
ECHOES OF DIVISION: TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND ETHNIC MOBILIZATION IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

This paper examines the persistent role of ethnicity in shaping Nigerias electoral behavior, with a focus on the 2023 presidential election. It contends that the historical amalgamation of over 249 ethnically distinct groups into a single political entity in 1914 laid the groundwork for a deeply fragmented national consciousness. Drawing upon theories of social identity, unconscious affect, fascist authoritarianism, and transgenerational transmission, the study explores how ethnic affiliations—rather than civic nationalism—continue to influence voter behaviour, elite mobilization, and intergroup dynamics. Using empirical evidence from electoral outcomes and psychological interpretations of ethnic sentiment, it demonstrates that ethnicity functions not merely as a cultural identity but as an emotionally charged mechanism that fuels political polarization and undermines national integration. The paper argues that this ethnicization of political life erodes the prospects for democratic consolidation by reinforcing in-group favoritism, exclusionary practices, and a zero-sum struggle for power among Nigerias three dominant

ethnic blocs. By integrating psychoanalytic and sociopolitical frameworks, the study offers a multidimensional understanding of how affective memory, symbolic displacement, and ethnic pride inform Nigerias electoral psychology and socio-political discourse.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Elections, National integration, Social identity theory, Transgenerational transmission.

Introduction

Election is a democratic exercise of selecting a leader through a voting system (Isiaq et al., 2018). However, the election outcome is hugely reliant on various factors. Studies have shown that ethnicity is a key factor that can shape voters choice of a political candidate and a candidates ability to manipulate electorates during an election time (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyawo, 2024; Salisu et al., 2024). Ethnicity is viewed as shared ancestry, culture and language that bestows individuals a marked social identity (Macionis & Plummer, 2005, as cited in Ojo & Sadeeq, 2023).

What was hastily merged in 1914 into a politically organised unit, afterwards known as Nigeria was an aggregation of over 249 ethnic groups disintegrated based on culture and language (Ojo & Sadeeq, 2023). This is because each ethnic group has specific norms and values that make it distinct from another and none is willing to negotiate its identity for others interest (Salisu, et. al., 2024). Naturally, humans tend to single out and associate with their ethnicity ahead of nationality (Ojo & Sadeeq, 2023). Ethnicity thus becomes formidable in framing Nigerias social and political discourses. When not properly managed, ethnicity leads to dispute, agitation and suspicion, especially among the three main ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) which grapple for significant resources in their society (Iyanga, 2018).

Ethnicity can therefore affect Nigerias progress towards democratization as voters tend to favour candidates from their ethnic descent rather than merit, character and competence (Salisu et al., 2024). Political candidates also take advantage of ethnic attachment to

garner support by appealing to shared ancestry, culture, historical narratives, language and interests (Akinola, 2018; Omotola, 2020) which aligns with Adorno's analysis of fascism and Volkans transgenerational transmission of past events. According to Glynn and Stavrakakis (2008), and Thompson and Hoggett (2012), the emotions of individuals are ingrained in historical and social discourse (such as those related to ethnic identities) and they often carry with them elements of conflict that are framed by the unconscious affective forces.

This ethnic sentiment was evident in the 2023 Nigeria presidential election which had three major political candidates — Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC) who hailed from the Southwest region and Yoruba by ethnicity; Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) who hailed from Southeast region and Igbo by ethnicity; Atiku Abubakar of the People Democratic Party (PDP) who hailed from Northeast region and Hausa-Fulani by ethnicity. The election result showed that the three major candidates were heavily voted for along ethnic and regional lines. Tinubu received 57.9% of votes from Yorubas and the Southwest region. Obi garnered 88.8% of votes from Igbos and Southeast region while Atiku garnered 52.6% of votes from Hausa-Fulanis and Northeast region (Ojo & Sadeeq, 2023). This showed that ethnic rather than national identity played a role in deciding the election outcome which makes this topic important because of what is at stake politically, psychologically and culturally.

Politically, the election is supposed to be a unifying tool for Nigeria which is desperately in need of national integration, but this is not the case as the 2023 results depicted the “us vs. them” impression. This makes the nation significantly divided and a rearing ground for disorder in the polity (Ojo & Sadeeq, 2023). Psychologically, ethnic sentiments in voting leaders as evident in the 2023 election could cause various ethnic groups to be in continual suspicion, doubts, and fear of each other which may further lead to anxiety, bitterness, hostility and contempt. Culturally, power tussle among various ethnic groups as evident in the 2023 elections affects their way of life. Each ethnic group now aims to overpower each other at their hurt. These attitudes strengthen tribalism, nepotism, bigotry, and inequality

across various cultural groups (Oji et al., 2023).

Ethnicity usually goes through an evolving process that begins as a hidden and obliging feeling but afterwards becomes instigated as a tool of hostility, dispute disagreements and tension. According to Freud (1915), there are latent conflicts and desires of the oedipus complex which are subdued. However, it is the idea not feelings of affect that is subdued. These feelings of conflict (affect) are displaced towards someone else as observed in the hostility and violence shown towards other ethnic groups during the 2023 presidential elections. The unconscious parts of ones emotional experience interpreted as affect are linked with the actions of desire, fathers law and formidable mixed fantasies and feelings that are triggered in connection to early babyish fantasies of the mother. The unconscious effect is expressed symbolically via ones relationship to both imagined and real others (Yates, 2018). Consequently, ethnicity encompasses a significant emotional and affective aspect that influences the formation of ethnic consciousness in individuals, thereby affecting their interactions and relationships with members of different ethnic groups (Blackman & Cromby, 2007). This emotional foundation offers an essential perspective for analyzing the dynamics of interethnic social engagement, which will be the focus of this paper.

Social, Cultural and Political Context of Ethnicity and Elections in Nigeria

Ordinarily, the vast ethnic diversity of Nigeria is supposed to intensify her rich social and cultural life, however, the reverse is the case as the flow of patriotism seems to be reducing from the pre-independence period to the inception of civilian rule in 1999 in Nigeria as a result of ethnic nationalism. Nationalism has now been streamlined to primordial nationalities substituting civic nationalism among the majority of Nigerias populace (Maichiki & Yahaya, 2022). This aligns with the primordial theory of nationalism which posits that a country is rooted in ethnic ties and common genetic makeup, where loyalty to the nation is based on ethnic descent (Bell, 2003).

Osaghae and Suberu (2005) noted that Nigerias regionalism has been diminished to “East for Easterners”, “North for Northerners”, and “West for Westerners”, which makes those from other ethnic groups

and/or regions to be discriminated against and deprived of their fundamental privileges and rights such as exclusion from electoral exercises. The unequal characteristics of ethnic politics increase sectionalism in Nigerias polity which truncates national integration as evident in several general elections over the years (Oji, et al., 2023). Social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979) supports this position in that individuals tend to classify themselves into in-group and “out-group”. They positively perceive their in-group and negatively perceive others, which results in favouritism towards the in-group and discrimination towards the out-group. Thus, as individuals identify with their ethnic groups, they tend to show support to political candidates that align with their ethnic interests (Osmond & Anaukwu, 2024). Also, the scapegoating of minority groups shows splitting by characterizing certain groups as basically bad, which strengthens discrimination and gives grounds for social exclusion (Želinský et al., 2021).

Chandra (2012) noted that since membership and memories are passed down from one generation to the other, ethnic groups do not change regardless of economic, social and political crises. Social agency theory posits that memory is understood to be a socially-framed attribute of a persons mind, that is, a result of groups of persons assembling to share memories of past events. Thus, memory about ethnic groups can be expressed through various acts of recollection and social exchange (Bell, 2003). Also, transgenerational transmission focuses on the transmission of both good and traumatic events of the pasts of a large identity group to the next generation in the same way mothers transfer their aggressions, expectations, and perceptions to their childrens developing identities (Volkan, 2001).

Political leaders have been observed to garner votes based on hidden or unremembered ethnic conflicts and grievances, thereby using ethnicity as a weapon to attain their electoral agenda (Ikre, 2023). In Adornos analysis of fascism, the psyche (mind) of a fascist is “authoritarian” in that it attaches itself to those it considers as strength while disdaining those it regards as weak. It tends toward conservatism, inflexibility, and stereotyped thoughts that are resolute on the clear difference between in-group and out-group, and its jealousy protects the borderlines between them (Gordon, 2020).

Ethnic politics is thus a type that is driven by a selfish or ulterior motive of political leaders (Ikre, 2023).

Various ethnic groups also see each other as contenders for power having the belief that they will be denied access to benefits and protection if their own is not in power (Oji et al., 2023). Corresponding to the split outlook by Klein, the impulse to reduce individuals to what they can give and do for us, (such as provision of money, milk, and labour), instead of seeing them as many-sided individuals, can be observed in electorates choice of who they vote for (Klein, 2017).

Psychological Context of Ethnicity and Elections in Nigeria

From a psychological context, ethnicity is an internal consciousness, an assertion of recognition and status either as a superior group or at the very least equal to others (Nnabuihe et al., 2014). It is an exaggerated and strained feeling of distinction concerning various ethnic groups (Heinecke, 1986, as cited in Nnabuihe et al., 2014). Ethnicity seems to offer inherent satisfaction as well as significant utility. Individuals seem to need to differentiate between us and them, good and bad communities, and ethnic consciousness emerges when such psychological designs are connected to observable distinctions in languages, physiognomy, or lifestyle (Brown, 1994, as cited in Ikre, 2023).

The above submission aligns with Kleins theories, which emphasize the often destructive nature of emotional experience and fantasies originating from childbirth. Effects arise from maternal fantasies during early life stages. Klein posited that infants enter into the world with a capacity for envy, linked to life and death drives. The envy experienced relates to the incapable reliance of the child as they start life in a paranoid-schizoid state, perceiving the world through a dichotomy of an idealized good or bad. The children protect themselves by developing self defense mechanisms such as projection, splitting, and projective identification, and envious attacks on the maternal figures. Kleins theories apply to the undesirable sentiments that a particular ethnic group projects onto those they despise, categorizing ethnic groups into good and bad (Klein, 1957; Yates, 2018).

Ethnicity directly and strongly impacts Nigerias electoral

behaviour through the development of a longstanding psychological sense of loyalty to their party and where voting is an expression of ethnic group identity (Horowitz, 1993). Ethnicity in its utmost psychological level is a sense of ones survival. Thus, if ones ethnic group survives, he or she is assured of survival (Tama & Keffi, 2019). Rather than owe fealty to the nation, Nigerians in their psyche often owe their loyalty to their ethnic groups (Eme-Uche & Okonkwo, 2022). This psyche also belittles other ethnic groups and sees them as inferior which usually makes it aggressive and competitive.

Politicians special treatment towards their co-ethnics as seen in elections across the nation (Ejdemyr et al., 2018; Mousseau & Mousseau, 2023), could decrease the sense of belonging to the nation among people from minority ethnic groups as they feel disenfranchised (Tuki, 2024). Object relations psychoanalysis links these feelings to the early development stage. When a child fails to receive appropriate reflection from the parents, it results in a narcissistic injury that later manifests as shame (Mollon, 2002). This experience, linked to attachment neglect, also reverberates when applied to the populace who feel spurned and unrecognized by the political class (Yates, 2018).

In their tussle for political power through elections, various ethnic groups are in continual skepticism, distrust, fear, and doubts of each other which causes hostility, tension and resentment (Oji et al., 2023). Sennett (1977) noted that the evolution of ethnically-propelled politics, where voters focus on the ethnic identity of a candidate instead of political issues and ideologies causes power tussle among groups that build envy or resentment about others in social democratic societies (Yates, 2018).

Social and Psychological Theoretical Underpinning: Ethnicity and 2023 Presidential Elections

A high level of ethnic and regional identity politics was seen in the 2023 Nigeria presidential election. The All Progressive Party focused its support base in the South West (Yoruba zone) and North West (Hausa-Fulani zone), where the presidential (Tinubu) and vice presidential (Shettima) candidates respectively come from. PDP concentrated on the North East (Hausa-Fulani zone) and South-South

where the presidential (Atiku) and vice presidential (Okowa) candidates respectively hail from. The Labour Party concentrated on the South East (Igbo zone) and South-South regions. The focus of all the parties was to appeal to ethnic and regional sentiments which resulted in a huge level of ethnic division across the nation (Namo & Attah, 2024).

An analysis of the 2023 presidential election results (figure 1) reveals that political ideology did not reflect on the results. The results were simply an outcome of the contest among regional and ethnic identities rather than ideals. The election results thus appear to illustrate that the essential factors that determined prior general election outcomes were also apparent in the 2023 general election, in which ethnicity was a major causal factor (Babalola, 2024).

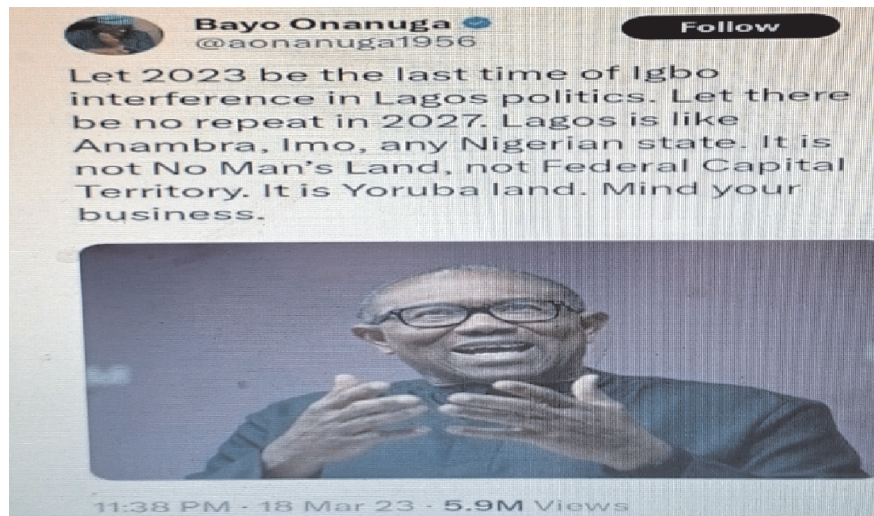
	APC	%	PDP	%	LP	%	NNPP	%
NC	1,670,091	42	1,087,893	28	1,133,840	29	55,540	1
NE	1,185,458	35	1,741,846	52	315,107	9	126,343	4
NW	2,652,235	40	2,329,540	35	350,182	5	1,268,250	9
SE	127,605	6	91,198	4	1,960,589	90	9,227	0
SS	799,957	29	717,908	26	1,210,675	44	17,167	1
SW	2,279,407	56	941,941	23	846,478	21	16,664	0
FCT	90,902	20	74,194	16	281,717	62	4,517	1
Total	8,794,726	36.61	6,984,520	29.07	6,101,533	25.40	1,496,687	6.23

Figure 1: Results of the 2023 presidential election.
Source: Babalola (2023)

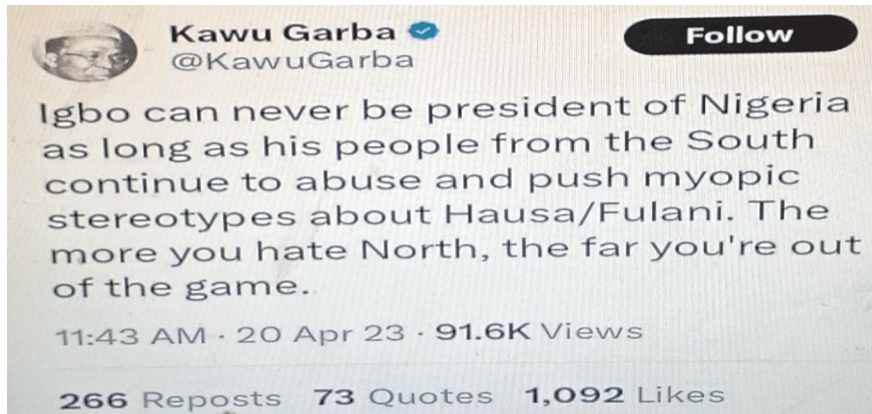
In the run-up to the 2023 presidential election, most of the parties paid attention to primal identities in their political judgement instead of engaging ideology as a means of voters mobilisation. The candidates and parties showed lesser concern for issues like corruption, economy and insecurity and instead participated in hostile speeches and vehement rhetoric along ethnic lines in their campaign (Babalola, 2024). In Adornos analysis of fascism, he noted that the authoritarian political candidate creates hostility towards ethnic minorities (Adorno et al., 1950). Such candidates position themselves as a moral fortress to be followed while propagating a cliché that evil is associated with ethnic differences. Those who belong to the in-group,

are portrayed as the good, and should get rid of the evil (other ethnic groups) from society (Bueno & João, 2021).

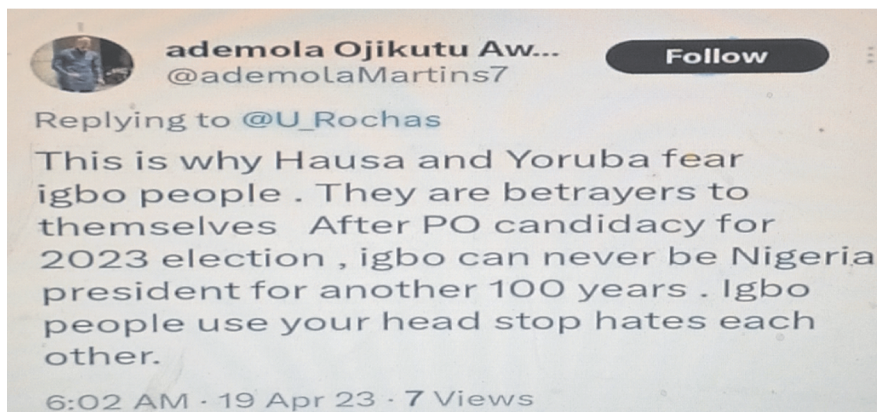
Also, in the 2023 presidential elections, voters choices were mainly propelled by primordial ethnic sentiments and belonging which confirms the social divisions that have surrounded politics since the nation received her independence (Idowu & Iyabode, 2024). This aligns with Freuds concepts of group psychology, where he noted that group members redirect their aggression against their leader in a similar manner as a son transforming negative emotions towards his oedipal father to loyalty. Social media was flooded with resentful speeches and reprisals against ethnic groups as the election fast approached (Yiaga Africa Report on the 2023 General Election, 2023). The rising popularity and acceptance of Peter Obi revived an Igbo-phobic sentiment among other major ethnic groups (Ndukwu & Onyebuchi, 2024). Few textual evidence from social media is shown below:



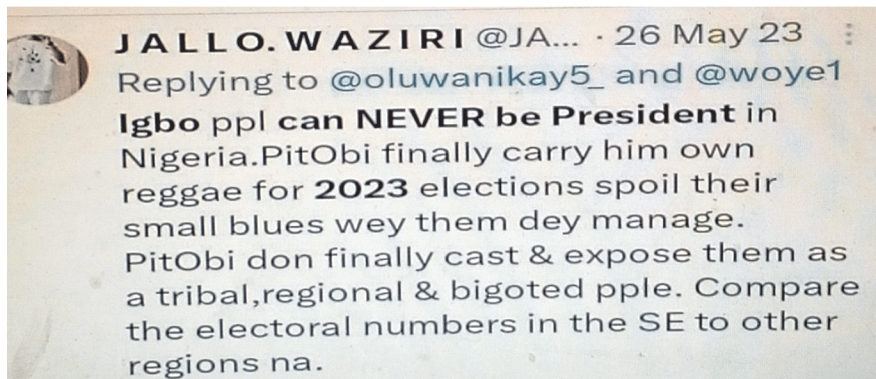
Source: Ndukwu and Onyebuchi (2024)



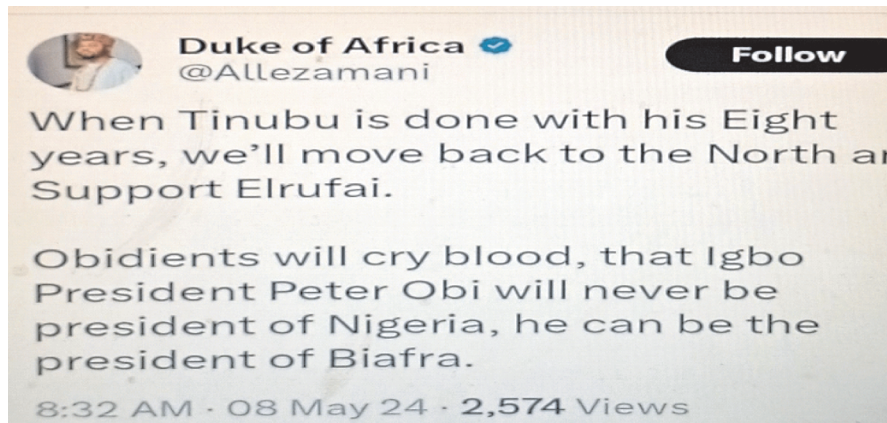
Source: Ndukwu and Onyebuchi (2024)



Source: Ndukwu and Onyebuchi (2024)



Source: Ndukwu and Onyebuchi (2024)



Source: Ndukwu and Onyebuchi (2024)

The above textual evidence shows the emotionalization of modern politics which is associated with the medialization of politics and the springing up of up-to-date means of political discourse and emergence of modern communication methods that spur up emotional responses and allow peoples expression via social and interactive media platforms based on ethnic grounds (Standing, 2011, as cited in Yates, 2018). As a result, faith and/or belief in political narratives that one time shaped mutual identities within a national context is lost leading to fear, distrust and uncertainty among each other (Yates, 2018). In transgenerational transmission of chosen traumas, Freud and Burlingham (1942) noted that the volatility between a mother and child's psychic borderline permits transmission of the mother's unconscious fantasies, anxiety, expectations and perception of the external world to the child's evolving sense of self. In a similar vein, there exists a traumatic past in every large ethnic group that is passed down to the next generation perhaps due to the previous generations inability to mourn the losses of lands, people or prestige or the inability of the group to rescind narcissistic wounds and humiliation inflicted by another group within the same country (Volkan, 2001).

In the 2023 general election, there was voters lack of interest and some voters who did not identify strongly with any of the three major ethnic groups, felt alienated and decided not to participate in the

voting process. Psychoanalytic theory examines how early childhood emotional experience influences adult behaviour as a person. The first experience is usually the mother and emotional means of associating are shaped at this time. The prolonged dependency of individuals builds psychological defenses as a means of dealing with the feelings of frustration and powerlessness that were earlier experienced in childhood/infancy. These defences are later utilised by adults to shield themselves against feelings of alienation, vulnerability, and loss (Minsky, 1998)

Conclusion

The psychosocial approach has shown that individuals identity with an ethnic group and their subsequent choice to vote for a leader and relate with people from other ethnic groups are driven by psychological experiences. These psychological experiences are based on preconscious, conscious and unconscious emotions that were formed based on their early relationship and fantasies with their oedipal father or nurturing mother. These experiences were also formed based on memories and past events passed down from one generation to another. They affect individuals behaviour and/or attitude towards the social world including politics and election exercises. This approach shows that a persons psychological experience and his/her social life concerning ethnicity and elections are therefore interwoven.

Suggestions

The following are the possible corrections towards ethnic influences in elections. Introduce comprehensive political reforms aimed at minimizing ethnic favoritism by advocating for merit-based candidate selection and discouraging ethnic mobilization during elections. Strengthen civic education initiatives that cultivate a national identity among various ethnic groups, fostering tolerance and alleviating ethnic suspicions. Encourage dialogue and reconciliation efforts to confront historical ethnic grievances and emotional scars, aiding in the healing of mistrust and diminishing political ethnic hostilities.

Promote interethnic cooperation in community development and governance to enhance social cohesion and mutual trust among diverse ethnic groups.

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