

**COLONIALISM, URBANIZATION AND THE PAN-IGBO
CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY IN NIGERIA, 1900-1960**

Nwachukwu J. Obiakor

&

Kingsley Okwudili Ibeh

Department of History and International Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.18277.47848

Abstract

Scholarly works abound on the life and history of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The major point of convergence of most of these historical literatures is their espousal of the resilience and I-can-do spirit of the Igbo, as well as the Igbo man's proclivity to have a say in what concerns him. The ontological basis for these traits could be found in the republican worldview of the Igbo, which hallows independence, hard work and egalitarianism. On the other hand, there are aspects of Igbo history where ethnographers and historians hold divergent views and which have thus divided them. The first is the issue of the historical origin of the Igbo and the other wherein this work anchors itself is the evolution of pan Igbo identity or Igbo ethnicity: did pan-Igboism or Pan-Igbo idea predate colonial rule or was it necessitated by the socio-economic novelties consequent upon the colonial rule? While few scholars staunchly hold that pan-Igboism existed long before European incursion; some others differ, and argue that the pan Igbo idea or pan-Igboism itself came only in the face of European domination and thus, pan-igboism is as colonial a product as the nation Nigeria. The later claim seem more convincing to any historian who is at home with the pre-colonial socio-political system of the Igbo, which has the village as the highest unit and each of this villages was as independent, autonomous and sovereign as any of those Central European polities created by the Westphalia treaty of January 30,1648. However, it could be observed that Igbo ethnicity did not totally and directly evolve in the face of European domination. It was rather spurred by the colonially motivated inter-ethnic rivalry that characterized the colonial urban centers from the 1930's. Thus, the study concludes that while the colonial urban centers were the loci of the development of Igbo ethnicity, inter-ethnic rivalry resulting from the heterogeneity of urban centres in colonial Nigeria was its raison d'être.

Keywords: Colonialism, Urbanization, Ethnic Identity, Primordialism and Consciousness

Introduction

The Igbo are referred to as one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. The question of the existence of the Igbo in Nigeria is not in doubt but the question of who are the Igbo in contemporary Nigeria has been compounded by the state creation and geographical balkanization of the indigenous Igbo people which the military administration of Gen. Yakubu Gowon piloted. Based on this, many people wrongly associated the Igbo with the defunct East Central State, which metamorphosed into the five states of the current Southeast geopolitical zone (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo). Among the proponents of this view is Katharine Slattery, who espoused that 'Igboland is the home of the Igbo peoples and it covers most of Southeastern Nigeria.'¹

For some others, the Igbo are found in the southeast and south-south zones of Nigeria, Adiele Afigbo in his map of Igboland showing Nsukka area, the Holy City of Nri and Arochukwu share this view. His definition of Igboland limits the Igbo to seven states in Nigeria (Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers).²

However, contrary to the above shades of opinion, the Igbo make up the total population of the southeastern geopolitical region of Nigeria which include; Anambra, Abia, Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi States. They Igbo are also found in the South-south states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. A small population of the Igbo inhabits Benue, and Kogi States in the North-central region of Nigeria. The Igbo are widely travelled and in every city or town in Nigeria, they are the second largest population after the indigenous population. The Igbo maintain a life of extreme simplicity but this simplicity is easily sacrificed in the face of civilization from the outside world. G.T. Basden rightly puts it thus:

The Igbo live a simple life characterized by contentment with the barest modicum of those articles which are usually regarded as indispensable in a household. However, discontent with primitive condition comes only with the introduction of novelties from the outside world and then like a child, the Igbo covets what he sees.³

The Igbo were among the last ethnic groups in Nigeria to come in contact with western civilization and education, but this trait to covet novelties has put the Igbo in the first place with regard to western education and civilization. Explaining this further, G.T. Basden notes; "left to him the Igbo neither needs nor desires foreign luxuries but once the possibility of securing them presents itself,

be they even so incongruous, he will not relax his effort until they become his cherished possession.”⁴

In line with the above postulation of Basden, the quest for novelties which in the context of colonialism are civilization and western education, spurred the Igbo into migration to non Igbo urban centres. The exclusion characteristic of struggle for scarce resources in these centres moved the Igbo speaking people into deep introspection culminating in the question ‘who are we?’, ‘do we have a common identity as various Igboid groups?’

Urbanization in Pre-Colonial Nigeria Area

Urbanization in this context refers to the physical development and growth of a once rural area into an urban centre as a result of rural migration. Urbanization is therefore synonymous with the growth of cities. Corroborating this view, Manzoor Hussein and Iram Imitiyaz submit that urbanization implies a change in the economic, social and cultural aspects of the society. It is a process of becoming urban, the movement of people or process of becoming to urban areas⁵. This conceptualization of urbanization is at variance with the identification of urbanization with population growth; the former can be a result of the later.

Urbanization in Nigeria nay other African countries are wrongly associated with the advent of the Europeans. This condemnable line of thought anchors on the Eurocentric prejudices of some Western scholars. Hugh Trevor Roper had argued that there is only the history of European presence in Africa, the rest is darkness⁶. The urbanization implication of this prejudiced thought is that Nigeria began to urbanize with the advent of the Europeans and to argue otherwise is baseless. However, history reveals that the above claim is devoid of any foundation in reality. Urbanization began in Nigeria even before it began in Britain. Urbanization in Britain came as an after effect of the collapse of feudalism in the 9th century. This is corroborated in the assertion of Russo below:

Towns began as borough, that is, as fortifications erected during the 9th century Viking invasions. Towns were at first places of defense, into which farmers from the surrounding countryside moved when their area was attacked. Later, the merchants were attracted to the fortifications because they had something to sell ...⁷

On the other hand, urbanization began in Nigeria earlier than 9th century. Adegbola *et al* share the view when they submitted that “urban system had been developing in Nigeria since the early medieval period circa 7th century and was particularly evident in the north of the country”⁸. These Nigerian cities that predate colonialism were technically designated as old cities to differentiate them from the new cities which later sprang as a result of colonial socio-political and economic activities.

Features of Urbanization in pre-colonial Nigeria

Adegbola *et al* are of the opinion that pre-colonial urban centers existed in northern Nigeria. Thus the first feature of urbanization in the pre-colonial Nigeria is its concentration in the North. However, some scholars are of the opinion that pre-colonial urban centers in Nigeria were concentrated not only in the north as Adegbola *et al* postulate but also in the southwest and that the east was out of the picture as there was virtually absence of urban centres in the east. Among these scholars are Mabogunje and Abumere. Mabogunje for instance argues that urban system was particularly evident in the north of the country and in the south-western Yoruba part of the country, and they developed around the same time.⁹ Abumere in a similar manner submits that prior to British colonial rule, urbanization tended to concentrate in the north and south-west, the east had a predominant rural character.¹⁰

Some of the pre-colonial urban centers in Nigeria owed their rise to the trans-Saharan trade. These include the cities of Kano, Katsina and Borno (Ngazargamu). There were three famous trans-Saharan trade routes: eastern, central and western trade routes. Of these three, two terminated in northern Nigeria bringing the cities of Kano, Katsina and Borno within the operational arena of the trade. These trade routes were the Eastern trade route which began in Libya and terminated in Borno and the central trade route which ran from Ghadames, Ghat and Agades to Katsina and Kano in Nigeria.¹¹ The rise of Kano, Katsina and Borno due to the trans-Saharan trade go a long way to buttressing the role of trade, trade routes and markets in urbanization. This idea was well grasped by Muhammed Korau of Katsina as far back as the 15th century. When the central trans-Saharan trade route was being constructed, Korau relocated Katsina to its present site which is about hundred miles north of the former location. This relocation brought Katsina within the operational arena of the trans-Saharan trade.¹²

Another outstanding feature of urbanization in pre-colonial Nigeria is that politics played important role in spurring the rise and growth of urban centers.

Certain pre-colonial cities like Oyo, Gwandu and Sokoto owed their urbanization to their status as administrative headquarters of a larger socio-political unit. For instance, Sokoto was “the capital of the vast empire or caliphate formed after the jihad ... a twin but subordinate capital, Gwandu was also built near Sokoto”¹³. The administrative and political relevance of these political nerve centres constituted a pull-factor that drew people to these places thereby encouraging urban growth.

In describing the features of urbanization in pre-colonial Nigeria one must acknowledge the role played by religion. Some cities like Ile-Ife which was acclaimed as the spiritual headquarters of the Yoruba people owed their pre-colonial urban status to their non-displaceable religious significance and this became a pull-factor that transformed them into urban centers.

Absence of Urbanization in the Pre-colonial ‘Eastern Igboland’

As previously noted, Abumere maintained that pre-colonial Igboland had a predominantly rural character. This statement does not denote a total absence of urbanization in pre-colonial Igboland, however, it does imply that though majority of Igbo towns were rural and agrarian, there were nonetheless a few urban centers in pre-colonial Igboland. These urban centers existed not in the east but in the western Igboland in the present day Delta state. The ancient city of Aboh stands out here. G.T. Strides observed that the “kingdom of Aboh situated where the Niger enters its delta had become an important urban political unit by 1800”¹⁴. The reason for the urbanization of this western Igbo city is her strategic position on the Niger. “Aboh controlled access to the hinterland and to the coastal ports of Nembe and Kalabari.”¹⁵ The civilization attained by Aboh explains why at the instance of Obi Ossai of Aboh, the British explorers, Richard and John Lander (the Lander brothers) were arrested for trespassing the territorial waters of the kingdom and they had to remain in Aboh prison until they were ransomed by Kingboy, a Brass merchant.

In the eastern Igbo area, urbanization was totally lacking. The eastern Igboland was rural in character prior to British incursion. Two major reasons could be given as to why the eastern Igbo lacked pre-colonial urbanization and these are: the socio-political system of the pre-colonial Igbo and the geographical location of eastern Igboland.

The socio-political system of the pre-colonial Igbo east of the Niger ontologically negates urbanization. The Igbo of this zone maintained a five tiers socio-political

system with the *Obodo* (village republic) as the highest tier. The *Obodo* is “a social unit which comprised a number of maximal lineages knit together by kinship bonds and whose inhabitants consider themselves distinct and autonomous from other such unit”¹⁶. This description by L.U. Ejiofor further brings out other features of an Igbo village republic. Every Igbo village was distinct and autonomous; it is what J. Ekei calls “autonomous political entity”¹⁷. An Igbo village maintained acephalous or segmentary political system which is a political system without a central government, which in pre-colonial Africa was usually headed by a single person (king, empire, sultan, Almami)¹⁸.

The above socio-political system of pre-colonial Igbo worked against the factors that engendered urbanization in pre-colonial Africa. The first of these factors is the politics of state capital. Urbanization during the pre-colonial era was inter alia as a result of politics. Those towns that served as administrative capital of pre-colonial African states, developed into urban centers. The Igbo village republicanism excluded the existence of administrative state capitals, given that a capital presupposes a ruler that would operate therefrom. The Igbo prior to colonialism was acephalous and egalitarian. The affairs of the village were discussed not in administrative capital (which was absent) but in the parliamentary square which could be village square or a major market square and which as Webster et al observe “operated every four or eight days depending on its size and importance.”¹⁹ Again, the population as well as the size of an Igbo village republic vitiated the political need for an ideal administrative capital which in most cases was bigger than an Igbo village republic itself.

The pre-colonial Igbo political system negated the existence of a spiritual headquarters for the entire Igbo people. Some pre-colonial African towns grew into urban centers because of their status as spiritual headquarters of a people bonded by one language, culture or religion. There was no existence of such spiritual headquarters in Igboland and the reason for this is not far-fetched. The Igbo villages maintained what is called religious egalitarianism and in virtue of this, every Igbo village considered itself as equal in religious importance as the other. This notion of religious egalitarianism exudes an air of religious sufficiency and this is encapsulated in the dictum “*nku di na mba na-eghere mba nri*” (an institution evoked by a people serves and works for them). Thus, egalitarianism in Igbo worldview does not only denote equality of all persons but also equality of all village republics in political and religious matters. Adiele Afigbo may have differed with this, having argued that Nri is the spiritual

headquarters of Igboland, it was a holy city which was for the Igbo what Ile-Ife was for the Yoruba.²⁰ There is a difference here, while the Yoruba valued Ile-Ife as a city, the Igbo valued not the town of Nri but the priests who came from Nri because of what they could offer. Thus, there is a dichotomy between the importance of Nri people and Nri town to Igbo people. Nri priests were more important to the Igbo than Nri town just as conversely Ile-Ife town was more important to the Yoruba than Ile-Ife people. One can say that because the Yoruba valued Ile-Ife as a town, Ile-Ife acquired a centripetal force or a pull-force that engendered the urbanization of the town. On the other hand, because the Igbo never valued Nri as a town, Nri lacked that pull-force needed for her urbanization rather, what Nri had was a centripetal force which discouraged her urbanization. While the Yoruba flocked to Ile-Ife to consult Ile-Ife oracles and priests, Nri priests on the other hand, moved from Nri to Igbo towns to perform their religious duties. Nri people were "itinerant priests and the highest representation of sacerdotalism in the Ibo race"²¹. Nri was the headquarters of an itinerant priestly cult and not the religious or spiritual headquarters of Igbo people; while a spiritual headquarters attracts people, a headquarters of priestly cult releases her priests into the villages (in the manners of the Jewish tribe of Levi) to minister to the spiritual needs of the people. This explains why Nri priests were peripatetic priests. In corroboration of the above, G.T. Basden points out that among the Igbo, Nri is the headquarters of a priestly cult and that Nri men were travelers so much so that they were met with frequently²².

Precolonial Igbo socio-political system negated the existence of security pull-factors that makes for urbanization. Such security pull-factors according to C. Tetey include "city walls, fortifications and moat"²³. These attracted people who sought for defense. As the population of the town grew, it developed into an urban center. As earlier noted, the pre-colonial Igbo village republic was non centralized and stateless and among the features of the non-centralized states of Nigeria before 1800 was non-existence of security-pull factors like city walls and moats²⁴.

The second factor that accounted for the lack of pre-colonial urbanization in Igbo land was the geographical location of Igboland. Igboland lies between lat.4'15' and 7'05' North and longitude 6'00 and 8'30' East. It covers a total surface area of approximately 41,000 square kilometers²⁵. The "Igbo [east of the Niger] occupy the forests hinterland in Nigeria"²⁶ without direct access to the sea and outside the world. The geographical location of the Igbo automatically cut her off from the operational arena of the Trans-Sahara trade and the coastal trade which could

have engendered the rise of pre-colonial urban centers in Igboland. Trade and trade routes played important roles in the emergence of pre-colonial urban centers in Africa. This does not imply that there were no trading activities in the pre-1800 Igboland. There were trades but this was not international enough to birth urbanization. The Aro trading system could have encouraged urbanization but the trade was illegitimate being a trade in persons, and slave trade according to Inikori Joseph is characterized by social tensions, political conflicts and warfare which were extremely harmful to any development be it urban or economic.²⁷

Colonialism and rise of New Urban centers in Nigeria

Colonialism has been defined as the practice by which a powerful country directly control less powerful countries and uses their resources to increase its own power and wealth. The intervention of John Beecroft, the British consul in the kingship tussle between Kosoko and Akintoye both of Lagos opened the door for the British colonialization of what is today called Nigeria. The British annexed Lagos in 1861 and installed Mr. H. Freeman as the first governor of Lagos. From Lagos they began the conquest of the indigenous people of Nigeria such that by 1914, the whole Nigeria seems to have come under British control. The goal of colonialism has always been economic exploitation of the indigenous people. In keeping with this, as soon as the British established their rule in Nigeria, they did not waste time in establishing small ports along the coast for their economic activities and for easy transportation of commodities to the metropole. These port towns grew into urban centers. Lagos, Calabar and Port Harcourt were examples of these port towns. Having established ports and base, there came the need to establish administrative headquarters among the indigenous people from where they would be controlled to ensure unchallenged exploitation of their resources. These administrative headquarters such as Enugu, Onitsha, Owerri, Kaduna, Lokoja and other towns that served as colonial regional, provincial and divisional headquarters grew into urban centers. With the people now under effective control from the administrative headquarters, the British settled down for the main business which was economic exploitation. Those towns with abundant natural resources were explored, discovered and extractive industries sited in them. These mineral towns grew into urban centers as a result of influx of people. Enugu, Jos, among others, were examples of these mineral towns. The need to transport the extracted minerals to the coastal ports for onward shipment to Europe necessitated the linking of these mineral towns

with the coastal ports through rail way. The further result of this was that some towns along the railway lines such as Umuahia grew into urban centers.

Igbo Ethnicity

Ethnicity encompasses values, traditions, and practices but, crucially, it gives a people a common identity and sense of distinctiveness usually by focusing on their homogeneity in origin and descent.²⁸ Ethnicity or pan identity is achieved when a group of people with “both linguistic and/ or cultural similarity develop a common consciousness”²⁹ “of being one in relation to the other relevant ethnic groups.”³⁰ Pan-Igbo identity or Igbo ethnicity refers to development of common consciousness by those who have Igbo language as their primary language and who equally share common Igbo culture and worldview. Igbo ethnicity in this context can also be called pan-Igboism or pan Igbo identity. In today’s Nigeria, there is Pan-Igbo identity among the Igbo people and this is represented by the Ohanaeze Ndigbo socio-cultural organization.

Theorizing Igbo Ethnicity: Primordialism and Constructionism

With regard to Igbo ethnicity, there is a lingering question begging for clarification and that question is: **how did Igbo ethnicity evolve?** This question has elicited two theories: primordialism and constructionism. The primordialist school incorporates all who argue that Igbo ethnicity is something innate, fixed and permanent in the psyche of every Igbo person. Thus each person born into Igbo ethnic group comes with him/her a germ of pan Igbo consciousness. The primordialist theory of Igbo ethnicity is anchored on the primordial theory of ethnicity propagated by Vanhanem, Estaenban, Harowitz, among others. Harotwitz for instance submits that under primordialism; ethnic identity is fixed across time. As a function of common blood shared within each ethnic group... hospitality and cooperation are expected among members of the in-group and hostility and conflict against out-groups...³¹

In the light of primordialism therefore, Igbo ethnicity is considered as old as the Igbo race and predating the British incursion into what is known today as Nigeria. It can conveniently be stated that the character Odenigbo in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of A Yellow Sun* fits into this school.

However, an explanation of the evolution of Igbo ethnicity using primordialist approach is confuted by the fact that the Igbo started coming together as a people during the colonial era. The pre-colonial division between the *Igbo* (as

referred to the people inhabiting upland Igboland by their riverine kits and kin) and *Olu* (as the Igbo people that live in the riverine/coastal areas refer to themselves), expressed in such adages as *e jee m Igbo jee Olu* (I have traversed Igbo upland as well as the coastal Igbo). Also, *Adaka no n'olu ma odu ya no n'Igbo* (literarily, the baboon is in the coastal Igbo while its tail extends to the upland Igbo); *ude ya na-edede n'Olu na-edede n'Igbo* (his fame resounds in the coastal Igboland as well as upland Igbo) have debunked the innatism of Igbo ethnicity as well as its pre-colonial dating. Okwudiba Nnoli shares this view that the Igbo speaking people were self-consciously divided into the *Olu* and the *Igbo* peoples...therefore among certain neighbouring peoples, there was a definite distinction between *Olu* and *Igbo*...³²

What the Igbo had prior to colonialism was micro-ethnicity or at best a polarized ethnicity founded on the dichotomized pillars of *Igbo* and *Olu*. Therefore, common possession of Igbo culture, worldview and language lack the needed centripetal force for the development and sustenance of pan Igbo identity or ethnic consciousness.

A better understanding of the evolution of pan Igbo identity could be done using the constructionist approach. In line with this, Igbo ethnicity is viewed as socially constructed by the Igbo elites. Thus, Igbo ethnicity never predated colonialism. The proponents of the constructionist theory of Igbo ethnicity include: Okwudiba Nnoli, Elizabeth Isichei, Ejitu Nnechi Ota and L. Ezeka. Okwudiba Nnoli argues that "...in what is today known as Igboland, there was no history of common pre-colonial consciousness and identity, Igbo ethnicity is a social and not biological phenomenon. It has colonial and urban origin."³³In the same manner Elizabeth Isichei espoused the constructionist theory of Igbo ethnicity when thus:

This book is a history of the Igbo people. It immediately suggests the question, to what extent were the Igbo people a real entity in precolonial times? There was of course, no sense of Pan-Igbo identity. The Igbo villager's view of external reality was a sharp dichotomy, 'them and us'.³⁴

The conclusion of the constructionist theory is that Pan Igbo identity as earlier stated is as colonial a product as the nation Nigeria.³⁵

Reasons for the of Igbo Ethnicity in the Pre-colonial Nigeria

There are a number of factors that account for the absence of pan-Igbo identity and consciousness in the pre-colonial period. The first of these factors is the Igbo

kinship system which viewed a non-kinsman as an outsider or a foreigner. Under this arrangement, a non-kinsman be him an Igbo or non-Igbo was regarded as a foreigner. The pre-colonial Igbo therefore, maintained a closed system and this explains why “with the exception of the Aro and Nri people, the various Igbo pre-colonial polities did not make any contact whatsoever before colonization and were even in certain cases oblivious of the existence of one another.”³⁶

The ‘acephalousness’ of the Igbo or the ‘*Igbo-enwe-eze*’ posture was another factor that obliterated pan-Igbo identity in the pre-colonial period. There was no central ruler who could unite the Igbo and bring them to the consciousness of their ethnicity just as Tsoede did among the Jukun people of Northern Nigeria. Again, the homogeneity of Igbo villages contributed to the lack of pan-Igbo identity. Before the colonial era, the Igbo did not have much contact with other ethnic groups save the Niger-deltans who did not pose threat to the Igbo. Heterogeneity is the obverse of homogeneity and inter-group rivalry associated with heterogeneity is a factor in bringing a people to the consciousness of their ethnicity.

Another inhibiting factor for a pan-Igbo identity in the pre-colonial period was the total absence of a myth of common origin. The Oriental hypothesis on the history of the Igbo as represented by the Eri myth could only account for the common origin of Aguleri/Umueri and the other Umueri clans of Anambra state, and a few Igbo communities in Delta and Enugu states but could not account for the origin of the other Igbo people. This myth’s strength was further depreciated by the historical revisionism that sprouted in the Otuocha/Omambala area of Igboland³⁷. The inadequacy of Eri myth has also led to the *Eri-Arodi-Areli* hypothesis which accounts for the origin of all Igbo people. However, the problem with this tradition of origin is that it is not widely accepted by the Igbo and again, it did not pre-date colonialism. Among the factors that spur ethnicity, myth of common origin stands out, in fact, when other factors are not there, the myth of common origin is enough to bring people to the consciousness of their ethnicity. Okwudiba Nnoli explains this with the Yoruba people of Nigeria: During the pre-colonial times, the Yoruba speaking peoples were organized in kingdoms which fought bitter wars against one another but this notwithstanding the myth of common Oduduwa ancestry of ‘Omo Odua’ factors made them see each other as one especially in relative to other groups.³⁸

The general absence of a pan-Igbo identity in pre-colonial Igboland, explains why there was no wars fought together by the Igbo as a collectivity.³⁹ when a pre-colonial community or town was attacked by a non-Igbo group, the town in question sorted itself out. For instance, Aro-Efik war and Aro-Ibibio wars were fought by Arohukwu and not by the generality of Igbo people.

Urbanization in Colonial Nigeria and Evolution of Igbo Ethnicity

Pan-Igbo identity owes its development to urbanization in colonial Nigeria. The modernity, social amenities and general allures of city life among other factors spurred the migration of the Igbo into the colonial urban centers within and without Igboland. Among the features of these colonial cities into which the Igbo migrated were social alienation and social heterogeneity. As the Igbo moved out of their home, a sense of social alienation from their kinsmen staked them in the face ⁴⁰ in the colonial cities characterized by diverse people, race, culture and religion. The social heterogeneity and alienation of the city life produced two effects in Igbo socio-political system. Firstly, in the urban centres within Igboland, like Enugu, Port Harcourt, Owerri, Umuahia, Onitsha, Aba, and so on; they led to the development of what Dan Chukwu calls 'family meeting' which is the meeting of those from the same Province, Division, District or even town.⁴¹ In the non-Igbo cities like Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Jos, in addition to family meetings, they led to the formation of ethno-cultural unions which brought together every Igbo speaking person in a particular urban centre outside Igboland. These family meetings and ethno-cultural unions carried with them the germ of Igbo ethnicity but at this level, the ethnicity has not assumed a 'pan' character as the entire Igbo has not been brought under one umbrella.

The Place of Lagos in the Development of Igbo Ethnicity

Before 1939, almost every city in the colonial Nigeria was dotted with a number of Igbo ethno-cultural unions and this development was in realization of the distinctness of the Igbo people in the Nigeria commonwealth. However, each of these unions was like a monad closed up in itself and which could not engineer the needed pan-Igbo identity of ethnicity. The struggle to birth a pan-Igbo identity began in 1943, when Igbo Union, Lagos, the ethno-cultural union of Lagos-based Igbo which was formed in 1934 evolved into Igbo Federal Union. The aim of this was to federate all Igbo unions in Nigeria. The Igbo Federal Union in pursuit of this pan-Igbo identity and consciousness set out to build and run thirty secondary schools all over Igboland as well as to establish an Igbo National bank.⁴² However, the full realization of pan-Igbo identity came to near

realization in 1948 when the Igbo Federal Union headquartered in Lagos was transformed into Igbo State Union (ISU).⁴³ The botheration of the ISU was to carry out the task of uniting every Igbo person under one umbrella which she inherited from Igbo Federal Union. This botheration reflected in her constitution which was adopted in Aba on June 20, 1954 and which *inter alia* states the task of the union to be is; “to devise ways and means whereby all the sons and daughters of Igboland... shall be brought together under one union”⁴⁴and by so doing bring them to the consciousness of their ethnicity.

Ejitu Nnechi Ota, after a critical study of the aims and objectives of the Igbo State Union notes that “from its set objectives, the most important responsibility which the ISU assigned to itself was the encouragement and promotion of Igbo ethnic identity and solidarity in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria”⁴⁵ To achieve the above task, the ISU utilized several strategies. The first of this was the registration of every Igbo Improvement Union, non-inclusive Igbo ethno-cultural unions, clans, and towns. Having brought the Igbo under one umbrella, the second task was how to infuse in them the consciousness of their common ethnicity. In doing this, the ISU utilized the common ordeal which the Igbo suffered in the hand of other ethnic groups in colonial cities especially the Yoruba cities. This ordeal was described thus by Ejitu Nnechi Ota:

Before 1936, the Igbo occupied few, if any positions in government establishment and privately-owned European commercial houses. The Yoruba, who had a head-start over the Igbo in terms of contacts with western civilization occupied most of the positions in both the colonial government and in the private sector. The Igbo in the colonial cities were looked down upon as people from the backwaters.... They were taunted in very debasing manners and the ego of the average Igbo in early colonial cities was greatly deflated by such humiliating remarks and reference.⁴⁶

This common ordeal of hostility and exclusionism suffered by the Igbo in the colonial cities, was whipped by the ISU to bring the Igbo to the consciousness of their ethnicity. To compensate the Igbo who seem to have been looked-down on as a result of their late contact with western civilization and to solidify the newly born Igbo ethnicity and consciousness, the ISU built a school in Aba and encouraged Igbo Unions in non-Igbo urban centres to build and run schools for Igbo children. Another means utilized by the ISU to encourage the nascent Igbo ethnicity was the institution of Igbo Day Celebration in 1954. The Igbo day was celebrated annually on every first Saturday of October throughout Nigeria. The

essence of Igbo Day Celebration was to commemorate Igbo accomplishments, and to signify Igbo unity. It afforded the Igbo the opportunity to reflect on their common cultural heritage.⁴⁷ The Igbo State Union awarded scholarship to brilliant Igbo students irrespective of their place of origin. Dennis Chukude Osadabay an Igbo of the Anioma stock was among the first beneficiary of this scheme. The ISU also took it upon herself to organize receptions and lectures for Igbo sons and daughters who had returned from abroad after their academic sojourn.⁴⁸with these exploits of the ISU, it became fashionable to be Igbo. Every Igbo from the present Southeast and South-South and Northcentral was proud to be Igbo. This golden Igbo ethnicity built by the Igbo State Union seemed to have crumbled during the Biafra-Nigeria war as some Igbo from the South-South region denied their Igbo ethnicity in order to escape the wrath of the Nigeria federal government and troops.

Formative Agents of Igbo Ethnicity

The formative agents of pan-Igbo identity were the Igbo Union Lagos, Igbo Federal Union and lastly the Igbo State Union. Dennis Chukude Osadabay, H.K. Offonry, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Jaja Nwachukwu were the founding fathers of pan-Igbo identity. Osadabay and Offonry were the president and secretary of Igbo Union Lagos, which later transformed into Igbo Federal Union, while Nnamdi Azikiwe and Jaja Wachukwu were respectively the president and secretary, respectively of the Igbo State Union.

Conclusion

While attempting a conceptual clarification of ethnicity, Okwudiba Nnoli made a distinction between the “ethnic group in itself” and the “ethnic group for itself”. The former refer to a group marked out by linguistic and/or cultural similarity but without a common consciousness or identity.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the later refer to “a group with both linguistic and/or cultural similarity and a common consciousness or identity.”⁵⁰ The Igbo before colonial urbanization was an ‘ethnic group in itself’ marked out by linguistic and cultural similarity but without a common consciousness. With the colonial rule, the Igbo evolved into an ‘ethnic group for itself’ with a common consciousness and pan-identity. This common consciousness was birthed in the colonial urban centers in the face of the perceived exclusion, denigration and hostility faced by the Igbo. Pan-Igbo identity in today’s Nigeria seems to be showing some cracks. This reflects in the constant denial by some Igbo of Rivers and Delta States of that same Igbo ethnicity which hitherto they were proud of. The Ohaneze Ndigbo can do a lot

more here to restore the pride and confidence of the Ikwerre and Anioma peoples in the Igbo project. She should understand that ethnicity is a social construct and this implies that there is the need for constant reinforcement of this construction lest it crumble.

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