Minorization of the Majority: The Politics of Ekiti State Creation and the Limits of Homogeneity Thesis in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT Studies on intra-ethnic relations among the sub-ethnic groups in Nigeria have observed that allegations and counter claims of marginalization and domination among the groups within states are rife. In some paradoxical instances, numerically superior groups allege domination and subjugation by the minorities dominated. This paper, using the agitation for the creation of Ekiti state as a case study, examines the specter of minorization of the majority in the struggle for state creation in Nigeria. The study observes that in spite of its superiority in the areas of demography, education, landmass and homogeneity, Ekiti became marginalized and excluded by the groups who are in the minority. But no sooner than the state was created for them than in-fighting started. This study examines the factors contributing to this paradox. Specifically, the paper concludes that numerically superior groups could become minorities in the context of the latter's ability to control power or influence power control through possession of economic resources over the numerical majority a democratic setting. This is what we term "a special case minority".

INTRODUCTION

In the history of and literature on state creation in Nigeria, agitations for creation of states were most prominent among minority ethnic groups. This was occasioned by the sense of insecurity of the minorities in the country. Thus, ethnic minorities in the country have rationalized their demand as a way of escaping domination by larger ethnic groups. The state creation exercises of 1963 and 1967 were done, ostensibly, to allay the fear of the ethnic minorities in Nigeria. However, beginning from the late '80s when Edo state was created, there have emerged new patterns of agitation for new states by majority groups claiming marginalization and exclusion by minority groups. While under the old Bendel state, Edo people who were in the majority clamoured under the auspices of marginalization and homogeneity to secure a separate state for themselves. It was on the same claim to marginalization and homogeneity that Ekiti state was carved out of the old Ondo state in 1996.

The study focuses on the creation of Ekiti state from the old Ondo. The old Ondo State consisted of about nine sub-ethnic groups namely Akoko, Akure, Apoi/Arogbo, Ekiti, Ijaw, Ikale, Ilaje, Ondo and Owo. The Ekiti constituted a simple majority in that state. Of the 26 local government areas in the former state, 12 of them were in Ekiti while 14 were shared among the rest. Prior to the creation of Ekiti State, the Ekiti

constituted about 50% of the public service and dominated the top echelon of the service. At that time, 50% of the directors-general (Permanent Secretaries) and about 75% of the directors were of Ekiti origin (Ondo State Government 1997)[1]. The Ekiti also accounted for about 52% of the general population and 56% of the landmass of the former State (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1963 Census). They also had a high literacy rate. Despite their majority status, however, the Ekiti people still clamoured for a state of their own; and the clamour was, to a large extent, based on the claims of marginalization, oppression and suppression in the area of locus of power and other dimensions of power like location of industries, federal and state public service appointments and provision of infrastructures and distribution of other resources (see Appendix iii)[2]. The pertinent questions here are: (1) under what circumstance would the numerical majority become *minorized* in the political process of old Ondo state? Or, to put it differently, what could have led to the "*minorization*" of the majority? (2) Under what circumstances is it likely for "dominating minorities" to emerge?

But another dimension to the Ekiti creation issue is that no sooner than the state was created that infighting started. What accounts for this? Most works on ethnic politics and conflicts in Nigeria have dwelt largely on inter-group conflict to the neglect of intra-ethnic, which is an integral part of the nature and dynamics of

ethnic politics in the country (Alubo 2006: 56-57). In contributing to the study of intra-ethnic literature and the majority-minority question, this paper examines the intra-ethnic conflicts that characterized the relations between the Ekiti and other groups (Akoko, Akure, Arogbo/Apoi/ Ijaw, Ikale, Ilaje, Ondo and Owo) of the Yoruba ethnic group in the former Ondo State, South West Nigeria, that culminated in the Ekiti's agitation for the creation of their own state. The study also addressed the controversy that characterized majority and minority status of the constituent groups in the old state.

MAJORITY-MINORITY ETHNIC RELATIONS AND STATE CREATION IN NIGERIA

The minority problem in Nigeria is multi-dimensional. It includes the desire for self-determination and escape from domination by major ethnic groups; the quest for political relevance in the Nigerian political equation; and the desire to benefit directly from the national wealth. It is also the belief of the minority that it could achieve identification through the creation of its own separate state. According to Eteng (1997: 111), agitation for state creation by the excluded minorities between 1940 and 1967 was perceived as the most effective solution to the menace of majority domination in the country. The creation of Mid-west in 1963 out of the West was a product of this struggle. Eteng (1997: 111) further states that since the petty-bourgeoisie among various ethnic minority groups were the major beneficiaries of incessant creation of states between 1963 and 1990, doubts have been created about the genuineness of minority agitation in the first place. A lot of controversy has been generated by this phenomenon.

The problems have emerged from the inseparability or otherwise of the objectivity of the issues raised by minority agitation and the appropriateness and efficacy of state creation as a solution to the problems of the minorities. There is a convergence of opinion among the Willink Commission Report of 1957; Ekekwe (1986: 132-133); and Nnoli (1978: 168) that grievances of minorities are most of the time truly political, socio-economic and less cultural or linguistic in complexion. Reinforcing this view, Nnoli states that for domination to be inherently and uniquely ethnic; it must take place along the lines of inherent characteristics of ethnicity, namely; language and culture. Otherwise,

it becomes difficult to distinguish ethnic domination within the same group from the domination of one class by another (Nnoli 1978: 120). Contrary to this position, Eteng argues that Nnoli's observation was an attempt at dislodging the interface that connects social relations within which ethnicity, micro-ethnic loyalties, class, religion, statism and other primordial forces operate. He avers that ethnic minorities in Nigeria and other societies are usually exposed to cultural and linguistic domination, and that ethnic minorities usually suffer social, political, economic and cultural neglect from the larger Nigerian political economy. Eteng reiterates that the linguistic, religious and cultural differences of these groups are generally used as rationalization for this neglect, concluding that agitation for separate states cannot be and should not be seen as an escape route from cultural domination. He observes further that under circumstances of grossly underdeveloped peripheral economy, intense scarcity, zero-sum competition, asymmetrical distribution, political repression and the like, ethnicity will almost and always be malleable and generally susceptible to extreme manipulation by class, political, statist, religious and related force to their own advantage.

The Willink Commission[3] on its own part, while confirming the genuineness of the fears of the minorities, refused to recommend the creation of states, apparently conscious of the fact that granting all or some of the requests might delay or further extend the independence date. It, however, recommended that constitutional guarantees be provided for the rights of minorities, including the right to economic development, as reflected in the proposal for ad hoc development boards or councils for areas that need special attention (Yaqub 1997: 196-197). In Yaqub's view, state creation is a response to several grievances, injustice, marginalization and unfairness. He posits that state creation should be situated in the context of the political economy and that it does not seem structured on economic viability but on conquering the centre. He notes that states should be created during economic boom and not when the economy is lean. He argues that states should be economically stronger than the centre such that they (the states) can survive. Since states creation tends to be divisive, Yaqub suggests that states should be created in the interest of the federation, to unite the country and not to promote the interest of a given political class or the minorities (Yaqub 1997: 197). Arguing along the same line, Nwoye[4] contends that it is

wrong to conclude that agitation for state creation is induced by greed for control of political power. He further argues that agitation is based on the *grievance principle*. He, therefore, suggests that other ways should be explored for fashioning and maintaining a true federation where the lot of the common man can be improved.

What constitutes the majority is commonly attributed to numerical superiority. This is more relevant especially in democratic societies where number counts in arriving at political decisions and other dimensions of authoritative allocation of resources. According to Ikporukpo (2007: 114), numerically superior groups become majorities in the context of their ability to control power or influence through an electoral process. He posits that it may be possible for a group which is not numerically superior, through its control of political power, to emerge as a special case majority. There are handful examples of this category. But before the researchers turn to them, they shall explore further some theoretical underpinnings of majority-minority relations. Some scholars are also of the view that the process that produced the majority-minority politics at the national level has replicated itself at both state and local levels. For instance, it has been suggested that the regionalization process over the years clearly indicates that the majority-minority issue is not one restricted to the national level, but has also emerged at the level of the state, and to some extent, at the local government areas. At this level however, the traditional national minorities are joined by some groups within national majorities who now find themselves in some states where they are outnumbered by minority groups. (Ikporukpo 2007: 113). Examples of this category, that is, majorities who find themselves in states where they are outnumbered, are the Yoruba in Kogi, the Ekiti in Kwara, the Igbo in Delta and Rivers, and the Ijaw in Ondo State. A closely related dimension to the issue discussed above is the question of what process produces "*minorized majorities*" and or "*dominating minorities*".

It has been proven with cognate examples and cases that minority status has little or nothing to do with numbers. According to Nzongola-Ntalaja (2007: 18), "a numerical majority may be reduced to the status of a sociological minority if such majority is economically dominated as well as politically and socially oppressed". He went further to illustrate this thesis with the cases of Africans under colonialism including the apartheid regime in South African and settler colonialism in Liberia under the Americo-Liberian oligarchy. It is also the case with the ethnic polarization in Rwanda and Burundi between the Tutsi and the Hutu. In Burundi, the Tutsi were in the minority; constituting only 20% of the population while in Rwanda, the Tutsi formed only 9% of the general population. In the two cases, the Tutsi controls the state system (Microsoft Encarta Suite 2008). Also, Ethiopia presented an apt example of a system in which one ethnic group (the Amhara) imposed its political and cultural hegemony over all the others. Other examples are the Fulani's overthrow of Hausa settlers in northern Nigeria and the Hausa-Fulani hegemony over the other groups in Nigeria. What are the variables responsible for this paradox? The phenomenal emergence of what Ekeh (1986: 33-63) refers to as "dominant minorities" can be explained multidimensionality. Whichever way it is conceptualized, majority cannot always be conceived in numerical terms, for what bestows majority status on a population could indeed be superiority in other variables than numbers. Ikporukpo (2007: 114) captures this thesis with his submission that several special cases of majorities which may be different from the conventional majority may be identified within a given country, although in some cases, these may be coterminous with the conventional definition. These include political, and social, economic and geographical. The first is defined in terms of political power base/social standing, the second in terms of economic resource base and the last is reflection of geographical extent. The above proposition explains to a large extent why and how the Tutsi and other dominating minorities acquired their special status. In all the cases cited above, the dominating minorities possessed more economic power and therefore, political power.

THE MINORITY-MAJORITY QUESTION IN THE OLD ONDO STATE

Nigeria, as earlier noted, is a multi-ethnic society. The Nigerian federation started as a three-region-structure and these three regions coincided with the three major ethnic groups namely, the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East and the Yoruba in the West, the over 271 other ethnic groups who constituted the minorities were spread under the hegemony of these three regions. This triadic structure, to which Nigeria was organized, made the issue of ethnicity, identity and primordial attachment problematic. This perhaps is the reason why the

issue of majority and minority a recurring decimal in the nation's political process. It is on this basis that there is a persistent demand for creation of more states among the constituents of the country. Experiences have, however, shown that creation of additional states and local government councils have not solved problems of ethnicity, rather, it has led to and perpetuated further fractionalization. Again, creation of more states has not also diminished the fears of domination; rather, the exercises only led to the emergence of new majorities and minorities. As Ikime succinctly observed, each time a state is created, there is a new majority nationality and new minorities, and relation within the states have been more acrimonious since states were created because the struggle for resources and development become more localized and so more intense (Ikime 2001: 28). Creation of additional states in the country has, *ipso facto*, culminated in concentric primordial loyalty. Most states in the country are multi-ethnic in nature. They consisted of and are constituted by sub-groups. These sub-groups although, united during the struggle for their own states in the past, soon engaged in identity politics occasioned by distributional conflicts and subsequently clamoured for a new political space. This was the situation in the old Ondo State.

The old Ondo state was the Ondo Division of the defunct Western state. This division alleged marginalization in the process of allocation of state resources in the former state and struggled for Ondo State. The state after its creation consisted of sub groups like Akure, Arogbo/Apoi, Ijaw, Ekiti, Ikale, Ilaje, Ondo, Owo. In terms of population, the Ekiti alone constituted 52.8% of the general population, while all others added together constituted 48%. The Ekiti occupied 56% of the land area of the former state, and had a larger population in the public service of the state. The state, also, consisted of 26 local governments as at 1995 before the creation of Ekiti State, Ekiti had 12 of the local government while the other sub-groups among themselves shared 14 (Memo of Ekiti State Committee for state creation to the Presidency, 1995. see Appendix iii). By this token, the Ekiti can be said to be in the majority in the former state while the rest constituted the minorities.

Research findings show, however, that despite their majority status as enumerated above, the Ekiti alleged marginalization and subjugation by the other groups. The Ekiti claimed that they were marginalized in the locus of political power and other dimensions of power like political and public service appointments, (federal and state), location of industries and other infrastructures[5]. The other groups also claimed that the Ekiti dominated them, citing their population in the public service. The Ekiti population was truly predominant in the public service and they reside in the state capital, Akure, where the ministries and other extra-ministerial parastatals were located[6]. The Ekiti section of the state had no industries or resources that could attract investment[7]. What we are emphasizing here is that after the creation of the old Ondo State in 1976, new minorities and new majorities emerged in the state with corresponding identity politics and intra-ethnic politics. We shall, however, explore the process that led to the emergence of "dominating minorities" and subjugated majority in the intra-ethnic politics in the old state.

As earlier observed, the idea of majority is usually conceptualized and perceived in terms of numerical superiority especially in a democratic setting where number counts in political decision making. However, minority status has little to do with numbers. A majority can be reduced to the status of a sociological minority by the numerical minority if the latter possesses economic and political power. Majority status cannot always be determined by the numeric, for majority in reality implies superiority in a given quantity and quality. This is the case with the Fulani, Ijaw and Itsekiri in Ekeh's categorization and analysis of the dominant "minorities" (Ekeh 1986: 33-63). The non-Ekiti who we categorize here as numerical minorities are, in actual fact, noted more for their skill in commerce. The Ondo, Owo and Akoko are noted for trading and business activities. This they translated to political and economic advantage. The net product of this advantage was that they were more connected to the power elite at the centre and their wealth fetched them enormous political influence which they deployed in securing patronage from federal government and with which they wrest and dominate power at state level.

The Ekiti on their own part preferred public service jobs like appointments into civil service, teaching service (primary, secondary and tertiary). In this wise, it was possible for other groups who are more political to control them because civil servants, most times, are not involved in

the political process because of professional ethics of neutrality, but propelled by elements (political and economic) outside the service. The Ekiti dominance in the civil service must have been informed by their preference for western education. For instance, virtually every home in Ekiti could boast of graduates. It is generally assumed that the more educated a people are, the difficult it is for them to be dominated. Research findings, however, reveals the contrary. The Ekiti were actually dominated. Why is this so? Perhaps the basic reason is education itself. According to Ayoade, western education "could become a political liability because it carried with it greater competition and individualism" (Ayoade 1997: 7). This clearly explains the Ekiti situation. In the words of Ade-Ajayi (1985: 57) Ekiti have historical characteristics of rugged individualism and isolationism and these traits are accentuated by western education with which they are noted. These traits made collectivism and coalition building problematic. This makes them divisible and amenable to domination by more cohesive groups in the former state.

It is argue here that the Ekiti rallied behind cultural identity to demand for a state, not because they fit into that ascription but because of what Leifer (1981: 43-45) and Smelser (1969: 33-54), referred to as an overlap or coincidence of "ethnic boundaries" and "occupational" cleavages. Smelser argues that ethnic attachments are most likely to persist when ethnic boundaries and occupational cleavages coincide (cultural division of labour). This special case may reconcile ethnic attachment with the developmental framework which states that economic development produces functional societies and that cleavages in functional societies are class based, and group formation around class interests is not taken to be problematic. But the developmental school denies an independent role to the former in the dynamics that result. These dynamics must be based on the occupational (that is, class) cleavages, while the ethnic cleavages serve only as a "façade". That is, ethnic attachment or identity will appear as the basis for political conflict only because they overlap with the actual class basis. In spite of creation of additional states, intra-elite and inter/intra communal conflicts still subsist over resource sharing. To this extent, it is puerile to see intra-elite conflicts as cultural or identity conflict but distributional conflict. Because the

failure of the Ekiti bureaucratic and political elite to use their position to develop their own region and because they were faced with the crisis of relevance in the old Ondo State, they cashed in on the opportunity provided by the disaffection of the people with the state to seek a political space within which they could become relevant. Paradoxically, the study revealed that since the state was created, those who have been governing it since inception were not part of the struggle for its creation and the people who actually agitated and got the state created were excluded from governance (Fasuan 2009: 7).

Another problem that this study observed is that the Ekiti in spite of the bureaucratic and political positions they occupied in the former state and their population in the public service, lacked what Somjee (1982: 69-71) referred to as political capacity. According to Somjee, the ultimate goal of the development of political capacity is the ability to protect or advance one's legitimate interests or the interest of one's group or community by means of an instrumental use of one's position as a voter or public official. Be it an individual or group interest, collective action is often required to have effective response, implication of which is that individuals pursuing their interests will have to form collectivities, group organizations, etc to be able to secure a favourable response from decision making bodies. In all developing societies, ascriptive groups or groups to which one is born place emphasis on the question of social origin and therefore act as a constraint on the development of secular collectivities across the ascriptive divide. Such ascriptive groups, based on common ethnicity or religion can serve as one's interests only up to a point. The facet of political capacity in question here is the ability to look beyond the narrow confines of ascription to secular collectivities in conjunction with others, regardless of ethnic, or social origin in order to build, sustain and continue to exercise political pressure on institutions which have the deciding voice in granting satisfaction. It is in such context that political capacity comes to acquire a tangible economic significance, with consequences for one's pocket which cannot be ignored. In situations when this collectivism did not evolve, as is the Ekiti case, ethnocentrism or clannish tendencies will replace collectivism and will become an instrument for achieving desired socio-economic and political objectives. This is

at the base of the use of cultural or clannish symbols as tools of negotiation within the state institutions and structures. This is an attempt to essentialize cultural or clannish identity as a means of distributing state resources. The emphasis should not be on ethnic differences or cultural difference rather than on economic, class and ideological differences.

DISCUSSION

Facts from the foregoing, two issues came to bold relief. First is that Ekiti people, despite their seeming homogeneity, are not known to characteristically express a feeling of ethnocentrism in their relations with others. Neither are they united. As a matter of fact, they, as argued heretofore, are noted for mutual isolationism and individualism. Second, they are also known for elevating the culture of '*villagization'* and '*townization*' over and above a pan Ekiti culture. Investigation reveals that Ekiti communities place more emphasis on their villages and towns over and above a pan Ekiti culture, and this has affected them in the area of coalition building and collectivism, where cooperative efforts were required to compete against other groups in the politics of resource distribution. The rallying slogan "Ekiti *Parapo*" attests to this conclusion. It presupposes and suggests that the Ekiti lacked a collective and cohesive trait; hence, they are vulnerable to outside 'invaders' today as they were in the distant past. In this wise, the absence of an external enemy (as the case of Ondo state) tends to emphasize the internal divisions among the Ekiti. The consequences of their "individualism" during the Ibadan and Benin invasions spelt danger of annihilation which gave birth to the slogan and clarion call to "*parapo*", that is, to "unite". Today, as in the past, Ekiti coalitions are still sporadic and issue-specific, quickly dissolving into mutually antagonistic splinters after solving a collective problem. To this extent, coalitions are neither institutionalized nor sustainable. One recent struggle which Ekiti's momentary collectivism won for them was the Ekiti State creation, but after its creation, one cannot say that the so-called homogeneity has translated into unity.

Suffice it to say, however, that in examining the issue of ethnicity in Nigeria, there is a need to differentiate between the healthy assertion of ethno-cultural identities in a plural context and ideology and a mindset of ethnicity and sectionalism which could be disruptive. Ethnicity and sectionalism become problematic as a result of real or perceived differential access to jointly owned resources in a plural society, especially when the elites of these ethnic populations seeking political advantage parade ethnic symbols to assert their relevance or negotiate access to power. In this regard, this study distinguished between the real exclusion of groups, clans and communities in a plural context and the opportunistic deployment of allegations of marginalization in the quest for political advantage, of which creation of states is an important part. In the Nigerian context, where almost every ethnocultural group complains of deprivation and marginalization, this thesis suggests that we must look deeper than the banner headlines or the high decibel of protestations to frame policy.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that pluralism *per se* does not constitute a problem on its own but the mismanagement and or manipulation of it. The mismanagement of the multi-ethnic nature of the country, which gives rise to identity politics of a pernicious brand, sometimes threatens national unity and poses a danger to the viability of the democratic order. A deep understanding of ethnicity and the reality of the ethnic configuration of the Nigerian nation can also lead to an understanding of the class, religious and other socioeconomic bases of conflict in the Nigerian society and polity. This study reveals that states' creation in Nigeria has elevated ethnicity to the status of national ideology. As a result, a vicious cycle has been created. Other groups who are yet to benefit from the state creation largesse are wont to start fresh agitations for their own states. Demands for states then become concentric and hence emphasize the level of the country's heterogeneity, on the one hand, and a manifestation of differentiation and fragmentation of the country on the other. Nigeria is not likely to attain the desired national integration and unity which state creation was meant to achieve if this phenomenon persists

NOTES

1. Ondo State civil service commission staff profile. 1997.

2. Memorandum presented to the Federal government by the Ekiti Committee for State Creation. 1995
3. Willink Commission Report1958 on the fears of minority and the measures of solving them, London: Her Majesty 's Stationary Office
4 . *Nwoye's comment as a participant in the conference on constitutions and federalism* held at the University of Lagos, 23-25 April 1996. See Constitution and Federalism: Proceedings of the constitutions and federalism Conference. Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Foundation. 233.
5. Memorandum prepared and submitted by the committee for Ekiti state creation. (1995).
6. All the government ministries, departments and agencies had their main offices in Akure the old Ondo state capital; hence, most of the workers reside in Akure.
7. Interviews conducted among non Ekiti elites by the researcher in Akure on 23, March, 2010.

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