

TACKLING INTER- ETHNIC/RACIAL COMPETITION AND EDUCATIONAL DISPARITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper states that Ethnicity and ethnic nationalism is one of the most politically sensitive areas of social life in Nigeria. It is a very serious social virus that is endemic in Nigeria. The disparity in educational development and provisions in Nigeria is traceable to the colonial policy besides, while the colonial administration permitted the missions to establish schools in the south, it could not encourage missionary educational activities in the North. The mode on penetration in the two sections of Nigeria dictated to a large extent, the educational policy for each area. While political expediency stunted educational development in Northern Nigeria, the missionaries had a field day in the south to the extent that there was fierce competition among them in opening schools. The result was a massive educational provision in the south and very little efforts in the North. The paper recommends among others that the fundamental premise of federalism which recognizes the independence of the federating units and the central government must be enshrined in the constitution.

Ethnicity and ethnic nationalism is one of the most politically sensitive areas of social life in Nigeria. It is a very serious social virus that is endemic in Nigeria; it is on record that Nigeria experienced an unsuccessful secession movement as a product of ethnicity and ethnic nationalism from 1967- 1970. Nigeria has 36 states plus the federal capital territory and six geopolitical zones, south-south, south-east, south-west, north central, north east and north- west but each of its many different ethnic group (tribes) has its own long history and rich existing cultures.

Altogether, Nigeria boasts of more than 250 different ethnic groups, with different languages, cultures and lifestyle. According to the 1952/53, 1991 and 2006 census figures, the larger ethnic groups are the Hausa in the North, Yoruba in the West and the Igbos in the south- East. Other prominent but numerous groups include Edo, the Ibibio of Cross River state, the Tiv of the Benue valley, Nupe of the middle Niger valley, Kanuri of the Lake Chad basin, etc. The largest concentration of the smallest ethnic groups is in the middle belt, where there are more than 180 different groups, a significant feature of the different distribution of ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Nevertheless, the richness of the Nigerian ethnic distribution and culture has not been appreciated, much less explored. This is basically on the fact that this beautiful natural and beyond disposition has been misconceived and misjudged. Some say it a mere geophysical arrangement; others say “it is British arranged,” and all this insinuates and instigates ethnic nationalism and fights, whatever and whichever way one looks at it.

A Brief History of Disparity in Educational Development

The disparity in educational development and provisions in Nigeria is traceable to the colonial policy. Education in Britain was basically controlled by voluntary agencies especially the missions. The colonial administration in Nigeria also based its policy on that premise. They did not get themselves seriously involved in educational development and provision. Besides, while the colonial administration permitted the missions to establish schools in the south, it could not encourage missionary educational activities in the North. The mode on penetration in the two sections of Nigeria dictated to a large extent, the educational policy for each area. While political expediency stunted educational development in Northern Nigeria, the missionaries had a field day in the south to the extent that there was fierce competition among them in opening schools. The result was a massive educational provision in the south and very little efforts in the North.

The ethnic factor in Nigerian educational development offers a vital tool for the analysis of contemporary issues in education. It was seen from the early days of missionary educational enterprise, ethnicity was dominant in educational provision. The ethnic connection has immensely influenced the spatial distribution of educational facilities and provision. For instance, the liberated domestic slaves became the standard bearer of western education, but in playing that role, they considered their own ethnic group as a priority, having themselves realized the value of education. Commenting on this Kosemami (1993; 26), has this to say “it is instructive to note that both in the East and West of Nigeria, the target of early missionary activities were those areas where the liberated slaves come from” This was the case with James Fergusson and Samuel A Crowther, the Egbas in Abeokuta in the west and Kinsmen, Rev. Taylor, J.C and |Simeon Jones, Ibos in Onitsha, in the East.

In addition to the above factor, the missionaries considered factors such as conducive environment, population, accessibility etc in the sitting of schools. This gave advantage to some ethnic groups above the other. But a time came when some of these

factors mentioned above no longer constituted serious problems. The missions in a desperate move to win more converts and enlarge their coasts compelled the various denominations to engage in rivalry instead of healthy competition. This led to the opening of more schools, within the period under- review in the south. In the North, the trinity of Islamic religion, Islamic Law (sharia) and political authority of the Sokoto caliphate consequence on the 19th century Jihad cemented North apathy to European incursion and educational activities. In some areas in Yoruba land, Ibo land, the middle Belt, missionary and colonial presence provided an escape from internal domination or repression; this was the case with the Ekiti, the Ijesha, the Ondo, the Akoko, and the Ika among the Yoruba. The Igala, the Idoma and others in the middle Belt share the same experience with those mentioned above.

The McPherson constitution of 1951 which introduce effective regionalism in Nigeria politics empowered the regions to legislate on a number of items including education. The three regional structure of the country that time where dominated by the three major tribes of Ibo, East; Yoruba, West and Hausa- Fulani, North. The political parties that were formed followed the Ethno-Religious structure, the Ag was predominantly Yoruba, the NPC Hausa- Fulani and the NCNC, through national in outlook, was still predominantly Ibos. The competition between the regions in the area of development, both human and material resources, gave rise to the enactment of various education laws. This led to the launching of the UPE in the west in 1955, and in the East in 1957. The North, in its conservative nature, did not “jump” into the UPE programme, rather established schools only on the basis of availability of funds. Though the UPE programmes in the East and West have been roundly criticized, by few, as a failure; but the undeniable facts still remain that the UPE programme, not only created sufficient awareness, it also led to the opening of primary schools in so many areas across the country.

It also gave rise to the compelling need for secondary education to take care of those leaving the primary schools. The massive production of teachers in the west by the teacher training colleges set up then, helped to sustain educational demand and development in the west in the years ahead. This perhaps accounts for why the west in the years leads in educational enterprise in this country. It also accounts for the current in balance and disparity in educational facilities and provision; which have remained a near permanent issue in educational development in Nigeria. With the massive turn-out of children from the various primary schools across the length and breadth of the country, the need for post primary schools to absorb these children became imperative and urgent. Besides, education has come to be known as a veritable instrument of change and social mobility hence the quest for it. Since the interest of the colonial administration and missions was on the primary education, they shown little or no serious interest in the secondary education. The Nigeria elites and ethnic associations took the center stage since nature abhors vacuum.

The Issue of Ethnicity

It is pertinent at this point and for proper understanding, to define the term Ethnicity. An ethnic group according to Nnoli (1980; 5) is a social formation distinguished by the communal character of its boundary. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture or both. Nnoli also identified conflict as an important characteristic in ethnic relations. Ethnicity itself is a hangover of the colonial rule in Nigeria. The colonial masters did not make frantic efforts in bridging or returning the ethnic relations before their existence. The hostile relationships were maintained. The projection of ethnic interest over national interest was, inadvertently encouraged. There was little or no cross cutting into ethnic groups. The competition and usage of power tended to follow ethnic lines rather than national basis. The formation of political parties took the same ethnic pattern. It is important to note that before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, there were little to compete for between the various ethnic groups. Ethnicity was perceived differently in the pre-colonial era. Interestingly too, it assumed a new dimension during the colonial period due to the forces of change. The change created new opportunities in commerce, economic and political spheres.

The struggle for these opportunities was bound to produce frustration as those not favored, would easily blame their plight on the advantages possessed by members of other groups. During the period under review and even in the contemporary Nigeria society, the state is not only regarded as the source but also the distributor of resources commonly valued in the society. As the chief of allocator of services, facilities and factors of development, the state becomes a target over which the control, ethnic territorial groups engage in an endless struggle. Group in competition displace one another not only through appropriate constitutional and political procedure, but also by maneuvering their position. Once power is won, the state becomes an instrument used by the elites for differential distribution of resources amongst the component, ethnic/territorial units. The practice of leaving education in the hands of voluntary agencies, by the colonial administration tended to create disparity in educational opportunities and attainments. The result was that those who did not have the opportunity of acquiring education felt cheated once appointment to top government post is made on grounds of educational qualification. Their reactions naturally, ate along the ethnic sentiment. The above scenario becomes the basis the ethnic rivalry during the colonial era and even beyond. In furtherance of group interests and in realization of the value and role of education in development and social mobility, ethnic groups started forming associations. This was ostensibly for individual protection and survival in urban areas.

In the face of the new realities, the ethnic associations were compelled to initiate actions from their “foreign bases” or the expansion of modern type of education among their ethnic group since the avenue to the new power base is education, the ethnic associations gave it a priority. This is because a motivation for ethnic solidarity and identification. These ethnic associations took the initiative and leadership in the establishment of secondary schools in their respective home bases. The schools include the Ibibio College opened in 1946 at Ikot Ekpene, Uhrobo College at Effurun

established in 1950. Ijesha improvement union founded Ijesha High school, Ijesha, in 1934. In 1958 the Nigeria social development society established the Igwebuik Grammar school at Awka. In 1957 the Ikwerre and Etche communities established the Ikwerre Etche county Grammar school and in the same year, the western Ahoada county High school, Ahoada was established by the western Ahoda county council. Missions were also invited by some communities to build secondary schools on their land without encumbrance. Some schools called mission schools today were built by members if the controlling missions.

While the ethnic groups and the various communities were competing with each other in the establishment of secondary schools in the south, the north remained relatively uninterested. This accounts for the educational in balance between the north and south. For example between 1955 and 1969, out of a total number of 74 secondary schools in Nigeria only 2 were found in the north. The east, west and mid west which constituted the south had a total of 72 secondary schools. The issue of educational disparity in Nigeria is therefore closely related to ethnic motivation and competition. Abernehty (1969:105) highlighted this point when he observed that:

The gospel of ethnicity and the gospel of education are thus mutually reinforcing educational schemes sponsored by tribal unions fostered ethnic consciousness in the rural areas, a heightened sense of ethnicity, in turn facilitated the spread of education.

The ethnic motivation and competition also influenced, though lately, the establishment of Offa Grammar School in 1943 by the Offa community. The Ibo union schools in Kano were founded in 1959. In 1961, the Ibo community in Kafanchan established another secondary school. The school in the Offa was established by the Yoruba sub-ethnic groups in the North. It is expected that the activities of other ethnic groups in Lagos and other centers might have influenced them too. The nine schools established by the end of 1969 in the North were at New Bussa, Ilorin, Oke- Odo etc in the present day Kwara state. The others were opened at Abuja, Mina, Argungu and Biu. All the schools were located in Middle Belt and among the minority groups who might be seeking avenues of escape from the political and economic oppression of their powerful neighbours, the Hausa/Fulani.

There were also private initiatives in the field of secondary education during this period. Though the motives of these individuals could be interpreted in many ways. One thing is clear, that is, many were imbued with nationalistic ideology, and others were fired by their interest to invest in what appeared to be a well paying concern. There were also some who were philanthropists and educationalists who wanted to contribute their own quota in the educational development to contribute of their countrymen. They include Alvan Ikoku who established Aggrey memorial secondary school. Arochukwu, in 1932. In 1945, Adealo Odutola college was founded by adeola Odutola. Tai Solarin founded the May-flower Ikene. It is important to state that most of these schools were

built reserved for the children of the ethnic group that established the school. Thus compounding the problem of educational disparity.

Basically, the issue of educational disparity in Nigeria will remain with us for quite some time. This is because, currently and even for some time to come, the south especially Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Edo, Delta, imo, and Akwa ibom states are educationally more advanced than their Northern counterparts. Equally states in the middle belt particularly Kwara, Kogi, Plateau and Benue are educationally more advanced than the extreme northern states of Sokoto, katsina, Kano and Borno. This explains southern domination of the federal civil service before the politics of “federal character” and quota system. This early lead in education is what is still maintained and to some extent consolidated today.

Access to Educational Opportunities by Minority Ethnic Groups

After the civil war, steps were taken by the military government to address the educational inequalities amongst the ethnic groups and to close the educational disparity between the North and the South. The first of this steps aimed at opening up educational opportunities in minority ethnic group areas in the country was the establishment of Univeristy of Benin by the mid-western government in 1971 (Fafuwa 1974 Kosemani and Anuna, 1996) Then, the federal government establishment what is known as the seven second generation universities in the minority regions of country and the backward north was aimed at spreading educational opportunities to these ethnic groups. These universities include University of Calabar, University of Jos, University of Maiduguri, University of kano and University of Port Harcourt (Fafunwa 1974, Kosemani and Orubite, 1995).

Others steps to address this, include quota system of admission into the Universities and the civil services were moves initiated to spread equal educational opportunities to all the ethnic groups in the country and to balance the educational disparity between the north and the south. Also it aimed at addressing the educational disparity between the ethnic groups in the middle belt and Hausa- Fulanis’ and the Kanuri people of the North. The establishment of schools of basic studies in the Universities in the minority areas in the southern was to address the ethnic problem in the country by offering educational opportunities to the ethnic groups perceived to be educationally backward by the then military government. Also, unity secondary schools were established to help balance the educational opportunities of the ethnic groups in the country. All these as have been stated were to correct the in balance and encourage the minorities to embrace western education.

The question was, where were the manpower to implement these policies? This opened the frontiers for the Yoruba’s and Ibos again to occupy the principal offices in the state civil service and the state Universities for the purpose of accreditation. There were also foreigners from Ghana, Sierra Leone, India, Poland and Pakistan in some minority schools. Free tuition was offered to students from the North as incentive. But

the truth of the fact remained that they were some equally minority groups among the Ibos and Yorubas. The idea of state of origin was created or coined as it became mandatory to know those who would benefit from the scholarship or offices. In other to enjoy these laurels some went to court to swear affidavits claiming state of origins other than their own. Government officials were being offered bribes in various forms and this lead to tons and tons of corrupt practices that are found in the country today.

As it is today, some gifted children are disadvantaged simply because they are from the minority states or majority states. Minority states because they are opportune to go to school or majority states because the current policies in the country on quota basis block them from being useful in the society.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, the issue of educational disparity is closely related to ethnic motivation and competition. Currently and for some time to come, the south especially Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Edo, Delta, Anambra, Enugu, imo, Abia and Akwa- ibom states are educationally more advanced that their northern counterparts. Equally, states in the middle belt in particulat Kwara, Kogi and Benue are educationally more advanced than the extreme northern states in Sokoto, katsinal, Borno, Jigawa and Kano. Various explanations might be proffered for this but it cannot be overlooked that areas where local initiatives and enthusiasm for secondary education was high have an early advantage over areas where this motivational attitude was absent. The ethnic association and local communities founded school in order to provide education for their locality and clansmen. Thus, the historical, social and economic changes which lead to rivalry in the provision and consequently access to secondary education.

Recommendations

Nigerian political leaders representing all the ethnic nationalities must discuss these problems and seek for solutions that recognize Nigeria as a community of communities. Bold and imaginative considerations are needed to redress these fundamental challenges. The following proposals are advanced toward this end.

1. It is imperative that we recognize and respect the diversities of the Nigerian mosaic. This implies the recognition of ethnic nationalities as the core federating units of the Nigerian federal system. Exclusive jurisdictions over key sectors of the economy agriculture, culture, natural resources, including oil and gas, mines, minerals and mining etc must reside with the respective states with the ethnic nationalities of the state enjoying equaity ownerships. It is only through these mechanisms that enduring peace and stability can be secured in the policy, when each state of the federation begins to explore alternative avenues to generate its own resources for instance, the top 10 most populous ethnic nationalities should constitute 10 homogenous states, while a maximum of 15 heterogeneous states created for the other ethnic nationalities In the country. Within a give heterogeneous state, for example, each ethnic nationality with defined language and kingship system will constitute jurisdictions over key elements of the

economy identified above, ethnic group with multiple kingship systems within a given region. This political arrangement will guarantee the rights of minorities in the polity.

2. The fundamental premise of federalism which recognizes the independence of the federating units and the central government must be enshrined in the constitution. Exclusive state jurisdiction over natural resources, including oil and gas, mines and minerals etc is a key aspect of this position. There is a distributing perception in several quarters in Nigeria that, if the oil fields were located in the northern regions of the country, the north would have long seceded from Nigeria. This perception seems to fuel the frustrations of the Niger Deltans who see themselves as entrapped constituents of a federation over which they have no jurisdictions. The current number of states is not sustainable, as most of the states lack the capability to survive as independent entities in a federation. Thus, fusion as proposed above is a viable alternative that deserves serious consideration by Nigerians.

A state government which depends on handouts obtained through haggling and begging from and manipulation with a central government, but lacks the capability to raise its own money, is a deficit to democracy. Therefore, it is imperative that all states of the federation begin to explore and exploit their internal sources for wealth in order to ensure a minimum dependency on external sources of it's a growth and development. Nigerians need a genuine federal system and not the caricatured variant currently in place.

3. It is necessary that we recognize a distinction between integration and assimilation, especially in the fields of language and culture. The current language policy of the federal government which compels the teaching of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in all schools in the ethnic minority regions of Nigeria, is not an integrative measure but a policy of cultural and linguistic assimilation. To impose Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba on other ethnic nationalities is a colonial approach to integration. An effective integrative measure is one that recognizes the rights of all ethnic nationalities to learn and preserve their respective languages. On the basis of this, the language of the dominant ethnic nationality in a given local government area must be the only Nigerian language taught in primary and secondary schools in that local government area. This inclusive approach to teaching language and culture will significantly address the causes of ethnocentrism in Nigerian politics.

4. The concept of federalism must be realized in all federal (national) political institutions, including political parties. For example, a state chapter of a political party sharing the same name with a national political party, must be recognized as independent from then national political party, in such a way that the executive committee of the latter has no jurisdiction in the affairs of the state executive committee. In fact, the state executive committee is not obliged to

endorse the presidential candidate of the same party in its views, the policies of the state. When each state begins to exercise and enjoy the benefits of federalism within its respective boundaries, the tendency to engage in policies seemingly injurious to the federation will disappear as the fear of oppression of an ethnic group by another ethnic group gradually diminishes. This is a key property of federalism.

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