

Media, Ethnicity and the Challenge of Peace: Exploring the Crisis of State-Building in Nigeria

by

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Abstract

Nigeria is purportedly at peace, yet, it is perennially embroiled in skirmishes that threaten its geo-stability. At the base of this dilemma is the mutational interface of religion and ethnicity in motorizing tension. The Nigerian media is not enamoured of the undercurrents that flow from this interaction. Rather, it is sucked into its centrifugal fold as it plays dialectic roles both as advocate of unity and champion of sectional interest in the country's struggle to erect a cohesive national structure that is superior to ethno-religious allegiances. Thus, this paper examines the contradictions of state-building in Nigeria, the attendant elite deployment of primordial forces that are antithetical to peace and contends that the solution to the jigsaw puzzle of conflicts lies in the reinvention of the media to rise above the narrow boundaries of interethnic fusion erected by media-owning elite.

Keywords: Peace, state-building, nation-building, ethnicity, skewed federalism

Introduction

The atlas of peace in Nigeria is sketchy. Its sketchiness is rooted in the fluidity of underlying triggers of conflict. While conflicts in Nigeria manifest in four variants, namely, interethnic, intra-ethnic, ethno-religious and hybrid, involving the combination of the foregoing, they are motorized by tripartite entities of the state, the elite and the masses. The state fans the embers of violence through two failures: to put in place certain systemic safeguards that would conduce with peace; and, to live above the inherently destabilizing class war within the polity (Ibeanu 2003). Thus, the seeming partisanship of the state tends to undermine peace and create the necessary condition for the thriving of conflicts.

The culture of peace is neither native nor alien to any society or state formation. It is consciously cultivated, nurtured and entrenched. Culture of peace entails a deliberate and elaborate strategy, which facilitates the internalisation of those values, beliefs, behavioural patterns and norms that promotes peace. The culture of peace presupposes the mind-set of “reciprocal toleration and cooperative understanding of common aims, whether within or between any groups” (Igwe 2002:316-7). The emphasis of the Nigerian elite on nation-building as opposed to state-building creates a very serious crisis of loyalty that undermines national cohesion. This constitutes a key challenge to peace-making and peace consolidation in Nigeria.

The elite-media linkage also reflects the aggregate character of the state. Despite the inherent social responsibility of the media to preach societal survival, it is limited by the dominant forces that give it its essence. Thus, the media mirrors the preferences of the elite. And its role in the matrix of peace and conflict is dictated by an overriding elite interest. There is a patent polarisation of opinions among the media organizations and this is energized by the tainted lens of ethnicity and religion as seen by the *media-preneurs*. This paper interrogates the roadblocks to the cultivation of a culture of peace and contends that the inherent systemic contradictions compromise the capacity of the media to spearhead peace.

Geographical Expression: The Pursuit of Ethnic Agenda

The process of integrating the disparate ethnic groups into a coherent national structure, which started in 1914 through the Lugardian amalgamation policy, was not consolidated by the time Nigeria was granted political independence in 1960. In other words, Nigeria was an unfinished and unconsolidated creation of the British. Before this decreed merger by the British overlords, these nationalities had independently existed and related with others within the framework of mutuality and self-generated ground rules. The 1914 unification, therefore, was externally driven rather than internally spawned. It is misleading to assert as Babawale (2007:15) did that “Nigeria, as we know it today, is an aggregation of several nationalities that have jointly agreed to co-exist as one nation.” The various ethnic groups that make up contemporary Nigeria were forcefully banded together and as such were not privy to, nor participated in, negotiating the basis for Nigerian statehood. The externality factor of the union and the internal rigidities prevalent in the operations of the Nigerian state constitutes a threat to its corporate survival.

Although the foremost intention of Britain - possession of a wide geographical area and achievement of an economy of scale necessary to cut the cost of governance - was achieved, yet, a fundamental error in the mechanics of forging the Nigerian state was the absence of cross-cutting ethos to anchor national identity. As Ademoyega (1981:1) contends, “British administrators did not make an effort to weld the country together and unite the heterogeneous group of people.” This position is quintessentially escapist in orientation as it seeks to absolve the Nigerian elite from culpability in Nigeria’s ethno-national integration crisis.

The post-independence Nigerian elite neglected to pursue a new strategy that would augment the shortfalls in the British integration models. Rather, they were content to be in the saddle of power as mere replacement of the erstwhile colonialists and to use state power for the promotion of “disruptive local loyalties” and advancement of personal aggrandisement (Ake 1981; Suberu and Agbaje 1998; Nnoli 2003; Campbell, 2011). This imperfect integration spawned the seeds of disaffection that blossomed into perennial inter-ethnic conflicts for ascendancy.

Thus, post-colonial Nigeria grappled with the question of statehood in the midst of ethnic fractionalisation. Everything happening at the political arena was interpreted from the prism of ethnicity. This was reinforced by the regionalisation of political parties and the absence of truly national parties. The key political figures theorised that the building blocks of the Nigerian state were the ethnic groups rather than individual citizens. The first decisive step to roll back the influence of ethnicity in the body politic was the banning of ethnic unions by the military shortly after the coup d'état that dismantled the First Republic. But this move did not yield the desired dividend as the state's dereliction in meeting its obligations led to the re-modification of ethnic structures. As Ukiwo (2005:12) asserts,

While pan-ethnic unions vanished, homeland associations continued to flourish. Pan-ethnic unions only became useful in the Diaspora where homeland associations could hardly be effective as a result of their insignificant membership. It was such dormant unions that were revitalised in the context of the ethno-religious conflicts from the mid-1980s.

What gave room to this trend to thrive was the crisis of citizenship that pitched Nigerians against each other under the auspices of social categories of “natives” and “settlers” (Egwu 2005; Akanji 2012). The perception of the state as a source of wealth; and the intra-elite struggle to control its apparatus in order to advance their economic interests intensified the dichotomous designation of bona fide citizens as settlers and natives.

All through the formative years of Nigeria, the emergent leaderships were not only ambivalent about forging statehood, but by their speeches, actions and mind-set, were pessimistic about the workability of a corporate Nigeria built on the pedestal of cross-ethnic ethos. Instead of transforming the diversities into a veritable asset, these became barriers to forging a macro-nationhood. Chief Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Ahmadu Bello, and Gowon variously doubted the basis for Nigerian unity (Douglas and Ola 2007). However, because of the charismatic and iconic symbolisation of these figures, generations of Nigerians built their mind-set around these misgivings of a true federalist structure.

It is anachronistic and unhelpful to blame the British for the integration problems of Nigeria. The British forged the Nigerian state for its own convenience, what have the Nigerian elite done to transform the seemingly unfinished business into a vibrant nation-state? What the successive Nigerian elite did was to undermine the corporate survival of Nigeria by emphasizing its unworkability. Ahmadu Bello's thesis of understanding the diversities as basis for unity was not seriously pursued. Emphases appeared to be in deepening diversities rather than bridging them. Fifty-two years of national existence have not blunted the lines of ethnicity; rather these years have sharply entrenched and accentuated them.

Skewed Federalism, Ethnic Discord and Retreat of Peace

The *raison d'être*, which underpinned Nigeria's adoption of the federalist principles was principally to fuse the various ethnic groups into a seamless union. Federalism tends to blunt divisive factors and emphasize common grounds of unity. As Igwe (2002:154), opines, "federalism is the structural basis of the doctrine of unity in diversity". The seeming innate coagulation properties in federalism appeared to underpin the position of the Willink Commission in 1958 appointed by the Nigerian colonial government to look into the fears of the minorities bordering on domination, and thus reported, "the minorities who have appeared before us have thought of separation as a remedy for their troubles. But unity might have the same effect, and though unity cannot be manufactured by a Commission, machinery can be devised which aims rather at holding the state together than at dividing it" (cited in Ojiakor 1981:44).

The essential character of Nigerian federalism is that it is institutive, that is, it came into being through coerced imposition, as opposed to constitutive, the voluntary agreement of the constituent units (Igwe 2002). Hence, Nigerian federalism was not a product of negotiation and consensus. The first task of the immediate post-independence leadership, which ought to have been the conversion of Nigeria's institutive federalism to constitutive federalist state, was shirked. Thus, the progression of Nigerian federalism towards the ideal typology (characterized by agreement amongst component units to enter into such a federation; clearly delineated assignment of powers; concession and retention of certain powers within designated spheres of influence) was scuttled. (Ijalaye 1979; Babawale 2007). And in actuality, Nigerian federalism consistently mutated away from the ideal typology to a hybrid version that is patently arbitrary, and as a result, successive military regimes superintended over the erosion of the federalist principles and the entrenchment of *de facto* unitarism.

Nigeria's contemporary skewed federalism appears to confirm the pre-independence fears of the minorities about marginalization. Although every ethnic group alleges marginalisation, including the big three, it is the minority ethnic groups, especially those domiciled in the oil-bearing areas that have suffered most, especially in the wider context of national equation (Obianyo 2003).

Nigeria's oil economy created an intricate web of parasitic state-units that reordered the fiscal distributive system previously anchored on the principles of derivation. The fiscal aspect of Nigerian federalism negatively mutated overtime as derivation formula plummeted from 50 percent in 1960 to 13 percent in 1999 (Osipitan 2004). Thus, the mutation coincided with and was reflective of the change in the composition of Nigeria's foreign exchange earners, and the more dominant oil became, the lesser the percentage was devoted to derivation. When Nigeria depended on a bouquet of primary commodities for its foreign exchange, the derivation principle played a critical role in calculating what accrued to the regions. Then, there was regional dispersion in the production of primary commodities with healthy competition among the regions.

However, the shrinkage in the diversification of Nigeria's foreign exchange earners and the trajectory to a mono-cultural perspective which created parasitic component units that no longer created, but merely consumed (Obi 1998). This consumerist disposition of the component units and the commandist and occupationist orientation of successive military regimes also distorted and skewed the federal system taking shape in the pre-military epoch. Hence, the beneficiaries of the contraction of the principles of derivative and the new revenue-sharing formula were the federal government and the unproductive component state-units (Olowononi 2003). And in other words, while the revenue allocation framework strengthened the federal government, it weakened the fiscal autonomy of the constituent units, especially the resource-bearing states.

Thus, the agitation for resource control as an integral part of true federalism is a reaction to "decades of uninterrupted process of economic marginalization and political repression" orchestrated by the federal government (Anam-Ndu, 2007). And today, the long drawn war between Niger Delta youth and the federal government flowed from this perception of marginalization as the depth of parasitism and reliance of the component state-units on oil money was exemplified in hard-line opposition to upward adjustment of the derivative principle during the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) in 2006. And in the midst of the agitation by the South-South geopolitical zone for 50 percent derivation, Alhaji Ibrahim Hassan, the Second Republic Minister of Mines and Power and Member of the Northern delegation to the NPRC was quoted as saying:

If anything is given to the South-South above 17%, then all the remaining 30 States and Abuja will be financially strangled and pauperized. Unemployment in the country will increase. Crime will increase. Civil strife and disorder will increase and there will be no more money to pay even the staff of the States, except South-south, let alone money for any capital development in the country. ...If they get 25% or 50% the rest of the States will get zero allocation (cited in Ikeji et al 2012:9-10).

Furthermore, adjunct to the issue of equitable revenue sharing formula was the rivalry surrounding the acquisition and exercise of federal power among the Nigerian elite, and in addition, the contraction of the federal space, the creation of imperial presidency and the enormous resources at the disposal of the federal government made the presidency extremely attractive, and thus, the quest for federal power is not purely to engender development, but to advance personal (economic) and group interest (Ake 1981). Thus, the continuing dependence of the Nigerian elite on state power as its main source of accumulation places high premium on it wherein they would go to any length to safeguard it, including mobilizing the masses and exploiting ethnic and religious prejudices (Babawale 2007).

This distortion of the federalist principle and the recourse of the elite to religious and ethnic prejudices to advance their political agenda have had the effect of eroding peace in the polity. And the most radical demonstration of this was the institutionalization of political sharia in Northern Nigeria, starting with former Governor Yerima who implemented sharia in 2000, while other Northern states followed suit, and by 2001, almost all northern states were operating one form of sharia legal system or another (Iduh 2011; Berkeley Center 2013). And at the heels of this seeming de-secularization of the country were religious riots with far-reaching multiplier effects all over the country.

One Year, One Conflict: Ubiquity of Conflicts and the Retreat of Peace

The Nigerian polity enjoyed relative peace until the first two coups d'état in 1966 that ushered in military rule and civil war in tow. The ensuing crises were a horizontal fusion of political, ethnic and religious disaffection and etched the pattern of future conflicts in Nigeria. Perhaps, the effects of the civil war created conflict-weariness in the immediate post-civil war era. There was no real serious threat to peace except on the political turf where the military oligarchs engaged in the power game of coups d'état and counter coups d'état. According to (Halliru 2012), prior to 1980, only two ethno-religious and political conflicts occurred in Northern Nigeria, that is, those of 1953 and 1966. But since the 1980s, over 50 ethno-religious and political conflicts were recorded with death tolls in the hundreds of thousands.

There are multifaceted sources of pressure for peace in Nigeria that range from inter-elite and inter-ethnic competitions as a result of the weak federal structure to real and imagined loss of traditional means of production coupled with: communal grievances via the perception of unequal treatment, resistance to state violence, and an abridgement of access to and exclusion from profitable sources of livelihood (Onimajesin 2008; Nnoli 2003b; Ibeanu 2003).

In short, conflicts in Nigeria manifest in five basic forms:

- inter-ethnic (struggle over who controls certain spheres of influence; historical disputes over land and sources of pasture; fears of domination and marginalisation; disputes over access to economic and political power; hegemonic control national apparatuses of economic and political power; formation of ethnic militias);
- intra-ethnic (land disputes; disagreement over the location of governmental offices, especially local government headquarters; dispute over the distribution of government patronage);
- religious (religious bigotry; political sharia; extremist religious groups.);
- political (disputes over the location of government offices; perceptions of being politically marginalized; manipulation of electoral process; political intolerance); and
- hybrid that cuts across these spectra (poverty; anti-people economic reforms)

And interestingly, their nature ranges from being diffused to being concentrated, and what this implies is that certain conflicts have domino effects as they resonate through reprisal attacks, while others are localized and contained within a geo-space.

Throughout the 1980s and downwards, conflicts in Nigeria were triggered by a variety of factors. The first was closed economic opportunities owing to state-sponsored economic reforms. The introduction of structural adjustment programme (SAP) in 1986 by General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) had untoward effects on the income generation opportunities of the people. Many factories closed shop and industrial employment plummeted from 335,000 in 1985 to 27,000 in the 1990s with widespread poverty distributed in the matrix of 71 percent being categorized as poor; 36 and 35 percent as core poor and moderately poor respectively (Onimajesin 2008; Babawale 2007). Similarly, in the period before 1999, poverty incidence was 65.6 per cent, but as at 2012 it had climbed to 72.0. (NBS 2011; CBN 2012). Some scholars locate the various incidences of conflict to the prevalent poverty in Nigeria. Alozieuwa (2012), in the tradition of human needs perspective, links frustration to economic deprivation.

The second factor was a hegemonic hold of the North on the politics of Nigeria. Whether it was the military or democratic regimes, the North dominated Nigeria's political development. The balkanization of Nigeria into states and local government areas (LGAs), which was initially justified as a strategy to bring the government closer to the people and for accelerated development, was subsequently converted into an instrument of domination.

Between 1976 and 1999, more states and LGAs were created which enhanced disproportionateness: from the 12-state structure erected in 1967, which enthroned equity between Northern and Southern Nigeria by giving each six states, the ratio became disproportional with the North having 19 states and 414 LGAs and the South, 17 states and 355 LGAs (Egwaikhide et al 2009). Thus, the constitutional provision of federal character configured to ensure the dispensation of fringe benefits to other ethnic groups is, ipso facto, anchored on injustice. Thus, northern domination was considered a zero-sum game that alienated and marginalized other ethnic groups. This mindset led Adams (2007); Onimajesin (2008) to attribute the emergence of militia groups, especially the OPC, as not only a reflection of the existence of perceived or real injustice but a strategy to contain it.

The third factor was the feeling of relative deprivation among ethnic nationalities, which arose from economic marginalisation and resource control exclusion. Distortions in the revenue sharing arrangement coincided with the oil boom of the 1970s. But the issue of derivation principle has a long history that is rooted in the colonial era. The Chick Commission (1953), which was set up to prepare the groundwork for the revision of the Constitution that later became the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, and decided that mining rents and royalties and the personal income tax would be shared through the derivation principle (Ahmad and Singh 2002).

Sequel to this was the Raisman-Trees Commission, which was set up on October 10, 1957 to examine revenue allocation and problems of taxation. It expanded the regions' tax base by making personal income tax once again a regional tax and established a pooling account. A portion of each major revenue item was paid to the regions on the basis of derivation, to the federal government and into the distributable pool for sharing among all regions (Ojiakor 1981; Ahmad and Singh 2002). Another important component of the recommendations of this commission was the conferment of the power to appoint a revenue allocation review commission from time to time, outside the framework of the constitution review process. Ever since then, the revenue sharing arrangement underwent fitful changes with over five ad hoc committees set up to review the revenue sharing formula (Alade et al 2003; Anam-Ndu 2007; Egwaikhide et al 2009).

The fourth factor was the democratization and opening of political space. The struggle for political ascendancy among the elite spawned and exacerbated conflicts. Between 1999 and 2012, Nigeria recorded more conflicts and death, in terms of rapidity, spread and intensity, than any other period in its history. Under the guise of ethnic irredentism and religious renaissance, conflicts which were patently political was pursued. The pervasiveness of conflicts and associated deaths led Maier (2000:xx) to claim,

Nigerians from all walks of life are openly questioning whether their country should remain as one entity or discard the colonial borders and break apart into several states. Ethnic and religious prejudices have found fertile ground in Nigeria, where there is neither consensus nor a binding ideology

The fifth was the allegation of political marginalisation among the various ethnic groups. Almost every ethnic group claimed it was their turn to produce the President. These agitations deepened animosity at the class and ethnic level. The interpretation of the agitation for political positions especially the presidency, which was basically a class war, within the context of ethnicity in a polarised polity. The cumulative effect was that the country was put on a keg of gunpowder as militant ethnic organisations emerged to defend the status quo and to stampede change.

The most recent manifestation of aggression against the state, and which appears intractable, is the Boko Haram terrorist insurgency. Although the origin of the Boko Haram is mired in conflicting speculations, its descent into extremism is connected with its intention to overthrow and Islamize the Nigerian state (Onuoha 2012). The Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan, underscored the seriousness of the Boko Haram menace when he acknowledged that sympathizers of the sect populated his administration (Adetayo 2012). The peculiarity of the Boko Haram insurgency is the eclectic nature of its operations and the haziness in the parameters of determining its targets. With the media coming under bomb attacks and threats of bomb attacks, it has been cowered and hamstrung to engage in investigative journalism that could expose the operations of Boko Haram. This disposition of the Nigerian media led Haruna (2012:np) to posit that the coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency and wider religious and ethnic conflicts by has been “more propagandist than factual and objective [as the media] behaved more as weapons of mass deception for ideological and commercial reasons, than as weapons of mass education of the people about the complexity [of] Nigeria”.

The Media, Elite Politics and Paradox of Peace Engineering

The Nigerian media originated as a tool for social action in the heydays of colonialism. Thus, the press, which was its earliest department, symbolized a hybrid tool for social crusade, radical nationalism, commercial enterprise and the voice of the masses. Using the strategies of editorial and column writing, the Nigerian press of that era pursued its agenda-setting role as the conscience of the society. As Obafemi (2008:np) observes, “one of the most significant functions of the press lies in the power of its editorial comments in influencing socio-political development since the colonial days”. Contemporaneously, the media introduced feature writing and “special project adverts” to deepen its agenda-setting role.

The media is more effective now than ever, especially with expansions in the information and communication technology (ICT) and the new social media. Today, information is shared in split seconds around the globe, making the world truly a global village. As part of the domestic and international system, the role of the media in socio-economic, cultural and political development is not in doubt: the media has, at every point in history, stood to be counted. As Salawu (2009:75) opines, “the media as a social institution are also involved in conflicts in the society either as a harbinger, channel of information and analysis of the conflicts, or as part of the escalation or resolution of the conflicts”. This is so because the media and its decision making apparatus are part and parcel of the society and are not enamoured of the values that might dictate partisanship in societal conflicts.

In Nigeria, the media is stuck in a class war. The nature of accumulation and the character of the Nigerian elite could not have spawned a different scenario for the media. The media is yet another tool in the arsenal of the Nigerian elite to further their predatory appropriation of the state. Ikpeze, Soludo and Elekwa (2004:342) put it in proper perspective,

In a country like Nigeria where the prizes are so few, and the stakes so high, the fight for booty or “national cake” is fierce and often vicious. “Who gains, who loses in these federal, state and local policy arenas is rarely an accident. More often than not, the distributional consequences of public policies are the intended result of the private interests... .”

The culture of peace is neither wished nor decreed, but consciously worked out and enthroned. The seeming failure of Nigerian federalism to deploy its essential attributes to spawn the right environment for the realization of ethnic dreams and aspirations appears to be the basis of the endless conflicts in the polity. This failure finds expression in ethnic exclusivity; the mindset that each ethnic group must struggle for its own share of the national cake, no matter how defined (Onimajesin 2008).

Thus, the media, with its reach and socialising attributes, has been deployed to help in the propaganda necessary to maintain ethnic boundaries. That is why the media ownership composition reflects ethnic cleavages. As such, the core interests of the elite *media-preneur* tend to determine the editorial slant of the various media establishments. The implication is that social action is seen from the prism of ethnicity, and the media is used as a negotiating chip in the state-wide power game. Therefore, the quest to entrench a culture of peace must start from repairing the structural imperfections that ascribe primacy to primordial ties.

The distribution of the media, apart from their disproportionate concentration in Lagos, shows their regional leaning. On practically any issue, the interpretation and editorial slant of the individual media outfits belie their impartiality. The slant is often tarred with the brush of ethnicity. Depending issue, the northern newspapers such as *Trust*, *Leadership* and *New Nigerian* do not see issues from the perspective of the Lagos-Ibadan newspapers. There has been a longstanding tradition of newspapers following the trends and preponderance of opinions popular with their affiliated ethnic and religious groups. For instance, following the mindless orgy of destruction as a result of the indiscretion of *Thisday* newspaper, which triggered what later came to be tagged Miss World riots in 2002, Nigerian newspapers were sharply divided. While the southern media condemned the riots, the northern media rationalized it and almost haloed it (Salawu 2009).

The same trend characterizes the reportage of, and critical commentaries on, the Boko Haram mayhem. The thrust of northern newspapers tends to locate the underpinning impetus to Boko Haram's ascendancy on the failure of government to engineer socio-economic engagement of youth (Ekwueme & Obayi 2012). The paternalistic rationalization of Boko Haram by northern media and the critical reportage by their southern counterparts made the latter the target of attacks: on 26 April 2012, the Boko Haram sect bombed the offices of *Thisday*, *The Moment* and *Daily Sun* newspapers in both Abuja and Kaduna. Thus, the entrenchment of a culture of peace in Nigeria must start with addressing the key challenges to peace as well as transcend the ethnic fault lines. Haruna (2012:np) epitomizes the partisanship of commentaries along ethnic and religious lines when he asserted, "no doubt Boko Haram poses an existential threat to Nigerians and to Nigeria itself. But it is not the only existential threat facing Nigerians and their country. And properly isolated it is not even the most serious threat". The bifurcation of the media along ethnic and religious lines as well as tinting commentaries to gloss over obvious threats to national peace is antithetical to peace.

Conclusion

The relevance of the media in enthroning a culture of peace is beyond doubt. But the media cannot do it in isolation. The traditional institutions of inculcating the basic societal culture have varying roles to play. An enduring strategy will require a three-pronged approach that must start with dismantling certain systemic structures that glamorize violence, strengthening the framework for punishment and setting up institutions that will promote and fast track ethno-national integration outside the existing framework.

Rather than project and elevate the media as the conscience of the society, the elite have deployed it as part of the ensembles of their warfare. Worse still, the media organizations operate from the parochial prism of ethnicity and religion, thus compounding the dilemma of cultivating the national ethos that can be a promoter of peace.

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