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## THE ADMINISTRATION OF POPULATION CENSUS IN NIGERIA: OVERCOMING THE HURDLES OF FALSIFICATION OF POPULATION CENSUS FIGURES

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### ABSTRACT

*Overcoming the hurdles of population census falsification in Nigeria is of serious concern not only to the government but also to the citizens. In spite of the nation's failures in its past to achieve reliable population census figures with little or no successes, the administration of population census should rank high on the government list. The study discussed the tremendous importance of the role played by accurate census data in the planning and executing of policies for the development of the Nigerian state and identified the challenges facing the nation in its attempts to achieve a reliable census figure. It is the view of this work that accurate reliable population figure could be achieved by the erection of the ethical standard for the country. The work was descriptive in its methodology. In order to arrive at accurate reliable population census figure, the work recommended among others, the de-emphasizing of the political motives of the census enumeration and a shift towards globally acceptable head counts as a way of realizing the vision of comprehensive national development strategies in the 21st century and beyond.*

**Keywords:** Census, falsification, ethnicity, ethics.

### INTRODUCTION

Census is dreaded by many Nigerians. To some of them a thought of conducting population census in the country evokes some nightmares. They argue that the exercise should not be on the country's priority list at the present time. This view is based on the assumption and belief that it is impossible to conduct census and obtain accurate and reliable population figure for Nigeria. Despite the fact that population data is sine qua non for national development plan, most of the developing countries including Nigeria are faced with challenges that have been affecting accurate population data. Such challenges include lack of moral and ethical safeguard, bureaucratic red-tapism and official logrolling, ethnic sentiments, poor coverage, poor transportation and communication systems, mass illiteracy, superstition and cultural taboos., lack of technically qualified staff, lack of permanent organization charged with the collection of data, non-familiarity with socio-economic enquiries.

Even though, some of the factors mentioned above have been reduced to the barest minimum in Nigeria, Ebigbola (1981) has concluded that while Nigeria can now boast of a large number of capable technical staff that can handle enumeration effectively, these staff have equally become torms in the flesh of population census in Nigeria for they have been responsible for falsification of population figures. In spite of the nation's failure in past efforts, it should be noted that census should rank high on the government's priority and should be conducted as at when due. This proposal is anchored on the awareness of the tremendous importance of the role played by accurate census data in the planning and execution of policies for the development of the country.

### THE CONCEPT AND HISTORY OF CENSUS

Census is described as a periodic official count of the population and resources of a country for accurate and up-to-date statistical information of the given country. The term census comes from the Latin word, *cenere*, which means to assess. As used today, it means primarily the official and periodic counting of the people of a country as well as the printed record of the counting. The actual use is more general than this. It is applied to the collection of information on the size and characteristics of population as well as the number and characteristics of dwelling units, various business enterprises, and government agencies (Umoh, 1986). Census is, thus, a strategy for demographic data collection. Here the focus is on the population.

Reference to census or counting of population goes back to ancient times. By the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of taking census had spread throughout the world. It is a regular exercise in all countries today. A considerable number of countries throughout the world take their censuses decennially, i.e. at ten year intervals. Records have shown that Census is known to have started as far back as 3, 000 years BC, some five thousand years ago. Ancient states of Babylon, Persia and Egypt in the Middle East and China in Asia are known to have started the system of census in those early years.

Europe made its first serious attempt to conduct census a little over five hundred years ago, that was in the eighteenth century. This is some four thousand five hundred years after the system was introduced for the first time in the recorded history. The system was adopted by one country after another in Europe and later on spread to America and the rest of the World.



Census was first conducted for the purposes of determining taxable adults in the society for the purpose of conscription into the army for military purposes. As more and more nations adopted census, the purpose for which census was conducted became broader. From the limited device, aimed at facilitating conscription into the military and tax assessment, the census was turned into a more comprehensive exercise for determining broader economic and social characteristics and obtaining information.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

In Nigeria, the falsification of population census result is to be understood within the context of dialectic of ethnicity and class struggle (Grat, 1988). Drawn into the impersonal colonial-capitalist economic milieu which was characterized by extreme disparities of wealth and privilege, subject to low or subsistence wages, and often forced to endure wretched working and living conditions, the Nigerian elites of various ethnic groups immediately found themselves in competition for a whole range of essential and scarce social resources such as money, jobs, education, training, housing, and the entire spectrum of social services. In such situation, various means including falsification of census results are employed to regulate the distribution of social advantage. In other words, the phenomenon of manipulating census results to favor one's ethnic group must be viewed in terms of its political and socio-economic contexts, functions and advantages.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF POPULATION CENSUS**

Census data are of enormous significance in the present global system. As Yakasai (2002) asserted, governments use census data in determining political representation in legislative assemblies; businessmen and organizations as well as governments use census statistics in locating industrial establishments, sales forecast and marketing among other things.

Similarly, national, states and local governments use census figures to determine their operations. Researchers depend heavily on accurate information supplied by census to carry out their activities. Census is used to determine not only the population in a given country, but also the sex ratio, age groupings, professional groups, industrial and agricultural production in the community.

The importance of reliable population census to a nation's development was emphasized by Sharma (2004) when he opined that elementary principle for planning and development in any nation is for the

government to have access to a reliable and detailed demographic. The linkage between population census and nation's development is inseparable.

Census is used for effective planning for the provision of critical infrastructures and social amenities such as schools, medical services, water and electricity supplies and provision of other necessities of life. It is also used not only for determining the actual population of a people in the component units that made up the nation. An accurate census is essential for making proper projection of the demands of national development for the future. As a matter of fact, the more the human society becomes complex, so also the nature and character of modern census. In short, census in present day society is an essential instrument for all round development (Yakasai, 2002).

Government and corporate organizations use population census data to assess the progress and consequences of administrative projects, and how to allocate both resources and the right to political representation to each region. Population census data can provide key information such as the growth, stability and declination of an area. For instance, If a corporate organization plans to open a new outlet in a specific region, it is important for the management to have access to population census data of that region for it to know if the region can supply workforce or customers it needed. The knowledge of the population census data can have a great influence on the management's decision (Eniayejuni and Agoyi, 2011).

Having a trustworthy data of the citizens will go a long way to end election malpractices, prevent underage and immigrants from voting as well as flushing out "ghost workers included in the government payroll by top government officials in order to defraud the government through salary payments) in federal and state ministries. Reliable identification data in the country can also help the government to identify criminals, prevent tax evasion, and avoid multiple identities, voting fraud and all other forms of fraud and corruption.

Eniayejuni and Agoyi (2011) again declared that statistical knowledge and accurate data's of the citizens is a key requirement for proper application and execution of government policies and programs in different sectors of the society. The political and economic development

in Nigeria would have been much easier if reliable population data were available because the absence of trustworthy or accurate population data directly affects the government's inability to ensure balanced political representation and equal access to important governmental resources.

#### The Population Census: Nigerian Experience

Nigeria adopts the practice of decennial census. Vital registration started in 1863. Between 1866 and the present, the country has conducted about sixteen censuses. Conventional methods of enumeration such as vital registration and sample surveys were used. Most of these censuses yielded limited results. Their conducts were bedeviled by many problems that impeded their success. Some of the problems as listed by Olorunfemi and Fashsagba (2014) included organizational and managerial skills, weak technological capacity, inadequate findings, and unfavorable political environments.

There was also the problem of mass illiteracy compounded by attendant superstition and cultural taboos. All of these hindered the people, in many instances, from offering themselves for enumeration at the call of field enumerators. Poor transportation and communications systems also militated against the success of census taking in Nigeria. Bad roads as well as lack of adequate and appropriate means of transportation made it difficult for the enumerators to reach some rural and riverine areas for head counts.

The census of 1952/53, for example, suffered from under-enumeration on grounds of problems listed above and other shortcomings including poor coverage, non-simultaneity of enumeration and unusual age categories in the presentation of results. Another census, whose result was cancelled because of the political heat that it generated, was conducted in 1962.

In 1963, still another census was conducted. It returned a population figure of 55.7 for Nigeria. This figure, though accepted, was considered to have been inflated. Another census was conducted in the country in 1973. Its result was also cancelled because the population figure of 79.8 million was adjudged to have been grossly inflated.

Censuses of 1962 and 1973 were rejected on grounds of irregularities. Thus, up to 1991 when another census was conducted the data from the 1963 census remained the most current census data for Nigeria and, despite its questionable accuracy, all official population projections were

based on it (Umoh, 1986). However, in 1991 and 2006 censuses were conducted. The figures obtained were controversial.

Apart from those discussed above, there are, at least three other sufficiently serious problems that posed as hurdles between the achievement of accurate population count and Nigeria. One of these problems is the absence of perceivable moral and ethical safeguards. Most Nigerians respect neither the law nor custom. Whenever a regulatory law is promulgated and a procedure for societal action is prescribed, an immediate reaction of a great many Nigerians is either to ignore the law and procedure or devise a way of contravening them and, at the same time, evading the penalty or consequences. To the extent that a Nigerian succeeds in achieving this negative and anti-societal feat, to that extent he considers himself great and courageous or even brainy (Umoh, 1986).

Conduct of census does not escape from this psychology. This lack of regard for law expresses itself in the way Nigerians respond to census questions and provide the information required of them. Many refused to avail themselves for enumeration while others expressed the same psychological phenomenon by inflating data. Within this kind of general lack of compunction, what comes out at the end of the exercise can hardly represent an accurate population figure.

The next difficulty lies in the general understanding of Nigerian leaders as regards the utility of census or population figure. Whereas census drew widespread resentment in its early history because it was used or associated mainly with taxation, the attitude of the Nigerian leaders is quite different. They perceive and understand the utility of population figure strictly within the political spectrum. They know that legislative seats and national revenue are allocated to areas with consideration to their population, among other things (Yakasai, 2002). The same may also go for the distribution of other amenities collectively referred to as the national cake. During electioneering campaigns, high population of the area which also holds out prospects for large number of votes enhances the capacity of the political leaders to attract funds from the national headquarters of the parties to the area for the purposes of effective campaigns.

In view of the above and given the federal nature of the government as well as the ethnographic diversity and the patterns of ethnic settlements in the country, the leaders of the various states and ethnic groups try to register the highest figures for their areas. This propensity coupled with the lack of objective source of ethical restraint and the antinomian bent of many Nigerians to open a flood gate for inflation of population figures.

The lethargy and inertia which characterize the Nigerian public bureaucracy bestow credence to this attitude. In 1979, for example, the Federal Military Government promulgated a decree to make vital registration compulsory in the country. Although the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979* subsequently provided for and created the National Population Commission (NPC) and charged it with the responsibility of establishing and maintaining the machinery for continuous and universal registration of births and deaths throughout the federation, the NPC is yet to do this with significant level of success.

Two agencies of the Federal Government conducted two nation-wide surveys with the objective of obtaining national demographic estimates. One was the Rural Demographic Sample Survey of 1966/65 conducted by the Federal Office of Statistics. The other was the National Demographic Sample Survey of 1980 conducted by the National Population Bureau. Many years after the surveys, their results were yet to be public. The people waited endlessly for the output of the exercise and lost interest in such programmes the next time around. Apter and Andrain (1968) cited Nigeria as a good example among countries that publish false census figures and other statistics for political considerations. The present federal administration has a duty to change this record.

For policies aimed at improving the living standards of the people and solving social problems in the country to succeed they must be informed by and formulated from accurate population figures of the country. Without reliable census, socio-economic planning can only be based on guesses. Given the fact that the population figure on which Nigeria bases her policies today are projections from the census data taken some years ago and having regard to the fact that the accuracy of the said census data is disputed, it is not totally unreasonable to infer that the endurance of some of the social problems of the country are attributable to the inaccuracy of the population data upon which the solutions to them were

devised. To help the nation out of this predicament, the present government should conduct population census in the country based on suggestion proffer below.

### TOWARDS AN ACCURATE POPULATION CENSUS

Studies by different scholars and contributors have suggested ways on how to obtain accurate population census. For examples, the study by Eze (2009) suggested the use of satellite remote sensing and geographical information system to the planning, mapping and measurement of the census data set. He concluded that both SRS and GIS are effective tools in terms of monitoring, detecting, retrieving, querying, and analyzing population and its spatial characteristics. Okafor cited in Eniayejuni and Agoyi (2011) maintained that rather than using population for planning and development the population census has resulted in political instability and diminishing capacity in Nigeria. The study explained that census conducted in the context of extant hotly disputed and largely illegitimate state structure will not be able to accomplish its state objectives. The study then suggested that true federalism, decentralized government and de politicized census will help stop the census being inverted its role in Nigeria.

Similarly, the study by Bamgbose (2009) on falsification of population data in Nigeria has suggested that to get accurate population figure, using population as the yardstick for the allocation of governmental benefits should be de-emphasized through equitable distribution of resources to ensure satisfactory living conditions for all Nigerians.

A biometric system approach to population census and identification is proposed by Eniayejuni and Agoyi (2011) to help stop the manipulation and falsification of population census figures in Nigeria. They claimed that in order to have an accurate and trustworthy data of Nigerian citizens there is need for a biometric system for data collection and centralized database for the data. This, according to these authors will help in identifying multiple identities and it can also be used to curb fraud and election malpractices. In pursuance of a reliable and credible census, the Commission designed methodology and incorporated new techniques and the most modern technology for conducting the census. Thus for the first time, 2006 census employed the use of Geographical Positioning System (GPS) and Satellite imageries to carve out geo referenced Enumeration Area maps, OMR/ICR/OCR machine readable forms to record information, Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS)



to read fingerprints and thereby prevent multiple counting and as well as Geographic Information System (GIS) used to store the 2006 census result (Obasanjo, 2006).

These are all good suggestions which if adopted and implemented would have assisted the nation in its effort to overcome the hurdle of census falsification. As discussed earlier, considering the fact that many Nigerians lack moral and ethical safeguard and are inclined to negative and anti societal practices, it is not incorrect to infer that these recommendations may not escape this psychology.

For example, when the result of the 2006 census was presented to the president, the chairman of the national Population Commission, Alhaji Lamaila Makama assured the nation that, the census was conducted with considerable transparency and confidentiality. Declaring the result, president Obasanjo stated on January 9, 2007 that Nigeria's provisional population as at March, 2006 stood at 140, 003, 542. The announcement of the result was followed as usual with protests, accusations of falsification of result, and expressions of disillusionment (Tinubu, 2008).

For another, it was stipulated that with the use of card reader, an electronic voting system, rigging during elections would be drastically reduced. However the experiences of last elections tended to prove such assumption wrong as staff of Independent National Electoral Commission, security operatives, politicians, etc devised means to make the innovation not to work. They either escaped with the card readers or just rightly refused to use the machines on the flimsy excuse that the machines did not work. This work offers these additional suggestions.

#### a) **Preparation for the Enumeration**

Conventional methods for gathering demographic data includes census which involves actual enumeration of persons and gathering of other personal data, vital registration which records all births and deaths in the country, and sample surveys. By and large, Nigeria has used all of these methods, through census and sample surveys more extensively. Indeed, much of what is known of the population of Nigeria today is derived from sample survey.

To arrive at a reliable accurate figure, there is no alternative to actual enumeration. The present federal administration has to start planning for this exercise. In doing so, attempts should be made as a matter of urgency to solve or minimize some of the problems that impeded the success of

past censuses.

Transportation system in the form of roads should be extended into the rural areas so as to make them accessible to census exercises in due course. Even before then, these roads serve as concrete evidence of government's concern for the people and create receptive attitude that helps to restore credibility to the government.

Presently, the dwellers in the rural areas share one hundred per cent in the sufferings and hardships befalling the country as a result of the misgovernance of the ruling elites, but see very little of the benefits of belonging to a nation-state around them. Accordingly, they have low faith in government and are, often, indifferent or apathetic to some public programmes. Construction of good roads and the establishment of other social facilities in the rural areas will aid the government to penetrate the hearts of the inhabitants of Nigeria's rural areas.

Public education and publicity on census should start. It should be carried out on the press, radio and television. More importantly, public education and publicity on census should be carried right down to the grass-roots, i.e. the village level. The attempt should focus on enlightening the people of the country. This work suggests the creation, as a matter of urgency, of a Census Education Bureau (CEB) with offices in all the states and local government areas to handle this task.

Political motives of census should be de-emphasized. In the same way, efforts should be made during these campaigns to dispel the kinds of superstition that tend to create misunderstanding of the true implication of census and cause the people to avoid enumeration. The importance of truth in responding to census questions should also be emphasized. Good access roads, thorough publicity, and effective public education will mobilize the citizenry totally for enumeration and successful census.

The greatest problem issues come from the ethical void in the nation. It would be suggested that all who participate in the census exercise, either as citizens coming up for enumeration or staff, do so under oath. Because most Nigerians have no respect for oath and are unwilling to be bound by procedures, this will be of no effect. For a people who respect oath, however, statement under oath and service under oath would minimize inflation of facts and figures in the exercise.

**(b) The Actual Count**

Inaccuracy in census figures appears not to derive from the organic structure for enumeration. Rather it originates from extraneous tampering with the enumeration and computation organs and processes by political interests. If this interest can be curbed, and this is difficult, and the National Population Commission (NPC) or any such body is isolated from such political influences, the usual structure used in the past can handle the enumeration effectively. It may be unnecessary to draft people from Ondo State, for example, to conduct the enumeration in Sokoto State or vice versa as in the past.

In form, the enumeration record should carry the usual census information which includes the actual names, sex, date of birth, age, education, occupation, etc. Field workers who collect this information as well as all other officials who are likely to handle the record should maintain the confidentiality of answers to census questions and swear to secrecy so as to allow for efficient census counts.

**(c) Cross-checking of Figures**

Whatever figures may be returned from the field need to be cross-checked for accuracy. It should be assumed that, having been accustomed to inflating population figures for the census and voting register, those politically minded people will still find some chance to do it this time. Besides, normal errors by enumerators and others associated with the process of census data collection will appear as mistakes. Accordingly, there should be some unconventional way of cross-checking of the figures returned from each State.

A suggestion here is that the population figure returned for each state be checked against the total of the population of the students in the state's primary schools, secondary and post secondary schools and the population of the staff in the public service of the state. Obviously, the two figures will vary, but there should be some relationship between both. The number returned from the field enumeration should be higher, but an extremely high difference may indicate a need for a sound look and a rational adjustment in the final computation to reflect reality. A final figure for the federation may also be cross-checked by the same approach.

**Vital Registration**

Once the population figure has been announced, the National Population Commission should ensure that the machinery for continuous and universal registration starts to function in every local area. The suggestion here is that a unit of this be established at each village head's office. Data from these Vital Registration Units should be submitted quarterly through the local government office of the area to the N.P.C. If this is done, the problem of yearly adjustment or projection of the population figures can ease considerably.

**CONCLUSION**

Some of the suggestions made here that may seem simplistic like those made under preparation for enumeration are not intended as a quick sweep the day before the count starts. Rather, they are activities that should begin and continue for a long time before the census enumeration starts. Some of them, like suggestions on transportation and public education, are also strategies for government's penetration of the masses and the rural communities. They also help create credibility which aids government programmes to succeed.

Erection of ethical standard for the country is not a matter that can be achieved in a day, but the government certainly needs one in order for anything to work in this country. The view here is that if these approaches are timely taken, Nigeria may be able to conduct a successful census that produces an accurate and reliable population figure by the year 2016.