THE AZIKIWE-BELLO INTERLOCUTION AND THEPATHWAY TO NIGERIAN INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Nigeria's enduring quest for national integration through the lens of the historic 1959 exchange between Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Sir Ahmadu Bello. Azikiwe's call to "forget our differences" contrasted with Bello's insistence on "understanding our differences," presenting two divergent pathways to unity. The study adopts a qualitative approach of using secondary data and drew on global and local contexts, the study examines theories of integration, identity politics, and ethnocentrism, arguing that while Azikiwe's vision represents the ideal, Bello's approach reflects Nigeria's reality. The paper concludes that genuine unity requires acknowledging and respecting differences, fostering sensitivity, and building cohesion through mutual understanding.

Keywords: Azikiwe, Bello, Interlocution, Integration, Identity Politics.

Introduction

The task of managing the ethno-religious plurality of Nigeria has been one of the major preoccupations of the post-colonial political leaders, and this has brought forth a plethora of policies and strategies. Several of the strategies have been geared towards achieving integration. Indeed, the plurality of the Nigerian state has made the quest for integration a task to be pursued, more so that is has a lot to do with the realization and sustainability of meaningful development (Wahab and Ogunniyi, 2021).One of the instances of the quest for the strategies of achieving integration was found in the exchange between Nnamdi Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello. Specifically, during the a meeting on December 12, 1959 general elections, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and Sir Ahmadu Bello, unknowingly established two clear paths towards integration in Nigeria. The exchange goes thus:

Azikiwe: "Let us forget our differences."

Bello: "No, let us understand our differences. I am a Muslim and a Northerner. You are a Christian and an Easterner. By understanding our differences, we can build unity in our country" (Iyanda, 2023).

To a large extent, this exchange represents two theoretical and empirical routes to integration, which was unknowingly bequeathed to the country at infancy. The questions now are: (1) which one is the right route to take? (2) Which one is supported by the literature? (3) Which one is supported by reality? This paper interrogates these questions by engaging the verbal exchanges between the two nationalist leaders.

This paper is divided into four sections: Following this introduction is a literaturereview on national integration. This is followed by examination of some historical context of Nigeria's historic conquest, divisions, and the quest for integration. After this, itenters the Azikiwe-Bello exchange by trying to analyze the issues it raised, after which a conclusion is drawn. Th study adopts a qualitative method that relies on data from secondary sources such as texts, newspapers, magazines, archival materials, and the internet.

Concept of National Integration

Integration is a multi-purpose concept that features in virtually all disciplines. You find it in mathematics, sciences, business studies, engineering, social sciences, and humanities, etc. It therefore has varied meaning and operational values. Even, in the social science perspective, it is one of the concepts that is yet to submit itself to a unified meaning. The basic understanding of integration, in the literary format, is to bring people or things together. When viewed from national prism, it assumes the "the desire for unity of the various ethnic groups making up a country in such a way that they see one another as brothers and sisters devoid of tribal sentiments, nepotism and all other vices that bring polarization of the people" (Usara 2001). It represents the harmonious co-existence of diverse social groups (Bello 1987). It is the process whereby diverse people in an entity will speak and think alike in respectof their country. In such a situation, preferences will be given to what unites them, rather than what separates them. At that level, the people have moved beyond their narrow cocoon of ethnicity and other social differences to see themselves as one. It is one of the ways to transform an entity from being a state into becoming a nation.To Johan Galtung (1968: 380):

Integration is the process whereby two or more actors form a new actor. When the process is completed, the actors are said to be integrated. Conversely,disintegration is the process whereby one actor splits into two or more actors. When the process is completed, the actor is said to be disintegrated.

Galtung conceived integration in the form of, in the Nigerian Pentecostal parlance, being "born again", in which something new is formed after they have come together, and "old things have passed away". To him, integration is a process that involved many steps. To this perspective, integration is never an ad hoc or haphazard thing. It is something fundamental. Translated to the state, it means that the coming together of people should translate to something new. That means, we should have a new thinking, a new way of life, of relations, of resolving

issues or of seeing issues, because to him, "when two municipalities coalesce completely and form a new municipality, a new actor of the same kind, only bigger, has been born" (Galtung, 1968:381).

The principle of national integration assumes that people will shelve their primordial loyalty to the national one. This logically follows that in a properly integrated society, loyalty will be to the national, as against local or regional affiliation. National integration is also conceived in terms of degrees. Thus, there could be vertical integration and horizontal integration. Vertical integration applies more to social classes in a society, while horizontal integration deals more with the integration of ethnic groups. Integration could also be conceived according to levels of operation: thus, we have such things as sub-regional, regional, national, and international integrations.

Specifically, the idea of national integration is erected on the reality that states are made of diverse groups. Except in isolated pockets, every state is multi-national in form and character. This flows from the very origin of the state. States grow from forcible annexation and lumping of people together. It is formed using force, and it is maintained by using force. The practice is that after consolidating the state, leaders strive to forge unity by way of integration. Therefore, integration is always a major project of every state. National integration is thus a deliberate action of leaders to forge sense of unity amongst its divergent citizens. But just as Galtung prescribed, it is a process, and its success depends on several factors ranging from elite formation and behaviour, leadership, followership, performance of the state in terms of welfare and care of the citizens,

Nigeria's Foundation of Division

Nigeria, just like any other states of the world, was created by the force of arms, launched by the British colonialists. It was a product of annexation, sacking and packing of various kingdoms and were administered separately. In 1914, these tendencies were brought together to form a Nigerian state under one administration. As argued elsewhere, the name and boundary were dictated by external powers. The boundary was drawn by Otto Von Bismack, the German Chancellor in his palace in Germany in 1888-89. The name was given by Flora Shaw, who as at that time was a girlfriend of Lord Lugard (this generation will call her a side chick). At the formation, there was no indigenous people in attendance present. Neither was agreement (Olaniyan, 2023).

The Nigerian state was therefore formed without inputs form anybody in the country. It was an imposition, and was run like a conquest colony until independence came in 1960. Although, pressures from nationalists tried to influence the dynamics of the colonial administration, the pressure was maintained until independence was given on a platter in 1960. There was no bloodshed. No rioting. It was negotiated independence. The manner of the independence was dictated by the nature of the British colonial policy. Unlike Belgian and Portuguese

colonialpolicies, which were marked by naked brutality and unimaginable oppression of the colonized entities, British colonial policy was considered mild. Thus, while the nationalists under the Belgian and Portuguese colonies fought bitter wars of liberation, the same could not be said of colonies under British rule (Olaniyan, 2023).

After independence, the major task facing the first set of political leaders was forging unity among the disparate groups. How did they go about this? What was the formular. There then is the relevance of the altercation between the two gladiators of the time: Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello.

The Azikiwe-Bello Exchange

The Azikiwe-Bello interlocution was a short but powerful dialogue that captures two different approaches to Nigerian unity. It was part of the processes leading to the 1959 general elections in which Nigerian nationalist figures were trying to figure out how to address the Nigerian unity. The exchange goes thus:

Azikiwe: “Let us forget our differences.”

Bello: “No, let us understand our differences. I am a Muslim and a Northerner. You are a Christian and an Easterner. By understanding our differences, we can build unity in our country”.

Since the exchange borders on discourse on Nigerian unity and how to achieve it,they made statements that border on different routes to unity. It is also a stark disagreement on ways to achieve unity.

Azikiwe presented a formular that will overlook the differences. He believes that the much-needed unity and peace can best be achieved when we forget our differences. These differences include religious differences, ethnicity, region, outlook, differences in educational attainment, history, culture, languages, which all constitute hinderances to attaining unity (Olaniyan, 2023). When we see all these as things that do not matter, we can forge ahead. In reality, if we look at societies that are in crises, these elements are present. Rwanda genocide was triggered by hatred occasioned by ethnicity and hatred of one ethnic group against the other. There are only three ethnic groups in the country – two major and one minor. The country is almost 95% Catholic. Yet, the singular difference of ethnicity trigger genocide. This is because they did not forget their differences. They allowed the differences to overwhelm them and this led to tragedy. That is why in the post-genocide Rwanda, nobody is allowed to mention ethnicity. Therefore, the differences are supposed to be forgotten. This is in line with Azikiwe’s suggestion. For example, the United States is made up of people from different countries and ethnicities – Irish, German, British, Welsh, Polish, etc. But the primordial attachments were suppressed for the national project. Thus, Americans think and act alike when it comes to their country. The differences are forgotten. For countries to be great and survive, there must be unifying ethos to sustain them. That is why countries create some myths as one of the ways to achieve national integration.

Thus, Azikiwe's prognosis is rooted in different factual examples. Nigerians should identify themselves as Nigerians, and not in terms of their ethnic or regional affiliation. It is the ideal thing.

Now, let us turn to Ahmadu Bello's repartee. By saying "No, let us understand our differences. I am a Muslim and a Northerner. You are a Christian and an Easterner. By understanding our differences, we can build unity in our country", he practically"reconstructed Nnamdi Azikiwe's statement by adding negative and positive conditionalities (Iyanda, 2023). He believed that recognizing, understanding, and acknowledging our differences is the best way to achieve unity. He specifically identified religion and regionalism as critical differences that must be understood, not ignored, as Azikiwe suggested(Iyanda, 2023). To Ahmadu Bello therefore, ignoring or pretending that religion and ethnicity do not matter, and can be forgotten or glossed over, is like playing the game of ostrich.

To forget or not to forget?

Which of the two perspectives offers the better routes for our integration? Before making a judgment, it is important to examine some contexts.The desire of countries all over the world is to achieve national integration. The literature on integration was dominated by the view that for nations to emerge and progress to be achieved, attachment to primordial feelings and solidarities must be suppressed. This was what most countries subscribed to. However, since the 19th century, notably after the Second World War, there have been several instances of low intensity violent conflicts. Majority of these instances have been nationalists and ethnic movements, to the extent that the 20th century has been described as one of a global resurgence of ethnic consciousness, a development borne out of intense mobilisation of ethnic groups for political ends (Olaniyan, 2007).

However, the most significant aspect of the global resurgence of what has been captured in the literature as identity politics is the tempo and extent to which it is challenging the post-world war nation-building project of most states. For example: the Madhesi ethnic movement in Nepal has been unrelenting in seeking a separate identity from the Nepalese state. In New Zealand, the indigenous Maori ethnic group is clamouring for a *"Tino Rangatiranga"* (absolute freedom) from the state. In India, the Negroid Dravidians, regarded as the original inhabitant, have resisted their identity been 'swallowed' by the dominant Caucasian Hindis, who are considered late entrants into the Indian subcontinent. In the same India, the Nagal Federal Army has waged a 50-year-old guerilla war with the Indian Armed forces in their quest for separate identity that borders on religious freedom. The Nagal enclave is a Christian dominated, and completely at odds with the majority Hindus in India. The *Plaid Cymru* (The Party of Wales) and the Scottish Distributists are daily agitating for their own identity from the British state. The French speaking Quebec, have been persistent in craving fora separate identity from the larger English-speaking Canadians. In Indonesia, East Timor separated from Indonesia based on religion. East Timor is Christian dominated and they fought against the domination by the majority Muslim population

in Indonesia. The Lozi speaking population of the Caprivi Strip in Namibia seek exiting from the Namibia state for the purpose of rejoining their Lozi brethren in the western Zambia. TheLozi people felt their identity is being wallowed in Namibia (Olaniyan, 2007).

Flowing from the foregoing; therefore, the quest for separate socio-cultural identity has become a global language; and is been activated under the platforms of ethnic movements, which are often grafted on the sentiments of ethnicity and ethnic mobilisation. The end products have been tales of ethnic conflicts across the globe as evident, especially, in such countries as Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Liberia, Somalia, India,Pakistan, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, etc.

The import of the foregoing is that identity cannot be suppressed, and attempts to make people forget their identity often leads to resentment and even violence. In their book titled *Diversity, Violence and Recognition: How Recognizing Ethnic Identity Promotes Peace,* Elizabeth King, and Cyrus Samii (2020) proved empirically that the best way to foster unity and peace is not by suppressing identity, but by recognizing it. They however introduced a caveat that it depends on the prevailing ruling ethnic group. The book is a comparative analysis of Burundi, Rwanda, and Ethiopia experiences. While Rwanda suppresses ethnic identification, Burundi and Ethiopia recognize it. Although the suppression in Rwanda is based on their recent history, however, they foresee the problem of sustainability of the policy, particularly after the exit of Paul Kagame. Generally, the import of the authors is that the policy of identity suppression depends on the regime and ruling party and the system.

In Nigeria, what should be our route? The Azikiwe's position represents the ideal while Ahmadu Bello's reply represents the reality. It is therefore the ideal versus the reality. Of course, the ideal, which is always the best, may not be practicable. In a way, the Ahmadu Bello's position offers a more practical approach to the discourse of unity. The reality in Nigeria suggests that our identity and religious affiliation are so deep and well-entrenched to the extent that nobody can say it should be forgotten. The differences are so stark that they cannot be subsumed under any rubric. Rather, what can be done is for us to know the differences and try to understand our differences.

The Nigerian situation over the years indicates that Nigerians do not even know themselves. That is why people see everybody from the North as Hausa; everybody from the Southwest as Yoruba, and everybody from the East as Igbo. Whereas, not everybody from the Southwest is Yoruba. There are sub-ethnic variations even in Yoruba land. For example, there ar Ijaw-speaking people in Ondo State, etc. There are hundreds of ethnic groups with difference languages and culture in the northern Nigeria. In Adamawa state alone, there are over 50 ethnic groups. The presence of Hausa language as lingua franca in the North is not an indication that everybody there is Hausa. None of the groups will like their ethnic groups suppressed. Understanding our differences is very important to achieving unity.

That takes us to the pre-colonial time. Studies confirm that long before the arrival of the colonialists, there are interactions among the different ethnic groups, and this was based on understanding, respect, and sensitiveness to the peculiarities of the values of each group. This informed the diffusion of languages.

One of the greatest threats to national integration in Nigeria is ethnocentrism. As a fact, ethnocentrism is "rooted in a negative mindset that is typically absolutist and exclusivist". It is a belief in the supremacy of one ethnic group or identity over the other. This mentality is borne out of lack of knowledge of others. There is no ethnic group that does not have its own values and ethos. No ethnic group is superior to others. Each group should be examined within the context of its values and ethos. Therefore, a knowledge of others would let us know the values of each. Therefore, it will make us sensitive to the feelings of other groups. This will bring understanding and the much-valued unity. To me, the Ahmadu Bello perspective is more practical.

Conclusion

Nigeria has indeed come a long way in its quest for national integration, yet the journey remains fraught with challenges. The country continues to grapple with deep divisions, where attachment to national values is often fragile and overshadowed by competing loyalties. These divisions are not accidental; they are rooted in a long history of leadership failures, elite conspiracies, and the persistent dominance of identity politics. Ethnicity and religion, rather than serving as sources of cultural richness, have frequently been weaponized to entrench divisions and foster mistrust among citizens. This reality has weakened the collective sense of belonging to the Nigerian project.

The solution, however, does not lie in denying or suppressing these identity differences. To pretend that they do not exist would be both unrealistic and counterproductive. Instead, the path forward requires a deliberate embrace of diversity through understanding and dialogue. When Nigerians learn to appreciate the values, traditions, and sensitivities of one another, they cultivate empathy and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Knowing what others hold dear makes us less inclined to trample on their beliefs or dismiss their perspectives. This is the essence of building a society where differences are not threats but opportunities for mutual enrichment.

National integration, therefore, must be anchored on respect, inclusivity, and a shared vision of progress. It calls for leadership that rises above parochial interests and inspires citizens to see themselves first as Nigerians before identifying with ethnic or religious affiliations. It also demands civic education, intergroup dialogue, and policies that promote fairness and justice. Only by facing the reality of our diversity and choosing to harness it positively can Nigeria move closer to genuine unity. The task is daunting, but it is the only sustainable path toward building a nation where every citizen feels valued and invested in its future.

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