

THE CHALLENGES OF ETHNIC BIGOTRY TO PEACEBUILDING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA AND THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The human person has an innate desire for peace and development. This inherent trait in every human being translates into society, as it is the human persons who make up society. Hence, all people of every nation desire and seek ways of building lasting peace and sustainable development for the welfare of their citizens. Nigeria as a nation is not left out of this drive for peace and nation-building. Considering the heterogeneity of Nigerian society and the peculiarities inherent in its multi-ethnic groups, there are excellent prospects for a progressive society. However, it burdens the mind that the Nigerian ethnic diversity, instead of enhancing peace and speedy national development, has constantly intensified tensions. Was it not a situation like this that prompted the Psalmist to exclaim in Ps. 55:9, "I see nothing but violence and strife in the city." The continued violence emanating from extreme ethnic attachments has created divides that have continued to impinge on peace-building and national development. The focus of this study is to explore and provide a suggestive opinion that will help mitigate undue ethnic sentiments. Hence, the paper discusses the effects of undue ethnic sentiments on peace and nation-building. It contends that for Nigeria to achieve enduring peace and meaningful development, its citizens must optimally harness and conscientiously utilize their rich ethnic diversity. There is a need to eschew everything that constitutes ethnic divide and prioritize all the essentials for unity in diversity so that a strong and progressive nation can be built.

Keywords: Ethnic Diversity, Bigotry, Peace-building, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Nigeria is a diverse nation comprising approximately 250 ethnic groups. This diversity should be seen as a blessing because within these groups are rich cultural heritages and individuals with potential and talents that, if properly harnessed, could help elevate the country. However, our ethnic differences, instead of helping us build a united society, are becoming a threat and causing divisions. Nigeria has abundant human and natural resources, but ongoing ethnic conflicts have hampered national growth and development. To build a unified society, we must work together and actively promote peace and harmony. A peaceful environment encourages cooperation and mutual support.

An Igbo adage says, "*gidigidi bu ugwu eze*," which highlights the strength of unity of purpose and togetherness. This is especially relevant between a leader and their followers, the ruler and the ruled. A similar phrase is "*igwebuike*" (unity is strength; there is strength in the oneness of many people). Basically, where unity exists, progress follows. When people come together as a community, they support each other; as a result, much can be achieved. On the other hand, one person alone can sometimes go faster. Still, to go far, you need to walk with others. The power of unity helps us reach our goals and dreams because together, we can do much more of what we aim for. Pope Francis (2020) didn't hold back in praising the value of working as a team, pointing out that only by strengthening our brotherhood can we "turn our life into a wonderful adventure" (p. 8). He also emphasizes that we are beings in communion who can get the best outcomes when we work together in mutual help and support. Additionally, the Pope says that when we dream together, we see more clearly, as there's a risk of "seeing mirages" when we dream alone (p. 8).

This study demonstrates that, despite our diverse ethnic backgrounds, we must acknowledge that we are one nation working towards a common goal. Therefore, it is our responsibility to contribute meaningfully to the greater good. Our diverse ethnic groups offer a wealth of strengths that can help us build a strong nation. It is time to stop all forms of hatred, competing against one another, and abandon unhelpful rivalry, focusing instead on cooperation and mutual benefit.

Understanding Ethnic Bigotry

The diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria have become one of the nation's most complex challenges. Our cultural diversity, which should be a blessing, has apparently turned into a curse because of the growing hostility stemming from ethnic bigotry. The question now is, what is ethnic bigotry? "Ethnic" and "bigotry," though paired here, are two different words with distinct meanings. 'Ethnic' is an adjective derived from the noun "ethnicity." In the New Testament Greek Lexicon, "ethnic" is said to originate from the Greek word "*ethnos*," which designates "individuals of the same nature or genus," or a group of people "associated or living together." As described by Guibernau and Rex (2010), ethnic groups are formed when a set of people "entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs" (p.13). Ethnicity, therefore, connotes a group of people linked by some distinctive cultural characteristics, such as language, religion, customs, etc. According to Obasi (2010), they share "a commonality of social customs, rites, myths, religion, and ancestral homeland" (p. 13). Umezina (2012) emphasizes the concept of "common blood or common ancestry" among people of the same ethnic group (p. 217). The belief in shared ethnicity fosters a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood.

The term "bigotry" comes from the Old French word "bigot," which described an excessively religious or religiously intolerant person, and earlier, it was used as an insult. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (n.d.) defines it as an "obstinate or intolerant devotion to one's own opinions and prejudices: the state of mind of a bigot." The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) describes bigotry as "the fact of having opinions that are based on strong, unreasonable beliefs and disliking other people who have different beliefs or a different way of life." These definitions show that bigotry has a wholly negative connotation. It provokes strong emotions and deep-seated aversions, as well as negative attitudes and behaviors, against a group or an individual because of their membership in that group. Migliorati et al. (2022) view it as an "antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization" (p. 236). Bigotry can also exist in institutionalized forms and be embedded in societal structures and systems, affecting social relationships, operations, and interactions. Such forms of bigotry are often "invisible—at least to those who are not its victims" and can "damage the health and well-being of a society overall" (Bailey et al., 2022, p. 412).

Ethnic bigotry, therefore, refers to intense hatred and hostility toward a group that is different culturally or religiously. According to Quillian et al. (2023), it involves "unequal and adverse treatment of people because of their ethnic or racial origin" (para. 2). Ethnic bigotry has wide-reaching adverse effects on individuals and society. It can cause psychological and emotional distress and create socio-economic disadvantages for victims (Lee et al, 2018), and lead to social divisions, conflicts, and the erosion of human rights.

Peacebuilding and Sustainable Development

These two terms are often used together, although they have distinct meanings. Peacebuilding describes a multi-dimensional and long-term process aimed at preventing violent conflict, managing and resolving current disputes, and establishing the foundations for sustainable peace (Lederach, 1977). It goes beyond merely halting direct violence (such as warfare) to tackle the deeper structural and cultural causes of conflict (Galtung, 1976). Galtung (1996) introduced the concept of "positive peace," a crucial element of peacebuilding that extends beyond the mere absence of conflict to foster equitable social, political, and economic systems.

Sustainable development is a widely discussed and crucial concept in the 21st century, aiming to foster human well-being while safeguarding the planet. It is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43). Muonwe (2024), Alaimo (2018), and Kates, Parris, and Leiserowitz (2005) emphasize the multidimensional nature of sustainable development, which is based on three interconnected pillars: social, economic, and environmental. These pillars encompass human relations within institutions, robust financial revenue to drive positive societal impact, and ecological considerations. While some authors argue that environmental sustainability is the most important of the pillars (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015), it is essential to note that neglect of any aspect automatically affects others.

Peacebuilding and sustainable development are deeply interconnected and mutually supportive of one another. One cannot truly thrive without the other. This connection is especially vital in a country like Nigeria, which has experienced numerous internal conflicts, from insurgency in the North-East to farmer-herder clashes, communal violence, and other social unrest. Conflicts damage schools, hospitals, roads, and other critical infrastructure, directly impeding the delivery of basic services and economic activity (UNDP, 2021). Achieving sustainable development is nearly impossible without strong and ongoing peacebuilding efforts. Conversely, genuine and

lasting peace cannot be achieved without addressing the root developmental deficits and inequalities that often trigger and sustain conflict. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that incorporates peacebuilding strategies into every aspect of development planning and implementation is crucial for Nigeria's future stability and prosperity.

Instances of Ethnic Bigotry

Since Nigeria's formation in 1914, its people have rarely lived in harmony (Apenda 2011). The country's history is marked by ethnic conflicts, as diverse groups struggle to reconcile their cultural differences. Each ethnic group believes its values are superior to others'. Ethnic conflicts are increasing: some Igbo see themselves as more innovative and successful in commerce, some Yoruba pride themselves on cultural and entertainment achievements, and the Hausa/Fulani believe they are destined to rule. Other groups also claim superiority.

Conflicts over resources, lands, and political offices have led to political complaints and sectarian crises, often fueled by elites exploiting ethnicity for manipulation. These power struggles have led to ethnic grievances and, in some cases, violent insurgencies. The first major ethnic conflict in 1964 was triggered by a perceived Northern power hijack, with claims of election rigging favoring Northern candidates, as the Northern People's Congress controlled the central government (Achebe, 2012, p.50).

Some believed the 1966 coup that installed Aguiyi-Ironsi to have been ethnically motivated to end Hausa/Fulani political dominance, thus paving the way for the Igbo to take over the control of Nigeria from the North (Achebe 2012). The Northerners' counter-coup, also driven by ethnic bias, led to Ironsi's death and Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner, taking power. Gowon's rise increased tensions, triggering violence against the Igbo in the North, killing around 30,000.

Most Southern Governors rejected Gowon's authority amidst ethnic conflict, with Col. Odumegwu Emeka Ojukwu leading Biafra's separation, triggering a civil war from 1967 to 70. The brutal war left a lasting scar, affecting Nigeria's ethnic relations and shattering hopes for unity. Achebe (2012) notes the war's lasting negative impact on Nigeria's progress despite its resources.

The ongoing ethnic conflict in Kaduna since 1987 mainly involves Muslims in northern Kaduna and Christians in southern Kaduna. Notable incidents include the Kafanchan disturbances of March 1987, the first Zangon Kataf disturbances of February 1992, and the second in May 1992 (Onmhawo and Adamu, 2011). Attacks between January and July 2020 caused mass killings and property destruction. Specifically, on July 19, 2020, unidentified gunmen attacked a wedding in Kaura LGA, and on July 20, 2020, violence in Zango Kataf involved killings and destruction (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2020). To this day, many are still massacred in southern Kaduna.

When Chief Olusegun Obasanjo became the president of Nigeria in 1990, some Hausa people who did not accept his victory clashed with some Yorubas in Shagamu, at Ipaja in Lagos, and in Kano (Apenda, 2011). Our findings also show that, in October 2000, some Yoruba people clashed with some Hausa/Fulani in Idi-Araba in Lagos State.

Furthermore, the Tiv and Jukun in Plateau State do not get along, with their rivalry peaking in 2001 and continuing to this day. Since then, Jos has experienced conflicts driven by ethnic or religious differences. One example is the November 28, 2008, Jos Crisis, triggered in part by Hausa/Fulani protests over political marginalization. The crisis followed a local election won by a Jos native, which Hausa/Fulani rejected, feeling marginalized in their land, as Gonjoh (2011) notes.

The 2020 End SARS protest, initially peaceful, was hijacked by malicious individuals in some areas, leading to ethnic violence. Notably, Igbo traders' shops in Apo were burned, and similar incidents occurred in Lagos and elsewhere. Some incited Yoruba against Igbos, claiming Igbo involvement in attacks, including vandalizing a palace. An ethnically motivated killing also took place in Oyinbo, Rivers State.

Reasons Behind Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria

The escalating tension and conflicts among various ethnic groups in Nigeria have continued due to several factors. Some of these originated from Nigeria's very foundation, while others emerged later. These are discussed below.

Colonialism

To a large extent, the colonial legacy worsened tensions among Nigeria's ethnic groups. Overtly, the British amalgamation policy of 1914, which unified Nigeria into a single colony, was carried out without much regard for the cultural, structural, and linguistic differences among the various ethnic groups (Apenda, 2011). Clearly, merging people who are dialectically independent and culturally distinct into a single homogeneity without understanding the implications was a loose form of integration. Achebe (2012) confirms that the British approach

to unity in 1914 only resulted in a weak and artificial connection, complicating Nigeria's destiny. Since the scheme was not a strong unifying force, it occasionally loosens, leading to tension and conflict. In this connection, Uzoigwe and Nwadior (2013) note that "the economic interest of the colonial government paved the way for the integration of different ethnic groups with varied ideologies and religious affiliations, hence the emergence of ethno-religious unrest and tensions in Nigeria" (p. 74). Nwodo (2011) also blamed the British colonizer for the amalgamation, which merely paved the way for their dominance and "economic exploitation" of Nigeria (p. 101).

Furthermore, the indirect rule system employed a divide-and-conquer strategy. The fact that northerners were more receptive to indirect rule than southerners created a clear ethnic division among Nigerians, openly establishing unfriendly boundaries and leading to a tense, conflict-prone environment (Achebe, 2012). Nnoli (1980) also concludes that "the system of indirect rule reinforced ethnic division and has made it difficult for the ethnic groups to come together as a true nation" (p. 113).

Ethnic Domination of National Political Space

Since ethnicity has, to a considerable extent, become a defining feature of identity in Nigeria, the outcome is usually a tribally blind democratic system, which results in exclusionary identity politics. Nigerian politics is often characterized by the exclusion of certain ethnic groups from political positions or their use as placeholders in the political arena. Often, ethnic groups compete with the aim of domination; each strives to be recognized and deemed relevant within the available political space (Umezina, 2012).

When the political space is dominated by the northern ethnic groups, which are predominantly Muslim, there is always the fear among the southerners, who are mainly Christian, of imminent Islamization of the country. The same paranoia comes into play when the southern region with a larger Christian population assumes the majority in the political domain. In many instances, politicians exploit ethnic sentiments and tensions to serve their political ambitions (Achebe 2012).

Mismanagement of National Resources

Nation-building should be a comprehensive effort that includes all social layers of the nation's population. Every segment of society expects fair consideration from national policymakers. However, when some ethnic groups remain impoverished and deprived of opportunities, it fosters ethnic hostility. There is a saying that when injustice becomes the norm, resistance becomes a duty. Therefore, when preferential treatment denies equal and balanced representation of all ethnic groups, protests are inevitable. If not adequately addressed, it could lead to conflicts. Pope Francis (2020) states that tension will continue to rise as long as "Some parts of our human family... can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence" (para. 15).

Ethno-religious Extremism

A rigid and extreme adherence to beliefs, practices, and identity of a particular ethnic or religious group is often accompanied by a strong sense of exclusivism and superiority over other groups. One of the results is the attempt to impose one's cultural values and religious beliefs on others. Such impositions often involve advocating an adversarial stance, which can potentially result in conflicts. For example, the implementation of the Sharia legal system in some northern Nigerian states—where diverse religious communities coexist—was seen as highly provocative. It infringed upon the religious freedom of non-Muslims and poses significant challenges for others to practise their religions freely. Furthermore, as Jacob (2011) observes, "the imposition of the Sharia increased fanaticism and irredentism on the side of most Islamic adherents and gave legitimacy to Islamic fundamentalism" (p.31).

Settlers Communities

There have been several records of violence in connection with the nomadic settler communities. Most of the ethnic clashes in southern Kaduna and Jos are said to have resulted from disharmony between the Hausa/Fulani settlers and the indigenes. Gonjoh (2011) states that, among other things, "settlement syndrome" is a significant cause of the continuous ethnic clashes in Jos (p. 277). Again, the movement of a large number of cattle herders from the northern part of Nigeria to the southern part in search of grazing areas for their cattle is generating a lot of crisis. Although their movement is necessitated by ecological decay, such as desertification, their entry into communities often constitutes significant conflicts, as it frequently involves the destruction of the indigenous people's farmlands (Muonwe, 2021).

Deprivation

The state of the Nigerian nation is one in which the vast majority of the population lacks the necessities of life. Many suffer from deprivation, mainly due to the greed and self-centeredness of their leaders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, warehouses were found to be hoarding food and other palliatives intended for people experiencing

poverty. Is this not a serious indictment of the leaders who pretend to care for the poor masses but are only interested in their gains? (Aluko, 2020). It is no exaggeration to say that in Nigeria, many people face systematic violations of their natural rights and fundamental freedoms. When some people in a society are denied their rights and privileges, violence is likely to persist. The impact of deprivation is well expressed by Pope Francis (2020) in his statement that “the loneliness, fear and insecurity experienced by those who feel abandoned by the system creates a fertile terrain for various mafias” (para. 28).

Bad Governance

The Igbo people say “*mmiri si n'isi gbarua nsogbu di*” (literally, there is trouble when the water gets bad from its source). The foregoing maxim assumes that one cannot expect the entire body to be healthy when the head is sick. Nigeria, as a nation, has endured many years of misrule, leading to widespread corruption and the mismanagement of public funds. Lack of good governance has been the greatest hindrance to the country's developmental progress. It is, more or less, poor governance that has deprived many people of their opportunities and left a larger section of the populace on the margins, leading to frustrations that are sometimes expressed through violence.

Impacts of Ethnic Bigotry on Peace-Building and Sustainable Development

Ethnicity itself is not inherently harmful. It is natural to feel a sense of collective belonging. Every individual is born into a specific cultural environment, and it is common to feel more affinity towards those who share the same cultural identity. Problems only arise when the tendency towards one's ethnic group becomes exclusive and leads to social discrimination. We will now highlight some ways in which ethnic loyalties and intense ethnic passions have caused violence that adversely affects all areas of the nation.

Economic Loss

Persistent ethnic violence has significantly harmed Nigeria's economy. The nation's economy remains unstable due to severe disruptions caused by widespread ethnic clashes. Ethnic disunity has resulted in considerable regression for the country. The Jos crisis, as previously mentioned, has had a negative impact on the economy, as Jos, once a hub for tourism, no longer attracts visitors (Gonjoh, 2011).

Ethnic conflicts also deter foreign investors, as ethnic violence often leads to the destruction of properties and investments. When the environment is tense, there are profound uncertainties about the future; therefore, no one would want to invest in such an unstable environment. To a large extent, Nigeria has remained underdeveloped due to the fears in investors' minds that their investments could be compromised during crises.

Furthermore, ethnic violence also causes economic loss because it leads the government to spend large amounts of money that could have been invested in meaningful development, such as peace-building schemes in war zones and the reconstruction of destroyed public facilities.

Undermining the Spirit of Patriotism

Ethnic bigotry damages the spirit of patriotism. It promotes greater ethnic loyalty than national allegiance. This kind of ethnic loyalty sometimes appears among those in national positions, who, as Uzoigwe and Nwadiakor (2013) observe, fight for the “rights of their respective ethnic groups, instead of working for the interest of the nation” (p. 78). Ethnic loyalty frequently leads security agencies to support their ethnic groups in conflicts rather than resolving issues for the benefit of all.

In short, when ethnic chauvinism becomes popular, patriotism declines, suspicion rises, and individuals are discouraged from working towards the common good. The focus shifts exclusively to advancing the interests of one's ethnic group (Uzoigwe and Nwadiakor, 2013). Such ethnic loyalty invariably leads to the retardation of national progress.

Divisive Tendency

Unwarranted ethnic sentiments and regional parochialism promote hostility, dissatisfaction, and prejudice, which eventually deepen the divide between ethnic groups. Excessive emphasis on ethnicity leads to stereotypes, often resulting in segregation and exclusion. When individuals hold certain perceived notions about other ethnic groups, inter-ethnic interactions become challenging. For example, in Nigerian society, some ethnic groups harbour resentment towards the Igbo people due to the widespread belief that they are competitive and notoriously adventurous.

The reactions of some people during the recent End SARS demonstrations still serve as a point of reference. Some individuals deliberately incited violence with unsustainable, despicable, and outright lies against certain ethnic groups. Such a ploy was aimed at creating an ideological divide to undermine the protest's real aim and focus. Clearly, that movement by the youth was free from any ethnic affiliation. Therefore, to have ironically hijacked

it and infused it with ethnic connotations was wrong. An attitude like that does not promote unity; on the contrary, it fosters insecurity, suspicion, divisiveness, sectionalism, and ethnic hatred.

Identity Contestation

A multi-ethnic society often faces conflict over identity, with groups believing their value system is superior and refusing to learn from others. This ethnic chauvinism and bigotry lead to rivalry over power and resources. In countries like Nigeria, such chauvinism is dangerous as it fuels ethnic rivalries. Nnoli (1995) notes that emotionalism in inter-ethnic relationships limits wisdom, reason, and views others as moral equals. When conflicts spread, people tend to associate with those sharing similar backgrounds. They often prioritize their interests, which can lead to injustice. For instance, criminal cases against someone from the powerful ethnic group are often dismissed, but if they involve another group, they are amplified.

Impoverishment

Ethnic clashes in Nigeria have led to widespread destruction of lives, properties, and investments. There is a saying in Igbo that “*a naghị eji a kpata a tufue aba ogaranya*,” meaning that one does not become rich by being wasteful. Poverty persists in many parts of the country today, as numerous lives have been lost and businesses have been jeopardized due to ongoing ethnic conflicts.

Way Forward for Peacebuilding and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The widespread presence of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria makes the idea of peace and sustainable development seem unrealistic. The frequent ethnic clashes reflect a situation where, in Pope Francis’s words (2020), “working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia” (para. 30). Meanwhile, a common saying states that death is the only event that has defied all solutions. This suggests that as long as someone is alive, a remedy is possible. Nigeria can grow as a diverse society and prevent ethnic bigotry if the following considerations are given proper attention.

Eschewing Identity Politics

To maintain peace and support sustainable development, Nigerians should avoid using ethnic identity as the sole criterion for access to political and economic resources. Politicians should refrain from inciting ethnic violence as a means to further their political ambitions. While the politics of representation are essential in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria, political positions should not be awarded solely based on ethnic affiliations. Peace will be strengthened when citizens stop using ethnic origins as tools for political participation, mobilization, and appointments.

Debunking Ethnic Exclusivity

Peace and growth decline when there is neglect of fair inclusion and mutual integration. Nigeria's ethnic exclusivity blocks development, as Pope Francis (2013) warns against economic exclusion that 'kills.' To progress, a national framework must include everyone regardless of ethnicity, encouraging open-mindedness and tolerance. Inclusiveness supports equitable resource distribution and political representation. Achieving peace and growth depends on fairly sharing positions and services among capable individuals. Achebe (2012) criticizes nepotism, saying it undermines meritocracy and promotes mediocrity.

Eliminating ethnic considerations in appointing individuals and evaluating their performance, regardless of ethnic group, will also greatly help Nigeria avoid shame in the international arena. We cannot achieve much progress as a nation if we keep harbouring the mindset of “get the achievers out and replace them with less qualified individuals from the desired ethnic background” (Achebe, 2012, p. 76). It is important to note that, to move forward as a nation, we must, in the words of Pope Francis (2020), cultivate a love that “transcends all prejudices, all historical and cultural barriers, all petty interests” (para. 83).

Constitutional Review

It would be prudent to organize a sovereign national conference to redefine and reconstitute Nigeria through a constitutional review, ensuring that citizens' rights and privileges are not based on ethnicity and nativism. Additionally, the constitutional review should include recommendations to promote justice, equity, and national unity. The national conference for constitutional review should not be a process that is initiated and then abandoned, as has happened before, such as with the Aburi Accord of 1967 (Achebe, 2012) and the 2014 national conference. The conference should make key decisions that need to be implemented to improve the management and reduction of ethnic conflicts and to ensure peaceful coexistence.

Proper Utilization of the Country's Human and Material Resources

Nigeria is richly endowed with natural and human resources. Our development will speed up if we stop fighting each other and value what we have. With its many ethnic groups, Nigeria has great potential for growth and sustainable progress if we stop dividing ourselves and instead harness our diverse heritages, which are full of valuable human and material resources.

Renouncing Cynicism

To create a nation free of ethnic discrimination, we must reject the indifference, skepticism, and self-centeredness that dominate our political, religious, economic, and social lives. We should not allow ethnic identity to cause division in political representation and opportunities. Unless we see ourselves as part of one human family, united in achieving a common goal, we cannot stay committed to building the unity that fosters peace and national growth. According to Pope John Paul II (1987), to remove obstacles to development, we must stay aware of our interdependence. Perhaps we should also heed St. Paul's reminder in 1 Cor 12:25 that, for the body to grow in perfection, its different parts must be united, not divided. We achieve little or nothing when we continue cycles of violence and division. A strong foundation for development is only guaranteed when there is "peace and harmonious co-existence" (Apenda, 2011, p.335).

Good Governance

Good governance reduces tension because, as Abok (2011) notes, recognizing the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace. Similarly, Pope John XXIII (1963) asserts that when society is organized in ways that respect human dignity, peace and freedom will follow. It is high time those managing the country's affairs began to abandon the policy of "might makes right" and promote the principle of respecting the inviolable rights of the people. Abok (2011) advises that respecting citizens' natural rights should be regarded as a "categorical imperative for the promotion of the dignity and equality of mankind" (p. 260). If government officials implement policies that promote development and create opportunities for citizens, people will feel valued and start to trust them. It is self-evident that conflict will decrease if we have an effective, responsible, and responsive government. Society will experience less tension if, as Onmhawo and Adamu (2011) show, Nigeria has a functioning system that addresses human needs by fostering "economic progress through deliberate and articulated policies" (p. 290).

Enthroning Justice and Equity

We have already noted that deprivation is one of the factors that incite ethnic tension. It does not sit well in a pluralistic society like Nigeria when those in government focus on enriching a particular ethnic group. In contrast, others are left feeling as if they are not part of the nation. To reduce the tensions that lead to ethnic violence, it would be appropriate for those in administrative roles to adopt the principles of neutrality, subsidiarity, and solidarity, which will promote a commitment to the common good and support an equitable distribution of the nation's resources. According to Benedict XVI (2005), to have a just social structure, we need a state that "in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need" (para. 28).

Respect for the Rights and Dignity of the Human Person

Pope Francis (2020) emphasizes that respect for human rights is essential for any country to progress socially and economically. He states that, to eliminate division and bridge disagreements among people, everyone must understand that "the human person and human dignity are not simply catchwords, but pillars for creating shared rules and structures capable of passing beyond purely pragmatic or technical approaches" (para. 28). Every human is endowed with some inviolable rights that arise from human nature. The image of God, which is inherent in every individual, grants each an incomparable and inviolable dignity. It is because of this exceptional dignity that humans possess certain intrinsic rights. According to Pope John XIII (1963), every person has rights "flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature, which are therefore, universal, inviolable and inalienable" (para. 1). Since dignity and rights are fundamental to each person's nature, Benedict XVI (2010) states that proper recognition and respect for them must be considered "indispensable for building of a society directed to human fulfillments" (para. 2). Everyone must work together to prevent violations of human rights and dignity to reduce tensions that could lead to violence.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that ethnic strife is a significant factor that has hindered growth and development in Nigeria. The country has been plagued by ethnic violence, which has significantly obstructed progress and peace. However, we demonstrated that the diversity of ethnic identities within Nigeria's multi-ethnic composition is a strength.

Instead of pitting ethnic groups against each other in a competition that causes setbacks, people should find ways to leverage the rich resources of various ethnic communities to promote lasting peace and sustainable development.

We also argued that maintaining unity among people with a common origin is not inherently wrong. However, using that unity as a threat against others impedes societal progress, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. We contended that ethnic loyalty should not lead to ideological attitudes that discriminate against others. Ethnicity should not be exploited as a tool to destabilize the nation. We must prevent our ethnic differences from dividing the country into fragmented communities, which hinder the pursuit of peace.

All ethnic groups must unite to bridge divisions and promote peace, solidarity, love, and understanding. Citizens need to overcome divisiveness that weakens unity—key for building a strong nation. Discouraging unhealthy rivalry fosters cooperation. Working in love and solidarity enables decisive actions for progress. Mutual empathy helps eliminate oppression, promote justice, ensure resource fairness, and create equal opportunity. Our research shows equality reduces regression. Without a fraternal society, lasting peace and progress are unattainable.

Our study demonstrates that achieving peace, unity, and stability requires improving our system. Nigeria needs a complete overhaul to dismantle structures of marginalization, exploitation, poverty, impunity, corruption, domination, and destruction. A capable government should develop transparent policies to advance the country. Nigeria must end ethnic bigotry, heal our fractured society, and reject conflicts that threaten national unity and progress. Ultimately, lasting peace and sustainable development are achievable if people avoid brief-sighted extremism and resentful, aggressive ethnicism, which weaken competence, credibility, and excellence.

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