

## THE MISTAKE OF 1914: 100 YEARS AFTER?

**Ngozika A. Obi-Ani**

Department of History and International Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

**Paul Obi- Ani**

Department of History and International Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

**Mathias C. Isiani**

Department of History and International Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

### **Abstract**

*The amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 by the British overlord has remained controversial. Some believe it was contrived by the colonial authority to sustain the unviable Northern Protectorate. This group believed that the North has remained an economic parasite on the naturally endowed Southern Protectorate of Nigeria. But the North posits that the marriage was between an ordered and cultured society on one hand and on the other hand between an impetuous, aggressive and savage group. Even the founding fathers of Nigeria did not help matters. Sir Ahmadu Bello bemoaned the union as the mistake of 1914 while Chief Obafemi Awolowo dismissed Nigeria as a mere geographical expression. General Gowon at the height of the 1966 crises opined that the basis of unity was no longer there. The national question has remained a major national past time that successive administrations routinely convoke national conference with a view to resolving the issue. The war cry is where does the president come from: North or South? This has created instability in the country with separatist movements mushrooming on a daily basis, militancy, insurgency, kidnapping and armed banditry on the rise. The paper will employ qualitative methodology in addressing the issue.*

### **Introduction**

In 1914, the diverse ethnic groups around the Benue valley, the Gulf of Guinea and the western Sudan were wielded into one. This became known in history as the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates by the British overlord. This union according to Lugard was to sustain the unviable Northern protectorate but the idea behind the union as has been advanced overtime was for easy administration and for selfish reasons of the colonial power. The parsimonious British government was never eager to commit resources into their colonies but rather expected their colonies to be self-sustaining. This contraption has remained controversial. Some believe that the north since amalgamation has remained an economic parasite on their naturally endowed southern neighbour. The north on the other hand, posits that the marriage was between an ordered and cultured society and on the other hand between an infidel, impetuous, aggressive and savage group.

The development of ethnic nationalism and ethnic consciousness since the 1940s and 1950s had stymied the union that cry for dissolution from north and south had become the order of the day. To ensure adequate pillage of the "national cake" the war cry at every election was where does the president come from: north or south? This has created untold hardship to this union and observers

have been very sceptical of the continuance of this marriage of convenience. This paper will attempt to examine the amalgamation of north and south in 1914, the unpatriotic calls to dissolve the union, the mushrooming of ethnic and religious insurgency and possible way forward.

### **The Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates In 1914**

Nigeria was made up of independent polities formed by peoples of amazingly distinct cultures. The north, which comprised three quarters of Nigerian territory contains more than half of the population and was largely dominated by the Muslim and Hausa speaking people. Accustomed to feudalistic system of governance with a capital at Sokoto after Uthman dan Fodio's jihad of 1804. The caliphate could be described as a confederation of provinces, each of which was ruled by a dynasty founded by the local leaders of the jihad.

In Western region, the dominant ethnic group were the Yoruba. The Yoruba had been culturally organised into a number of states ruled by kings. The demise of Oyo Empire led to the formation of a great variety of independent polities notably, Ijebu, Ibadan, Ijaye and the Egba. The Yoruba progressed far in education, commerce, administration and had absorbed western skill. This was as a result of their early contact with Europeans and long experience of city life.

The Eastern region was largely dominated by the Igbo people. Their political organisation took the form of independent village groups which erroneously has been described by writers as 'stateless'. With contact with western influence, they had become one of the best educated ethnic groups in Nigeria. Emigrating from their homelands to find work elsewhere as artisans, clerks, traders and labourers, they banded themselves into unions outside their geographical enclave. Their presence in various cities of the federation has created ethnic tensions both in the West and North.

Aside these three major ethnic groups mentioned above, there are about 250 ethnic minority groups<sup>1</sup>. In the North, there are those of the middle belt, in the West, the Edo, Urhobo speaking peoples while in the East, the Ibibio, Efik, and Ijo were found among others.

These considerable large territories made up of different independent polities with different political institutions, cultural and economic attainment which had evolved overtime to suit their various needs and the need of their environment was what Lugard forcefully merged together in 1914. One for easy administration and second for selfish economic considerations. The merger was done without consultation of these various independent, ethnically diverse groups, to enhance proper adequate economic exploitation of the country. The parsimonious British government who lacking the necessary personnel to administer this vast territory, applied the policy of indirect rule whereby the British officials ran these territories through their indigenous rulers. The Nigerian people were lumped together, forced into an unholy wedlock and denied the privilege to accept or reject this marriage of convenience.

In the south, the influence of Christianity and educational system flourished while in the north the indirect rule system of administration suited the emirate system already in place. The colonial administrators as much as possible shielded the area from western influence and civilization mission of the Christians. The north was not to be contaminated. Few traces of the modern world in education and economic life were allowed to intrude in the north. The disparity was so conspicuous that in 1949 when Sarduna travelled to Lagos he was so appalled by what he saw. He commented that "the whole place was alien to our ideas and we found the members of the other regions might well belong to another world as far as we are concerned"<sup>2</sup>. Such disparity was to ensure that the British

government as was with other colonial powers in Africa found it more convenient and interesting to play one ethnic group against another. As Okpoko and Onuoha aptly stated that:

The colonial administrators saw more 'backward' peoples as less rebellious and therefore encouraged them to achieve greater height vis-a-vis the groups to be adjudged 'advanced'. This attitude succeeded only in promoting mutual suspicion and ethnic intolerance<sup>3</sup>.

The Northerners were because of their traditional political structure more pliant to political institutions unlike the Southerners. The British administration quickly favoured the North over the South. The 1914 merger has its own shortcomings too as finding a constitutional arrangement that satisfied such diverse interests became a herculean task. The Richard constitution of 1946 became a compromise and further regionalised the country. The 1951 constitution lasted for only three years while the 1954 constitution granted each region its own government, assembly and public service and allowed them to move separately towards self-government<sup>4</sup>. The West and East attained self-government in 1957 but had to wait till 1959 for the North to catch up. The independence constitution provided for a federal structure as Meredith observed that the constitution was:

regarded as an effective compromise balancing regional interests, though it left the North, because of the size of its population, in a commanding position, with a potential stranglehold over the political process, capable of dominating the combined weight of the other two regions<sup>5</sup>.

However, Nigeria gained independence in 1960 with a notably sense of optimism. Unlike Mozambique and Guinea that their colonial overlords- Portugal and France trained only a few personnel to take over the mantle of leadership, Nigeria did not lack the requisite manpower but missed experienced technocrats at the attainment of independence. By virtue of her size, population and resources, Nigeria was marked out as one of Africa's emerging power. Although, Independence did not usher in the most anticipated unity and harnessed natural endowment of the country. Shortly, after independence, the war drum began to beckon for separation which plunged the country into an unforgettable war.

### **The Unpatriotic Calls to Dissolve the Union**

The call for disintegration of Nigeria dates back to the era of nationalist movements in Nigeria. Many ethnic groups in Nigeria had called for the divorce of this union. From pioneers of independence movements to this present generation the agitations for separatism had continued unabated. In the early 1940s at the peak of nationalism, some already lost faith in this union called Nigeria. Comments and polemics to stymie against this union are always rife. In 1948, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa who was to become the Prime Minister of Nigeria commented that:

since 1914 the British government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any signs of willingness to unite... Nigerian unity is only a British invention<sup>6</sup>.

Likewise, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who dominated Western Nigerian politics for more than 30 years wrote in a book published in 1947:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh" or French. The word Nigerian is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not<sup>7</sup>.

These were some of the outburst of the great leaders of independence movement who had overwhelming followers who looked up to them to steer the ship of this country to a unified anchor. Such comments rather than unified tend to deepen the orgy of disunity and our differences. The differences in culture and political institutions of the various groups added to ethnic and religious tensions and rivalries. The crack in this union has been noticeable since the merger in 1914. Even the colonial administrators after Lugard shared such pessimistic view about the indissolubility of the Nigerian state. The British administrators from 1922-1948 saw that the amalgamation was never intended to unite the various component units. They did not anticipate that a united and independent Nigeria could emerge for a very long time. Raymond Leslie Buell who wrote the forward in Awolowo's book had placed it a century away<sup>8</sup>. In another occasion, Margery Perham concluded that: the day when Nigeria from being a name written on a map by Sir George Goldie and an administrative framework put together by Lord Lugard becomes a true federation still more a nation is still far away<sup>9</sup>.

The above predictions still hunt and live with Nigeria as a nation. 100 years after, the search for unity has eluded the country. The call for dissolution resonates at every corner given impetus to the mushrooming of ethnic and religious insurgency. Nigeria was admittedly the artificial creation of the British and was made up of a large number of small, unintegrated tribal and clannish units<sup>10</sup>. British policy nevertheless helped to maintain the *status quo*. The most important single feature of the British policy was the effort made to preserve the Muslim North in its original and unspoilt condition of Islamic purity. This was done by excluding Christian missionaries and limiting Western education, by denying Northern leaders representation in the Central Legislative Council during the period of 1923-47 and by minimizing the contact between the Northern peoples and the more sophisticated and nationally minded Southerners temporarily resident in the north<sup>11</sup>. All these aspects of British policy and others tended to perpetuate the individuality and separateness of the north. To further widen the gap between these groups, the Land and Native rights Ordinance of 1910 was used to limit the activities of Southern traders, businessmen and especially lawyers and missionaries in the Northern region. The Northern authorities according to Okwudiba Nnoli:

believed that the liberal ideas of the Southerners were capable of undermining the authority of the emirs and therefore, destroying that alliance between the Fulani ruling class and the colonial administration which Lugard regarded as crucial for colonial exploitation<sup>12</sup>.

This ordinance inadvertently discouraged the free and uncontrolled immigration of Southerners to the North who might undermine the traditional authority. Those Southerners who were able to pass the hurdle were housed in segregated areas away from the uncontaminated indigenous population, known variously as Sabon Gari.

They set up special quarters for the immigrants from south. For example in Zaria as in some other parts of north, the colonial policy led to several different settlements. These settlements are grouped into three:

- (1) the walled city- this was housing the indigenous population.
- (2) (2) Tudun Wada- this was created by the British to house Northerners who were not Indigenous to the town.
- (3) (3) SabonGari-this was for what the colonial administrators called 'native foreigners'<sup>13</sup>.

These were mainly Southerners. These settlements as observed by Sir Rex Niven were a drastic mistake. According to him, it meant that they became specially segregated communities instead of being made to mix in with the general run of the population<sup>14</sup>. This structure has made it possible that if any ethnic group were pencilled down for attacks in the North, they know where to be found. On the other hand, if the colonial overlords had ensured, advocated and created an environment of greater integration, maybe the calamities that have bedevilled this country since independence could be averted.

The various constitutional developments ranging from Clifford to Lyttleton constitutions were meant to widen the gap among the various component units. Hugh Clifford in 1920 made it clear that his administration would seek to secure to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality, its chosen form of government and the peculiar political and social institutions which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and accumulated experiences of generations of its forbears<sup>15</sup>. This kind of statement laid greater emphasis upon greater ethnic separation. There is little doubt that such as above statement puts a question mark on the idea of 1914 amalgamation. This equally complicated the task of welding these diverse ethnic elements into a Nigerian nation. Thus, the cry for dissolution.

Another factor that aggravated the cry for dissolution is uneven development among the various groups. Nigeria was not created as a complete whole but rather a composite political unit which was merged in 1914. As a result, western influence was unevenly impinged upon the people of Nigeria. It was from Lagos that western influence spread into western region from 1860s. The result of the protective policies of George Goldie, Lord Lugard and their successors were that such influences had very little impact upon the Muslim North. These spatial differences in western penetration in the areas of education, communications, sanitation facilities, hospitals, public works, housing and other aspects of modern civilization had bred ethnic competition and rivalry between the late comers and early starters. The result was that as Nigeria moved towards self-government, some politically conscious leaders became aware of the positions of the groups and region on such westernizing influence. The effect was that this unleashed competitiveness on the parts of these groups who were low on the scale. They strove harder to fill the gap or even overtake them. According to Coleman: unevenness in development sharpened the awareness of group and regional differentiation which in turn intensified intergroup and interregional competition and tension<sup>16</sup>. The tensions became acute between the three dominant ethnic groups. Yoruba and non-Yoruba, Muslim versus Christian and between the dominant ethnic groups and minority within the same region. Uneven development has given rise to call for the creation of more states, greater autonomy, and

resource control and in most extreme cases dissolution or divorce as youths of this generation usually say.

Cultural nationalism has equally widened the gap of unity. The earlier writers of history of Nigerian concentrated only on their region and not on Nigeria as a whole. Before 1950s, books written by the educated elites were meant to extol their various nationalities. They tend to extol their various, socio-cultural and political past. This more or less engendered individualism to the utter neglect of national feeling. As a result, it projected regional integration to the detriment of national integration.

Corruption, agitation for resource control, kidnapping, electoral malpractices, ethnic and religious insurgency and above all the inept leadership had marred the corporate existence of Nigeria. The dominant question or interest at the end of every election has always been from where the president came from: north or south. The corruption which brought unequal distribution of wealth has made political offices a lucrative business. The easiest way to make money for oneself and his/her cronies was to occupy any political office. The political arena had become a contest for scarce resources. The political leaders see political office as an opportunity to accumulate wealth and patronage with which to improve both their personal and their party's fortune. This according to Meredith was a scenario where using public resources, party and government bosses were able to reward their supporters and friends with jobs, contracts, loans, scholarship, public amenities, indeed any favour that came within their purview<sup>17</sup>. Power itself in effect came to rest on the ability to bribe. Stealing of state funds and subsequent diversion to private account has become a tradition. As long as a thief is from a particular region, the members of his ethnic group will defend him. The state was regarded as a foreign institution that could be used for personal and community gain without any sense of shame or need for accountability. Plunders of the government treasury were often excused on the grounds that they have taken their share<sup>18</sup>. "Tribalism" became the ideology of politics as plunderers were there to take the 'national cake' of their particular regions.

This unequal distribution of resources in Nigeria gives rise to intense competition and reinforced by the attitude to social relations. The resultant effect as opined by Okwudibia Nnoli, was struggle of individuals and groups not to be consigned to the bottom of the ladder. Inequality has anti-social effects. Competition rather than cooperation predominates in human interaction and hostility is the dominant feature of such competition<sup>19</sup>.

### **Mushrooming of Ethnic and Religious Militias**

Abject poverty, lack of infrastructure, high rate of unemployment, corruption, inept leadership, insurgency, ethno-religious conflicts are among the many hydra-headed problems in Nigeria that had given rise to ethnic and religious insurgency. Aside the problems mentioned above, ethnic and religious insurgency have taken its toll on the corporate existence of Nigeria. Religious insurgency has taken a new dimension since the extra-judicial murder of the leader of the dreaded Boko Haram in 2009, Muhammed Yusuf. Other ethnic organisations were Odua Peoples Congress, (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Arewa Peoples Congress (APC), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), and Niger-Delta Youths among others.

The masses are frustrated, bitter and angry. The battle cry is marginalisation and there are no ethnic group that cannot point to scores of cruel and harsh atrocities committed against its people. The

Nigerian state has become deaf and dumb to the woes that have befallen its citizenry. Insecurity, ritual killing, kidnapping, armed banditry, riots erupt like mushrooms all over the country. The failure of the Nigerian state to be equitable to all, to protect lives and property of its citizens and to give every citizen a sense of belonging has led to the recent upsurge of ethnic and religious insurgency across the country. As Obi-Ani noted that after several years of grumbling, petitioning and protesting against injustices, many ethnic groups have decided to take their destiny in their own hands<sup>20</sup>. Some of the grievances range from unjust revenue allocation formula, lack of federal presence, electoral malpractices, political emasculation, inept leadership, the denial of appointment into choice federal ministries and parastatals and so on.

### **Conclusion**

One hundred years after amalgamation the basis of the union is still being questioned. It is self-evident that the structure is weak. The architects of nation-building has been abandoned. Impostors have taken over the realm. No modern nation state survives on injustice. The United State of America was revived after the severe economic depression of the 1930s with the social security benefit for her citizens. The apostles of capitalism (Britain, France, Holland etc) have introduced one form of welfare scheme or the other for their citizens. What has Nigeria done for millions of her people 100 years after? The answer is nothing! It is ludicrous that in Nigeria one needs to generate ones electricity, sink one's bore hole, and very soon pave one's road if one needs to drive on a smooth road.

It is this systemic decay, hopelessness and injustice that have given birth to insurgency, militancy and ethnic Chauvinism around the country. Today Nigeria youths have been brainwashed into taking up arms against their fatherland. A part of the country has virtually been made ungovernable by Boko Haram insurgents that use terror to overwhelm fellow citizen. School children have been abducted while some have been murdered in their sleep. Fellow compatriots have been beheaded, maimed, kidnapped, and displaced with our leaders unable to check the menace. This same group is capturing towns and hoisting their flag of infamy. Their activities have made Maitatsine of the 1980s a child's play. Villagers now sleep with both eyes open for fear of the Boko Haram while the government who had sworn to protect them virtually left them to their fate. The nation's scarce resources are being diverted to contain this menace rather than being utilized for the betterment of our people.

However, despite all these anomalies, Nigeria is neither a mistake of 1914 British invention nor a mere geographical expression. We must redesign the country with the necessary supporting pillars of justice, equity and good governance. It must start with good leadership as Chinua Achebe after dissecting the problems with Nigeria concluded that it was a matter of leadership. Every nation state experienced these teething problems. Italy was once dismissed as a mere geographical expression until two formidable personages incarnated in their country: Garibaldi and Cavour. The same was applied to the German people until Otto Von Bismarck appeared on the stage and united them into a force to be reckoned with in Europe. Nigerians are of one racial stock-black race. Their cases have never been like the Americans with different racial stock but have been able to rule the world and become a power to be reckoned with in the comity of nations. The citizens see themselves first as Americans unlike Nigeria, where one is first seen from his ethnic prism before being a Nigerian. As Coleman observed that:

The majority of Nigerians, when queried about their homeland, will usually identify themselves with the name of their division or of the province in which it is located. It is not unlike the identification of an America with his home state<sup>21</sup>

He went further to state that:

there are many nations in the world which began as 'geographical expressions' inhabited by peoples of widely different cultural background and yet subsequently achieved nationhood under a unified administration imposed either by a dominant group within or by an alien invader from without.<sup>22</sup>

In Nigeria, the alien invader was Britain but one is appalled that after one hundred years, Nigerians collectively cannot achieve nationhood. We still need the incarnation of visionary leaders to take the country to that Promised Land. Those fanning the embers of disunity should have a rethink. We have found love across ethnic or social division, trustworthy business partners outside our ethnic or regional cleavages and political associates beyond the compass of geography. Our leaders should promote peace, unity, love and justice among fellow citizens. As the late Nnamdi Azikiwe opined that the:

various communities or nationalities inhabiting this county have great traditions and a rich heritage of cultures which if pooled together, can make Nigeria great and enable her to take her rightful place among the family of nations<sup>23</sup>

Division is not as easy as we mouth every day. The recent event in United Kingdom in which Scotland voted on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014 on whether to pull out of United Kingdom is a case. Anybody who followed the event witnessed the rise in their stock market after those who opted to remain in the United Kingdom won the referendum. It shows that they are stronger when united.

As Abraham Lincoln in his first-Inaugural speech observed thus:

Physically speaking, we cannot separate. We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced, and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them<sup>24</sup>.

## References

1. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of the Continent since Independence*, (Britain, CBS Company, 2011), 76.
2. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa . . .*, 75.
3. P.U Okpoko and J. Onuoha, (eds), "Issues in Ethnic Nationalism and Democratic Consolidation" in J. Onuoha, *Ethnic Nationalism and Democratic Consolidation: Perspectives from Nigeria and the United States of America*, (Nsukka: Great Ap Express Publishers Ltd,2004), 3.
4. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa...77*.
5. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa...77*.
6. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa...77*

7. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa...77*
8. J.S Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to nationalism*,( Nigeria; Broburg and Wistrom, 1986), 321.
9. J.S Coleman, *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 321.*
10. J.S. Coleman *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 322.*
11. J.S. Coleman, *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 322*
12. O. Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, Enugu; Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978, 148.
13. O.Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, ... 146.*
14. R. Niven, *The War of Nigerian Unity, 1967-1970*, (London: Evans Publishers, 1970).
15. O.Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, ... 150.*
16. J.S. Coleman... *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 322.*
17. M. Meredith, *The State of Africa... 77*
18. Obi-Ani, P. “Ethnic Militias in Quest of Social Justice in Nigeria” in Jonah Onuoha and Pat Uche Okpoko (eds.) *Ethnic Nationalism and Democratic Consolidation: Perspectives from Nigeria and United States of America*,( Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd, 2004), 181.
19. O.Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, ... 148.*
20. Obi-Ani, P. “Ethnic Militias in Quest of Social Justice in Nigeria” ,...181.
21. J.S. Coleman... *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 330-331.*
22. J.S. Coleman... *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 330-331.*
23. J.S. Coleman... *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism... 328.*
24. Abraham Lincoln’s first-Inaugural speech