

Federal Character Principles, Nation Building and National Integration in Nigeria: Issues and Options

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Abstract

Nigeria remains a product of British political experiment of social cloning. There are about 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Prior to 1914 amalgamation, each of the 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria existed independently and distinctively in culture and tradition. The amalgamation midwifed birth of a country which is a replica of catholic marriage which may not be palatable but cannot be separated easily. By 1954, British government further displayed their political dexterity by introducing federalism. Yet it did not provide the desired unity. Giving the problems inherent with federalism, federal character principles were introduced along with national integration and nation building as a palliative measure in the 1979 and 1999 constitutions respectively. The extent to which the principles and policies have achieved its fundamental objectives in terms of nation building and integration demands scholarly excursion. Significance of this work lies in the understanding of why in spite rich content of the principles; national integration and nation building have not been fully achieved. Are there some issues with their application? The crux of this paper was to identify issues with the principle as well as options that would facilitate attainment of a desired nationhood. Central issues identified among others include, ethnocentrism, mutual suspicion, elitism, and mediocrity. The paper adopted content analysis of scholarly inputs. In conclusion, the paper opted for value orientation, patriotism, honesty and fairness which would seemingly enthrone confidence among Nigerians and facilitate the attainment of the desired peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: Nigeria, federal character, nation building, principles and integration.

1. Introduction

Among comity of nations, a country is distinguished not only by its geographical location but of certain peculiarities which may either be natural or have evolved over a period of time. Nigeria's peculiarities include; ethnic diversity, religious and cultural differences particularly the feeling of superiority by an ethnic group over the other. It is remarkably relevant to note that ethno-cultural and religious superiority have contributed significantly to most of the problems in the country (Kukah,2003). Over the years, several regimes have designed and constitutionalised some principles, provisions, policies and programmes aimed at promoting peaceful co-existence among the diverse ethnic nationalities. Specifically and currently too, section 14, subsection 3 of the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) states that:

The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no

predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

It is widely believed by advocates of the principle that federal character would deeply promote nation building and national integration both of which are sized as the panacea for peaceful co-existence. It is rightly understandable that Nigeria's history towards federalist status was inadvertent in nature and chequered in composition. There were notable stages and activities during colonial period and in recent time. It is argued and rightly too that Nigeria is a mere geographical expression (Awolowo, 1947). This responded directly to why federal character principle was strongly proposed by the 1976 Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) and upheld in the 1999 constitution. The extent to which the provision/principle (federal character) and advocacy have achieved its aim remains imaginary.

Afigbo (1987:21) in Ezeibe (2012) identified some stages in the evolution of federal character which is originally a colonial heritage. The stages include: The period of informal federation 1900-1946; The period of formal federation, first phase, 1946-1966, and The period of formal federation second phase: 1967- present. Afigbo further noted that the principle arose out of a compromise among the protagonists of the 1976 CDC. In another perspective, *"Amalgamation" theories of the 1898-1914 type were not necessarily the first to hit the political horizon in the territories that later became Nigeria*". (Tamuno, 2003:15). He further noted that federalism developed and grew from 1954. The political exercises by the colonialists (then) signaled a marriage of about 250 ethnic nationalities. In order to keep and sustain the marriage, 1979 and 1999 constitutions respectively introduced federal character, while nation building and national integration were propagated by its pundits as the blending cream. On the contrary, the provision and affiliate concepts paradoxically nurtured ethnic and primordial nationalists. Were as Tamuno, (2003:16) noted that the growth, development and practice of federalism, from 1954, allowed both elite and the masses to encounter severe crises, Shivji (2009) aptly states that nationalism became cultural relativism at best or fundamentalism at worst. As it were, these constitutions (1979 and 1999) are products of the military juntas, designed for democratic practice. The beauty of democracy globally lay in equity. Its applicability in Nigeria infers equitable representation of the ethnic nationalities in political appointments, career positions and such other positions of national representation or significance. The beauty and strength in the merger is probably preferred on democratic principles, such as good moral value and ethics, patriotism and nationalism which stand to promote and sustain synergy among the ethnic nationalities. The question is, do Nigeria's elite and the masses possess the courage and will to uphold and apply those values and tenets that promote peace rather than crises, democracy rather than sentimentalism?

According to Mohiddin, (2009), there is no universally acceptable model of democracy. Implicit in the idea is that a country is at will to develop democratic principles that promote good understanding, unity and development. This is likely the task which federal character is set to achieve. The principle is home grown in nature and practice. Practice of federal character principle in Nigeria so far raises curiosity and doubts.

The paper is therefore anchored on identifying issues in the application of federal character as well as options that would promote peaceful co-existence. The paper is contextually and methodologically opinionated as well as based on scholarly, visual and experienced observation. Again, it was deliberately partitioned into three main sections: firstly, it presented conceptual and contextual explications which are remarkably the very foundation of the paper. It further x-rays issues with the application of federal character and this is considered the crux of the paper. The third section was dedicated to options to federal character in Nigeria. In the end, the paper drew conclusion and acknowledged some notable scholars that directly or by extension discussed similar points.

Federal Character : Olagunju (1987) defined federal character as a deliberate design to accommodate less dominant but often forcibly expressed interest. Ezeibe (2012) says that federal character principle involves a deliberate plan to construct means of ensuring the proper distribution of amenities and government projects in a country. Implicit in the above definitions is that federal character is introduced where there are observed differences in culture, tradition and inequality either in human, natural or both. Therefore, federal

character is a palliative principle aimed at uniting once existed autonomous sub-nationalities through quota system for purposes of equality of opportunities and peaceful co-existence. Ezenwa (1987) and Heirmexy (2011) noted that federal character was introduced for equitable sharing of posts and even distribution of natural and economic resources. Contextually, the policy evolved through three main phases: implied, expressed and applied/ practiced. From 1914-1953 the principle was saliently applied as encapsulated by the amalgamation policy. From 1953-1976, it was applied under federalism, introduced in 1954. From 1976 to date, the principle is constitutionalised and fully practiced. Throughout the phases, the principle consummated Nigeria into a catholic marriage which may no longer be enjoyed but conditions for separation is near impossible. For the period, it has only achieved co-existence devoid of peace and this is evident in most national issues and developments.

Nation Building: Elaiwu in Okorie (2009) defined it as the process of creating unity and sense of belonging among heterogeneous groups in the state. In the view of Wikipedia (2013), it refers to the process of constructing a national identity using the power of the state. It further stated that it involves the process aimed at unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. The concept gained popularity due to the observed diversity in culture, tradition and religion in Nigeria after amalgamation and 1960 independence. It became obvious that the existence of Nigeria is marriage of divergent bed fellows and so its corporate existence hinges on advocacies and policy trust that can restore confidence, safety and sense of accommodation irrespective of the differences. Federal character/quota system is one of the principles and policies introduced to guarantee nation building.

National Integration: This refers to the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It means that though we belong to different castes, religions and regions and speak different language, we recognize the fact that we are all one (Shona, 2003). Nigeria is a country with about 250 ethnic nationalities distinctively isolated in terms of religion, languages. National integration implies that we should de-emphasize these differences and promote such policies that could unite Nigeria. Alapiki (2005) observed that introduction of Unity Schools, National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) state creation, quota system are some of the policies aimed at achieving national integration.

2. Issues with the Application of Federal Character, Nation Building and National Integration

In view of the fact that Nigeria is a country of diverse religious and ethnic nationalities, it is strongly believed that introduction and application of federal character and its affiliate concepts are faced with certain problems, some of which include:

2.1 Ethnocentrism:

"The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Othman Danfodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the North as willing tools and South as conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over our future" (Shilgba, 2011).

This was said to be the statement of one of the famous nationalist from northern oligarchy, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello in 1960. Further prove was instructively recorded in 1986 when , a Sokoto Prince, Alhaji Shehu Malami and Alhaji Maitama Sule, one of the Nigeria's respected bureaucrats created a storm among southerners when they respectively informed their listeners of Hausas superiority. To their bewilderment (southerners), they were informed that they (Hausas/Fulanis) acquired their dark skin from inter-marriages with the local Africans and that they were endowed with leadership qualities (Kukah, 2003:98).

The evils of tribalism in Nigeria are many. Tribal appellations cause tribal idiosyncrasies, these lead ultimately to variety and superciliousness and disharmony. An Hausa man may think a Yoruba man is inferior, while the Yoruba man in turn commonizes the Igbo; and Igbo man concedes to himself that both the

Hausa and Yoruba are just the people without gut (Ngozi, 2012).

The above quotations capture the reason and current situation in Nigeria due to ethnocentrism. An ethnic group is distinguished by language, culture, religion or both (Nnoli, 1978). Ethnocentrism is a self judgment that ones ethnic group is superior to others. Such assumption promotes antagonism evidenced in Nigeria. In response to many challenges orchestrated by ethnocentrism, Awolowo (1968) described Nigeria as divergently and almost irreconcilable entity.

Drawing from the above quotations, principles of federal character, nation building and national integration are irreconcilable with the composition and attitude of most Nigerians. Nweke (1995) described ethnocentrism as being attitudinal in form and perceptual in content. It is not easily erased particularly when the leaders do not display sufficient and convincing attitude that our strength lies in the diversity and exploration of resources for equitable benefit of every citizen irrespective of affiliation or originality.

2.2 *Elitism:*

Afigbo (1987) noted that the principle of federal character arose out of a compromise among the protagonists of 1976 CDC. In the view of Agbodike (2003), federal character has been manipulated and channeled to serve the overall interest of the petty bourgeoisies ruling class. In a similar opinion, elitism represents interests of the few minorities (Guaba, 2004, Agarwal, 2006 and Chaturvedi, 2006). Implicit in the above explanations is that those who champion the principle and policies are indirect benefactor hence it is another form of expanding their solid-political and economic empire.

Emergence and rise of elitism in Nigeria is traced to the unmarceable amalgamation and introduction of federalism in 1914 and 1954 respectively. It is understandable that significant number of pre and post-independent nationalists do not have sound economic base. Gboyaga (1989) aptly says that federal character principle is merely an elite ploy which could not materially improve the lot of the down-trodden in whose name it is raised. They constitute corrupt cabals and use ethnic sentiment to cover their ills. They strategically position their few agents in offices who act as political representatives against the set out goals of the establishment where they work.

Nigeria has had more crises since the introduction of federal character, some of which includes; the Nigeria civil war, several election violence particularly in 2011. Why and who is responsible? These concepts serve interest of elite who are eager to use their slaves to unleash terror and destabilize the country when they are schemed out.

2.3 *Mediocrity:*

Federal character is introduced for purposes of ensuring ethnic balancing. In Nigeria, ethnic balancing is conceived, perfected and applied by elite for the promotion of their egocentrism through an institutionalized mediocrity. Nigeria is divided along ethnic nationalities. The most outstanding is language and it impliedly forms the basis for consideration in federal appointments. Given the share size and nationalities of the sub groups, it is repeatedly vital to acknowledge that difficulties of nation building and national integration are deeply rooted in putting the wrong peg in the right hole. This has been identified as one of the major challenges of public enterprises in Nigeria. There are other countries with federal system but has viable public enterprises, why? Federal character is introduced in Nigeria as an acceptance of bad and non responsive governance.

Okata (2004:179) posited that public enterprises management is a progression and requires that administrative managers should possess certain kind of education, knowledge, skills and values as pre-requisite for effective performance in the job. This suggests that competence not quota system or ethnic balancing as opined by apostiles of federal character is the nexus for successful, effective and efficient performance of public organizations. Abba (2003) and Sharma *et al.*, (2011) affirmed that politicization of

public enterprises breeds mediocrity which is destructive and thus contributes significantly to the inefficiency of most public organizations. Mediocres are more loyal to their godfather because they lack competence. They tend to frustrate organizational goals and go unpunished. Utume (2003) shares the view stating that there is genuine fear that officers, secured by provisions of federal character may begin to act like political representatives without paying due attention to their duties. The variation in human and material resources across ethnic nationalities is known but competence promotes good governance and in turn reduces tension of ethnic revolt. What Nigerians need most is good, responsive and responsible government that has the courage and will to do the right thing at all times and for all Nigerians.

2.4 *Mutual Suspicion*

Before 1914 amalgamation and 1954 introduction of federalism, each of the sub-nationalities lived independently. Each of them enjoyed autonomy which explains insignificant social strife when compared to experiences after the amalgamation. In expression of the volume of problems bedeviling Nigeria state, Awolowo (1947) described it as a mere geographical expression. Ahmdu (1962) and Onu (2008) affirmed that the amalgamation is the mistake of 1914.

Shortly after independence, Nigeria was faced with plethora of problems including mutual suspicion. Afigbo (1987), and Ezigbo (2007) pointed suspicion and hatred among the major problems in Nigeria. To cushion the effects, protagonists of 1976 CDC compromised for inclusion of federal character in the constitution. Nation building and national integration were some of the slogans advocated in justification of its inclusion.

Major crises ever recorded in Nigeria since the amalgamation is significantly rooted to suspicion. This cuts across ethnic and religious boundaries but more pronounced across ethnic boundaries. They include 1964 federal election, where political parties and alliances were more ethnic than ideological. Nigerian civil war 1967-1970, 2011 general election and so on. Each of these crises shook the foundation of Nigeria due to suspicion as against reasons for the introduction of federal character. There can be no successful implementation of federal character principles amidst suspicion and hatred amongst the ethnic groups.

3. **Options for Achieving Nation Building and National Integration in Nigeria**

Inclusion of federal character into the 1979 and 1999 constitutions is a display of heinous attitude by the elite. Since its inclusion, Nigeria has known no peace. That Nigeria is still united is not unconnected to the elite tie that sacrifices popular agitation for personnel gains. The raising security challenges orchestrated by militia groups are indications of disillusionment among different ethnic groups and sub-nationalities.

Against the provision, Sanusi (2012) aptly criticized the constitution as a document that hinders development. The mistake has been made and is unlikely that it will soon be deleted. Efforts should be to thinker smart options for survival as a nation such as true federalism, patriotism, honesty and fairness.

There is need to replace quasi or centripetal federation with true federation. Federation purports that everybody can be satisfied (or nobody permanently disadvantaged) by nicely combining natural and regional/territorial interests within a complex web of checks and balances between a general, or federal government on the one hand, and a multiplicity of regional government, on the other (McClean and Mcmillian, 2003:194). Drawing from the above assertion, true federalism is a system of government in which the individual states within a country have control over their own affairs, but are controlled by a central government for national decisions (Kobojunkie 2012). True federalism will significantly grant constitutional autonomy to states as well as local governments. This will undoubtedly reduce tension at the centre because the different tiers will have shared responsibilities. For years Nigeria has been practicing quasi federalism meaning that a shift from the status quo would either require constitutional amendment or sovereign national conference which will permit autonomous and independent status in decision making for the continuation (or

not) of Nigeria state. At present, we practice centripetal federalism in nature and practice. There is need for regional/sub-national autonomy in areas of resource control, policy making and implementation, fiscal relationship and so on.

There is need for value re-orientation. In the past Nigerians are known for hard work, high moral standard which is the epitome of each sub-nationality. In recent times, corruption and immorality is celebrated thereby promoting evil. Value orientation will help re-shape the attitude of Nigerians particularly the elite who are the major actors and benefactors of federal character. Good moral value will entrench national patriotism rather than ethnic patriotism/primordialism, fairness rather than sentimentalism/bias.

4. Conclusion

Any successful strategy to promote peaceful co-existence in Nigeria ought to consider other options rather than federal character. Peaceful co-existence in Nigeria requires focused emphasizes on those tenets and values that promote individual habit for integration. The paper has presented conceptual and contextual explications of the principle of federal character and the affiliate concepts such as national integration and nation building. It also x-rays issues with the application of federal character in Nigeria some of which include: ethnocentrism, elitism, mediocrity, mutual suspicion and so on. It further highlighted the options such as: true federalism, patriotism, honesty and fairness. It is the ample submission of the paper that more efforts should be dedicated in inculcating high moral value in every Nigerian and more importantly making political office holders and corporate institutions and career officials more responsive and responsible. This will undoubtedly give every Nigerian hope, improve their future and make government accountable to the people.

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