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**The Social Relations of
Identity Construction and
Reconstruction among
Ethnic Groups in Benue
State, Nigeria**



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Abstract

In Nigeria, ethnic identity occupies a salient position as it is usually mobilized for group action leading to violent and non-violent contests to establish or protect their supremacy. This study aimed at examining the social processes of ethnic identity construction and reconstruction in Benue state. On the basis of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and archival research, the study shows that ethnic pre-colonial identities were reconstructed to a Hausa identity by the colonial administration, and then evolved again afterwards. This process of reconstruction was fraught with a lot of conflicts and created identity contests for supremacy among the ethnic groups there by reconfiguring social interactions and created a situation of mutual suspicion and fear among the ethnic groups in Benue state.

Keywords: identity, history, Benue, Hausa, conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Identity is a critical aspect of social interaction as it is the basis for individual and group definition in relation to others in the society. Identity inherently connotes a principle of “we” and “them” in group interaction and defines boundaries between groups in the society. The earliest conception of identity was that it was fixed and remained permanent throughout life irrespective of social situations (Gosine 2002, Cerulo 1997, Lentz 1995). This was refuted by the psychological and sociological work of Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud, Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead. The psychodynamic tradition emerged with Sigmund Freud’s theory of identification which explains how a child develops identity through interaction with others, while that of Erikson portrays identity as a process which is located in the core of the individual yet also in the core of the communal culture pointing to the fact that identity is related to an individual’s social environment (Ashley and Orenstein 2007, Erikson 1968). The sociological works of Cooley and Mead also portray the individual as an interactive dynamic being whose identity was a reflection of the interactions with significant others in the society pointing to the fact that identity is constructed in the course of social interaction (Abraham 1982, Ritzer 2008). Beyond these traditions, the emergence of nationalist, feminist, ethnic and religious movements and contestations across societies of the world in recent times point to the fact that identity is socially constructed and can be reconstructed in the course of social interaction.

Identity has historical significance in modern Nigeria as it was a political tool used by the colonialists to make their colonization process successful. The colonialists constructed identities for ethnic groups and subsumed some other ethnic groups under more dominant ones using population and perceived cultural superiority as a basis (Obi 2004, Anugwom 2000, Jega 2000, Obi 2001, Oha 1991). For instance, the ethnic groups in the Northern region were designated as pagans and subsumed under the Hausa Fulani while hitherto autonomous kingdoms in the south western Nigeria were subdued under the new Oyo empire (Atanda 1973, Alubo 2006) Today the identity of ethnic groups occupies a place of salience as it could be mobilized and used as a tool for political manipulation, to contest for or against exclusion/inclusion and as a way of executing fundamentalist hate values (Gandu 2001, Nagel 1996). At independence the colonialists had successfully constructed a tri polar ethno-political and social structure was dominated by the Hausa Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo. This structure was inherited by the political elites and

the political class at independence. Contemporary post independent Nigeria has however witnessed the continual reconstructions of identities within each of these regions with different myths of origin pointing to the fact the ethnic groups were reconstructing their identity away from the inherited colonial imposed regional identity.

The middle belt area of Nigeria which is politically referred to as the North Central zone comprises of ethnic groups which were historically part of the defunct Northern region. These ethnic groups in the 1950s forged a common consciousness to contest the Hausa Fulani hegemony and their non-inclusion in the Nigeria political process and structure. Their agitations which led to the creation of the Benue-plateau state 1967 appears to have developed a crack as the ethnic groups in this region appear to be reconstructing their identities away from the homogenous north agenda (Kaza- Toure 1999, Alubo 2004). According to Best (2006), ethnic groups in this region have been involved in identity contests for inclusion and exclusion. Still following the creation of Benue State from Benue-Plateau in 1976, the state has continually experienced identity contests. At the creation of Benue state, there were two predominant identities, the Tiv and Idoma. Today other ethnic groups have emerged to contest for recognition. Some of them include Igede, Etulo, Jukun, Abakwa, Arago and Agatu. Whereas the Igede and Idoma were historically under the Idoma division before the creation of Benue state and they were also jointly referred to as Idoma. Over the years there have been conscious efforts by the Igede to construct a distinct Igede identity away from the Idoma. Within the Idoma ethnic groups other groups which were historically clans have begun to reconstruct and emphasize their identity as distinct part of the Idoma ethnic group. Still, among the Tiv, clan and kindred associations have begun to engage in intra-group contest over real/perceived exclusion of aggrieved clans from the political structure and process in the state at the expense of homogenous Tiv identity. These trends point to the shifting of boundaries of ethnic groups and the reconstruction of identities. This presents a problematic situation because the identity of ethnic groups is embedded in the overall social structure of the state. Reconstructing identities means reconstructing and reconfiguring social interactions and the overall social structure. It presents a situation of a possible problematic process of identity reconstruction and as such it may be the catalyst of most of the conflict bothering on indigene, settler, visitor, stranger concepts/question in the Middle Belt region and Nigeria as a whole. In essence identity construction and reconstruction has implication for social relations within social settings. This research aimed at examining the social relations of identity construction and reconstruction among ethnic groups in Benue with the following specific objectives:

- To examine the nature of identity construction among ethnic groups in Benue state
- To examine the trend of identity reconstruction among ethnic groups in Benue state
- To examine the social relations of identity construction and reconstruction among ethnic groups in Benue state.

The study was carried out in Benue state. Benue state is located in the North Central Nigeria and is home to five ethnic groups of Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etulo and Jukun. The methodology was essentially qualitative comprising focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) as primary method and archival research at the national archives as secondary method. IDIs and KIIs were conducted among the natives of the five ethnic groups of Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etulo, and Jukun who were between 20–65 years of age. A total number of 50 IDIs and 10 FGDs were conducted. The respondents ranged from civil servants, traders, retired civil servants to students. Archival research was conducted at the National Archives Ibadan. The data collected was then subjected to content and descriptive analysis.

THE NATURE OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS IN BENUE STATE

A significant aspect of the identity of a group of people can be located in myths about their origin. These myths of origin tell about their world view and the way they see themselves. The Tiv trace their origin to the Bantu found in northern Katanga in East Africa from where they migrated through Cameroon to their present location after settling in several areas including Swem in Cameroon, where they had to galvanize themselves into defensive bands as a result of hostilities from the natives. They settled in their present location and their existence has not been without skirmishes with other neighbouring ethnic groups such as Chamba, Jukun and Udam. There are two traditions about the origin of the Tiv ethnic group. They point to the fact that these myths are not a “closed essence” that cannot be subject to change. Rather, the myths are handed down from generation to generation and they may have been modified on the basis of subsisting experience and successive realities. One tradition traces their origin to a man called Anyamazenga who had a male child called Takuruku. Takuruku married a woman known as Aliwe, who gave birth to a son named Tiv who in turn had four children out of which two of the children known as Ipusu and Ichongo produced children who now constitute the Tiv people. The descendants of the remaining two children are believed to have been integrated with the

children of Ipusu and Ichongo. The second tradition has Aondo as their progenitor. Aondo in Tiv mythology means sky or firmament. Aondo was said to have power to control the forces of nature. Aondo had a son called Takuruku who got married and produced two sons called Tiv and Uke. Tiv later got married and had Ipusu and Ichongo who produced all Tiv clans. Uke on the other hand got married and had children who are regarded as the non-Tiv today.

Archival records also trace the origin of the Tiv to the Bantu in east Africa but stated that they migrated through Sonkwala hills in Ogoja province to their present locations in Benue area (Benue Province Annual Report 1931:730). Archival records further describe them as migratory in nature; practicing shifting cultivation and as a result were steadily shifting into neighbouring provinces. This explains why the Tiv are found in Taraba, Plateau, and Nassarawa states apart from Benue state which they recognise as their home land.

The Idoma trace their origin to a place called Apa (near Wukari in Taraba state) a part of the Kwararafa alliance. They are said to be the descendants of one Idu who was the son of Oma. A combination of these two gives the name "Idoma". No other details were given in the IDIs and FGDs except for the fact that they migrated from the Kwararafa kingdom to their present location in Benue state. Archival records show two variations of origin. The first records them as being descendants of the Jukun founders of the Igala state in Idah, in Kogi state while the other account traces their origin to the Jukun who settled at the lower Niger area (Benue Province Annual Report 1931:730). The Igede trace their origin to Sabon Gida Ora in present day Edo state. They are said to be the descendants of Agba a high chief in Sabon Gida Ora. A skirmish between the Igede and the natives of Ora led to their migration from that region to the present day Benue state through Nsukka in Enugu state. Archival records on the contrary portray them as migrants from Ogoja province who have increasingly adopted the culture and practices of the Idoma (Benue Province Annual Report 1931:730). The Jukuns in Benue state trace their origin to the Kwararafa kingdom. According to the respondents, there are land-Jukuns who are predominantly in Taraba state while there are riverine-Jukuns who live at the bank of the river Benue. The Etulo trace their origin to the Kwararafa kingdom from where they migrated to the bank of river Kastina-ala in Benue state. The name Etulo in Etulo mythology denotes fatherliness, endurance and persistence. The name describes the land the people as well as their language.

An examination of these myths shows a struggle by the ethnic groups to assert their distinctiveness in relation to the other ethnic groups in the

area. The ethnic groups in this area historically were lumped together, designated as pagans and subsumed under the Hausa- Fulani through the British colonial arrangement of divide and rule. Beyond the struggle to wrench free from the imposed Hausa- Fulani identity, there appears to be a conscious effort to show that they are not just pagan tribes but they had their own distinct identity away from the wholesome middle belt identity and Benue identity. Furthermore the variation in the Tiv mythology points to the fact that a myth can be reconstructed based on prevailing social situation and interpretations. The second story not only talks about the origin of the Tiv but that of other ethnic groups lumped together. This shows that from the Tiv view point, there are two ethnic groups: the Tiv and others. The myth of migration shows the expansionist tendency of the Tiv whom archival records describe as migratory in nature.

These ethnic groups beyond the myth of origin have their identity constructed around their occupational life, culture, social organization. The Tiv social organization is built around the compound system - yar. This may comprise of several generations of one family with the eldest male as the head of the family. They are predominantly farmers who practice shifting cultivation as land is very important to them. The place of land in the life of the Tiv cannot be over emphasised as today it is a constant source of intra and inter communal/ethnic conflict among the Tiv and with other ethnic groups. The occupational life of the Tiv portrays them as hardworking, industrious and expansionist in nature. This is usually a source of contention between the Tiv and other ethnic groups in the region. Some of the ethnic groups in the course of the interviews referred to them as people who always want to own and control everything- resources, positions and opportunities. Besides this, the Tiv have a method of social control located in a belief in Mbatsav (witches and wizards) along with Ajoos (spirits). These were believed to be capable of inflicting injury, sickness and pain on their enemies and those who engaged in acts considered to be against the Tiv laws and customs. The Tiv also practice communalism; moving and eating in groups. They have festivals like the Kwaghir through which they display their cultural heritage, accentuated their identity and transmitted their culture and beliefs to the younger generation. Archival records describe the Tiv as people who were migratory in nature and lived in family groups. They had a system of shifting cultivation which resulted in the overlapping of family, family group and clan borders. The Tiv according to the records had districts which were divided into village areas corresponding to the family groups. They records also confirm the existence of the mbatsav but further explain the mbatsav is possessed by each family grouping and exercises administrative, judicial and religious control.

The Idoma on the other hand were also predominantly farmers but not migratory in nature as the Tiv. They lived in compact settlements in family groups. They placed a high premium on marriage as young people of marriageable age were regarded as irresponsible if they were not married. Infertility was regarded as a curse and adopted children were not accepted as members of the family. The male child was held in high esteem as a woman's place in her home was determined by her ability to give birth to a male child. The system of social control at this time revolved around Alekwu which was believed to punish those who went against the laws and customs of the people though it was used more against women who committed adultery. The Idoma also practiced slavery as people who were regarded as ugly were sold in to slavery. Children were kidnapped, cruelly bound and cramped in baskets and sent to Arochukwu in Ibo land (Benue provincial Annual records 1932). Deformed and imbecile children were buried alive. The richest man in the village had a lot of powers as he could use his wealth and influence to capture other peoples wives and children. They had festivals such as Alekwu festival during which there was a lot of celebration. Women and the uninitiated were not allowed to see the Alekwu as it was generally believed that a woman who saw the masquerade would not have a male child.

The Igede also live in compact settlements in village and clan arrangement with the oldest male being the head of the family group. Their own system of social control revolved around Achukwu and Akpang which were believed to punish those who violated the native laws and customs. They were also farmers that grew yam and cassava. They had various festivals like Igede Agba, and Evo which they used to accentuate their cultural heritage. They also have traditional cloth called Ogodogodo which they wear on special occasions like festivals and the coronation of a chief. The Jukuns in Benue live by the riverside and are predominantly fishermen. Their women trade in fresh and roast fish. The men weave their hair. They have tribal marks to differentiate them from other groups and they also believe in a god of thunder called Ashikan. They also worship idols such as Ashikange and Akonase. They have two traditional attires known as Adire and Akye. The major festival they celebrate is a fishing festival which is usually held in the dry season when the river Benue water level would have gone down. This fishing festival according to the respondents affords them the opportunity to showcase their cultural heritage and their mastery in terms of fishing. They are regarded generally by other ethnic groups as "people who reside in water".

The Etulo are regarded by other ethnic groups as people who are Tiv at heart but speak a different language. This may be as a result of the

proximity to the Tiv people. The Etulo do not have a local government of theirs. They are spread in two local governments predominantly occupied by the Tiv and as such the Etulo are regarded as minorities. Findings from the study portray Etulo as hunters and farmers. They also live in family groups. They have festivals such as Okpleka and Agashi which they use to assert their cultural distinctiveness and their identity. They also worshipped idols before the advent of Christianity.

THE TREND OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

Findings from the study show that the reconstruction of identity may have been influenced by a number of factors: colonialism, the introduction of education, Christianity, independence and recurrent trend of state creation, perception of dominance and subjugation in inter and intra-ethnic interactions. Colonialism actually set a tone or a stage for the reconstruction of the identities. In order to successfully colonize Nigeria the colonialist needed to create a favourable administrative and social-political structure. A major aspect of this arrangement was the tri polar construction discussed earlier on in this paper. There were three provinces; Eastern, Northern and Western provinces. The Northern region was larger than the two other regions put together. The inhabitants of the Northern region were divided into two groups both religiously and culturally into the Hausa-Fulani Muslims and the pagans who were predominantly animists (Meek 1921). Beyond this categorization, the so called pagans who were actually the minority groups were regarded as uncivilized and backward while the Muslims were regarded as civilized. Meek 1921:5 further captures this in the following:

“If we consider Islam to be a political, social and economic factor, the case is very different. Islam has brought civilization to barbarous tribes; it has converted isolated pagan groups to nations, it has made commerce with the outside world possible [...]”

The Hausa-Fulani were considered more civilized so the colonialists constructed and imposed a Hausa-Fulani identity for the pagan ethnic groups in the Northern region. The colonialists further also subdued the so called pagan tribes under the Hausa-Fulani caliphate and emirate system. Furthermore, Hausa language was adopted as the language of communication and instruction in the Northern region. Hausa was used for communication in the offices and was the medium of instruction in the schools. The pagans had to learn Hausa language so as to be relevant in the administration. The adoption of Hausa language had implications for the construction of identity of the pagan ethnic groups.

Language is a crucial aspect of identity and identity construction. Beyond the fact that language itself is an identity, it provides a way of viewing things and in effect, it constructs a kind of social reality for those who speak the language. It further places the speakers within a social structure and conditions individual or group way of thinking (Omobowale 2008). The imposition of Hausa thus imposed a Hausa identity on non-Hausa ethnic groups in the Northern region. Today all the ethnic groups in the Northern part of Nigeria are regarded as Hausa by the other ethnic groups in the other parts of Nigeria. Even though this identity persists, the other ethnic groups are not accepted by the Hausa as proper "Hausa". This has led to a situation where most of the ethnic groups apart from the Hausa Fulani have been engaged in a struggle to reconstruct their identity from the regional Hausa Fulani identity constructed and imposed on them by the British.

The Northern region was divided into provinces with the ethnic groups in Benue falling under the Munshi province. The name Munshi is actually a bastardized form of the Hausa word Munchi. Munchi in Hausa language means "we have eaten it". This name was actually given to the Tiv to depict the fact that they were devourers who could expand into any territory with or without permission. Munshi was thus a kind of identity constructed through colonialist-Hausa relations and imposed on the minority ethnic groups within the region. The name of the province had implications for the identity of the non-Hausa ethnic groups in it as it imposed bastardized Tiv identity on the other ethnic groups and also created a majority minority dichotomy within Munshi which placed Tiv as the superior ethnic group. Furthermore describing the Tiv, Charles (1965:55) succinctly states that "... the Munshi appear to be exhibit a higher form of civilization than most of the pagan tribes in the locality"; hence further constructing a kind of superior identity for the Tiv in relation to other ethnic groups in the region.

In 1925 Munshi province was renamed Benue Province and reorganised as the Idah division was handed over to Kabba Province leaving the province with four divisions of Abinsi, Idoma, Wukari and Keffi (Benue Province Annual Records 1925). Within this reorganization, the Idoma, and Igede were under the Idoma division, the Agatu and Arago under the Keffi division, the Tiv and Jukun were both under the Wukari and Abinsi division. More reorganization took place before the end of the year as the Keffi division was merged with the plateau province but the Agatu tribe was removed from the Keffi division and placed under the Idoma division. With this reorganization, the ethnic groups of Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etulo and Jukun remained within the Benue province. The Province was named after the river Benue which was one of the largest rivers in the area. The colonial

masters created kingdoms in all the major towns and imposed Muslim-Hausa Sarkis and Alkalis on the new provinces. Sarki is a Hausa word for king while Alkali is a Hausa word for judge. These were imposed on the people without recourse to their own traditions and customs further entrenching a Hausa identity on the ethnic groups. Aside the reconstruction of the peoples identity to Hausa, they were also described as barbaric and backward. For instance the Idoma were described as having a reputation for truculence and excitability and lacked cohesion while the Igede were described as primitive and were swayed by their passions and instincts (Benue Province Annual Records 1931:753).

The Idoma division was occupied by the Idoma and Igede ethnic groups. There were also other groups within the division who spoke other languages like the Agatu, Abakwa Nyifon Akweya and Apa but were all classified as Idoma. The lumping of Igede and Idoma under one division had implications for the identity construction. First of all it created an Idoma identity for all the ethnic groups in the division. As such the Igede who were migrants from the Ogoja province but were akin to the Idoma began to adopt the Idoma language and customs (Benue Province Annual Records 1931:753). This in essence constructed a majority-minority identity between the Idoma and the other ethnic groups in the division. The Idoma identity was by default imposed on the groups in the region. This identity has remained an issue of contention till date as the other ethnic groups are usually discriminated against by the Idoma who are from the Otukpo . Beyond the imposed Idoma identity, the colonialists created an inferior identity for the whole of the Idoma division in relation to the Tiv. For instance according to Benue Province Annual Records (1931:709), the Idoma are described as "... primitive people who have recently abandoned head hunting". Still, a colonial Report claims that: "Economically as well as culturally, Idoma division is the most backward area and there the scarcity if currency is greatest. Except in the extreme north where cotton is grown for sale, there is no economic crop... they are a serious embarrassment to the administration..." (Benue Province Annual Records 1934: 117). Also "... the framework of the social structure of the Egedde and the Idoma tribes is somewhat weak and difficult to wield into a satisfactory for of administration... they are primitive and swayed by their passions and instincts..." (Benue Province Annual Records 1937: 1186). Furthermore "the Idoma still of course are backward and lack a sense of justice and social obligation in their public business" (Benue Province Annual Records 1944:2). All these point to the inferior identity constructed for the Idoma in relation to the Tiv who were described as exhibiting a higher form of culture or civilization than the other ethnic groups in the

locality (Charles 1965). Furthermore as “cheerful and pleasant (Benue Province Annual Report 1937:1186) and as a tractable and teachable group (Benue Province Annual Report 1931:709). In addition to this, the Idoma were regarded as possessing less tribal cohesion than the Tiv (Benue Province Annual Report 1944:5). In the Idoma division, the Igede were described as “...hardly emerged from a state of primitive savagery into which it occasionally relapses” (Benue Province Annual Report 1934:1168) The Jukun and the Etulo were under the Abinsi division but were completely subsumed by the Tiv and overtly adopted the Tiv identity. All these in essence created an inferior identity some ethnic groups in relation to others.

Apart from colonialism, the introduction of formal education by the colonialists and Christian missionaries along with Christianity also influenced the reconstruction of identity. Ethnic groups began to give up some aspects of their cultural practices that they considered barbaric because of their exposure to Christianity and education. Between the 1940s to the 50s the ethnic groups began to reconstruct their identities away from the imposed Hausa Fulani. In 1949 the proposed revision of the Nigerian constitution led to holding of several conferences in the regions. The Idoma and Tiv divisions were represented at the northern regional conference. The non pagan members of the conference were reported to have grumbled about the way the Idoma and the Tiv dominated the proceedings. A motion was moved by the Idoma and Tiv members for the separation of the Emirates from the rest of the province but it was defeated by the larger majority (Benue Province Annual Records 1949:193). A recommendation for the establishment of a Central Province also received no support. The ethnic groups in Benue state along with other ethnic groups who had been paganised by the colonialist subsequently constructed a Middle Belt identity away from the imposed regional identity and continued to agitate for their inclusion in the Northern/ Nigerian political process and structure. In 1964, the Tiv on the floor of the Northern House of assembly articulated their grievances through Isaac Shahu who declared that the Tiv felt unwanted and they were pulling out of the North and the federation as a whole (Ibrahim 2000). Shahu further posited that the Tiv were over a million and could constitute a country of their own bigger than Mauritania and Gambia. This culminated in the Tiv riots of 1964. As a result of sustained agitations by the Tiv and other paganised tribes, Benue –Plateau state was created in 1967. Again in 1976, Benue and Plateau states were created. Inherent in the creation of these states were theatres for identity contests among ethnic groups in Benue state.

THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The creation of Benue-Plateau state and the consequent creation of Benue state further heightened the consciousness of the imposed Hausa Fulani identity on the ethnic groups in Benue state. It also created a consciousness of the colonialist's imposed Idoma and Tiv identity among the other ethnic groups in Benue state. Besides this, the provincial arrangement which was eventually reconstructed into states already had theatres for identity contests. The initial identity contest was between the Tiv and the Hausa- Fulani. Though the contests involved the other ethnic groups in the state, it was articulated in a Tiv vs. Hausa Fulani agenda since a Tiv dominant identity had been imposed on the ethnic groups in the state. Furthermore The Tiv being the dominant ethnic group saw the state as belonging to them so they were in the fore front of the struggle to wrench free from the Hausa – Fulani domination. This was evident in the adoption of the name Tiv as against Munchi which was given to them by the Hausa. Besides the change of name, the Tiv also tried to accentuate the distinct Tiv identity through the adoption of Tiv names, celebration of festivals where their distinct culture and traditions could be displayed. In the creation of Benue the Tiv ethnic group was regarded as the majority followed by the Idoma, Igede, Jukun and then Etulo. With the colonial arrangement of the division and the imposition of the dominant-subservient identities; mutual suspicion of exploitative dominance further heightened identity contests. This resulted in concerted efforts by so called subservient ethnic groups to reconstruct their identity as distinct from the imposed dominant identity and in this case; Tiv and Idoma.

Findings from the study show that there is a general perception that the Tiv dominate in political positions, employment, scholarship, land ownership and other resources/opportunities . The Idoma and Igede were under the Idoma division in the Benue province but with the creation of Benue state a separate local government was created for the Igede. The Igede over the years have been engaged in a struggle of reconstruction from the Idoma identity along with the backward and barbaric identity constructed by the British. They have used festivals such as the Igede Agba and Evo, their traditional cloth ogodogodo to emphasize their identity as different from the Idoma. The other ethnic groups like Etulo and Jukun have also made efforts to reconstruct their identity from the imposed Tiv identity towards having and accentuating a distinct Etulo or Jukun identity. Furthermore these ethnic groups have been involved in identity contests of supremacy especially to contest real/ perceived domination by other ethnic groups in the locality. Some of these contests have assumed violent dimensions. For instance the Tiv vs Jukun conflict of 1995. Beyond this

some ethnic groups like the Igede and Jukun are tagged backward, inferior and fetish by others. Inter-marriage is even forbidden especially between the Igede and the Tiv. There are also concerted efforts to transmit the culture and practices to the younger generation through festivals, seminars and workshops on their histories and the writing of books on their culture and practices. Beyond this contest for inclusion in the political process and structure has become a recurrent trend. The other ethnic groups in the course of the interviews pointed to Tiv as the dominant ethnic group who had ruled the state since inception apart from the military era. On the whole there are struggles by the ethnic groups to ensure they remain relevant in the political process and social structure within the state. In the appendix are some of the responses which show identity contests between the ethnic groups in Benue state.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to examine the social relations of identity construction and reconstruction among ethnic groups in Benue state. The study found out these though the ethnic groups had pre-colonial identities, the British colonization process and structure constructed and imposed a Hausa Fulani identity on them. Over the years these ethnic groups have been involved in wrenching free from the Hausa Fulani identity imposed on them by the British. A major aspect of this process was the agitation for the creation of a separate region or state for the ethnic groups. The creation of this state further created room for identity contests among the ethnic groups. Beyond the imposed Hausa Fulani identity, the regional and division arrangement was such that the identity of the predominant group was imposed on the other ethnic groups in the region. Over the years this has been a constant source of contention as ethnic groups attempt to reconstruct their identity from the imposed one towards constructing a distinct group identity for their own ethnic group. As a result there are concerted efforts to accentuate the identity of each ethnic group. This has also led to the emergence of identity contests among ethnic groups in the state.

Identity construction is a social process that influences and is influenced by intergroup relations. The fact that it is constructed in the course of social interaction shows it can also be reconstructed. More often than not the reconstruction is as a result of the interpretations given to events in the social settings by members of the ethnic group. The reconstruction process is usually influenced by interactions and perceptions of the significant other groups in the environment. The significant other groups could be government and more importantly, other ethnic groups in the region. In the face of real/ perceived domination along with the desire to

meet up with certain standards in the environment, ethnic groups are left with no option than to reconstruct their identity so as to remain relevant in relation to other groups within their locality.

APPENDIX

These are few responses that show identity contests among the ethnic groups:

“Other ethnic groups think we are inferior. The Idoma call us “Igede ichichi” which means can anything good come out Igede. The Tiv and Idoma use us to get what they want.” (Igede male/IDI/ 12th September 2010)

“Other ethnic groups refer to us as their servants and they do not want to give us their daughters in marriage.” (Igede male/IDI/ 12th September 2010)

“They think we are minority so they do not want to give us our proper place.” (Igede female /IDI/ 13th September 2010)

“The Idomas want to fight us to get equal share politically and in the allocation of resources.” (Tiv male/IDI/ 5th September 2010)

“The Tiv people refer to us as a tree, an object that you beat and it stands still while the other ethnic groups like us.” (Idoma male/IDI/15th September)

“We speak different language with the Idoma but they want us to be together and share Ochi Idoma but we want our own Adi Igede.” (Igede female/IDI/ 6th September 2010)

“The Tiv dominate us and we have no said in governance we had a crisis with them in 1995. In resolving the crisis, it was resolved that we should be given a chieftom of our own. They have refused to implement that recommendation. One recommendation was that our chief should be dethroned and banished which they did. Even when he died they objected to their bringing beck his corpse home for burial.” (Jukun male/IDI/22nd September 2010)

“The headquarters of Benue state was Abinsi. It was shifted to Makurdi. Jukun controlled the affairs of the state before. Now that the Tiv man is more in number and are educated, they have taken over everything.” (Jukun male/IDI/23rd September 2010)

“The other ethnic groups accept us but they are suspicious of us. The Idoma show that the Tiv are dominating. The Igede accept us. The Etulo used to be together with us but now they are trying to get their own identity.” (Tiv male/IDI/ 12th September 2010)

“The Idoma does not like the Tiv man also the Etulo and the Jukun. The Tiv man is not wanted in any place in Nigeria. Looking back at the killings in Taraba, Nassarawa, Plateau and Wurukum and the destruction and killing in Zaki biam.” (Tiv female / IDI/ 12th September 2010)

“The Jukuns and Idoma are troublesome and I cannot marry them. The Jukuns also practice witchcraft. The Idoma have no regard for widows. Anyway I would rather marry another tribe than Tiv because they are lazy.” (Tiv female/IDI/12th September 2010)

“The Tiv are very wicked and domineering. The Igede used to be very close but now they seem not to accept us. The Jukuns; am afraid of the Jukuns because we believe they are mermaids and witches and wizards. While the Etulo, we are not that close so I don’t have anything to say about them.” (Idoma female/IDI/ 15th September)

“We are trying to resist them (Tiv) and be independent in the sense that we do not have a local government of our own. Political appointments hardly reach us. The other ethnic groups see us as inferior because we are few in number.” (Etulo/ male/ IDI 24th September 2010)

“We have been suppressed by them (Tiv) we do not really have a say and we are not really represented in government.” (Etulo female/IDI 24th September 2010)

“The Tiv and Idoma dominate us in politics. The Idoma want to use us to get Apa state which we don’t want. Even in the government offices, the Tiv and the Idoma are the most favoured. In employment, elective or appointment positions also. Even in the state television, it is only Tiv and Idoma news that is being aired.” (Igede females FGD/ 27th September 2010)

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