

Social Capital and the Management of Ethno-Religious Differences in Nigeria

Temidayo David Oladipo, Ph.D
Reader, Department of Political Science
College of Social and Management Sciences
Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State

and

Francis Offor, Ph.D
Professor, Department of Philosophy
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, and
Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences
Dominican University, Ibadan

Abstract

In this essay, we argued that the plural nature of the Nigerian state is being exploited through religion and ethnicity, to further deepen fragmentations among groups in a manner that hinders the flourishing of values that would promote the kind of relationship needed to foster human cooperation and solidarity and the evolution of a proper sense of nationalism. To underscore the import of the moral dimension in addressing problems arising from the unfortunate exploitation of ethno-religious differences by some, the essay identifies a derisory of essential human values and norms as what continues to stifle the quality of human relations, fuel ethno-religious crises and hinder the development of the kind of group psychology needed for a harmonious relationship among the various groups in the country. Consequently, the essay recommends the building of bridging values and norms, not restrained by primordial considerations, as encapsulated in the social capital resources of trust, tolerance, cooperation and mutual respect. These, the essay concludes, would serve as relational principles for promoting internal cohesiveness and bridging relations among the disparate ethno-religious groups in Nigeria. The study employs the qualitative method of research through critical analysis of texts, library and archival materials.

Keywords: Bridging norms and values, Ethno-religious differences, Peaceful co-existence and development, Social capital.

1. Introduction

A major part of the literature on Nigeria's developmental challenges dwell on identifying the trouble with Nigeria. Epitomising this search for what has crippled Nigeria from taking its rightful place among comity of developed nations, despite her huge potentials, are Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria*¹ and Eghosa Osaghae's *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*.² Scholars, deepening on different research interests, have identified various factors as responsible for Nigeria's inability to fulfil her manifest destiny. Among these are bad leadership, colonialism, military rule, the nature of Nigeria's politics and of late, the structure of the Nigerian state. In this essay, effort is directed at examining the role social capital resources, defined in terms of moral values and social norms like trust, tolerance, co-operation and mutual respect, can play as cementing agents in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state like Nigeria. The argument pursued in the paper is that religion and ethnicity has been exploited by some in exacerbating ethno-religious fault lines, to the detriment of those essential human values and norms that would help cement harmonious relationship and promote the kind of group identity needed for national cohesion and development. While the paper admits that being a plural society need not constitute a problem for national cohesion, it however insists that where ethnicity and religion are unduly expropriated to exploit the weaknesses of an already segmented plural society, there is the need to improve human co-existence through promotion of values that would enhance solidarity, harmony and cohesion.

It is to underscore the importance of the moral dimension in addressing problems arising from the unfortunate exploitation of ethnicity and religion which has stifled the quality of human relations in Nigeria. The essay advocates the cultivation and promotion of the social capital resources of trust, tolerance, cooperation, and mutual respect, to serve as relational principles

¹ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Essex: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984).

² E. E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

for promoting internal cohesiveness and bridging relations among the disparate ethno-religious groups in Nigeria. Pursuant of the above goal, this essay is divided into four sections. The first section reviews the debate on the nature of social capital, while the second examines the plural nature of the Nigerian state as a deeply divided society and its implication for development. The third section focuses on factors fuelling Nigeria's ethno-religious crises, while the fourth section explores the provisions of the social capital resources of trust, tolerance, cooperation, and mutual respect in the management of ethno-religious differences in Nigeria. The study is qualitative in nature. It is undertaken through critical analysis of texts as well as library and archival materials on the subject of discourse. The method is also reflective in nature by meditating on some historical events in Nigeria, with the aim of drawing out vital lessons which have implications for nationalism.

2. On the Nature of Social Capital

Prior to the time the idea of social capital began to appear in academic literature in the late 20th century, most especially with the appearance of James S. Coleman's 1988 article, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,"³ the idea of "Capital" had occupied a central place in the discourse about development, and the term "Capital" was employed to refer to resources or assets that may be tapped and converted to development. Then, the term Capital was employed with the qualifiers "Physical Capital" and "Human Capital" and these were projected as being instrumental to gearing development. The idea of physical capital is employed to refer to tangible assets like land, buildings, equipment, machinery, and money that can be put into production for further creation of wealth or development. Physical capital is, however, not enough to guarantee development. It needs to be supported by other forms of capital. On the part of a nation, for instance, the presence of natural resources that can be exploited to facilitate long term sustainable economic growth must be complemented by, among other things, the ingenuity and the managerial and technical skills

³ J. S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, (1988).

of its people.⁴ It is this realisation that necessitates the emphasis placed on human capital in the quest for development.

Underlining the notion of human capital is the belief that national development depends on the quality of citizens a nation has, with quality referring to issues like competencies, skills, knowledge, creativity, level of education and experience among others. There is, however, a lacuna in the things that human capital emphasises, and the gulf lies in the fact that the notion of human capital merely lays emphasis on the capability of individuals, but fails to identify the moral values and social norms that are critical to providing the enabling environment for social institutions to thrive.

The focus on social capital, therefore, is to draw attention to the character of institutions within which decisions are made by various parties in society. The social environment in which the basic institutions of society operate matters for their successes and so, cultivating the right attitude and social behaviour is critical to nurturing development-enhancing political culture and institutions. This is because of the realisation that “policies that read well often come to naught in dysfunctional institutions”.⁵ An environment where selfishness, greed and lust holds sway, that is, “where normlessness and social disorder constitute the chief index of national life”,⁶ would certainly pose great challenges for its operating institutions.

Although, a lot of on-going debates revolve around issues of what social capital is and what it is not, yet, at least three main ideas may be gleaned from discussions about the social capital theory. These are: the emphasis on the role that values and social norms play in the society; the fact that the social realm has implication for other realms in a polity and thus that the quality of norms operational in the social realm determines the quality of what is experienced in other realms of a community and; the fact

⁴ M. P. Todaro and S. C. Smith, *Economic Development*, Tenth Edition (Essex: Pearson Educational Limited, 2009), 72.

⁵ P. Dasgupta, and Ismail Serageldin, Preface to *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000), x.

⁶ O. Oladipo, *Thinking about Philosophy: A General Guide* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2008), 85.

that social capital is a means to an end, which could include the facilitation of social cooperation among others.

One of the advocates of social capital in term of the role that values and social norms play in the society is Francis Fukuyama, who defines social capital as “an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals.”⁷ He postulates the idea of social capital that recognises the challenges that lack of a moral environment has for the operation of human capital. Social capital, for him, refers to sets of norms that ought to guide a collective and the benefit accruing to all when everyone abides by those norms. In this regard, social capital refers to assets that “count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit.”⁸

Social capitalists of this persuasion realise that social norms and moral rules are essential in social and daily lives because they are instrumental in engendering social stability arising from harmonious coexistence of groups and individuals. The emphasis on moral rules and social norms is due to the realisation that “no form of social life can endure unless appropriate conditions are secured for the achievement of social cooperation.”⁹ These appropriate conditions requisite for social cooperation depend on the functioning of the basic institutions of state, and the functioning of institutions depends on the social environment in which they operate and the environment itself is a function of the prevailing social norms and moral rules in society.

Admittedly, not all norms are instrumental to enhancing cooperation in the society and any norm that does not enhance social cooperation cannot be regarded as social capital. Any norm that will so qualify must admit of virtues like honesty, trust, truth-telling, the keeping of commitments, reliable performance of

⁷ F. Fukuyama, *Social Capital and Civil Society*. IMF Working Paper (WP/00/74, 2000), 3.

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 2.

⁹ Oladipo, *Thinking About Philosophy*, 80.

duties, the meeting of obligation, reciprocity, and the like.¹⁰ Such norms should not only promote a harmonious relationship among particular ethnic or religious group, but should enable members of a particular group to connect to other groups in the society. This means that norms subscribed to by a particular group should leave no room for “a gulf between members of a [the] group and those on the outside.”¹¹ This is important because “strong moral bonds within a group in some cases may actually serve to decrease the degree to which members of that group are able to trust outsiders and work effectively with them.”¹² A society which lacks social values that enable them to relate well, and cooperate with others within the body polity becomes a liability because of the clash its members begin to have with members of other groups.

The above scenario seems to depict the case of Nigeria, where different ethno-religious groups have norms and values which are not connecting them to other groups in the society. The northern part of the country, for instance, finds it convenient, on the ground of religion, to regard the south as different, if not out rightly inferior. Likewise, the southern part of the country, alluding to literacy, regards the north as largely uneducated folks. There are also sentiments in some parts of the country against voting the Igbo into political offices at the national level. These attitudes exist in so far as those social capital resources of trust, tolerance co-operation and mutual respect responsible for cementing intra-group and inter-group relationship are lacking. It is also important to state that the development of such a value system in Nigeria has been affected by a trajectory of historical events which in no small way further undermined the generation of other social capital resources upon which shared meanings and interest would have been built.

The second idea inherent in the social capital theory is the belief that the social realm has implication for other realms in a polity and, thus, that the quality of norms operational at the social

¹⁰ F. Fukuyama, “Social Capital” *The Tanner Lecture of Human Values*, delivered at Brasenose College, Oxford on May, 12, 14, 15, (1997).

¹¹ Fukuyama, “Social Capital,” 431.

¹² Fukuyama, “Social Capital,” 430.

realm determines the quality of what is experienced in other realms of society. Proponents of the perspective are also of the view that the political realm, as represented by political institutions and agencies, cannot totally guarantee the best conditions sufficient for generating the set of norms that will provide the right atmosphere for development in human society. For them, social norms and moral values are generated and entrenched in people's daily interactions and in the relationship they share with others. For instance, in relating the success of democracy to activities at the social realm, S. A. Renshon writes:

... social capital locates the foundations of democracy not primarily in citizens' beliefs, nor in their institutions, but in the relationships of each to the other. Constitutions may provide a framework and institutions a setting, but in the view of social capitalists, it is the engagement of citizens that provides the building blocks of successful democracy.¹³

What can be inferred from the foregoing claim by Renshon is that although democracy is founded on deep-seated beliefs and convictions entrenched in the constitution, which provides the framework and setting for democracy to operate, yet the success of basic political institutions like democracy depends largely on associational life, that is, on the engagement of citizens and their relationships with other institutions and sectors of society. Hence, the need to constantly improve on social structures and associational life, in order to promote activities in the social realm.

The emphasis on the need to improve social structures and associational life could be interpreted in a way to mean the need to seek solution to problems plaguing a community from the social realm which is considered to have high influence on other realms in the polity. Advocates of the superiority of the social realm recognise the existence of various spheres in a community of humans, such as the political, the educational, the economic, the religious, and the military and that these spheres are not exclusive of one another. With the understanding that "social interactions

¹³ S. A. Renshon, "Political Leadership as Social Capital: Governing in a Divided National Culture," *Political Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2000), 199-200.

can have negative as well as positive effects,”¹⁴ and that the social realm is the most germane in influencing or shaping other realms. Advocates of the superiority of the social realm believe that with the right social capital, there will be increased participation and improved relationships in the social realm which will ultimately influence and transform events in other realms of society. For instance, in the economic realm, it is believed that: “such things as trust, the willingness and capacity to cooperate and coordinate, the habit of contributing to a common effort even if no one is watching- all these patterns of behaviour, and others, have a payoff in terms of aggregate productivity.”¹⁵ Trust, when generated in the social realm is believed to have great impact on economic performance. This is because, establishing and running an organisation does not depend only on property rights, contracts, and a system of commercial law, but, also on an unwritten set of ethical rules or norms that serve as the basis of social trust. Trust, when possessed as a social capital makes the economic realm more efficient as a result of the reduction in extensive rules, contracts, litigation, and bureaucracy that otherwise would have been encountered.¹⁶ Having, therefore, realised that persons’ actions are shaped, redirected, and constrained by the social context; and that norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organisation are important in the functioning not only of the society but also of the economy,¹⁷ social capital theorists then try to employ this thesis to interrogate “the way a society’s institutions and shared attitudes interact with the way its economy works.”¹⁸

Some benefits accrue to the political realm too. One, it is believed that social relations and networks formed at the social level enable more information flow, better communication and opportunity for people to be involved in more extensive systems of

¹⁴ J. K. Arrow, “Observation On Social Capital,” *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000), 3.

¹⁵ R. M. Solow, “Notes on Social Capital and Economic Performance,” *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000), 7.

¹⁶ Fukuyama, F., “Social Capital and the Global Economy,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (2004), 90

¹⁷ Coleman, “Social Capital,” 96.

¹⁸ Solow, “Notes on Social Capital, 7.

social relationships. Such relations and networks will be instrumental to enhancing political participation, as citizens are likely to become more engaged in political activities in ways they might not ordinarily be.¹⁹ The argument here is that a “dense network of voluntary associations and citizens organisations help to sustain civil society and community relations in a way that generates trust and cooperation between citizens and a high level of civic engagement and participation.”²⁰ These networks are said to “create the conditions for social integration, public awareness and action, and democratic stability.”²¹ More importantly, activities within these networks are instrumental to enhancing trust, defined as “the actor’s belief that, at worst, others will not knowingly or willingly do him harm, and at best, that they will act in his interests.”²²

The third perspective on social capital theory arises from a major criticism against it as intangible, in the sense of not being a tangible capital like human capital and physical capital. The response to this, which gave rise to the third view on social capital, is that although social capital is intangible, yet, it still qualifies as capital, in the sense that its possession, just like the possession of other forms of capital, serves a means to some end. The possession of social capital is expected to produce a number of political, social and economic results. The expectation is that it will enhance “life chances by mobilising social rewards, reinforcing commonly shared standards, and gaining connections and assistance to achieve economic, political, and social ends”.²³ James S. Coleman describes this teleological benefit of social capital thus:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common; they all consist of some aspect of social structures,

¹⁹ R. Lake and R. Huckfeldt, “Social Capital, Social Networks, and Political Participation,” *Political Psychology* 19, no.3 (1998), 570.

²⁰ K. Newton, “Trust, Social Capital,” *International Political Science Review* 22, no.2 (2001), 201.

²¹ Newton, “Trust, Social Capital,” 201.

²² Newton, “Trust, Social Capital,” 202.

²³ F. F. Furstenberg, “Banking on Families: How Families Generate and Distribute Social Capital,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 4 (2005), 810.

and they facilitate certain actions of actors- whether persons or corporate actors- within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.²⁴

What can be gleaned from Coleman's submission above is that social capital enables some benefits to accrue to both individuals and the community. Since social capital emphasises social networks, support systems and collectivism,²⁵ which provide support and opportunity for individuals to achieve certain personal goals, benefits accrue to such individuals as a result of their belonging to particular groups. These not only provide some encouragement to the individual but are also instrumental to raising their overall achievement level. This is the reason social networks are considered as an important resource in countries where formal systems of support are limited.²⁶

3. Religion, Ethnicity and Nigeria's Pluralism

Class, caste, religion, language, race, ethnicity, clan, settler versus native, immigrant versus indigenous population, pastoralist versus cultivator, peasant versus landowner, urban versus rural, centre versus periphery are some of the factors around which divisions in various parts of the world have formed.²⁷ What this reveals is that in some way, all societies have some form of divisions. However, not all societies are plural societies. According to Robert Dahl (1982), a country is pluralist if there is a plurality of relatively autonomous subsystems or segments within the domain of the state. In other words, a plural society is one in which there exists,

²⁴ Coleman, "Social Capital," 98

²⁵ J. Welshman, "Searching for Social Capital: Historical Perspectives in Health, Poverty and Culture," *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 126 (2006), 268.

²⁶ M. Palmer, "Disability and Poverty: A Conceptual Review," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 21, no. 4 (2011), 213.

²⁷ A. Guelke, *Politics in Deeply Divided Societies* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012), 14.

segmental cleavages.²⁸ The term segmented cleavages is said to exist in a deeply divided society containing organisations, subsystems or communities that are relatively independent. Segmental cleavages may be based not only on political preferences and ideology but on cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic characteristics of the people and most “political parties, interest groups, media of communication, schools, and voluntary associations tend to be organised along the lines of segmental cleavages.”²⁹ Cleavages are not bad in themselves, even though they are the criteria which divide the members of a community or sub community into groups. Essentially, main cleavages are mutually reinforcing between communities and groups, rather than cross-cutting. In their *The Analyses of Political Cleavages*, Rae, Douglas and Taylor (1970) explain that cleavages are on different levels of measurement; the ascriptive, attitudinal and behavioural. The ascriptive measures the degree of heterogeneity, the attitudinal measures degree of dissensus and the behavioural measures degree of fractionalisation in the population. So, it is not enough, and obviously not a bad feature, to have divisions or segmented cleavages in a society. However, when such cleavages begin to fundamentally inform how society is organised around some salient issues that divide as against those that cement groups, then the plural nature of the society is being exploited for subterraneous purposes.

All through the history of the Nigerian state, many issues have been seen through the prism of ethnicity and religion. Many of the political parties that existed before independence and up to the second republic were not only formed along ethnic lines, they also employed ethno-religious sentiments to portray political parties outside their regions as ‘parties of the other’. Although the present crop of political parties in Nigeria may not be said to have been formed along ethnic and religious lines, yet they have continued to

²⁸ A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (London: Yale University Press, 1977), 3-4. See also: Robert A. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy. Autonomy vs. Control* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

²⁹ Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 4. See also: Douglas Rae and Taylor, *The Analyses of Political Cleavages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

profiteer on the country's ethno-religious formation. As such, rather than being instruments of integration, they ended up entrenching further divisions in the already segmented society. This is the dangerous dimension! As Guelke rightly explains, "there are social and political divisions in all societies. But deeply divided societies are a special category of cases, in which a fault line that runs through the society causes political polarisation and establishes a force field. This divide makes establishing and sustaining democratic rule a huge challenge".³⁰ A deeply divided society is a society in which fault lines created by ethnicity, religion and other divisions often lead to violence and create some challenges for the administration of the political system. In a deeply divided society according to Guelke, "conflict exists along a well-entrenched fault line that is recurrent and endemic and that contains the potential for violence between the segments."³¹ In such a society, not only is there sustained division along fault lines for a long period of time, attachment to the fault lines also have overriding importance and influence over a wide range of issues facing the society, thereby preventing the formation of coalitions on issues that cut across main societal-divides.³² The above picture depicts the reality in today's Nigeria. The country has, in the words of Osaghae, become "one of the most complex countries in the world that belongs to the genre of the most troubled complex societies called deeply divided societies".³³ One implication of a deeply divided society that is playing out in present day Nigeria is "the contested legitimacy of the polity... which hampers the capacity of parties to make political appeals that are able to bridge the divide."³⁴

³⁰ Guelke, *Politics*, vi.

³¹ Guelke, *Politics*, 30.

³² Guelke, *Politics*, 28-29.

³³ Osaghae, *Nigeria Since Independence*, ix.

³⁴ Guelke, *Politics*, 11.

4. Factors Fuelling Ethnic and Religious Crises in Nigeria

Crises occasioned by ethnicity and religion have in many cases proven difficult to resolve for two interrelated reasons. First, religion involves emotions based on faith in a Supreme Being and second, ethnicity involves sentiments which have to do with innate attachment to some facticity of life that are primordial to a people. According to Rex (1997) such "...bonds are quite unlike all others; they are recurrent, largely inexplicable, and have an overpowering emotional and non-rational quality."³⁵ However, there are other factors which themselves undermine the development of values and norms that would promote cooperation and mutual understanding, and thereby provided incentive for ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. Two of such will be mentioned briefly here.

The first has to do with the failure of the Nigerian state to meet up with its constitutional responsibility of protecting lives and properties and of providing essential welfare for its citizenry, forcing the citizens to resort to religious, ethnic and other primordial groups for succour. One implication of this development which is playing out in Nigeria today has been calibrated in Peter Ekeh's 1975 theory of the two publics in Africa.³⁶ Ekeh presents a theory of the primordial public and the civic public in Africa in which the state is seen as an "alien institution",³⁷ not deserving loyalty and patriotism. A state so perceived is unable to earn the trust and loyalty of the people which are automatically transferred to the primordial groups.

Again, the deficient foundation on which the Nigerian state is laid has also promoted the festering of ethno-religious crises in the country. This is because the basis of Nigeria's corporate existence was never properly negotiated in a manner that would have addressed some of the pertinent challenges now threatening it, and for which many bigots now appeal to ethnicity and religion for solutions. As Offor rightly notes, "... the basis of governance and of

³⁵ Rex is cited in Guelke, *Politic*, 21

³⁶ P. P. Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975).

³⁷ C. Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (Essex: Heinemann, 1960), 30.

our collective existence as a country were not properly negotiated in 1914, as the leaders then were propelled instead by economic and political considerations.”³⁸ To realise this, the colonisers through a deliberate policy promoted “... the enthronement of ethno-religious identities- the kind that dethrones national identity and belie national interest.”³⁹ This laid the foundation for mutual distrust among individuals and groups, making it difficult for citizens to cultivate the sense of belonging needed to establish social cooperation within the polity.

There is no doubt that crises fuelled by ethnicity and religion have resulted in the depletion of trust and other social capital resources among the various groups in Nigeria. The events that preceded the civil war of 1967 to 1970 and even those after it had ethno-religious undertones, and they created the basis for mutual distrust and the feeling of alienation by the Igbos of the south-eastern Nigeria. This is the same way events prior to, and following the cancellation of the June 12 presidential election in 1993 created a similar disposition among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria. The oil politics in the Niger Delta and the Boko Haram insurgency in the northern region all have ethno-religious dimensions. There is no doubt that all sections of the country have had a fair share of crises weaved around ethnicity and religion. In fact, analysts are of the view that successive governments in Nigerian have over the years promoted ethno-religious crises through a deliberate placing of “...priority of some kind on the major ethnic groups while marginalising those possessing the cultural attributes of minority groups,”⁴⁰ leading to the unfortunate consequence of some ethnic groups feeling maligned and marginalised. Given the destructive potentials of ethno-religious

³⁸ F. Offor, “Social Justice, Democracy and the Crisis of Development in Africa,” in *Ethics and Public Affairs*, ed. F.A. Adeigbo, Dipo Irele and Amaechi Udefi (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 2014), 93.

³⁹ D. E. Agbibo, “Ethno-Religious Conflicts and the Elusive Quest for National Identity in Nigeria,” *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013), 3.

⁴⁰ A. U. Iwara, “Identity Politics, Globalisation and Socio-Political Engineering in Nigeria,” in *Nigeria and Globalisation: Discourse on Identity and Social Conflict*, ed. Duro Oni et. al. (Ibadan: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation CBAAC, 2008), 24.

related crises on critical elements needed to build an enduring society, how then do we explore the resources of social capital in the management of ethnic and religious differences in ways that will reduce to the minimum, ethno-religious crises within the Nigerian polity?

5. Bridging Social Capital and the Management of Ethno-Religious Differences

The attempt in the foregoing sections has been to demonstrate how the plural nature of the Nigerian state has been exploited by some, using ethnicity and religion, to create deep fragmentations and promote values that engender division, disunity and mutual distrust; values that are inimical to group psychology, national cohesion and solidarity. Like most other segmented societies in similar situation as ours, people are more comfortable with and tend to put more trust in people with whom they share similar ethno-religious and other group identity, while distrusting people from other cleavages.⁴¹ This may not be unconnected with the shared belief that common ethnicity facilitates trust and exchanges among member of the same ethnic group, but inhibits exchange between members of different groups.⁴²

Addressing this challenge would require the generation of Bridging Social Capital that will help shrink social divisions and enhance fellowship among members of heterogeneous groups. The idea of Bridging Social Capital refers to “links a community has with others that are different, to whatever degree.”⁴³ Bridging Social Capital is important in that it extends the scope of the circle of connectedness from a smaller group to a larger one by building bridges that enable members of other societies to cooperate. Bridging Social Capital is meant to expand the “radius of trust,” defined as “the circle of people among whom cooperative norms

⁴¹ H. Coffe, “Social Capital and Community Heterogeneity,” *Social Indicator Research* 91, no. 2 (2009), 157.

⁴² Fukuyama, “Social Capital,” 440.

⁴³ T. Schuller, “Reflections on the use of Social Capital,” *Review of Social Economy* 65, no. 1, and *Beyond Social Capital*, 15 (2007).

are operative.”⁴⁴ The justification for Bridging Social Capital is that if a body polity will achieve internal cohesiveness, then the various groups making up the polity would need shared norms and values that cut across the various groups and that would make them co-exist harmoniously. These shared norms and values are encapsulated in the social capital resources of trust, tolerance, cooperation and mutual respect. Bridging Social Capital is particularly important to us as a people because the levels of social trust, tolerance, cooperation and mutual respect in contemporary Nigeria is low, thereby shrinking the opportunity of a common ground upon which to undertake a common purpose.⁴⁵ It is the long neglect of these social capital resources that has stunted the various attempts at building bridges and cementing group relationships in Nigeria.

A major step, therefore, towards managing ethnic and religious differences in Nigeria would be to intensify efforts at developing these social capital resources which are not restrained by primordial considerations, and using them as guiding principles of relations among the various ethno-religious and other segmented groups that make up the country. To achieve this, social institutions have a role to play. This is because

... the organisation and sustenance of social life and national development go beyond merely occupying a geographical territory and having a state that is able to maintain law in some ways. They involve...the construction of social institutions, which regulate social life in its various manifestations and [enable] the inculcation of those values that make social cooperation possible.⁴⁶

Social institutions are key to achieving this quest because they are to individuals, the first port of call where values and ideals are first devolved and where individuals first learn and imbibe the habits

⁴⁴ F. Fukuyama, “Social Capital and the Global Economy,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (2004), 4.

⁴⁵ Renshon, “Political Leadership,” 203.

⁴⁶ Oladipo, *Thinking About Philosophy*, 85

that they eventually carry into public life.⁴⁷ Since, as stated earlier, whatever happens in the social realm has implication for, or a transformative effect on other realms in the polity, social institutions are, therefore, instrumental to bringing about a change in thought and lifestyle through habituation of bridging social capital resources like trust, tolerance, co-operation and mutual respect.

6. Conclusion

This essay has argued that the plural nature of the Nigerian state is being exploited through religion and ethnicity, to further deepen fragmentations among groups in a manner that hinder the flourishing of values that would promote the kind of relationship needed to foster human cooperation and human solidarity and the evolution of a proper sense of nationalism. To underscore the import of the moral dimension in addressing problems arising from the unfortunate exploitation of ethno-religious differences by some, the essay identified the derisory of essential human values and norms as what continues to stifle the quality of human relations, fuel ethno-religious crises and hinder the development of the kind of group psychology needed for a harmonious relationship among the various groups in the country. Consequently, the essay recommended the building of bridging values and norms, not restrained by primordial considerations, as encapsulated in the social capital resources of trust, tolerance, cooperation and mutual respect. These, the essay concluded, would serve as relational principles for promoting internal cohesiveness and bridging relations among the disparate ethno-religious groups in Nigeria.

⁴⁷ F. Offor, "The Sociality of Democracy," *Journal of Power, Politics and Governance* 2, no. 2 (2014), 55.