

# Misconception of Population Census and Vital Registration in Nigeria: A Factor in Socio Economic and Political Stagnation

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**Abstract:** The concept of population census and vital registration was developed to specifically capture the aggregate and distribution of individuals and groups in a particular geographical territory. However, the concepts and their applications, to actualize their essence, have been faced with hitches both naturally occurring and human induced. This has led to socio economic backwardness among the nations that misconstrued population census/vital registration, and their socio economic implications. In the case of Nigeria the misconception of population census and vital registration arising from the colonial era, has kept the country in confusion about how to harmonize census administration, and utilize population information in meeting with the socio economic and political needs of her citizens. This paper therefore assesses the socio economic and political consequences of the misconception and subsequent subversion of population census and vital registration in Nigeria. The paper analyzes the socio cultural, political, institutional and historical factors, which laid the faulty foundation on which population census, and vital registrations continue to waver, using published literatures and existing sources. Considering that census and vital registrations are the exclusive responsibilities of the government- and that- every effective administration must understand and appreciate the dynamics and heterogeneity of her population, the paper recommends reform of existing institutions and engendering of attitudinal change among the citizens as remedy.

**Keywords:** Historical factors, institutional factors, Nigeria, population census, subversion of census and vital registration, vital registration.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As human society continues to evolve from simple to complex nature, so ideas, concepts and ideology develop to capture the phenomena that surround the human social, economic, cultural and political life. However, developing, adopting or borrowing a concept without its full understanding and proper application, no matter how plausible such concept is. It can be as irrelevant as not knowing about the existence of such concept, hence, developing nations with multiple borrowed concepts, which are not properly applied cannot be different from underdeveloped nations that have not known about the concept in question. The concept of population census and vital registration emerged out of necessity, to help society understand what has happened, and how to plan for future.

Misconception and improper application of the concept of population census and vital registration in Nigeria right from the colonial era because of circumstances beyond and under the control of the nation have almost made it, irrelevant to the socioeconomic cum political development of the nation. This has led to the stagnation of these aspects of the national life (Ezeah, Iyanda & Nwangwu, 2013).

Across human societies, socio economic, cultural and political phenomena are so interwoven that, a part becomes insignificant without the whole, and the whole become dysfunctional in the absence of the contribution of the parts. Human population among other things in every society/nation is such an important phenomenon, which determines the way other phenomena affect the members of the society individually and collectively (Weeks, 1999).

Production and distribution of goods and services, qualitative educational and health systems, harmonious political arrangement, harmonious information and communication network, etc, all are the needs of a modern nation. It can be possible if the birth, death, sex, and age distribution of the inhabitants (human population) of the territory are accurately recorded and analyze (Eniayejuni& Agoyi, 2011; Mahapatra, Shibuya, Coullare, Notzon, Roa, and Szreter, 2007,). The misconception and improper application of vital registration in Nigeria, which started in 1863 (National Population Commission, 2008), and population census which started in 1866 (Okolo, 1999), have become chronic illness which has continued to affect other parts of the system. This has denied the country opportunity of accurately managing her human population as a resource, and the available natural resources, to meet the needs of her citizens.

The misconception and improper application of vital registration and population census, and their consequences for socio economic and political development of Nigeria are as result of mostly human errors and deliberate actions for private or group gains. Nevertheless, this paper is focus towards unravelling those factors responsible for the misconception and improper application of population census and vital registrations. Having introduced the interest of this paper, the remaining parts will address the following: concept clarification, factors responsible for the misconception and improper application of the concepts of vital registration and population census in Nigeria, the socio economic cum political implications of these for the country, and conclusion and recommendations.

## II. CONCEPT CLARIFICATION CENSUS

The word “census” originated from the Latin word “censere” which loosely means to tax, assess value (Ezeah et al, 2013). Though the word in question originated from Latin, the concept of census had been earlier applied for its utilitarian value in such ancient civilizations like Egypt (Kemet), Babylonia, China and India (Weeks, 1999). As civilization and knowledge diffused from these societies to others, the concept was captured and transferred to European civilizations and as the wave of conquest for empires and economic expansion continued to spread, individuals and groups who found it useful for private interests configured the concept. For instance, after establishing city-state in Medina (The present day Saudi Arabia) in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Prophet Mohammad utilized the concept in capturing the Muslim population in the territory.

Similarly, William of Normandy employed a similar strategy in 1086 after conquering England in 1066. He ordered an enumeration of all the landed wealth in the newly conquered territory in order to determine how much revenue the landowners owed (Hinde, 1995; Weeks, 1999). Consequent to the utilitarian value of the concept of census, exhibited in the societies where it was adopted, and the improvement in knowledge (science) which gradually spread to other parts of the world, census was modernized to capture the human population in a more comprehensive manner. The first modern census was carried out in Sweden (1749) followed by the U.S census of 1790 and England in 1801 (Carr Saunders, 1936; Cassedy, 1969 & Staistika [Sweden] 1983 in Weeks, 1999). Nonetheless, following scientific approach, census as a concept was comprehensively defined to include the information about various aspects of human population. Thus, the United Nations (1975) defined population census as the total process of collecting, compiling and publishing demographic, economic and social data pertaining to a specified time or times to all persons in a country or de-limited territory. By implication, this definition moves the concept of population census from the level of isolated counting of human beings to the level of comprehensive acknowledgement of every individual in a given territory and the socio economic aspects of their existence.

In view of the foregoing chronological presentation of the development of the concept of population census, it is unfortunate that Nigeria has not managed to utilize the concept of population census according to the definition by the United Nations which, is the basis on which every other nation, especially the developed ones conduct population census. According to the available records, from 1866 when the first census was carried out to the last census (2006 census), the processes had been characterized by the abuse of the concept and other controversies (, Adeleke Oparac & Okafor 2007; Arowolo and Daramola, 1982, Ekanem, 1972; , Makinwa, 1985 & Okolo, 1999). This is because of some factors that surrounded the inception and the conduct of population census in Nigeria starting from the colonial era until date.

**Vital Registration:**

According to Salawu (2009), vital registration can be defined as the continuous and permanent collection, recording, collation, analysis, presentation and distribution of data on the occurrence and characteristics of vital events (such as births, still births, marriages and annulment of marriages, foundlings, migration and naturalization, etc.) done in accordance to legal requirements of a nation. The concept of vital registration, in modern times, according to available documents, can be traced to Europe (London specifically), among the Clergies who were saddled with the responsibility of compiling vital events such as death (burials), birth (baptism), marriage and divorce in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Wrigley and Schofield, 1981). Beginning in 1592 these records (or bills) were printed and circulated on a weekly basis during particularly rough years, and so they were called London bills of mortality (Laxton, 1987; Lorimer, 1959 & Weeks, 1999). In a more comprehensive manner, John Graunt (a Londoner) in 1662 succeeded in using these compilations of vital events, to check the effect of bubonic plague on the population and the trends of mortality with other demographic factors. This gave birth to the first statistical analysis of demographic data using vital registration. The work of Graunt stimulated efforts by other scholars such as Lotka, William Petty and Edmund Halley, who ventured into harnessing the utilitarian value of vital documents in explaining other social phenomena related to human population such as death, birth, suicide, divorce, etc (Willcox, 1936 Sutherland, 1963, ).

While Graunt was working on bill of mortality in London, William Petty worked on bills of mortality in Dublin (Ireland). In Petty's work, apart from the general calculation like that of Graunt, he further put his calculations into smaller units based on political and geographical arithmetic hence presenting political arithmetic in Ireland in particular and Europe generally (Wrigley, 1974). William Petty published his work in two volumes (1676 & 1683). On the foundation of Graunt's work, Edward Hailey (an American Astronomer) was able to produce complete life table in (1693) while John Sussemilch on the same foundation produced a thesis on population, analyzing population from religious perspective (in 1742) (Weeks, 1999).

Vital registration is one of the most important and a reliable document, which enables any government operate efficiently to accommodate different categories of the citizens if properly harnessed. This is due to the fact that population census may take years to be conducted with certain levels of errors however, the vital registration if properly documented; it produces a comprehensive and consistent information about a particular population (Mahapatra et al, 2007). Vital registration document guides proper economic, health and social policies (Backhind, 2007, Johnson, Sorlie & Szreter, 1991). From the first time vital registration started in Nigeria until date, the conduct and outcome have contradicted its essence. For instance the first documentation of vital events which started in 1863 during the period British colonial government was in control of the southern and northern protectorates, ended up at Lagos colony and also segregated other rural settings when it was reinforced in 1892 and 1903 (NPC, 2008).

After the dawn of political independence, the conduct of vital registration continued with the errors of poor coverage, inconsistency in data collection and method of data collection, and inactivity of some registration centres across the federation (Maliki, 2003, NPC, 2008 Salawu, 2009). All these, amount to misconception and improper application of the concept of vital registration, looking at the origin of the concept and the subsequent comprehensive definition. However, Nigeria publishes census data from time to time and vital registration, however, the concern is whether these publications are realities based on the proper application of vital registration.

### III. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MISCONCEPTION AND IMPROPER APPLICATION OF VITAL REGISTRATION AND POPULATION CENSUS IN NIGERIA

In respect to the available records and documents about Nigerian vital registration and population censuses, there are evidences of lapses, abuse of the concepts and subversion of the essence of these concepts starting from the first attempts at applying them (in 1863 and 1866 respectively), till date. All these inconsistencies and lapses are the outcome of certain factors, which affected and continue to affect the processes of vital registration and population census. Among these factors are historical, institutional, socio cultural and political.

**Historical factors:**

The impact of colonialism on what is now known as Nigeria is so enormous that every facet of the life of the nation feels it till date. The policy of divide and rule in isolation by the British colonialists was fundamentally responsible for the

misconception of population census and vital registration. For instance, the earliest attempts were characterized either by separation between the protectorates or between the rural and urban areas (Okolo, 1999). Also, evidences from the colonial documents showed that more than any other thing, the colonialists used the concept of census and vital registration to champion the causes of the economic interests of the empire owners (the British government), separating the adults from the children in order to check the potential opportunity for tax and landed properties (Makinwa, 1985). Aluko (1965) reported that the 1931 census ended up in Lagos and few other places in the Northern part of the country, leaving a large chunk of the country uncounted.

The platform, which the colonialists laid for Nigeria with regard to population census and vital registration, were carried over into the independence and post-independence era. Owing to the fact that the colonial government did not specifically conduct population censuses and vital registration objectively and accurately, their hitherto stooges who inherited the administration from them, continued on the platform of abusing the concept of census and vital registration for personal and group gains; denting the image of the country on the global stage. According to Mahapatra et al (2007), Nigeria is one of the African nations whose vital statistics is not reliable and may not be used as a basis for population projection.

Nearly all the post-independence censuses in Nigeria have been mired in controversies resulting in at least two cancellations (Okafor, Adeleke & Oparac, 2007). These were because of configuring the purpose of census by the group who feel they have upper hand over others, in order to perpetuate their political and economic interests. Following the seed of disintegration, which the colonial government sowed among the ethnic groups, through distorted population census, it became the object of interest. The focus of average Nigerian Elite in the post independent era, was largely on how to manipulate the census figures to champion the economic cum political interest of his/her group irrespective of what such unscrupulous and unpatriotic attitude will do to the accuracy of the available data (Eniayejuni and Agoyi, 2011). The political and economic development in Nigeria would have been a lot easier if reliable population data were available. It is unfortunate that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria still does not use effective and trustworthy census data after the faulty foundation in population census, which the colonial government laid for her (Matthews, 2002).

#### **Institutional corruption (the National Population Commission, NPC):**

The concept of corruption is so diverse that one requires a properly nuanced definition to make sense of it meaning more than moral justification of actions and inactions. Someone may have sound moral judgement and a good public image signalling honesty, but may have been part of morally unjustifiable activities depending on the criteria employed to evaluate the action. Corruption according to Khan (1996) is an act, which deviates from the formal rules of conduct governing the actions of someone in a position of public authority, because of private regarding motives such as wealth, power or status. For Black and Gamer (2000), corruption can be present when an official fiduciary person unlawfully or wrongfully uses his situation or character to procure some benefits for himself or for another person, contrary to duty and rights of others.

Furthermore, it covers any illegal use of power by any person(s) for personal or arbitrary purposes. For our purpose here, bureaucratic corruption, which has to do with the established government institutions, occur in the public administration or the implementation end of policies (NORAD, 2000 in Keeper, 2012). Nonetheless, corruption is the subversion of the essence of a proposed agenda, established institution and a designed policy, by an individual or a group either deliberately or not, either for pecuniary purpose or on the ground of emotional or whatever sentiment. Thus, the most serious whistle blower against corruption may have been perpetuating the same vice in one way or the other but can only cry about what he/she assumed to be corruption.

In respect to the above, institutional corruption then is the witting or unwitting action, which subverts the purpose and essence of any established institution, government or organisational policy and the justification of any such activity in a defined context. Almost all the government institutions in Nigeria have fallen prey to institutional corruption which has rendered most of them weak and inactive (Adewale, 2011). Using a scale of 1 to 100, Adewale was able to capture the rate of corruption in Nigeria at the institutional level, where police institution led the rest in corruption in 2005 (96%) and 2007 (99%). The least among these institutions around 2007 included the Nigerian Port Authority (24%).

The institutional corruption, which started with the colonial legacy in Nigeria (Afikop, 1960, Gann & Duigan, 1978), saturated every other institution making it hard for any of the institutions in the nation to live up to expectation. The

present day National Population Commission (NPC) is not an exception in the case as this had manifested in the epileptic services it has rendered until date. This is responsible for the misconception of population census and vital registration in Nigeria today by the citizens. Due to the corrupting of the essence of census and vital registration by the operators of the institution, it has become hard for the institution to convince the public about the importance of participating in population census and vital registration, resulting in the often poor regards for the institution and its programme.

#### **Socio political and cultural factors:**

Socio political and cultural factors are those factors that affect the understanding and application of the concept of population census and vital registration, which have political and cultural undertones. These include, seeing the census and vital registration activities from the perspective of ethnic sentiment, the opportunity of dominating others through the power of number and the fear that counting or registering the newly born baby, dead person, marriage or any vital event; may have spiritual implication to the person or group participating in them(Okeibunor,2000). Due to lack of proper information and conviction among the citizens from the inception of vital registration (1863) and population census (1866), the activities were avoided by a significant number of persons owing to the fact that traditional African culture in different contexts, avoided certain level of exposure of private information.

Many African (Nigerians) until recently, avoided divulging information about a new born baby, dead person or even marital affairs to unknown person for the fear of spiritual attack such as witch craft (Okeibunor, 2000). Similarly, death was seen as a sacred matter, which ought not to be talked about especially, with a stranger. All the above, coupled with the isolation of the population by the colonial government, in their administration, which created some level of suspicion among the citizens, did not allow the citizens to objectively understand the concept of population census and vital registration, and their importance to the population. Of course, this reflected on the outcome of census and vital registration activities in the country right from the colonial period until the last (2006) census and the compilation of vital registration from 1994 to 2007 (NPC, 2008, Okafor et al, 2006, Okolo, 1999, Salawu, 2009). The compilation of registered vital events from 1994 to 2007, showed disparity in terms of level of education, urban rural context, religion and other socio cultural factors. For instance, while there were responses in the reportage of death in the urban setting, the result, was the opposite in the rural setting.

Again, while the average enlightened husbands and wives contributed largely to the captured data on birth registration the uneducated or education with religious affiliation (Koranic education), contributed less (NPC, 2008). All these were the evidence of socio cultural factors that affected the knowledge and understanding of the concept of population census and vital registration. Similarly, Okolo (1999) and Makinwa (1985) recorded the large extent of non-participation in population censuses by certain segments of the Nigerian population for reasons other than non-coverage by census officials.

Nevertheless, beyond the socio-cultural factors were the political factors, which blurred the knowledge and understanding of population census and vital registration in Nigeria till date. After the colonial legacy of allocating political seats based on population size of the region the citizens picked interest in population census, not in the objective essence of it, but for the sake of economic and political benefits accruable to larger population figure. According to Okolo (1999), in preparation for elections into the federal house of parliament around 1954, the data from the 1952 – 1953 census were used as the basis for allocating 50% representation to the north. Politicians from the southern region on the ground that the colonial administrators ostensibly projected the population of the north in order to ensure their political domination of other regions, as they were the only group who favoured the colonial administration fiercely contested this action by the colonial administrators. Gradually, the citizens became aware that political power arising, from the number of elected members of parliament or local councils as well as the allocation of government amenities largely depended on the size of the population. After the independence, the population of each region became an important yardstick for deciding how much of the country's annual earnings that was allocated to the regions.

This unfortunate mixture of political and economic issues with population count was responsible for the high level of inaccuracy in all the censuses that have taking place in the post independence era. Thus, to average Nigerian since 1952 when the concept of census was mixed up with political domination, population census was nothing but the act of using larger figure to project your group for political and economic benefits from the national cake. Evidently, the political interest among the ethnic groups in the country distorted the minds of Nigerians from understanding objectively, the essence of the concept of population census.

#### IV. THE SOCIO ECONOMIC IMPLICATION OF MISCONCEPTION OF POPULATION CENSUS AND VITAL REGISTRATION IN NIGERIA

According to Salawu (2009), the relationship between population, planning and development has a long history, which has been well documented in demographic study. The issue of the relationship between population and development continues to be the focus of many international conferences on population. It can be difficult for any nation, which does not know the size and structure of her population, to observe a meaningful development plan. This is because; planning for development in any society is for human beings order than objects. Consequently, human beings vary in their development needs, growth and expansion in size (population). The misconception of population census and vital registration in Nigeria, which started from the colonial era, has dealt a great blow to Nigerian economy and national life.

After some decades of developmental efforts and management, Nigeria is still being classified as an underdeveloped poor country of the third world. Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, in terms of human and natural resources, with one of the seventh largest reserves of crude oil, the country is still living below the poverty line with a gross national products per capita of N1, 220 (Adewale, 2011). This is one of the evidences of improper application of population census and vital registration.

Even though the availability of natural and human resources can indicate Nigeria roll in enormous wealth as, the country cannot accurately distribute and utilize these resources simply because you do not know whom to plan for apart from the incidence of corruption. Nigeria has borrowed different economic policies from Europe, America, Asia and even some nations in Africa yet; nothing seems to be going instead, things continue to be worse. For instance, estimate show that by 2000, about 66% of Nigerians lived below the poverty line of one US dollar per day compared to 43% in 1985 (WHO, 2005, Federal Office of Statistics, 1996). All the economic policies have achieved little or in some cases totally failed because of undermining the essence of accurate population data. Thus, government may have been planning for the adults, due to wrong population data when, there are more infants and youth, planning for a health system which favours males when maternal mortality is high, planning for the distribution of social amenities in the rural setting when the urban setting is harbouring over 80% of the population etc.

Another implication of misconception of population census and vital registration to the national life is the ethnic division and domination of one ethnic group by another. After the colonial government sowed the seed of discord (by adopting population size as the determinant of revenue allocation), the dominant ethnic groups started playing on the cord of population politics leading to incessant manipulations, falsehood and population politics. The ethnic group with the highest population census figures uses it as a systematic institutional platform to exercise dominance over others.

Since, population figures are the yardstick with which national resources and political representations are shared, each ethnic group battle to inflate census figures in order to keep dominating other ethnic groups with the advantages socio economic and political resources (Ezeah et al, 2013).

Demographic manipulation according to Odimegwu (2013) deleteriously rubs off on all facets of the country's poor human development index and overall backwardness in most parameters of national transformation. At the heart of the reliable censuses over the years is the twin: Sore point's ethnicity, religion and these two indicators have remained the core issues because of the struggle for supremacy on both grounds by the three major ethnic groups in the country. Nigeria national population census has been a victim of intense elite contestation for political and economic power, accusation of regional bias and favouritism, popular distrust, resistance and wide spread suspicion of the census results (Diamond, 1988). As was recorded by Oyedele (2013), the National Population Commission has admitted that it does not have accurate figures on Nigeria's population because the various estimates that have been presented by the commission in the past have been mired in controversies.

Of paramount importance among others, is that Nigerian demographic information has never been accepted as reliable anywhere in the world creating by implication, a bad image for the nation. The 1991 census provisional figure amounted to 25% deviation from the estimate of about 115 million that was being used by many international organizations, including the United Nations and the World Bank (Okolo, 1999).

Indeed, the misconception of population census and vital registration, which started from colonial era and spilled over to the post independence era, has affected every facet of the national life and by implication, has frustrated the national effort to move forward in the developmental analysis according to global development index.

## V. CONCLUSION

The concept of population census and vital registration developed out of circumstances surrounding human socio economic development with more priority, on the accuracy of demographic information in a particular geographical setting. Over the years, scientific advancement have refined the concept and put it at an acceptable level to all human societies. Going by the available information so far, Nigeria as a nation has falling prey to the abuse of the concept, its misconception and improper application due to certain factors such as historical, socio cultural, institutional and political. Whatsoever that has been responsible for the improper application and materialization of the concept of population census and vital registration; the socio economic implication has been a great challenge to the national development efforts and the international public image of the nation.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the current situation of population issue in the nation and the factors surrounding it, there is likely to be more problems if it continues unchecked. Based on the factors discovered to be responsible for the misconception of population census and vital registrations, the following strategies can be adopted to reverse the situation:

1. Since the federal government has at least, succeeded in operating a uniform educational system, the issue of population census and vital registration should be more emphasized in the academic curricula at all level, to ensure adequate regular enlightenment of all the citizens; instead of the ad hoc methods adopted during the census period.
2. Population issues should be depoliticized by leaving them in the care of scholars and experts who are relatively neutral from ethnic, religious and political cum economic interests. More so, everything about population issues in the country should be separated from political appointment.
3. The institutions responsible for the population issues should be sanitized, to save them from the incessant abuse of office and corrupting of the essence of institutional existence.
4. Since the traditional systems in the nation still hold sway in the attitudinal manifestation among the citizens, government should introduce a mild approach to inculcate the concept of population census, vital registration and their essence, in the mind of the citizens, using the existing traditional structures

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