EXPLORING NIGERIA'S ETHNO-RELIGIOUS DIVERSITIES FOR AN ENDURING NATIONAL UNITY: THE PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS IN BAYELSA STATE

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Abstract

The over one hundred years of Nigeria's nationhood has been a mixture of fragile unity and mutual suspicion coloured by bitter rivalries among the various ethnic and religious groups. Thus, this paper is premised on the dire need to explore the possibility of harnessing the ethno-religious diversities in Nigeria to foster a genuine and sustainable national unity devoid of rancour and acrimony while assessing the perception of senior secondary school teachers in Bayelsa state. In realizing this objective, the paper adopted a descriptive survey research type with a sample of 500 secondary school teachers drawn from five local government areas in Bayelsa state through a proportionate sampling technique. A 10-item researcher's designed questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on Exploring Nigeria's Ethno-Religious Diversities for an Enduring national Unity (QENERDENU)" was developed and it was subjected to face and content validity by Test and Measurement lecturers from the Department of Teacher Education, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State. The questionnaire was trial-tested on senior secondary school teachers outside of the research locale. The

two set of scores were correlated using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and it yielded reliability co-efficient of 0.71. Arithmetic mean was used to answer the research question without a corresponding hypothesis at an acceptable criterion level of 2.50 while the only null hypothesis was tested with the use of t-test statistical method at 0.05 level of significance. From the data collected, analysed and the results presented; it was recommended among others that, there is a need for Nigerians irrespective of ethnic or religious differences to cultivate the virtues of tolerance, mutual understanding and forgiveness.

Keywords: Ethno-Religious, Diversity, National Unity, Perception and Teachers.

Introduction

History provides us with the undeniable truth that Nigeria, as a politically independent in nation-state, was a product of the British colonial rule. Its policy of indirect rule culminated the amalgamation of the Northern and theSouthern Protectorates in 1914 by Sir Fredrick Lord Luggard, the then Governor-General of the colony of Nigeria. Indeed, the amalgamation, which is oftentimes described as a marriage of inconvenience, incidentally laid the foundation for Nigeria's continuous search for unity in order to achieve personal, social, economic and political goals and aspirations (Ekanola, 2006; Nwaoga, Nche & Olihe, 2014).

However, events and happenings in the body polity, right from independence in 1960 till date, have made critical-minded individuals and groups to question the ability for the continued existence of Nigeria as an indivisible and indissoluble entity.Paden (2005) reported that between 1999 and 2004 alone, an estimated 54,000 people lost their lives in communal violence induced by religious differences. Similarly Salawu, (2010), Fawole and Bello, (2010) Ibenwa and Ngele, (2010) attributed crisis in places such as Kaduna, Zango-Kataf, Bauchi, Maiduguri, Aba, Owerri,Umuahia, Lagos just but to mention a few to ethnic and religious factors. The Nigeria Civil War experienced between 1967 and 1970 claimed lots

of lives with several properties destroyed. In these crises, several religious, residential and market buildings were burnt and lives lost. These situations propel individual and groups desire to protest against the Nigerian state at one point or the other; all of which shook the very foundation of our togetherness as a nation.This fact was rightly captured by Nwaorgu (2003), when he argued that the problem of ethnic suspicion created a situation where primordial opinions or views are oftentimes considered as national interest, and when such interest runs contrary to that of the other ethnic groups, they distant themselves and consider such an action or policy taken as counterproductive.

In the socio-economic and political sphere of Nigeria, there has been a continuous competition between the majority and the minority ethnic groups for vantage placement in the democratic space where the majority perpetually take firm control of the available economic and political goods while the minority groups are left to yearn, gasp and struggle for relevance (Dukor, 2003).Wolff (2006) asserted that in a multi-ethnic nation-state, ethnicity on its own does not necessarily become a centrifugal tool but individuals wanting to promote their subjective consciousness and interest at the expense of the collective interest of the other groups. In Nigeria, there are over 300 ethnic groups and three major ones include Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo (Salawu,2010).The reality of the diversities in these ethnic groups is more pronounced in their rivalries and mutual suspicion than in peaceful co-existence and, by extension, promotion of national unity.

Closely related to the problem of ethnicity is the issue of misuse of religion by some misguided and misdirected adherents of the different faiths, to threaten and destabilize the country of the fragile peace and unity. Dowd (2014) said the diverse nature of religious beliefs in the country today has been capitalised on by some fanatics of the well-known religions to fuel socio-political conflicts which have severally cut short the lives of many people and properties worth billions of naira destroyed. The recent case of Boko-Haram insurgency in the North-East Nigeria has been attributed to religious interests of the terrorists to create a purely Islamic state. Bombing of churches and mosques and abduction of Muslims and Christians by the terrorist

generate many perceptionsin public circlesabout actual reasons behind the insurgency which some people view as political. However, religion from all intent and purpose is supposed to be seen and used by adherents as a vehicle for social solidarity, peace and national unity (Adebayo, 2003).It is enshrined in both Quran and Bible that peace is paramount to living in the society. Therefore, diversity of religious beliefs should not be a basis for suspicion, hatred, discrimination and distrust among Nigerians. Studies have shown that contrary to religious diversity, issues of religious intolerance, politics, and fanatic and segregation induce conflict, hatred, distrust and misunderstanding among followers of different religions (Ladan, 2010; Dowd, 2014).In fact, a better understanding of ethno-religious coloured crises can be gleaned from the table below, culled from Ibenwa and Ngele(2010) and Ezeamalu (2016).

Table 1: Specific Cases of Ethno-Religious Crises in Nigeria, 1990-2016

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In addition, ethnicity and religion easily become a nursery bed for the inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalries, especially when public office holders use state resources and their privileged positions to make policies to favour one particular ethnic or religious group to the detriment of the others. The point to note is that ethnicity binds

people together with subjective consciousness and perception of common identity in relation to other groups when they come in contact (Suberu, 2006; Uhunmwuangho & Epelle, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Given the nature of the major variables under investigation, it is absolutely necessary to adopt a substantive theoretical perspective so as to provide us better understanding and clarification of the concerns of the paper. Hence, the functionalist perspective about society is employed as the theoretical base for describing and identifying the place of ethno-religious diversities in enhancing sustainable and enduring national unity in Nigeria. Thus, functionalism, as it is often called, is credited to the ideas and literary works of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). However, these earlier ideas of functionalism were later popularized and refined through the works of Emile Durkhiem (1858-1917) and Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). Functionalism as a social theory sees society as a social system made up of different interdependent, interrelated and interconnected parts.

To the functionalists, society is likened to the human body, which is made up of interrelated, interconnected and interdependent parts such as the cardiovascular system, respiratory system, central nervous system, reproductive system, etc; all functioning to survive and maintain itself in an integrated manner. So also, the human society is made up of network or relationships and institutions such as religion, politics, economy, education, family, etc; which all function in an integrated manner for the survival and continuous maintenance of society. Functionalists argued that society grows with the acquisition of some functional prerequisites such as adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance (Asuka, 1997). These functional prerequisites manifest in the form of man's need for food and shelter, conflict resolution, setting of societal goals and the attendant allocation of scarce resources to achieve them and as well as maintaining societal norms and values (Igbo, 2003).

Again, the Functionalist believes that human biological system is to regulate itself to maintain equilibrium even in the midst of

pressures from the external environment.So also the human society tender to balance its equilibrium among its component parts and among the forces operating on it such that, any change in one institution or part could have a social implication on the other institutions in particular and the society, in general (Otaki, 2006). Additionally, Functionalism holds that society can maintain its equilibrium only when it's able to regulate and coordinate its activities on one side, and adapting to social changes that may arise on the other side. In fact, this is made possible by the shared values held by the vast majority of members of society and implemented through the process of socialization (Igbo, 2003).

In addition, Functionalists, especially Merton (1968) (cited in Asuka 1997) and Otaki (2006), argued that when each part or institution of society performs their societal endowed functions then the stability and continuity of society is assured. Otaki (2006), for instance, sees functions as the critical, organised and directed tasks for social living that must be performed by the social institutions (like religious and ethnic groups) and groups to ensure the continuous survival of society. However, the failure of these social institutions and groups to perform their societal-endowed roles and function effectively may tend to disrupt the social equilibrium or lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the social system. When this happens, dysfunction has taken place.Indeed, the Functionalist theory is relevant in this study because when the various ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria play down on their perceived differences, they work in an integrated manner to achieve the corporate objectives of Nigeria as a social and political entity, then it is possible to attain a continuous survival and oneness in the nation.

Statement of the Problem

That Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is not in doubt. That the diversities in ethnic and religious groups, more often than not, tend to promote division rather than unification of the country is not also arguable. Though there are several theoretical cum qualitative based researches conducted in the area of Nigeria's ethno-religious diversity and national unity such as those reported by Adebayo (2003), Salawu (2010), Fawole, and Bello (2011), and

Uhunmwuangho and Epelle (2011), to the best of the researchers knowledge however, no quantitative or empirical evidence is available on this subject matter, especially one that deals with respondents' perception. Therefore, this paper sought the perception of teachers in Bayelsa state on the need to explore the diversities in Nigeria's ethnic and religious backgrounds to enhance sustainable and enduring national unity.

Purpose of the Study
The general purpose of this paper is to examine the perception of secondary school teachers in Bayelsa state on the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity. Specifically, the paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:
1. To assess the perception of secondary school teachers on the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity
2. To determine the influence of gender on perception of secondary school teachers on the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity

Research Questions
The following two research questions were raised to guide the study:
1. How do secondary school teachers perceive the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity?
2. Does gender influence the perception of teachers on the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity?

Hypothesis
H_{o1}: Male and female secondary school teachers do not differ significantly in their perception of the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity.

H_{o2}: Gender has no significant influence on the perception of the teacher on the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity

Method

This paper adopts the descriptive survey research type in the collection and analysis of data. This is in line with Ofo (1994), who maintained that descriptive survey research has a common feature of assessing people's attitudes or opinions towards situations. The target population of this study was the 850 public senior secondary school teachers in Bayelsa state as at the 2014/2015 academic year while 500 public senior secondary school teachers in Bayelsa state were proportionately selected from five out of the eight local government areas in the state. The instrument for data collection was titled "Questionnaire on Exploring Nigeria's Ethno-Religious Diversities for an Enduring national Unity (QENERDENU)".The questionnaire comprises researchers' designed 10-items conforming to the modified four point Likertscales of Strongly Agree (A), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with weighted scores of 4, 3, 2 and 1 for positive worded items was used to collect data for the study. It was subjected to face and content validation by some lecturers in the Department of Teacher Education, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa Sate. Twenty copies of the QENERDENU were administered to secondary school teachers, not included in the sampled local government areas, through a test-retest method for an interval of two weeks. The two sets of scores were later subjected to Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) method where a reliability coefficient of 0.71 was obtained. The arithmetic Mean was used to answer research question one with an acceptable criterion of 2.50 while t-test statistic was used to test the only research hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1:How do secondary school teachers perceive the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity?

Table 2: Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of Response on the Perception of Secondary School Teachers on Exploring Nigeria's Ethno-Religious Diversities for an Enduring National Unity.

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Table 2 above shows the mean scores and standard deviation of responses on the perception of secondary school teachers on exploring Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity. Items 2 and 3, which record low, mean scores of 1.87 and 2.23are rejected. In terms of ranking, items 5, 1, 8, 4 and 6 ranks 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th respectively; are factors that can facilitate the attainment of an enduring unity in Nigeria. In other words, an enduring unity in Nigeria is attainable, despite the glaring ethno-religious diversities.

Hypothesis Testing

Ho_2:   Male and female secondary school teachers do not differ significantly in their perception of the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity.

Table 3: T-test Analysis of Male and Female Secondary School Teachers' Perception of the need to explore Nigeria's Ethno-religious Diversities for Enduring National Unity

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Table 3 shows that the calculated t-value of 1.45 is less than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 498 degree of freedom. Therefore, we do not reject the stated null hypothesis. This means that male and female secondary school teachers do not significantly differ in their perception of the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity.

Discussion of Findings

From the data analysed and results presented in tables 2, it is obvious from the secondary school teachers' perception that in spite of marked differences in ethnicity and religion; a virile, strong and a united Nigeria is possible because relationships among citizens of different

ethno-religious background is based on mutual understanding and when citizens embrace the attitude of peaceful co-existence. Of course, this seems to be in line with the assertion made by Adebayo (2003) that religion should be seen by adherents as a vehicle of social solidarity, peace and national unity. It also confirms the opinion of Ladan (2010) that ethnicity or religion alone cannot fuel conflict among Nigerians but that misunderstanding and mistrust can arise only when it is manipulated for selfish reasons or when one is intolerant of others. Again, a critical examination of table 2 also reveals that tolerance and peaceful co-existence are key drivers of an enduring and sustainable national unity. This is in agreement with submission of Suberu, 2006;Uhunmwuangho and Epelle, 2011 that social interaction and contact of ethnic and religious groups should rather bind them together because of individual group subjective consciousness and perception of common identity. Similarly, table 3, which reveals that male and female secondary school teachers do not differ significantly in their perception of the need to explore Nigeria's ethno-religious diversities for an enduring national unity, implies that the gender of the respondents may not have influenced their perception.

Conclusion and Recommendations

More than any other thing, the peace, unity and progress of Nigeria should be the primary focus of every well-meaning individual and corporate organisation, in actions and in words not minding the diversities in ethnicity and religion. Thus, from the findings of this study, it is recommended that Nigerians, irrespective of tribe or religion affliation must learn how to put aside the perceived differences for the sake of national unity. In addition, more attention should be given to those things (especially our similarities) that unite us rather than those things (our differences) that always tend to divide us as a nation. Finally, all men and women of goodwill who desire to bequeath to the future generation, a strong, virile and united Nigeria better than they met it, should cultivate the virtues of mutual understanding, tolerance, peaceful co-existence and forgiveness.

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