

# **Democratic Transformation and Indigenous Peoples in the Commonwealth: Focus on Nigeria**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It gives me much pleasure to present this paper before a regional meeting of experts focusing on indigenous rights in the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth of Nations is a vast international organisation combining over 50 member states which were former colonies of Britain. After the United Nations, the Commonwealth is undoubtedly the second largest world body.

It is a forum where rich industrialised countries like Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa meet with extremely poor countries like Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Gambia, Bangladesh, etc. to discuss issues of common interest.

A meeting of experts is a place to say some home truths to ourselves, and there are a lot of salient truths to say about the fact that the Commonwealth harbours today some of the worst centres of conflicts, (most ungovernable and unworkable states) in the world. Countries like, Pakistan, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Sudan and Zimbabwe, to mention a few, are practical examples of countries where there has been no peace since the attainment of independence.

In many of the countries, military dictatorships and one-party rule have so usurped state power that the mere mention of indigenous and ethnic minority rights is viewed as hostile opinion that should be ignored or killed outright.

With the emergence of globalisation in this era of uni-polar politics, replacing the age of bi-polar world order of capitalism versus communism, there has been new thinking on the international scene.

In Africa the waves of democratic transformation after many years of colonial rule, military and one-party dictatorships have been blowing over the continent.

With the end of the cold war, there have been a lot of explosive nationalist passions with indigenous peoples, cultural and ethnic groups calling for self-determination.

In this paper I am going to focus attention on Nigeria, Africa's biggest nation and the Commonwealth's fourth-largest country after India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Of all the former colonies created by Britain during its glorious years of empire mongering, the creation of Nigeria remains the most absurd. Peoples with distinct culture, language, territories, pedigrees, etc. were lumped together to form one state without their consent, only to be welded together by the forces of the army and the police.

Some of the nationalities in Nigeria are as far from each other, environmentally, ecologically, culturally, temperamentally, as Portugal is from Norway or Italy is from England. Yet they were made one country without their consent.

### **CONFLICT BREEDERS**

Issues that breed and fester conflicts, riots and even wars in Nigerian communities are many and varied. They include religious intolerance, ethnic rivalries, old hatred and ignorance.

Some could be serious, while others may be trivial matters. Yet they could lead to trouble all the same.

Lack of uniformity of the knowledge of Nigerian nationalities, which made it difficult if not impossible for them to withstand negative foreign cultural interventions, constitutes problems. Nigerian leaders have not been able to produce new values that can establish and consolidate Nigerian authenticity, which can carry the people along the path of modernity.

Because different Nigerian communities had established local authorities before they were grouped together to form the Nigerian nation state without their consent, unwarranted problems have continued to develop among the people, long after the British colonists had withdrawn.

Nigeria, with a population of 120 million constituting three big tribes, each constituting about 25 million people sandwiched by over 100 smaller ethnic and linguistic groups, was merged together to form one country.

As Nigeria is not able to resolve its internal problems, the fallout extends to other countries in Africa.

The Organisation of African Unity, the Commonwealth and the United Nations Charters that say that there should be no meddling in the internal affairs of member states tend to give a blank slate to Nigerian leaders to manipulate things in the country. With this excuse, the various governments since independence have created laws that made it possible for one ethnic group to appropriate to itself resources that belong to other ethnic groups or denied them group freedom outright in the name of one Nigeria.

Since economic interests seemed to have dominated the idea behind the creation of the Nigerian nation state by Britain, emergent Nigerian leaders who rely on crude oil resources, foreign loans and aid to survive and thus want the artificial status quo to remain. Most of the leaders reject the idea of restructuring the country because according to them it will lead to conflict and wars.

Nigerian people have been fractionalised by colonial intervention but the fact remains that the people's cultures have not been broken as they remain intact. Whenever there is any attempt to undermine these links, crises do occur.

The latest impeachment threat on President Obasanjo has shown that the Nigerian conflict is more ethnic than political.

African government members of the Commonwealth have started to develop systems that can overcome colonial mentalities and thoughts in collaboration with other African nations. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) idea established by countries within the West African sub-region in 1975 is one of such commendable steps. Yet, since its membership is based on the existing nation states that lack the capacity to resolve issues of internal domination, it has not been effective.

Many communities in the African nation states have become minorities in their homeland and as a result the continent continues to have structures that cannot hold together. In Nigeria, the people find it difficult to reach consensus on national issues due to ethnic suspicions. Even the academics, the media and the professionals, who are supposed to be dynamic in ideas and world outlook, find it difficult to develop a common position on issues that relate to national development.

In Nigeria, the nationalities want freedom and autonomy but the elites that dominate and exercise government control at the centre

feel that autonomy will reduce their power or destroy it completely. Democracy can only make headway in Nigeria if group freedom is recognised. Things have developed to such a bad stage at present because, right from independence, group autonomy and freedom have been denied to the Nigerian nationalities, indigenous communities, ethnic minorities and cultural groups by the politicians.

### **CONTROL OF RESOURCES**

In Nigeria, governments have excessive control over land and resources, forests, ancestral homes, traditional places of worship and shrines. This has been creating serious conflicts. In some cases, these conflicts are exacerbated by authoritarian regimes leading to serious human rights abuses and instability.

The land use decree of 1979 vested the control of land in the state, which says any mineral found both on the surface or under the ground belongs to the state. This law is repressive for indigenous tribes like Yorubas, Igbo, Edo, Ogoni, etc. who have had their land tenure systems for many centuries now displaced. This oppressive law was again reinforced by the 2002 ruling by the Nigerian supreme court that all coastal waters belong to the central government.

The forests in Nigeria's indigenous territories, which were so natural and relatively unexploited a few years ago, are today on the verge of total destruction for commercial interest by governments and their agents. The voices of indigenous communities who have developed mechanisms over the centuries to sustain these forests and biological diversities remain almost unheard or ignored by governments and policy-makers.

Forests feature as areas of frequent conflicts, because Nigeria depends heavily on the forests for its traditional sustainability. More than 70 percent of the total energy consumption comes from wood. The people largely depend on the forests for food, shelter and medicinal herbs. The depletion of the Nigerian forests has thus become very central to major crisis in the country, all the more so when land, forests and people transcend national boundaries.

### **DIVISION OF ROLES**

It has been explained that most Nigerian communities are divided into distinct compartments of age groups made up of councils of

elders, chiefs, warriors, housewives, married daughters and vanguards. Each group has its privileges and responsibilities as well as sanctions and penalties. They all compliment one another.

### **CASE STUDY**

A glance at the traditional formations of a typical Edo Community in Nigeria can serve as a case study.

Council of elders remains the spiritual and physical overseer of the community. Age is revered in all Nigerian indigenous societies. It is the duty of the elders to ensure that all decisions affecting individuals and groups agree with laid-down communal conventions. They are empowered by existing customs to settle disputes, impose sanctions, restrictions, fines or costs where appropriate. They ensure that all decisions are carried out by using the principles of justice, truth and fairness to all parties concerned.

The council of traditional chiefs remains the political voice of the community and ensures that the decisions collectively agreed upon by the community and sanctioned by the elders council are carried out without fear or favour.

The council of warriors' duty is to defend the city from outside attack and internal insurrections. They could as well be called the traditional army.

The community vanguards comprise the youths of between 18-30 years. It is the duty of the youths to ensure that all public places are made clean and the community kept under hygienic state at all times. They enforce all environmental rules and regulations.

The group of housewives and married daughters ensure that nobody escapes sanctions, whatever the status, once found guilty. They do this by performing special rituals in times of societal stress.

Most of the Edo communities are monarchical and the thrones are hereditary, where the eldest son takes over on the death of the reigning king. All the heirs apparent to the throne are strictly monitored by the cults of king-makers right from the cradle.

The status of kingship does not confer only privileges on the reigning king. It also has its sanctions. The king could be dethroned and banished from the community should he violate certain cardinal rules and principles laid down for kings. These

mechanisms of governance that have lasted for millennia have in-built devices of how to reward hard work, competence and integrity, just as there are sanctions against societal delinquents. These norms are still relevant for group accommodation in Nigeria. How do we marry these traditional methods of governance which are still relevant today with the complex mechanism that exists in the modern states?

### **EDUCATION**

Cultural values vary from ethnic group to ethnic group, from community to community, between man and woman. What is not in doubt is that culture as a science of nature is not static and it has development, harmony, peace and stability as its basic focus. This pre-supposes that every citizen must be provided with the basic education of how to read and write in a modern society to enable him or her to be a better stakeholder in decision-making in matters that affect his or her interests. Education determines the yardsticks for the measurement of power and powerlessness in society, between knowledge and ignorance.

### **GENDER RELEVANCE**

In traditional Nigerian societies, women were noted to have exercised certain degrees of power in decision-making alongside their male counterparts. This trend of women's relevance was a dominant culture that traversed different communities before the colonial intervention, which excluded female education in the early years of colonial governance and put women at a great disadvantage. The Commonwealth governments should take note of this disparity and encourage free mass education as well as full employment both for the boy and girl child.

### **PROBITY**

One basic bane that has plagued all Nigerian governments without exception is the issue of corruption and embezzlement of public funds. It has been argued correctly that Nigerian ruling elites obey their communal tradition and ethnic norms more than the law and regulations of the national government. Most social projects, like the building of schools, health centres, community halls, markets and roads, are built through communal effort. Those community members put in charge of these projects dare not tamper with the funds allocated, knowing the repercussion of any acts of misbehaviour to their persons as well as their families. Every

Nigerian elite fears his or her communal deity (god) and will not want to do anything to incur its wrath or carry communal curse, e.g. an Edo person will do anything to avoid offending Osa, his or her ancestral god, just as the Yoruba will not want to attract the curses of Sango, the Yoruba god of fire and thunder. Nor will an Ijaw person want to offend the Egbesu deity.

What these imply is that the average Nigerian elite in government, whether as a politician or a bureaucrat, is more loyal to his or her ethnic group than to the national government. While he or she fears to offend communal authority, he or she could defy national laws with impunity.

### **SOLUTION**

First, it must be established that both the traditional and modern systems are complimentary to each other and not antagonistic. What follows is for the government to recognise the fact that Nigerian communities have distinct territories, cultures, languages, customs, norms and values. They cannot be governed as if they were homogeneous entities.

Having agreed that Nigeria is a domain of a multiplicity of diverse cultures, customs and traditions, the concept of culture demands that people of different nationalities have to accept the differences between cultures.

There must be mechanisms put in motion to ensure, where office sharing is at stake, that the different ethnic groups have a say and all interests are protected.

There must be cultural identity when constructing societal norms so that some freedom, ethics, and rules are always taken into consideration while deciding national, sub-regional, continental and global issues.

Many people have argued that the Nigerian nation state was badly decolonised, and have suggested that sub-regions like West Africa should constitute one nation state and the present colonial imposed arrangements should give way to the nationalities, tribes and indigenous communities to form the federating units of an umbrella nation state.

Dr Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana belongs to this school of thought. He used to advocate for a United States of Africa, a form of

continental government. Scholars such as Odi Ofeimun of Nigeria, Dr Ramzy of Egypt and social analysts like Anta Diop argue that West Africa is a most cultural empowered region to create a single nation state.

Most West African countries have identical cultures and non-cumbersome border links, with these glaring examples, the idea of forming one formidable West African nation state composed of the nationalities is realisable.

The Commonwealth Charter needs to be reviewed so as to make it more effective in matters affecting conflict management and resolution in member states like Nigeria.

Languages of the mother tongue will be vital instruments for guaranteeing peaceful and constructive group accommodation among peoples and community in Nigeria's multicultural domain.

Questions have often been asked why Nigerian leaders should continue to surrender to every demand by western countries. Why should they adopt IMF and World Bank monetary policies without considering local situations? Why should they not be able to develop their own languages of science?

## **DIALOGUE**

All African member states of the Commonwealth are today in search of common character. Dialogue is one word that has often been misunderstood or misinterpreted by Nigerian leaders. Social analysts like Professor Wole Soyinka, Professor Tunji Dare, General Alani Akinrinade, the late Ken Saro-Wiwa and others had, since the end of the cold war, started to raise awareness in international opinion about the unworkability of the badly decolonised Nigerian nation state.

Attention is drawn very often to the conflicts and wars ravaging Nigeria. There are intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts, armed robberies, general social insecurity, advanced fee frauds, embezzlement of public funds, hired assassinations and political violence. These however are dismissed as unfavourable opinion.

How do we run genuine efficient and honest administrations in a country whose languages, cultures and values have been distorted and devalued by decades of military and one-party dictatorship?

Part of the solution to the problems will be first to define what kind of socio-political reforms are required. Nigeria currently operates a Unitarian centralist system which concentrates power and resources in few hands.

Given the ethnic contents of Nigeria, efforts should be concentrated at the grass roots level. This implies that power should be decentralised.

When indigenous communities can rely on those who understand and respect the relevance of their customs and traditional values this will enhance good governance and better relations among Nigerian communities.

All the indigenous nationalities in Nigeria want to regain their land tenure systems, culture and language. They want platforms where they can talk about their experiences, their hopes and aspirations.

Nigeria's indigenous peoples' ways of living have been dislocated. They are tortured by the desire of the governments to impose top-down administrations on them which completely undermine their traditional ways of life.

The best way to make Nigeria stable is for the Commonwealth to support the principle of self-determination for the ethnic nationalities, big or small, in Nigeria.

With group freedom and self-determination for the federating units, Nigeria will solve its problems of instability, corruption, crimes, violence and deaths.