

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF NATION BUILDING: THE PARADIGM OF POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

Okeja Uchenna

Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main

Germany

uchenna.okeja@gmail.com

Abstract. *What connection can one make, on the normative level, between epistemology and nation building? What sort of inquiry is possible in this regard? In this paper, I provide answers to these questions by looking into the nature of nation building against the background of its epistemological foundations which, though not so obvious, are nonetheless necessary and palpable upon deeper reflection. To this end, the following questions become central: what sort of convictions stand behind (legitimize) the nation state's structure and functioning? What sort of knowledge are these convictions? If these convictions are (or are not) objective realities, could they be (or not be) known? What, if any, are the justificatory grounds for these convictions? In answering these questions, direct recourse will be made to the Nigerian context as a paradigm. Against this background, a theory of the epistemological foundations (albeit in the normative form) of nation building in Nigeria is conceived. The central argument is that Nigeria, like most African states, operates with a linear epistemological foundation of nation building which is limited in many important respects. This forms the reason this paper rearticulates the epistemological framework of nation building in Africa around the theorization of complexity, failure and error*

Keywords: Epistemology, Nation Building, Postcolonialism, Normativity, Africa, Complexity

1. THE ART AND SCIENCE OF NATION BUILDING

Since the concepts of our investigation here are anything but obvious, it is pertinent to begin with a preliminary note on their meanings. Added to this is the need to spell out the scope of the investigation we are embarking on from the outset in order to forefend any occasion of losing bearings and indulging in verbose digressions. Let us begin with a specification of the meaning of nation building. Like the concept suggests, nation-building is the process of integrating different components into an integral whole. Specifically, it is the process of fusing together divergent groups and interests into a unified group of people within a specific boundary. A very succinct characterization of this concept was proffered by Ali Mazrui who, in characterizing the use of the concept of nation building in the rhetoric of development in East Africa, contended that “the advantage of the metaphor of

nation-building is derived from the simple fact that so much of the work of turning newly invented, fragile states into more

secure, integrated nations is analogous to construction.”¹ Following Mazuri’s contentions, nation-building can be seen as a process that involves the securing and integration of newly invented states; the means to this end being the building of institutions for various purposes, the bridging of tradition and modernity, the ordering of relationships and lastly, the laying of the foundations for a new national heritage. Nation building aims at an irreversible integration of the groups that people the state. So, when the nation is successfully built, that is, when nationhood is attained, there will be little or no need to debate whether or not the nation should exist.

If nation-building refers to the process of attaining nationhood, it would necessarily involve a stipulation of when it is attained, that is, a stipulation of when a group of people have become a nation. Without knowing when a group of people can be considered a nation, the whole exercise of nation-building will surely be futile. So, when can a group of people be considered a nation? Wole Soyinka rightly observed that this question could be framed in several other ways: “what price a nation? Half a million lives lost in brutish termination, within the cheap span of a mere month What mores define a nation? Or indeed, what yardsticks? What does the claim “I belong to this nation” mean to the individual, and when did it begin to mean anything? For instance, for the Ewe split between Ghana and Togo?”²

I agree with Soyinka that these are unavoidable details of the concept of nationhood. In the main, when these questions are considered in the sphere of philosophy, they engender discourses that are very complex and sometimes intractable. Thus, although we are not basically concerned here with the conditions and the details of the signification of what a nation means, it is pertinent to note that the two methods of nation building (going by Fukuyama’s distinction between nation-building from outside and inside³) are necessarily faced with a common problem which is the discovery of the most viable epistemic attitude that should inform and direct the exercise. This last point clarifies the importance of epistemology to the success or failure of nation-building.

2. DECIPHERING THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

How then can we find out the normative epistemological foundations of the art of nation- building? On the strength of the considerations above, it should not be hard to see that the quest to decipher the main elements that internally constitute the epistemology of nation building lies squarely in the convictions that inform the various means to the end of nation- building (which is to irreversibly secure and integrate newly invented states) are employed. But then, there is a problem with this procedure. The problem simply stated is this: how is it possible to know the convictions that stand behind the employment of the various means to the end of nation-building? The basic problem here is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to know for sure what convictions lie behind any action if the agent carrying

¹ Ali Mazrui, *Cultural Engineering and nation-building in East Africa*, Illinois, 1972, p. xiii

² Wole Soyinka, *The open sore of a continent*, Oxford, 1996, p. 19

³ See Francis Fukuyama (ed.), *Nation building beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, Baltimore, 2006, p. 1-18

out the action does not himself explicitly spell out what those convictions are.

For exemplification purposes, let us take the case of the following example. A certain man goes out through the front door of his house every morning and enters into his house upon his return in the night through the back door every day of his life. A neighbor who always observed this happen tries to make sense of the wisdom of entering into the house in the night through the back door that can only be reached through a path that is not lighted. Without asking the man (agent) who acts this way, the neighbor goes on to relate this singular act of the man to his other acts (like his being a member of a certain tribe, religion or class etc) in order to come up with an explanation and finally concludes that the explanation is that the man acts that way because of the beliefs of his tribe, religion or class. This conclusion, although it could have some supporting grounds (like the fact that similar practices have been reported about some other members of the groups to which this man belongs) is inconclusive. In fact, it is a poorly supported assumption because it is only the agent that knows the convictions that inform his acting in a certain way.

The above analogy is meant to emphasize the point that what is sometimes considered as the conviction for the peculiar way of employing the means of nation building by different agents involved in such an exercise is often times only an interpretative assumption. This is because, like the imperfect analogy above shows, it is only the articulation of the convictions behind an action by the agent who carries out the action himself that passes as an authoritative expression of these convictions. The consequence of this is that if one is to attempt to theorize the epistemological foundations of nation-building, one must necessarily deal with the problem of credibility of what is considered as the convictions that stand behind the actions of the agents involved in the process of nation-building.

To solve this quagmire, one could distinguish between the theorization of the epistemological foundations of nation-building as an *is* on the one hand, and as an *ought* on the other hand. The one refers to the actual convictions of the agents involved in nation-building while the other refers to the convictions of the agents involved in nation-building that should be supposed based on certain indices that point in certain directions. The epistemological foundation of nation-building that is premised on the concept of *oughtness* could be regarded as normative epistemology of nation-building. And this is the sort of consideration with which we are concerned here.

With this distinction in mind, let us look at the process of nation-building in order to make explicit its internal constitution. Mazrui contends that nation-building has five major processes viz.: 1) the achievement of some degree of cultural and normative fusion 2) the promotion of economic interpenetration among different strata and sectors of society 3) the process of social integration 4) the building of institutions for effective conflict-resolution and 5) the psychological accumulation of a shared national experience.⁴ These processes are indeed not short of varying complexities and concomitant costs. This being the case, the question of what makes the idea of nation-building imperative cannot be ignored. The question here is: why should the newly invented states strive towards nation-building in the face of the huge costs and complexities that it involves and the reality that they did not come up themselves with the amalgamations that produced the newly invented states? Why, in other words, should they not abdicate on this responsibility and disintegrate?

The answer to the question above can be found by looking at the reasons provided for

⁴ Mazrui, op. cit., p. 277

the existence of nations as such and not merely the reasons provided for the activity of nation building. Answering the question in this way would lead to questioning the need for nations in their modern forms and not ethnic communities or kingdoms of the African past. So, the basic issue is to spell out the reasons why it is good to have Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon, Namibia, Zambia and so on and so forth, as nations carrying on from their amalgamated beginnings instead of reverting back to the pre-colonial past where what existed was the ethnic nationalities of the Kikuyu, Bayangi, Igbo or the Benin kingdom, Ashanti kingdom etc.

In current discourses, the need to hold on to the present form of these newly formed states, especially the post-colonial African states, has been premised on the gains of co-existence of the diverse groups. When viewed this way, however, one will still have to address an obvious short-coming, namely, the adequacy of using a post-phenomenal *Erlebnis* to judge the goodness or otherwise of the phenomenon itself. The issue here is that the answer to the question (why should the diverse ethnic nations in the newly formed states continue to co-exist?) should be adduced from the context of the question and this is the context prior to the contemporary lived experiences of the humanity that people these newly invented states. The demand thus is to place one's answers within the context of the time there was just going to be a new state that goes by whatever name. In this context, the question would then be: what accounts for the goodness or otherwise of the decision of the so-called independence fathers of the newly invented states to opt for the continuation of the artificially amalgamated territories and not its disintegration?

Framed in the above way, the central question would easily be thought to elicit a very straight forward answer namely, that the so-called independence fathers of different post-colonial states opted for the maintenance of these artificially created territories or states because it is what afforded them the chance to demand for independence in the first place.

Without that collective bargain; without the unity of the divergent ethnic nationalities that made up the artificial territories, it would have been impossible for the fathers of independence of the different states to demand independence from colonial rule. So, the reason, it will further be supposed, is that upholding the unity of these artificial states served the purpose of securing the collective freedom of the different ethnic nationalities as a group. Having served this function, the reason for the continued co-existence of these divergent ethnic nationalities for the fathers of independence could be interpreted then to be the realization that there are more things to gain by being together than being apart as distinct ethnic nationalities and this is specifically the higher efficacy of expanded collective bargain. On this ground, one can readily see the wisdom behind the insistence on unity as a cardinal virtue by most of the fathers of independence of these newly invented states.

3. THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

Its merits notwithstanding, the above answer would still be insufficient because of several reasons. The most central of these reasons is this: although the power and the advantages of being together as a state was a reason for the continued co-existence of the different ethnic nationalities, it should not be forgotten that the freedom gained by the collective bargain of these groups was negotiated freedom. The fathers of these independent

states negotiated with the colonial powers for their freedom and, in doing so, they had to make some concessions and ratify some agreements. To buttress this point, let us take the case of Nigeria. Obafemi Awolowo (one of the fathers of independence in Nigeria) brought this issue very succinctly to the fore when, in a lecture he delivered to Nigerian students in London in 1961 titled "Philosophy for Independent Nigeria", he stated: "a good many things have happened in Nigeria since October 1, 1960. The first major act of the Government took place on the very day of our independence. It is an act which in my considered judgment detracts very seriously from the sovereignty which was that day conferred upon us."⁵

This first major act is the agreement between the government of Nigeria and the Viscount-Head, the British High Commissioner in Nigeria. In Awolowo's words, "On October 1, 1960, the British High Commissioner in Nigeria (Viscount Head) and the Prime Minister (Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa) exchanged correspondence, by means of which an agreement was concluded on that day between Britain and Nigeria. Under this agreement, Nigeria assumes and undertakes all the rights and obligations of Britain under any valid international instruments in so far as they were applicable to Nigeria before the latter's attainment of independence."⁶ The issue becomes more complicated when it is noted that neither the nature nor the content of "these rights and obligations were spelt out in the above mentioned correspondence; and in spite of repeated demands by [Awolowo's] colleagues and [Awolowo], the Federal Government has refused to inform the country of these rights and obligations of Britain which our country assumed and undertook on the day of her independence."⁷

The only explanation offered, as Awolowo recounted, was that of the Viscount-Head who, in reply to Awolowo's criticism of the agreement on one occasion, said that the agreement was harmless, and that some of the rights and obligations assumed and undertaken by Nigeria under it were those under The Geneva Convention. Awolowo's cogent contention in this regard was that "if we would be party to the Geneva Convention, we must do so in our own right as a sovereign state, not as Britain's underling or foster child."⁸ Besides, if the sovereignty of the newly independent state of Nigeria was the affair of the humanity that peoples that state, this sort of situation would not have been a possibility.

Leaving the foregoing aside, a review of the developments leading to the attainment of independence in some of the newly independent states like Nigeria would reveal that the aforementioned recognition of the value of collective co-existence in the newly independent states was neither the cardinal nor the only reason for the maintenance of their collective co-existence which was artificially created. Falola was apt in noting that the "nationalists wanted to work within the new state of Nigeria, not within their old indigenous nations such as those of the Yoruba or Ibibio."⁹ The reasons for this were neither the far-reaching

⁵ Obafemi Awolowo, *Philosophy for an independent Nigeria*, A lecture delivered to Nigerian students in London in at Conway Hall on 3rd September 1961, p. 3

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Toyin Falola, *The history of Nigeria*, Westport, 1999, p. 82

mutual love among the different ethnic groups nor the collective love of the newly independent state but rather diverse considerations of how the newly independent Nigerian state would further the attainment of different interests for different groups or individuals.

It is true that “as the colonial era began, an awareness of being residents of the same country became important and a desire for freedom from colonial rule was a paramount expression of nationalism” since “colonial policies generated discontent among the people, especially the elite who originally demanded reforms, and later on, independence.”¹⁰ Also, within the confines of the mould and cast of this new awareness, “many Nigerians believed that they could overcome the problems of low price for raw material and expatriate control of the economy only if they had power to determine their own destiny.”¹¹ Thus, “to the Nigerian businessmen and men who saw themselves driven out of trade by foreign companies, an identification with anti-colonial movement became a strategy of regaining control.”¹²

Besides this conviction, there were others as other epochs of the developments and reason for the demand for independence in Nigeria would reveal. In all, however, majority, if not all the reasons provided in the course of the movement towards independence, makes apparent that the leaders (fathers of independence) only made appeals to anti-colonial sentiments rather than to culture, language and other internal factors of co-existence and (in)stability. In doing this, they clearly “exaggerated what independence would bring to everybody, contrasting this with the limitations of colonial accomplishments.”¹³ It is in this one-dimensional approach to the discourse on the need for independence that the seeds of the complexities that have been the albatross of the Nigerian nation were sown.

Even before independence on the 1st of October 1960, there were exhibitions of the problematic and contours of this one-dimensional thought. To make this explicit, we have only to refer to the occurrences after the concessions granted by the colonial government in

1948 which was the turning point of the quest for self-rule. In 1948, the colonial government “reformed the Richards Constitution and announced measure to Nigerianize the civil service, democratize the Native Authorities, and expand higher education.”¹⁴ And when political reforms were introduced, emerging leaders of the nation began to call for greater regional autonomy. And to actualize this aim, they created associations to fight for this aim.

I think Falola cannot be bettered in his observation that it was in this context that the problem of ethnic politics that would consume Nigeria for the rest of the century began.¹⁵ But what were the causes of the recourse to ethnicity in the process leading to independence? Concisely, “among the causes of ethnicity were the regional disparities created by colonialism, the competition in the urban environment for limited resources, and the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 90

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 91

¹⁵ Ibid.

instrumentalization of ethnicity by emerging politicians seeking the fastest means to mobilize support.”¹⁶ This is basically the reason for the ethnic character of all the first major political parties that were formed. None, not even the hitherto non-parochial, national party, NCNC, transcended this tepid tribal grouping. So, we find the Action Group led by Obafemi Awolowo in the West, the Northern People’s Congress and the left-wing Northern Elements Progressive Union in North and finally the (former) National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons in the East. With this melody of the tide of events, “things would never be the same again as the leaders abandoned pan-Nigerian issues and focused more and more on regional concerns.”¹⁷ And, it is interesting but yet disheartening that just “within one generation, nationalists became tribalists, interested in independence for narrow gains.”¹⁸

The Macpherson constitution which allowed public debate on what the people wanted¹⁹ brought to the fore the complications already caused by tribal politics. Although there were very strong points raised about regional imbalances, the constitution still came into effect with a lot of irreconcilable elements. To wit, the constitution “retained the three regions but gave the north representation equal in number to the two other regions combined.”²⁰ With the entire rancor about regionalism, it soon became clear to both the active and the passive participants in Nigerian politics that the enemy to fight was no longer the colonial power but fellow Nigerians. Now, one may be wondering what, if anything at all, the out-going colonialist did to sort this issue out before independence especially as it is obvious that the status quo would only lead to an instable independent Nigeria.

The colonial government, in a bid to solve this problem, convened a conference in London. This conference is what is today regarded as the Minorities Commission. The central question of this conference was this: what will become of the other ethnic nations that did not have a clear voice like the three big ethnic nations; what will become of them in the Nigerian state after independence? To answer this question, “Awo, Zik and the Northern leaders gave assurances. Zik produced his (1948) Freedom Charter, a trumpeted message to all, big and small, that their separate sovereign rights and entitlements deserved to be, and would be, respected and protected. There would be “freedom for *all*.”²¹ There would indeed be freedom for all but the fear of the minorities was that some would become freer than others. The central concern was this: Would the three big ethnic nations – Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba – “not look *first* to the interests of their *own* ethnic brethren? Were they not *already* doing so? Was this not natural? Indeed, did not this new democracy, this strange system of “one man, one vote” ensure paramountcy of *local* ethnic interests; the *very reverse* of the golden promises of these new men of magic words who proclaimed life in more abundance for all?”²²

Taking their destiny into their own hands, the minorities formed associations to fight for their proper place in the envisaged independent Nigeria. Among them, “in the East,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 92

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Michael Vickers, *A nation betrayed: Nigeria and the minorities commission of 1957*, New Jersey, 2009, p. 11

²² Ibid., p. 11

Ibibio and Efik took the lead in shaping the Calabar, Ogoja, Rivers (COR) Movement; in the North, Idoma and Tiv, the Middle Belt Movement (Movement of Middle-Belt peoples); and in the West, Edo folk, behind the Oba of Benin and his Bini, and with an embrace extending into Delta and West Niger lands, drew into life, growing strength and prominence, the Mid-West State movement. The battle lines were set.”²³ If the battle lines were drawn as the above quotation makes clear, the real clash was set to take place in London because, “with self- government soon to complete its span, the final step, agreement on a constitution to meet Nigeria’s Independence needs, was sought at a Conference convened in June 1957 at London’s Lancaster House.”²⁴

Although the big performer were The British Government delegation, led by Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd, while the featured performer were the Nigerian Big-3 of Zik, Awo and Balewa; the over 247 ethnicities not directly represented by the Big-3 were also present to voice their demands. And spokesmen, they did indeed have. In voicing their demands, the “spokesmen for COR, Middle Belt and Mid-West State Movements took the lead.”²⁵ At the very least, they contended, “a separate state from each of the existing Regions must be created. The British representatives and the Nigerian Big-3 leaders tried magic talk, they tried appeasement. But to no avail. Nothing this time worked. Nigeria’s minority nations were adamant. They had the right, they declared, and now demanded the authority to run their own affairs in their own way, indeed just as the Big-3, in pursuit of securing their own interests, were clearly intent on doing.”²⁶

This was a fix, an impasse that would have prevented the independence of Nigeria with the porous holes of ethnic uneasiness. There would have been a basis for the unity of Nigeria on the terms of the collective inhabitants had it been that this deadlock was addressed satisfactorily. But this was not the case because independence, on the terms of the already charted course of action, was a goal that ranked higher than every other thing at that moment. So, the deadlock was resolved by the shrewd proposal of the Colonial Secretary, Lennox- Boyd. His suggestion was that a Commission of Enquiry into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them would solve the problem. This Commission of Enquiry “would produce a Report and Recommendations; it would advise the Colonial Secretary, the representatives of the Nigerian government and their various interested parties how best to solve this thorny problem.”²⁷ This was indeed “a stroke of genius; a panacea. The British congratulated themselves. The Big-3 leaders were lavish in their praise. And for Nigeria’s COR, Middle Belt and Mid-west minorities, a tiny guttering flame burst suddenly into a flaming torch. Fulfillment of hopes long and ardently sought was now surely on the very brink of attainment.”²⁸

Luckily, this Commission of Enquiry concluded its tasks before the declaration of Nigeria as an independent state. The report of the Commission, which was officially

²³ Ibid., p. 13

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 14

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

released on July 30, 1958, saw no reason for the creation of a Mid-West State. It did not also see any need that warrants more lenient treatment of other Nigerian minority claimants. The basic view was that a separate state would not provide a remedy for the fears of minorities in the prospective independent state of Nigeria.²⁹ The reason for this conclusion of the Commission was that “the Commission, with an eye to the country’s future, maintained that tribal separation should ([not] *sic*) be embodied in the structure of Nigerian government. This step should not be taken, it was stressed, because it was the expressed belief of the Commission that real and lasting security for Nigeria’s minorities would be ensured by what the Commission envisaged as the inevitable shift of political gravity from the regional governments to the federal government where, it was conjectured, no single nationality group could predominate.”³⁰

The general and specific safeguards for the protection of the interests of minorities that was recommended by the Commission were 1) the institution of a Nigerian Police Force under the control of the federal government and 2) provisions for securing Fundamental Human Rights. These two provisions, the Commission advised, should be included as appropriate articles in the Independence Constitution.³¹ The specific provisions attached to these two general provisions were geared towards ensuring the protection of particular minority area interests. In this light, the Commission suggested that “the Niger Delta should be designated as a “Special Area” due to the problems of development in this area of creeks and mangrove swamps. A *Special Area Board*, with a Chairman and Vice-Chairman chosen by the Federal Government, would be in charge. Secondly, and of particular interest, to COR and Mid-West supporters, the Commission called for the creation of a *Calabar Council* in the East Region, and an Edo Council in the West; neither Council, however, to have authority extending beyond *the power to consult and advice*.”³²

The hypothesis of the recommendation of the Commission basically boils down to this: if new states are not created, there would be the outcome of decrease in tribalism. This conviction was eloquently and logically defended by the Commission in sundry manners. But with the issues of independence concluded, the new Nigerian state had to manage its own affairs. Over the course of time, the fulfillment of this task by the state apparatus of governance is visible to everyone that cares to take a look. If the indicators of evaluation are success and satisfaction of the citizens, then, it is evident that the task of governing the country has not been carried out in any satisfactory way. Among all the banes of the independent state of Nigeria is the issue of tribalism which was purposefully minimized at the very point of independence.

According to Chinua Achebe, “nothing in Nigeria’s political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word tribe in her vocabulary.”³³ This phenomenon has been so central to politics in Nigeria that it “has been accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another, and finally

²⁹ Ibid., p. 203

³⁰ Ibid., p. 203 (quotation marks removed)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 203f

³³ Chinua Achebe, *The trouble with Nigeria*, Enugu, 1983, p. 5

smuggled in through the back-door as an accomplice.”³⁴ Be that as it may, since our concern is epistemological, our question in this context would be geared at deciphering the sort of knowledge and conviction that stand behind the tribal platform of group dynamics in Nigeria. Summarily posed, the questions in this context are: 1) why is tribe so important in the Nigerian context? 2) What are the convictions behind tribal identifications and politics? 3) What are the convictions behind the efforts of the government to integrate the tribes within the state?

The answer to the first question should be clear to anyone with an insight into the issue of tribal identity as a form of group identity. It is not hard to see why the issue of tribe and the problem of tribalism are so central to the effective functioning of governance in Nigeria. Being a country with a far reaching diversity in culture and language, it is important for the sake of national integration to get the tribal equation right. Moreover, the tribal platform has been a closer platform of union politics before, during and after colonial rule in the country. And, since colonial rule aggressively lorded itself over the different tribes in most cases, it contributed to the inculcation of the idea among the tribes that there was a common enemy oppressing them; that this common enemy was not as natural as the tribal union. Colonization offered a platform for the construction of *otherness* among the tribes and this constructed *otherness* created a stronger bond among the tribes. So, whereas the construction of *otherness* prior to colonial rule was mainly along the lines of anterior tribes, its metamorphosis which produced a stronger tribal bond occurred during colonial rule. And with a strengthened tribal bond, interests became generally conceived along these lines because what mattered was the survival of the group (tribe) as an independent entity within the collective state (Nigeria). Even with the end of colonial rule, this remained the case because tribal consciousness was still the norm for the construction of identity and the promotion/safeguarding of interests.

From the above, we can see that the second question above (about the convictions behind tribal identification and politics), has a two-fold answer. The first is the conviction that tribal identification and politics is a surer platform for the pursuit of political interests and the fulfillment of one's goal as a human being. Secondly, there is the conviction that what the state cannot, and has not, been able to provide, the tribal union can, and would provide. An example should make the point here clearer. Many have seen that the government of the newly independent Nigerian state has failed to provide them a functioning legal system that will guarantee the protection of their rights. But within the tribal union, it is supposed, that cannot be the case because there is an organic system of cultural, social, political, legal etc., organization within the tribes that ensures the fulfillment of the functions that the state cannot, or has not been able to fulfill for whatever reason. Thus, the logic is squarely that tribal union provided and still would continue to provide a kind of life and guarantees that has not, or would not, be possible within the state.

Now, in answer to the third question, let us ask first of all what the government has done to quell the tide of tribal uneasiness, rancor and mistrust in Nigeria after independence. In other words, what has been the tool of national integration in Nigeria since the attainment of independence? The very basic and consistent tools of national integration of the government in Nigeria have been the Federal Character principle and the

³⁴ Ibid.

National Youth Service (NYSC) for recent graduates. That these two tools have not had any serious impact on the recalcitrant tribal mistrust and animosity is very evident in the language, events and the posture of intra-tribal relations within the country today.

To recapitulate, let us summarize, in a normative form, the epistemology of nation building in what we have considered so far. Firstly, there is a need to point out that there are two epochs of the epistemology of nation building in Nigeria, as in most other independent states in Africa namely: 1) the epoch of the developments leading to independence and 2) the epoch of self-rule in alien structures of governance. In both epochs, the basic epistemological conviction is linear. This means that the convictions that inform the reasoning of the actors have basically been of the “if this, then that” type of reasoning. The linearity of this form of epistemological conviction lies in its one-dimensional nature where phenomena are basically conceived of as being totally comprehensible and thus, obeying a singular principle that could be manipulated to yield a desired solution. But this has malfunctioned in more ways than one. It is clear that linearity with regard to the epistemological foundation of nation-building is not inadequate, because it does not only over simplify the phenomena, but also is short-sighted. This is because it does not allow for the theorization of failure and error in a non-pejorative manner. So, since the basic issues that must be confronted in the epistemology of nation- building in independent African states are mainly the issues of error and failure, there is a need to transcend the linear form of epistemology that has been en vogue. This, to my mind, means finding a very viable context for the theorization of failure and error in a way that comprehensibly articulates the complexity of the phenomenon of nation-building.

4. A SHIFT IN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ATTITUDE

Here we shall concern ourselves with the articulation of the theory of epistemological complexity as the most adequate epistemological framework for the exercise of nation-building. The best point of departure would be to ask: what is epistemological complexity? First off, epistemological complexity cannot be adequately understood without an understanding of what the theory of complexity is itself all about. For this reason, we would have to begin by describing what is meant by the theory of complexity. Complexity, simply stated, “does not describe objective properties of natural or social phenomena. Nor does it denote complex objects as contrasted with simple objects. Rather, it refers to the cognitive situation in which agents, whether they are individuals or social groups, find themselves. The relations which agents construct and project on their environment in their attempts at self-orientation – i.e. at arrangement, prediction, planning, manipulation – will be more or less complex according to circumstances.”³⁵

In line with the premises of the above description, Zolo describes the following conditions of complexity viz.: 1) the wider scope of possible choices and the higher the number of variables which agents have to take account of in their attempts to resolve problems of knowledge, adaptation and organization, the more complex their environmental situation becomes 2) an environment grows in complexity, the more interdependent the variables becomes 3) the instability or turbulence of the environment and by the tendency of its variables to change along swift or unpredictable trajectories form an element of complexity and 4) the state of cognitive circularity reached by agents who become aware of

³⁵ Danilo Zolo, *Democracy and complexity*, 1992, p. 2f

the high level of the complexity of their own environment.³⁶

But, of what use is the theory and concept of complexity to our present concern? To answer this question, we will have to first of all spell out the import of the theory for the fields of studies that deal with the conceptualization of social and political phenomena. In this regard, the following explanation is most apt: "Complexity theory, when applied to the social sciences, entails non-linearity between cause and effect or action and outcome, the unforeseen consequences and emergent properties that emanate from political action, and the undecidable and unknowable nature of the entities we are dealing with due to their dynamism as they engage with a multiplicity of other dynamic variables."³⁷

Now, if this is the import of the theory of complexity in the fields of studies that deal with the conceptualization of social and political phenomena, what sense could be made of its epistemology? What, to be sure, should one understand under the concept of epistemological complexity as distinct from linear epistemology (which, as we have seen, has been the defining option visible in the *modus operandi* of the theory and practice of nation-building in Africa)? Epistemological complexity refers to a reflexive epistemology that describes a cognitive situation of the agents. Otto Neurath's metaphor provides a very good description of this issue. In describing the position of the philosopher of science in the post-Einsteinian period, Neurath stated that philosopher's are like sailors who are prevented by storm from returning to port and so are forced to repair their disintegrating ship in mid-ocean, supporting themselves, while they carry out the repair, on the very structures threatened with collapse by the waves.³⁸ What is alluded to in the above is "a cognitive situation in which any possibility of certainty or, following Popper, of 'approximation' to the truth, is excluded because agents themselves are included in the environment which they attempt to make the object of their own cognition."³⁹ Against this background, reflexive epistemological position "argues that the point of departure and the point of arrival in every cognitive process consist [of] circularly in the propositions of linguistic communication and not in the data of a supposed environmental objectivity, which both proceeds, and is external to, language."⁴⁰ Thus, this sort of epistemology "is bound to deny the possibility of a nomo-logical and deductive explanation in either the natural or the political and social sciences."⁴¹ And there are two-fold reasons for this namely: 1) any general law can only really be held valid within a particular defined area and, even within this area, only with exceptions and anomalies 2) any empirical phenomenon can always be interpreted in the light of a plurality of different theories which are even, in many cases,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 3

³⁷ Adrian Little, Complexity, error, failure: Reconceptualising the epistemological foundations of contemporary liberal democratic politics, A paper presented at the 2009 Australasian annual conference of political studies association, p. 3 (cited with the permission of the author)

³⁸ The description of the metaphor here is taken from Daniello Zolo, *Democracy and complexity*, Cambridge,

1992, p. 6f. For the original description, see Otto Neurath, *Foundations of the social sciences*, Chicago, 1944. P. 47

³⁹ Danilo Zolo, op. cit., p. 7

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 9

mutually exclusive.

When the thoughts ingrained in the theory of complexity are brought to bear on political actions (one of which nation-building is), the resulting insight is that linearity between cause and effect is a mistaken path to follow because of the constraints on the foundations of political and social action that is made explicit by the theory of complexity. To bring out the import of this non-linear epistemology for nation-building, let us consider the instance of the central themes of nation-building. Like we saw earlier on, the question of nation-building has usually, especially in the Nigerian context, revolved around the discourses on unity. Questions have always sought to make explicit the basis for the co-existence in the state. In this regard, some refuse to accept the purported basis for the continued co-existence of the people in Nigeria because there was no basis for the amalgamation of the different regions and there is still no basis for continued co-existence since the state has failed to satisfy the aspirations of the people within it.

On the other hand, however, others have affirmed that there is indeed no alternative to living together within the newly independent state of Nigeria because there is no basis for secession or total disintegration other than the fulfilment of the selfish interests of some persons from some regions. Also, from the language and action of the actors that are confronted with the questions of nation-building within newly independent states like Nigeria, one can see similar epistemology at work. It is often thought that certain results should necessarily follow from certain lines of action. Thus, democracy is usually supposed to be a means of governance that must necessarily lead to certain ends like freedom of speech, eradication of poverty, accountability, religious tolerance et sic cetera.

This nomo-logical epistemology is very bankrupt. This is due to the fact that it does not make any room for the kind of investigation that befits the phenomenon. It does not have the capacity to include within its scope the very basic issues of uncertainty and most importantly, partial unknowability or vice versa of the different facets of the phenomenon of nation-building. Besides, the sort of linear epistemology at play in the discourse on nation-building in most African states like Nigeria is premised on the conviction that the observer (the citizens and political actors of these countries) could be detached from the object of observation (the nation) in such a manner that allows a disinterested and/or complete overview of the object of inquiry. This surely is not the case. The observers who carry out the discourses on the context we are considering are implicated, just like the philosophers of science described by Neurath as being like sailors on a sinking ship, in the situation they are trying to control.

Within the contexts of the forgoing, complexity theory would thus elicit a change in the conduct, language and mindset of political actors, policy makers and everyday citizens in such a manner that would lead to the premising of the epistemological foundations of political action on non-linearity between cause and effect or action and outcome. The reason being “the unforeseen consequences and emergent properties that emanate from political action, and the undecidable and unknowable nature of the entities we are dealing with due to their dynamism as they engage with a multiplicity of other dynamic variables.”⁴² With this sort of epistemological foundation, failure, which is the main attribute of the

⁴² Adrian Little, op. cit., p. 3

efforts at nation-building in most postcolonial African states today, would be conceived in a less prejudiced or rather non-pejorative manner. It would be understood as the outcome of not only incompetence or lack of dedication (which are the two favoured explanation of linear epistemology of the subject matter) but basically due to the fact that “failure is a highly likely outcome of action given the unknowability and dynamic nature of multiple variables that affect a particular outcome. In other words, not only can we not fully comprehend the variables affecting a particular issue but those variables themselves and the problem we are addressing are in a state of dynamic change.”⁴³ Thus, the error of political calculation may not sufficiently be explained by the limitedness of the knowledge or imaginative capacity of the actors alone, but also by the emergence of a truth that was hitherto unknown.

5. CONCLUDNG REFLECTION

In all, complexity theory provides a more viable epistemological foundation of nation-building as opposed to the linear epistemology that has thus far informed the mindset, action and language of both political actors and everyday citizens in most postcolonial African states struggling with the challenges of nation-building. Complexity theory, most importantly, provides a pedestal upon which a less prejudiced and non-pejorative understanding of the most ubiquitous elements of the experience of nation-building in Africa, namely, error and failure, would be harnessed in a viable way. This is because, instead of seeing failure and error as the outcome of incompetence, lack of commitment or limited aptitude of political actors alone, they would be seen primarily as pivotal dimensions of policy learning because it is through our mistakes that we create new grounds for political action.⁴⁴

In the Nigerian context where the most thorny issue in the efforts at nation building is whether or not the different ethnicities should continue to co-exist, the theory of complexity would basically make clear the fact that the stakes and explanations are higher and beyond the linear explanations, or rather musings, that suggest, on the one hand, that the co-existence of the different ethnicities is an absolute value that cannot be compromised for any reason, or, on the other hand, that it is the most common denominator of the quagmire of the state (Nigeria) and thus, that the only solution would be the total disintegration of the state so that every group can go its way. Little thought would make clear that these linear (and to some extent, very simplistic) epistemic convictions are inadequate because there are many factors that elude, as complexity theory would tell us, the total possibilities of the linear basis of such epistemological approach to nation-building.

REFERENCES

- Ali Mazrui, *Cultural Engineering and nation-building in East Africa*, Illinois, 1972
 Wole Soyinka, *The open sore of a continent*, Oxford, 1996
 See Francis Fukuyama (ed.), *Nation building beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, Baltimore (John Hopkins University Press), 2006

⁴³ Ibid., p. 4

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 4f

- Obafemi Awolowo, Philosophy for an independent Nigeria, A lecture delivered to Nigerian students in London in at Conway Hall on 3rd September 1961
- Toyin Falola, The history of Nigeria, Westport, 1999
- Michael Vickers, A nation betrayed: Nigeria and the minorities commission of 1957, New Jersey, 2009
- Chinua Achebe, The trouble with Nigeria, Enugu, 1983
- Danilo Zolo, Democracy and complexity, Cambridge, 1992
- Adrian Little, Complexity, error, failure: Reconceptualising the epistemological foundations of contemporary liberal democratic politics, A paper presented at the 2009 Australasian annual conference of political studies association (cited with the permission of the author)
- Otto Neurath, Foundations of the social sciences, Chicago, 1944