

# Nigerians

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will unalterable facts of regional hostility keep Nigeria's major groups apart? An individual's experience

THE FIRST NIGERIAN I GOT to know well enough to discuss politics with was a Fulani, Alhaji Ismaila. In 1957 independence and even self-government were still well over the horizon as far as the North was concerned. Northerners were afraid that the educated and westernised South — Yoruba as well as Ibo — was waiting to take advantage of the British departure to exploit and dominate their backward region. Few Northerners were sufficiently qualified to be appointed to the technical, administrative and even clerical posts of the civil service, or to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the region's growing commercial and industrial enterprises. The chaos in which the Ibo exodus in recent weeks has left the Northern Region indicates that the progress which has been made since then is far from spectacular, but it is not too late to bridge this educational gap which divides Nigeria. Nor is it too late to overcome the tribal differences which are not nearly as static and ingrained as they appear to many people today.

Alhaji Ismaila was an exception: shrewd and hard-working, he had been able to draw on his peoples' traditional knowledge of cattle and herding to work his way up to a senior post in the Ministry of Animal Health. In this capacity he had travelled extensively in the South, particularly in the Ibo Eastern Region and the Cameroons which then were still administrated as part of the country. He often told me about this experience, and how on these journeys he had always tied a long piece of string with a rooster at the other end to his toe at night. With the aid of this home-made alarm clock he rose at cock-crow every morning to study until breakfast: he had set himself the task of translating unrecorded Fulani literature — traditional drama — into the Hausa language, work for which he was later recognised.

He was certainly a scholar, but he was not unduly concerned about the Northern lack of education. "Tell me who is more civilised," he demanded of me, "the God-fearing, law-abiding communities in the North — illiterate though they may be — where strangers can walk safely, by day and by night; or the Southern communities where *nobody* is safe, where people are afraid to travel unaccompanied between village and village, and where strangers are

apt to disappear at night. I don't care how literate they are, and even if every one of them can read and write English, people like that are not civilised!"

I asked him what he meant; why were strangers unsafe in the southern regions? He shrugged. "Christianity there is only a veneer." Pressed further, he brought out the old stories of ritual murder and cannibalism which the Moslem North believes about the High Forest tribes. I remonstrated with him. "Surely you don't believe that? Have you personally come across any evidence in support of it?" There may be occasional cases of ritual murder, but cannibalism of the cooking-pot variety — the catching and eating of strangers — is not and never has been practised in Nigeria, or anywhere else in Africa, despite generations of hear-say reports.

Ismaila admitted as much. What, then, was his *real* reason for disliking the people from the other regions? "I will tell you: wherever you see a double-storey, it belongs to an Ibo," he said, flashing me a rueful smile.

Double-storey houses are a sign of considerable affluence and social standing in Nigeria, where most buildings are of the bungalow type. They usually contain a store, workshop or office, the premises in which the wealth to build them was derived. That so many of them in the North belonged to Ibos from the Eastern Region was a measure of Ibo industry and enterprise. Of course, Ismaila's feelings were representative of most Northerners whose political awareness incorporated the resentment of the material success achieved in their region by members of the southern tribes who were often very tactless in flouting their advantage and the power that went with it, particularly when they occupied official positions. But the Northern resentment was anti-Ibo only insofar as Ibos happened to form the large majority in the southern communities which were growing up throughout the North. It is was a tribal antagonism which was dictated by economic conditions; intrinsically it was free from racial feeling and it was not hallowed by tradition, as some people maintained, though religious prejudice had something to do with it.

THIS WAS THE SITUATION in 1957. By 1959 — when the NPC of the North had

entered into a coalition with the NCNC in the East to provide Nigeria with the government under which it attained independence — tribal attitudes had already started to change. This shift was reflected in many ways through public utterances by leading figures, in newspaper columns and inter-regional traffic, but to me it was brought home by the amazing transformation in the outlook of an old friend, a senior Councillor from Kano. This gentleman was an ultra-conservative traditionalist who before independence had told me that he would "never sit next to one of those Ibo pagans." He was elected to the Lagos House of Representatives in 1959, and when I met him a year later, I asked him how he got on with his Ibo colleagues in parliament. "Allah!" he laughed. "They are almost human!" Then, more seriously: "I don't only *sit* with them, I also *eat* with them!" In Nigerian terms this denotes social intimacy. One does not share a meal with a despised inferior. Now that the Ibos were political allies, they had ceased to be unwelcome intruders. Tribal feelings were responding to political reality.

It was now the turn of the Yorubas to become the hated tribe in the North. The Yorubas were synonymous to Northern minds with the hated Action Group whose leader, Chief Awolowo, had conducted an election campaign employing helicopters, which were said to intrude on the privacy of Moslem households, and a regiment of Western Region lawyers who threatened the authority of the Northern customary courts. I was in Lagos during the Nigerian independence celebrations, and a well-known London journalist who wanted to learn something about tribal relations within the new nation asked me to introduce him to a friend of mine, a Nigerian diplomat whom I regarded and still regard as representative of the most liberal type of Northern intellectual. The atmosphere was relaxed — the two men knew each other by reputation — and in the conversation that ensued my Northern friend denied that there had ever been reason to believe that Northerners would be unable to get on with their Eastern fellow-citizens. "We must forget all that tribal talk now," he said. "We must cease to regard ourselves as Ibos or Hausas or Fulanis or Tivs, we must think of ourselves as Nigerians rather than anything

the massacre of thousands of innocent Ibos in Northern towns.

TO MANY OBSERVERS THESE recent events have put paid to any hopes of forging the various tribes of Nigeria into a single nation. To me, this judgment seems premature. I believe tribal feelings in Nigeria to be determined by economic and political considerations, and not by any inherent and unalterable factors of tribal life. They resemble the national and patriotic feelings of European nations. The hated Germans whom the British fought at the cost of so much suffering a couple of decades ago are now valued allies and, to many people in Britain, preferable to their French comrades of yesterday. Who would have predicted in 1945 that this change of attitude would be publicly stated in 1965? There are those who argue that no comparison can be made between the power-pattern of European nations and African tribal relations, but I think that the only difference is the degree of sophistication — or, to be more precise, the amount of hypocrisy which cloaks diplomatic exchanges.

I have not touched on the ups and downs of Ibo-Yoruba relations, or the relations between the many other tribes which form part of the Nigerian state and which often have the power to affect Nigeria's precarious balance of power. But they are subject to economic factors and they change as political attitudes change. Last week an Ibo friend told me that he would prefer to see his region in alliance with the North rather than with the "treacherous" Yoruba West. As he had been most violent in his reaction to the persecution suffered by his people in the North — at the time, the depth of his bitterness and his desire for revenge seemed to know no bounds — this choice, however mistaken in its motives, indicates that the chances for a reconciliation in Nigeria are greater than may appear from current accounts. ●

else." There was a slight pause. Then he added, "With one exception, of course — you can never trust a Yoruba. They are an irresponsible, corrupt and utterly unreliable tribe." Despite our shocked silence he stuck to this opinion and would not even concede that it is dangerous to generalise on such points.

The Yorubas remained the target of Northern antagonism until 1962, when the political crisis in the Western Region and the trial of Chief Awolowo on charges of treasonable felony put a different government in power in the West, providing a new Yoruba ally for the Northern Region. This came at a time when the NCNC/NPC coalition was beginning to crack under the strain of the census controversy and a host of other differences between the regions, and President Azikiwe — an Ibo — became the target of vicious political attacks from the North. I met my friend, the diplomat, again at that time and heard him defend the honesty of Chief Awolowo's successor, Chief Akintola, and I reminded him of what he had said about the Yorubas at the time of independence. He could not remember the incident at first, but after a while his memory returned. "Ah, well," he said, "we live and learn. Besides, the

truth is now beginning to emerge about our so-called allies from the East." He recited a long list of incidents to show how the NCNC was trying to undermine the authority of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister, who was of course a Northerner. "Perhaps we were foolish to expect more from these people. They have no tradition of civilised government, these Ibo pagans."

I would like to say he did not really mean it, but he meant it — at the time. The animosity against the Ibos continued to grow in the North, recalling all the old resentments and adding a host of new grievances. The stories about Ibo cannibalism received new impetus through scurrilous cartoons of the cooking-pot variety which appeared in Northern papers, and the trend accelerated with the January military coup — allegedly engineered by Ibos on behalf of their tribe — which seemed proof of the Ibo determination to dominate and exploit the helpless North. In reality it was nothing of the kind, but the North was convinced that it was about to lose not only its economic and political self-determination, but also its cultural and religious heritage to those "pagan upstarts" from the Eastern region. The whole affair culminated with

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