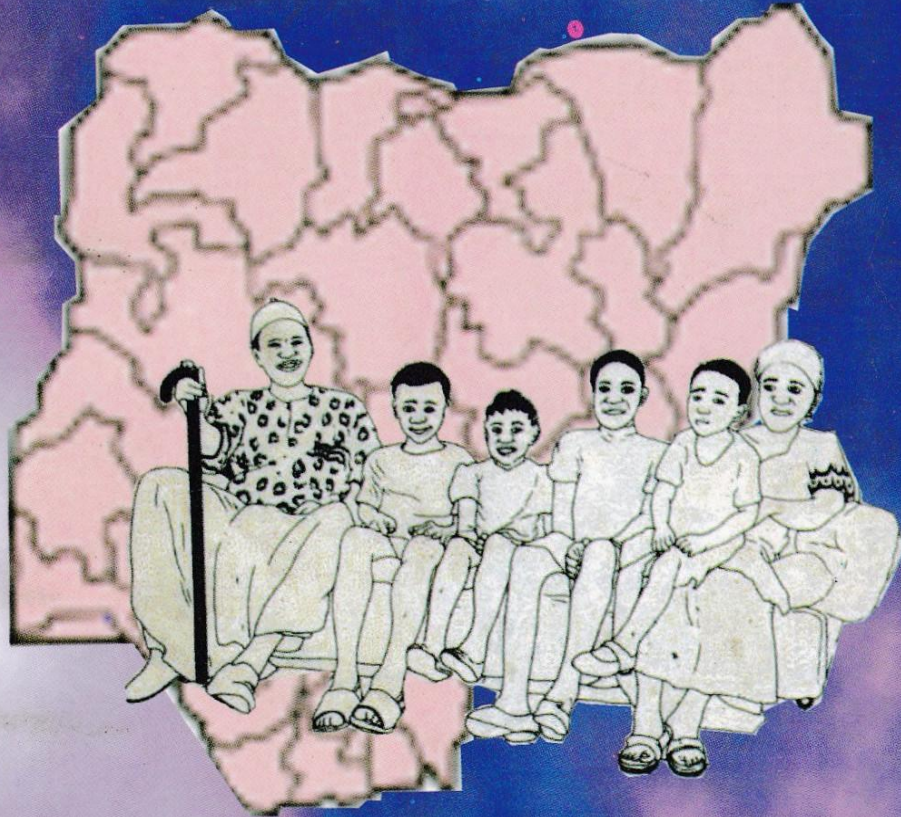


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POLITICS OF HEADCOUNTS IN NIGERIA: THE STRUGGLE FOR NUMBERS

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ABSTRACT

The paper sets out to appraise the justification for the high degree of controversy which population censuses in Nigeria always turn out to be. It adopts the historical approach and locates the essence of Headcount in the practice of Athenian Democracy. In its investigation of the rationale for the ever present contest for number in Nigeria, it establishes that the struggle for number is not unconnected with the political and fiscal expediencies which census confers on the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Headcount often allows the government the privilege to have an estimate of its expected income from taxes (though this often is ignored in Nigeria). It states the number of people in each social group to enable public goods to be provided by the state, it allows for the delineation of political constituencies for representation and how much fiscal funds should be allocated to each ethnic group with the highest number of people. This explains the intensity of the politics of headcount in Nigeria. The paper concludes that the concern with the distribution rather than with the making of fiscal resources base upon figures accounts for the intensity of the struggle for numbers in all Nigeria's headcounts.

Introduction

In Nigeria, all the act of headcount has always be contentious. For instance, the fact that the 1991 population census had been certified to be 88,514,501 was heartening to those of us who had always believed that the 1963 census figures were highly inflated and that the various populations projections based on them were equally unrealistic. It was confidentially known to a few statisticians, political leaders and analysts that the 1962 census count put the Nigerian population at about 42.5 million and not 55.6 million that was eventually manipulated and accepted by the government. In 1973, the original census figures obtained by the census authority was said to be

about 55.3 million and not 75.6 million that was to be officially released had there not been powerful protest which made the Murtala-Obasanjo administration cancel the figure in 1975. Also, if we agree that there had been a high degree of rural-urban migration in the last three decades, it becomes unscientific and double-counting to ascribe a high rate of population growth of about five per cent per annum to the main urban centres, while at the same time, projecting that the population of the rural areas was growing at about 3.3 per cent per annum. These lacunae had made the problem of how many real Nigerians we are not a statistical, but a political and speculative issue (Aluko, 1992:A7). What is responsible for this struggle for numbers in Nigeria?

Problem Statement

Head count or censuses has always been shrouded in controversy in Nigeria. The 1962 headcount was cancelled for 1963 temporary exercise which swapped the minority to majority and vice versa. 1973 exercise was cancelled. The 1991 and 2006 were equally fraught with intense disagreement with Lagos state contesting same in the court till recently. It is the conjecture of this paper that headcount or numbers have specific advantages it generates hence the contest to be allocated the highest of the numbers. Thus if the census is conducted today in Nigeria, it would certainly be contested. Why the colonial master 'Britain' did rig elections and census for the North? (*Tell* No. 10, March 7, 2005). What is responsible for this ever present controversy of the numbers allocated to each nation within the Nigerian state? This is the question addressed in this discourse as outlined in the various sections to which the paper has been divided into.

Objectives of the Paper

In this paper it is averred that that 'Census' or 'Headcount' is intended:

- i. To enable the Government know the total number of people in the state and to know the percentage of the taxable population in order to estimate its expected income thereof;
- ii. Head count is also intended to enable the Government know the ratio of distribution of the various categories of persons of different age group, in order to provide corresponding social services (public-goods) for their use;
- iii. It is imperative to delineate political constituencies for effective political representation in organs of governance, as a constituency that is too large would make political representation ineffective;
- iv. Political constituencies based on 'head count' translate to political power

and inadvertently economic power. Put differently, the struggle for numbers in the Nigerian federation is as a result of the fact that number guarantees political power which translates to the power to decide who gets what when and how. This is why political struggle for numbers is insatiable in Nigeria. The higher your number, the higher the amount of fiscal allocation accruing to a group.

These *raison d'etre* accounts for the struggle for numbers; since politics is 'who gets what when and how' as Professor Lasswell would say. But why is the struggle so intensive in Nigeria?

Theoretical Basis of Head Count

Theoretically, we derived from political theory the basis of 'head count' in the conduct of Athenian democracy in which every ward was represented according to their number, in the build-up of the social contract and the government based on consent. The number of people in a ward would mean greater number to represent them. This translates to power or majoritarian tyranny in democratic setting as currently being seen in Nigeria. This is the outcome of the man's escape from the Hobbesian state of nature into a political community.

John Locke, following in the steps of Hobbes opined that men lived peacefully in the state of nature and owned private property. But unable to protect their rights in the state of nature, people therefore established government for that purpose. In doing so, they delegated to government the authority to make and enforce laws, but they stipulate that government must abide by the will of the majority (Morton, *et al*, 1976:417). The contest for numbers in the Nigerian state is to be the majority. The law of nature he averred regulated the relationship among men with the proviso 'no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty and possession. The difficulty of applying equitably and acting justifiably propelled the movement of the society into a political community through the social contract.

Social contract according to McClean *et al*, was a contract between persons in pre-political or pre-social condition specifying the terms upon which they are prepared to enter society or submit to political authority ... adherent of social contract theory need not suppose the historical reality of the agreement, for they are often interested in exploring the limits of political obligation by reference to what a rational actor would be prepared to agree to, given such gains and losses, (2003:493). Out of the social contract emerged the Leviathan-Government in which men surrendered part of their natural rights

to in return for the assurance of peace and security, provision of all those services in which the individuals in the state of nature could not provide individually for themselves. The Government was to provide public goods. Implicit in this theory therefore is the fact that the Government need to know how many people it is supposed to provide specific type of public goods. This is the crux and essence of a Headcount or census, as ordered by the Emperor Augustus Caesar. It is instructive to note that both in the imperial and post imperial times, 'headcount' had dual purposes. To know the number of people to plan and provide services for as well as to know the quantum of estimated resources expected from the people to enhance the operations of the Leviathan. It is a liberal view to pay for services which you need. This constitutes the framework of analysis in this paper.

The Importance of Census

There are various reasons for embarking on census. But the concern with socio-economic development has made it imperative that government should know the number of people it has to provide for. Thus the reasons and uses of census could be summed up as:

- i. Much information is needed in order to institute programs that will improve health, literacy, education, income, levels of living, supplies of food and other consumer goods, agricultural production and industrial output.
- ii. Census data are collected in order to determine the representativeness of legislative bodies, the number of persons eligible to vote, and the areas or groups that have a claim to benefits deriving from the state.
- iii. Census provides a basis for much demographic, economic and social research. It makes possible the identification and description of such groups as the labour, economically dependent persons, recent migrants to cities, rural and urban populations, racial or religious minorities, refugees.
- iv. The census returns are used as a frame from which samples are selected for subsequent inquiries (Taeuber, 1968:361).

The other uses relate to the fact that census data reveals the trend of internal migration between the rural and the urban centres. It provides data on the numbers, distribution, problems and needs of disabled persons. With this statistics, government is in a better position to plan for its special citizens.

It is also through the data base provided by census that the state is able to distinguish literate and illiterate persons. Thus the educational policy of the

state gets refined to meet the needs generated by the census.

Furthermore, it informs the government on fertility level of the populace which has consequences for population growth. A well conducted headcount brings to the fore the proportion of the population engaged in active economically productive employment t the time of the census. Census data are useful in computing the labour force of both employed and unemployed in the country. It could as well supply information regarding the major economic activities of the population and the overall thrust of the economy. On this premise, it reveals the number of persons that are economically active in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

A well structured census questionnaire would also acquaint the state with the type of living houses and the facilities available to the citizenry. On mortality, it seeks to find out how many people have died in the household, the cause of death and age ranges of the dead. This helps in the formulation of virile health policy among other uses.

Essential Features of Census-Headcount

A census must have national sponsorship. Only a national government can provide the necessary resources for this form of exercise. Secondly, a census must cover a precisely defined territory; boundary changes that affect comparisons between successive censuses should be clearly stated. Thirdly all persons in the scope of the census must be included without duplication or omission. Fourthly, the people must be counted as at a fixed time. Persons born after the census date are to be excluded, and persons who die after the census date re to be included. Census is not complete until the data are compiled and published.

The United Nations has approved a set of recommendations for national population censuses that includes the following: location at the time of census and/r place of usual residence, relation to the head of household or family, sex, age, marital status, place of birth, citizenship, whether economically active or not, occupation, industry, status (as employer or employee, etc.), language, ethnic or nationality characteristics, literacy, level of education, school attendance, and the number of children born to each woman (United Nations, 1958). The minimum data collection scope for countries that could not include ll the questions in their questionnaires should apply, sex, age, marital status, some indication of economic activity.

It is instructive to state that a successful census is contingent upon availability of the following tools: well structured questionnaires, recruitment and training of both permanent and ad-hoc staff, enumeration of area

demarcation and the adoption of *de facto* method of enumeration and vehicular facilities.

Head Counts [Census] in Nigeria

The British colonial authority stamped their authority in Nigeria in 1861 when they took over the Lagos colony. The colonial authorities had sought to know the population of the areas under their domain. That was how the country was introduced into population census. Significantly, there was no country named Nigeria then, but the census was taken in a fraction of what now constitutes the federal Republic of Nigeria. The Census of 1866, 1871 and 1896 were restricted to Lagos island and part of the mainland. Those of 1901, 1911 and 1921 went beyond Lagos colony. In the real sense of the word, all these were mere population estimates. The country's real experiences with elaborate population census were in 1952/53. Its major flaw was that it did not take place simultaneously and as such gave room to double counting (Newswatch, 2006:38). Another source which outlined the history of 'Head count' in Nigeria upheld that the first census in Nigeria was organized from the Government House, Zungeru, in 1911 and gave the total figure as 15,966,380 (North, 8,110,531 and South 7,855,749). The second census came in 1921, after the amalgamation of Northern and Southern provinces in 1914, which included the first territory of Southern and Northern Cameroon which had become part of Nigeria ... the census of 1931 was given as 19,922,729 .. was a product of documentary inferences on social economic and political reports. The distribution was Northern Provinces 11,010,668; Southern Province 8,115,034, 1952/53, Northern Province, Lagos and Southern Provinces were counted in 1952, and Eastern Nigeria excluding Northern and Southern Cameroon in 1953. It gave the total population as 29,093,007 (Northern Nigeria in 1952, 17,007,3277, Western Nigeria (1952) 4,595,801, Eastern Nigeria (1953) 7,217,829, Lagos (1952) 272,000 (Adedokun, 2008:40). The observation is that the increase in total populations for the four colonial census exercises were just too arbitrary to be realistic. What then was their stake? It herein reasoned that the British erred in the allocation of high headcount to the North because this number game did not translate into fiscal resources for the colonial authority. It would be recalled that at this time, the North was unable to balance its budget. This prompted the transfer of funds from England to the Northern region to enable them balance the budget. The northern budget was always in deficit.

Perhaps the census culture of controversy had emerged from the colonial conducted exercises of Headcount. For Herbert Macaulay one of the nationalist leaders had observed that the census figures which placed the north

in the majority must have been because it was conducted from Zungeru. He further claimed that the density of human habitation was in the South, that now the north came to be in the majority was a matter of speculative censuses. In the post independence 'Headcount' of 1962 the original and first results of which indicated that the people in the south were more than those in the north led to its cancellation. The initial outcome of the 1963 census, also showed that the south were more. The serious crisis that trailed it however fizzle out with a re-count of the results which now gave the north a majority (Adedokun, 2008:42). The 1973 census which ought to have been an improvement on the 1963 exercise was trailed by controversy, on account of massive irregularities, which prompted its cancellation. In 1991, the census figure of 88,514,501 million people was accepted. The result became the plank upon which government and all concerned anchored their planning. It became the bases for the distribution of who gets what, when and how many? By this token of number game, the north had it.

Headcount Significance

Earlier in the discourse of the 'theoretical basis of Headcount', we had posited that since the people wanted to assuage the inconveniences of the state of nature, they set up the Government. It was incumbent on the Government to provide those services which they could not provide individually and collectively for themselves to them. Thus the Government needed to know how many people it was providing for, else some will be left out. This accounts for the importance of 'Headcount'.

The importance of Census to a nation is legion. An accurate and reliable Headcount in a territory enhances the following:

- i. It provides the total number of persons and housing types and their distinctiveness in every locality;
- ii. It enables the Government to plan for education, health, housing and other social needs of the people;
- iii. Both the private sector and international organizations, including donor agencies also find it useful in planning its activities for the country;
- iv. It gives room for planning in such a way that sustainable development is guaranteed;
- v. The database created out of census gives room to forecast for the future needs and assists planners make realistic projections;
- vi. Censuses enable the Government evaluate the impact of its public policy;

The Politics of Numbers

The struggle for numbers is herein referred to as 'politics of numbers'. The question to ask is what do Nigerians want from numbers, which has made the struggle so ferocious? Let's break the country into its erstwhile geopolitical sections; the 12 far northern states --- have a combined population, by 1991 estimates, of 37,153,671 or 41.98 per cent of the total population. The four Ibo States ... have a population of 10,712,675 or 12 per cent, while the three minority states ... have a combined population of 8,209,197 or 9.28 per cent of the total.

Thus, if the minority states of the Middle belt (Plateau, Benue, Kwara, Kogi), of the Eastern States (Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Rivers) combine with the minority states of the Western states (Edo and Delta), their total population will be only 22,668,843 or 25.61 per cent, of Nigeria's population. Insufficient to put them into political leadership which they had always yearned for ... unless they lean heavily on one or more of the three major groups in the Northern, Western or Eastern States. It means that the northern block ... will continue to hold the political ace. It constitutes almost 53 per cent of the population for the northern states (Aluko, 1992:A7).

Though this politics of numbers tilted the political equation in favour of the north, it has a salutary effect which it could have on the nature of politics in Nigeria, given its heterogeneous component. By this fact, every political aspirant would have to pursue issues which cut across ethnic and regional sentiments in Nigeria. By this token, politics would have been a means of service delivery as contained in the manifesto of the party. Put differently a national contender for the office of the President of the country would have to be one whose appeal cuts through the nation-state rather than the present intimidatory one. Thus, the diversity of Nigeria would have become an expedient shaping tool of politics. The body politics could then be described as being characterized by both ideological and issue conflict. Beyond all these the struggle for numbers in Nigeria's headcount is to maximize the political, administrative and fiscal advantages.

Policy Implications

The 2005 population census put Nigeria's current population at 140 million people. This has already caused the government to reappraise its population policy. It does not call for that but rather the population policy should seek to establish the age component of the populace, and putting the economically active population into jobs rather than control. The further

policy proposition is an inter-ministerial linkage with those responsible for job creation for the most active population.

The composite population (details) should lead to reassessment of the entire development policy geared towards providing facilities for the needy group in the population. This in turn leads to general development pursuant to addressing every genre in the population. The impact of such a population policy would be long life expectancy, reduced child and maternal death among others.

Conclusion

Population data are necessary for development purposes. These developments are provided with finances which must be derived from the populace through taxation and many other means of public finance. Consequently, the government ought to use the population statistics towards generating estimated resources. An area which claims a large per cent of the population should be expected to contribute a certain percent to the general financial pool. This is not the case in Nigeria's federal finance. The concern with the distribution rather than with the making has accentuated the struggle for numbers in every post-independence headcount and the political expediencies it bestows, accounts for the intensity of the brawl.

The Government could turn the heterogeneity of Nigerian population to an advantage. This is because if well articulated into the guidelines for winning election, it could turn the nature of politics to that of issues away from rigging.

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