ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A SOCIAL CLEAVAGE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Adopting Lipset and Rokkan’s submissions which suggest, social cleavages as resulting from conflict groups based on perceptions of association in opposition to other such groupings among large segments of a population, the study argued that ethnicity is the single most important embodiment of social cleavages in Nigeria. The study relies on secondary methods of data collection; further stressed that in the absence of formidable class structures, ethnicity plays a crucial role in defining individual identity in relation to groups, derivative of norms, and intermediaries between the society and the state. Building on the pedestals of the ethnic competition model, we further argued that central to the mobilization of ethnicity is the presence of opposing groups and ethnic elites. Beyond the potency for conflictual group relations, the ethnic competition model was adopted to account for the widespread predisposition to compete along ethnic lines in socially diverse societies like Nigeria. The study concludes by stating the very significance of ethnicity as a social capital in Nigeria, derives from its social acceptance and mobilizing properties.

Keywords: Social Cleavage, Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity, Political Orientation, Ethnic Competition Model, Social Capital.
1. Introduction

With mainstream studies, the most renowned scholarship on social cleavages can be traced to Lipset and Rokkan’s seminal study, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspective*, published in 1976, arguably. They conceived social cleavages as outcomes of conflicts and controversies that derive from relationships in a social structure, often than not, it obtains between groups competing for scarce economic resources or political authority in the same political association, in the likes of modern nation-states. They identified four historically important cleavages arising out of the national and industrial revolutions: the urban–rural, worker–employer, center–periphery, and church–state. (Lipset et al., 1976). This perspective remains widely accepted today. Social cleavages are usually understood as conflicts among large segments of the population embedded in sociological divisions. The attributes that comprise sociological divisions are difficult for individuals to change, such as race. Some have called such traits ‘sticky’ (Van der Veen et al., 2004) and others ‘ethnic’ (Chandra et al., 2003).

Lipset and Rokkan argued that modern European party systems are shaped by a series of historical conflicts about state building, religion and class that took place from the Protestant Reformation to the Industrial Revolution. According to Lipset and Rokkan, the sequential interaction of these conflicts created distinct and highly durable identities, social institutions and patterns of political contestation that can explain both national variations in party systems and the ‘freezing’ of such systems (Gary et al., 2000; Mark et al., 2011). While the influence of conventional social cleavages has arguably diminished significantly in Europe, their effects in developing world remain particularly enduring. It is thought that the emergence of social cleavages reveals the causal power of social groups like ethnicity in the face of formal institutions (Liesbet at al, 2017).

In Nigeria for instance, heightened levels of ethnic consciousness arguably cements the place of ethnic as a major currency for social competition and group relations. The evident fragmentation of the Nigerian state, has in amongst others, informed widespread unhealthy competition and rivalry for access to scarce economic resources and political power along ethnic fault lines. More than ever, Nigerians are inclined to identify with their ethnic decent as opposed to their national identity, it is not uncommon to hear phrases like ‘I’m Hausa, he is Yoruba and so on (Yakubu, 2019). Mazrui (1982, p. 24) shares a similar view claiming contemporary African nationalism derived and prospered on racial solidarity and shared blackness. Further arguing that viability of modern nations continues to be deterred by acute
ethnic cleavages, often separating the Bantu from the Nilotes. Relatedly Suberu (2014) argued that the threatened foundations of Nigeria’s multiethnic structure seem to be all too ostensible from the ethnic, regional, religious and political turbulence that has assailed the country (and claimed more than ten thousand lives) since returning to civil rule in May 1999. Consequently, Eriksen (2011) is of the view that ethnic ideologies are at loggerhead with prevailing nationalist dogmas, considering the latter upholds cultural correspondence and all-encompassing integration of inhabitants of a nation-state regardless of their ethnic descent. For Ake (1993) in the evident absence of class consciousness, elites who come from numerically large ethnic origins, could not help but exploit their substantial ethnic base politically.

The research assess the centrifugal role of ethnic identity as a social cleavage in Nigeria, the also study examines the effects of ethnic politicization on nation building. The study demonstrates how widespread predisposition to identify with ethnic origin, thwart any meaningful attempts at integrating federating units that constitutes contemporary Nigeria. Hence, it argues that, despite the numerous challenges that could bewilder nation cohesion and the quest for building a supra-national identity, ethnic consciousness pose the greatest threat to aforementioned aspirations of the Nigerian state. A reality which is thought to be exuberated by ethnic elites, given their predisposition to sow seeds of discord, if it increases the chances of individuals or groups gaining advantage over competing groups.

To do so, the study relies on secondary literature to examine the interplay between ethnic cleavages and political competition in Nigeria. In what follows, the study examines mainstream frameworks for analyzing and accounting for social cleavages. This is followed by the analysis of the mobilizing effects of ethnic identity as a currency for competition in the presence of opposing ethnic groups. The research then moves to examine the manifestation of ethnicity as a social cleavage in Nigeria, which is preceded by a conclusion.

2. Social Cleavages, a Framework for Analysis

Mainstream literature on social cleavages reflects the existence of competing definitions of the concept embedded in contrasting approaches to analysis. It also suggests substantial intersections in research interest. The most frequently addressed issue arguably remains attempts at establishing a correlation between social cleavages and the characteristics of political conflict or contestation. Principal amongst such studies is that of, Lipset et al. (1967) which use the term 'cleavage' to refer to conflict groups based on perceptions of association in
opposition to other such groupings among large segments of a population. Cleavages 'originate' in the social realm. They are politicized, however, as they become issues of large-scale conflict and become tied to political parties. Implicit here is the conceptualization of social cleavage as a type of political division based on major social division. The central assumption of all such analyses is that the particular manner in which members of a society differ from and socialize with one another in regard to political issues has major, direct and specifiable concerns for political contests (Zukerman, 1975). Different patterns of social divisions with different underlying notions will have diverse political repercussions both at domestic and regional levels. Inclusionary notions and policies are likely to foster peaceful coexistence in both the country and the region (Nezihoglu: 2017, 2020). Heterogeneous or homogenous all societies are split along one or more social distinctions, or cleavages. The study suggests, often than not, these cleavages transform into fault lines or mediums along which political attitudes form and podiums for political competitions or conflicts as the case may be. Various schools of thoughts have proffered varying theoretical and empirical interpretations and clarifications, which seek to in amongst others rationalize the existence and influence of social cleavages.

For instance, Karl Marx contends social class determines everything, that it was the only important social cleavage. In this line of thought, the argument is based on claims that the social class one belongs to determines their political attitude. Put differently, whether one was bourgeois or proletarian determined most political orientations (Marx, 1964). Class cleavages, demonstrably obvious because of industrialization, did not become politicized until socialist parties explicitly articulated the interest of the working class (Przeworski et al., 2006). While class matters significantly, evidence abounds to suggests, class and political orientations are not necessary exclusive, and that other factors such as race, geography, education, economy, ethnicity and others could also inform ones political orientation. The question in the context does not challenge the significance of class; rather it argues that class and other factors affect political orientation. Hence class might be a sufficient condition for forming cleavages, but are not necessary conditions. Even in the advance west, class as social cleavage has overtime fallen short of accounting for group political orientation, in the wake of nationalist agenda as witnessed in the Brexit saga and European integration. The situation is however more pronounced in developing countries like Nigeria, where class rarely serve as a basis for formation of social cleavages, given the near absence of formidable class structures in such societies. Against this backdrop, beyond the social stratifications or division, this research emphasizes the role of actors in streamlining such political conflicts, which includes but not
necessarily limited to, competition for resources and political power along social distinctions such as ethnicity, culture and religion.

This line of thought derives predominantly from a logic which suggests social groups like ethnicity in their latent or symbolic form may serve as basis for social classification, without the instrumentality of key actors however, they fall in driving political conflicts or otherwise (see, Salihu et al., 2021). Arguably, in the absence of formidable class structures as emphasized above, ethnicity with intersects like religion and culture in Nigeria, remains an enduring feature of social distinction in pre-colonial and contemporary Nigeria. In lieu, it is the opinion of the research that, class cleavage barely holds water and remains dissimal in accounting for social norms and conformity in Nigeria, rather ethnicity which cuts across class seems a more viable political currency.

The second, urban-rural cleavage which again accompanies industrialization has little relevance in Africa in the way we know it from Western Europe. It describes the conflict of interest between the mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie on the one hand, and of the feudal landowners on the other hand. Increasing urbanization in Africa might provide the potential for a conflict between the urban and rural population (e.g. about the pricing of basic foodstuffs). Up till now, this has not been developed into a clear cut line of cleavage and, more importantly, into specific political party formations or orientations. One reason might be that urbanisation, which is not linked to industrialisation in Africa, is, sociologically, to some degree only an extension of the village into the (shanty) town, and the urban and rural population maintains close personal links as well as their ethnic identity (Elwert et al., 1983; Gluckman 1960).

The state-church (religion) cleavage which was so important in Western Europe has basically no meaning in Africa. With the end of the colonial era, countries south of the Sahara became independent as secular states. Early Christian or Muslim orientated parties (e.g. in Uganda or Sudan) of the 1950s and 1960s were not interested in a religious state but operated as representatives of a particular denomination or sect (tariqa). Only during the 1990s the secular state has been challenged by some fundamentalist religious groups (e.g. in Nigeria). This, however, was not accompanied by the formation of corresponding political parties (Erdman, 2007). An example of the intersection between religion and state is best exemplified in the structural dynamics and power relations in the Ottoman Empire. As Toprak (1981) puts it, the history of secularization in both the Ottoman and New Republic represents a conscious attempt to contain the influence of Islam on the socio-economic and political process in the New
Republic. Put differently, it can be said to be an attempt to transform the pre-existing structures to allow the distinction between the state and religion.

According to Erdman (2007) ethnicity has been recognized as one of the influential and resilient social cleavage in Africa. Although ethnicity is not addressed in the Lipset-Rokkan model explicitly, it locates within the centre-periphery model of social cleavages (Erdman, 2007). In Western Europe, this cleavage described the conflict about the dominant culture of the emerging nation state, which of the various regional cultures would become the nation’s state culture. Put differently, it was the conflict between various ethnic groups about cultural dominance in the state. In Africa, the problem is slightly different; in most cases the conflict is not so much about the dominant culture but about who controls the commanding heights of the state for the selective or particularistic distribution of patronage. Within the Lipset-Rokkan model this cleavage is based on the concept of territorial opposition which is explained as ‘the commitment to the locality and its dominant culture: you vote with your community and its leaders irrespective of your economic position’ (Lipset et al., 1967). In so far as ethnicity can be incorporated into the model, it can be utilized as one social cleavage which might provide the basis for political conflicts, contestation, and orientation.

The starting point for examination of ethnicity as a cleavage could begin with the line of thought which suggest, political systems in contemporary Africa possess multiple lines of potentially mobilizable ethnic cleavage, as espoused by (Posner, 2009). Although ordinarily lumped under the umbrella term ethnic, communal identities in Africa take many forms. Sometimes people identify themselves in religious terms. At other times they distinguish themselves from others by language. At still other times in-group/out-group distinctions are made on the basis of tribal affiliation, clan membership, geographic region of origin, or race (Ferre, 2013; Ekeh, 1975). Within a single country, each of these distinctions may serve, in different situations, as potential axes of social differentiation and conflict.

In lieu of the above, the study is of the view that, while a host of socio-economic, political, structural and social norms could inform the decision conscious or otherwise to form Cleavage. This being duly discussed in prior frameworks, in respect to Africa, the absence of formidable class or economic structures across many states, reinvigorates the position of ethnicity as a dominant social cleavage. While the study does not argue or discard the viability of other cleavages to inform political orientation and attitudes, evidence abounds to suggest ethnicity as the single most important currency for political conflicts or contests. In what follows, the
research attempts to locate ethnicity as social cleavages and by extension a major currency for political conflicts and contests across underlying federating units that make up contemporary Nigeria.

3. Ethnicity as a Social Cleavage

In this section, the research adopts the instrumental and ethnic-competition model to account for the transformation of ethnicity from a source of individual identity in relation to a larger group, to a currency for collective action to which politicking falls under. Before moving on to proffer relevant arguments in support of or against aforementioned models, a definition of ethnicity in the context within which it’s applied is necessary. This is done with a view to operationalizing ethnicity as a concept, given its multi-usage and interpretations across board. Osaghae (2005) defines ethnicity as a process, which involves the instrumental mobilization of conscious sense of belonging, informed in part by ethnic diversity, which is in turn serves as mediums for collective action, with a view to assuming vantage positions and or dominance in cases of competition, conflict or cooperation. Central to the manifestation of instrumental ethnicity are emotions, which have been argued as a key human motivation, and constitute the social ties that makes groups, societies, or nations, possible (Lang et al., 1998). Against this, it will not be out of place to suggest ethnicity in Africa, serves in amongst other functions, as an epitome of collective emotional concentration that can be variably or invariably deployed when group’s interests are assumed to be endangered. Before moving on, it will suffice to acknowledge the work of Salihu et al. (2020), who argued that, the widespread predisposition in the scholarly realm to advance the conflictual dimensions of ethnicity serve as the peril of its competitive and cooperative elements.

Building on the submissions of Barth (1969), ethnic competition theorists maintains that, ethnic conflicts are outcomes of intense group competition in the presence ethnicity. They contended that intersections in the economic activities of two or more ethnic groups leads to ethnic competition, which could result in deprivation, exclusion and even disenfranchisement of smaller groups or minorities (Olzak et al., 1992). The competition models offers a potent justification for intergroup conflict, ranging from riots, to church burnings, to voting behavior, to hate group mobilization. Rooting strife in struggles over resources, the theory suggests that ethnic cohesions deepens when members of multiple groups occupy similar positions; most often linked with intersecting labor market niches and vie for scarce rewards. The basis for
conflict lies in the threat posed by competing groups, for whom ethnic identities take on enhanced salience in competitive contexts (Cunningham, 2007).

Central to the efficiency of ethnic mobilization are ethnic entrepreneurs who exploit mutual sense of belongingness for numerous ends. From a political standpoint, it has been argued that; the nature of citizenship status, access to state resources, and wealth redistribution formula greatly influence perceptions of political threats to a dominant ethnic population, creating a heightened sense of political competition where political challenges are more credible (Koopmans et al., 2000). “The nature of national and ethnic identity and mutual ethnic perceptions directly affect socio-political cleavages and patterns of social relations (Nezihoglu, 2016, 2015, 2011, 2010)” Competition model scholars draw on resource mobilization arguments to suggest that disadvantaged ethnic or racial populations will mobilize when their access to resources rises substantially. Competition theory also provides an explanation for backlash movements that arise in the wake of social movements for expanded civil rights. In this view, dominant groups whose power is threatened will mobilize against disadvantaged groups. If successful, such practices maintain existing apartheid conditions, which heighten the salience of ethnic boundaries and further aggravate ethnic tension (Ozlak, 2013).

To this end, it will suffice to argue that, society where certain groups feel shortchanged in relation to privileges and wealth redistribution, are more likely to contend with political mobilization along ethnic fault lines. Elsewhere the researcher argues that, the most basic conclusion from the analysis undertaken, suggests that, central to numerous manifestations of ethnicity is the decision by ethnic entrepreneurs to invoke the mutual consciousness shared by individuals who identify with a particular group (Salihu et al., 2020).

To advance the thesis of this research which suggests ethnicity as a social cleavage, the role of ethnicity in informing political orientation and conflict in contemporary Nigeria will be examined. Specifically, the study highlights the roles of socio-cultural associations with ethnic undertones in informing competition.

4. Ethnicity as a Social Cleavage in Nigeria

In contemporary Nigeria, political and economic contests are pursued primarily on an ethnic basis (Agbese, 1996). Trends in regional voting behavior suggest ethnicity, which intersects religion, tribe and culture; remains the major denominators for political mobilization. In the period leading to Nigeria’s self-actualization in 1960, outcomes of elections shows, from 1951
onwards, nearly all Igbo’s supported the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), the Yoruba’s overwhelmingly also voted Action Group (AG), and the Hausa and Fulani from the North identified with the Northern People's Congress (NPC) (Post, 2015). Political elites have overtime depended on their ancestral origin as exemplified by ethnicity, as the main basis of their political support. In like manner, the electorates are predisposed to voting based on mutual sense of belongingness on the basis of shared ethnic origin (Post, 2015). The primordial attachment to ethnicity will remain a perpetual feature of African societies. For David et al. (2015) events in the last decade corroborate the arguments that suggest, communal connections do not unobtrusively wane away, even in the wake of modernizing influences. Rather, modernization often creates the very environments required for the gestation of strong collective identities and sets the stage for communal competition.

In the wake of heightened mass migration from rural to urban settlements, attempts have been made to carry along and sustain the bond between individuals who identify with larger ethnic groups. This obtains in the formalization of ethnic groups into social cultural organizations, which serves in amongst other functions, advancement of mutual group aspirations or that of their members. For the purpose of this analysis, the study examines the role of Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) in advancing the socio-economic and political ambitions of Northern Nigeria.

The Arewa Consultative Forum, northern Nigeria’s main socio-cultural group, formally endorsed the re-election bid of President Muhammadu Buhari, premised on claims that he deserves a second coming as a democratically elected president in oder to consolidate on his achievements. Incumbent President Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) is being challenged by dozens of candidates in the presidential election. As it is the practice, aggrieved devotees of the ACF under the guise of Northern Elders Forum (NEF), endorsed the candidate of the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, for the election (Ibrahim, 2019). ACF is also known for its vocal stance as it concerns the plight of northerners. In recent times, the forum has described the security situation in the north as depressing, saying it is so bad that the present generation would have nothing to leave behind for future generations. It also lamented the fact that violence has become a means of livelihood for children of the region (Vanguard Newspaper, 2020). Furtherance to which the group has also started politicking ahead of 2023 general elections. The pan-northern socio-political organisation, the ACF, sends a strong message to northern elites with presidential ambitions, stating candidates who failed to comprehend security challenges facing the region should forget its support in 2023. The
ACF's National Publicity Secretary, Mr Emmanuel Yawe, who stated this in an interview with The Punch Newspaper in Kaduna, candidates pursuing the support of northerners should have a deep understanding of security challenges and other problems confronting the region (Sahara Reporters, 2020).

Farther from politicking, the ACF is also renowned for speaking on the developmental challenges bewildering northern Nigeria. In a condolence visit to Borno state in the wake of heightened Boko Haram atrocities, the leadership of the ACF reiterate, that “the ACF have to rebuild Borno State, we have to re-grow the north, and we have to re-grow Nigeria. We have no industries; agriculture has declined and our own children have now turned to violence as a means of livelihood. Your Excellency, in ACF we have decided that we will not discuss politics as much as we did, we intend to however focus on something else, we are going to start a program of developing small-scale agro-industries across the north” (Thisday Editorial, 2020).

Regional organizations like the ACF are not also central to regional politicking; their relevance is underscored by the battle amongst stakeholders for control of the soul of such organizations, given their ability to mobilize social capital. Recently, the North-Central Peoples Forum (NCPF) broke away from the umbrella body of northern Nigeria, Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), triggering fears in some quarters about the unity of the north and indeed Nigeria. Concerned stakeholders implied of the need to do something straight away to douse the tensionragging among the ethnic nationalities. In floating the group, however, prominent leaders in the North Central cited security challenges in the region as key reason. This came on the heels of the emergence of a similar group, from the ACF, North East Elders Forum, NEEF (Olumide, 2020). Another breakaway group, the Northern Elders Forum, has not been shy of discussing the security challenges bewildering northern Nigeria. In an interview the leadership of the group, expressed apprehensions on the deteriorating security situation in the region, saying the attack on Government Science Secondary School, Kankara, in Katsina State, further inveterate their position that the region was only now at the mercy of terrorists, bandits, and other criminal elements. The elders, under the aegis of Coalition of Northern Elders for Peace and Development, pointed out that the continuous stay in office of the service chiefs whom they noted, have been exhausted with nothing more to offer in security service, was emboldening the adversaries in their increasing dastardly actions against the country (Umeh, 2020).

Regrettably, the complexity that characterizes the unhealthy nature of competition amongst underlying ethnic groups has in other times resulted in discriminate sectarian violence. The media space in recent times is agog with antics from self-acclaimed activist and warlord,
Sunday Igboho who is out to expel herders, predominantly of the Fulani descent from the Yoruba populated South West Region. In his speech, Mr Igboho described the Ooni of Ife the paramount ruler of the Yoruba’s, the governor of Oyo state and other key regional elites as slaves to the Fulani. He explained that his recent activities aimed at restoring peace and normalcy to Yoruba land without being sponsored by anybody. Further noting his disregard and lack of fear of law enforcement agencies, on the basis that, his quest to expel herders from the Southwest derives in his desire to secure his ancestral land (Kabir, 2021). Regrettably, the likes of Mr. Sunday are revered and have come to assume status of cult heroes, although highly placed traditional rulers and regional elites continue to sue for peace, the widespread support the likes of Igboho have come to receive, reverberate the complexities of Nigeria’s ethnic fault lines. At this point, it is imperative to note, the trend of intimidation and threat of expulsion is not new in contemporary Nigeria, all major ethnic groups have at a point or the other threatened to expel other groups from their ancestral lands in the wake of conflictual group relations. And that beyond the potency for social capital mobilization, ethnic groups in their capacity as social cleavages play significant roles in promoting the socio-economic welfare of their members and kin, this obtains in the Igbo apprenticeship model “Nwa-boy”. Under this model, individuals serve as apprentice to masters who engage in numerous businesses, after which they are given resources or settled as it is widely referred to, which enables them set up their own ventures.

As rightly observed, ethnic groups or their elites do not necessarily determine a monopolistic political orientation or inform the behavior of others in their entirety, in other times cracks emerge within ethnic groups, resulting in fractionalization and establishment of parallel organizations. This does not only highlight the difficulty of monopolizing behavior of individuals or groups who identify in relation to a particular ethnic group, it reflects the utility of such associations and their relevance as social capital. The research contends that ethnicity as a social cleavage transcends the bounds of political mobilization; it applies and serves the functions of socio-economic welfare of its members in other times.

Furtherance to which the study argues that, the goals beseeched by ethnic groups in socio-economic or political competition are functions of many dynamics, such as the issues involved, the audience to which the appeal is being made, the type of organization that spearheads the struggle, the probability of success, and the internal consensus within the organization engaged in the invocation. The recognition that ethnicity may be a device to mask other interests or an ideology to advance a particular political viewpoint can help us better understand the dynamics of ethnicity as a social cleavage in Africa’s most ethnically diverse nation Nigeria.
5. Conclusion

The wave of political liberalization that swept across Africa in the early 1990s was accompanied by a wave of scholarship on its effects (Gibson, 2002). A number of authors presupposed the effects ethnicity would have on political pluralism and party politics, others focused on the dangers inherent in the proliferation of ethnicity as a social capital. While the expansion of public domain to accommodate opposition politics has ushered in pathways for inclusive politics, the mobilizing effects of ethnicity endanger the very idea of individualism. Others suggested that the cores of civil liberty as enshrined in liberal democratic norms will diminish the reach of ethnicity and accompanying communalism (Posner, 2007); it is public knowledge that ethnicity plays a dominant role in deciding who gets what when and how. While this norm could be exuberated by the intersecting dynamics of ethnicity with religion and culture, as in political mobilization, the reduction of intricate strategic conflicts to ethnic strife remains predominantly popular (Remi et al., 2016). Either way, existential realities suggest ethnicity as one of if not the most formidable social cleavage in contemporary Nigeria. Not even urbanization could curb the influence of ethnicity, if anything, it has transcended beyond conventional means of social and identity as a distinctive tool to a valuable social capital. The research concludes the seeming proliferation and mobilization of ethnic identity for numerous ends derive predominantly in the absence of formidable class structures and that beyond the potency for informing and shaping political orientations and socio-economic competition, ethnicity and its attendant practices define the nature of socialization between and amongst competing for ethnic groups in contemporary Nigeria. Arguably, not only are public policies or resources redistributed construed along ethnic lines, formal and informal institutions are shaped more or less by the interactions between competing ethnic groups.

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