

## **ETHNICITY AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN NIGERIA: INSIGHTS FROM JOHN 4:9**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ethnicity often has a negative connotation. That is why it is often associated with nepotism. Yet, ethnicity can be a marker of identity. This is evident in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. In this case, one comes to terms with the interplay between the Jewish and the Samaritan identity markers with all the history behind these terms. While it was one of the barriers to the interaction between Jesus and the woman, it was later transcended without being cancelled, through the woman's encounter of Jesus. The study shall employ historical critical method in analysing ethnicity as one factor in the constitution of identity capable of negative effects. The paper concludes by drawing attention to and applying key insights from Jesus' encounter with the woman at Jacob's well, to issues of Nigerian national integration and development.*

**Key Words:** Ethnicity, identity, Jacob's well, national integration, national development

### **INTRODUCTION**

A stanza in the first Nigerian national anthem, which was composed and set to music by two British women – Ms. Lilian Jean Williams and Frances Berda – acknowledged that “though tribes and tongues may differ, in brotherhood we stand.” (Kukah, 2017). This highlights the diversity of Nigerian peoples. Since the amalgamation of the northern and the southern protectorates in 1914, the challenge has remained the same: how to build the diversity of peoples into one nation. In 1946, Nigeria was divided into three regions with their respective governments. The various constitutional reviews from 1949-1954 between the colonial masters and the nationalists were geared towards evolving a structure of government for post-colonial Nigeria. It is also on record that the motion for Independence of Nigeria moved by Action Group's Chief Anthony Enahoro in 1956 was amended by the representatives from the Northern Region to read that independence should be granted when practicable. No wonder then that the diversity of post-colonial Nigeria was acknowledged and enshrined in the National Anthem. Brotherhood and sisterhood were highlighted as the way forward. Granted that the National Anthem was bequeathed to Nigeria by the colonialist, it gave a fair assessment of the situation on ground.

In 1978, a new National Anthem was composed. This addressed Nigerians as compatriots and invited all, Nigeria's call to obey. The situation on ground as regards diversity and nation building had not changed much. Indeed, the Nigeria-Biafra civil war exposed the tension and fragility of the project of national integration. Maybe, the political calculation was that by playing down on the diversity, that it will go away on its own. This does not seem to be the case. The calls for restructuring of the national polity and rise of secessionists movements in different parts of the country indicate that the management of the diversity of the Nigerian peoples remains a challenge.

Diversity, difference and plurality are facts of life. Children of the same mother differ from each other. It is because of their difference from each other that their individual identities are constituted. Yam is yam because it is different from every other thing that is not yam. That which makes yam different from beans or plantain, for example, enables one to distinguish yam from beans and plantain. In other words, difference is a basic element in the constitution of any identity. At the social level, differences in language and other cultural elements constitute different peoples, ethnic groups, or tribes. Unfortunately, the differential relations between individuals and peoples are not drawn in a vacuum. Sometimes, they are drawn in opposition or in ways that denigrate groups. In other words, one must take into consideration the element of power and its differential in the constitution of the identities. To make difference, diversity, and plurality a means of enrichment and not a source of tension, one must find ways and means, on the one hand of engaging the stereotypes that preserve the oppositional and conflictual constitution of identity and then, on the other hand, relates these identities towards mutual respect and enrichment.

In this work, we shall engage the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. We shall use a historical-critical analysis of the story to map the identity politics at play in that interaction between the Jewish and the Samaritan identities as framed in First Century Palestine and as embodied in the persons of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. At the end of the story, Jesus and the Samaritan woman encountered each other at a level of depth. They penetrated the cultural stereotypes with its denigration of the Samaritans and interacted at the level of their humanity. This interaction was marked by respectful concern. The challenge is to learn from the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman lessons for the transformation of identities in the Nigerian context. As we do this, we acknowledge that the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman took place at a personal level. Society is not just an aggregation of individuals. Structural elements emerge when individuals interact. Therefore, these structural elements must be taken into consideration as regards the application of the lessons.

### **JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH THE SAMARITAN WOMAN – AN ANALYSIS**

One way to read the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is in the context of the transformation of a relationship and identities. On his way from Judaea to Galilee through Samaria, Jesus came to Sychar, a Samaritan town. Tired by the journey, Jesus sat down by the well. The writer of the Gospel indicated that it was about the sixth hour. That is about noon. The disciples had gone into the town to buy food. Then came a Samaritan woman to draw water. Jesus asked to be given something to drink. The woman's response – "how is it that you ask me, a Samaritan for something to drink?" – signals difficulty. The editorial commentary – "Jews of course, do not associate with Samaritans" (v.9) – indicate that the difficulty inheres on the identities that Jesus and the woman bear – Jewish and Samaritan.

The hostile relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans is recorded in the New Testament. In the Gospel of John 8:48, the Jews are presented as denying Jesus his Jewish identity and describing him as a Samaritan and possessed by the Devil. In the Gospel of Luke (9:51-52) a Samaritan village is reported to have been inhospitable to Jesus and his disciples because he was making his way to Jerusalem. In the Mishnah, (Niddah 4.1) it is recorded that the "daughters of Samaritans are menstruants from the cradle" (Daude, p.137). As menstruants from the cradle, Samaritans were seen as pollutants. The Samaritan woman's

retort to Jesus' request for something to drink can therefore be understood as flowing from either surprise at Jesus' request as flowing out of ignorance or gratitude at the kindness of recognizing her humanity. The flow of the conversation, however, shows that it is more appropriate to understand her question as surprise at his seemingly lack of knowledge. One can better appreciate how shocked and possibly scandalized the lawyer in Luke's Gospel would be when Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate who one's neighbour is. Above all, the parable contrasted many Jews negatively to this Samaritan.

The prejudice that coloured the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans is historical. Hebrew Scripture records the origin of the Samaritans in 2 Kings 17:24-41. Samaria was a city founded by Omri (c. 884 BC) and made the capital of the Northern Kingdom after the division of Israel into the Southern and the Northern Kingdoms. When Samaria fell in c. 721 BC., the Assyrian king deported the Israelites into Assyria and brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and resettled these in Samaria. This new population however did not know how to worship the local god. Consequently, lions were set on them which was killing the new occupants of the land. When he was informed, the king of Assyria commanded that one of the priests be sent back to teach the people how to worship the local god. When one of the priests who had lived in Bethel before the deportation was brought back, he taught the new inhabitants of Samaria, how to worship Yahweh. Yet, these people did not give up the worship of the gods of their lands of origin. The narrative about the Samaritans concluded thus: "these nationalities, then, worshipped Yahweh and served their idols as well, as did their children; and their children's children still behave today as their ancestors behaved in the past." (2 Kings 17:41).

It seems that the major issue that Jews have with Samaritans is religious. This is because in the history of the Israelites, non-Jews had been assimilated into the Jewish community. The example that comes to mind is Caleb the son of Japhunneh, the Kenizzite (Nm 32:12). He was one of the spies sent by Moses into the promised land. Although a Kenizzite, he was given a heritage in the promised land (Joshua 14:6-15). At least, this shows a precedent of assimilation into the people of Israel. But the Samaritans were not treated as such. Rather, there seems to be rivalry between them and the Jews. The question about the site for authentic worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim suggest that.

The above is the background to the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Both figures were narratively positioned and repositioned in the course of the interaction which also disrupted and reconfigured mental frames (Matthews V.H. 2010). By asking for something to drink, Jesus steps out of the comfort zone offered by the constitution of his identity as a Jew and the politics of this identity vis-à-vis that of the Samaritan. To the woman's reference to the cultural stereotype, Jesus invited her to consider a new possibility: "if you only knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you, 'give me something to drink,' you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water." (Jn 4:10). The rest of the encounter is geared towards unpacking what God was offering and who Jesus is. What God was offering to the woman is liberation, that is, freedom from the quest for love and meaning. One must, however, add that the fact that the woman had married five times and is living with the sixth, while evidence of a quest for love, does not suggest that she was a prostitute (Reeder, C.A. 2022). It is meant to emphasize that however much our hunger for love may be, an adequate response is embodied in Jesus. Patiently, the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus built up to this identification and

awareness. The unconditional acceptance given to the woman by Jesus afforded her the opportunity to perceive in him the liberation and meaning she was yearning for. On the basis of that she became convinced that he was the messiah and set off to inform other members of her community. The story ends by indicating that many Samaritans believed in Jesus on the strength of the woman's words of testimony. In other words, she became a disciples and brought other Samaritans to believe in Jesus (Pazdan, M.M., 1987). The story ends by observing that Jesus stayed with the Samaritans for two days.

In the above, one observes that the movement has come round full circle. From the initial oppositional and hostile pattern of relationship inherited from the past to an encounter that led to self-discovery to a transcendence that retained the difference but canceled the opposition between Jewish and Samaritan identities. This was made possible by a focus on existential issues.

### **THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN NIGERIA – A BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE GAZE**

That has been instances in Nigeria when ethnicity was not the primary consideration even as regards political representation. The first elected mayor of Enugu Municipal Council in 1956 was an Hausa, Mallam Umaru Altine. He was once the Secretary-General of the Zikist movement and contested under the N.C.N.C (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons). To show that his electoral victory was not primarily because of his party, he was re-elected as an independent candidate. Earlier in 1951, the N.C.N.C led by Nnamdi Azikiwe won the majority seat in the Western House. These show that there was a time when ethnic identity was not a huge factor in election to offices. Unfortunately, this has changed. In the second Republic, the political parties had regional bases and identified with the ethnic group of their leaders – NPN (the National Party of Nigeria) was perceived mainly as a party for the Northerners; UPN (Unity Party of Nigeria) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo was for the westerners and NPP (Nigerian Peoples Party) led by Chief Nnamdi Azikiwe was for the Easterners. Votes were also cast along ethnic lines. It is no wonder that General Babangida decreed only two parties into existence in the botched attempt to return Nigeria to democratic rule – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Party (NRC). The aim was among other things to neutralize the influence of ethnicity and other identity markers in politics. In hindsight, this experiment brought about the 1993 annulled elections that has been adjudged the fairest so far in Nigeria in which Alhaji M.K.O. Abiola was the apparent winner. It has to be added that the success of this experiment owed more to people's disaffection with the continued stay of the military in political power, than to the neutralization of identity politics.

In the politics of the Fourth Republic, ethnicity and identity politics have taken new dominant forms. There seems to be an unwritten rule about rotation of power between the geopolitical zones and also the sharing of the ticket among Christians and Muslims. What is playing out before the 2023 General Elections in the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) and the APC (All Progressives Congress) show the consequences of flouting this unwritten rule. The PDP is rocked by a crisis stemming from not zoning the presidency to the South and the APC by is Muslim-Muslim ticket. These show that ethnicity is still much at play in politics in Nigeria.

Ethnic politics in Nigeria can be traced to many factors. In line with the analysis of Peter Ekeh, it can be seen as the result of insufficient re-engineering of society by the Nationalists to emerge from colonial to post-colonial status. According to him, the Nationalists were

interested in ousting the colonial masters and stepping into their positions without questioning the colonial construction of the people as subjects and not as citizens on the one hand, and reworking the dominant elements of the primordial and the civil publics (Ekeh, 1975). At Independence, the Nationalists gained political power and control of the colonial state and its apparatus that had hitherto existed to extract wealth for the colonial masters. But they needed to gain legitimacy through elections which the colonial masters never needed. Thus, to gain and retain control of the State, politicians appealed to ethnic or religious identity to win the people. They cornered the resources of the State to buy and maintain the loyalty of the people, beginning with those they share close identities with. In the Nigerian instance, the first Military coup by some officers of the Nigeria Army was understood as an Igbo coup. This brought about reprisal attacks on the Igbo and this precipitated the Nigeria-Biafra Civil war.

Beside the colonial legacy, the State as a socio-political arrangement is an institutional innovation that introduced fundamental changes in the economic, political and cultural dynamics of a society. With the state there is a concentration of both allocative and authoritative resources which had never been seen in human history. The concentration of allocative resources means that state operators determine the direction of development, what vision to pursue, what projects to embark and where to site those projects. The concentration of authoritative resource shows that the operators of the state can decide on laws, through determining the legislative priorities and appointing members of the judiciary. In sum, capturing the state or having someone from one's group being at the centre where all the resources are shared is a noble project, especially in the Nigerian context where mechanisms for accountability for public office holders is very weak. The stakes are even higher in the Nigerian context. In the years of military rule, elements of federalism, such as regional autonomy with control over resources, security and development, were systematically removed in the mistaken belief that concentration of resources at the centre will bring about centripetal force and give rise to national integration. However, what this unitary federalism has achieved is to make competition for control of the centre fierce. The discovery of oil and the sharing of the oil revenue brought about a lack of incentive of the federating units to be committed to development. The calls for the restructuring of the Nigerian polity and also for secession can be traced to this dynamic. Paradoxically, these calls, at the face value, seem to be flow from ethnic sentiments. A closer analysis however shows that they are remonstrations against the dysfunctionality of the Nigerian polity and an insistence on a better Nigeria. Yet, as in a vicious cycle, ethnicity is one of the factors that muddy the water and thwart any move towards digging the country out of the hole she is in.

### **LEARNING FROM THE DYNAMICS OF THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN**

We have noted the difference between Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman and ethnicity within the political context of a state. The interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman can be likened to the interaction between a Fulani and a Yoruba for example, with inherited ideas about each other. It is easier for these individuals to sort out their identity differences and identifications than for a minority group in a dysfunctional democracy not to be feel marginalized and excluded, precisely on the basis of ethnicity, because it does not have the number to constitute a formidable force in any negotiation of its interest with the rest of the people. In other words, there are structural issues that exacerbate

ethnic sensitivity and politics especially in polities that have not evolved to be guided largely by the rule of law and strong institutional safeguards of the right of citizens.

The above notwithstanding, structures are put in place or dismantled through concerted efforts by individuals, especially when there are enough people campaigning for the change. For example, there are minority groups in many countries. But the enthronement of a governance system or structure in which the rights of everyone, irrespective of tribe or other accidents, reduces the politicization of ethnicity. Such a governance system is put in place by human beings who set out to build bridges across the divisions in their society. This brings us to a situation like the one between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The lesson of that encounter becomes helpful as regards the way forward.

As seen above, Jesus penetrated through the divisive ethnic positioning of the inherited narrative by gradually focusing on the existential situation of the woman. His request for something from her was the first bridge across the ethnic divide. The woman consistently tried to keep the discussion on the divisive and explosive issues surrounding the strained relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans, for example, the relationship between Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim. Jesus kept focusing the discussion on her, holding out to her the promise of a better and more fulfilled life. It was that gentle and loving attention to her and to her deepest and unvoiced need that made her acknowledge her as a prophet and became a missionary to her people. She rushed into the community to spread the news of her extraordinary encounter. This resulted in Jesus staying among the Samaritans for two days. Unlike in the story of the ten lepers who were cured of leprosy and only the Samaritan came back to express gratitude, where adversity made both Jews and the Samaritan accept each other as outcasts, the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman shows the reasoned acceptance of common belonging which does not cancel out but builds bridges across the ethnic divide.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ethnicity, as an identity marker, is neutral. Unfortunately, it can be drawn in an oppositional manner. This causes conflict, marginalization, and oppression. This dynamic had been there since the dawn of civilization. It was there during the time of Jesus as shown in the contempt in which the Samaritans were held. The emergence of the State as the form of organization of society concentrated both allocative and authoritative power in the State and the capture of State became a new quest. The introduction of democracy, understood in this context primarily in terms of the organization of elections as means of legitimation, made ethnic identification a tool for mobilization. This is exacerbated where due to weakness of socio-political institutions, the State and its enormous resources could be captured and personalized. This gives rise to corruption and social disruptions. In such a situation, the political class appeals to ethnicity to divert attention from the real cause of the social challenges. But as seen in the interaction of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the way to upturn the table is to seek to penetrate the ideological frame by addressing the existential needs of the people. In the light of the analysis above, it is interesting that as the eve of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, one of the Presidential candidates has mastered the art of constantly focusing attention on the existential need of ordinary Nigerians irrespective of ethnic belonging or religious affiliation. Such a discourse has served as a bridge across the

ethnic divisions without obliterating them as markers of identity. That was exactly what Jesus did with the Samaritan woman in John 4.

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