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**ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS IN NIGERIA:  
Current Situation and Major Problems**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the United Nations

## **Introduction**

This paper is a survey of the current situation of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. In the intense religious and ethnic turmoil of contemporary Nigeria, the specific situation of the numerous ethnic minorities in the country is hardly mentioned. Instead, attention is concentrated on the conflict between the majority ethno-religious groups. This paper follows broadly the Terms of Reference set by the UN Working Group on Minorities. As much as possible, the analysis will be both historical and process based. The section one examines the operational definition of ethnic minority in Nigeria, along with the related problem of the number of ethnic minority groups in the country and the proportion of the national population that falls within this category. Section one also discusses the geographical distribution of ethnic minority groups. Section two discusses the formal constitutional and political rights enjoyed by ethnic minority groups, and the limits imposed on the enjoyment of those rights by the exigencies of practical politics. This discussion is continued in section three, where three contemporary forms of ethnic minority agitation are examined. Section four provides a conclusion.

### **1. Definition and Numbers:**

The common myth is that Nigeria has 250 ethnic groups. The simple fact is that nobody knows the real figure; and estimates vary widely, depending on the criteria used. Bangura [nd], put the number at 470, while the sociologist, Onigu Otite, provides a tentative list of 374 ethnic groups [Otite, 1990]. However, some ethnic minorities, such as the Lufum and Paati in Taraba State [Mustapha 2000, 104] are not included in the Otite list. Otite also notes that Hoffman suggests that there are 394 ethnic groups in Nigeria while Wente-Lukas provides an entry with between 550 and 619 groups [Otite 1990 35-6]. This confusion over numbers has as much to do with problems of classification and data gathering as with the tendency for ethnic segments to coalesce or differentiate in the face of economic or political developments. Some classifications, such as Hoffman's, are based on linguistic criteria, while Otite includes other issues such as notions of common descent and a shared socio-ecological space. The linguistic criteria is also complicated by multilingualism, particularly amongst small groups who have had to use more than one language for everyday interactions, and the politically-driven 'dialect question' amongst larger groups. This problem of classification and enumeration is further complicated by the problem of group coalescence or differentiation over time, largely as a consequence of political, administrative and economic changes. For example, the groups that adopted the privileged 'Jukun' identity under colonial rule in Nigeria soon broke up into the 'core' Jukun, the Chamba and the Kuteb, once electoral politics were introduced in the run up to decolonization in the 1950s [Mustapha, 2000].

Defining an ethnic group in Nigeria is usually a combination of a number of factors: a shared language or related dialects, myth of common origin, shared cultural traits, a core territory, and often, a shared religious or spiritual universe. But despite these 'objective' criteria, subjective factors are also important. Firstly, group boundaries are constantly changing, depending on context. Sub-group identities, which might be unimportant at the national level, remain extremely salient at the local level. Secondly, assimilation or affiliation to groups is influenced by changing political and

economic factors. Finally, group identities are sometimes subsumed under imposed broader identities with the result of ‘masking’ group self-identification. For example, the numerous ethnic minorities in northern Nigeria are often seen in the south as ‘Hausa’. The figure of 250 ethnic groups may not be far off the mark, even if the state of our current knowledge does not permit a greater precision.

While a healthy skepticism is needed with regard to the question of numbers, there is common agreement, however, about the ethnic structure of the country. It is generally agreed that the ethnic groups are broadly divided into ethnic ‘majorities’ and ethnic ‘minorities’. This classification has its own history, for in pre-colonial Nigeria, a small population size was not necessarily equated with ‘minority’ status [Ekeh 1994]. Under colonial rule, however, but particularly under the ethnicized electoral politics associated with decolonization, minority status became associated with the smallness of population size and the related question of limited electoral clout. Nigeria’s ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ ethnic groups developed in this political hothouse from the early 1950s.

The numerically – and politically - major ethnic groups are the composite Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. These three ‘hegemonic’ ethnic groups are popularly referred to by the generic term ‘*wazobia*’<sup>1</sup>. All the rest constitute different degrees of ‘minority’ status. There are ‘large minorities’ with millions of members, such as the Ijaw, Kanuri, Fulani, Edo, Ibibio, Nupe and the Tiv. However, since minority status is both a numerical and a political category, often underlined by administrative and economic factors, the bulk of the minority groups shade into different degrees of ‘minoritiness’, right down to the Belewa of Bauchi State, who, in 1922, numbered only 120 people [Otite 1990, 26].

The estimated population of Nigeria in 2001 is 126.6 million, making the country the most populous in Africa. The percentage of each ethnic group in the national total is the subject of intense political contestation. Virtually all post-colonial censuses have produced contested results. Table 1, based on the 1963 census, gives an idea of the 12 largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. The 3 ethnic majority groups make up about 54 percent of the population [Bangura, nd]. Agheyisi [1984, 235-6] argues that there are ‘about 400’ language groups in Nigeria and suggests that, minus the 9 largest groups, the remaining 390 languages are spoken by 20 percent of the population, with over 300 ‘minor’ languages spoken by only 7 percent of the population. The numerical and political preponderance of the three majority ethnic groups, and the tendency for many ethnic minority groups to cluster – politically, linguistically and culturally - around the big three have given Nigeria a tripolar ethnic characteristic. A paradox of modern Nigerian politics is the resilience of this tripolarity in the face of repeated political engineering efforts by different regimes in the cause of nation-building.

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘come’ is ‘wa’ in Yoruba, ‘zo’ in Hausa and ‘bia’ in Igbo.

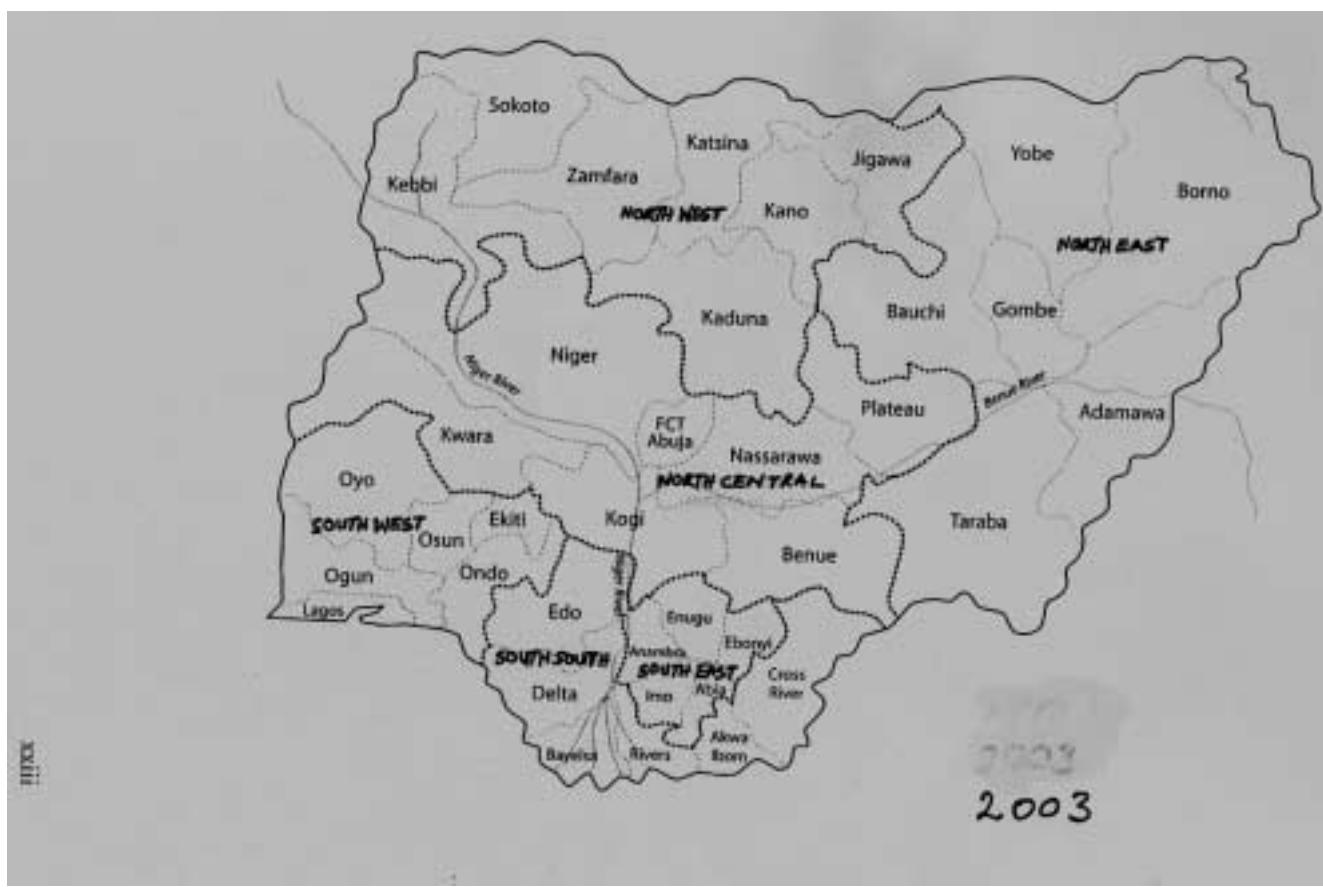
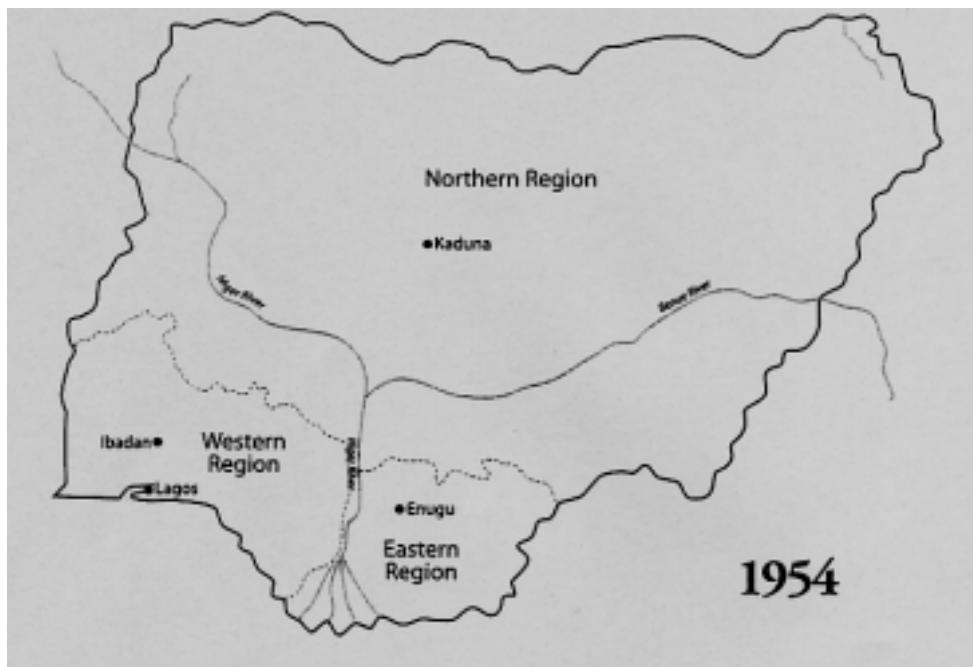
**Table 1.****Population of Speakers of the 12 Largest Language Groups.**

| <b>Language</b> | <b>1963 Population</b> | <b>1986 Population<br/>(projected)</b> |
|-----------------|------------------------|--|
| Hausa           | 11,653,000             | 23,233,000                             |
| Yoruba          | 11,321,000             | 22,571,000                             |
| Igbo            | 9,246,000              | 18,434,000                             |
| Fulfulde        | 4,784,000              | 9,538,000                              |
| Kanuri          | 2,256,000              | 4,498,000                              |
| Ibibio          | 2,006,000              | 3,999,000                              |
| Tiv             | 1,394,000              | 2,779,000                              |
| Ijaw (Izon)     | 1,089,000              | 2,171,000                              |
| Edo             | 955,000                | 1,904,000                              |
| Nupe            | 656,000                | 1,314,000                              |
| Urhobo          | 639,000                | 1,274,000                              |
| Igala           | 582,000                | 1,160,000                              |

*Source: Jibril, Munzali: 1991, 111]*

### **1.1 Location:**

Nigeria is a federal system of government that has evolved over time, from 3 regions in 1946 to 36 states in 2003. The bureaucratic and political changes associated with these developments within the federal structure have influenced, not just the location, but also the identities of the ethnic groups and the opportunities open to them. For example, the identities of the 3 majority groups were consolidated in the context of the creation of the 3 regions in 1946 which resulted in each majority ethnic group constituting a ‘core’ ethno-political group in its respective region: the Hausa-Fulani in the Northern Region, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. These ethno-regional blocs were further strengthened with the devolution of financial powers to the regions in 1954. Concomitantly, ‘minority’ identity within each region intensified as the core group’s hold on power intensified. Different ethnic minority groups in each region now developed a second, generic identity of being ‘minorities’. Some political organizations like the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) in the North, the Midwestern Movement in the West and the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) Movement in the East, gave organizational expression to this new-found common identity. Indeed, from the time of the Willink Commission in 1958, these ‘minority movements’ sought to constitute regions of their own. While each of the three ethno-regional hegemons sought to contain its own minorities, it nevertheless supported and promoted minority agitations in other regions as a means of weakening its competitors for power at the centre. From the point of view of ethnic minorities, alliance with extra regional groups provided a modicum of protection from the suffocating diktat of the ethno-regional powers.



*Source: adapted from Suberu, Rotimi: 2001.*

It was the repeated agitation of ethnic minorities for regions of their own that propelled the further division of the federating units. Their first success was recorded in 1963, when the Midwestern Region was carved out of the Western Region, at the height of the regional political crisis. This was followed, in 1967, with the breaking of the 4 regions into twelve states, as a result of the crises that led up to the Nigerian

Civil War (1967-70). By 2003, Nigeria has 36 states and a federal capital territory in Abuja. Some states are ethnically homogeneous, with sub-ethnic divisions being politically salient at the local level. Others contain a majority group with some minority groups. Yet some others contain a ‘major’ minority group with some smaller minority groups. Finally, others, like Benue or Kogi States, contain two or three ‘major’ minority groups in uneasy balance. The particular composition of the state might affect the fortunes and prospects of the minority ethnic group. The 36 states are also organized into 6 informal geo-political zones which correspond, to a large extent, to ethno-regional groupings.

**Table 2.**  
**Nigeria 2003: 6 Zones and 36 States of the Federation.**

| <i>North West</i> | <i>North Central</i> | <i>North East</i> | <i>South West</i> | <i>South South</i> | <i>South East</i> |
|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Sokoto            | Kwara                | Yobe              | Oyo               | Edo                | Enugu             |
| Kebbi             | Niger                | Borno             | Osun              | Delta              | Anambra           |
| Zamfara           | Kogi                 | Gombe             | Ekiti             | Bayelsa            | Ebonyi            |
| Katsina           | Benue                | Bauchi            | Ondo              | Rivers             | Abia              |
| Kano              | Nassarawa            | Adamawa           | Ogun              | Akwa Ibom          | Imo               |
| Jigawa            | Plateau              | Taraba            | Lagos             | Cross River        |                   |
| Kaduna            |                      |                   |                   |                    |                   |

In very broad terms, the North West is the ‘core’ Hausa-Fulani and Muslim zone, the North Central is the zone of the quintessential ethnic minorities of the old Northern Region. They are more likely to be Christian or followers of African religions. The North East Zone is also a zone of northern ethnic minorities, but with the important fact of the Kanuri, with their thousand years of state-formation and Islamization, being a ‘core’ group in this zone. The conflict between the pre-colonial Sokoto Caliphate, with its core in Sokoto and the Kanem-Borno Empire, with its core in Borno, dates back to 1804, and includes both political and theocratic disputes. As a result, the Kanuri have always enjoyed a measure of respect and independence within the Hausa-Fulani ethnic framework of the old Northern Region. Another important ‘core’ minority group in the North East is the Fulani in Adamawa. These are different from the bulk of their Hausanized Fulani kin in the North West in the sense that they continue to speak their original Fulbe language. In religious terms, the North East has substantial populations of both Muslims and Christians. The South West Zone is the ‘core’ Yoruba area, and the South East Zone is the ‘core’ Igbo area. The South South Zone is the zone of southern ethnic minorities from the old Western and Eastern Regions. Islam is an important factor in the South West, while the other two southern zones are largely Christian or followers of African religions.

However, these broad categorizations mask the reality of the ethnic and religious complexity of each zone and each state, as indicated in Table 3. Though the North West is characterized as Muslim, it has substantial Christian populations in southern Kaduna State and in Kebbi State. Furthermore, from Table 3, we can see that the North West, despite being the ‘core’ Hausa-Fulani zone, also contains 54 ethnic minority groups; the North Central, 123; the North East 205; the South West 4; the South South 59; and the South East 1.

**Table 3.****Nigeria: Location of Minority Ethnic Groups**

| <i>States by zones</i>                   | <i>'Majority' Ethnic Group with some presence</i> | <i>Minority Ethnic Groups</i> |
|--|---|-------------------------------|
| <b>North West</b>                        |   | <b>54</b>                     |
| Sokoto, Kebbi + Zamfara (Old Sokoto)     | Hausa   | 12                            |
| Katsina                                  | Hausa   | 1                             |
| Kano + Jigawa (old Kano)                 | Hausa   | 9                             |
| Kaduna                                   | Hausa   | 32                            |
| <b>North Central</b>                     |   | <b>123</b>                    |
| Old Kwara (+ some parts of Kogi)         | Yoruba, Hausa                                     | 20                            |
| Old Niger                                | Hausa   | 19                            |
| Old Benue (+ some parts of present Kogi) | Hausa   | 12                            |
| Plateau + Nassarawa (Old Plateau)        | Hausa   | 72                            |
| <b>North East</b>                        |   | <b>205</b>                    |
| Borno + Yobe (old Borno)                 | -   | 29                            |
| Adamawa + Taraba (old Gongola)           | Hausa   | 112                           |
| Bauchi + Gombe (old Bauchi)              | Hausa   | 64                            |
| <b>South West</b>                        |   | <b>4</b>                      |
| Oyo + Osun (Old Oyo)                     | Yoruba  | -                             |
| Ekiti + Ondo (Old Ondo)                  | Yoruba  | 2                             |
| Ogun                                     | Yoruba  | -                             |
| Lagos                                    | Yoruba  | 2                             |
| <b>South South</b>                       |   | <b>59</b>                     |
| Edo + Delta (old Bendel)                 | Igbo  | 13                            |
| Rivers + Bayelsa (Old River)             | Igbo  | 10                            |
| Akwa Ibom                                | -   | 7                             |
| Cross River                              | -   | 29                            |
| <b>South East</b>                        |   | <b>1</b>                      |
| Anambra, Enugu + Ebonyi (Old Anambra)    | Igbo  | 1                             |
| Imo + Abia (Old Imo)                     | Igbo  | -                             |

Source: adapted from Otite, 1990, 44-57.

Some ethnic minority groups are found in more than one state or zone. Despite the multiplicity of ethnic minority groups in the northern zones, there is some linguistic unity in the prevalence of Hausa as a regional lingua franca [Agheyisi 1984]. The 59 minority groups listed for the South South seems to be a serious undercount for that zone which is noted for ethnic and linguistic fragmentation. The picture is further complicated by the fact that millions of non-indigenous Nigerians are resident in each zone. Given that ethnic minorities are largely concentrated in the North Central, North

East, South South, and the southern fringes of the North West, it is not surprising that these are also the zones of the most acute ethnic minority political and religious agitation as I show in a subsequent section.

## **2. Minority Constitutional & Political Rights.**

The 1960 Constitution under which Nigeria gained political independence expressly forbade any discrimination against ‘a particular community, tribe, place of origin, religion or political opinion’ [Bach 1997, 338]. There was therefore no formal constitutional restriction on minority political rights. However, this general constitutional principle of non-discrimination was operationalized within the context of intense competition and conflicts over political and economic resources by the *wazobia* ethno-regional blocs. Even within the context of an open and competitive political system, and explicit constitutional provisions, the ethnic minorities suffered from different degrees of discrimination and neglect, largely because of the majoritarian tendencies of a political and social system with scarce economic and political resources. Jobs, scholarships, political appointments, government infrastructure and contracts, and social amenities all became the focus of intense competition, often structured around competing ethnic and regional demands. As a consequence of this political dynamic, a series of cleavages developed, particularly between the three majority ethnic groups; between these three *wazobia* groups on the one hand, and the rest of the minorities groups on the other; and between the north and south [Mustapha 1986]. In the run-up to decolonization, many minority politicians pointed to the majoritarian stranglehold of the three ethno-regional blocs, and demanded the creation of regions of their own as the guarantee of their freedom. This was the foundation for the COR movement and the Niger Delta congress in the Eastern Region, the Midwest Movement in the West, and the Middle Belt congress in the North.

The departing British colonial authorities, in collusion with aspirant hegemonic politicians from the majority ethno-regional blocs, rejected any attempt to restructure the federation to take account of the legitimate fears of the minority ethnic groups. Instead, sops were offered in the form of a Bill of Rights and the Willink Commission which sat in 1958 to investigate ‘minority fears’. Its report and the resulting recommendations did not depart from the framework already agreed upon by the British and the hegemonic nationalist politicians. Only in the northeast was some compromise struck between the Kanuri minority ethnic group and the dominant Hausa-Fulani ethno-regional bloc of the North. As mentioned earlier, this compromise had deep historical roots, and was also based on a shared religion and a common fear, prevalent in the North, of ‘domination’ by the better educated and better skilled southerners. The competition between the three dominant ethno-regional blocs, and the attendant suppression of minority rights, created an increasingly unstable political climate which culminated in the series of military coups in 1966 and the Civil War between 1967 and 1970.

Thereafter, Nigeria embarked on a series of imaginative political engineering programmes which have altered the constitutional and institutional context, if not the substance, of minority discrimination. Firstly, the creation of new states, ostensibly ‘to allay minority fears’ gathered pace from 1967, starting with the initial creation of the Midwest Region in 1964. The creation of the Midwest Region was the first

instance of ethnic minorities holding both *de jure* and *de facto* political power. The number of states multiplied over the years: 12 in 1967; 19 in 1987; 21 in 1976; 30 in 1991; and 36 in 1996. At the third tier of governance, that of the local government area (LGA), there was an equal inflation of numbers from 301 LGAs in 1976 to 775 LGAs in 1996. As noted earlier, many ethnic minority groups came to control their own state or local government; but in many cases, a number of ethnic minorities were lumped together in a state or local government, thereby unleashing intra-minority competition and the fragmentation of the generic ‘minority’ identities built up in the previous era. Some ‘majority’ minority groups emerged at the state level. All of this administrative fragmentation was underwritten by federally controlled oil revenues from about 1970, creating the paradox of increasing centralization of power coinciding with the increasing fragmentation of constituencies.

A second important aspect of Nigeria’s political engineering is the adoption of ‘federal character’ as a constitutional principle, and ‘quota system’ as an administrative principle. The post Civil War period after 1970 was characterized not just by an explosion in revenue from petroleum exports, but also by various attempts to unify the country, and a failed attempt at the capitalist transformation of the country. These last two processes created contradictory institutional imperatives. On the one hand, the need to manage the capitalist transformation led to the rise of a meritocratic technocracy of ‘super permanent secretaries’, in which minority ethnic groups were well represented. The operative principle was recruitment based on merit. These bureaucrats supported the Gowon military regime and filled the vacuum left by the lack of civilian political processes. On the other hand, the heightened quest for national unity, particularly after the intense trauma of the crises of 1966 and the Civil War of 1967 to 1970, led to the very deliberate efforts at establishing the representativeness of national institutions in the hope that such balanced representation would obviate the winner-take-all scramble of the previous era. Increasingly, institutional building became subject to the political imperative of representation and national unity, with merit playing a secondary role.

This was the context for the adoption of the constitution provision on ‘federal character’ in the 1979 constitution in the run-up to the return to civilian politics in that year:

The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few States or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

The composition of the Government of a State, a Local Government or any of the agencies of such Governments, and the conduct of the affairs of the Governments or such agencies shall be carried out in such manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within its area of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the Federation [Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1989, Section 15.3 & 15.4]

In Section 217 of the same Constitution, the need for federal character in the composition of the armed forces was specifically expressed. These two provisions on the federal character principle were retained and even strengthened in the 1999 Constitution which midwifed the return to civil politics after another bout of military rule which started in 1983. In the 1999 Constitution, the Federal Character Commission was created to monitor and enforce the federal character principle (Section 153.1). The Commission has since generated two extensive surveys of the ethnic composition of various federal bureaucracies.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the federal character principle is now to apply not just to the armed forces, as in the 1989 Constitution, but to the composition of the ‘officer corps’ and the other ranks (Section 217.3). Political parties are also expected to have a national ‘spread’ before they can be registered to seek electoral offices; their executives must also reflect the federal character of the country.

The Constitutional stipulation of the federal character principle is buttressed in administrative practice by the use of state quotas in the filling of university places, job vacancies, and the award of scholarships. For example, the National Policy on Education, 1981, stipulated that student places in all federal-owned universities must be shared according to a prescribed quota system: 40 percent based on merit, 30 percent for applicants coming from the ‘catchment’ area in which the university is situated, 20 percent for ‘educationally disadvantaged states’, and 10 percent at the discretion of the administrators of the various institutions. Similarly, informal arrangements within various political parties have meant that party posts and elected offices are shared to different territorial-cum-ethnic constituencies through ‘zoning’ and ‘rotation’. These practices obtain right down to local government offices. As Bach [1997 335] rightly argues, what obtains in Nigeria is less of a federation and more of a Lijphart-type power-sharing arrangement with emphasis on incorporating all significant segments of the population, the protection of vital minority interests, and proportionality as the standard principle of political representation. Yet, as I will argue in the following section, despite these constitutional and administrative changes after 1970, ethnic minorities in Nigeria continue to face major disadvantages in their access to political and economic resources. I suggest that there are three principal reasons for this continuing situation.

Firstly, state creation was seen as a panacea in the 1950s and 1960s by ethnic minority movements on the assumption that the three ethnic majorities already had regions which they controlled; the new states were therefore to be created for the minorities, as was the case in the creation of the Midwest Region in 1964. However, once the fragmentation of the ethno-regional blocs was accepted in principle, it was difficult not to create additional states even in areas dominated by the three majority ethnic groups. As a result, there are now roughly 7 states that can be said to be Yoruba dominated (the South West plus Kwara), 10 states dominated by the Hausa-Fulani (the North West plus Gombe, Bauchi and Adamawa), and 5 states dominated by the Igbo. This gives the three ethnic majority groups a control over 22 of the 36 states; the northern and southern ethnic minority groups are still left with the control of a minority of 14 states, often with poorer infrastructure. While state creation was envisaged as creating equality between the majority and minority ethnic groups, in

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<sup>2</sup> These surveys are the object of an on-going UNRISD research on Ethnic Structure & Public Sector Reforms.

practice it has reproduced the extant inequalities that have been historically structured into the construction of the Nigerian state [Mustapha 2002]. Since resources – grants, jobs, scholarships, social infrastructure, public investments, etc. – are shared on the basis of territorially defined states and local governments, the ethnic majority groups who control the preponderant numbers of these units continue to enjoy a preponderant share, and this is coming on top of their already accumulated advantages.

The second reason why the ethnic minorities continue to suffer from disadvantages relates to the distributive logic of the rentier state in Nigeria, particularly after its coffers were filled with oil revenues from 1970. As pointed out earlier, the new states and local governments were in no position to finance their own operations and all depended on federal handouts. In deed, ethnic majority groups also demanded additional states and local governments because such territorial units were vital for access to federal funds. The reliance on grants controlled by a federal centre still dominated by ethnic majority interests meant that the new ethnic minority states were severely constrained in their ability to fully represent their local constituency, even if, as in Plateau State, they wanted to do so. In fact, in many instances, the governors and administrators of the ethnic minority states did not always reflect the wishes of their constituencies because of what Guyer [1994] succinctly referred to as ‘representation without taxation’. Since taxation was not the basis of public finance, most governments in Nigeria, including those in ethnic minority areas, did as they pleased, with little effective oversight from the ethnic constituencies who voted for them.

The last reason why ethnic minorities continue to suffer disadvantages is the issue of ‘indigeneity’ which arose as a consequence of the adoption of the federal character principle. Nigeria is a country of high human spatial mobility. Even by the 1950s, 5 million of the 55 million population of the country were living in areas other than the ones to which they ethnically belonged [Eleazu: 1977]. In pre-colonial Nigeria, those involved in such movements might ultimately be absorbed into their host communities as full members; but in the colonial and post-colonial periods, boundaries of community membership became more tightly drawn, and such resident ‘strangers’ were often denied full community membership. Even the British colonial administration encouraged this attitude through its concept of the ‘native foreigner’ [cf. Skinner 1963; Nnoli 1978; Mustapha 1998; Bach 1997].

Giving the massive scale of population mobility and the effective division into ‘citizens and strangers’, it became important to specify who was to benefit from the share of resources allocated to a state or local government area. The decision reached was that such resources should go to ‘true indigenes’ determined by blood ties and ethnicity, and not just to anybody living there, no matter how long they may have been resident there. As a consequence, a citizen at the local government and state level has been defined in the 1979 Constitution (Section 329.1), the 1989 Constitution (Section 329.1), and the 1999 Constitution (Section 318.1) as ‘... a person either of whose parents or any of whose grand parents was a member of a community indigenous to that State.’ Ideally, this constitutional provision should strengthen the access of ethnic minorities to resources allocated to their states or local government areas; in reality, it has only fuelled conflict and violence in many ethnic minority areas in the North West (southern Kaduna State), North Central (Nassarawa and Taraba States, and North East (Adamawa State). These conflicts are examined in the next section.

### **3. Major Problems.**

My central argument, so far, is that the structural cleavage in the Nigerian state system between the three ethnic majority groups on the one hand, and the minority ethnic groups on the other has tended to reproduce itself, despite persistent constitutional and institutional engineering. Yet, to place too much emphasis on this continuity is to miss the many tangible and intangible fundamental changes that have taken place in majority/minority relations since 1966. Many minority ethnic groups are now in a much better position to represent their interests within different state institutions, even if they continue to be constrained in so doing by the majoritarian tendencies of the political system. Within this dynamic of both continuity and change, it would seem that three major problem areas are worthy of special attention. Firstly, there are the continuing claims of old-style domination by many minority ethnic groups. Secondly, there is the specific situation of the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta from where the nation's oil revenue is derived. Finally, there are problems associated with the nation's language policy.

#### **3.1 Claims of Old-Style Domination.**

In southern Kaduna State (North-West), in Plateau State and in Adamawa State (North-Central), minority claims of old-style domination by the Hausa-Fulani and the Fulani have persisted, fuelling continuing conflict. In southern Kaduna State, there have been the Kasuwan Magani riots in 1980/1, the Gure/Kahagu riots in 1984, the Lere riots in 1986, the Kafanchan riots in 1987, and the Zangon Kataf riots in February and May 1992 [cf. Mustapha 1997; 2000]. In this part of Nigeria, centuries-old settlements of the Hausa ethnic-majority group constitute influential and sizeable communities of settlers on the territories of ethnic-minority groups. The historical context of relations between the Hausa and these minorities is important for a proper understanding of the contemporary crises, which essentially revolve around conflicting notions of history, justice, rights and citizenship. The history of Zangon Kataf illustrates these points.

Zangon Kataf is a Hausa settlement (*zango*) within Kataf territory. The original town was established as a trading post for Hausa merchants en route to the Niger Basin in the early part of the 16th century. While the Hausa of Zangon Kataf and the Kataf tribal polity established economic and commercial relations, they had little in the way of social relations, Zangon Kataf being a wholly Hausa and Muslim settlement. The Hausa settlement was also politically autonomous. By the end of the 18th century, the settlement became subordinated to Kauru, a larger Hausa settlement within the territory of another ethnic minority in the same region, the Ruruma. Early in the 19th century, Kauru itself became subordinated to Zaria, one of the major Hausa states that constituted the Sokoto Caliphate.

For much of the 19th century, the minority ethnic groups south of Zaria, the Kataf included, were raided for slaves to supply the domestic needs of the Sokoto Caliphate, and for export on both the trans-Saharan and the trans-Atlantic slave routes. From the Kataf point of view, the Hausa community of Zangon Kataf were seen as distinct from the Hausa slave raiders from Zaria. With the imposition of British colonial rule at the turn of the 20th century, however, the Kataf polity was subordinated to the Emir of Zaria, under Lugard's policy of Indirect Rule. Kataf territory became Katuka

District of Zaria Emirate. In 1902, 1904, 1905 and 1907 the Kataf attacked Zangon Kataf, allegedly for colluding with the British and the Hausa emirate of Zaria in their designs to subjugate the Kataf. The colonial army was called in to suppress the attacks. Subsequently, Zangon Kataf town was moved to its present location around 1915. For much of the 20th century, especially between 1920 and 1950, there has been a steady influx of Hausa people to Zangon Kataf, primarily from the Hausa-Fulani Emirates of Zaria, Kano, Katsina and Bauchi.

The Zangon Kataf crises of 1992 started over the construction of a new market by the Local Government Authority. Disagreement between some members of both Kataf and Hausa communities over the issue led to clashes early in February 1992, resulting in a number of fatalities. From the 15th to the 17th of May 1992, fresh rioting erupted in Zangon Kataf. The immediate unfolding of the riot has become the subject of intense controversy as each community tries to justify its conduct. There are divergent positions as to who started the killings. There is no doubt, however, that most of the victims were the Hausa of Zangon Kataf. There is evidence to suggest that at least 1536 Hausas were killed in Zangon Kataf. Most of the houses in the town were razed to the ground and Hausa household property valued at N29,173,850<sup>3</sup> destroyed. These events precipitated rioting in other parts of Kaduna State; large-scale rioting broke out in Kaduna, Zaria, Ikara, and Kauru. Kaduna is the state capital, while Zaria and Ikara constitute the Hausa heartland of the State. In Kaduna and Zaria, hundreds of lives were lost, either in the rioting, or in police/military actions that followed.

In justification of their actions during the crises, the Kataf argue that they have historically welcomed strangers into their midst. These strangers were given clan/communal lands to cultivate but there was no alienation of the land from the original household, lineage or clan, as the case may be. Individual ownership was not part of tribal land tenure. Strangers from similar groups were often absorbed into Kataf society, particularly from southern Kaduna state and parts of Plateau State. The Kataf go on to suggest that when the Hausa merchants came to the Kataf polity in the 16th century, they were given land to build their settlement but the rights of ownership over the land remained with the Kataf clans. A mark of this continued ownership, consistent with their traditional tenure system, was their abiding right to harvest the tree crops on the land. Since most of the Hausa immigrants were traders or craftsmen, they rarely had need of farmland and there was no conflict over this resource.

Though both communities remained politically and culturally distinct, there was little conflict between them, even when Hausa-Fulani slave raiders from Zaria Emirate launched attacks on the Kataf. The problem started, the Kataf claim, from the imposition of British colonial rule in the early 20th century. While the Emir of Zaria, for regional geo-political reasons succumbed to colonial imposition without a fight, the Kataf forcefully resisted colonial domination. Against this background, the Kataf were regarded by the British as 'ungovernable'. Given their lack of a centralized state structure and their traditional religion, they were regarded as 'uncivilized pagans' who were incapable of self-governance. Furthermore, racist colonial anthropology characterized the Kataf as inferior to the lighter-skinned Fulani elite of the Emirates, who were not only monotheists but had also built up a large empire, the Sokoto

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<sup>3</sup> US \$3.7 million at the 1992 exchange rate.

Caliphate. The Kataf claim that the British were therefore favourably disposed to accept the Zaria claim that the Kataf polity had been 'conquered' by Zaria in pre-colonial times. As far as they were concerned, Zaria, through Kauru, may lay claim to the political allegiance of the Hausa community of Zangon Kataf but that had nothing to do with the political autonomy of the Kataf or their ownership of the land on which the town stood.

With the loss of their traditional political system based on clans and their subjugation to an 'alien' authority, the Kataf claim that they became victims of a series of injustices. They were excluded from the District administration, which became a wholly Hausa affair, right down to the messengers. They were also subjected to various indignities by the 'alien' local administration: cultural denigration, tyrannical excesses by the Emir's Native Police, and subjugation to the unsympathetic arbitrariness of the Emir's Alkali courts, which dispensed a form of law based on Islamic principles which were alien to the Kataf. They also complained of excessive taxation, confiscation of their goods for failure to pay, and exclusion from the markets built with Kataf forced labour. They claimed that the ordeal of forced labour was not extended to the Hausas of Zangon Kataf. Above all else, the Kataf complained that the colonial and local administrations encouraged the influx of Hausa settlers to the area, leading to the forcible transfer of Kataf farmlands to new Hausa immigrants.

The Kataf claim that they protested their situation through numerous petitions to the colonial administration, often with the assistance of Christian missionaries who had gained a foothold in the area. After two bouts of rioting in 1933 and 1946, the Kataf agitated for the formation of an Independent Tribal Council composed of the indigenous Kataf. After another episode of rioting in 1953, the principle of including some Kataf in the District Council was accepted but it was made clear that the district still remained under the Emir. As a result, a few Kataf got into the administration, especially at the Village Head level. The agitation for an Independent Tribal Council continued. Kataf agitation for an 'indigenous' District Head subsequently led, in 1967, to the appointment of the first Kataf as District Head. However, considering that the emirate officials from Zaria defined 'indigeneity' in the districts of southern Kaduna to include the Hausa and Fulani communities of the area and continued to appoint same as 'indigenous' officials, the Kataf, along with other minority ethnic groups in the area, reverted to their old demand for their own independent, 'traditional', chiefdoms in 1974.

The 1976 Local Government Reform created the possibility for the minority ethnic groups of southern Kaduna State, who nevertheless constituted a huge majority over the Hausa/Fulani settler communities in the area, to vote in their own people as chairmen of the local government councils. However, in their view, this development did not address their problem as the elected local government chairmen were incorporated into the Zaria Emirate Council as subordinates of the Emir. Furthermore, all District and Village Heads, though employees of, and paid by, the local government, continued to be appointed by, and reported directly to, the Emir of Zaria. Though Kataf men were now both Local Government Chairman and District Head, Kataf disaffection continued to simmer, fuelled by what they regard as their continued subordination to Zaria, and the alleged nepotistic appointment of the minority, but now 'allegedly indigenous', Hausa/Fulani elements from the southern Kaduna area to political and other offices in the State and Federal governments as 'representatives' of

the people of the area. They formed the view that elements of the local Hausa/Fulani communities were using their wider connections within the Nigerian state system and the society in general to continue their effective domination of the southern Kaduna minority groups.

Needless to say, these Kataf interpretations of their history and circumstances are hotly disputed by the Hausa of Zangon Kataf [Mustapha 1997; 2000]. That notwithstanding, a Kataf Chiefdom was ultimately created in 1996, but the climate of suspicion and tension has persisted, and nowhere is this ugly situation more apparent than in the sprawling metropolis of Kaduna, claimed as their own by both the southern Kaduna ethnic minority groups and the dominant Hausa-Fulani.<sup>4</sup> Since the return to civilian politics in 1999, Kaduna metropolis has witnessed repeated bouts of rioting and killings, the latest of which was the Miss World riot of November 2002 which left more than 200 people dead. Though most ‘explanations’ of this latest riot suggested that Islamic sensibilities and fanaticism may be responsible, an influential national commentator of Kaduna State origin suggested that the real reasons were much deeper:

Those who say they own Kaduna ... from Southern Kaduna (referred to as predominantly Christians) are hopelessly too weak economically and politically to even begin to participate in the affairs of the state in any meaningful way. The social, economic, political and even bureaucratic inequalities that have been institutionalised in the state from colonial times up till now, have heightened the tensions that have turned Kaduna into a cauldron that is permanently on the boil.

... Why is it that the State House [Governor’s official residence] in Kaduna has remained off limit to any non-Muslim since the creation of the state in 1967? ... What is it about the security of Kaduna State that has made the position of the Commissioner of Police almost exclusively Muslim? ... What is it in the control of the State Bureaucracy of Kaduna State that since its creation in 1967, no non-Muslim has ever headed the State Civil Service? ... What is it about Kaduna State that all these years, no non-Muslim ever represented the State as a Federal Permanent Secretary? ... What is it about Kaduna State that no non-Muslim has ever represented the State as an Ambassador? ... What is it about the Southern part of Kaduna State that there isn’t a single evidence of Federal government presence in terms of either a Parastatal, Institution or Industry? [Father Matthew Kukah, mimeo. Also published in the Lagos *Guardian* after the riot]

What the situation in Kaduna State raises, is the fact that quotas and concessions given to a *territorially* defined state or local government could still be distributed with an *ethnic* bias within the state or local government. And this is more the case when different ethnic groups within a given territory have accumulated different historical advantages and opportunities. In such cases, particularly in the northern zones, the

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<sup>4</sup> Both sides have agreed to a separation into two states, but the Federal government has been unable to enact this separation because it affects the wider geo-political balance between the north and the south. Nevertheless, both sides are in competition with regards to who will keep Kaduna metropolis in the event of their ‘divorce’.

dynamic of majority/minority relations increasingly revolve around the question of indigeneity and citizenship.

To a lesser extent, many ethnic minority groups in Plateau, Bauchi and Adamawa States also raise similar fears about the perpetuation of old-style domination, even within the changed context of post Civil War Nigeria [cf. Dilawa 2002]. In some cases, the continuing frustration of ethnic minority groups is turned, not on a majority ethnic group, but on another ethnic minority group that is perceived to have enjoyed some undue privileges in the colonial or post-colonial past. For example, the complicated three-cornered violence involving four ethnic minority groups in Taraba State – Jukun, Tiv, Chamba, and Kuteb – is of this order [Mustapha 2000]. The continuation of the Taraba violence led, in 2001, to the sacking of the Tiv provincial town of Zaki Biam by the Nigerian Army. Tiv settler communities that moved in the distant past from their Benue State heartlands into Nasarawa State have also been violently removed because they are not defined as ‘indigenes’ worthy of the claims of full citizenship and the rights attaching to it. It is also very common now for the elite of one minority ethnic group to accuse competing elites from another minority ethnic group of seeking to monopolize new opportunities at the state and local government levels, thereby seeking to create a situation of old-style domination. Since 1966, *intra* minority conflicts have therefore become as prominent as majority/minority conflicts, precisely because the reforms aimed at addressing majority/minority conflicts have tended to generate new cleavages within minority groups.

### **3.2 Minorities of the Niger Delta.**

Whilst the old-style domination of minority ethnic groups is about unequal political and bureaucratic access, the contemporary complaint of the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta is about the control of the abundant natural resources found in their area, but controlled by a federal government beholden to majority ethnic groups. The reforms carried out since 1966 had addressed most of the problems associated with the old-style Igbo/minorities relations in the former Eastern Region. These changes were within the context of the defeat of the Igbo-led rebellion that sought to create the Republic of Biafra out of the Eastern Region from 1967 to 1970. The uncoupling of the Eastern Regional ethnic minorities from their erstwhile Igbo ‘overlords’ after the Civil War was further hammered home by the way in which Igbo property rights in the contested city of Port Harcourt – the so-called ‘abandoned’ properties issue - were sacrificed at the alter of minority interests. From the 1970s, the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta ceased to face any serious Igbo threats to their freedoms; the old-style pattern of minority domination was effectively at an end, though the majoritarian domination of the national economy and politics by the three *wazobia* groups persisted.

The paradox of the new situation in the Niger Delta was that on the one hand, the military-led federal government needed to weaken regional governments and assume many of their powers in order to carry out the sort of political engineering necessary for breaking up the old regions and creating the new minority controlled states and local governments. Enhancing minority interests was coterminous with accumulating federal power and this effort to ‘nationalize control of the sources of Nigerian social power’ was further consolidated in the 1979 Constitution [Suberu 2001,36]. On the other hand, the erosion of regional powers by the centre meant that the new states,

which the ethnic minorities got, were not as powerful and as autonomous as the ethnic minority elites had hoped for. After the euphoria of state creation, many southern ethnic minority elites began to suggest that they were still subject to domination and exploitation, but this time, the culprit was often seen as the federal government, dominated by ‘northern’ or *wazobia* interests. Increasingly, a contentious relationship developed between the Niger Delta ethnic minorities on the one hand, and the federal government and the oil multinationals on the other; this conflict over natural resources was a new dimension in minority rights agitation.

One feature of this new conflict has been proliferation of ethnic minority organizations in the Niger Delta.<sup>5</sup> These organizations reveal some of the distinctive features and thinking of the current ethnic minority agitation in the Niger Delta. Firstly, an uneasy tension exists between the inclusive, generic, ‘minority’ identity developed by these ethnic minorities in the 1940s and the 1950s, and the new assertion of specific, and narrow ethnic identities such as Ijaw, Ogoni or Ikwerre identities. If in the 1950s, the tendency was to embed *ethnic* minority identities within the *political* identity of being ‘minorities’ in the same boat, in the 1990s, the politically salient was increasingly narrowed down to the ethnic. Related to this, is the element of intra-minority competition for political and economic resources. Secondly, even within a single ethnic minority group, there is the tendency for internal fragmentation, particularly along generational lines. As I explained earlier, in the 1940s and 1950s, the ethnic minority political elites tended to look for allies in other regions for their ‘protection’. In the Eastern Region, the Niger Delta Congress looked to the Northern Region, while the COR movement looked to the Western Region. In the new circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s, this ‘extroverted’ political orientation was challenged by the ethnic minority youths who increasingly emphasised looking inwards.

A third aspect of these new organizations was the shift in focus from national level political processes, to local level direct action; while most emphasised peaceful action, others, particularly the youth, sought to reincarnate the spirit of the armed rebellion by the Niger Delta Volunteer Forces in 1966. A fourth aspect of these organizations is the deliberate effort to excavate, polish, and re-deploy ethnic, cultural, historical, or mystical symbols in their agitations. This underlies the shift away from the more ‘civic’ to the more parochial in the pattern of agitation and demands; Okonta, [2002], however, argues that groups such as the Ogoni had to become ‘tribesmen’ as a necessary condition for having their civic rights respected by the Nigerian state.

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP); Ijaw National Congress (INC); National Youth Council for the Survival of Ogoni People (NYCOP); Council of Ikwerre Nationality (CIN); Southern Minorities Movement (SMM); Movement for Reparation to Ogbia (MORETO); Ethnic Minority Rights Organization of Africa (EMIROAF); Ijaw Peace Movement (IPM); Ijaw Youth Council (IYC); Itsekiri Nationality Patriots (INP); Movement for the Survival of Izon Ethnic Nationality in Niger Delta (MOSIEND); Chikoko; Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA); Isoko National Youth Movement (INYM); Bayelsa Forum; Egi Women’s Movement (EWM); Urhobo Study Group (USG); Egi National Congress (ENC); Ogbia Solidarity; Urhobo Progressive Union; Traditional Rulers of Oil Mineral Producing Communities (TROMPCON); Ika Group; Akwa Ibom Emancipation Group; Ijaw Ethnic Nationality Rights Protection Organization; Federation of Ogoni Women Association (FOWA); Council of Ogoni Traditional Rulers (COTRA); Ekpeye Peace Vanguard; Niger Delta Youth Movement; Ogoni Teachers Union (OTU); Council of Ogoni Churches (COC); and the Ukwani Forum [Okwuosa *et al* 1994; Mustapha 2000; Obi 2002].

The first major expression of this resurgent minority mobilization took place in Umuechem in October 1990, and involved a confrontation between the youth of the community and staff of the oil multinational, Shell. The Nigerian army was subsequently called in on Shell's behalf, leading to the sacking of the Umuechem community and the killing of many people, including the community head. The seething undercurrent of resentment against the federal government gradually broke into the open all over the Niger Delta. Also in October 1990, MOSOP was formed, and adopted the Ogoni Bill of Rights which called for a halt to environmental degradation and the control of Ogoni resources by the Ogoni. When the government did not respond to the Bill of Rights, the Ogoni internationalized their struggle through such organizations as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), Body Shop, Amnesty International and Friends of the Earth.

In 1993, the Ogoni conducted mass demonstrations, and a section of the MOSOP leadership demanded that the 1993 Presidential elections be boycotted. This amounted to a repudiation of the legitimacy of the federal government [Mustapha 2000]. The federal military government fanned anti-Ogoni sentiments amongst the neighbouring ethnic minorities, leading to violent clashes. Meanwhile, internal tensions intensified within the Ogoni movement with youths pitted against elders; Ken Saro-Wiwa against the other executive members of MOSOP; and 'moderates' who wished to use national political structures to advance Ogoni claims, against 'radicals' who did not. In the end, four Ogoni elders were denounced as 'vultures' and killed by an irate mob of Ogoni youth. Capitalizing on this division, the federal government subjected nine Ogoni activists, including the Ogoni leader, Saro-Wiwa, to a kangaroo trial, after which they were hanged. Peaceful and violent agitation, by Niger Delta ethnic minorities, have continued; in 2000, the town of Odi was invaded and destroyed by federal troops after local youths kidnapped and killed some policemen. The Niger Delta remains a heavily militarized area.

A major demand of the Niger Delta ethnic minorities, enunciated in various documents including the Ogoni Bill of Rights and the Kaiama Declaration, is that of 'resource control'. From 1954, the principal criterion for the allocation of federally collected revenue to the regions was the principle of derivation. Under this principle, Regions were entitled to 50% of revenue collected from their territories. From 1970, however, crude oil, found in the Niger Delta, gradually replaced agricultural produce as the main basis of government revenue. In 1970, the federal government encroached on excise duties and import duties that had gone to the states; in 1971, states in the Niger Delta and other littoral states lost their right to 45 percent of the revenue from offshore oil operations. Still, the application of the derivation principle to revenue from onshore oil explorations meant that, in the 1974-1975 fiscal year, the southern ethnic minority states of Rivers and Mid-West, with a combined population of 4.1 million, were allocated N241 million, while the ethnic majority areas of the Western, East-Central, North-Western states, and the northern minority state of the North-East, with a combined population of 30.2 million received only N102.3 million. Gradually, there was the abandonment of the principle of derivation which had been a mainstay of regional fiscal autonomy. Derivation, as a principle of revenue allocation declined from 50 percent in 1969, to 2 percent in 1981, and 1 percent in 1989 [Suberu 2001, 49-65]. This figure improved to 3 percent in 1992 and 13 percent in 2000. In 2002-3, ethnic minority leaders from the Niger Delta have been pushing for legislation at the

federal level which makes the 13 percent applicable to both onshore and offshore operations. While President Obasanjo is willing to extend the rights of littoral states to 24 nautical miles, termed the ‘contiguous zone’, ethnic minority advocates are demanding that the ‘continental shelf’ or 200 nautical miles should be the extent of the application of the 13 percent derivation principle. There is an acrimonious political deadlock over this issue.

Minority demands for ‘resource control’ have persisted; there have also been demands for a national conference of ethnic groups as a path to the restoration of a truly federalist or confederal constitution which will guarantee the autonomy and right to ‘self-determination’ of the various ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta. Coupled to this particular demand was the minority complaint that while their resources were being used to develop other parts of the country, their areas were left without basic social amenities and subjected to environmental pollution. On January 4 2003, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic January 4<sup>th</sup> 1993 march, Ledum Mitee, leader of MOSOP summed up the current perspective of his organization:

The conflict that has been on with Shell for over 10 years stands unresolved. The concept of autonomy within a genuine Federal state stands unanswered and the concept of resource control pioneered by us and supported by our allies stands unresolved by the Federal Government and (is) even bastardised by some of our politicians who seek to hijack our resources from the Federal Government for their personal benefit [Lagos *Guardian*: 05/01/03].

The ‘our politicians’ referred to, are the state Governors in the oil producing communities. This is symptomatic of the increasing alienation between the ethnic communities of the Niger Delta and the state governments whose creation was a central aspect of minority agitation in the past.

### **3.3 National Language Policy and Ethnic Minorities.**

The National Language Policy is an area of latent discrimination against all ethnic minorities in Nigeria. However, this should not be exaggerated as cultural and linguistic interchange between ethnic groups in the country is largely voluntary or determined by factors such as economic and spatial mobility. Even in the Northern Region where Hausa was used as an administrative lingua franca, it would still be hard to make a case of unwanted assimilation. On the whole, I do not think that unwanted cultural assimilation or exclusion is an issue in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the policy on languages discriminates against ethnic minority languages to the extent that it confers a special status on the ethnic majority languages.

The National Policy on Education issued in 1977 stipulated that the initial language in primary schools must be the mother-tongue of the child, or the language of the immediate community. The official language, English, is to follow later [Akinnaso 1991]. In another section, the National Policy on Education points out that apart from:

preserving the people’s culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-

tongue. The government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba [cited in Agheyisi 1984, 245].

These centralizing cultural project of the post-Civil War Nigerian state – there was also the nationalization of regional television and radio stations and universities – was given constitutional sanction in the language specification of the 1979 Constitution which stated that parliamentary business in the National Assembly could be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, when adequate arrangements for translation have been put in place (Section 51 of the 1979 Constitution; 53 of the 1989 Constitution; and 55 of the 1999 Constitution). The House of Assembly at the state level is allowed to conduct its business in English and other local languages the Assembly may resolve to use.

While Jibril [1991, 110] has justified the special privileges given to the three languages as ‘commonsensical and rational … since not all languages can be used’, others have pointed out that it amounts to a state-sponsored discrimination [Essien 1991] which might result in ‘gradual lingo-cultural genocide’ for ethnic minorities [Adegbija 1997]. Others have pointed out the assimilationist implications for minority languages [Akinnaso 1991, 90]. Essien [1991 156-7] lists some of the privileges of the three major languages: (1) while the teaching of the mother-tongue of the minority child terminates at the junior secondary school level, the three major languages continue to taught at the senior secondary school level; (2) only the three major languages are taught on national television<sup>6</sup>; (3) translation of national network news on the national television network are done only in the three languages; (4) the three languages benefit from state-sponsored language development, particularly in the development and enrichment of parliamentary vocabulary; (5) the print media only publishes in the three languages.

While condemning Jibril’s advocacy of ‘language imposition’ on ‘rational grounds<sup>7</sup> and in good faith’ [1991, 116], it should be noted that the debate on the language policy is limited largely to academics precisely because it has no dramatic impact on the lives of the average Nigerian. Many Nigerians speak more than one language as a matter of course; it is a matter of convenience and opportunity, rather than an imposition. Secondly, as Agheyisi [1984, 250] argues, ‘… the policy as presently expressed, is far too weak to impose any binding force on state and/or local Governments for its implementation’. Local communities are well able to protect their linguistic interests against the policy if they so desire. And although official effort may be more directed at the three major languages, the others are not entirely ignored: 118 Nigerian languages now have orthographies, although only 35 of them are well developed; about 50 languages have been tried as media of instruction in early primary education; and about 100 languages have been used in radio broadcasts at the national and regional levels [Akinnaso 1991, 102]. In the long run, some ethnic minorities with about 7,500 people may lose their language and even disappear, but this will not be as a result of active cultural and linguistic suppression or discrimination.

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<sup>6</sup> WAZOBIA was originally the name of the popular TV programme that taught the three languages.

<sup>7</sup> Akinnaso [1991, 102] suggests that ‘over 50% of the nation’s primary schools’ already use the three languages.

#### **4. Conclusion.**

In the period 1950 to 1966, Nigeria's ethnic minority groups were increasingly subjected to a majoritarian oppression, founded on the ethno-regional structure of the country. After 1966, efforts were made to correct the structural/institutional anomalies of the country. Though many gains have been registered in the promotion of minority interests, many problems remain. I suggest that these problems affect all Nigerian groups irrespective of whether they are majority or minority. The necessary reforms needed in Nigeria transcend the majority/minority divide. Firstly, the centralizing tendency of military-inspired political engineering has undermined the autonomy of the federating units of the country. Nigeria is a federation with very strong unitarist elements in its constitution and operations; the concentration of powers in the centre is cause for both instability and disaffection. Secondly, between 1983 and 1999, Nigeria was subjected to a series of military regimes that did much to erode the vitality of important national institutions. Within the context of this decay of national institutions and collective political traditions, powerful individuals have become very prominent. The capacity of groups for self-representation has consequently been eroded.

Thirdly, the adoption of the structural adjustment programme in 1986 destroyed what was left of the national economy. It also marked the abandonment of the nation-building agenda that has characterized Nigerian national life since 1967. The social citizenship of most Nigerians has been severely questioned, given that there is a widespread lack of access to basic livelihood facilities; conservative figures from the Federal Office of Statistics suggest that in 1980, 28 percent of the population or 18 million people were living under the poverty line. By 1996, this figure had ballooned to 66 percent of the population or 67 million people [IRIN 2002]. The denial of social citizenship, which afflicts all ethnic groups, is central to the exacerbation of ethnic and religious tensions in the country as individuals and groups struggle to ensure some access to a dwindling resource base. This was particularly the case under the military, when virtually all national socio-economic institutions were run aground. The resulting struggle for survival has created a situation where opportunistic politicians and other aspirant power-seekers can hope to make political capital by mobilizing 'their' people, often against real or imagined 'enemies'. By the time the military handed over power in 1999, social tension was very high in the country, particularly in the Niger Delta.

Since 1999, Nigeria has witnessed many religious and ethnic conflicts whose roots lie in the previous military period. Ethnic and religious identities have become more salient in this conflictual situation; a survey in 2000 showed that 48 percent of Nigerians identified themselves in terms of their ethnic identity [Lewis & Bratton 2000]. The ethnic minority groups, like everybody else, have been caught up in this charged ethnic atmosphere. Interestingly, however, Lewis and Bratton [2000 iii] also reported that while only 12 percent of Nigerians overall felt that the economic conditions of their group are 'worse than the economic conditions of other groups in the country', among particular groups, such as the Ijaw of the Niger Delta, this sense of relative deprivation was felt by 32 percent of the respondents. They also report that in the South-South, despite a widespread feeling of political marginalization, there is considerable political mobilization in the zone [2000 22].

This combination of factors: (1) a defective federalism which threatens local autonomy; (2) the increasing salience of opportunistic politicians in local politics; and (3) the lack of social citizenship, can be seen at play in the virtual state of civil war that has developed in Plateau State since September 2001. In that conflict, the minority Berom and Tarok on the one hand, are confronting the Hausa and Fulani on the other, and:

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Inter-Communal Conflicts in Langtang-North, Langtang-South, Shendam and Wase, has heard that all the ethno-religious violence that occurred in different parts of the country was an expression of the level of the people's discontent with the structure of the Nigerian federation. ... The commission also heard that the experience of the Wase Tarok and Hausa/Fulani could be linked to the same discontent with the Nigerian system. ... These were the views of the Tarok-speaking community, who were represented by their spokesman .... According to him, all the clashes point directly to the failure to address some crucial issues such as exclusion stemming from political, economic and cultural marginalisation. ... He said: "The previous maladministration of the Nigerian state has generated enduring prosperity for few and impoverished the vast majority who have become so gullible and easy recruits for any kind of parochial mobilisation". The Hausa/Fulani in reply accused the prominent Tarok people of fuelling the crisis ... [Lagos *Guardian*: 14/1/03].

In recent times, most Nigerian ethnic groups, both the majority and the minority groups, have expressed serious reservations about aspects of the Nigerian state. There is the general feeling that the centralizing ethos started in 1966 has gone too far, constraining the necessary autonomy of the various groups in the country. Many have demanded the deconcentration of the enormous fiscal and political powers concentrated at the centre. But how do we achieve this objective without doing damage to the body-politic? This is the real challenge facing both ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities in Nigeria. Unfortunately, these issues must be tackled against the background of heightened ethnic and religious tensions in the country, and without the benefit of significant consensus. Fundamentally, both majority and minority ethnic groups face the same problem of fine-tuning a defective federal system which has so far enforced national unity, but without guaranteeing the local autonomy of its constitutive communities. The resolution of this problem will not only ensure improved local identification with governmental structures, it will also make these institutions more responsive to the needs of their constituencies.

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