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On the Study of Ethnicity in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper reviews the different perspectives that have been utilized to shed light on the phenomenon of ethnicity in Nigeria, arguably one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries. From an overview of the literature, this paper argues that while these perspectives have benefited from debates on ethnicity worldwide, Nigerian responses to historical developments such as the gruesome civil war in Nigeria have enriched the study of ethnicity. It notes, in particular, the dominance of instrumentalist interpretations in the literature that privilege the role of elites in ethnic mobilization and conflicts. The paper also suggests that such a position needs to be substantiated through a consideration of the connections and disconnections between elite and mass interests through a systematic study of horizontal inequalities.

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By Ukoha Ukiwo

1. Introduction

The vilification of ethnicity as the scapegoat of all vices associated with the Nigerian body polity has made the subject a dominant theme in the study of Nigerian political economy. No work is deemed 'scholarly' that does not consider the salience or irrelevance of ethnicity in its analysis and conclusions. Thus, analysts interested in such diverse issues as nationalism, decolonisation, national integration, political parties, military intervention, corruption, economic development, structural adjustment, democratisation and violent conflict have all considered the 'ethnicity' variable. This was the case even in the 1960s and 1970s when the major intellectual traditions felt ethnicity was of secondary importance as an explanatory variable; at best an epiphenomenon and at worst a mask for class privilege (Sklar 1967). The result of such interest in ethnicity, which is proportional to the high level of 'ethnic consciousness' in the Nigerian society (Lewis et al 2002), is a legion of literature on ethnicity, making a critique a Herculean task.

It is apposite to note from the onset that the title of the present article is not only ambitious, but also somewhat restrictive. It suggests that it is possible to isolate what might be called 'ethnic studies' in Nigeria from the wider scholarship on ethnicity. Actually, much of the material on Nigeria has been inspired by the paradigms of the study of ethnicity in the social sciences generally. As Jinadu (1994: 166) rightly puts it, 'the study of ethnic relations in Nigeria has passed through a number of phases reflecting changes in the country's political status as well as changes in fashions and trends in the social science research agenda'. The title is borne from the fact that the works in review focus on Nigeria and very little attempt has been made to bring in comparative materials. This introductory section is followed by conceptual clarifications and a critical analysis of the different explanations scholars have advanced for understanding the phenomenon of ethnicity in Nigeria. Following this, the themes that have dominated the study of ethnicity in Nigeria are examined, outlining some of the neglected issues.

2. Conceptual Issues

To begin with, ethnicity[1] may be defined as "the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation" (Osaghae 1995:11). This definition is preferred because it identifies two issues that are central to discussions on ethnicity. The first is that ethnicity is neither natural nor accidental, but is the product of a conscious effort by social actors. The second is that ethnicity is not only manifest in conflictive or competitive relations but also in the contexts of cooperation. A corollary to the second point is that ethnic conflict manifests itself in various forms, including voting, community service and violence. Thus, it need not always have negative consequences. Ethnicity also encompasses the behaviour of ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are groups with ascribed membership, usually but not always based on claims or myths of common history, ancestry, language, race, religion, culture and territory. While all these variables need not be present before a group is so defined, the important thing is that

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[1] The term ethnicity is consistently used in this work for what some analysts have called *tribalism* or *communalism*. For the different usages of the terms see, Lonsdale 1994:132-34, Mamdani 1996:184-87

such a group is classified or categorised as having a common identity that distinguishes it from others. It is this classification by powerful agencies such as the state, religious institutions and the intelligentsia such as local ethnic historians that objectifies the ethnic group, often setting in motion processes of self-identification or affirmation and recognition by others. Thus, ethnicity is not so much a matter of 'shared traits or cultural commonalities', but the result of the interplay between external categorization and self-identification (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004:31-32).

Most analysts agree on the basic constitutive elements of ethnic groups but disagree on how and why they were formed, why ethnicity occurs, why it occasionally results in violent conflicts and what should be done to prevent its perverse manifestations. Depending on what answers they provide to these elementary questions, analysts have been divided into several schools of thought. While earlier commentary classified the approaches as primordialism and constructivism, this paper is attracted to the recent schema used by Varshney (2002), which distinguishes four schools: essentialism, instrumentalism, constructivism and institutionalism. This is because it enables us to identify different tendencies that have been lumped under constructivism. Briefly, essentialism restates the thesis of primordialism (that ethnic identities are static and given) by noting that ethnic identities date back to the distant past and are rooted in cultural differences among kinship-based groups. Instrumentalism posits that ambitious classes manipulate dormant ethnic identities to pursue their interests, thereby politicising ethnicity and ethnicising the polity. Constructivists interrogate the origins of ethnic groups, tracing identity 'construction' or 'invention' to the activities of colonial authorities, missionaries and emergent nationalists and emphasizing the historicity and fluidity of ethnic identities. Institutionalists emphasize the critical role of political institutions and pragmatic policies in the framing of ethnic relations. As Ake (2000) and Mustapha (2000) have correctly argued these distinctions have been overemphasized as use of one does not necessarily preclude the other. Most scholars combine more than one perspective in their analyses. Essentialism, the earliest of the four approaches, arose from cultural cartographies and greatly influenced modernization theorists whose positions became the points of departure of the other three approaches. The following sections examine the interplay between the ethnicity literature and theories from other disciplines.

2.1 Modernization Theory and Ethnicity

Modernization theory assumed that conflicts in developing societies were borne out of the fact that the peoples who constituted these societies originated from varied cultures that engaged themselves in bloody duels before the advent of the 'civilisers'. Embedded in essentialist or primordial explanations is the assumption of irrationality in ethnicity. W. Arthur Lewis' (Cited in Sklar 1967:1-2n) prognosis of the problems of independent states of West Africa succinctly states this position:

> "Most of them include people who differ from each other in language or tribe or religion or race; some of these groups live side by side in a long tradition of mutual hostility, restrained only in the past by an imperial power. French writers use the word 'cleavage' to describe a situation where people are mutually antipathetic, not because they disagree on matters of principle, like liberals and socialists, or because they have different interests like capitalists and workers, but simply because they are historic enemies. Cleavage cannot be overcome merely by argument and economic concessions, as in the traditional British manner, because it is not based on

disputes about principles or interests. Hence it is the most difficult problem of all".

Such characterization, which was based on the earlier work of several of the colonial anthropologists, was credited for inspiring early policies of ethnic and race relations in several African societies such as Nigeria. These include the promotion of separate settlement schemes for 'natives' and 'settlers' in emergent urban communities; indirect rule; and, regionalisation aimed at ensuring there was a minimum social distance between the groups. While modernization theory was based on the premises of essentialism, modernization theorists were not convinced that separate development was the best solution to the problem of ethnicity. Rather it advanced charismatic national leadership, national parties, national youth movements, national political institutions, western education, advances in communication and transportation, and urbanization - indeed modernization - as catalysts for integration. The expectation of integration derived from antecedents of the 'American melting pot' as well as the apotheosis of nationalism in Western Europe. However, this 'prophecy' turned out to be false. Ethnicity rather than receding into the darker pages of history repositioned itself. It moved from the backseat it had occupied to take up the driver's seat. Analysts were quick to point to the persistence of ethnicity despite decades of unrestrained modernization in all spheres.

In a major critique of modernization theory, Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe (1971:3) asserted that, "inter-group conflict is seldom a product of simple cultural diversity and, in the Nigerian case, there is little that is 'traditional' about the contemporary pattern of political divisions. On the contrary, Nigeria's political crisis is traceable directly to the widening of social horizons and to the process of modernization at work within the national boundaries". The articles in the volume edited by Melson and Wolpe demonstrate that rather than eliminating ethnicity modernization managed to create and reinforce it. James Coleman (1971) shows how the desire of the Igbo speaking people for education was seen as threatening the status quo, where the Yoruba speaking people, who had earlier contacts with western civilization, dominated the colonial service. He also highlights how the rising profile of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (an Igbo) in the nationalist movement aroused rivalry among the Yoruba elite, leading to the formation of alternative political platforms. Thus, both education and charismatic leadership, which modernization theory expected to reduce or eliminate ethnicity, exacerbated it.

Abner Cohen's (1971) research focussed on the commercial enterprises of migrant Hausa communities in Ibadan, a Yoruba town, showing how ethnic identity developed as the migrants devised measures to take control of the cattle and kola nut markets. The study demonstrates that migrant communities often developed political institutions and systems distinct from cultural practices dominant in their places of provenance. Their relations with their 'host' communities were at different points cooperative, competitive and conflictive. The Yoruba started to mobilize against the Hausa traders not because they were Hausa, but because they had dominated the market and were regarded as exploitative merchants. Hausa migrants often felt their interests were not only distinct from their kinsmen at 'home', but sometimes threatened by them. Thus, they were ready to enter into alliances they deemed necessary for their survival. Their forms of organization were meant to checkmate not just competitors from other ethnic groups but those from their own groups. Hence, when some Hausa traders decided to create another market and attendant political organizations outside *sabo,* it was the Hausa traders at *sabo* that protested and fought against the idea, not the Yoruba.

John Paden (1971) examined Igbo migrants in Kano and concluded that it was not differences in values but similarity of values that resulted in the competition over scarce resources, in order to actualise such social values which pitched the Igbo against their Hausa-Fulani hosts. Wolpe's (1971) study of politics in Port Harcourt arrived at a similar conclusion. Other articles in the volume highlighted how the military and educational institutions, which were expected to foster integration, became sites of - and catalysts for - ethnic competition. In contrast, ethnic unions, which were deemed reflections of primordial loyalties embarked on community development initiatives and also played useful roles in political mobilization by political parties. Thus, Smock (1971), and Magid (1971) who studied ethnic unions among the Igbo and Idoma respectively, support Coleman's (1958) position that ethnicity, symbolised by the presence of ethnic unions, was not opposed to nationalism. Nationalists used ethnic unions to penetrate the rural areas and mobilise the people, which was to the chagrin of the colonialists who preferred to confine nationalist activities to the urban elites. Furthermore, Richard Sklar's (1971) contribution, using material from Western Nigeria, outlined 'the contributions of tribalism to nationalism' by distinguishing 'pan-tribalism (which) is a vigorous offspring of modern urbanization and distinctive expression of ethnic group activity for the most politically conscious members of a new and rising class' from 'communal partisanship that is endemic to rural areas and old towns where traditional values are paramount and the socially cohesive ties of traditional authority are binding upon the people' (Sklar 1971:263-264).[2]

Clearly, the Melson and Wolpe volume has helped clarify the phenomenon of ethnicity. However, the criticism of modernization theory is sometimes taken too far as to suggest that modernization inherently generates conflict. Such a conclusion is unfounded as it suggests that modernization leads to conflict everywhere. There is no empirical support for such position in Nigeria where most cities have not witnessed violent ethnic conflicts. Still, this absence of violent conflicts in several Nigerian cities has not attracted serious attention given the orthodox presupposition that ethnic diversity begets violent conflicts. As Horowitz (1998) observes if this were the case, the most modernised nations not the least modernized, would be the sites of intense ethnic conflicts. Studies that link modernization to ethnic conflicts need to underscore the specific contexts within which advances in modernization can contribute to the breakdown of harmonious ethnic relations. There is also a need to problematise the stage at which modernization would most likely generate conflict, by disaggregating aspects of modernization that tend to generate conflicts. Other issues that should be considered are demographic factors such as size of ethnic groups and patterns of migration, as well as the nature of socio-economic specialization, cooperation and competition among ethnic groups.

2.2 Ethnicity, Military Intervention and Civil War

Publications on the civil war have also contributed to the study of ethnicity in Nigeria either by privileging the ethnic factor or assigning it a marginal role in the hostilities. Melson and Wolpe's position that modernization promoted uneven development in different spheres among the different ethnic groups, and that the initiatives adopted by disadvantaged groups to bridge such disparities culminated in conflicts, is shared by several studies (Nafziger 1983). These and other studies, however, go beyond inter-ethnic competition to identify the role of class and international capital in precipitating the crisis. The bourgeois class bungled the First Republic because it did not play by the rules of the game (Dudley 1973) and manipulated ethnic sentiments in its competition for wealth and power (Diamond 1988, Post and Vickers 1973).

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[2] This is similar to Lonsdale's (1994) formulation of moral ethnicity and political tribalism in Kenya.

Increasingly, following the First Republic and the end of the civil war scholars began to adopt an instrumentalist view of ethnicity arguing that ethnicity was a weapon adopted and perfected by regionally based elites in their struggle to acquire state power and the wealth it guarantees. Ordinary Nigerians had nothing against each other. It was the elites that mobilised them against one another. The case of Bornu where the political and traditional elite spoke out against hostilities towards the Ibo, and therefore prevented anti-Ibo sentiments spreading to the Bornu area, is often cited as signifying the agency of the elite.

The problem with this analysis is that it is top-down. It assumes that the mass public is dormant and only acts at the prodding of the elite. It neither explains the convergence of elite-mass interests for political action nor acknowledges the possibility of the masses manipulating the elite. Dent's (1971) study of pre-civil war Nigerian military, which shows that northern soldiers pressured their officers to execute the counter coup, points to this possibility. In fact, research elsewhere has indicated that elites respond to mass expectations when they get involved in ethnic politicking. Moderate politicians who refuse to play the ethnic card often lose out to extremists who exploit popular ethnic grievances (Horowitz 1998:9). Hence, there is need to examine afresh the exact nature of the link between class and ethnicity.

2.3   State, Class and Ethnicity

Okwudiba Nnoli's *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (1978) represents the first comprehensive effort to investigate ethnicity in Nigeria. Unlike previous critics of modernization who identified social change as the cause of ethnicity, Nnoli, inspired by the Marxian class perspective of the dependency movement, asserts that ethnicity developed from colonialism. The provenance of ethnicity according to Nnoli was the colonial urban setting where:

> 'The exploited Africans soon experienced the colonizers' racial prejudice and discrimination in the fields of jobs, remunerations, housing, sports, and even churches and burial grounds. Having been uprooted from the pre-colonial setting which had valid meaning for him, in which history had effectively and organically related him to his local environment and culture had produced salutary patterns of interactions with others, the African migrant found the door to the coloniser's glorified world securely barred to him. The resultant anomie and alienation affected his socio-economic and political activities. Even in interactions with his fellow Africans, he experienced tension, anxiety, and insecurity. Disoriented, subjugated and humiliated by the colonizer he directed his aggressive impulses against other colonised 'natives' with whom he competed on the basis of equality. Ethnic group membership was useful for this competition' (Nnoli 1978:22).

The exploitative tendency of the coloniser and the scarcity of socio-economic and political opportunities in the colonial period generated intense elite competition. Nnoli argues that the colonial administration deliberately promoted ethnicity through policies of indirect rule, categorization of Africans by 'tribe', and promotion of separate settlements between natives and settlers of urban centres. The outcomes of the divide and rule oriented policies that led to the rise, spread and consolidation of ethnicity include: socio-economic competition, regional inequalities, lack of economic unity, rivalry in provision of amenities, low class consciousness, intemperate utterances and factional politics, among others. Although, Nnoli acknowledges that some pre-colonial differences were relevant in inter-ethnic competition, he states that cultural diversity was a myth because the colonised had been uprooted from the pre-colonial setting. By emphasizing the colonial experience,

Nnoli draws attention to role of the socio-economic system in the politicization of ethnicity. Ultimately therefore, he argues dependent capitalism pursued by colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, which promoted and exacerbated inequalities and placed emphasis on distribution instead of production, is the cause of ethnicity. It goes without saying according to Nnoli, that all projects such as the creation of the states within the Nigerian Federation administered by the bourgeois elites, will fail. Only a socialist revolution that rescues the country from dependent capitalism will promote the type of development that does not encourage ethnicity.

Nnoli's seminal study is illuminating in several respects. It identifies the materialist underpinnings of ethnicity. It shows that inter-ethnic contact does not necessarily provoke violent conflicts especially where there is socio-economic division of labour and exchange. Worthy of mention also is its inter-disciplinary perspective, which derives from Nnoli's political economy approach, enabling him to combine evidence from historical, anthropological, psycho-sociological, economic and political studies to buttress his arguments on the origins, crystallization and persistence of ethnicity. However, there is the tendency to exonerate the subordinate classes in privileging the role of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes leading to what Hodgkin (cited in Jinadu 2004:7) aptly called the 'clever elite/dumb mass thesis'. Moreover, history contests the view that ethnicity is a logical consequence of dependent capitalist development. Several dependent capitalist countries have avoided violent ethnic conflicts. Obviously, this position was influenced by the attraction of the dependency movement in social science faculties across Africa in the 1970s. It is instructive that Nnoli (1995) has changed his views and later propounded the argument that democracy and the substantial withdrawal of state from economic activities would help to check ethnicity. Finally, while it is true that colonialism was crucial, the approach can be questioned for underestimating pre-colonial antecedents. The assertion that migrants were uprooted from the pre-colonial setting presupposes an end of history, a clean break between the two epochs. There is no doubt however, that the transition was marked by both continuity and change. This is implicit in Peter Ekeh's (1972, 1975) theory of two publics, which he has applied to explain citizenship, ethnicity and corruption in Africa.

2.4   Civil Society and Ethnicity

Ekeh (1972, 1975) posits that one of the fundamental consequences of colonialism was the creation of two publics, which contested for the loyalty of Africans. These are: (1) the primordial public which is made up of ethnic unions, community associations and other primordial groups, established in the colonial period to meet the welfare needs that were denied by the colonial state; and (2) the civic public whose genealogy begins with the colonial state apparatus and encompasses the symbols and institutions of the post-colonial state. While the primordial public enjoyed the affection of the people who always thought of what they could do for it without asking for anything in return, the civic public is inundated by avaricious citizens with a notion of citizenship that begins and ends at the realm of rights. It is Ekeh's argument that ethnicity has flourished because the Nigerian elite who inherited the colonial state have conceptualised development as transferring resources from the civic public to the primordial public. The civic public is thus a contested terrain where representatives of the primordial public struggle for their share of the national cake. In this struggle, politics is amoral and the end justifies the means. The state is so treated because it is seen as alien, exploitative and oppressive.[3] Ekeh cites as evidence of the dichotomy between the two publics, the

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[3] Ekeh's thesis is similar to the views of French writers like Balandier and Bayart who argue that ethnicity is a form of resistance to colonialism. See, Lonsdale 1994.

fact that the same bourgeois elements that evaded taxes and pilfered public funds contributed generously to community projects and, when called upon, exhibited the highest level of probity in management of community finance. An example of this is found in the popular Igbo lexicon where the public service is referred to as *olu oyibo* (white man's job) and is different from *olu obodo* (community service).

Despite the light which Ekeh's theory sheds, especially on the centrality of the struggle for access to and control of the state, some of its assumptions remain suspect. It is still an instrumentalist explanation that privileges the role of the elite; it wrongly assumes that the motivation for corruption emanates from the desire to serve the primordial public; and it overlooks the possibility of overlap between the two publics given its fixation with the tradition-modernity dichotomy popularised by functionalist theory (See, Osaghae 2003, Joseph 1987). Moreover, Ekeh's theory overemphasizes the 'love' for the primordial public. Yet, studies on ethnic and hometown associations show clearly that payment of dues by members have remained a problem. Some communities were engulfed in violent conflicts on account of embezzlement of community funds indicating that corruption is not restricted to the civic public (Ahanotu 1982).

The major problem with these pioneering studies on ethnicity is that they are state-centred, elite based and proceed on the assumption that the history of the Nigerian peoples started with the arrival of the British. The preoccupation with the nation-building project, which is assumed to have began at the onset of colonization and is conceptualised as the transfer of loyalties of cultural units to the nation-state, has stymied any consideration of the "the possibilities and constraints offered by the actual historical dynamics of the sub-nation groups and formations" in pre-colonial Nigeria (Mustapha 1999:27). Indeed, Obaro Ikime (1985) has drawn attention to various forms of inter-ethnic relations that prevailed in the pre-colonial period but have since been supplanted by the colonialists and the post-colonial political elite.

Mustapha (1989, 1999) suggests that one possible approach to the national question is to take a cue from pre-colonial state formations which did not promote the indigene-settler distinction in identity formation, but granted full citizenship rights to non-natives that had settled and become important actors in their political economy. Pre-colonial histories and cultural differences also matter because they sometimes provide a useful background for understanding current conflicts, such as the Zango-Kataf and Ife-Modakeke conflicts, amongst others (Mustapha 2000, Albert 1999, Ekeh 1996). The localization of some of these violent conflicts in rural areas where "a particular ethnic group invokes historical and ancestral claims to the land area which is the subject of conflict, with the aim of restoring ownership" suggest the emergence of rural ethnicity which was neglected in earlier studies on ethnicity (Egwu 1998:55).

In addition, recent studies have shifted focus from the so-called major ethnic groups which exclusively preoccupied studies in the period between 1950 and the mid-1970s to minority ethnic groups. While minority politics from the late colonial period to the onset of the civil war were subordinated to the conflicts of the major ethnic groups, the state creation exercises that started in 1967 reconfigured the terrain for contestation. It led to the rise of 'majority minorities'[4] who have increasingly been

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[4] The term was coined to capture the new fortunes of ethnic groups who were hitherto regarded as minorities under the three-region structure but became dominant in the newly created states even though they are still regarded as minorities in the politics of the federation. They include Edo, Ijaw, Tiv and Ibibio. Minority minorities on the other hand are those groups that remained minorities in the new states such as Idoma, Itsekiri, etc.

accused of oppressing the 'minority minorities' with occasional outbreaks of hostilities, vindicating the position of the Willinks Commission that states creation was not the solution to the minority problem. The problem is, however, compounded by the fact that major ethnic groups also acquired more states in successive state creation exercises. These groups continue to dominate the federation which witnessed greater fiscal centralization since the advent of the military in 1966. This provoked dissent from ethnic minorities in the oil producing Niger Delta region who bemoan the continuous reduction of the share of revenue based on the derivation principle since the discovery of oil (Naanen 1995, Mustapha 2000).

The Niger Delta thus became a site of conflicts manifested in various forms, ranging from conflicts between communities and the state to conflicts among communities and oil companies, and conflicts between communities (Ojo 2002). While some have argued that these are environmental conflicts others have implicated the discrepancy between state and community understanding of security as contributing factors. According to Ibeanu (2000), who assimilates both views, conflicts in the Niger Delta arise from the fact that while the state defines security as the condition where transnational corporations have unrestricted access to the oil rigs in order to explore and exploit oil, community conceptions of security focus on guarantee of livelihoods. The efforts of both parties to each enforce their own security result in violent conflicts. Furthermore, it has been suggested that some of the communal conflicts in the region are proxy wars engineered and executed by state agents to divide and rule the people of the area (Ake 1996). While these explanations may hold in some cases, it is still risky to generalise. It has become evident to some scholars that while there is a national template for conflict, each conflict scenario has its own peculiarities and deserves to be studied in its own context. This realization has resulted in several studies that target specific conflicts in order to offer deeper insights into their origins and transformations (Otite and Albert 1999, IPCR 2003). One effort in this direction which focussed on the restive Niger Delta arrived at the interesting conclusion that:

> 'In virtually all the conflicts, the role of ethnic entrepreneurs who mobilize ethnic grievances in pursuit of their material interest has been decisive. Politicians, businessmen and youth leaders have been implicated in virtually all the conflicts. And usually the aim has been to mobilize ethnic grievances to achieve personal in individual objects, which are oftentimes even subversive of collective communal interests' (Isumonah and Gaskia 2001:74).

However, beyond the refrain of 'low' and 'false' class consciousness that attends instrumentalist theories, one is left to wonder how few 'greedy' characters are able to instigate and sustain conflicts that are against the common interest unless a concerted effort is made to understand the genuine 'grievances' of the apparently voiceless majority. We need to understand what specific political processes endear ethnic leaders to their followers.

Explanations of ethnicity would be richer if they combined the historical and structural approaches. As Mustapha (2000:105-106) has aptly argued there has recently been a tendency for western scholars to focus on the historical aspects in a bid to deconstruct the notion of primordial ethnic groups without relating such historical analysis to current manifestations of the problem which has been the preoccupation of scholars in Africa. The tendency for social constructionists to describe the agency of the colonial state, Christian missionaries, and fledging African elite in the construction of ethnic identities (as Law (1996) has reiterated for Yoruba identity) would be tantamount to a fairy tale if it is not related to contemporary developments.

Conversely, studies that focus on what has been described as the rise of sub-ethnicities since the onset of economic crises without relating it to the social history of pan-ethnic identities will end up with a short story that lacks depth. To this end, it is necessary that academic research on ethnicity in Nigeria, as elsewhere, take a closer look than ever, at local histories authored by 'amateur' historians to understand the social basis of ethnic identity formation and mobilization (Harneit-Sievers 2002)

3. Dominant Themes in the Study of Ethnicity

Apart from the abovementioned theoretical explorations, several themes have attracted the attention of scholars interested in ethnicity. These themes are: ethnic unions and ethno-political associations; economic crisis, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) and ethnicity; management of ethnicity; and ethnicity and democratization.

3.1 Ethnic Unions and Ethno-political Associations

Earlier insights on the phenomenon of ethnicity emerged from the study of the formation and roles of ethnic unions and homeland development associations (Coleman 1958, Sklar 1963, Smock 1972, Nnoli 1978, Ahanotu 1982). These studies trace the origins of the unions to migrants who conglomerated in the colonial urban environment that was unfamiliar, unfriendly and insecure. Their roles in the mobilization of resources order to award scholarship to promising youths, provide credit to businessmen, and to embark on amenities provisioning of the homeland have been highlighted. It has also been shown that although they emerged as a result of lack of interest of the colonial state in community development, they became more popular in the 1950s when some regional governments began to provide counterpart funding for such development. Their politicization and involvement in ethnic politicking have also received scholarly attention. But scholars began to shift attention from the unions after the new military banned them for their alleged involvement in partisan politics during the First Republic.

There was renewed interest in these bodies in the wake of the economic crises of the 1980s, which saw the resurgence of civil society perspectives, as it became apparent that some of these groups had filled the vacuum created by the retreating state (Albert 1993, Osaghae 1994a, 1995). One of the interesting revelations of these studies is that ethnic unions did not vanish entirely after the ban. They merely transformed their identities through changes in name, and concerned themselves with immediate communal issues. While pan-ethnic unions vanished, homeland associations continued to flourish. Pan-ethnic unions only became useful in the Diaspora where homeland associations could hardly be effective as a result of their insignificant membership. It was such dormant unions that were revitalised in the context of the ethno-religious conflicts from the mid 1980s.

The impetus for this resurgence was the desperation of military administrators to impose peace by seeking representatives of different ethnic groups in their domains. One consequence of this legitimization or state recognition was the traditionalization of the bodies as their leadership appropriated traditional chieftaincy titles and symbols. This development has generated intra-group conflicts, as chieftaincy tussles have emerged in the Diaspora that hitherto crippled development in the homelands. The export of tradition to the areas of settlement has also generated inter-group tensions, as the 'sons of the soil' fear this might be a prelude to making claims to their land. Recent attempts have also been made to analyse the rise of ethno-political associations within the framework of civil society against the predatory rule of an ethno-military class (Joseph 1999, Mustapha 2000, Akinyele 2001, Ikelegbe 2001 a&b). These studies need to be enriched by examining the

possibilities of historical affinities between present and past groups, analysing their structures and modes of resource mobilization, and the extent to which they represent those they claim to represent as well as their constraints.

3.2   Economic Crises, Structural Adjustment and Ethnicity

There is an underlying assumption in studies of ethnicity that ethnic identities and conflicts flourish in the milieu of economic crisis and poverty (Nnoli 1978, 1995). The common feature of such argument is the centrality of the state and the agency of conspiratorial bourgeois elements. This is evident in Jega (2000:25):

> 'Under conditions of economic crisis, and subsequently structural adjustment, there has been a swift decline in the ability of the state to provide for the basic socio-economic needs of the people. Similarly, there has been increased exclusion of a segment of the elite and the bourgeoisie in the distribution of the spoils of office, and an acute marginalization of the majority of the population from the benefits of development projects and social provisioning…And as the state …disengages from critical, basic social provisioning, only the constituencies and clients of those who control state power actually continue to have access to the state resources through patronage. Thus, under these conditions, groups have tended to rely on identity-based politics to struggle for access to the state and the resources that it controls, in order to protest exclusion and oppression, as well as to demand basic rights and socio-economic provisioning.'

Apart from showing a coincidence between the onset of economic crisis and resurgence of conflicts, analysts have provided empirical evidence for different dimensions of the crisis. Egwu (1998) has shown how the 'agrarian crisis' has relocated conflicts to rural Nigeria. Osaghae (1995) argues that structural adjustment has heightened mobilization of ethnic identity with evidence from the privatization programme and the Ogoni crisis. Most analysts are also in agreement that although, ethnic mobilization has been instrumental to the development of social capital, its net impact on development has been largely negative (Egwu 1993, Nnoli 1995). Despite the great insights these studies offer in understanding contemporary ethnic conflicts, they have tended to generalise excessively. The attempt to link ethnicity to economic crisis and SAP needs to be framed in such a way that it explains why conflicts have arisen in some areas and are absent elsewhere even though there has been uniform implementation of the programme across the country. This would entail highlighting the important intervening variables such as ethnic inequality. Osaghae (1995:21) has rightly suggested that, "It is the perception of inequality held by actors rather than actual inequality that leads to action. In some cases, inequalities are exaggerated to justify action or mobilize group solidarity…It is not so much deprivation or disadvantage that engenders ethnic action, it is rather the prospects of advancement from them".

Still despite the centrality of horizontal inequality to the understanding of ethnic relations (Stewart 2002), studies on ethnicity in Nigeria have merely glossed over it assuming it is evident for all to see. Few studies that have touched on inequalities have highlighted educational, economic and political inequalities at the federal level (Mustapha 1987, 2004, Ekeh and Osaghae eds. 1989, Osemwota 1994). However, although inequalities at the federal level have shaped the national template of inter-ethnic animosity, most of the conflicts have arisen out of perceptions of inequalities at the local and state levels. Even in the anti-Igbo riots in Northern Nigeria in 1966-67, which degenerated into a national conflict, it was significant that members of the Igbo ethnic group held prominent positions in both the public and private sectors of

Northern Nigeria, and were *ipso facto* implicated in inequalities at the region and local levels in northern Nigeria.

3.3   Managing Ethnic Diversity and Conflicts

Years before the attainment of independence, Nigeria's constitutional development experiences were concerned with the principal goal of managing ethnicity, which had shown clear signs of subverting the nation-building project. Federalism, the creation of regions and states and local governments, the shift from parliamentarism to presidentialism, the institutionalization of quota systems, the prohibition of ethnic political parties, consociational politicking, and the adoption of the federal character principle are some of the approaches that Nigeria has taken to manage ethnic diversity. These mechanisms have enjoyed the intellectual backing of institutionalists who posit that there is a connection between ethnic conflict or peace and the nature of political institutions (Young 1976, Horowitz 1985). Several works on ethnicity in Nigeria have been committed to examining the impact of these approaches to the management of ethnicity (eg. Ekeh and Osaghae ed. 1989, Adamolekun ed. 1991, Ekekwe 1986 Horowitz 1985, Mustapha 1986, Nnoli 1995, Osaghae 1998, Suberu 2001).

The verdict of such scholars who have examined the issues from different theoretical standpoints is that while these initiatives have solved some old problems they have generated many unintended consequences that have exacerbated ethnicity. What is more, they have been destabilizing for the Nigerian state system. As Suberu has noted with respect to revenue allocation and states creation:

> 'The establishment of nine separate commissions on revenue allocation since 1946 has led to neither the development of an acceptable or stable sharing formula nor the elaboration of an appropriate framework of values and rules within which a formula can be devised and incrementally adjusted to cope with changing circumstances' (2001:11)

> 'Given the sheer multiplicity and fluidity of the territorial and cultural cleavages that can be used to justify the demands for new states and the federal resources they bring with them, there is no certainty that the states-creation process will ever be concluded in Nigeria' (2001:15)

Analysts have attributed the limitations of the ethnic management policies to improper implementation, distortion of visions and lack of political will. Some however doubt the possibility of a state that generates fissiparous tendencies (Ibrahim 2000) and a predatory class that is endlessly looking for formulas to divide the Nigerian peoples (Mustapha 1985) implementing policies that promote ethnic peace and harmony.

3.4   Ethnicity and Democratisation

Those who profess their love for democracy have always been afraid of plurality. This is one of reasons why the ancient Greek 'inventors' of democracy excluded the 'weaker' sex and the 'barbarian' race from political participation. This antipathy for plurality was carried over into the 'age of liberty' as evidenced by the belated extension of suffrage in liberal democracies. J. S. Mills voiced this concern when he argued that democracy would not survive in a plural society (See, Horowitz 1985). These fears trailed most of the plural African countries at the eve of independence as some countries adopted one-party systems in order to preserve democracy and build

the nation. Nigeria is one of the few African countries that retained a multi-party structure even though *de facto* one party rule persisted in the regions and states. In the wake of 'the resurgence of democracy' from the mid-1980s, several analysts warned that democratization would ignite ethnic conflicts. This warning came at a period when scholars and renascent civil society were advertising democracy as a liberator from dictatorship and violent conflict (Nnoli 1995, Osaghae 1995, Olukoshi and Laasko eds. 1998). Some analysts referred specifically to the fact that liberal democracy, which privileged individual rights and disregarded group rights was not suitable for the African context where group rights are emphasized (Ake 2000, Jinadu 2004). Thus, some efforts were made to assuage the fears of impeding doom. Ake (2000:114) was one of the boldest optimists:

> 'Far from being prone to generating ethnic conflict, democratization is actually an antidote to those things, which promote ethnic identity and what passes for ethnic conflicts in Africa. What are these causes? The most important is the character of the post-colonial state in Africa…its power over economy and society is enormous, arbitrary and it is largely privatised. For all but a few of its citizens, it is alien and remote, uncaring and oppressive…many of them have turned away from the state and given their loyalty to sub-national formations '

As Ake argued most of the conflicts that erupted in post-military period in Nigeria have been linked to the state in one form or the other (Mustapha 2002, Ukiwo 2003). Since the state is regarded as an obstacle to democracy and ethnic harmony it has become expedient for scholars to advocate significant state retrenchment. For instance, Nnoli (1995:271) has advocated the devolution:

> ;(O)f state power from the centre to regions and divesting the state of its economic enterprises and holdings, and their privatization and/or commercialization. A great deal of ethnic conflict has emanated from the struggle over the location of these enterprises, recruitment of their personnel and the use of their resources. This divestment would allow impersonal market forces to assume control of the allocation of resources of these enterprises. And it is clear from the Nigerian situation that whenever such market forces are in control, the distribution of the national cake follows the lines of relations of production (class) rather than ethnic lines.'

It remains to be seen whether decentralization and economic liberalization will stem ethnicity. There are no studies of the incidence of ethnicity in the private sector though it is common knowledge that decentralization through the creation of states and local government councils has generated ethnic conflicts in some parts of the country. Clearly, there is need to investigate the impact of decentralization and economic liberalization on ethnicity as recent conflicts in the country have been triggered by issues of representation, chiefdoms and access to jobs, rents and markets at the local level. Existing studies have looked at these issues holistically. In order to get a sharper picture it is important to look at different aspects of liberalization. In this regard, one area that might be illuminating is the study of the impact of the deregulation of wages, which led to a marked increase in wages in some sectors, on inter-ethnic relations. The need for such a study is underlined by the fact that the resurgence of ethnic conflicts since the mid 1980s coincides with the introduction of the policy, which offered lucrative emoluments to workers in the federal public service and the oil sector among others. There are strong indications that perceptions of horizontal inequality and the resultant ethnic rivalry have centred on contestations over control of these lucrative sectors.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that changing socio-political realities in Nigeria and the dominant intellectual traditions of the social sciences have greatly influenced the study of ethnicity in Nigeria. The quest for imperial hegemony inspired cartographic demarcation of ethnic boundaries and anthropological observation of bio-cultural characteristics of ethnic groups. Ethnic studies also proliferated as efforts have been made to test the universal validity of the melting pot thesis. The aficionados of class analysis did their best to confine ethnicity to the realm of false consciousness. But these competing perspectives, which have been presented as essentialism (primordial), instrumentalist, constructivist, and institutionalist are not mutually exclusive. Scholars have applied them eclectically in explaining the linkages of such events as military intervention, civil war, economic crisis and adjustment and democratisation, to ethnicity. These studies have enriched our understanding of the nature of politics, the state, resource competition, identity formation and transformation, and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

One false start in ethnic studies which was the assumption that the ethnic groups were always at each others' throats for no just cause tailored studies towards examining instances of ethnic conflicts and competition to the neglect of numerous instances of harmonious inter-ethnic cooperation. Related to this is that because ethnicity is seen as the fault-line, few scholars have been interested in the incidence of intra-ethnic conflicts which sometimes pose more threats to human security than inter-ethnic discord (Nnoli 1995, Osaghae 1994). By neglecting intra-ethnic conflicts studies have missed out on fissures and tensions within groups and limited possibilities of investigating how ethnic groups come to agree to declare or acknowledge a common identity and identify a common interest to pursue. Part of this lack of interest in the study of the internal dynamics of ethnic mobilization arises from the assumption that violent ethnic conflicts are instigated by elites to serve their personal interests. Studies of ethnicity have privileged the agency of the colonial and post colonial state as well as that of the ethnic elites while denying popular agency.[5] This instrumentalist assumption, which pervades the literature, needs to demonstrate that there is no congruence between the interests of the ethnic leaders and those of their followers. This would require an investigation of the nature of horizontal inequalities among ethnic groups and the response of groups to such inequalities.

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[5] Mamdani (2001) makes the same point in his study of Rwanda.

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