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# Us – Them Mentality Vis-À-Vis Current Security Challenges in Nigeria: The Way Forward

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### **Abstract**

It is undeniable the existential fact that the human person is a being that cannot but interact with others. It is in this sense that we say that the human person is a social being. As a social being, every human person belongs to a social group. Members of a particular social group are believed to share the same or similar ideologies and belief system which may be different from other social groups. This underscores the notion of us – them dichotomy. Experience has shown that when a member of one's social group is injured or killed, it is perceived as criminal; but when it has to do with a member of another social group, it becomes a normal thing. This mentality is a clear manifestation of discrimination, ill-treatment, marginalization, social inequality and violent conflict in human society. Employing the philosophical method of phenomenology, this study observes that us – them mentality is the major hunchback of the current security challenges in Nigeria. It further argues that this mentality has brought about polarization of Nigerians. The paper concludes that as Nigerians, we have to rise above the mentality of us – them dichotomy in order to guarantee a peaceful and prosperous Nigeria. We should always be conscious of the fact that despite our individual and group differences, we are human beings and more still, we are Nigerians.

**Keywords:** Us – Them Mentality, Security Challenges, Nigeria, Conflict, Peace

### **Introduction**

Philosophers and sociologists are of the view that the human person is a social being. This implies that the human person is a being that cannot but interact with others. Experience has shown that there is one thing that is fundamental to human interaction, namely, social categorization. Society tends to categorize people based on status, gender, religion, political affiliations, wealth, education, tribe, race, geographical location, etc. People who are categorized into one social group tend to understand each other easily and behave in a certain way, this is one of the major characteristics of social groups. Oftentimes, the categorization of people into groups brings about Us vs. Them mentality. The thrust of this study is to examine the reality of us-them mentality especially as it affects the current security challenges in Nigeria. In order to achieve the aim of this study, we shall first of all take a look at the reality of polarity in nature and also the notion of us – them mentality. We shall also take a look at the current security challenges in Nigeria in brief and thereafter look at how the notion of us – them mentality constitute a serious challenge to the current security challenges in Nigeria. The study ends with a concluding reflection.

### **Polarity in Nature**

Simply put, polarity refers to the mode of thinking or relations where things are placed into two opposing camps. It is also seen as a concept generally used to describe the reality of dualism in nature. In the view of Richard Taylor, polarity “consists of dividing things into two exclusive categories, and then supposing that if something under consideration does not belong to one of them, then it must belong in the other.”<sup>25</sup> Both scientists and philosophers have cultivated a way of thinking

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25 R. Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 4th ed., (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992), Pg. 117.

in a polarized manner. Polarity in nature is an existential phenomenon. "Polarized thinking is not, however, the invention of philosophers. It is very common almost natural, to anyone who thinks at all."<sup>26</sup> So the notion of polarity in nature simply connotes the fact that nature is perceived basically from two perspectives.

One of the traditional structures of logical thinking is that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time under the same condition. In this sense, we can only talk of good or bad, positive or negative, up or down, legal or illegal, male or female, living or dead, us or them, etc. The point here is that polarity is a natural phenomenon; it is a way nature manifests itself. It is also a way of understanding nature and natural activities. Polarity also points to the fact that one cannot fully understand the reality of being male without the idea of being female. In this sense, the idea of polarity brings about holistic understanding of natural phenomenon. Therefore, having established that polarity is a natural phenomenon and also a way of understanding nature, the next subtopic that follows shall focus on a brief exposé of Us - Them mentality.

### **The Notion of Us - Them Mentality**

The notion of us - them mentality is typical of group categorization. Every society has a way of placing persons or group of person into certain groups. In our society today, a person is hardly seen or understood simply as a human being without reference to the social group which the person in question belongs to. This attitude is fundamental to the notion of us - them mentality

Us - them mentality indicates how people who belong to the same social group think and behave. It also points to the area of divergence among varied social groups. It is an observable fact that the human mind has the tendency to think in certain ways different from others. In this regard, Steven

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<sup>26</sup> R. Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 4th ed., Pg. 117-118.

Handel observed: “The human mind has a tendency to categorize people into social groups. And often, these social groups can create an “Us vs. Them” mentality towards people who may be different than (sic) us in some way, whether it’s race, gender, age, nationality, culture, religion, or socioeconomic status.”<sup>27</sup> The idea of group categorization denotes people who share in the common beliefs of a particular social group. This kind of attitude, it has been observed, is responsible for us – them mentality.

The fact of thinking of ourselves as a group automatically places one as different from another group. In this sense, one begins to see one’s group as a separate group and as such should be favoured. Us – them is made manifest in group favoritism. This is a situation whereby a person is given a special treatment not by merit but simply on the basis that he/she belongs to a particular social group. Generally, people tend to favour those who belong to their social group. Studies have shown that “people tend to favour a group bias even though they are categorized on relatively meaningless distinctions, for example, eye colour, what kind of painting they like, or even the flip of a coin.”<sup>28</sup> Group bias is a major factor for us – them mentality. Each group thinks of itself as different and also superior or better than others.

The Social Identity Theory proposed in 1979 by Henri Tajfel and John Turner posit that people derive their social identity as a member of a particular social group. The theory stipulates that “being part of a group or groups gives us a sense of social identity, a “way of being” in the world”.<sup>29</sup> It is generally difficult, if not impossible, for a person to live and thrive in our contemporary society without any form of social identity. Tajfel

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27 S. Handel, “The Us vs. Them Mentality: How Group Thinking Can Irrationally Divide Us”, Retrieved from: <https://www.theemotionmachine.com/the-us-vs-them-mentality-how-group-thinking-can-irrationally-divide-us> (Accessed: 24/04/19).

28 See S. Handel, “The Us vs. Them Mentality: How Group Thinking Can Irrationally Divide Us”.

29 Henri Tajfel and John Turner as cited in “Social Identity Theory” Retrieved from: <https://www.swpm.com/social-identity-theory/> (Accessed: 24/04/19).

and Turner stated three mental processes that are associated with the social identity theory.<sup>30</sup> They observed that firstly, we categorize people in order to know their place in the world. This type of categorization gives us a quicker idea of whom they are and also provides us with the opportunity to what to expect from them. Secondly, we categorize people for the purpose of social identification. This, for them, allows us to form an emotional connection that will enhance self-esteem. Thirdly, we categorize people for the purpose of social comparisons. This is premised on the idea that other groups are seen as rivals, whom we need to compete with. These three mental processes as outlined by Tajfel and Turner are basic to the notion of us – them mentality. It is in a bid to have the sense of social identity as a member of a particular social group that the world is divided into “Us” and “Them”. S. A. McLeod observed that the idea of social identity theory shows that “group members of an in-group will see to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image.”<sup>31</sup> The point here is that the idea of social identity brings about or more still, enhances the notion of us – them mentality. In sum, us – them mentality depicts the view that people who share certain traits, beliefs, culture, etc tend to relate well more than those who do not share the same traits.

### **Brief Exposé of Current Security Challenges in Nigeria**

There is no nation without some security challenges. As a nation, Nigeria has faced and is still facing a lot of security challenges. Without mincing words, there are many security challenges in Nigeria today. However, the concern of this subsection is simply a highlight on some of the current threats to security in Nigeria. In Nigeria today, it is very hard for a day to pass by without any story of shedding of blood. Each day we read from our national dailies and also watch on our televisions

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30 Henri Tajfel and John Turner as cited in “Social Identity Theory”.

31 S. A. McLeod, “Social Identity Theory”, Retrieved from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html> (Accessed: 24/04/19).

about series of killings going on in the country. Many Nigerians have lost their lives and properties worth trillions of naira have been lost because of the current security challenges.

Abdulrahman Dambazau beams a search light on the current security challenges in Nigeria. He said:

Since the return of democracy in 1999, the security situation in Nigeria has been quite disturbing, and in the past fifteen years, things have been worsening on a daily basis. Of course like any other human society, conventional crimes have always been part of the experience, especially after the civil war, but the more recent experience in violent extremism, insurgency and other forms of militancy have made the situation much more complex. Currently, the most serious security threats in Nigeria are those in the category of discontent or separatist agenda, specifically the violent extremism of Boko Haram and the violent militancy in the Niger Delta. While the former uses religion as its platform, employing such tactics as suicide bombing, organized attacks on police and military installations, terrorizing rural communities, etc.; the latter is resource-based, and uses the control of oil found in its domain as its platform, knowing that about 90 percent of Nigeria's revenue comes from that natural resource.<sup>32</sup>

It is no longer news in Nigeria that Boko Haram has destabilized the Northeast of Nigeria. This is a group that has been declared as a terrorist group and has since been unleashing mayhem to Nigerians. Chzitera Njoku observed that "since 2009 the group [Boko Haram] has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions more."<sup>33</sup> Boko Haram is a serious threat to Nigeria as a state. Farmer-herder clashes are another serious security challenge in Nigeria today. These clashes are experienced mostly in the north-

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32 A. Dambazau, "Nigeria and Her Security Challenges" Retrieved from: <https://hir.harvard.edu/article/?a=57//> (Accessed: 24/04/19).

33 Chzitera Njoku, "Here are 5 Security Challenges Nigeria's Leader Must tackle" Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/02/5-security-challenges-facing-nigerias-leadership/> (Accessed: 27/04/19)

central and some eastern part of the country. In this regard, Chizitera Njoku further observed that farmer/herder clashes have claimed six times more lives than Boko Haram.<sup>34</sup> This is really very serious. The security challenge posed by the Niger-Delta militant groups cannot be overemphasized.

The point being made above is that there are some pressing security challenges in Nigeria today militating against the unity and peaceful coexistence of Nigeria as a nation. These challenges, in the view of this study, can be traced to the problem of us – them mentality. In this regard the next subtopic that follows shall focus on the problem of us – them mentality and the current security challenges in Nigeria. It is pertinent to note at this point that we did not exhaust all the current security challenges in Nigeria, but the above can suffice for the purpose of this study.

### **The Problem of Us – Them Mentality and the Current Security Challenges in Nigeria**

As discussed earlier, the reality of us – them mentality places human beings at opposing camps. This is as a result of categorization of human beings into social groups. This categorization has inherent problems. Without mincing words, there are certain group biases which members share consciously or unconsciously. In Nigeria today, there is a way an Igbo perceives a fellow Igbo as different from how the same Igbo person perceives a Yoruba or Hausa. One of the problems associated with the notion of us – them mentality is the idea of social inequality which is made manifest in racism, ethnicism, gender inequality, age inequality, etc. Us –them mentality brings about blatant discrimination and marginalization.

In discussing the problems of us – them mentality, Henry Showers pointed that us – them mentality “stems from our basic fear, the unknown”.<sup>35</sup> People are always afraid of the unknown and as such that may plunge them into unhealthy and unbalanced

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34 Chzitera Njoku, “Here are 5 Security Challenges Nigeria’s Leader Must tackle”.

35 Henry Showers “The Problem with the Us and Them Mentality” Retrieved from <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/the-probles-with-the-us-and-them-mentality-part-1> (Accessed: 27/04/19).

relationship with others. Henry went further to observe: “When we first meet someone new we are often hesitant to socially engage with them beyond what is necessary, mostly because we develop preconceived notions based on a person’s appearance, speech, or the way they carry themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

This is typical of what is obtainable in Nigeria. If Mr. A meets Mr. B for the first time, the next most likely question after knowing the name of Mr. B is “where are you from?”. The essence of this question is to know if the person belongs to “us” or “them”. The way and manner we relate in the political, religious and socioeconomic spheres are clear manifestations of the problems associated with us – them mentality.

The notion of us – them mentality has polarized Nigerians. It has gone as far as beclouding the reasoning of most Nigerians. People no longer see things the way things are but the way things are perceived by the social group which they belong to. Whatever a member of one’s social group does is good and whatever a member of another social group does is wrong. It is a truism that killing of human being is bad and condemnable. However, when a person who belongs to one’s social group is killed or injured, it is seen as bad and condemnable; but if it is from another social group, no one cares. If something bad happens to “us”, it is bad; but if the same bad thing happens to “them”, then it automatically becomes good. This is the major problem of us – them mentality.

The current security challenges in Nigeria are clear examples of the ills of us – them mentality. The members of Boko Haram will certainly frown at the killing of their members but will certainly rejoice at the killing of a non-member. This mentality fans the flames of hatred, anger and disunity among Nigerians.

### **Concluding Reflections: Towards Overcoming the Ills of Us – Them Mentality in Nigeria**

So far, we have observed that the notion of us – them mentality is a major contributing factor to our current security challenges.

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<sup>36</sup> Henry Showers “The Problem with the Us and Them Mentality”.



It is very easy for one to injure or even to kill another person simply because the person is not part of “us”; the person belongs to “them”. Ours is good; theirs is bad. This is practically what we experience daily in Nigeria. The escalation of the current security challenges points to the ills of erroneous perceptions of us – them mentality.

Nigeria, as it is today, is highly polarized. Most Nigerians would rather see themselves as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Christian or Moslem before seeing themselves as Nigerians. This is what is observable in the workplaces, markets, churches, mosques, schools, etc. This erroneous perception makes it easier for the current security challenges to thrive.

Us – them mentality emphasizes more on the things that divide us; the things we do not share with another group. This attitude is not healthy and as such cannot truly engender peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. We have to emphasize more on the things that unite us as a nation and not on the things that separate us. Those within the corridors of power should see it as their sole responsibility to do anything within their capability to ensure the unity of this country, Nigeria. Our traditional and religious leaders should make it as a point of duty to dislodge the age long cultural biases that account for the ills of us – them mentality in Nigeria. Studies have shown that religious prejudices and biases are responsible for the ills of us – them mentality. “Religious prejudice, as we observe among Moslems and Christians in Nigeria today, is the root cause of most of the violent religious crises in the country.”<sup>37</sup> Irrespective of our different religious affiliations, Nigerians have to be always conscious of the fact that we are rational beings. And as such, we have to be rational in our dealings with others. It is rational to preserve human life than to take human life. “All the religions of the world, both Islam and Christianity, value life so dearly. Every rational human person values life”.<sup>38</sup> The first natural law is the law of self-preservation. Every being

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37 E. J. O. Ndubisi, “Religious Dialogue in Nigeria: The Way Forward”, *AFRREV IJAH*, Vol. 1 (4), (2012), Pg. 171.

38 E. J. O. Ndubisi, “Religious Dialogue in Nigeria: The Way Forward”, Pg. 170.

makes effort to protect and preserve its kind. Human beings in general and Nigerians in particular, should bear this in mind. We should know that an injury done to one Nigerian is an injury done to all Nigerians irrespective of the victim's tribe, religion or political affiliations. This existential fact must be drummed into the ears of all Nigerians.

Both Islam and Christianity are religions that are based on the consciousness of God which should be reflected in human relationship. The religious leaders of the two religions should stand out as the messengers of truth. They should not allow themselves to be used by those who do not have the good of the country at heart. No doubt, religion is a powerful force. The force of religion should be channeled for the good of the country. It is pertinent to note that both Islam and Christianity teach love of one's neighbor and hatred for evil ... Since the religious leaders are the mouthpiece of God, they should always condemn any act of violence, killing of human beings, discrimination, as these acts are against the will of God.<sup>39</sup>

Very importantly is the role of our schools in overcoming the ills of us – them mentality. Our schools' curriculum should be designed in such a way as to engender peaceful coexistence. The value of peace education in our schools cannot be overemphasized. "Peace education is the deliberate attempt to educate children and adults in the dynamics of conflict and the promotion of peacemaking skills in homes, schools, and communities throughout the world, using all the channels and instruments of socialization".<sup>40</sup> Proper peace education has the capacity to engender national peace and also to overcome the ills of us – them mentality.<sup>41</sup>

It is the position of this paper that all Nigerians should rise above the mentality of us – them dichotomy. For sure, us – them

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39 E. J. O. Ndubisi, "Religious Dialogue in Nigeria: The Way Forward", Pg. 173.

40 V. Gamut, "Peace Education and Peer Mediation" in S. G. Best (Ed.). *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2009), Pg. 165.

41 E. J. O. Ndubisi, "Agents of Socialization and Peace Education: Towards National Integration", *Pacem Journal of Peace and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2018), Pg. 27 – 28.

mentality is an ideological thing and can only be dislodged with a superior ideology. There is need for a national consciousness. Tribal consciousness or social group consciousness should not be placed above national consciousness. It is a fact that social categorization is a part of human society, but be that as it may, it should be seen as complementary and not the basis for breeding problems and vices. The ethnic groups in Nigeria should be seen as an interdependent and interconnected whole and not as exclusively separate entities. Despite our individual and group differences, we must not forget that we are human beings and more still, we are Nigerians.