



Essentialist Identity and Political Instability in Africa: The Role of John Rawls Veil of Ignorance

Dr. Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo, Ph.D

Philosophy Department, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State.

Abstract

Africa has a complex history of conflicts that spans centuries and is shaped by a variety of factors, including colonialism, ethnicism and tribal tensions, economic disparities, and political instability. These factors have led to the continuous underdevelopment of Africa. At the root of this political instability is essentialist approach to Identity. A situation where individuals solely pitch their loyalty to their ethnic group rather than the common good. The "Them versus us" mindset. This study sets to primarily answer two questions: how does the essentialist approach to identity cause political instability in Africa? How can John Rawls concept of the Veil of Ignorance help in mitigating this situation? Hence, the paper, through the method of critical analysis, examines the history of political instability in Africa, with a particular focus in Nigeria. It reveals that essentialist approach to identity in Africa has been the major propellant of political instability. This births a situation where leaders who are incompetent remain at the corridors of power even when they grossly underperform, simply due to their affiliation to a tribe or faith with a population advantage. Also, through a hermenutical analysis of John Rawls' concept of the Veil of Ignorance, the paper reveals that the concept, given its advocacy for a mental attitude that deemphasizes differences and focuses on the common good, can serve as an effective tool in mitigating against political instability in Nigeria and Africa at large.

Keywords: *Essentialist Identity, Political Instability, Veil of Ignorance*

INTRODUCTION

In several African countries, religion and tribal hostilities have had tragic consequences. In some cases, a dominant tribe has assumed political control over a country and then slaughtered fellow citizens who are members of a targeted tribe. Tribal massacres have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of victims, and some countries have fallen into anarchy and chaos; Eritrea, Liberia, Burundi and Rwanda are some examples. Elsewhere, bitter civil war has been fought, such as those in Nigeria and Zaire. In the Republic of South Africa, democracy is threatened by the potential for civil war between two major tribes, the Zulus and the Bantus, who have been enemies for centuries (Baldwin et al., 1997, p. 251)

Africa's primary distinctive characteristic is the diversity of its languages, cultures, tribes, and religions. As an incredibly diverse continent, Africa is home to over 3,000 distinct ethnic groups, each with its language, customs, and traditions. The interactions among these groups have profoundly shaped the social, political, and cultural landscape of the continent (Hogan, 2000, cited in Thelma et al., 2024). Consequently, Africa embodies a community of individuals with diverse identities. Unfortunately, the continent has a complex history of conflicts spanning centuries, influenced by various factors

such as colonialism, ethnic and tribal tensions, economic disparities, and political instability (Thelma et al., 2024).

Years of intertribal wars, religious conflicts, and ethnic discrimination have resulted in genocides and tribal politics, illustrating how these differences, rather than fostering unity, have driven Africa apart. This division is most evident in the political arena, where there is an overemphasis on tribal affiliation rather than the collective good. Tribal or religious groups often seek to dominate others by pledging loyalty to members of their group, leveraging their numerical strength to influence democratic processes. Competence for office is frequently overlooked in favour of ensuring that "their man" holds power, rather than someone from another group.

A typical example of this dynamic is seen in Nigeria, where the major ethnic groups—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—along with their different religious affiliations, engage in fierce competition to ensure their kin attain political office. Public offices are often treated as the exclusive prerogative of specific tribes or religions, thereby marginalizing others from accessing these positions. Ethnicity and religion are instrumentalized as tools of legitimacy and hegemony, particularly when the interests of the political class are threatened (Takaya, 1997). This prioritization of sectarian loyalty over the common good leads to underdevelopment, corruption, and national stagnation. It also breeds tribal

and religious resentments, perpetuates tribal politics, and ultimately results in conflicts and political instability.

At the root of this issue is the essentialist approach to identity. Essentialized identities, which categorize individuals or groups based on ethnic or religious affiliations, race, or skin colour, are potentially explosive (Sen, 2006; Goff and Dunn, 2004, cited in Marovah, 2015). This approach segregates, circumscribes, and pigeonholes people, viewing them as homogeneous, exclusive, and impenetrable groups. Those who advance this perspective are referred to as essentialists or solitarists (Hudson & Melber, 2014; Sen, 2006, cited in Marovah, 2015). Such an approach fosters jingoism and hierarchical bias, excluding those from different identities. When individuals with these essentialized identities gain power, they often refuse to engage with others who do not share their identity.

This essentialist approach to identity is prevalent in Africa, where tribalism, conflicts, and political instability are widespread. Notable examples include the clash between the Tutsi (minority) and Hutu (majority) in Rwanda, which escalated into a full-blown genocide (Nwagwu, 2018). Similarly, in Kenya, a country with over seventy distinct ethnic groups, elections since independence in 1963 have been dominated by ethnic affiliation, leading to exclusion and discrimination against those aligned with the opposition (Nwagwu, 2018).

In such contexts, loyalty is often pledged to tribes and religions rather than the common good. Nigeria, with its numerous tribes and diverse ethnicities, epitomizes the essentialist approach to identity. The country's fractured historical past, marked by volatile ethnic and religious lines, has spawned numerous conflicts and political instability. This essentialist approach institutionalizes marginalization, segregation, and violence against those from different groups.

John Rawls's political philosophy offers valuable insights for addressing this situation. Rawls, a strong advocate for social justice, proposed that socio-economic inequalities should benefit the least advantaged. His concept of the "Veil of Ignorance" eliminates bias and sentiments, promoting justice and the common good in society. This concept can also mitigate the essentialist approach to identity, fostering political stability.

Focusing primarily on Nigeria, this paper argues that the essentialist approach to identities significantly undermines political stability in Africa. Additionally, it contends that John Rawls's veil of ignorance, advocating for a social contract based on fairness and the common good, can effectively address this issue. The paper critically examines essentialist identity and political instability, revealing how these undertones have been precursors to political instability in Nigeria. Furthermore, it explores how Rawls's veil of ignorance can serve as a bridge to political stability. The study concludes by offering Rawls's veil of ignorance as a psychological standpoint to combat the essentialist

approach to identity by prioritizing the common good. This study relies heavily on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and internet sources.

Conceptualizing Essentialist Identity: An Overview

Generally, the essentialist approach to identity fosters a "them versus us" dynamic. This perspective involves a monolithic categorization of individuals, emphasizing the characteristics that distinguish one group from another. Essentialist views reinforce homogeneity and exclusiveness within groups by overemphasizing their defining essences. Consequently, essential identities categorize individuals or groups as homogeneous, exclusive, and impenetrable. Proponents of this perspective, referred to as essentialists or solitarists (Hudson & Melber, 2014; Sen, 2006), often aim to segregate and pigeonhole people based on ethnicity, skin colour, race, or other categories. Such narrowed identities are fundamental to the process of othering (Marovah, 2015).

The essentialist perspective on identity inherently fosters discord, particularly within ethnically diverse societies. Wielenga (2014), as cited in Marovah (2015), observes that those in positions of power in politics and media often utilize essentialist discourses to construct propaganda narratives that mobilize support for specific agendas, rather than advancing the common good. A notable example is xenophobia in South Africa, which illustrates how people in impoverished conditions can be mobilized in ways that neither benefit themselves nor the collective welfare.

Furthermore, scholars, including philosophers, may consciously or unconsciously contribute to such propaganda narratives. For instance, Mlambo (2013) argues that historians and historical writing have significantly influenced perceptions of Zimbabwe's past and shaped present conceptions of essentialized nationhood, citizenship, and belonging. These concepts are variants of identity that can be manipulated for divisive purposes. During the Rwandan genocide, for example, the Hutus were incited to believe in their ethnic superiority and rightful dominance over the Tutsis, leading to extreme violence. Similarly, race theorists who categorize humanity into hierarchical race distinctions do so to undermine certain groups as less human (Keet, 2014), as was evident in both slave and apartheid societies.

Similarly, the colonial subjugation of Africa and Asia was justified under the guise of a "civilizing" mission, leveraging the identity tag of race. Sen (2006), along with Goff and Dunn (2004), cited in Marovah (2015), argue that essentialized identities are inherently volatile and can be exploited to incite violence and xenophobic tendencies. Understanding identities and their influence on our self-perception and relationships with others is crucial for promoting peace and development. Given this framework of the essentialist approach to identity, it is important to examine political instability in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, and analyze how this approach contributes to such instability.

Understanding the Concept of Political Instability

Political instability can be characterized as a condition where political upheaval and turmoil predominate. It encompasses various elements such as profound illiteracy, high cost of living, low standard of living, poverty, and growth without development (Freeman, 1974). This concept elucidates the political and socioeconomic conditions of a society, which can vary significantly from one country to another.

Empirical evidence indicates that political instability manifests in various forms, including political violence, electoral violence, revolts, politically motivated deaths and killings, and revolutions, as well as ethno-religious, ideological, and economic violence resulting from political manipulation (Promise, 2022).

According to Isife (2020), political instability describes the uncertain state of public affairs within a country. It also reflects the fluctuating dynamics of power among different groups, organizations, or the nation itself. Thus, political instability is characterized by an unstable governance condition, marked by shakiness, unsteadiness, and insecurity. This denotes a situation where the political structure deteriorates, leading to precarious conditions and societal upheavals.

Consequently, some scholars interpret political instability as incidents of political turmoil or violence, such as demonstrations, agitations, workers' strikes, and dissidence (Kolstad, 2019, cited in Isife, 2020). Michael (2004) notes that the development of an unstable political environment is typically gradual. Therefore, any uncertain or fluctuating condition within an organization or government, coupled with public unrest, constitutes political instability. In this context, political instability represents an unhealthy civil society marked by power struggles, poor decision-making, ineffective policy implementation, and widespread public disapproval.

Given the established definition, it is imperative to undertake a historical investigation into political instability in Nigeria, to confirm the essentialist approach to identity as a fundamental contributing factor.

Historical Overview Political Instability in Nigeria: The role of Essentialist Identity

The Nigerian Federation comprises over 400 ethnic nationalities whose consent was not solicited during its formation. This inherent deficiency is compounded by significant differences among these ethnic groups, encompassing language, population size, educational attainment, and geographical terrain, aspects overlooked during the establishment of the Nigerian State. Consequently, the political landscape and governance of Nigeria are consistently disrupted by alarming ethnic and ethnically-driven crises that pose a threat to the nation's continuity (Achimugu et al., 2013). Nearly six decades following the attainment of political independence, Nigeria grapples with the challenge of reconciling ethnic disparities and

constructing a cohesive national identity. This lack of a strong sense of national consciousness permeates various facets of Nigerian society, particularly evident in the process of selecting political leaders (Promise, 2022).

Ethnic distrust and tension are prevalent in Nigerian politics, with ethnic allegiance often outweighing national loyalty (Achimugu et al., 2013). Each ethnic group voices grievances of marginalization, with accusations directed towards other groups. The Hausa/Fulani have faced allegations of monopolizing political power, while they in turn accuse the Yoruba of dominating the economy and civil service. The Igbo attribute their challenges to Hausa/Fulani political dominance and Yoruba economic and bureaucratic dominance. Additionally, minority ethnic groups assert that they are subjected to political, religious, and cultural oppression by majority ethnic groups. In the oil-rich Niger-Delta region, minority ethnic groups feel marginalized in the distribution of the nation's oil wealth, viewing it as monopolized by the three major ethnic groups (Achimugu et al., 2013). Ethnic sentiments permeate all aspects of Nigerian life. Allegations of ethnic discrimination in job appointments, school admissions, business transactions, and resource allocation are prevalent across the nation (Musa, 2009, cited in Achimugu et al., 2013).

In his essay titled "Nigerian Crisis and the Problem of Development: A Multicultural Solution," Okoye (2013) provides insightful commentary on the pervasive essentialist identity dynamics that have contributed to political crises and instability in Nigeria. He observes that Nigeria's political landscape is deeply entrenched in ethnic and tribal affiliations, which have significantly influenced the trajectory of its governance since its inception. The amalgamation of Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups following the colonial "polis" encountered immediate challenges, notably marked by the prioritization of tribal identities not only in individual integrity but also in collective character. Thus, the origins of Nigeria's political crisis and instability can be traced back to the formation of political parties in Nigeria from 1960 onward (Okoye, 2013).

Identity-based discord had already taken root in Nigeria before its political independence in 1960. The constitutional division of the country into three regions by Sir Arthur Richard in 1945 further exacerbated ethnic tensions. This division subsequently led to the formation of regional and ethnic-based political parties. Consequently, by 1960, three major parties emerged, each predominantly representing one of the country's major ethnic groups. The National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), predominantly representing the Igbo, was championed by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. The Action Group (AG), under the leadership of Awolowo, represented the Yoruba. Meanwhile, the Northern People's Party (NPP), representing the Hausa, aligned itself politically under Sir Ahmadu Bello (Okoye, 2013).

During the First Republic, which operated under a parliamentary system of government borrowed from the

British, leadership positions were determined based on party and ethnic coalitions (Aguda, n.d., cited in Okoye, 2013). The NCNC and NPC formed the government during this period. Subsequently, a merger between the Yoruba and Hausa factions brought the AG-NPC coalition to power, eventually dissolved by the 1966 coup. This coup, spearheaded by Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and labelled the "Igbo coup," precipitated widespread marginalization, instability, and violence, particularly against the Igbo ethnic group. The resultant sense of insecurity among the Igbo culminated in the demand for secession and the onset of the 1967 Nigerian-Biafran war, a conflict that has continued to pose a threat to the nation's unity (Okoye, 2013).

The post-war political landscape in Nigeria continued to underscore tribal affiliations, with each ethnic group striving more assertively to assert its dominance over others within the multi-party system (Okoye, 2013). During the second republic, several parties emerged, each predominantly representing specific ethnic constituencies. For instance, the Yoruba community established the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) under the leadership of Awolowo, while the northern region saw the formation of the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP) led by Ibrahim Waziri, the Northern People's Party (NPP), and the People's Redemption Party (PRP) under Aminu Kano. The Hausa/Fulani faction established the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), while the Igbo elite initiated the Nigeria's People's Party. These parties, reflective of the ethnic attachments of the Nigerian populace, became conduits for systemic political crises, encompassing legitimacy, participation, and integration challenges (Okoye, 2013).

In the third republic, during Ibrahim Babangida's transitional period, attempts were made to mitigate political ethnic inclinations by introducing a two-party system, consisting of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). These parties, akin to the United Progressive Parties Alliance in 1982, aimed to mitigate political monotony and ethnic rivalry. Although neither party assumed national governance, their establishment and operations laid the groundwork for a more cohesive political system that could have fostered greater unity in Nigeria (Okoye, 2013).

It is noteworthy that one of the most conspicuous occurrences during this era was the vested interest of General Ibrahim Babangida, which led to the annulment of the 1993 elections, despite their recognition as the fairest in Nigeria's history. This decision stemmed from Babangida's dissatisfaction with the outcome, as his preferred candidate from the North, Bashir Tofa of the NRC party, did not emerge victorious. Consequently, Babangida nullified the elections on grounds of electoral irregularities. Furthermore, the presumed winner of the 1993 presidential election, Chief M. K. O. Abiola of the SDP, was detained and eventually died in custody. Notably, political violence was particularly pronounced in southern Nigeria during this period (Ogele, 2022).

The aftermath of the political transitions following the third republic in Nigeria exacerbated ethnic tensions, leading to heightened political significance attributed to ethnicity, region, and religion. Feeling disenfranchised, the Yoruba community responded by establishing the Alliance of Democracy (AD) during the fourth republic, advocating for a restructuring of Nigeria's societal framework into a federal system based on ethnic nationalities. Despite concerns regarding national security, the military permitted the continued existence of this heavily ethnicized political entity.

Subsequently, the advent of the fourth republic witnessed the ascension of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), comprising various political factions, into power, perpetuating a climate of intense ethnic politics. This culminated in the phenomenon of zoning, which nearly tore Nigeria apart during the 2011 general elections, marked by severe ethno-religious violence. Consequently, ethnicity, regionalism, and statism emerged as prominent political platforms for aspiring politicians (Okoye, 2013).

The political crises stemming from ethnic tensions have further exacerbated religious conflicts in Nigeria, with ethno-religious discord prevailing as a predominant issue. Various religious groups continually clash, often provoked by minor incidents, leading to heightened intolerance among them. These challenges are exacerbated by certain groups or individuals who exploit conflict situations for their political gain, resulting in the manifestation of religious violence. A prominent example is the case of Boko Haram, which emerged as a threat during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, aiming to destabilize the political landscape (Okoye, 2013).

The pervasive influence of essentialist identity dynamics throughout Nigeria's protracted political history is evident. This "them versus us" paradigm has not only fostered stagnation but also precipitated conflicts and civil unrest, resulting in incessant loss of life and property. According to a World Bank report, the diversion of resources due to conflict, away from development initiatives, has been substantial, amounting to approximately \$1 billion annually in Central Africa and over \$800 million in West Africa. Consequently, development assistance projects have been severely impacted in numerous African nations, with resources originally earmarked for developmental endeavours redirected towards conflict management and peacekeeping endeavours (Nwagwu, 2018).

The disproportionate emphasis on differences and the adoption of monolithic approaches to identity perpetuate a cycle of stagnation, as each group prioritizes its own interests without due consideration for the broader societal implications. This predicament underscores the relevance of John Rawls's concept of the Veil of Ignorance, which warrants examination in the subsequent section of this paper. It is posited that this philosophical construct offers a potential avenue for mitigating entrenched precedents and fostering a more equitable and cohesive social order.

Understanding John Rawls's Concept of the Veil of Ignorance

John Rawls emerges as a significant figure in American political and ethical philosophy during the 20th century. His seminal work, "A Theory of Justice" (1971), serves as a cornerstone for his widely discussed concept of justice as fairness. In this treatise, Rawls endeavours to formulate a framework for justice grounded in principles of social contract theory. Within this framework, Rawls envisions a society composed of autonomous individuals who possess equal fundamental rights and engage in cooperative endeavours within the confines of an egalitarian economic structure (Orji, 2023). Central to Rawls's theory is the notion of the "original position," wherein individuals, referred to as "hypothetical people," deliberate upon and formulate principles of justice while positioned behind a metaphorical "veil of ignorance." This veil of ignorance serves to obscure the particular circumstances and identities of the individuals, rendering them unaware of their attributes, such as social status, wealth, or personal characteristics. Consequently, the decisions reached within the original position are presumed to be impartial and objective, free from biases or vested interests (Orji, 2023). To grasp the concept of the veil of ignorance fully, it is essential to comprehend Rawls's concept of the "original position." In this state, individuals engage in rational deliberation under conditions of impartiality, facilitating the creation of principles of justice that are equitable and fair for all members of society.

ORIGINAL POSITION

Rawls introduces the concept of the original position as a theoretical construct representing the initial status quo in his seminal work, "A Theory of Justice" (1971). Within this construct, Rawls aims to replicate the circumstances under which individuals in a hypothetical state of nature initially consented to abide by societal laws. He contends that analyzing the conditions under which this consent was given can yield insights into determining the justness of laws. Essentially, the original position serves as a conceptual starting point preceding the formation of society. It symbolizes a hypothetical assembly or convention where representatives, embodying all members of the prospective society, convene to deliberate, propose, and advocate for various principles that will govern the nascent society. It is important to note that at this juncture, society does not yet exist, and deliberations commence from a blank slate. Therefore, the original position functions as a prerequisite for the forthcoming society's establishment.

Analogously, the original position can be likened to a contemporary Senate, albeit with a crucial distinction: the "senators" in this theoretical construct represent the entirety of the populace and refrain from engaging in opportunistic manoeuvres to further their interests (Miele, 2017). According to Richardson and Weithman (1999), as cited in Orji (2023), the original position represents a hypothetical

standpoint employed in moral deliberations concerning the foundational principles of social and political justice.

The fundamental aim of the original position is to establish an equitable procedure to ascertain the ensuing principles, which are intended to govern the fundamental structure of society, ensuring their fairness. However, awareness of this purpose does not inherently guarantee that individuals will act by it. Human nature inclines individuals towards exploiting both social and natural circumstances to their advantage, as noted by Rawls (1971). When faced with strong temptations, individuals may succumb to the urge to manipulate the system for their own gain. Instead of endorsing policies they perceive as fair, individuals may advocate for policies that confer advantages upon individuals possessing traits similar to their own.

For instance, an individual endowed with physical strength might advocate for a system that distributes resources and authority based on physical prowess, while a tall individual might support a system that allocates resources according to height (Miele, 2017). The crux of the matter lies in individuals potentially advocating for policies they recognize as inequitable to serve their interests. Rawls, cognizant of this risk, asserts that to establish a genuinely fair process and, consequently, ascertain the correct principles, the representatives in the original position must exhibit complete impartiality (Miele, 2017). To enforce impartiality, Rawls advocates for the removal of "knowledge of particulars" from the representatives, which encompasses factual information about themselves and their preferences (Rawls, 1971, p.118). This removal of knowledge is referred to as the veil of ignorance.

VEIL OF IGNORANCE

Rawls implemented the Veil of Ignorance within the original position to ensure that those determining the laws and principles of the forthcoming society approach their deliberations with impartiality and fairness. By employing the veil of ignorance, individuals are devoid of any prior knowledge or control regarding their placement within the imminent societal structure. Consequently, they are compelled to deliberate justly to avoid potentially unfavourable circumstances. Hence, the Veil of Ignorance affords individuals the liberty to act in a rational, self-interested manner. Rawls (1971) succinctly defines the "Veil of Ignorance" as follows:

no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan for life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism. More than this, I assume that the parties do not know the particular circumstances of their society. That is,

they do not know its economic or political situation, or the level of civilization and culture it has been able to achieve. The persons in the original position have no information as to which generation they belong (p.118)

In order to mitigate the inclination towards unjust propositions among individuals in the original position, Rawls employs the veil of ignorance to obscure certain specific details from consideration. Consequently, those situated in their initial circumstances are unaware of various aspects, including their societal status, inherent or acquired traits or skills, as well as their personal ideals and objectives. Moreover, they lack knowledge regarding the specific political, economic, or cultural characteristics of their society or the era to which they belong. However, they acknowledge their contemporaneity with one another, the potential for collaboration, and the shared capability to possess a sense of justice (Orji, 2023).

The fundamental equality among individuals, and thereby their entitlement to equal treatment and consideration, emanates from the possession of two moral capacities. Firstly, there is the capacity for a robust sense of justice, and secondly, the ability to formulate a conception of the good (Rawls, 1971). Notably, the latter encompasses an array of personal preferences, as each individual's notion of a fulfilling life may vary slightly. As these personal preferences are intricately linked to an individual's conception of the good, and consequently, their perspectives on morality and justice, it follows that individuals characterized by equality and morality are unable to discern what is fair. This is because the very attributes that underpin their equality also predispose them to bias (Rawls, 1971).

Put simply, due to the inherent equality among all individuals, no one person's conception of a fulfilling life holds inherent superiority over another's. Consequently, determining which principles society should prioritize becomes a complex task. However, if there were a method to temporarily suspend an individual's personal preferences while retaining their moral capacities, which are the basis of their equality, it would facilitate a scenario where individuals could approach decision-making without bias, thus ensuring fairness. This condition, as previously established, is deemed essential for deriving the correct principles to govern society (Orji, 2023). Rawls accomplishes this by implementing the veil of ignorance, effectively removing individuals' knowledge of their circumstances.

Hence, the veil of ignorance not only proves essential but also becomes the sole means to ascertain truly fair principles. The principles of justice proposed by representatives in Rawls's original position, operating under the veil of ignorance, are therefore deemed correct for structuring society, while those proposed under different circumstances are considered flawed (Orji, 2023). Consequently, the veil of ignorance serves as a litmus test to validate whether the principles

devised by representatives in the original position align with fairness. If unanimity is achieved among individuals in formulating these principles, it signals the discovery of the correct principles (Rawls, 1971).

Understanding Rawls's concept of the veil of ignorance lays the groundwork for engaging in the central focus of our inquiry. This entails a thorough examination of the practical application of John Rawls's Veil of Ignorance in alleviating political instabilities stemming from the essentialist approach to identity.

Essentialist Identities and Political Instability in Africa: The Role of John Rawls Veil of Ignorance

At the core of the conflicts underlying political instability lies the pervasive "us versus them" paradigm. The essentialist perspective on identity accentuates inherent differences to the detriment of collective welfare. Consequently, it fosters a climate wherein particular groups isolate themselves from others who diverge in identity. This mindset breeds the notion of one group's superiority over others, precipitating segregation, oppression, and discrimination, particularly in ethnically diverse societies. Such dynamics often entail the dominant ethnic group or tribe leveraging its numerical advantage to perpetuate its hold on power. The merit or suitability of candidates from this group for their respective positions often becomes secondary to the goal of maintaining dominance, rather than prioritizing the common good.

Nigeria serves as a typical example for illustrating this scenario, notably evident in the political dynamics within the All Progressives Congress (APC) party. Preceding the 2023 general elections, an implicit understanding pervaded the APC party that the presidency would rotate to the Igbo ethnic group (South East region). This arrangement was rooted in the rationale that other major geopolitical zones—North East, North West, South West, South-South, and North Central—had all previously produced presidents for Nigeria, leaving the South East as the sole region yet to occupy the presidency through an elected candidate. However, in June 2022, in the lead-up to the 2023 elections, this tacit agreement was disregarded, opening the presidential candidacy to contenders from all regions. Late Dr. Ogbonnaya Onu, a former Minister of Science and Technology, raised concerns over the APC's deviation from the zoning arrangement during his address to party delegates at Eagles Square, just before the commencement of voting at the presidential primary (Silas, 2022).

Where is the justice? ...What is very, very important, exceptionally important, is that we must ensure that justice is upheld. Naturally, it should be somebody from the South East that will replace (Buhari), and that will give the opposite South versus North and Christian versus Muslim a balance, and it will bring stability to the nation; it will strengthen Nigeria. The South West had eight years as president; the South-South had eight years as president and

vice president; where is the justice? Where is the Justice?...I held the presidential ticket for one of the three parties then, but I had to let it go to solve a problem with the South West, to make sure that two Olus contested for the presidency, that head or tail, one would become the president and that brought down tension within the country. This is what would have happened if we allowed the South East at this time(Silas, 2022).

The major underpinning to this renegeing was "We do not want an Igbo man to be a president". It does not count that it was justfully their turn of the Igbo. In a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, an obvious injustice against a group incubates ethnic tension. It is this that breeds conflicts and political instability. This clearly shows the "us versus them" mentality, which leads to distrust and the pitching of loyalty to the individual's tribe rather than the centre. Eloma et al.,(2014) affirmed this in their statement:

Political instability therefore depends on ethnic conflict. A society that is comprised of people with diverse cultures, traditions, languages and religions which have not been harmonized by the individual groups to work as one people in a nation-state means practising these differences in the polity, it implies that sentiments will prevail which will surely bring conflict with one another's interest. In essence, Naomi Weir (2012 Internet) portrayed ethnic ties as inherent in human beings, that we have deep, natural connections that link us to some people and that lead to natural divisions with others, whether based on race, religion, language or location, applies here. Also when some ethnic groups are larger than others with such sentiments, it is obvious that the big or large ones will suppress the small ones and the small ones will always struggle to be heard just as the big ones will keep suppressing. In a situation that among the big groups there is any attempt of such suppression on any or some of them will be violently resisted. Political leaders in the ethnic groups are always mobilizing their followers to ensure that suppressions are resisted and rather strive to move forward from the present position in the polity to a higher position. While the others that have not had a share of the national cake keep striving to belong or have their share of the cake,(Eloma et al., 2014. P.41)

The above analysis succinctly encapsulates the profound impact of the essentialist perspective on identity within the African context, with Nigeria serving as a focal point for examination. This prompts an inquiry into the potential applicability of John Rawls's conceptual framework of the Veil of Ignorance in addressing this complex scenario.

In a nation like Nigeria, characterized by deep-seated divisions along ethnic and religious lines, the prospect of

employing Rawls's idealistic concept of the Veil of Ignorance to mitigate the inherent political instability stemming from essentialist identity constructs may appear ambitious. This stems from the entrenched nature of Nigeria's societal structure, where individuals are inherently affiliated with specific ethnic groups, and where historical grievances and suspicions among tribes run deep. Given these complexities, the notion of establishing an "original position" to formulate a new societal framework and subsequently implementing the Veil of Ignorance seems impractical.

Rawls recognized the practical challenges associated with implementing the Veil of Ignorance in pre-existing societal structures, thus conceptualizing it as a cognitive or psychological instrument. Consequently, attention must be directed towards the fundamental objective of the Veil of Ignorance, which centres on the pursuit of fairness for all members of society. Its primary aim is to mitigate the emphasis placed on divisive factors that impede societal progress and to instead prioritize the collective welfare that transcends tribal, religious, or other identity-based affiliations. The underlying goal is to foster a just social order that serves the interests of all individuals equitably. By employing the Veil of Ignorance, the divisive edges of essentialist identities are dulled, thereby fostering an environment conducive to the advancement of the common good. Consequently, individuals develop a framework of justice while remaining unaware of their specific societal position or roles. Rawls posits the notion of the Veil of Ignorance as a cognitive tool to navigate societal complexities.

The Veil of Ignorance advocates for the equitable distribution of fundamental social rights and underscores the importance of justice in structuring society to benefit the most disadvantaged members. In Nigeria, with its diverse array of identities, cultures, and ethnicities, individuals often grapple with ethnic and religious biases. This dynamic manifests during elections, where voting patterns are frequently influenced by ethnic or religious affiliations, even in cases where candidates lack competency. Moreover, access to political power or influential positions is sometimes leveraged by different groups to primarily benefit their constituents rather than advancing the common good.

Utilizing Rawls's Veil of Ignorance in legislative processes, policy formulation, and electoral practices promises to foster justice and inclusivity within society. By adopting this approach, space is created for the recognition of individual and group circumstances, thereby mitigating the pitfalls associated with essentialist or monolithic perspectives on identity. These perspectives often fuel discriminatory practices, ethnic rivalries, and resultant political instability, leading to societal stagnation.

The Veil of Ignorance facilitates inclusivity by encouraging diverse ethnicities and sects to transcend their differences and prioritize the common good. How can this concept be practically applied? Given its nature as a cognitive tool, the

most effective strategy for implementing the Veil of Ignorance in countries like Nigeria lies in sensitization efforts aimed at promoting awareness of the common good. This entails educating youths and children about the significance of collective welfare, ensuring that political leaders refrain from exploiting ethnic divisions for personal gain, establishing unity schools that bring together individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and refraining from perpetuating stereotypes or disseminating false information about ethnic groups through mainstream media channels. Through such initiatives, the Veil of Ignorance can be effectively operationalized, fostering a societal environment where citizens are shielded from ethnic and religious biases and are empowered to prioritize the common good.

Dike Chukwumerije's Poem "Fix the Politics" captures Rawl's concept of the Veil of Ignorance and the need to move away from the essentialist approach to identities and focus on the common good. It reads:

A broken road does not understand Igbo
It will not maim the Fulani and let the rest of us go
The accidents it will cause will take all lives
For when a vehicle somersaults it breaks all bones

So, you can speak Nupe till morning comes
It will not build libraries in our public schools
And when a woman, a young woman, lies dying in childbirth
Your fluency in Ijaw will not save her life

For Christian or Muslim, it makes no difference
When you're being driven around in an ambulance
From hospital to hospital in search of oxygen
Northerner or Southerner, you will die suffocating

You will die of causes easily preventable
Like no fuel for police to respond to your distress call
No water, no light, no nurses, no jobs
Nothing kills as efficiently as bad governance

As Politicians in Office who do not pay salaries
Whose response to bad roads is bigger SUVs
Who set up committees, and publish white papers
Presiding over affairs that never improve

Politicians in Jeeps, with minds in London
Perpetual latecomers to every meeting
Irritated by anyone with a different opinion
Who sees 'The People' as a throne to sit on

Politicians in Power, who personalize the State
Who criminalize criticism, and terrorize dissent
Nothing in society kills as efficiently
As a Politician in High Office with a low mentality

For you see? Boko Haram will burn down a classroom

But a Politician can swallow the entire school system
Can fold our Power Stations and put in his briefcase
Can roll up the Railways and keep in her house

Politicians can file our seaports away in a drawer
Can cripple all our farms with no fertilizer
No matter the passion you bring to your start-up
Government can kill it with just one pronouncement

And no degree you hold, no grammar you speak
No decision you make to just face your work
No protest you stage can save you from those
Elected to make and enforce our laws

The way they see things is a wall around you
For you cannot drive faster than the person driving you
No matter your wealth, education or achievement
You are subject to the mentality of those in Government

Politicians in Office hold the yam and the knife
For to elect is to give the elected power over life
Which child will remain almajiri or become someone better?
These things are in the hands of the people in Power

Politicians in Office hold the farm and the seed
For to elect is to give the elected the power to decide
Whether Security operatives can murder citizens and walk away free?
These things are in the hands of those who run the country

So, if you are tired of it all, then strike at its roots...
If you are tired of needing a letter from a Senator to get a job
If you are tired of seeing your hustle frustrated by public policies
If you are tired of insecurity, then fix the politics

If you're tired of the hunger, the anger, in our streets
If you're tired of the number of children who die before age 5
If you're tired of the dreams suffocated in our youths
If you are tired of this shame, then fix the politics

For until they are there in Public Office
Men and women with a heart for public service
No tribe, no tongue – just a commitment to build
A functional nation that fills us all with pride

Until they are there in the highest Office
Men and women with a heart for selfless service
No region, no religion – just commitment to
Nation...
Until we elect them, we labour in vain
(Maravin,2021)

CONCLUSION

The central point of this whole discourse is that the essentialist approach to identity engenders political instability in African countries, particularly in Nigeria. This degenerates into conflicts that are detrimental to a country's development. Given the presence of diverse identities in Nigeria and Africa at large, there is always the tendency to emphasize these differences to the detriment of the common good. This over-emphasis on identities breeds the "us versus them" mentality, which ultimately leads to injustice, segregation, discrimination, conflicts and underdevelopment, which culminates in political instability. This is because the different groups pitch their loyalty to their tribes and are focused on protecting their interests even when it is to the detriment of the other groups or the common good. This breeds mutual suspicion and distrust. The Biafra civil war(1967-1970), which threatened the very foundational existence of the country was a product of the essentialist approach to identity. The hurts, biases and sentiments born from that experience have spiralled through generations of Nigerians and have been a major root cause of political instability in the country.

In a diverse country like Nigeria, the only leeway to peace is fairness and justice. John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance calls for a mental attitude which focuses on the common good, by deemphasizing differences. In this way, the diverse ethnic groups are united for their desire to have a just and fair society that benefits everyone regardless of their tribes' religion or tongue. So, Rawls recognizes that as human beings we all have different identities, biases and inclinations. However, for the sake of the common good and fairness to all, he advocates that we momentarily leave these differences, tribes, ethnicity, and religion, among others, behind and work towards a just society, where everyone has equal footing, that works in the interests of all.

REFERENCES

1. Achimugu, H., Ata-Agboni, U. J., & Aliyu, A. (2013). Ethnicity, Ethnic Crisis, and Good Governance in Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable National Development," *Public Policy and Administration Research*, 2(12), 46-60.
2. Baldwin, Douglas et al. (1997). *Ideologies*, 3rd Ed. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd.
3. Eloma, U, John, I & Elemi. E(2014). Ethnic Conflict and Political Instability in Nigeria: A Case of the 1967-1970 Civil War. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 3(2), 40-47.
4. Freeman,D. (1974).*Theory of Conflict*. London: Humane Press.
5. Goff, P.M. & Dunn, K(2004). *Identity and global politics: Theoretical and empirical elaborations*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
6. Isife, E(2020). Political Instability In Nigeria: Causes, Impacts And Philosophic Solutions. *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 18(6), 1-13.
7. Keet,A(2014).Epistemic'othering'andthedeolonisation of knowledge. *African Insight* 44(1), 23-37.
8. Maravin(2021). <https://www.maravipost.com/fix-politics-poems-by-dike-chukwumerije/> accessed on 26/4/2024
9. Marovah, T(2015). *Using the Capability Approach to Conceptualize African Identity(ies)*. 16(2), 42-57.
10. Mauro, P(2000). Corruption and Growth. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 681-712
11. Michael(2004). Jimaza. Political regimes and economic development of Nigeria (1960 – 2003). *In Journal of Political Studies*. Abuja, 1(1), 168.
12. Miele, A(2017). An Explanation of John Rawls's Theory of Justice with a Defense of the Veil of Ignorance. CMC Senior Theses http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/1537
13. Mlambo, A. (2013). "Becoming Zimbabwe or becoming Zimbabwean: Identity, nationalism and state-building. *Africa Spectrum*, 48(1): 49-70
14. Nwagwu, E (2018). Ethno-Religious Conflict, Political Instability And Africa's Dilemma In Sustaining Democracy. *South East Journal of Political Science*, 4(1), 242-257.
15. Okoye, C(2013). Nigerian Crisis and the Problem of Development: A Multicultural Solution. In *Identity and Multiculturalism*, ed. Cletus Umezina, 184-200.Enugu: Delta Publications Nigeria.
16. Orji, P(2023). The Social Contracts from the Lens of John Rawls Veil Of Ignorance: A Philosophical Analysis. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 9(4) 314-330.
17. Promise, E(2022). Ethnicity, Democracy, and Political Instability in Nigeria: An Appraisal. *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*,16(2), 38-53.
18. Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. London: Oxford University Press.
19. Silas, D(2022). 2023: 'Where is the Justice' – Onu questions APC for not zoning presidential ticket to South-east Daily Post Nigeria <https://dailypost.ng/2022/06/08/2023-where-is-the-justice-onu>

- questions-apc-for-not-zoning-presidential-ticket-to-south-east/ accessed on 4/25/2024
20. Sen, A(2006). Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny. London: Allen Lane
 21. Takaya, B(1997). Religion, Politics and Peace: Resolving the Nigerian Dilemma. In *Religion and Peace in a Multi-Faith Nigeria*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press
 22. Thelma, C, Chitondo, L, Sylvester, C, Phiri, E & Gilbert, M(2024). Analyzing Sources Of Instability in Africa: A Comprehensive Review. *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science*, 6(2), 23-39.
 23. Wielenga, C. (2014). Lived identities in Rwanda: Beyond ethnicity. *African Insight*, 44(1): 122- 136.

Citation: Dr. Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo, "Essentialist Identity and Political Instability in Africa: The Role of John Rawls Veil of Ignorance", *Universal Library of Multidisciplinary*, 2024; 1(2): 28-37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulmdi.2024.0102004>.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.