

# **ETHNIC CHAUVINISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL.**

**Emmanuel Adetokunbo OGUNDELE**

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,  
Augustine University, P.M.B. 1010, Ilara-Epe 106101, Lagos State  
Nigeria.  
emmanuel.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

## **ABSTRACT**

Ethnic chauvinism remains one of the most significant challenges confronting Nigeria's political system in the post-colonial era. The influence of ethnicity on Nigeria's political landscape, economic progress, and overall development cannot be over-emphasized. A viable political system for Nigeria must recognize and incorporate the essence of ethnic diversity and cultural differences. As a nation characterized by cultural heterogeneity, multi-ethnic groups, linguistic diversity, and religious plurality, Nigeria faces the complexity of harmonizing these differences. Each ethnic group operates with distinct ideologies that shape their perspectives on societal development. However, the structural development of Nigeria is hindered by the persistence of ethnic chauvinism, which impedes equitable access to developmental opportunities. This paper, employing philosophical appraisal and critical argumentation, examines the implications of ethnic chauvinism and proposes strategies for fostering sustainable national development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Post-Colonial Period, Ethnicity, Development, Culture, heterogeneity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa," is home to an estimated population of above 235,208,544 individuals (Worldometers, 2025). The history of Nigeria's development cannot be discussed without referencing the post-colonial period—a period characterized by political instability, military rule, and recurring themes of ethno-religious and ethno-regional patronage. Nigeria, as a nation-state, is richly diverse, encompassing over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 indigenous languages (Oluwadele, Adediran & Olaogun, 2023, 62). However, this diversity has significantly influenced political, economic, and social decision-making, often hindering the country's progress. Ethnic allegiances have coloured decision-making processes, obstructing the implementation of policies that prioritize collective national development which has not been a force for good. Effective governance requires objectivity and inclusivity in political and administrative affairs, yet Nigeria has continually struggled with poor governance, corruption, and ethnically motivated patronage. It is evident that "The Nigerian state is a victim of high-level corruption causing the retardation of national development and a ceaseless cycle of crisis arising from peoples' discontent against the government" (Fagbadegbo, 2007, 32)—all major contributors to its underdevelopment.

Nigeria's classification as a less-developed nation stems from its failure to meet the fundamental criteria of a developed country. These criteria include territorial integration, national security, protection of citizens' rights and freedoms, popular franchise, and the orderly transfer of political power. Socio-political and economic stability is critical to achieving meaningful development, which, in turn, is essential for the growth and sustainability of any nation. Every society operates with an ideology that serves as the foundation for its

development. To enhance meaningful progress, effective ideological strategies must be established and implemented.

This paper examines the impact of ethnic chauvinism on Nigeria's political and economic systems, identifying it as a root cause of the nation's underdevelopment. Furthermore, it explores pathways for fostering development within a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria. The discussion begins by analyzing the conceptual meanings of key terms to lay a foundation for the discourse.

## **ETHNIC GROUP**

Scholars have long attempted to define the concept of "Ethnic", yet no universally accepted definition exists. Various approaches to the term have been considered over time. Broadly, an Ethnic group is understood as a social organization bonded by shared interests, values, and beliefs. It refers to a group of individuals with common characteristics, such as religion, language, or culture, that create a sense of unity. Specifically, culture—comprising shared values, beliefs, practices, norms, customs, traditions, rituals, and lifestyles—is central to the identity of an ethnic group, as it binds members together, often alongside a shared language.

Cohen (1974) defines an ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members distinguish themselves from others within a society by shared features such as kinship, religion, and linguistic ties. Nnoli (1978) describes an ethnic group as a social formation defined by the communal nature of its boundaries, emphasizing language as a crucial variable in ethnic identity. According to Nnoli, an ethnic group is characterized by members who identify with one another through shared ancestry, language, and culture, and who are similarly recognized by outsiders. This shared identity is further defined by the group's ascription to a common bloodline or ancestry—whether real or imagined. Regardless of a group's numerical size or geographical scope, the unifying psychological awareness of a shared origin fosters solidarity and a sense of belonging among its members (Cletus, 2012, 217).

From these definitions, it can be argued that the core elements of ethnicity include shared language, geographical proximity, culture, religion, traditions, ancestry, and morality. These shared factors bind members of an ethnic group together and shape their identity. However, this strong internal cohesion often leads to a sense of exclusivity, where members regard others as outsiders. This perception can, in turn, foster discrimination and tension due to the distinct values and characteristics that unify the group. This has happened in Nigeria and many other countries in Africa.

## **CHAUVINISM**

Chauvinism is generally defined as the strong and unreasonable belief that one's own country or race or even sex is superior to all others. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it refers to an extreme form of nationalism or prejudice, often characterized by an unyielding loyalty to one's own group, whether based on nationality, ethnicity, or race. The Longman Dictionary describes it as an unreasoning belief in the superiority of one's race or country over others, while Merriam-Webster extends the definition to include undue partiality or attachment to one's group or place. Chauvinism, at its core, serves as an ego-enhancer—establishing other

groups as "inferior" and thereby positioning one's own group as "superior" by default (Ramet, 1994, 122). Chauvinism was the result of experiences that had severed the national consciousness from the national soil, alienating nationalism from the physical reality of the country and detaching pride and loyalty from tangible achievements represented in both the material and spiritual aspects of the nation. Instead, chauvinism redirected this sense of identity toward an abstract notion of the "soul," a quality believed to be universally shared by all members of the same people through the mere accident of birth (Arendt, 1945, 459).

At its core, chauvinism functions as a psychological mechanism for inflating the ego—defining other groups as "inferior" and, in doing so, positioning one's own group as "superior" by default. This constructed sense of superiority draws strength from the imagined uniqueness of the groups identity, further alienating it from the shared human experience.

Ethnic chauvinism specifically refers to this mindset within the context of ethnicity, where individuals prioritize the interests of their ethnic group above the well-being of others, often leading to division and conflict. Such chauvinism tends to foster an exclusivist mentality that diminishes the value of other groups, creating barriers to national cohesion and progress.

Ethnic chauvinism is a product of an exaggerated or unreasonable belief in the supremacy of one's own ethnic group, which manifests in the desire for national dominance. It often fosters exclusion, where ethnic identities are rigidly defined, and there is little tolerance for diversity within the nation. While patriotism in its purest form is meant to unify, the extreme version of patriotism can be twisted into chauvinism, as loyalty becomes an absolute, unquestioning force. This shift turns a positive sense of belonging into a harmful tool for exclusion.

Patriotism, on the other hand, is the love of one's country, identification with it, and a special concern for its well-being and that of its people. Unlike chauvinism, patriotism seeks to promote unity, fostering a shared sense of belonging that transcends ethnic, regional, or religious divides. However, patriotism exists on a spectrum, ranging from extreme to moderate forms. Extreme patriotism, often associated with strong or robust patriotism, can mirror the excesses of chauvinism. It is characterized by an unconditional loyalty to one's country, summed up by the phrase, "My country, right or wrong." In this sense, extreme patriotism can lead to pure nationalism's unquestioning defense of one's country, regardless of the ethical implications of its actions. Igor Primoratz argues that this form of patriotism, framed in terms of absolute loyalty, can be dangerously close to chauvinism, where national pride veils critical thought and reflection.

In contrast, moderate patriotism is characterized by a more nuanced attachment to one's country. Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that patriotism can be a moral force when it operates within constraints—both procedural and object-related—that ensure legitimacy and prevent harm. This more balanced form of patriotism recognizes the imperfections within one's nation and supports its progress through constructive engagement and critical reflection.

In the context of ethnic chauvinism, a healthy form of patriotism can be a powerful antidote. Where ethnic chauvinism divides, patriotism can unite. A patriotic love to the nation that acknowledges and embraces its diverse ethnic and cultural groups fosters social cohesion and national identity, which is critical for development. Unlike ethnic chauvinism, which prioritizes the interests of one group over others, patriotism for a unified nation emphasizes collective well-being and mutual respect across different groups.

Patriotism, when practiced in moderation, offers a vision of the nation where all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background, are valued equally. It encourages a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic boundaries, inviting individuals to identify with their country as a whole rather than through the narrow lens of ethnicity. In this sense, patriotism acts as a corrective force, counterbalancing the negative impact of ethnic chauvinism by emphasizing shared values, national progress, and the importance of inclusion in building a better future for all citizens.

## **ETHNIC CONFLICT**

Conflict refers to a clash or disagreement, often violent, between two or more opposing groups or individuals. Ethnic conflict arises when individuals or groups seek to defend their ethnic identity, often fueled by unwarranted bias and excessive devotion to one's own group. Such devotion becomes a potential source of inter-ethnic violence and strife. Ethnic conflict can be defined as a struggle between two or more ethnic groups, often characterized by battles over subordination, rebellion, or hegemony (Friday, 2014). While the root causes may be political, social, economic, or religious, participants typically fight to assert their ethnic group's position within society. The origins of ethnic conflict, whether internal (societal) or external (physical), can be traced to historical rivalries and structural inequalities (Ray, 2012, 13). Ethnic conflict may manifest in two primary forms: violent and non-violent.

Violent ethnic conflict involves actions fueled by ethnic hatred and animosity such as the case with the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda. Such conflicts are often driven by social and political inequalities and result in direct assaults. In these cases, individuals or groups take up arms to attack and kill members of opposing ethnic groups. Violent ethnic conflicts are particularly destructive, leading to significant loss of life, injuries, and widespread devastation. Their peril lies in their ability to inflict long-term harm on both human lives and societal structures.

On the other hand, non-violent ethnic conflict is less destructive and focuses on achieving significant political or cultural objectives based on ethnicity. Unlike violent conflict, non-violent ethnic clashes do not involve direct physical attacks or weaponized aggression. These conflicts often stem from political rivalries, such as leaders vying for power based on ethnic affiliations. While such conflicts may escalate tensions, they generally result in fewer casualties and less infrastructural damage compared to violent ethnic conflicts.

Both forms of ethnic conflict, violent and non-violent, underscore the complex interplay of social, political, and cultural factors that drive group tensions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for mitigating ethnic conflict and fostering peaceful coexistence among diverse communities

## **DEVELOPMENT**

Development refers to a comprehensive process aimed at improving the overall quality of life for individuals and communities. It goes beyond mere economic growth to include equitable access to essential services such as healthcare, education, housing, and other basic needs. True development is measured by its ability to reduce poverty, unemployment, and inequality while promoting social and economic advancement.

It encompasses the reorganization and improvement of an entire societal and economic system. This process is multidimensional, affecting economic, political, social, cultural, and even religious aspects of life. It seeks to enhance the capacity of individuals and communities to utilize resources effectively, ensuring better living standards. Additionally, development is a continuous effort to uplift the material, social, and psychological conditions of people, fostering progress and well-being for all members of society.

Alex Gboyega (2023, 6-7) views development as an idea encompassing all efforts to improve human existence in every aspect. It implies enhancing the material well-being of all citizens, not just the wealthy and powerful, in a sustainable manner that ensures today's consumption does not jeopardize future generations. Furthermore, it seeks to reduce poverty and inequality, enhance physical security and livelihoods, and expand life opportunities. Naomi (1995), on her part, believes that development is usually taken to involve not only economic growth, but also some notion of equitable distribution, provision of health care, education, housing and other essential services all with a view to improving the individual and collective quality of life.

From the definitions above, it is evident that development encompasses the administrative, economic, social, and cultural activities of human life. It can be concluded that development occurs when these activities lead to the betterment of individuals and society, improving the conditions of human existence in all dimensions.

## **INFLUENCE OF ETHNIC CHAUVINISM IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria gained prominence in 1914 following the amalgamation of its three regions: the West, North, and East. The country is culturally heterogeneous, with approximately 250 ethnic groups, including nearly 200 in the Middle Belt alone. Each ethnic group occupies a distinct territorial area considered its homeland. Four ethnic groups—the Hausa and Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East, and the Yoruba in the West—constitute nearly half of Nigeria's total population. Historically, these groups dominated the three regions of the Federation of Nigeria, with the majorities occupying central positions of political and economic power, while minorities were relegated to the peripheries.

Despite being endowed with vast human and material resources; Nigeria's development has been significantly hindered by ethnic divisions. These divisions have resulted in inequitable state policies, pervasive corruption, social decay, and widespread poverty. Ethnic politics, in particular, has posed a major obstacle to Nigeria's social, economic, and political progress. Before independence, the quest for self-rule was overshadowed by the struggle for ethnic dominance (Kalejaiye & Alliyu, 2023). Political parties during this period were often formed along ethnic lines, transitioning from cultural organizations into political entities. For instance, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), established in 1951, evolved from the cultural group *Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa* and was dominated by the Hausa/Fulani under leaders such as Sir Ahmadu Bello and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Similarly, the Action Group (AG), the political wing of the Yoruba cultural organization *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, was formed in the same year under the leadership of Obafemi Awolowo. The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), formed in 1944, was initially regarded as a national party but later became associated with the Igbo-dominated Eastern region under the leadership of Nnamdi Azikiwe.

Ethnic tensions have historically fueled major political crises in Nigeria. The Kano riots of 1953 and the census crisis of 1962/63 are notable examples. The Kano riots were sparked by a motion for self-government, proposed by Anthony Enahoro of the Action Group, which sought independence from Britain by 1956. Northern members of parliament opposed the motion, viewing it as an attack on their unpreparedness for independence. This led to a series of riots when Action Group representatives visited Kaduna in May 1953. Similarly, the 1962/63 census crisis arose when the Eastern and Mid-Western regions rejected the census results, claiming they were inflated and marred by irregularities.

Since independence, ethnic politics has exacerbated corruption and stifled national unity. Ethnic loyalty often shields corrupt elites from accountability, as citizens hesitate to expose wrongdoing by members of their ethnic group. According to Jacob (2012), "official corruption is at its peak due to ethnic politics and social conflicts," with ethnic affiliations frequently obstructing justice. This "ethno-corruption" undermines economic development, deters foreign investment, and perpetuates poverty, unemployment, and poor infrastructure. Former President Ibrahim Babangida (2002) noted that social conflicts rooted in ethnic and religious divisions pose significant threats to security, investments, and overall economic confidence.

Ethnic chauvinism has further eroded trust among Nigeria's diverse groups, fostering division and weakening the spirit of nationalism. As Umezina (2012) argued in his paper *Ethnicity and Nigeria's Underdevelopment*, ethnic rivalry has hindered the emergence of competent, selfless leaders capable of advancing national development. Elections are often decided based on candidates' ethnic affiliations rather than merit, resulting in a political system dominated by individuals who prioritize ethnic interests over national progress.

This ethnically charged environment has led to favoritism in public service, particularly in regions like the North, where ethnic bias influences hiring practices and resource allocation. For instance, in some cases, individuals who do not speak the Hausa language face discrimination in public offices. Such practices perpetuate inequality and reinforce the divisions that hinder Nigeria's development. For Nigeria to achieve meaningful progress, it must prioritize unity, foster trust among its diverse ethnic groups, and cultivate a national identity that transcends ethnic allegiances. Only then can the nation overcome the challenges posed by ethnic chauvinism and unlock its full developmental potential.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. For political, economic, and social development to thrive, certain prerequisites must be met. These include territorial integration, national security, the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms, popular franchise, and the ability of citizens to elect leaders through free and fair elections. Furthermore, the orderly transfer of power is essential, as is appointing individuals to government positions based on merit rather than cultural or ethnic affiliations. Merit-based appointments eliminate bias and enhance efficiency in governance.
2. In Nigeria, the absence of territorial integration and national security hampers development. Citizens are the nation's greatest asset, and their well-being is the foundation for progress. Corruption remains one of the primary obstacles to Nigeria's development, permeating every aspect of the state. To curb corruption, Nigeria must enforce strict measures to make theft impossible and ensure that prosecutions are swift and certain. The judiciary must embrace a 21st-century approach to justice, particularly

in cases threatening national security. A developed nation must prioritize advancements in its political, economic, and social systems.

3. Nigeria operates a presidential system of government within a federal framework, where power is decentralized among federal, state, and local tiers of government. However, a reevaluation of these systems is necessary for meaningful development. The multi-party system currently in place is plagued by a lack of ideology, with parties often prioritizing the interests of the elite rather than the general populace. Adopting a two-party system, where parties are built on clear ideologies and principles, could enhance political development. Additionally, rotating political power among ethnic groups at the federal level could foster unity and healthy competition, ensuring all groups have a sense of belonging. This approach could reduce political crises and promote national cohesion.
4. Key principles such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and checks and balances must be upheld in Nigeria's governance framework. The rule of law emphasizes the supremacy of the law over all individuals, ensuring equality and the protection of individual rights. Separation of powers divides responsibilities among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, preventing the abuse of power. Checks and balances further ensure accountability and fair play, preventing any arm of government from overstepping its boundaries.
5. A national conference could play a pivotal role in addressing Nigeria's challenges. For example, the 2014 National Conference brought representatives from various regions to discuss pressing national issues and propose solutions. Such platforms foster unity and coordination among members of the federation. Additionally, reducing the salaries and allowances of public officeholders could redirect funds toward national development. Free and fair elections, devoid of vote-buying and malpractice, are essential for fostering trust in the democratic process.
6. Economic development in Nigeria requires adopting a clear ideology, such as a mixed economy. This system combines elements of capitalism and socialism, allowing private individuals and the state to share responsibility for production, distribution, and exchange. Capitalism fosters rapid development by encouraging innovation and private enterprise, while socialism ensures equitable wealth distribution. This dual approach could address Nigeria's economic challenges and drive sustainable growth.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has analyzed the challenges to Nigeria's development, emphasizing the role of ethnicity in shaping the political system. The prioritization of ethnic interests over national interests has hindered progress. To achieve meaningful development, Nigeria must embrace unity in diversity, accountability, and transparency. Leaders must be visionary, selfless, patriotic, and free of ethnic bias. Proper education and a commitment to national unity should be the government's focus. While it must be admitted that these shortcomings will not be easy to overcome, there is the urgent need to make serious efforts to start addressing them now if our potentials are to be realized. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more developed and harmonious Nigeria.

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