Growing Apart? Ethno-Regional Identity Politics, Tensions and Threats to the Nigerian State, 1960-2010

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Abstract

The notion of democracy, the motive behind party formation, ethno-regional spread of parties, voting behaviour and pattern of electoral results, and pre and post election crises among other fissiparous tendencies are all indications that Nigeria is a highly divided society. This article examines manifestation of ethno-regional identity politics, and how identity has re-focused political participation, struggles and conflicts in the Nigerian federation. It concludes that despite institutionalisation of measures aimed at preventing the use of any form of divisive identity in the Nigerian body politic, Nigeria, after over fifty years of state-building and political engineering, appears to be growing apart.

Key Words: Ethnic Conflict, Ethno-Regional, Identity Politics, Nigeria, Tensions, State-building.

Introduction

The promise and prospects of the new world order which came in the wake of the collapse of communism and the subsequent disintegration of Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) in the late 1980s seem to have been swiftly replaced since the 1990s with anxiety about the rising tide of ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe, especially in the former Yugoslavia, and the phenomenon of genocide and ethnic cleansing, especially in Rwanda, Burundi and Darfur on the African continent (Wrage, 2003; Mulaj, 2008). The anxiety about the negative forms of identity politics was reported in the Guardian Newspaper (1997) when it quoted Kofi Annan as saying that, ‘…exclusionary form of identity politics…is responsible for some of the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law, …Great care must be taken to recognise, confront and restrain them lest they destroy the potential for peace and progress that the new era holds in store’.

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Inspite of the potential dangers inherent in negative forms of identity politics as Kofi Annan observed, one of the most prominent features of Nigeria’s post-independence politics has been increasing surge in ethno-regional identity politics. Indeed, identity has become the rallying points for collective action among groups in Nigeria. To be more specific, as opposed to the pre-independence national identity campaign, Nigeria’s contemporary body politics is, paradoxically, shaped and conditioned by intense ethno-regional competition, incessant ethno-factionalism and in-fighting, struggles and conflict by contending groups in the Nigerian society. All of these negative forms of identity politics were nurtured and sustained by the elites through mobilisation of regional, ethnic and religious sentiments.

In view of negative ethno-regional identity politics, the ability of the successive Nigerian governments to deliver and or attend to socio-economic and political development of its ordinary citizenry has been drastically affected. This is more so that, ethno-regional identity politics have become a factor that define and condition the pattern and character, as well as the essence, of Nigeria’s capability in the state building processes, in state-civil society relations, in international relations, and in the dynamics of oil resource allocation and utilisation. From the foregoing therefore, what is clear is that ethno-regional identity-based politics has been a significant tool of mobilisation by the various groups’ in their struggles to gain political power and control of the Nigerian economy. And obviously, ethno-regional identity politics has escalated tensions and crises among Nigerian societies.

It is important to mention here that, in order to prevent fissiparous tendencies in the use of identities, successive Nigerian constitutions have always sought to legally prevent such identities as religion, ethnicity and regionalism from being the basis of political organisation and contest for state power (Bogaards, 2010). For example, the federal character policy and quota system among others were enshrined in the Constitution for the purpose of organising political parties and in the distribution of public offices. In the above regard, it can be argued that, the various post-independent Nigerian governments ostensibly pursued policies of state-building and political engineering, which entailed the relegation, if not destruction, of identities considered as primordial and divisive, and their substitution with a Nigerian national identity (Mustapha, 2007; Omotosho, 2010).

Inspite of the above moves by the government of Nigeria, the reality of the situation has been, however, far from its outward appearance. For example, political parties, voting behaviour and patterns, and allocation/distribution of national resources among others remained that which are based on ethno-regional identities. Under the given therefore, resilient forms of ethno-regional identity politics have found accommodation in, and became
organised around issues related to marginalisation in the distribution and allocation of public goods. As marginalisation in the distribution and allocation of public goods has continued to happen even in a democracy, and under situations of increasing public revenues from the petroleum sector of the economy, marginalisation has heightened and re-focus groups political participation to recourse to ethno-regional identities to articulate, as well as challenge both the actual, as well as the perceived, injustices. Thus, the ways in which Nigerian government conduct state-building policies, site projects, execute programmes, and distribute patronage reinforce perceptions of injustices, domination and exploitation, has created an atmosphere conducive for the resurgence of negative forms of identity politics (Adebanwi, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2007).

Furthermore, organisations that have affiliations with ethno-regional identities, such as the Northern Elders Forum, the Egbe Afenifere, the Eastern Mandate Union, the Western Elders Meeting, the Middle Belt Forum, the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, to mention but a few, have also been openly active, either in challenging or in supporting state-building policies and political engineering, and also, aggressively mobilising identity sentiments to prop up their positions. Thus, in the wake of perceived fear of domination, accusations and counter-accusations, state-building and political engineering in Nigeria have historically been highly regionalised and ethnicised.

This article explores manifestation of ethno-regional identity politics and threats to the Nigerian state. Within the above context, it exemplifies how ethno-regional identity has re-focused political participation, incessant struggles and conflicts in the Nigerian federation. The article will specifically provide further insights into the uprisings in the oil producing Niger Delta and the place or linkage of ethno-regional identity politics in such uprisings that are rocking Nigeria’s quest for peace and national security among its diverse groups. The article at the end hope to conclude that after over fifty years of state building, and a country that is blessed with abundant human and material resources, its ability to harness these resources for the benefit of its citizens has so far been undermined by prevalence of negative forms of ethno-regional identity politics, intense ethno-regional competition, incessant ethno-factionalism and in-fighting, struggles and conflict by contending groups in the Nigerian society. Finally, although many citizens openly express pride in being a Nigerian, there is a lot to be concerned about how due to ethno-politics and other divisive pathologies, it is “growing apart” rather than being “one nation” and “one destiny”.

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Conceptualising Identity, Identity Politics and Identity Transformation

The concept of identity has long been used in social anthropology and psychology, especially by structuralists and post-structuralists, and has gained particular currency in the post-modernist literature. As a socio-political concept, identity has both an individualist and a collective meaning. For instance, Jega (2000:14) defined it as ‘a person’s sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political behaviour’. Implicit in this definition is that, identity is ‘always anchored both in physiological givens and in social roles...’ (Erickson, 1968:57). It is along this point of view that, Pye (1962) by assertion simply referred it to mean, ‘those who share an interest share an identity; the interest of each requires the collaboration of all’.

On the basis of the above definitions therefore, the attributes of identity comprises among others: “commitment to a cause”, “love and trust for a group”, “emotional tie to a group”, as well as “obligations and responsibilities” relating to membership of a group with which a person identifies with or belong.

The attributes of identities above in the view of Jega (2000:16) means that, identities ‘serve as rallying and organising principles of social action within the civil society, and in state-civil society relations’. By implication therefore, identities inform and guide political behaviour, and they add dynamism to political conduct in the context of plural societies (Parry & Moran, 1994). Similarly, identity is not only about individuality and self-awareness, but also and especially about identification with, and commitment to shared values and beliefs in a social group in which a person belongs. At any given time, a person may have multiple identities, each of which (may/always) have some bearing on his or her political conduct and social roles in society. On the basis of the foregoing therefore, in the course of competition or struggles over societal resources, especially in situations of scarcity, collective demands tend to be predicated and organised on shared interests, which in turn tend to be hinged on either physiological givens or, as is more often the case, on shared socio-cultural identities.

Identity politics on the other hand is nothing more than the mutually reinforcing interplay between identities and the pursuit of material benefits within the arena of competitive politics. In other words, identity politics is basically politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonists in national political struggles over access to the state and to the benefits associated with it (Rudolph, 1987; Calhoun, 1994). Under the given, identity politics therefore involves the mobilisation of identity consciousness in order to create a mass base of support by the political elites in their factional struggles, and in the
process of acquiring power and access to the resources of the state. Overall, identity politics connotes a relatively ‘high degree of the “subjective” entering into politics’ (Jega, 2000:15).

As Omotola (2009:77) rightfully observed, ‘threats to an identity, real or imagined, often generate a reaction from the affected to ward off the threat… compels identity transformation’. Given the above observation, identity transformation is conceived here, not as an end product, but rather as a continuous process. In other words, the concept of identity transformation is different from a change in the nature of identities, which on its own implies the creation of completely new forms of identities. Rather, it is simply ‘the change in the role of identities and the heightening or increasing magnitude and consequences of identity politics’ (Jega, 2000:6). Overall, identity transformation is operationally defined to mean, the process and dynamics involved in the conversion of identity differences into political differences and its attendant mobilisation for differing purposes in the society.

What is significant from the foregoing conceptualisation, especially on the entering of identities in the state-building and political engineering in Nigeria is that, it serves as a tool of mobilisation by the Nigerian elites to garner popular support for perceived political marginalisation and domination. It is important to mention here that; identity political situation in Nigeria is comparable to many other African countries such as Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Zaire, Angola, Sudan and Ethiopia. In these countries, according to Eddie (2003:84) political parties were all based on identities (ethnic, religion and regional) because ‘political dominance translated into control of political offices and better access to jobs, housing, and other valued services. Competitions for increased access to such scarce resources favour mobilization and collective actions along ethnic lines’. Furthermore, the winner-takes-all style of politics in these countries also encouraged collective actions based on identities, because political practice perpetuated economic deprivation among, or denied overall opportunity to, losers in election. With particular reference to Nigeria, inspite of the fact that Federal Character and Quota System are enshrined in the Constitution, in most cases, and as rightly observed by Ikpe (2005:5) ‘only members of the ethnic-based regime controlled the best access to jobs, housing and other valued resources’. Significantly therefore, the steady transformation and negative mobilisation of identities has constituted itself as one of the greatest threats not only to Nigeria’s political stability, but also its ability to continue to survive as one indivisible country.
Manifestation of Identity Politics and Threats to the Nigerian State

What clearly emerges from the conceptualisation of identity, identity politics and transformation is that, there are some intervening variables between them that needs to be investigated in order to unravel the nature of the connection between them and, in particular, to discern the linkages between how ethno-regional identities get mobilized and politicized and how this relates to the past and potential tensions and conflict in Nigeria. Thus, if we are to capture the ebbs, flows, nuances and changes that are involved in the dynamic character of ethno-regional identity formation, mobilization processes, and of the shift from identity-diversity to threats, tension and conflict, then, investigation must of necessity be contextual and historical.

Since Nigeria was amalgamated into a single political community in 1914, with some aspects of separate colonial administration and the eventual division of the country into three regions, state-building and political engineering in Nigeria has always had a very strong ethno-regional identity character (Osiki, 2010; Ewarhieme, 2011). For example, from 1951, nationalist politics was firmly split along ethno-regional lines; the Hausa-Fulani dominated Northern People’s Congress (NPC) in the North, the Yoruba dominated Action Group (AG) in the West and the increasingly Igbo dominated NCNC in the East. Similarly, during the Second Republic, there were reincarnations of parties and leaders of the First Republic. For instance, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), which became the new testament of the Action Group (AG), retained Chief Obafemi Awolowo as its leader and drew its support from the states in the Southwest and Midwest. Similarly, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigerian People’s Party (NPP), and People’s Redemption Party (PRP) could be linked to the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), and the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), respectively. As in the first republic, the last two retained late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and late Mallam Aminu Kano as leaders and presidential flag bearers respectively. The fifth party, the Great Nigeria People’s Party (GNPP) led by late Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim emerged from a split in the NPP. The NPN/NPP accord also resembled the NPC/NCNC alliance of the First Republic. Thus, ethnic support and pattern of alliances as in the first republic were reproduced even if to a somewhat reduced extent.

The issue at stake here is that, unlike in most federations where political parties have the important responsibility of building bridges, in the case of Nigeria, the political parties of the first and second republics not only reflected the extant cleavages, they helped to shape and intensify them, and to make matter worse, the situation has not changed, as party
formation, membership and voting patterns even during the 2011 elections in Nigeria still reflected cleavages. It is in the above regard it has been argued that, Nigerian political elites who developed within the contours of each region sought to maintain their privileged domain by “sanctifying” the regional artifice. To be more specific, Nolutshungu (1990:88) in his trenchant criticisms of the Nigerian democracy observed that, the Nigerian elites developed a notion of democracy as the ‘context within which competition was to be undertaken rather than the issue contested. Democracy was not championed or challenged with respect to its content of rights, but was the mechanism through which political power would be gained or distributed and with it economic power and status(’es).

The inference one can make from the above is that, the political elite’ sees democracy more as a means to an end, rather than an end itself. Hence the Nigerian politics has been excessively personalised and connected to all the knowing wisdom and benevolence of the “big man” or political “godfather”, whose word is law, and demands absolute loyalty from all. This notion of democracy created several problems, not least in the clan of “big men” all jostling for power (Obi, 2007; Bello, 2011). Thus, what emerged from the notion of democracy described above was an intense regional and conflictual political system, led by “juggernauts” that represent the major ethnic group of each region: Late Sir Ahmadu Bello for the Hausa-Fulani North, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe for the Igbo East, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo for the Yoruba West. Each of these political elites wanted to succeed the departing colonial authorities, or to have a major say in the successor regime.

Given the elites notion of democracy, and with the three dominant regions that were mutually suspicious of each other in place at independence in 1960, sooner than later, it became obvious that, two broad political issues surfaced in Nigeria’s body politics. According to Ibrahim (2000:41), these were, ‘control of political power and its instruments, such as the armed forces and the judiciary; and control of economic power and resources’. Hence within a short post-independence political life, Nigeria was riddled with calls for secession, confederation or other ways of breaking up the country. For instance, whenever the opportunities for the political elites to access state power were forestalled, they would float the secession banner, and all major political groups in the country have resorted to the tactic at some point or the other (Mahmudat 2010).

In the period between 1951 and 1966, the regionally-based political parties disagreed over a number of issues. For instance, the parties bitterly disagreed over the date for the granting of regional self-government. Specifically, while the two southern regions (East and West) wanted an early transfer of power, the North was fearful of such a development. In
view of this for instance, Agbaje (1989:105) cited the influential Northern Nigeria Newspaper, Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo, where it warned against the precipitous granting of self-government on the ground that ‘… Southerners will take the places of the Europeans in the North … it is the Southerner who has the power in the north. They have control of the railway stations; of the Post Offices; of Government Hospitals; of the canteens …; in all the different departments of Government it is the Southerner who has the power …’ In addition to the expression of fear of domination by Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo above, Sir Ahmadu Bello, leader of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), had earlier referred the amalgamation of the Nigerian provinces as the mistake of 1914. In the opinion of Bello (1962), ‘…the Southern politicians are unwilling to understand the concerns of the North towards independence and as such, the North would not rush (ask) for independence if it meant replacing European domination with Southern domination’.

Given the kind of expression above, it becomes easy to note that, fear of domination made the North sceptical of the independence motion by the South. Rather than stay in Nigeria where they would be dominated, the Northern House of Assembly and the Northern House of Chiefs passed an eight point resolution that amounted to a call for confederation and separation. From hence, threat of secession has become a regular occurrence in Nigeria’s body politics.

Another important case of tension in Nigeria’s quest for nation-building during the first republic was when, as part of the preparatory arrangements for the 1958 Ibadan Constitutional Conference to review the Richards Constitution, a representational ratio of 45:33:33 for the North, West and East respectively were proposed. But the North felt insecure by this arrangement on the ground that it contained more than half of the population of Nigeria. A particular sticking point was the insistence of North, and the Emir of Zauzau in particular that the North must have 50 percent of the seats or it will secede from the country (Tamuno, 1990). Similarly, at the 1954 Lagos Constitutional Conference, the Action Group (AG), a Western Nigeria and Yoruba based political party headed by the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo had its own turn when it demanded that a secession clause be inserted in the Constitution. But the demand of the AG was strongly opposed by the NPC and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (Tamuno, 1991).

Similarly, the NCNC which was the dominant political party in the Eastern region joined the secession threat when in 1964, following the census and regional election crises, the political elites from the East became disenchanted with their future in Nigeria if they were to continue as a part of the Nigerian federation. To this end, Okeke (1992:66) cited the
statement issued by the government of the Eastern region that bitterly attacked its alliance partner at the federal level, the Northern-based NPC of using, ‘the little power we surrendered to them to preserve a unity which does not exist’ in order to direct money obtained from Eastern oil resources- “our money”- to carry out development projects in the North’.

Because the Eastern region was so concerned about Northern marginalisation, Michael Okpara, the then Premier of the Eastern Region threatened that the East would secede, and Sir Ahmadu Bello, the premier of the Northern Region had to draw the attention of Okpara to absence of secession clause in the nation’s Fundamental Laws. Tamuno (1991:406) specifically cited Sir Ahmadu Bello when he asserted that, ‘the attitude of Eastern region to continue membership of the Nigerian Federation is a result of the discovery and development of crude oil resources in the South East Nigeria’. After a lot of criticisms, Michael Okpara denied the secession threat, but he did not drop the idea. Hence, he went ahead to inaugurate a committee under the Attorney General for the Eastern region to work out the modalities for a declaration of secession by the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria. When eventually Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the then military Governor of the Eastern Region finally decided to embark on the course of secession three years later; he had a readymade plan at hand (Osaghae etal, 2001).

In addition to the regional secession threats from the major ethnic groups above, intra-regional calls for secession have also been expressed by minority ethnic groups within their respective regions. For instance, Tamuno (1991); Adebanwi (2009) and Moti (2010) cited a statement made in February 1964 by Isaac Sha’ahu, a Tiv and a minority ethnic group in the Northern Region, under the platform of the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) declared in the Northern House of Assembly that the Tiv people felt unwanted and therefore threatened that ‘the Tivs intends to pull out of the North and the Federation as a whole. We shall be a sovereign state, we shall be joining nobody. We are 1,000,000 in population, bigger than Gambia and Mauritania’. The comment of Isaac Sha’ahu above was a reaction to perceived Hausa-Fulani marginalisation of the Tiv elites from the formal political process and excessive Northern region repressions in Tivland.

The transition from threats to actual violent attempt after independence to forcibly secure regional autonomy over the Niger Delta from Nigeria took place on 23 February 1966 when Isaac Boro, an ethnic minority Ijaw militant, led the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) in an abortive attempt to secede from Nigeria and establish a Niger Delta republic. At stake then, as now, was self-determination and the ownership and control of the oil in the
region, which Boro and his supporters feared would be seized by the Eastern region government, dominated by the Igbo ethnic majority, and the new “unitarist” Nigerian military government, led by General J.T.U. Aguyi-Irons, an Igbo officer. Following Nigeria’s first coup and the establishment in January 1965 of the Major General Aguyi Ironsi Regime, Isaac Boro became very disturbed about Igbo domination of Eastern minorities. The perceived Igbo domination of the Eastern minorities was born out of his experience as a student, and activist at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He, therefore, went ahead to declare the independence of the Niger Delta People’s Republic, because he felt that, he and his people were not ready to live in a Nigeria that was to be ruled by Igbos.

Despite the bravery attempts by the Ijaws, the Niger Delta People’s Republic lasted for only twelve days, including the time it took the police to round up the 159 rag-tag army known as Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF). Isaac Boro and two of his colleagues were later charged with treason in March and condemned to death in June 1966. But Boro was eventually released at the on-set of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war; he joined the Federal side and was killed in the war front in 1968 when he was fighting for the liberation of the Niger Delta areas which was at the time under the control of the Biafran republic. Even though Isaac Boro did not achieve his goal, the bravery and exploits in furthering the cause of Ijaw freedom made him a hero in the eyes of his people, and his legacy was to be revived in the 1990s by Niger Delta militants struggling for local autonomy and resource control (Omeje, 2004).

In a bloody military takeover in July 1966, Major General Yakubu Gowon became the Head of State. But the then Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu refused to recognise the authority of Gowon. As the impasse could not be resolved, Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu through a radio announcement declared that, the people of Eastern Nigeria would no longer leave their lives and properties in the hands of any leader outside the Republic of Biafra. The attempt of the Igbo of the Biafra republic to secede from Nigeria resulted in a three year civil war, and was the most serious threat to the existence of Nigeria as a country (Frost, 1968; Ukiwo, 2009). It is important to add here also that while the Igbos attempts to secede from Nigeria loomed, and the Federal Government of Nigeria was struggling to keep Nigeria one, the Western Nigeria also issued a threat that if the Igbos of the Eastern region were allowed to secede, it would also follow suit. However, the Western region could not actualise their desire to exit from the federation of Nigeria because, the Igbo of the Biafra republic failed in their attempt to secede (Ewharieme, 2011).
Between 1978 and 1983, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the political leader of the Yoruba and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) made two electoral attempts to become the president of Nigeria. The first attempt was in 1979, and the second attempt was in 1983. When Chief Awolowo lost the election on these two attempts, one of his closest confidants, the then Governor of the Old Ondo State, late Chief Bisi Onabanjo was quoted by Tamuno (1991:430) when he declared on 1 October 1983 that ‘the time has come to consider a confederation, by which I mean a federation of autonomous states’. Onabanjo’s proposal to make Nigeria confederation of states became and was a regular agenda at the National Executive Council of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). But deliberations of the proposal to make Nigeria a confederal state was abandoned when the government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari was overthrown in a military coup d’état in December 1983 under the leadership of General Muhamadu Buhari coup (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1985; Turner, 1985).

As the General Muhamadu Buhari military government was trying to settle down, the motive behind the coup was interpreted by many groups in Southern Nigeria as a further narrowing of the base of political power to the core Hausa-Fulani oligarchy. For this reason, Brigadier Benjamin Adekunle and Lt. General Alani Akinrinade both retired Army Officers from the Western Nigeria continued the call for a confederation on behalf of the West. It is important to mention also here that, political elites from the other geo-political regions were also not left out in similar calls for confederation or dismemberment of Nigeria. Some examples were the calls by Dr. Muhamadu Sani Abubakar (North) and Francis Arthur Nzeribe (East). In what appears to be identity politics, group of army officers of the Nigerian Army who were predominantly minorities from North-Central zone, and headed by Major Gideon Orkar on 22 April 1990, announced in a national radio broadcast that a group of officers had carried out a coup. In the coup announcement, Major Gideon Orkar among other issues excised the five most northerly states (comprising North-West and North-East zones) from the rest of the Nigerian federation (Ihonvbere, 1991); Ojo, 2009).

Other than the Nigeria-Biafra war, one of the most ferocious threats that is undermining peace and national security of Nigeria in the contemporary time can be attributed to two closely related issues: First, a surge in identity consciousness and transformation in the Niger Delta areas, and secondly, issues arising from the politics of oil ownership and revenue sharing between the oil bearing communities and the Federal Government of Nigeria (Omotola, 2010). Although the impasse between the Federal Government and the people of Niger Delta can be said to be endemic, the actual manifestation of militarised threats to peace and Nigeria’s national security started on the 11 December 1998, when youths from different
clans, together with representatives from political organisations from an ethnic group in the Niger Delta known as the Ijaw, gathered, deliberated and issued the Kaiama declaration. The Kaiama Declaration is a ten-point statement, the main subject of which was demand that all oil companies leave Ijawland by 30 December 1998, pending the resolution by the Federal Government of Nigeria questions relating to the ownership and control of petroleum resources and political autonomy for the Ijaw. Between 29 and 30 December 1998, protest marches and demonstrations took place throughout all the states in the Niger Delta. In characteristics of the Nigerian state, especially on the relationship between it and oil, the protests were quelled with the full weight of the Nigerian military. Niger Delta areas were garrisoned as up to 15,000 soldiers and two warships were sent to Bayelsa by the then military government of General Abdusalami Abubakar and a state of emergency was declared. An estimated 200 people died during the events of late 1998 and early 1999, whilst many more were injured and tortured (Ikelegbe, 2005; Omotola, 2009).

The Kaiama Declaration and its violent aftermath marked the turning point in Ijaw political history and a highpoint in the restiveness that had become the characteristic feature of life in the Niger Delta, and Nigeria in particular. The Kaiama Declaration also gave birth to the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), a civil society organisation which took upon itself the task of co-ordinating and speaking on behalf of all Ijaw youth throughout the Niger Delta, and to ensure the successful realisation of the goals of the Kaiama Declaration. Many of the activists behind the Kaiama declaration and the formation of the IYC, such as Oronto Douglas, Robert Azibola and Von Kemedi, had previously campaigned for the rights of the Ogoni people on the platform of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), which in 1990 issued the Ogoni Bill of Rights, and which provided the model for the Kaiama declaration. It was in the wake of the disintegration of MOSOP following the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 by the then military regime of General Sani Abacha that the IYC emerged to fight for the rights of the Ijaw people in the same way MOSOP had earlier fought for the rights of the Ogoni people (Campbell, 2002).

In view of the enormity of security issues emanating from the Niger Delta that is threatening Nigeria’s national security, there has been plenty of talk and some new initiatives but little in the way of concrete results. For example, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), was set up by former president Olusegun Obasanjo, but was from the outset mired in corruption and undermined by incompetence. The late President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua on the other hand established a technical committee in late 2008 to study all previous reports on the Niger Delta and plan a strategy. After due consideration of the report,
the “Niger Delta Amnesty” initiative, was recommended and subsequently adopted by the
Federal Executive Council. The late president also established a ministry of the Niger Delta
in December 2008 to deal specifically with the problems of the region. At this stage, it is too
early to judge the effectiveness of the Niger Delta Amnesty initiatives. This is because,
despite the amnesty, Nigeria’s statehood is still witnessing persistent unrests and agitations
for autonomy or secession from the very region that produces 90 percent of its foreign
exchange earnings (Asuni, 2009; Nwozor, 2010 and Omotola, 2010).

On the basis of the discourse so far, one can assertively observe that, particularistic
interests of the elites made them to consider politics a mere mechanism through which
political power could be gained and distributed. In a similar vein, the prevalence of pan-
ethnic groups in Nigeria in the contemporary time suggests that some degree of identity
consciousness and transformation exists amongst the ethnic groups in the various parts of
Nigeria, and the elites use it as populism to purportedly struggle for rights and against
perceived group marginalisation. In addition, apart from the specific grievances used by the
regional elites to threaten or lunch secession bids against the Nigerian state, in the recent
time, there has been many other areas of discontent among Nigeria’s diverse groups. For
instance, there exists incessant argument about power shift/sharing, control and ownership of
oil, what criteria are to be used to for the allocation of oil revenue, which authority had the
power to collect which taxes, and how federally collected revenues were to be distributed to
the composite units of the federation. These issues among others are a constant political
disputation among Nigeria’s vast and complex societies (Mustapha, 2007; Omotosho, 2010).

Finally, even though Nigeria’s ethnic structure is vast, it need not ordinarily transform
to negative forms of identity politics. That is to say, contrary to what some overly simplistic
analyses of the implications of ethno-regional ethnic structure and or diversity suggest, ethnic
diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict. In other words, the very fact
that a country has different ethnic, communal, religious, and racial groups does not make
division and conflicts inevitable. And for that matter, empirical evidence shows that ethno-
regional division and conflict are not dependent on the degree of diversity, as some of the
most diverse countries for example, Switzerland, Belgium, Malaysia and Tanzania among
others enjoy relative peace and stability, while some of the least diverse are the most unstable
or violent for example, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and, perhaps, Sri Lanka among others. It
is on the basis of the above argument Fearon & Laitin (2003:75; 82) are of the view that ‘a
greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity… by itself is not a major and direct cause of
violent civil conflict’. Rather, ‘violent civil conflict is associated with conditions that favour
insurgency, including poverty, which marks financially and bureaucratically weak states’. Other factors that have been identified to intervene between diversity and conflict include the role of formal and informal institutions for conflict regulation, the different sizes of groups relative to the national arena, and the extent to which different identities (ethnic, regional, religious, class) etc overlap with or crosscut each other (Horowitz, 1985; Fearon, 1996; Posner, 2004)

Summary and Conclusion
This article explored ethno-regional identity manifestation and transformation that have taken place in Nigeria’s body politics in a period of over five decades. It specifically examined the overlapping and cross-cutting linkage of politics and identities, and observed that state-building and political engineering in Nigeria have been chequered by acute crisis of identities and heightened identity politics. The article also noted the evolution of the Nigerian State from a federal polity characterised by three politically strong regions, each controlled by the elite and parties of the dominant ethnic group Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Thus, in the period 1960-2010, excessive use of identities such as ethnic, religious and region were mobilised by all concerned elites in order to purportedly fight marginalisation.

Although diversity should not ordinarily lead to identity politics, one can easily observe however that, the transformation and mobilisation of identities in state-building and political engineering in Nigeria was circumstantially due to prevalence of mutual fears of domination of one geo-political/cultural zone over the others. For instance, as Kirk-Greene (1975:19) observed, ‘fear has been constant in every tension and confrontation in Nigeria. Not the physical fear of violence, not the spiritual fear of retribution, but the psychological fear of discrimination, of domination. It is the fear of not getting one’s fair share, one’s dessert’. Given the foregoing, fearful of being outwitted by ethno-regional rivals, more often than not, the political elites have had to employ or rely heavily on particularistic and exclusionary claims. As a consequence, mobilisation heightened the sense of ethno-regional identity consciousness and conflict in the Nigerian federation. Many examples of heightened sense of ethno-regional identity politics that have threatened or are threatening peace and national security of Nigeria were given. For instance, there has been a surge and proliferation of militia and civil society organisations in the Niger Delta, recurring ethnic and religious hostilities, and last but not the least, the post 2011 elections violence in the North-East, North-Central and North-West geo-political zones of Nigeria among others (Ojukwu & Onifade, 2010; Salawau, 2010).
The inference one can make, especially with reference to partisan politics in Nigeria is that, one may not be wrong to characterise it as a deeply divided society in which major political issues are vigorously and violently contested along the lines of the complex identities (ethnic, religious, and regional) in the country. It is also important to note that, the issues that generate the fiercest contest among groups include those that are considered fundamental to the existence and legitimacy of the Nigerian state. In addition, the competing groups tend to adopt exclusionary, winner-take-all strategies. Examples of the issues which groups adopt exclusionary strategies include access to and or the control of state power and resource allocation/utilisation. Thus, a result of undemocratic competition for power and the benefits associated with power, inter-ethnic relations tends to be fragile and the Nigerian state remain unstable, because, there are fewer points of convergence and consensus among the constituent groups. Nonetheless, despite the many pathologies and negative identity (ethnic, religion and regional) politics and perhaps, conflicts that is plaguing Nigeria, there exists what one can describe as “real ambivalence” among Nigerians on their attitude to the question of Nigeria’s nationhood. For instance, whenever they are dissatisfied or feel marginalised by the government in power, they would retreat into their primordial shells to mobilise support against the government. But most frequently, when they realise that they need the country to survive as a protector of their own identities, they soon begin to sing a different tune. Thus, even though the Nigerian state is characterized by intense polarisation of identities and conflict, yet most Nigerians detests its disintegration as they need it to protect their primordial identities.

Conclusively, on the basis of the discourses in this article, one may not be wrong to make a general observation that, after over fifty years of state-building and political engineering, in a number of fundamental respects, Nigeria is growing apart. This is because; identities that the Nigerian elites once mobilised purportedly for the purpose of nationalist movement against British imperialism have over the 51 years ironically re-transformed into formidable and virulent tools that are not only undermining Nigeria’s national security, but also threats to its statehood. Finally, even though many groups express pride in being a Nigerian, there is a lot to be concerned about the prevalence of negative forms of ethno-regional identity politics in Nigeria.
References


Trends, pp. 28-34


