

“Us” versus “Them” Ethnic Identity Construction in Nigerian Political Discourse

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Abstract

This work interrogates observed exclusionist political discourses that tend to assign ethnic identities of “Us”/“Them” to mark Nigerian citizens in linguistically- and socially-constructed categories. Taking ethnicity as a sociolinguistic variable, the work specifically focuses on identified linguistic strategies and social motivations that arguably explain ethnic identity construction along lines of selective alignments and exclusion. Adopting van Dijk’s ideological square, Ukiwo’s social tendencies of ethnic identity construction and Reisigl and Wodak’s linguistic strategies for sustaining ethnic and racial othering, this paper analyses purposively sampled textual representations from online and print media texts. Qualitative analyses show exaggerated and contrived divisive social constructions for instrumental and spurious gains in the utterances of the political elite and ethnic stakeholders in Nigeria. The paper concludes that national rather than nepotistic considerations should drive the utterances of the power elite and apex ethnic leadership in working out synergistic avenues of harmonious interethnic understanding.

Keywords: Us/Them, ethnic identity construction, interethnic relations, political discourse, critical discourse analysis, ideological square, power elite, linguistic strategies,

1. Introduction

Language plays important role in constructing experiences and identities as well as enabling humans to transact and interact with one another to enact group and intergroup relationships. In performing this complex function, language is seen, not as transparent and neutral means of communication, but as largely skewed to protect certain interests. Montgomery (1995, p. 228) describes this relativist view of linguistic representation as “interested”; as constructed to suit certain ideological positions, a powerful conduit for language users’ stance to the unfolding discourse with respect to the alignments and positions they take up in relation to self and others. The tendency is for speakers to project self above others, to construct intergroup identities along lines of “Us” and “Them”.

Cap (2006) has referred to what he calls the IDCs (Inside the Deictic Centre) social actors (Us) who see the ODCs (Outside the Deictic Centre) agents (Them) as aliens constituting a threat and imminent danger to the secure territory of the IDCs. He was referring to the American-Iraqi war as an aftermath of nine-eleven attacks on American World Trade Centre, and how America legitimizes war with Iraq as an interventionist imperative to imminent terror which Iraq represents. In the same vein, Rahimi and Sahragard (2006) discuss how social actors tend to euphemise their negative attributes while casting those of others in derogatory epithets.

In their collection of essays, Thomas and Wareing (2000) listed a number of sociolinguistic variables – culture, social class, gender, age, ethnicity, politics, race and others – that consign and categorize individuals to certain identities that tend to determine how ingroup members frame themselves in relation to the outgroup. Van Dijk (1993) specifically refers to racism and ethnicity as “elite discourses”, the elite being the controller of the means of communication and information dissemination via mass-mediated texts, and so have the power to dominate discourse and knowledge production at the detriment of the less-privileged groups.

In this paper, ethnicity as a sociolinguistic variable as well as an elite discourse is implicated as being at the crux of most of Nigeria’s ills especially the recent political dissensions and so deserves serious scholarly attention. This work aims to interrogate the various factors that intersect to aggravate ethnic alignments and exclusion in Nigeria, especially since 2015 when ethnicity became more prominent in the nation’s political discourse. The questions the paper sets out to address are: what linguistic strategies emphasize Us versus Them ethnic identities in the selected media texts targeted for this study? What social tendencies motivate this divisive ethnic identity construction? Which political actors are implicated in these nepotistic choices? How have these choices enhanced or marred cohesion of ethnic ingroups and outgroups? What power structures are evident in these choices, and finally, how can these exclusionist discourses be deconstructed for more harmonious inter-ethnic relations?

Answers to these questions become even more pertinent with the obvious fact that the extreme borderline of these ethnic divisive tendencies in all human societies is conflict. Having witnessed violent conflicts in Nigeria at various periods of her history, which still persists to date, it becomes imperative for researchers and discourse analysts to scrutinize the root causes of such vituperations. This work will therefore contribute to existing knowledge on how ethnicity contributes to identity construction and how discourses can be de-ethnicised to create a better Nigerian nation.

2. Conceptual review

2.1. Ethnicity

The word *ethnicity* derives from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning “nation” (Singh, 2000, p. 83). In defining a nation as a community with a common history, culture, tradition and language, Singh calls to mind the popular reference to over five hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria as “ethnic nationalities”, with a multiplicity of ethnic languages over and above that number (Blench and Dendo, 2003). Little wonder then that every Nigerian is first and foremost a citizen of his/her ethnic group before being a Nigerian. One does not need to search hard to confirm this claim which is easily verifiable in admission forms, appointment application forms and any form for allocation of citizenship rights. Questions like “state of origin”, “from what catchment area?” what is the quota for that area?”, “does the appointment reflect federal character?” and others such as whether one is an indigene or non-indigene of a particular state or ethnic group are all part of ethnically-motivated divisive discourses.

As earlier mentioned, Van Dijk (1993) has linked ethnicity with racism and xenophobia in connection with the ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees in North America and Europe. According to him, these concepts are socially constructed and legitimized in text and talk by the power elite (just like gender, social class etc) along lines of dominance, exaggeration of intergroup differences (essentialism) and minimization of ingroup variation. Ethnicity and its twin concept, racism, is seen as a system of group dominance based on cultural criteria of categorization, differentiation and exclusion on the bases of physical appearance (tribal marks), language, religion, customs and worldviews, what has been referred to as “Othering through dominance” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 15). Van Dijk argues that motivations for ethnic prejudice is “prepared” by the elites – a top-down relationship since the elite largely define and constrain the major life chances of minority people especially in and through education, employment, economic affairs, social affairs, promotion of individual and group potentials through the media and culture. Van Dijk (1993, pp. 10-11) writes:

Since the elites dominate the means of symbolic reproduction, they also control the communicative conditions in the formation of the popular mind and hence ethnic consensus ... Such elite-controlled discourse and communication may provide the format for the interpretation framework that defines the ethnic consensus about intergroup conflict ... The developing child is soon confronted by more sophisticated forms of discourse about Other people, for instance, in children’s stories, television programmes, lessons and textbooks (and we might add, the social media).

2.2. “Us” versus “Them” identity construction

The first person plural pronoun “we” and its variant “us” in subject and object slots respectively, when contrasted with “they/them” third person pair in similar slots, may appear to have the most innocuous interpretation of “the speaker plus others” and “others minus the speaker” respectively. Van Dijk (2011, p. 397) refers to these lexical items as “ideological pronouns” that have strong implications in text interpretation. As types of reference items that track their antecedents/referents either forward or backward in text or extra-text, these pronouns have been extensively studied in critical discourse analytic studies – one of the theoretical underpinnings of this paper. They have been associated with diverse semantic and ideological connotations such as “self and others” (Fairclough, 1995), “we-dom and they-dom” (Watson and Hill, 2006), ingroups and outgroups (Hewstone and Giles, 1997), positive self and negative other presentation (van Dijk, 2001, 2011), euphemization and derogation (Rahimi and Sahragard, 2006), Self-glorification and Other-derogation (Ezeifeke, 2012) among others. This projection of self over others calls to mind a Hausa chant by schoolchildren jubilating over a win in a competition while casting aspersion on their opponents:

Mun chi su – We’ve won them
A bamu kofu - Give us cup (trophy)
A basu gongoni da kwalikwata - Give them a can of worms/scabies

In social interaction, individual and group identities are enacted and negotiated. According to De Fina (2011, pp. 263-265), “we use language to convey images of ourselves ... to identify others, to classify and judge people, to align ourselves with them, signaling our similarities, or to distance ourselves from them, underlining our differences”. De Fina’s view also is that identity is a social construction and in line with Butler’s (1990) anti-essentialist view of gender, identity is not what one has or possesses, rather what one does or is able to do at a given time.

It is thus what exists independent of the self but comes into being through exchanges and interaction with others. In the light of this assertion, identity is subject to manipulation by the power elite, who may construct and deconstruct various identities to suit various hidden agenda. The various motivations for ethnic identity construction are discussed in the next section.

2.3. Motivations and tendencies for ethnic identity construction

Ukiwo (2006) sees ethnicity as a dominant theme in Nigeria's politics because of the high level of ethnic consciousness in the country. Confirming ethnicity as a social construction, essentialist, politically motivated and susceptible to manipulation, Ukiwo identified four variables, tendencies or explanatory frameworks for constructing ethnic identities: primordialism, constructivism, instrumentalism and institutionalism. Primordial tendencies construe ethnic ties in kinship terms, traceable to a common ancestry, with the common belief that their identities are ancient if not God-given. This view is also held by Bonfiglio (2007, p. 620), who calls it "racializing discourse", thus confirming the two variables – ethnicity and racism – as having the same segregating potential. Groups that subscribe to this primordial view tend to construe their identities as essentially different (and superior) to others who are not so privileged to come from the same progeny. This tendency may explain why some ethnic groups in Nigeria claim they are "born to rule", the word "born" implying that, coming from blue blood ancestry, by right of origin and descent, theirs is the prerogative to hold for life the apex political leadership. The Igbo ethnic group equally traces their roots to the Hebrew/Israeli ancestry, claiming that their industrious and resilient natures, including other cultural and ritual performances, support this filial link. The same can be said of the Yoruba ethnic group that traces their lineage to a common ancestor, Oduduwa just like the Hausa and other ethnic groups may have their myth of origin.

One important factor that may support common ethnic ancestry is language. Fishman (1997, pp. 332-333) which supports the primordial tendency, asserts that ethnically associated language is often perceived in kinship terms; "the language used by our ancestors and bequeathed to us, their descendants... Indeed, language is, in a sense, the primordial home, the ever present home for those who may have no other that they can call their own". Fishman further reports of an admonition by a Bengali advocate to another; "Go back, go back, you fool, go back to your home" – meaning "speak your ethnic language and not a foreign one", for according to him, "(t)he language is the people rendered audible ... the index of our nationality and the distinctive individuality...". The fact that Nigeria cannot boast of a common ancestral language may be one of the remote causes of fragmentation and divisions but this assertion is outside the scope of the arguments presented in this paper.

The constructivist explanation, according to Ukiwo (2006), is actually a deconstruction of the primordial framework. This tendency puts a query on the myth of common origin of ethnic groups, and describes ethnic identity using terms such as "construction", "invention" and "imagination", traceable to the activities of such social forces as colonial authorities, politicians, religious bodies, and emergent nationalists. This framework presupposes that, as ethnic identities mutate and varying interests crop up among hitherto seemingly homogenous ethnic nationalities, the boundaries may be reconstructed to bring forth new ethnicities with redefined identities. Fishman (1997) regards ethnicity as fundamentally subjective, variable and very possibly non-consensual. In this vein, we reiterate the multitude of ethnic groups in Nigeria, over five hundred (Blench and Dendo, 2003) with more still emerging especially in the new dispensation of endemic ethnic violence; groups with identical interest are making efforts to come together in the pursuit of common political and social gains. A typical example in Nigeria is the diverse ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt coming together under one umbrella to pursue common political interests.

The next tendency that determines ethnic affiliation is instrumentality, an extension of the constructivist view. According to Ukiwo (2006), ethnicity is usually conceptualized as a form of consciousness (usually false) which ambitious social forces promote for their group interests. Political actors may, for instance, hide under some pretentious, ostensibly common interest to achieve ethnic identity mobilization which may serve spurious ends. It is clear that some ethnic group in Nigeria, out of political gains or losses, are seeking to realign with or detach from their former affiliations owing to changing inherent benefits and/or disadvantages of such alliance.

The last but not the least of ethnic identity mobilization is institutionalism – a tendency that focuses on the critical role of political institutions and pragmatic policies in the definition of ethnic relations. Once these emerging identities become recognized in official circles, they earn legitimacy and sustainability. The need to demystify such social constructions of the power elite is within the ambit of critical discourse analysis, which we shall discuss in the next section

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Critical discourse analysis

As mentioned earlier, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) paradigm on which this work hinges on, is aimed primarily at deconstructing power structures and repressive language use hidden in textual representations. In CDA, the actions and utterances of the power elite are put on the spot, so to say, and scrutinized for underlying dominant ideologies and repressions. It usually takes the perspectives of those who suffer oppression, marginalization, underrepresentation, propaganda, segregation and exclusion. It thus takes political stance explicitly, on the side of the disadvantaged groups and regards texts as “sites of struggle, sites where contending discourses struggle with one another for dominance” (Wodak, 2001a, p. 6). Wardhaugh (2006: 10) regards CDA as “linguistics with a conscience and a cause” and Mey (2001, p. 310) calls it “emancipatory linguistics” with an interventionist stance, while van Dijk sees it as neither a framework nor a method, but “a perspective of doing scholarship” that interrogates dominant elite discourses (2001, p. 96).

Other scholars that have written on CDA focus on the different facets of the theory, such as Fairclough’s (1995, p. 10) “orders of discourse”, Wodak’s (2001b) anti-Semitic discourse and discourse-historical approach, van Dijk’s (2001) socio-cognitive approach to CDA, and elite discourses and racism (1993). However, this work borrows from van Dijk’s (2011, pp. 396-397) “ideological square”: emphasize Our good, emphasize Their bad; deemphasize Our bad, deemphasize Their good. Van Dijk summarized these four facets of his theory in one phrase: positive Self and negative Other presentation. It has been argued that this rhetoric pervades most if not all text and talk about racial and ethnic others and so comes in handy in the present study.

3.2. Linguistic strategies for ethnic identity construction

The work also derives its theoretical underpinnings from Reisigl and Wodak (2001, p. 44, in Jiwani and Richardson, 2011, p. 243) analysis of racist and ethnic discourses. These scholars bring up the various linguistic strategies that may be looked out for in interrogating such discourses. These include: referential strategies – how people are named and referred to semiotically; predicational strategies – how these people are described; what qualities or characteristics are attributed to them; argumentation strategies – what arguments (explicit and/or implicit) are used to support these characteristics, and/or justify exploitation and discrimination against others; perspectivization strategies – from whose perspective such naming, descriptions and arguments are expressed; and finally, intensification/mitigation strategies - are these utterances stated explicitly or implicitly? Are they intensified or mitigated?

These linguistic strategies will be applied to our data to determine how they emphasize the ideological ethnic Us versus Them. Since this work has both linguistic and social facets, the social aspects of the analysis represented here by Ukiwo’s tendencies or motivations for ethnic identity construction (discussed above) are also integrated in the theoretical framework that drive the analysis.

4. Methodology

The work adopts a qualitative approach to the analysis of textual and participant observation data. Textual data were drawn from both print and online sources. Since the work is not doing any comparative analysis of the ideological stance of the media in the reports, the most accessible news material becomes the most plausible rationale for the choice of textual data. The data target utterances of apex ethnic leadership and holders of public office from the five apparently “major” ethnic complexes, namely: the North, South West, South East, South South and Middle Belt. A total of fifteen (15) texts were selected and numbered for analysis. Topics of the texts have been selected in consideration of the major issues of general concern in the present political dispensation such as the prevailing insecurity especially the herdsmen recent menace, restructuring and other ethnic-motivated discourses.

Participant observation data are the result of the researcher’s privileged position as a citizen of Nigeria and having mingled with fellow Nigerians since childhood. Data from this source is mainly on the pejorative labels emanating from interethnic prejudice which allude to the different ethnic groups internalized from childhood. Analyses of data follow the five strategies enunciated in Reisigl and Wodak mentioned earlier – referential, predication, argumentation, perspectivization and intensification/mitigation. Ukiwo’s four motivations for ethnic alignments and exclusion also guide the discussion.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Referential Strategies - Labelling

From participant observation data, the first overt presence of ethnic identity conflict is the pervasive name-calling of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Labels such as *nyamiri*, (give me water), *okoro* (young energetic man) *ajeokuta ma omi* (eat stone without water) (for labelling Igbos), *awusa* (sit with no worries) *aboki* (friend) (for Hausas); *ofe mmanu* (oily soup), *ngbati* (when/at the time) (for Yorubas), *mu nchi* (I have eaten (it)) (for Tivs) and *mmono* (no exact meaning) (for Efiks) are replete in the reference to the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Tiv and Efik respectively.

These labels thus acquire pejorative connotations in spite of their being completely harmless words in their original meanings and seem to sustain the referential strategy for ethnic exclusionist agenda. Negative stereotyping and prejudicial statements may be part of this labeling strategy, as in for instance, the rhetoric that every Hausa-Fulani is lazy, every Igbo is an Evans (kidnapper) or every Yoruba person cannot be trusted. These stereotypic references offend the sensibilities of the ethnic groups involved and breed mutual distrust.

Furthermore, labels such as “indigenes” versus “non-indigenes”, “settlers” versus “migrants”, or “catchment area” for some citizens in matters of school admission, employment opportunities, political appointments and other national benefits call for concern. This is in spite of one wielding a certificate of Nigerian citizenship. It is obvious that primordial tendencies inform these selective labels. The following text illustrates this assertion.

Text 1: Headline: Obey Nigerian Constitution: Remove your Hausa-Fulani brothers as security chiefs – HURIWA tells Buhari. (Dailypost.ng, Friday, 26 Jan 2018)

The word “brother” confirms Ukiwo’s primordial criteria for ethnic alignment and exclusion and may have served as a motivation for nepotism being alluded to in the appointment of security chiefs which HURIWA (Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria) regards as “fulanization” of national security, the group insisting that “the lopsided domination of the security forces by the Hausa-Fulani ethnicity was a breach of the extant provision” (of the Constitution).

Text 2: Proscription Saga: IPOB loses in court, Ohanaeze kicks (DailySun Friday, January 19, 2018: 11) South East News by Chidi Nnadi Enugu and Godwin Tsa Abuja

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) yesterday failed to reverse the order of the Federal High Court, proscribing it and designating it as a terrorist organization... President General of *Ohanaeze*, Chief Nnia Nwodo, condemned it as nepotism aimed at ... stigmatization of our children” Nwodo said.

Again in the above text, the use of the phrase “our children” point to the appropriation of kinship ties in constructing ethnic identity, just as the word “nepotism” connotes inclusion in the “mainstream” ethnic group based on blood ties and exclusion where the opposite is the case.

The next illustration (Text 3) reflect the tremendous proliferation of ethnically motivated groups and further shows how fragmented Nigeria has become in the bid to form bonds for stemming looming insecurity, and which, going by the many hues and cries about restructuring and self-determination, seemed to fan ethnic exclusionism.

Text 3: Headline: Lawyer sues FG, seek right for self-determination (punchng.com/...) 15/2/18

A lawyer Chief Malcom Omirhobo has sued the Federal Government, urging he court to hold that there is no law stopping citizens from any part of the country from seeking self-determination if they so want.... Omirhobo filed the lawsuit on behalf of himself, 373 ethnic nationalities and 45 pressure groups agitating for self-determination in the country...

Note the “373 ethnic nationalities and 45 pressure groups” to get the real picture of the fragmentation of Nigeria. It supports the constructivist and instrumental motivations for ethnic identity affiliations. These are obviously newly-formed ethnic alignments with ad hoc identities that mark them out as “different” from others, but are now coming together for a common goal, that of making a case for the right to self-determination. This work argues that this proliferation of ethnic identities and nomenclatures portend ill for a country clamoring for a non-negotiable unity. Whatever is at the root of these splits is of tremendous importance to the country and should be tackled head-on.

Another instrumentally motivated ethnic identity construction is the highly publicized “Handshake across the Niger” summit where many “ethnic nationalities” came together to agitate for restructuring of the country. The headline reads:

Text 4: Handshake Across the Niger Summit: South East, South South dare Buhari

Team up with South West, North Central to insist on restructuring, demand action against herdsmen (DailySun, Friday, January 12 2018: 1, 12 by Chidi Nnadi)

These geopolitical zones are forming the above alliance out of an emergent need to forge a united front to press for issues that are of common interest to them. It is obvious that those excluded in this “handshake” are pursuing a different interest as the following text illustrates.

Text 5: Headline: Forget Atiku, North will resist restructuring of Nigeria – Ango Abdullahi (SaturdaySun, March 17, 2018: 42-43,45)

The leader of the Northern Elders Forum (NEF), Prof Ango Abdullahi has declared that the region will resist any attempt to restructure the country...He concludes: “we have all personalized restructuring with a view to targeting a section of the country and this is the area that we feel very sensitive about and we will resist it. Even if we don’t resist it objectively, we will resist it politically”

5.2. Predication Strategies

The next strategy of ingroup/outgroup construction of ethnic identity is predication strategies – defined by Reisigl and Wodak (2001: 54; in Jiwani & Richardson, 2011: 244) as the very basic process and result of linguistically assigning qualities to persons, animals, objects, events or social phenomenon. “Sometimes such predication is achieved through reference to a ‘space’ (political, cultural, social, mental, physical or metaphorical) rhetorically made separate from ‘our own space’ thereby placing a (negative) social value on the (constructed) space, and by extension, its occupants”.

The linguistic predications for the sources of insecurity in the texts that follow vary based on the ethnic affiliations of the stakeholders. Whereas in Text 6, the source of danger is “herdsmen”, in Text 7, it is “cattle rustlers”.

Text 6: Front Page Headline: Benue: Goodnight as herdsmen’s victims are buried in mass graves (DailySun, Friday February 3, 2018: 9) by Juliana Taiwo Obalonye, Abuja, Rose Ejembi, Makurdi; Gyang Bere, Jos and Fred Ezeh Abuja)

People from all walks of life and across political and age divide were yesterday united in their grief as remains of the 73 persons killed by herdsmen on January 1 (2018) were given mass burial in Makurdi in Benue state... Governor Ortom described the victims as fallen heroes...

In the above report, the victims of the herdsmen killings are 73 people and here the killers are referred to as “Fulani terrorists” by the people whose brothers and sisters suffered this dastardly brutality. On the other hand, in Text 7, the Fulani herdsmen are calling on the government to protect their cows from “cattle rustlers” as the next text will illustrate.

Text 7: Headline: Cattle rustlers kill 73 cows; injure 18 in Nasarawa. Naija News by Ibukun Josephine Bankole, January 29, 2018)

This news report, obviously as a counter to the accusations of the killing of 73 Benue indigenes, refers to their own source of insecurity as “cattle rustlers” and “kidnappers”. It is evident from the foregoing that the state of the nation regarding ethnic rancor may have degenerated in the total loss of our humanity making fellow Nigerians equate the life of cows with humans. The following texts also give credence to the priority given to cows over human lives while the enormous security threat of the country is relegated to the background.

Text 8: Headline: Army to begin Operation Python Dance III, others soon, says Buratai (The Guardian, February 3, 2018 by Segun Olaniyi).

The Chief of Army Staff (COAS) ... has declared that the Nigerian army would soon deployed (sic) its personnel to the various parts of the country to contain ongoing security threats in the country. He said the troops would be deployed under Special Forces such as Operation Python Dance III in the South East, Operation Crocodile Smile III in the Niger Delta and South West, and Harbin Kunama III in the North to contend (sic) cattle rustling in that part of the country... Of interest here is the foregrounding of “cattle rustling” as the major objective of the Northern operation while those in the South are vaguely captured in the phrase “ongoing security threats” making one wonder at the implication of these Southern operations.

5.3. Argumentation Strategies

Argumentation strategies or what has been described as “topoi” (Jiwani and Richardson. 2011: 244) is another dimension to the taking apart of ethnically motivated discourse, a strategy for justifying actions of the power elite and stakeholders in constructing ethnic Self and Other. The term *topoi*, according to these authors, are defined as “content-related warrants or conclusion rules which connect the argument(s) to the conclusion”. They involve common place rhetoric or premise and subsequent disclaimers regarding people and events which provide a kind of reasoning step to certain predetermined conclusions used, in most cases, to justify how these people and events are constructed. The following textual data contain interesting illustrations of this strategy of constructing ethnic self and others.

Text 9a : Headline: Fulani values cows more than their own lives – Honourable Aishatu Duku (Worldwide TV, www.oak.v)

“I don’t know why we Nigerians we have become so edgy now; maybe because of the food we eat; we eat too much Maggi (spice). We have become so impatient that we don’t want to listen to each other. We don’t want to proffer solutions that will be workable for the country. Mr Speaker, when I sit here, my colleague is saying ...the...the... that the herdsman values his cows more than the lives he is killing, but that is not true. You can’t just sit there and make conclusions. Yes, the herdsman values even his cows more than his own life! That’s how God created him!”

The above argument presented on the floor of the Red Chamber is as “ad hoc” (Trail, 2004: 8) as it is denigrating, dehumanizing, insensitive and unfortunate. It shows how ethnic self-interests can blind people to the human side of their natures. Furthermore, coming from a woman, it means that Nigeria is losing grip as a nation; a woman, a mother, the rallying point of humanity, talking about human life in such unfeeling tones portends grave danger for humanity. The deserving rejoinder by another male member of the apex legislative chamber in a charged tone did very little to dissipate the tension and psychological trauma of the affected people.

Text 9b “No cow, not even ten billion cows is (sic) up to or has (sic) enough value than a human being or not up to one human life. So when you say that the herdsman values his cow more than human life, I find that insulting and demeaning!!!”

Another argument is one put up by the chairman of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF).

Text 10: Headline: Nigeria can’t survive without the North, says ACF – Ohanaeze, Afenifere, SS, M’Belt groups react (DailySun, Wednesday March 21 2018: 6 by Sola Ojo, Kaduna and Chinelo Obogo Lagos, Femi Folaranmi, Yenogoa)

This assertion of superiority over others is worrisome, and when taken alongside the one in the following text where a professor of history from one ethnic group claims that they “own” another “by conquest”, and are “destined to rule Nigeria”, it becomes increasingly illusive to hope for a united Nigeria.

Text 11: Headline: Afenifere, Ohanaeze, IYC, others knock Labdo over pro-Fulani Comments (Opera mini February 24, 2018 by Jesusegun Alagbe, Tunde Ajaja and Ted Odogwu)

Some socio-cultural groups across the country have reacted to comments by a Fulani professor ... that the Fulani brought literacy to the country and that Plateau and Taraba States belonged to the Fulani by right of conquest...

5.4. Perspectivization Strategies

Perspectivization implies the way speakers express, or conceal their involvement in the unfolding discourse so as to present their alignments and stance in the description, narration or quotation of relevant events or utterances. Here, this strategy is seen as the mainstreaming of ethnic identity discourse by the ruling power elite to reflect their own perspectives to a particular issue. In the following text, the perspectives of the power elite are masked under selective declaration of terrorist groups.

Text 12: Headline: Fulani herdsmen are criminals, not terrorists like IPOB – FG (Vanguard News September, 21, 2017, by Anthony Ogbonna)

When the power elite constructs mainstream discourse, it becomes the “order of discourse” (Fairclough, 1995), the consensus for identification and signification, a given. Even when international bodies like the Global Terrorist Index has ranked Fulani herdsmen as the fourth deadliest terrorist organization in the world, their activities are justified by the power elite in Nigeria, as the following text illustrates.

Text 13: Headline: Fulani herdsmen need help, not all are criminals – Gov Bagudu (DailySun, 16 January, 2018 by Olanrewaju Lawal, Birnin Kebbi)

Governor Abubakar Atiku Bagudu of Kebbi state, on Thursday, has said that Fulani herdsmen needed help to change their old lifestyle and pastoral practices which they have been practicing (sic) for centuries

The “help” being alluded to may be the quashed “cattle colony” which the federal government planned to implement in all the states of the federation.

Text 14: Headline: No going back on cattle colonies – FG. (SaturdaySun, January 27, 2018: 11, 47, 48.

In spite of the disclaimer in the body of this report that *the Federal Government would not force any state government to provide land for the project...*, the perspective of the power elite is that “the Federal Government proposal to set up cattle colonies and the encouragement of ranches remained *the best option to the killings and toxic hatred the current altercation had generated; ... the wanton loss of lives was not acceptable.*

5.5. Intensification/mitigation strategies

Intensification/mitigation strategies are seen in the use of such disclaimers as seen in Texts 9a and 14. In Text 9a, such expressions “but that’s not true (that the Fulani herdsmen loves his cow more that human life) goes ahead to assert what was disclaimed. Text 14 disclaims the use of force to establish cattle colonies. Such disclaimers are said to mitigate the force of certain assertions, concealing the raw side of the argument.

5.6. Deconstructing the ethnic divide

From the analyses and discussions, it seems that nepotistic tendencies underlie inequality and inequities in Nigerian interethnic relations and the only hope for Nigerian unity lies in the deconstruction of the ethnic divide since countries where ethnicity and racism have paled into insignificance seem to forge ahead as a united nation.

Take America for illustration, where every citizen of different races work together to achieve the American dream. It may be argued that such countries had these teething problems in the course of their history, but they have worked out means to tackle them to a level where they do not impede national and patriotic consciousness. Nigeria can borrow a leaf from such countries.

Since every relationship is a negotiation of common ground, a ray of hope seems to emanate from the coalition of youth groups across all the major ethnic groups Nigeria. In all the textual data sampled for this study, few had recorded any meeting point for all the ethnic groups among the elder politicians, as the following text anticipates. These youth groups seem to bring relief to the battered Nigerian body politics that there may be a meeting point for stakeholders to discuss as Nigerians rather than as ethnic groups.

Text 15: Headline: Arewa, Igbo, Ijaw, Yoruba youths meet, vow to mobilize... (Dailypost.ng 27 March 2018 by John Owen Nwachukwu)

In addition to the above synergy promised by the youth, every Nigerian especially the elder politicians should be aware of the precarious state of Nigerian unity and equally synergize for the survival of the only nation Nigerians can call theirs which will enable them stand out as a sovereign state in the comity of nations.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The work has discussed the various linguistic strategies and social motivations of ethnic identity construction in Nigeria. Our findings have shown that these ethnic identities are constructed, artificial, contrived to achieve spurious ends and can be manipulated by the power elite with changing situations and changing political interests for instrumental purposes. Awareness is thus created in this paper that rather than ethnic divisions bring Nigeria the much desired unity, Nigeria will continue derailing along nepotism, primordialism, segregation and exclusion.

In view of the diverse ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, and bearing in mind that language can make or mar relationships, Nigerians, especially those in positions of leadership, should eschew language use that offend the sensibilities of the other ethnic groups. The so-called “hate speech” and “hate song”, a hitherto unknown phenomena in Nigeria, should be deemphasized, not by punitive measures as the government intends to enforce, but by appealing to the consciences of Nigerians of the debilitating effects of such utterances. It is believed that these issues will not arise when the people feel a sense of belonging in the Nigerian state, a situation that has seemed to elude it since independence, orchestrated by the so-called “majority” ethnic groups. Utterances and actions that edify our collective humanity as a nation should be the watchword of all Nigerian citizens. We should be able to drop the acid in our mouths and hearts and use words that not only bring out the nationalists in us but also suppress the ethnicity in us. What should predominate our utterances should not be the ethnic “Us” that denigrate, inferiorize, discriminate and demean, but a national “Us” that edify, extol and build self confidence in every Nigerian citizen for maximal harnessing of the vast human potential, so that we can collectively subvert and withstand external adversaries, the real “Them” who continuously conspire to supervise and umpire our self-inflicted divisions, hindering sustainable development since Nigeria came together as a sovereign state.

However, since one cannot completely deny one’s ethnic affiliations where every individual citizen feel a sense of origin and identity, the baseline will be to try some of the alternatives that have been suggested by some prominent Nigerian citizens at home and in the diaspora especially the issue of restructuring. Since Nigerians have not been able to stay together for the past over fifty years of her independence, restructuring along geopolitical zones, which also allows ethnic complexes with common cultural bond to form federating units may be a contingency plan for the country. Whatever solutions are arrived at, the watchword should be peace, justice, fair play and sincerity of purpose by both the leaders and the subjects that will drive sustainable development. This will enable this generation of Nigerians leave a country which posterity will be proud to call “Our own”.

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