

## **THE REALISM OF NIGERIAN NATIONALISM AND THE CHALLENGES OF NATIONHOOD, 1922-2015**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria is a product of British adventure in Africa which was actualized by the Berlin Conference of 1884/5. The conference legalized British colonial control over Nigeria. But this was not to last for too long as Nigerians began agitations for self rule. Nigeria's educated elite spearheaded the struggle for self-rule and to achieve nationhood. Thus, Nigeria's nationalism was a reality that ended colonialism in 1960 but her transition to nationhood has been hampered by several challenges. In less than a decade of Nigeria's independence, however, her transition to nationhood was interrupted by a military coup in 1960. This episode later triggered a civil war that lasted for thirty months. Thus, Nigeria's journey to nationhood can at best be described as a challenge. This paper, therefore, considers the realism of Nigeria's nationalism and her painful transition to nationhood. The paper acknowledges that there are so many factors that have punctuated Nigeria's transition to nationhood, but the greatest of them all are ethnicity, military intervention, inequality, etc. The paper adopts the historical method in its analysis. It submits, however, that Nigeria's transition to nationhood can only be achieved if the challenges of marginalization, exploitation, inequality and unemployment which hamper nation building is addressed and reduced to their barest minimum. It therefore, recommends a holistic approach by Nigeria's political leaders and policy makers toward achieving nation building by giving every ethnic nationality a sense of belonging.

**Key Words:** Nationalism, Berlin Conference, Transition, Nationhood, Colonial Rule.

### **Introduction**

British colonial rule it was which created the colonial state now known as Nigeria. Colonial rule brought formerly disparate peoples of the Nigerian territory together in new ways and for new purposes (Ikime 178). The wave of nationalism, which swept across the African continent in the twentieth century, was basically an attempt to resist colonial rule which was legitimized by the Berlin Conference of 1884/5. Nigeria nationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had two main objectives. The first was to end colonialism while the second was to create a modern nation-state. While the first objective has been achieved, the latter has continued to be elusive and problematic. Nigeria's educated elite spearheaded this struggle for self-rule and to achieve nationhood.

Thus, Nigeria nationalism became a reality when it ended colonialism in 1960 but Nigeria's evolution into nationhood has rather appeared more like a mirage. In less than a decade of Nigeria's independence, her transition to nationhood was hampered by a military coup in 15 January, 1966. This episode later triggered a civil war that lasted for thirty months. Thus, the progress of Nigeria's nationalism was disrupted and the journey to nationhood held back. Nation building rather became

a challenge. This paper, therefore, considers the realism of Nigeria nationalism and Nigeria's transition to nationhood although this appears more like an ambition. This scenario, it is most obvious, is not limited to the Nigerian state; most African countries are equally entangled in the twin web of the realism of nationalism and the façade of transiting into nationhood. This scenario was expressly captured by Ali Mazrui when he avers:

Africa is caught between the birth of her modern nationalism and the quest for nationhood. Her nationalism is a reality that played a part in ending territorial colonialism but nationhood itself is an ambition rather than a reality. The agonies of Africa in the second half of the twentieth century have been ultimately derived from the pains of intermediacy between nationalism and nationhood (23).

From the above excerpt, it is clear that nationalism contributed a great deal in ending colonialism on the African continent, but achieving nationhood by individual African countries still seems ambitious. It has been argued in some quarters that the basic dialectic to understand in Africa is that while the great force that propelled African nationalism was ending alien rule; one of the greatest obstacles to African nationhood has been ethnic consciousness. It is this condition that informs the choice of this topic "The Realism of Nationalism and the Challenge of Nationhood in Nigeria". It is unfortunate that the motivations African nationalists had in ending colonialism became non-existent once independence was achieved. This made the task of nation building formidable and it stares Africans in the face. For a better understanding of this paper, attempt will be made to clarify terms as adopted.

### **Clarification of Terms**

#### **Nationalism**

Nationalism, like most concepts in the humanities and social sciences, is fluid in its conceptualization. The fluidity of this concept arises principally from the prismatic lenses scholars and authorities view it. This is to say that the perspective in which an African views nationalism might be different from the perspective the Europeans or the Arab may consider it. However, irrespective of the perspective or line of thought of any scholars, one salient thread that runs through its conceptualization is that nationalism entails love, sentiment, patriotic feelings, etc. towards one country or ethnicity, all geared towards liberation. For instance, Nwabughuogu define nationalism as a "strong devotion to one's own country, patriotic feelings, efforts, principles... a consciousness on the part of individuals or groups of membership in a nation, or a desire to forward the strength, liberty or prosperity of a nation"(4). Again, Chikendu, citing Coleman, sees nationalism as "...a sentiment and activity directed towards the creation of a nation and the attainment of independent statehood" (49). With regard to this paper therefore, it is safe to define nationalism as the struggle by Nigeria educated elites (the nationalists) secure political freedom for Nigerians from British colonialism. Notwithstanding the above clarification, it is important to note here that, nationalism is a double-edged sword. That is to say, it can build and it can destroy. Nationalism if not effectively checked can result to war especially ethno-nationalism.

#### **Nigerian Nationalism**

This refers to the sentiment and activity on the part of Nigerians who claim Nigeria as their home, aimed at the establishment of an independent Nigerian state and the creation of a Nigerian nation coextensive with that state (Coleman 425).

### **Nationhood**

For the purpose of this paper, the definition of Hole-Combe will suffice. According to him "nationhood is a corporate sentiment, a kind of fellow - feeling or mutual sympathy relating to a definite home country. It springs from a common heritage of memories, whether of great achievements and glory, or of disaster and suffering" (Cited in Golwalkar 58).

### **Realism**

As regard this paper, realism refers the representation of reality. It also means the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, as well as implausible, exotic and supernatural elements ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary\\_realism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_realism)). Thus, Nigeria nationalism could be said to be a historical realism.

### **The Realism of Nigeria's Nationalism**

Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, has been regarded as a part of humanity which might not escape the scourge or the blessings of Western modes of human organization and Western patterns of political behaviour. In fact, Africa was referred to as the "Dark Continent". Little wonder, most European adventurers who came during these periods concluded that Africa had no history, that history begins when men began writing. For instance, Hugh Trevor-Roper, a professor of modern history claimed that: "Africa has not history other than such history as centred on the activities of her European invaders" (Uya 2). This perspective was in part the product of the belief that Nigerians in particular and Africans in general are fundamentally different from the rest of mankind and that their destiny could and ought to be guided by the so-called advanced races (Coleman 2). Hence, the need for a "civilizing mission". This marked the prelude to colonial rule in Nigeria which was made possible by the Berlin Conference of 1885 under the watch of Otto Van Bismarck. Under the guise of "civilizing mission" European powers carved Africa arbitrarily into many territories and exploited her resources for the benefit of the colonizing power.

Decades into colonial rule, some historical events changed its course. There was a wave of nationalistic ferments across the world especially at the end of Second World War. Nationalism surged in Nigeria and took a twist at the end of World War II. African demands on the colonial governments in Africa grew immensely after the War (Coleman 230). African soldiers who participated in the war became emboldened by the demystification of the idea of the white's man invincibility and superiority. The nationalists were equally emboldened by the education which they have acquired. It was these tools and many more that they used to end colonialism on the continent.

Another development that spurred the nationalists towards resisting colonial rule was the publication of the Atlantic Charter and the subsequent public discussion that centred on its famous third clause: "...the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live ...." (Coleman 231). This charter elicited hopes for nationalists agitations everywhere in Africa.

During the brief period of 1945-1951, the outside world was shocked into realization that Africans were determined to assert control over the pace and direction of their political development. In both the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria the British were compelled to make radical political concessions pointing towards the early creation of independent African states (Coleman 235).

These concessions were forced by nationalist movements which were inspired by the doctrine of national self-determination to agitate for self-rule.

Nationalism in Nigeria, as in the Gold Coast (Ghana), according to Coleman, was a manifestation of long dormant people groping their way to nationhood in order that they may enter the life of the world community as equal participants. Just as Japan and India spearheaded the Asian revolt, so did Nigeria and Ghana spearheaded nationalism in the West African sub-region (241).

It is worthy of note to state here that the nationalist movements that became a dominant political factor in Nigeria after World War II evolved both from an older political particularism and broad pan-Africanism rather than from any sense of a common Nigerian nationality (215). Its initial goal was not self-determination, but rather to agitate for an increased participation in the governmental process on a regional level. This could be seen from the Clifford Constitution of 1922 and the subsequent constitutions of Richard in 1946, Macpherson 1951 and Lyttleton 1954.

For instance, the opportunity afforded by Clifford's Constitution led to the election of a handful of representatives to the Legislative Council in Lagos and Calabar. One significant factor in the 1922 constitution is that it increased political consciousness among some Nigerians. The principal figure in the political activity that ensued was Herbert Macaulay, who is referred to as the father of Nigerian nationalism. He created political consciousness using his newspaper, the *Lagos Daily News* as the focal point and at the same time spearheaded the formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), which was the first political party in Nigeria until the ascendancy of the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) in 1938.

The Nigerian Youth Movement was described as "the nucleus of Nigeria's first genuine nationalist organization" (Coleman, 218). The NYM, which metamorphosed into a national organization was formerly the Lagos Youth Movement, an organization formed in 1934 to organize opposition against the establishment of Yaba High College. Its aim was to forge a united nation out of the diverse elements, which were found in the country.

The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon, another party with a national character was also formed in 1944 with the goal of achieving self-government for Nigeria. The organization was led by Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe as president, and Secretary respectively. Their newspapers- *West African Pilot* and *The Comets* served and defended the nationalists cause. Cameroon was included in the party's name following the desire of the Cameroonian Association in Lagos to affiliate with the new movement. However, by 1959, the party's name was changed to National Council of Nigerian Citizens following the campaign by some prominent citizens from the South-West Province to join their kith and kin in Cameroon in a plebiscite (Ubaku, *et al.*, 62). There were other political parties like the Action Group (A.G), Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) and other ethnic organizations that played active roles to ensure that Nigeria achieved self-rule.

It must be noted that the major thrust of this section is not to discuss the politics and intrigues that preceded Nigeria's independence, but to give a synopsis to the fact that Nigeria's independence was a reality. Eventually, on October 1, 1960, Nigeria became an independent nation. Sir James Robertson was the last British Governor-general who presided over Nigeria. He was later succeeded by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. Consequently, Nnamdi Azikiwe, became the first and only indigenou Governor- General of the federation of Nigeria in 1960.

## **The Challenge of Nationhood**

The challenges Nigeria faces in contemporary times emanated from the pains of intermediacy between nationalism and achieving nationhood. Fifty-eight (58) years after independence, Nigeria's transition to nationhood can best be described as idealistic. Primordial sentiments and affiliation, regional agitations for self rule and intolerance seems to be the order of the day. Nigerians see themselves as strangers with no historical ties. The struggle to attain viable nationhood has considerably been punctured by acute ethnic rivalries and uncompromising loyalties, often pitching the Igbo against the Yoruba, Tiv against the Idoma, Jukun against Kutep, Berom against the Hausa, Yakurr, Mbembe, Boki, Bahumono, Ikun, Ejagham in the Central and Bekwarra, Yala, Bette, Bendi, Ishibori, Mbube etc in the Upper Cross River against the Efik and Ibibio to mention but a few. This has been occasioned by inequality, marginalization, poor leadership and uneven distribution of the country's common patrimony. These conditions have made the citizens to backtrack more and more into primordial sentiments to satisfy their basic needs of employment, identity and security. This is to say that, their loyalty lie with their ethnic nationalities rather than the Nigerian state. The lines of division are more pronounced today than any period of Nigeria's long history. It was this line of division that Obafemi Awolowo saw during the nationalist struggle when he averred that:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no Nigerians in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh" or "French". The word Nigeria is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria, from those who do not (47,48).

The above oft-quoted statement has been interpreted differently by some scholars and commentators whose aims have been to discredit Awolowo and portray him as an ethnic chauvinist of Nigerian politics. Why is Awolowo's statement often so misinterpreted and magnified? When we narrow our sense of reasoning and fail to analyse issues on their merit we are bound to pass wrong judgment or at best falter in our consideration of issues. Obafemi Awolowo has been variously described as an ethnic jingoist or bigot and a regionalist. It is difficult to find one Nigerian past leaders who would not be so described. Less we deviate from the focus of this paper; the point here is not to exonerate Obafemi Awolowo from these human errors but to look at issues on their merits. Agreed, Chief Obafemi Awolowo was not a saint, but within the context of his oft-quoted statement, it was simply an assertion of a passionate, patriotic and concerned Nigeria to the reality and dynamics of political struggle and its reflections on the Nigerian nation and its people which was made obvious by the missing recipes of nationhood during the decolonisation period.

Like Awolowo, the Algerian political activist, Ferhat Abbas, who studied pharmacology at Algiers University, Algiers, had in 1936 summed up his view on Algerian nationalism in a statement which supports Awo's point of view when he observes that:

If I had discovered an Algerian nation, I would be a nationalist and I would not blush for it as though it were a crime. Men who die for a patriotic ideal are daily honoured and regarded. My life is worth no more than theirs. Yet I will not die for the Algerian homeland, because such a homeland does not exist. I have not found it. I have questioned history, I have asked the living and the dead, I have visited the cemeteries; no one has told me of it... One does not build on the wind (7,8).

The above statement was not peculiar to Algeria; it was the predominant feeling in most African countries during the nationalist struggle. There were geographical locations called Nigeria, Algeria, Congo, Togo, Ghana, Gambia, Angola etc but the recipes for attaining nationhood were non-existent because those who inherited the state were ‘scavengers’ who lacked the vision of building viable nation. They merely hijacked the machinery of governance to make the various people see themselves as strange bedfellows while surreptitiously looting the country’s common patrimony without concerted effort to integrate them and build a viable nationhood. The lack of these chemistry or integrative elements of nationhood was what informed Awolowo’s statement. Sharing in Awo’s line of reasoning, Justice Chukwudifo Oputa (rtd) remarks that:

Nationhood implies much more. Nation deals more with the people than with the place (geography). As defined a nation is a body of people marked of by common descent, language, culture or historical traditions; a large community of people sharing a common history, culture, language and government. From the above it is obvious that some vital elements of nationhood do exist in Nigeria. The task before all of us now is to supply the missing elements (1,2).

In his own account, Remi Oyeyemi, a public opinion commentator in expatiating further on Awolowo’s statement as cited by Ayo Turton thus:

A nation to exist has to be ingrained in the psyche of its citizens. There has to be that emotional connection. It has to run as blood in the veins and marrow in the bones of those who subscribe to it. A nation is that consummated indescribable feelings that command the unalloyed love, permeated with buoyant affection and infused with unsolicited loyalty of those who subscribe to it. A nation, other than its geographical delineation is that which is patently invisible but translucently obvious and recurrent in the gliding waves of the sea of sub-consciousness of its people ([www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com)).

To continuously dwell on the statement Awo made about the reality of the Nigeria situation more than 60 years ago is not only an attempt to shy away from the fact of the situation but also an act of irresponsibility to jettison the task of nation-building which the present generation has failed to embark upon let alone learn from the mistakes of past generations. The Americans, British, Germans, Spaniards, and South Africans to mention but a few have these feelings of nationhood ingrained in their psyche. They know that they do not have any other country apart from the one they currently live in. This is why they have emotional attachment, connection and patriotism towards their countries and these recipes run through their veins and blood. The famous “American dream” is that consummated unexplained consciousness that flows through the veins of all Americans and command the unalloyed love subsumed by affection and patriotic zeal over long period of existence. This dream, as old as it appears, remains evergreen in their minds and is handed down from generation to generation.

The above condition was what Obafemi Awolowo wished for Nigeria. The integration of Nigerians into a nation to foster social, cultural and economic development that Nigeria can take its place proudly among other nations of the world. Like Bola Ige posits:

Awo, of course, wanted Yorubaland to be strong and prosperous, but not for any selfish end. The prosperity and well-being of the Yoruba nation was to be a benchmark for the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As Awo used to say, he could not be a good Nigerian,

if he was not a good Yorubaman! ([nigeriavillagesquare.com/ articles/obafemi-Awolowo](http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/obafemi-Awolowo))

The same could be said of any ethnic group in Nigeria. To be a good Nigerian, one must first be a good Igbo man, Hausa Man, Bekwarra Man, Ejagham Man, Tiv Man, Efik man, Annang Man, Ikwerre Man, Ibiobio Man, Nupe man, etc.

It is important to state here that building a viable nation is not a happenstance. This is how Gambari posits that:

... nations just don't happen by historical accident; rather they are built by men and women with vision and resolve. Nation-building is therefore the product of conscious statecraft, not happenstance. Nation-building is always a work-in-progress; a dynamic process in constant need of nurturing and re-invention. Nation-building never stops and true nation-builder never rest because all nations are constantly facing up to new challenges (1).

Gambari further asserts that building a nation has many facets and involves:

Building a political entity which corresponds to a given territory, based on some generally accepted rules, norms, and principles, and a common citizenship; building institutions such as a bureaucracy, an economy, the judiciary, universities, a civil service, and civil society organizations which symbolize the political entity; building a common sense of purpose, a sense of shared destiny, a collective imagination of belonging and finally, building the tangible and intangible threads that hold a political entity together and gives it a sense of purpose (1,2).

## **Conclusion**

From the discussion above, there has been an attempt to analyse the realism of Nigeria's nationalism and the challenge of her transition to nationhood. Nigeria's nationalism developed as a reaction to colonial rule with the goals, first of achieving self-rule and subsequently, nationhood. This struggle was spear-headed by Nigeria's educated elites with motivations from ex-service men who participated in World War II and the declaration by Atlantic Charter to mention but a few. Independence was finally achieved in 1960. It was equally discussed that the nationalists had the twin goal of achieving self-rule and building a viable nation. While the former was achieved, the later has been a challenge not only in Nigeria but perhaps the entire African continent.

The paper also discussed the challenges or obstacles to nationhood in Nigeria. While there are so many challenges obstructing the building of a viable Nigerian nation, the most obvious of them all is ethnic consciousness. The paper therefore recommends that Nigeria's political leaders and policy makers need to give every ethnic nationality a sense of belonging irrespective of political affiliation. The national policy must be such that guarantees, to a reasonable and identifiable extent, equal recognition, equal opportunities, fair and equitable distribution of the country's common patrimony. By this, the triggers of ethnic consciousness like unemployment, marginalization, poverty, inequality and exploitation will be adequately addressed.

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