

## Nigeria and State-Building Initiatives: A Critical Assessment

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### Abstract

The thrust of this paper is that plural and sharply divided societies like Nigeria require effective state-building initiatives to achieve national cohesion and integration as platforms for development. Five of these initiatives were assessed with the aid of secondary data anchored on textual analysis which revealed the fundamental contradictions inherent in these state-building measures. The character of the Nigerian state, its leading personnel and policy outcomes responsible for the current state of affairs were highlighted. The philosophical foundations and practical utility of some of these initiatives need to be revisited and tinkered with, in order to fast track national integration and development.

**Key Words:** Assessment; Critical; Initiatives; Nigeria; State-building.

### 1. Introduction

Nigeria as a country has been defined more by its fault lines or weaknesses over the years, and this underscore the need for state building. Two of Nigeria's post-independence leaders (late Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Sir Ahmadu Bello) in various discussions on Nigeria pejoratively asserted that the country is a "mere geographical expression" and that the "mistake of 1914 has come to light" respectively (Adeniran, 2002:67). At the heart of, or perhaps underlining these averments are the absence of a national consensus and political legitimacy in governance among other issues, which constitute the National Question in Nigeria.

The Nigerian question boils down to fear of being dominated and grievances about being exploited (Akiyemi,2004). This narrows the problem to that of power relations between the ethnic nationalities and distribution of resources from the nation-state or central government. It is deducible therefore that the National Question centres on re-ordering the socio-cultural, economic and geo-political imbalance and configuration of Nigeria which comprise many nations and nationalities. Some of the basic issues constituting the national question include: federal structure which is overbearing or a dominant centre; the application of federal character principle; national integration evidenced by absence of loyalty to the federation; the minority question/resource control agitations which translates to an appropriate formula for sharing resources to the detriment of resource generation (Onah and Ibietan,2010); religious differences (Sharia), insurgency and terrorism.

It is pertinent to note that it is not the presence of many nationalities in the nation-state that poses the challenge called the Nigerian Question, it is the management of the power relations between them that forms the crux of the matter. The character of the state, the leading personnel of the state and public policy output are crucial to the resolution of this ticklish question. Some state-building initiatives have been devised and implemented by successive central (military and civil) governments in Nigeria, which include: regionalism; state creation; federal character principle (Onyeoziri, 2002:11-18); introduction of Unity Schools and National Youth Service Corps. This paper seeks to evaluate the impact and efficacy of these policy options, and possibly proffer recommendations.

### 2. Main Argument, Methodology and Structure of the Paper

The central thesis of this paper is that the state-building initiatives utilized by successive central governments in Nigeria suffer from inherent philosophical contradictions because their bases were not properly articulated and the objectives lack focus and clarity. These account for the poor application of the measures and the inability to achieve national integration and equity upon which development efforts rest. The paper relied on secondary sources of data which were textually analysed, and these informed the discussion, conclusion and recommendations of this paper. The paper is made up of seven

parts. The first is the Abstract; followed by Introduction; and sequentially as follows: Main Argument, Methodology, and Structure of the Paper; Research Setting dealing with Historical Information on Nigeria; Part five is devoted to Conceptual Clarification; Part six provided the Critical Assessment of State-building initiatives in Nigeria; the final part anchored the Conclusion and Recommendations of the paper.

### **3. Research Setting: Historical Information on Nigeria**

The geographical entity that later became known as Nigeria consisted of large-scale emirates of the North, the kingdom/empires and village-level republics of the South. Although, both were administered by Britain, the North and the South experienced different versions of colonial rule. Nigeria dates back to 1914 when the Northern and Southern Protectorates cum Lagos colony were amalgamated (Asia, 2001:4). The name “Nigeria” implying Niger area was derived from the significance of river Niger and its tributary (the Benue) as waterways (Erim, 2001: 13).

Broadly, Nigeria comprises the old empires of Kanem-Bornu around the Lake Chad; Fulani Empire with Sokoto as the administrative capital and Oyo empire in the Western region. The Igbos in the present day South-Eastern part of Nigeria were organized at the village or extended (African) family level (Mundt and Aborisade, 2000:681). Basically, the Igbos are republican in nature, unlike in the North where the Fulani empire held sway and were ruled by the Emirs with their Islamic system of judicature and administration until it was defeated by the British in 1903. It is noteworthy that this style of administration and culture in the North accounted for the success of the colonial system of Indirect Rule there (Asia, 2001:3).

The period between 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century up to the colonial intrusion witnessed the formation of empires among the Yoruba and Bini peoples of the South-Western part of the present day Nigeria. They established their own system of administration with the Kings or Obas as the head, and in Oyo Empire for instance, there was the Oyo Mesi (Council of King Makers) who acted as a check on the tyrannical exercise of power by any “Alafin”. It is a system of administration based on order, justice and discipline that accorded the Oyo Empire its place in history. The Bini Empire was also organized on same lines of administration and practices with Oyo Empire in view of their cultural affinity and descent (Mundt and Aborisade, 2000:683).

It is posited that one out of every five persons in Sub-Saharan Africa is a Nigerian. Nigeria is made up of more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and this singular factor gives it diversity and relevance globally. The country attained full independence status as a sovereign nation (politically) on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960. It became a republic in 1963 and comprises thirty-six states presently and a federal capital in Abuja (having been relocated from Lagos). There has been a lot of metamorphosis in Nigeria’s administrative and political development, from three to four regions in 1962; twelve states in 1967; nineteen and twenty-one states to the present thirty-six states and six geo-political zonal structure.

Constitutional development also progressed from the various colonial constitutions to the Independence (1960) and post-independence constitutions of 1963, 1979, 1989 (Akinyemi, 2004), and the present experience with the 1999 Constitution which has been undergoing various process of amendment. Politically, Nigeria cannot be viewed as stable until 1999 (at the re-emergence of democracy) having been oscillating between various military and civilian regimes, with the military regimes being preponderant. The country is currently under civilian administration with a wobbling democratic practice through which it has managed to experience civilian to civilian transitions that is putting to test the maturity and durability of its institutions.

### **4. Conceptual Clarification: State-building and Nigeria’s Experience**

Scholars of political science are wont to commencing their discussion on the concept of state by asserting that it is an abstract entity that can be felt through the operation of its institutions. It is to this extent that the state is qualified by its organizational presence and as an organizational abstraction that homogenises and hegemonises “a society conceived as inherently fragmented, atomized and centreless” (Olaitan, 1988: 138). It is pertinent to note that elite complicity in resource management and governance in Nigeria could present it as a fragmented and atomized society, the country is definitely not centreless due to military incursion into governance and their centralizing tendencies via decrees, which substitutes federal practice for unitarism (Onah and Ibieta, 2010).

A distinction must be made between state building initiatives targeted at creating a new state where one did not exist before and a situation “where the state in existence has a fitful life...and one designed to consolidate the existence of the state through changes to meet...the contrasting interests of its peoples in its institutions and principles in order to be meaningful” (Olaitan, 1998: 139-140). The latter part of this averment seems to typify the Nigerian situation. Accordingly, several policy initiatives namely: regionalism; state creation; federal character principle; National Youth Service Corps; and Unity Schools, among others ( a critical assessment of these state building measures is reserved for another section of this paper) have been conceived and implemented by successive central administrations in Nigeria. It is however plausible to argue based on the initial dichotomy (made above) that a new state anchored on genuine nationalistic orientation and consciousness of citizens is desired for Nigeria. This is predicated on the views that the 1914 amalgamation that produced

the country as a single entity is artificial and a “creation of British colonial authority whose primary motive was economic imperialism (Obasi; 2005: 55), and constitutes a foremost danger signpost of the Nigerian state (Ajayi, 2002).

In a related discourse, Ake (2003:9) posited that state building is one of the challenges “which the political system has to cope with.” He corroborated that state building represent measures aimed at solving “the problem of establishing or maintain authority of penetration and control”. Other challenges that the political system has to cope with are participation; nation building; distribution and welfare.

Building on the works of other scholars, Bereketeab (2013:73) posited that state building “occurs through the penetration and integration of the territorial economy, polity and society and speaks to questions of political authority and effective governance.” This underscores the idea of horizontal and vertical integration with special emphasis on societal integration and state penetration of society, which is sine qua non for contemporary state formation. The issue of legitimacy in governance strikes directly at the heart of discussion on state-building which translates to the willingness and consent of citizens to state rule. The consequences of legitimacy deficit are dire, and they include state failure and implosion.

Efforts and attempts at state-building in Nigeria can be better highlighted as the response to the Nationality Question, but there are problems with this solution, not only arising from the faulty conception of the Nigerian state (Fani-Kayode, 2012b:47), but due to the inadequacies and deficiencies of the policy measures. The ineffectiveness of these measures resonates from the following features of the Nigerian State: it has been an exploitative state, largely irrelevant or coercive (Onyeoziri,2002). Gana (2003:29) aptly qualified this point thus: “the Nigerian federal state has been transformed into political monster-thanks to the oil economy”.

Onyeoziri (2002:27) enumerated the other attributes of the Nigerian state to include its indifference to social welfare; the state has an image of a hostile coercive force (and this converges with the assertion made above by (Gana,2003); the Nigerian state lacks autonomy, this reverberates on the overhang that the governing elites are predatory and carriers of particularistic nationalism. The net effect and painful repercussion (but avoidable) of these are that securing acceptance and winning legitimacy belong to the realms of fiction or a tall order.

Weber (1964 cited in Gana,2003:28) operationalised state building in a federal system as a “process whereby the associative type of relationship implied in the conscious creation of a federal state is transformed into the communal type in which orientation to social action is based on a feeling that everyone belongs together.” This seems to be a mirage in Nigeria, although there was a glimmering attempt that found expression in the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, wherein Nigerians jettisoned mundane sentiments and banal inhibitions to vote massively for their preferred candidate. History was made on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1993 as this election adjudged to be the freest, fairest and most credible was annulled by a selfish, clueless and rapacious military junta. “Thus began the reverse process of de-nationalizing the state” (Gana, 2003:30). It is obvious from the foregoing that the task of state building in Nigeria has become herculean or arduous requiring adept leadership, nationalistic re-orientation and patriotic commitment.

## **5. State-Building Initiatives in Nigeria: A Critical Assessment**

The task before this section is to evaluate thoroughly some of the state building initiatives of successive central or federal governments in Nigeria, with a view to proffering workable and enduring solutions to the ticklish Nigerian Question which has consistently proved the politically adept wrong. Some scholars are inclined to viewing these initiatives as accommodative strategies, policy options or solutions (Orluwere and Jaja, 2007; Onyeoziri, 2002; Uke, 2007), these include: regionalism; state creation; federal character principle; National Youth Service Corps; and introduction of Unity schools.

Regionalism lends itself to multiplicity of usage, namely: as a concept in socio-political analysis, and as policy option for managing convoluted power relations among the disparate and heterogeneous units of a nation-state, re-ordering distributional inequities and allocative inefficiencies in resource management. This paper is primarily interested in the latter usage of regionalism. Predicated on this, it is seen as “a principle which seeks to attribute a unit within a federation a distinct individuality, with a claim upon the loyalty of its inhabitants, competing with, if not overriding loyalty to the Federal state” (Nwabueze in Onyeoziri, 2002: 12). With reference to Nigeria, the various historical landmarks or milestones in regionalism are 1914; 1939; 1954 and 1963. The 1914 amalgamation of Colony of Lagos and the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria is a landmark event in the annals of Nigerian history, and this makes it possible to identify two distinct regions in the country. In 1939, the Southern region was further split into Eastern and Western regions. The 1954 Constitution accorded recognition and gave vent to the existence of three dominant regions as North, West and East which are populated by the majority ethnic groups as: Hausa-Fulani; Igbo and Yoruba. The creation of Mid-West region in 1963 increased the number of regions to four. These developments underscored the major political, administrative, economic, and socio-cultural divisions of Nigeria.

It is however germane to note that regionalism as a state-building initiative or policy option for managing problems associated with pluralism aggregated many social formations and ethnic nationalities under an untenable paternalistic post-colonial federal state, thus creating or fostering conditions for the Nigerian question. Therefore, its adoption as an accommodative strategy for the problem it created advertently or otherwise amounts to double jeopardy. This position was reinforced by Onyeoziri (2002: 12–13) thus:

When in the name of regionalism, you permit a policy of North for the “Northerners,” contract job for “Southerners” in the North, restricted or reluctant admission to “Southern” children into “Northern” schools, regionalise some of the hitherto public services, and base revenue allocation exclusively on derivation principle, you retard the forces of integration by engaging in some form of de-integration. Such road-blocks in the way of national integration postpones solution to the national question.

The above author corroborated that regionalism threatened the stability of the Nigerian political system via undue focus of citizen attention on the region of origin and diversion of loyalty from the nation-state. It further created the Minority question within each region through the dominance of majority nationalities (Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba) over the minority ethnic nationalities.

The above state of affairs manifested in a carryover of practice that undermined the efficacy of state creation as a policy option for managing the national question in Nigeria and ultimately achieving effective integration, utilisation of resources for maximum impact and national development. State creation implies administrative/bureaucratic and democratic decentralisation aimed at bringing governance very close to the ordinary citizens. This is intended to achieve rapid and sustainable development, provided the governing elites are committed to effective service delivery and altruism.

To be sure, state creation in Nigeria was intended as a solution to the minority question (agitation for equitable representation and resource distribution) by according the minorities an autonomous identity in the spirit and letter of unity in diversity. The trajectory of state creation and an objective analysis of this exercise which commenced from 1967 when twelve states were created (from the four regions) through 1976 when seven states were added; 1987 (two states added); to 1991 and 1996 (nine and six states respectively) came on board (Uke, 2007: 39), show that the fear of marginalisation or domination and the need for equity through agitation for more states has not abated.

Indeed, the experience in Nigeria shows that the more states that are created, the more the demand. This has been corroborated by Soludo (2012: 7) thus:

For the military, state creation became an instrument of divide and rule and elite appeasement ... by ‘giving’ them a state or local government or ‘capital’ of state or local government ... we must admit that state creation is a failed strategy. After the 12 states failed to ensure ‘stability’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’, and ‘remove the fear of domination’ as envisaged in 1967, we have now tripled the number to 36, and there is still demand for another 57 or more states. The more states we create, the greater the demand for more ... Rather than uniting us ... Nigerians are more divided under the state structure than before. Suddenly, the man from Abia state thinks he is different from the one from Imo state or one from Bauchi as different from Gombe.

Apart from the insatiable appetite for demands/agitations for state creation, every state created throws up issues of ‘minorities’, ‘indigenes’ and ‘settlers’ within it, which ultimately leads to squabbles and acrimony over resources/equal representation, and in some cases, unmanageable crises and conflicts. It is predicated on these and adjoining reasons that Onyeoziri (2002: 16) observed that “the policy has failed as an antidote to fear of ethnic domination ... it has still failed to bring about balanced development ... have increased the intensity and hostility of the scramble for the ‘national cake’.”

There is unanimity of opinion and documentation among scholars on the origin of federal character (Afigbo, 1989; Ekeh, 1989; Gboyega, 1989; and Uroh, 2000). Afigbo (1989: 3) was quite exact in tracing the origin and usage of the term as one of the inventions of the Constitutional Drafting Committee which was inaugurated by the late General Murtala Mohammed on 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1975. As a practice which took cognizance of the federal nature of Nigeria’s society, it dates back to 1914, but “became explicitly adopted as a formula for federalizing central institutions” Onyeoziri (2002: 16) and achieving geo-political balancing and representation in personnel appointments with state creation exercises.

Afigbo (1989: 6) documented that “federal character of Nigeria must be taken to mean ... the character of the Nigerian federation.” He expatiated that in order to understand and define the character of the Nigerian federation, these factors must be noted: the innate or primordial characteristics of Nigeria’s federal society going back to the days of yore; the quality and performance of the statesmanship which has sought to harness the inborn characteristics of Nigeria’s federal society to a federal constitution; the degree of harmony existing between the primordial and usages of Nigerian society; the structure and usages of the constitution; and the fact that the character of the Nigerian federation has been rather dynamic in response to the changing perceptions of statesmanship and other relevant forces.

It is deductible from the foregoing that the concept of federal character becomes clearer and illuminating based on history, with the amalgamation of Lagos Colony and the two protectorates in 1914 as landmark event. The plurality and centrifugal nature of the Nigerian society demands that these diversities and divisive tendencies be managed via a durable accommodative/integrative strategy. In Nigeria, this found expression in the adoption of Federal Character principle which has a 1979 constitutional backing with a view to enhancing participation of people from different segments of the Nigerian society in governance and public management process.

As a state-building initiative, the implementation of the federal character principle has been quite unimpressive and anti-development. The weight of evidence from scholarly research attests to this. For instance, Suleiman (2009: 33) argued that “poor capacity of the majority of civil servants, sometimes to the point of illiteracy” arising from the application of this

principle is one the reasons for poor performance in the Nigerian public bureaucracy. Similarly, Tonwe and Oghator (2009: 237) posited that “federal character allows ethno-regional patrons and their clients to exploit and mismanage state resources without contributing to any meaningful development.” As one of the state-building strategies designed to manage Nigeria’s combustive diversity, Olaopa (2012: 56) submitted that the federal character (FC) principle has “badly eroded professional and competency capacity of the public service.” Its application has therefore led to the unintended effect of creating situations of ‘elimination by situation,’ hence to all intents and purposes, become counter-productive.

The application of FC principle rather than accord the Nigerian citizen as an individual his/her rights, it treats the individual as a member of an ethno-linguistic group in Nigeria. This way it emphasises sub-national identity, loyalty and attraction of the citizens to those structures, rather than to the nation-state. To this extent therefore, the application of FC principle creates ambivalence and has an inherent weakness as an initiative for managing the national question or in achieving integration and development in Nigeria. It is even more puzzling that the institution (Federal Character Commission (FCC) saddled with the direct function of ensuring compliance with constitutional provisions has not lived up to its billing as reinforced by Nzeshe (2012: 97) that “the inefficiency of the FCC to effectively enforce its mandate as a government watchdog in identifying and addressing inequality is increasingly worrisome.”

In an attempt to reduce the tendencies and crave for micro-nationalism and loyalty to sub-national units, thereby promoting wider interaction, cooperation and national cohesion after the Nigerian Civil war which ended in 1970, the Federal Military Government promulgated National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Decree 24 of 22nd May 1973 (Orluwere and Jaja, 2007: 133). Under the NYSC scheme, all young Nigerian graduates (aged 30 and below) are enlisted in a compulsory national service in a state other than the one they come from. This was targeted at national integration and conceived as a state-building initiative. The implementation of the scheme has been mired by favouritism in postings, selective treatment of corps members/discriminatory practices in post-service year employment opportunities in those states. In recent times, there are outright hostilities, violence and murder of corps members to the extent that there are strident calls in the public domain for a rethink of the scheme or a need to tinker with the NYSC enabling law to restrict their postings to states within their zones or regions, other than state of origin. Predicated on these narratives, the NYSC scheme as a policy option for achieving national integration and state-building requires closer examination, as corps members experience outside their “states of origin” alienates them, instead of building loyalty to the Nigerian state.

One other initiative borne out of the need or drive for national consciousness and integration is the establishment of Unity schools known as Federal Government Colleges (FGCs). The idea behind this is that young pupils in formative and impressionable years from different parts of Nigeria with diverse ethno-linguistic and cultural backgrounds are admitted into these schools to learn, interact and understand one another and ultimately develop a sense of a truly united country. It is important to observe that the utility or effectiveness of Unity schools as agencies of national cohesion and integration requires through scrutiny. Like the Quota system and the FC principle, the irregularities and in-built discrimination in its admission standards (different scores or cut-off marks for different states, especially lower marks for some states in Northern Nigeria regarded as educationally disadvantaged) has robbed this initiative of any strong appeal in contemporary Nigeria, and would demand greater commitment, objectivity, and unflagging resolve to the application of merit on the part of governing and bureaucratic elites for the optimisation of the potentials for integration in this policy instrument. This becomes clearer and appreciable in the light of the averment by Onyeoziri (2002: 21) that “... state elite who preside over these policies, are themselves carriers of particularistic nationalism rather than the more universalistic consciousness” that the Nigerian nation-state eagerly anticipate.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper evaluated some of the state-building initiatives that Nigeria has adopted over a long period of time. These include: regionalism; state creation; federal character principle; NYSC; and establishment of Unity schools. The weaknesses or limitations of these policy options were identified through critical analytical framework utilised in the paper. The absence of national consensus and political legitimacy reinforced by the coercive and exploitative nature of the Nigerian state, occasioned by indifference to citizen social welfare were highlighted. The character of successive leading personnel of the Nigerian state, its policy outcomes and the management of inter-group relations, plus poor quality of governance are obvious and deserve urgent redress. The following recommendations are therefore proffered:

- There is a need to revisit the philosophical basis of some of these policies and to tinker with them for practical implementation, devoid of inequity, acrimony and injustice.
- The paper calls for speedy institutional reforms that can guarantee the architecture of strong and enduring institutions of governance in cultivating and sustaining virtues of accountability, transparency cum allied codes of good public governance.
- The Nigerian state is long overdue for re-capacitation and a break from its colonial trappings and overhang. There is a need for massive overhaul on the approach to public resource management to make governance citizen-friendly and focused, thus redressing the apathy or nonchalance to citizen welfare.

- Aspiring political leaders and public sector managers require training and re-training to cultivate the virtues of selflessness, probity in office, moral rectitude, accountability and transparency in public governance. This has the potency of arresting further regression into poor quality governance.
- The agencies responsible for mass mobilisation, national orientation and institutions of allied mandates should accelerate efforts at mass enlightenment and civic education to voters and citizens in general to elect/defend their votes (by legitimate means), therefore ensuring the enthronement of credible leadership across tiers and arms of government.

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