

## Ethnicity and the Development of the Toto Area of North Central Nigeria, 1980-2000

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### ABSTRACT

One of the challenges of independent Nigeria is the issue of inter-ethnic integration. Nigeria is a country with over three hundred and fifty ethnic nationalities whose post independent relation is characterised by endemic inter-ethnic conflicts, making intergroup relation difficult. North Central Nigeria is home to two-third of different nationalities making inter-ethnic challenge centred on mutual distrust and intense antagonism rife. In Toto area, Nasarawa State, relation between ethnic groups such as the Bassa, Gbagyi, Gade and Egbura has produced persistent violent agitations. The main agitation inherent among the majority of the peoples of the area is agitation for more political space in the traditional administration and in the modern political arrangements of the area. As consequence of this, institutional arrangements which appear to have functioned smoothly in maintaining unity and peaceful co-existence among different groups that constituted the area in the pre-colonial period are increasingly being called into question. This, for instance, continues to aggravate inter-ethnic animosity between the Bassa and their Egbura neighbours. The current growing clamour for self-determination and demand for the right to greater participation in governance is therefore a reaction to the marginalisation problem. This paper using multi-disciplinary approach shows that ethnicity and its attendant problems in Africa, as shown in the Toto Local Government Area, Nasarawa State and as in many other parts of the North Central Nigeria, which is defining inter-group relations have been constructed and not in any way, natural. Its recourse to discrimination and violence is therefore a product of its nature. And this has panned out prominently as part of the national question of the area. The paper shows that as ethnicity has become a central theme in the analysis of Toto politics, political behaviour is driven by ethnic solidarity and this is antithetical to both human and non-human development. The paper concludes that unless ethnic groups in the area appreciate their history, redefine their socio-economic and political relations, and develop a sense of nationality to resolve conflict through non-violent means; the problem will continue to undermine peaceful co-existence and development in the area.

**Keywords:** Development, Ethnicity, Toto, North Central Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this study is on ethnic sentiments and how it marred development in Toto area. With respect to the area the challenges of ethnic integration revolves around mutual distrust and intense antagonism among the

various groups. The situation has often led to persistent violent agitations by the various disenchanted groups over modern political arrangements and traditional leadership and fuelled by ethnic sentiments. Thus, this study has shown that the main challenge of integration in Toto area today is that of an existing intolerable system of inter-ethnic suspicion. The Bassa and Egbura relations, for instance, is reflected in extremely problematic co-existence of the two groups in spite of their centuries of inhabiting Toto area. Emotive ethnic sentiments on benefits bordering on one group by another have constituted serious hindrance to peace and progress in the area.

### Conceptual Clarifications

Two key concepts are focused in this study: Ethnicity and Development. Thus, insight into the concepts will be highly beneficial to this study. The term ethnicity refers to the social phenomenon associated with interactions among different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture, or both. It is therefore necessary to distinguish clearly between ethnicity and social class (hierarchy). Two hardly inseparable definitions of classes by Karl Marx and Max Weber will suffice for our purpose here.

The Marxist view of social classes emphasises economic aspects. In this view, a social class is defined according to its relationship to the productive process of society. A further central feature of this theory is the notion of class struggle. Marx and his followers held that the oppressed classes would eventually rise against the oppressors, overthrow them through a revolution, and alter the political order and the social organisation of production.<sup>1</sup>

The Weberian thesis of social classes, which has partly developed into theories of social stratification, combined several criteria in delineating classes, including income, education and political influence. Unlike Marx, Weber did not regard classes as potential corporate groups; he did not believe that members of social classes necessarily would have shared political interests. Weber preferred to speak of status groups rather than classes.<sup>2</sup>

A close look at the two concepts above, indicate that the class categorisations advocated in them is applicable to the conflict situation in Toto which borders on social differentiations and group interests. This is because the post-colonial Toto ethnic contest and conflict revolve around quest for power, wealth and recognition. This trend which has assumed a worrisome dimension in many societies in the Niger-Benue Confluence Area of Nigeria produced what Otite described as, "a situation of revival of ethnic identities and the consequent

resurgence and struggles to have access to, as well as alter the relations of political, and economic power in the contemporary situation is the order of the day."<sup>3</sup>

The conceptualisation of ethnicity led to the emergence of five prominent schools of thought. These are primordialist and cultural anthropologists, modernisation school, the elite model, the constructivist or invented theory and the Marxist school. The primordialist sees ethnicity as arising from biological descent<sup>4</sup> while the modernisers see Africa as consisting of "primitive and tribal" views which could easily be eroded with modernisation in education, mass media, communication and higher income brought about by modernity. The elite model sees ethnicity as manipulative instincts of the top brass in religion, education, military, politics and economy. These groups used ethnic identities for their selfish ends in their competitive struggle with other elites. The point here is that ethnic elites use ethnic leanings of their group to the direction they wish to advance their interests—a phenomenon that is prevalent in Toto area today.

Development in the sense in which it is conceived in this study is the gradual growth of a people and a society, so that they become better, more advanced, leading to an unfolding of potentials of the individuals in the society. Ogude Steve<sup>5</sup> conceptualised development as consists of two major factors: the human factor and the physical non-human factor. The non-human factor refers to natural resources—mineral oils, solid minerals, the fauna and flora etc and infrastructure—the basic systems and structures that a society or country needs to work properly. Development can take place when people are in the position to exploit the natural resources they have in order to provide infrastructure. The point here is that the human factor is expedient in development; since it is the factor that will harness the later.

It is a common phenomenon that "lots of crises in Africa and Nigeria are often as a result of certain historical and cultural differences among people who are otherwise bounded within the same territory but are denied equal access to common resources."<sup>6</sup> Ethnic diversity in Nigeria creates a nation that is consisted of people with differences in cultural, religious, linguistic and territorial features. These factors tend to generate natural tensions arising from basic human factors. The assumption is founded on the fact that, "ethnocentrism is an ideology which sees one's cultural group, traditions, customs, and values as superior to others."<sup>7</sup> This supremacy rivalry in Toto area is attributed to the arbitrary juxtaposition of different ethnic nationalities by the jihadist and colonial rules, in order to facilitate control and administration of the area. It is a cinch that most times, the cause of the rivalry revolves around the issue of 'who gets what' or 'who controls what' and 'why?' All these border on the phenomenon and the tension of diverse groups living in the same territory but are denied equal access to common resources. This understanding is

again sustained by Obaro Ikime when he noted that ethnic crisis in Nigeria has become “a national question around which is a great deal of our national life revolves.”<sup>8</sup>

### The Problem

In Toto area the steady growth and consolidation of communal allegiances and socio-cultural identities among various ethnic groups in Toto, in pursuit of competing material value preferences, have sharpened much of the socio-economic and political development in the area. In the post independence era especially from 1979, communities of the area increasingly combined ethnic and other communal forces to protect and advance their socio-economic, political, and cultural interests.<sup>9</sup>

The behaviours and actions of their nascent elites (treading ethnic lines) did not help the matter as they acted as key influential, opinion-leaders, and political decision makers in the process. This rendered cohesion and peaceful co-existence, among the various groups, a herculean task. The works of Nnoli<sup>10</sup> and Otite<sup>11</sup> lend credence to this fact. Deprivation is one of the sources of hostility in the area. Deprivation of the Bassa's demand for a wider political space in the traditional village administration by the Egbura and which enjoys tacit official support is, for instance, at the root of Toto conflict. As aptly observed by John Dollard, the inability to recognise the existence of this factor, “deprivation”, accounts for the failure of many attempts to solve ethnic problem.<sup>12</sup> This eventually led to the socio-political conditions that progressively worsen the mutual and ethnic animosity which crystallised in the violent outburst and destruction of lives and properties within Toto.

### Ethnicity and the Development of Toto Area

As a consequence of poor colonial administrative arrangements, ethnicity became sharpen in the post-colonial era in the area of our study. This became virulent as from 1996 when the zero party political arrangement was enthroned in Nigeria in 1996. Mr Wabare Paul emerged as the chairman of Toto LGA as a result of ethnically based Bassa-Gbagyi political alliance.

In order to achieve the target of the alliance, three key areas were harped on. Firstly, cultural sentiments were whipped. The Gbagyi with the Bassa have the most similar cultural traits than with either the Gade or Egbura. The Gbagyi and Bassa for instance are the groups in the area that their women carry loads on their shoulders, while their men are great farmers and hunters; coupled with their belief in African traditional religion and traditional medicine/magic. This has even led some outside observers and writers alike to think that the Bassa and Gbagyi are from the same cultural and linguistic stock and that they share similar migration history.<sup>13</sup> In

the face of this situation they often looked at themselves as one. Secondly, in terms of traditional and modern administrative structures the Bassa and Gbagyi were the most marginalised in the area. Thus, during the zero party election in Toto area, a Bassa candidate, for the FIRST time, for the seat of chairmanship in Toto LGA was most preferable by the two groups. The slogan then was "O.K" it is our "TURN". Thus, EVERY Bassa and Gbagyi were mobilised to defeat the candidature of the Egbura in person of Jibrin Mohammed. Thirdly to weaken the Egbura- Gade alliance, Ali Badakoshi, a Gade man, was brought in as the running-mate of Mr. Wabare Paul. The momentous victory this arrangement gave informed the continuation of the alliance during the 1997 political election of Mr. Samson Samtani Daudu. Abdulmalik Suleiman, a Gade man, became his running-mate. The Samson-led team ran for the seat with a Gade man, Aliyu Sani; and this again weakened the strength of the Egbura-Gade alliance. With this alliance coupled with the Bassa population strength, and of course, the candidates' popularity, there had never been a case of a Bassa or Gbagyi losing any elective seat to an opposition party.<sup>14</sup> The most serious disadvantage of these alliances is that they heated the political embers of Toto politics. This ultimately culminated into violence that rammmed the area for four consecutive years. As Ikime rightly pointed out:

As I always say, in the matter of inter-group relations, we are not dealing with saints and villains; we are dealing with villains all. Whoever are [sic] favoured by a particular administrative arrangement want to hold on to it and to exploit it as much as possible to their maximum advantage. It is human. Yet what is good for the goose is good for the gander.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the manifestations of ethnicity in the area took the form of competition or struggle over chieftaincies, political and administrative positions. Tied to this was the emergence of stranger sentiments, better known as "settler-host phenomenon". The series of conflicts in the area which has affected the political and social fabrics of the community attest to this disposition.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the process of unequal access to public positions has long stirred suspicion and hatred among the ethnic nationalities of the area. In this light, as noted by A. M. Adejo:

The consequences are contagious ethno-political activism and the emergence of ethnic elite willing to mobilise their kith and kin in response to changing political opportunities and resources. And since governments have designed structures of exclusion and privilege which they are not willing to change, so long will violence continue to be used as final expression of frustration in the oppression.<sup>17</sup>

Here people were members of ethnic “groups” first and members of social community secondarily. In the process, ethnic elites succeeded in creating the false impression that they were the champions of interests of their respective ethnic groups. And that struggles of these elites for political relevance in the area represented the struggles of the various ethnic groups for political ascendancy in the society. They covertly and even overtly used emotive ethnic symbols and played on the alleged ethnic conflicts of interests as a means of mobilising mass support for their selfish class interest.<sup>18</sup> In the competition for the limited numbers of positions and scarce resources within the area, antagonism and hostility between and among groups were generated. The inevitable consequence was the intensification and the politicisation of ethnicity.<sup>19</sup> For the political elites to succeed in their game plan they harp on ethnic agitations against rival ethnic group and by so doing they fanned the embers of ethnic rivalry. As noted by Kukah the result is that there is “today many fossilised and deep-rooted prejudices”<sup>20</sup> which now create avenues for opportunists to use these differences as means of political bargaining and ethnic differentiation were built.

John Huwick had earlier noted that, in uncanny manner, religion which was meant to be the basis of brotherhood and integration among adherents has sowed the seeds that would in the hands of greedy power elite; undermine what the gospels of Jesus Christ and Mohammed stood for.<sup>21</sup> The interplay of religion and ethnicity has therefore served as forces of ethnic mobilisation for political gains among some societies in the Niger-Benue Valley area. But in the case of Toto LGA, ethnicity rather than religion played significant role in the power calculations.

The major point of argument, derivable from the forgoing is that ethnicity and its attendant problems in Toto LGA and many parts of the Niger-Benue Valley area, which is defining inter-group relations have been constructed and not in any way, natural. Its recourse to discrimination and violence is therefore a product of its nature. And this has panned out prominently as part of the national question of the area. As ethnicity has become a central theme in the analysis of Toto politics, political behaviour is driven by ethnic solidarities. According to Gwatana Yigwu, the conflict in Toto LGA for instance is not religious but ethnic and principally between the Bassa and Egbura. Harping on ethnicity, he noted that, “Key to the causes of the conflict in Toto area is modern party politics and traditional leadership positions. These were all tied to ethnic sentiments.”<sup>22</sup>

Although the construction of ethnic identity influences attitudes and collective action, it is germane that when communal identities are construed politically, as it is in Toto, stronger effects on views and behaviours are produce. The character of elections in Toto which provides a key catalyst for the intensity of ethnic identification is a pointer to this fact-voting centres and pattern of voting

followed ethnic pattern.<sup>23</sup> The fact remains that in any electoral constituency in which there are different ethnic and sub-ethnic groups or clans and lineages, and these are seen as the basic units of political representation, it is very difficult for the voters in that constituency, to call a corrupt or incompetent, elected official to order. This is because he was elected because of his origin and affinity and not because of what he can do to promote the security and welfare of all citizens in his/her constituency. The basis of making him/her publicly accountable to those who elected him/her becomes very weak. Because ethnic or sub-ethnic, religious or sub-religious representation, does not allow for democratic accountability and is fundamentally opposed to the pillar of democracy. The personalities manipulating these processes claimed that they are pro-democracy agents. It is emphasised here that those who say that they are pro-democracy and yet insist on ethnically-based political units and ethnic representation, are either trying to fool other people, or, are themselves just confused, and actually do not know what they are talking about. The intermixing, and intermeshing of dialects, and of languages, which has gone on for millennia in the area, for example, has made it obvious that any attempt to use ethnicity as a basis for political representation will not only be economically retrogressive, but be a recipe for a complete political irresponsibility. Yet this patterned the political live of the people in Toto LGA. There are avowed people among the Bassa and Egbura who would not vote for any other ethnic group's candidate except those from their own extraction.<sup>24</sup>

A further impetus on ethnicity and identity politics in the area is the proximity to resources. The presence of marble and other precious solid minerals in Toto and who gets access to them often accentuates ethnic sentiments. Thus, resource wealth has become an inducement for mobilising ethnic sentiments and fostering of conflict of interest. The two warring parties- the Bassa and Egbura- have simultaneously fixed their eyes on the premium derivable from the marble deposits of Ugya area of Toto Local Government Area.<sup>25</sup> And this has turned Ugya area as the darkest spot and main theatre of Toto conflict.

### **Ethnicity: The Hemlock of Development in Toto Area**

Otite and Ikime noted the major dangers of ethnicity in their separate contributions. According to Otite":

The ethnic virus has been one of the most important causes of social crisis and political instability in Nigeria; and ethnicity has been perceived in general as a major obstacle to the overall politico-economic development of the country."<sup>26</sup>

While Ikime opined that, "The ethnic problem in Nigeria is indeed the 'National Question', around which a great deal of our national life revolves, and in the name of which all sorts of crimes have been perpetuated against the nation."<sup>27</sup>

Contrary to the above valid contributions of the two eminent scholars, is the perpetuation of ethnicity on any formula which will make for a more equal opportunities for all in Toto. Any move, which more people will owe loyalty because they see themselves represented meaningfully, was always besieged by ethnic sentiments. Ultimately, therefore, ethnicity was enamelled with political, economic and social undertones; almost every Toto indigene is infected with "ethnicity virus" and the consequence has been division, isolation and acute fragmentation leading inevitably to the weakening of the fabric of the unity of the people. Unfortunately therefore, instead of stressing the imperative of ethnic-balancing, ethnicity was invariably enthroned. These tendencies form the basis of disaffection among various groups in Toto area.<sup>28</sup> The budding elites again manipulated and channelled the peoples' will in their favour or to serve the overall ethnic group interest. Most often these interests were narrowed and detrimental to the general interests of the community. The impact of this is that members of each ethnic group elites drenched themselves in the struggle for control and exercise of power over the administrative machineries but failed to reconciled their differences through the operation of acceptable formulae for the allocation, distribution and sharing of the political gains for the benefit of the masses. Again, in the process, one fact seems to have eluded the various ethnic groups in the area; that interaction and interdependence are not just a fact of life, but one which is universally constant and basic. Sadly, while the elites engaged in this power debacle by capitalising on and fanning the embers of ethnic leaning, supposedly on behalf of their people whom they represent, they widen the gap of inter-ethnic harmony in the society. And this has generated ethnic tension and heightened mutual suspicious and fears, quarrelsomeness and violent confrontations.<sup>29</sup> It should be pointed out here that identity consciousness in itself and its varied forms, are not major problems in a plural society like Toto, however, it becomes a problem when they are mobilised negatively and used as platforms on which political action is organised. A close look at the process, one noted that, materially, the downtrodden on whose back the elites rode did not have their lives improved. Under these circumstances, there bound to be acrimony and socio-economic conflict between and among the groups of the area. The elites forgot that unless there is access to the basic necessities of life there will be no recipe for solving the problems of inter-ethnic integration in the community. It will rather, at best provide a deceitful wedding of the community because it will make the masses to remain passive to elite-directed efforts at peaceful co-existence.



Closely linked to ethnicity factor is the grinding poverty across all the ethnic groups of the area. In the frustration generated by unemployment, lack of government welfare package added to insensitivity on the needs and aspiration of the people, veritable tools for mischief-makers were enthroned. As noted again by Adejo, "The poor are vulnerable and are easy targets for cynical manipulation by the rich and desperate politicians."<sup>30</sup>

### Way Forward

What is to be done? Looking at the above scenario, the prospects of inter-ethnic integration seem to appear bleak. However, hopes are not lost. Toto area, when thoroughly examined with the view of developing optimum values and ideals, will necessitate a re-definition and re-evaluation of rights and values held by various persons or groups. The social impact of private, ethnic or sectional values within the area and their use or application should be critically examined. The area and its citizens should develop a common ethic and a common ground approach to group issues to replace exclusive parochialism and ethnic nationalism/patriotism. Government affirmative action could go a long way in checkmating the situations among and between polities. The government affirmative action in broad term encompassed a host of policies by governments that seek to support marginalised groups in society. According to Terna Agor, affirmative action is:

a commitment by government through policy declaration (pronouncement) backed by concrete, measurable program strategies, actions, plans etc to actively and positively re-dress or reverse historical inequalities (injustices), discriminations suffered by any class of citizens in all spheres of life and thereby create an equal opportunity/environment for all and in the future.<sup>31</sup>

The above position is apt based on the discourse thus far in this study and the implication of ethnic parochialism. Doing the contrary is tantamount to ignoring the quoted grave dangers pointed out by Otite and Ikime.

The steady growth and consolidation of communal allegiances and socio-cultural identities among various ethnic groups in Toto area, in pursuit of competing material value preferences, particularly as from the coming of the Second Republic political dispensation in 1979, should be discarded. This renders inter-ethnic cohesion and peaceful co-existence, among the various groups, a herculean task. Fine tuning these communal lines will go a long way in enhancing inter-ethnic integration.

It is most often as a result of mass misgiving over real and imagined political marginalisation, poverty and unemployment, collapsed infrastructure and state welfare programmes as well as the inefficiency and corrupt state of governance that

prop up most agitations resulting in the formation of ethnic militias, not only in Toto area but in Nigeria as a whole.<sup>32</sup> Adejumobi incisively revealed that "The fears and demands of ethnic militia groups have basically revolved around the issues of the national question: marginalisation and domination of one group by another."<sup>33</sup>

This undoubtedly, is unhealthy for cooperate co-existence of the Nigerian people. Thus, it is stressed here that, of all the problems besetting inter-group relations in Toto LGA, the indigenous population has a significant role to play if they must forge ahead and transform their society positively. The political elites have in the main, been found wanting in the discharge of its basic duties of being brothers' keepers. The people of the area should also realise that it is governments' inactions that have led to disenchantment of the masses, who in turn have become frustrated, aggressive, desperate and despondent in their interactions.<sup>34</sup> It is then obvious that consensus and not conflict that should be the bottom-line in the relationship between the communities of Toto. Consensus should essentially be a cementing force that chained the socially and economically inter-dependent polities in the area. After all, the mutual aid thesis upholds the view that even in all-important question of the struggle for the basic needs of life; human beings cooperate not just for the sake of social community but indeed out of necessity.<sup>35</sup> This conceptual insight recognised and upheld consensus or cooperation as a vital feature in society's growth and development. Although it accepted and acknowledged the role of conflict as a necessary consequence of the complex nature of contact and interactions between groups, especially in the contest for scarce resources, but however emphasised the point that the supposed preponderance of this was temporised by the imperative of consensus and cooperation that are even more effective and life perpetuating. Tseror in his analogy of the Tiv lent credence to this perspective that:

although the struggle to get food might prevail, this does not rule out the fact that man must cooperate out of necessity...while aggressive tendencies can be pervasive, they must be seen as having their limits especially when economic realities begin to dictate the form inter-group relations have to take.<sup>36</sup>

He aptly concluded that those who survive best are those who have perfected in the art of cooperation rather than conflict. Suffice to add here that what matters in inter-group relations is the inter-play between consensus and conflict and not their separation. In view of the above, ethnic nationalities in Toto area and all stakeholders interested in peaceful co-existence must close ranks and cement ethnic relationship rather than engage in organised violence.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the pattern of inter-group relations in Toto Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, North Central Nigeria, has moved from accommodation to exclusion. It has identified the reasons for such at the level of politics, ethnicity and state failure. Specifically, it has argued that what has put the people of Toto area poles apart from each other has been essentially ethnic divide. This became much prominent in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has emerged as an aspect of the "National Question" which depicts an apparently stalemated crisis condition, in which prevailing socio-economic, political and cultural conditions inherent in the area often than not generate endemic and seemingly irresolvable conflicts. In Toto area the issue of ethnic integration is empirically the historical culmination of decades of communal distrust among the various groups. The inherent patterns of inequality in the area laid the seed of inter-ethnic acrimony and by planned strategy of inter-ethnic relation building and integration, the situation could be turned for the better. Thus, the re-interpretation of ethnic differences in a positive way will inject an inter-ethnic cementing culture. In that wise, the challenges of integration in the area could be surmounted.

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