

31

DIVERSITY IN NIGERIA: AN ISSUE OF PEACE OR WAR?

Charles Ikenna Okeke

Abstract

Every human society is an enterprise of world building. Man is at the centre of this exercise and society which is a dialectic phenomenon is a product of man and man is also a product of society. Man who is a cultural being brings diversity into society. Thus, in society, there is diversity through language, religious affiliations, knowledge, art, morals, laws, customs et cetera. However, diversity in society tends towards peace and/or war depending on the management of societal elements. This work using Nigeria as a case study, explores the negative and positive implications of this diversity. Some of the positive dimensions are: Unequal and differential treatment of ethnic groups; the prioritization of tribal identity over professional efficiency; fatal consequences on the political process; ethnocentrism and ethnic tensions. Some of the positive sides are cultural identity, increase in creativity, source of economic power, natural and mineral resources. The article further recommends that all hands must be on deck for peace to be achieved in a diverse Nigerian nation. This entails all the agents towards conflict transformation. The agents of conflict transformation refer to the various means through which the root causes of violence, disputes, riot et cetera, can be addressed in order to restore human relationships. Peace in a heterogeneous country like Nigeria will be achieved with balanced federation, equity and social justice, democracy and good governance.

Keywords: Diversity, Nigeria, Ethnicity, Ethnicism, Peace and War.

Introduction

In 1914, Lord Frederick Lugard under British colonial administration unified the northern and the southern protectorates. Nigeria, thus, became a multi-ethnic, religious and constitutional state. It was as a result of the problems associated with the governing scattered and vast territories with separate administrative entities that gave rise to amalgamating these vast territories into one nation, Nigeria.

This diversity creates a nation that is constituted of people with differences in cultural, religious, linguistic and territorial features. However, these factors tend to generate natural tensions arising from basic human elements. Thus, the major problems of Nigeria today are linked with its multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-constitutional diversities. These factors however have their own positive values as well as negative implications which can be managed. This article explores these varied implications and proffers functional solutions towards unity in diversity. The drive of the work is to eliminate every seed of ethnicism which is prejudice based on ethnic origin and to encourage ethnicity which is the common characteristics of a group of people.

The work takes the following headings for systematic presentation: The Concepts of Peace and War, Human Diversity in Society, Diversity in Nigeria, Negative Effects of Diversity in Nigeria, Positive Effects of Diversity in Nigeria, Functional Solutions and Conclusion.

The Concepts of Peace and War

Peace is a multidimensional concept. Akpuru- Aja (2007) notes that “Peace is a relative condition of security friendly climate that allows individuals and group relations to progressive order and stability” (p.1). Peace does not mean the absence of conflict or war, and the absence of war does not automatically mean peace. It reflects that security-friendly system that frees individuals and groups of people from fears and dangers of losing such inalienable human rights as life, liberty and property. Peace is the human desired condition and order of existence that allows the ruler and the ruled fulfill life obligations with minimum fear or danger on life, liberty and property.

In principle and strategy, war is the antithesis of civility, order, stability, peace and security. The main difference between war and peace, according to Akpuru-Aja (2007), is that while the former is destructive and disintegrative, the latter is constructive, cooperative, integrative and collaborative. The vital point to note is that peace is no fixation, but process. Thus, peace may even exist in a conflict or war situation to the extent that the major actors are more committed to constructive and harmonious settlement of issues rather than destruction, which breaks down relations. Thus, relations value or system maintenance in conflict situations may still create an atmosphere that guarantees relatively normal activities and the absence of fear of violent death or flagrant abuse of fundamental rights.

Human Diversity in Society

People have many differences, which makes them diverse as a whole. No two people are exactly alike and this uniqueness is what makes us individuals. Although the differences are intrinsic, extrinsic differences exist that further mark our diverse natures. Some of these differences are in racial, ethnic, socio-economic, geographic and academic/professional backgrounds. More so, people with different opinions, social experiences, religious beliefs, political beliefs, sexual orientations, heritage and life experiences. Thus, diversity in human society entails differences in culture. Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society (Taylor, 1871). In general, human diversity literally means the differences inherent among people which could be internal, external, organizational and worldview.

Diversity in Nigeria

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is a diverse West African country. People have things in common but are different in different ways. Nigeria as a nation has many cultural differences which include: Language and Religion. The former is the most remarkable difference which distinguishes one culture from the other in Nigeria. We have over 250 indigenous languages in the country and over 1150 dialects and ethnic groups. More so, apart from the two major religions; Christianity and Islam, there are various traditional religious beliefs in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the three largest ethnic groups are the Hausa who are predominant in the north, the Igbo who are predominant in the southeast and the Yoruba who are predominant in the southwest. It is obvious that Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with multi-ethnic groups and religious affiliations. It is a conglomeration of multi-ethnic groups. However, it is important that we recognize and value all the diverse differences.

Negative Effects of Diversity in Nigeria

Nigeria is an expression reflecting an amalgam of different tribes struggling to coexist in harmony. What is often viewed as a rich cultural heritage has often been a source of conflict and a deterrent to development. It has become a battle field where ethnic and religious riots are constantly staged. Some of the negative effects of diversity in Nigeria include:

❖ Unequal and Differential Treatment of Ethnic Groups

It is a common phenomenon that “lots of crises in Africa and Nigeria are as a result of certain historical and cultural differences among people who are otherwise bounded within the same territory but are denied equal access to common resources.” (Ekei, 2006, p.169). The political system in Nigeria has been skewed to favour a particular group, pushing marginalized groups as Irobi (2005) notes, to use their ethnicity to mobilize for equality. Irobi commenting further also states that this strategy of governance disturbed ethnic groups from each other, prejudice and hatred became rife in all the provinces as different ethnic groups started looking at each other suspiciously in all spheres of contact. Unequal and differential treatment of ethnic groups was responsible for the intense competition in Nigeria society; it created disparity in educational achievement and widened the political and economic gap between Northerners and the Southerners in Nigeria.

❖ The Prioritization of Tribal Identity over Professional Efficiency

The prioritization of tribal identity over professional efficiency often results in the poor execution or non-execution of projects that could have potentially transformed the lives of many Nigerians. Thus, many lack the proper motivation to do their very best when in positions of power unless their actions are directly benefiting them or their ethnic group. Nwaejike and Okeke (2009) note that since independence, the situation in Nigeria has fraught with ethnic politics whereby the elite from different ethnic groups scheme to attract as many federal resources to their region as possible neglecting issues that could have united the country together.

❖ Fatal Consequences on the Political Process

There is serious tribal associated prejudice in Nigeria. The inter-ethnic rivalry has also had fatal consequences on the political process. The country seems to have a unique presidential rotation system. At a bureaucratic level, we have the federal character principle, which gives room for the minority communities to complain of marginalization. This alludes to the fact that key positions seem to be allocated based on tribal affiliation rather than merit and capability.

❖ Ethnocentrism and Ethnic Tensions

Ethnic diversity in Nigeria creates a nation that is constituted of people with differences in cultural, religious, linguistic and territorial features. These factors tend to generate natural tensions arising from basic human factors. The assumption is founded on the fact that “ethnocentrism is an ideology which sees ones cultural group, traditions, customs, and values as superior to others.” (Nwigbo, 2002, p. 227). Most times, the cause of the rivalry revolves around the issue of who gets what or who controls what and why? All these border on the phenomenon and the tension of diverse people living in the same territory but are

denied equal access to common resources. This denial to common national resources arises from what Warnock (1973) observes:

Most human beings have some natural tendency (human factor) to be more concerned about the satisfaction of their own wants, than those of others. Even if they do care to some extent about others, is quite likely to be only about some others-family, friends, class, tribe, country, or race. There is also complete or comparative indifference to such a thing as active malevolence. A man will sometimes be not only unconcerned about, but actively malevolent towards others whom he may see as somehow in competition with himself. (p. 21).

If human beings as reported by Warnock have some natural tendency to be more concerned about their own wants than those of others then the implication is that in a country like Nigeria with at least two hundred and fifty ethnic languages, there is going to be diverse wants that will be made and it seems that greater ethnic diversity often increases the probability of ethnic tensions and conflict.

Positive Effects of Diversity in Nigeria

Naturally, a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria would share more values and endowments of manpower and natural resources than an equally endowed unitary state. This is premised on the fact that, two good heads are said to be better than one. The merit is also anchored on the principle that, multitude is power expressed in Igbo as *igwe-bu-ike*. Diversity of people promotes economic, political, social, cultural and linguistic powers. In effect, Nigeria possesses multi dimensional values, endowments and heritages. It is pertinent to note that diversity in society plays some functional roles. It is an essential matter in the formation of federal societies. Some of the functional roles of diversity are:

❖ Cultural Identity

According to Ibe (2020) “The end of colonialism in many parts of the world and consequent global migration patterns have meant that most states today are made up of different cultures; in fact, very few countries are monoculture” (p. 87). Nigeria, being a creation of this colonialism has been battling with the balance of autonomous cultural identity and secular modern state organization. The presence of such groups in modern societies highlights the importance of cultural identity; that is the inherited beliefs and practices that give a person a sense of identity.

❖ It Increases Creativity

Diversity prevents the stagnation and decay of the social system by stimulating innovation and creativity. Some have remarked that diversity may lead to new social norms and reforms that could in turn enhance the welfare of a larger segment of the society. It therefore, encourages the search for novel information and perspectives, leading to better decision making and problem solving.

❖ Source of Economic Power

With regard to cultural diversity in Nigeria, Ogbusu (2006) infers that “cultural diversity is a gift to be celebrated; we need to name, own, reverence, honour, value, celebrate and ritualize our diversity” (p. 64). It is not only that Nigeria is the most populous countries in Africa; she is also the most multi- cultural diversified country in Africa. She has about two

hundred and fifty ethnic/ cultural groups and about five hundred language groups. For the economists, this information means a lot. It reflects the power of diverse and varied domestic products flooding markets on daily basis. This factor of diversity of marketable products and services add to Nigerian immense population to boost the Nigerian economic potentials.

This in line with the provision of Cultural policy in Nigerian Constitution that confers the rights to the people to develop and promote their cultures, and to apply their cultures as an instrument of promoting national identity and unity. These two factors among other things will attract foreign investors. In other words, population and diversity are sources of economic power and economic strength in Nigerian building.

❖ **Natural and Mineral Resources**

The multicultural and ethnic diversity in Nigeria have paved way for the harnessing of varied quantity of mineral and natural products. Apart from oil, petroleum, and gas explorations, Nigeria can boast of other mineral resources to her credit. These include coal, gold, granites, diamond, iron and skin, gravels, etc. These natural products have added great values to Nigeria domestic earnings and have enhanced tremendously her aspiration to nation building.

Functional Solutions for Peace in a Diverse Society

In a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, the aspiration for national integration should be a constant hallmark of nation building. It involves a basic aspiration for unity that is built on the philosophy of mutual co-existence, cooperation, accommodation and tolerance. Since Nigeria is made up of people from diverse cultures, languages, attitudes, expectations, then the sense of understanding and tolerance should be the watchword in their collective aspiration for peace. The unity and proper integration of multi-ethnic Nigeria is the first step towards peace. There is an immense power and potentials in a nation with many diversities and large population. So, while Nigerian ethnic constitutions may be deprived of a common culture and a common language, her numerical strength and diversity of values are significant. These indices sustain tremendous business and economic markets. Therefore, large population is always an attraction to foreign and local investors especially where there is a greater integration, security and harmony among her citizens.

Furthermore, all hands must be on deck for peace to be achieved in a diverse Nigerian nation. This entails all the agents towards conflict transformation. The agents of conflict transformation refer to the various means through which the root causes of violence, disputes, riots, et cetera, can be addressed in order to restore human relationships. These agents include peace and conflict studies associations, judiciary, mass media, religious ministers, government, security agencies, employers of labour, psychologists, the institution of guidance and counselling, et cetera.

❖ **Peace and Conflict Studies Associations**

Peace and conflict studies are both pedagogical activities in which teachers transmit knowledge to students and research activities in which researchers create new knowledge about the sources of conflict. According to Jabri (2007), peace and conflict studies entail understanding the concept of peace, which is defined as a condition that ensures justice and social stability through formal and informal institutions, practices and norms. Rose (1995)

notes that the normative aim of peace studies is conflict transformation through mechanisms such as peacekeeping, peace-building, and peacemaking.

Nigeria's Institute of Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) was established in February 2000 under the Ministry of foreign affairs. Its objective is primarily a research centre, a think- tank and an agency to strengthen Nigeria's capacity for the promotion of peace, conflict prevention, management and resolution. However, the special investigation has revealed that the institute, in the last few months, has failed to fulfil its mandate and objective as prescribed by its setup aim and objectives.

❖ **Judiciary**

The judiciary is the third arm of government and is responsible for the interpretation of laws, settling of disputes and punishing the law breakers. In Nigeria, the judiciary is made up of the Chief Justice of the federation, high court judges, magistrates and state counsels who preside over different courts. They range from the Supreme Court which is the highest court to the appeal court, the high court, the magistrate court and down to the customary court.

Conflict in general is difficult to resolve but can be managed even in Nigeria. Peace will be achieved in the society if there is integration of diverse and autonomous groups which may create political stability. Its good management is a necessary condition for economic growth and development. A federal state thrives in an environment of legal order. This is why the judiciary is segmented; customary court, magistrate court, High court, Appeal and Supreme courts. This type of legal system makes adequate provision for the protection of both individual liberty and cultural right of component units. The court is seen as the last hope of the common man. Thus, it is an important agent of conflict transformation through litigation exercise. Judiciary therefore, has the objectives to settle disputes, quarrels, et cetera and to give punishment as a warning to others. The judiciary should work hard to fulfill its moral obligation as the last hope of the common man.

❖ **Mass Media**

The mass media is one of the vital institutions of the society. The press can be described as the total sum of all the organization and systems that make up the mass media of any given society. The mass media includes all agents of public opinion and the watch dog that speak through the voice or by pen; who gather, analyze and disseminate information through electronic means or by documentary methods. Some of the electronic means of information include: Television, radio, newspaper, the internet, films, books, journals, et cetera. Some are called journalists while others are called news casters. They pass one message or another to the general public.

People learn a lot of things through the mass media. Not only knowing what is happening around them and other parts of the world but lives are also formed and molded through relevant messages from the media. Conflicts of different sorts can be handled and transformed through relevant communication instruments. People also learn about the roots of conflicts and how it can be managed through the mass media.

❖ **The Church/Mosque/Shrine (Religious Ministers)**

Religion plays important roles in peace-keeping, peace-making and peace-building. The ideas of human dignity and the common humanity of all, derived from the notion that all are created in the image of the Divine are foundational to true peace. It is true that sometimes

deeply held beliefs can lead to clashes and there have been many wars that were caused by disputes over religion and beliefs. However, for many people religion can be a power for peace. A message of peace and love towards others is at the heart of all of the major world religions. Religious communities ought to oppose repression and promote peace and reconciliation. Religious leaders and institutions can mediate in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing sides and provides training in peace building methodologies.

These institutions through their sermons and teachings should help to discourage and dissuade people from bad behaviours. They should encourage people to do good always. Their ministers ought to preach against injustice, exploitation, oppression et cetera. More so, in Nigeria, the religious ministers ought to encourage Nigerian citizens to obey laws and constituted authorities. Obedience to the law is the supreme duty of all citizens, because laws are made for the general good of all and sundry. Obedience to the law brings about peace, order, justice and unity in the country while disobedience leads to breakdown of laws and order and breeds insecurity.

❖ **Government Security Agencies**

This is the concerted effort made or measures taken by the Federal Government of Nigeria to secure and guarantee safety of lives and property and ensure that people live or co-exist harmoniously or peacefully in an environment devoid of any form of hindrance, threat or intimidation by any group or individuals. National security is the collective efforts by various security agencies like the military, para-military, police, state security services, immigration et cetera.

It is important to note that the principal threats to domestic security in Nigeria are violence in the Niger Delta, sectarian strife or violence between Muslims and Christians and Islamist militant groups in the north. According to Ukegbu and Anyaoha (2012) these internal threats have on several occasions led to riots, religious crisis, mayhem, destruction of oil and electrical installations and private property, giving rise to a sense of insecurity among the citizenry.

❖ **Avoidance of Hate Speech or Language**

According to Odinkalu (2015), hate speech can be seen as the ridicule and slander of persons, incitement to hate, contempt, threat of violence and discrimination against people because of their race, ethnicity, identity, belief, or opinion. Adelakun (2017) avers that hate speech is any speech that is used to demean persons based on their identifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and predispose them to acts of violence. Still on the same note, Hamzat, (2017) posits that hate speech is an act of emotional terrorism, done with the intention of injuring, damaging or inciting a person or group of persons or better still, we can see hate speech as anti-peace advocacy or an act to cause mass disruption of personal peace. It can aptly be described as an act of violence against the mind with the intention of instigation. From the foregoing, one can say that hate speech is an advocacy of hatred based on nationality, race or religion and should be avoided in order to integrate values of diversity in every society.

Conclusion

Diversity is an integral part of society's ongoing evolution and development. It should not be understood solely as an inherently negative and destructive occurrence but rather as a potentially positive and productive force for growth if harnessed constructively. Inherent in every society is conflict. No society can survive without individuals who face different conflicting issues. To conflict theorists, conflict is the great liquidator of fixed and dogmatic customs, conventions and practices and, hence, is the source of real progress in all societies.

Diversity in society has always presented the positive and the negative sides of the story. The case of Nigeria is hardly an exception. The human factor that brought about the amalgamation of the country into a multi-ethnic constitution has always posed positive and negative implications. Right from the time of her historic unification in 1914, Nigeria has witnessed many crises and challenges culminating in tribal conflicts and war. However, despite the cultural diversity of Nigeria, it is not impossible for Nigeria to be united and experience peace. There is need to eliminate the harmful stereotypes we have formed against one another and also stop inciting divisiveness among Nigerians for political reasons. We should involve healthy dialogue that integrates instead of magnifying our differences. The moment a nation can resolve its ethnic tension, everything pertaining to its growth and development becomes easier. Nigeria's objective should be to install a sense of collectiveness that transcends tribe and ensure that we reap the benefits of being an ethnically diverse nation. National unity is the most important factor that holds the country together. Finally, peace in a heterogeneous country like Nigeria will be achieved with balanced federation, equity and social justice, democracy and good governance. Ethnicity is golden while ethnicism is a vice to be rooted out in order to have unity in diversity.

References

- Adelakun, A. (2017). *But, what exactly is hate speech?* Retrieved from punchng.com/but-what-exactly-is-hate-speech.
- Akpuru-Aja, A. (2007). *Peace & conflict resolution*. Enugu: Keny & Brothers.
- Ekei, J. (2006). *Justice in communalism and social stability in Philosophy and Praxis in Africa*. Ibadan: Hope Publications.
- Hamzat, A. (2017). *Between hate speech and freedom of expression*. Retrieved from saharareporters.com.
- Jabri, V. (2007). *War and the transformation of global politics*. London: Palgrave.
- Ibe, A.N. (2020). *Secularism and security challenges in modern Nigeria*. Enugu: Rhyce Kerex.
- Irobi, G. E. (2005). *Ethnic conflict management in Africa: A comparative case study of Nigeria and South Africa*, 9, 10. Unpublished Monograph.
- Nwaejike, T. and Okeke, O. (2009). Ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria: Reprisal attacks on the Hausa community in Aba since 2000. *Journal of History and International Studies*. II, 1, 200.
- Nwigbo, F. (2002). Conflicts and ethnocentrism in Nigeria: The Church response in H. Achunike (Ed.). *Evangelization in the third millennium*. Nigeria: Africana-Fepp.
- Odinkalu, M. (2015). *Hate language is deadly*. Ibadan: Hope.
- Rose, L. (1995). Reactive devaluation and negotiation in conflict resolution. In A. Kenneth (Ed.). *Barriers to conflict resolution* (pp. 26-42). New York: W. Notorn.

- Rosenau, J. (1990). *Turbulence in world politics: A theory of continuity and change*. Princeton: Princeton university press.
- Taylor, E.B. (1871). *Primitive Culture*. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne.
- Ukegbu, M. & Anyaoha, C. (2012). *Basic civic education*. Owerri: Meybiks.
- Warnock, G.J. (1973). *The object of Morality*. London: Methuen.

