

## **ETHNO-RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO NATION BUILDING: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The growing trends of ethno-religious intolerance and the attendant conflicts in Nigeria do not only constitute a major threat to the corporate existence of the country but are also working against democracy and its sustainability. Against this background, this paper argues that nation building continues to be a mirage in Nigeria as sectional, regional, tribal, religious, group and individual interests rather than national interests are promoted. This is despite the integrative mechanisms that are in operation in the country. The paper insisted that Nigeria's endless search for nationhood is reflective of the insincerity of the political elite who exploit the religious and ethnic diversity of the country to feather their nests. The implication of this is that the glue of shared values in the polity is increasingly melting as citizens lose a sense of their collective citizenship and unity of purpose. An extensive political education and mass mobilization, among other suggested measures, is therefore imperative in order to free the people from this elitist grip and indoctrination so as to be able to build a united Nigeria in the midst of ethno-religious plurality.

**Key words:** *Conflict, Diversity, Ethnicity, Fanaticism, Integrative mechanism, Nation, National integration, Religion.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Given her heterogeneous nature, Nigeria is obviously one of the crisis-ridden parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The country is made up of diverse ethnic groupings with different religions, which were brought together for administrative convenience by the British colonialists (Ademoyega, 1981; Kuna, 2005; Porter, 2011; Salawu, Mohammed & Mohammed, 2005). The aftermath of this is the problem of ethnicity and religion. This ethno-religious problem had posed and continues to pose serious challenges to the survival of many countries composed of amalgamated ethnic groupings in Africa. As a result, their' efforts towards achieving national integration continue to be an exercise in futility. Adeyemi (2006), observed that "the character of the Nigerian state is responsible for the country's deepening ethno-religious contradictions". The heterogeneous nature of the country "originates a constant feeling of distrust between the component units, and the fear of one ethnic or religious group dominating the other is rife" ([www.dawodu.com/adeyemi3.htm](http://www.dawodu.com/adeyemi3.htm)).

Consequently, any attempt at understanding the continuing and seemingly endless national integration in Nigeria cannot escape the issue of ethno-religious intolerance as one of the main challenges of nation building in the country. This is because:

*The nature and composition of the state is very important and central to the nature and composition of the state is very important and central to the nature of the relationship that exists within it. If it is unstable, hegemonic and illegitimate contraption, there is often the tendency of instability and chaos arising from the unhealthy rivalry that will always be built within it. On the other hand, if it evolved on the platform of consensus and fair play, there is tendency for it to have a serene domestic politics. The Nigerian situation is such that boycotted the due course of legitimization at formation and this posits serious consequences for its stability at the present moment (Adeyemi, 2006: [www.dawodu.com/adeyemi3.htm](http://www.dawodu.com/adeyemi3.htm)).*

The genesis of the problem of ethnicity and religion in African countries could, thus, be traced to colonialism and its "divide and rule" strategy. The policy of divide and rule was put in place to purposively weaken the nationalistic aspiration and struggle of the Africans against colonial oppression (Ihonvbere, 1994). During colonialism as buttressed by Salawu, Mohammed & Mohammed (2005: 3), "the colonial masters found it more expedient to appeal to ethnic sentiments in order to divide African elite for exploitative relations of power". The problem becomes one of the legacies bequeathed to the post-colonial governments at

independence, so that the post-colonial elite can consolidate their control over their society and continue the exploitative relation of power (Ihonvbere, 1994).

Nigeria is a rainbow collection of ethnic groups, with different religious and diverse cultural background. Ethno-religious competition and intolerance are therefore not unexpected. It is however unfortunate that the competition and intolerance had degenerated into crises that continue to threaten the survival of the country. The phenomena of ethnicity and religion are consciously being invoked in situations where these strategies are adjudged to be more effective than other cleavage-based strategies (Nnoli, 1993). In other words, there is an employment of ethno-religious strategy in the process of competition for power and other resources at all levels of government in Nigeria (Salawu, Mohammed & Mohammed, 2005).

It can therefore be argued convincingly that, ethnic and religious consciousness and intolerance continue to impede the nation building process in Nigeria, as every action and inaction of government is given ethnic/religious coloration. Due to intolerance, Nigerians are quick to suspect hostility and hasty at shouting marginalization. Appointments, promotion, retrenchment and retirement etc that are routine administrative issues in other countries are all sensitive issues in Nigeria. This accounts for the reason why despite a century of her 'nationhood', socio-political actions are still based on primordial sentiments built around the criteria of ethnicity and religion. Ethnicity and religion have, thus, become a myth which live with Nigerians and which determine their socio-politico-economic actions (Salawu, Mohammed & Mohammed, 2005).

The experience in Nigeria since the re-democratization in May 1999 shows that the "termites of ethnic and religious intolerance are beginning to eat into the wood works of our national unity and cohesion" (Adamu, 2001: [www.abdullahiadamu.net/speeches/gambi.htm](http://www.abdullahiadamu.net/speeches/gambi.htm)). Since the return of civil rule, the country has witnessed scores of ethno-religious crises (Ayinla, Muhammad & Adeoye, 2006; Kuna, 2005; Ojo, 2006; Owutu, 2012; Salawu, 2010) with the gory memory of losses of lives in thousands and properties worth billions of naira. Thus, as the shadow of ethnic and religious intolerance lengthens, the shadow of understanding among the various ethnic groups and religious adherents is growing shorter. "Over the years, the phenomena of ethnicity and religious intolerance have led to incessant recurrence of ethno-religious conflicts, which have given birth to many ethnic militias" (Salawu, 2010: 345).

The growing ethno-religious consciousness and intolerance in the scheme of events in Nigeria coupled with the pressing need for nation building in the country informs this paper. With the use of descriptive content analysis as a means of data collection, the paper dwelt extensively on the antithetic relationship between ethno-religious intolerance and the quest for nation building using Nigerian experience as the focus of analysis. To accomplish this objective, the paper is divided into six sections with this introduction being the first. The second section is the conceptual framework of analysis where key concepts of ethnicity, religion, ethno-religious tolerance and nation building are clarified. The third section deals with the theoretical framework of analysis. The examination of ethno-religious intolerance as a major hindrance to nation building in Nigeria is the thrust of the fourth section. The fifth section is devoted to various measures of building a united Nigeria in the midst of ethno-religious plurality while the last section is the conclusion.

### **Conceptualization of Ethnicity, Religion, Ethno-religious Intolerance and Nation Building.**

#### **Ethnicity.**

In an attempt to fully understand the concept of ethnicity in the light of the objective of this paper, it is necessary to conceptualize it vis- a -vis another related concept of 'ethnic group'. An ethnic group, as defined by Porter (2011), consists of people whose members identify with one another through a common heritage, often consisting of language, culture, religion, ideology or geographical area. Thus, according to Yinger (1981), an ethnic group exists in a fullest sense when a segment of a larger society is seen by others to be different in some combination of a number of characteristics such as language, religion, race and ancestral homeland with its related culture. To Sanda (1976), ethnic groups are culturally based on social organizations which compete for strategic resources of their societies. They, as seen by Cox (1970), are socio-cultural units which while inhabiting the same state, country or geographical area consider themselves biologically, culturally, linguistically or socially distinct from one another and in most antagonistic terms, thereby politicizing their relations.

Ethnicity could therefore be defined as the process of politicizing ethnic identity. As observed by Hendricks (1997: 106), "one usually speaks of ethnicity in the context of contestation between particular ethnic groups, and / or between ethnic groups and the state". On this basis,

ethnicity is a “derivative of ethnic group, which may ensue when two or more ethnic groups are involved in a competitive setting” (Salawu, Mohammed & Mohammed, 2005: 5). In the light of this, ethnicity has been taken to connote ethnic loyalty, which is a strong feeling of attachment to one’s ethnic group. Such loyalty carries with it the willingness to support and act on behalf of the ethnic group and a rejective attitude towards those regarded as outsiders. This view is in line with that of Osaghae (1994 & 1998) who demonstrates ethnicity as a political behavior which exists between and among groups to further individual and group interests in competition with others. The nature of ethnic politics in each society and the competitive short term tactics and long term strategies they employ are functions of history and of the resources they seek to control (Sanda, 1976). Not surprisingly, therefore, that there is a kind of cut-throat competition among various ethnic groups in Nigeria, due to the abundant resources, unequally endowed in the country, and the belief in the political power as the most rapid yielding investment.

### **Religion.**

Religion, as a concept in social sciences, does not lend itself to one generally acceptable definition. Philosophers, sociologists, theologians and many others interested in this particular aspect of life have all conceptualized it in their own perspectives. Oxford Learner’s Dictionary defines religion as the belief in super-human-controlling-power that is entitled to obedience and worship. It explains further that, religion is a particular system of faith and worship that one is entitled to. This definition is corroborated with that of Adeniyi (1993) which sees religion as the consciousness of one’s dependence on a transcendental Being and the tendency to worship Him. To Adeniyi, religion is a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendental Being. In its general and comprehensive connotation, religion depicts “man’s relation to that which he regards as holy, whether the holy Being is supernatural or even personal to the individual concerned” (Abdulsalam, 2002: 23). From these definitions, it could be logically deduced that religion in its widest sense includes far more than relationship of man to God or gods.

However, most Nigerians associate religion with the existence of a deity who assumes different names or nomenclatures in different parts of the country and among different groups and communities. Religion is therefore believed to be a system or a set of systems in which

doctrines, myths, rituals, sentiments and other similar elements are interrelated in a competitive manner. From these definitions, religion can be understood in two ways. First, in a material sense, it refers to religious establishments (i.e. a system of institutions and officials) as well as to social groups and movements whose primary interests are found within religious concerns. There is also the spiritual sense which deals with models of social and individual behaviour that help believers to organize their every-day life (Hynes, 1996). For the purpose of this paper, religion is seen as a symbol which acts to establish powerful, persuasive and long lasting moods and motivations in people by formulating conceptions of a new general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

### **Ethno-religious Intolerance.**

‘Tolerance’ is defined in the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as “putting up with and being fair to people whose ways and opinions are different from one’s own” (Hornby, 1974: 927). The dictionary explains further that the concept also means “ability to take things that are difficult to take, such as drug or ability to endure (bad conditions) without effect, especially bad effect” (Hornby, 1974: 927). Similarly, Gibson & Bingham (1982: 603) opines that tolerance “implies a willingness to ‘put up’ with those things that one rejects”. In the same vein, Rukamble (2009) cited in Akindele, Olaopa & Salaam (2009: 369) sees tolerance as “accepting (accommodating, living and putting up with, and respecting) the views and ideas of others you do not agree with”. To tolerate therefore means to bear, endure, to put up with, and to allow opposing views. Intolerance, on the other hand, means unwillingness or refusal to tolerate or respect contrary opinions or beliefs, person of different races, faith or background. In short, it is an unwillingness to extend expressive rights to people, groups or individuals with different socio-cultural traits.

From the foregoing, ethno-religious intolerance could be conceptualized as a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic or religious group and another of such group in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, and a tendency towards violent confrontation (Salawu, 2010). It is unwillingness of people in a heterogeneous state to endure the religious practices or social ways of behaving that are different from their own religious beliefs and ethnic orientation. It is also seen as a “blind and fixated mental and psychological negative attitude towards

religious beliefs and ethnic practices that are contrary to one's cherished beliefs and practices" (Ayinla, Muhammad & Adeoye, 2006: 3). In essence, ethno-religious intolerance obtains when an ethnic group or adherents of a particular religion are not willing to let others act, speak or think differently from the opinion or views held by such ethnic group or religion. In this circumstance, the 'opposing' groups or religions may be discriminated against simply because of their ethnic origin or religious affiliation. "In many instances, violence and intimidation (are) the natural reaction of intolerant people to views they consider inconsistent with theirs" (Akintade, Olaopa & Salaam, 2009: 369) as the situation in Nigeria.

### **Nation Building.**

Cultural homogenization is believed to be the essence of nation building. However, a brief definition of a nation will assist in fully understanding the concept. Watson (1977) defines a nation as a community of people whose members are bound together by a sense of solidarity, a common culture and a national consciousness. From this definition, three factors are noted to be basic about a nation. These are: feelings of solidarity; homogeneous cultural traits and national consciousness. A nation, in the view of Hroch (1996: 80), is a "large social group integrated by a combination of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious geographic, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness". This definition corroborates that of Watson (1977). A nation has similarly been defined as an "expression of large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future" (Kuna, 2005: 17). These definitions showcase that a nation is a "daily plebiscite and a continuous entity that constitutes a broad framework of interaction beyond sub-national identities" (Kuna, 2005: 17). Since a nation is seen as a social grouping with common cultural traits, nation building is a sort of integrative process in a plural society. It is a conscious process of social engineering which involves the subordination of all competing ethnic interests and loyalty to the state. As a process of social constriction, nation building:

*Takes a variety of forms depending on specific historical circumstances wherein broad national, in contradistinction to sub-national communities emerge as the nuclei of solid political and economic organisation. Such broad national communities are distinguishable by among others, internationally recognized geographical boundaries, a fairly common broad*

*cultural and linguistic ethos, an identifiable feeling of belonging, and a state* (Kuna, 2005; 18).

From these definitions, it is glaring that nation building is built on the fact of cultural plurality, the need for mutual accommodation and the desire of the 'parties' in the polity to sacrifice their primordial interests for national interest. This paper, thus, conceives nation building as those conscious governmental policies geared towards inculcating a uniform consciousness among its diverse people, with their cultural, historical, linguistic and territorial diversities, with the ultimate aim of evolving a common identity.

Nigeria, like some other countries that are plagued by specific incompatibility problems, has since colonial period embarked on a nation building project. Some nation building policies (Centralization policy with Unification Decree 34 of 1966, National Youth Service Corps, Formation of Political Parties with national coverage, Unity Schools, Federal Character Principle, Relocation of Federal Capital etc) have been adopted to assuage the negative practices that obstruct harmonious coexistence among various ethno-religious groups in the country. It is saddening, however, that despite the fact that much efforts and resources have been directed towards this project, little has been achieved. This is because, this task of building a nation out of a multiplicity of nations within the context of Nigeria is besieged by a variety of problems. Prominent among these problems are the ones relating to the ethno-religious diversity of the country with its attendant destructive antagonism and ceaseless crises.

### **Theoretical Framework of Analysis.**

The phenomenon of ethno-religious intolerance can be examined from a multidimensional perspective. Approaches such as cultural pluralism, premordialism, instrumentalism, modernism and constructivism have been used to analyse this phenomenon (Esan, 1967; Gorski & Dervisogu, 2013; Hendricks, 1997; Mugubane, 1969; Shils, 1957). However, this paper bases its analysis broadly on functionalist and conflict theories. From functionalist angle, this paper emphasizes the capability of ethnicity and religion (in particular) to contribute towards the attainment of some degree of social solidarity, value consensus, harmony and integration in plural society. Emile Durkheim, 1912(2001) argues that primitive societies were held together by a mechanical solidarity premised on social similarity and enforced conformity, whereas modern societies were bound up via an organic solidarity based

on social differences and functional interdependency. In this context therefore, ethnicity and religion can play a significant role in cementing relationships between diverse people and serve as their major rationale for continuing existence.

Most emphatically, religion, by establishing general principles and moral beliefs, helps to provide the required consensus which is notably necessary and fundamental for attaining order and stability in society. As observed by Kuna (2005: 6-7):

Looking at literature on the history of the formation of social groupings, a strong belief exists in the progressive development of human society in which religion was expected to recede to the background. Even with some of the strongest theorist on the role of religion in human progress such as Durkheim and Weber, there is an expectation that science and rationality would not only impose the imperative of secular, cooperative living, but that religion would be transformed into a 'civil realm', making it rational, positive force reflecting a group's or society's broad interpretation of and agreement about some principles of organisation that could include beliefs, symbols and rituals transcending specific sectarianism. Such rational forms of thought would be powerful engines of secularization and modernization in general; rationalization would deepen the application of science, and this would in turn help to address some of humanity's major problems such as poverty, hunger, and disease; raise living standards, rationalize politics, and perhaps, even minimize conflict.

It is thus believed that, with cultural solidarity and religion, peaceful and harmonious coexistence is made possible by the shared values and moral beliefs that form the collective conscience without which there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation and the unity of the society would be the victim.

This paper also views the phenomenon of ethno-religious intolerance through the prism of conflict. The functionalist theorists emphasize the positive contributions of ethnicity and religion to the society and tend to ignore their dysfunctional angles. The conflict theorists believe that the relationship between religion/ethnicity and societal stability is far more complex and contingent than assumed by the functionalists. The conflict perspective is hinged on Marxism. Karl Marx, for instance, sees religion as nothing but an opium of the people, an opium to dull the pain produced by oppression. It is thus an illusion which ease the pain produced by exploitation and oppression; a myth that justifies and legitimate subordination and domination of the weak class and a distortion of reality which provides many of the

deceptions that formed the basis of ruling class ideology and false class consciousness (Marx, 1964 (2000)). The sweeping distinctions between monotheism and polytheism; Islam and Christianity; and homogeneity and heterogeneity in contemporary global community create internal divisions within societies that often lead to conflicts. Thus, as the phenomena of religion and ethnicity can serve as a binding tool within a society, they can also serve as agents of disintegration. Huntington (1997), cited in Kuna (2005: 5), argues that in the post cold war era, cultural identities, more than anything else, are shaping patterns and processes of social grouping in which a fundamental conflict of identities represented a clash between Christianity and Islam.

Ideally, religion, as reviewed above for instance, is not an arena for conflict. Rather, it is man's attempt to find and maintain peaceful relations with his Creator and fellow human beings. However, the politicization of religion and the growing culture of intolerance among believers and worshippers of different religions have given rise to conflicts in some countries. Specifically in Nigeria, adherents of the universalistic religions, i.e. Islam and Christianity, have severally clashed over situational supremacy, access to prestige, power and privilege, most especially in relation to the political sphere in the country (Adeyemi, 2006; Ayinla, Mohammed & Adeoye, 2006; Kuna, 2005; Owutu, 2012; Salawu, 2010). Hence, in Nigeria, rather than just a set of rules guiding private life, religion has become an intensely political phenomenon and in this regard, continues to pose a serious impediment towards nation building and national integration.

### **Ethno-religious Intolerance as a Clog in the Wheel of Nation Building in Nigeria: A Synopsis.**

It is not hyperbolic to express that ethnic and religion questions are the major challenges facing nation building and national integration in Nigeria. The experiences in the in the country have indicated that the growing intolerance among various ethnic and religious groups in the country have some negative effects on the quest for national unity and cohesion. This is again best seen if one realizes that nation building and national integration can only be achieved in a just and an egalitarian setting, and in a land of equal opportunities for all citizens. These are virtues on which lasting integration is built. Also, socio-political pluralism

and diversity requires an environment in which citizens engage with one another and with public institutions in a free and open manner. The limited availability or non-existence of these avenues leads to a situation where, as observed by Akindele, Olaopa & Salaam (2009: 370), “people became disenchanted with democracy and revert to undemocratic (sometimes violent) means to vent out their frustration”. This development greatly retards the nation building progress. Thus, nation building which manifests in social equity demands that citizens endure, tolerate, create and maintain supportive political culture devoid of mutual distrust and suspicion.

The experience in Nigeria, however, betrays this expectation. Ethnic bigotry and religious fanaticism continue to obstruct the movement of the country towards integration. In the words of Momoh (2009: 66):

*the outlook on national identity is fast giving way to ethnic and religious identities (a la Pentecostal fundamentalism and political Sharia). It is incorrect to say that religion is being manipulated in Nigeria, rather religion is instrumentalized. That is why it is possible to talk about the politicisation of ethnicity and ethnicisation of politics in Nigeria.*

As a result of this, the rulers find it easy and cheap to mobilize ethnic and religious sentiments in the pursuit of power and resources. This “opportunistic use of identities” (Salawu, 2009: 194) has ended up in the politicization of ethnicity and religion to the detriment of national unity. Salawu’s rendition will also suffice here:

*In Nigeria, it is interesting to know that ethnicity and religious bigotry have become a fulcrum of various forms of nationalism ranging from assertion to language, cultural autonomy and religious superiority to demand for local political autonomy and self determination. All these sometimes lead to some forms of contextual discrimination of members of one ethnic and religious group against another on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols and religion. Therefore, in a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse society like Nigeria, with some forms of contextual discrimination, relationships between people may be characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear as it is the case among the ethnic and religious group in Nigeria. In fact, this mutual suspicion and lack of cordiality among*

*the various ethnic components explains why ethno-religious conflicts have become a permanent feature of Nigeria as a nation as far back as 1980s to date (Salawu, 2010: 346).*

Consequently, ethno-religious intolerance and its resultant conflicts continue to threaten peace, unity, and stability of Nigeria. The country's national unity is therefore being systematically eroded. Contest for political offices has been reduced to a primitive struggle among the ethnic and religious groups. Tribal and religious loyalty are stronger in the country than national loyalty as Nigerians see themselves first and foremost as Yorubas, Hausas, Fulanis, Kanuris; Igbos, Ijaws, Kalabaris, Ibiras, Igalas, Tivs, etc before accepting themselves as Nigerians. Candidates for elective offices are fielded and backed by ethnic and religious groups in order to bring political gains to their ethnic groups and religious bodies. In employment, admissions into schools, distribution of social amenities and in social relationships, ethno-religious affiliations and attachments are very strong and conspicuously manifest. All these weaken the unity base of the country, as attachment of a Nigerian first and foremost to his/her ethnic group prior to the nation is a bane to Nigeria's national unity, national consciousness, nation building and socio-political integration (Jekayinfa, 2002).

Thus, "nothing in the Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more than the chequered fortune of tribe in her vocabulary" (Achebe, 1983: 1). Ethnicity and religion in the country function as tools of disintegration, for perpetration of violence, fuelling ethno-religious consciousness and solidarity, acquisition of political power and socio-economic gains, massive killings and the wanton destruction of life and property. This negative exploit of ethnicity and religion had devastated the ground for building a nation. The ethno-religious plural nature of Nigeria has, thus, not been for the best of the country as it has been the basis for many conflicts. Due to its ethnic and religious diversity and the inherent intolerance, the country has witnessed the most disturbing and unprecedented upsurge of ethno-religious conflicts. Ethno-religious intolerance has therefore remained a constant threat to peace in Nigeria and has continued to threaten the continuing existence and cohabitation of the different ethnic nationalities in the country.

This precarious situation is aggravated by the disintegrative posture of the Nigerian political elite who exploit ethnicity and religion for their selfish ends. The fanning of ethno-religious intolerance and the consequent conflicts by elite who exploit this to seek and consolidate

power do constitute hindrance against nation building. This disintegrative role of the Nigerian elite in the nation building project has some ethno-religious underpinning. The elite, first and foremost, come from one ethnic and belong to one religion or the other. And by reason of their access to power and national resources, they tend to have unlimited opportunities to several strategies of manipulating the local citizenry in such areas as appointments and elections. Most often, the elite are known for whipping up ethnic sentiments from the local populace when they are seeking loyalty or support in order to attain or retain position of power and authority.

The recent controversial letter from former President Obasanjo to President Jonathan buttressed this. In the letter, the ex-President advised that the political elite “must move away from advertently or inadvertently dividing the country along weak seams of North-South and Christian-Moslem” (Leadership, December 12, 2013: 1). He also accused the President of clannishness and divisiveness. In his words:

*President, the most important quality for your present position is your being a Nigerian. Whatever else you may be besides being a Nigerian is only secondary for this purpose. And if majority of Nigerians who voted had not cast their votes for you, you could not have been there. For you to allow yourself to be “possessed”, so to say, to the exclusion of most of the rest of Nigerians as an ‘Ijaw man’ is a mistake that should never have been allowed to happen. Yes, you have to be born in one part of Nigeria to be a Nigerian if not naturalized but the Nigerian President must be above ethnic factionalism. .... To allow or tacitly encourage people of ‘Ijaw nation’ to throw insults on other Nigerians from other parts of the country and threaten fire and brimstone to protect your interest as an Ijaw man is myopic and your not openly quieting them is even more unfortunate (Leadership, December 12, 2013: 6).*

This captures the nature and character of Nigerian political elite. President Jonathan, due to his ‘yet-to-be-openly-declared’ 2015 re-election ambition, has been accused severally of deliberately advancing and promoting the interest of Niger Delta in general and that of Ijaw nation in particular. This point is buttressed by the intimidative utterances of the ex-militants of Niger Deltan and some prominent figures in the geo-political zone that, 2015 is a ‘must’ for

President Goodluck Jonathan without which the country will be plunged into indescribable circumstance.

Although, President Jonathan, in his reply refuted this, as he re-affirmed his commitment to Nigerian unity “as any patriot can be” (Guardian, December 23, 2013: 13), he nevertheless attested to the pursuit of personal and sectional interest by the political elite. According to him, very central to the problems bedevilling political parties and the entire polity “is the unbridled jostling and positioning for personal or group advantages ahead of the 2015 general elections”. Consequently, “the bitterness, anger, mistrust, fear and deep suspicion” characterising the polity “flow from this singular factor” (Guardian, December 23, 2013: 13). An unfortunate outcome of this scenario is that, openness, merit, efficiency, and general acceptability, which form the underlying principles of the emergence of ‘national’ leaders, are sacrificed on the altar of ethno-religious chauvinism. As a result, Nigeria fails to have a real national President, rather tribalists and ethnic bigots continue to sail the ship of the country. However in such a situation, the ship of the country cannot be allowed to sail freely in the ocean of integration as ethno-religious sentiments becloud good navigative reasoning and judgement of the sailing captains.

### **Building a United Nigeria in the Midst of Ethno-religious Plurality.**

In view of the magnitude of the challenges posed by ethno-religious intolerance on the polity and in the face of the dire need to nurture and consolidate democracy on one hand, and integrate the various sentiments in the system on the other, some urgent steps need to be taken to ruthlessly rid the system of the alarming rate of increase in ethno-religious intolerance and attendant negative effects that are seriously threatening the continuing existence of Nigeria as one indivisible entity. The conscious efforts in the country since colonial era, at nation building and national integration have been variously assessed and evaluated thereby exposing their strengths and weaknesses (Gambari, 2008; Ojo, 2009). However, the increase in the spate of ethno-religious crises, most especially during this Fourth Republic, shows that the country needs to intensify her efforts at nation building.

There is, therefore, the need for the government to sincerely, fully and deeply engage in ‘integrative processes’ that are capable of giving birth to a fully ‘integrated polity’. The processes that will recognise but de-emphasize ethno-religious differences, accord recognition to all ethnic nationalities and religious institutions by recognising their right to participate in

government and other economic, political and social interests. These 'integrative processes' must be effective enough to diffuse some of the inherently exclusive characteristics of the contemporary Nigerian state. The state, whose structure and mechanisms of power accentuate and reproduce exclusivity instead of an inclusive attempt to solve the problems of national integration (Kuna, 2005). That the various nation building policies which have been adopted in the country have failed as solutions to the problems of national integration is obvious, not only in the increase in antagonistic relationship between ethnic groupings and religious bodies but also in daily outbreak of ethno-religious conflicts, out of which the Boko Haram tragedy in the North Eastern part of the country has worrisomely emerged. Therefore, it is safe for one to conclude that Nigeria's nation building policies "need general overhauling to enhance better performance" (Ojo, 2009: 208).

Measures such as 'consociation', 'grand coalition' and 'proportional representation' need to be embraced to ensure inclusiveness. Consociational measures, as opines by Kuna (2005: 29) "can assist in transcending some of the major fault lines along which the structure of colonial and post colonial domination is effected". These measures, if concretely supported by positive programmes of action, are capable of addressing seriously, the inequality and discrepancies between ethnic nationalities. The Arend Lijphart's (1977) 'grand coalition principle' should also be adopted to associate all segments of the society with the country's management. The emergence of proportional rule as the principal standard of political representation as exemplified by Federal Character Principle and Quota System should be more sincerely applied. Due to the diverse nature of Nigeria, there is the need to be cautious when dealing with the issues that affect the interest of a part or of the whole so as to ensure an equitable representation of all the diverse interests at play without compromising the interest of the whole.

From the discourse so far, it is quite evident that religion and ethnic differences are ready weapons in the hands of political elite who cynically use them to exploit and manipulate the ignorant and unsuspecting masses towards selfish and undesirable ends. The only way to free the people from their grip and indoctrination is through education. Thus, political education and mass political enlightenment on critical socio-political issues in the polity is of great importance. Conscious efforts should be made to educate Nigerians on the danger of being unduly manipulated for selfish ends by the politicians using ethnic or religious slogans which have always been a political tool of manipulation by the political elite by fomenting

differences in the achievement of sectional or personal political and economic gains. This is necessary because eliminating, neutralizing or taming disloyal players is pertinent in order to erode ethno-religious consciousness, thereby putting an end to the furtherance of ethnically structured political objectives which are detrimental to the actualization of national integration. To quicken the pace of nation building, therefore, as Ojo (2009) opines, government must embark on vigorous mass mobilization programmes with more zeal to make Nigerians more patriotic and bear true allegiance to the federation.

“Nations are built by men and women who have the will and vision to accomplish greatness, not for themselves, their immediate families and friends, but for their country” (Gambari, 2008: 37). There is, thus, the need for the emergence of a class of visionary leaders that will be able to situate Nigerian citizens at the centre stage of socio-economic and political projects. Nigerians leaders at all levels must be honest, transparent and accountable in the conduct of governance. They must also be educated and re-oriented as they have been accused of causing most of the socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts experienced in the country since independence. They must see themselves as role models and opinion leaders in the society and see the country as one political game, indivisible and involving many participants. They must also be ready to make sacrifices and positive contributions to the country.

Another step towards building a united Nigeria in the midst of ethno-religious diversity is the enthrone of a poverty alleviation mechanism. Poverty and nation building are inversely related. As notes by Gambari (2008: 25), “a large marginalized citizenry, increasingly crippled by poverty and lack of basic needs, can hardly be expected to play its proper role in the development of the nation”. In this regard, it is imperative that the economy is empowered to take care of the unemployed and poverty-ridden populace as mass poverty has been noted to be a breeding ground for religious extremism and ethnic/class consciousness. The joblessness of the large percentage of the youth also makes them easy manipulative tools in the hands of ethno-religious bigots. Devising strategies to address these problems for meaningful development rather than employing same as smokescreen for fanning embers of intolerance among diverse people of Nigeria, is paramount at this period. The National Poverty Eradication Programmes (NAPEP) and the recent Subsidy Reinvestment Programmes (SURE-P) introduced in the country have not really addressed the issues, as their impacts are not felt by the down-trodden people at the grassroots. Due to the endemic corruption in the polity, instead of eradicating poverty these policies are ‘elevating private pockets’. Such

programmes should be directed towards the improvement of the living conditions of the common people.

It also needs to be noted that the absence of equity in the 'sharing' of national wealth among various 'competing' groups in Nigeria engenders hatred and the politics of fear, which more often results in intolerance. What is urgently needed is a national direction and enshrinement of a real sense of belonging in all the country's ethnic groups and nationalities. In addition, there is the need for a coordinated effort and conscious drive towards incorporating the socio-cultural values and aspirations of the different ethnic groups, while also bringing about a common ground where various groups can interact and interchange cultural heritage with one another. The various contact policies such as, National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), Unity School and transfer of federal civil servants are good policies in this direction and should not be abolished, rather they should be restructured to meet contemporary challenges. The contact and the resultant cultural exchanges could result in a decrease in suspicion and an increase in national consciousness and the achievement of national integration. Notwithstanding the cultural, tribal, religious and political diversity of Nigeria, concerted efforts should be directed at building a nation, whose citizens, no matter their ethno-religious background, will feel a sense of partnership in all the initiatives of government, thereby creating a nation of the dream of Nigeria's founding fathers, a nation where, *though tribes and tongues may differ, in brotherhood we stand.*

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper dwelt extensively on ethno-religious intolerance and the challenges it poses to nation building in Nigeria. The culture of intolerance that leads to alienation of some parts of the country and which promotes their denial to equal treatment, has made those affected to think and believe that striving for national interest is a pervasion and in contrast, fighting for individuals' and group's interests is "an acceptable norm" (Arowolo & Aluko, 2012: 806). Attendant, ethnocentric politics, sectional solidarity and primordial interests have become prominent features in the country's political system. Sectional and individual virtues and interests rather than collective virtues and national unity are advanced and exalted. Thus, communal orientation precluded any attachment to the nation and the syndrome of the 'son of the soil' took preference over merit and competence in the choice of policies and leaders (Adeyemi, 2006: [www.dawodu.com/adeyemi3.htm](http://www.dawodu.com/adeyemi3.htm)).

The quest for nation building and national integration in this scenario, however, becomes a mirage. Ethnicity and religion continue to be clogs in the wheel of progress in terms of Nigeria achieving national unity where all will have a sense of belonging and commitment not minding their ethnic or religious affiliation. The current environment is far from being a good ground for nation building, as nation building and national integration require an environment in which citizens engage with one another and public institutions in a free and open manner. It can be argued that Nigeria is still caught up in the process of a “nation state in the making” (Hendricks, 1997: 111) after a century of her creation. All efforts should, thus, be geared towards constituting a political community on the basis of principles and policies acceptable to all diversities that make up the country. The proposed National Conference must try to build consensus around controversial issues that impede nation building. It should fulfil its main aim of “bringing Nigerians together to resolve contentious national issues in a formal setting” (Guardian, December 23, 2013: 13). The paper is concluded on the note that Nigeria’s diversity should be a veritable source of strength and not a weakness and as Hendricks (1997: 112) “diversity can be a power base or it can be a destabilizer, depending on how these resources are managed”.

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