
By

Dr. David Aondoakaa Utume & Iveren Adoo Uganden

Abstract
Ethnic contestations are inherent congenital discontents of Nigeria’s federalism. From 1999, the assertion of freedom of expression reinvigorated ethnic tensions effectively transforming political expression from national dialogue to vitriolic ethnic diatribes. These diatribes divert attention from nation building objectives while neglecting the substantive feat of Nigeria’s survival for over a century in spite of the ‘artificiality’ of the amalgamation. In this paper four overlapping these namely; the so-called failed state thesis, the socio-economic thesis, the amalgamation, and quest for hegemony thesis and the democratic space thesis are interrogated to identify drivers of ethnic diatribes. Analyses of these theses indicate functionality of diatribes in furtherance of elite and ethnic ends diametrically opposed to the goals of national integration. The argued imperative is elimination of diatribes and promotion of national dialogue to expedite national integration and development.

Key words: Ethnic diatribes; identity; national dialogue; national integration

Introduction
Accompanying the nascence of Nigeria in 1914 were multiple ethnic and linguistic identities as a distinct national feature hardly rivalled on the African continent (Mimiko & Adeyemi 2005; Aluko 2005). While ‘the existence of multiple ethnic nationalities does not by itself constitute a problem or an issue with political consequence’ (Aluko 2005:34), diversity and heterogeneity quickly settled into both elite and mass political consciousness as the most pervasive organizing frame (Ekeh 1975; Nnoli 1978). To Williams (1980:69), ‘the competition for access to resources in Nigeria has taken place predominantly between ethnically-defined constituencies’. However, ethnic identities are not ready-made as lines of political conflict but social constructions designed for the demands of specific historical circumstances. This involves selective application of differences and similarities in legitimizing actual claims to solidarity and exclusion. Campbell’s (1997) proposition that ethnicity does not exist as a real and objective phenomenon innate to Africa but finds its reality in the relationship between Africa the West stands close to Williams submission. Southall (1974:159-160), submits that ethnicity does not equate to irreducible cultural differences; it is rather a framework for the channelling of competing vested interests in economic, religious, linguistic and other cultural forms which are products of colonial policies. British indirect rule can be rightly perceived as the effective instrument that institutionalized and sustained ethnicity and tribalism in Nigeria.
The resultant tendency for degeneration of political expression as a component of political competition from dialogue to diatribes congenitally typifies the Nigerian political landscape. As a feature of the nationalist struggles, ethno-consciousness, though ingrained in the political labyrinth, operated relatively in the background deriving from the perceived presence of a common enemy personalized in the colonial authority. Political energies, though with strong ethnic colourations, more readily found expression in collectivized nationalist struggles aimed at decolonization to pave way for realization of the envisaged political and economic paradise. According to Fanon (1967), all over colonial Africa, the nationalist front was decisive in forcing colonialism to withdraw, slogans of independence were used to mobilize the people and the objectives of political parties were strictly nationalist. Nationalist leaders in Nigeria “sunk deep ethnic differences and mobilized the Nigerian people (Ejiofor, 1981:27).

The attainment of independence including activities building up to its attainment however impelled a relegation of national consciousness, concomitantly raising and sharpening divisions along ethno-regional lines aggregated amorphously into the North, East and West. These amorphous aggregations created by colonial fiat emerged with ingrained segregations of dominant ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities’ which have subsisted not only in Nigeria’s political lexicon but also as a basis for political expression and organization (Egwu 1999; Kehinde 2005). Subsequent accentuation of ethnic identities and differences and the burrowing of same into the political psyche of Nigerians stemmed from the post-colonial reinforcement of ethnicities as criterion for economic and political distribution (Mimiko & Adeyemi 2005). This provision is disingeniously enshrined in the constitution under the nom de guerre of federal character.

Akinyele (2003) advances a popular argument apparently countering Awolowo’s ‘infamous’ reference to Nigeria as a mere geographical expression. The summation of the argument is that ethnic tensions cannot be blamed on the amalgamation as the amalgamated peoples were no strangers to themselves. He draws support for this position by citing Ade-Ajayi and Alagoa’s assertion that ‘despite the fortuitous manner in which the political unity of Nigeria came to be achieved, culturally, and economically, Nigeria was not really an arbitrary creation’ (Akinyele 2003:123). However, while some level of interaction existed, stronger or weaker at different points, exchanges and even collaborations as independent entities differ substantially from a sudden non-consensual placement under one central political authority with implications for the economic, political, socio-cultural and religious fortunes of the disparate groups. Awareness of each other’s existence does not present a sufficient pre-condition for amalgamation, it is indeed grossly insufficient.

As the subsequent argument in this paper will demonstrate, ethnic and cultural affinities were not the primary consideration of the architects of Nigeria’s amalgamation. Affinities established through migration and socio-economic exchanges strengthen political unification only where the process is driven by internal forces with some level of consensus. The desire to benefit from expanded economies, larger populations and armies as functional considerations for integration (Doherty & Pfaltzgraf 1971) provides the real strong arguments for proximity as a factor for political unification. Where an alien force separately conquers proximate territories and forces them into a single political union (Mimiko & Adeyemi 2005), any gains derivable from previously existing affinities are undermined. For instance, it can be tenably argued that the fact
of the national question remaining unresolved in Nigeria after a century of co-existence demonstrates the arbitrariness of the amalgamation and its un-consensual character. Given these colonial permutations in the political and social fabric of the ante-Nigerian territories, it is indeed an achievement in itself that the nation has survived one hundred years as a single political entity.

The January 15th, 1966 coup and the contestations that predate it and yet continue to trail it for over five decades, eloquently epitomize the depth of ethnic cleavages and the dominance of the ethnic prism through which every political act is viewed and interpreted in the country. Following the failed Eastern region’s secession attempt and the end of the civil war, the nation affirmed the need for accommodation and national integration. This endeavour was encapsulated in Gowon’s declaration of ‘No Victor, No Vanquished’ and his three Rs of Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (Aluko 2005). National affirmation of the need for unity was also demonstrated in the reverberation of the slogan of ‘One Nigeria’ across the length and breadth of the country.

During the prolonged military rule punctuated by abortive attempts at civil governance- 1997-1983, Babangida’s convoluted transition programme and diarchy and Shonekan’s illegitimate government, the nation’s political landscape featured interspersed ethnic contestations. These bouts of ethnic based contestations laced in some instances with religious connotations were largely characterized by limited spatial scope revolving mainly around territorial contestations. Egwu (1999) outlines several of these contests and their location including the Mambilla Plateau involving the Mambilla, Kanka, Kamba and Banso ethnic groups; Tingno-Waduku involving the Bachama and Hausa both in Adamawa state. Others are Zango-Kataf featuring the Kataf and Hausa in Kaduna state; Chamba-Kuteb and Tiv-Jukun in Taraba state. Some of these limited ethnic contests according to Egwu (1999) are microscopically intra-ethnic such as Ife-Modakeke (Yoruba) and Offah-Ibeiku (Igbo).

These ethnic, religious and communal engagements notwithstanding their enormous scales of destruction largely excluded questions relating to Nigeria’s existence as a sovereign entity. The more nationally significant ethno-regional fault lines created by colonialism temporarily back-stepped due to perception of the military as a common enemy of democracy; this was reminiscent of nationalist anti-colonial collaboration. Arguably, the ease with which ethnic differences relatively become relegated at different periods in Nigeria’s history provides some empirical support to Williams’ (1980:69) contention that ethnic identities are ‘social constructions designed for the demands of specific historical circumstances’. The rallying cry led by the intelligentsia (Ake 1993) and organized civil society groups such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) was demand for return to democratic governance.

Largely muted was the now dominant exigency of restructuring translated as return to true federalism and articulated as devolution of power to the federating units, resource control, correction of lopsided geopolitical zones, redressing of inbuilt injustices and marginalization in the sharing of national offices and revenues among several others. Tension strung narratives dominating national politics emerged consequent on return to civil rule with broader space for political expression. Regression from national dialogue to ethnic diatribe has manifestly attended the
resurgence of separatist tendencies led by but not excluded to neo-Biafran activism. The essential character of national dialogue is progressively morphing into ethnic diatribes with the re-affirmation of ethnic identities as definitive. What explains these reaffirmations? What are the forces working against the evolution of a Nigerian identity after a century of existence as a single political unit? Why has the character of national conversation persisted as diatribes instead of dialogue? What do ethnic reaffirmations portend for the unity of Nigeria as a sovereign entity? Answering these questions provides a critical perspective for the discourse of the Nigerian national question which this write up hopes to achieve. It is difficult to envisage diatribes as the pathway to addressing the national question. In attempting answers to these questions, the underlining argument while accepting and conceding the fact that ethnic entities comprise the actual federating ‘units’, contends that addressing the national question demands a conscious development of a Nigerian identity. A view of vexing issues from a national prism has the potential of ridding political expression of the negative vibrations of diatribes. The Nigerian nation has demonstrated resilience in the face of daunting challenges to national unity; this reality necessitates scholarly efforts at unearthing and understanding sources of destabilization and disintegration such as ethnic diatribes to facilitate national integration.

Diatribe as Extreme Dialogue

Within Nigeria’s Fourth Republic (1999-date) ethnic diatribes have substantially substituted national dialogue as a means and character of political expression. Various champions of particularistic designs employ linguistic missiles in attacking real or perceived political enemies while laying claim to law and civility in such engagements. Because exclusive political identities drawn along party and ethnic lines constitute ground rules for the Nigerian spoils system, opportunities for constructive and non-emotive political engagement are systematically curtailed. Arguably, political expression as dialogue even when conducted within limits permissible by civility does not exclude vehement contestations.

As extreme dialogue, diatribes tend to selectively obscure and attenuate certain actualities while simultaneously highlighting and accentuating others. This selectivity deliberately aims at furthering certain positions while relegating others. To some extent, it becomes a contest where the loudest voice wins. For instance, in putting up a case of political marginalization, neo-Biafran agitators draw attention to the fact that the South-East has only five states while the other four geo-political zones have six each with the North-West having seven. While this is an incontestable fact, Toyo (2001:12) argues convincingly that the creation of states only resulted from strident demands from minority groups that sought relief from the chauvinistic injustices suffered at the hands of dominant ethnic groups in each region. Ethnic based elite actively resisted division of their regions into states during the military era. The intra-ethnic divides characterized by minority impression of marginalization at the hands of regional majorities which were the main drivers of demands for state creation are silenced using the bogus claim of the existence of an ethnically homogenous South-East. Moreover, this tends not only to obfuscate the facts but to insult those who suffer real marginalization- the ‘minoritization’ of stakes in the national equation.

The placement of diatribe as dialogue typifies in the fusion of two distinct political narratives into a potentially disturbing
grandiloquence. These are the long standing restructuring narrative on one hand and that of separatist agitations on the other. As component of national dialogue, the demand for restructuring according to Pa Ayo Adebanjo (Salaudeen 2017) is neither a peculiarity of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic nor propped up suddenly as an affront on the Buhari government by elements sympathetic to Jonathan who lost the presidency in 2015. Indeed, vituperations from the political elite disparaging Nigeria’s federal arrangement are documented in Toyo (2001) who sufficiently demonstrates the basic ethnic essence of such expressions. Toyo rejects the political elite penchant for blaming the constitution for the difficulties of the practice of federalism in the country. To him the first difficulty of federalism in Nigeria is the ‘irreconcilable ambitions of the chauvinistic elite of the big three ethno-cultural areas: Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. The elite chauvinists of each of these groups want to dominate and control the country. Therefore, there is intense rancour, rivalry and even hatred among them’ (Toyo 2001:13).

To a large extent, Toyo’s analysis explains why the restructuring narrative and debate is collapsed with separatist agitations; it explains the semantic convolution of simultaneously articulating restructuring and separatism within the contours of the same narrative without the two amounting to empirical equivalents. A tenuous logic purports inevitability of disintegration only avertable by restructuring; the marshalling of strong voices in support of restructuring affirms this contingent inevitability. The restructuring narrative consequently resonates in personalities such as the former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who argues that ‘Nigeria’s disintegration is imminent and immediate solution is restructuring’ (Salaudeen 2017:33). In fairness to Pa Ayo Adebanjo, calls for restructuring and the articulation of tenable arguments in its support grossly predate the 2015 general elections and its implications.

The incessant calls for a sovereign national conference have the theme of restructuring at their core. It is however interesting that even though the very survival of Nigeria hangs on restructuring as perceived by some Nigerians, a certain segment of the country is not keen on the subject. In contrast to Ayo Adebanjo, Mahmoud Haruna (Salaudeen2017) argues that restructuring is a buzz word of a section of the elite that feels shut out of governance especially at the federal level after the last general elections, who are thus seeking political relevance. Notwithstanding the convoluted logic, the ebb and flow of conversation on the current structure of Nigeria’s federalism ostensibly operated within the limits of civilized dialogue until June 6, 2017 when some leaders of Northern youths sitting in Kaduna issued a quit notice to all Igbos residing in the North to leave by October 1st, 2017. This was apparently in response to the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB)’s public pronouncements directed not just against President Buhari but against the North as a whole. The pronouncement which has become known as the Kaduna Declaration occasioned the addition of hate speech to Nigeria’s political and social lexicon. Subsequent utterances from different parts of the country have become characterized by acrimonious diatribes. These self-acclaimed ethnic champions, political fortune seekers and opportunists, are hardly representative of their publics. They help to conceal the evil conspiracy of the thieving elite where identity is becoming clear.

Separatist agitations, quit notices and other expressions of their kind which are narratives conducted using diatribes mislead many to thinking that Nigeria has been a failure after its more than hundred years of existence.
That is certainly a wrong verdict. Omotola (2017:222), opposes the notion of Nigeria’s failure as a united nation by stating that ‘Nigeria has arguably been most successful in coming to terms with the dilemmas of maintaining unity in diversity’. This paper canvasses this position advocating that Nigerians and their detractors must drop diatribes for dialogue to forge ahead with project Nigeria.

Understanding the Dynamics of Political Expression in Nigeria

In attempting an understanding of the metamorphosis of political expression in Nigeria from civilized dialogue to ethnic diatribes a number of theses have been examined. These theses which overlap at some points individually embody debates that seek to explain historical and current political, economic and social realities in Nigeria. The theses include the so-called failed state thesis, the socio-economic thesis, the amalgamation and quest for hegemony thesis and the democratic space thesis. Identifying and documenting the practicalities of these theses provides an avenue for charting an alternative course conducive to civilized political expression as national dialogue in order to attain national unity and progress.

The Failed State Thesis

The failed state thesis is highly contentious with vociferous proponents on both sides of the debate. This contention applies directly to the state in Africa. Polemics associated with the discourse on state failure are, however, generic appraisals of state behaviour not restricted to Africa. Milliken and Krause (2002:757) view the prevalence of polemics as resulting from tensions between the institutional and functional understanding of state failure as ‘state institutions can persist even while the state fails to fulfil what we understand as its key attributes’. Understanding state failure or collapse within its institutional and functional dimensions is at the centre of Milliken and Krause’s analysis. Institutional dimensions relate to the ideal of ‘stateness’ against which a state can be measured as either succeeding or failing. This can be understood as the extent to which formal institutions of governance are legitimate and representative and the extent of monopoly of instruments of violence by the state. Institutional dimension of state failure or collapse has to do therefore with a decomposition of such governance institutions and the erosion of state’s legitimacy.

Other scholars such as Acemoglu and Robinson, (2013), view African states as failed states due to the dominance of what they term extractive political and economic institutions. Extractive political institutions concentrate power in narrow political elite which exercises power with little constraints, while extractive economic institutions are designed to extract incomes from the people. While some claim to empirical scholarship can be permitted the authors, their conclusions may not escape the charge of being ahistorical. Southall’s (1974) examination of state formation in Africa provides support for a fundamental historically derived argument in this paper that African states were not designed to thrive by their colonial architects. He describes these states as irrational assemblages of rival ethnic groups holding only remote possibilities for the forging of a sense of nationhood. Most of these were formerly independent states in their own rights such as the Emirates of Northern Nigeria, the Yoruba empires in the West and the Kingdom of Benin. At independence the ‘new states’ were practically left in the lurch in the sense that ‘the democratic models presented by colonial powers for adoption at independence were a rather sudden and
complete reversal of the highly centralized and administratively dominated system which had characterized the colonies for many decades’ (Southall 1974:158).

In other words, the democratic, inclusive, pluralistic and participatory state form assumed for independent Africa by the expiring colonial state was at best an optimistic illusion and at worst a deliberate imperial ploy to make the state in Africa unviable. The grotesque ‘democratic’ structures inevitably collapsed shortly after independence giving way to military dictatorships and one party states throughout Africa. Indeed Southall reasons further that even after independence, external pressures remain at the heart of the problems of state management in Africa with Nigeria given as a prominent example. The so-called failed state thesis is considered faulty because it ignores the basic historical negation of existentialism for the African state by utilizing the same ‘objective’ standards to measure state behaviour across the line dividing the Northern and Southern hemispheres. It is also discredited by the fact that even with this quandary, the continent has not imploded as ‘a holocaust of confusion and bloodshed’ (Southall 1974:164). Military regimes and the one-party state are gradually becoming mere relics of African history as the continent displays an uncommon resilience in the quest for stability, or sticking together.

The failed state thesis, notwithstanding its weakness, has gained currency among African scholars. Jinadu (2005:12) argues that the Nigerian state can be said to have failed because it has negated its professed system which is democracy whose universal principles embrace accountability and representation. Indicators of this failure, according to him, include the arbitrary use of power within a system of general impunity, deliberate violation and abuse of the rights of citizens, tardy nature of the judicial and legal system that places emphasis on technicalities to prolong and frustrate litigation. Similarly, Aluko (2005) depicts the character of the Nigerian state as ‘invasive and predatory’ with the implication that such character undermines governance structures designed for development. The resultant effect of this state character is the high degree of distrust for the state and the promotion of sub-national consciousness, loyalty and allegiance, as well as suspicion and rivalry amongst the composite entities.

Akpar, (2014:26) focusing on Nigeria, views ‘the perennial problem of violent conflicts between religious, ethnic, sectional and military entities in endless feuds within and against the state’ as symptomatic of a failed state. Arguably, this position is tenable given that the prolonged prevalence of conflicts and their apparent intractability questions and challenges state legitimacy especially where and when armed groups directly challenge a country’s armed forces. The drawback with this conclusion is whether such scenarios alone suffice to qualify a state as failed. For instance, suggesting that the United States of America is failing as a state due to renewed right wing activism, increasing radicalization of young Americans and terror attacks, frequent gun attacks, mass shootings and external threats would appear preposterous. Madzokere and Matanda, (2014), in an extensive and detailed analysis attempt to answer the question on the status of Zimbabwe as either a progressive or failed state. The submission of the argument tilts largely in favour of the latter with a documentation of crises ramifications for health and education, society and economy, politics, religion and human rights which falls short of the expectations of Zimbabweans.
The allusion to Nigeria as a state without citizens but only subjects given its incapacity to deliver basic rights and amenities to the people (Agbaje & Adebanwi 2003) typifies a failed state existing in denial of its obligations. Succeeding generations of Nigeria’s political elite neglected the utilization of their political power for nation building and the engendering of national prosperity and progress. Due to this failure, Nigeria has become ‘the sleeping giant of Africa’ (Akinyele 2003:123).

Assuming an acceptance of the failed state thesis, appropriate reactions would consist of mass mobilization against the failed political elite as expressions of loss of confidence. In such scenarios the lexicon of political expression and exchange would draw from a repertoire of revolutionary thought which identifies the political elite as the common enemy and not specific ethnic agglomerations. The proclivity for drawing the battle lines along the ethnic frontier using diatribes is probably a function of expert or intelligent manipulation and ethnic channelling of social exasperations. From an ingrained survivalist instinct, the power elite anticipate imminent eruptions and manipulate factionalized vents which do not translate to threats to entrenched elite interest. According to Toyo (2001:14), ‘…Oduduaism, Arewaisms, Ohanezeism, are merely being used to inflame the common people and elite fellow travellers in targeted ethnic-cultural areas to gain or consolidate constituencies for the power contest involved in primitive capitalist accumulation’.

Akinyele (2003:141) reiterates the instrumental power of exclusive political cleavages for elite aims by arguing that ‘ethnicity and religion, because of their all-embracing and emotive nature, have become suitable platforms for mass mobilization in the hands of the political class’. According to Jinadu (2005:13), meaningful reform in Nigeria must ‘address the structural question of changing the character of the Nigerian state as the vehicle for primitive accumulation’. The dominated, marginalized and oppressed are the Nigerian people-workers, peasants, professionals and traders contemptuously referred to as the common man or the ordinary man by the political elite.

While accepting the itemised problems of the state in Africa and Nigeria according to the failed state thesis as factual, it is important to note that as a frame of analysis, the thesis is actually a ploy paradigm of liberal scholarship which seems not to be properly understood by Nigerian intellectuals. It has therefore become a cheap vehicle for deployment of the Nigerian political expression now finally grounded as ethnic diatribes replacing dialogue. The so-called failed state thesis fuels diatribes by creating the impression of doom and end of the road scenario for Nigeria. For instance, the narratives of restructuring and separatism derive strength from the notion that the Nigerian state has failed; it is however difficult to envisage an automatic disappearance of the problems of governance such as corruption in the aftermath of either restructuring or disintegration.

The Socio-Economic Thesis

The parties to ethnic diatribes in Nigeria innately claim the socio-economic fundamentals underlining their engagements. Akinyele (2003) acknowledges that ethnicity becomes acutely salient and problematic when it is employed as a generalized strategy for furthering individual and group interests. Neo-Biafra agitations clearly allege marginalization of the Ibo in federal appointments and the fact that no Ibo man has occupied the office of executive
president in Nigeria. The emphasis on occupation of public offices utilized as instruments of accumulation demonstrates the relevance of the socio-economic thesis. Also, Niger-Delta agitations revolve around disproportionate allocation of the economic resource derived from the region to the maintenance of other parts of the country. The Arewa youths who issued a quit notice to the Igbos also appropriated ethnic unity with an implied perception of the Igbo as economically dominant and ungrateful ‘strangers’. Arguably, the failure of the Nigerian state resulted from the ethnic definition of politics organized sorely for accumulation and which is negligent of nation-building and socio-economic development. The poor state of the economy in turn reinforces ethnic dimensions of political expression and competition; as it further renders resources scarcer.

Encapsulated in the current ethnic diatribes, masquerading as national dialogue, is the already mentioned old and recurring restructuring narrative which identifies an overly strong centre as the malaise assailing Nigeria’s federalism. To this end, to restructure means to devolve power to the federating units especially the power over exploration of natural resources and use of revenues deriving therefrom. Indeed, Kehinde (2005) utilizing historical validation expounded Nigeria’s flawed federalism as a function of the dis-aggregative process of its formation and made a strong case for restructuring. Embedded in Kehinde’s submission are disproportionate sizes of the federating units at inception with the Northern Region alone bigger than the Eastern and Western Regions put together. Also argued out sufficiently is the “unitary federalism” given to the nation by prolonged military rule. At the centre of these factual submissions is the criticism of central control of regionally derived revenue. The strength of the socio-economic thesis in explaining preponderance of ethnic diatribes in Nigeria’s political expression comes out in the context of these submissions. It claims, the strong centre being in firm grasp and control of the North (the Hausa/ Fulani oligarchy) lacking natural and even human resources, presides over the ‘milking of the cow’ (oil revenues from the South-South and South-East) to support the country created by the British. It will appear that the original purpose of Lugard’s amalgamation of the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria is still being served. According to Olaniyan and Alao (2003:6),

The amalgamation of the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria was in practical terms an attempt to solve the problem of financial administration of the North... The colonial office was not prepared to spend British taxpayers’ money on unprofitable colonial administration. The immediate concern of the British government was how to use the resources of the South to reduce the financial burden of the North.

Whether articulated or left un-mentioned as the elephant in the room, the use of oil revenues for the development of the entire country stands at the core of demands for resource control. Omatsaye (2017) argues that the control of oil by a centre dominated by the North constitutes the cause of the frustration of the East, the West and the Minorities. There is, however, an inherent historical dishonesty in some of these submissions which is characteristic of diatribes which selectively obscure and
attenuate certain actualities while simultaneously highlighting and accentuating others. It is difficult, for instance, to state what the East and the West produced over and above the North before oil became a dominant factor in Nigeria’s national life. Before oil exploration began in commercial quantity, the North produced groundnuts, cotton, beniseed, hides and skin for export when the West produced cocoa and the East palm oil. If at that time the East could boast of coal, the North offered tin. It becomes difficult to tell who funded who in this equation before the coming of petroleum. The socio-economic thesis seems to totally neglect this historical fact, fuelling the diatribes instead.

Utilizing similar selective discourse, demands for restructuring are utilized by state governors to deflect local grievances about lack of development by putting the blame on the federal government (Jinadu 2005). The aggressive search for oil in the North including the recent announcement that oil exploration has begun in Nassarawa state indicate the desire of the North to break away from dependence on oil revenues from the South which is the source of acrimony. Diversification of the economy into expanded agricultural production and solid mineral development apart from generally boosting national revenues also aims at reducing federal dependence on the South. The present crises are derivative of a focus on distribution as opposed to creation and generation of wealth. The component units are locked in a fight for equitable allocation which has replaced competition for development witnessed in the First Republic. This creates tension that manifests in the extant diatribes. This is the import of the socio-economic thesis.

The Amalgamation and Quest for Hegemony Thesis

The Igbo, Yoruba and Northern political elite had engaged in a hegemony contest even before the attainment of independence. This refers to a not so cogently articulated contest on who should rule Nigeria. The question of who is more politically astute and therefore defter at appropriating political power constitutes the point for engagement. Akinyele (2003), comments that Nnamdi Azikiwe committed a political blunder in 1948 by stating that the Igbo had the right to lead the other ethnic groups in Africa. This assertion which was contained in his acceptance speech as the President of Igbo State Union did not go down well with other ethnic groups in Nigeria and prompted the Eastern minorities to form their own unions. He states further that the formation of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa in 1948 was interpreted by the Igbo in Lagos as a declaration of war. Akinyele’s quote from Awolowo graphically illustrates this argument underlining the quest for hegemony thesis.

…there was a fierce and almost cut-throat competition among the three so-called majority ethnic groups for federal hegemony. …Each of the three major ethnic groups regarded it as its destiny to lead the country, to the permanent exclusion of the other ethnic groups. In due course, this misguided ambition generated hatred among the three, fears, resentment and antipathy among the minorities and pernicious disharmony among the entire ethnic groups (Akinyele 2003:132).

The staging of the coup of January 15th, 1966 led mainly by Ibo military officers can be interpreted along these lines as an attempt by the Igbos to eliminate Northern hegemony. The bloody coup and a subsequent secessionist war, however, failed to secure
the much desired political gains for the Igbos. The quest for hegemony thesis seeks to explain ethnic diatribes that have at present polarized the Igbo East and the Hausa/Fulani North.

In the blind quest for political hegemony, the ‘dominant’ ethnic groups in Nigeria display primitivism because clinging to ethnic identities for political mobilization and organization is as primitive as racism. Primitivism here implies the refusal to move beyond the crude nature of the amalgamation. Accepting its crudity in no way negates the imperative of creating a new national identity through conscious and deliberate strategy and process of inclusion that emphasizes contribution before distribution.

Empirical support for the quest for hegemony thesis is inferable from the different meanings attached to restructuring by ethnic clusters vocal on the subject. For the Yoruba of the South-West, restructuring equates to regionalism. The elevation of Awoooism almost to an ideological pedestal by the South West political elite expresses nostalgia for a return to regionalism. The persuasion being that operating under a regional arrangement pulls more power to the federating units; gives room for political autonomy; and is more conducive for development. Awoooists are quick to point out socio-economic development evidence in support of regionalism despite attempts to hamstring the Western Region by the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) led Federal Government seen in its role in the Action Group crisis of 1962 and the creation of the Mid-Western Region in 1963. While the benefits of regionalism are debatable, demand for a return to regionalism contains ingrained aversion to prolonged political domination by the North. Olakunle (2017) sees Nigeria as a torrent of injustices operating under a skewed political geography with a Northern sheriff dominating the East and West.

For the Igbos of the South-East geo-political zone, restructuring is confederation which has been taken to extremes by (IPOB) to mean secession. Confederation believed to be synonymous with self-determination also translates into a desire for freedom from political domination by the North. The reasoning being that if the Igbo cannot occupy the office of president of federal Nigeria, then that aspiration is attainable under a con-federal arrangement. The South-South seeks a restructuring which eliminates federal control of oil revenues and replaces it with resource control by oil producing states.

To a reasonable extent, it is plausible to contend that the disposition of the North to the restructuring narrative lends credence to the protestations of the other ethnic groups. Given that the North’s notion of restructuring does not include physical political rearrangement or institutional tinkering implies a satisfaction with the status quo. Instead of regionalism or confederation or resource control, the North prefers more equitable governance as its understanding of restructuring. According to the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Nigeria needs competent leadership and needs to maintain unity, not restructuring (Salaudeen, 2017). The polarization under this thesis does not douse the fire of political expression manifested as diatribes but inflames it. This does not help the national cause for Nigeria.

The Democratic Space Thesis

With the return to civil rule in 1999 after prolonged military dictatorship, the political space was opened and expanded. The emphasis on freedom of expression which is cardinal to democracy has tended to produce abuse of political expression which has also contributed to the metamorphosis of the political language from national dialogue to diatribes. Pluralism and diversity of origins, ideas and ideologies inherent in democracies render dialogue indispensable for the creation
of a shared understanding and the nurturing of such diversity (Arslan 2015). Sobowale, (2013) is of the view that many problems experienced in Nigeria result from lack of appropriate communication. While his emphasis is on communication between politicians and the voting public, his position underscores the fact that while verbal exchanges of information and facts always take place, communication only occurs where meanings are shared in reciprocal arrangements.

The return to civil rule in 1999 opened up the democratic space for inclusive political expression and participation hitherto constricted under military dictatorship. Concomitantly, the opportunity for expressing dissatisfactions and disappointments with the state presented itself. Given the multiplicity of pending grievances in a system where almost every ethnic group alleges official marginalization, Nigeria’s experiment with democracy became particularly noisy as many voices expressing different and even conflicting positions became audible. Goshit (2016) examines freedom of expression and the social media in Nigeria and affirms freedom of the social media industry in Nigeria. In affirming this freedom, inescapable responsibility is emphasized implying that while freedom of expression is a fundamental right, it is not absolute. Within Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, freedom of expression as a measure of political inclusiveness has contributed to robustness of political and social conversation conferring a democratic spirit on the polity. At the same time variations and deep-seated character of economic and political grievances of Nigerians have tended to produce extreme dimensions to national conversation and action. Opening up of the democratic space has occasioned panoply of ethnic tensions and clashes, religious extremism and crises, anti-state phenomena such as militancy, insurgency and even terrorism.

Civil rule has also generated incongruities within official circles in the form of official impunity which derives from an odd mixture of democratic mandate with an imperial disposition which typically characterized the Obasanjo administration. To Isumonah (2016:43), Obasanjo was an imperial president whose rule fostered one-party domination, derogated from political competition and participation using party machinery, the Independent National Electoral Commission, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and state agents of force. A high degree of pugnacity was evident in verbal expressions and actions of Obasanjo as an individual. This disposition proved infectious with a resultant militancy in national political conversation which has successfully morphed into diatribes projected mainly from ethnic consciousness and identity.

Conclusion

Political expression in Nigeria comes across clearly as ethnic diatribes notwithstanding its being presented as national dialogue. Nigeria as a post-colonial state contends with numerous problems of statehood. The theses identified as forming the basis for Nigeria’s political debate do not exhaust the grounds for Nigeria’s problems. That each of them proves defective in dealing with Nigeria’s problems, though giving grounds for the perception of same, and as the resultant quarrels or contests, the worry is in the manner of the conduct of these contests.

The failed state thesis echoes a Western penchant for apocalyptic predictions on Nigeria’s nationhood and it in turn fuels grievances that apparently confer credence on the socio-economic thesis and the quest for hegemony thesis. The dis-ingeniousness in deployment of the failed state thesis shows in both the ahistorical nature of certain arguments and the fact that the failed state attributes are
not a peculiarity of Nigeria. The failed state argument lacks the strength to support the prevailing debilitating ‘diatribic’ narratives. Similarly, Nigeria’s excessive dependence on oil revenues is an incontestable national dilemma. The imperative is concerted efforts at diversification and not the deployment of unfavourable socio-economic variables for the building of narratives that threaten national unity and survival. The quest for hegemony thesis demonstrates elite escapism where articulated alternatives for mitigating perceived or real political marginalization reflect frustration arising from failure to establish effective hegemony by each of the so-called ‘majorities’. Verbalizing this position would appear thus- “if I can’t be in charge, we must restructure or go our separate ways”. This rhetoric relegates and undermines interdependence as a source of strength and

weakens the fabric of the nation. The expansion in the democratic space has provided opportunity for healthy exchanges and dialogue for the furtherance of the Nigeria nationhood project which must not be undermined by inverted dialogue.

‘Diatribes’ is a fitting description of the language now developed by Nigerians for political contests. It begs the question to state that diatribes can never be useful substitutes for dialogue if Nigeria is to forge ahead successfully. At this critical stage of her national history, Nigeria must not squander the opportunity for engaging a useful debate for dealing with the real problems of nation-building. Restructuring must not be seized by so-called ‘majorities’ who think Nigeria belongs to them, especially using the weapon of diatribes to destroy the opportunity.
References


