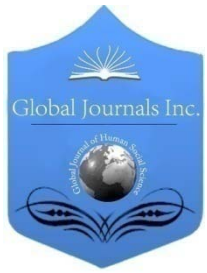
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The Nigerian Elite and State Creation: The Creation of False Ethnic Dichotomies for Self Aggradizement

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Abstract- Nigeria has undergone a long process of restructuring in terms of the number of geopolitical administrative units that constitute the polity. The process is popularly referred to as "state creation" in federal systems, particularly in Nigeria. This study examines the various rationale posited for creation of states in the country, such as quest for balanced federation, integration and fostering a feeling of belonging among its disparate population, national development etc. and finds out that most states created so far in the country were a product of false ethnic dichotomies orchestrated by the ethnic elites through superficial ethnic affiliations. The study concludes that the state creation exercise in the country had benefitted the elite rather than the masses because of the patronages that accrue to theformer to the disadvantage of the latter.

Keywords: *elite, ethnicity, state creation, federalism, integration.*

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I. Introduction

This study analyses the interconnection among the various issues, such as ethno-territorial resource competition, class accumulation, quest for the use of state as agent of development, as they relate to state creation. Scholars in the field of the political economy of Nigeria have made propositions on the seemingly interminable agitation for further creation of states with the aim of clearing the conceptual undergrowth inherent in the exercise. For instance, Eteng (1998: 58) situates his observation in political economy framework with his observation that

> a class analysis of ethnic and related communal politics in Nigeria offers adequate explanation of the persisting national question.

We must note here that the problem of state creation in Nigeria is a derivative of the 'national question'. The use of ethnic, religious and other communal bases for political and economic competition and legitimization among status quo beneficiaries has become the strategy in the hands of the ethnic populations in Nigeria to etch themselves in critical positions in resource allocation process in the country. In this process, the elite manipulate regional, state and local government apparatus for class and communal competition and personal aggrandizement. This is referred to as the *manipulation thesis* in the literature.

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The structural reorganizations of 1963 and 1967 were carried out to redress the structural imbalance that characterized the Nigerian federation, and to allay the fears of the dominated and marginalized ethnic minorities in the country. According to Bach (1997: 384) whereas during the 1960s demands for the creation of new states came exclusively from the minorities, elites everywhere now canvass for the division of their states ostensibly because the revenue formula and the federal character principle ensure elites' increased capacity for crude and primitive accretion and guarantee their representation at the federal level if new states are created.

Corroborating this assertion, Suberu (1995: 56) argues that

> the agitation for new states had transformed] from a political mechanism for assuaging ethnic minority fears into a generalized strategy in the competitive struggles among diverse constituencies for federal resources.

This struggle is usually championed by the various elites of these constituencies. The class character of this struggle was aptly captured by Gana's observation that

> given the character of the Nigerian political economy, in particular the central role of the state in the process of accumulation, it is not difficult to understand why the creation of states has served to expand the material base of the agitators in their aspiration to transform themselves into effective competitors (1987).

II. The Nigerian Elite and State Creation

The centrality of the state in the process of production and distribution of socioeconomic resources and opportunities and the multiethnic nature of the country had led to what Bach (1997: 385) referred to as 'politicization of ethnicity and ethnicization of politics'. For Suberu (1999: 277) this development is unavoidable

> because Nigeria is an ethnically plural society and because of the relative underdevelopment of socioeconomic processes and identities, public competition for resources of the state would take

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> place, predominantly among ethnically defined constituencies.

and this has definitely resulted in a situation where

> ethnicity and the associated primordial paradigms of communalism, religion and regionalism… emerged as the primary organising principles for conceptualising, articulating, protecting or promoting collective *distributive interests in Nigeria* (Suberu, 1999: 277)

For Nnoli (1978:21), Ake (1985), and Ekekwe (1986: 132-133), the hidden hand of class contradiction and the opposing class interest of the country's dominant social forces lie behind virtually all the virulent and interminable communal agitation for the creation of more states and local government areas as well as for the establishment of an ethnic-based confederacy.

Bringing a broader dimension into the class analysis of the national question, Ayoade (1999: 106) sees state creation as a strategy of the northern oligarchy to ensure the perpetration of what he called 'Northern ascendancy' in the Nigerian federation, on the one hand and to divide and rule the East and the West whereby 'both of them would continue to be vassal states to the north".

Chronicling state creation exercises from the inception of the exercise in 1963, Ayoade (1999: 106) concludes that by the various state reorganization exercises in Nigeria

> a relationship, which stood at 50:50 in 1951, had by 1995 become 54:46 [ostensibly referring to north-south relationship]. Similarly, east-west relationship, which started in 1951 as 50:50, has by 1995 become 53:47. Consequently, the north has gained at the expense of the South, and the East at the expense of the West …If anything, the creation of states in the north has improved the northern argument for domination.

This dimension of class analysis of state creation in the country is very revealing. We observe that since independence and for the better part of its existence, a particular ethno-linguistic and religious group has ruled Nigeria. This particular group, whether through civil rule or military administration, carried out all the state reorganization exercises that had ever taken place in the country. The Hausa-Fulani Muslim of the northern Nigeria *de facto* has ruled this country than any other group, only choosing between either the East or West to secure a minimum winning coalition at any particular point in time. This group had used the advantage of office to manipulate state creation exercises to give it "greater liberty to solely determine the political fate of all Nigerians while ensuring east's victory over the west, yet keeping both as "political vassals of the north" (Ayoade, 1999: 107).

From the political economy point of view, it is generally believed that agitation for creation of states has become "a veritable source of socioeconomic opportunities and political patronage for sectional elites and communities" (Suberu, 1994: 67-82) and Gana (1987: 12-23) are of the view that behind most of the agitation for creation of additional states, "looms largely (sic) class interests of ethnic warlords who wish to transform into effective competitors" in order to expand their material base.

The struggle over creation of states in Nigeria can also be discussed and analyzed within the conceptual scaffold of Joseph's (1983: 3; 1987; 1997: 90). *Prebendal politics* According to him, *Prebendalism* refers to patterns of political behaviour which rationalizes the belief that the state institutions and offices are the structures to be competed for and subsequently captured used for personal benefits of the occupants and those of their communal groups. This notion re-echoed in Reno's (1998:67) comment that "corruption in Nigeria is widely linked to the close association of elite networks and official's use of office for private gain." Or how do we explain the stupendous wealth of public officials or political appointees who before their appointments were poor? Also, the communal group whose member exploited public office for personal gain is always ready to defend, protect, and support such member in the event that such person was caught and sanctioned. Two vivid examples are illustrative here. One is Chief Alamesiegha, the impeached and convicted governor of oil-rich Bayelsa state and the other, Chief James Onanefe Ibori, the erstwhile governor of Delta state. Both, members of Nigerian elite from the Niger-Delta region of the country enjoyed massive and high degree of support from their communal groups when they were to be arrested. This is conceptually captured in Ekeh's (1975, 91-122) seminal work, "Two Publics." To him, individuals in Africa and Nigeria in particular, function within two diametrically opposed publics namely *primordial and civil.* Operationalizing the concept, Ekeh ascribes societal morality and privacy to the primordial public while the civil public is characterized by amorality and does not operate within good behaviour or good conduct. To this extent, public offices are seen as a means of perpetrating egoistic graft and solidaristic consolidation.

The entire scenario we have been describing above is captured in Joseph's observation. To him, the grid of Nigerian political society is an intricate and ever expanding network of patron-client ties. Expatiating on this, he avers that the clientelistic networks link individuals at different levels while the exchange of various kinds of patronage, assistance, support and loyalty is crucial and central to the relationship. To this extent, clientelistic relations promote ethnic clustering as individuals provide the conduit for transmission of resources from their own patrons downwards while

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ensuring in return, the support of a reliable base or constituency. While the state institutions have failed in their roles as impartial and nonpartisan arbiter in the process of authoritative allocation and distribution of state resources, competition for access to national resources in the country has always taken place predominantly between ethnically defined constituencies just as these institutions are hijacked by the elite for personal gains (Joseph, 1997).

a) States as Agent of Primitive Accumulation or Development?

The Nigerian political system has the reputation of throwing up corrupt leaders who presided over her politics and economy from independence up till now. A longitudinal survey and analysis of the political economy of the country would reveal a pattern, a pattern of elite struggle for state resources through the manipulation of state institutions for primitive accumulation and using same to protect such loots. Reno's observation is both illuminating and illustrative here. Commenting on the Babangida administration's ploy to widen distribution of national resources and patronage as a strategy for regime legitimacy and perpetuation through the state reorganization exercise of 1991, Reno (1998: 67) posits that;

> Babangida's creation of nine new states increases the number of entry points for elite desiring access to privatizations and government export promotion programs as well as traditional opportunities to provide contract services to state agencies…against official rhetoric…portraying state creation as an effort to make regional government more accessible to all Nigerians.

Consequent upon the above, it is doubtful if a strong, viable and sustainable private sector-driven economy can emerge in the country, outside the public sector, in the face of the preponderance of state institutions in its political economy. In essence, public offices in the country have been turned to factors and means of production. This class analysis has proven that "class of Nigerians has been the principal beneficiary of the proliferation of states (Reno, 1998: 67).

Viewed from a comparative perspective, Nigeria's state creation experiences have been quite dramatic. In the first place, unlike in most other federations where reorganizations of state boundaries have usually been followed by a period of fairly stable consensus on the state structure (Dean, 1986), Nigeria's state creation exercises have tended to be cyclical and self-perpetuating, with each reorganization merely provoking pressures for further reforms (Suberu, 1995).

Secondly, while new states in most of the classical federations have emerged largely from the incorporation of external units to an initial core (Daniel, 1989), the Nigerian states evolved through a strategy of internal fragmentation or deflation, rather than through a process of outward expansion or aggregation (Suberu, 1999: 57-58). Regrettably, however, the Nigeria situation is such a system without in-built mechanisms for redressing historic wrongs and ensuring fairness without recourse to organized divisions and deliberate bouts of pulling apart. Undoubtedly, it was elite selfishness, and not national interest, which has propelled the state creation movement till this decade (Suberu, 1999: 58). Nevertheless, as earlier enunciated, the initial historical rationale for the movement for new states in Nigeria involved the quest by ethnic minority groups for autonomy from the regional stranglehold of the majority ethnic formations. The minorities' quest for "statehood" status did not, however, receive a sympathetic consideration or endorsement from the Sir Henry Willink Commission established in 1957 to inquire into the alleged fears of minorities and the means of allaying them. Rather, the commission argued that the grievances of the minorities could be redressed through administrative changes, greater federal and regional attention to the needs of depressed areas and entrenched guarantees of fundamental human rights (Willink, 1957).

From independence, Nigeria had had to confront the problem the issue of state creation posed to its stability. The prevalent aura of developmental collapse and perennial requests for creation of additional states associated with several potentially combustible inter and/or intra-ethnic ethnic conflicts (Igalas vs Ebirra in Kogi state, Tiv vs Idoma in Benue state, Itsekiri vs Urhobo of Delta state etc.) confront the Nigerian government's bent on influencing the apparently unending pattern of state reorganizations. But what are the major rationales behind state creation in Nigeria? They can be addressed from different points of views. These views include those of scholars, politicians, the government (official view), and the agitators. For instance, According to Adejuyigbe, the notion of economic development is a two-prong concept. One, the view of the Federal Government that states have been created to ensure even development throughout Nigeria, and two, the view at the local level that new states would receive greater shares of federal resources and hence enable local elements to develop more rapidly (Adejuyigbe, 1982: 18-20).

One important rationale for state creation stems from the fear of the minority in the Nigerian federation of domination by the majority ethnic groups. Generally, feelings of mental anguish, cultural devaluation, economic sacrifice, political subjugation and inferiority as second class citizens remain central to the foundation of ethnic minority movement for state creation (Sowho, 1991). The complaints of the minorities are a function of the existing structures that relate to the dynamics of Nigerian political economy. The country's ruling classes have been drawn principally from the

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three big ethnic groups who have dominated the centre since independence, while subjugating the minorities to the background in the process of distribution of national resources. Again, even within the minority ethnic formations, small cliques of elite dominate the masses, often monopolizing and appropriating funds meant for the development of the generality of their people. Thus, the 1963 and 1967 state reorganizations appear to have been done to assuage the frayed nerves of the minorities. Yet, agitation from "minorities" for creation of additional states continued unabated when, in actual fact, there may be in the real sense of the term, no more minorities. According to Otanez (1992:46), the core of minority fears of domination does not consist in ethnic antagonism but the imperialist-inspired, ethno-regional personality of Nigeria and the class action of minority-based to generate ethnic sentiments to help satisfy their lust for economic resources in the face of shrinking capital. More importantly, after the creation of a new state, new minorities emerged from within which starts a new movement for the demand of a separate state.

To Gana (1987: 12-23), creation of state helps state capitals put on a facade of development in the springing up of a fresh crop of *nouveaux riches* around commercial activities. According to him there are no advanced or backward areas but backward and advanced family groups. He concludes "to talk maliciously of an ethnic domination is to be naïve, malicious, mystifying and criminal to the core".

By this statement, one can infer that state creation has merely been used by and has indeed served the class interest of the Nigerian ruling class.

For instance, Nnoli (1978) in refuting the development thesis of state creation observes that by focusing on the distributive side of the production process to the neglect of the production aspect, the creation of states militate against the mobilization of creative energies of the population through the transformation of the productive forces. Development is inconceivable without growth in the productive forces of the society.

Berating the elites for disarticulating the developmental forces of their societies, Nnoli notes that, because they lack capacity to increase production owing to their remoteness from the directly productive functions, they (the elite) rely on the manipulation of the distributive forces for whatever benefits they derive from production process. Nnoli insisted that the elite have not been known to build any material civilization.

Nnoli's observation as enunciated above explains why there has been insignificant development save for distribution of socioeconomic amenities and opportunities from the centre in the new states after they are created. The socioeconomic resources and opportunities are usually the payoffs of the elites in the ethnic competitions in which they are principal actors and through which they strategize.

The manipulation of state creation for self-aggrandizement is not confined to the civilian category of the elite alone. It extends to the military. In the history of state creation in Nigeria, the exercise has been the exclusive preserve of military regimes. Ambitious military heads of states and other military elites are known to create new states to fulfill personal ambition of civilianizing through creation of clientele states to secure support from such population and to create a sphere of influence for themselves (Suberu and Agbaje, 1999: 343). Moreoer, the proliferation of states also leads to their incapacitation and the emergence of a very powerful centre. The military, by creating mushroom states, had imprinted its nature and organizational structure on Nigerian federalism. Since the Nigerian federation was administered by the "Northern military", the latter has used the balkanization of the south to help the North achieve its political ascendancy agenda in the country. Every military government in Nigeria headed by a northerner had always helped the "caliphate" actualize its agenda of northern hegemony.

III. Conclusion

This study reveals that a large proportion of the states so far created were a product of false ethnic dichotomies by the elite's superficial ethnic affiliations. States' creation in Nigeria has, therefore, elevated ethnicity to the status of national ideology. As a result, a vicious cycle has been created. Other groups who are yet to benefit from the state creation largesse are wont to start fresh agitations for their own states. Demands for states then become concentric and hence emphasize the level of the country's heterogeneity, on the one hand, and a manifestation of progressive differentiation and fragmentation of the country on the other. Nigeria is not likely to attain the desired national integration and unity which state creation was meant to achieve if this phenomenon persists (Adetoye, 2000).

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