

PERSONHOOD, ETHNICITY, AND THE NIGERIAN STATE

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Abstract

One factor inhibiting national growth and development in many African states is the lack of nationalist attitude among citizens. This results from the fact that these states consist of multiple ethnic communities enjoying loyalty from their members at the expense of the state. This paper argues that the strength of this ethnic loyalty is largely influenced by the conception of person in African thought system. This conception of person maintains that personhood is essentially determined by social factors which individuals derive from their ethnic communities. The paper thus argues that, to evolve a true sense of nationalism in Nigeria and many other African states, the concept of person should be reviewed to conceptually detach the metaphysical from the normative elements of personhood. This distinction helps to deemphasize the significance of ethnic identities in the constitution of persons, thus helping to conceive of individual persons beyond the narrow lens of ethnicity.

Keywords: Ethnicity, personhood, nationalism, globalization, racism, Colonialism, Nigeria

Introduction

At the independence of Nigeria in the year 1960, the hope of many Nigerians, leaders and followers alike, was that the country would evolve into a nation, and that this evolution would foster a nationalist attitude, which in turn will aid national development in the country. This was not, by any means, an easy task. Among other factors that characterized the Nigerian state at the point of independence, the fact that the Nigerian state consisted of many ethnic groups was a major clog in the wheel for driving towards the desired nationalist attitude. This experience is similar for a number of other African states. One of the major tasks before the new states was to find a way to harmonize the interests of the various ethnic groups that constituted the states. This required transcending the varying ethnic identities to evolve a national identity, along with values, beliefs and attitudes that will be shared by the individuals who

make up the state. Put succinctly, there was a requirement to suppress ethnicity and to evolve a single nation, one which members of the various ethnic nations that constitute the country will accept as a collective for the purpose of fostering national development. The evolution of a Nigerian nation was expected to overcome ethnic divisions and curtail ethnic rivalries within the nation state. Unfortunately, some sixty years after independence, ethnic divisions and rivalries are still rife in the Nigerian state, raising questions about whether there have been significant gains in the process of evolving a Nigerian nation.

The aim of this paper is to examine the complicity of ethnicity and ethnic identities in the failure to evolve true nationalism in Nigeria and other heterogeneous African states facing similar nationalism crisis. The paper examines the connection between ethnicity and the concept of person in Africa and how this connection can help to address the challenge posed by ethnicity in the drive towards nationalism in the Nigerian state. The paper is divided into five sections. Section I examines the relation between racism and ethnicity and how these pose a major challenge for contemporary African states. Section II examines the basis of ethnic divisions in African states and how these ethnic divisions undermine the drive towards civic nationalism. Section III examines the concept of person in African thought system and how this influences the attitude of Nigerians in particular, and Africans in general, towards their ethnic communities and the state. Section four examines the constitution of the contemporary Nigerian state and the need to review the concept of person in Africa. Section IV adopts Kwame Gyekye's distinction between the metaphysical and normative constituents of person as a foundation to argue for the need to deemphasize the relevance of ethnic identities in the organisation of the Nigerian state. The paper concludes that just allocation of resources recognizing the autonomy of individual persons is vital in evolving a true nationalist attitude in citizens of the state.

Race and Ethnicity

The persistence of ethnic divisions and rivalries in many African states calls for an urgent need to examine the nature of ethnicity in order to determine how we ought to handle this important element of the organization of the people of these states. A good number of scholars, especially in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, have attempted to examine this concept (Mazrui 2004; Appiah 2013; Festus 2015). Many of these attempts examine the concept of ethnicity from the socio-political lens. This paper deviates from the traditional perspective and attempts to examine the metaphysical grounding of ethnicity in the concept of

person. This is important because the grounding of ethnicity in the concept of person explains some of the difficulties encountered in attempts to suppress ethnicity within multi-ethnic states. Understanding this metaphysical grounding of ethnicity thus places us on a better pedestal to address the challenges arising from ethnicity or harness its potentiality in fostering nationalism.

Besides its effect on the drive towards nationalism, understanding the concept of ethnicity is also important because of its link with a more globally acknowledged problem – the problem of racism. Recent experiences of people of colour who reside outside their countries of origin have raised fresh concerns that the menace of racism is far from being subdued. What seems to have happened is that this menace persists in subtler forms which hides its true nature, making it more difficult to combat (DiAngelo 2012). The recent killing of George Floyd in the year 2020 in the United States of America has drawn the anger of many people from various parts of the world, leading to calls for reviewing the perception of people of colour all over the world. Interestingly, many Nigerians have vented their anger and displeasure, through formal and informal media, at what is perceived as degrading in the treatment of Nigerians outside their country of origin (Lawal 2020). The practical and theoretical struggle against the ills fostered by racism has been on for a very long time. The fact that racism persists suggests that the problem may be wider than is usually acknowledged. This suggests a need to widen the discussion of racism beyond the traditional lens from which it is usually examined. One way to do this is to examine the question of race from its relation to some other allied concepts. One of such concepts is the concept of ethnicity.

The relationship between racism and ethnicity is expressed by Start Hall (2017, 82-83) who claims that if we look beyond the approach that reduces racism to biological differences grounded in nature, we would realize that it is a cultural and historical system for the production of otherness. This means that underlying racism is the projection of cultural differences expressed in language, traditions, beliefs, ideas, customs and rituals that bind particular groups of people together. However, the cultural differences that tend to fuel racism are themselves grounded in ethnicity. Thus if the idea of racism must be properly understood, it is important to examine the related concept of ethnicity which grounds the very values and beliefs that tend to fuel racism. What this suggests is that, within the Nigerian social context, much attention needs to be paid to the impact of ethnicity in the social and political organization of the state. While we

lament the social discrimination Nigerians experience on foreign soil, it appears that the grounds for a similar problem are rife within the Nigerian social space.

To observe this link more closely, one only needs to imagine what will happen if a particular ethnic group within the Nigerian state is able to appropriate the bulk of the social, political and economic resources. Such an ethnic group will probably treat other ethnic groups as inferior, just as these other groups will be relegated to second class status within the state. Viewed from the cultural lens that connects racism with ethnicity, the 1994 Rwanda genocide can be described as the peak of a violent racial as well as ethnic struggle. In this vein, while comparing the Rwanda genocide and the German holocaust of 1941-1945, Helen Hintjens (1999, 242) notes that “[in] both cases, too, more or less pristine theories of ‘racial struggle’ and racial hierarchy became activated and politically charged during a period of severe economic and social stress.” This suggests that the Rwanda genocide is as racially motivated as the German holocaust, even though the Hutus and Tutsis have similar black skin colours and are seemingly engaged in an ethnic rivalry. Commenting about the colour of the skin of Tutsi’s, Rémi Korman (2016, 227) notes that the Tutsis were sometimes described as ‘false negroes’ or ‘Europeans with black skin.’ The foregoing suggests that, while it is important to condemn racism on foreign soils, the problems associated with racism are closer on home soil, disguised as volatile ethnic divisions which require urgent attention.

Ethnicity and the Drive towards Nationalism

The concept of ethnicity has been defined in various ways by various scholars. These various definitions suggest that the concept of ethnicity has to do with certain cultural and behavioural patterns that define and distinguish certain groups of people. According to Hall (2017, 105-108), the patterns that define ethnicity are usually characterized by shared blood ties of family and kinship, common language, customs, and a strong sense of being bound to the group. For example, some version of the Yoruba cosmological account maintains that the Yoruba ethnic group has a common ancestry which is linked to Oduduwa, a migrant who fled from Mecca to establish the ancient city of Ile-Ife, which is generally believed to be the common source of the Yoruba people (Lange 2011, 583). This account thus explains the close link which many members of the Yoruba ethnic group believe that they share. This link is exploited in various ways to make claims and demands that are expected to benefit many people who especially belong to the ethnic group. This is because the kinship link that

characterizes ethnicity creates a cultural grouping which, for Festus (2015, 264), elicits distinct behavior towards others in society or organized polity.

The political relevance of the concept of ethnicity, especially in multi-ethnic states, is widely acknowledged by scholars. Festus, for instance, argues, on the one hand, that ethnicity can offer security and protection of interest. On the other hand, Festus notes that ethnicity has potentials for danger if not properly handled as it can lead to secession, civil wars, instability, etc. (2015, 264-267). Similarly, Mazrui (2004) notes that one of the significant paradoxes that lead to post-colonial violence is the paradox of religion and ethnicity, following arbitrary borders designed by imperialism. Aside its influence in promoting or minimizing political conflicts, Appiah (2013) argues that ethnicity is one resource that can be harnessed positively to sustain democratic governance in developing African states. This is because this ethnic resource justifies the collective dimension for the identity of African peoples, and this creates a framework within which people feel pride or shame as members of various social groups.

In spite of the great deal of awareness on the political relevance of ethnicity, it appears that it has been largely difficult for a number of states, especially within Africa, to mitigate the negative effects of ethnicity on the political organization of those states. The impediments arising from ethnicity and ethnic divisions are obvious in many parts of Africa, both on the continental level and at national levels. In this regard, Claude Ake (1993, 4) notes that politics and ethnicity have become muddled together such that ethnic groups tend to become political formations competing to protect the interest of their members to the exclusion of members of competing formations.

At the continental level, xenophobic attack on foreigners have been reported in many African countries. Kersting (2009) attributes the cause of this trend to a concept borrowed from Claude Ake (1996). This new concept, which is called 'New Nationalism,' Kersting argues, is motivated by globalization and growing national inequalities which has led to a high level of migration within some African states. This wave of migration has triggered questions about who deserves what resources within specific African states. Some of the reactions that have been triggered by this situation include attempts to deny non-indigenes (who are regarded as foreigners) certain privileges, or to expel these 'foreigners' from the state. Thus, the mass expulsion of Nigerians from Ghana in 1969, the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983, the expulsion of DR Congo migrants from Angola in 2008, etc., signal the execution of the new nationalism which identifies people belonging to certain ethnic grouping for hostility which

are sometimes violent (Brydon 1985; Adepoju 2005; Neocosmos 2008; Aremu and Ajayi 2014).

At national levels, ethnicity has been, on the one hand, a strong pedestal for secessionist movements to thrive, basing their claim on existing administrative structures. For example, the secessionist agenda of South-eastern Nigeria to create an independent state of Biafra was built on the Igbo ethnic grouping. This secession attempt led to a great deal of hostility, culminating in a civil war that lasted from 1967 – 1970 (Margery Perham 1970). On the other hand, ethnic divisions have been an impediment to the growth of civic nationalism in many African states. Ultimately, this situation has impeded national growth and development, leaving many African countries like Nigeria in a perpetual state of underdevelopment.

Interestingly, in many of these African states, there have been attempts to attenuate the negative effects of ethnicity and ethnic divisions. In Nigeria, for instance, one of such attempts involves the adoption of a federal structure in the political administration of the state. Within this structure, government powers, including responsibility and benefits, are shared between a central government and a number of regional governments which have certain powers, rights and responsibilities within a certain territory delineated to it by the laws of the federation. This federal structure allows people from various ethnic and cultural groups to participate, directly or indirectly, in the administration of the state. This is expected to reduce the threat of exclusion and diffuses the intensity of competition for top spots of social and economic power within the federation (Festus 2015, 265).

The adoption of a federal structure in the Nigerian state became important at independence because, as Kersting (2009, 9) argues, in the process of nation and state building, unity and homogeneity are important goals and ethnic cleavages are potential triggers for violent action. Given the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity that characterized the Nigerian state, it was impossible to develop nationalism along ethnic lines. Thus, the option that seemed viable was to develop a civic nationalism which required the forging of a national identity which will suppress ethnic identities and promote a sense of unity among the citizens of the Nigerian state. Thus, the state adopted national holidays, anthem, currency, constitution, and a host of other social elements that are to be played into the subconscious of the citizens to foster a sense of nationalism.

The adoption of the aforementioned social elements was supposed to be a catalyst to drive the aggregation of ethnic communities making up the Nigerian

state to evolve into a nation. The distinction between a state and a nation is important here. As Mazrui (2004, 472) notes, the failure of many African nationalists to draw this distinction between a state and a nation is one of the great problems of post-colonial African states. In his distinction between a nation and a state, Oluwaseun Bamidele (2015, 12) notes that a nation is “an aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history, as to form a distinct people, usually organized as a separate political state occupying a definite territory.” While Nigeria exists as a geographical entity, with a system of authority, it is yet to evolve into a fellowship of communities that can be properly referred to as a nation. This is as a result of the fact that, despite the adoption of the federal structure, the Nigerian state is yet to successfully evolve a system underplays ethnic considerations. For instance, rather than adopting meritocracy in the allocation of responsibilities and benefits, a Federal Character to ensure sectional/regional representation appears to be favoured. Value systems, beliefs, language, vision, etc., are yet to be harmonized.

What follows from the foregoing is that the Nigerian state is yet to evolve into a nation as many individuals in Nigeria are unable to evolve the sense of loyalty which is required to foster the evolution of the Nigerian state into a nation. Rather, people have held on strongly to their ethnic ties in outlining power, positions and entitlements. This ethnic colourations are usually visible in the political and social institutions that are established in the Nigerian state. This is not peculiar to Nigeria and, according to Festus (2015, 268), is reflected in the formulation of ruling and opposing political parties, which are usually dominated by some ethnic groups who use the associated power to favour their ethnic groups to the marginalization of others. It is also reflected in the responses and reactions to government policies that tend to alter the original ownership of resources perceived as originally belonging to certain ethnic groups.

For instance, in order to address the problem of land shortage facing pastoralists predominantly resident in the northern part of Nigeria, the federal government introduced the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) Policy. This policy was aimed at carving out certain settlements in different parts of the country for herders and their animals. In these settlements, herders are expected to graze their animals within defined boundaries which are provided with required amenities for the herders and their animals (Toromade 2019). This policy generated a lot of controversy and was ultimately suspended by the federal government of Nigeria. One of the alleged reasons for the rejection of this policy, especially by people of the southern part of Nigeria is the distrust and fear that the policy was

aimed at grabbing ancestral lands belonging majorly to members of Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups and handing over these lands to Fulani settlers from within and outside Nigeria. Thus, the policy generated heated accusations and exchanges among varying social groups representing their respective ethnic divides.

It appears that the strong attachment to ethnic groupings that characterizes many contemporary African societies has its roots in the idea of person that is prevalent within the African thought system. In other words, the understanding of what constitutes the self is a significant factor in fueling the strong attachment that people have towards their ethnic groups. Thus, it is important to examine the concept of ethnicity from its connection to the concept of person because an individual's loyalty to a nation or state is invariably connected to the individual's self-perception and the perception of his or her place within that nation or state. Consequently, a person's devotion and loyalty to any institution will be greatly influenced by how strong the person perceives his existential connection to that institution to be. Thus, if a person feels more strongly connected to the ethnic grouping than the state, it is more likely that such a person will be loyal to the ethnic grouping than the state because s(he) feels more and better represented by the ethnic grouping.

Personhood and the Metaphysics of Ethnicity in African Thought

It is difficult to ascribe any particular idea or thought system to any particular African state. This is one of the fallouts of the multi-ethnic character of these African states. Cultural beliefs, values and thought systems can vary as much as there are ethnic divides. The same goes for the characterization of ideas that are usually tagged 'African'. Nonetheless, as Polycarp Ikuenobe (2015, 1006) notes, certain theoretical abstractions can be generalized about some *enduring* and *dominant* themes within varying African traditions. One of such abstractions is the concept of person within the African belief system. A good number of scholars who have discussed the concept of person in Africa have identified basic metaphysical elements that are believed to constitute the human person in African thought system. However, it has also been well argued that the concept of person in Africa has two dimensions. These two dimensions, the metaphysical and social, are interrelated (Menkiti 1984; Gbadegesin 1998, 175; Ramose 2005; Ikuenobe 2015). This is unlike western theories of person which tend to analyze persons solely from the metaphysical and individualistic perspective. One common example of the western concept of person is the Cartesian doctrine that

seeks to analyze the concept of person from the strictly metaphysical lens as a combination of mind and body (Descartes 2008).

In his discussion of the concept of person in Akan thought system, Kwame Gyekye (1984) identifies three important elements which constitute the human person – *okra*, *sunsum*, and *honam*. The *okra* is believed to be a ‘spark of God’. It constitutes the individual self, and it is the transmitter of destiny and the cause of breath (201). The *sunsum* is the basis for an individual’s personality, it is that which thinks and is the subject of an individual’s experience. It is also the *sunsum* that makes it possible for the soul’s destiny to be fulfilled. For Gyekye, the *okra* and *sunsum* are spiritual and immaterial elements (204-205). However, while Gyekye acknowledges that the *okra* and *sunsum* are logically and functionally distinct, they are ontologically inseparable. In other words, ontologically speaking, the *okra* and the *sunsum* are “a unity in duality [and] a duality in unity.” (207) These two elements combine to make up the immaterial aspect of a person while the *honam* (the body) is the physical aspect. Thus, for Gyekye, Akan thought proposes a dualist account of the ontology of a person (208).

Similarly, presenting a description of the Ibo concept of person, Richard Onwuanibe (1984, 187) suggests a similar dualist account of person. According to this account, “[to] talk of human person makes sense only when to be human includes not only the physical aspects, but also the transcendental aspects.” Again, in his account of the Yoruba ontological concept of person, Moses Akin Makinde (1984, 195) identifies three important elements, namely, *emi* (the soul), *ori* (the inner head), and *ara* (the body). The *emi* and *ori* are spiritual elements while *ara* is a physical element. The *emi* is the “indestructible ‘living force’, while the *ori* is the bearer of human destiny and other discernible characteristics of human personality.”

While the foregoing represents the metaphysical account of person on African thought system, some scholars have argued that this purely metaphysical analysis presents an incomplete account of the concept of person in African thought system. This is because the African concept of person has both descriptive and normative dimensions. While the purely metaphysical analysis presents the descriptive dimension of the account of person in Africa, it ignores what has been described as the normative account of person. For instance, Kwasi Wiredu (2004, 17) argues that the concept of person in Africa is essentially normative because “[a] person is not just a certain biological entity with a certain psycho-physical endowment, but, rather, a being of this kind who has shown a basic willingness and ability to fulfill his or her obligations in the community.”

On Wiredu's account, a person is constituted by three elements, *Okra*, *Mogya* and *Sunsum*. While the *okra* derives from God and is the life principle, the *Mogya* is the blood principle and the basis for lineage. This derives from the mother. The *sunsum* is the personality principle and derives from the father. Following Wiredu's lead, Adetayo Alade (2015, 35) argues that "the biological features inherited by individuals from their parents are the first indications that human beings are essentially social. These biological links place human beings in inalienable mutual relations." Similar ideas have been expressed by various scholars. For instance, John Mbiti (1970, 141) expresses the fact that the ontological and social significance of a person, within an African space, depends on the community with the popular dictum "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."

Considering the normative concept of person, Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004, 324-326) notes that the conception of person in Africa presupposes that every individual has a distinct body, but that does not imply that each individual stands alone. The umbilical linkage between persons through the navel and the fact of human language, which is biologically anchored, indicates a link with others. Thus, personhood is not something that is given biologically. Rather, personhood is something that an individual will have to achieve over a long period in a lifetime. Interestingly, the community necessarily have to step in to help the individual attain personhood because the individual cannot attain it in isolation from the community.

The implication of the forgoing is that the person, within the African thought system, is closely knitted to the community through the normative dimension of personhood. Though this normative dimension of personhood is conceptually distinct from the metaphysical dimension, both are, from an African perspective, inseparable in defining the identity of a person. In other words, notes, an individual is not a person in the strict sense without the social element as "the person identifies herself, her interests, and rational life plan in relation to her community, and then makes autonomous choices and acts as an organic part of that community." (Ikuenobe 2015, 1011).

On the normative concept of person, as described above, lies the metaphysical grounding of ethnicity in African thought system. The community defines the person. This account aligns with what Daniel Agbibo and Andrew Okem describe (2011, 99) as the "primordialist" approach to ethnicity as "something given or ascribed at birth, deriving from the kin-and-clan structure of human society and hence something more fixed and permanent. Since blood lineage and

ethnicity are significant determinants of personhood in traditional African communities, the individual person finds it easier to identify with the ethnic grouping that provides the communal basis that has shaped the person. Put differently, an individual person feels a strong connection to his/her ethnic community because ethnic identity constitutes a significant element in the ontological constitution of a person within the African thought system.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Divisions in Contemporary Nigeria

While ethnic groupings were strongly visible, and directly relevant, in the constitution and administration of traditional African societies, the constitution of contemporary African societies have since changed. The distinction between the constitution of traditional African societies and contemporary societies can be likened to Menkiti's distinction between 'collectivities' and 'constituted' human groups in his comparison of African and Western communities. On the one hand, traditional African societies, he notes, assumes an organic dimension to the relationship between individuals, where the community forms the basis from which individuals spring. On the other hand, contemporary societies, similar to the description of western communities, are constituted in such a way that there are individuals within the same community who do not have the kind of organic connection that is found in the traditional societies (Menkiti 1984, 179-180).

Two factors have been largely identified as majorly responsible for the change in the constitution of modern and contemporary African societies. These factors are colonialism and globalization. According to Kersting (2009, 7), one of the reasons why what he describes as territorial nationalism was considered inauthentic was because African states are delineated along colonially imposed boundaries which arbitrarily grouped multiple ethnic groups to create territorial entities characterized by strong cultural heterogeneity. This cultural heterogeneity arose with the advent of colonialism in many African communities. Colonial administrators lumped many ethnic communities together to make up various districts and countries for ease of administration. These colonial creations were then inherited by many African countries at independence. Thus, the Nigerian state, for instance, is reported to consist of over 250 distinct ethnic groups with three dominant ones. The Northern Hausa/Fulani ethnic group constituting about 30 percent, the South-western Yoruba ethnic group constituting about 20 percent, the South-Eastern Igbo ethnic group constitute about 17 percent, while the remaining 33 percent consists of the minority ethnic groups. It is also to be noted that the three major ethnic groups can be further sub-divided into sub-groups (Jinadu 1985). The implication of this is that national identity in the

Nigerian state cannot be built along ethnic ties because such an attempt will unavoidably lead to violent ethnic conflicts.

Apart from the impact of colonialism, one other factor that has seriously affected the constitution of the contemporary Nigerian state is globalization. Globalization has led to a large increase in the volume of migration all over the world, and especially in Africa (Kersting 2009, 7). Globalization integrates economic production, markets, financial systems, flow of information, technologies, etc., across the world. It also leads to movement of goods, capital, and people, disrupting settled borders in the process (Hall 2017, 102-103). As a result of the phenomenon of globalization, Nigeria, like many other states, have very diverse people with very diverse values, beliefs and culture, all inhabiting the same geographical space and competing for the same resources. With this development, individuals are moved to work towards ensuring that they get the best they can from the resources available within the state.

The competition that comes with the constitution of contemporary African states reinvigorates ethnic bonds. Given the bond between members of the same ethnic group, it is easier to form alliances against others who are perceived as foreigners. Such alliances occur on the part of both migrants and aboriginal members of various communities, especially in urbanized cities. For instance, on the one hand, Gbenga Fasiku and Victor Alumona (2018, 342) note that, “when a migrant comes to a particular city, such a migrant, more often, finds herself clustering with others from their ethnic background in different parts of the new urban cities.” On the other hand, ethnic alliances among aboriginal members of a community or state is a trigger for the new nationalism which instigates members of particular ethnic communities to try to appropriate resources for the benefit of members of their ethnic communities, to the exclusion of others. *Aboriginal* members of various communities, having stronger ethnic ties, begin to develop a common sense of hatred for others, especially those other ethnic groupings that are not autochthonous in the community. This partly explains the history of various xenophobic attacks that have been recorded in various parts of Africa since the political independence of these African states.

Thus, while the Nigerian state desires to evolve into a nation, the existential conditions of the people make for strengthening of the ethnic bonds, thus promoting ethnic nationalism rather than the civic nationalism that is required to drive heterogeneous African states towards national development. Individuals continue to value their ethnic groupings over and above the state and, sometimes, do the best they can to corner resources within the state for the

benefit of the members of their ethnic constituency. This ethnic consciousness percolates into all facets of national life, determining how people interact with each other, and even the perception of social issues such as corruption where, for instance, an individual who appropriates state resources to benefit his or her ethnic community is perceived a hero within the ethnic community while the person is perceived as corrupt by members of other ethnic groups (Fasiku and Alumona 2018, 342). As Menkiti (1984, 172) states, “it is by first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychophysical world that the individual also comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent, fact of this world.” The individual defines herself within the ambits of her ethnicity. Viewed from this perspective, for an individual to protect and defend the ethnic group to which he or she belongs at all cost is to do a duty to the self.

In the face of the current realities, Nigeria, like many other African states, is faced with the problem of how to address the influence of ethnicity and ethnic identity in the drive towards national development. Considering the strong influence of ethnicity on social integration, adopting a model that requires building nationalism around ethnic ties may be suggested. However, any such attempt is bound to fail. While it may be true that many contemporary African states were created around artificial and arbitrary boundaries, the fact remains that there is hardly any contemporary African state or community that is inhabited by only indigenous residents. The economic and social realities foisted by globalization is such that migration may possibly be controlled, but it cannot be stopped. This is because various people will, as a matter of necessity, move, and this will ensure that no community will be inhabited solely by native indigenes. This situation then suggests that states and communities will necessarily be constituted by people with different ethnic affiliations. Thus, a viable solution to the challenge raised by ethnicity must be able to accommodate difference. It is in this light that one may then understand Hall’s claim that the “*the* problem of the twenty-first century [is] the problem of living with difference.” (2017, 86)

Granted the foregoing, it appears that the option available to Nigeria, and other African states, is to downplay the significance of ethnic ties as much as possible. As Bamidele (2015, 28) notes, “Nigeria still has to transform itself from the geographical expression established arbitrarily by colonialism into a true nation with a common identity, common values and a shared vision for the future.” This has to be done in both theoretical and practical terms. Practical attempts to address the challenge will be difficult, or even impossible, to achieve if the underlying conception of person among Nigerians in particular, and Africans in

general, is not reviewed. The necessity of this metaphysical review is demonstrated by the fact that most attempts to nationalize the Nigerian state by introducing national policies and programmes are inhibited by ethnic wrangling in varying appearances, both among leaders and other citizens. Thus, there is a need to review the normative conception of person in Africa, if we must address the challenge that ethnicity imposes on national development.

Mediating Normative Influence in the African Concept of Person

While not advocating a rejection of the normative attributes of a person, Kwame Gyekye (1992, 108) argues that the ontological relevance of this normative element in the ascription of personhood should be rejected. This, for him, is because persons acquire those features that constitute the normative elements of persons such as status, habits, personality or character traits in the community over time. However, these acquired features determine an individual's personality and moral status. They do not determine the ontological status of persons qua persons. Thus, ontologically speaking, psycho-physical elements like having a rational will indicates the autonomy of a person and the independence of that person from the community. This creates a capacity for self-assertion and even possible critique of cultural values which help to develop the communal values that define the community. This is possible because the metaphysical self is distinct from the normative self, and this metaphysical self can take a distanced view for reassessing its communal values (112-113).

Gyekye's position presents an instructive framework for reviewing the concept of person in African thought. Drawing a clear distinction between the metaphysical and the normative identity of persons is important if we are to properly situate persons within the social realities that surround them. It is important to note that distinguishing between the metaphysical and the normative in the conception of person in Africa is not to undermine the overall importance of the social factors that shape an individual's personality and moral development. Rather, it is to make a purely descriptive point that a person, as a metaphysical entity, is a person regardless of the social factors that shape his or her personality. In this sense, Gyekye (1997, 54) argues that a person is an autonomous being whose autonomy derives from an internal rational will. This rational will gives a person the capacity to be influenced by the community. Ontologically speaking, therefore, the person is the *being* which is being influenced by communal values and who owes some duties to the community. This is why if a *Robinson Crusoe*, who has spent his entire life outside a human community, were to find his way into an African society, he would not be treated

as less than a person, even though he will most probably lack many of the personality traits that constitute the normative concept of person within that community.

What the foregoing implies is that a person is essentially a psycho-physical entity, and this entity is ontologically distinct from the normative elements that determine the personality of the person. The constitution of these normative elements also depends on the value system of the community within which the person lives. This further implies that the values that constitute these normative elements are not rigid and can be reviewed to accommodate the existential realities within the community at any given period in time. If this is true, then one can rightly say that a person exists primarily as a distinct being while his or her link to the community is secondary. Thus, a person should be able to see his or her essence well beyond the limits imposed by the communal values of his or her ethnic grouping. This theoretical distinction is an essential foundation for grounding the practical approach to addressing the challenge posed by ethnicity in Nigeria as well as in other heterogeneous African states.

The distinction between a person and his or her normative components is important both for individual persons and the state. The individual who acknowledges this distinction is able to reasonably detach himself or herself from ethnic prejudices and realize that his or her social environment consists of relations that go well beyond that ethnic connection. Thus, while the individual person recognizes the importance of the normative elements that shape his or her personality, he or she is able to recognize the fact that the constitution of the contemporary society is such that that community is not restricted to the narrow ethnic grouping. Thus, the individual is able to extend the scope of his or her obligation demands to include other members of the state who do not share the individual's ethnic identity. On the part of the state, conscious attempts need to be made to put the interest of individual persons foremost in making and executing policies, without necessarily conflating the individual interest with the interest of any ethnic group.

Conclusion

As already noted, the sense of attachment that people feel towards their ethnic community is very strong. For this reason, the attempt to deemphasize ethnic influence in the administration of the state is a very complicated one. Thus, at both individual and state levels, due caution must be exercised in evolving theories, principles, and policies that are needed. For instance, even though the Federal Government of Nigeria presented economic and security reasons as basis

for proposing the RUGA policy, the proposal was not wary enough to consider that the policy tilted towards benefiting a particular ethnic community at the expense of other ethnic communities. This largely explains the hostility that followed the announcement of the proposal. If a true sense of civic nationalism must be evolved, policies must be formulated and executed in such a way that citizens will not be justified in developing a sense of distrust arising from ethnic and individual prejudices in the allocation and reallocation of resources within the state. Thus, a just distribution of resources within heterogeneous states, bearing in mind the benefits and obligations of individuals within the state, is very vital in evolving a nationalist attitude in citizens.

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