

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE, ETHNO-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF NATIONAL UNITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper highlighted the ethno-religious pluralism and the attendant rivalry and violent conflicts in Nigeria. It also critically analyzed the proposed National Conference (NC) in the light of its potentials in reducing the age-long ethno-religious resentments and sectarian violence that have been tearing the country apart. Although the authors condemned the unilateral and arbitrary amalgamation of January 1st 1914, they believe that a genuine National Conference can solve and undo the mistakes of the past. Using a historical phenomenological approach, it was found that a genuine national conference or dialogue is an inevitable solution to the threat of disintegration in Nigeria.*

KEYWORD: National conference, Ethno-religious Pluralism, Amalgamation, Ethnic groups, conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Since the popular amalgamation of 1914 by Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard, the attainment of national unity has been the greatest challenge of Nigeria. Okonkwo (2009:31) has observed that “the issue of national unity has plagued Nigeria from its inception”. The amalgamation event brought the Southern and the Northern Protectorates alongside their respective cultures and religions into an entity called Nigeria. This epoch-making event was unfortunately done without the consent of the people; hence, it has been variously criticized by many Nigerians and non-Nigerians. Whereas, some view it as a “curse”, others view it as a “blessing”. Still, some others take it as an unforgiveable act of cruelty and greed on the part of the British colonial masters, who ruined the destinies of generations of people. This is due to the multi-ethnic and religious plurality of the people that have in so many cases proved highly incompatible in the country. Robert Farris Thompson as cited by Achebe (2012:2) has observed that “...the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates, inextricably complicated Nigeria’s destiny. Animists, Muslims and Christians alike were held together by a delicate, some say artificial lattice”.

This, notwithstanding, national integration and unity is profoundly important to the Nigerian state, hence, the endless struggle to achieve it. Achebe (1983:14) wrote that;The most commonly enunciated Nigeria ideal is unity. So important is it to us that it stands inscribed on our coat-of-arm and so sacred that the blood of millions of our countrymen, women and children was shed between 1967 and 1970 to uphold it against secessionist forces.

In the same vein, Mr. Ukpabi Asika, as cited in Achebe (1983:14) described Nigerian Unity as “an absolute good” that has been pursued and upheld with utmost ferocity and tenacity. Decrees and policies have been enacted; agencies and schemes have been created and media jungles formulated; all to enhance and engender national unity in the country. However, it seems the more the struggle or campaign for national integration builds, the more the country is torn apart by ethno-religious crisis, wars and terrorist attacks in the country.

The objectives of this paper, therefore, are to highlight the ethno-religious pluralism in Nigeria as initiated by the amalgamation of 1914 and critically analyze the prospects the proposed National Conference (NC) holds for the national integration and unity of Nigeria. A historical phenomenological method is employed to achieve these objectives.

The Amalgamation

The popular unilateral amalgamation of 1st January 1914 by the British colonial master, Sir. Fredrick Lord Lugard gave birth to an entity known as Nigeria. Interestingly however, it was this event of 1914 that marked the beginning of an endless struggle for unity. This is because the amalgamation brought the southern, northern protectorates alongside their differences into “one-diversified” union.

However, several important events took place far before this amalgamation event of 1914. The most significant is the Berlin Conference of 1885 that was summoned by Otto Von Bismarck in Germany. This conference became necessary following the European scramble for African territories. Bismarck, who was the first chancellor of Germany, therefore summoned this conference for a “peaceful” sharing of the African territories among the European powers that included Austria, Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway and Turkey. Hence the decisions at the meeting signaled a milestone in the history of the world and Africa in particular, “where European powers peaceably parceled out African lands among themselves without the consent of Africans” (Enebe 2009:2). Achebe (2012:1) has noted that “the controversial gathering of the world’s leading European powers...created new boundaries that did violence to Africa’s ancient societies and resulted in tension-prone modern states. It took place without African consultation or representation, to say the least”.

Nevertheless, among the African territories allocated to Britain was the geographical entity that was to become Nigeria. This geographical area was in the words of Achebe (2012:1) handed to the Great Britain “like a piece of chocolate cake at a birthday party”. And the rest was history, as the territory was divided by the colonial masters into the colony of Lagos, the southern protectorate and the northern protectorate in 1900. One would expectedly want to know whether the people that occupied this area were together or united to have warranted the divide into protectorates. The fact is that these people were never united and existed independently and in little or no awareness of the others existence in the pre-colonial era. This is why history has recorded the independent existence of the pre-colonial Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba Kingdoms and societies. Hence, the division into protectorates was for administrative convenience. Then, in 1906, the colony of Lagos was merged with the southern protectorate by Sir. Walter Egerton, for the same administrative purpose.

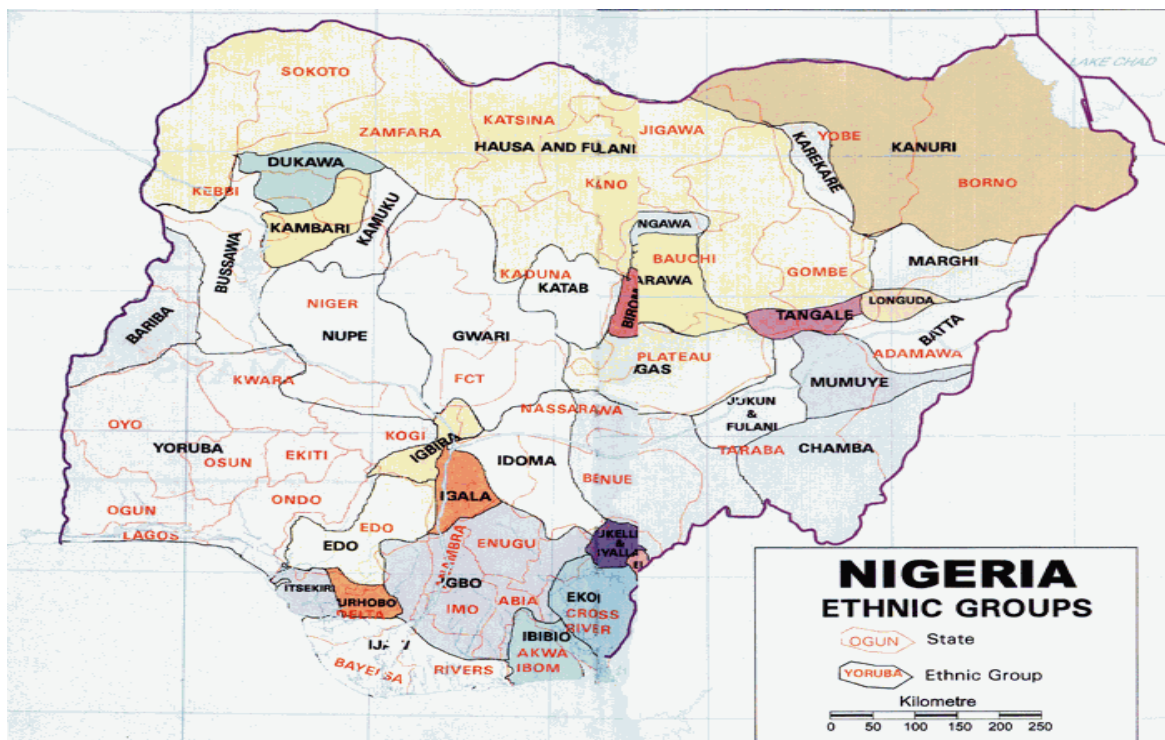
Eight years later, specifically on 1st January 1914, the northern and southern protectorates became amalgamated by Sir. Fredrick Lord Lugard, who became the Governor-General of the unified entity called Nigeria. As has been noted, this amalgamation of 1914 has been heavily

criticized as it arbitrarily coerced people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds into living together which of course have in so many instances proven difficult as a result of the incessant cases of ethno-religious crisis and sectarian terrorism that have marred the country.

Ethno-religious Pluralism in Nigeria

Nigeria, by the virtue of the amalgamation event of 1914, became an embodiment of diverse ethnic and religious groups. This makes the country a pluralistic society. Pluralism according to Laguda (2013) “suggests divergent views”. A pluralistic society therefore, refers to one in which there co-exist more than one ethnic and religious group and there are some degree of recognition by all the parties concerned. As the most populous country in African continent, Nigeria realistically has “374 ethnic groups” (Nnoli 2008:68), “with a variety of customs, traditions, languages and dialects” (Uwechue 1971:15). This number is opposed to the number of 250 ethnic groups often found in several literatures (Otite, 1990:14).

Figure 1: showing the distribution of ethnic groups on Nigerian map



Source: <http://www.onlinenigeria.com/mapethnic.asp>

Okonkwo (2009:32) has argued that ethnic groups as well as the attendant problem of ethnicity in Nigeria is a creation of the colonial masters. According to the author, “the colonial government helped to develop ethnic groups through their uniting of villages into regions”, hence extreme regionalism became the major characteristic of the first republic. According to her, the slogan at this first Republic, was “East for the Easterners, West for the Westerners, North for the Northerners, Nigeria for nobody”. The position is buttressed by Nnoli (2008:71) as he said that “tribalism or ethnicity in Nigeria is a creature of the colonial and post-colonial order”. The colonial-created ethnic differences and divide, according to Nnoli (2008:143) was

accentuated by the introduction of the colonial policy of Divide and rule system. According to Madiebo (1980:3), “the important aspect of this system is that it laid emphasis on the differences among the people, while encouraging social apartheid. As a result, there was division, hatred, unhealthy rivalry” among various peoples of Nigeria. The divide and rule system was implemented in a way that regional and ethnic groups were given peculiar policies, while regional interrelationship and integration was highly restricted as in the case of the north which was declared a no go area for the ideological and western educated southerners. The colonial masters put up this restriction to avoid the interruption of the successful indirect rule system thriving in the northern region.

Nigerians, through this policy, were consequently made to believe they were “separated from one another by great distance, by differences in history and traditions and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers” (Coleman, 1958: 193-194). It is however repugnant how the history and future of generations of people could be toyed around with by policies designed to meet selfish economic and political interest. The first was the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates in the disguise of achieving ‘national unity’ and at the same time, dividing the peoples and turning them against themselves through the divide and rule system and the accentuation of ethnic differences.

Be that as it may, Nigeria as has been noted earlier is consisted of 374 ethnic groups. Some of the major groups include “Hausa/Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, Tiv 2.5% (www.cia.gov.com). Religion, on the other hand, has thrived in the country to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions. Three major religions are distinguishable in Nigeria and they include Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. Research result reveals that 50% of Nigerians are Muslims, 40% Christians and 10% are members of traditional religion (www.cia.gov.com). Whereas Islam dominates the north and has a number of adherents in the south and western part, Christianity dominates the south and also has a distribution of adherents both in the north and west.

For clarity, some major ethnic and religious groups shall be briefly discussed below:

The Major Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

The Igbo Group

Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. They occupy the southeastern part of Nigeria. They generally speak Igbo language though with some dialectical variations and a majority of them also speak English language. In rural areas of Nigeria, Igbo people are mostly craftsmen, farmers and traders.

The pre-colonial Igbo were a politically fragmented group. There were not many centralized chiefdoms, hereditary aristocracy, or kingship customs except in kingdoms such as those of the Nri, Arochukwu, Agbor and Onitsha. Various subgroups were organized by clan, lineage, village affiliation, and dialect. This political system changed significantly under British colonialism in the 19th century; *Eze* (kings) were introduced into most local communities by Frederick Lugard as "Warrant Chiefs". The Igbo people became overwhelmingly Christians under colonization. Chinua Achebe's “Things Fall Apart” is one of the most popular novels to depict Igbo culture and changes under colonialism. By the mid-20th century, the Igbo people developed a strong sense of ethnic identity. Certain conflicts with other Nigerian ethnicities led to the Igbo-dominant Eastern Nigeria seceding from Nigeria to create the independent state of Biafra. The Nigerian-Biafran war (6 July 1967 – 15 January

1970) broke out shortly after. With their defeat, the Republic of Biafra was reabsorbed into Nigeria. However, MASSOB, a sectarian organization formed in 1999, continues a non-violent struggle for an independent Igbo state.

The Yoruba Group

The Yoruba people are an ethnic group of southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin in West Africa. According to the CIA World Factbook, the Yoruba constitute over 35 million people in total, making up 21% of Nigerian population (www.cia.gov.com). The majority of the Yoruba speak the Yoruba language which is a tonal Niger-Congo language.

The Yoruba share borders with the Borgu in Benin; the Nupe and Epira in central Nigeria; and the Edo, the Eṣan, and the Afemai in mid-western Nigeria. The Igala and other related groups are found in the northeast, and the Egun, Fon, and others in the southeast Benin. The Itsekiri who live in the north-west Niger delta are related to the Yoruba but maintain a distinct cultural identity. Significant Yoruba population in West Africa can also be found in Togo, Sierra Leone (where they have blended in with the Saro and Sierra Leone Creole people), and Ghana.

Monarchies were a common form of government in pre-colonial Yoruba land, but they were not the only approach to government and social organization. The numerous Ijebu city-states to the west of Oyo and the Eḡba communities, found in the forests below Oyo's savanna region, were notable exceptions. These independent polities often elected an *Oba*, though real political, legislative, and judicial powers resided with the *Ogboni*, a council of notable elders. Generally, the notion of the divine king was so important to the Yoruba, that it has been part of their organization in its various forms from their antiquity to the contemporary era.

The Hausa Group

The Hausa are acclaimed the largest ethnic group in Nigeria and West Africa at large. They live primarily in the Sahelian and Sudanian areas of northern Nigeria and southeastern Niger, with significant numbers also living in parts of Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Togo, Ghana, and Sudan. However, a larger Hausa population is concentrated in Nigeria and Niger, where they constitute the majority. They live in small villages or towns in West Africa, where they grow crops, raise livestock including cattle and engage in trade. They speak the Hausa language, an Afro-Asiatic language of the Chadic group.

The Hausa population is predominantly Muslims following the conquest of the region in eleventh century by the Fulanis led by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio who Islamized the region afterwards. Also, this conquest gave rise to ethnic mixture of the Hausa and the Fulani peoples and cultures. Hence, they are currently referred to as the Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups. Dan Fodio also instituted a highly centralized Islamic Emirate system of government after the conquest, a political system that heralded the British colonial master's indirect rule system.

Major Religions in Nigeria

African Traditional Religion

African traditional religion is the indigenous religion of Africans whose origin is lost in antiquity. However, it is believed to have been practised by African fore-bears who handed it down from one generation to another. Awolalu (1976: 257) has described this religion as;... the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the fore bearers of the present generation of Africans. It is not a

fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it.

It is a religion founded on African soil, and inextricably interwoven with the culture of the people expressed in beliefs and practices. These traditional beliefs provide “supernatural protection and sanctions, as well as legitimize and regulate governing claims on resources, especially agricultural lands and house sites” (Okonkwo and Nzeh, 2009) in the communities. Also, “access rights to resources, political offices, economic activities, or social relations were defined and legitimized by these same religious beliefs (www.country-data.com). Research has shown that 10% of Nigerians are adherents of traditional religion. (www.cia.gov.com).

Christianity

Christianity is one of the three main religions in Nigeria. Christian religion is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is a missionary religion and believed to have entered Nigeria through the southeast (Onitsha) in 1857 from Sierra Leone through Christian missionaries (Okonkwo and Nzeh; 2009). It is a monotheistic religion with the Bible as the major source of doctrine. According to findings, 40% of Nigerians are Christians.

Islam

Islam is one of the major religions in Nigeria and the world at large. It was founded in the seventh century by Prophet Muhammad by whose life and teachings, the religion has been profoundly influenced. The word Islam means *submission to the will of God*. Islam was introduced to Nigeria through the northern part of the country as early as the 11th century and was well established in the major capitals of the region by the 16th century, spreading into the countryside and toward the Middle Belt uplands. Although a monotheistic religion, Islam has become heterogeneous in Nigeria with the springing up of many Islamic sects such as the Sunni, Shia and the likes. However, the Quran and the Hadith are the major sources of belief and practices in the religion.

Ethno-religious Crisis and Terrorism in Nigeria

The pluralistic nature of Nigeria, as has been established above, has trapped the country in a plague of intractable conflicts and wars fought along ethnic and religious lines. Adeyeri (2010:31) has observed that since independence, bitter ethno-religious crisis have been rampant, thereby slowing down national progress and threatening national unity and stability”. Whereas, the several gory cases of religious wars have Muslims and Christians as key players, ethnic conflicts have involved several ethnic groups as in the case of the Tiv/Jukun; Ijaw/Itsekiri; and the likes. It should however be noted that some religious conflicts in Nigeria have ethnic undertones. The same applies to ethnic conflicts contracted on religious differences. In fact, in most cases, it is often difficult to extricate religious conflicts from ethnic violence as the causative variables often overlap. Kaigama (2006:5) has argued that “the crisis generally regarded as religious are often triggered by sectional, social or economic interests, political ambition or ethnic considerations which soon take on a religious garb because of the sensitive place and role of religion in Nigeria”. This explains the regular usage of the term “ethno-religious conflicts” in several literatures. However, while this paper treats the two variables ethnicity and religion separately, they shall at some point, be treated inseparably.

Nevertheless, a conflict can be said to be ethnic, when such conflict involves organized political movement, mass unrest, separatist action, and civil wars with opposing lines drawn along ethnic boundaries (Tishkor, 1995). There are many causes of ethnic conflicts which include the

scramble or dispute over resources; “the political domination of one ethnic group by another or fear of such domination” (Nnoli, 2008:viii). In this case, conflict may occur in the words of Tishkor (1995):

When majority controls access to the power and resources of the state and the minorities often without going into an open confrontation with the dominant groups, could question the state structure as a whole and act violently when the society and the state are unable to suggest any mechanisms for regulating and resolving the issues at stake.

Ethnic conflict can occur as a result of what Nnoli (2008: viii) called “state unilateralism in the formulation and implementation of public policy”. In other words, there are likely to be ethnic upheavals when public policies are undemocratically enacted and implemented without seeking the opinion of the people who are the recipient of such policies. Other causative factors include the bias of the state in favour of one or two ethnic groups at the detriment of others; poverty; corruption; religious differences and so on. All these and more, have given rise to ethnic violence that have led to the lost of hundreds of thousands of lives and property worth billions of naira in the country.

Yet, on the other hand, religious violence seems to have wrecked more havoc on the growth and development of the country. Ibenwa and Ngele (2010:134) have observed that “religious groups in Nigeria have not been fair to one another by not respecting the diverse view points, doctrinal positions of diverse religious groups in a heterogeneous Nigerian society”. Consequently, there have been countless cases of religious violence that have destroyed lives and property in overwhelmingly large scale. This is not surprising as Ekwue (2006:41) aptly argued that “in a multi-religious society, the plural religious identities may led to persistent prejudice, suspicion, distrust, intolerance and aggression, destruction of lives and property as we oftentimes experience in several parts of this country”. This often happens, when one or two religious groups claim superiority over the other, probably on the basis of theological traditions or soteriological doctrines (salvation/redemption doctrines). Be that as it may, the pluralistic nature of Nigeria as well as the seemingly incompatibility of the diverse ethnic and religious groups have enmeshed the country in cataclysmic ethno-religious conflicts that have nullified any attempt at achieving national unity.

Table showing Some Cases of Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria

S/No	Date	Town or State	Grievances/Causes of Riots	Number of Casualties	Government's Response
1	December , 1980	Kano	Abubakar RImi, former Governor of Kano issued quit notice to Mohammed Maitatsine to leave his kingdom in the heart of Kano	About 4,177 people were killed	Government paid N8 million as compensation to victims
2	April 26, 1985	Bauchi	Mohammed Maitatsine under the guise of the same quit notice attacked Moslems in Gombe	More than 100 people died after about ten hours of fighting	Government intervened by using Armed forces

3.	1990	Kano	Triggered by an Igbo Christian, Gideon Akaluka who was alleged to have defecated on the Koran	May people died and properties were destroyed	Government used joint efforts of the police and the military to quell the riots
4	October 1, 1991	Kano	Triggered by Moslem fanatics who claimed to be protesting the Christian religion crusade of Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke	Lives and property worth of millions of Naira were destroyed	Soldiers were deployed by the government to quell the riot
5.	March 1987	Kaduna	Moslem attacked Christian students who organized a crusade at College of Education, Kafanchan	This led to the killing of people and burning of churches and mosques by Moslems and Christians	Government used joint efforts of the police and the military to quell the riot
6	May 1992	Zangonk ataf riot Zaria, Kaduna	This Simply Arose As Communal Feud Between Kata Christians And Zango Moslems (Hausa)	This equally led to loss of lives	Government set up panel of inquiries to find out the causes of the riot
7	2006	Maidugri in Borno State and Onitsha in Anambra state	Reprisal attack by the Igbos on the Hausa indigenes as a result of killing of innocent citizens under the guise of protesting against the publication of Prophet Mohammed by Dannish newspaper	Over 50 lives lost in Maidugri, over 30 churches and 5 hotels were burnt while many shops/businesses belonging to Christians were either vandalized or looted. Eastern Christians	Governor Ngige and his counterpart in Maidugri intervened to avert further escalation of the riot.

				at Onitsha staged a reprisal attack on the Moslems.	
8	September 7 to 17 th 2001	Jos, Aba, Owerri and Umuahia	A Christian woman attempted to cross a barricaded street. This led to a scuffle between her and a group of Moslems	The fight spread to Bauchi, Lafia and Nassarawa. There was a reprisal attack at Aba, Owerri and Umuahia. 3000 people were mowed to death, 2700 internally displaced, 1543 children were displaced	President Obasanjo visited the scene and commented thus: we are not only citizens of one nation but also children of one God...we must therefore resolve our differences and without resort to violence
9	November 18, 2008	Jos	Alleged rigging of local government election by PDP against ANPP	More than 100 people killed, over 1000 vehicles, houses, mosques and churches burnt	Governor Jang directed security agents to shoot on sight any person or groups suspected to be fuelling the violence
10	April, 2009	Wase in Jos	Expulsion of Fulani nomads from Wase market by the Governor because of their alleged involvement in November 2010 ethno-religious crisis	2 Fulani people were killed and several Fulani settlements were burnt at Gwarza. Police arrested	Governor Jang decided to deport them to neighbouring states through the use of combined team of police

				and prosecuted 23 Fulani people	and military personnel
11	January 17, 2010	Jos	Crisis caused by Moslem youths who had gone to attack worshippers in Nassarawa Gwom on Sunday 17 th of January, 2010	Over 100 lives and properties worth millions of Naira were wasted	Government declared a dust to dawn curfew. Army vehicle with full troop patrolled the street in order to restore peace

Source: Ibenwa and Ngele (2010:130).

Yet, the unity of Nigeria seems to have recently received the greatest threat from the insurgence of Boko-haram religious sect. This is an Islamic sect founded in 2001 by late Muhammad Yusuf and became known internationally following sectarian violence in Nigeria in July 2009, which left over 1000 people dead (Umar 2011:12). It is known for burning of churches and federal government buildings or structures in the country. And since its founding in 2001, the group has been responsible for not less down 6,000 deaths in the country, and mostly in the North. More interestingly, it is currently ranked the second on global terror list after the Taliban in Afghanistan.(www.nguardiannews.com). There is no doubt that this Boko Haram insurgence has brought a lot of misfortune and threat to the unity of the country.

The National Conference and the Challenge of National Unity

The plethora of ethno-religious crisis and violence that have plagued Nigeria since its inception go a long way to suggesting that, perhaps, if the different people and ethnic groups had their way, they would not have consented to being brought together in one entity. Notwithstanding, they were brought together through the amalgamation of 1st January, 1914, and have been struggling to peacefully co-exist afterwards. Madiebo (1980:3) has insightfully argued that; The federation of Nigeria, as it exists today, has never really been one homogenous country for its widely differing peoples and tribes are yet to find any basis for true unity. This unfortunate yet obvious fact, notwithstanding, the former colonial master had to keep the country one, in order to effectively control his vital economic interests... Therefore, the only thing these people had in common became the name of their country. That alone was an insufficient basis for true unity.

At present, Nigeria harbours 374 ethnic groups “speaking about 400 languages, which depict the nation as the worlds’ linguistic crossroad” (Ajayi 2005:90). The Governor-General of Nigeria between 1920-1931, Sir Hugh Clifford, at the Lagos Nigeria Council Debate in 1920, described Nigeria as “a collection of independent native states, separated from one another by great distances, by differences of history and traditions and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers” (www.openmindfoundation.com). Little wonder the colonial masters adopted the divide and rule system that accentuated these differences and severed any harmonious co-existence and co-operation between the ethnic groups in the country. Madiebo (1980) observed that the ultimate result of the introduction of divide and rule system, was that it reduced, if not completely eliminated “the possibilities of a co-ordinated

national resistance against the British colonial domination". Nevertheless, this obvious pluralistic nature of Nigeria brought about by the amalgamation event explains ethno-religious rivalry and agitations that have over the years resulted in countless violent conflicts that have been threatening the unity of the country.

All these and more, justify the President Goodluck Jonathan's administration proposal for a National conference of the entire ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Interestingly, the idea and agitations for a conference is not a recent development and has been long overdue. The agitations and struggles for a national conference can be historically summarized in the following order;

- The struggle for a National Conference in Nigeria started during the regime of Ibrahim Babangida (1985 – 1993);
- Civil Society effort to hold Sovereign National Conference in 1990 which was aborted by the military regime;
- Continuation of struggle during Abacha and Abdulsalami regimes (Roles of Campaign for Democracy, United Action for Democracy and NADECO);
- Continuation of agitation on return of civilian rule in 1999 and
- The debate of SNC vs. National Conference. (Otiye 2005:23).

Also, individuals such as late human right activist and lawyer, Chief Gani Fawehinmi joined the agitations for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) in a speech titled "A Call for Genuine Sovereign National Conference: An Alternative to Chaos, Catastrophe and Disintegration" which was presented at a Press conference held on 22nd March 2000. According to him;

The primary duty of the Sovereign Nigeria Conference is to address and find solutions to the key problems afflicting Nigeria since 1914 to date. The concern is to remove all obstacles which have prevented the country from establishing political justice, economic justice, social justice, cultural justice, religious justice and to construct a new constitutional frame-work in terms of the system of government – structurally, politically, economically, socially, culturally and religiously (www.openmindfoundation.com).

And when the Obasanjo led administration finally succumbed to these agitations and convened a conference in 2005, it was called National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) and whose committee was led by Alhaji Ja'afaru Makarfi. The agenda of the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) as given by the government included "Reformation of the Political Party System, Electoral Reforms, Judicial and Legal Reforms, Civil Society Reforms, Police/Prison System Reforms, Inter-governmental Relations and the structure of government and governance" (Obiagwu, 2005: 8 – 9). Unfortunately, however, it was not too far the 400 inaugurated delegates got into the business of the conference, that it was discovered that there was a hidden political agendum which was the Obasanjo's "Third-term Scandal". Consequently, the conference was dismissed as a failure. Yet, the desire for a genuine Sovereign National Conference did not completely diminish. In fact, the recurrent ethno-religious rivalry as well as the intensified activities of Boko-Haram always remind many, of Nigerian's ugly past and culminate in growing and renewed desire for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC). It was observed that:

The foundation of this country was built upon dishonesty, corruption, selfishness, tribalism and all evil. We need to visit our foundation again, destroy every evil brick, rebuild with love and respect for one another, integrity of the heart, sacrificial living, love for our fatherland (www.openmindfoundation.com). This is why the proposed National Conference by President Goodluck Jonathan should be welcomed regardless of the timing and suspected political agenda. In his Independence Day Speech on 1st October 2013, the president said:

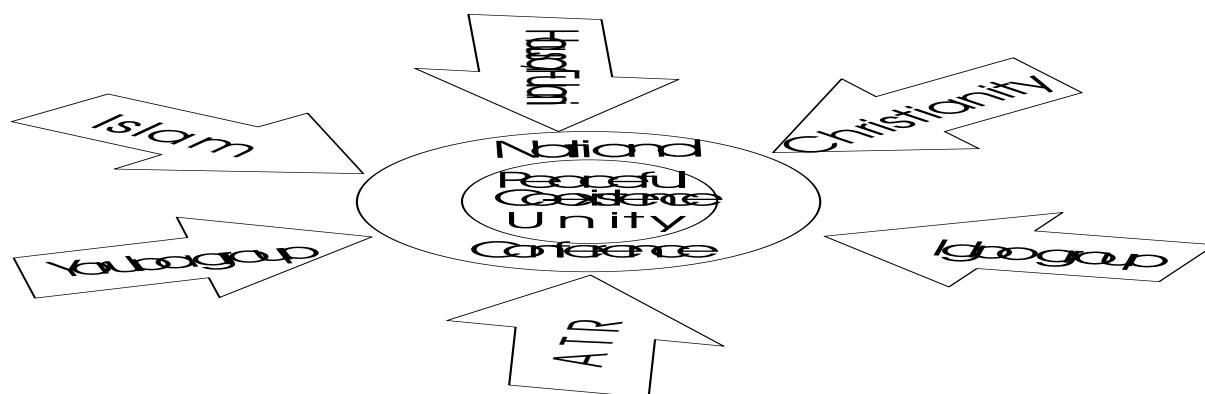
Fellow Nigerians, our Administration has taken cognizance of suggestions over the years by well-meaning Nigerians on the need for a National Dialogue on the future of our beloved country. I am an advocate of dialogue. When there are issues that stoke tension and bring about friction, it makes perfect sense for the interested parties to come together to discuss. In demonstration of my avowed belief in the positive power of dialogue in charting the way forward, I have decided to set up an Advisory Committee whose mandate is to establish the modalities for a National Dialogue or Conference. The Committee will also design a framework and come up with recommendations as to the form, structure and mechanism of the process.

Seven days later, a 13-man committee was inaugurated and given six weeks to work out modalities or blueprints for a successful National Conference.

However, sequel to this, a great debate ensued on whether the country needs a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) or a National Conference (NC). Interestingly, there are differences between these strands of conferences. Whereas a Sovereign National Conference possesses limitless powers; a National Conference has limited autonomy. This goes to suggest that while the decisions or report from the delegates to a National Conference is subject to official tinkering before approval and implementation by the government, the authoritative decisions emanating from a Sovereign National Conference is a supreme political order, which is not subject to any authority (Ajayi 2005:89). Although a Sovereign National Conference has always been the desire of many, the proposed National conference, if genuinely organized, may also meet the needs of the country.

The proposed National conference should therefore, be a conference of the people, by the people and for the people. It should be all encompassing both in people's representation and in the topics that would be discussed. While it is expected to involve the representative of all ethnic nationalities, religious bodies, professional bodies, students, artisans, elites and so on, it should feature topics such as fiscal federalism; federal character, local government creation and autonomy; cost of governance; state police; immunity clause; regionalism and electoral process; resource control; human rights and obligations; corruption; education; religion; ethnicity among other issues. Most importantly, before commencing discussions on some of the topics as listed above, Ubani (2013) has argued that different ethnic nationalities should be asked whether they desire to stay together as one indivisible nation or not. If the response is in affirmation, the terms and conditions for co-existing in a nation will then follow, exhaustively discussed and agreed on.

Figure 2: showing what the National Conference or Dialogue tends to do, which is to bring all ethnic, religious and other groups together for a dialogue; through which National unity and peaceful co-existence would be achieved.



Source: Authors' findings

In addition, a legal framework as already suggested by Mr. Femi Okuroumu led committee should be provided for the NC in order to have a result-oriented deliberation, and this should be provided by the National Assembly. The legal framework will spell out the mode, modalities, parameters, representations and what will happen to the outcome of the talk or dialogue (Ubani 2013). Again, during the conference, observer status as rightfully suggested by the Late Gani Fawehinmi, should be given to international bodies such as UN, OAU, ECOWAS, EU, Commonwealth, International Human Rights and Media Bodies (www.openmindfoundation.com).

Finally, the decisions from the conference should be passed over to a popularly selected constitution drafting committee to draft a new constitution. Furthermore, the drafted constitution shall be presented to the people in a referendum to accept or reject any provision of the drafted constitution. And whatever is ratified at the referendum becomes a brand new constitution given to Nigerians by Nigerians themselves and on which the affairs of a renewed Nigeria, as expected after the NC, would be piloted in the spirit of love and unity.

Recommendations

In addition to the above, the following are recommended.

- Democratic principles should be upheld during and after the Conference, which holds that sovereignty lies with the people and what the people demand should prevail.
- The general public irrespective of political, ethnic and religious affiliations should accept, support and actively participate in this process of making a new Nigeria that would be built on true love and unity.
- The government at all levels should ensure that the outcome or final report of this conference is implemented to the last word.
- Finally, and more importantly, the organizers or coordinators of the conference should endeavour not to give a preferential attention or treatment to any ethnic, religious or other groups on the basis of population strength, political strength, economic strength, cultural strength and the likes during and after the conference.

CONCLUSION

So far, this paper has discussed the amalgamation event of 1914, the ethno-religious pluralism as well as the attendant conflicts and sectarian violence in Nigeria. The proposed National

Conference was also exhaustively discussed in the light of its prospects for the unity of the country.

There is no doubt that the colonial foundation of the country is faulty. However, the country is currently far-afield from the colonial era and consequently has its destiny in its hands. The different ethnic nationalities and religious groups should therefore utilize the opportunity that would be offered by the proposed National Conference to dialogue and settle differences and grievances among themselves. The government should also sincerely offer an equal play-ground to all groups- ethnic and religious groups, in order to achieve a fruitful deliberation.

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