Review Article

The Presentness of the Past: Pre-Colonial Inter-Ethnic Relations and the Challenges of National Integration in Contemporary Nigeria

Ejitu Nnechi Ota, Ph.D, BL[1], Chinyere Samuel Ecoma, Ph.D[2*]

[1]Department of History and International Relations, Abia State University, Uturu, Uturu – Nigeria
[2]Department of History and International Relations, Veritas University, Abuja, Abuja – Nigeria

Abstract

Prior to British involvement in the affairs of the geographical area that later became Nigeria, the peoples had interacted through trade, marriage, and cultural exchanges. Thus, there already existed shared values and attitudes which were not broken by colonialism. These pre-colonial common connections were cast into the dustbin of politics, and ethnicity was invoked by the inheritors and successors of British colonialism. In contemporary Nigeria, competitions for economic and political resources have assumed virulently ethnic and regional dimensions which have ignored the enduring legacies of harmonious inter-group relations that existed prior to British colonialism. This paper, therefore, attempted to interrogate those factors that served to foster harmonious and peaceful coexistence among the various ethnic groups that later came to constitute Nigeria after the 1914 amalgamation. In so doing, it adopted the qualitative research methodology which basically involved reliance mainly on such secondary sources as books, journals, and other documentary materials. It concluded that Nigeria's search for national integration should not ignore the history of inter-ethnic and inter-group relations in the period before contacts with Europe. By internalising the factors that brought the different groups together before 1914, Nigerians would have learnt from the past in order not to bungle the present and jeopardise the future.
Keywords: Pre-colonial, Inter-Ethnic Relations, National Integration, Contemporary, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Throwing up the ethnic and regional trump card has become a favourite pastime for Nigerian politicians. This is a result of their famished intellectual mentality which has blinded many of them to the imperative of unity in diversity. The country's recent history is replete with references to the ethnic, regional, religious, and even 'racial' differences between its various peoples. In the main, these are part of the inheritance of British colonialism which saw such 'differences' as a convenient platform for actualising the British colonial policy of divide-and-rule. Unfortunately, contemporary politics in Nigeria has continued to emphasise these differences without much conscious efforts at a historical articulation of the harmonious inter-ethnic relations among and between Nigerian peoples prior to British colonialism. Indeed, this is regrettable, for as Obaro Ikime has rightly argued, Nigeria is not the only country in the world that is an artificial creation. In his words: "All nations are products of History, which history often involved periods of imperial subjection of some groups by other groups. In that sense, all nations are "artificial creations" (Afigbo, 1981).

The peculiarity of the Nigerian situation has accentuated rather than reduced ethnic, religious and regional dichotomy. In the long-run, Nigeria has had to contend with the challenges of achieving real national integration which is a sine qua non for nation building and development. The conscious pre-occupation of the political and military elite has served to fan the embers of separation rather than encouraging nation-building, democratic consolidation, and economic development. Thus, the expectations of ordinary Nigerians that their lives will have meaning through the satisfaction of such basic needs as food, shelter, infrastructure, functional educational facilities and opportunities, healthcare services, as well as gainful employment, reduction of poverty, and improved security of lives and property by the government, have remained a mirage over the years. Selfishness, greed, graft, acrimony, dishonesty, avarice, envy, corruption, and ethnicism have been isolated as

part of the explanations for Nigeria's backwardness (Arizona-Ogwu, 2008). In a way, the failure of the leaders to drink from the cup of history has resulted in the erosion of any consciousness of nationhood. As has been rightly observed:

...the remembrances of the events of pre-British days continue to linger in certain areas and under certain circumstances of our present-day politics. The more we understand the politics of the past, the more we are likely to present a full interpretation of the politics of today (Post Express, 2001).

Part of the politics of the pre-colonial peoples of Nigeria was the existence of political, economic, social, and cultural relations which exhibited a tendency towards peaceful co-existence. This does not mean that social and political conflicts did not exist. On the contrary, they occurred not too infrequently. But these were localised. In other words, such conflicts did not take place between the pre-colonial peoples and societies, but occurred within such entities and peoples. Furthermore, pre-colonial politics was characterised by strict adherence to religion which, together with social structures like the council of elders, age grade organisations, and secret societies, effectively checkmated any tendency towards despotism, and corruption (Ikime, 2008: 37). This was particularly the case among the acephalous or so-called 'stateless' societies of Igboland, Ibibioland, and Tivland, where public decision-making was not the exclusive preserve of a theocratic ruler or a clique of all adult males (Ibid: 19).

In this paper, attempts are made to bring into focus the various mechanisms which facilitated harmonious inter-ethnic relations in pre-colonial Nigeria and how these could be positively utilised to achieve national integration and economic development in contemporary Nigeria. By national integration is meant: "...those processes by which a state characterised by sectional or otherwise competing economies, polities, and culture within a given territory, is transformed into a society composed of a single all-pervasive, and in this sense, 'national' economy polity and culture" (Olisa, 2002).

Mechanisms of pre-colonial inter-group relations
History studies the past activities of man in dynamic interaction with his social and physical environment. In this regard, it is inter-disciplinary in approach, and studies every society holistically without emphasising the importance and relevance of any particular segment of such a society vis-à-vis others. In pre-colonial Nigeria, states were formed, some of which expanded to incorporate other societies outside the linguistic confines of the dominant state. Similarly, the major rivers facilitated trade relations between peoples of different ethnic origins and religious backgrounds.

Furthermore, social relations were a natural outcome of closer political and economic interactions, and manifested in inter-ethnic marriages and cultural exchanges and adaptations. This part of the essay examines how these mechanisms served to ensure harmonious and peaceful coexistence among pre-colonial peoples in what was to become Nigeria.

1.   State formation, expansion, and incorporation
Many pre-Nigerian groups were acephalous, and their traditions of origin, migration, and settlement lack any unitary direction. In many instances, such traditions are either contradictory or reflect the opinions of the dominant families. Among the Igbo and Ibibio in southeast Nigeria, for instance, there are no common traditions of origin. An explanation for this could be the obvious lack of any recorded history of a unifying political authority among them. Thus, among the Igbo, the popular answer to any question of their origins is likely to be that they have no history of migration from elsewhere to their present location. Instead, they believe in internal migrations to other parts of Igboland from the Igbo heartland in the Nri–Awka–Orlu axis (Afigbo, 2008; Ijoma, 2010). Other scholars and commentators have tried to speculate on Igbo origins by giving it a Jewish flavour; that is claiming that the Igbo migrated from Biblical Israel (Alaezi, 2002; Ikeanyibe, 2004; Ilona, 2004). But the situation among pre-colonial communities and groups with forms of political authority and control is different. Here, the directions of migration were distinctive and straightforward.

Among the Efik, there is a common tradition of migration from Ibom, a village in present-day Arochukwu, Abia State (Alagoa, 1999: 59). In a similar vein, the evolution and metamorphosis of Ijo communities and groups into city-states and their traditions of origin, migration, and settlement in their present locations cannot be divorced from their ability to establish an effective political system anchored on a kingship institution and the House System between 1200 and 1400 (Ibid: 17). Also, among the Bini, Hausa, Igala, Kanuri and Yoruba, there existed highly centralised political institutions which ensured relative stability in the politics and economies of these groups and which, overtime, also resulted in their expanding beyond their borders and incorporating members of other ethnic groups in the process of state formation. For instance, the Oyo Empire in Yorubaland was to overshadow other independent kingdoms like Owu, and even incorporated non-Yoruba groups such as the Tapa and Bariba or Ibariba (Akinjogbin and Ayandele, 1999: 129). The imperial expansion of Oyo also led to the incorporation of Ilorin, Egbaland, and Dahomey, among others, into the empire. It has indeed been observed that prior to the collapse of its central authority in the early 19th century, the Oyo Empire, "…controlled a sea coast from about Whydah to just east of Badagry, and the territory extended for perhaps more than two hundred

miles inland" (Ibid: 135). On its part, the Igala kingdom which emerged at about the same time as Benin and Oyo, expanded beyond Igalaland to not only attract the attention of Benin, but to also threaten its existence in the 15th and 16th centuries (Obayemi, 1999: 153). The ancient Benin kingdom, for example, was the dominant power in southern Nigeria, and its military influence extended to Igboland. Also, the claims of many Niger Delta groups of traditions of origin from Benin are pointers to that kingdom's overwhelming influence in the region (Ifemesia, 1981: 72).

Further north, there was a dynasty (the Saifawa dynasty) which was established by Bani Saif. Its rule in present-day Borno and Yobe States and beyond lasted for over a thousand years. Apart from Kanem and Bornu, the Saifawa dynasty did, at various times, exercise authority over areas that today fall within the precincts of the republics of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. It is even claimed that at a time, the Kanem-Bornu Empire extended as far north as Fezzan (Okeke, 1992: 8). Under Idris Alooma in the 16th century, the empire embarked on several wars of expansion, and was ultimately to incorporate parts of present-day Kano and Katsina States and even Jukun in present-day Taraba State. In the early decades of the 18th century, Zaria, Katsina and Daura (all in Hausaland) owed one form of allegiance or the other to the Kanem-Bornu Empire. When Muhammed Al-Amin Al-Kanemi (or El Kanemi) drove the Fulani invaders out of Bornu following an appeal for assistance from him by Mai Ahmad, he took over the reins of power in Bornu. In addition, he incorporated the emirates of Hadejia and Katagum, and overtime, his dynasty supplanted that of the Saifawa. It still rules Borno till date.

Although the Fulani were later to overshadow them politically, the Hausa of present-day northern Nigeria had been connected to Islam as far back as the 14th century A.D. But it is on record that Islam, prior to the coming of the Fulani, was basically a class religion practiced mostly by the ruling group who continued to combine its practice with their traditional religion (Ifemesia, 1983). It was this syncretism that Othman dan Fodio and his Fulani brethren found abhorrent and therefore decided to enforce a stricter form of the Islamic religion and legal code in pre-colonial Hausaland. Eventually, the Fulani jihadists were able to set up a caliphate based in Sokoto, but which incorporated most of present-day northern Nigeria. They also made successful and significant inroads into Yorubaland, especially after the Afonja debacle in Ilorin. State formation therefore served to enhance inter-ethnic/group relations by incorporating a multiplicity of ethnic groups within a single political authority.

2. Rivers and commercial relations

There are a number of rivers in Nigeria, but the most important is the River Niger. Many of the States in Nigeria today are named after rivers, and these include Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Ogun, Osun, Cross River, Niger, Kaduna, Benue, et cetera. The name 'Nigeria' is itself derived from the very important River Niger. Its most important tributary is the River Benue, and as shall be made clearer in this paper, these two rivers fostered peaceful co-existence among pre-colonial groups and societies in what is today called Nigeria. These rivers were veritable meeting points for traders from different ethnic backgrounds. In particular, the River Niger and the River Benue were very important in nurturing and sustaining commerce and communication among those who derived their livelihoods from their resources. Traders moved along the rivers in large canoes, bringing with them commodities and merchandise from the hinterland, and taking home products from inhabitants of the banks of these rivers. With time, important trading centres emerged to serve not only as meeting places of traders and their goods, but also as melting points of cultures.

Frequent commercial interactions between the Ijo, Igbo, Igala, and Nupe along the banks of the River Niger also engendered peace and trust among members of these ethnic groups. For instance, some kind of relay system was involved in transporting goods from one market on the rivers to another, from where other traders took over and continued until the goods got to where demand met supply (Ibid: 18-19). The relationship of trust and confidence enjoyed by the participants in this commercial relay game did, indeed, symbolise the union of the peoples that today make up Nigeria. The traders related harmoniously and were instrumental to the introduction of imported goods from other parts of Africa and even Europe, to the hinterland communities. On their parts, the Kings in whose domains market fairs were held, such as those of Aboh, Asaba, Onitsha, Idah, and Ikiri, cooperated in ensuring that peace prevailed in such places.

Trade was indeed, a very prominent aspect of the economic activity of pre-colonial Nigeria. There was an amazing and intricate network of routes linking together not only nearby villages and markets, but also those that were thousands of miles apart. The alignment of such trade routes which was generally of the north-south direction, emphasise the place geographical variations in encouraging trade between communities, irrespective of ethnic differences. As said earlier, the rulers of each market community ensured that the reputation of their markets was not in any way tainted in the course of trading, either through misdemeanours or other unwholesome methods or practices.

Basically, there were two types of trading in pre-colonial Nigeria, namely: the short-distance trade,

and the long-distance trade. The short-distance trade was conducted within a working radius which enabled the traders to go and come back the same day without any stop-over. Markets of this type were generally periodic, the periodicity varying from one community to the other. Also, there was a tendency for contiguous communities to form themselves into a market ring which was generally so arranged as to avoid conflict within that ring. The guiding principle in the arrangement derived from the theory that proximity in space implies separation in time. The idea was to maximise the purchasing power of the peoples within that market ring which was usually on a four-day or eight-day basis. This arrangement was popular among border communities where, for instance, riverine communities would supply fish and salt and get pottery and iron implements from the communities producing such. Generally, women dominated the short-distance trade.

Unlike the short-distance trade, the long-distance trade involved manufactured goods, including minerals whose purpose was geared towards satisfying the demands of the rich. Exception, of course, might be made of such necessities as salt, metal-wares and clothing. As a matter of fact, long-distance trade prior to the advent of European traders was connected with the Niger system. According to Chieka Ifemesia, such land routes which were aligned to commercial activities on the River Niger and its tributaries include the Kano–Badagry land route, running from the north to the south, as well as that from Ngazargamu through Bauchi to the Benue basin, with the termini in Igbirraland (Panda), Tivland (Abinsi), Jukunland (Wukari), and Fulaniland (Yola) (Ibid). In the southern parts, long-distance trading activities saw merchants from various parts plying their trade on the Niger as well. For instance, Igbo and Igala merchants supplied goods through the Igbo territory and even up to Calabar and Bonny. Traders in particular and travellers generally, entered into agreements with communities along the trade routes which ensured their safety. One of such arrangements was ritual brotherhood through which long-distance traders connected with host communities and those along the trade routes. This resulted in a blood union whose members were obligated to treat each other as brothers. The practice enabled long-distance traders to travel in safety and to conduct their business without molestation.

3. Inter-ethnic marriages and cultural borrowings adaptations

The movement of trade and goods along the River Niger and its tributaries, as well as interactions between peoples of different ethnic groups at local markets did, naturally enough, result in inter-ethnic marriages, the transmission of ideas, greater understanding and appreciation of other people's values and ideas, as well as the commonality of their interests.

Apart from blood covenants and similar rituals which marked inter-ethnic relationships among pre-colonial groups who later became Nigerians, marriage across ethnic boundaries helped to cement relationships. This type of marriage was particularly common among long-distance travellers who embraced it for both commercial and diplomatic purposes. As the Igbo would say, "*Ogo bu ikwu ato*" (An in-law is a blood relation). In the words of A. E. Afigbo:

Most long distance travellers were polygamists, and usually took care to choose their wives from important and strategically placed towns along their normal routes of business. By marriage such a traveller became an accepted member of his father-in-law's clan… the traders went so far as to leave some wives in their natal homes where they built them houses into which they themselves could turn in as the occasion demanded. If the trader subsequently retired he could place the connections he had built up at the disposal of his townsmen and friends trading along the same route (1981: 136).

It was through such contacts and connections that individuals from different ethnic backgrounds were able to foster lasting relationships with each other prior to British colonial rule. There were therefore no cultural vacuums which the British colonialists could fill among pre-colonial groups of latter-day Nigerians. This is because prior to British conquest of what is now Nigeria, an appreciable degree of social and cultural intermingling had occurred between ethnic and linguistic groups. Such contacts expectedly led to the adoption and exchange of values and ideals. For instance, among Cross River Igbo communities, such as Abiriba, Abam, Afikpo, Ihechiowa, Nkporo, Edda, and Ohafia, the matrilineal system of succession and inheritance was adopted. This practice, which is alien to other Igbo sub-groups, may have been borrowed from the peoples of the Cross River region. Among other Igbo communities, the patrilineal system was predominant. That is probably why P. O. Nsugbe (1974) observed that the system of kinship and marriage, the rules of inheritance and succession, as well as the form of men's association and cults, differentiate the Cross River Igbo sub-group.

Similarly, and as has been rightly observed by eminent Nigerian Historians (Ajayi and Alagoa, 1999: 234), "Geographical factors seem to dispose the territory of Nigeria to movement of people from one ecological zone to another…" Such widespread mixing of various pre-colonial Nigerian groups resulted in the establishment of several strangers' quarters or settlements in various parts of the country, especially during the era of the slave trade. Thus, a number of Nupe warriors settled in Lagos, while Hausa house attendants and veterinarians were to be found in Yorubaland, in much the same way that Igbo (Awka)

blacksmiths were found in ancient Benin (Ibid). To say that cultural exchanges occurred in the course of such interactions is to state the obvious. Among border communities, cultural borrowings were common. For instance, in the Igbo border communities of Ihechiowa, Isu, Ututu, and Arochukwu, all-male secret societies such as Ekan, Ekpe, and Obon, as well as the all-female society (Eyamba) were originally from the neighbouring Efik and Ibibio ethnic groups but they became part of the cultural practices of the aforementioned Igbo communities through interactions. Further, inter-ethnic marriages resulted in the adoption by these communities of non-Igbo names like Ekpenyong, Bassey, Ekpe, Affiong, Eno, Inyang, et cetera. Such inter-ethnic marriages were not unidimensional: Igbo names were also to be found among many non-Igbo groups, especially those with whom they shared geographical contiguity and by extension, conjugal and filial relationships.

The challenges of national integration in colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria

It is a historical fact that Nigeria is a British creation. Ethnic groups existed and interacted with each other but the advent of British colonial rule and the introduction of colonial institutions on a national scale altered the degree and patterns of inter-ethnic contacts. Not only were the ethnic groups brought into closer contacts with each other, such contacts also created in these ethnic groups an acute awareness of their distinct cultural attributes. Yet, such distinctiveness and differences did not constitute barriers to collaboration between Nigerians in their struggle to end British colonial rule. Nationalist movements and later on, political parties were inspired by the doctrine of national self-determination which had become the vogue in Asia in the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, ethnic affiliations among Nigerian nationalists would appear to have been slightly devalued in favour of a new principle that took the territory created by British colonialists as the framework for political associations and as the basis for the state, even when it cut across these affiliations. This was especially so in the period before 1945 when it was relatively possible to 'integrate' ethnic nationalism into a wider territorial consciousness and political purpose.

However, the formation of political organisations in Nigeria and in particular their activities from the 1940s and upwards in general, mortified the ideas of uniting and integrating Nigerians into a nation whose citizens would place loyalty to the state over any other conflicting loyalties. In the period after World War II, ethnic loyalties assumed supremacy over national interests (Coleman, 1986: 3). The colonial government had built railways across the length and breadth of Nigeria, connecting communities from the north and south. It also embarked on economic development planning which provided a modest

stimulation to the economy, though this was essentially for sustaining the economic motive of imperialism. Yet, there is no denying the fact that these programmes brought Nigerians into closer contacts than was the case hitherto. But the formation of political parties, especially the Action Group (AG) and the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) consequent upon the promulgation of the Macpherson Constitution in 1951, were done along regional and ethnic lines. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) which had a nationalist outlook, was later to assume ethnic colouration following Nnamdi Azikiwe's denial by the Yoruba-dominated Western House of Assembly from representing Lagos in the Federal House of Representatives after he had won the election to do so (Ikime, 2008: 102). Thereafter, ethnic affiliations and loyalties became the major concerns and considerations of the leaders and members of Nigeria's major political parties. Indeed, none of these parties would appear to have paid much attention to national unity except in as much as it would serve to project their ethnic, regional and/or religious interest (Coleman, ibid: 346-347; 361).

While there was therefore a sort of concerted though tenuous effort on the part of Nigerian nationalists up to the 1940s to win independence from Britian, the political parties introduced cleavages which frustrated this noble dream, as it were. Among the factors blamed for the injection of ethnicism into Nigeria politics and the subsequent decline in the tempo of the nationalists' collaboration are the colonial urban setting with its characteristic socio-economic competition (Lloyd, 1974: 223) and the colonial policy of divide-and-rule (Okonjo, 1974). This situation was exacerbated by the regionalisation of national wealth and the inter-ethnic struggle for political power which the Richards and Macpherson Constitutions of 1946 and 1951 respectively, introduced. These two Constitutions also effectively regionalised the civil service. That way, one of the strongest uniting links among Nigerians was cut.

It has to be noted that though the Macpherson Constitution introduced the north-south dichotomy into Nigerian politics, it only brought into limelight what the Richards Constitution tried to hide, namely, that Nigerian nationalists were mutually suspicious of each other. For instance, whereas the Richards Constitution did not give any legislative or executive functions to the regional Houses of Assembly which it created, so to say, the Macpherson Constitution empowered the Regional government to legislate on some specific matters. Regional executive powers were also extended to all the matters covered by the legislative powers of the region. The Constitution made the regions more dependent on the central government, but they were allowed some measure of freedom (on which the regional political parties were later to capitalise). Moreover, because none of the three major political

parties had its leaders in the House of Representatives, the federal Ministers identified more with their regions of origin than with the central government, a situation that often gave rise to inter-regional squabbles. Perhaps and rather unfortunately, the 1951 constitution's most remarkable negative contribution to Nigeria's political history was the ushering in of an era of ethnic nationalism and regional divisions as demonstrated by the emergence of the Action Group and the Northern People's Congress in 1951, the same year that the Constitution was adopted. The regional arrangement under the Constitution was such that each political party had an adequate regional base, more so when ethnic nationalism was at an all-time high.

The clearest manifestations of this new strand in Nigeria politics would include the events that culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-1970. From 1964, the Nigerian state was placed in a very tight corner, as inter-regional conflicts and strife threatened to tear it apart. First, there was the 1964 census fiasco, followed by the equally disheartening election crisis of the same year. Towards the end of 1965, there was the western regional crisis, followed later by a period of unbridled ethnicism, nepotism, and corruption in official and unofficial quarters. The root cause of these included selfishness on the part of Nigeria's political leaders and their desire to project their regional interests at the expense of the nation. These politicians have been accused of invoking the spectre of ethnicism to cover up their misdeeds (Muhammadu and Mohammed, 1988: 26). Therefore, it was their failure to stem the divisive tendencies and evolve minimal nationally-shared values that led to the event of 1966 to 1970.

The challenges of national integration in contemporary Nigeria and the role of history

One's idea of contemporary Nigeria in this context is Nigeria since 1970. That year marked the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war, and with it came a new emphasis on national integration. In other words, the war of 1967-1970 and its deleterious consequences on the Nigerian state have renewed calls for an interrogation of the past and a reshaping of the future of the country. For one thing, Nigeria at independence was a collation of ethnic groups and factions with no great consciousness of nation and national integration. Thus, each group preferred to pursue its own parochial goals with little regard for the overall well-being of the nation. Loyalty was embedded in the various regions, and the capture of the federal government meant the transfer of these loyalties to the centre; a situation which the other regions (apart from the winner) were set to frustrate at all costs. To this end, regional governments embarked on a series of expensive and ethnically-based coalitions which were at best to prove progressively disruptive and untenable (Stremlau, 1977: 4). These were the conditions under which the first military coup d'etat took place in January 1966.

However, since 1970, successive governments have taken a number of measures and adopted many programmes to achieve and sustain national integration. These include the re-absorption of those within the Biafra enclave into Nigeria, as well as the creation of more States; the establishment of more Federal Government (Unity) Colleges; the mandatory one-year National Youth Service Corps programme; the establishment of the Federal Character Commission; the introduction of the quota system, among others. By implication, Nigeria has adopted the functional approach to integration, probably because of the failure to bring about communal integration in the 1960s, and also because of the experiences of the 1967-1970 war.

In any case, the performance of the various attempts at achieving national integration in Nigeria may best be evaluated when such efforts are examined against some set standards. These include, *inter alia*, balancing political power, achieving regional, economic parity, providing relevant education, and language policy (Smock and Bentsi-Enchill, 1976). Herein lies the importance of history in finding answers to the lingering problems of national integration in Nigeria. It has been argued that Nigeria "...is the world's greatest paradox of failure and despair: a conflicting contraption that abhors and indeed inhibits the progress of its constituent groups" (Nwobu, 2007). Admittedly, Nigeria is a large and complex nation with a multiplicity of ethnic groups, each fighting for relevance under the same political sun. The verdict of history will certainly be in favour of a continuation of the nation in spite of its cultural pluralism and diversity. There is no denying the fact, as Dapo Fafowora (2011: 64) has rightly observed, that the Nigerian political system has failed to contain the fissiparous and centrifugal tendencies of the country's ethnic groups as they struggle for power. Yet, if the future must be made brighter, the mistakes of the past must be avoided.

History has shown that contemporary Nigeria is a combination of peoples, cultures and civilisations that shared a lot in common long before contacts were established with Europeans. In the words of E. O. Erim:
...a variety of links existed in the pre-colonial period between the various states and peoples who were the predecessors of modern Nigeria; between the kingdom of Benin and the principalities of Igala, Igbirra, Epe, Igede, Idoma, and the loosely associated Alago communities of the lower Benue valley; between Kwararafa and the Igbo communities to the east of the Niger; between Benin and the Yoruba (1981: ix).

The obvious implication of this statement is the need for history to serve as the store-house of knowledge on those things that bound Nigerians together in times past, and the need to reinvent them as a veritable source of solution to the challenge of

national integration. It is true that the adoption of a fraudulent federal system and the many years of military rule with the concomitant abuse of human rights ignored the aspirations of many Nigerians. It also true that the return to democratic governance, first between 1979 and 1983, and now since 1999, has not succeeded in enthroning a culture of consensus and shared values among Nigeria's many ethnic groups.

Among the many obstacles to national integration in contemporary Nigeria are ethnic and cultural diversities; a multiplicity of languages; the north-south dichotomy; a defective revenue allocation formula; a burgeoning youth population (most of whom are either unemployed or unemployable); corruption, nepotism and cronyism; political instability; and mass poverty. Put differently, the pervasive influence of ethnicity and ethnicism in the country is the product of a lopsided federal structure which has continued to favour the northern part of the country in both political representation and in the distribution of the country's economic resources. For instance, the north has more States, local government areas, and representatives in the federal legislature than the south. Since the country's revenue allocation formula includes such criteria as land mass and the number of local government areas in each State, the north receives more money from the Federal Government than the south. This has continued to generate ill-feelings and, therefore, hindered efforts at national integration. Similarly, corruption by political leaders has made it difficult for the government (Federal, State and Local) to establish industries to absorb Nigeria's teeming youths (who make up more than half the country population of about 200 million). The result is that this army of unemployed youths, including the notorious almajiri (or street children in the north) become ready tools to be manipulated for a variety of anti-social purposes by politicians, criminal gangs, and religious fundamentalists. Corruption has also created a very wide gap between the rich and the poor in the country. This has, in turn, increased the rate of criminality and by extension, insecurity in Nigeria.

One way through which these threats to national integration could be addressed is through the teaching of Nigerian History as a compulsory subject in tertiary levels. The curriculum should include topics that would emphasise the ways through which members of the various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups interacted with each other prior to contacts with the British. Through this way, the students would be made to appreciate the imperative of national unity by de-emphasising their differences, especially ethnicity and religion. It will also enable them to know how British colonial rule deliberately sought to keep the north and south of the country perpetually divided and disunited in order to frustrate any concerted effort at opposing colonialism.

The compulsory teaching of Nigerian History will also expose the antics of the inheritors of the post-colonial State in exploiting and appropriating the country's commonwealth for their selfish interests, as well as the lingering consequences of such actions on the nation's economic and political development. This is where the students will evaluate the activities and performance of politicians in the First Republic (1960-1966); military rulers; and the various civilian governments that have ruled the country from 1979 to 1984, and 1999 till present. A study of these governments will definitely be an eye-opener and would embolden Nigerians, especially the youths, to question the political elite's huge appetite for lies and corruption. It will also clear their (youths') delusion and obsession with quick and ill-gotten wealth. Finally, the attainment of real statehood and development by Nigeria depends largely on her success in achieving national integration and unity.

CONCLUSION

Prior to British colonial rule, the peoples of what is today known as and called Nigeria interacted with each other. There were many channels through which such inter-ethnic and inter-group relations were facilitated and fostered. These include state formation, expansion and incorporation; commercial interactions; as well as inter-ethnic marriages and cultural adaptations. Through these channels and mechanisms, pre-colonial Nigerians from different ethnic origins were able to establish lasting and mutually beneficial relationships. But the intrusion of the British and what followed subsequently destroyed these pristine relationships. This is a factor that has continued to haunt efforts at national integration in contemporary Nigeria. In other words, British colonial rule, its creation of a parasitic political elite, a lopsided federal structure, and the north-south dichotomy, have combined with such other factors as ethnicity, corruption, nepotism, and political instability to frustrate most attempts at achieving real national integration in the country since 1960, but especially since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970. It is however now imperative to reinvent those things that encouraged peaceful coexistence among pre-colonial Nigeria peoples. The study of History in Nigerian schools, from the lowest to the highest level, is an important and desirable option in this search for Nigeria's self-discovery. Its study will provide a ready and relevant source of solutions to the myriad of factors that have tended to hinder previous efforts at national integration, unity, and progress in the country.

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