

People and State: A Genealogy of the Political Constitution of the Nigerian State

Abstract

Recent agitations to restructure the Nigerian state reflect the deep discontent that has defined the political constitution of Nigeria since the 1940s. Extant explanations attribute the absence of an agreeable political constitution to the undemocratic constitution-making process, the lopsided nature of the so-called over-centralized federal system and the failure to constitute the state based on 'true federalism'. Combining the approaches of history and political science, I examine official publications, Hansards, draft constitutions, constitution documents, constitutional conference proceedings and reports, autobiographies, biographies and relevant political writings sourced in archives and libraries to challenge these explanations. The thesis argues that the challenge of evolving an agreeable political constitution derives not merely from the competing political imaginations of the nationalist intelligentsia, military elites and constitution framers but also from the enunciation of political blueprints that uncritically reproduced the colonial regime of ethnic difference and thus foreclosed the prospects for inclusive political community. The study traces the genealogy of the colonial regime of difference to a distortion, one that assumed that the modern colonial state in Nigeria was created out of an assemblage of fixed, discrete pre-colonial ethnic groups and nationalities. I show how this regime of difference was similarly reproduced by nationalists and regionalists in the context of the struggle for independence in the 1940s and 50s, military elites in the 1960s and 70s and by constitution framers in cahoots with the military in the context of the transition to civil rule in the 1970s. Yet despite differences in the blueprints enunciated, the thesis argues that they represented two sides of a coin given their shared commitment to managing the ethnic question. Critiquing these blueprints from the standpoint of decolonization, the thesis maps a lineage of alternative discourse to the colonial regime of difference articulated at different times between the 1940s and 70s. Beginning with Nnamdi Azikiwe's problematization of ethnicity in the 1940s, Aguiyi Ironsi's desire to detribalize political society in the mid-1960s and the Constitution Drafting Committee's attempt to premise national integration on resident-based citizenship in the 1970s. I argue that the decolonial potentials of these ideas were subverted by entanglements with ideas that embodied the colonial logic. Drawing lessons from these proposals for an alternative political constitution, the thesis argues that decolonizing the political should grapple with the challenges of forging inclusive political communities at the triadic levels of the Nigerian federation: beginning by reconceiving localities from domains of tribal privileges to communities of residents united by productive, cooperative, social relations; reconceiving subnational states from domains of ethnic privileges by unleashing their potential as territorial and resident-based communities and rethinking the Nigerian state from a federation of ethnic communities to a federation of territorial units.