Bridging the Gaps of Indifference in a Pluralistic Nigerian Society for National Integration

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Abstract
This paper explored how to bridge the gaps of indifference existing in a pluralistic Nigerian society for the purpose of achieving national integration. Nigeria is a pluralistic society consisting of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, tribal, and religious groups, with each possessing different distinct culture, norms, needs and aspirations, among others. The country has faced numerous ethno-tribal, political, and religious conflicts, land disputes, nepotism, ethnocentrism, and all kinds of disturbing occurrences. All these problems stand as the factors hindering national integration, unity, peace and progress of the country. In this connection, the paper was divided into subheadings with the conceptual clarifications of the concepts of pluralism and national integration; likewise in-depth discourse of the challenges and strategic approaches to challenges of national integration as well as relevance of national integration in bridging the gaps of indifference in a pluralistic Nigerian society were articulated. The document notes that national integration lays a solid foundation for building strong, dynamic, democratic, progressive, cohesive and inclusive societies based on social justice, fairness and equality. Also, it emphasizes the need to rebuild the Nigerian education system, for religious and cultural tolerance, and put human rights and dignity, patriotism, and loyalty in the hearts of citizens.
Keywords: pluralism, society, national, integration, inclusiveness

Introduction
Nigeria as a developing country stands the chance of achieving national consciousness, integration, peace, democracy, and sustainable national development if the country is built on the path of unity, justice, equity, fairness, cultural integration, inclusiveness, and the cultivation of diligent team spirit. Nigeria is a pluralistic society consisting of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, tribal, and religious groups, with each possessing different distinct culture, norms, marriage pattern, burial pattern, belief systems, and even the needs and aspirations of the components that constituted the geographical

expression called Nigeria. Since the independence of Nigeria in 1960, there has been a serious outcry for national integration which is the core foundation for nation-building.

Successive governments have made some concerted efforts aimed at bringing the people of Nigeria together to have a common heritage, and live as one indivisible, tolerant, united, peaceful, and democratic nation. These efforts include the creation of the National Orientation Agency (NOA), National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), Federal Character Commission, and many other programmes aimed at integrating and uniting the people of Nigeria to live peacefully and harmoniously irrespective of caste, ethnicity, language, culture, and religion. However, the country has faced numerous ethno-tribal, political, and religious conflicts, land disputes, nepotism, ethnocentrism, and all kinds of disturbing occurrences. All these problems stand as the limiting factors hindering national integration, unity, peace, and progress of the country (Nyambu et al., 2011).

The untimely amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Regions in 1914 birthed the geographical entity named Nigeria. According to Ademoyega cited in Ngele (2008), Nigeria emerged as a nation in 1914 when Sir Frederick Lord Luggard brought together what was then the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria under a single administrative system. Preceding this time, as noted by Egbule and Olori (2018), the political entity called Nigeria today was administered in separate smaller units including the Northern protectorate, the Colony of Lagos, and the Southern protectorate. Nigeria is a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic country and these diversities bring about the disparities existing among the nation's diverse groups. It is the desire of every nation that is developed and/or developing to rapidly achieve social, cultural, economic, political, and technological transformation, which should have its foundation fitted on good democratic governance, patriotic citizenship, national integration, morality, self-will, quality educational system, inclusiveness, and harmonious and peaceful coexistence among all the ethnic groups.

Owede (2018) thinks that a country exists to achieve the ultimate goal of nationhood; if it fails, it will serve two unintended, inevitable purposes. These include a convenient means for the few privileged class to exploit the system for personal gains without giving a second thought, and a breeding ground for hatred of the country among the underprivileged class due to unmet dreams and expectations from the system. The above assertion as noted by Ohanyere et al. (2022) is a true reflection of the Nigerian situation, where the majority of the population has lost faith in the government and its elected representatives. It will not be out of place if one assumes that Nigeria is yet to display its ability and willingness to build a progressive, democratic, dynamic, united, integrated, broadminded, inclusive, and indivisible nation devoid of discrimination, disbelief, marginalization, and inequality, as well as ethnic, religious and political conflicts. This is a signal in services of the government policies that tend to impede

nation building; such policies like the rotational presidency, and quota system, among others.

Falade and Falade (2013) advocated changing attitudes through social mobilization and accepting and imbibing vital concepts of unity and trust to achieve national unification. In a more extreme stance, claiming that national integration in a multinational society like Nigeria includes eradicating national oppression and inequality, as well as removing hurdles to the creation of a viable nation-state (Joshua, 2019). It is a truism that no single individual, cultural group, ethnic group nor religious group can successfully build a nation on their own without the all-inclusive and cooperative efforts of all the concerned groups. This implies that integrating and unifying the country's diverse ethnic nationalities is a challenging task requiring the supportive efforts of all and sundry, notwithstanding their caste, culture, language, ethnic or religious differences.

Ohanyere et al. (2022) opined that building a strong, integrated, and united nation requires that the citizens should be aware of their roles, rights, and privileges, as well as tolerance, appreciation, a positive attitude, and love for their country, and who, at times, would put the nation's interests ahead of individual selfish and tribal interests. According to Federico in Njoku (2015), the unity and integration of a large social system are contingent on majority groups adopting minority groups inside their neighbourhoods and minority groups accepting the majority's culture. From the foregoing, one would wonder if the majority groups in Nigeria are carrying the minority groups along in the decision-making process. Also, one will be tempted to ask, if there is equality in the sharing of national resources between the majority groups and the minority groups. This and other questions about national integration demand to be answered for the achievement of equity, justice, and fairness.

Furthermore, Ohanyere et al. (2022) succinctly expressed that a harmonious, united, and integrated society does not discriminate against minorities in decision-making, political appointment, employment, education, or the location of developmental projects, but instead tries to form a cohesive force that leads to general national success. Njoku (2011) concurred with this submission by noting that integration decreases ethnicity, discrimination, unfair treatment, and the non-indigene syndrome. Therefore, bridging the gaps of indifference in a pluralistic Nigerian society for national integration requires building one indivisible country where all patriotic citizens would first see themselves as Nigerians before identifying themselves along tribal, cultural, ethnic, and religious inclinations. As a result, the principal theme of this paper entails how to bridge the gaps of indifference existing in a pluralistic Nigerian society for the achievement of national integration.

Conceptual explications
For the purpose of clarity and understanding, the following concepts of pluralism, and national integration are hereby conceptualized.

Pluralism
Pluralism can be defined as the existence, within the society, of groups that differ culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and religiously. Pluralism according to Wollenberg et al. (2005) refers to the co-existence of many values or other human traits in a society to enable individuals to pursue happiness. Pluralism is an infusion of value in lives, an endless quest for ethical orientation. Mitchell and Alexandrova (2020) also defined pluralism as a stance that endorses the coexistence of two or more entities or processes and denies that they can be reduced to one another or some third entity or process. Pluralism is a position that explicitly drives toward accommodating and nurturing the richness and diversity of people. In the words of Colombo (2013), the term pluralism refers to the existence of diverse and competing interests as the basis for a democratic equilibrium, which is crucial for the possibility of individuals obtaining goals.

Pluralism, according to Bobbio as detailed in Colombo (2013), represents not only a consequence of the complexity of the social systems, a descriptive principle to better understand modern institutions and agents, but also a normative principle of democracy in the sense of a combination between diversities. It implies something more than the coexistence of pluralities; rather, it indicates a certain choice towards integrating those pluralities, which affirms that difference is better than uniformity; that is, the difference is a value in itself and the system (or the single actor) will profit more from the presence of variety than from homogeneity (Colombo, 2013). It can also be defined as a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization. In a pluralistic social setting, as opined by Colombo (2013), an expectation of assimilation is not found, but rather strong expectations of integration taking place between majority and minority groups.

Assimilation leads to neglecting diversity and the values of minority groups and implies a cultural hegemony by the dominant group over the others. Therefore, a pluralistic society is a collection of people from different origins, castes, belief systems, and other differences that came together either naturally or by political force to form and live as a single entity. In this regard, such a society is more or less based on the principle of "Live and Let Live". The main strength of a pluralistic society is that its citizens are more receptive and tolerant as they strive to be much more appreciative of the differences that others may find difficult to accept. In a pluralistic society, those seen as the majority groups tend to be less discriminatory towards minorities as they are allowed to maintain their own different identities in the matters that differentiate them. India and the United States are good examples of pluralistic

societies. Indian citizens live together peacefully despite their beliefs in many religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Jainism.

On the other hand, people of different races and cultures live and work together in the United States. A major value of pluralism lies in the formation and building of strong social ties. The reverse is the case in Nigeria as a pluralistic society as there exist tensions and hostilities among different competing political, ethnic, and religious groups due to observed favouritism from the authorities towards any particular group over the other, in terms of political appointment, resources allocation, the composition of security apparatus, siting of developmental projects, and election into the office of president of the federal republic of Nigeria.

Despite this illegitimate foisting of "Nigeria-hood" on peoples of different nationalities, who did not aspire to become one united entity in the first place, further internal divisions were orchestrated by the colonial lords, who introduced several constitutional methods of division and rule and imposed one tribe on the other ethnic groups (Mbakogu, 2002). This, expectedly, gave rise to a sense of mutual suspicion, distrust, intolerance, and conflicts among the ethnic groups, soon after political independence. The unaddressed issues of plurality have continued to give impetus to a growing political consciousness and ethno-religious identity that always culminate in communal and societal conflicts. The fragile peace in Nigeria most often falls apart, resulting in horrible violence. This includes, among other incidences, claims over land and scarce resources like the Berom-Fulani crisis, Ijaw-Itsekiri crisis; power and chieftaincies like the Ife-Modakeke crisis and Osu caste system of Umuleri-Aguleri crisis. Others include, settlers and indigenes Jos crisis, Christian and Moslem violence in Kano and Kaduna and more recently, the Boko Haram menace (Adagba et al., 2012). Pluralism helps the people to be more realistic about the short-lived or partial nature of agreements, which informs on how to better maintain them. Pluralism also helps people to value the social diversity that exists and to use it in a way that balances social and individual needs (Wollenberg et al., 2005). As a pluralistic society, Nigeria should strive to build an inclusive society that transcends regional, caste, gender, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences to achieve sustainable national integration for all members of society.

National integration
Before elucidating on the concept of "national integration", effort is hereby made to first of all conceptualize the term "nation". A nation is viewed as a group of people with common historical background, sharing a unified cultural, social, ecological and political structure. Smith as detailed in Ohanyere et al. (2022) defines a nation as "a designated human population sharing a historic geography, common mythologies and historical memories, public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members". Asira (2017) agreeing with the above definition, views a nation

as a collection of people who share same ancestry, language, history, culture, and governance.

A nation, according to Nyambu et al. (2011), is a group of people sharing common land territory, resources, values, culture, aspirations, common symbols such as language, flag, national anthem and Coat of Arms, common history and government. Also, a nation in the words of Heywood (2004) in Nyambu et al. (2011) is a cultural entity, a body of people bound together by a shared cultural heritage. The cultural factors that define a nation are usually a common language, religion, traditions, historical, consciousness and so on (Heywood, 2004 in Nyambu et al., 2011). It is this shared common interest, values, cultures, and the feeling of sense of belonging (oneness) that unite people of different ethnic groups, languages and religions to form a nation. Sequel to the aforementioned definitions of a nation, one can perceptively postulates that nations formed by natural, cultural or historical forces develops strong attachment which acts as a source of national identity than nations formed by political force. Nigeria, of a truth, was not naturally, culturally or historically formed but was rather forcefully fashioned by the British colonial masters for their own selfish gains, without recourse to the existing differences in tribe, culture, languages, ethnicity and religion.

From the foregoing, it becomes imperatively obvious that 'historical' and 'cultural' nations are more stable, and unified, bounded together by a powerful cultural and historical sense of national integration. Heywood (2004) noted that it is sometimes argued that the style of nationalism which develops in such societies is typically tolerant and democratic. The author further submitted that the USA has, for example, sustained a remarkable degree of social harmony and political unity against a background of profound religious, linguistic, cultural and racial diversity.

On the other hand, nations that are politically established can often times fail to generate the social harmony and sense of historical unity which is found in culturally formed nations. This is obvious in Africa, predominantly Nigeria, whose 'nationhood' comprises of a varied collection of regional, dialectical, ethnic, and religious groups, bounded together by little more than a common colonial past and land borders shaped by long obsolete lordly rivalries. This is complicated by the inherited "divide-and-rule" policies of the former British colonial rulers that had over the years bred ethnic and tribal tension. Nigeria, as a pluralistic nation, is inhabited by persons of diverse ethnic groups residing in different localities, communicating in different dialects, devoted to different religions, and possessing different way of life.

Recent happenings show that tribalism, favouritism, bribery and corruption, insecurity, political conflicts, ethnic and religious dogmatism have broken the country along ethnic lines, making it virtually difficult to build a potent, progressive, unified and integrated Nigerian society. Moreso, Ohanyere et al. (2022) noted that Nigeria is currently at war, with widespread secessionist agitation in the South East, South West, and even the

Middle Belt; Boko Haram terrorism and banditry in the core North; farmers/herders crises occurring on a daily basis in almost every part of the country; and kidnapping and killing of innocent citizens as well as traditional rulers occurring in almost every part of the country. All of these happenings have cast a serious aspersion on the unity and identity of the Nigerian nation.

In the light of the prior discussion, what then is "national integration?" The process of developing national consciousness and a sense of common identity among the citizens of a country is what has been recognized as "national integration". This consciousness evidently entails a sense of belonging or allegiance to the nation, usually referred to as "patriotism", or literally put, "a love of one's country". National integration, as noted by Nwaji (2011), is the harmonious personal adjustment of the individual to the standards, demand and responsibilities of the society of which he is a part and in which he lives. Within and among the groups that make up a community, integration embodies a state of fusion or harmonious interaction and interrelation of the values and functions of persons and groups to make them an identifiable single entity with common attributes, goals, purposes and objectives. Integration can be fostered through socialization process (Nwaji, 2011). National integration, according to Akinyetun (2020), is defined as the formation of a unified and cohesive national identity and awareness in a varied society in which all individuals are given a fair chance to attain their full potential. Eniekebi (2021) opined that national integration breeds in a country's people a feeling of common identity, nationhood, unity, and patriotism. It is also motivated by inclusiveness, a sense of belonging, and a powerful trust in a country's life and future (Eniekebi, 2021). National integration as stated by Nkom (2008) must involve an understanding, respect and appreciation of the differences of the entities being integrated.

Furthermore, Abia detailed in Onyeakazi and Okoroafor (2018) described national integration as both the capacity of a government to control the territory under its jurisdiction as well as a set of popular attitudes towards the nation generally described as loyalty, allegiance, and intelligence to place national above local and parochial concerns. Makosso as cited in Eniekebi (2021) submitted that national integration encourages inclusiveness and a sense of belonging as individuals identify and are cohesive with shared values. Usman (1999) asserted that Nigerian national integration has entirely failed to bring about nation-building, particularly in the post-colonial setting, and that the process is under siege. Joshua (2019) also noted that marginalizing and oppressing some segments of the country or ethnic groups in the country's political and economic life is a violation of the national integration goal, which must be rejected. A country and people that are united and integrated are better positioned to solve development, nationhood, and stability challenges. Therefore, as a pluralistic society, Nigerians must strive to live together in peace and kindness, respecting the culture and religion of fellow Nigerians.

Challenges of national integration in a pluralistic Nigerian society
The achievement of national integration in a pluralistic society like Nigeria has become an audacious task as the country is faced with numerous challenges retarding its progress, growth, and development. No country achieves greatness, peace, national unity, and integration with a lackadaisical, weak, porous, insensitive, corrupt, clueless, lawless, and ineptitude system under which Nigeria is governed. Be that as it may, below are some of the highlighted challenges facing national integration in a pluralistic Nigerian society.

i.   Nepotism: This is the practice of favouring one's relatives, religious group, or ethnic group above other ethnic and religious groupings, as evidenced in Nigerian government political appointments, armed forces recruitments, resources distribution, and project siting (Ohanyere et al., 2022). The current status quo impedes national integration. For instance, Nosa (2020) opines that a 2017 business day report, titled "81 of Buhari's 100 appointees are northerners", shows that 81 of Buhari's appointments were either from the North East, North West or North Central since he became president of Nigeria.

ii.   Corruption: Corruption has become inseparably institutionalized as part of Nigerian national life, creating a lacuna in the attempts of building a strong, peaceful, harmonious, prosperous, united, and integrated Nigerian society. It now occurs as a daily routine as individuals, corporate bodies, security personnel, and government officials at all levels of leadership are involved in corrupt practices without remorse. Since the establishment of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the commission has been able to recover sums of money from many corrupt officials. Idris (2020) states that EFCC in 2017 and 2018 has achieved tremendous success; for instance in January 2017, EFCC directed two directors of Ontario Oil and Gas Limited to make restitution of N754,000,000 (US $ 2,464,952) and they were sentenced also to sixty-nine years by Justice Latifat Okunnu of Lagos State High court. Also in February 2017, the commission recovered 3.04 billion naira (USD 9, 803, 921) from Andrew Yakubu, former group managing director of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) (Idris, 2020).

iii.   Inequalities: Inequalities within and between regions, ethnic and religious groups is concomitant with the feelings of exclusion and marginalization among many Nigerians which has triggered secessionist movement in many parts of the country like the South East, South West and even the Middle-Belt in North Central. This is also a serious problem that hinders national unity.

iv.   Ethnocentrism: This describes a situation of suspicion towards outsiders combined with a tendency to evaluate the culture of others in terms of one's own culture. As a result, people tend to view those who do not belong to their people as inferior, outsiders, and   exploited   (Reuben-Etuk,   2018). It reflects the reality of Nigeria, where one tribe is proud to have handed over the country to colonial rulers. This, as noted, has often triggered innumerable ethnic and religious crises in the history of Nigeria. Hate speech mostly originating from ethnocentrism has hitherto been regarded as a dangerous but often neglected phenomenon that has set

many tribes ablaze and sent many into cold war. For instance, the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum (AYCF), a coalition of Socio-Political groups in Northern Nigeria, on Tuesday 6th June 2017, issued a three months ultimatum for all Igbos in the 19 Northern States to vacate the region. If the Igbos fail to leave by October 1st, 2017, the group said, it would use force to evict the Igbos. According to Abdulkareem (2017), the group also threatened to take over all the landed properties of the Igbos after they have left the region. These and so many other similar hate speeches do not in any way support national integration, therefore such actions must be avoided for humility and peaceful coexistence (Abdulkareem, 2017).

v.   Cultural insensitivity: Cultural insensitivity hampers people from becoming compassionate to other cultures rather than being judgmental. This act of misdemeanour destroys a diverse country like Nigeria, where people of different regional, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups live and work together. This is another serious challenge hampering national integration as people often become insensitive to the plight of others outside their ethnic and religious groups. The country's relentless polarization along cultural, dialectical, ethnic and religious lines that determine political views, positions and appointments is dangerously high, which over the years has created political divisions, tensions, conflicts and unhealthy competition. It also hinders national integration.

Strategic approaches to the challenges of national integration in Nigeria
There is no single nation, be it developed or developing, that makes progress nor achieves social cohesion, national unity, and integration without first developing a framework of action to stem the tide of challenges hindering and retarding their nation-building drive. Nigeria as a pluralistic society can achieve national integration by applying the following strategic approaches:

1) Economic unity: Economic cohesion occurs when financial and business structures and governmental institutions work to ensure justice, equity, fairness, and transparency in the distribution of resources devoid of exclusion and discrimination. The dependence of the local government on the state and federal government allocation has led to its inability to positively affect the economic growth of the country. Hence, the local government alongside the state government should be given autonomy, and efforts should be made to boost the internal revenue of the local and state governments (Sylvester & Sunday, 2018).

2) Social unity: This is a continuing process of evolving and building a society of shared values, common interests, shared challenges, and equal opportunities based on a sense of optimism, belief, and mutuality. It also involves the willingness of groups with diverse values and objectives to coexist, share resources, have mutual respect, and abide by the rules of the land.

3) Promotion of political unity: Political unity occurs when structures and institutions are effectively working to ensure that citizens' needs, expectations, and aspirations are met while ensuring that political actors are in harmony with each other playing issue-based politics, devoid of ethnic and religious bigotry and sentiments.

4) National unity: National unity means building a united citizenry with a sense of belonging among members of diverse regional, dialectical, ethnic, and religious groups, achieved through legislation and resolution of differences, and conflicting interests and demands.

5) Respect for the symbol of national unity: Only paying more attention to the effective use of people's sovereignty, indigenous language, national symbols, national anthem, national day, national values and sound governance principles can contribute to the achievement of national unity.

Relevance of national integration in bridging the gaps of indifference in a pluralistic Nigerian society

The very importance of national integration being the core foundation required for bridging the gaps of indifference in a pluralistic Nigerian society cannot be overemphasized. This implies that national integration lays a solid foundation for the building of a strong, dynamic, democratic, progressive, cohesive, and inclusive society anchored on social justice, fairness, and equity. Therefore, the relevance of national integration in a pluralistic Nigerian society includes but is not limited to the following:

a) Creation of socio-political consciousness: It helps to empower the citizens to strive for good governance and leadership that will possibly bring about the dividends of democracy and strengthening of cultural and national ties that can lead to a rapid and effective social, cultural, economic, political and technological transformation of the country.

b) Equality of all citizens before the law: Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that "all human beings are equal before the law and are entitled without any form of discrimination to equal protection of the law". Hence, all Nigerian citizens must be treated equally under the law irrespective of caste, language, gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability without privilege, discrimination, or bias.

c) Improved feeling of sense of belonging: The achievement of national integration in the pluralistic Nigerian society would go a long way in bridging the gaps of indifference that threatens the Nigerian peaceful co-existence as a nation in that it will help the citizens develop a strong bond as well as having an improved feeling of sense of belonging.

d) Ensure transparency: National integration also helps to re-create the sense of patriotism by ensuring strict adherence to the dictates of the constitution in all matters of power-sharing, allocation of available resources, and developmental projects, as this will bring about transparency.

e) Promotion of national consciousness: National integration helps to create a sense of national consciousness, the distinctiveness of identity, attachment, loyalty, and love of the nation among people with different cultural, ethnic, and religious identities, bringing them into a single identifiable territorial political entity. The achievement of this will go a long to bridging the gaps of indifference in a pluralistic Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Bridging the gaps of indifference in a pluralistic Nigerian society to achieve national integration requires building an equitable and all-inclusive society that tends to enhance national unity, social and economic interaction. It also harnesses the strengths and talents of the marginalized communities and groups, improve national development, empowering of the marginalized groups, improve political and economic stability, promoting citizens' patriotism and respects of human dignity and transparency. In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, efforts must be made to usher in major radical reforms by enacting legislation that seeks to abolish the bottleneck of social inequalities and exploitation handed down by the existing traditional status quo; and give privileges to all members of the Nigerian society irrespective of caste, languages, culture, ethnicity, and religion.

Meanwhile, it is broadly an accepted truism that education, effectively lensed in quality is the most potent instrument for achieving goals of social cohesion and national integration. Be that as it may, the Nigerian educational system must be re-visited, re-evaluated, reconstructed, restructured, and reformed to train, inculcate and develop in the mind of the child respect for human rights and dignity, patriotism, loyalty, and love of the nation.

Recommendations

1) There must be key radical reforms through enactment of legislative laws that seek to abolish the bottleneck of social inequalities and exploitation handed down by the existing traditional status quo, as such would help in bridging the gaps of indifference in the pluralistic Nigerian society.

2) The Nigerian educational system must be reconstructed, restructured and reformed to train, inculcate and develop in the mind of the child respect for human rights and dignity, patriotism, loyalty and love of the nation.

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