

Hate Speech in Nigeria: Opportunity in Crisis

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Abstract

This paper reflects on ways hate speech grounded in ethnic and religious narratives precipitate loss of confidence in the Nigerian state. It attempts to characterise how inter cultural dialogue and patriotic fealty could be leveraged to redefine pre-existing relationships and pioneer monumental changes. Methods employed involve desk reviews of the incendiary comments within Biafran separatist and Arewa Youth Coalition quit notice on the Ndigbo rhetoric and their analyses from theoretical prisms of intercultural communications and nationalism. Findings suggest that national coexistence could be progressed through dialogue and accommodation with partisan matters being resolved within the latitudes of constitutionality and governance institutions. They also alluded to the symbolic importance of nationalist consciousness by emphasising need for civic loyalties and political allegiances to the country rather than cultural identity. Consequently, Nigerians are recommended to respect their diversity, embrace compromise and engage in cross cultural dialogue to rebuild the country.

Keywords: Hate Speech, Nation, Nationalism, Inter Cultural Communications

Introduction

Even though the proscription of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) in September 2017 initially by the military and subsequently South East Governors Forum, Federal Government and finally court judgment abated Nigeria's drift to the brink, the measure did not entirely checkmate the country's relentless reel to catastrophe. Nigeria's catalogues of debilitating malaise are legion, an ailing reticent president, youth unemployment, economic recession, kidnapping, insurgency and runaway corruption at high and low places. However, hate speeches and divisive politics on mainstream media and internet platforms between IPOB-Biafran irredentists and Arewa Youth Coalition who served the Ndigbo quit notice from the North have firmly set Nigeria on the course of disintegration.

The strong arms of law ultimately rescued Nigeria from anarchy, but the the intercultural conversations Ag. President Yemi Osinbajo convoked with leaders of thought and traditional rulers from the North, South East regions as well as Nigerian Governors Forum over IPOB's Biafra agitations and the retaliatory antics of Arewa youth coalition are the appropriate steps that need to be sustained and further explored.

Significance of Inter Cultural Communications and Nationalism at Curtailing Hate Speech

It is important to contextualize relevance of intercultural communications and nationalism at countering hate speech and promoting appropriate ideas about nations.

Hate speech attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes such as gender, ethnic origin, religion, race, disability, or sexual orientation. It is a verbal and nonverbal expression used to demean, oppress, or promote violence against someone on the basis of their membership in a

social or ethnic group. Nockleby (2000) contextualises hate speech as conveying dislike, teasing, ridiculing or shouting ugly words in moment of frustration at someone. Targets of hate speech are chosen just because they belong to that particular group of people and the messages of hate are designed to degrade or otherwise harm these targets for the same reason. The incendiary commentaries now replete in Nigeria's social and political spectrum greatly undermine concordance and unity amongst its heterogeneous populace.

The interchangeable usage of the term nation with states, country, ethnic group and race underscores existing confusion about what constitutes nations. Heywood (2007: 110) notes that the blend of cultural and political characteristics within nations causes difficulties about whether to define nations objectively as distinct political communities or subjectively as cultural entities comprising groups of people with same language, religion and bound by shared past. He refers to nations as 'psycho-political constructs', meaning, a complex phenomenon shaped by a collection of cultural, political and psychological factors. Nigerians need being refocused on ideas about their nation state.

Nationalism similarly suffers from the political equivalent of multiple-personality syndrome. Like the concept of nation, Heywood (2007: 115) observes that the cross cutting nature of nationalism makes it, at various times, to be considered progressive and reactionary, democratic and authoritarian, liberating and oppressive, left wing and right wing. Heywood traces roots of the confusion to whether a cultural or political criterion is decisive in defining the nation. "Nationalism is often regarded as reaction against foreign domination; a liberating force linked to the goals of liberty, justice and democracy, a product of social dislocation, a vehicle for racism and xenophobia or a commitment to the principle of national self-determination whose goal is the construction of a nation state. Tribalism which distinguishes 'us' from a foreign and threatening 'them' is also another irrational face of nationalism".

Intercultural communication, however, is a scientific field whose object of interest is the interaction between individuals and groups from different cultures, and which examines the influence of culture on who people are, how they act, feel, think and, evidently, speak and listen (Dodd, 1991 cited in Aneas & Sandin, 2009).

Intercultural communication occurs when individuals influenced by different communities negotiate shared meanings in interaction (Ting, 1999). What counts as intercultural communication however depends on what one considers a culture, since the definition of culture itself is quite contestable. Some authorities limit the term "intercultural communications" to refer only to communication among individuals from different nationalities. Other authorities, in contrast, expand the notion of intercultural communication to encompass inter-ethnic, inter religious and even inter regional communication, as well as communication among individuals of different sexual orientations.

Hate Speech and the Loss of Nigerian Nationalism

Prevalent nationalist sentiments in Nigeria seriously diverge from the Federalists ideals that consolidated United States of America and, if anything, conform more to the Anti- Federalists norms. The potent logic which persuaded delegates at 1787 Philadelphia convention to transform the United States of America from weak league of states to an enlarged republic with a strong central seems lost on Nigerians. Federalists arguments was disposed to expanding the size of the republic to prevent single interests from dominating, multiplying the number of interest groups and affording elected officials opportunity to rise above the clash of party and govern in a neutral manner for the common good and setting check and balance mechanisms to assure that a strong

central does not abridge the power of states nor descend into an arbitrary and tyrannical regime. The Anti-Federalists view was merely that “republics only flourish where homogeneity of interests exists” (Spellman, 2011: 95-96).

Nigeria’s current situation is in consonance with Heywood’s (2007: 110) seminal observation that whilst common factors of language, religion and ethnicity shape politics of nationalism, they also occasion nationalistic tensions within the same country. In Nigeria, commentaries of her historical trajectory oft-repeat the difficulties of forging a united nation from the assortment of four hundred ethnic and linguistic groups professing Islam, Christianity and traditional fetishism which colonial Britain constituted into a single colonial territory through piecemeal amalgamation of over 54 years (1861-1914).

Otite (Alemika, 2005: 1) and Ojiako (1981: 1-2) centralise Nigeria’s political problems on difficulties of finding means to bind together and form a nation from the three main ethnic groups (Hausas in the North, Ibos in the East and Yoruba’s in the West) different in race and language and in social and political organisations. Maeir (1981) maintains that Nigeria conjures images of chaos and confusion, military coups, repression, drug trafficking and business fraud because of ethnic and religious prejudices as well as the absence of national consensus and a binding ideology. Kasfelt (1994) traces the historical roots of numerous violent and bloody confrontations between religious groups, especially between Christians and Muslims, which tear Nigeria apart along religious lines to the emergence of constitutional regionalism and regionally based political parties in 1950s. As he claims, “since then ethnic, religious and regional loyalties have been decisive and formative elements in Nigerian politics”. Dickson (2011) concludes that ethnic conundrum continues to hunt and haunt the Nigerian state and remains a major obstacle to its existence. According to him, “beginning with the transition from colonial to neo-colonial dependence, military misrule to the 13 years of PDP brand of democracy, the conflict spiral generated by ethnicity can be seen at all critical phases of Nigeria’s development; its democracy, the party system, electoral process and the sharing of national cake via office appointments and resources allocation. Dickson (2011) observes further that as much as some form of true federalism or on the extreme confederacy, resource control and largely self- determination are desirable, the complexity of ethnicity in Nigeria could only be properly understood in the context of power struggle among various factions of the ruling class as well as within the context of the lower class ignorance through manipulation. Ethnicity has been constantly shifting because of a fluid and dynamic nature of changing interests, determined mostly by rigid North/South and Christian/Muslim divide”.

To ensure that the country remain as one entity and does not break into separate states, Kurfi (2014: 19-34) recollects that Nigerian constitutions were serially doctored to reflect true federalism and ensure more administrative, fiscal and resource control to constituent states. From 1951 to 1960, Nigerian leaders negotiated for federal constitution based on parliamentary system of government but Nigeria’s special problems and complex political forces successfully made nonsense of the parliamentary system and plunged the country into civil war fought, 1969-1971 with bitterness and vengeance. Since then, political elites have introduced ‘nebulous’ concepts like ‘rotational presidency’ in which geo-political zones are treated equally irrespective of their size, population or landmass negating democratic principles that requires majority to have its way whilst ensuring that minority must have a say in governance. ‘Resource Control’ was also introduced and emphasizes allocation of revenue on the basis of natural resources, especially oil derived from particular areas. The search for alternative system of government to combat Nigeria’s problems similarly landed the country into Executive Presidential system that only

lasted from 1979-1983 after which relentless interregnum of military dictatorship ensued till 1999.

With the ascendance of Buhari presidency in May 2015, Nigeria witnesses upsurge of agitations, claims and counter claims, hate speeches, name calling and incitement to violence. Okino (2014), who designates hate speech as a catalyst for war and a crime against humanity, and not in the realm of freedom of speech, notes that except for the build-up to the civil war and the civil disturbances that greeted the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election, the drums beats of war by Nnamdi Kanu's Biafran agitations and the orchestrated quit notice on the Ndigbo by Arewa Youth Coalition have pushed Nigeria close to the precipice. Kanu is known to apply coarse and intimidating expressions against Northerners, Hausa Fulani and Yorubas. He oft repeats his opposition to peaceful negotiations and threatens to use force and violence to disintegrate Nigeria, promising that Somalia would be a child's play as he would bomb and burn down the zoo (Nigeria) if Biafra is not actualized.

Igbokwe (2016) classifies Biafran rhetoric as a centrifugal tendency that has instigated rise of ethnic, regional and community politics. He notes that since Buhari won the 2015 presidential elections, vast preponderance of South-South and South East indigenes have descended on the President pouring invectives, calling him names, abusing his person and his exalted office, preaching hate, and ethnic divisions. Every move the President makes to rebuild and reposition the country is abused, castigated and ethnic meaning read into it.

Femi Fani Kayode's tirades against Northern Nigeria, Hausa-Fulani and Muslims including name calling of the President and certain officials of incumbent APC administration qualifies him as a purveyor of hate speech. In his article *The Deteriorating Mind of Femi Adesina* (Vanguard, 2017), Kayode refers to President Buhari as "son of perdition and tyrannical servant of Satan who did not emanate from a righteous lineage or noble stock but is a wicked, unforgiving sadistic, bloodthirsty and vengeful Amalekite". In another article, *The APC Cult of Death* (Pointblanknews, 2017), Kayode offensively libels Lai Mohammed, Nigeria's Minister of Information as diaper wearing, foul breathed, big nosed and lying APC minister who brings out the worst in him. He also accuses the APC ruling party of committing blasphemy and heresy by bestowing divinity and infallibility upon their ailing leader and deifying themselves adding that "APC smells like rotting Chinese fish and a Calcutta brothel all rolled into one".

Asari Dokubo, an ex-Niger Delta militant also uses spiteful rhetoric to interrogate the rationality of rotating presidency to Northern Nigeria. "So we are going to wait for another 50 years under the bondage of people we are better than? People, the United Nations and all agencies in the world said are the lowest in educational index, infant mortality and everything? Are they people? (Daily Post, 2017).

Similarly, while reacting to purported withdrawal of religious curricula from lower strata of education, Northern Christian Elders Forum (NCEF) fanned embers of war by alleging lopsidedness in the appointment of the nation's security chiefs and also declaring that "Nigeria is on the throes of war over President Buhari's attempt to impose Sharia" (Daily Trust, 2017).

Other contentious issues conflagrating hate speech is the divergence amongst Nigerians on the subjects of marginalisation and restructuring. While some insist that the nation should be restructured economically and politically, others contend it was a wasteful effort that would further aggravate the precarious situation in the country.

Muhammad (Daily Trust, 2017: 53) diagnoses Biafran irredentism as hovering around 'marginalisation', lack of Igbo president, insufficient federal appointments and the fact that south

east has five states as against seven for the north west (even while the north west geopolitical zone is several times bigger in landmass and population).

President Buhari posed a phenomenal question during a media chat, "...What do the Igbo's want...? ...Who is marginalizing them...?" Several Ndigbo's serve in the Federal Executive Council; Minister of State for Oil, Minister for Science and Technology, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Labour & Productivity, Minister for Transport, Minister for Trade, Industries and Investment, Minister of State for Education as well as Governor of the Central Bank (Nwakanma, 2016).

The Ndigbo's insistence on restructuring equally evokes different reactions across Nigeria. To the Middle Belt and Northern minorities, the term conjures regional governments with a structure of 12 federating units and 54 states as basic centers of development. This group recommends three tiers federating structure, with a governor general for each of the 12 regions and elected governors for the states. Local governments should remain the responsibility of state governments (The Guardian, 2017).

Constitutional expert, Auwalu Yadudu and Middle Belt politician Paul Unongo both consider Ndigbo claims of marginalisation and insistence for restructuring as a ruse. Yadudu (Daily Trust, 2017) says restructuring is a ballgame to people in the South East whenever elections are pending. South-South sees it as resource control and implementation of 2014 national conference report. In his opinion, though restructuring the functions of governmental institutions, re-adjusting organs of state or the powers between states and federal government could be accommodated within existing constitutional order, secessionist idea of restructuring has no place within existing constitutional stipulations and legal requirements.

Paul Unongo (Daily Trust, 2017) also dubs Ndigbo outcry for restructuring as merely politics. "Nnamdi Kanu considers restructuring as meaning secession and resurrection of Biafra. To some, it represents fiscal federalism to enable states control their resources. Others want presidential system to be abandoned in favour of regionalism and the parliamentary system while, for several more, it means autonomous regional powers for the six geo political zones". Nigeria has had regional governments and parliamentary system before military intervention. According to him, "some people just want to change governance to end northern hegemony. The first coup eliminated northern dominance from power, politics and governance through selective killings and elimination of leadership from particular part of the country so as to impose another section of the country".

Research Questions

Nigeria is no doubt a colonial creation and a patchwork of multiple cultures, religions and languages. The country's aspiration for greatness has been stultified by hate speeches and divisive politics on mainstream media and internet platforms between Biafran irredentists and Arewa Youth Coalition. These altercations heat up the polity by heightening mistrust between tribal groups, endangering lives of peace loving Nigerians living in other parts of the country, affected trade and investment drives.

The research questions therefore are: what incidents demonstrate hate speech and nationalistic tensions? How could Nigerians to reify their country over their cultural groups, shun suspicion and embrace respect for one another? What necessary steps could reinforce civic bonds and allegiances to Nigeria?

Research Objectives

This paper explores the manner hate speeches grounded in ethnic and religious narratives obscure ideals of nationalism in Nigeria. The objective is to identify and understand the anger and frustrations generating this phenomenon and analyse specific processes of inter cultural communications fundamental to building a united prosperous nation.

Research Methodology and Analytical Framework

Data on hate speech and lack of patriotism in Nigeria used in the research are derived mainly from literature documented in newspapers, internet and some published books. Theories of nationalism and intercultural communications were frameworks employed to interpret the observed impacts of these twin phenomena.

Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 113) argues that nations are invented traditions, consciousness of nationhood were fashioned with the invention of national anthems and national flags. According to him, a belief in historical continuity and cultural purity was invariably a myth created by nationalism itself. Nationalism creates nations, not the other way round. Going by this view therefore, concerted efforts are needed to make Nigerians embrace the idea that nations are political, not ethnic, communities. Nigerians should recognise themselves as a group of people who, though might belong to different ethnic communities, are nevertheless bound together primarily by shared citizenship, regardless of their cultural, ethnic and other loyalties. Nations are essentially political entities that emphasise civic loyalties and political allegiances rather than cultural identity.

Secondly, Vila (cited in Aneas et al, 2009) describes intercultural communication as a communicative process involving individuals from reference cultures which are sufficiently different to be perceived as such, with certain personal and/or contextual barriers having to be overcome in order to achieve effective communication. Interactions are highly intercultural when individual group identities determine their salient values, prejudices, language, nonverbal behaviours and relational styles upon which those individuals draw.

On this basis therefore, intercultural communication could reconfigure Nigerian nationalism and patterns of life. Tribal and religious groups should be encouraged to have meeting of minds on their disparate ideas and concepts about the Nigerian nation. Intercultural communications can easily identify and implement essential behavioral, cognitive and emotional components of the expected "Nigerian culture". The focus should emphasise nationalist values, conceptual systems, behavior and both material and symbolic artifacts. Intercultural communication is well suited to regenerate Nigeria and overcome perils of hate speech.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many Nigerians already contest Ndigbo claims about being dominated and marginalised. Mainasara (1982) dismissed the altruistic slogans of January 1966 coup makers and their claims that redemption of the country through eradication of bribery and corruption, putting an end to tribalism, regionalism and sectionalism as well as freeing the masses from misery of poverty, ending the drift of the country and providing purposeful leadership. For him, their purpose was to prevent a section of the country, the North, from effective participation in the governance of the country. This was achieved through the physical elimination of the entire political and military elite of the North beginning with Sardauna of Sokoto, the Premier of the Northern Region. Major Ademoyega and his co-conspirators, resented the application of the quota system

to the recruitment of the army officer corps. An idea of ensuring fair play for all the ethnic groups in the country which has now been entrenched in the 1979 constitution and applied in the educational sector and employment opportunities.

Igbokwe (2016) also recognises that ethnic bigotry and hate speeches by Ndigbo's both at home and abroad endanger their brethren living in all parts of Nigeria warns that President Buhari belongs to a section of Nigeria and his people will not be happy and clap for us when we malign and abuse one of their own. No ethnic group in Nigeria moves and settles in any part of the country like the Igbo. They settle and do business in almost every part of the country, and when we throw stones to other Nigerians we endanger their lives and their businesses.

Efforts must be made to understand and address the grievances that cause hate speech. As an immediate remedial measure, greater consciousness prioritising nationhood should be spread. Nationalism creates nations, not the other way round. Nigeria developed from communities with long established histories. Therefore symbolic activities and inventions emphasising civic loyalties and political allegiances should be promoted rather than celebrations of cultural identity. Present democratic politics is a convenient platform to upscale patriotic fealty, compromise and respect for diversity. Nigerians should reconcile rival opinions, different wants, competing needs, opposing interests by engaging in cross cultural dialogue to rebuild the country. Politicians, traditional elites, intellectuals, professionals, market leaders, town union leaders, village heads should, by deeds and utterances, display tolerance and promote dialogue across communal groups.

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