

RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND ETHNICITY: A BANE TO POPULATION CENSUS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria no doubt is a multi-religious and ethnic diverse nation where no particular religion or ethnic region is given air of superiority. But in terms of Population census which is a determinate factor in allocation of government resources and appointments, these issues of religion and ethnicity have become a serious bane taunting population census in Nigeria thereby making its figures grossly and arbitrarily inflated and in most of the cases unacceptable. At the centre of constraints confronting population census in Nigeria are the twin issues of religion and ethnicity as have been observed by this researcher. This paper's title was conceived with the intention to investigate the relationship between religious plurality, ethnicity and population census in Nigeria with a view to examine the extent to which it could be concluded that religion and ethnicity are the banes of population census in Nigeria.

Key Words: Religion, Ethnicity and Religious Plurality

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria as a nation is an aggregation of several nationalities. In real terms, it is a pluralistic and multi-faceted society, both in terms of religion and composition. It has about 450 different ethnic groupings. According to 1991 officially certified census by Nigeria Population Commission, it has a population of 88.9 million with a growth rate of 2.9% per annum. This makes it the most populous country in Africa and the largest concentration of black race in the world. An estimated 37.7% of the populations are urban dwellers while 62.3% are rural based (Uduma 2009)

The issue of religion and ethnicity has become problematic especially when it has to do with the issues of politics and population census in Nigeria. The Association of religion and ethnicity in Nigerian population exercises which has always resulted in doctoring of census figures is the main focus of this paper. Religion and ethnicity has been misconceived and wrongly applied in the scheme of things in the society, especially persons occupying leadership positions in Nigeria. It is important to state that there is nothing wrong with knowing the number of Muslims and Christians as well as the number of people occupying a particular ethnic region in Nigeria. But when the motive is beyond this then there is need for caution. According to Okolo (1999), "religion does not only raise values to the position of ultimate concern but also serve as an evaluative factor in politics." And, by emphasizing common values, religion may reduce the sharpness of the tensions that result from the pursuit of scarce values.

The issue of determining the population of Nigeria has been a very contentious issue since 1866 and establishment of the total population in the country, in each state and local government area has been mere speculations. The reason for this believes is because people are of the view that population is a political arsenal that must be maximised towards a group interest.

The higher the number, the more government presence a particular ethnic group will stand to attract. Higher population figures lend credence among other reasons to the demand for more seats in parliament, more local governments and more states for a particular tribe or region. Therefore, it becomes expedient for people to inflate the figures of their regions and attempt to deflate that of others. These are the reasons behind the tension that have continually trailed Nigeria's attempt to answer the simple question of "How many are we through a population census?" Emphasis by now should rather be placed on the quality of the population - how the skills and abilities of people can be improved and how their motivations and values can be modified for the specific purpose of development efforts other than allowing religious ideologies and ethnicity mar the process.

Thus ethnic categorization should be viewed as somewhat subjective and dependent upon human perception and identity. In the milieu of fluidity, ethnic consciousness and "way of life" may be created and reinforced to maintain the status quo at certain times and be transformed to embrace other social constructs at other times. Provided that choice, process, and change are all central to ethnic identity, consciousness, and categorization, ethnicity must not be viewed as entirely objective, permanent, or static (Haug, 1998).

At this point, it is imperative to observe that, ethnicity and Religion has been the main reasons impeding population census in Nigeria. Using the Power theory as a framework of analysis it will become obvious how the two variables identified above are the problems to population census in Nigeria. Power theory by nature has to do with the dominance and influence of one person or group of persons over the other. Power in this instance, simply mean one of the ethnic group can use power to influence and as well control the behaviour of others in order to achieve his or her own interest.

The above statement explains the struggle among the ethnic groups in Nigerian society in order to use census to influence figures to control the highest resources of the country.

Suffice to note that whichever ethnic group that controls the highest population, controls the greater share of the national resources. It is quite clear that political power is all about "who gets what, when and how." Among the major proponents of the concept of power includes the following, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Hana Morgentha, Fredrick Schuman, Robert Dahi, Harold Laswel, etc.

Concepts Clarification

At this juncture, the researcher shall clarify the basic concepts in this research topic. The terms ethnicity and religion to this researcher are seen as an inter-related concepts, although there is a little difference in meaning. But, both ethnicity and religion share common ideologies and each stands for a group who works in order to achieve their individual interest.

Census

Odewumi (2000) while referring to the 1970 United Nations Draft Recommendation on population census defined census as 'the total process of collecting, compiling, evaluating, analysing and publishing or otherwise disseminating demographic, economic and social data pertaining to a specified time to all persons in a country or in a well delimited part of a country' (Odewumi, 2000). Population census is a terminology now restricted to complete enumeration of human population legally conducted at regular intervals, often every 10 years. Enumeration of people is not a recent phenomenon. It dates back to antiquity and stands as the most important source of demographic data. Records have shown that census started as far back as 3,000 B.C. Ancient civilizations was not exempted from population census. This was why ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Persia, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, Japan and China among others found it expedient to embark on population census. Some of these ancient civilizations conducted census of their people for the purposes of military recruitment, collection of taxes or other tribute and for communal labour. According to, Osinaike, Aiyoola and Alao (2006) census is a method used for accumulating statistical data about a population, which is acclaimed to be vital to democracy and development. Census is also defined as the official head-count of people and their residence.

Ethnicity

To Obasanjo (2006) ethnicity implies negative feelings directed against an ethnic group. He further refers ethnicity as the contextual discrimination by members of cultural group against others on the basis of differentiated system of socio-cultural symbols.

Deng (1997) defined ethnicity as an "embodiment of values, institutions, and patterns of behavior, a composite whole representing a people's historical experience, aspirations, and worldview". Ethnic classification either externally imposed or intrinsically engendered, often defines people's membership to a group. Aside from social constructs, ethnicity is innately more central to human experience and identity than race. In turn, ethnic distinctiveness is more likely to invoke an innate sense of peoplehood. Ethnic uniqueness thus provides an immediate identity marker both within a group and between groups. As is the case with racial categorization, ethnic categories are often perceived or discussed as though they are fixed and unchanging entities. However, because ethnicity incorporates language, religion, demarcations of territory, and other cultural traits, changes in

people's affinity with any of them can occur over time. The term, ethnicity can be regarded as the social phenomenon which is associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups e.g. Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa as the three major ethnic groups.

Religion

According to Obilor (2003:133), etymologically, religion is derived from the Latin noun 'religio'. The beauty of this Latin word is that, it is most closely allied to other three verbs: 'religere' - which means "to turn to constantly" or "to observe conscientiously", 'religari' - which means "to bind oneself (back)" and 'reeligere' meaning "to choose again". He further avers that, "a closer scrutiny shows that the three verbs point to three possible religious attitudes and thus a purely etymological probe can tell us much about religion and can also help to resolve most of the difficulties often associated with religion". According to Gilbert (1980:5), religion is described as, "any system of values, beliefs, norms, and related symbols and rituals, arising from attempts by individuals and social groups to effect certain ends, whether in this world or any further world, by means wholly or partly supernatural". Religion is the belief in the existence of a supernatural nature ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has given to man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body. It is also the various systems of faith and worship based on such belief. In terms of religious plurality, the researcher implies that Nigeria is a state that is composed of more than one religion.

The Banes of Ethnicity And Religion on Nigerian Population Census

From the inception therefore, censuses in Nigeria have been experiencing credibility crises. A number of disagreements have arisen over the conduct of population censuses which have been threatening Nigeria's unity. The Political Bureau appointed by the Babangida administration was aware of the problematic nature of Nigeria's population census when it remarked that:

An overview of the Nigerian political experience since independence in 1960 shows clearly that among the many issues that have created great anxiety and brought the country to the brink of collapse has been the attempt at obtaining an accurate count of the country's population. The potency of the issue as a source of confusion and a national discord is underscored by the fact that attempts made by civilians (1962 - 1963) and the military (1973) were greeted with the same degree of cynicism, suspicion and controversies and had to be cancelled (Political Bureau Report, 1987).

The Nigeria's census has suffered serious setbacks resulting from religion and ethnicity. The impact of these variables on the National population census could be negative and as well positive. But in the interest of this paper, the writer is of the view that the negative impact outweighs the positive.

When we view ethnicity from the standpoint of "the socio-political economic and socio-psychological phenomenon by which the colonialists categorized the citizens of African nations in general and Nigeria in particular into unbridgeable ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversities by which they kept them perpetually apart and disunited, then one can best understand the evil effect of ethnicity in our social life especially on population census. Ethnicity and religion has

succeeded in planting the seed of negative feelings directed against an ethnic group. Contextual discrimination by members of cultural group against others on the basis of differentiated system of socio-cultural symbols has negative impacted coexistence among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria thereby impeding census process in the country. Ethnicity according to Onyekakeyah (2007) is a conscious and deliberate separation and recognition that a particular group of people with their peculiar characteristics should be isolated and carefully discriminated against. By implication, while a particular group is born to rule other are born to suffer.

Ethnicity clearly constitutes a social problem. When millions of Nigerians are systematically discriminated against for their cultural belief, kingship or history, our sense of justice is violated. It remains unbelievable by the people of this great nation to possibly believe that an ethnic group, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and the like consisting of children, adults and the elder share negative characteristics in common, regardless of their values, personalities and life circumstance. But we truly recognize the differences which exist among the members of our own group, How could mere historical, cultural or kingship differences make groups of people bad, making them persons whom it is acceptable to harm through cultural prejudices and discrimination. The past and current causes of ethnicity in this country are predominantly social. Nevertheless, one way of determining the status of ethnic relations in our society is to ask what various ethnic groups feels about each other, the status of their own ethnic groups and about political issues relating to ethnic relations. At present, it seems that our pattern of politics inheres from ethnic sentiments. A brief history of the ethnic groups in Nigeria will provide good premise for the past social factors which set in motion patterns of prejudice and discrimination, so strong that, they persist up till date. In practical terms, it appears that we are ready to kill each other over noticeable differences of language, religious faith, history, kingship or culture.

Onyekakeyah (2007) also rightly observed that it was the colonialist capitalist methods of operation and belief pattern that introduced unhealthy competition and artificially created scarce resources which twisted as well as distorted the pre-colonial life pattern of urban migrant Nigerians. Furthermore, colonialism also introduced class structures, which labelled some groups inferior, and other superior on the basis of the groups position in the acquisition of western oriented life style. Consequently, our people began to struggle over that "standard" life style as defined by the colonialist.

It is pertinent that life pattern of Nigerian people got from the white people are still in practice even up to date. For instance, the population census that was first conducted in Nigeria was done by the white people and they conducted it in favour of them and against the Nigeria. Thus, such idea is already initiated to Nigerian people. For example, census conducted in 1952 /1953 resulted conflict to among the major ethnic group in Nigeria. And even the independent one, that is the 1962/63, 1973, 1979, 1991 and the recent one (2006) also resulted to conflict because of ethnicity and Religion. In 1962/63 for instance, the population of South was little than that of the north, where as the East was reported to have unimportant villages. And this event led to violent disagreements which generated fear that it may lead

to civil disorder. These violent disagreements over the population census stands as impediments to development processes, like sharing of amenities and equitable representation of interest.

Nigeria last had a population census in 2006, putting the population at 140 million, a figure now being discredited. Even with the removal of the two complex variables militating against a credible census figure that is religion and ethnicity, yet the figures were still doctored in favour of the north who claims to greater population (Etete 2006).

The inclusion of religion and ethnicity in the headcount as suggested by the National Population Commission (NPC) and at this fragile level of politicking will cause more harm than good for the nation. It will encourage many forms of sharp practices in which these two factors will lead to inflation and desperate manipulation of figures to falsely project the numerical strength of a group. It will encourage unhealthy rivalry and competition in which each ethnic or religious group will seek to outdo one another by aiding and abetting doctoring in the exercise (Etete 2006).

This is not to say government is unmindful or insensitive to public opinion, especially that the tide of the opinion is self centred and is fulfilling towards an unfavourable development. Government has nothing to hide by this decision. In as much as the opinion of the people is important, it is not timely, in view of the current level of political socialization and Psychology in the country. There is nothing wrong by the inclusion of the two issues in question in the forthcoming census but the real problem lies with the attitude of the political elites and religious leaders who are bent on manipulation of figures to their advantage.

The negative aspect of the phenomenon of ethnicity and religion brought to Nigeria (among other negative impacts), ethnic consciousness, discrimination, corruption, politics of federal character and above all disunity, to mention but a few. Suffice to note that drawing from the above mentioned negative impacts, population census in Nigeria cannot be credible. Ethnic consciousness and as well religious consciousness brings about disunity among the people of Nigeria which always results to internal conflict and thereby hampers the development planning in Nigeria such as economic, social and cultural development.

Population census is always carried out in Nigeria in order to know the actual figure of Nigerian citizens to enable government to equitably allocate resources. It is pertinent to note that religion is one of the factors that has contributed to unsuccessful population census ever conducted in Nigeria. For instance, Muslims do not permit their women to be counted, reason been that, their culture does not permit such, this accounts to over estimation resulting in Northern figure becoming higher than any other ethnic group in Nigeria.

It is an understatement to conclude that nothing good came out of ethnicity in Nigeria. According to Kukah (1999) Ethnicity seems to have been given bad name and castigated as being responsible for intolerance and disunity among the various groups in Nigeria. Now, the reality is that ethnic consciousness did have its own benefit as a propelling force, at least in the early history of Nigeria. Ethnicity actually as the propelling factors which motivated most of the political leaders whose frontal attack in defence of ethnic interest

attracted incalculable development. And if it is properly applied; it will bring about a reliable and an acceptable census in Nigeria. Therefore, the positive impact of ethnicity and religion on the population census in Nigeria is that it can help galvanise the various groups to carry out an acceptable census in Nigeria. Argument have been put across that if religion is properly utilised it would assist in determining the actual population of Nigeria without controversies.

Religion and ethnicity will, for the first time, be included in the parameters used in Nigeria's 2016 census, officially bringing to the fore the two variables believed to be at the core of disunity in Africa's most populous country. Odimegwu argues "If you don't describe Nigerians in relation to ethnicity and religion and other parameters, then you are not describing them because we are proud of ethnicity and religion even if that is at a low level," Festus Odimegwu, the chairman of the National Population Commission (NPC), told reporters. The decision to include religion and ethnicity is the first in Nigeria's 53 years of political independence as previous population counts avoided the two sensitive issues, which many fear could worsen ethno-religious profiling.

In Nigeria, there is the need for religiously minded politicians and leaders whose intellect is well attuned to what is honest, right and just. Our nascent democracy which is the bases for sustainable development cannot survive unless we have men and women who will not religious or ethnic selfishness ruin a credible census programme in Nigeria.

Recommendation

In order to ensure census credibility in Nigeria, government should intensively engage in mass campaign aimed at emphasising the need for accurate and reliable census figures, in a bid to realise effective development in Nigeria. The church and mosque should serve as a medium because of the dogmatic effect of religion on a people.

Ethnicity and religion should be wiped out from the census exercise in Nigeria. It is clear that if Nigerians kindly agree to work as one nation, there will be accurate and reliable census figure, but if the ethnicity and religion is to be included, Nigeria can never boast of acceptable population census.

Above all, honesty is the "watch-word." If all and sundry – the enumerators, the officials and the civil society treat the issue of census figures with honesty, the problem is solved.

CONCLUSION

Religious plurality and ethnocentrism in Nigeria has contributed to the violation of population exercise in Nigeria when they are applied in population exercise. It will make the population census in Nigeria unrealistic and unbelievable exercise. The experiences of civilians and military attest to the fact that religion, ethnicity and ethnocentrism is the bane of all political and economic misfortune in Nigeria, which in other way round affect the exercises of population censuses in Nigeria. The possible impacts of ethnicity and religion on population census in Nigeria have been very evident because of the selfish interest within the different ethnic group in the country. And if the selfish interest is removed and proper representation is allowed to take place in Nigeria, no doubt the outcome of census in Nigeria will be acceptable. Since 1866, census in Nigeria was largely inaccurate as they did not meet all the accepted characteristics of a census;

government responsibility, individual enumeration, universality, simultaneity periodicity. This paper concludes that ethnicity and religion are the factors militating against accurate census in Nigeria. The writer is aware of existence of a number of factors that make population census unreliable in Nigeria. It is very unfortunate that the military with all its might could not remove these cankerworms which are factors inhibiting accurate census in Nigeria and capable of militating against national development. Little wonder why successive civilian administration have also failed in giving Nigeria a credible head count. The issue of census, which Nigeria needs badly at this level of development, was being viewed or perceived with muted feelings, which obviously, are beclouded in political colourations and inspirations.

In Nigeria, from post-colonial times to date, the polity had always been enmeshed with ethnic (tribal) and religious factors that have unsuccessfully tried to divide the country with calls for succession, confederation and even outright break-up. To such proponents this is the only way to live peacefully. But curiously, that very suggestion is the very cause of our instability and disunity in the country. Why must we be too conscious of issues such as ethnicity and religion, both of which tend to divide more than unite us? One of the characteristics of civilization is the beauty that is inherent in living together by people of different backgrounds. When government decided that the country needs to know its actual population figure to put paid to speculations by both local and foreign insinuations, it was a good development to once again, address the reoccurring problem of statistical uncertainties. Nigeria has for the past many years relied on projections by either the World Bank or other development partners or guesses by its citizens to have an idea of how many we are, a situation that is not helpful to the goals of planning and development.

Now, Nigerians must appreciate the political will and commitment that led to the commencement of the Census. This time around, it is not only the people who would be counted, but also their houses, which will enable government to measure peoples' quality and standard of living and identify basic indicators that would be used to improve on these conditions.

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