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IDENTITY AND THE QUEST FOR NATIONHOOD IN NIGERIA

Dele Layiwola

The Problem of Definition and Focus

In many contemporary writings on identity studies, there is a perceived bent towards psychoanalysis rather than history or philosophy: from Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id* (1950) to Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941) to Erik Erikson's *Children and Society* (1963); and from Piaget's *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1962) to Bruno Bettelheim's "Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations" (1943).

Freud emphasises "anxiety reduction" as the underlying basis for identification and aggressive identification occurring as a result of the resolution of the "Oedipus Complex". Erikson identifies eight developmental stages or crises which an individual goes through before maturation into normal adulthood. Each state relates to a basic element in the society so that the individual and society grow together. In other words, an individual who achieves ego identity gains a sense of belonging (and confidence) within the group. S/He is thus able to relate to a past and a future within that group. Two Africanist scholars, Diejomaoh and wa Karanja (1986) paraphrasing Secord and Backman (1974) write thus:

Basically then, identity has to do with who we think we are and the various roles, statuses, and stations that we occupy in life and in the community. In other words, self-identity may be conceived as "an interlocking set of views that an individual holds about himself." This, in turn, serves as a core from which role identities are formulated in connection with role categories that the actor acquires. (1986: 52).

If we start from the viewpoint of the individual as a social component, as most psychoanalytic approaches tend to do, then it is necessary to start from the three identity components of Karl Hausser (1986): Self concept: Self esteem: Belief in control.

1. Self perception leads to self concept
2. Self evaluation becomes self esteem
3. Personal control (restraint) generates belief in control (the affirmative, law, order, etc.)

We do realise, however, that many a time questions of identity, particularly *cultural identity*, in a world battered by historical problems — enslavement; warfare; colonialism; racial, class and political subjugation — have become far more nuanced, and far more complex. Incidentally, though we all speak about cultural identity, the term is yet to elicit such a uniform, scientific definition that will give rise to a research or sociological method.

The various psychological approaches are often predicated on the instigation of ego identities which, as we all know, is not necessarily a summation of the various possible modes of identifications. It is only capable of showing us how the ego fits within a large cultural, ethnic, class, occupational or national framework, as the case may be. Erikson feels that at a national level, cultural identity appertains to what people “appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day (Erikson: 261; Diejomaoh and wa Karanja: 52). He concludes that “a nation’s identity is derived from the ways in which history has, as it were, counterpointed opposing potentialities; the ways in which it lifts this opposing counterpoint to a unique style of civilization or lets it disintegrate into mere contradiction” (Erikson: 285).

Whilst Erikson’s postulation is true for a truly industrialised, individuated society (with a clear industrial working class consciousness), it might not be altogether accurate for pre-industrial, agrarian or, even, envisioned post-industrial societies. In pre-industrial societies, the consciousness, from the formative years of life, are particularly focussed on a communal ethos whilst post-industrial societies engender an atomised collectivity constantly re-articulated. Increasingly, individuality as opposed to individualism takes over the processes of communal sociation. In both cultures, it is not in doubt that the sense of society is increasingly aware of the collaborative nature of human interaction in most fields of human endeavour.

Culture and Identity

It is clear that the conceptualisation of identity itself is, as affirmed earlier, always problematic without an ancillary notion being attached. In other words we are prompted to ask of any one process of identity formation: what kind of identity? What classification of identity? What notion of identity do we aim to

define? Is it class, religious, national or cultural? In this regard, identity would be akin to culture. We do realise as Worsley writes that Culture is a whole: a defined overall pattern: a *gestalt*. It is also cumulative achievement of humanity well above skills associated with genetic transfer (1984: 45). But Worsley's statement on culture here creates a dilemma if we apply it to the definition of identity. Can we really say that models of identity are not genetically affiliated? Do models of identity supersede those of culture? Or can we safely affirm otherwise?

We probably are content to say that whilst cultural affinity may discount fundamental, geneticist association, the notion of identity cannot. However, identity in social and political, even cultural terms, can also share in the notion of culture. But that fundamental, shared similarity must, however, be visible or perceivable. In this regard, the Tylorian definition of culture holds good for the definition of identity in neo-traditional societies:

that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor, 1871: 1; Worsley 1984: 45).

It also follows from the present definition that beyond physical genetic features, culture or identity will tend to dictate a whole way of life: an acceptable system of manners, conduct as well as taboos. This naturally includes affective values such as sense of judgement or reaction. It thus allows for a certain communal tenet which guarantees that cognitive, normative and conative values are predictable and can be pre-programmed.

Ethnicity

We may go a step further by asking whether identities, given the same culture, can mutate or change periodically. In a situation where the political system is fully democratic: where social and class osmosis are guaranteed, identities may change in a relative fashion. On the other hand, where there is cultural hegemony: where behaviours are imposed from above, subjective attitudinization may occur. The former is healthy, the latter is not. We hypothesize on these even as we realise that each society can be peculiar unto itself. This is without prejudice to the fact that society, as a term of reference, is not often governed by physical and verifiable boundaries but a complex of interests. It really does not matter whether that society is homogenous in a contiguous or disparate geographical milieu. The necessitating factor of identity becomes that of genuine self interest. Worsley again captures the idea:

Cultural traits are not absolutes or simply intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide identities which legitimise claims to rights. They are strategies or weapons in competitions over scarce social goods. What is

mistakenly often seen as tradition—attachment to the past as a value in itself — is better viewed as a way of maintaining title to power, wealth and status in the present, or as a nostalgic spiritual contrast to present disprivilege. Affirmations of ethnic identity become particularly passionate when claims to rights are contested by others. (1984: 249).

It is probably for this and for sundry historical reasons that the so-called emergent nations of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean are undergoing profound crises of identity. Nigeria is an apt example where ethnic nationalities with differing religious and linguistic characteristics interact in conflicting situations under one pseudo-national constitution and laws. This tension constantly generated are inimical to national integration and development (Diejomaoh and wa Karanja: 53). The conflict is further heightened by the co-existence of new as well as old social orders; one jostling for ascendancy over the other. It is an example of what Shils calls the “modernization of the traditional and the traditionalisation of the modern” (1963: 6). It thus helps us to conveniently agree that one of the more pressing needs of developing nations in Africa and Asia is the search for a collective identity in a pluralist situation. Industrialisation and modernity represent one aspect of historical development whilst the quest for identity stands for another, without discounting one for the other. Wherever prototypes of identity formation are not uniform, and national goals are not defined; national development, national dicta and ideology necessarily suffer. Let us now turn to identity-formation patterns in Nigeria.

Ethnic and/or Religious Identities

Before Nigeria emerged as a nation-state in 1914, the area presently designated by that name was made up of about 250 ethnic and linguistic variants and dialect groups. Each group had, and still has, a distinct history, cultural and political set-up, religion and value systems. Sometimes, neighbouring groups share similar institutions, values and linguistic root. We can, therefore, say that each linguistic/ethnic group had its own identity. Though there are three major groups — Hausas to the North, Yorubas to the West and Igbos to the East, there are also other significant groups — the Fulanis, Kanuris, Nupes, Tivs, Igalas and Ebiras to the North; the Ijaws, Efiks, Ibibios of the Eastern and Delta areas; and the Edos, Urhobos, Isokos, Ishans and Itshekiri of the Western areas.

Before the invention of modern Nigeria, the elites in each of the major ethnic groups tended to identify more with their towns and subgroups rather than with the entire ethnic group or other ethnic groups. For instance, the Yorubas are identified by their various subgroups as Ekitis, Oyo, Egbas, Ijebus, Ijeshas etc., though trade links existed across the ethnic divide. The Ijaws and Ijebus, as riverine people had both trade and cultural links. In a similar vein, the Yorubas and Hausas have always been linked by the trans-saharan trade. However, the

present political representation of the country has brought greater intergroup awareness. In the process of competing for scarce (sometimes ironically abundant) resources or even for power at the centre, the emergent bourgeoisies — particularly politicians and bureaucrats — resorted to atavistic ethnic loyalties and solidarity as a way of strengthening or safeguarding their interest and positions. I have called it atavistic because the solidarities have not been based on ideals as such but on some throwback, self-centred motives. Where a state or region is made up of several ethnic groups, the respective identities are often sharply insular with individuals associating more with the village/town or clan interest rather than the regional or national.

We must note that religion sometimes takes on a tribal garb but there is a usual distinctiveness in the way by which traditional modes of worship have influenced imported faiths, that is Christianity and Islam. The Africanisation of Churches and the strengthening of traditional African practices in Islam are cases in point. In the new world, the influence of Negro spirituals, Rastafarianism and praise worships on Christian orthodoxy are cases in point.

The Colonial Identity Factor

After the ratification of the Berlin treaty of 1885 where European powers shared out the African continent for the furtherance of trade and the pursuit of capitalist expansion, African nations witnessed the physical presence and impact of a new order. Aside from the historical fact, this has been represented copiously in the work of leading African writers like Achebe, Ngugi and Soyinka. For us in Nigeria, the political impact came in 1914 with the amalgamation of the Lagos colony with those of the Southern and Northern protectorates. Most scholars have rightly identified the purpose of colonialism as largely economic — the exploitation of labour and the expropriation of wealth and material culture (sculptures, artefacts and masks). Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* provides a classic example of Belgian Congo.

The incursion of international capitalism has brought great, irreversible changes to the organisation of indigenous institutions and structure. Not least amongst these were the introduction of market economy, the expansion of Western education, Christianity, increased rural-urban migration, the disintegration of communal life, etc. All of these changed the concepts of culture and identity as they were known hitherto. Whilst there were substantial gains in the evolution of society itself, there emerged a great erosion of confidence in the psyche of the ordinary people. This is the basis of what is termed the colonial mentality which inculcates in subject persons the overriding idea that (s) he is inferior to the coloniser (cf Fanon, 1968). There are, in fact, linguistic coinages which reveal this self-disparagement:

Oguntoyinbo is a popular name which translates 'the metal deity is equally as able as the white man'

Ilu Oba, literally the King's home country becomes the homonym for Britain.

Eegun Ajofeeba becomes the pseudonym for the great dancer-masque

The above examples only serve as a prelude to the onslaught which thereafter overtook traditional values, religion and fashion and the introduction of such disparaging terms as 'primitive' and 'pre-literate'.

There emerged a new bourgeoisie which largely identified with the values of the coloniser; acquired a new status and a new identity by serving as middlemen and helping to facilitate a newfangled rulership over their own people. Colonialism was, however, 'wise' by placing the emergent elite in subordinate positions for fear of open rivalry. Those who showed promise and initiative were disregarded and discredited. The enlightened section of this group later coalesced to precipitate the nationalist movement of the 1940s and the 50s.

The Evolution of a National Identity

Under colonial rule, there was no concerted or conscious plan to create an identity that is specifically Nigerian although traditional institutions were sometimes respected and preserved in art, religion and architecture. In policy analyses, there was mire of divide and rule. Nationalists who stridently advocated a true Nigerian consciousness were harrassed and imprisoned (see, for instance, Awolowo's *My March Through Prison*, 1985). Emphasis then was on loyalty to the British Crown rather than on the preparation of a successor elite. In Nigeria today, one unifying factor is the use of the English language as our *lingua franca*. It is thus the fact that at independence, as it is today, Nigeria has no clear national identity. It was just 'a gathering of tribes' as in many other African nations (see, Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*). Indeed, a leading politician of the time saw Nigeria as 'a mere geographical expression'. We became a nation only by a unilateral, creative fiat and for the economic expedience of the British. For the same reason, political party formation and election to political offices in 1959 were along ethnic rather than across ethnic lines. This would later appear to be one of the causes of the Nigerian civil war.

Momentarily, after 1970, the civil war paved the way for some kind of hollow nationalistic feeling in Nigeria as well as on the continent of Africa. One hazards this to have stemmed from the fear that the threatened disintegration of Nigeria might have signalled the same fate for other postcolonial African states. The military authorities of the time seemed, from about 1975 onwards, to have played on the increasing African consciousness, climaxing it with the idea of a

Festival of Black and African Culture (FESTAC) and the cultural unity among the world's black peoples in 1977. It is, however, clear that in spite of FESTAC's lofty aim, a Nigerian identity based on a concrete culture and civilization is yet to emerge. As there is no cultural or nationalistic centre to hold on to, the scramble for resources and political offices, compounded by the divide and rule tactics of the neo-colonial elites, will continue to ensure an inherently unstable polity.

Conclusion

Though Africans can be said to have a racial identity, there is often no cultural and economic base to support it. Hence two Africans may meet in the streets of New York without being able to communicate in an African language. On the other hand, the lack of a national identity has had grave, deleterious effects on the development of African nations. In Nigeria, the national elites have always identified with their ethnic groups than with the nation. The result is that they have often tended to see the national economy as wealth to be exploited for the benefit of their own kinsmen or ethnic group or, as it sometimes occur, for their individual selves. For this reason, many irrational economic decisions have been taken with less regard for cost effectiveness than for ethnic and nepotistic considerations. It is the same lack of a national identity that is largely responsible for the high incidence of "official corruption and inefficient utilization of manpower" because of a preference for ethnic considerations in the recruitment of manpower, rather than the merit and efficiency of the worker concerned.

By and large, states of poverty and oppression enunciated by political subjugation, sometimes underdevelopment, occasions of moral and material deprivation, often precipitate extreme conditions and peculiarities in the quest for survival. For example, there have been times in Nigeria when political terrorism and forced loyalties lead citizens to rationalise ineptitude by advertising it. A rather interesting example is the use of commemorative patterns on cloth whereby rulers and despots are worn and advertised as badges and insignia. On the other hand, the individual forces his/her own conscience into acquiescence with a situation which, though anathema, is overwhelming. There is thereby the institution of a secondary identity complex such as the one which Bettelheim (1943) refers to about human abuses in Nazi camps. He explains that in extreme situations, Jewish prisoners take on the attitudes, status and uniforms of Nazi soldiers. In other situations, they rehearse the passionate nationalism of German officers. This would seem to be a mode of adjustment to absolute power in an otherwise impossible situation. Much as the Nazi example is extreme, the indices on models of attitudinization take on different forms of rehearsed and acquired identities as dramas of consciousness. Even these types of adjustment to political and social oppression often masquerade as ethnicity or nationalism. Identity formations thereby occur as a mode of control and as false consciousness.

In conclusion, in Nigeria, there is the prevalence of strong ethnic and religious identities to the detriment of class or national identities. For this reason, our search for a national identity and genuine national integration continues far down the line in a future of which we are largely unsure.

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