

Ethnicity and Transition to Democracy in Nigeria: Explaining the Passing of Authoritarian Rule in a Multi-ethnic Society

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Abstract

This essay addresses an important variable in Nigerian politics, namely, ethnicity and the ways in which it affects the conduct of national affairs. It represents an effort at theorizing the role and place of ethnicity in the transition from authoritarianism in a multi-ethnic setting such as that represented by Nigeria. Drawing on historical evidence on the ways in which ethnicity was constructed in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria as well as the wide literature on the subject, an attempt is made to demonstrate the centrality of the variable to Nigerian politics but without suggestion that it is the sole or most important determinant of political outcomes. Indeed, it is argued that there are other important variables, such as class, which not only affect the political process but also impinge on ethnicity. The ways in which ethnicity influences the different phases of the transition from authoritarianism are discussed drawing on the Nigerian experience.

Introduction

In the recent past, there has been a burgeoning of literature on transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. Two major intellectual strands are deducible from this development. One strand interprets the Latin American transition as a logical outcome of forces released by unique experiences with authoritarian rule in each country. As such, each transition unfolds under specific conditions from which it is arduous to deduce general features (Lechner, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). But the difficulty in making generalization notwithstanding, Lechner suggests that democratization in Latin America is a reaction to social disintegration wrought by capital. Modernization, defined as capitalist efficiency or rationality, has become the unavoidable path to economic development. But this hegemony of modernization is leading to social disintegration, hence new demands for community (1991: 542–543).

The second strand roots the current wave of democratization in the end of the cold war and the "victory" of the West. This set of writings, usually by Anglo-American and European scholars, form an extension of a long pedigree which, tacitly and overtly, have portrayed East-West relations as a struggle between authoritarianism and democracy (see Moore, 1966; Arendt, 1973). By extension, the victory of the West in the cold war is a triumph of democracy over authoritarianism. Consequently, we have witnessed the resurgence of Tocquevillean and Schumpeterian notions that associate democracy with institutional political arrangements originating from the West and spreading to the rest of the world (Modelski, 1992; Dahl, 1989; Schumpeter, 1987; Tocqueville, 1969). Thus in Modelski's estimation, democratization is

... a technology, that is, a means to an end, a technique of collective choice or a form of macro decision making, [then] its dissemination may be subject to patterns observed in the diffusion of technological and other innovations. For societies unfamiliar with such practices, democracy is indeed a bundle of innovations (1992: 1361).

It is not difficult to see that in this reincarnation of "modernization", Africa is one of those areas that are "unfamiliar" with democratic practices to which democracy will inevitably spread by diffusion. It is true that global factors, for instance, the end of the cold war, the resurgence of liberal democracy in the former Soviet bloc countries and demands of political conditionalities by the Bretton Woods institutions, have had an effect on democratization in Africa. However, they have only served as a fillip to popular discontent with economic stagnation and political repression that had become pervasive on the continent. Calls for a second independence (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1987) encapsulates this long-standing discontent, which ironically was fuelled, in many cases, by the same external forces.

To be sure, democratization in African countries has its own internal logic quite apart from the thaw in East-West relations. Unfortunately, the limits of democratization in Africa have been set prematurely by the West as liberal, multiparty democracy. Consequently, as with modernization, liberal democratic theory has guillotined the mass-based intellectual ferment and political struggles in which Africa's democratization was initially being shaped.

Today, a majority of African countries have either adopted liberal, multiparty democracy or are transiting to it. According to records, in 1992, only nine countries, Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Gambia, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal and Zambia, were regarded as democratic. In the same year, 28 other countries were said to be in the process of transition to democracy. But in 1995, 15 countries were classified as democratic, representing a 66 per cent increase, while 14 were transiting (Diouf, n.d.: 9). Presently, following the mass revolt that ended military rule and brought Mr Gbagbo to power in Cote d'Ivoire, virtually the entire African continent has transited to liberal democracy with varying degrees of pretension.

Conceptualizing African Transitions: Orthodoxies and Paradoxes

Early studies of what Huntington (1991) has described as the "third wave of democracy" were on Eastern Europe and Latin America (Pastor, 1989; Przeworski, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Malloy and Seligson, 1987). African situations were treated as marginal, and analysed on the basis of conceptual tools distilled from the experiences of Eastern Europe and Latin America. However, in recent times, African experiences with democracy and transitions from authoritarian rule have been attracting more attention (Ake, 1991; 1992; Anyang' Nyong'o, 1987; Olagunju, et al, 1993).

A number of salient ideas, concepts and theories about African transitions are now discernible. Some of them are quite original, while others are strongly influenced by writings on other parts of the world. There is need to critically re-examine these orthodoxies.

A. Transition as Democracy

The link between transitions and democracy is one that is commonly made in the literature. A dominant way in which this link is posited is that transitions in Africa, as elsewhere, represent a diffusion of democracy from the West to the rest of the world. The "third wave of democracy" (Huntington, 1991) or the third democratic transformation (Dahl, 1989) is "the process by which democracy spreads across the world" (Modelski, 1992: 1353). Democratization has emerged as the modernization of the 1990s, a process in which non-Western societies that are not familiar with democracy are sucked in by its "irresistible and universal" movement (Tocqueville, 1969).

Liberal democratic theory, as most forcefully argued by Schumpeter, has now re-emerged as the alter ego of transitions. The essence of this theory, as Schumpeter stated over fifty years ago, is to make the power of "the people" in deciding political issues secondary to the election of men who are to do the deciding.

... the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (Schumpeter, 1987: 269).

But for a few attempts to argue an African perspective, for instance, Anyang' Nyong'o (1987), Ake (1992; 1993) and various projects and Working Groups of CODESRIA, the Tocquevillean and Schumpeterian notions of democracy are the orthodoxies, even for African researchers.

We do not think that democracy is the preserve of any one people, culture or part of the world which is spread by proselytizing others. Therefore, while Africa's democratization may be influenced by extra-African experiences, is not a bequeathal from the West. Africa's democratization is first and foremost the product of the internal logic of relationships among social forces in various African countries, though linked in complex ways with extra-continental forces.

Still, are transitions from authoritarian rule necessarily transitions to democ-

racy? Leaving aside the meaning and content of the democracy on offer, to say speak of transitions from authoritarian rule as if they necessarily end up in democracy is incorrect. The African experience so far amply illustrates this. Many African countries saw a rapid demise of democratic institutions and practice only a few years after the transition from colonial rule to self-rule in Africa. Of about forty African countries which became independent under democratically elected governments in the 1950s and 1960s, only seven were classified as democratic in 1992 (Diouf, n.d.). Even in the current "wave of democracy", the rate of decline into authoritarianism has been high. In Benin, President Soglo dissolved parliament a few years after transition, and almost plunged the country into crisis by refusing to hand over to Kerekou after he lost the presidential election of 1996. President Ousmane of Niger dissolved parliament, and when his party lost the ensuing parliamentary election he decided to obstruct the opposition prime minister in performing his duties. And in Zambia, barely 18 months after his election, President Chiluba declared a state of emergency and arrested many opposition leaders. He has since followed these up by trying to stop former President Kaunda from contesting the next election.

Surely, the mere transfer of power to an elected government is not enough for democracy. It is what happens after power has been transferred that determines whether a democratic transition has taken place. What is critical is consolidation of democracy, the acid test of which is the first post-transition election. We cannot determine a priori that democracy will follow transition. Democracy may be the expectation from transition, but transition is not a warranty for democracy.

B. Transition as Transfer of Power

There is a broad agreement that transitions involve power transfers. But what is less unanimous is whether all transitions, both from and to democracy, should be studied. One approach sees transition as an aspect of military/authoritarian rule. By this approach, transition is both a movement from democracy to military/authoritarian rule and from military/authoritarian rule to democracy. Thus, Olagunju, et al, argue that

... when applied to the politics of Africa and Latin America, the concept of transition is a specific generic reference to the cycle of democratization, authoritarian or one-party rule and of redemocratization that has characterized the politics of many countries in the two continents since the 1960s. ... Sometimes, it is set in motion by military intervention to prevent the national descent into chaos and anarchy. ... At other times, the cycle is triggered off by the long stay in power or "overrule" by authoritarian or even pseudo-democratic regimes (1993: 9-10).

Edmond Keller then suggests that what needs to be studied is the general process of regime change in Africa as a means of understanding of ongoing transitions (cited in Olagunju, et al, 1993: 18).

By making transitions a post-independence phenomenon dating to the 1960s, this approach does not account for the very first wave of democratic transitions in Africa, namely decolonization. Moreover, in defining transition as a phase in a vicious circle of authoritarianism-democratization, this approach is bound to wind up in one of two enervating conditions. At one level, even though it speaks of democracy and the general process of regime change in Africa, it banishes transitions involving statutory transfers of power between constitutional governments, and non-statutory transfers between authoritarian governments. And even if it limits itself to changes between authoritarian and democratic governments, it is likely to end up, at another level, analysing all forms of regime change, thereby emptying the term transition of parsimony, which is so crucial to conceptual clarity. For example, changes may be from unelected civilians to elected civilians, from elected civilians to the military, from military to elected civilians, from elected civilians to unelected civilians, from "pseudo-democratic" military regimes to democratic civilian regimes, etc. In addition, there is the case of transfer from an authoritarian regime to itself, following a manipulated transition process. Moi in Kenya, Rawlings in Ghana and Biya in Cameroon promptly come to mind.

A different approach limits the concept of transition to change from authoritarian rule to democratic government through elections. This is the dominant usage of transition in the literature, and it explains why transition is usually linked with democracy. But it does not account for cases of truncated transition to democracy, for instance where an authoritarian regime democratizes at some levels of government but retains overall control. This was common in transitions from colonial rule to independence in Africa. For instance in Ghana, following the Aiken Watson Report, the Justice Henley Coussey Committee Report and the 1951 Constitution, an election was held for the Legislative Assembly in 1951. Still, even though that election put Nkrumah and other members of the CPP into the Executive Council, colonial control persisted under a Governor, Sir Charles Arden-Clarke.

The same experience of elected governments without overall sovereign power is common in both colonial and post-colonial transitions. A theory of transition should be capable of accounting for these conditions. While it is true that transfer of power from unelected to elected governments is central to the concept of transition, for transition to have duly occurred such elected governments must be capable of making and implementing sovereign national decisions.

C. Transition as the Relationship between Economic Reform and Democratization

Perhaps the most frequently examined issue in the literature on transition is the link between economic reform and democratization (Anyang' Nyong'o, 1987; Malloy, 1987; Przeworski, 1991; Olufemi, 1992; Olagunju, et al, 1993). About Latin American transitions, Lechner writes:

Looking back at Latin America in the decade of the 1980s one sees a situation of contrast: democratic governments are taking over throughout the region, while at the same time a profound economic crisis is shaking the structures of society (1991: 541).

To be sure, this is an old issue making a second coming. In the first appearance of this question during colonial rule and the immediate post-colonial period, it was posed as the relationship between the pace of democratization and the requirements of economic development. Then it was set in the context of demands of popular demands on the colonial and post-colonial African governments for better economic conditions. Such demands were at the core of the first independence struggles against the colonial state, and the "second independence" struggles against the post-colonial state in parts of Africa (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1987). In both cases, the people's demand and object of struggle was clear: that there is an organic unity between economic well being and democracy. The struggle for one is the struggle for the other. And this is where their position diverged from that of the petty bourgeoisie, their allies in the first independence struggle. The latter had admonished the need to seek first the kingdom of political independence and everything will be added. But when this did not materialize, the people declared the first independence struggle a failure. Writing on Zaire, Nzongola-Ntalaja aptly observes:

For the people, independence was meaningless without a better standard of living, greater civil liberties, and the promise of a better life for their children. Instead of making these promised benefits available to the masses, the politicians who inherited state power from the Belgians lived in much greater luxury than most of their European predecessors and used violence and arbitrary force against the people. For the latter, the first or nominal independence had failed. Their discontent with the neo-colonial state served as a basis for an aspiration towards a new and genuine independence, one that the 1964 insurrections were to incarnate (1987: 113).

In its current incarnation, the issue is posed as the relationship between market-oriented structural adjustments and democracy. Its context is the so-called political conditionality (political liberalization) for aid demanded by the Western governments and international financial institutions from Africa's authoritarian regimes since the end of the cold war. For instance, between 1990 and 1992, the United States suspended military and/or other aid to some of its abiding dictator-friends in Africa like Mobutu, Moi and Doe, over political liberalization.

The relationship between democracy and economic progress in Africa has been argued in two distinct ways since colonial times. First, for authoritarian regimes, both colonial and post-colonial, democracy and economic development are separate and should be pursued consecutively, with democracy only coming after economic development. The position adopted by some African scholars in reaction to this position is also that they are separate and consecutive, but in a reversed order. So that Anyang' Nyong'o (1987: 20) argues that "... political liberties and the accountability of the state to the people (in particular the popular classes) is a precondition for material progress".

Second, for the IMF, World Bank and many social scientists on the right, the two are separate, but should be pursued concurrently. In reaction to the common charge

that there is link between SAP and political repression (Ibeanu and Nwosu, 1988; Oyediran and Agbaje, 1991; Przeworski, 1991), the position is that SAP is not necessarily antagonistic to democratization. It may give rise to social and political tension, but that does not mean that it must result in political repression or undermine the democratic transition process. The furthest they go is to accept that economic reform is a burden on democratization (Olagunju, et al, 1993: 14).

But, the consistent democratic position lies in returning to the position of the masses of Africa, which they so clearly stated in their struggles against the economic exploitation and political repression of the colonial state, and have maintained in their struggles against the post-colonial state and global capital. That position is that material well being and political freedom express an organic unity. They cannot be separated either in a consecutive or a concurrent sense. Strictly speaking, the issue is not whether SAP coheres with liberal democracy or not: it may. Instead the issue is whether SAP is the path to popular economic well being: it is not. Therefore, the people's struggle for democracy is also a struggle against SAP.

D. Transition as Political and Social Engineering

This perspective presents transition to democracy as a constructionist project. Here, democratization is a process of engineered political and socio-economic change; it is a "design project" (Olagunju, et al, 1993: 20). In this "design project", constitution-making occupies a central place. As the bedrock of democracy, the constitution must embody the best and most enlightened ideas, set up effective structures and processes, and be capable of channelling political behaviour in desired, predetermined directions. Indeed, ideas are so important in this perspective on transitions that they constitute autonomous social forces (Olagunju, et al, 1993: 21). Armed with the requisite constitution, what is left to consummate the original design is political will among the leadership to construct and ultimately realize it.

This view of transition to democracy is patently idealistic and subjectivist. The *problématique* underlying it is that of the subject—the historic role of concrete individuals and creative persons who exercise their free will, reason and capacity for choice. This *problématique* of historic individuals as the origin of social action, leads research into a wild search for finalist explanations founded on the motivations of conduct of individual actors, rather than to objective conditions that determine the distribution of individual social agents into contradictory classes (Poulantzas, 1972: 242).

We need to emphasize that ideas are not social forces. Ideas are only products of struggles among social forces, notably classes, being the outcome of the endeavours of organic intellectuals to elaborate the interests of social forces (Gramsci, 1971). This explains why ideas never enjoy autonomy from social struggles. They invariably respond to the rhythms of the contradictory relations of social forces. At the same time, political will is meaningless except in the context of the relations among social forces. Without over-flogging this issue, let us state simply that

democracy is nothing to be socially engineered by rational individuals, however well-meaning they may be. The best ideas embodied in the most enlightened constitutions lay useless before the force of the dynamic relations among social forces. Social forces shape history, ideas and constitutions only reflect it. It is this fact that also explains why many constitutions, including the 1989 Nigerian Constitution, which ostensibly was well thought through, never saw the light of day.

E. Transition as a Phased Process

There are as yet very few studies that have theorized the phases of the transition process in Africa. An exploratory taxonomy has been provided in the Carter Centre's Quality of Democracy Index (QDI) (Diouf, n.d.: 23-24). It speaks of the phases of decay, mobilization, decision, formulation, electoral contestation, hand over, legitimization and consolidation.

While this is quite useful, it should be borne in mind that a theory of transition is not simply a genealogy of stages of the process but, more importantly, a theory of beginnings. Therefore, a theory of transition should incorporate answers to at least four questions:

- (a) What is transition?
- (b) How do transitions begin?
- (c) What are the stages of transition?
- (d) How do transitions end?

To say that transitions begin with decay, that is government's decline, economic stagnation, political fraud, etc., does not go very far. What is important in theorizing transitions is an understanding of the social forces at play and the articulation of their interests.

Transition: Meaning, Causes, Stages and Telos

Transition, as we understand it, has a specific meaning, which has to do with transfer of power from unelected to elected government, the latter being capable of making and implementing sovereign decisions. This definition avoids the sticky wicket of meaning and content of democracy. Transition is the progressive opening up of the political space, culminating in a change from unelected to elected government. Without doubt, only very few will contest that this process has a democratic connotation. At the same time, it is clear that democracy involves a much deeper theoretical and empirical discourse than political liberalization or an elected government.

Democratization is a phased process of decentralizing state power and promoting appropriate values and attitudes that enable justice and equity to be institutionalized in political relations. There are various aspects of the decentralization of state

power. One involves the transfer of certain powers from the authoritarian state to an emerging civil society. Another involves the decentralization of power within civil society. And yet another involves the decentralization of power within the state system itself (Nnoli, 1995).

Thus, democratization includes but goes beyond political liberalization. The latter refers to the relaxation of government controls on the political activities of citizens through the reduction of government intervention in politics and the permission of greater pluralism of opinions and associations. It occurs when the state grants previously denied civil and political liberties to individuals and groups in society (Nnoli, 1995; Bratton, 1993).

By linking transitions to the constitution of national governments capable of making and implementing sovereign decisions, the transition from colonial rule can be correctly inserted in this formulation. In addition, it accounts for situations involving transitions from unelected to elected government, but in which the elected government is not sovereign. Those often tend to be transitions within a transition.

Transitions reflect the character of social forces in struggle. These are not necessarily or exclusively class forces, even though in each concrete transition there is always a class element which articulates with the struggles of other social forces in complex ways. A central task of studying transitions is an exposition of these struggles.

Transitions begin when there is a relative balance or equilibrium of power between social forces pushing for democratization on one hand, and an authoritarian regime and its social supports on the other. This equilibrium may or may not be catastrophic, in the Gramscian sense, for the authoritarian regime (Gramsci, 1971: 219–223). Catastrophic balance exists where further attempt not to open up the political space will most likely lead to the complete destruction of the authoritarian regime. When this point is reached, the authoritarian regime invariably begins a programme of political liberalization. However, a Caesarist third force may emerge to either start the process of transition or to block it. This is most likely to be a regime resulting from the military regime. Like in all Caesarist situations, the third force could be progressive or reactionary (Gramsci, 1971: 219). It is progressive if it embarks on transition, but reactionary if it does not. In Mali, it required a Caesarist military intervention to get the transition process properly under way. But in Sierra Leone, the Strasser coup apparently obstructed the victory of pro-transition forces over Momoh. Subsequently, the uncertainty over Strasser's willingness to push through a transition was resolved with the intervention of the army in 1995.

Transition is necessarily a phased process. Generally it is a composite of four major stages (Nnoli, 1995a): (1) the phase of pressure on the authoritarian regime by pro-democracy forces; (2) phase of formulating a programme of transition to democracy; (3) phase of implementation of the programme; and (4) phase of institutionalization of democracy, including the first post-transition election.

The Link between Ethnicity and the Transition to Democracy in Nigeria

Discussion of ethnic identity and its interface with politics in Nigeria is an old one, dating to the published works of anthropologists who worked in the country during the colonial period (Smith, 1965; 1960; Meek, 1937; Perham, 1937; Green, 1948; Forde and Jones, 1950; Lloyd, 1954; 1960). Many of these studies tended to romanticize ethnic identities and the cultural, social and political systems of the various ethnic groups. Colonial administrators often drew the flak for being insensitive to the culture, history and language of the local people (Perham, 1937). Increased autonomy for colonized peoples, especially in the cultural sphere, was widely advocated. In time, it was accepted in colonial circles that colonial rule by proxy, that is indirect rule through local chiefs, was not only cheap and effective, but also good for the colonized (Lugard, 1929). It has been noted that this policy contributed immensely to the emergence of ethnic politics in countries like Nigeria (Nnoli, 1995b: 45–47; Mamdani, 1996).

The next generation of studies emphasized the political mobilization role of ethnicity in Nigeria's march to nationhood. Nigerian nationalists and expatriate writers influenced by them came to emphasize the positive contributions of the various ethnic identities to the independence movement and the social and political development of Nigeria (Awolowo, 1947; Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1960; Levine, 1971). This went against the grain of mainstream modernization school that was dominant among Anglo-American writers in the 1950s and 1960s, which viewed communalism (religious and ethnic) as a pre-modern phenomenon that is bound to decline with technological and economic development. However, the persistence of communalism in "modernizing societies" like Nigeria led later modernization writers to suggest that communalism may not be transitory and anachronistic, but a permanent feature of social change in Africa (Melson and Wolpe, 1971: 1). What is put forward is an "inevitability thesis" linking communalism and politics in "modernizing" societies. According to Melson and Wolpe, "in a culturally plural society, the competition engendered by social mobilization will tend to be defined in communal terms" (1971: 5). Therefore, what is needed is a political strategy for managing conflicts arising from communalism (Smock and Smock, 1975).

Later studies challenged this portrayal of ethnicity and communalism as inherent and permanent in the African way of life. From the early 1980s, a near consensus was emerging that ethnicity is a historically contingent, fluid and flexible social form, which was "manufactured" or invented by colonial administrators and constantly reinvented by the post-colonial African elite to serve political purposes (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Ranger, 1994; Doornbos, 1982). Specifically, writers on the left of the ideological spectrum saw ethnicity as the creature of the exploitative project of colonialism and the manipulative politics of the petty bourgeoisie. In both cases, ethnicity served a class project (Nnoli, 1978; 1995b; Mafeje, 1995). It is this class purpose that assures the persistent politicization of ethnicity in Nigeria (Nnoli, 1978).

Apart from the general link between ethnicity and politics, the more specific interface between ethnicity and democracy has also been a prominent theme in the research literature. Studies have focused principally on the reciprocal impact of ethnicity and multi-party democracy (Nnoli, 1992; Egwu, 1995). Some argue that multi-party democracy reinforces ethnicity, and therefore there is a negative impact of multi-partism on ethnicity (Wolfinger, 1965; Parenti, 1967). But others insist that ethnicity has a positive link with multi-party democracy, and that democracy offers an auspicious context for the management of ethnicity, particularly through a policy of equalitarian pluralism (Marger, 1992; Osaghae, 1986; Schwarz, 1979). These differences point to divergences in theoretical foundations (Nnoli, 1992: 7-18). But perhaps as crucial, they point to the need to study the link between ethnicity and democracy concretely, based on the historical experiences of multi-ethnic societies. It is by so doing that we can understand the seeming Janiform association between democracy and ethnicity, whereby their reciprocal impact is sometimes complementary, and at other times opposing.

Still, discussions of the link between democracy and ethnicity only make sense in their conceptual contextualization of democracy. Egwu (1995: 12-13) points out that discussions do not seriously address the kind of democracy on offer. The tendency is to assume democracy as a settled matter, namely its liberal/multi-party form. Certainly, the dominant inclination among academics, policy-makers and the general public in Nigeria is to think of democracy in terms of its multi-party form. Thus, implicitly and explicitly, democracy is portrayed as a once-and-for-all thing, having to do with setting-up and operating those procedures and institutions of governance associated with developed capitalist countries (Inkeles, 1969). This outlook has a lot to do with the resurgence, since the end of the cold war, of Tocquevillean and Schumpeterian notions that associate democracy with institutional political arrangements originating from the West and spreading to the rest of the world (Modelski, 1992; Dahl, 1989; Schumpeter, 1987; Tocqueville, 1969).

It is not difficult to see that this is a reincarnation of "modernization". But more importantly, this conception of democracy is predominantly institutional. It only tangentially recognizes the actions of social forces in the constitution and operation of "democratic" institutions. When Western democratic institutions are merely transplanted into Africa, a dangerous gap often develops between them and the democratic struggles of the people. This gap is often filled by various undemocratic and anti-democratic forces, such as ethnic, religious and other millenarian and pseudo-political organizations that manipulate and feed on the fears and deprivations of the people. In time, "democratic" institutions become distorted and converted into instruments of authoritarianism. However, this is not an acceptance of the opposing argument that cultural and civilizational traits of non-Western societies make Western values like democracy a source of conflict both within such societies, and between them and the West (Huntington, 1996).

Still, even in the context of the liberal democratic project, what remains largely lacking in existing studies is analysis of ethnicity in the recent and on-going

democratic transitions in Africa. Nnoli (1995a) has tried to fill this gap. He identifies four phases of the current wave of transition to democracy in Africa, namely pressure on the authoritarian regime, formulation of a programme of transition, implementation of the programme and post-election consolidation. He also analyses the character, dynamics and significance of ethnic conflicts during each of the phases. According to him, at each of these phases the character of ethnic conflicts differ.

There remains a paucity of analyses of the role of ethnic organizations in Nigerian politics generally, and in the just concluded transition to democracy in particular. To be sure, a number of studies have recorded the social and political roles played by ethnic associations in parts of West Africa (Wallerstein, 1964; Gluckman, 1966). Likewise, the role of ethnic associations in important political developments in Nigeria, especially in the colonial period, has been noted by various studies (Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1960; 1963; Nnoli, 1978; 1995b). These associations, which arose in the colonial urban setting, provided a network of communication for information flow between the urban and rural areas (Hodgkin, 1956: 87) which has been very essential in maintaining ethnic solidarity and giving pan-ethnic organizations a high profile in national politics.

The growth of ethnic associations has also been linked to the character of the colonial urban setting. It has been argued that the high incidence of socio-economic frustration is a central element in the motivational complex that leads to ethnic identity (Nnoli, 1992: 15). Moreover, competition for scarce resources and opportunities among people of different ethnic identities in a contact situation is at the heart of ethnic conflicts (Nnoli, 1978: 71-72). Above all, the pattern of spatial concentration of ethnic groups in a contact situation has a profound bearing on not only ethnic conflicts, but also on the emergence of ethnic associations. It has been shown, for instance, that the segregation of blacks in American urban areas was important in the rise of the Black Power Movement (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1968).

The colonial urban centres of Nigeria were, therefore, the cradles of ethnic associations for at least two reasons. First, they offered little socio-economic security to the teeming population that migrated from the rural areas (Nnoli, 1978: 72; Furnivall, 1942: 452). In addition, the scarcity that characterized life in the colonial urban setting led to fierce socio-economic competition. According to Nnoli,

The net effect of the intense socio-economic competition arising from scarcity and inequality in colonial Nigeria, was the insecurity of individuals regarding their outcome. First, there was insecurity resulting from the search for limited job opportunities and social services. ... Once the members of a particular group gained access to the best jobs and other resources, they used their positions to find jobs for others or at least to pass on news of job opportunities to them. The repercussions were felt in unequal levels of unemployment, income and in differing degrees of social status among the

communal groups. Attempts by each group to escape the negative consequences of this phenomenon led to the further strengthening of communal associations (1995b: 40).

Second, the character of ethnic residential settlements in Nigeria's colonial urban centres fostered ethnic associations. A policy of keeping the ethnic groups divided and separated became a hallmark of colonial administration. The emergence of "sabon garis" (strangers' quarters) in the colonial urban centres of Northern Nigeria, ostensibly to "protect" Hausa-Fulani culture from the destabilizing incursions of other "tribes", epitomized this policy (Melson and Wolpe, 1971; Nnoli, 1978: 115-116).

The net effect of these two conditions is the celeritous growth of ethnic associations. For one thing, these associations provided members of the ethnic group the much needed social security and welfare services, generally denied them by the colonial state, and equipped them to compete with members of other ethnic groups. In this regard, education was particularly important. Both Coleman (1958) and Sklar (1963), among others, have recorded in details the commitment of ethnic associations to providing education for young Nigerians from the 1940s. For another thing, segregated residential areas assured ethnic associations a recruitment and power base. In time, the rapid growth in the membership and activities of these associations made it possible for them to coalesce into pan-ethnic, national organizations such as the Igbo Federal Union (later Igbo State Union), Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Organization of the descendants of Oduduwa, the mythical founder of the Yoruba nation) and Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa (Northern Congress), and therefore potential national political actors.

The politicization of ethnicity and of pan-ethnic organizations has sometimes been explained in terms of personal rivalries among the emergent elites of Nigeria's ethnic groups, especially the three dominant ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba—from the 1940s. The relationship between Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo is widely cited in this regard (Coleman, 1958: 319-352; Sklar, 1963: 88-93). However, rivalry among individuals for political power, though relevant, is perhaps too voluntaristic to constitute a fundamental explanation of the insertion of ethnic organizations in the Nigerian state and politics. For one thing, rivalry did not always run along ethnic lines. For another, individual rivalry cannot explain the persistence and importance of pan-ethnic organizations in Nigerian politics long after specific personalities have left the scene.

Apart from individual rivalries, another secondary, but relevant, factor accounting for the significance of ethnic interests in Nigerian politics is the expression of these interests in political parties. Indeed, a very profound expression of the politicization of ethnic organizations in Nigeria is to be found in party formation. Some studies of Nigeria's political history have argued the point that in an attempt by the various ethnic elites to take over political power, they transformed ethnic organizations into political parties, converted ethnic organizations into a recruitment base for party loyalists and split existing national parties into ethnic factions.

The histories of the three dominant political parties in Nigerian politics in the 1950s and 1960s, namely, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and Action Group (AG) are particularly illustrative (Coleman, 1958; Sklar, 1963).

We also think that the type and structure of political parties are important in understanding the link between ethnic organizations and party politics in Nigeria. It seems that the tradition of Nigerian political parties, which is not unconnected with their antecedents in the nationalist movement, is that of mass, socialist parties of the continental-European type. This type is "directed to organizing as large a proportion of the masses as possible" (Duverger, 1964: 1), they tend to favour indirect membership through primary organizations, even though direct membership is not abandoned, and nation-wide branches replace the caucuses. Zucarelli has shown the emphasis on collective party membership to be true also for Senegal, as has R. Molteni for Zambia (both cited in Gonidec, 1981: 187). In fact, Gonidec generalizes indirect party membership to the whole of Africa:

... as in the case of elections, membership is rarely an individual act, maturely deliberated. Allowance must be made for the structures of African societies, particularly in the traditional environment, which is quantitatively the most important. As in the past, the social group in which the individual is most closely integrated, that is to say the family, the ethnic group, sometimes the religious organization, plays a role of capital importance and exerts a pressure on those who might be tempted to adopt a political standpoint different from that of the group. In fact, it is the group much more than the individual which belongs to the party. ... To a certain extent, we may even say that African politicians favour this tendency, because it allows a manipulation of votes destined to facilitate their political ascension (1981: 187).

However, we think that the most important gap in existing knowledge about the link between ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria is the under-articulation of the character of the Nigerian state. The salience of ethnicity in the recent transition from authoritarian rule to elected government in Nigeria has to be located at two related levels: one remote, fundamental and primary, and the other immediate, exterior and secondary.

The fundamental explanation has to be sought in the character of the post-colonial state in Nigeria. First of all, this state emerged at the stage of extensive (rather than intensive) growth of capital. This is the stage of internationalization of capital. At this stage, there is really no need for the complete dissolution of pre-capitalist social forces, symbols and institutions, as in the stage of intensive growth of capitalism (Ibeanu, 1993). Consequently, there was a great deal of preservation effect on these social forces, symbols and institutions in a new symbiosis with capitalism, especially where they made it possible for capital accumulation to proceed without hindrance. As a result, the emergence and hegemony of the market-oriented, formally free and autonomous individual as the subject of economic and

political organization was either blocked completely, or impeded and limited to a few urban centres. The net effect of this is that the vast majority of Nigerians still exist as agents of precapitalist social forces, principally ethnic groups.

Secondly, the history of that state also shows that it is has been utterly unable to stand above and balance social antagonisms, like the state that emerged from the establishment of capitalism in Europe (Ibeanu, 1993). Rather, it is a state constituted by colonialism principally for conquering and holding down a restive people. As such, *ab initio*, there was no question of evolving and routinizing principles for the non-arbitrary use of the state by its controllers. When in the post-colonial era it passed into the hands of an upstart local bourgeoisie, which the colonialist had raised around its ideology of the native-subject, the state became for its controllers and their co-ethnics a veritable instrument for pursuing private and sectional interests to the exclusion of others.

Two deductions could be made from the preceding points. One, the post-colonial state in Nigeria principally deals with its members as social agents of ethnic groups, rather than as free, individual and equal citizens. In effect, state power exists as prebends parcelled out to ethnic groups, instead of a unified, objective and independent force standing above society and expressing the corporate existence of the people-nation. As such, this state is pitifully unable to autonomize class domination, which is a requisite condition for the smooth practice of bourgeois (democratic) rule. Inability to actualize autonomous class rule creates a vacuum which is then filled by ethnic groups and their organizations (Ibeanu, 1997). Consequently, ethnic groups and organizations become autonomous political actors, inserted as the solidarity and collective interests of members of the ethnic homeland. Still, behind this unity of interests and solidarity are three interconnected matrices:

- Class domination, that is the domination of the working people by bourgeois and petty bourgeois interests (the power bloc).
- Rivalries among different ethnic factions of the power bloc for hegemony.
- Politically pertinent pursuit of purely individual-private interests portrayed as the collective interests of ethnic groups and the power bloc.

Two, being the exclusive tool of those in power (who are agents of ethnic groups), defence of prebends becomes a very fundamental and charged issue. Politics becomes an overriding and war-like exercise waged among ethnic groups to increase and consolidate access to state resources. Pan-ethnic organizations are the phalanxes in this war; their leaders are the generals.

Organically linked to the character of the Nigerian state is a second, but less fundamental explanation of the importance of ethnic groups and their organizations in the transition from authoritarian rule to elected government in Nigeria. Authoritarian rule is marked by many years of ban on political parties and muzzling of independent organizations and power centres in society. This leaves pan-ethnic organizations as the most potentially effective organizations that could emerge quickly and with minimal prompting as political liberalization is embarked on by an

authoritarian regime. This is so for two reasons. For one thing, their recruitment base exists, fixed and exclusive to them. For another thing, the catalyst for them to emerge is readily present: an elite that preys on the fears and anxieties of ordinary people mobilizing them by raising the spectre of ethnic domination.

Ethnicity and the Phases of Transition: Some Hypotheses

The role of ethnicity varies with different phases of the transition process. Even in the same phase, its role could differ depending on the course of events. The period of equilibrium of power between pro-transition forces and the authoritarian regime marks the beginning of the transition process. We shall call this early stage the pressure phase. In this phase, the authoritarian regime is subjected to pressure from domestic and foreign forces which demand democratic political change. Depending on the extent of the pressure and the prevailing political atmosphere, the regime may successfully resist the pressure or succumb to it. Therefore, there are two major concerns here. One, an analysis of the forces that compel the authoritarian regime to embark on democratic change. The other is an understanding of the forces that make the regime to either successfully resist pressure or to succumb to it. In these two regards, in the Nigerian context, ethnicity is central. Ethnicity will shape both the sources of pressure for democratization and whether authoritarian regimes are able to resist this pressure or not. Political alliances will show extensive traits of division between ethnic groups of the authoritarian regime, that is those ethnic groups that are or are perceived to be the principal beneficiaries of the policies of the regime (the in-group), and those of the opposition (the out-group).

The second and third phases are those of formulation and implementation of a detailed programme of transition from the authoritarian situation. The formulation phase concerns the decision processes leading to the vision of democratic society, including the constitution-making programme. This process takes a number of forms. They include the (1) sovereign national conference, (2) constitutional conference, (3) amendment of the constitution by the incumbent authoritarian regime, and (4) agreement between an armed opposition and the authoritarian regime in a situation of contested sovereignty.

What determines the course followed? To be sure, each specific transition has its own unique logic. But two matrices are strongly suggested. First, if the history of anti-authoritarian struggles in a country is elitist, as in most of British-ruled Africa, then constitutional conference or constitutional amendment path is likely to be followed. But if the history of anti-authoritarian struggles is one characterized by mass political movements or armed struggle, then the sovereign national conference or armed opposition is likely to be adopted. Obviously, Nigeria falls into this category.

Second, if the balance between the authoritarian regime and pro-transition forces is catastrophic, then the sovereign national conference is likely to result. This is because a catastrophic equilibrium reflects a deep-seated weakness in the authoritarian regime. As such, the pro-transition forces will be capable of exacting

from it a sovereign national conference. However, this equilibrium is not a once-and-for-all situation. It is rather a shifting equilibrium. As the relative strengths of the regime and opposition shift, consequences could be any of these: dismissal of the sovereign national conference, reversal to a constitutional conference, precipitate overthrow of the authoritarian regime, emergence of a third force which may support either or none of the sides, etc.

Obviously, Nigeria falls into the "constitutional matrix" rather than the "sovereign matrix". Still, in both cases, ethnicity will be an important factor where multi-ethnic societies are involved. It is difficult to explore all the possible consequences of ethnicity in either case. But, it is safe to say that generally in the "constitutional matrix" ethnicity will tend to play a reactionary role, while in the "sovereign matrix" it is likely to play a reactionary role. However, the specific impact of ethnicity will be mediated by a number of factors. Among the crucial ones are:

1. The history of inter-ethnic relations in the country, particularly if inter-ethnic conflict has crossed a threshold of irreversibility (Nnoli, 1992; 1995a). If this threshold has been crossed, then ethnicity would play a reactionary role irrespective of whether the constitutional path or sovereign path obtains.

2. The depth of ethnic feeling. If ethnic feelings are deep-seated, then ethnicity tends to be reactionary.

3. The capacity of the authoritarian regime to manipulate ethnic feelings against democratizing forces.

The implementation phase has to do with the execution of the programmes worked out during the previous phase. It includes the conduct of free and fair elections as the final phase of implementing the programmes. At this phase, ethnicity will be particularly marked in the sensitization of the public to the need to protect the interests of the ethnic homeland. In addition, during this phase, particularly during elections, ethnic groups and their organizations will emphasize mobilization. The message is usually the need to vote massively for the chosen party and candidates that will protect the interests of members of the ethnic group and the ethnic homeland. Ethnic groups will also target specific structures of the state during this phase. Generally the most important targets will include (a) The government/ regime; (b) other ethno-political movements; (c) pro-democracy organizations; (d) members of the constitutional conference; (e) co-ethnics in the ethnic homeland; (f) co-ethnics outside the ethnic homeland; (g) members of adjacent ethnic homelands; (h) members of non-adjacent ethnic homelands; (i) political parties and candidates.

In line with a specific centrality of "sharing" of resources to politics in a peripheral capitalist, post-colonial state like Nigeria, ethnicity will be of most significant in the transition process at those phases involving power sharing. These are mainly the formulation and implementation (second and third) phases. During these phases of the transition, the attention of ethnic groups and their organizations shift from the authoritarian regime (its overthrow or maintenance) to one another. Once the transition process moves into phases involving the sharing of economic and, particularly, political power, ethnic groups are bound to become very active,

raising the tempo of both conflicts and co-operation among them. If those phases dovetail into periods of national economic difficulties, ethnicity will be even more marked because of scarcity and consequent competition.

Finally, the last phase of the transition is that of consolidation. It concerns the early period of the new democratic order up to and including the first election to be conducted by the incumbent elected government. In the main, this phase represents the litmus test for the new democratic order. Again, ethnicity is bound to play a crucial role here. New ethnic alliances will evolve and old ones consolidate. How well the new order is able to contain the mobilization and counter-mobilization of ethnic sentiments will depend largely on the following factors:

(a) Extent of ethnic divisiveness involved in the disposal of the authoritarian regime, especially during the first three phases of the process; (b) Extent to which the incumbent elected regime has been able to draw in all ethnic groups during its first term; (c) Extent to which political parties are able to mobilize across ethnic boundaries; (d) The economic performance of the incumbent regime.

Conclusion

Theorizing transitions to democracy in countries like Nigeria constitutes a very complex presentation. This is not just because these countries do not have a long history of democratic practice, but also because the factors involved are enormous thereby presenting stochastic and unstable contexts. It may well be an oversimplification of reality to isolate ethnicity for analysis, which may give the impression that it is the most important variable in theorizing transitions in Nigeria. Still, it remains a very important variable. More importantly, the exploration of ethnicity provides us a good context to evaluate other important variables like class that impinge profoundly on ethnicity.

Finally, the phases of transition that we have conceptualized should imply neither a genealogy nor a linear process that necessarily ends up in an elected government. To the contrary, transition is a reversible process. The most common threat being an anti-transition, ethnic coup. However, whether the transition pulls through or is reversed should not be attributed to the will of coup plotters, that would be too voluntaristic to be fundamental. Instead, it depends in the last analysis on the struggles among social forces at all stages of the transition. In Nigeria, ethnic groups and their organizations remain central players.

Note

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