Majority-Minority Identity Context in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT
Identity is a critical aspect of social psychological theorizing and research. It has to do with how people acquire a sense of belonging and situate themselves in a wider social context. Identity defines ones relationship with "others" in the society and further structures individual and group interactions within the society. Issues of identity have been a constant feature in Nigeria's social scene right from the colonial times till date. The paper focuses on the evolution of the majority minority identity context and examines the issues and challenges. The paper argues that the majority-minority identity context in Nigeria originated from the regional arrangement in the 1940s by the British colonialists and revolves around two major issues; the control of political power in concert with the armed forces, and judiciary and the control of economic power and resources. Issues of majority and minority identity are keenly contested and sometimes lead to violent and non-violent conflict thereby reconfiguring mutual social existence and the creation of fear and tension between ethnic groups. The paper therefore suggests restructuring of the Nigerian state and the creation of awareness by civil society, the academia and government on the positive uses of identity and its construction.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is a critical aspect of social psychological theorizing and research. It has to do with how people acquire a sense of belonging and situate themselves in a wider social context (Gosine, 2002). Identity defines one's relationship with "others" in the society and further structures individual and group interactions within the society. The subject of identity was introduced into sociological thought through the works of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead (Cerullo 1995, Berger 1966, Robert 1964). Their works which dominated sociological thought through the 1970s focused on the formation of the "me"; the individual identity. They believed an individual's self formation was a reflection of his interactions within the social environment. In recent times research and discourses on identity have shifted from the site of the individuals to the collective. This is as a result of various events in society ranging from the emergence of various social and nationalist movements, globalization and the emergence of various identity based movements and the prevalence of collective political and socialist actions. Collective or group identity can be located in Emile Durkheim's "Collective Conscience", Karl Max "Class Consciousness", Webers "Verstehen" and Tonnies' "Gemeinscaft" (Mannheim, 2013, Cerrulo 1995, Eisenstaedt & Giesen 1995). Their works focused on the shared attributes of individuals that qualify them to be seen as having a collective identity. Earliest conceptions of identity regarded it as a 'given' which remained permanent throughout life irrespective of social change and varying social experiences within the society. Essentialist views of identity which previously dominated social thinking sees identity as having three core features: identity is a fixed phenomenon which cannot be changed irrespective of social and institutional context; who one is at birth remains

throughout life irrespective of changes in the physical and social environment. Secondly, identity is natural and God given therefore should be maintained. Threats against such maintenance should be fought against. The third feature is that identity remains constant regardless of time and space implying that one is born with a fixed identity and it remains throughout life irrespective of social circumstances. Beyond the sociological works mentioned above, events in most societies have proved an antithesis to essentialism as individuals and groups have reconstructed their identities across gender, sexuality, race, religion and ethnicity. Also, feminist, racial, gay, gender and ethnic movements that were not existence previously have been witnessed all over the world further illustrating the fluid and open ended nature of identity and its construction.

Issues of identity have been a constant feature in Nigeria's social scene right from the colonial times till date. The British colonialists in a bid to successfully colonize Nigeria lumped together over 250 ethnic nations in three regions without recourse to their history, traditions and practices (Infidon 1999, Kaza-toure 1999, Ayoade, 1986). Inherent in this regional arrangement was the categorization of ethnic groups into "majority" and "minority" with a majority ethnic group controlling power and resources within each region and a centre which controlled the three regions (Mustapha 2004, Obi 2004). This configured the Nigerian State into one with a centre where access to it had to be on the platform of one's particular ethnic group. In essence when the British colonized Nigeria and they also designated these majority groups to 'colonize' the minority groups in order to ensure that a Nigerian nationalism was not created. The designation of majority and minority not only reconfigured social relations among the ethnic nations united to form Nigeria from that of interdependence to mutual suspicion and rivalry, it created an "inferiority" identity for the other minority ethnic groups whose identity had to be defined either in relation or in contradiction to the majority ethnic groups in the region.

In the long run, majority and minority ethnic groups became politicized beyond generic ethnic categorization to a situation where they transformed into a status symbol for ethnic groups and a catalyst for reconfiguring interactions among these groups to that of competition and rivalry. As a result, beyond the struggle for supremacy by the three dominant ethnicities, pre and post independence Nigeria has witnessed many "minority" identity contests in an effort to wrench free from the imposed inferiority identity and to contest for inclusion in the Nigerian political structure. In an effort to cope with the agitations of minorities, the Nigerian state was restructured from three regions to 36 states and in addition a federal principle was adopted (Uche and Uche 2004, Osaghae 1998). These actions instead of allaying the fears of the minorities instead created more theatres for contests as more new majorities and minorities are created along with new issues of inferiority identity. This paper traces the trajectory of the majority-minority context in Nigeria and the creation of inferiority identity among ethnic groups. The paper specifically examines the nature and challenges of the majority- minority identity context in Nigeria. It is divided into four sections: the first section gives a background to the paper; the next section discusses the evolution of the majority-minority context. Identity contests and the majority-minority context is the focus of the third section while the fourth section summarizes and concludes the paper.

The Evolution of a Majority-Minority Context in Nigeria

Central to the discussion of the minority-majority context in Nigeria, is the process of the social construction of Nigeria. Nigeria was created by British imperialism in the late nineteenth century, starting with the establishment of the Colony of Lagos in 1861,(Agbu 2004). Subsequently, the Oil Rivers Protectorate was created in southeastern Nigeria and the Royal Niger Company was given a charter to control what later became Northern Nigeria (Mustapha, 2004). These later became Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria though the southern province was later divided into Eastern and Western provinces using the rivers as the dividing line. All these entities were amalgamated in 1914 to create the modern state of Nigeria, motivated by the objective to reduce British subsidy on Northern Nigeria. In spite this amalgamation, the British continued to run the two halves of the country – North and South - as separate political and administrative entities except for common linkages such as currency, roads and railways. These two regions also had different laws and land tenure systems. The British created these regions using population and the geographical division of Nigeria by river Niger and Benue resulting in the Northern region's dominance over the other regions. This large population later became a tool in the hands of the Northern political elite to dominate the other regions especially in decision making. The Northern elite mobilized their majority status of numbers to establish a hegemonic hold over the Nigerian state to the near exclusion of others. In relation to them other ethnic groups were 'minorities. Over the years other ethnic groups have contested their hold on the centre and as a result there have been successful "power shifts" from the Northern region to the southern region.

The major context for majority-minority identity evolved with the creation of the regions in 1940 and the use of population to subjugate some ethnic groups under the control of others. Historically the ethnic nations that were unified to form Nigeria existed as independent units with different customs, traditions and leadership structure. Interactions with the other ethnic nations were on the bases of trade and exchange of goods and services. In many cases these ethnic nations interacted more with others outside the Nigerian territory than with those nations within. It is pertinent to note that these and interactions with other ethnic nationalities within Nigeria in many situations were hampered by geographical boundaries like rivers, hills, mountains, forests and deserts.

The process of colonization was such that in each of these regions, ethnic nations were subsumed under a dominant ethnic nation on the basis of population and supposed cultural superiority. This imposition had implications for the minority ethnic nations in the region. First of all it meant an imposition of culture, traditions and beliefs on the other ethnic groups. The identities of the minorities were now being defined in relation to the dominant ethnic group. The identity of the dominant ethnic group was in essence imposed on the other ethnics in the regions thereby creating an inferiority identity for these groups. The Northern region was dominated by the Hausa-Fulani, the Eastern region by the Igbo while the Western region was dominated by the Yoruba. Many ethnic minorities existed within these regions. It is important to note that while ethnicity is the

basis of the majority-minority identity in the eastern and western regions, the northern region has religion and ethnicity as the basis of their identity. In the Northern region the colonialists divided the ethnic groups culturally and politically into two groups; the Hausa-Fulani and the pagans. The Hausa-Fulani identity was synonymous with Islam because the Hausa-Fulani were predominantly Muslims. All the other ethnic groups were seen as pagans, animists and barbaric head hunting and backward tribes (Charles 1965, Meek 1925). They Hausa-Fulani already had well established Emirates so the British decided to use these indigenous structures to further colonize the other minorities. Emirates were established throughout the Northern region especially in the "pagan" territories. This designation of particular minority groups as pagans who were also primitive and sometimes barbaric created an inferior identity for these other ethnic groups apart from the Hausa-Fulani.

The colonialists subsequently encouraged the migration of the Hausa-Fulani into the pagan areas to *civilize* them for instance. As a result many of the so-called pagan territories had Hausa settlements where the Hausa-Fulani because of their superiority status refused to pay tax (Charles 1965). Besides the imposition of a strange leadership structure which disconnected the other minorities from their own culture was the imposition of Hausa language as a medium of communication in the northern region. This in essence imposed a Hausa-Fulani identity on the other ethnic groups. The imposition of language had a strong social significance as language beyond its function as a tool of communication provides a perspective of comprehending reality, initiates one to a way of thinking and identifies one within a social structure (Itenkel 2005). In some areas the British even tried further to impose the Hausa-Fulani identity on some of the ethnic groups by tracing their origin to Hausa. For instance Ngas was regarded as primitive Hausa while other groups like Jukun were believed to have many elements in common with Hausa (Munshi Province Annual Reports 1920/1921). An interesting aspect of the Hausa identity imposed by the colonial administration is the fact that though the Hausa impose their traditions on the pagan tribes they are still not regarded as "proper Hausa' meanwhile other ethnic groups in other region basically refer to them as Hausa.

In the other regions the other ethnic groups were forced to adopt the identity of the dominant ethnic group. In the 1950s a wide spread of these minorities constructed a minority identity platform and began to contest the hegemonic hold of the dominant ethnic groups in the region. In the Middle Belt region, a minority identity known as "Middle Belt" was formed and later an organization called the United Middle Belt Congress was formed to contest for political space within the Northern region. In the Eastern region, Calabar, Ogoni and Rivers (COR) alliance was formed while a mid western organization known as Mid Western Minorities' organization was also formed. In response to this a Mid-Western region was created but the agitations among the other minorities continued with threats of secession by the Tiv[1] in the Middle Belt region and the secession attempt led by Isaac Adaka Boro in the Niger Delta area. These attempts

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1. In 1964 Isaac Shaahu of the UMBC on the floor of the Northern House of Assembly that the Tiv felt unwanted and wanted to pull out of the North and the federation as a whole to be a sovereign state since they had a population of about 1,000,000 which was bigger than Gambia and Mauritania.

were actually aimed at wrenching free from the imposed inferiority identity. In other to allay the fears of the minorities, 12 states were created from the four regions by the government of General Gowon in 1967. Seven more states were created by the government of General Murutala Mohamed in 1976, 2 in 1987 and 9 in 1991 by General Ibrahim Babangida and 6 more in 1996 by General Sanni Abacha. The creation of these states liberated some of the minorities as it created a platform for direct access to participation at the centre of Nigeria's politics and governance but created new majority-minority issues at the state and local government levels while the context at the regions remained. New states meant the creation of new majorities and minorities as both a numerical and political category. The relationships of majority-minority became replicated at the state and local government levels. Agitations for state creation further became a tool to wrench free from a minority status at the state level. Thus the creation of new majorities and minorities multiplied minority agitations for more states as well as infteriority conflicts. The strategy of state creation rather led to the emergence of various minority movements and ethno-political conflicts such as the failed military coups by Lt. Col. Bukar Sukar Dimka and Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar in 1976 and 1990. An interesting aspect of the majority-minority relations is the fact that minority ethnic groups in search of security have had to align with the dominant ethnic group or the state. For instance Isaac Adaka Boro chose to fight on the side of the Nigerian state after he was released with the hope that the hegemonic hold of the Igbo over the ethnic minorities would be broken. J.S. Tarka in Central Nigeria who was one of the spearheads of the Middle Belt identity movement allied with the Northern government with the hope that his people, the Tiv, would be given a place of prominence in Northern Nigeria. The aims of these alliances were not achieved as the majority ethnic groups remained dominant over the minorities within their regions. Having examined the evolution of the majority-minority context, it is pertinent to note that this context has created a theater of identity construction, reconstruction as well as contests. Some of these contests assumed violent dimensions leading to the loss of lives and property and the reconfiguring of group relations from that of mutual existence to mutual suspicion. As such, till date majority-minority identity in Nigeria remains a very highly contested and salient issue.

Majority-Minority Issues and Challenges in Nigeria

The context of majority-minority ethnic configuration was the main objective of the British colonial administration's arrangement for the divide and rule of the Nigerian polity. Majority-minority contest signifies a differential access to resources and positions on the basis of belonging to either the majority or the minority groups. Individuals do not have a control over the majority-minority grouping but are able to redefine it to suit their purpose. Colonial structures deliberately ignored and marginalized minority ethnic groups and in consequence issues of majority and minority continue to be reconstructed from the larger (national) political process and structure in Nigeria to the ward and village (grassroot) levels. The majority at any level takes all and leaves very little to the minority who are most times at the political mercy of the majority. Many ethnic groups make concerted efforts to create a platform for a majority status through state, local government and council wards creation. All these are usually aimed at creating a place in public space

where they can attain majority status and have access and control of resources at their level.

The creation of states was aimed at allaying fears of the minority ethnicities within the ethnic tripod structure inherited from the British. This latently created a platform for reconstruction of identity thus agitation for states became a recurrent trend. The quagmire at this point is that the more states are created; agitations for more arise. The creation of states creates new majorities and minorities and the new minorities because of real or perceived marginalization agitate for the creation of their "own" state where they can be majorities who control. It is important here to note that majority identity in Nigeria has many privileges which include the control of state power to the exclusion of the other minorities, ability to decide the fate of other ethnic groups especially with regards to their rights, responsibilities and also access to valued resources in the society. The *tripodal* nature of the Nigerian state is such that such resources and located at the "centre" are controlled by the majority ethnic groups to the exclusion of others. So attaining majority status at the national, state, local government and even ward level is regarded as a "gold mine" that many ethnic groups aspire for. In local parlance it is regarded as access to the "national cake".

The majority-minority context in Nigeria revolves around two major issues; the control of political power along with the armed forces, and judiciary and the control of economic power and resources. These two instruments are used to allocate power and resources. In this situation democratic transition and its manipulation become the main the agenda, thus the question of numbers assumes a crucial part of the game. Political forces seek to assemble the largest coalitions that could assure them of access to power. Apart from ideology, and interest articulation, primordial issues such as ethnicity, regionalism and religion are central forces that are used to open the gate ways to power or are used to exclude or marginalize other groups from power in one way or the other. This is why Ibrahim, (2000) opines that such issues of majority-minority identity construction and contests, remain a recurrent reality in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
There exists a majority-minority identity context in Nigeria which is linked to the control of resources (economic and political) to the exclusion of others. Within this context is a vigorous contest between majority and minority groups where majorities make concerted efforts to perpetually dominate the minorities who struggle to liberate from the domination of the majorities utilizing identity construction as the preferred *modus operandi*. This is premised on the fact that access to resources in Nigeria is enhanced on the basis of identity. Nigerian citizenship is abstract where the rights and privileges are located in an individual's ethnic identity. Membership of the majority ethnic group at any level ensures greater access to the control of resources. Another interesting aspect of the majority-minority identity question is the illusion that once a majority ethnic group is given a position it translates to development for the entire ethnic group. The reality of the situation is such that the political elite of the majority groups use these positions to primitively accumulate. The entire majority identity is used as a political tool to gain access to resources. The majority identity is a political tool that has utility and is

mobilized by the political elite for personal gain. Many political office holders today have nothing to show for their many years in office apart from the possession of huge bank accounts and properties that were acquired using state funds. Their amassed wealth is used to bribe various constituencies during elections. Any attempt to prosecute them is seen as an attack on their majority or minority status as such they mobilize members of their ethnic group against the state on allegations and accusations of victimization of the group and not the individual. On the whole the majority-minority context in Nigeria is typified by a few political elite that manipulate the socio-political space to benefit themselves and immediate family members to the exclusion of the general larger group. The scenario above points to the fact that the collective consciences of ethnic groups can be reconstructed, and manipulated depending on the particular social situation. There appears to be no end in sight for majority-minority identity constructions, reconstructions and agitations. This reality poses a threat to nation building as people pay more allegiance to their majority or minority ethnic status than to the one indivisible entity nation project. The prevalent attitude here is to continue to take from the common-wealth of Nigeria without putting anything there. Successive governments have continually depleted the nation's common-wealth to the detriment of future generations. On the whole the majority-minority context in Nigeria is one that revolves mainly around competition, subjugation and dominance interactions. Other issues include exclusion / inclusion issues, identity construction and reconstruction and ultimately the failure of the nation building agenda. Having looked at the inevitability of endless identity construction among majority and minority ethnic groups the study therefore suggests a restructuring of the Nigerian state to represent contemporary realities. The incessant creation of states and local governments has created a very strong center for the control and access to resources. Decentralization will be necessary as a weaker center will lead to various ethnic groups looking inwards and evolving their own ingenious development efforts.

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