Nigeriana:
Portraiture on Ethnicity and Elitism in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Drawing from the aphorism, which holds that: “a picture is worth a thousand words,” and adding that a painting is worth a million words, the paper subjects a work of art by Agboola Ayodeji to critical analysis within the purview of the degree to which ethnicity, with the consequent ethnocentrism, is a major factor in statecraft in Nigeria. Arguing that the portrait encapsulates the ethno-political and the resultant socioeconomic realities of the Nigerian project, the paper examines the reasons for the inability of the masses to mobilize themselves and embark on nationwide constructive engagement with the government on issues of common interest. It shows how the masses have been blinded to the fact that, irrespective of the differences in tribe, tongue and creed, the common denominators in the Nigerian socioeconomic and political milieu are pervading poverty, malnutrition, disease, collapsed infrastructure, crippled educational system, inefficient health-care delivery system, lack of water, constant power outage, inter-community conflict, insecurity and general hostility bothering on xenophobia. The prevalence of these ills, in spite of the enormous wealth in the country has resulted in their domination and exploitation by the elites. The paper ends with a call on the masses to transcend these primordial sentiments, see the real dividing lines, depart from the prevailing docility and dormancy and demand that public officers give acceptable account of their stewardship or be recalled or voted out at the next electoral opportunity.
Introduction

One day in November 2004, Honorable Emmanuel Deeya (Member of House of Representatives), Engineer Domenico Gitto (Managing Director of Gitto Costruzioni Generali Nigeria Limited—a company with which I have retainership for external relations) and I stepped into the warm welcome of the Right Honorable Sir Austin Opara, the Deputy Speaker (DS) of the House of Representatives of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In the tradition of showing respect to those in high office, all his staff and guests accorded me the respect with which the DS most humbly received me; he referred to me as “senior,” which is a product of the fact that he was my junior colleague at the Rivers State College of Arts and Science, Port Harcourt from where he ventured out and found fame and, I hope, fortune in business and politics. That show of respect was a profound expression of the humility that is characteristic of the teaching
profession—an attitudinal disposition that was not affected by office, even a very high profile national office for that matter; coming from the sixth citizen of Nigeria, it surely massaged my ego, especially given the presence of Domenico.

Just before we completed the robust exchange of pleasantries as a prelude to settling down for the essence of our visit, a painting on the wall behind the seat of the DS caught my attention. At first glance, it was just another painting. Further glances followed and then I had to make spirited effort to keep my eyes off it and concentrate on the business of the moment. In the end, the painting attracted and sustained my attention to the point where I was embarrassingly distracted from the very serious discussion that was the subject of our visit.

One week after that meeting, Honorable Deeya and I were back at the office of the DS; in tow was Eng. Lica, a Romanian friend, who is dexterous with still cameras. The purpose of the second visit was not a follow up on the subject of our earlier visit; rather, it was the need to take a photograph of the painting hence Lica was in tow. Deeya and I engaged the DS in a discussion of the artwork and he found our analysis very interesting and rather intriguing. Prodded on the provenance and history of the artwork, the DS said the painting preceded his advent at the office; and, perhaps, had not given a thought to its essence and symbolism. Lica took numerous shots of the portrait and the DS obliged us a group photograph with the portrait in the background.

For the contemplative mind and lover of art, the stretched-out flag, the configuration of figures in the portrait (most of them silhouetted into virtual
obscurity while some are clearly defined) and the kinetics of the clear figures indicate the theme—an impassioned national discourse on governance in Nigeria. That portrait inspired this work, which seeks to highlight the voluble expressivities of the painting and the extent to which the portrait captures the degree to which ethnicity is a major, if not the foremost, factor in statecraft (ethnocracy) in Nigeria. The paper also discusses elitism in Nigeria in view of its inevitability given the realities of representative democracy and how the elites have consciously, calculatedly and consistently explored and exploited the phenomenon of ethnicity. It shows how this phenomenon continues to draw steam from pervading primordial sentiments and religious bigotry to the detriment of cohesion, economic viability and political stability in Nigeria. It argues that all these have been taking place at the expense of a citizenry suffused in ignorance of the fact that the common denominators among the different groups and regions are collapsed infrastructure, crippled healthcare delivery system, constant power outage, lack of pipe bourn water, ever-increasing rate of illiteracy, ever elongating unemployment line that now includes university graduates, ethnic intolerance bothering on xenophobia, disintegrative nationalism, and other vices in the Nigerian social milieu; in a sense, a citizenry that is quiescent and quiet.

**Theoretical Framework**

The word content of the title of this effort forms the basis of the theoretical framework. We shall, therefore, briefly discuss the concepts of ethnicity (with the consequent ethnocentrism and ethnocracy) and elitism. It is armed with an
understanding of these phenomena that we shall embark on the analysis of \textit{Nigeriana}—a name that has been adopted for the artwork for the purposes of this presentation since it is unnamed.

\section*{Ethnicity}

While the intellectual enterprise of definitions are vital in virtually every subdivision of the social sciences, faced with the study of political identity issues, a hazy understanding of terms often culminates into complete confusion. This is especially true with regard to the concept of “ethnicity,” a word that has often been defined to refer only to people of racially distinct minority groups.

Taking a historical view of the concept of ethnicity, Joireman (2003:9) holds that: “ethnicity did not come into common usage until the latter part of the twentieth century…it is a term that is strongly contested in …academic literature.” Relating the term to ‘nationalism,’ Joireman insists that: “ethnicity is a benign manifestation of identity [while] nationalism [is] a politicized shared identity.” Shedding more light on what ethnicity entails, Hutchinson and Smith (1996) present the characteristics of ethnic groups as follows:

- A proper name, such as ‘Hutu’, ‘Tutsi’, ‘Ijaw’, ‘Hausa’, ‘Serbian,’ African-American’, ‘Lebanese’ etc,
- A myth of common ancestry,
- Common historical memories. This can refer to events and celebrations, heroes or other common experiences,
• A universal culture, defined by language or religion or customs or some mix of these three,
• A connection with a geographic homeland, and
• A sense of common root or commonality among some members of the population.

While most of the above characteristics can be taken on face value, the ‘myth of common ancestry’ calls for revisitation, albeit briefly. It is therefore necessary that we note that ‘myth’ is a highly apposite word because ethnicity is not concerned with the hereditary realities of common ancestry, rather, it is concerned with the popularized beliefs regarding ancestry. For instance, Moses grew up and was socialized in the culture of Egyptian monarchy with all the trappings of Egyptian ethnicity until his real identity as a Jew was discovered. Had his Jewish identity remained a secret, Moses could have ascended to the highest throne in Egypt of that epoch.

As a social phenomenon, ethnicity has attracted enormous attention in social and political relations in Nigeria with special reference to relationships amongst the numerous disparate ethnic groups that form the agglomeration called Nigeria. It has been pointed out that; “practically every major national issue [in Nigeria] is cast in the mold of ethnicity, and this leads to virulent ethnocentric vituperation being a common feature in every national discourse.” (Osai, 2006:43) The reality of ethnicity in Nigeria is such that most Nigerians consider themselves, firstly, as members of a particular ethnic group; secondly, as indigenes of a local government or state and thirdly as Nigerians, in that
descending order of allegiance and loyalty. While the existence of ethno-cultural peculiarities and uniqueness such as customs, language, religion, and other primordial elements creates challenges for national unity, they need not preclude the possibility of such unity. It is the misuse of these primordial forces for negative and divisive ends by the political elite and, sometimes, traditional rulers of the different groups, that is the root of the problem. With this negative use, the quest for public office is seen from the perspective of promoting the socioeconomic gains of one ethnic group against the others in an atmosphere of continual inter-ethnic contest for economic and political dominance. The end result of this is that patriotism has given way to parochialism or, at best, sectionalism, all in the name of ethnicity. (Osai, 1997)

In consonance with the above and with emphasis on the public service, Oronsanya (1984) offers that: “authority figures apply ascriptive values and particularistic rather than universalistic criteria in recruitment, placement, redeployment, promotion and numerous political patronages.” In a more recent reaction, Ali Mazrui (2004) contends that Nigerians are more strongly moved by socio-cultural ideologies than appeals to such primordial forces as ethnicity, religion, micro-nationalism and regional allegiance. In a rather philosophical and yet practical perception of ethnicity, Horowitz (1985) contends that it “entails not the collective will to exist but the existing will to collect.” Here, we note not only the situationality of ethnicity but also its instrumentality. Espousing support for the situationality of ethnicity, Joireman, (2003:35) views ethnicity from the perspective of instrumentalism and contends that ethnicity is the:
Means to some specific political end, and as such it is focused on the goals of ethnic groups rather than the origins. Ethnicity is [therefore] changeable. It is not a characteristic acquired at birth and consistent over time. Moreover, ethnic identities may be important sometimes and in some circumstances and completely absent at other times.

In the study of ethnicity, three schools of thought have emerged; each approaching the study based on its tenets. Historically speaking, there was the primordial school of thought; then came the instrumentalist school of thought and social constructivism, which is the third. Irrespective of the perspective from which ethnicity is viewed, be it primordialism, instrumentalism or social constructivism, the study of ethnicity is not easy. This is because it is not as clear-cut as studying citizenship or war between states, where it is categorically clear to which state someone belongs. Lake and Rothchild (1996) offer that as many groups that have been shut out of the political process in the past, or have themselves limited the participation of others, face uncertainties; resultantly, a collective apprehension of the future is the powerhouse of numerous and fierce ethnic conflicts.

Nationalist movements, often based on ethnicity and having independent states as their goal, will always have strong enemies to contend with, as they threatening the territorial integrity of the state. Geetz, (1963) offers that economic, class, and intellectual disaffection threatens revolution, but disaffection based on race, language, or culture threatens partition, irredentism, or merger redrawing of the very limits of the state and a new definition of its domain
Ethnocentrism

Arguably, the first definition of ethnocentrism as a form of sociocentrism is by Summer (1953:18) who offered that ethnocentrism is a “view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it…Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities and looks with contempt on outsiders.” For a concept evolved at the turn of the twentieth century, Summer’s grasp of the duality of ethnocentrism is commendable. However, his definition focuses on the group rather than the attitudinal disposition of the group towards other groups. In this regard, Preiswerk and Perrot (1978:14) zero in on that element as they define ethnocentrism as:

The attitude of a group which consists of attributing to itself a central position compared to other groups, valuing positively its achievements and particular characteristics, adopting a projective type of behavior toward out-groups and interpreting the out-group through the in-group’s mode of thinking.

Nnoli (1980) holds that ethnic groups are social formations differentiated by the shared and peculiar characteristics (such as language, culture etc) of their boundaries; ethnocentrism, on the other hand, is behavioral in form and perceptual in content and symbolizes the prejudiced or emotive component of ethnic behavior. The members of an ethnic group are ethnocentric when they are proud of their culture and perceive their beliefs, folkways and mores as superior to those of other ethnic groups. In its inward-looking element, ethnocentrism is basically the affection to and pride in the group, and its attributes are restricted to beliefs, group identity, parochial orientation and group pride. For Olatunde
(1993), ethnocentrism is the partly conscious and partly unconscious predisposition to hold the aspects of the culture of the group into which one was born and socialized, as the paradigm against which one evaluates, negatively or as inferior, the aspects of the cultures of other ethnic groups.

Ethnocentrism is therefore a social malaise in the Nigerian national life. It is the divisive product of ethnicity. It is a cankerworm or cancer that, if allowed to fester, is bound to destroy the nation. This is even more so in a situation where it is regularly strengthened by government’s continued reliance on certain institutions whose anachronism and antics continue to pull the people of the country in the opposite directions of integration and cohesion.

In a fairly balanced assessment of ethnocentrism, Olatunde (1993) further offers that for the members of a culture group, living in relative isolation and independence from members of other differing cultural groups, ethnocentrism is a positive integrative force. However, in the Nigerian situation, where the forces of history have brought members of many ethnic groups with their cultural differences into physical, economic, social, and political contacts and competition, ethnocentrism, if unrestrained and managed, can become quite dysfunctional.

The tendency toward ethnocentric reaction, judgments and cognitive assessment of one’s own culture and those of others, derives mainly from socialization, beliefs and social conformity and reciprocity. To these we shall now turn:
**Socialization**

Socialization of individuals into the beliefs, values, norms and practices of their ethnic groups is carried out in the family and other social units, the members of which exist in the vast majority of cases, in ethnically homogenous communities, living in relative and, in most cases, complete isolation from members of differing ethnic/tribal communities. This scenario is predicated and sustained on the concept of geographic exclusivism. This is a phenomenon that confines a person and his posterity to being a native of the community of his paternal ancestors irrespective of how long he has been domiciled in another community.

**Belief System**

Beliefs, values, norms and practices are institutionalized in the personality of the individual members, either on the basis of their being in accord with the dictates and injunctions of sacred, revered beings such as sky gods, nature gods or ancestors, or on their being in existence from time immemorial; or on the basis of their rational, instrumental efficiency,

**Social Conformity and Reciprocity**

In every social formation, there is always the commitment to, and positive affirmation of, the beliefs, values, norms and practices shared by persons that individuals depend on for meeting their human needs and to whom they therefore owe obligation of social conformity and reciprocity. This is applicable to
the family as the basic unit of socialization as it is to the community and even formal and informal organizations outside the community.

**Ethnocracy**

This is a coinage from ethnicity and “cracy,” which means governance, and is used in reference to the extent to which ethnicity has become imbedded in the process of selecting leadership in Nigeria. For instance, the presidential election of 2007 in Nigeria focused more on ethnic rhetoric than on issues. The South-south argued that since it has never held the position of President, it should be given the opportunity to produce the next president. In so demanding, the statistics of the headship of the Nigerian government were presented and reference was made to the first mono-tribal presidential election that pitched Chief Olusegun Obasanjo against Chief Olu Falae, both from the Yoruba ethnic group. At the other end of the divide, it was argued that:

Given the realities of ethnocentrism in Nigerian politics, the North will not sit aside and watch the South take the presidency for another term after eight years of southern presidency. That the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) will likely zone the vice presidency to the South-South in view of the fact that that is the only region that has not held the presidency in the political history of Nigeria. That in the face of [this] the Ijaw nation would insist on the vice presidency; Governor Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa State had alluded to this when he drew a distinctive line between what he dubbed “blue blooded South-South” and others within the South-South. (Osai, 2007:123)

From Alamieyeseigha’s reaction, we note that within the multi-ethnic South-south geopolitical group, there are those who consider themselves more South-south than others.
Perhaps, the most barefaced expression of the effects of ethnocracy is the annulment of the election of Chief M.K.O. Abiola as president. In June 1993, Chief Abiola emerged the winner in what is widely acclaimed as the most free and fair election in the history of Nigeria. (Diamond, et al, 1997) According to Prof Omoruyi, a confidant and political adviser to President Ibrahim Babangida, the annulment originated from the Sokoto Caliphate, which, he claimed, could not at that stage of the national development accept the political leadership of a southerner. (TELL, September 29, 1977) This is, of course, a problematic thesis, considering the fact that Babangida was no cipher. Acutely ambitious, Babangida was not a push over. He was the strong military president, who appeared to have all the cards in his hands. His greatest strength was his ability to adroitly play one group against the other to achieve and promote his ambition to cling on to power. Being a Babangida apologist, Omoruiyi may have proferred this explanation to absolve his boss who may have sought to use the Caliphate as a cover to perpetuate his ambition to elongate his tenure. (Paul Beckett and Crawford Young, 1997) Taken alongside the emergence of Chief Obasanjo, a southerner, as president in 1999, Omoruyi’s argument becomes questionable. However, the issue of sequestering leadership based on ethnicity (ethnocracy, which finds expression in the concept of zoning) is still the unwritten rule in the current Nigerian political scene.
Elitism

With the Athenian (direct) democracy having receded into the annals of history and mega-states emerging on the global scene, representative government has become the order of the day in modern democracies. Resultantly, individuals are now chosen through the process of election to run the affairs of the people through the institutions of government. (Osai, 1998) In the words of former British Prime Minister, Gladstone (1809-1898):

No people of a magnitude to be called a nation has ever, in strictness, governed itself; the utmost, which appears to be attainable, under the conditions of human life, is that it should chose its governors [emphasis, mine] and that it should on select occasions bear directly on their action. (Goodwin, 1951:226)

In line with the above assertion and emphasizing the inexorability of elitism, Dye and Zeigler (1971) offer that: “whether elites are public-minded or self-seeking, open or closed, competitive or consensual, pyramidal or pluralistic, responsive or irresponsive, it is the elites and not the masses who govern the modern state [emphasis, mine].” (Shank, 1974:15) Similarly, Dahl (1961) holds that key political, economic and social decisions are made by tiny minorities [emphasis, mine]. The inevitability of the representative element in modern democracy and the consequent elitism demands therefore that the electorate ensures that the electoral process as a machinery for choosing leadership is optimally utilized to elect political parties with people-friendly programs and the right caliber of persons to run the affairs of the state.

Shedding more light on the essence and utility of democracy, with special reference to the electoral process, MacIver (1947:198) alludes to the inevitability
of elitism when he insists that “democracy is not a way of governing, whether by majority or otherwise, but primarily a way of determining who shall govern and broadly to what ends… the people… do not and cannot govern [emphasis mine]; they control the government.”

Elite theory, one of the purviews of public policy analysis, asserts that public policy reflects the views, preferences and values of a governing elite. Although it is generally assumed that public policy reflects the demands of the people, the truth remains that the people are apathetic and ill informed about public policy; therefore, elites actually shape mass opinion on policy questions more than the masses shape elite opinion. Thus, public policy really reflects the preferences of elites. Public officials and administrators merely carry out the policies decided upon by the elite. Generally, policies move “downward” from elites to the masses; they rarely arise from mass demands.

*Nigeriana: Portraiture on Ethnicity and Elitism in Nigeria.*

We shall begin this segment of this discourse by drawing from the aphorism, which holds that: “a picture is worth a thousand words,” and add that a painting is worth a million words. Without being drawn into the semantics and polemics of the difference between a picture and a painting, we shall, for this purpose, accept a picture to be a photograph—the product of a still camera; we shall also see a painting as an artist's impression of an object, on canvass. Again, within the typology of painting, we shall draw a distinction between the artist's impression of an existing object (structure, scenery etc) and the
committing to canvass the products of imaginative thoughts of the artist. We note that while the former is objective, the latter is subjective and therefore allows the artist to stretch his creative ingenuity and strokes of the brush to the limits of his mind's eyes. And being the frontier of infinite possibilities, the mind has the capacity of taking the artist on an eternal spree, accessing where flesh and blood, as we know them, have not dared.

Nameless and undated, *Nigeriana* is by Agboola Ayodeji, painting under the auspices of Gifted Hands Concepts. While it would be a safe assumption to locate the artist in the Yoruba nation as a result of his name, spirited effort was made to search him out in the hope of determining the date and, possibly, ascertain what inspired the painting but that failed as the predecessor of the DS also met the portrait there and had no information on the artist. We can only conjecture that the work was part of the furnishings of the building, ab initio, as a result of its symbolism. So to determine what inspired the painting, whether it was commissioned or otherwise is, to the extent of the effort, impossible. Again, that the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) requires the registration number of a company registered under the laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria before giving information on it ended the search for Gifted Hands Concepts since that information was not available. The next step would have been an advert in the newspapers; in the Nigerian academia where research funds are simply not there, that option became unlikely since the search so far was funded from the meager resources of the author, a teacher in a Third World society.
For presentational convenience, the portrait has been christened *Nigeriana*, a caption that reflects the theme. *Nigeriana* is portraiture, on canvass, of seven Nigerians positioned on two sides of a road-like table that stretches from the fore of the portrait to a point where the silhouette of a man who is implicitly presiding over the affairs of the people is; the road-like table is adorned with green-white-green—colors of the Nigerian national flag. From their attires, six out of the seven persons represent ethno-linguistic groups of Nigeria with the seventh providing gender tokenism. The Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, Niger Delta and the Middle Belt including a representative of the women folk are obviously present in the depiction. The portrait therefore encapsulates, in bold relief, the ethno-political realities of the Nigerian project. Beyond these discernible figures, a crowd, which is distant from the scene, is visible in their drab, dreary and shadowy form that is more like a silhouette.

**Observations**

From *Nigeriana* we note that, agitated by a decision or position taken by the Hausa man, the Ibo man, who, in view of his peculiar attire, is obviously of the Abriba extraction, raises a hand in violent protest if not a defiant attack. Confident in himself and insistent on his position, the Hausa man is absolutely unperturbed by the threat; he is evidently unruffled, with his Aminu Kano trademark “tower of pizza” cap steady on its foundation of scalp and receding hairline. A critique of the physique and mien of the Hausa man vis-à-vis that of the Ibo man shows such instructive contrasts that are reminiscent of the “I sold
on credit/I sold in cash” portrait that adorned the walls of virtually every store in Nigeria, in the past, especially in the rural areas.

Beyond these two, a woman, dressed in Yoruba attire, is in a dejected mood, practically sobbing. Her countenance is reflective of the chauvinistic element of the Nigerian society, which is extended to politics where the role of women has been minimal. However, the situation is improving rather rapidly with women serving or having served in such positions as Speaker of House of Representatives, Senators, Ministers, Deputy Governors and even as Governor, albeit momentarily. Beyond the woman, is a man, dressed in an attire that is obviously depictive of the Tivs of the Middle Belt, but he is not visible enough for his physiognomy to be clearly discernable. Thus, his feelings and emotions are therefore barely visible thus indiscernible in the art. The inference here is the marginal place of the minorities of the Middle Belt in Nigerian politics, especially during democratic dispensation.

On the other side of the table, a Yoruba man raises his two hands halfway in helplessness while the Niger Delta man, in his characteristic hat, woko (big and long shirt of thick and colorful fabric), wrapper and coral beads, sits and watches helplessly and hopelessly. His facial features denote a state of absolute discomfiture and misery but obvious contemplation of other means of addressing the situation. This is probably because he cannot find justice in the dialogue-driven democratic process where the minority is usually allowed to sit and speak while the majority always insists on having its ways. The twitch on his face and the twinkle in his eyes are ominous. Next to the Niger Delta man, the Fulani,
sporting his trademark straw hat and sleeveless top made of hand-woven fragile fabric, obviously expresses surprise at the hullabaloo; his expression implies satisfaction with the way things are, so he wonders, kinetically, why the hue and cry by the others. Note that the foreground of portrait is occupied by what is generally referred to as the tribal tripod of Nigerian politics—Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo, of Wazobia fame. Since the Fulani rides comfortably on the political back of the Hausa, the other groups (Niger Delta, woman and Tiv) reflected in the portrait share the commonality of playing the second fiddle. Note further that these three groups are silent in the portrait while the others expressed themselves, as least kinetically, which is the most a painting can offer, given its lack of audio. The other minority groups that are not reflected in the portrait remain part of the mix but with no discernible influence on the state of affairs in the country. This assertion is without prejudice to some individuals from minority groups who have transcended ethno-regional political contraints to make their marks at the national level, often purely on their own merit.

Whereas these seven Nigerians are identifiable in the portrait as representing their ethnic groups and gender, the man sitting at the head of the “flag table,” with table-wide shoulders, is silhouetted as a result of distance from the discussants. This could be read as insensitivity of leaders and elites in high offices, which is characteristic of leadership in Nigeria, especially during military dispensation. Meanwhile, the masses in the portrait share the commonalities of being drab, dreary and, naturally, not part of the discussion; they all face and therefore look up to the distant silhouette at the head of the table.
However, beneath the colorlessness of the masses, *Nigeriana* depicts an enormous bond of energy amongst the participants. This energy is observable to the discerning eye or mind and it is energy that has the capacity of precipitating progressive change. Unfortunately, it is an energy that has been made dormant by the palpably divisive essence of the altercations in *Nigeriana*, and altercation that is reflective of the degree of ethnocentrism that is found in the vituperations of public office holders especially at the national level.

**Analysis**

*Nigeriana* is a furtherance of the role of arts and the engagement of artists in Nigeria’s politics and society. Hitherto, artistic engagement with politics, other than literary works, had been primarily through cartoons, music and drama; this is found in songs, cartoons and drama that date back to the 1960s with Hubert Ogunde’s *Yoruba Ronu* being very prominent in artistic constructive engagement in politics. With the general discontent with governance, such art works are becoming very popular as people consider the artists as vanguards of the civil society; and here lies the forces that generate, inspire, promote and sustain such forms of public culture expression. The symbolism of *Nigeriana* hanging on the wall behind the seat of the DS is subject to a multiplicity of interpretations that could be as diverse as the number of critics. However, the obvious is that *Nigeriana* is a depiction of Nigerians gathered for purposes of public policy, which is, fundamentally, what takes place in the National Assembly where the DS is a major player.
That *Nigeriana* is not dated makes it impossible to locate it within a timeframe with specificity; all that can be done is hazard a well thought-out conjecture. That the portrait was seen in the office of the DS in 2004 and was there in 1999 when the DS’s predecessor took office, taken side-by-side with the frustration and helplessness kinetically expressed by the Yoruba man, indicate that the portrait may have been painted before the ascendancy of Obasanjo to the presidency; this places the portrait at any time before 1999. By this argument, the era of Obasanjo’s military presidency, as a timeframe, is eliminated. This argument also applies to the three-month tele-guided presidency of Ernest Shonekan. Ironsi’s brief era of unitarism is also out of the question given the agitated reaction of the Abriba warlord to the Hausa businessman-politician and the fact that the Niger Delta politicians had not started contemplating the actions implied on the expression of their personification in *Nigeriana*. If these arguments hold water and are therefore accepted, then *Nigeriana* is a depiction of the state of affairs in Nigeria during the reign of a Northerner (civilian or military). This is perhaps underscored by the fact that the bone of contention amongst the discussants in *Nigeriana* is the decisional disposition of the Hausa man in the portrait.

Beyond the above nuances, *Nigeriana* may be the artist’s expression of frustration over the persistent failure of the Nigerian elites without a historical sense of mission or vision at reaching a mutually acceptable grand norm based on which the Nigerian enterprise may flourish. So, Ayodeji may have reacted to the inability of Nigerians to successfully conduct a national discourse and,
implicitly, how these national events are conducted without the masses having
the opportunity of contributing to it. How and why are the masses not allowed to
contribute to it? One may ask. Simply answered: all the national discourse, same
as depicted in *Nigeriana*, were conducted under the shadow of military
administrations that, generally, chose the participants, determined the agenda
and stipulated “no go” areas. Again, while elitism is inevitable in all
representative democracies, the budgetary provision and requirement for
constituency offices to be established and appropriately manned provides for the
necessary link between the legislators and the constituents. Unfortunately, these
offices are rarely established and when established are rarely manned and
therefore do not function. As a result of the fact that the compensations of
constituency office staff are monetized, the legislators, generally, do not employ
them; they just add the emoluments to their monthly take home. So there is a
systemic disconnect, which results in the exclusion of the masses from the
debates in this representative democracy; resultantly, they are frustrated
Reacting to this imposition and exclusion with special reference to the 1999
Constitution, Chief Gani Fawehinmi holds that:

> The preamble is false, fraudulent and deceptive. [reference to “we the
people”] We did not make the constitution. We know nothing about its
making. The making was done by 26 uninformed [uniformed] men who,
behaving like the leaders of an army of occupation, imposed this
document on us as enacted by their commander-in-chief on May 5, 1999.
Since 1914 till date, [Nigerians] have never had an input by way of a
referendum into how they should be governed. (Odondiri, 2005:147-148)

The history of constitutional development in Nigeria shows that over the
eighty-five years between the Clifford Constitution of 1922 and today, Nigeria has
been a laboratory for experimentation in Westminster parliamentarianism, true federalism, unitary system, presidentialism and other contraptions that soothed the fancy of one military despot after another generally tele-guided by ethnicity. And in the fifty years between the Independence Constitution and today, there were six different sets of fundamental laws of Nigeria. Incidentally, these instruments were heralded by one form of social upheaval and unrest or the other and under a great deal of rancor, generally laced with virulent ethnocentric vituperation from different parts of the country.

The resultant discontent with the nation as constituted and operated has led to numerous attempts by various segments of the federating ethnic nationalities to, at one point or the other, seek exit from the Nigerian union. It is on record that Chief Obafemi Awolowo served term for what was called “treasonable felony”, while Major Isaac Boro’s twelve-day revolution sought to liberate the Niger Delta from the claws of a jaundiced and insensitive federation. In his July 1966 coup day broadcast General (then Lieutenant. Colonel) Gowon’s said that: “suffice to say putting all considerations to test...[that] the basis for unity is not there” (Ademoyega, 1981:122). Similarly, Colonel Odumegu Ojukwu led an aborted thirty-month secessionist bid, which resulted in the Nigerian or Biafran civil war. It is also on record that Gideon Okar and his co-conspirators in April 1990 attempted, rather premature, to expel a group of what he described as five troublesome and domineering northern states from the Nigerian union, and that Diya and his group in 1996 also allegedly sought to dismember the nation in the event of the success of their real or phantom coup. These events (real or
alleged), presented in the chronological order of occurrence, were informed more or less by ethnic sentiments.

**Conclusion**

In the words of former British Home Secretary, Lord Chris Smith: “the arts tell stories of…civilization; they are part of…history.” (BBCWORLD, 2007)

Artwork also lends itself readily to interpretations and critical analysis that are informed by the experience, circumstance and resultant perception of every critic or scholar. Take a thousand critics to an art gallery and you may end up with one thousand and five hundred interpretations of every artwork found there. In with the light of this, Barna (1997:21) observes that: “even the most brilliant team of people would see different elements and nuances in a Picasso or Rembrandt.” Consequently, the enterprise of this conclusion is entered into without prejudice to whatever interpretations will result from the perception of *Nigeriana* by other connoisseurs of art.

The essence of *Nigeriana*, based on the meanings read herein and interpretations made, underscores the elitist essence of the Nigerian political system and the fact that the masses have been hoodwinked and blinded to the fact that, irrespective of the differences in tribe, tongue and creed, they all share the lower rung of the Nigerian socioeconomic ladder. At this level, they are all together mutual recipient of the effects of the decisions of the leadership (elite). Notable among these have been deseases- resulting from an inefficient and ineffective health care delivery (HCD) system, poverty and the consequent malnutrition, bad roads and the resultant carnage on the highways, and
collapsed infrastructure. Others include a crippled educational system, an ever-expanding unemployment pool that now includes graduates, lack of water, constant power outage, crippling inter-community conflict, and general hostility which borders on xenophobia in the Nigerian socioeconomic and political milieu. As a result of continuing economic mismanagement and rampant corruption, these problems have persisted, in spite of enormous wealth and natural resources possessed by the country. A half educated elites lacking a sense of history, mission, and vision, and totally devoid of any idea of how to win elections or compete with others in a free and fair contest, often resort to playing the ethnic game or to violence to achieve their self or group interests.

In line with the above view, Obasanjo asserts that: “the ordinary Nigerians are no problem. They are wonderful in hospitality, forbearance, tolerance, and in the love for their fellow human being. But the elite…it is when the elite want something and cannot get it that they remember that you are Igbo and he is Yoruba. Or he is Hausa and you are Igbo.” (TELL May 14, 2007:23-4) Here, Obasanjo’s averment points at the situationality and instrumentality of ethnicity. This is underscored by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Northerners voted to put Abiola in power and the fact that Tofa lost his home state (Kano) to Abiola in that election, which, as stated earlier, has been adjudged the freest and fairest election in the political history of Nigeria; this is a clear indication that the Northern elite did not succeed, if they tried, in influencing the masses to vote for a Northerner. It is also an eloquent testimony to the fact that the masses were beginning to think for themselves, independent of elite influence. On the other
hand, it could also mean that it was the decision of the majority of the northern elite to vote for Abiola, with the masses following suit.

That Ayodeji adorned the female member of the discussants in Yoruba attire gives the artist away as having not transcended ethnicity; it is an unfortunate telltale of the extent to which ethnicity runs deep into the inner recesses of the Nigerian psyche affecting the politician, artist, the intelligentsia, the literati in the Ivory Towers and even the clergy. While the presence of the woman discussant provides the necessary gender tokenism, the artist, whose name clearly indicates that he is Yoruba, would have adorned her in the attire of any ethnic or tribal group in Nigeria other than his.

In summation, *Nigeriana* is a very eloquent and voluble single frame rendering of how ethnicity and the associated negative isms in the Nigerian socioeconomic and ethnopolitical setting have continued to extend their divisive frontiers to the detriment of forging a nation out of the disparate ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria. This, the portrait portrays, thrives under the persistence of elitism, which only survives in the face of masses that refuse to see beyond ethnic and religious lines to know that the determinant social hedgerow is economic and that the elite will sink their differences and eternally employ the best of their collective endeavors to give every situation an ominous ethno-religious coloration.

A parting instance is that at the height of the seeming crises between President Obasanjo and Governor Ngige of Anambra State, Mr. President was seen sauntering through virtually every walkway holding hands with Governor
Ngige during the birthday of a political bigwig on January 7, 2006, in a countrified community in Anambra State; and all the men of worth from the Ibo nation were there exchanging pleasantries and bear hugs, irrespective of their political differences; differences that have precipitated intra-tribal, inter and intra-community skirmishes; skirmishes that have, in many cases, led to fatalities and wanton destruction of properties.

Succinctly stated, *Nigeriana* is an apt paint-and-brush portraiture of elitism in Nigeria. In a single frame, it lucidly and eloquently presents the essence of elitism as it applies to Nigeria while reflecting its diverse culture. It is depictive of the ‘governors’ of Gladstone’s opinion, the ‘who shall govern’ of MacIver’s view, the ‘tiny minorities’ of Dahl’s postulate and ‘the elites’ of Dye and Zeigler’s contention. Finally, it persuasively underscores the inevitability of elitism in representative democracy and its application to the Nigerian political situation.

**What is to be done**

Globally, civil society is beginning to assert itself, especially in the Third World. Operators of the political system are being pressured into enacting public policies that foster human capacity building with a greater focus on the family. Spirited demand is being made on government to adopt alternative development as a public policy option towards a viable economy. Towards this, the following are suggested for the Nigerian system:

- Political office holders, especially the president, governors and legislators should look beyond the self and seek a better and more viable Nigeria by
embracing the concept of alternative development—demos-centric (people-focused) development. While this may be interpreted as class suicide in the Marxist paradigm, the fact remains that it gives capitalism a human face as it enhances economic and social stability.

- Government should ensure compliance in the establishment and maintenance of constituency offices for all cadres of legislators; this will reconnect the legislators to their constituents.

- National Orientation Agency (NOA) should embark on mass enlightenment program to educate the people on the utility of constituency offices and what to expect from their representatives; the mass media could be of enormous assistance in this regard.

- Very importantly, the Nigerian masses must see themselves as one indivisible entity united by the common denominators of pervading poverty, malnutrition, disease, collapsed infrastructure, crippled educational system, dysfunctional health-care delivery system, lack of water, constant power outage, inter-community conflict, insecurity, general hostility, and domination and exploitation by the elites all in the face of enormous wealth; they must reject the primordial sentiments of ethnicity and religious dogmatism and chauvinism.

- Civil society must organize itself, tap into the Representative-Constituent Chain towards demanding for people-oriented development; development that is geared towards human capacity building.
While the intra-class crisis finds expression in the wave of impeachment across the country, the masses should explore the inter-class war of recall. Recalcitrant or non-performing legislators should be recalled and better replacements elected through by-elections.

Having been economically empowered, their capacity for political participation would crystallize. This could roll back the frontiers of rigging.

If the political events in national life of Nigerians are subject to empirical realities, we note that mass mobilization is achievable as evidenced by the uprising that greeted many of the electoral manipulations and other brazen mal-administrations of the past: The wild, wild, West of 1965; Major Isaac Boro’s uprising to liberate the Niger Delta; June 12, 1993 crisis; Tiv uprising; and the current volatility of the Niger Delta that has threatened to cripple the oil industry.

The masses and civil society in Nigeria must harness the bond of energy clearly present in the portrait, borrow from the global trend of constructive engagement and demand and insist on alternative development—demo-centric development.
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