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## **Institutionalised Marginality, Social Conflicts and the Quest for National Unity in an African Nation-State: A Theoretical Exploration**

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### **Abstract**

This essay focuses on the issue of marginality, marginalisation and the quest for national unity. Although, the issue of marginalisation in a nation-state such as Nigeria has been widely discussed by writers, few have attempted to offer a systematic analysis of the issue through a theoretical or conceptual basis. This paper examines the extent to which the competition for resources and the exercise of political control have compelled the marginalisation of various segments of Nigerian society. It highlights the evolving nature and different expressions of marginalisation. By looking at the issue of marginality and the social order in Nigeria against the backdrop of the brutal facts of injustice, inequality and exploitation, we seek to discern the epochal configurations and socio-cultural locations of the problem. Our aim is to discover how this problem has militated against the quest for national integration and reconciliation in the polity. And by highlighting the attendant crisis of social order occasioned by marginalisation, this essay reinforces the need for the urgent establishment of enduring humane rules of distributive justice in the society.

### **Résumé**

Cet article s'intéresse à la question de la marginalité, de la marginalisation et de l'unité nationale. Bien que la question de la marginalisation dans un état-nation tel que le Nigeria ait été largement traitée par divers auteurs, très peu d'entre eux (voire aucun) ont essayé de présenter une analyse systématique de cette idée, en s'appuyant sur une base théorique ou conceptuelle. Cette contribution cherche à découvrir dans quelle mesure la concurrence relative au contrôle des ressources et du pouvoir politique au sein de la société a provoqué la marginalisation de divers groupes de la société nigériane. Elle montre le caractère évolutif, ainsi que les différentes formes de marginalisation présentes au sein de cette société. En examinant la question de la marginalité et de l'ordre social au

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Nigeria, dans le contexte de l'injustice sur fond de violence, de l'inégalité et de l'exploitation, nous cherchons à distinguer les configurations périodiques, ainsi que les localisations socioculturelles du problème. Notre objectif est de découvrir dans quelle mesure ce problème a constitué un frein à l'intégration nationale et à la réconciliation politique. A travers l'évocation de la crise connexe de l'ordre social provoquée par la marginalisation, cette contribution tente de souligner le besoin urgent de mise en place de règles humaines viables pour une justice distributive au sein de la société.

### **Introduction**

This essay examines the problem of marginalisation in the Nigerian nation from a theoretical and analytical perspective. Its primary concern is to identify and examine the conditions of social transformation needed if there is to be enduring national unity in Nigeria. It attempts to confront the fundamental ethical challenge of creating a free society, a social arena of equal rights, and a social system based on justice and mutual cooperation. The marginalisation of some sectors of Nigerian society have led to a series of ethnic, class, political and religious conflicts which have beset the country, vitiating its potential for development and on various occasions threatening to cause the total collapse of the state and the dissolution of society. The propensity for human differences to degenerate into deep and enduring conflicts and violence are clear indications that a multiplicity of factors are at play in the analysis of marginalisation as a basis of the crisis of social order in the country. Apart from the crisis of social order, and the problem of resource management confronting Nigerian society, the reality of marginalisation indicates that Nigeria as it exists in this evolutionary stage has not fully articulated the crucial concepts necessary for establishing a truly humane, civil and harmonious society. Central to the problem of marginalisation of individuals and groups within Nigerian society is the lack of an enduring system of social justice, which can effectively promote genuine social reconciliation and national reconstruction. Indeed, domination in whatever form cannot last forever, hence the need for a restructuring and renegotiation of the diverse contending interests in the society.

### **Marginality and marginalisation in postcolonial discourse:**

#### **A conceptual analysis**

Over the years different governments, individuals and institutions have systematically entrenched a culture of marginalisation within the social order. The modern social system has produced widespread violence, arbitrary hierarchies and avoidable deprivation. This situation has often led to

'the perpetuation of poverty, widened material inequalities, increased ecological degradation, sustained militarism, fragmented communities, subordinated groups, fed intolerance and deepened crisis of democracy' (Scholte 1996:52–53, Quayson 2000:7). The prevailing injustice and exploitation have created a regime of marginal peoples. According to Axtmann (1998:3) the central feature of marginalisation is the capacity to render regions and countries 'structurally irrelevant'. Evidence shows that structural irrelevance is fueled by the realities and consequences of the notions of difference and dichotomies (Kellner 1998:36), dependence, disorder and discriminatory power (Bhabha 1996:37), contestation (Chakrabarty 1996: 237), tension, genocidal oppression, (Shohat 1996:323–324), invisibility (Quayson 2000:7) and above all, a focus on the idea of separateness as emanating from distinct cultural and historical identities (Gilroy 1996:249–250).

Marginalisation arises out 'of particular relations of power which entrench a system of privileging and structuring that leads to the concrete objectification of individuals, and its corollary—the exploitation of these persons within the social system' (Peterson 1996:3&18). Central to the issue of marginalisation is a relationship of difference, in which people are subjected to political and economic structural domination (Shohat 1996:326). These ideas and their application are central to marginalisation, which simply highlights 'antagonism, aggression and disjunctive binaries in the determination of human interpersonal relations' (Slemon 1996:32–74). The consequence of this phenomenon is a perversion of human relations in a way that creates an underclass through the foisting of a cultural identity, simply because the centre wants an identifiable margin (Spivak 1996:198–200). For Chakrabarty (1996:223) marginalisation compels the idea of a subaltern, existing within 'the distinction between opposites paired in a structure of domination and subordination'. According to Willie (1975:10) marginalised peoples suffer a loss of identity, seen in their retention of a sense of anonymity. The effect of this loss seems to be a search for security, acceptance, and the struggle to be recognised by others. The question then is the extent to which any individual or group can go in order to find meaning, security and significance within the social order.

Laitin (1996:38–39) observes that 'marginality is so thoroughly demeaning, for economic well-being, for human dignity, as well as for physical security. Marginal peoples can always be identified by members of the dominant society and will face irrevocable discrimination'. Nolutshungu (1996:17–18) notes that 'marginal populations are distinguishable minorities within states whose integration to the society and the state is markedly incomplete so that their participation in either is partial, intermittent,

or subject to special qualifications and restrictions'. Furthermore, Nolutshungu (1996:30) insists that marginality 'is primarily about participation (or relative exclusion from participation) in gainfully cooperation with others which includes institutional representation, fair inclusion in the schemes of social protection and support and in the system of rights applicable to each context. The problematic of marginality and insecurity, therefore, invokes the politics of belonging where this entails the rights of participation'.

Although, Nolutshungu (1996:17–18) points out that marginal populations are 'minorities' in a political sense, they need not always be so numerically. Marginality can be linked to ethnic, racial, gender and sexual attitudes of discrimination. Nolutshungu (1996:30) says that the insecurity of marginal people is, in most cases, a problem of oppression and exploitation that highlights the problem of vulnerability. Hayes (1996:13-14) points out that this can lead to resentment which itself is a symptom of deep pathology in a culture, as occasioned by the refraction of oppression and the perpetuation of domination. The reality of political domination and cultural dispossession will lead to 'a consciousness of wretchedness, outrage and a sense of justice denied'. Gaines (1996:25) argues that in order to resist this confrontation posed by cultural hegemony, individuals and groups assert themselves against the odds of institutional and interpersonal barriers to economic and sociopolitical advancement. White (1996:101–103) holds that since the collective experiences and traditions of a nation provide it with the foundation for social living and sociality, domination elicits its rejection such that in any state of oppression a group of individuals will organise to resist.

### **Institutionalised marginality and the collapse of sociopolitical order in Nigeria**

Marginalisation within the nation is the outcome of political and human development deficits arising from the mismanagement of the economy and the pursuit of a development paradigm that has polarised the different groups in the society (Adedeji 1999:32). In Nigeria, evidence shows that the state is central to this process of marginalisation, in so far as it presides over diverse and unequal societies. The state has not always been representative of, or responsive to, all sections of the population. Worse still, its interests and concerns have not always been always coterminous with popular interests (Nolutshungu 1996:2). Fanon (1963:133–138) points out that marginalisation arises because the national bourgeoisie, which seeks alliances with the foreign capitalists, ensures a restriction in the disburse-

ment of dividends or profits from resources and erects a leader capable of stabilising the regime and perpetuating bourgeoisie domination. For him, central to the issue of marginalization is the 'inequality in the acquisition and monopolization of wealth, the rise of specialized opportunism, and the expansion of the domain of privileges and corruption'. This leads to the voracious depletion of national wealth and the state is incapable of inspiring confidence in the citizen. This situation points to the reality of exclusion as a directive principle.

According to Dommen (1997:485-491) exclusion is a reality in every society, and some paradigms of governance are central to the institutionalisation of marginalisation. For instance, prebendalism and kleptocracy are factors that keep the number of beneficiaries at a minimal level. Within the state the ruling class is almost always central to the existence of marginalisation. Fatton (1992:19) holds that the existence of a ruling class implies necessarily the existence of a state whose role is to preserve and promote the economic, social and the political structures of ruling class dominance. There have been varied claims by certain individuals and groups in Nigeria that they are being marginalised. This idea of marginalisation as a depiction of the reality that some persons have been alienated or sidelined to the fringes of social and political life in the country, has become a somewhat politicised concept in Nigeria. The idea has become a weapon in the service of groups (whether small or large) that have either been removed from, or eased out of, positions of power. This idea has also been peddled or adopted by those seeking more benefits or advantages from the existing arrangements within the state or society, or even those who wish to draw increased attention to their real or perceived plight.

More importantly, the perception, threat and reality of marginalisation, such has arisen in the past decades or even in the recent times, have engendered a conflict situation in Nigeria which has facilitated feelings and expressions of mistrust, division and resentment among the different interests, groups and sectors of Nigerian society. Some scholars have linked such divisions and resentments to the diverse cultural and religious beliefs and values of the different groups constituting Nigerian society. Diamond (1995:420) holds that the differences in culture, education and religion have ensured that there are enormous disparities in the economic and technological development of the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. Such realities have engendered feelings of marginalisation in the nation. This has led to the existence of social conflicts because groups possess, or have confirmed the suspicion or feeling, that the state as appropriated by

certain sectors of the Nigerian society has shortchanged or deprived them of desired or accruing social benefits, rights and entitlements. The realities of exploitation and hatred have consistently aroused the struggle for personal dignity, self-determination and human rights. There has been a tendency to reject or react to alienation and dispossession.

Marginalisation can provide a framework for the analysis of policies and social values. And this can be discerned in the extent to which factors such as poverty, civil strife and sociopolitical instability exist in the society. The marginalisation of groups can be linked to the high rate of failed nation-state projects in Africa, due to the insecurity and violence it breeds. Some persons hold a somewhat sceptical view about the currently widespread claims by some groups in Nigeria that they are being marginalised. Individuals and groups in Nigeria claim that they are being marginalised when certain factors do not seem to be working in their favour (Makama in Aidokanya 1999:33). There is no doubt that such a situation described by Makama can exist, through posturing and deception. However, with reference to Nigeria the truth is that there is at least one individual or group that is being marginalised in the society. For instance, there are those whose rights and privileges have been denied them either as individuals or as groups. The peoples of the Niger Delta are a case in point. In what seems to be either a more optimistic view, or a naïve assertion concerning the problem of marginalisation in Nigeria, one exponent of a democratic minimalist view holds that 'nobody is being marginalized. In a democratic system, the whole country is represented. Every state has a minister. Every part of the country is adequately represented on the boards of government agencies which have been reconstituted' (Babangida 2000:3). Unfortunately, this view is either a blind denial of a reality that is indisputable, or it is a masterpiece of unwarranted presumption. Either way, it does not offer a portrayal of the truth, such as is required for genuine social transformation. Does the fact that institutions exist, detract from the reality that they can be subverted or abused?

The debate on whether democracy can be rightly construed as merely arrangements or a set of institutions for arriving at a desired goal remains pertinent in the light of the issue of marginalisation that is being discussed here. Schumpeter (1982:153–73) says that the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will. According to this paradigm, we arrive at legislative and administrative decisions by vesting in certain individuals the power to decide on all mat-

ters as a consequence of their successful pursuit of the people's vote (Held 1987:165). Scholars have provided a list of institutional requirements for democracy or technical democratic tools such as political parties, elections (Barletta in Touraine 1991:268), judicial autonomy, power alternation (Nzouankeu 1991:381), agreement over the management of political competition (Clapham 1994:423), power separation, rule of law, and the constitution as a means of assuring rights (Held 1993:23–24).

However, Ghali (1995:6) has objected to the idea of democracy as a set of institutions. He says that although many states are committed to democracy and free elections, simply holding an election does not make a democracy. We also hasten to add that it is very possible for us to have a set of institutions that represent democratic principles, and yet in actual fact, these institutions are not effective or are even non-functional. We also point out the real threat of hijacking, perversion, relegation and abuse to which these supposed democratic institutions are highly susceptible. Surely, it clear that the institution themselves are mere means to democracy and, therefore, are not the end themselves. Moreover, the external character of institutions makes them prone to violations. Worse still, institutions have been known to quickly lose their humane faces, and enthrone rigidity or inflexibility, which makes people slaves to their laws.

Given the reality of marginalisation in Nigeria, and the attendant crisis of social order and national security arising out of it, we must agree with Schochet (1979:21) 'that there is a sense in that our institutions have betrayed us and can no longer be trusted'. In a more precise geopolitical analysis, Anyaoku (2000:32) notes that in the southeast zone, north-north zone and north east zone, there are reports of marginalisation by the Federal government itself. It is instructive to note that the Federal government, which ought to be an effective machinery for the creation and sustenance of national cohesion and reconciliation, has clearly failed in this critical task. Clapham (1991:92) holds that the most positive view of the state sees it as supplying the opportunity for individuals to pursue their own happiness and the essential foundation for the pursuit of public benefits peace, welfare, all of which can be described as public goods. For Shepsle (1980:35), examples of these public goods include national defense, inter-state highways, other features, which are vital requirements for human well-being, peace and progress. The state can also enhance the private goods of the citizens by creating effective sociopolitical space for the actualisation of human personal and social aspirations.

The reason why the state ought be effective is that large numbers of people depend on government for protection from a wide spectrum of

dangers such as foreign threats, criminal threats, fuel and food shortages and so on (Edelman 1975:14). All the above features are illustrative of what the government seeks to achieve, when it aspires towards the common good. 'The idea of the "common good" is attached to objects and policies that are beneficial to the whole taken collectively' (Schochet 1979:24). If government is to be seen as a rational device for satisfying people's needs, then it must be capable of proper functioning, using the rules of governance that can promote national unity. Over the years military rule and massive corruption have led to the mismanagement of the country's human and material resources. Obasanjo (1999:8) rightly notes that the fears about ethnic and religious discrimination effectively militate against the establishment of a united country. Madunagu (2000:41) argues that marginalisation in Nigeria is aggravated by the acts of a selfish political class and the restlessness of the greater bulk of the disaffected and exploited citizenry. In this sense, Nigeria retains the character of a place where people have sectional interests, antithetical to the establishment of national unity. In the recent past, one of the leaders of a major armed insurrection against the erstwhile military government of Babangida, stated that the basis for his revolution 'is to free the marginalised, oppressed and enslaved peoples of the Middle Belt and the South. There is a need to stop intrigues, domination and internal colonisation of the Nigerian state by the few' (Orkar 2000:30).

However, 'the complaints by some politicians in the northern Nigeria that they are marginalised could be deceptive and hypocritical because it is this same people who have occupied the most important positions in the nation' (Makama in Aidokanya 1999:33) especially before May 1999 when the military rulers handed over power to the civilians. It is crucial to mention that central to the issue of marginalisation is the question of the balance of political power in Nigeria. The truth remains that the old ethnic divisions remain unmitigated, thus engendering insecurity and instability. The issue at stake in the marginalisation controversy is therefore the fact that no one group can possibly occupy positions of power in society for too long, without others complaining of marginalisation. The question that arises here is, thus, what has been the frame of mind of those political and ethnic groups that have been on the fringes of political power for several decades? More importantly, Anyadubalu (1999:11) notes that there have been claims that the North has been marginalised since May 1999, 'but the question that arises concerns whether or not the north has been marginalised in the Army? In reality the Igbo have been persistently and officially marginalized'. Under erstwhile military dictators, important government



appointments went to individuals from one sector of the country – the northerners. The problem of marginalisation also existed in the realm of the provision, construction and maintenance of infrastructures (Ebelo 2000:5) There were ethnic biases in the allocation or construction of roads, electricity, etc.

The claim by various nationalities that they are being marginalised has led to a loss of faith and optimism in the Nigerian nation (Ogunmodede 2000:7). It must be noted that the issue of marginalisation is not only restricted to the agitation of those excluded or sidelined in the struggle for, or control of, political power. It is also an important factor in the quest by some groups and nationalities for greater regional or ethnic autonomy, greater control of the means to their communal security and the quest for greater economic control and empowerment within the nation. One of the most recent consequences of the long history of marginalisation, and the fundamental ethno-cultural differences existing among the various groups in Nigeria, has been the increasing demand for the initiation of a social and political process which will ensure the re-negotiation of the basis of, and the principles underlying, human social existence in Nigeria. In short, there has been a growing demand for the re-negotiation of the political entity called Nigeria. It seems that the call for the re-negotiation of the basis of Nigerian unity seems to possess some merit, because, it has been consistently argued that the only partnership that is or can be enduring, stable and viable, is one in which all participants are happy, satisfied and have a sense of belonging (*Africa Research Bulletin* 2000:13946–47).

The consistent demand by some groups for the re-negotiation of the sociopolitical entity called Nigeria is anchored in their firm belief that hitherto the prevailing structures and institutions in Nigeria have not adequately met the desires, needs and aspirations of most of the social and interest groups within the society, especially in view of the individuals desire for happiness, peace, justice and security. The state and society can deliberately or inadvertently create a crisis when it intervenes in social conflicts, in order to create security for some, and insecurity for others. In response to the demand for the restructuring of the Nigerian nation, the Obasanjo regime created a constitutional committee to examine the conditions for the amendment of the constitution so as to make it conform to the aspirations and yearnings of the diverse interests in the country. This strategy which seems commendable, cannot as yet provide the quality of sustained and fundamental social transformation needed to rectify the Nigerian situation.

### **Envisioning national unity and positive social transformation in Nigeria**

Willie (1975:11–13) holds that there is a need to devise a way of building an effective power base to foster social change. Effective social systems endure the tension between the need for unity and marginality. The above view implies that marginality can sometimes yield good results. For instance, it can lead people to seek new and creative forms of emancipation. It can also make people to work harder at self-actualisation and accomplishment in life. But despite these laudable goals, can we rightly say that marginalisation has received its justification or certification? Does the fact that marginality can make people work harder, justify its application by a society or government? In fact we can ask whether it is moral to marginalise people. But then this very question is in need of clarification. If we ask whether marginalisation is morally good, we seek to know whether the motives underlying it, or consequences it yields, are good or acceptable. If they are, how many are satisfied by this agenda? More importantly, can we say that marginality is good to the extent that it prevents harm to those in society? Or it is good to the extent that it fosters social cohesion and mutual respect? Does it promote the dignity and integrity of man, as a being deserving of respect and capable of making a contribution to society? These are questions that need to be answered, if the task of national unity is to be realised in a systematic and focused way.

However, there are other types of questions that can arise from a moral evaluation of marginality. If it is the case that marginal people need to transcend the limits of marginality, then the question is: how will this transition be made? Is it through violence, which begets hate, death and destruction? Or will social transformation be achieved by peaceful means, befitting humans imbued with responsibility and dignity? To put it more theoretically, how can we balance the desire to reach our goals, in relation to the means that will be adopted? How can we avoid the contradictions that can arise when the cause is as invidious as the effect, or when the cure is as terrible as the disease? Jinadu (1980:66–67) says that liberation from restraint or bondage, aims at removing certain physical or non-physical impediments that obstruct the realisation of one's potentialities as a morally autonomous agent. One cannot be completely free if one does not consciously or deliberately act to make good the opportunities and possibilities open to one. And in overcoming the overbearing phenomenon of marginalisation, 'people must commit themselves to the quest for freedom and dignity' (Puckrein 1993:2).

According to Thorat-Hencke (1989:14) there is a need to establish a country predicated on liberty, equality, opportunity and justice for everyone. For Nolutshungu (1996:290) there is a stress on a common belonging, asserting both a potential universality of membership and an individuation of persons. The importance of shared outlooks and values cannot be over emphasised. With reference to the democratic order, tolerance and the appreciation of difference is necessary. The solution to the national crisis confronting the Nigerian nation-state consists in the promotion of a sense of belonging among the various groups. There is a need for the exercise of mutual interdependence between the northern and southern regions. In resolving the national question we must confront the challenge of faithfully applying the principles of genuine federalism, which itself cannot be possible unless there is an understanding of the principles of morality and social order and how these prevent marginalisation. The attempts to re-define the Nigerian state must take into consideration the re-creation of the people's confidence and faith in the ability of the national government to protect and secure citizens. There must be adequate and effective machineries for sustaining social dialogue, tolerance, good governance, respect for human life, and human rights. The moral basis of such social transformation depends on the discussion between various components of the Nigerian state on how to relate with each other in peace and cooperation as the essential ingredients of national unity. Enduring national reconciliation can be achieved only through social justice, seen when certain groups can live in the society without fear of discrimination, occasioned by their ethnic origin or religious creed. There is a need to devise public policies that enhance social solidarity and economic management consistent with the redistribution of wealth such that the adequate welfare of the majority of citizens can be more effectively guaranteed.

Finally, the great challenge before Nigerian society will continue to be how to make this society more organised, humane and progressive. In this context social policies must conform with the nation's obligations to its citizens, and vice versa. As Obasanjo (1999:8) put it, the 'responsibilities of citizenship in Nigeria, compel us to create and sustain a community in which the well-being of all depends upon the collective thrust towards a common goal, and the obedience to the laws intended to guarantee security, peace, justice equity and accountability'. But then there is a need to move beyond the paying of mere lip-service to the need for change and to emphasise those ideals and structures that can adequately mitigate the problem of marginalisation in the social order. This essay has tried to do the latter from an analytical viewpoint.

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