz presumed that people give their ties of origin, a familial area, kith and kinfolk a value which dislodges all others in building up their identity and because of its fixed position, it is consequently the main source of the ties that bind people together.

As a form of primordialism, culture is unarguably another binding factor that has decisively affected the identity and relationship between and among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. The cultural distinctiveness of these various groups in Nigeria remains unflinching and each group has persisted in pursuing its cultural dominance with resolute determination.

The desire by one cultural group to play a dominant role in the Nigerian political scenery is another precursor to identity politics. As expected, this is often met with resistance from other groups who also seek relative relevance even if it means resorting to violence. Grillo (2014) contends that ethnicity is a false and pretentious

construct used by political leaders to cynically secure their desire. This was corroborated by Taoheed (2016), that bloody violence experienced in Nigerian politics arises from the manipulation of identity groups by the elite to achieve a political end. The challenge is how to reconstruct diversity and identity from serving violent ends to promoting unity, a sense of belonging and security among the people. Sofolah (2016) notes that Nigerians have not exhibited enough capabilities to cross-examine cultural elements before adoption, which is corroding the culture and growth space in the country. Policies and efforts targeted at development are usually adopted without paying enough attention to traditional and indigenous cultural values that invariably determine policy outcomes in the nation.

Duruji (2010) submits that India is a classic example of a country where language has been used in identity formation and shaping of the culture and character of a group of people in the constitution-making process and where it was also decided that the sub-unit ought to choose its own most widely used language. Another point of view of primordialism is the one that offers prominence to relations arising from the myth and history of a typical nation as opposed to cultural heritage and blood ties. As it were, ethnic identification from this view-point is emotional and psychological instead of biological. This point of view has been buttressed fundamentally by Connor (1994) that the most critical part that hauls people together is normal convictions and myths of heritage. For example, Connor (1994) characterizes a nation as a gathering of people who are persuaded that they are genealogically related. The conviction of common origin is essential and has been a catalyst to different issues, such as the importance of hereditary social issues and native land.

Bodomo (1996) notes that a constantly neglected area of the challenges in Africa is the multiplicity of language. Language is a dominant indicator of group membership and social identity. This is due to its relevance in fostering social relations and promoting customs. As a crucial distinctive feature of ethnic identity, language differentiates one ethnic group from another and strengthens identity (Egenti 2015). Despite the advantages, language can also be a bane of cohesion especially in a multilingual nation like Nigeria where politics of exclusion is pervasive. Ndiribe & Aboh (2020) argue that multilingualism is a divisive factor in Nigeria because it emphasizes marginalization between the various dominant groups due to the inability to develop an indigenous language from the various languages. Besides, because the speakers of these various languages are caught in a web of ethnic contestation, they adopt the language as another basis of division. Agheyisi (1984) classify Nigerian languages into major, minor and minority languages. He identified nine major lan-

guages viz: Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Fulani/Fulfude, Tiv, Kanuri, Efik/Ibibio and Ijaw – with the first three being the main major languages. These three main major languages correspond with the major ethnic groups that are locked in a recurring pattern of superiority-inferiority relationship. As such, the conflicts can be said to also have a lingual colouration. After all, the fight for dominance by one ethnic group is a fight for the supremacy of its language. Akinnaso (1990) stress the above submission that language in Nigeria is caught up in politics and the resulting language politics is confronted with a two-faced challenge of trying to overcome the legacies of colonialism and representing the interest of indigenous ethnic groups in the fight for domination. More so, there is the challenge of minor ethnic and lingual groups against domination by the larger groups.

## **IDENTITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS: A REFLECTION**

Identity has in recent times become more popular in analyzing conflicts. Identity is a sociopolitical precept that has both an independent and aggregate significance. Lapid (1996) affirmed that in its singular form, identity is basic, continuous, particular and fundamental to the possibility that identities (plural) are built and reproduced through sociopolitical doings. Consequently, identities are emergent and constructed; not fixed, polymorphic, intuitive and substance like. Thus, identity, rather than conceived as arrival at a foreordained endpoint, is a departure. Du Plessis (2001), opined that the idea of identity expounds on the idea of oneself (against the other) as established by society. In like manner, people have allegiance to a group that they are collectively affiliated to and to which they have a place and social ties resting on the formation of social distinctiveness bolstered by collective action and group cohesion. This creates a distinction between and among various groups, where members identify themselves with certain groups and classify others as not belonging to the social milieu.

Erickson (cited by Okpanachi 2010) sees identity as a notion located at the core of the person and situated at the nuclei of his locale culture. It can be characterized as an individual's feeling of having a place with a group that impacts his political conduct. Identity is persistent and continuously emphasized in psychological givens and social roles. Such characteristics include the trust an individual has in a group and the love shown to other members of the group. In addition to this is the passionate loyalty a member has for a group and the commitment to a particular cause. The concept of identity is a broad term that encompasses several other strains such as per-

sonal, social, tribal, ethnic, state, national and transnational identities (Du Plessis 2001). Identity indicates the development of significance based on a social characteristic, or an interconnected arrangement of sociocultural qualities, which takes precedence over the other sources of significance. As such, an individual or a group might have diverse identities. However, such a multiplicity can confer on the individual, stress and inconsistency, especially in taking a social action or in self-representation. After all, identities attract role sets (Giddens 1991).

Castells (2004) submits that identities become pronounced when and if political actors build their importance around them and internalize them. Meanwhile, there is a distinction between identity and role set. When identity signifies importance, role sets connote function. Therefore, identities are more grounded sources of significance. Identity reinforces itself and self-continues over time. It is not stable or uniform, rather, it is dynamic and adapts with time. The quality and significance of identity differs according to the group and may vary much after some time. Thus, identity is powerful and mirrors the changing roles in society thus influencing resource allocation and political participation. Therefore, identity consciousness is a major factor in identity politics whereby the multiple identities of members of various groups influence their political behaviour in society. Eriksen (2001: 44), refers to identity politics as the use of identity to represent a groups' belief and interest. He takes it to mean "the political ideology, organization, and action that openly represents the interests of designated groups based on 'essential' characteristics such as ethnic origin or religion, and whose legitimacy lies in the support of important segments of such groups." He argues that the conflict is often associated with identity politics as in the case of Yugoslavia, Fiji and India.

## **DRIVERS OF IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS**

Ethnic diversity and multiculturalism is not anathema to nation-building. The experience of multicultural and plural populations like the UK, Asia, South Africa, Canada, Netherlands, USA, Belgium and Brazil are ample examples of this premise. The challenge of ethnic identity in Nigeria has been explained from several perspectives. Akinyetun (2020), argues that the colonialists' desire to subdue the political system and further its imperialistic agenda necessitated the merger of hitherto diverse groups whose opinion on the amalgamation was not sought. This became the basis of political dissonance, ethnic tension and national disintegration. Meredith (2011) added that Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa stressed that Nigerian unity is an illusion of the British

colonialists, given that Nigerians are inherently different. Advancing a contrary opinion, Okpan & Otega (2019) maintain that Nigeria's experience with ethnic diversity is dismal because of the state and political elites' manipulation of ethnic identity for pecuniary and selfish benefits. The desire to capture and hold on to power has led the elite to emphasize ethnic differences in their campaigns. The result of this has been ethnic-based conflicts and recurring identity-induced electoral violence.

More so, systemic inequality pervades the Nigerian political system and denies members of the various ethnic groups access to resources. This is made clear given Nigeria's petrodollar economy that attracts a rush to the centre by each ethnic group. In the course of jostling for access to this largesse or 'national cake', leaders of the ethnic groups espouse conflict thus raising identity consciousness. As Jenkins (2000) argue, ethnicity and identity are not sufficient to compel people to act in certain ways. Rather, it is the prevailing economic and political conditions that explain their actions. Therefore, to grasp ethnicity, it must be interpreted in line with group members' pursuit of material benefits. When contextualized in Nigeria, it is the local material interests that various ethnic groups seek to achieve that fuels their actions. That is, the three major ethnic groups; Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, are concerned with who benefits what and how, and when these interests clash, conflict and violence is engendered.

Grillo (2014) opines that ethnicity emphasizes categorization and differences that are not stable or permanent. Ethnicity expresses political, social and economic interests. For instance, the categorization of the Hausa (north) in Oyo state (west) among the Tijaniyya Islamic group is majorly to protect their economic interest of cattle rearing. More so, the organization of the Igbo (east) in Lagos (west) especially in areas such as Ikeja, Alaba and Ladipo market is to advance economic trade, while the collectivity of the Hausa (north) in Alaba rago Lagos (west) is for economic reasons. Meanwhile, this organization to promote economic activities has carried with it political incursions as these people have organized themselves according to their ethnic groups in their host communities to contest for power and several political positions, as well as to collectively influence political decision making.

As Okpanachi (2010) observes, in the struggle, rivalry or competition for resources and societal assets, particularly in circumstances of shortage, demand will, in general, be predicated on communal interests, which will, in general, be dependent on psychological attributes or, as is all the more regularly the case, on mutual multicultural identities. In this manner, identity politics is simply the mutually strengthening interchange between identities and the quest for material profits in the area of competitive politics. As it were, while identity fundamentally reflects an emotional and

affective character of people dependent upon genuine social involvement, identity politics, is likewise essentially politics that begins from or is aimed at the assumed identity of their nationalists and heroes who fought their political battles for continued access to the state's resources and means of resource aggregation and acquisition. It includes the emphasis on propagating identity consciousness to create a large base of political support for the political elite, in their ethnic-superiority contestations. More so, identity politics stems from the quest by an identity group to create a political, economic and cultural communication network that favours its members against others. Such cultural components incorporate language, cultural image and a common history (Ibid).

## **EFFECTS OF IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS**

Identity or its changes can either be constructive or broken. Concerning the resurgence of negative types of identity politics, Kofi Annan (cited by Jega, 2000: 11) opined that:

“This particularistic and exclusionary form of identity politics has intensified in recent years within and among nations... It is responsible for some of the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law and, in several instances, of elementary standards of humanity... Negative forms of identity politics are a potent and potentially explosive force. Great care must be taken to recognize, confront and restrain them lest they destroy the potential for peace and progress that the new era holds in store.”

However, identity consciousness can likewise be positive. Osaghae (1995) gives insight into the positive role of identity mobilization as used by the state to create a surplus that is never adequate to fulfil the needs of its citizens particularly the disregarded rural part. Alger (2002) submitted that the scholarship on ethnoreligious identity has underlined the constructive role of religion in peacebuilding. Meanwhile, its utilization has shown that many groups have used religion to create strife while religious scholars are being recruited to provide unprecedented legitimacy for conflict, violence, war and insurgency. Commenting on this pattern, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding Program on Religion and Conflict Resolution (2007) referred to Kofi Annan's 2002 report on the counteractive action of armed conflict wherein he confirmed that religious assemblies can assume a role in forestalling armed conflict due to the ethical influence they wield in their numerous communities.

He also notes that specific religious groups and their leaders are better positioned to prevent conflict and emphasize unity. Due to their traditional positions, they can preach a broad-based adherence to peaceful elective methods for communicating disputes before the outbreak of violence.

Nations, where separatist and divergent inclinations exist, are regularly casualties of brutal identity-based conflicts. To be sure, the existence of diverse identity groups in such a society is a significant determiner of hostility and an enabler of identity-based conflicts. Identity politics, therefore, is the decisive political action of different religious, ethnic and cultural groups in demanding greater political, social and economic rights; including secession and self-determination (Osaghae & Suberu 2005). It claims to speak to and tries to propel the awareness of specific groups, whose members frequently unite around the common knowledge of apparent economic inequality and relative deprivation, in comparison with the general public of which they are part of (Ambe-Uva 2010). This generally creates a political premise in which they may come together and start to advocate for themselves in the public eye (Zweiri & Zahid 2007). Thus, identity politics implies more than the mere acknowledgement of ethnic, religious or cultural identity. Indeed, it tries to convey these identities beyond simplistic selfhood, to a political system dependent on that identity. This paper hereby turns to assess the various manifestations, indicators and pointers of identity politics as it threatens political stability in Nigeria. This will be done by emphasizing the ethnic and religious conundrum.

## **IDENTITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA: THE INDICATORS**

Adamu and Ocheni (2016) aver that the persistent political instability and recurring aggravation that portray the Nigerian Fourth Republic is occasioned by unwavering sentiments of marginalization by different ethnic groups. All things considered, upon acknowledgement by these excluded ethnic groups that the language they speak, their religious faith or that their cultural beliefs do not represent their ethnic identities in the larger society, the feeling of deprivation and exclusion becomes evoked. Such a group begins to seek to gain recognition in the sharing and control of resources by appealing to the sensitivity of its group members through aggressive agitations. This is evidenced in the insecurity that characterizes the northeast part of Nigeria; where Boko Haram continues to hold sway and the incidence of banditry in the northeast. This has also been responsible for the calls for disintegration and secession by the southeast part of the country.

According to Osai (2010), ethnicity has attracted enormous attention in the social relationships among the distinctive ethnic groups in the country. Every significant national discourse in Nigeria is given an ethnic colouration, so much that political issues are seen from an ethnic lens first. This trend has necessitated destructive ethnocentric judgments and remains a typical feature of the national treatise in Nigeria. According to Taoheed (2016), ethnic tension and chauvinistic apprehension are dominant indicators of conflict in West Africa since after the Cold War.

### ***The Conundrum of Ethnicity***

The reality of ethnicity in Nigeria is that most Nigerians owe allegiance and loyalty to their ethnic groups first. They think about themselves, initially, as individuals belonging to a distinct ethnic group, before identifying with a particular state and then, as Nigerians in that regressive order. While the presence of ethnocultural particularities and peculiarities, for example, traditions, language, religion, and other primordial requisites create difficulties for national solidarity, they need not block the plausibility of such solidarity. It is the misapplication of these primordial sentiments for disruptive ends by the political class and – more often than not – traditional leaders of the various groups that is the basis of the problem. With this negative use, the pursuit for public office is regarded as a means to advance the social and economic gains of one ethnic group against the others in an atmosphere of persistent inter-ethnic competition for political and economic supremacy. The result of this is that nationalism has offered an approach to parochialism or, best case scenario, sectionalism, all under the guise of ethnicity (Osai 2010).

Ethnicity in Nigeria has been a burden since independence and has led to series of conflicts that have claimed several lives and led to the destruction of many properties. To be more specific, identity-related conflicts in Nigeria has claimed more lives than imagined. According to Nigeria Watch (2020), the majority of the ethnic clashes and deaths took place in fourteen states of the country i.e. Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Delta, Kaduna, Kano, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Ondo, Plateau, Taraba and Yobe states – Benue state had the highest occurrence of ethnic-related deaths. This is a clear indication that ethnicity in Nigeria is being used to perpetuate violent conflicts.

### ***The Conundrum of Religion***

According to McCaslin (2019), the challenge of religious polarity in Nigeria is pervasive and continues unabated. The Federal Government of Nigeria is struggling to curtail the excesses of Boko Haram and at the same time, deal with conflicts in the Middle Belt. As observed by Omilusi (2015), politics and religion make up important parts of the life of the same people. For instance, citizens from the secular society still make up members of the various religious groups. Meanwhile, these twin identities get complex. Religious beliefs have moral relevance, which makes it imperative for religious practitioners to express such by participating in the political order as citizens. The way moral views are established in religion doesn't exclude them from the political sphere. Albeit, they don't have common legitimacy simply because they are thought by their types to be religiously approved. They should be contended for through appropriate political and social means with the consciousness of national values. The mind-boggling connection between politics and religion is most unmistakable in a plural and multicultural society like Nigeria where everybody in the nation intensely identifies with two of the religious groups in the country; Islam and Christianity. Today, the Nigerian populace is partitioned almost similarly among Muslims and Christians.

In deeply divided societies like Nigeria, ethnoreligious attachments appear permanent and severely infiltrating thereby determining who will gain access to political power and the state's resources. Often, religious and ethnic groups have mounted political pressure on the government and have exerted great influence on Nigeria's political activities. By so doing, the line between politics and religion have become blurred, thus explaining why identity-based conflicts have become a unit of political and economic relations between and among the various groups. In a bid to pervade the political environment for group-based benefits, the identity groups in Nigeria often promote political antagonism, ethnic resentment and tribal antipathy among themselves. While doing this, a common narrative of propaganda is the accusation and counter-accusations of perceived marginalization, relative deprivation, inequality, injustice and social exclusion of a particular group. The result of this has been the persistent politicization of religion and ethnicity as well as the wanton death that follows it (Nnoli 1978; Caleb & Danjuma 2018). Nigeria Watch (2020) claims that religious-related clashes have claimed more lives than ethnic-related clashes in Nigeria, with 2010 having the highest number of deaths (564). More so, these clashes and consequent deaths took place in thirteen (13) states of the country: Sokoto, Adamawa,

Plateau, Bauchi, Borno, Taraba, Edo, Gombe, Kaduna, Yobe, Kano, Niger, and Zamfara states. Meanwhile, the majority of the deaths is attributable to Plateau state.

Both ethnic and religious groups are responsible for most of the number of deaths witnessed in the country between 2006 and 2020. Afolabi (2015) argued that from May 1992, more than 10,000 individuals have died from communal-religious conflicts. States with the highest number of casualties are Benue, Taraba, Borno and Plateau states. Consequently from 2001, occurrences of Christian-Muslim conflicts have turned out to be increasingly recurring and gorier. Conflicts among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria has taken a significant number of lives in the last decade. This reignited again in February 2006 when Muslims were offended at the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad (SAW) which prompted a slaughter of many Christians in the northern part of the country and followed by backlash killings of Muslims by Christians in the south. Over 150 individuals were executed and various holy places and mosques were demolished. More so, due to the influence of religion on politics, people have abandoned merit for identity. Voting behaviour has become more influenced by the religious affiliation of the candidate rather than by leadership capability (Okafor 2011).

## **RISING ABOVE IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

Given the devastating effect of identity politics in Nigeria, this paper hereby proposes the following as practical solutions to mitigate the effects of the indicators. Since the fear of being continually deprived and marginalized is a major factor that drives groups to engage in violent conflicts, it is thus imperative that a visionary leader with the acumen to place the citizens at the centre of the Nigerian political project without a penchant for ethnic chauvinism is advocated for. The country needs a leader who will not capitalize on the differences of the people for political gains. One who will not fan the embers of diversity to serve sectional interests, but to serve collective interest without ethnic or religious inclination. This will not only quell accusations, counter-accusations and mutual suspicion of one ethnic group against another but will also raise national consciousness in the people to transform their ethnic cum religious loyalty to the advancement of national interest. Needless to say that doing this, will lead to a reduction in ethnic conflicts and a quest for ethnic and religious domination.

Beyond this, it is also pertinent to note that the entrenchment of justice, equity and fairness in governance will further ameliorate the chances of identity dissension

and identity-based conflicts in Nigeria. Indeed, the government should not only preach fairness or romanticize democratic values, rather, but this should also be vigorously accentuated and pursued through equitable distribution of resources and broad-based, all-inclusive governance. Sectional appointments should be discontinued and the recommendations of the Federal Character Commission should be followed to the letter. The representation of all sub-nationalities – of course, based on merit – irrespective of ethnic, religious or cultural affiliation in governance will no doubt, spur a sense of belonging in the various groups, and thus, see the need to work assiduously towards achieving developing Nigerian project.

It is further proposed that the Federal Government of Nigeria should move to establish a ‘National Identity Commission’. The commission will be saddled with the responsibility of making research into the underlying challenges faced by the several identities in their bid to coexist peacefully in the country. This commission will be subdivided into several units i.e. Ethnic, Cultural, Religious and Lingual Identity Departments, will the aim of recommending to the government, positive steps to be taken to synthesize the inherent diversity of the various groups in Nigeria, towards forming a national identity. This Commission will be responsible for policy formulation and implementation, especially as it concerns identity and national identity formation and development in Nigeria.

If development involves the ideal change of the political, economic and socio-cultural frameworks of the general public, and language is viewed as a repository and a device for the articulation and communication of these structures, then, an effective conceptualization and promotion of the cultural change must be encouraged through the use of the mother-tongues of the dialects indigenous to the general public. Hurskainen (cited by Waya 2008) pointed that, the level through which Nigerian development approached the interrelation between language and improvement is no doubt a matter of concern. In that capacity, the Nigerian slow-paced development is a significant clue on how language can be an essential device for societal transformation.

Although the number of languages spoken in Nigeria is not clear, figures from the 2006 census reveal that there are 390 indigenous languages spoken by various ethnic groups across the country. As a result, cross-boundary communication in Nigerian indigenous languages is extremely impaired because these languages are largely spoken within their geographical areas of origin. This has also led to a colossal inter-ethnic linguistic rivalry which hinders the development of a national language policy. This explains why no indigenous language can emerge as a national language in Nige-

ria. More so, with the multiplicity of languages comes cultural pluralism which makes curriculum development and implementation a daunting task. For emphasis, all of these indigenous languages cannot be taught in schools and neither can any emerge as the national medium of instruction. Therefore, these languages merely exist in the spoken form in the various areas of origin, while the English language remains the sole language of documentation in Nigeria (Ezema 2009).

Language conveys the identity of its speaker; it is an unmissable social part of any society. Meanwhile, the depreciation of an indigenous dialect leads to the depreciation in the local information (value system and ethos) contained in such a dialect (Roy-Campbell 2006). Therefore, the inability to develop an indigenous national language has not only eroded the sensibilities of Nigerians but has also impeded national cohesion as a result of a weakened value system. As Roy-Campbell (2006), further argues, an abundance of indigenous information is being carted away in these dialects and is continuously being lost as the overseers of this learning pass on. It is because of this that Bodomo (1996) proposes a localized trilingual model that recognizes the concurrent use of indigenous language and a recognized national language to carry out domestic and international relations. This, he argues, will create a linkage between these diverse languages at the educational, administrative and political levels and engender cohesion. This is because when applied to the Nigerian context, the theory implies that an individual from a particular ethnic group is obliged to speak his indigenous language alongside that of other groups and the national language in daily communication.

According to Ayeomoni (2012), in Nigerian multilingual society, the roles accorded a language is a function of the extent of its development. For instance, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo and Hausa are subjects offered in secondary school and at the National Examination Council and West African Examination Council, due to their level of development. Adebija (2004) maintain that, by and large, the historical and political antecedent tradition tends to attract greater roles to a language. For instance, Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa represent the indigenous language of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, as assigned national functions. Meanwhile, the institutional policy of government immensely contributes to the determination of language functions. Mostly, languages backed up by government policy tend to function more while those without institutional blessing are weakened. For instance, the elevated indigenous languages in Nigeria; Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, are backed up by government policies. It is therefore advisable that the government recognizes the various indigenous languages by incorporating them into the school curriculum to be offered in the respective states.

Finally, it is equally important that community policing is promoted in Nigeria. When each community has its police equipped with up-to-date intelligence-gathering gadgets, it will be easy to combat violence as they erupt in various communities. The major advantage community policing has over central policing is majorly in the area of language and communication. Since members of the community police are recruited from within the community, it will be easy to not only identify but to mediate between various opposing groups before it festers.

Going forward, the Nigerian government must pay dire attention to democratic tenets and principles in such a way that the voice of every group in a system is heard and cherished whilst ensuring that various groups with strong religious loyalties are enlightened on the need to compromise. In the same way, serious attention must be paid to the incidence of ethnic and religious differences through the establishment of a Conflict Management Commission that will take into account the root causes of ethnoreligious conflicts in the country and how these can be managed. The commission will also identify the role that religion and culture play in conflict escalation and proffer traditionally based solutions through mediation and reconciliation which involves Councils of Elders to arbitrate disputes.

Meanwhile, in the case of external mediation, emphasis should also be placed on the economic framework. The Federal Government of Nigeria should address the economic inequalities, uneven distribution of wealth and economic antagonism in the political system and ensure that nonviolent use of third-party Civil Society Organizations to maintain peace among belligerents identity groups is adopted and sustained.

## **CONCLUSION**

The foregoing narrative buttresses the fact that identity consciousness in Nigeria has spiralled in the past years and has undoubtedly become a front-burner issue in practically almost all the political discourse identifying with the country. To be very sure, Nigerians have turned out to be progressively mindful of whom they are or not, particularly as it identifies with ethnic, religious, cultural and lingual identities. This is attributable to the political elite who have utilized each opportunity available to turn Nigerians against one another along these lines, to further their savage gathering forms and to reuse themselves in places of intensity. This paper has demonstrated that identity and identity politics has become a major theme in Nigerian politics with each group; ethnic, lingual, religious and cultural, striving for domination and hege-

mony. As further argued in the paper, identities are not detrimental in themselves, but the fault is in the primordial sentiments attached to these identities and how they have come to be powerful manipulative instruments in the hands of the political elites to divide and conquer the unsuspecting populace; the majority of whom have bought into the hoax and made it a way of life of life.

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## IDENTITET I POLITIKE IDENTITETA U NIGERIJ: OSVRT NA INDIKATORE

### Sažetak:

Nigerija je država s mnoštvom etničkih, religijskih, jezičkih i kulturnih identiteta koje politička klasa neprestano iskorištava za promociju svojih sebičnih interesa. Iako nije determinanta za konflikte, različitost je u Nigeriji neopravdano izazivala etničke, društvene i religijske konflikte koji su posljedično rezultirali stvaranjem separatizma, secesionističkih pokreta, pobuna, široko rasprostranjenog siromaštva, marginalizacije, podjela, nejednakosti i etničkih nemira, a sve su to prijetnje koje mogu odvesti zemlju u stanje neprestane nestabilnosti. Ovaj rad stoga nastoji procijeniti mučno iskustvo koje je Nigerija imala s identitetom i politikama identiteta uz poseban osvrt na etničke, religijske i lingvističke izazove. Rad daje doprinos diskusiji o politikama identiteta u Nigeriji kako bi ponudio praktična rješenja. Rad tvrdi da je svijest o identitetu nadjačala nacionalnu svijest te je iznjedrila odnose koji se odlikuju dominacijom, superiornošću i hegemonizmom različitih grupa. Rad otkriva kako su sredstva politike sentimenta zasnovani na etničkom, na hegemoniji i rivalstvu, što predstavlja prijetnju nacionalnoj integraciji. Rad daje pregled dostupne literature o ovoj temi koja uključuje članke iz recenziranih časopisa, izvještaje renomiranih međunarodnih organizacija, radne dokumente i novinske članke. U zaključku se kaže da su identiteti postali snažni instrumenti manipulacije u rukama političkih elita koje ih koriste za stvaranje podjela među stanovnicima Nigerije. Rad preporučuje promoviranje pravde, nepristranosti i poštenja u vlasti kako bi se umanjile šanse za pojavu konflikata zasnovanih na pitanjima identiteta.

**Ključne riječi:** konflikt; različitost; etničko; identitet; politika identiteta; religija

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