



The 1914 Almagamation of Nigeria: Some Matters Arising

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Abstract: *The 1914 amalgamation remains one of the most debated issues in Nigerian history. For while some scholars argue that it was a completely needless and tragic endeavor, others maintain that it was an inevitably good exercise that when properly harnessed, would generate immeasurable benefits for the northern and southern protectorates. This paper is in harmony with the latter position and seeks to demonstrate so. The paper also intends to show that it is not altogether true that the trouble with Nigeria's federalism is a function of the amalgamation or that of British colonialism at large. Nigeria's federalism is buffeted by self-inflicted maladies including leadership, followership, ethnicity, religion and institutional weaknesses. Once these maladies are tamed by a committed and patriotic citizenry, Nigeria would rise up and occupy its pride of place in the comity of nations. This paper shall depend essentially on extant secondary sources on the subject.*

Key words: *Ethnicity, federalism, amalgamation, nation-building, colonial rule, independence, unity, leadership and religion*

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Many commentators make nonsense of the amalgamation of 1914 by simplistically deriding it as the product of a lewd relationship between Lord Lugard and his girlfriend, Flora Shaw. Put differently, they throw up the impression that the amalgamation was not a properly thought out event; that at best, it was a product of romantic experimentation. A lot of Nigerians take this impression seriously arguing that the northern and southern protectorates had nothing in common by the time they were brought together in 1914 and in fact deserved to remain separate entities.¹ Put simply, the proponents of this thesis maintain that the amalgamation of 1914 was a mistake that continues to haunt Nigeria to this day.

It is in the light of the foregoing that some scholars even argue that Nigeria's federalism is not working because it is predicated on an admittedly weak, mischievous and vulnerable foundation deliberately laid by the British to further their own interests. This explains why this genre of scholars refer to Nigerian federalism as a "treacherous federalism" that was geared at enforcing division with a view to tie down the country permanently to the apron strings of British colonialism.² Indeed, this was possibly what Obafemi Awolowo meant when he described British colonial policy as "an abominable, disruptive and divisive British heritage".³

This paper seeks to show that whereas it is true that the amalgamation process was informed essentially by British imperial interests, it is not correct to say that the Northern and Southern protectorates enjoyed no commonalities on the eve of amalgamation. It is also not true that Nigerian federalism is not adequately functional because it was constructed *ab-initio*, by the British to fail. The process of the evolution of the Nigerian nation is akin to that of most nation-states across the world that have made significant progress and achieved profound developmental strides over time. The crises inherent in our federalism therefore, can easily be explained by a myriad of self-inflicted injuries that have conspired to rob us of our chances of making progress as a nation, as we shall show in the course of this essay.

There is no doubt that the amalgamation remains one of the most vexed issues in Nigerian historiography. However, in the vortex of all the accusations and counter-accusations regarding the amalgamation, the economic factor stands out as the most critical element that propelled the process. Michael Crowder put it elegantly thus:

The immediate reason for the decision to amalgamate the two Nigerias was economic expediency. The Northern protectorate was running at a severe deficit which was being met by a subsidy from the Southern protectorate, and an imperial Grant-in -Aid from Britain of about £300,000 a year. This conflicted with the age-old colonial policy that each territory should be self-subsisting. Apart from the fact that it seemed

¹OnyioraChiduluemije Pascal, "The 1914 Amalgamation: A Mistake or Blessing?" *Sahara Reporters*, March 10, 2014.

²Odo, Ugwu Linus, "Federalism and the Minority Question in Post-colonial Nigeria", Victor Egwemi *et al*, (eds) *Federalism, Politics and Minorities in Nigeria*. P.353

³O. Awolowo, *The Peoples Republic* (Ibadan, University Press: 1968) P.69

logical to amalgamate the two territories, the one landlocked and the other with a long seaboard, it was felt that the prosperous Southern protectorate could subsidize its northern neighbor until such time as it became self-supporting.⁴

Indeed, it has been particularly noted that:

By centralizing the Treasury, Lugard was able to divert revenue that earlier had been the South's to balance the Northern deficit...⁵

The foregoing scenario, for many commentators, especially those with Southern sympathies, puts the amalgamation in a place that can at best be described as illogical and at worse, deliberately wicked. They could not for instance, understand why even when "the bulk of the revenue of the South came from a liquor duty, of which he (Lugard) disapproved and which could not be raised in the Mohammedan North", he had few qualms diverting the proceeds of this duty for Northern use.⁶

Be that as it may, those who reason solely along the lines of the economic imperative of the amalgamation, shut their minds from other vistas that make the amalgamation a truly worthwhile exercise. M. Fabiyi, for example, persuasively argues that the colonial civil service which was a logical precursor to the Nigerian civil service, benefitted profoundly from the amalgamation. As he put it:

By amalgamating the Northern and Southern protectorates, Lugard could consolidate the disparate benefits that the two protectorates offered. By consolidating the colonial civil service into one and reducing administrative costs, Lugard was able to obtain what modern productivity experts would call synergies-benefits that provide higher gains than would have been obtained by a simple addition of the benefits offered by the sum of the parts.⁷

This broader conceptualization of the amalgamation exercise includes the fact that the entire diversity portmanteau epitomized in the cultures, vast lands, huge vegetation outlay, soil types etc. and the opportunities and advantages available in all these, were brought together into one integrated system, that when properly harnessed, would breed exponential benefits to all members of the Union. As Malcolm Fabiyi rightly observed:

The North had ample land and mineral resources. Spanning three vegetation types – The Sahel, Sudan and Guinea savannah – The North's lands could sustain a diverse variety of crops. Grains, cereals, cotton and legumes could be farmed in

⁴Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London, Faber and Faber: 1966) PP.240-241.

⁵*Ibid*, P.243.

⁶*Ibid*

⁷Malcolm Fabiyi, "Rethinking the Amalgamation of 1914", *Sahara Reporters*, January 6, 2014. P2.

the Sahel and Sudan Savannah regions; Yams and fruit crops were especially suited to the guinea savannah. The extensive grasslands of the North, and its dry, low humidity climate were excellent for cattle rearing. The South had land that was particularly suited to the farming of Yams, Cassava and Oil palms. Its forest offered an abundance of Timber and Jute, and its lands were especially conducive to growing cash crops like Cocoa. The South also had an abundance of Coal – a fuel necessary for providing the energy to be used for transportation and for production.

While the North offered lands, minerals and people, it had no access to the oceans. While the South had an abundance of enterprising citizens, it did not have the diversity of lands and climates that the north offered.⁸

Many scholars do not seem to come to grips with the stark reality that even if the British did not invade Nigeria, some form of amalgamation of its constituent parts was already afoot and would have still occurred, even if not exactly in the same manner and proportion. The Nigerian geo-political landscape, long before the advent of the British, had witnessed the bountiful criss-crossings of peoples and groups, sometimes in organized waves propelled by the expansionist proclivities of empires and kingdoms, and at other times, informally by bands of men and women in search of food, shelter and security. This explains the argument that:

While it is proper to credit Lugard with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates, it is wrong to ascribe to Lugard the original idea of Nigerian unification. Long before Frederick Lugard stepped foot in Nigeria, Nigerians had looked across the Twin Rivers – the Niger and Benue – and imagined the unification of the tribes on either sides of the divide. Lugard was a century away from setting foot in Nigeria when Dan Fodio launched a Jihad in 1804 which was aimed amongst other things at extending Hausa Fulani hegemony across all of Nigeria. About 400 years before Dan Fodio Jihad of the 1800s, the Yoruba had occupied Nupe in the heart of the Middle Belt in a wave of expansion of the Oyo Empire. Yoruba mythology suggests that the deified Yoruba King Sango, son of Oranmiyan, was born to a Nupe Princess.⁹

Nigerian history is replete with evidence that our people did not live in “splendid isolation”.¹⁰ For instance, there was huge socio-cultural and commercial intercourse aided

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Stella Attoe, *A Federation of Biase People*, (Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers: 1987); S.O. Onor, *The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria*, (Makurdi, Aboki Publishers: 2015).

by the lagoon between Benin and Ijebu and Ijebu and Lagos in the 19th Century; in the same way as there was traffic over the years along the lagoon from Port Novo in the west to Calabar in far east as well as healthy exchanges between the Benin empire and the Igbo, especially those on the banks of the Niger. The Ijaw were known, longtime ago, to fan out all over the Niger Delta establishing fishing entreports/colonies along the banks and in most coastal communities.¹¹

There is ample evidence to show that there were in the Western region of Warri, popular trade routes linking the Niger and Hausaland with the River Niger itself acting as a highway of commerce and civilization. In the Cross River region, there is a corpus of rich evidence, showcasing a network of relationships built amongst groups over time. The Efik and the Ejagham; the Yakurr and the Biase, the Agbo and the Mbembe; Bekwarra and Bette; Yala and Ukelle etc. All these networks of relationships through trade, commerce, warfare, intermarriages etc. have existed for a long time before the advent of the British. The mega Kingdoms of Oyo, Benin, the Kwararafa confederacy, the Kanem Bornu Empire, the Hausa states etc. spanned several kilometers, incorporating diverse nationalities, occasioning the fashioning of different kinds of federalisms long before the British amalgamation of 1914.¹²

The argument therefore, about the British bequeathing to Nigeria a treacherous and weak federalism does not add up. Those who argue that the pattern of piecemeal colonial conquest, the culture/doctrine of divide and rule etc. were all meant to keep Nigerian people permanently divided in the interest of British colonialists, forget that there exists on the other hand, an entire gamut of the history of inter-group relations amongst Nigerian peoples before the advent of colonialism that justifies British colonial policy.¹³ This history was characterized by a rich and long process of inter-marriages, trade and commerce, warfare and diplomacy that left in its wake, an aggregation/co-operation of groups and/or lack of same in some other instances. Therefore, whether the British came or not, there would always have inevitably been cases of co-operation and conflict, unity and disunity at any given point in time as the “Nigerian” society evolved with resultant amalgamation of groups and/or indeed in some cases, the existence of separate societies engaged in the pursuit of diverse causes and destinies.¹⁴ What this means is that an emergent Nigeria, in any shape or form would at best, have been a plural and heterogeneous society. It is worthy of note that scholars are generally agreed that federalism is the best form of government in all plural societies, which explains why the British did no wrong in adopting same for Nigeria. In fact, as has been broadly established:

The basic reason that makes federalism uniquely beautiful in a multi-ethnic or plural society is the fact that it allows the constituent units of the federation, the liberty to grow at their

¹¹Erim O. Erim, “Pre-Colonial Antecedent of the Foundations of the Nigerian Federation: Theoretical Considerations”, J. IsawaElaiwu and E.O. Erim (eds) *Foundations of Nigerian Federalism, Pre-Colonial Antecedents*, (Abuja, National Council on Inter-Governmental Relations) P.2, PP.15-17, PP.18-19.

¹²*Ibid*

¹³S.O. Onor, “Federalism, the Local Government System and good governance in Nigeria.” *International Journal of Academic Studies*, 3(i): (2017) PP.14-36.

¹⁴*Ibid*

respective pace taking reasonable advantage of the resources available to them and the peculiar socio-cultural and historical experience that characterize their identity while ceding to the central authority only as much power as can avail them the broader institutional protection that they all require to consolidate their growth.¹⁵

The challenge of Nigerian federalism, in our opinion, has more to do with the Nigerian people. Nigerians have not been honest enough to allow federalism sustainably thrive, in the same way as they have not been bold enough to restructure Nigeria in tandem with its historical and contemporary realities with a view to promoting a federalism that would profit the generality of the populace. Nigerian leaders are heard talking of true and false federalisms as if such labels truly convey any reality anywhere in the world. The truth is that once a system is enthroned that does not allow superordination on the part of the central government and subordination on the part of federating units (which can include states and local governments), then the major ingredient of federalism which is the relatively independent existence of component units within a geo-polity in such a manner that allows the respective component units to flourish at their own pace and resources is guaranteed.¹⁶ Nigerian federalism need not necessarily resemble any other federalism to make it true or false so long as it is located within its own historical/contemporary realities in such a way as to guarantee good governance and ensure the availability of the much needed democratic dividends for the mass of Nigerian people. There is the urgent need to eschew intellectual laziness and begin to think and act original.

The challenges buffeting Nigerian federalism are legion. They include leadership, followership, ethnicity, religion and general institutional weaknesses. The challenge of leadership is seen by many scholars as the fundamental bane of Nigerian federalism, good governance and development. Chinua Achebe in his slim but seminal study, *The Trouble with Nigeria* states unequivocally that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility of the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.¹⁷

There is no doubt whatsoever that this view point is very popular with Nigerians. Nigeria has not really been blessed with exceptional leaders whose intellect, vision, selflessness, incorruptibility and patriotic/nationalistic zeal are obviously impeccable and unimpeachable. The country has rather been substantially plagued by clueless leaders with little intellect, distorted vision and a vainglorious disposition that feeds on avarice and greed. In this situation, proper planning is absent and real development is consequently

¹⁵ *Ibid*, P.15.

¹⁶ S.O. Onor, *Local Governance in Nigeria* (Lagos, Amazingrafiks: 2005).

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Heinemann Publishers: 1983) P.1.

arrested. It is around this cycle of cluelessness that the Nigerian Federation has been revolving for over half a century.

The followership tragedy also exists. The quality of followership in Nigeria is abysmally poor. Citizens have rights they know nothing about. In the few cases where these rights are known, they are not activated as complacency reigns supreme in the lives of the broad generality of the people. Accordingly, genuine demands by citizens on their leaders as it concerns their expectations on good governance as is widely the case across the world are not commonplace. Indeed, more often than not ordinary citizens are themselves so immersed in the pool of hopelessness and corruption that one wonders where the salvation of the country would spring from. As O. Obasanjo puts it:

A person who served in the public sector for many years without ending up with substantial personal acquisitions would be regarded by his community as a failure and a fool no matter his or her contributions to the larger society. He might even be treated with scorn and disdain. We must extol more intrinsic values in public service than wealth acquisition and accumulation. These values must be ingrained in our subconscious and in our psyche.¹⁸

Several works have addressed the calamitous role of ethnicity in Nigerian politics but perhaps the most epochal contribution so far on this scorching subject remains OkwudibaNnoli's *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*. The book articulates the ravaging effect of ethnicity in our politics beginning from as early as the 1930's to contemporary times.¹⁹ The conclusion that can be safely drawn from this and other similar studies is that, until the cankerworm of ethnicity is removed from the fabric of Nigeria's federalism, there can be no real justice, equity, fairness and peace in the country because more often than not, merit would be sacrificed for mediocrity in the conduct of the affairs of the nation.

Religion has since been described by Karl Max as "the opium of the people".²⁰ Perhaps nowhere else is this statement truer than in Nigeria. Churches and Mosques have been turned into fertile grounds for religious demagogues masquerading as men and women of God. Instead of being fed with the proper messages from the word of God, that edify, teach, reprove, conscientise and generally purify and elevate the human mind, spirit and body for a better life here on earth even as it looks forward to heaven; what we commonly find today are religious leaders who distort the word of God and create in their adherents a false sense of assurance of material prosperity, promote religious sectarianism and generally popularize doctrines that defy the imperative of national integration. Mathew Kukah's book, *Religion, Power and Politics in Northern Nigeria* is a useful reference material

¹⁸Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Watch, Early Life and Military*, Vol I, (Lagos, Kachifo Publishers Ltd: 2014) 293-4.

¹⁹OkwudibaNnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers: 1978).

²⁰Karl Marx "A Contribution to Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1843); <https://www.marxist.org>

in the understanding of this unfortunate phenomenon in Nigeria's federalism and democracy.²¹

The general malaise of institutional weakness in our federalism cannot be over-emphasized. It is a commonly acknowledged fact that societies need strong institutions, not strong men. Nigeria is in dire need of strong institutions that would check wanton abuses in public life and guarantee due process and transparency in the conduct of government businesses. As a seasoned public affairs commentator rightly observed:

Adequate laws, regulations, rules, instructions, orders, conventions and practices need to be in place for good management performance. In most cases, there is always inadequacy of these guiding laws, regulations, rules and conventions. They must be put in positions and kept more by observance than by breach.

Every breach of the law, regulation and practice encourages another breach and undermines management to the point of paralysis. Strict obedience of the law and compliance with regulations and code of practice by all must be ensured and upheld. Anything less will lead to injustice, unfairness, favoritism, godfatherism and destruction of *esprit de corps*.²²

The cumulative effect of all the aforementioned challenges has created a terribly indifferent citizenry that does not truly care about the progress and development of Nigeria. As a result of the perennial absence of leaders without worthy examples and a followership devoid of an active conscience, the ship of the Nigerian state permanently verges on a slippery precipice. The other issues of followership, religion, ethnicity and institutional weaknesses have all conspired to create an unpatriotic citizenry that sees Nigeria merely as a cake that must be ruthlessly shared rather than as a country that deserves to be loved, protected and defended by all and sundry regardless of religious orientation, ethnic backgrounds and geo-political leanings.

It is germane at this point to state the fact that all hope is not lost on Nigeria as there are a plethora of examples of great and prosperous countries that have emerged from severely heterogeneous backgrounds. Put differently, the histories of some of the greatest, integrated and developed countries in the world do not show a single past for inhabitants or citizens who derived from a common putative ancestor. Indeed even in African historiography, where such fables were once bandied, rigorous scholarship has exposed the falsity of the foundations upon which they were predicated.²³ In the United Kingdom, for instance, their past could be traced into "an English, Scots, Welsh past... and into a highland and lowland past, a Northumbrian and an East Anglian, A Wessex and a Cornish

²¹Mathew Kukah, *Religion, Power and Politics in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan Spectrum books: 1993).

²²Olusegun Obasanjo, *Op cit* P.289.

²³S.O. Onor, *The Ejagham Nation in the Cross River Region of Nigeria, Op cit*.

past”.²⁴In spite of this disparateness, the United Kingdom has continued to substantially function as a nation with common hopes, yearnings and aspirations. For the United States of America, the past is even more dizzying. America is a rainbow coalition of different nationalities that coalesced through the furnace of a “melting pot” of disparate identities, all of which have today blossomed into a unique American culture, civilization and nation.²⁵ Native Indians, Africans, Europeans, Asians etc. all have a part in this interesting story and all of them in spite of their challenges have grown to love America and develop in the process, an uncommon patriotism that puts America first at all times. The high point of this American reality, was captured in the election of the first black President of America, Barrack Obama. America rose beyond race and longtime prejudices to speak as a nation and enthrone merit over prejudice. The beauty of this fact becomes especially glaring when we consider that the percentage of black population is 12.3% and 12.5% for Hispanic, totaling 24.8%. This leaves the white population standing at a whopping 75.2%. This is a country which white population would surmount and/or disregard this huge population advantage and vote twice for a black President in spite of the long history of deep and bitter racial segregation that plagued America for centuries.²⁶ This is a great lesson in national integration and patriotism that challenges devotion to ethnic, geographic and religious boundaries and prejudices in Nigeria. If it could work in America, United Kingdom and elsewhere, there is no reason why it should not happen in Nigeria where the architecture of division is far less complex and challenging.

In conclusion, it can be safely and categorically stated that Nigeria is no historical accident. It is the product of a functional assemblage of diversities in peoples, cultures, vegetation and soil types as well as mineral endowments. Alongside these diversities was a strong tendency for harmony and nation-building embedded in the historical experiences of the groups that constituted Nigeria by 1914. It is therefore wrong to argue that the amalgamation was either needless or tragic. The challenges of Nigeria’s nationhood including leadership, followership, ethnicity, religion and institutional weaknesses can be cured by a determined and patriotic citizenry. There is therefore hope that the Nigeria we see today, through proper management, re-orientation, transparency and accountability, can still fulfil its manifest destiny as the leading black nation in the world.

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²⁴E.O. Erim “The Roots of Our National Unity” *The Calabar Historical Journal*, Vol 4, NO.1, June 2000, P.2.

²⁵John Blum, *The National Experience: A History of the United States* (New York: 1977)

²⁶*Ibid*

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