

Pyrex Journal of Geography and Regional Planning  
Vol 3 (2) pp.11-17 August, 2017  
Copyright © 2017 Pyrex Journals  
Author(s) retain the copyright of this article  
<http://www.pyrexjournals.org/pjgrp>

*Full Length Research Paper*

## The Influence of Politics and Ethnicity on Population Census Exercises in Nigeria

Eze U. Basil

Department of Geography and Meteorology Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria.

Email: ezebasil24@yahoo.com

Accepted 29th August, 2017

### **Abstract**

**This paper examined by reviewing the inter-meddling of politics and ethnicity in population census exercises and data in Nigeria. It traced the eruption of political and ethnic bickering's over census data in Nigeria, pinning it to the cancellation of 1962 census and subsequent conduct of a fresh one in 1963. The use of census data for the allocation of political and economic power, including distribution of socio-infrastructural amenities/facilities remain at the root of census data manipulation and disfiguration in the country. The result of any census exercise conducted since independence had always generated much heat, bitterness and rancor along political, ethnic and tribal lines, especially between the northern and southern part of Nigeria over accusations and counter accusations of census data manipulation. Amongst the various redemptive measures recommended include the idea of 'population tax' and much more importantly the restructuring of Nigeria along true fiscal federalism.**

**Keywords:** Politics, Ethnicity, Population Census, Nigeria.

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the opinion of Eze (2015) the essence of census statistics for development planning need no overemphasis among the informed. Human populations are the most important factor in the development process. The people work for the development of the country and they in turn benefit from the development. Population census provides information on the people that are to benefit from the development and how their size and characteristics can be fully maximized for the development process, thereby making it possible for all tiers of government to guide the process of positive change.

The recognition that population size is the basis for political power in multi-ethnic countries like Nigeria has been at the root of controversies over the accuracy of

national census figures. Since representation in the national and state legislatures is based on population, it follows that the number of representatives from each ethnic or other politically discrete groups will also be in proportion to the size of the population of the groups. More importantly, the national leader is usually selected from the majority ethnic group.

In Nigeria, ethnic power politics has been largely responsible for the census controversy which started in 1962. Two of the three major ethnic groups – the Yoruba (10 million in 1963) and the Igbos (8 million) live in the southern states, while the Hausa-Fulani group (12 million) live in the northern states. These three groups have dominated the politics of Nigeria since independence. The key issue at the national level,

however, is that the northern states together have a population which is larger than that of the southern states. The significance of this fact is that the Hausa-Fulani group which dominates the politics of the northern states also dominates by virtue of its numerical strength, the politics of the entire country. Any census, which suggests that the population of the southern states is larger than that of the northern states will certainly be unacceptable and dismissed as cooked or inflated by southern politicians e.g. the 1962 census result was cancelled on this context and even the officer in charge of the census body was dismissed by the government (Mbeke-Ekanem 2006). Similarly, southern politicians will reject outright figures that suggest a relative increase in the population of northern states viz-a-viz that of the south. This makes the prospect of a reliable head count in Nigeria quite dim. This is even more so as population size has acquired additional importance in the areas of revenue allocation and creation of new states and LGAs and socio-infrastructure development allocations.

Conflicts over national censuses are not only associated with ethnic rivalries for political power no rare they restricted to Africa alone. In Lebanon, for example, it is not ethnic but religious rivalry that is the source of census controversy and this is so because the competition for political control is between Muslims and Christians rather than rival ethnic groups. Any census that shows a relative increase against the other can therefore cause the crisis (Mazrui, 1975).

Demographics are central to the political process in the United States. The constitutional basis of the census of population is to provide data for the apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives and the process reaches down to the local level. However, sometimes, there is equal elements of manipulation when redistricting-the reconfiguration of congressional districts (geographic areas) that each seat will represent. This is the so called "Gerrymandering"- when political boundaries are drawn solely for partisan gain. Here the majority party uses a mix of demography, geography, and politics to increase its majority without increasing its share of the vote after the census. (Weeks, 2012). Irrespective of these undeniable hitches, it is accepted that the development of a coordinated, systematic and responsive database is necessary for the government to make informed decisions for policy and planning, assess the impact of such decisions and effectively execute its programs. Without doubt the need for information available from a census extend beyond the federal government to state and local governments, private providers and third-party players. Each one needs reliable, timely and comparable data and analyses which describe the ethnic composition, literacy levels, number of children ever born, number of children living, occupation, sex,

age, presence and durability of disability, and so on. Dearth of such data weakens the ability and capacity of government to plan, manage, and assess its investments in its economic and social programs. This paper explores the meddling of politics and ethnicity on census exercises and data in Nigeria and proffers redemptive measures. It pursues this course through the following subheadings.

- 1). Conceptual and contextual clarifications
- 2). Census data in planning
- 3). The underlying factors of census data manipulations
- 4). Political and ethnic strife and expressions in Nigeria's census experiences
- 5). Redemptive measures

### **Conceptual and Contextual Clarification Politics**

Generally, in the Nigerian parlance, politics is the struggle for power to rule or be in charge of the affairs of the state, institution or an organization. It is generally pursued through different groupings of people, groupings that have some essential elements in common which give them the needed cohesion or oneness strong enough to pursue common goals, interest and desires - with the primary purpose being to rule or be in charge. Some dictionary definitions of politics see it as follows: "the art and science of government of a state, relates to the activities associated with government, especially the activities associated with governing, with obtaining legislative or executive power or with forming and running organizations connected with government, (Encarta Dictionaries, 2008).

Similarly, politics include the ability of an individual or group to influence decisions that affect a country, group or society. In the same vein, politics could be used to reflect power relations in a specific field of human endeavors: the interrelationships between the peoples, groups or organization in a particular area of life especially insofar as they involve power. Politics can also refer to calculated advancement involving the use of tactics and strategy to gain power in a group or organization. Politics in this context involve the control of a state's resources for the purpose of deciding who, when and where it should be channeled (Bamgbose, 2009).

Political power is usually a game of numbers and who controls the majority of people usually harnesses the greater political power and the benefits that accrue from it. Thus, in a multi-ethnic society as Nigeria, the jostle for political power through numerical strength is evident and so clarifying this concept in this discourse in critical.

### **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a socially created system of rules about who belongs to a particular group based upon social or perceived commonalities such as language or religion (Knox and Marston 2004). Membership of an ethnic group is defined through shared cultural values. In principle the cultural values shared with others of the same ethnicity derive from religion, language and material culture (Rubenstein, 2010). Citing Nnoli, Adejoh (2005), saw ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Going further, ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. Badru (2000), asserts that the term portrays the passion of ethnic identity or a feeling of commitment to one's ethnic group in the background of multi ethnic existence. To him, ethnic groups are social groups sharing cultural characteristics with particular origin. A geographic focus on ethnicity is an attempt to understand how it shapes and is shaped by space and how ethnic groups use space with respect to mainstream culture.

In this vein, territory is also a basis for ethnic group cohesion. In most parts of the world, ethnic diversity is a reality and even increasing in many of them. Scholars have argued that the origin and function of ethnicity can be tied to the nature and purpose of colonialism. Colonialism introduced a new selfishly motivated economic order that enthroned competition among Africans. The competitive nature of the new economic system under colonialism reinforced ethnic sentiments and created divisions among Africans. This inevitably epitomized the feeling of false class consciousness among different people (groups) in Africa. Hence, inter-ethnic struggles for control over scarce resources emerged (Nnoli 1980). In Nigeria, there are between 250 to 450 ethnic groupings with varying cultural and linguistic affiliations. Ethnicity is one of the major ways to understand Nigeria's pluralistic society. It distinguishes groups of people who for historical reasons have come to be seen as distinctive (Nnoli, 1980).

It is because the population is tied to development, the creation of states, LGAs and delineation of constituencies that ethnic rivalry continues to thrive in Nigeria. It is on the basis of these functional purpose for which ethnicity has been explored in Africa that it is considered pertinent to examine its influences in Nigeria, where census information plays central role in the distribution of scarce valuable resources and political arrangements.

## **Census**

A census is the enumeration of everyone residing in a country at a given time. It is said to be a photograph of the population characteristics and features of a country

in such time of counting expressed in numbers. It is therefore aimed at collecting and collating data on the characteristics of the population. A modern scientific census has been defined by the United Nations (1958) as the total process of collecting, compiling and publishing demographic, economic and social data pertaining at a specific time or times to all persons in the country or delimited territory. Continuing, Eze (2015), citing United Nations listed six essential features of a census as follows: it must have a national sponsorship; must cover a precisely defined territory; all persons in the scope of the census must be included without duplication or omission, people must be counted as of a fixed time, census data must be obtained separately for each individual, and the data from a census must be published. It is also recommended that a census should determine total population, sex, age and status, place of birth, citizenship or nationality; mother tongues, literacy and educational qualification; economic characteristics, urban or rural domicile, house -hold or family structure and fertility pattern (Eze, 2015).

Generally, there are two approaches to census enumeration namely De facto and De jure. It is de facto when people are counted wherever they are found at the time of head count. It is de jure when people are counted at their usual place of residence irrespective of whether they are found there at the census time or not. The census can be Decennial when carried out every ten years, Quinquennial when executed every five years, and bi-Decennial when conducted at mid-census intervals to ascertain the present state of the data collected during the real census.

Census holds a central place in a country's data provision for planning socioeconomic development. Information collected during the census is used to assess the current welfare needs of the population as well as to project future needs to assist planners make realistic future development needs. This forms the basis for government all over the world being concerned and making the necessary efforts to ensure the conduct of accurate censuses.

## **CENSUS DATA IN PLANNING**

The census viewed as a technical exercise to generate statistics for planning purposes is of enormous significance in the socioeconomic program of a nation. The array of demographic, social and economic data generated about the residents in a country at a given point in time through census exercise serve as a veritable tool for planning. In the social sector for instance, according to Umoh (2001), information about the total population, age and sex compositions as well as fertility patterns are useful for planning health

services. Informed decision on the location of health institutions such as maternities and children's hospitals can be based on census information. To establish the health status of the people as well as calculation of mortality and mobility rate, population census provides the needed information. In economic planning, we need to know how many persons are in the country, how many are employed and how many are unemployed. For short and long term planning of employment opportunities, government and private sector functionaries need to have an insight of labor-force characteristics which are readily provided by the census. Educational planners require to know the number of children as well as when they are due for school. This will enable them to establish the relevant school distribute them where the people are found, recruit teachers and provide other requisite educational materials.

Manufacturers will need to know the size of the market both now and in the future to enable them to make investment decisions on where to locate their firms, what to manufacture and whom to expect to employ. The age and sex structure determines the level and composition of production, consumption and investment. Age structure determines the dependency burden, which is usually positively correlated with the levels of investment and savings (Umoh, 2001). Data on migration tells planners and decision-makers how many migrated, age, sex, qualification, source region and destination which are useful planning inputs for addressing the causes of this movement which might lead to reduction of regional disparities in development. Planners can derive many socio-economic indices for planning purposes e.g population density, room density, which are all measures or indicators of population pressure on housing and land in the various towns/villages and regions. From such indices, curious planner will then know the build up to migration. Census data are used also significantly for distribution of political positions both at states and national levels as well as input for state or local government creation and for the allocation of resources. These three last points form the basis for politicking and ethnicism over census data in Nigeria.

## **THE UNDERLYING FACTORS OF CENSUS DATA MANIPULATIONS**

Ordinarily census should be seen purely as a technical exercise meant to generate statistical data to guide planning, but in Nigeria, as in many other countries, a number of factors have made it a platform of politicking and ethnicism, thus jeopardizing the authenticity of census data generated. This situation poses challenge to the effectiveness of census data usage as a planning

tool and guide. These underlying factors are hereby discussed.

### **Revenue allocation**

The federal government revenue allocation formula is tied to the size of the population of the constituent states as enshrined in the constitution. This constitutional provision makes the various states engage in all kinds of tactics so as to get more revenues thus politicizing the exercise and so diluting the reliability and accuracy of the census information.

### **State and local government creation**

All those agitating to have their own states and local governments are aware that one of the salient elements is population size and such states will inflate their returns. According to Eze (2015), even within one region, one community went on to inflate the population figure especially those who sought autonomous communities. Also tribal sentiments went in; one tribe striving to make sure they are greater in number than the supposedly rival tribes.

### **Sharing and distribution of political positions**

Representations in the national and state assemblies and redistricting of senatorial zones are all constitutionally dependent on population sizes. This had broadened the competition for political positions and has led to under-moves to return inflated population figures in census exercises in the country.

### **Provision of public services**

Population data is a critical factor in development planning in Nigeria. It serves as the criterion for allocating public and social services such as school, hospitals, pipe borne water and electricity, etc. This is based on the assumption that the more the population in an area, the more the services required in the area. To ensure numerical supremacy during censuses, people leave their usual place of residence in the cities which are in most cases different from their ethnic or state of origin and return for enumeration in their homes of origin. This can then result to the allocation of services to areas with less population (Bamgbose, 2009).

Generally, the issues enumerated above have been the most intractable, most consistent and loud problems since the commencement of post-independence censuses in Nigeria. These envisaged and actual benefits of higher population figures have been at the root of inflationary tactics engaged by different areas of

the country to boost their population figures during census exercises.

### **Political and Ethnic Strife, and Expressions in Nigeria's Census Experiences**

Official census taking in Nigeria began in 1866 when data were collected from the people of the settlement of Lagos. The exercise was repeated in 1868 and again 1871, after which population count became decennial till the end of the nineteenth century, to be specific 1891. The next census taken in 1911 was the first of a series of national decennial 'censuses' broken only in 1941 when a census could not be conducted owing to the exigencies of the second world war (Adegbola, 1984, Eze, 2015). The first attempt at a modern and scientific census was conducted between 1950/1953, and was popularly called the 1952/53 census, which breached the important principle of simultaneity owing to economic and political exigencies. It fell prey to either double or under-counting due to the staggering of the dates of enumeration across the different regions of the country in the face of the continuous inter-regional migrations.

All the attempts to carry out a reliable post-independence census have been enmeshed in political and ethnic bickering's with three officially accepted out of five census exercises. The first census after independence was held between May 13 and 27, 1962. The regions were then given autonomy to organize and execute the census and the result was rejected and so cancelled on account of widespread over counting in the various regions and areas. The result of the 1962 census puts the southern states slightly ahead of the north. This development did not go down well with the then prime minister, Tafawa Balewa, a northerner, who saw no justification for why the south should be more populated than the north. After sacking the official in charge of the census, he conducted another one in 1963 giving the north an edge over the south (Mbeke-Ekanem, 2006). This very event formally and officially introduced mistrust and flagrant manipulation of census figures among the different regions of the country. A total of 55.7 million people was released from the 1963 census. After detailed study by various experts both nationally and internationally, it was found that the census figure has been inflated by 14% as each region strove to make the new figures the same or higher than the 1962 figures so as not to expose the region to guilt of inflation in 1962. DR.M.I. Okpara, the then premier of the Eastern region described the figure as worse than useless. He took the federal Government to court to contest the census result, but could not prevail since the Supreme Court backed out on account of non-jurisdictional. The 1963 census was accepted even though it was inconsistent with the census of earlier

years since it implies a virtually impossible growth rate of 5.8 percent.

The 1973 census witnessed a great deal of innovations and improvements, but this did not guarantee accuracy. The census reports showed validation tests revealing serious irregularities in the returns. The collection of data was characterized by irregularities and malpractices leading to undue inflation of returns. A provisional figure of 79.79 million was released and a breakdown revealed that all states in the north experienced an unusual annual growth rate of 4% except Benue plateau. The figure elicited so much criticism, reactions and counter reactions between the southern and northern parts of the country that it was cancelled.

The 1991 census had many factors in its favor; many advancements in technological capability, accessibility, education, etc. and was adjudged the best over the previous ones. Ethnic and religious identification was not included in the census forms to mellow down the controversy. At the end of the exercise a figure of 88514501 million was posted. After various analysis by different experts, serious doubts were cast that after 28years (1963-1991), Nigeria's population will have remained at 88.5million. The census was also not greeted with an ovation of acceptance from the general public, the usual acrimony of accusation of manipulation and counter accusation by the different areas of the country toeing political, ethnic and religious sentiments went on like the predecessors.

The census of 2006 which is the latest so far was supposed to have been held in 2001 but was postponed both in 2001, 2002 and 2005 (Bamgbose, 2009). According to Eze (2015), one would agree that the instability and uncertainty of government before the handover to civilian administration did not create the necessary social and political atmosphere to execute a census exercise in 2001. Also, when the new civilian administration came in 1999, the year 2001 was too close to the government to settle down, find her feet and make any meaningful preparation for such an exercise that would usually require at least three years of effective preparations and meaningful execution.

The 2006 census was conducted from 21 to 27 March, 2006. The census puts Nigeria's population at 140,003,542 which represents an increase of 63% in 15 years. This has been described as incredible. The reactions resulting from the provisional result followed the traditional lines: The south versus the North. There were sharp reactions and counter reactions, the south picking holes and condemning the result and the North and NPC justifying it. A call from then a faction of Ohaneze Ndigbo, a Pan-Igbo cultural organization described the figures as a fraudulent exercise. Employing the services of experts, demographers and geographers to analyze the figures, they concluded that

the population allocated to the southeast cannot be a reflection of their number. They therefore declared it doctored and tailored and so rejected it. Afenifere – a pan Yoruba socio-political group described the exercise as a well-managed and manipulated demographic ventures. The most rancorous contention and controversy over census 2006 has been the population of Lagos versus that of Kano State in which Kano State posted more numerical strength than Lagos State. Opinion had it that Lagos typifies the undercounting of the south (tell magazine, 19<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2007). Reacting to the fact that Northern population figures have consistently posted more population figures than the south and the various rancor's and controversies that have persistently been associated with it, the then Governor of Kwara State, Bukola Saraki and the leader of the supreme council of Sharia in Nigeria, Datti Ahmed, have both argued that the controversy over which section of the country is more populous is needless.

They attributed the rapid increment in the population of the North to polygamy and high fertility since family planning in the Muslim-dominated North is a rarity. This means, therefore that the population edge of the North will continue. This means also that the rancor's, controversies, accusations and counter accusations and condemnations regarding census exercises and results will never abate until Nigerians come together in a round table conference to decide, agree, accept and implement the terms for a peaceful co-existence devoid of suspicions.

## REDEMPTIVE MEASURES

National population and housing census will always remain imperative in the federation of Nigeria as in other countries of the modern world. This is because an accurate census is in everyone's interest. It provides the knowledge so that public resources can be shared evenly across the country and to ensure that services at local level are relevant to people who live there. I therefore advocate a few of the steps enunciated below to improve and ensure a high quality census exercise in Nigeria and douse the tension usually generated. Some of the steps are not unfamiliar, but it is re-echoed more emphatically.

It has been postulated that states should be re-created and re-organized in such a way that the population of all the states will be almost equal. It is also suggested that the states are re-organized with the boundaries having no regard to ethnic and cultural boundaries (Eze 2015). It is expected that such measures will douse the proclivity to falsify figures. The issue however is that the contention and the politics of population size is not situated in rivalry between the

component states but between the South and the North. For instance, a commentator on the 2006 census maintained that the undercounting of Lagos state typified the undercounting of the South.

The issue of gearing serious efforts towards effective socio-infrastructure development of the various constituent units of Nigeria has been noised abroad. This is premised on the fact that people inflate their population figures to gain more revenue for development or to attract a modicum of such infrastructure from the federal Government. If the government faces this squarely without any ethnic sentiment or bias and all the constituent parts have the necessary socio-infrastructure facilities falsification of census figures will be abated.

One has also played with the idea of population tax. By this I mean that each state will be made to pay a particular type of tax to the federation account based on its population number. So the more you claim numerical strength, the more the quantum of tax you will pay to the federal government. The principle here is that since more numerical strength means, more responsibility towards you from the federal government, you will also have to support the federal government more from your monthly allocation.

There have been agitations in various parts of the country, especially the South-West, South-South and South-East and now North Central for the restructuring of Nigeria into a true federalism – so called fiscal federalism – where the various states in the federation are made to control the natural resources available in their states while paying taxes to the central government. This is as against the present situation where the federal government control the natural resources of all states and the state governments go cap in hand every month for monthly allocations to run their states. Since one of the central motives of inflating census figures is to gain more revenue from the federation account, fiscal federalism will disappear this.

This is because no matter the number you claim to be, you source the resources from your own state rather than looking up to the center for national cake, which one did not labor for and engaging in all kinds of census manipulations to have more revenue allocation. It is therefore maintained that getting a reliable population census in Nigeria will remain far-fetched as far as the country maintains a Pseudo-federal structure in which the component units exist on regular financial handouts from the central government. This is explicitly re-echoed in a statement credited to the former governor of Lagos state who maintained that “unless we remove the country from bread and butter revenue approach, we shall continue to wallow in fraud and corruption, especially when issues have to do with the federal government” (tell magazine, 2007). Thus the central condition for ending census fraud in Nigeria is

doing everything possible to make the central government less attractive and the component parts more responsible and independent.

## CONCLUSION

There have not been any census exercise in Nigeria since independence that went without contention, strife, politics and ethnic sentiments. Nigeria's censuses have gained more popularity along these lines than the main essence of the census, which is the production of social, economic and demographic data for national socio-economic planning. The political and ethnic undertone has always overshadowed its technical essence. This paper is of the contention that one salient way out of this quagmire besides many other suggestions in the archive is the restructuring of Nigeria along true fiscal federalism which will kill the urge to inflate census figures with the aim of getting more robust advantage from the center.

## REFERENCES

- Adegbola, O (1984): "The Nature of Nigerian Censuses" Population Association of Nigeria, proceedings No.1 Selected papers at the first Annual Conference on Population Data Assessment in Nigeria, Benin City.
- Adegoh. P.E (2005). "Ethnicity, Marginalization, Integration and Development in Nigerian in Oyekanmi, F.A.D (ed): Development Crisis and Social Change. Department of Sociology, University of Lagos.
- Ali Mazrui (1975): Ethnicity, Power and Population in Eastern Africa in R.K Udo et al (eds) Population Education Source Book for Sub-Sahara Africa. Heineman, London.
- Badru, F.A (2000): "Ethnic Conflicts and Minority Interests in Nigeria: A critical perspective" Journal of cultural studies 1(1).
- Bamgbose .J.A (2009): "Falsification of Population Census Data in a Heterogeneous Nigerians state. The Fourth Republic Example" African Journal of Political Science and International Relations 3 (8) 311-319.
- Encarta Dictionaries, 2008
- Eze B.U (2015) "Census Exercises in Nigeria". Lessons, Problems and Prospects UNIZIK Journal of Geography, Meteorology and Environment 1(1) 86-i99
- Knox, P and Martson, S. (2004): Human Geography. Peterson Education Inc. New Jersey.
- Mbeke – Ekanem .T. (2006): Census: The untold story "(March 2006) accessed online at <http://dawodu.com>
- Nnoli, O (1980), Ethnic politics in Nigeria Enugu. Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Rubenstein, J.M (2010): Contemporary Human Geography PHI learning private Ltd. New Delhi.
- Tell magazine No. 8.2007.
- Umo B.D (2001): Population Studies for Nigeria: A new perspective. Institute of Development Studies, University of Nigeria. Enugu Campus.
- United Nations (1958): UN. Principles and Recommendations. UNN. Geneva.
- Weeks, J.R (2012); An Introduction to Population International Edition. Nelson Education Ltd; Canada.