Constructing National Identity in Modern Nigeria: A Deliberative Democracy Approach

By

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Abstract

In addition to its status as Africa's - and by extension the world's - most populous black nation, Nigeria with over 160 million people contains more than 300 ethnic groups who speak several languages and dialects. Its ethnic diversity cuts across religious and class divides, and makes the country one of the most diverse sociocultural, political, economic, religious, and multiethnic societies in the world. However, the quest for a national identity amongst the people of Nigeria as members of a united state remains elusive as ethnic conflicts and religious clashes continue to polarize the citizens of the country. Thus, the national identity of Nigeria appears to be of a country divided between several ethnic and religious groups constantly in conflict. This paper argues that for Nigeria to overcome the national identity problem, a deliberative democratic approach that is based on open discussions amongst Nigerians about the future of the Nigerian state and the need to construct a national identity is required.

Key words: Nigeria, identity, democracy, ethnic, religious.

Introduction

In addition to its status as Africa's - and by extension the world's - most populous black nation, Nigeria with over 160 million people contains more than 300 ethnic groups who speak several languages and dialects. Its ethnic diversity cuts across religious and class divides that makes the country one of the most diverse sociocultural, political, economic, religious, and multiethnic societies in the world. However, the quest for a national identity amongst the people of Nigeria as members of a united state since the amalgamation of the southern and northern Nigeria protectorates in 1914 by the British colonial administration remains elusive as ethnic conflicts and religious clashes continue to polarize the citizens of the country. As such, ethno-religious violence and conflicts “generated on the basis of real or imagined difference in ethnic and religious identities” (Egwu, 2011) have unfortunately become an emblem of social, economic, political and cultural life in Nigeria. The incessant ethnic and religious clashes all over the country have produced unprecedented amounts of deaths since the colonial era. For instance,
between the first three months of 2010 and the first quarter of 2012, over 1000 lives have been lost to the bombings and explosions carried out by the extremist Islamist sect called “Boko Haram” in the northern part of the country. The group has continually attacked and claimed responsibility for attacks on Christians, moderate Muslims and state buildings in the north. It also claimed responsibility for the bombing of the UN office in Abuja the Nigerian capital in August 2011 killing more than 20 people. Hence, as a leading Nigerian news agency notes in the wake of the religious and sectarian violence of June 2012, “Nigeria’s image at the best of times has always been far from the ideal. But with the orgy of violence unleashed on some parts of the country in the past few days, it is now a stark reality that the nation is in bad odour in the comity of nations” (The Guardian, Lagos, Thursday June 21).

In the southern part of Nigeria, it is estimated that more than 100 ethnic militias mostly concentrated in the oil rich Niger Delta region are in existence (Florquin and Berman, 2005; Hazen, 2007). Hence, in what Adebanwi (2004) refers to as the “balance of terror” in the country, “aggrieved ethnic and religious groups have observed the logic of ‘democratic violence’ in practice” since the return of democracy to the country in 1999. This has unfortunately dented the image of the country and its national identity building efforts. Consequently, the national identity of Nigeria appears to be of a country divided between several ethnic and religious groups constantly in conflict. Added to this is the dilemma of citizenship characterized by the indigene-settler dichotomy used to describe the native versus settler difference in the Nigerian context (Mamdani, 2001). This remains a major cause of sectarian clashes all over the country. More so, the “north-south divide” that fuels centrifugal politics and struggle for power between various groups in Nigeria remains a bane to national progress. Nigeria’s crises of nationhood and its perennial quest of constructing a national identity amongst its citizens have effectively been hampered by strong divisions amongst the people that occupy it. Given this impasse, this paper argues that for Nigeria to overcome the national identity problem, a deliberative democracy approach that is based on open discussions amongst Nigerians about the future of the country and its national identity is needed.

The following three sections of this paper discuss why deliberative democracy is important in the construction of national identity and how Nigeria can achieve its quest of national identity amongst its citizens through deliberative democracy. Section one provides a conceptual framework for understanding the nexus between national identity construction and deliberative democracy. The second section examines the Nigerian national identity quagmire and debacle, noting in particular its challenges as a postcolonial multicultural state. The third section explains the opportunities offered by deliberative democracy for constructing national identity in Nigeria. The paper concludes that building national identity in Nigeria will require the education of citizens in all spheres of life in order to equip Nigerians with the requisite information to deliberatively engage in the construction of their national identity.

**Constructing National Identity in Divided Societies: Conceptualizing the Deliberative Democracy Nexus**

To understand how constructing national identity for a group of people can take place, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by “national identity.” Simply put, national identity involves a “sense of political community which implies a definite social space, a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory” (Smith, 1991: 9 cited in Williams, 2010: 169). As Palmberg (1999: 10) explains, according to Smith, national identity is “founded in culture” and “involves both cultural ideas (such as ideas on
common ancestry or history), and cultural symbols, (such as monuments, poetry, architecture)." Like Smith, Keillor et al. (1996: 58) citing Herskovits (1948) maintain that national identity can be “most parsimoniously defined as the extent to which a given culture recognizes and identifies with its ‘cultural focus.’” That is, “the tendency of every culture to exhibit greater variations in the institutions of some of its aspects than others so that these focal aspects can be used to characterize [the] whole culture.” Hence, for Keillor et al. (1996: 58), national identity is “the set of meanings owned by a given culture that sets it apart from other cultures.”

While an elaborate explanation of “culture” as a concept goes beyond the scope of this work, its centrality to definitions of national identity makes it important to emphasize that culture can be explained in terms of “shared meanings or shared conceptual maps” (Hall, 1997: 18) or “semiotic practices” (Wedeen, 2003: 713). This means that culture “marks what people experience as a distinctive way of life characterized in the subjective we-feelings [emphasis mine] of cultural group members (and outsiders) and expressed through specific behaviours (customs and rituals) – both sacred and profane – that mark the daily, yearly, and life cycle rhythms of its members” (Berger, 1995 cited in Ross, 2009: 138). For Ross (2009: 58), it is important to emphasize the fact that “shared understandings are found among people who have a common (and almost invariably named) identity that distinguishes them from outsiders.” Although these explanations provide insights into how culture is identified between groups that are distinct from one another, it must be added that culture remains a highly nebulous phenomenon to pin down as cultural practices can transcend intra-group relations. Cultures borrow from one another. Yet, homogeneity of groups is often used as a defining factor to distinguish one group from another. Cultural representations in common historical heritage, symbols, customs and traditions can sometimes be used to distinguish one group from another.

Nevertheless, while culture can seem easily identifiable in homogenous societies that lay claim to been “nations” where the construction of a “sense of political community” that implies a “definite social space” as Smith’s definition of national identity suggests, constructing national identity in heterogeneous societies where several cultural groups exist can be quite challenging. In itself, understanding a “nation” as occupied several scholarly debates as authors have tried to engage what constitutes a nation (see for instance, Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1986; Brass, 1991; Greensfeld, 1992; Hutchinson and Smith, 1994; Eley and Suny, 1996; Anderson, 2006). Variations in definitions and conceptualization of what a nation is notwithstanding, common trends can be deduced. For instance, while Smith (1996) insists that there is an “ethnic core” to every nation, his definition of the nation as “a community of history and culture, possessing a unified territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights” speaks to the notion of socially constructed ideas of the nation as “imagined communities” as Anderson (2006) argues. Moreover, even though it is possible to differentiate a political community as expressed in notions of citizenship from cultural community as in shared understanding and symbols such as language, it is now acknowledged in reality that many political communities comprise several cultural communities (Stone, 2002: 19-20). That is, “both majority and minority nations are moving towards a conception of national identity which is post-ethnic and multicultural” constructed on the notion of “civic nationalism” (Ipperciel, 2007: 397).

What the above explanations about the nation and the existence of political and cultural communities suggest is that heterogeneous as well as homogeneous societies in the modern world seek to construct ideas of “civic nations” defined as
communities of “equal, rights bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values” (Ignatief, 1993: 6; cited in Ipperciel 2007: 396). By extension, commitments to the “set of political values” are often used to form the basis upon which socially constructed ideals of culture as symbols of shared understanding can serve as a means of building national identities in modern nations. Keillor et al. (1996) designed a National Identity (NATID) scale to “empirically measure how strongly individuals in a given nation identify with religious, historical, cultural and social aspects of their national identity.” The scale adapts Samuel Huntington’s elements of civilization such as religion, history, customs and social institutions (Huntington’s 1993 cited in Keillor et al. 1996). On the bases of explaining the influence of culture on national identity, they identified four dimensions through which national identity can be shaped. These are through the creation of a national heritage, appeals to cultural homogeneity, ethnocentrism and belief structure. In Keillor et al., (1996: 60) words,

The national heritage and cultural homogeneity items were developed to investigate the extent to which respondents consider the culture’s social institutions to be unique and these institutions’ importance to the respondent’s overall national identity....The items addressing national heritage focus on the importance attached to historical elements in defining the individual’s national identity while items within the cultural homogeneity dimension deal with the uniqueness of this national heritage. Theoretically the relationship between these dimensions provides a link between the constructs of “culture” and “nation.”

While these dimensions are useful theoretical, understanding how national identity is constructed in multiethnic and multicultural societies is a far more difficult exercise to comprehend. For example, Williams’ (2010) application of NATID to understanding national identity Nigeria reveals that the belief structure understood as the “extent to which religion or supernatural beliefs define cultural participation and solidarity” has the highest percentage of national identity consciousness amongst the four other dimensions.

According to Williams’, this translates into the idea that Nigerians consider religion to be the most influential element in the construction of national identity in the country in a survey conducted in two federating states and the federal capital territory in Nigeria. But as Williams (2010: 177) concludes, “national identity cannot be imposed; it has to be developed from within the community.” Moreover, several of the dimensions do overlap. It is to this end that the question of how to develop or construct national identity in multicultural and multiethnic countries with strong ethnic and religious divisions becomes germane. For if national identity is constructed based on reference to cultural values emanating from a common socio-political space where the sense of community is “imagined” (cf. Anderson, 2006), it is crucial to engage the different cultural communities that constitute the political community in discussions about the common identity. Whether from historical heritage, ethnicities, belief structures or social institutions, the construction of national identity requires a dialogical process that promotes inclusion of several views and perspectives. The process can include the combination of all the dimensions at one and the same time. As such, deliberative democracy becomes a necessary imperative in fostering such endeavour.
In *Why Deliberate Democracy*, Gutman and Thompson (2004: 7) define deliberative democracy as “a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future.” For Gutman and Thompson, deliberative democracy serves four interrelated purposes: it makes collectively determined decisions legitimate; allows for open discussions of public issues; promotes reciprocity in decision-making; and assists in the correction of past mistakes (2004: 10-12). Deliberative democracy is considered by Held (2006: 232) as a new model of democracy that focuses on improving the “quality of democracy” with the main objective been how to enhance the “nature and form of political participation.” To this end, Held maintains that deliberative democrats do not believe in the ability of representative or direct democracies to ensure the active participation of citizens in the democratic process beyond the ballot. As Gutman and Thompson also add, deliberate democracy is better than aggregative democracies (2004: 13). Although perspectives vary on the forms of deliberative democracy (cf. Elster, 1998; Koh and Slye, 1999; Gunderson, 2000; Levine, 2000; Richardson 2002; Fishkin and Lasslett, 2003; Besson and Marti 2006; Parkinson, 2006; Rostboll, 2008; Elstub, 2008; Dryzek 2010; Kahane et al., 2010), the benefits of deliberative democracy in divided societies in general (Dryzek, 2005) and for the construction of national identity in particular (O’Flynn, 2006) is well recognized.

O’Flynn (2006) argues that in deliberating about how to construct a national identity in divided societies, the goal should be the creation of a “civic nationalism.” As defined above by Ignatief (cited in Ippeciel 2007) above, “civic nations” refer to communities where citizens bear equal rights and are united patriotically to share political values and practices that resonate amongst them. For O’Flynn (2006: 54), the construction of national identity can be achieved in two main forms. The first stresses the importance of having “civic institutions, public offices, agencies and officials, as well as common and authoritative rules that typically apply across the territory of a given state.” The second entails stressing the “importance of ethnicity and culture, ancestral memories and struggles, and common fears and hopes for the future.” O’Flynn however maintained that these two forms overlap. In advancing “the deliberative alternative” in the construction of national identity, O’Flynn explains that unlike Liberalism and Republicanism as forms of democracy, the “superiority of deliberative democracy” is based on the facts that,

> With liberalism, deliberative democracy affirms the need to protect citizens from tyrannical majorities. Yet unlike liberalism, it recognises the need to ascribe rights to groups *qua* groups rather than to their members severally. With republicanism, deliberative democracy affirms the importance of public deliberation about the civic character of society. Yet unlike republicanism, it places the emphasis on the procedures by which that character is debated and shaped rather than on any one substantive vision of it. (2006: 72)

What O’Flynn believes deliberative democracy can deliver is the “subjective we-feelings of cultural groups” that Berger (1995 cited in Ross, 2008) explains as part of the cultural values that a group of people come to identify with over time. However, fundamental to the process of evolving a “we-feeling” amongst a group of people is
answering the question of “who are we” or in an evolutionary sense “who are we this time?” (Mead, 1936; Taylor, 1991; Pojman, 2006; Burkitt, 2008; Lawler, 2008). For this purpose, states seek to have “ideologies of legitimation” according to Nelson (2006). As Nelson notes, in addition to the basic characteristics of states as possessing defined territories, governments, definite laws and sovereignty, there is the imperative of having some “state consciousness or ideology of legitimation” (2006: 8). Nelson further explains that although states can theoretically exist through structures without an ideology of legitimation, “in reality no state can survive without some operative myth that legitimized it. And it is characteristic of all states that the legitimizing ideology is framed in terms of some myth of foundation by which they were initially formed, by the Gods in the earliest states or, in the modern state, by an act of rational consent” (2006: 8). From Nelson we therefore get the sense that in constructing the “we-feeling,” having a foundational “myth” created by reference to terrestrial or extra terrestrial sources is crucial. To be sure, as mentioned above, several scholars of national identity have noted the importance of culture expressed through religion, social and political norms and values, in the process of national identity construction. Thus, the imperative of a “political myth” that can be constructed to form a national identity cannot be ignored in the process of building the notion of “we the people” that is often stated in national constitutions. Of relevance therefore is what makes a myth political? As Bottici and Challand define it, a political myth is

...the work on a common narrative, which provides significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group. Therefore, what makes a political myth out of simple narrative is not its content or its claim to truth, but (1) the fact that it coagulates and reproduces significance; (2) that it is shared by a given group; and (3) that it can address the specifically political conditions in which a given group lives. (2009: 320)

From the above, the task of deliberate democracy is to provide the enabling context in which the construction of national identity through deliberation amongst the various cultural groups in any political community takes place and achieves the goal of building a “civic nation” where the rights of both majority and minority groups are equally guaranteed and their voices heard in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The construction of a “political myth” and narrative that would form the bases for national identity is therefore a major aspect of achieving the goal of a civic nation as O’Flynn suggests. Deliberation of this political myth can however take different forms. While there are several means of achieving deliberations in a democratic system beyond the ballot, Held (2006) identifies the use of “deliberative polls and deliberative days,” “citizens juries,” “expanding voter feedback mechanisms and citizen communication,” and “civic education and public funding of deliberative bodies” as means of achieving deliberative democracy. It is important to stress the role of education and especially language and communication in deliberating national identity in divided societies. For one reason and following Habermas, “there is no democracy without communication in a public sphere” and a common language is crucial to advancing communication (cited in Ipperciel, 2007: 400), and for another, education is considered crucial by democrats for the advancement of democracy itself (Przeworski, 2011). Hence, in advocating a deliberative approach to constructing national identity, it is pertinent to state that different societies will utilize different means of deliberation according to the wishes and aspirations of the people who constitute such societies. In the rest of this paper, the conceptual understanding
of the deliberative approach to national identity construction discussed in this section serves as a foundation for discussing Nigeria’s national identity problem and how deliberative democracy can aid the construction of national identity in the country.

**In search of a national identity: Nigeria and the challenges of building a nation**

Nigeria’s national identity crisis is sometimes referred to as the “national question” in the Nigerian context, that is, the problem of “becoming national” in an ethnically and religiously fragmented state (Eley and Suny, 1996). The national question has been explained differently by several authors such as Abutudu (2010) and Momoh (2002). As Abutudu (2010: 29-30) puts it, “in Nigeria, the national question is an ongoing debate, fuelled by societal dynamics acting as constant reminders that at inception, the people that make up the country were not consulted and did not extend any mandate for the creation of an entity called Nigeria.” Hence, for Abutudu, the national question in the Nigerian context is about “nationhood and development” as every ethnic group continues to struggle for a definition of their place within the Nigerian public space.

To be sure, Abutudu maintains that this struggle is reflected in the agitations of different groups on what they consider important to them as members of the Nigerian state. For instance, the debate over greater control of Nigeria’s oil wealth by the ethnic groups in the Niger Delta has been advanced most forcefully by those from the region, while issues of rotational presidency and true federalism has occupied the demands of the people of the southeast and southwest regions respectively even as some groups in the north remain reluctant in supporting any of these demands (Abutudu, 2010). However, as Momoh (2002: 2) explains from a theoretical standpoint, “the national question in Nigeria is nothing but the (un)evenness in the distribution of or access to power and economy in the context of deliverables and what advantage co-ethnics or a fraction of them take of one another in the process. It has little to do with ethnic domination-qua-ethnic domination” (emphasis in original). Yet, while the element of social class and structure introduced by Momoh may lead us to believe that the Nigerian national question and identity crises has more to do with the class structure of ethnic groups and not ethnicity itself, Anikpo (2002: 50-51) avers that ethnicity and class co-exist, overlap, and reinforce each other in the Nigerian context. Anikpo’s point therefore confirms that the “allurement of ethnonationalism in Nigerian politics” (Udogu, 1994) continues to reflect itself not only in ethnic terms but also along class lines, even as the enduring religious tensions in a secular state persist within and between a predominantly Muslim north and Christian south.

What can be deduced from the above discussion on the national question in Nigeria is that the questions of ethnicity, religion, class, federalism revenue allocation, and constitutionalism amongst other factors have remained largely unresolved almost 100 years after the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. But how did Nigeria get to a point where the we-feeling still remains absent almost a century after amalgamation? The answers are numerous and scholars have tried to provide answers from varying perspectives. It is nevertheless important to state some of the issues that have been discussed and which form challenges to building a civic nation that can be used to construct national identity in Nigeria. As mentioned by Abutudu (2010), the Nigerian crisis stems from the fact that the groups that now make up Nigeria were never consulted before they were incorporated into modern Nigeria. The amalgamation of the southern and northern Nigeria protectorates in 1914 has thus
been labelled by a prominent Nigeria leader, the late Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, as the mistake of 1914 (Osaghae, 1998). Like Ahmadu Bello, Chief Obafemi Awolowo also referred to Nigeria as a “mere geographical expression” (Awolowo, 1947: 47). In Awolowo’s words, “there are no ‘Nigerians’ in the same sense as there are ‘English,’ ‘Welsh’ or ‘French.’ The word ‘Nigerian’ is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not.” As such, Honey’s (1999: 175) assertion that “Nigeria is an African place created by Europeans” can be fully understood as a telling reality of a country where “nested identities” exist from the village to the national levels.

What is more, if it is accepted that the original sin of the British was not consulting the various groups that now make up Nigeria - a sin that is in itself a blunder in nondeliberative democracy - it might be necessary to add that the problem of such blunder was not unknown to Lord Frederick Lugard, the British Governor General that amalgamated Nigeria. Lugard’s insistence on bringing diverse groups of people with separate socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious systems together despite advice from his contemporaries to the contrary laid the foundation of the skewed geographical and ethnic distribution of various groups in Nigeria, not only in the ethnic majority-minority nexus but also in the settler-indigene problem. Levin (1997: 135) captures this realities and is worth quoting below,

As is well known, Nigeria is an artificial creation. When Flora Shaw suggested the name in 1898, the word anticipated the thing; unfortunately, a clear identity did not follow directly from the naming. “Nigeria” was the name for a colonial project: to make a country out of a set of British territories; or, more accurately, to unite politically neighbouring but formerly autonomous states and peoples under imperial rule in one colonial state. Initially, Nigeria was imprecisely defined; territorially, British administration varied considerably, if it existed at all. The British presence was precarious as best since there was no public of citizens or member.... Almost a century later the state is not in question, but what national allegiance, identity, and patriotism means in Nigeria is deeply in doubt.

Levin goes on to add that, E. D. Morel who was then the editor of The African Mail suggested to Lugard that Nigeria be created into four regions, while C.L. Templer, then Lieutenant Governor of northern Nigeria advised that the county be divided into nine regions to accommodate the plural character of the various groups that now make up Nigeria (1997: 137). With the origin sin of not engaging Nigerians about the creation of the new state, the emergence of the nation-state that Davidson (1992) refers to as the black man’s burden in Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State, the national identity construction process in Nigeria thus suffered a false start. But the burden of the nation state in Africa created amongst other problems, two publics in Africa instead of one as found in western societies according to Ekeh (1975) in his seminal work on “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement” which provides succinct insights into the crises of building a civic nation in most African countries, not least in Nigeria.

Beginning with the identification of politics as concerning activities of individuals in the public realm where the collective interests of citizens are catered for, Ekeh (1975: 91) argues that it is the distinction between the public and private realms of individual activities that “delimits the sphere of politics.” Yet as he adds, the private realm sometimes encroaches the public realm and vice versa. The two realms
however carry “moral” foundations in the western world. That is, what is considered morally right in the private realm is also considered morally right in the public realm. This Ekeh maintains is the western connotation of politics. But when looking into Africa, the western notion of morality been the same in both the private and public realms does not hold, and as he stated “can only be made at conceptual and theoretical peril” (1975: 92). This is because in Africa there is a private realm that is morally different from the public realm, meaning that in Africa there are in fact two publics. Ekeh explains the two public realms as follows,

At one level is the public realm in which primordial groupings, ties and sentiments influence and determine the individual’s public behaviour. I shall call this the primordial public because it is closely identified with primordial groupings, sentiments, and activities, which nevertheless impinge on the public interest. The primordial public is moral and operates on the same moral imperative as the private realm. On the other hand, there is a public realm which is historically associated with the colonial administration and which has become identified with popular politics in post-colonial Africa. It is based on civil structures: the military, the civil service, the police, etc. Its chief characteristic is that it has no moral linkages with the public realm. I shall call this the civic public. The civic public in Africa is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and the primordial public. (Emphasis in original) (1975: 92)

It becomes clear from Ekeh’s explanation above that the existence of the primordial and civic publics in Africa and the different moral foundations which underpins them gives rise to varying degrees of loyalties to the two publics on the part of citizens. What this is means according to Ekeh is that the loyalties to the primordial public where ethnic and tribal allegiance dominates trumps the loyalty to the civic nation where everyone can lay claim to equal rights as members of a common political community. The problem engendered by ethnicity in the African context in general and the Nigeria state in particular as a result of the contending loyalties has been well documented by scholars (cf. Nnoli, 1995; Berman, 1998; Ibeanu, 2000; Ejiogu, 2001; Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka, 2004; Ukiwo, 2005; Cocodia, 2008; Ebegbulem, 2011).

Building a civic nation therefore is a herculean task in Africa. The Nigerian experience arguably mimics the reality of the efforts of African states at constructing national identities in highly polarized settings. The post colonial effort of the Nigerian state has shown that the process of building a nation remains tainted by the original sin committed by the British. Yet, much has not been achieved in correcting the malaise of lack of deliberation on the issues of national interest such as the nature of the Nigerian federation, its security, revenue distribution and multicultural nature. Unfortunately, Nigerian constitutions from the colonial era till date have failed to generate support and consensus amongst Nigerians due to their lack of consultation with the Nigeria people. With the exception of the 1963 constitution that was put together under the first republic in the early 1960s, but which itself is largely a replica of the 1960 constitution midwived by the British, all other constitutions of the country have been guarded by the colonial masters and post independence military rulers. The problem of constitutions been put together by nondemocratic colonial and military rulers as Linz and Stepan (1996: 82-83) maintain is that the “constitution-
making environment” is tainted with laws that seek to protect the departing regimes and their allies. Hence, as opposed to “free and consensual constitution making” that occurs “when democratically elected representatives come together to deliberate freely” and seek constitutional arrangements that can foster the consolidation of democracy, constitutions drafted under the supervision of military and colonial agencies do not pass the test of been free and fair (emphasis mine) (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 83). The current Nigerian 1999 constitution was introduced by the military in 1998 and did not engage Nigerians in any form of deliberation over the inputs in a free and fair manner. What is worse however is that the agitations for a Sovereign National Conference by civil society activists in Nigeria has been met with reluctance from the ruling civilian political class who maintain that the National Assembly, comprising the Senate and House of representatives as the highest law making bodies in the country, conduct constitutional amendments. But the problem of the Nigerian state and especially as regards the construction of a national identity is one that requires a more comprehensive deliberative process beyond mere constitutional amendments as discussed below.

A Deliberative Democracy Approach to National Identity Construction in Nigeria

Admittedly, the construction of a national identity would require the development of a “civic nation” to which members of any political community such as the state would identity as equal citizens with shared rights and privileges. The development of a civic nation from the discussion above requires the creation of a culture with shared meanings and understanding as expressed in national institutions that are based amongst other things on a shared historical heritage, symbols and experiences. The civic nation or public therefore can be a socially constructed one with a narrative that serves as a political myth of uniting the people based on shared ideologies of legitimation: be it on rational consent or reference to extraterrestrial beings as Nelson (2006) noted.

The task of building a civic nation in multicultural societies as already stated is however a challenging one given deep roots and ties in the primordial public as sometimes represented by ethnonationalism. But the hopes and aspirations of any country as expressed in the opening statements of most constitutions in the phrase “we the people of ......, do solemnly swear,” attests to the commitment of many nations to a set of political values upon which they will live together in theory. In practice achieving the status of a civic nation can prove somewhat challenging in some circumstances such as those where ethnic and religious cleavages abound.

The Nigerian experience from the pre-colonial times illustrates the problems of nation building in multiethnic societies in Africa. Hence, in attempting to construct a national identity in Nigeria, a deliberate democracy that seeks to engage the citizens of the country on a number of sundry issues about the future of the country is a way to start. To be sure, these issues all relate to building a civic nation through national dialogues and discussions around institutions such as social, political, cultural and religious issues that dominate the divisions between the various groups. Issues such as the role of ethnicity and religion in national life, the bases for revenue allocation and distribution, the structure of Nigerian federalism and citizenship status are some of the issues that need to be addressed.

The discussion on ethnicity in Nigeria as tended to situate the discourse on politics as the determination of “who gets what, when and how” (see Lasswell, 1954), that is, the ethnicity of individuals is a determining factor in their access to state
resources and institutions. For instance, although Nigeria is a federation of over 300 ethnic groups, with the exception of the current president of the country, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, who is from a “minority” ethnic group known as the Ijaws, Nigeria’s heads of states in the past 50 years have all been produced by the three dominant ethnic groups: Hausas, Yorubas and Igbos. Indeed, ongoing debates relate to whether or not the current president should be allowed to run for a second term in 2015 because some groups believe it is their turn to rule. It is important to add that at the return of democracy in 1999, the Yorubas of the southwest were “compensated” with the presidency by Nigerian elites over the death of the acclaimed winner of the annulled June 12 presidential election in the country, Chief Moshood Abiola, who died in custody in 1998 under military rule. Abiola, a Yoruba business mogul and politician contested and he is widely believed to have won the election in 1993 but was prevented from becoming president by a northern military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida. The annulment of the election generated animosity between many citizens of the southwest and the northern parts of the country, an animosity which further deepened ethnic politics in Nigeria. But ethnic tensions in Nigeria had always been an emblem of Nigerian politics, especially with respect to the north-south divides created and promoted by the divide and rule politics of the British. The Nigerian civil war was partly as a result of the Igbos feeling dominated by the Hausas and the rest of Nigeria. Yet, Nigerian ethno politics goes far into the fabrics of the state as all ethnic groups in the country, both large and small, now complain of marginalization within the Nigerian state. The cries of marginalization have often taken violent turns but no genuine national dialogue as taken place on the issue. It is therefore important that Nigerians deliberate on the role of ethnicity in politics.

Also, the on-going religious conflict in the north highlights the problem of religion in the country and the urgent need to deliberate on the secular nature of the Nigerian state. Although Nigeria is considered to be a secular state, the largest religions are both Islam and Christianity with various denominations within them. One of the issues that have challenged the secularity of Nigeria in the past decade is the introduction of Sharia in some states of the federation after the return of democracy. However, as Suberu (2010) explains, the Sharia controversies have always been around since independence in 1960. For Suberu, “debates and conflicts about the Sharia implementation have dominated constitutional politics in Nigeria for several decades. These conflicts have their roots in the gradual subordination of the elaborate Islamic institutions of northern Nigeria following the onset of British colonial occupation of the country in the second half of the nineteenth century” (2010: 219). Unfortunately, “the adoption of Sharia in the predominantly Muslim northern states has reanimated the longstanding animosity between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria” (Ukiwo, 2003: 124). The incessant killings of Christians in the north has continued to lay credence to the fear mostly expressed by Christians in the north that the introduction of Sharia encourages the application of Sharia law to non-Muslims and makes them soft targets in times of crises. The efforts of states and non-state actors to allay the fears of non-Muslims have often failed as a result of the lack of protection of lives and properties by the state whenever there are attacks on churches and other places of worship. The reprisal attacks that follow the violence in the north sometimes leads to the killings of non-Christians in the south. Hence, deliberating the true meaning of secularity in the Nigerian context is long overdue.

Moreover, equally contentious is the question of federalism in Nigeria. At independence, Nigeria was a federation of three regions: the northern, eastern and
western regions. The regions were governed by the three major political parties in the country. The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) in the north, National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the east, and the Action Group (AG) in the west. The three parties were mainly ethnic dominated parties representing mainly the Hausas, Igbos and Yorubas respectively. After the first military coup in 1966, the military government of General Aguiyi Ironsi promulgated the unification decree of 1966 that made Nigeria a unitary state. The counter coup six months after the first coup produced a cancellation of the decree, and in 1967 the military government of General Yakubu Gowon created 12 states at the eve of Nigeria’s civil war which lasted until 1970. The federal structure of Nigeria has evolved today into 36 states, 774 local governments and a central government known as the federal government of Nigeria. The state creation exercises took place under several military rulers who used the process to mainly reward loyalists and not a genuine attempt to create economically viable sub-national units within the federation. Despite the clamour by some observers and scholars for the return to the regional system of the early 1960s in light of the failures of most states to survive without relying on the oil revenues from the federation account, agitations for the creation of more states remain very loud and clear as many ethnic and sub-ethnic groups believe they have been unfairly left out of the state creation exercises. In creating a national identity through deliberation, the federal structure and indeed the revenue allocation formula that currently gives majority of the national revenue to the federal government must be deliberated and an amicable solution found to the problem of federalism in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the question of citizenship within Nigeria is a highly contested one. Although the Nigerian 1999 constitution proclaims that every Nigeria is entitled to equal rights regardless of where they reside, systemic discrimination on the bases of states of origin and ethnicity as well as religious affiliation is widespread in the country. One of the visible reflections of this problem is the differentiation between the settler and the indigene or native. A settler is often regarded as someone whose ancestral heritage is linked to migration from a place other than the place he or she is currently domicile regardless of how long the person or his or her generations have been living in the “new” place. On the other hand, an indigene is considered to be someone whose ancestral generations is believed to have been domicile in a place for a longer period or whose historical background ascribes the status of occupying the land before anyone else. The indigene-settler dichotomy is often invoked by all groups in Nigeria and has been the source of age long communal clashes between and amongst several ethnic and religious groups all over the country. Fundamentally, the debate exists on whether or not there should be dual citizenship within the Nigerian state itself (cf. Abutudu, 2010). Hence, in deliberating on citizenship in Nigeria, several issues will emerge about how Nigerians should view themselves within the Nigerian state.

Consequently, given the myriads of issues that require urgent resolution, Nigerian is not in want of topics for deliberation. Thus, a model of democracy that can enable a process of constructing national identity while moving the country towards a civic nation is required. Deliberative democracy can aid these efforts. Deliberative democracy seeks to engage the citizens beyond the ballot and therefore offers an opportunity for Nigerians to express themselves on the problems of the country. The current “liberal” democratic dispensation in the country has so far failed to achieve meaning democratic development as it only seeks to foster electoral democracy which in Nigeria has been a travesty. As such, Diamond (2002) describes Nigerian version of liberal democracy as ambiguous, a democracy without any definite and
coherent form. The governance crises created by Nigeria’s current democratic experience has worsened the efforts at building a nation. Ethnicity, religion, vote rigging, corruption, underdevelopment and impunity have taken over the reins of government at all levels in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2010). The illiberal aspects of Nigerian politics make mockery of the country’s effort at democratic consolidation and nation building after decades of military rule. More so, as Agbaje (2010: 83) remarks on the ability of the over 50 political parties in the country to forge a pathway for Nigeria’s future,

The balance of evidence so far points to a dismal future in terms of the role of political parties in facilitating democracy, good governance, and development in Nigeria’s fourth republic. In fact, it is obviously the case that the republic’s dominant parties are fast emerging as front-line candidates in the race to identify the most active gravediggers for that republic, given their penchant for literally expanding the sphere of undemocratic practices in the polity.

From the above, it is clear that turning the corner on the kind of democracy that is practiced in Nigeria is a sine qua non for creating a civic nation and construction a national identity for the country. But how will deliberative democracy take place in Nigeria? Despite the challenges encountered by Nigerians on a daily basis, a sense of community still exist in the country and the hope for a better future is high amongst most Nigerians. The machinery for delivery that better future lies partly in the political arrangement that can be created to actualize the countries potentials. In anticipating a role for deliberative democracy, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of overhauling the current democratic system that only promotes civic engagement during election periods. Deliberation of both local and national issues should be done at all times of the year from the village to the national levels. A major process in initiating deliberative democracy in Nigeria is the writing of a new constitution for the country. Nigeria’s constitutional development in the past nine decades largely has excluded most Nigerians in the deliberation of the terms upon which the country is founded. It is therefore fundamental that a constitutional process that begins from the grassroots and is broad based be created to engage citizens on issues such as the forms of political, economics, religious and social systems and institutions to guide the creation of a new modern Nigeria out of the existing system. This process would seek amongst other things to answer the question of “who are we” and what do we stand for? Also, it would form the basis of creating a “political myth” that would serve as the collective narrative of the Nigeria people and grant legitimacy to the statement of “we the people of Nigeria do solemnly swear..” This hopefully will begin the process of building a civic nation in Nigeria, thereby making the construction of a national identity less challenging.

For this purpose and in building a civic nation, the cultural milieus that Nigerians as a whole have shared in the past 500 years as formerly slave producing societies as well as former British colonies can be used to create an historical background, even as the distinct historical heritage of various ethnic groups is provided to enrich the history of the country as a whole. Correcting the “mistake” of 1914 can be the beginning of the Nigerian “miracle” as a successful post-colonial and multicultural state where the civic nation is constructed on very strong feelings of national identity. It should be emphasised that one of the purpose of deliberative
democracy as identified by O’Flynn (2004) above is the correction of past mistakes through open dialogue amongst various groups.

Conclusion
Constructing national identity in Nigeria through deliberative democracy is not going to be an easy task in view of the myriad challenges identified in this paper. Crucial to any endeavour at deliberating a national identity in a democratic environment is the role of education which unfortunately has not been taken serious by most Nigerian governments (Hinchliffe, 1989; Tawari and Koko, 1996; Ukiwo, 2007). But the importance of civic education in deliberative democracy (Hanson and Howe, 2011) and indeed, in the national integration of Nigeria (Akpan, 1990) cannot be overemphasised. To this end, it is highly recommended that the educational system in Nigeria be improved significantly in other to equip citizens with the adequate information to engage in deliberative democracy and the construction of national identity in Nigeria. Finally, effective political leadership and active citizenship will no doubt enhance the process of building a new Nigeria in the 21st century.

References


