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# Negative Ethnicity and Its Impact on Good Governance and Development in Africa

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**Abstract**
Associating the poor state of development of African countries to reasons of colonialism is no more plausible. This is because almost all of these countries have gained political independence and are self-governing. Like African countries, China, Hong Kong, India and South Korea were colonized. But after their independence, because of purposeful leadership, sheer determination and forthrightness, today, they have recorded discernable developments. While colonialism might have militated against the development of African nations in the past, this paper argues that the negative ethnicity is a key factor today impacting negatively on good governance with resultant underdevelopment. The paper argues that multi-ethnic nature of most African nations has rich resources which could contribute to good governance if properly harnessed. The paper recognizes that today competitive ethnicity is the bane for bad governance and conflicts in some African countries. By employing a descriptive-historical approach the paper draws a lot from historical antecedents of ethnic challenges in Africa from available literature. It also examines ways the multiple talents and capabilities that abound in multi-ethnic Africa could be utilized for its development through good governance.
**Key Words**: Negative Ethnicity, Challenge, Governance, Development

## Introduction

Many African countries suffer from bad governance and are undeveloped in spite of the abundance of human and natural resources which are key factors for development. It is not just Africa that has this problem, countries in the rest of the world faced this for a long time but luckily most of them were able to navigate out of the quagmire. A number of scholars have identified some factors responsible for the underdevelopment of Africa. For example, Walter Anthony Rodney a Guyanese historian in his work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* argued that the poor state of development of Africa can be traced to its colonization by Europeans (30). Some of these factors include culture, moral decadence, traditional religion, belief in occult powers, technological backwardness, colonialism, geography, biogeography, leadership, and ethnicity etc. Also identified are the issue of temporality, the lack of proper use of time, and the inappropriate application of reason by Africans (Umezinwa, 215-216). Although these aforementioned factors might have contributed to the poor development of African countries at present ethnicity seems to play a major role.

Many African countries are multi-ethnic nation-states with socio-cultural differences among their component ethnic groups all of which have resulted into cultural differences. These cultural dissimilarities have embedded in them certain values that if utilized positively may contribute to the development of their countries. Therefore, the ethnic diversity of most African nations should be a cause of celebration. Unfortunately it appears this is not the case. Rather,

ethnic differences and ethnicity has become one of the factors impacting negatively in the development of many African countries. The inability of various ethnic groups to have access to social services and good governance has continued to impact negatively on the forces of national integration, cohesion and development.

Today *negative ethnicity* has spread throughout every facet of the life of an African, and more fundamentally determines who gets what, when and how. The ethnic virus has been considered as one of the most important causes of social crisis and political instability in one of most populous country Nigeria. And negative ethnicity has been perceived in general as a major obstacle to the overall politico-economic development of the country (Otite, 145). A number of African countries are passing through different types of conflicts which are closely related to ethnic issues. These incessant conflicts have in turn impacted negatively on the development of these nations. This paper examines the different ways negative ethnicity posses as a challenge to the development of African countries. Before this is done the paper discusses the concept of ethnicity and negative ethnicity. This is followed by a probe of factors that promote ethnicity. Next is a critical investigation of the various dimensions ethnicity has hindered good governance and development of some African states. In addition, the paper proffers solution to the challenge of ethnicity in Africa. It ends with a conclusion.

**Conceptualizing Ethnicity and Negative Ethnicity**

There is some difficulty as to what constitute ethnicity. The word has its roots in the Greek word *ethos,* which means nation or people, and is a derivative of the adjective 'ethnic' which is used to denote an 'ethnic community' or 'ethnic group'.(John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 4). In a way it is closely related to tribalism. However, tribalism is considered as a derogatory term used to describe people groups. Some scholars in an attempt to define the term ethnicity end up describing an ethnic group. For instance Fredrik Barth has defined an ethnic group as a population which:

> "Is largely biologically self–perpetuating; shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms; makes up a field of communication and interaction; and has membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order," (Fredrick, 75-82)

According to J. M. Yinger, there are three characteristic that define ethnicity. They include the perception by others that the group in question is different, the perception by those in the group that they are different from others, and the fact that those defined as being in the same group having the same identity and shared activities based on their 'sameness', whether real or imagined (Yinger, 200). Warren Kid views ethnicity as about awareness, identity, belonging, culture and difference. And the membership of an ethnic group suggests that there are others who are not similar (Warren Kid, 191). Some African scholars such as Onigu Otite has defined ethnicity as:

> "A contextual discrimination by members of one ethnic group against others on the basis of some exclusive criteria. This situation is more prevalent where there is competition for scarce resources like in the city or land. Ethnic pluralism does not necessarily lead to ethnicity because large collections of ethnic groups in an area exist side by side with ethnic harmony, cooperation, collaboration, competition and conflict" (Otite, 7).

Following from the above discourse, ethnicity is viewed as an empowerment force that creates a sense of personhood to groups of people bound together by their cultural and linguistic affiliations or both, with a sense of self-identity in their cause of interaction with others (Maigadi, 19). Issues of ethnicity manifest especially in a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic society. Yinger has identified four main characteristics of a multi-cultural society. First, the society might be based on a collection of different ethnic groups who are equal. Second, the society might have a major

'national' group alongside a number of smaller ethic groups. Third, the self-identity of some ethnic groups might be based on a 'mother' society outside of the host society. Last, some ethnic groups might be disadvantaged in relation to other groups in the same society (Yinger, 200).

In multi-ethnic African nations, various factors might be used to construct identity. Some of these determinants may include categories such as cultural affinity, religion, and place of origin. For example while establishing religious congregations, ethnic and denominational factors are used. Rupert Brown explained this further and argued that whatever factor shapes the construction of identity is dependent on particular local circumstance (173). For example in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, and the Indian subcontinent, religion is often crucial. In other places, however, religious factors do not count; rather other more powerful factors for social divisions come to play. The fact that Iran and Iraq are Islamic nations did not stop them from going into war in the 1980s. In this case the national conflicts of military and territorial interests overrode any psychological affiliations deriving from their shared religious category membership.

Ethnic affiliation itself is not bad because it engenders integration and cohesiveness. The real problem associated with ethnicity is when it is used negatively against others. This may occur when the desire to dominate or the fear of being dominated by other ethnic groups reigns supreme. This often leads to outright declaration of hostilities resulting inexorably in loss of lives and property. This along with other factors contributes to underdevelopment in Africa.

**Factors that promote negative ethnicity**

Ethnic diversity in itself is a very nice thing because it offers a variety of ways of doing things in a country. This is because every ethnic group contributes its positive virtues and capabilities for the benefit of the entire nation. The diversity of ethnic groups brings in an aspect of diversity in cultures, language, and religion. A country endowed with different ethnic groups boasts of successful intercommunity trade, tourism attraction, a lot of learning from each other and generally a super blending among people of different back grounds. It is the best thing that brings about unity in diversity and a lot of symbiosis. The outcome of all this is a hybrid country. Those nations that have managed to create good structures of equity among the different ethnic groups boast of a very cohesive way of living with beauty in diversity. However, those that have not gotten a solution always sit staring at a potential time bomb, a volcano of ethnocentrism ready to erupt anytime. There are several factors that promote such negative ethnicity.

First, ethnicity is one of the opportunities people have used to gain authority in all of its ramifications. These include political and economic powers. When the ethnic groups having these privileges are not considerate and fair-minded, opposition may arise leading to ethnic conflicts. This phenomenon is associated with the rise of ethnic hatred, conflicts and wars in Africa in the 20$^{th}$ century (Nyiri, 2). Some countries (or at least parts of them) have remained in conflict for over half a century now. These countries for instance Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan, Congo and parts of Kenya open up to ethnic wars spontaneously either because of resources, power, elections or boarder issues (2).

Another factor is the struggle for the protection of ethnic interests. This may include land, natural resources, and political relevance among others. The ethnic or communal conflicts in Nigeria and other parts of Africa are closely related to this. For example the contestations related to resource control in Southern Nigeria and the herdsmen-farmers crises in different parts of Nigeria today are ethnic in nature.

Also the desire to dominate or the fear of being dominated by other ethnic groups reigns supreme. This often leads to outright declaration of hostilities resulting inexorably in loss of lives and property. Nigeria was engulfed in 30 months civil war as a result of ethnic tension that had brewed for a long period of time. The war was fought, won and lost but the ethnic suspicions and

hatred still remains unabated. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was caused by ethnic rivalry between the Hutus and the Tutsis (Umezinwa 220).

**How Negative Ethnicity affects Development**

Ethnicity does not constitute any threat to the socio-political and economic development of a state. It is the negative employment of ethnicity – negative attitudes towards those regarded as outsiders – that constitute the threat to socio-political and economic development. Hence the positive aspects of ethnicity often become insignificant in multi-ethnic states.

The interaction of ethnic groups in a plural society may either negatively or positively affect the socio-political and economic positions of other groups. In essence, ethnicity becomes problematic when the various ethnic groups turn the table against each other in an attempt to have access to political power, thus degenerating from a form of political support into a basis for political conflict (Adetiba and Rahim, 660). Many African countries have witness tensions closely tied to the problem of ethnic rivalries. Examples of these countries include Nigeria, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, and others. It is this negative use of ethnicity that poses a challenge to good governance and development in African nations. There are different ways negative ethnicity has contributed to poor governance and underdevelopment of Africa. These are discussed below.

**Ethnic Conflicts**

Ethnicity has been identified as 'the force that is fanning the fire that is destroying Africa' (Wamwere, 133). Underlying some of the violent conflicts and wars are the internalized beliefs and values linked to group identity. For instance, shortly after securing their independence from colonial rule many African nations passed through periods of civil wars. Aremu (549) has noted that since the 1960's, series of civil wars had taken place in Africa. Examples include: Sudan (1995-1990), Chad (1965-85), Angola since 1974, Liberia (1980- 2003), Nigeria (1967-70), Somalia (1999-93) and Burundi, Rwanda and Sierra Leone (1991-2001). Other countries include Democratic Republic of Congo, and Southern Sudan, just to mention a few. However, it is pertinent to note that Africa is not the only continent with conflicts. Other regions of the world are also riddled with considerable violence and social conflagration. For instance, Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey and Northern Ireland are among the trouble parts of Europe. In Asia, one may point to Cambodia, Iraq and Myanmar among others as conflict ridden. Latin America is also enmeshed in conflicts as evinced by countries like Peru, Guatemala, Mexico and Columbia. (Adedeji, 1).

There is a direct link between ethnic conflict and economic growth and development of a country. Any social, political or even economic development requires an environment of stability and peace. While examining the case of Nigeria, Charles Soludo, a former governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria stated that the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report released in Geneva on January 17, 2011 says that "foreign direct investment (FDI) into Nigeria dropped by 62% in 2010 (from $6 billion in 2009 to $2.3 billion in 2010)—again the worst in many years, and even worse than during the global crisis. While developing and transition economies increased their FDI inflows by 10% in 2010, Nigeria's FDI fell by a whopping 62%" (Nigerian Guardian, 2011). The investors are scared away by the unfriendly and unstable business environment. Nigeria has a basic problem to contend with. This is the problem of ethnicity.

Together with hindering economic growth, ethnic conflict also destroys what has been done during the time of stability. It breaks structures and institutions that were created for economic growth and development. Businesses are annihilated, infrastructure is destroyed and lives of people lost. For example the wars in Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi and Sierra Leone brought about a lot of destruction to whatever had been achieved in these countries prior to the wars. In

some instances, the economic interests of an ethnic community can as well cause conflicts. This hence means that after the conflict has erupted more economic loss is encountered. It ends up being a never ending vicious cycle.

According to Doyle and Sambanis, civil wars or violence brought about by a clash of ethnic groups is really traumatic to the people and it always leads to some long lasting effects on growth. The destruction it brings plus the effect it leaves in the minds of the people causes fear and mistrust and hence there is in most cases a clear lack of a good environment for economic development (98). In Kenyan, ethnic conflicts have created conditions that have been impediments to local and international investment and integration. Investors, tourists, students, explorers and all other local and foreign business people consider peace and stability of a country to any investment (Nyiri, 2). Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan is battling a new civil war. The causes of the conflict range from ethnic tensions, management of oil resources and the power struggle between the key political leaders, President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Dr. Riek Machar (Luka B). There are many other countries of Africa and other nations of the world that have experienced instability as a result of ethnic contestations.

The effects of ethnic violence are huge and at times they have brought down huge economies into becoming poor and underdeveloped. For example, in the Rwanda case over one million people were killed. Countries such as Nigeria, South Sudan, Liberia, Congo, and others have witnessed different types of conflicts. The effects of these conflicts have been evident. The economies of these countries have been affected greatly. Where there is warfare and conflict globally, there can never be any meaningful economic growth (Debraj and Estaban, 244). The warring communities divert their resources and energies to fighting with each other and hence lose out on developing their communities and nation in terms of engaging themselves in meaningful economic activities.

Ethnic conflicts in Africa or other parts of the world have resulted in ethnic cleansing or genocide. World history shows the scope of genocide that has occurred. In Europe, there were genocides against Armenians, the Jews, and Gypsies. In Australia, there was genocide against the Aboriginals. In America, there was genocide against the Indians (154). In Africa, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was caused by ethnic rivalry between the Hutus and the Tutsis. The conflict brought the country to a halt. More than 800,000 people lost their lives in the imbroglio. In Kosovo, it was ethnic cleansing. The Serbian forces engaged themselves in the sinister project of decimating the Kosovar Albanians. Other countries that have experienced ethnic or sub-ethnic conflicts are Somalia, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Ethiopia and Uganda (Chasan, et al, 198). Such killings have resulted in the death of thousands of people that would have contributed positively to the economic development of their communities.

**Ethnicity, employment and location of projects**

Ethnicity is one of the factors that contribute to the underdevelopment of Africa in terms of employment and location of projects and other infrastructures. In many African countries the employment of people into public service is based on ethnic considerations rather than merit. Since merit has been rejected as a criterion for serving the nations all manners of people and mediocre have been appointed to hold public offices in which they had neither the training nor the experience. Citing the situation in Rwanda, Wammere (139) notes that before the genocide only ten percent of Tutsis were allotted places in schools and universities, and in civil services posts. Yet, they are expected to influence and contribute to development. How can the Africa nation states progress when those who drive her economy are not qualified to do so? Some public offices are filled with incompetent officials. And since their entry into these offices was not based on merit, they do not make any positive impact in their various ministries. Such officers only rather satisfy their ethnic sentiments rather than contribute social development (Umezinwa, 223).

When ethnic communities are politically and economically discriminated against in terms of location of social amenities, they may not want to support the government. However, when they return to supporting or cooperating with the government, development is restored (Wamwere. 143). Where dissent continues, the government officials sometimes deny them social services based on ethnic differences. For instance, President Kenyatta withheld development from Luo land because the Luo under Oginga Odinga opposed him. It is also reported that when President Moi came to power, he withheld development in Gikuyu land and Luo land because both the Gikuyu and the Luo have opposed him ever since he consolidated his ethnic power (144). In Nigeria, there have been complaints from different communities for the lack of location of government projects which is closely associated with negative ethnicity.

**Ethnicity and Politics**

According to Hameso (38), ethnicity has for quite some time been a key determinant to the political choices that are made in Africa. This has been the situation in most part of the globe. With globalization and urbanization, the phenomenon has eased away in most places outside Africa. Ethnicity is politics which has its very nature in protecting members' rights within a disjointed state. It is a kind of pressure politics being played. In the African context, this ethnicity is participation by groups of same culture engaging politically (Nyiri, 8). Politics based on ethnic factors does not provide a broad based meeting of politicians from different ethnic nationalities with similar ideas that can promote national development.

The negative impact of ethnic rivalry appears also in the formation of political parties. The parties are formed along ethnic lines with ethnic interest at the base. For example in Nigeria, the formation of political parties since independence has been closely associated with ethnicity. The same also applies to other multi-ethnic Africa states. Political leaders are elected into office based on ethnic consideration rather than competence. Such political leaders rather than pursue the development of the state put their ethnic interest in the fore. The altercations and noises from different ethnic groups are distractions in the running of government. The parties are much concerned with ethnic interests. And because they do so, they cannot come together to form a meaningful opposition against the party in government. Opposition is necessary in a democratic system. It puts the ruling party on its feet. Where there is no opposition or the opposition is weak, the ruling party is not challenged to initiate programs and ideas that are beneficial to the masses. So, the fact that the parties are oriented towards ethnic interest is doing a disservice to the nation (Umezinwa, 225).

The divisive nature of ethnicity does not allow Africans to call their leaders and past presidents to give account of their stewardship. Many of them did a great harm to the nation. No one dares to question them. They are untouchables. Some of them go about freely and make even inflammatory and incisive statements unhindered. If any of them is arrested and detained for questioning, the ethnic group to which he belongs will be up in arms.

**Ethnicity and Corruption**

In countries where ethnic elites are in power, grand scale corruption is common. Corruption amounts to the powerful stealing from the powerless (Wamwere, 138). Corruption is morally wrong. Where it is justified by negative ethnicity, however, it is not held in contempt. Rather, it is accepted and admired because those who benefit from it do not see any wrong in it. The ethnic communities do not call their leaders thieves, but praise them as heroes and may even give them chieftaincy titles. The leaders and their elites corruptly enrich themselves and become dictators. Some of the African leaders who fought for the independence of their nations assumed leadership and rather than develop their countries, began to enrich themselves. Mobutu of former Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) is believed to have stolen the wealth of country.

The corruption of ruling elites extends to the stealing of jobs from communities. High paying jobs in the government, police force, army, prisons, civil service, and public companies go to one ethnic community. In Nigeria the appointments of current heads of military and paramilitary organizations has been interpreted in ethnic terms. In some cases where allegations of corruption have been raised concerning certain individuals, members of his ethnic group do not condemn the action, but rather rise to his defense. For example Nigeria has been making effort to develop a health insurance scheme which is an index of good development. This attempt is not working well because of issues related to corruption. An attempt to solve this problem has been given ethnic interpretation. Even workers in the organization seem to split along ethnic lines.

According to Wamwere (143) ethnic corruption takes power and wealth away from the people, but more important is the fact that it destroys human values such as honesty, integrity, and truth. Without these values, lives become meaningless; people become disoriented and defenseless. Ethnic corruption thoroughly impoverishes ordinary people that they can think of where they get their next meal. They are left without any thought of liberating themselves from corruption and dictatorship. Born of negative ethnicity, corruption perpetuates ethnic dictatorship and hampers development.

**Solution to problem of ethnicity in Africa**

Ethnicity is one of the factors that contribute to the underdevelopment of African countries. It is therefore important that this issue be tackled since it is posing as a challenge to development. Some of the ways of tackling the challenge posed by ethnicity related to development of Africa are discussed below. As stated above one of the effects of ethnicity is ethnic conflict. There are many ways in which ethnic conflicts impact on economic development. We argue here that in some situations ethnic conflicts involve active participation by people low education. This is because with their education level, first, it is easy to convince such people through propaganda and a lot of convincing to join in a revolt against another tribe. And second, people who are not so advanced in education happen to be mostly unemployed and hence they can easily be dragged into cases of ethnic fighting. Some people who may be influential in the group are helped to safe guard self-interest. When people are poor, it is said that such people consider themselves and are considered to having nothing to lose by going into conflicts and hence the patrons of the ethnic conflicts can recruit people to go into rebellion or welfare since it is cheaper. Leaders of African nations are therefore encouraged to exhibit fairness in considering all the people groups under their leadership jurisdiction. This may reduce ethnic conflicts to the barest minimum, thereby promoting development.

Another way countries in Africa can deal with ethnicity is to allow every people's group to be on its own and govern itself. This is worth trying since the ethnic affinity is very strong in the continent. While making a case for Nigeria Ken Saro Wiwa argues that In the first place, it will have a most pleasant effect on self-reliance and social justice. The many ethnic groups in this country, who have been denied their freedom, either in pre-colonial times or after the advent of the British, will re-discover themselves or will be forced to take their fortune in their hands. Thus, indigenous colonialism will have been dealt a death blow. Second, the majority ethnic groups will be forced to stop battening on other people and will have the opportunity to develop at their own rate without feeling that other people are holding them back. Thirdly, the considerable energy which is being spent in a sterile struggle for power will be released and channelled to more productive ends. The different parts of the continent may witness development. This itself may be problematic since ethnic contestations in Africa sometimes within an ethnic group assume dialect or clannish dimensions and may become complicated.

Love for people even those who hate you is an important way of dealing with ethnicity. Wamwere (194) has argued that people like Dedan Kimathi, J. M Kariuki, Samora Machel,

Thomas Sankara, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and many others have taught humanity not to only love but to die for others. To defeat negative ethnicity we must walk in the footsteps of these giants.

**Conclusion**

Generally, ethnicity is a good thing because of the variety and diversity it brings into a community. The ethnicity that promotes healthy competition and learning for each other is called positive ethnicity. In itself, ethnic diversity is not evil. It is actually a great pillar of building a nation. This is because members of different ethnic groups have unique strengths and talents. Therefore, this variety in a community/nation enhances competition and a blend of several skills to bring in a high breed. On the other hand, negative ethnicity is the one that makes people disagree strongly, form biased stereotypes and even fight. Any form of ethnic polarization has a way of affecting negatively the economic growth and development of any nation. This is exacerbated by ethnic conflicts, corruption, discrimination in employment and location of projects, choice of political leaders and other factors. African leaders can do well by promoting unity among the different ethnic groups that they lead. This will engender good governance and development for the nations.

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