

Pre – Colonial Antecedents That Promote Nation Building in Nigeria

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Abstract: *The amalgamation of 1914 marked the beginning of Nigeria experiment. However, efforts at building Nigeria predate Lugard and his amalgamation. Prior to 1914, the land around River Niger was peopled by leaders whose love for mega political entity was unparalleled. This leaders were nearing successes when the British imperialists appeared in the coast, unleashed a war of conquest on the people living around the River Niger and Benue, introduced western culture and civilization and eventually brought the areas under her majesty. The British efforts eventually paved way for 1914 amalgamation. The 1914 amalgamation and the emergence of a mega structure called Nigeria did not emerged out of the blue. Apart from British imperialism, some other factors that predate British imperialism were equally at work. This paper, by using the historical method of enquiry attempts to examine the pre colonial antecedents that favoured large political entities and therefore paved the way for the amalgamation of 1914.*

Introduction:

The act of building Nigeria did not just start overnight. Though opinion may differ on when it actually started in the history of any nation. But since the period in history is divided into: pre – colonial, colonial and post – colonial historians would always take into consideration these three period in his/her examination of issues. While huge efforts have been expended on nation building process in Africa at large and Nigeria in particular during the colonial and post – colonial phase, little or no energy have been devoted to the examination of pre – colonial antecedents that favours the emergence of nations within the Nigerian region. The colonial masters did not help in this situation as they through their various derogatory descriptions discouraged serious academic research in this aspect. One of such comments came from Trevor Roper who according to Fadeye (2009) opines that “Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness. Its past, the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque and irrelevant corners of the globe.” Such assertion of Roper and numerous others have blinded Euro centric historians from seeing positives in the pre – colonial African history including pre – colonial factors that made the building of a mega political structure, the type that suited the exploitative tendencies of European possible.

With the foundation of various settlements within the Nigerian region, the process of nation building commenced through the building of mini communities which later metamorphosed into mega states which the British upon their arrival subjugated and turned into the appendage of the metropolitan country. These subjugated parts were later brought under one administration in 1914. While the British colonialists deserved the credit for the 1914 amalgamation, primordial factors which were the fulcrum upon which the amalgamation was erected deserve examination. However a brief examination of the composition of pre – colonial society is necessary.

Composition of Pre – colonial Nigerian Societies.

There are many kingdoms and Empires within Nigeria region in the pre-colonial period. A discussion of every of this would be impossible in a presentation of this nature. However, since the pre-colonial empires and kingdoms could be broadly divided into two i.e mega and mini state, examples would be drawn from both sides. Examples of mega kingdoms include: Kanuri/ the Bornu empire, the Benin empire and the Oyo empire. Examples of mini states include: The igbo society, the Ijaw, the Tiv, the Idoma, the Urhobo etc. (Stride 1971).

The Kanuri/Bornu Empire:

The empire came into existence in the 9th century, when the Kanuris succeeded in imposing their authority on the politically disunited and scattered communities of the Lake Chad basin. Kanuri/Bornu Empire survived for almost one thousand years. The first kanuri/Bornu Empire collapsed due to struggle for power and internal dissension. The empire was revived by Mai Ali Ghaji and this survived until the colonial invasion of the region in the 19th century. The Empire operated a monarchical system headed by the king but assisted by the council of state made up of twelve men selected from the nobility and great man of servile origin. These twelve dignitaries together with the king formed the supreme ruling body. It was very unlikely for Mai to take any decision without consulting them. As a result of its organizational structure, the empire was able to survive well into the period of scramble and partition when the powerful nations in Europe such as France, Germany and Britain advanced in all directions and converge in the Lake Chad region to inflict a devastating blow on one of the longest surviving kingdom in Africa.

Oyo Empire

The empire at its zenith covered a substantial part of Yoruba speaking area, extended to the present day eastern Benin and had influences in the western half of the north central zone. Equally, part of the modern day Republic of Benin came under its influence. The emergence of this mega political structure would have been an impossible mission if not for the efforts of able rulers, military might, buoyant economy and an unparalleled political organization. In spite of its power, the empire eventually crumbled as a result of attempts by local and international imperialists to build a super and mega political structure. From the northern fringe of the empire, the Fulani imperialists came calling and from the southern end the European imperialists. The efforts made by the imperialists power was aided by incessant civil wars that engulfed the whole areas. Despite its collapse, it represented a shiny example of monarchical empire capable of building an equivalent of modern Nigeria if not for the imperialist ambition of the colonial powers.

The Benin Empire

The kingdom/empire of Benin before the 14th century was ruled by the Ogo dynasty. Owodo was regarded as the last king from the dynasty. After Owodo, there followed a long period of interregnum. The second republic and the emergence of Oranmiyan dynasty commenced with the ascension of Eweka I. Benin witnessed rapid development and expansion during the second republic. It extended as far as to Lagos, covering part of Ondo and Ekiti region. Olatunbosun (1980). The empire survived up to the 19th century in spite of the challenges that confronted it. It however collapsed when it came face to face with British imperialism.

Hausa/ Fulani Kingdom

Hausa kingdom was a collection of states founded by Hausa people situated between river Niger and Lake Chad. It took shape as a political and cultural region during the first millennium as a result of westward expansion. From there, the growth and expansion of the kingdom started. While the Hausas were busy building foundation for a mega political entity, the region was invaded by the Fulani Jihadists in 1804 and the indigenous efforts were thus thwarted and the process for the building of a new mega political structure thus started by the Fulanis commenced (Abubakar 1980). The efforts of the Fulani eventually met a brick wall with the defeat and incorporation of the areas into the British colonial structure which eventually metamorphosed into Nigeria.

Apart from the above examples of attempts made at building nation in the pre – colonial Nigeria, numerous other efforts abound but were curtailed by European imperialistic ambition. Such efforts include those given rise to the emergence of non – centralized states of the Tiv, Idoma, Epira, Urhobo, Ijaw, the Igbo etc.

The Decentralized Igbo Society:

The Igbos generally occupied the former Eastern Nigeria and a part of the Mid Western Region. The Igbos generally had no kings. The Igbos had a decentralized system of government. The executive, legislature and judiciary power were vested in Oha-na Eze (i.e the Town Assembly, the council of elders, Ofor and Ozor title holder, the Age Grade, Chief Priest and the Umueda. The administrative system was decentralized and characterized by the absence of a centralized government. It was a chiefless society which was segmentary and egalitarian in nature.

The Ijaw Society

The Ijaw society of the pre-colonial period was a non centralized society. The Ijaw political system is a fragmented society in which the village group made up of people who claim descent from a given ancestor through the rule lines which constitute the basis of governance. Essentially, the village is divided into quarters which are lineage groups. Each quarter is in turn made up of extended families each normally lives within a definite compound. The compound represents the smallest unit of political and social organization. The oldest man among the compounds that form a village becomes the village head or town head. While the religious functions are performed by the chief priest, the executive functions are performed by the village council.

The Urhobo:

The decentralized political system of Urhobo people is based on political structures. For the purpose of effective administration, there exist many levels of government. The village and the clan administration are easily identifiable. The Kingdom is structured into units. Each kingdom is made up of clans which are composed of villages or towns. The village or town governments were in the hands of native medicine practitioners. There are two types of governments under the village administration e.g the family and that of the community.

A careful and holistic consideration of both the non – centralized and the centralized states in the Nigeria region in the pre – colonial period would reveal that certain factors were inherent in them which favour the emergence of a super political structure. These factors are considered below:

PRIMORDIAL FACTORS THAT PROMOTE NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA.

Language

With regards to languages, there are indications in studies by experts to the effect that, in spite of the diversity of tongues among the people of Nigeria, there are incontrovertible evidences of origination, if not from a single parent language, at least from much fewer common parent languages than the over – exaggerated number of today (Asiwaju 2000). Such larger classifications include the Kwa, the Niger – Congo or Benue Congo, Bantu and Swahili. These classifications suggest connections between languages widely used in Africa. Linguistic studies have also revealed the remarkable extent of mutual borrowing by and from such specific languages as the Yoruba and Hausa, Hausa and Kanuri, Yoruba and Edo, Edo and Igbo. However, with the imposition of colonial rule on Africa, the white supremacists who were aliens to African culture thought that African languages varies. However, among Africans there were some mutual intelligibility. Thus understanding made some educated Africans to suggest the adoption of Swahili language by Africa as far back as 1977.

Artistic Tradition

Similar threads of interconnections have been established among the artistic traditions centres of Nok, Ife, Idah, Benin and Ukwu – Ukwu (Asiwaju & Oloruntimehin 1988). It terms of both content and style, there are not only striking similarities between the terracotta heads of the Nok culture and the Ile-Ife brass heads but also suggestions about the arts of Idah, Benin and Igbo – Ukwu as intermediate production. Apart from being evidence of very high attainments in sophisticated civilization in the pre – historic times, the Nok as well as Idah and Ife artistic production suggest a shared concern of the artistic school for humanism, naturalism and occasional stylization. (Ogunremi 1994).

Tradition of Origin

An examination of the tradition of origins of many Nigerian communities suggest existence of relations among them. According to the Oduduwa Legend, the Yoruba and Edo kingdoms are linked together early in their history. Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yoruba came from Mecca to found Ile – Ife which has since then been accepted as the centre of Yoruba civilization. Oduduwa has seven children who then became ancestors of the Egba, Ijebu, Owu, Binni, Ijesha, Igobomina. Another variant included the Kingdoms in Ekiti among the children of Oduduwa (Obaro). The Oduduwa legend tries to explain the origins of the various Yoruba Sub – ethnic groups as coming from the same person which is an important core of nation building. The Oduduwa legend went further to say that the ancestor of Edo kings was Oranmiyan, a son of Oduduwa, who history claimed found the Edo people very difficult to rule and left them but married Edo woman who gave birth to a son called Eweka. Eweka then became ancestor of the present line of Edo monarchs. The historical of origin which links the Yoruba with Edo promotes unity between the two which is a necessary ingredient for nation building. Oranmiyan again went to found old Oyo kingdom then located just south of the bend of River Niger where he married a Nupe woman. From this it is glaringly clear that the Yoruba, Edo and Nupe are connected by their history of Origin. This pre – colonial historical connection is one of the factors that prepared those areas for amalgamation.

The tradition of origin of the Hausas equally established connections with other groups within the Nigerian region. The Hausas claimed to have descended from Bayajidda who first settled in Kanem where he married a daughter of the Mai but later fled to Daura to escape the murderous plan of his father – in – law. While at Daura, he married the Queen of Daura and had seven sons who founded Biram, Kastina, Zaria, Rano, Gobir and Daura, (Adeleye, 1971). It was equally recorded that Bayajidda had seven other sons from another woman who founded Zamfara, Kebbi, Gwari, Yauri, Nupe, Yoruba and Kwararafa. They are called Bansa states. From the above history of origin of the Hausas, we can see that the above history origin connected the Hausas, the Kanuris and the Yorubas. This is one of the factor that helped the British with their amalgamation of 1914.

Religious Connection

In religious matters, the communities occupying areas around River Nigers and Benue shared practice of what has been called ‘diffused monotheism’ centered on a belief in a Supreme Deity worshipped through a multiplicity of divinities and elaborate ritual sacrifice. The ubiquity of divination practices, especially the Ifa of the Yoruba and its several derivatives such as Afa among the Igbo, Fa among the Aja, Iha of the Edo, Eva among the Isoko and Eba among the Nupe suggest the extensiveness of the communication networks that existed among the pre-colonial cultures (Asiwaju, 1988). The introduction of Islam in the 10th and 11th centuries, was another major cementing factor for the numerous pre – existing indigenous culture areas. With the introduction and

spread of Islam through trade connection, migration and the 1804 Jihad, large portion of the country came under one administration and this prepared the ground for 1914 amalgamation of the North and the South.

Migration and Trade

One other factor that prepared the ground for the amalgamation of 1914 which brought about the birth of modern Nigeria is trade and migration. The geographical compactness of the Nigeria region and the absence of physical obstacles such as insurmountable highlands or unnavigable waterways facilitated human mobility. The area in pre – colonial times especially famous as a region massively traversed by a network of long-distance trade routes, both land and riverine. The most prominent navigable waterways were and are still Niger and the Benue Rivers and their numerous tributaries as well as Lagoon along the coast and the Lake Chad in the northeast. Additionally, the entire areas was criss – crossed by several overland routes, notably the Kano – Badagry, crossing the Niger at Rabah, used by the European explorers such as Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton and Lander brothers. (Falola & Anyawu 1991. Another overland route was Ngarzagamu (Bornu) – Calabar route via the Benue river. The north – south routes, which were essentially southern extensions of the trans Saharan routes that connected the Nigerian region with Mediterranean world, were complemented by equally important east – west networks of which the most prominent were Benin – Ife – Abeokuta – Ketu, used by the pioneer Christian missionaries such as Samuel Ajayi Crowther. With this inter – connectivity’s, traders from different part of the region interacted freely to promote economic interactions (Olaniyan 1980). Traders from the Northern part of Nigeria were found in every region selling products of their land and that of the Eastern world. So also traders from the Yorubaland and Igboland went as far as the Benue and Niger River for commercial interaction. The Arochukwu traders ensured products of their region were transported and distributed in other places while also taken the products of other region to their places. The itinerant Yoruba traders were also not left behind in this as they ensured steady supply of their products such as Kola to the traders of northern extraction who connected with the Arabs of north Africa. (Oтите, 1990). With the above, it is a quite visible that trade and migration favoured the emergence of a macro state and therefore promoted nation building in the Pre – colonial time.

Macro state formation

Macro state formation was not alien to Nigeria political space before the eventual amalgamation of 1914 which paved the way for a larger political structure. While discussing this, reference should be made to the series of successive indigenous Kingdoms and empires which were known to have risen and fallen in the areas and which came to embrace a substantial part of the region of present day Nigeria and thus providing appropriate antecedent for British,. Nigeria the most macro of the macro states ever to be created in the area. These antecedent include the Kanem – Bornu Empire in the northeast, whose area embraced Bornu and a larger part of Hausaland in Nigeria as well as Kanem in present day Republic of Chad; the junkun or Kororafa Empire based in Wukari, which dominated a good number of the Hausa City states including Kano; the Oyo Empire which embraced a good part of Yorubaland plus the ancient Fon Kingdom of Dahomey in present – day Republic of Benin; the Benin Kingdom and later empire which embraced virtually the areas of present day Edo, Delta, Ekiti, Ondo and Lagos States (Adesote, 2017). But by far the most expensive and the latest was the Sokoto Caliphate, which embrace virtually the entire area of north of the Niger – Kwara state, and beyond Nigeria’s Northern boundary with Niger where former Sokoto caliphate dependencies once included a good part of Southern Niger (Dioka, 1997). The point being made here is that the people of pre – 1914 Nigeria had an inextinguishable desire for a mega state which they worked tirelessly to build until the arrival of British and their nation building strategies which eventually came to fruition in 1914 with the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorate (Oshuntokun & Olukoju, 2002).

Conclusion

This paper took us down memory lane in its examination of factors that predate the British amalgamation of 1914 but such factors include Linguistic affinity, economic/trade connection, similar traditions of origin etc. all those had helped Kingdoms and empire within the region to build mega political structure in the pre – colonial period. Apart from charting a less travelled route by both the Euro – centric and Afro – centric historians, this paper has further proved that Africa is capable of initiating a worthwhile venture which the world would be proud of if not strangled by the advance culture of the world.

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