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**INFLUENCE OF ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND MEDIA NARRATIVES ON  
POWER RELATIONS IN NIGERIA**

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***Abstract***

*This paper interrogates the place of ethnic consciousness in the processes and outcomes of Nigerian politics. The study traces ethnic-motivated narratives and counter-narratives in Nigerian politics to the disagreements on independence among the leaders of the leading ethnic nationalities during the colonial days. Based on the foundations of McCombs and Shaw's Agenda-setting theory, the study examines the place of the media in the promotion of ethnic politics in Nigeria through the manufacture and entrenchment of narratives that promote primitive ethnicity and protect the personal interests of the ethnic leaderships while suppressing the interest of the ethnic masses and the larger nation state. While dwelling on the complex socio-political realities existing in Nigeria, the paper also draws lessons from the experiences of other African countries like Egypt, Libya, Togo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Botswana. Based on the historical patterns of political and media development in Nigeria, the study concludes that ethnic consciousness in Nigerian politics is unlikely to decrease soon due to imbalances in the distribution of political and economic resources in the country. It therefore, recommends a return to true federalism because it could promote healthy competition among the constituent groups like it was during the Nigerian First Republic. It also calls for greater social responsibility from media owners and managers that they should be more positive and less sinister in their promotion of political positions, candidates and ideas.*

***Keywords:*** *Ethnic Consciousness, Nigerian Politics, Media Narratives, Agenda-Setting.*

## Introduction

Ethnicity is a divisive political construct and Nigerian political elites play ethnic cards in their quest to acquire and/or retain political power. The electorates also make electoral choices with ethnic frames irrespective of the competence of the contestants. The ethnic trump cards of the political class are refined and packaged by the mass media.

The Nigerian political space has arguably failed to fulfil its potential. This failure can be partly attributed to the manipulation of the differences among the constituent groups of the Nigerian federation by the political elites of the different segments. The political elites stimulate ethnic consciousness among the masses of each ethnic group. This ethnic consciousness leads to chauvinistic loyalty towards their own ethnic group and resentment of the other ethnic groups. The building of love and hatred for the in-group and out-groups respectively is facilitated by the mass media. Newspapers are effective tools in the setting of political agenda. In Nigeria, the leading newspapers are owned by politicians or their friends and allies. Also the leading newspapers in Nigeria are heavily staffed by people from the ethnic region of their proprietors to the exclusion of people from other regions (Onifade, Jonah, & Sule, 2019). Consequently, they wield their acclaimed power in favour of the ethnic groups of their publishers.

Cohesion and cooperation among the strata of every society is needed for the peace and development of such a societies. It is expected that greater the affinity or fields of experiences of the members of a society would lead to greater cooperation among them. However, selfishness of the political class often leads to the escalation of differences among the composite units of the society.

This paper seeks to trace the history of ethnic consciousness in Nigerian politics. It also attempts to identify the manifestations of ethnic consciousness in Nigerian politics. In addition, it strives to ascertain the use of newspapers in the creation of ethnic narratives on power relations in Nigeria.

## Theoretical Framework

This work is sited upon the foundation of the Agenda-setting theory which was developed in 1972/73 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (Lane, 2001). The theory explains the powerful nature of the media as well as its resultant influence over the media audience. The synopsis of the theory is that

the media possesses “the ability to tell us what issues are important” (University of Twente, 2019).

Findings from studies on the agenda-setting ability of the media “strongly suggest that people think about what they are told but at no level do they think what they are told” (McQuail, 2010, p. 426). There is a “correspondence between the order of importance given in the media to ‘issues’ and the order of significance attached to the same issues by politicians and the public” (McQuail, 2010, p. 427). While it is widely accepted that the media sets the agenda for public discourse, it must be said that the media is only a tool for agenda setting by the political elites who are the real manufacturers of agenda. The agenda projected by the media are often at the prompting of the political elites who exercise direct or indirect control over the media.

In the process of agenda setting, the first visible step to the public is the publication and/or transmission of the agenda (series of important issues) into the public space. The media-defined “important issues” are then discussed by the media users until such a time when the media comes up with new agenda (Onifade, 2015, p. 20). The use of Agenda Setting as a theoretical foundation in political communication can be traced to the concern of Walter Lippmann, an American political commentator. As early as 1922, Walter Lippmann, who was also a newspaper columnist thought deeply about the effects projected by the media on the minds of the public. While Lippmann expressed concern that “the media had the power to present images to the public, McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976” (University of Twente, 2019).

This present effort hinges on these precedents by using the agenda setting theory as a theoretical base for the examination of the ethnic narratives on the dialectics of power relations in Nigeria. The focus is on the use of Nigerian national newspapers as tools and turfs for the ethnic tussle for presidential power by the elder statesmen of the leading ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. This is in view of the expectation of power shift in 2023. The elder statesmen are playing active roles in setting the political agenda for the Nigerian electorates through their interviews to newspaper organizations that are sympathetic to their ethnic causes and agitations.

The Agenda Setting theory takes into cognizance the power of individual differences unlike the Hypodermic Needle Theory which claims that people act as they are programmed to do by the media. The Agenda Setting Theory

says that the media can give the public topics to think about, but it cannot tell the public what exactly to think about the topics. However, the reaction of the public to the topic or agenda given by the each medium would depend on the social experiences of the audience as well as the history and reputation of the media organization that is reporting the information or setting the agenda (Onifade, 2015, pp. 20-21). Consequently, it is expected that the various narratives and discourses used by Nigerian elder-statesmen in their media appearances would generate further discourses among the readers or electorates. The resulting impact of the newspaper messages would therefore be a product of the receptions, perceptions and discourses at different levels rather than a product of the desire and effort of any individual elder-statesman, ethnic champion, reporter or media owner.

Nigerian elder-statesmen are unarguably among the elite class and they play active roles in the determination of political trends and direction. They are often in alliance with political office holders and media owners. All these people constitute the political “insiders”. They use media reporters and editors who are considered “semi-insiders” as channels of communication to the electorates who are “outsiders” in the political chain (Louw, 2005).

The alliance among elder-statesmen, political office holders and media owners gives them the professional leeway and license to determine the topics of public discourse as well as the narratives on them thus making them “symbolic elites”. This elite position provides them with the skills required for the manufacturing of “public knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, values morals and ideologies” (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2013, p. 442).

### **Ethnic Consciousness**

Ethnicity is a construct that unites and divides in equal measure. It is a term that is seen differently by individuals and groups across the world. An ethnic group can be seen as a collection of individuals within a larger society distinguished by “real or accepted common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their people hood” (Schermenhen, 1970). Such symbolic elements include kinship patterns, religious affiliation, nationality, tribal affiliation and dialect forms. It communicates a kind of consciousness “among the members of an ethnic formation: It also relates to the ideology of perception of collectivities as moral communities” (Roy Burman, 1992, p. 33).

This consciousness binds individuals and groups with similar ethnic traits in a geographical space irrespective of their physical proximity to one another. In a broader sense, ethnicity refers to “the dynamic process of interest alliance based on the manifest expression of adaptive strategy for fulfilment of the aspirations of individuals and groups involved in forming interest alliance” (Danda, 1999). This suggests that ethnicity is a product of aspirations and the indicators or parameters of ethnic definition are based on mutual interest and agreement by the leaders of the ethnic movements. Awareness is therefore created on the basis of the collective interest and members are awakened to the peculiarities of the ethnic group.

Ethnicity is a social construct with unstable boundaries. The scope expands and contracts in relation to the interest of those using the expression. This explains the nuances in the definition of ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. It is important to note that the diverse “groups that now refer to themselves as Yoruba and Igbo did not understand the ethnic tag nor refer to themselves with such labels, prior to colonial rule, until they were persuaded and mobilized by politicians to so see and regard themselves as such” (Adeforiti, 2018, p. 214). Although speakers of Ijesha, Egba, Ijebu, and Okun languages are agreeably, collectively called “Yoruba”, individually, they strongly distinguish themselves from the larger group whenever the political realities calls for it. Despite the linguistic similarities with the Yoruba nation, the Okun people of Kogi State widely reject their categorization as part of the Yoruba nation. Similarly, most speakers of the Igbo language generally include people from Ebonyi State in their struggles against the Yoruba and Hausa nations but they exclude Ebonyi indigenes from the spoils of their political struggles. They denigrate them as fake Igbos.

A similar situation plays out in northern Nigeria. The leaders promote the nation of a single north when competing for public opinion against the Yoruba and Igbo nations, but when it is time to share the political gains, they condense the frontiers of ethnic definition and smaller groups like Fulani, Berom, Tiv, Jukuns, Hausa, and Kanuri spring up. This explains the notion that Nigeria is a “multi-ethnic state is made up of different ethnic groups and nations” (Ekanola, 2006). This complex definitions of ethnicity results in the promotion of parochial consciousness and the dearth of national consciousness in the development and implementation of national programmes and policies (Osinubi & Osinubi, 2006).

Ethnicity could also be used to describe “aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive” (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2013, p. 132). A key ingredient in ethnic definition and growth is consciousness among group members (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2013, p. 132). The intra-group relations among members of an ethnic group and their perception of and relations with members of other ethnic groups are shaped by their consciousness of the manufactured socio-political realities around them. Ethnic socio-political realities are complex as they could be real or imagined and simultaneously subjective and objective. Ethnicity is subjective because “it is the product of the human mind and human sentiments. It is a matter of identification or a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group” (Yetman, 1991, p. 2). It is also objective because it hinges on some objective yardsticks which are constructed by societal forces of power relations without recourse to individual desires. Inclusively, ethnicity can be better understood as “the outcome of subjective perceptions based on some objective characteristics such as physical attributes, presumed ancestry, culture, or national origin” (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2013).

Ethnicity is “a cultural interpretation of descent and historical tradition by a group of people, as opposed to others, and expressed in a certain behaviour and cultural style” (Abbink, 1997). Although it is only a part of human social identity, ethnicity is “articulated in situations of conflict such as conquest, incorporation or marginalisation and is often concisely appropriated in a political sense by a collectivity” (Ugbem, 2019, p. 5401).

Ethnicity consciousness exists and thrives in multi-ethnic environments and it is used as a tool of individual and group competition for limited public resources like “contracts, employment, political appointments, scholarship, access to land as well as opportunity for lucrative trade and commerce; it is a political phenomenon as far as it has much to do with the allocation of values” (Egwu, 2007). Ethnic consciousness has been on the increase globally “increase even in the most developed countries of the world” (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2013, p. 128). The growth of ethnic consciousness can be attributed to the fact that “social interactions and conflicts in polyethnic environments can often result in rethinking the role of a person’s ethnicity and the transformation of their ethnic identity” (Zotova, Tarasova, Solodukhina, &

Belousova, 2019, pp. 5-6). As Chakraborty and Ghosh (2013) hypothesised, “education leads to ethnic consciousness of an individual or a group” (P. 128). Ethnic consciousness could be rearticulated for national development. This has been exemplified by the management of inter-ethnic relations in Kazakhstan to reduce conflict and maintain national harmony “despite having a difficult period of independence, which has produced a revival of ethnic consciousness as well as issues such as dual citizenship and the need for a unified state language” (Jakupov, Perlenbetov, L.S Ilimkhanova, & Telebayev, 2012, p. 115). However the success of Kazakhstan in taming ethnic consciousness for the growth of national consciousness has not been replicated across the world.

Davidson (1993) opined that ethnicity is a negative force which is extremely destructive to the inter-sectorial relations in any society. He argued that ethnicity promotes moral decadence and undermines the rule of law in the society. Ethnicity has developed into a powerful instrument of politics and power relations across the world. While ethnicity was arguably about preservation of collective values and heritages in ancient and medieval times, it is largely an instrument of acquisition and preservation of political power in modern times. Although the promotion of goodwill for members of an ethnic group is not inherently bad, mismanagement of ethnic aspirations wrong presentation of ethnic agenda often lead to “interethnic distrust and sometimes animosity rather than regional cohesion and development” (Nyambuga & Onuong’a, 2017, p. 21). Ethnicity is an intrinsic part of politics and political conflicts especially in multi-ethnic societies are greatly influenced by ethnic interests and “their origin can be easily traced to the media where they are played out through deliberate news framing engaged by the various media houses” (Nyambuga & Onuong’a, 2017, p. 25). This shows that the media is instrumental to the fabrication and spread of ethnic consciousness in the society.

### **Ethnic politics in Nigeria**

An ethnic group is a distinct community with a long shared history, cultural traditions, similar ancestry or geographical origin and a common language (Clark, 2006, p. 42). These unifying traits provide the basis for the development, projection and protection of a collective identity for members of the community. The projection and projection of collective identity and

interest of an ethnic group is ethnic politics. Political development in Nigeria has shown that ethnic politics is more harmful than helpful for humanity. For instance, the Nigerian civil war was caused by series of ethnic motivated killings of important government officials and ordinary citizens based on ethnic stereotyping (Adeniji & Ofiwe, 2015, p. 76). 49 years after the war ended, the major ethnic groups are still filled with mutual suspicion for one another and political actions and inactions are interpreted using ethnic frames. The inherent challenges in ethnicity transcends politics to media operations in Nigeria. It is a major challenge that Nigerian media is grappling with at the present (Okpe, 2005). Nigerian newspaper organizations are often staffed with people who share similar ethnic orientations with their publishers (Onifade, Jonah & Sule, 2019). This ultimately leads to ethnic motivated coverage of politics in which reporters report “political events from the perspective of ethnic affiliation. In other words, a Yoruba journalist will report issue from the perspective of a Yoruba person. Same goes for Hausa, Ibo, Tiv, Efik, Ibibio journalists” (Daramola, 2013, p. 39). This supports the finding of Olayiwola (1991) that the ethnic and political affiliation of media owners determine the editorial content and coverage of political parties (p. 43).

The foundations of ethnic politics in Nigeria were laid around the last decade before independence. In the early days of nationalism, all the leading nationalist leaders were based in Lagos. The founding fathers from the North cannot be called nationalists because they did not want total political independence due to fears of political domination by the more educated South. Nnamdi Azikiwe allegedly set the tone for ethnic politics in Nigeria in 1948 during his acceptance speech as president of the Igbo State Union. He was reported to have said that his Igbo ethnic group would one day lead all other ethnic groups in Africa.

In reaction to Nnamdi Azikiwe’s speech, other ethnic groups like the Edo, Ijaw, Yoruba and Hausa rushed to form their own ethnic unions to protect and promote their ethnic interests, thus breaking the cordial relationship that had existed among them up to that point in history (Akinyele, 2003). The cultural group formed by the Yoruba (Egbe Omo Oduduwa) transformed into a political party called the Action Group (AG) and it was led by Obafemi Awolowo who also contributed to the escalation of ethnic politics in Nigeria.



Regional elections were held in 1952 and Nnamdi Azikiwe and his party the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) won more seats than Awolowo's Action Group in the Southwest. Due to fear of ethnic domination, elected Yoruba members of the NCNC were asked to cross carpet to the Action Group. A similar situation played out in the Eastern region where Dr Eyo Ita from a minority ethnic group was removed from office (Daramola, 2013, pp. 41-42).

Etheridge and Handelman observed, that no kind of political division has caused lingering crises in the developing countries like ethnicity has. "Throughout the Third World, people have been drawn into opposing camps based on language, culture, religion, and race with an intensity that frequently exceeds the influence of socioeconomic class" (Etheridge & Handelman, 2014, p. 477). For instance inter-tribal wars have permeated Africa since the end of colonialism. Nigeria, Sudan, Angola, Congo, Liberia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Central African Republic and South Sudan are some of the countries who have either experienced or are currently experiencing civil wars. The vast majority of these wars were either instigated or escalated by ethnic pride.

The prevalence of ethnic tension in Africa and Asia can be attributed to the errors committed by colonialists who "drew national boundaries that threw conflicting ethnic groups into a single country" (Etheridge & Handelman, 2014) without seeking the consent of these ethnic groups. Nations are monolithic in ethnicity or religion are more likely to have peaceful political culture than those that are multi-ethnic.

Ethnicity plays important role in electoral contests. It matters even to the sophisticated societies of the West. The depth of ethnicity in political relations is better appreciated when one examines Israeli politics. Although majority of them are Jewish, they are often divided into Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. Sephardic Jews are descendants of Jews in Spain, Portugal and the Middle East while Ashkenazi Jews are descendants of European returnees. The Sephardic Jews favour conservative parties while the Ashkenazi Jews largely support leftist parties (Etheridge & Handelman, 2014, p. 105).

Ethnic politics "is inspired by the interests of, and intended to benefit, a particular group with a shared identity. It has been a key form of political activism, though one that is much criticized" (Wibben, 2014, p. 85) because it often leads to violence. Ethnic politics gives credence to the argument that "politics is the continuation of war by other means" (Foucault, 2003, p. 48).

Since the amalgamation of divergent ethnic nations to form nation states, they lose their rights to independently wage conventional wars against other ethnic nations within the nation state. This is because the state owns the monopoly of war. To protect the interest of their ethnic nations within the nation state, they engage in political warfare (Foucault, 2003, p. 51).

The practical realities of politics in developing countries reveal that the dividends of democracy rarely trickles down to the local government areas especially those that are populated by ethnic minorities. This is despite the design of the federal constitutions which “mandates that states shall give adequate power to the lower level of governments assuming their role in bringing the central government closer to the people (Mamo, 2017, p. 256). While there is a macro level tussle among the dominant ethnic nationalities for the control of resources and power at the federal level, there are micro struggles among the sub-ethnic groups in regions and states. For instance while the Yoruba nation competes with the Hausa and Igbo nations for relevance in national politics, sub-Yoruba groups in Ogun State engage in micro tussles for the control of power at the gubernatorial level. Electoral contests for the position of the governor has largely been dominated by the dialect of the candidates instead of their abilities to unite the people and facilitate development across the state.

The peoples of Ogun West senatorial district complain of governmental neglect especially in the provision of basic infrastructure. They attribute the deteriorating infrastructure to their inability to produce the governor of the state unlike the other senatorial districts and ethno-linguistic divisions. The replication of the unwritten national policy of “winner takes all” model at the lower levels of government indicates that the dividends of democracy will go to the dominant sub-ethnic groups in each federating unit thereby proliferating needless tension among the constituent groups.

### **Appraisal of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: Lessons from Other African Countries**

African history after independence is replete with struggle for “the control of the political space by ethnic and regional interests. The struggle of virtually all ethnic militias often translates into the struggle for political power (Caleb & Danjuma, 2018, p. 52). The component ethnic nations of most African countries are divided on the sharing of national resources. It is therefore arguable that national identity is virtually non-existent in some African

countries. In Nigeria, ethnicity unites individuals more than the nation state does. This explains why the control of political power is always viewed through political lens.

In addition, it could be safely stated that the contest for power and national resource distribution is an African challenge (Caleb & Danjuma, 2018). The “competition for scarce resources has been the more common bases of ethnic consciousness and tensions. This competition include in areas like land, boundary, natural resources and also for political power and control” (Adeniji & Ofiwe, 2015, p. 95). Politicians in Sub-Saharan Africa have “found out that the only platform on which they can win the votes of the masses or appeal to the interest of the populace is to appeal to communal cries and sentiments rather than universalistic appeal and ideology” (Adeniji & Ofiwe, 2015, p. 95). Governments also manipulate ethnicity for ideological and political purposes. Halabo (2017) affirms that “ethnicity is a useful tool to achieve political motives as it is malleable, and can be manipulated and mobilized from inside, relying on peoples own cultural and knowledge system”(p. 247). The manipulation of ethnicity for political gains holds the potential to create chaos and disrupt the stability and growth of the society. The panacea to ethnic politics is true federalism. True federalism can facilitate sustainable unity, stability and growth “if it is genuinely implemented beyond ideological and political motivation” (Halabo, 2017, p. 247). This would require great decentralization of power.

Batswana are losing trust in their political system and public institutions. This is despite the high rating of Botswana in the global good governance index. Although people with lower levels of education are generally pleased with the governance on offer, highly educated people in the country are more critical of government services (Seabo & Molefe, 2016 and Seabo et al., 2018). The contention is not the ethnic distribution of power but good governance. Nigeria could emulate the political/governance culture permeating Botswana but the first step is to democratize access to quality education for only then can the people understand the plethora of political messages around them. It must be noted that the displeasure expressed by the educated Batswana on governance in their country is not a sign of ingratitude, rather it is an indication that governance can always be better. If we must catch up with the First and Second World countries, then we must be willing to raise the bar of governance on the continent. It is important to note that ethnic politics and good governance are two parallel lines. They do not meet (Oladiran, 2013, p. 703).

There are concerns about the creation of ethnic hegemony in the Nigerian political space. There is a widespread perception that the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group has created a political and cultural hegemonic relationship with the smaller tribes in northern Nigeria. This is evident in the primacy of Hausa language at the detriment of other languages in the region. It is believed that there are covert and overt attempts to spread the hegemony to southern Nigeria. The emergence of a monarchy is also a concern for the ethnic nations that constitute Nigeria. As Yates (2017) puts it, “many monarchies in the world today came out of succession crises in kingdoms which were not at first run on the hereditary principle” (p. 356). Ben Ali Bongo, Fiore Gnassingbe and Joseph Kabila succeeded their fathers in Gabon, Togo and Congo Democratic Republic respectively. Similarly Saif Al Islam Gadhafi and Gama, Mubarak were primed to succeed their fathers in Libya and Egypt before the Arab Spring of 2011 swept their long-serving fathers out of office.

Children of long serving rulers in Equatorial Guinea and Uganda are strategically placed to succeed their fathers in office thus creating pseudo-monarchical governments. Interestingly, the first president of Botswana (Seretse Khama) was a king who renounced his crown and embraced democracy in order to serve his people well. It is therefore not surprising that Botswana is one of the longest running democracies in Africa. Seretse Khama’s son Ian Khama also governed the country years after his father and it is arguable that he rode to the presidency on the back of his late father’s goodwill instead of coercion or sinister media campaign. Nigerian leaders should follow the example of Botswana and not those of Congo Democratic Republic, Gabon and Togo. They must understand that their good deeds could serve as political platforms from which their children can launch successful political careers in future.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The influence of ethnicity on Nigerian politics is unlikely to wane because of the selective distribution of the dividends of power. Political leaders in and out of government have perennially used ethnicity to achieve their political objectives. This use of ethnicity for the acquisition of political power is detrimental to societal stability and development. It therefore becomes imperative to decentralize political power and enshrine true federalism both in theory and practice.

There is also a need for value renaissance. While healthy competition among the ethnic constituents of Nigeria is inevitable, it should not be placed above our humanity and nationalism. Rather than denigrate one another, the ethnic groups should try to outdo one another in positive deeds and the preservation of core African values like kindness, hospitality, honour, fidelity and compassion. Media owners and managers should be more responsible in their

use of the powers inherent in the media. Rather than malign perceived and real opponents, they should use their outlets to promote the strengths and opportunities inherent in their own political camps, candidates and ideas.

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