

# State Creation as a Tool for Resolving Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria: A Myth or Reality?

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**Abstract:** *Ethnic conflicts between the majorities and minorities as well as the imbalance of the Nigerian federation have led to agitation for the creation of new states in recent times. This is due to the fact that, creating new states could act as a catalyst for resolving ethnic conflicts. This work therefore, analysed issues of state creation and evaluated the mythology and reality of state creation in resolving ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Secondary sources were used in data collection. Findings review that state creation has never resolved ethnic conflicts instead, it led to fractionalisation of ethnic groups. The government should as a matter of fact, promote true democracy for the sustenance of unity among the various ethnic groups in the country.*

**Keywords:** conflict, conflict resolution, ethnic conflict, ethnic groups, state creation

## 1. General Introduction

In recent times, there have been clarion calls and request for creation of new states in Nigeria, by Nigerians, from almost every ethnic group. The cry of marginalisation and suppression by the minority ethnic groups is becoming a tradition. Our national Assemblies (both at state and federal levels) and politicians, meet often to deliberate on how to resolve this issue of state creation. The last creation of state was done in 1996 during the regime of late General Sani Abacha when he added six new states to the then thirty, making it 36 states. Quests for state creation in Nigeria could be dated back to the colonial epoch when the country was first divided into three major regions based on the three major ethnic groups of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo that were acknowledged then. According to Alubo (2008:5) this manifested itself aggressively in the middle belt region of the country which is also the non Islamic area of the north, the non Yoruba area of the west and the non Ibo area of the east.

The original agitation and demand for state creation started in the mid 1950s with the minority ethnic nationalities in the western and eastern regions, and a little later after 1960, among the minority ethnic nationalities in the confluence communities of the River Niger and Benue in the northern region. In order to convince the regional and colonial ruling classes, the British colonial government established the Henry Willink Commission in 1957 which submitted its report in 1958. Despite the credible assessment of the problem discovered by the commission, it however rejected the demands for states or regions to be created. Thus, our nationalists then decided to settle for independence first, and deal with the issues of more region or states at a later time, and nothing tangible (in terms of creation of more region) was done until the country had her independence, and later declared Republic in 1963. After the declaration as a Republic, only the mid-western region was created despite the agitations by other regions.

Agitations for state creation started with most of the minority ethnic groups as a result of fear of the three major ethnic groups of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo mentioned earlier on. However, after the first coup of 1966 which brought the military into power as a result of the collapsed regime of the first republic, several meetings of the era on the increasing national crisis led to the conviction by the military ruling class headed by General Gowon Yakubu, to create the twelve state federal structures. From then till date, states have been created raising the numbers to the present thirty six. Thus, the negative experience of the minority ethnic groups (nationalities) and the imbalance of the Nigerian federal state is a motivating force, for state creation in Nigeria.

Nigerians think that, state creation has the greatest possible diffusion and de-concentration of political and economic powers, which are considered critical to the maintenance of the freedom, by the different ethnic groups as well as the communities. No doubt, many states have been created since the nation attained independence, and more are being agitated for, in the current dispensation, but has state creation really resolved the multiple ethnic conflicts we have in Nigeria? The paper therefore examines the quest for state creation in Nigeria to see if it has actually resolved or created more ethnic conflicts. Before delving into the discourse proper, clarifications of some concepts will be made for proper understanding of the study. The paper is divided into different parts which include definition of concepts, mythology and realism of state creation, the requests before the national assembly and conclusion.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

- To analyse issues of state creation in Nigeria from independence till date.
- To examine the factors responsible for state creation.
- To evaluate the mythology and reality of state creation in resolving ethnic conflicts in Nigeria
- To enumerate the requests for state creation submitted to the national assembly

### 3. Research Methodology

Data were collected through secondary sources. These include library sources, books, journals, magazines and unpublished works relevant to the research topic. These gathered data were rigorously analysed.

### 4. Scope of study

As the topic suggests, this study covered the entire country. It involved both the major and minor ethnic groups in the country. It covered the period of amalgamation in 1914 through independence in 1960 till date.

### 5. Review of literature

In recent time, ethnic conflict has become an internationally recognised major social conflict. To properly address this issue and contribute to its solution, there should be a clear understanding of some of the concepts that deal with it. The main debates revolve around concepts such as ethnic group, ethnicity and ethnic conflict. It is altruism that, most African states emerged due to colonialism and thus, primordial attachments which exists between the diverse peoples who form these states, has been a major problem faced by them, since most of them attained independence. These attachments are marked by strong sectional affiliations that compete with much desired loyalty to the nation. Most ethnic diversity exists due to political instability and likelihood of violence. However, Brown (1996:10) has a contrary view when he pointed out that, some of the world's most ethnically diverse states such as Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia, despite not without internal conflict and political marginalisation, have suffered little inter ethnic violence while countries with minimal differences in language and culture such as Somalia and Rwanda, have witnessed bloodiest of all such conflicts. Affirming Brown opinion, ethnic conflict in Nigeria such as Urhobo-Itsekiri, Itsekiri-Ijaw, Urhobo-Itsekiri-Ijaw, Okrika-Elleme crises in the south, Berom-Fulani, Tiv-Jkun in the north, Aguleri-Umuleri crises in the east and Ife-Modakeke in the west among others, have little diversity in culture, language etcetera. According to Apolos (2001:40) all these experiences of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are as a result of making people believe that their problems persist due to exploitation of the ethnic group.

Ethnic groups according to Odendaal (1998) are groups of people, who see themselves or are seen by others, as sharing a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on: a belief in a common origin, history and destiny; culturally specific practices and beliefs. Ethnic groups form one of the cleavages in plural societies. It constitutes an increasingly necessary strategic unit for making claims to citizenship, as well as demands on the resources of ethnically divided nations. It also involves plural peoples expressing loyalty to their ethnic groups on the basis of which they relate to others in the larger society (Otitte 1971:311; Agbegbedia, 2011:52). Alubo (2008:5) asserted that, ethnic group refers to people who share a common ancestry, identity, language and culture while Lindgren (2004) regarded it as a simultaneous process of naming self, naming others as well as being

named by others. Common identity such as facial marks, peculiar clothing items, and diet among others, are most time, physical symbols of identification. Also, almost all ethnic groups in Nigeria have a geophysical space which is referred to as the 'homeland'. Ethnic group members at times, share diverse religions such as Christianity, Islam and traditional religion (Nnoli 2003; Osaghae 1995). Alubo (2008:5) noted that, Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, has distinct forms of ethnic group identity symbols, which are different from the western world where Irish or Polish Americans for example, speak the English language like other Americans, and do not have a homeland per se, even though they have large concentrations in certain parts of the city.

According to Skinner (1978:87-118) and Otitte (1979:119-130) among others, ethnic groups involve in competition for scarce resources, struggling to secure for their kiths and kins, the scarce amenities which are the benefits of modernisation. In addition, Kasfir (1976:156-158) argued in his 'capture theory' that ethnic groups, mostly large one, seek to capture power so that they could put members of their ethnic groups in dominant power and positions, both politically and economically, since politics consists the authorities allocation of values. Osaghae (1986:76) noted that, competition for scarce resources is not really between ethnic groups as it were, but between the elites of the various groups who consciencise the groups, producing ethnic and solidarities and loyalties, which later become the criteria for serving the selfish interests.

Ethnicity could be seen as the feeling of belonging to a distinctive cultural or linguistic group or a manifestation of ethnic consciousness in relation to other groups such as feeling of belonging to a distinctive socio-cultural groups or a manifestation of ethnic consciousness cannot by itself be considered to be a bad thing just as the manifestation of national consciousness is not regarded as a bad thing within the comity of nations. From the above therefore, ethnicity can be defined as the cultural characteristics that connect a particular group of people to each other. The concept is rooted in the idea of societal groups marked especially by shared nationality, tribal affiliation, religion, shared language or cultural and traditional origin and background. Ethnicity could therefore be regarded as, one of the primary source of conflict in Africa as it seems to thrive according to Brown (1996:10) on two significant factors: self consciousness and self aspiration.

On the other hand, ethnic conflict could be defined as conflict which occurs between ethnic groups, mainly due to ethnic nationalism and ethnic hatred. Odendaal (1998:1) defined ethnic conflict as situations where people mobilise against others on the basis of ethnic identity. An alternative term for it is 'identity conflict' which is more inclusive, since it may also refer to situations where religious or racial issues serve as the basis for mobilisation. But since the focus of the study is on ethnic conflicts as the dominant line of tension in the current agitation for state creation, the term ethnic conflict shall be preferably used. Otitte (2000:152) posited that, ethnic conflicts are generated from situations of contested claims over access to, or control of scarce resources. They may be also caused by different or opposing

perceptions, and politico-economic dividends of government and governance. Also, the more the persistency of group and individual interactions in a multi ethnic polity, the more the phenomenon of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts persist. Thus, ethnic conflicts can be regarded as a variant as well as an outcome of ethnicity. Ethnicity can lead to ethnic conflicts and vice versa. Otite (2000) went further to state that, although, individuals may consciously or unconsciously interact in discriminatory contexts, and hence introduce or project the phenomenon of ethnicity, ethnic conflicts may occur only, when the problems or gains of the individuals are portrayed as those of the members of their two different ethnic groups.

Ethnic conflict as stated above is one of the primary sources of violence and instability not only in Nigeria, but the world at large. For instance, between 1990 and 2000, more than 200 million people were killed by their own governments worldwide. These victims of internal conflicts by far, outnumbered those of wars between states for the same era. The post Cold War world and Africa especially, is predominantly characterised by internal conflicts where ethnicity plays an important function. Regehr (1993) wrote that, almost two-thirds of political conflicts worldwide were ethnic conflicts. Thus, Otite (2000:153) concluded that, ethnicity and ethnic conflicts are part of normal life and group experiences in contemporary Nigeria.

From the above discourse, one can infer that, ethnic groups provide basis for ethnic conflicts, and conflicts thus, take place only between and amongst groups. Can one therefore conclude that conflict could be properly resolved or managed if there were no ethnic groups? This is almost impossible since ethnic groups in Africa are differentiated basically on language, territory and myth of a common origin. In my opinion, the fact that states are new creations, should not mislead us to think that groups are also new, and thus, much need to be done in the linkages between pre-colonial and contemporary form of ethnicity.

Nevertheless, conflicts increasingly present themselves as ethnic conflicts, with ethnic identity serving as the rallying point of the mobilisation factor for the manifestation of the conflicts. As a result, an ethnic nationality proffer creation of state to the management of ethnic conflict and its related issues, but then, has it really resolve it? In the wake of ethnic conflicts and cultural revivals of suppressed ethnic groups, and in the agitation for creation of states and regions, it is common to see the tearing down of statues, the rewriting of history books, the renaming of streets, towns, regions, roads and mountains. But the politics of ethnicity associated with state creation in Nigeria, are about discrimination, lobbying, and the scramble for resource, which could often be regarded as social mobility, exclusion and inclusion. These historical settings have provided the foundation for almost every ethnic group in Nigeria, to be requesting for their own autonomous state. How these situations have been tackled will be addressed as we proceed in this study.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 State creation: a myth or reality in resolving ethnic conflicts in Nigeria

What is today Nigeria was cobbled together from diverse ethnic groups numbering over 370 (Otite 2000; Abba and Okwori 2002; Abah 2003; Suberu 1996; Mustapha 1998). Otite (2002) further stated that, Nigeria has several types of pluralisms, the major ones being ethnic, religious and political. Most of these groups had little contacts, while others were not even aware of the others' existence. During colonialism, Nigeria was ruled as separate southern and northern protectorates until the 1914 amalgamation into one Nigeria by Sir Lord Frederick Lugard. Nevertheless, Agbegbedia (2011:48) stated that, while one could speak of Nigeria from that date, the hard fact of the situation was that, its unity existed only on paper. For Agbegbedia therefore, nothing bounds the north and south together, except perhaps, in the person of Lugard, due to the distinct groups in the country. The component units became three regions before independence in 1960 which also coincide with the three major ethnic groups: the Hausa/Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the east and the Yoruba in the west; there were no regions for the other more than 370 ethnic groups who make up the minorities. They became four regions by 1963 when the mid-west region was added with the decapitation of the western region; and further increased to twelve units in 1967 from hence the concept 'state' replaced region (Oyovbaire 2011:63).

In other words, the history of state creation in Nigeria could actually be traced to the history of Nigeria itself. Contrary to the natural course of federalism in which previously existing distinct states enter into a contract of union of their own volition, for the mutual benefit of all federating units, the reverse was the case for Nigeria. In her case, heterogeneous societies, conquered by the rampaging British and formed into the Southern Protectorate, Northern Protectorate, and the Colony of Lagos (later collapsed into the Southern Protectorate in 1906), were amalgamated by colonial fiat in 1914. The Richards Constitution of 1946 introduced regionalism. Even though the Southern Protectorate was further split into Western Province and Eastern Province in 1939, while the McPherson Constitution of 1951 configured Nigeria into a semi-federal state, it was the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 that effectively structured Nigeria into a true regional federalism. Unlike the conventional federalisms that hitherto separated entities come together to form a union, Nigeria became a union through the 1914 amalgamation and began the process of further fragmentation into smaller federating units. Thus, from 1914 to date, the Nigerian map has changed seven times.

Furthermore, the ethnic tripod to which the colonial masters granted independence is fundamental to the persistent issues of ethnicity, sense of belonging and crises of citizenship. This is the reason according to Osaghae (2002) and Nnoli (1978) why most of the discourse on ethnicity and citizenship, has been dominated by considerations of majority and minority as well as relative power differences among groups. The Nigerian major ethnic groups, singly or as a group, block the will and civil liberties of minority

groups, due to the political calculus of ethnic majoritarian rule (Otite 2002). It was the issue of majority versus minority that actually led to the creation of the mid-west region after independence.

It is proper to state at this juncture, two vital issues concerning state creation. In the first place, creation of states was carried out even when disappointments and dissatisfactions were induced by them, only by military dictatorship. Secondly and quite paradoxically, some states struggled consistently for years to be constituted into a state, whereas, many others, such as Zamfara, Kebbi, Ekiti, Nasarawa, Bayelsa and Osun states to mention but a few, which did not struggle for, nor even needed the states, had states created for them. In essence, while some states demanded and sweated in the struggles were either unfairly denied or delayed (such as Urhobo in Delta, Adada in Enugu) which caused community recriminations and deep social injuries, some communities which did not agitate nor spill energies in any struggles, had states created for them on the platter of gold and diamond. In addition, each state creation exercise was rationalised as a mechanism for allaying minorities' fears of domination, thereby, providing for more integration. Perhaps, this is why the persistent agitations for the creation of states has their roots on ethnic consanguinity, to bring those with the same ancestral forbears to join their kith and kin, in a specific geo-political zone which a nation building process reflects and reproduces the competitions among the constituent segments. Creation of new states definitely, opens spaces and opportunities to exercise power and control over resources. It also offers easier access to electricity, employment and other social amenities and infrastructural developments. This is as a result of the fact that new state is compelled to make provisions for these services in the town that became the new headquarters of such state or local councils. But has this really been the case?

Apart from the persistent agitations for the creation of more new states and local councils, it should be noted, based on experience that, these exercises have not really solved the problems of a sense of belonging and integration. Instead, creation of states has merely led to more fractionalisation. Creation of state and local councils from experiences, has not in any way, allayed the fears of domination. Rather, the exercise only creates additional theatres for competitions as new majorities and minorities are created in the process. This motivated Obaro Ikime to point out that:

...each time a state is created, there is a new majority nationally and new minorities, and relations within the states have been more acrimonious since states were created than before because, the struggle for resources and development become more localised and so more intense (Ikime 2001:65-66).

This fractionalisation adequately neutralises minority nationalism as Mustapha (2000:99) observed. This entails that, state creation has not resolve ethnic conflict as earlier stated; instead, it promotes ethnic conflicts as more majority and minorities groups spring up in every creation of states. Thus, state creation should be regarded as a myth and not reality to resolution of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

## 6.2 Requests for state creation before the current Nigeria National Assembly

The country (Nigeria) National Assembly is said to be considering requests for creation of about forty five (45) new states (Mordi 2012:56). A breakdown of the figure shows that, the south-south geo-political region is leading with 13 requests, followed by south-west with 10; south-east 8; north-west 6; north-central 5 and north-east 3. If approved, Nigeria will then have a total of 81 states. This will make it possible for the southern states to have additional 31 states to their current 17 making a total of 48 states. On the other hand, the northern states which currently have 19 states will have 14 adding to them bringing it to total of 33, a ratio of 48 for the south and 33 for the north.

Looking at the 1999 constitution, creation of new states is always a difficult issue which requires a cumbersome process. Section 8, subsection 1 of the constitution states that:

- a) a request, supported by at least two-third majority of Members representing the area demanding the creation of the new state in each of the following, namely:
  - (i) The Senate and House of Representatives
  - (ii) The House of Assembly in respect of the area, and
  - (iii) The local government councils in respect of the area, is received by the National Assembly;
- b) a proposal for the creation of the state is thereafter, approved in a referendum by at least, two-third majority of the area where the demand for creation of the state originated;
- c) The result of the referendum is then approved by two-thirds majority of all the states of the Federation supported by a simple majority of members of the Houses of Assembly; and
- d) The proposal is approved by a resolution passed by two-thirds majority of members of each House of the National Assembly (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria).
- e) Since 2002, stakeholders have been mounting the possibility of state creation. However, the requests were formally followed through in the 2009/2010 and been given attention in recent times by the National Assembly. Apart from the constitutional provisions, there are other conditions already agreed to, as preconditions for state creation. Ekweremadu enumerated the conditions as follows:
  - i. Economic viability of the area seeking a state such as economic potentials for survival, capacity for revenue generation, etc.
  - ii. Socio-cultural affinity and geographical contiguity;
  - iii. Demographic strength;
  - iv. Possibility of addressing a lopsided cartography and boundary lines that result in perennial resource-induced and boundary conflicts;
  - v. Possible consensus among the areas/groups seeking a new state; and
  - vi. Availability of infrastructure(s), human resources for a takeoff, etc.
- f) The question now is; how can proponents of state creation surmount these hurdles?

**List of proposed states according to the zones**

Source: Tell Magazine, March 19, 2012 page 56.

**South-South (13):**

Ahoada (Rivers); Toru-Ebe (Delta, Edo, Ondo); Ogoja (Cross River); Urhobo (Delta); Minji-Se (Rivers); Ado (Delta); Confluence (Edo, Kogi, Nasarawa); Bori (Rivers); Anioma (Delta); Oil Rivers (Akwa Ibom, Rivers); Warri (Delta); New Delta (Delta) and Ethiope (Delta).

**South-West (10):**

New Oyo (Oyo); Remo-Ijebu (Ogun); Ijesha (Osun); Oduduwa (Osun); Ijebu (Ogun); Ibadan (Oyo); Yewa (Ogun); Ose (Ondo); Lagoon (Lagos) and Oluwa (Ondo).

**South-East (8):**

Aba (Abia); Adada (Enugu); Orashi (Imo, Anambra); Ugwuaku (Imo, Abia, Anambra); Etiti (Imo, Abia, Anambra); Equity (Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi); Njaba (Imo) and Orimili (Anambra, Imo, Delta).

**North-West (6):**

Karaduwa (Katsina); Gurara (Kaduna); New Kaduna (Kaduna); Tiga (Kano); Ghari (Katsina) and Biyajida (Katsina).

**North-Central (5):**

Kainji (Niger); Edu (Niger, Kwara); Okura (Kogi); Borgu (Kogi) and Okun (Ekiti, Ondo, Kwara, Kogi).

**North-East (3):**

Katagun (Bauchi); Amana (Adamawa) and New Borno (Borno).

**7. Recommendation**

In the first place, the government should bring governance closer to the people instead of creating more states. Government should also tackle development and raise the peoples' standard of living by providing the basic amenities. Should new states be created, the various minority ethnic groups should be given adequate consideration in the distribution of the state resources and political appointment.

**8. Conclusion**

The study started by defining and explaining some basic concepts such as ethnic group and ethnic conflicts which are necessary for this discourse. The logic inherent in state creation has no doubt, become unabated and also an issue that have dominated the National Assembly in recent times. One of the major problems of Nigeria federalism is the continuous agitation for creation of more states despite the fact that, the country has been restructured into six different zones and thirty six states. However, state creation has never resolved any ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, instead it led and still leading to more ethnic conflicts as new majorities and minorities spring up in every new created state. Therefore, one can conclude that it is a myth and not a reality.

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