

ETHNICITY, TRIBE, AND THE QUEST FOR COHESION IN AFRICAN STATES: MULTIDISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS

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A Keynote Address presented at the Grace Uzoma Okonkwo Foundation
International Conference with the theme, ETHNICITY, TRIBE AND THE QUEST
FOR COHESION IN AFRICAN STATES: MULTIDISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS in
February, 2025 at Princess Alexandra Auditorium University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Abstract

Ethnicity and tribal identity have long been central to African socio-political structures, shaping governance, conflict, and development. While these identities foster cultural richness, they also pose challenges to national cohesion. This paper explores ethnicity and tribalism within African states through a multidisciplinary lens, integrating historical, political, sociological, and economic perspectives. It examines the colonial origins of ethnic divisions, the role of political elites in ethnic mobilization, the impact of ethnic identity on governance and development, and potential pathways for fostering national unity. By engaging insights from history, political science, sociology, and economics, this study highlights the complexities of ethnicity in Africa and proposes strategies for strengthening national cohesion while respecting cultural diversity.

Introduction

Ethnicity and tribal affiliations have played a defining role in the evolution of African societies, influencing governance structures, economic policies, and social relations. In the African context, the concepts of ethnicity and tribe are often used interchangeably, although they have distinct meanings. Ethnicity refers to a shared cultural identity, which may be based on a common language, religion, or tradition. Tribe, on the other hand, refers to a specific ethnic group that is often characterized by a shared sense of ancestry and kinship. The Nigerian situation is complicated by another factor which is the ethno-religious dimension. While ethnic diversity can be a source of cultural enrichment, it has also been associated with political instability, exclusionary politics, and conflict. The challenge for African states has been how to balance ethnic identity with

national cohesion. This paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach to analyse the intersections of ethnicity, tribe, and national unity in African states.

Historical Perspectives on Ethnicity and Tribalism

The concept of the “tribe” in Africa is largely a colonial construct, used by European powers to categorize indigenous populations along rigid ethnic lines (Mamdani, 1996). Pre-colonial African societies were often fluid in their ethnic identities, with intermarriage, trade, and migration creating dynamic social structures. However, colonial administrations solidified ethnic divisions by implementing indirect rule, favouring certain ethnic groups over others, and defining political boundaries that ignored traditional affiliations (Young, 1994). In doing so, they fully exploited the “divide and rule” principle to marginalize the tribes they regarded as threats to their domination. Post-colonial African states inherited these artificially imposed identities, and their persistence has shaped contemporary political and social dynamics.

Political Science: Ethnicity, Governance, and Conflict

Ethnic identity has been instrumentalized by political elites to gain and maintain power. Ethno-political mobilization has led to clientelism, nepotism, and exclusionary governance, undermining the formation of national identity (Posner, 2005). Many African states have experienced ethnic-based conflicts, from the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 to Nigeria’s Biafran War (1967–1970). The politicization of ethnicity also affects electoral outcomes, as voters often align with co-ethnic candidates, reinforcing ethnic divisions. However, some countries, such as Tanzania, have successfully managed ethnic diversity through policies that promote national identity over ethnic allegiance (Miguel, 2004). Unfortunately, the same isn’t true of Nigeria, where rulers openly and brazenly display ethnic preferences in appointments, with total disregard for the federal character principles enshrined in our constitution.

Sociology: Ethnicity and Social Integration

Social cohesion in African states is often challenged by ethnic fragmentation. Ethnic-based discrimination and stereotypes deepen divisions, affecting intergroup relations. Language, religion, and cultural practices further shape ethnic identities, sometimes acting as barriers to integration. However, urbanization and increased inter-ethnic interaction in cities have contributed to the blurring of ethnic boundaries. Policies that promote inclusive education,

intercultural dialogue, and national symbols have been instrumental in fostering social cohesion (Laitin, 1992).

Economics: Ethnic Identity and Development

Economic inequalities along ethnic lines have contributed to social unrest in many African states. Ethnic favouritism in resource allocation, employment, and public services exacerbates tensions (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Research suggests that ethnically diverse societies may experience slower economic growth due to reduced trust and cooperation. However, countries that have implemented inclusive economic policies, such as Botswana, have demonstrated that diversity can coexist with sustainable development (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Pathways to National Cohesion

The challenge of state-building in Africa is closely tied to the complexities of ethnicity and tribe. Many African states have struggled to promote national cohesion and integration, in part because of the deep-seated divisions between different ethnic and tribal groups. These divisions have often been exploited by politicians and other elites, who have used ethnic and tribal identities as a basis for mobilizing support and consolidating power.

Several strategies can help African states navigate the challenges of ethnic diversity while promoting national unity:

1. Institutional Reforms – Decentralization and federalism can allow ethnic groups greater autonomy while maintaining national integrity.
2. Inclusive Governance – Proportional representation and power-sharing mechanisms can ensure broader ethnic inclusion in government. For instance (and on paper), the Federal government of Nigeria has requirements regarding observance of the federal character in appointments and in the distribution of amenities. Enforcing such laws would greatly facilitate national cohesion.
3. Education and Civic Nationalism – National curricula emphasizing unity and shared history can cultivate a common identity.
4. Economic Equity – Policies that address regional inequalities and promote inclusive economic growth can reduce ethnic tensions.

5. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms – Traditional and modern dispute resolution strategies can help mitigate ethnic-based conflicts.

Conclusion

Ethnicity and tribalism remain powerful forces in African societies, influencing political dynamics, social relations, and economic structures. While these identities present challenges to national cohesion, they also offer opportunities for cultural enrichment and pluralism. A multidisciplinary approach reveals that historical legacies, political practices, social structures, and economic policies all shape the ethnic landscape of African states. Addressing these complexities requires governance models that embrace diversity while fostering unity, ensuring that ethnicity becomes a bridge rather than a barrier to national cohesion.

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