# NIGERIAN FEDERALISM: AN OVERVIEW OF ITS IMPERATIVES AND IMPEDIMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of Nigerian federalism in relation to the imperatives and impediments of its practice, which it has been grappling with since the constitutional enactment of the system in October, 1954. This study utilized qualitative research method by way of analyzing historical archives and documents, including secondary data sources. Historical documentation method was used as the principal analysis tool in this study. The study found that federalism remains the most viable system for Nigeria based on the past and present experiences amongst the former Nigerian military regimes, politicians, British colonialists, nationalists and founding fathers of

the Nigerian state. However, there has yet to be a nationally accepted arrangement to be used in operating the country's federal system. This is based on the heterogeneous nature and character of the Nigerian state. There are, however numerous impediments to the effective and efficient practice of federalism, including prolonged military rule, manipulation of religious differences and regional diversity, revenue and resource allocation politics and conflict, including poor intergovernmental relations. Thus, the search for a viable federal arrangement and its advancement continues to be explored.

## INTRODUCTION

The foundation of every government and governance is the effective and efficient provision of services and use of powers - security, social, political and economic amongst others to its public. In the search for and adoption of viable systems, the most popular, especially in heterogeneous states and societies has been the worldwide adoption of federalism with decentralisation of powers, services and relative autonomy (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020; Othman & Osman, 2020; Makinde et al., 2016, p.306). Africa, the most ethnically diverse region in the world, is not left out in the search for and adoption of federalism, and Nigeria, with hundreds of ethnic groups, has the continent's largest of the ethnic groups and as such, the most ethnically antagonistic (Mohammed & Aisha, 2018; Saylor, 2016, p. 571; Mohammed et al., 2019b), which have, from pre-independence times, characterised the entity, and necessitated the adoption of federalism. When Nigeria gained its independence from its British colonial master, a federal system was chosen by the country. The basis of this decision lies in the consensus reached amongst various ethnic-based political parties to avoid granting independence in piecemeal to the main regions (North, West and East) from Britain (Achineke & Ogbonna, 2016, p. 372; Lugard, 1965; Anene, 1966; Kirke-Greene, 1968; National Archives Kaduna ZARPROF C.2/1940; National Archives, Kaduna, NAK [C. O. No. 446/99 No. 31917] C. O. 583/120; National Archives, Ibadan NAI, NAI CSO 1/21 Vol. II).

The adoption of federalism in Nigeria is an outcome of the interplay of several factors - political, economic, socio-religious, geopolitical, and also a consensus forged between and amongst the colonial masters (British) and the Nigerian nationalists/political elites representing the various and diverse regional interests (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020, p.15; Elazar, 1995, p. 19–26; Mohammed et al., 2020; Awolowo, 1966, p. 11; Aiyede, 2015, p. 40). In Nigeria, the historical narrative is the major determinant factor not only in establishing the institutional, legislative and executive framework of many federation states around the world, but also their mode of operations, power distribution and intergovernmental relations among others (Elazar, 1991; Watts, 1966, p. 42). Therefore, history has significantly influenced Nigeria's federal set-up and practice (Hyam, 1964, p. 528).

However, the Nigerian ethno-regional and geo-religious national groups are characterised by their varying potentialities and abilities in terms of endowment of human and material resources, civilisation, geography and world outlook. The Igbo and the Yoruba, to a larger degree, embrace the Western culture and orientation; while the Hausa-Fulani with their strong cultural and religious backgrounds are more conservative and hesitant about accepting Western culture and civilisation but are more interested and open to the Eastern or Islamic world (Awolowo, 1947, p. 49). For Nwabueze (1993, p. 21), the peculiar complexity of the Nigerian state not only goes beyond its diverse ethnic groups, but also lies in the attitude, character, worldview and outlook making up the groups. The two prominent religions widely embraced and practiced in Nigeria are Islam and Christianity, with the Muslim population having a slightly higher majority over the Christians (Kendhammer, 2013, p. 292). Thus, Elazar (1991) noted that Nigeria has remained strongly committed to federalism in order to achieve national unity and integration, despite all odds against it for being among one of the world's highly heterogeneous states. However, Wallackt and Srinivasan (2006, p. 421:430) asserted that throughout the history of Nigeria, fiscal federalism and revenue allocation have been contentious for they have been heavily politicised and made to be inherently inequitable. Regardless of this and many other encounters, the strength of such commitment has survived many challenges throughout the country's history, especially the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and prolonged military rule among others.

## Statement of the Problem

From the onset, Nigeria was looked upon and widely expected by other states, particularly in the African continent as a role model of a state with federal and democratic stability, but such expectation has yet to materialize (Cronjé, 1972, p. 6). Nigeria's historical narrative over the years has been ruffled by discords in the federal system and arrangements - constitutionalism, military factors, ethno-regional and religious interests. Except for a short period of time during the first National Military Government headed by General Johnson Thomas Agui Ironsi (January to July 1966), Nigeria has continuously adopted a federal system of government since October 1954 and this has continued over the years up until now. However, throughout the years from independence, to date, there have been unending debates, arguments, searches and agitations over which different styles of federal government -centralized, fiscal, and weak federalism, among others, is to be adopted and befittingly reflect the realities of the Nigerian state, societies and composition.

Even though 66 years have passed since its practice, the performance of the Nigerian federal system is considered poor, with adverse consequences of 'tragic policy failure' (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020; Anderson, 2012; Friedman, 2018; Saidu et al., 2019; Blitz & Campbell, 1965). There is a long list of factors and issues impeding the adoption of Nigerian federalism, ranging from British interests and intra-regional attempts, especially the partitioning of the Middle Belt/Central Nigeria from the Northern Region; the Biafra from the Southeast, Niger Delta from the South-South and recent secession threats by the Yoruba nation and Igbo dominated South East Nigeria under the umbrella of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), to the Movement for the actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) (Kwanashie 2002, p. 201–210). Thus, the reference to Nigeria as a 'politically arranged country' explains why the country's journey towards becoming a nation has been characterised and dominated for over a century by the complex search for a popular and viable political governing system to sustain its existence (Lanre, 2017, p. 40). Similarly, the issue of state creation has split Nigeria and Nigerians apart and subsequently led to debacles and power struggles among rival indigenous groups and settlers in their own

homeland, a development leading to a dire situation of triggering agitation among many Nigerians to push for the creation of divisive states at the expense of others (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020; Eze et al., 2015, p. 119).

Nigeria has survived many crises, in her journey towards federalism and nationhood, with the most relevant and profound events including: the pre-independence secession threats; the Nigerian Civil War; the June 12, 1993/General Abacha era; President Yar'Adua's terminal illness and the consequently orchestrated political and constitutional crisis among others (Bourne, 2015a, p. 55). Although Nigeria emerged as a result of the 1914 colonial amalgamation and there have been conflicting and controversial events and issues to date, Nigeria has remained as one entity. Similarly, despite the trend of subsequent events during the colonial and post-colonial era, Nigerians, against all odds, still have the desire to live together whatever may be the genesis of Nigeria's formation (Levan & Utaka, 2018, p. 1).

## METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative method of research. Qualitative research is a non-numerical means of conducting research which hinges on qualitative opinions, submissions, experience and accounts of an event or phenomenon and aims to achieve both a clear and deep understanding of a phenomenon under investigation (Mohammed & Ahmed, 2018; Creswell, 2012; Sule, Sani & Mat, 2017). Data from secondary sources were collected from books, public documents, historical accounts and autobiographies of the first generation nationalists, the elite and politicians. Primary data were sourced from the minutes of meetings, official records and gazettes available at the National Archives of Nigeria located in Kaduna State and Ibadan, Oyo State; the various submissions of Nigeria's first Federal Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the minutes and other documents of the colonial government; the abrogation of federalism and Unification Decree of General Ironsi; the reinstatement of federalism and states creation Decree of General Gowon. Relevant secondary data sources such as journal articles and books were also reviewed. The collected data were analysed using historical documentation method of qualitative data analysis (Othman et al. 2018; Creswell, 2009). The

choice of historical documentation was significant for this study in view of the fact that pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial history were substantial and represented an indispensable part of Nigeria's emergence as one united entity in 1914. Additionally, the subsequent events and issues which necessitated the practice of federalism have continued to shape and influence all actions and reactions in respect of federalism in Nigeria.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Federalism has often been studied, explained, developed and advanced using various theories. This theoretical-based study approach generally relates to "both 'psychology and the dynamics' of personality and interpersonal relations" and thus, revolves around differences "within and among humans" (Ostrom, 1973). From the perspective of psychological theorists, federalism involves and revolves around both the personal and interpersonal behaviours, interests and interactions characterizing and dominating federalism and may result in contradictions, as it applies to Nigeria where numerous groups, persons, regions, religions, ethnic groups interact, agree and disagree on a basis laid down in federalism (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020, p. 1; Elazar, 1991, p. 30–33). This argument correlates with the 'human anthropology' theories, in which human relationship is tied to 'covenant theory origin of human relationships' (Ostrom, 1971; Landau, 1973; Elazar, 1991). Since the inception of Nigerian federalism, Nigerians, to a large extent, have firmly upheld the covenant, but predominantly within their local geographical and political parameters, as well as other local forces and circumstances. In terms of anthropological and human relationships, the commitment and compliance or non-compliance towards federalism among many Nigerians are determined by their local geopolitical and other interests.

When these two "psychology and the dynamics" and "human anthropology" theories are used in this context, Nigeria's federalism becomes tied and related to the theories. Both geographical locations and political forces are also significant determinants of Nigerian federalism. Likewise, Nigeria fits into the context of the "human anthropology" aspect which also relates to the distribution of power and authority in a set up with heterogeneity as that of Nigeria. This

is despite agreements and disagreements which surround Nigerian federalism, depending on geo-political issues, relations, including allocation of resources and power.

## CONCEPTUALISATION AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Federalism is one of the major systems of government, and an academic or political term that has received greater, but relative attention from academics, social scientists and politicians (Elazar, 1991). It is, however, widely known as a concept or system of government that is fluid and subjected to varying approaches, perception, interpretations and practice. The conception and practice of federalism are relative to and greatly shaped by socio-societal set-ups, depending on numerous factors – geography, history, worldview, level of development, and other heterogeneous conceptions and practices (Adedeji & Ezeabasili, 2018, p. 160). Therefore, Wheare (1964, p. 10) defines federalism as "the method of dividing powers so that the general and regional governments are, each within a sphere, coordinated and independent". For Riker (1975, p. 98), federalism is depicted as a political power arrangement in which the activities of governments are constitutionally divided between regional and central government in such a way that each level of government has some activities that it makes and takes final decisions. In the same vein, Dye and Macmanus (2015) define federalism as:

> A system in which power is divided between national and sub-national governments with both exercising separate and autonomous authority, electing their own officials, and taxing their own citizens for the provision of public services. Moreover, federalism requires that the powers of the national and sub-national governments be guaranteed by a constitution that cannot be changed without the consent of both national and sub-national populations. (p. 56).

According to the Business Council of Australia (2006 p. 3), federalism provides a means of constitutional organisation of a state/society by way of sharing governmental powers and granting autonomy to government units. This arrangement, in turn, preserves the unit's

differences and each individual unit is assigned with responsibilities and is accountable to its subject/people. A state/system, therefore, becomes and retains federal status only when its heterogeneities are territorially clustered (Livingston, 1952, p. 85–86). Essentially, federalism is designed, intended and operated to attain certain desired levels of political integration among different components which is generally premised on self-determination (autonomy) and division of power (Elazar, 1991). In practice, federal systems are a product of reached compromise between numerous societal entities canvassing for strong central governance on one hand, and those in favour of self-determination/state independence on the other (Merritt, 1988, p. 3). Thus, the creation of federalism combines and harmonizes varying advantages and interests of the strength and weaknesses of nations and heterogeneous peoples (Alexis de Tocqueville as cited in Oates, 2011, p. 3). Federalism realistically represents a heterogeneous political, economic, and legal union among diverse groups characterised by multiple sovereignties which exist within a state (Erbsen, 2008, p. 500).

Federations, according to Watts (1966) are characterized by the main forces that determine the formation and sustenance of such unions:

> Desire for political independence; hope of economic advantage; need for administrative efficiency; enhancing of the conduct of external relations, both diplomatic and military; community of outlook based on race, religion, language, or culture; geographical factors; the influence of history; similarities and differences in colonial and indigenous political and social institutions; character of political leadership; existence of successful older models of federal union; influence of the United Kingdom government in constitution-making. (p. 42)

Furthermore, Nwabueze (1983, p. 125-188) identifies various principles of federalism such as the separation and granting of autonomy to each level of government; non-interference in assigned functions or powers; equality between regional/horizontal governments; existence of significant numbers of component levels in the federation; definite formula for distribution of powers; and existence of a supreme constitution that regulates conduct,

relations and operations of the federal system. These principles identified have to a large extent been the sources of conflict in most federal states, especially the developing ones. They form part of the impediments to the success of Nigerian federalism.

The accommodationists and integrationists are the two prominent approaches used to study and understand the literature on federalism. For the accommodationist, ethno-religious and linguistic differences are contained. This allows for the creation of a federal system with the coexistence of heterogeneous groups in a state. For the integrationist, the heterogeneities exist and manifest in and among groups which are mixed-up with some others, despite having differences in culture, history, religion and geography (McGarry & O'Leary, 2005, p. 268; Iff, 2012, p. 229). Although federations bear the main characters of the federal system, they have forceful relativities due to factors (centripetal and centrifugal) - history, worldview, including patterns and levels of political development. These factors determine federal arrangements, including the issues and options available, and to be chosen in the practice of the federalism (Negussie, 2016, p. 13). As such, federations are institutionally modelled and structured to reflect and overcome the unique challenges of heterogeneous states or societies (Lluch, 2011, p. 134). Hence, Horowitz (1993, p. 18) notes that heterogeneous societies display the "tendency to conflate inclusion in the government with inclusion in the community and exclusion from government with exclusion from the community." With that, federalism remains the best option for such political communities characterised by heterogeneities along with the desire to organise and achieve solutions to their challenges of unity, convergence, and cohabitation (Friedrich, 1963, p. 9). He also argued that this political governing system also enables the said communities to work harmoniously amidst their differences on both, a separate and collective sense. Henceforth, the spirit of federalism is inbuilt in the people while the federal system/government remains the mechanism used to explore, harness and sustain the heterogeneities inherent in such societies (Livingstone, 1952). With that, it is noted that federal governance has six basic philosophies of "separateness and independence of each government; mutual non-interference or inter-governmental immunities; equality between the regional governments; a meaningful number of constituent units; techniques for the division of powers; a supreme constitution" (Nwabueze, 1983, p. 125–188). In practice, the extent to which these principles are existent and or

applied, determines the success and or failure of a federal system, and have been applicable to Nigeria.

## Background to Nigerian Federalism

Colonialism, independence, federalism and heterogeneity (geography, religion, ethnicity, civilisation, etc.) including the significant role and influence of the military, have all been important drivers in transforming the Nigerian system (Suleman & Maiangwa, 2017, p. 262; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020). Prior to British colonial conquest and forced occupation of various areas and ethno-religious nationalities across the Niger River, the indigenous peoples, their respective states or entities were either separated or independent from one another until they were subjugated and unified by their colonial master in the January 1914 amalgamation (Shehu et al., 2017a). As manifested in Lugard's (1965) expressions, it is obviously clear that the underlying reason behind the merging of the North and South of the Niger areas (later Nigeria) was for British/imperial economic interests (Bourne, 2015b, p. 55). Therefore, Heaton and Heaton and Falola (2008) as cited in Levan & Utaka, 2018, p. 75) aptly described the British/ colonial stance on Nigerian areas:

> The British created the national borders and governing structures of contemporary Nigerian state. Colonial rule also transformed Nigeria's various regions toward a more explicitly extractive model focusing on the production of cash crops and mineral resources mainly for the purpose of export to international markets. Administratively, the British followed a philosophy of "indirect rule", whereby local power ostensibly remained in the hands of indigenous authorities at the local level even as those local authorities were controlled by British overlords.

It is in view of the situation that the Premier of the Northern Region of Nigeria and its leading political figure, Ahmadu Bello (1962, p. 133) noted that:

> Lord Lugard and his amalgamation were far from popular amongst us at that time. There were agitations in favour of secession; we should set up on our own; we should cease to have anything more to do with the Southern people, we should take our own way.

Nigeria is the most populous African state with over 193 million people. This population represents the largest and most diverse throughout the African continent (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2018; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020; Othman et al., 2019a). Towards the end of the British colonial rule in Nigeria, federalism became the inescapable option to adopt owing to the country's heterogeneous society. In their opinion, it appears that federalism is the only mechanism to contain and reduce conflicting interactions amongst the numerous groups making up the societal entity (Okpanachi & Garba, 2010, p. 3). With the exception of military periods under the rule of General Ironsi and a brief imposition of unitary system, Nigeria, throughout its post-independence period, remains under the federal system (Mohammed et al., 2018a; Mohammed, 2018b; Shehu et al., 2017b; Arikpo, 1967). Hence, it has been noted that what characterises the Nigerian state from the onset is rooted in a diversity of factors, including rivalry amongst the country's large ethnic-based political parties with each scrambling for control of the central government; the issue of ideological supremacy of Islam and Christianity; allocation and distribution of government revenue especially oil; and a host of hardly reconcilable heterogeneous political traditions of the ethnic groups (Trzcinski, 2016, p. 54–55; Othman et al., 2019a).

Before the discovery and subsequent exploration of oil in commercial quantities, Nigeria relied on the exportation of agricultural products, primarily cash crops (e.g. groundnut, cotton, rubber, cocoa and animal hide and skin) to various parts of the world (Mohammed, 2018, p. 27; Aiyede, 2015, p. 41). Nigeria became independent on 1 October 1960 based on the Constitution of Nigeria Order in Council 190 No. 1652 under the Legal Notice No. 159 of the year 1960. Nigeria also operated under the federal system until January 1966 when the Nigerian military led by the "Five Majors" of the Nigerian Army staged the first violent coup and overthrew the civilian democratic regime of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Ademoyega, 1981).

During the period between 1954 and 1963, Nigeria was a federation with three regions. It later became a federal republic from 1963, with four regions. Each of the regions had their respective foreign diplomatic mission representatives, regional constitutions (in addition to the central one for the Federation/Federal Republic of Nigeria). Each also had their own regional flags and anthem, regional revenue bases, public service, local police, and bi-cameral regional legislature

among others (Mohammed et al., 2018, p. 394–396; Lanre, 2017, p. 45; Mohammed, 2018, p. 24). There were three prominent decrees in General Ironsi's first military regime which affected the hitherto Nigerian government from practicing a federal system: (i) Decree No. 1 for the suspension of the 1963 Republican Constitution;(ii) Decree No. 3 which conferred powers on the National Military Government; and(iii) Decree No. 34 which banned all political parties, associations and activities, abolished the former federal system; abolished federalism and imposed a unitary system on Nigeria through the promulgation of decree No. 34 of 1966 by the National Military Government (Diala, 2013, p. 141). However, within six months after the first coup, a second and similarly violent counter-coup was staged. In the aftermath of this counter-coup, there was the re-enactment of the federal system through another military decree. General Yakubu Gowon abolished and replaced the earlier promulgated General Ironsi's military decree No. 34 (abolishing federal system) with Decree No. 59. The latter re-enacted the federal structure, but with a 12-state structure and a strong central government. This power arrangement differed from the previous Military Decree No. 34 that allocated four regions with greater regional autonomy but with a weak central and strong regional federal arrangement. Under the regime of General Yakubu Gowon, the adoption of the Decree No. 14 of 1967 further divided the Federal Republic of Nigeria into 12 states (six states each for the North and South). In 1976, the Creation of State and Transitional Provisions Decree No. 12 which was promulgated during General Murtala Obasanjo's administration, further divided the Federal Republic of Nigeria into 19 states and 301 local government areas.

**Federalism and the Aspiration for Regional Autonomy**

One of the major issues that have shaped Nigerian federalism is regionalism as previously there were the Northern and Southern Protectorates which later became regions. The Southern Protectorate was divided into the East and West from 1939 which increased the regions of Nigeria to three. The Richards Constitution of 1946 came into operation in the same year and ushered in regionalism in Nigerian federalism and politics. That was followed by the formal adoption of the federal system in 1954 with recognition of the three regions (which later became four regions from 1963). Indeed, nearly all of the country's first generation nationalists were engrossed in asserting

and protecting their own regional interests, ethno-regional cleavages and each pursued their respective regional agenda and interests (Ojo, 2014, p. 38; Arikpo, 1967). This development clearly indicated and characterised Nigeria as a tripod federation (Shehu et al., 2017c). The three leading personalities who were leadership their respective regions namely, Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, along with the British government, were adamant that the only feasible option for the heterogeneous Nigerian entity to remain as one was to adopt the federal system. Nonetheless, they did not openly hide their desire for self-determination and regional autonomy in governing their respective regional affairs, but without compromising the overall unity of the Nigerian entity. The then Northern regional Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello during the 1959 self-government celebration in Kaduna emphasised the significance of regional autonomy and self-determination by the northerners, and the need for pursuing the shared goals of Nigerian unity and making the country great, despite its inherent ethnic and cultural diversity (Amune, 1986, p. 18–19).Bello also stressed the importance and significance of accepting the creation of regional autonomy to enable each region and people to control their local resources, regional affairs and to serve the interest of its own people (Bello, 1962, as cited in Nchi & Mohammed, 1999, p. 9). At the same time, reflecting on the allocation of 50 percent seats of the federal legislature to the Northern region, the significance of Nigerian internal boundaries and relativities among the regions (Azikiwe, 1961, p. 113). Similarly, the impetus for working within the parameter of regional differences for domestic purposes and that, the sub-national groups/region should each have regional assemblies in what may look like the 'United States of Nigeria' (Awolowo, 1947). Moreover, Nigeria's first Federal Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa also remarked that federalism was agreed upon as the system under the prevailing circumstances that could guarantee the unity and stability of the Nigerian state (Balewa 1964, p. 3). He was of the view that despite the complex ethnic and cultural diversities of the country's population, and as such, it is subsequently imperative for the system to be strengthened.

With respect to the military regimes (Generals: Gowon, Murtala/ Obasanjo, Buhari, Babangida, Abacha and Abdussalami) which succeeded that of General Ironsi, they had all demonstrated the desire and imperativeness of the federal system for Nigeria. Notably, while

stressing the desire for a federal system as the most feasible for Nigeria, General Gowon maintained that the unitary system had remained the main fear of the various regions which made up the Nigerian entity. Similarly, all the other military regimes (Murtala/Obasanjo, Buhari, Babangida, Abacha and Abdussalami), including all the civilian democratic regimes (Obasanjo, Yar Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, and Muhammadu Buhari) pursued several constitutional, military and political policies to strengthen the federal system (Mohammed et al., 2020). These included the numerous state and local government creations by Generals: Murtala Mohammed, Babangida and Abacha (Mohammed et al., 2018, p. 374–392; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020). It is noteworthy that all the Nigerian states and local governments from 1967 to date were created by the Nigerian military through decrees and edicts which empowered them to make decisions that could override constitutional laws.

**The Imperatives of Federalism to Nigeria - The Colonial Perspective**

The formation of federation in a sovereign state is determined and necessitated by relative factors, and circumstances and so are the designs, and specifics of each (Loughlin et al., 2013, p. 27). There are two schools of thought, namely: the internal and external schools - on the determinism of the historical narratives of federalism in Nigeria (Mohammed &Aisha, 2020). Western colonialism that forcefully subjugated and controlled Nigeria's local population from different geographical areas was one of dominant external forces that shaped the evolution and sustenance of Nigeria's federalism (Oyovbaire 1979; Musa & Hassan, 2014). Besides external factors, internal factors had also played a pivotal role in molding the changing landscape of federalism in the country, including the indigenous politicians, the elite, ethno-nationalists and other stakeholders in the Nigeria project. Therefore, federalism is imperative to Nigeria's unity and stability even since the colonial days. Many Nigerian leaders including the country's first Federal Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa were hopeful that federalism would only be temporary and that a centralised system could be established as the force of unity, and embedded in the Nigerian state and its institutions (Ayoade, 1986, p. 89; Rotchild, 1966, p. 278; West Africa, 3 March, 1962, p. 243; Daily Times, 30 September 1961). Federalism became indispensable from the period of Nigeria's amalgamation and during the colonial days –

from the 1914 Lord Lugard amalgamation, to the formal enactment of the Federal Constitution and system of Government in October, 1954 by the British colonialists (Lugard, 1965; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020, p. 41-43; Bourne 2015a, p. 55; National Archives, Kaduna C. O. No. 446/99 No. 31917; C. O. 583/120; National Archives Kaduna ZARPROF C.2/1940; Al-gazali, 1970). Indeed, the British colonialists were partly responsible for pushing and facilitating the operationalization of federalism through constitutional enactment of the 1954 Oliver Littleton Constitution. This constitutional instrument formally created three regions – North, East and the West; a central government; and division of constitutional powers with exclusive and residual powers for the central and regional governments (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020). There were also the various and famous constitutional conferences held in Nigeria and London whereby agreements and compromises were reached on the arrangements to operate federalism (Mohammed et al., 2018; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020).

**The General Perspective**

Although federalism was relative (each with their perceptions) to the Nigerian nationalists, based on their background, worldview and outlook, a point of convergence of opinion and consensus shared amongst them s that federalism was the most feasible option for Nigeria's unity because of her heterogeneous composition and that only federalism could guarantee the country's unity as a cohesive entity (Babalola, 2019, p. 45–46). Hence, Nigeria adopted federalism in order to accommodate and resolve the contentions of heterogeneity of the multi-ethnic, religious, geopolitical regional composition of the Nigerian entity. From the British colonialist perspective, the British partly sought to have a harmonised policy on the production and export of tin, cotton, hide and skin, cocoa, and palm oil to Europe. In addition to these, it sought to ease colonial administration, maintain internal stability, and rationalise administrative costs of the vast areas of Nigeria (Eric, 2016, p. 66). Subsequent events led to the convening of the 1953 constitutional conference in Nigeria and London. The conference was attended by both British and Nigerian nationalists with the central theme of the conference as "the structure and pattern of the federal system of government to be adopted by Nigeria" (Anyebe, 2015, p. 22; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020). It was also observed by Birch (1966, p. 23–24) that Nigeria's federalism emerged from four factors:

> Expectations of stronger economic ties or gains; marked increase in political and administrative capabilities of at least some participating units; superior economic growth on the part of at least some participating units; and multiplicity in terms of range of communications and transactions.

Additionally, the 'internal administrative boundaries' were also a major factor that necessitated the unification of various regions in Nigeria, as none of them could single-handedly boast of being homogeneous and/or stable in itself (Ayoade, 1973, p. 61). These were tied to the fact that the British colonisers, especially during the later stage of the colonial period, were the 'movers and shakers' of the Nigerian federalism (Amuwo et al., 1998, p. 15). Noting the importance of adopting the federalist system in Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1964 p. 2) also maintained that:

> I am pleased to see that we have all agreed that the federal system is, under the present conditions, the only basis on which Nigeria can remain united. We must recognise our diversity and the peculiar conditions under which the different communalities live in this country. To us in Nigeria therefore unity in diversity is a source of great strength, and we must do all in our power to see that this federal system of government is maintained and strengthened.

With those submissions, federalism became the preferred choice for the colonial master, the indigenous Nigerian politicians, nationalists and other stakeholders in the Nigerian project even the independence (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020). Even from the military and centralist perspectives, especially after the overthrow of General Ironsi regime on 29 July 1966 coup, it became a general understanding and belief of many in the military and civilians, including the then new Head of State, General Gowon (as cited in Mohammed & Aisha, 2020, p. 39) that "a country as big as Nigeria and comprising such diversity of tribes and cultures cannot be successfully governed under a unitary government."

Relevantly, the richness of resources in the Northern Region of Nigeria *vis-à-vis* the Southern Region (East and West) was another

major driver in accelerating the push for the adoption of a federalist system in the country. The former is a Muslim dominated region which is also Nigeria's largest region, with a huge population and richly endowed with natural resources has long been the catalyst for the favorable adoption of federalism due to the latter's fears, competition, scepticism and inferiority/superiority complex. Moreover, the quest for regional autonomies, safeguard of the minorities, including the controversial Niger-Delta and the Middle Belt Regions, were also compelling causes for the adoption of federalism (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020; Cronjé, 1972, p. 7).

## Impediments to the Success of Nigerian Federalism

All federal systems are arguably imperfect and therefore, bound by either general or peculiar challenges. For Nigeria, it was clear that by 1951, it had undergone consolidation based on a tripod regional structure with the majority of the ethnic groups dominating the country's political and administrative affairs and thus, competing with each other for power in the central government in favour of their respective regions (Jaja & Agumagu, 2017). Therefore, since the early days when the federal system was initially adopted in Nigeria, the major challenge to date is how to cater for the interests and needs of the heterogeneous groups that constitute the federation. Such response is critical given the manifestation of a series of events that transpired in recent years, such as the inherent mutual fear and suspicion with regard to domination and marginalisation amongst the regions, religions, and geo-ethnic groups (Ehrhardt, 2017, p. 463). In fact, even prior to its independence in 1960, Nigeria had already been overwhelmed by ethno-regional differences and divided loyalties which altogether hindered the actualisation of a strong constitutional government (Kalu, 2008, p. 34; Mohammed & Aisha, 2020). Furthermore, the continuous 'debate and confusion' on the feasibility of the federal system in Nigeria arise from the 'conceptual misunderstanding' of the federal system in addressing heterogeneous national interests, and, to a certain extent, distorted limits of the central and component units of governments ensuing from the centralization of governmental powers. Similarly, the issue of regionalism was the root of minority problems in the then Nigerian federalism as there were hundreds of unequal minority groups but the political elite class of the three major groups had dominated and overshadowed the combined minority groups (Osaghae, 1991, p. 239). On the other hand, Nigeria's federalism

seemed to have been designed to fail because the allocated federal boundary lines do not conform to ethnic composition and boundaries, especially for the minorities (Lijphart (1969).

The creation of more states and local governments in Nigeria has, over the years, been greatly influenced by the fervent desire by certain parties to control state resources, especially oil revenue (Saylor, 2016, p. 572). Indeed, Saylor also asserted that the monthly allocation of federation, state and local government accounts are largely derived from oil revenues. This has been corroborated and also asserted that Nigerians have not been able to decide what the purpose of state creations are, other than for the self-serving economic and political interests of accessing power and expropriation of public resources (Ojukwu, 1989, p. 176). The local political elites have used the creation of states and local governments under the framework of the federal system as a tool to expropriate state power and resources for their self-interests more than for the benefit of the public, with the 'ethnic entrepreneurs and movements' as the main drivers for such creations (Saylor, 2016, p. 570–573). They have also been dominant in the decision-making process of such creations, including adjustments to merge or separate affected people and areas. From the viewpoint of Nigerian federalism and attendant challenges, similarly, it has been maintained that ethnicity in Nigeria arises due to over competition for "scarce and limited resources (land or grants from the federal government); perceived marginalisation of one group by the other; identify questions and quest for political relevance; and struggle for equal access to power at the center" (Albeely et al., 2018, p. 32-33). There are also, three other factors that have caused complications to Nigeria's federalism, including ethnicity, language, and religion (Adamolekun, 1991, p. 7–9). These three are manifested in the lack of an acceptable total number of the ethnic groups; the dominance of the three languages; rivalry and violent clashes amongst the groups (Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba), including the North (Muslim) and South (Christian divide). There are also, four irrefutable issues in Nigerian federalism, such as imbalance/over-concentration of power; the primacy of ethnicity in public affairs; high level of injustice; and an unpopular federal system imposed on Nigerians by the elite/national political leaders and the British (Achinike & Ogbonna, 2016, p. 370).

Olalede (2018, p. 26–34) also observed that there are numerous, major challenging issues in Nigerian federalism which include

federal concentration of power (over centralisation of political and economic powers in the central/federal government); territorial configuration of the federation (more or less demarcation of boundaries based on geo-ethnic basis); diversity issues (management of the diverse character content of the Nigerian federation); problems of the minority (the needs, rights, inclusion and participation of minorities). For Mandaci and Tepeciklioglu (2018, p. 413), criticisms against Nigerian federalism are rooted in poor devolution of powers, domination of power by the ethnic elite, and placing emphasis on ethnic origin and belonging over and above merit in the public service.

Secession has been one of the major challenges to Nigerian federalism. Although it is clear that Nigeria is regarded as one 'indivisible and indissoluble entity', the country's constitution is still ambiguous and silent on secession from the state (Ogunmodimu, 2017). Despite secession attempts by the Biafra (1967–1970) and other minor attempts, all the Nigerian constitutions, the military and civilian leaders and members of the public have in post independence history, have been showing consistency in their desire to support a united and prosperous Nigerian federal state. However, this has not been without challenges to the efficacy of the arrangements to be employed. These various regimes have relatively made both forceful and other attempts to maintain the unity of the Nigerian state under the banner of the federal system. Nigeria's last expatriate colonial, Governor-General Sir James Roberson while recalling his experience in heterogeneous and complex Nigeria admitted that he had difficulty with ethnic jealousy and rivalries (Kirk-Greene, 1968 p. 39-51),

Historically, all the three main regions of Nigeria (North, West and East) had, at one time or other, threatened secession (Mohammed & Aisha, 2020; Ayoade, 1973, p. 71-72). Yoruba, led by Chief Awolowo resisted the move and threatened to pull out of the Nigerian union if Lagos were to be separated from the former Western region (Ayoade, 1973, p. 67–72). Numerous secession threats and the various agitations for separation indeed came from Nigerian states and entities. Among notable examples of actions included the North's demand for 50 percent central legislative seats, the Isaac Idaka Boro secession declaration, the West region's threat to break away if Lagos were separated from it, the Biafran Civil War, and the attempts by Northern elements to break away during the July 1966 counter-coup. These secession attempts in Nigeria's practice of

federal system were attributable to many factors. These included the heterogeneous character, differing socio-political and value systems, personality clashes amongst the first generation of Nigerian leaders, and the lack of a forceful national ideology (Tamuno, 1970, p. 564).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The attempt to achieve federalism is one that has taken even the most advanced federal states many years and yet they continue to pursue it, for it is an unending one. Federalism over the last 67 years has proven to be the most viable choice for the heterogeneous Nigerian state. This is despite the inherent challenges, which characterize the practice of federalism in Nigeria. The challenges are mainly centred on the heterogeneous character of the Nigerian entity and the convulsion of conflicting interests - regions, religions, ethnic groups, resources, the elite, and power among others. Although, over the years there have been various attempts by different regimes, be it civilian, democratic or the military to consolidate and enhance the federal system (e.g. through the creation of state and local government, constitutional amendments, resource control reallocation, etc.), Nigeria's long-standing search for a most viable federal arrangement continues.

Thus far, for Nigeria to remain as a united entity, federalism remains the most viable option. This political system is more likely to guarantee the preservation of the country's heterogeneities among its people and assure autonomy, and to reduce fears of marginalisation, exclusion and domination. The states, regions (North/South, North, East and West) including the North/South dichotomy of Islam and Christianity would continue to shape the federal structure while the elite exploit such vulnerabilities to access and consolidate their strong hold on state power and resources. To arrive at a viable federal arrangement, the multiple stakeholders in the Nigerian state would have to honestly understand their differences, explore their strengths and understand that federalism is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Thus, the search for and adoption of federalism continues with the discovery, exploration and development of optional arrangements peculiar to Nigerian states and societies.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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