

IGBO IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE ABOUT ETHNICITY AND NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

The Igbo nation is widely misunderstood and derided by other ethnic groups, based on their aggressive and migrant nature of pursuits. An ethnic group regarded as backward and primitive, soon caught up with other ethnic groups, example the Yoruba's, in education and politics. The Igbo's played active role in awakening ethnic consciousness through the formation of Igbo union and political parties. Following independence in 1960, several unmitigated political crises led to the military intervention in January 1966. The coup which was led by Major Chukwuma Nzogwu, and counter coup d'etate by the Hausa's in July 1966. Further mismanaged political developments resulted to civil war which ended in 1970. The much desired unity of Nigeria, continued to elude her as it was still being threatened by ethnicity, despite the huge promises to unite the country by the military, irrespective of tribe or religion.

Keywords: Igbo Nation, Politics, Ethnicity, Nation Building

Igbo Nation in Perspective

Adiele Afigbo, writing in his work *Igbo Genesis*, succinctly described the Igbo thus:

The Igbo are that distinct nationality or ethnic group which inhabits that portion of Nigerian territory bounded by the Igala to the North-West, the Idoma to the North, the Ekoid Bantu to the North-East, Annang-Ibibio to the East, the Ijo and the related peoples to the South and by the Edo to the West.¹

The Igbo's one of the distinct ethnic nationality in Nigeria had existed and interacted with other ethnic groups before the arrival of the British colonial masters and their creation of modern state. The Igbo had been influenced by people of other ethnic groups like Benin in the West and the Igala in the North about 15th Century. Strong cultural exchanges had existed among these groups. Through trade around the 17th Century, the Igbo according to Afigbo, “built up an intricate trading network covering the former Eastern Region of Nigeria and even penetrated into the areas occupied by the Idoma, Igala and some people of the Western Delta”.²

On her part, Patience Onokala, posits that “intergroup trade existed between the main land agricultural communities in Igboland and the people of the creeks and Riverine areas in order to exchange commodities characteristic of these areas”.³ In the same vein, Okoro Ijoma submits that the Igbo traded with other Igbo and non-Igbo neighbours, a trade relationship which had existed centuries before the British occupation of Igboland. The Igbo traded overland route with the Igala and Akpoto in Benue State. He further posits that the Igbo were not stagnant; they acquired the knowledge of iron working and through this were able to overcome the ecological difficulties of the forest environment.⁴ Afigbo in his other work, “*The Igbo and their neighbours*”, confirms that trade being an important factor of inter-group relation had existed extensively between Nsukka and the Igala/Idoma. The result according to him was a very intensive degree of contact between the Igbo and the Igala/Idoma.⁵ Nwaka sums it up thus:

The people's of the region had for centuries interacted closely through trade, population movement and other forms of cultural intermingling, and had together played a

remarkable role in organizing and executing centuries of trade in slaves and palm oil.⁶ This paragraph became very imperative as the Igbo have been established as a distinct ethnic group, very industrious and interactive and by no means stagnant people, before their integration into Nigeria through British conquest and subsequent amalgamation of 1914. The Igbo had strongly existed, had genuine communications with their neighbours through trade and other cultural exchanges. According to Coleman, among all the ethnic groups, “*The Igbo are the most densely populated rural areas in the world. In some places the density is more than 1,000 persons to a square mile*”.⁷ In support of the above, Fage avers that the Igbo were exceptionally densely populated people who had achieved considerable economic sophistication before the arrival of the Europeans.⁸ Coleman further asserts thus:

The Igbo were expanding territorially in many directions at the time of the British intrusion. They equally exported large number of labourers and even semi-permanent residents, which has been the source of anti-Igbo feelings among the tribes bordering Igboland, example the Igala, Idoma, Tiv and the Ibibio.⁹

The Igbo are widely travelled and highly industrious. Among all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, they are easily found in every town of this country doing businesses and making meaningful contributions to the development of their host communities. An Igbo adage says, “*Obodo Obula igara, ma ihughi onye Igbo, si n'obodo ahu laa*”. (Any town you visits and did not see an Igbo man, leave that city immediately). The industrious qualities of the Igbo people are proverbial and widely respected throughout West Africa.¹⁰

The Igbo in Nigerian Nation

There is no doubt colonialism, which was a great arm of imperialism was responsible for truncating and dislocating the Igbo nation and succeeded in dragging them into a union they never solicited for. The cordial relationship maintained with her neighbours, through trade and cultural interactions became dislocated. According to Nnoli “Colonialism was a major force in the development of the Nigeria people. It moved them from one course of history into another; it affected all aspects of life including ethnic identity formation”.¹¹ Nwabughuogu opines that, “*They were rather nation-states brought together by accident of history-colonialism*”.¹² According to Adegbami and Uche, Nigeria came under the British imperialist during the 19th century and with the 1st January, 1914 amalgamation of Southern and Northern protectorate the foundation of a nation now called Nigeria was laid”.¹³ Several ethnic groups became woven together into the new Nigerian State, against their will. Among the major ethnic groups were Igbo, Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba, which were regarded as majority ethnic groups. Among other ethnic groups regarded as minority, includes, the Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Edo, Tiv, Igala, Idoma etc. Nnoli avers that “*In Nigeria the exact number of ethnic groups is not know*”.¹⁴ as several authors posit varying numbers between 250-500 ethnic groups. The majority ethnic groups of Igbo, Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba, dominated other ethnic groups in the three geographical areas they occupied in the East, North and West respectively. Having created Nigeria, it created room for new definition of roles and interaction among the ethnic groups that formed the Nigerian state. Melson and Wolpe corroborate the above thus:

It is here that the various elements of the mobilized population are thrown into direct, and very personal, competition with one another—for positions within governmental agencies and commercial concerns, for the control of local markets, for admission to crowded schools, for introduction into the army and for control of political parties.¹⁵

In a way, these competitions are given ethnic interpretations where one fails at the expense of the successful candidate.

It was a known fact that the Yoruba's, following their early contact with the liberated slaves and the Western world were more advanced than the other ethnic groups in Nigeria, both technologically and educationally. Earlier, the Igbo has been described as very industrious, they had to bring in, their vigorous pursuits economically and otherwise, into play in embracing the new order. The Igbo emigrated to the big city of Lagos and other parts of the West in search of a new means of livelihood. Ota supports the above view as he says:

“The Yoruba's who had a head-start over the Igbo in terms of contact with Western civilization, occupied most of the positions in both the colonial government and in the private sector. The Igbo who went to Lagos were employed mostly as laborers, house-boys, cooks and stewards to Europeans, Indians, Brazilian and wealthy Yoruba, and were derisively called “Kobo Kobo, aje ayo”.¹⁶

On his part, Nwaka agrees with the above when he submits that “Before ethnic and sub-regional identities and loyalties began to crystallizes in Nigeria in the 1940's and 1950's the people of Eastern Nigeria were collectively described in derisive terms as primitive and culturally backward”.¹⁷ The Igbo migrated to other areas, particularly Yorubaland, to work as farm labourers or as servants and unskilled workers”.¹⁸ In addition, the Igbo migrated in larger numbers to various urban centers in search of wage employment. According to Coleman, by the end of World War II, Igbo clerks, artisan, traders, and labourers constitutes a sizable minority groups in every urban center of Nigeria.¹⁹ Major metropolitan areas which attracted migrants between 1920-50's were Lagos the hub of Nigeria industries and commercial centre, as well as Ibadan in the west. In the North, Kaduna, Kano and Jos, while in the East, prominent cities were Onitsha, Enugu, Aba and Port-Harcourt.

These urban areas were the commercial, industrial, educational and administrative centers that accommodated migrants from various rural centers, who had sought for better life and jobs in the urban centers. It was this competition to acquire a new lease of life against the indigenous that creates conflict. Nnoli posits that not all urban areas were important for the emergence of ethnicity as most cities in the North, East and West are made up of one indigenous ethnic groups, in such circumstance; no significant inter-ethnic contact was possible.²⁰ He further avers that of political importance for the emergency of ethnicity are high rates of urbanization which have been sustained in some areas by migration from different ethnic groups.²¹ He went further to submit that mere contact among ethnic groups is not sufficient for ethnicity to emerge. What is of critical importance is the socio-economic context of the contact, particularly the nature and degree of socio-economic competition involved.²²

Competition arose as a result of scarce resources, which is accentuated by urbanization, as migrants compete for scarce resources, positions in government agencies, schools, healthcare and various commercial interests. The imbalance in wealth status or power among the ethnic groups may serve to intensify communal antagonism. Social, geographical or political segregation or negligence in the spread of amenities may accentuate conflicts.²³ For example, the Niger Delta had to take up arms against the Federal Government to attract attention to their deplorable and neglected environmental challenges, despite producing the wealth of the nation.

However, Melson and Wolpe observe that, nowhere is the reality of “modern scarcity” experienced more intensely than in the cities, wherein the rate of population growth almost invariably exceeds the rate of economic development and the availability of new jobs.²⁴ The failure of one against the other over any given opportunity is given ethnic interpretation which

exacerbates crisis among competing interest groups. Osaghae and Suberu agree with the above, as they posit that, identities do not by themselves lead to conflicts, the fact that a country has several ethnic or religious groups does not make conflicts inevitable. Rather to identify the actual and perceived horizontal inequalities in access to diverse resources and state failure.²⁵

Ethnic Factor in Igbo Union and Education Development

There is no doubt the Igbo's emigrated in larger numbers to the various parts of Nigeria after the amalgamation, in search of greener pastures, irrespective of the derisive attitude by the people of other regions, especially the Yoruba. Colman submits statistically that from 1911-1951, the number of Igbo's in Lagos increased from 264 to 26,000 and in the North from 3,000 immigrants to 120,000 by 1951, excluding Igbo's in other parts of the West.²⁶ This informed the need for protective association which led to the formation of Igbo unions in Lagos. Uchendu in support of the above submits that:

In Nigeria and other West Africa cities where some Igbo work or seek paid labour, the need to protect themselves and to educate the newcomers in the city ways... led to the formation of various associations called family meetings or improvement unions.²⁷

Among all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbo were the most misunderstood, despite their genuine contributions to the development and progress of the Nigerian nation. The formation of Igbo union was devoid of any political connotation at its inception, though it later acquired such trappings following other ethnic groups politicizing the issue. The Igbo society were quite acephalous and egalitarian in nature politically, if compared with the Hausa/Fulani of the North or the Yoruba of the West, who had organized political system and had kept records of indigenous administrations, before the intrusion of the British colonial powers. Political mobilization suffered no hindrance as a result of its political nature.

Unfortunately, the fortunes of the Igbo had been a chequered one, as there were several ups and downs or turbulence in her political history, despite her immense contributions to the wellbeing of the Nigerian state. The resilience of the Igbo against the Colonial British conquest, gave the impression that the Igbo were very difficult and ungovernable people. Ota supports the above when he writes that, “The disturbing experience which the British had subduing Igbo, created in them the impression that the Igbo, were ungovernable”.²⁸ According to him, it was the dehumanizing nature of Igbo migrants to Lagos, which prompted the formation of Igbo Federal union in 1936 and later Igbo State union in 1948.²⁹ Most importantly, the union helped in easing the transplantation of new migrants from the certainties and security of village life to the uncertainties and hostility of life in an urban environment.³⁰

Audrey Smock agrees with the above submissions when he writes that, in Nigeria immigrants to urban centers began to form ethnic unions in the late 1920's in their attempt to provide for security in the alien and sometimes hostile environment. According to him the Igbo unions became multipurpose, when they financed community development projects such as building of schools and the endowment of scholarships.³¹ The forming of Igbo state union triggered other ethnic groups, who read political meanings into its formation, forming rival groups to counter the Igbo union. Except the Ibibio welfare union founded in 1928 which pre-dates Igbo union, Nnoli opines that:

In 1945, a Pan Yoruba union, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa was formed in London by Yoruba students including Obafemi Awolowo... the Urhobo brotherly society (later Urhobo Progress Union) was set up in 1931... the formation of these all inclusive ethnic groups such as Idoma, Tiv, Biron and Bakwari.³²

Initially, the formation of Igbo State Union did not have any political undertone; it was aimed at alleviating the suffering of Igbo migrants in Lagos. In support of the above, Coleman submits that, “most non Yoruba's resident in Lagos suffered varying forms of discrimination, particularly in regard to housing; it is not unlikely that this Igbo drive to unity stemmed in part from a real common grievance”.³³ Ota gave credence to the above as he writes thus;

... a pan-Igbo conference was held in Port Harcourt in December 1948. Igbo leaders at the conference were quite familiar with the poignant injustice of subordination which colonial rule was meting out to the Igbo ethnic group vis-à-vis the Efik and the Yoruba. They also realized that nothing could serve as enough psychological compensation except the coming together of the various segments making up the Igbo nation.³⁴

The Igbo state union responded positively to the immense challenges facing Igbo migrants all over the Nigeria federation. The popular Igbo adage “*Onye aghala nwanne ya*” came into play as Igbo leaders through this organization tackled all the socio-economic and political challenges they were faced with. Among these challenges was the issue of education in which Igbo were very backward when compared with Yoruba's who had early start over the Igbo's. The Igbo made tremendous contribution to the advancement of education in Nigeria, not only for the Igbo's, but for Nigerians in general. The Igbo having formed Igbo union, through this body pursued, vigorously the advancement of education, gave out scholarships to willing indigent students and built schools in various places in Nigeria. Ota, submits that “*Igbo National High School, Aba founded in 1951, was built through this process of Igbo State Union*”.³⁵

Another of such school was located in Kano, which was non-discriminatory, and a center of enlightenment for the children of all Nigerian groups in the education starved northern city.³⁶ Coleman quoting one of the Igbo leaders affirmed thus, “*Give a boy a good secondary education and he can rise to any height in the world without being dragged down by the dead weight of inferiority complex*”.³⁷ He further asserts that the Igbo embraced Western education with great enthusiasm and determination, Christian missions were welcome and they set up schools in various places. By late 1930's the Igbo's who were educationally backward, were heavily represented than any other tribe in Yaba Higher College and other secondary schools. He further posits that the gap between the Igbo and Yoruba was virtually closed by 1945. By 1952, Igbo enrolment at University of Ibadan stood at one hundred and fifteen (115) students, against one hundred and eighteen (118) for the Yoruba's.³⁷ Ethnic unions therefore played a significant role in the rapid Igbo educational advance beginning in the 1930's and in the development of modern facilities in the country side.³⁸ There is no doubt, the rapid education advancement by the Igbo, helped tremendously in transforming and repositioning the Igbo in the Nigerian polity.

Ethnic Factor in Igbo Political Participation

The political evolution of Nigeria cannot be complete without the contributions of the Igbo in the political process of Nigeria irrespective of ethnic interpretations. Mention has been made about the formation of Igbo State Union, whose purpose was not political initially, but, a socio-cultural association aimed at promoting the welfare of the Igbo's in Diaspora. According to Nnoli, these unions were able to diffuse the frustration of insecurity of the colonialist as well as cushioned the effects of insecurity for the individual who needed to survive in the new political development process.³⁹ On his part, Ota avers that one important achievement of the Igbo State Union as an agent of cultural modernization was the emergence and consolidation of Igbo ethnic identity in Nigeria. Before now, the Igbo had no compelling traditional loyalties beyond their various villages. Among the advantages of Igbo union, according to him, was that it infused in the people a sense of cultural identification, helped to diminish divisive tendencies among the people,

created a forum through which they met the challenges of colonial setting.⁴⁰

The ethnic unions soon became political in nature following the apprehensions of other ethnic groups and the formation of rival bodies to check mate the influence of the Igbo state union. As a result, in 1944 a group of Yoruba students and professionals in London organized a Pan-Yoruba cultural society called “*Egbe Omo Oduduwa*”, which was inaugurated in Nigeria four years later. The organizers claimed that they followed the example of Pan-tribal organization set by the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. In 1950, the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* transformed into a political party, “Action Group”, which came to power in Western region following general election.⁴¹ In the same vein, Nwabughuogu submits that in the same 1948. In the North, the Hausa/Fulani elites founded the *Jamiyyer Mutanen Arewa*,⁴² which later transformed into a political party “The Northern Peoples Congress”.

Before the introduction of Macpherson constitution in 1951 the only political party which had a national outlook already in existence was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) formed in 1944. Herbert Macaulay was the founding chairman, while Nnamdi Azikiwe was the secretary. Azikiwe later became the chairman following the death of Macaulay. The year 1948 to 1954, saw a vigorous political transformation of Nigeria. The country became structured into three units, namely Northern, Western and Eastern regions. According to Osaghae and Suberu, it reflected the pattern by which the British acquired and administered Nigeria as well as the country's tripartite major ethnic configuration, the three-region federal structure was inherently divisive, disintegrative and unstable.⁴³ In corroboration of the above Adegbami and Uche posit that the first Republic saw the initial political parties formation based on ethnic attachment. For instance Action Group (A.G) was tagged with Yoruba ethnic group, led by Obafemi Awolowo, of the West, Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) of the Hausa/Fulani led by Abubakar Tafawa Balawa, belonged to the North, while the Igbo's had the NCNC with Nnamdi Azikiwe as their leader.⁴⁴ As a result, regional cleavages and identities evolved from the structures created and consolidated by the colonialists in the process of State formation in Nigeria.⁴⁵

With the meaning of regionalism reduced to “North for Northerners”, 'East for Easterners”, and “West for Westerners”, a discriminatory system under which people from other regions living in these areas were deprived of rights and privileges and excluded from the political process has become entrenched.⁴⁶

Nigeria lost the wonderful opportunity of being woven together as a country without any form of discrimination at this time of our political evolution. The colonialists were more interested in protecting their imperialist economic interest than creating a system that will cost them more money to administer. If America with their divergent and populous citizens could be welded into a coherent and organized society, why not Nigeria? In support of the above, Osaghae and Suberu postulate thus:

The very fact that a country has different ethnic, communal, religious, and racial groups do not make division and conflicts inevitable. And for that matter, empirical evidence shows that division and conflict are not dependent on the degree of diversity, as some of the most diverse countries (for example, Switzerland, Belgium, Malaysia, and Tanzania) enjoy peace and stability.⁴⁷

The role of the Igbo in trying to achieve a united Nigeria cannot be under estimated. The Igbo political leaders believed in nationalism, of Pan-Nigerianism as demonstrated by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Mazi Mbonu Ojike. Coleman agrees with the above when he says that in the 1950 constitutional conference, only the Easterners supported the Pan-Nigeria deals. While all the representatives from the North and West regions vehemently opposed the idea.⁴⁸ Azikiwe made

an effort to present a multi-tribal front in NCNC, in his newspapers, and later in the legislative council. He consistently denounced tribalism and separatism, there was nothing to prove that he deliberately favoured Igbo's in his activities.⁴⁹ Sklar supports the above as he writes, The NCNC, oldest of the nationalist organizations in Nigeria, was both trans-regional in operation and trans-tribal in composition.⁵⁰ Azikiwe's faith in Pan-Nigerianism, led him into contesting and winning election in Lagos and parts of Yoruba land. Unfortunately, owing to political intrigue by the Western Nigeria against Azikiwe's victory in their region, the NCNC which initially had a national outlook was forced by circumstances beyond its control to become a regional (ethnic) party like others.

According to Coleman, Azikiwe earnestly had the burning desire to liberate Africa, but circumstances limited his field of operation to Nigeria and the British Cameroons.⁵¹ Thus, the growth and institutionalization of regional separatism might well have affected the careers and future opportunities of larger members of Easterners resident abroad.⁵² The original nationalist leadership began to sound a more parochial line, and the radical Pan-Nigerian nationalists were displaced by champions of communal groups. Accordingly, by 1963 most of the NCNC's Yoruba contingent had broken away and found a new Yoruba-based political party and by 1964, the NCNC had to all intents and purposes become the party of the Igbo's.⁵³ The Igbo's were very assertive politically, and they gave their tacit support overwhelmingly to Azikiwe and the NCNC. An Igbo adage supports the above when it says that “*One ajuru, anaghi aju onwe ya*”, (whoever is rejected by the masses cannot reject himself).

Before now the Igbo have not relented in their efforts, as they championed the cause of liberating Nigeria from the pangs of colonialism against the will of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Their struggles or campaigns were greeted by other ethnic groups with great skepticism and sometimes violence. For instance, in 1953, the Hausa and Igbo clashed which led to the deaths and injuries of several Igbo in Kano, following anti-colonial campaign for independence. The Northern politicians opposed the campaign as a result of fear of Igbo domination, if British should relinquish power.⁵⁴ According to Nnoli who supports the above:

In its mobilization of the political energies of the masses the party formed and exploited the widespread fear of domination in an independent Nigeria by the more educationally advanced Southerners. Therefore, it adopted a more reactionary anti-colonial position of delaying the attainment of independence until Northerners were in a better condition to compete with Southerners.⁵⁵

The fear of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, was that the Igbo's dominated and controlled all the essential service areas like the railway stations, post offices, government hospitals, public works and other departments in government, and as such had demanded a delay in independence pending when the North was ready for it.⁵⁶ However, independence was granted to Nigeria in October 1960, in an uncertain and confused political platform. From the date of independence, the Nigerian polity became plagued by numerous problems accentuated by ethnicity and division in both opinion and direction. In the words of Osaghae and Suberu,

The polarizing efforts of ethno-regional federalism were more or less directly expressed in several other political tribulations that assailed Nigeria in the sixties, including the 1962 declaration of a state of emergency in the western region; the bitter ethno-regional dispute over the 1962-63 census; the 1964 federal election crisis; the 1965 western election debacle, the eventual overthrow of the first Nigeria Democratic Republic in 1966 following a bloody ethno-military coup; the complete fragmentation and politicization of the military establishment along ethno-regional lines; the attempted secession of the Eastern region, under the leadership of its Igbo governor, Odumegwu

Ojukwu as the independent Republic of Biafra, and the eventual outbreak of the 30-month civil war, which claimed an estimated one million lives mainly in the ill-fated Biafra.⁵⁷

The Igbo in the First Military Coup D'ate

This paper will not be complete without the roles of the Igbo in the first military coup d'ate that truncated the First Republic, led by Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. The Igbo military officers did not just wake up to overthrow a constitutional government elected by the people. Rather several political factors which created crisis led to the military striking. For instance the Yoruba felt threatened by the Igbo rise socio-economically and politically. The Akintola government, then the Premier of the Western region, in his attempt to please the Yoruba's criticized the appointments of the Igbo in the Nigeria Railway, as well as removed Prof Eni Njoku as the Vice Chancellor of University of Lagos and replaced him with Prof Biobaku. The 1963 census which was highly disputed by the Igbos and others but accepted by the Hausa/Fulani. It was the first census conducted in independent Nigeria, which provided a guide to revenue allocation and for defining political-electoral constituencies. The violence of 1964 and 1965 elections in the West marred by fraud and rigging created political crisis, which the NPC in control of the Federal Government, used state institution to turn the violence against the NCNC the opposing party.⁵⁸ Dent succinctly supports the above when he says that the military saw progressive decline in the prestige of civilian rulers, corruption was high, inability to run a free and fair election and increased division (ethnicity) among Nigerians, made military intervention more possible.⁵⁹ He further avers that:

The utter failure of the Government to do justice in the West after rigged election, or to restore order here, provide a sense of urgency, a climate in which many people were looking to the army for deliverance.⁶⁰

In the words of Adegbami and Uche confirming the above assertion the ethnic agenda of the political parties of Nigeria's first Republic, bred the political turmoil witnessed few years after independence, which consequently led to the termination in January 1966, the First Republic by military coup d'ate. Even the coup was perceived by the Northerners as a sectional coup targeted against the Hausa/Fulani in order to terminate their political leaders.⁶¹ The military actually struck on 15 January, 1966, in a military coup d'ate led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. The first Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Premier of the North, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, S.L. Akintola the Premier of the Western region, and others who could not be mentioned, were killed. Though the coup led by Nzeogwu was deemed to have failed, following the capture of Lagos garrison by Gen Aguiyi Ironsi on 17 January 1966.⁶²

The coup which was acclaimed initially, was later given ethnic interpretation. The Hausa/Fulani, who had been afraid of Igbo domination, resented Igbo ascendancy to power. The regional privileged class now transferred into the Northern armed forces who were determined to end Igbo supremacy in the military and federal government. In May 1966, the Northerners while resenting the ascendancy to power and the control of the central government and economy by the Igbo, led to a riot, organized by students of the institute of Administration and the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, the demonstration became hijacked by non students in which violent actions were meted to the Igbo resident in the North. Heavy killing, maiming and destruction of properties belonging to the Igbo were carried out unhindered. At the end of the debacle, over 3,000 Igbo had been killed or wounded. In reaction to the killing large members of Igbo residents in the North fled to their ethnic homeland or sent their families there.⁶³

Ethnic Massacre and the Eventual Civil War

On 29 July, northern officers carried out a counter-coup. They killed General Aguiyi Ironsi and Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi the Governor of the West, while Ironsi was on a state visit to the West. The northern soldiers murdered Igbo soldiers as well as some civilians. Initially, the northern soldiers favoured secession and the withdrawal of the north from Nigeria. It took strong intervention and persuasion of the British High Commissioner and America Ambassador in Lagos to reverse this decision. Gowon had affirmed that the basis for trust and confidence in our unitary system of government has not been able to stand the test of time, and that the base for unity is not there.⁶⁴

In support of the above, Nnoli submits that even before the country could recover from the July massacre of the army, a most destructive pogrom befell Igbo residents in the North. The North unhappy with the loss of autonomy and possible division of the region into smaller constitutional units, the privileged classes of the North unleashed harrowing wave of violence, killing the Igbo in the North and elsewhere. Between 29 September and end of November 1966, over 50,000 Igbo were gruesomely murdered. Others were maimed or horribly mutilated. Over 2 million who survived the killing and maiming became refugees in their ethnic homeland, in an unprecedented manner.⁶⁵

It is pertinent to note that the secession threat by the North above was neither the first nor the last in the history of the Nigerian evolution. Several threats of secession had been expressed by other ethnic groups before now. Rather, it was only the secessionist threat by the Igbo was actually carried out. Thus, at one time and another, each major ethnic group and even a minority one, threatened to secede.

The first threat for secession took place in 1914 following the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates. The North being backward educationally perceived that the southerners would dominate every opportunity economically and otherwise, demanded for a separate independent state for the North. A second threat for secession was carried out by the North in 1953 following the targeted date for independence. The North were equally not ready, as they were afraid of domination by the South, following its backwardness in education, trained manpower and socio-economic attainments.⁶⁶ British influence at this time took care of these expressed fears.

The Yoruba of the South, equally threatened to secede, following argument in 1953 and 1954 over the status of Lagos, which was an integral part of the Western region. The desire to pull out Lagos from the region as a Federal Capital Territory led to the threat. The Igbo on their side threatened secession in 1964, following the Action Groups (AG's) major interest to undermine Azikiwe's NCNC strong national base in Lagos, by bringing it under Action Groups (AG) controlled regional government. Secondly the frustration felt by the NCNC led government over the 1963 census and the 1964 federal elections.⁶⁷

Finally, the minorities threatened secession in 1966, which was backed with action to realize the objective. The minorities had demanded for creation of separate state from the Eastern region. The Delta People's Republic was declared in 1966 by its leaders, namely, Isaac Boro, Sam Owonaro and Nottingham Dick, took up arms to support this demand. However, their efforts were undermined by the creation of the Rivers State in 1967 and the subsequent civil war.⁶⁸

Politically, the country gradually receded to anarchy following a wave of systematic violence against the Igbo throughout the Northern Region, otherwise known as the Pogrom. Sklar asserts that it was carefully planned and ruthlessly executed, where the worst crimes were committed by

soldiers of Northern origin. The Igbo were assaulted ferociously by non-Hausa Northerners in the Southerly portion of the Northern Region.⁶⁹ William and Turner gave credence to the above when they submit that they were better organized than they had been in May. Soldiers as well as Native Authority officials both instigated and participated in the slaughter. The pogrom appears to have resulted from the evident vulnerability of the Igbo refugees, and the political uncertainties of the period. It was encouraged by those Northerners who feared the loss of regional security and protection and patronage of the regional government. The East never returned to the constitutional conference, as the constitutional arrangement could no longer guarantee to the military government of Eastern Nigeria, the protection of Igbo lives and properties. The condition for conciliation no longer existed. The politics of compromise and crisis had reached a bloody impasse.⁷⁰

Apart from the pogrom in which Igbo residents in the North were massacred, there were plausible evidence that Igbo soldiers serving in various barracks in the North and Western region, for example, in Ibadan, Ikeja, Abeokuta, Kano and Kaduna, were gruesomely murdered. Dent in support of this writes thus;

In Ibadan and in the 2nd Battalion in Ikeja the other ranks took over and refused to let their officers interfere while they killed their Igbo comrades and officers.⁷¹

The situation became so appalling and heart breaking that no senior officer could intervene to stop the reckless killings, by the junior officers. Within three days every Igbo soldier serving outside the East was either dead, or in flight, or in detention. Probably some two hundred to three hundred had been killed.⁷² Meanwhile, no action nor harm was done to other ethnic officers serving in Enugu. Rather, Ojukwu agreed to repatriate the six hundred Northerners of the 6th Battalion from Enugu supplying them with arms for the journey.⁷³ Thus, the ugly crisis continued unabated, as relations between the Federal Government and the East continued to deteriorate, until it had degenerated into 30 months civil war. In this prevailing uncertain circumstance, the Igbo seceded from Nigeria as a Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967 under the leadership of Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu.

End of The War and Igbo Re-Integration into Nigeria

The acclaimed civil war in which Biafra attempted to break away from the rest of the country broke out on 6th June, 1967.⁷⁴ One principal instrument of war employed against the Igbo, apart from the heavy military might of the federal force was “starvation”. The federal government blockaded the land-locked Biafran territories, that no assistance could reach the suffering populace. As Biafra lost more and more territory, its population fled to increasingly constricted space, posing serious refugee and sustenance problems. Nnoli further posits thus;

Hunger became increasingly widespread and people began to die on a large scale of malnutrition. The outside world, especially the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, rallied to provide relief to the population.⁷⁵

Against all odds, the Federal Government led by General Yakubu Gowon prevailed over Biafra secessionist bid and they surrendered unconditionally to the federal forces. Thus, bringing the war to an end on 10th January 1970, while Odumegwu Ojukwu fled to Cote d'Ivoire.⁷⁶ The Igbo had now been forced back into the Nigerian federation, now restructured into twelve states against the regionalism practice before the coup of 1966. The East was divided into three states, namely, the East Central State, South Eastern State and the Rivers State. The initial objective of this exercise was to deny the Igbo of Biafra, support from the minority ethnic groups in the region.⁷⁷

Now, having forced the Igbo back to Nigeria after having fought a fruitless war, the Igbo defeated but not deflated, embraced their fate with great enthusiasm. The egalitarian and shrewd nature of Igbo was brought to bear in their quest for re-integration into Nigeria.

The Igbo at this point were made to bear the brunt of the civil war in diverse ways following certain government policies or in-actions. First Igbo were forced to forfeit their monies deposited with the banks before they fled home for safety and the eventual civil war. No matter the amount of money left with the bank every Igbo received a paltry sum of £20 (twenty pounds) as compensation. Other aspects of post civil war which left negative impact on the Igbo included re-absorbtion of workers to their pre-crisis jobs or offices with loss of seniority as they were made to serve under their juniors, including the military where most of them were denied re-absorbtion or gruesomely demoted to lower ranks. The third among being the abandoned property saga. As the Igbo fled from their places of residence, indigenes of the areas seized their landed properties and in many cases refused to release it at the end of the war. This was principally witnessed in Port Harcourt, now Rivers State which was part of the defunct Eastern Region. Before the war, the Igbo had resided in large numbers and dominated both the political and economic life of this city. They owned most of the commercial and residential houses in Port Harcourt. In support of the above, Nnoli submits thus;

With the connivance of the Federal Government they seized the Igbo property in question, shared it among themselves and refused to return the houses to their rightful owners. This became a contentious issue which took a long time to be resolved. In the end, only a few of the properties were released to their owners. The rest were seized without compensation.⁷⁸

The above development led to the death of several property owners in Port Harcourt, whose life's had already been battered by the civil war. The ecstasy with which they received the news of the end of the civil war, and the hope they nursed to return to their property to rejuvenate their life's became shattered by the abandon property issue. Similar situation existed, on a much lesser scale, in other parts of the country, especially the North.

Furthermore, the Igbo suffered injustice with the way and manner the indigenization programme was handled between 1972 and 1977. Having borne in mind, the competitiveness of the Igbo ethnic group in the pre-civil war era in the socio-politico and economic struggles of Nigeria. The Igbo believed that the timing of the indigenization policy was well calculated to scheme the Igbo out of competition. Having lost practically all their wealth as a result of the war and their defeat in it. Igbo leaders did not have the money to buy relevant foreign enterprises. And they believed that the timing of the exercise was ethnically deliberate to scheme the Igbo out of sharing the National cake.⁷⁹ Despite loosing their wealth to the civil war and the deprivation of their property, the Igbo still went forward to have themselves properly re-integrated into the Nigerian socio-economic and political struggles as Nigerian citizens in all ramification.

They quickly forgot their losses, being creative and resilient, returned to their former places of residences in all parts of Nigeria, North, West and South, and re-engaged themselves into genuine business pursuits. The Igbo at this time did not seek for political power. Rather, they were intent on making money, as a way to rebuild their shattered economic lives destroyed during the war. The recovery of the Igbo was quite proverbial, not minding the gruesome murder and the destruction of their properties as a result of the 1966 crisis. They soon emigrated to every part of Nigeria and prevailed economically. In support of the above, Sklar submits that the Igbo scattered throughout Nigeria, employed in the provision of many crucial economic and social

services. The industrious qualities of the Igbo people are proverbial and widely respected throughout West Africa.⁸⁰

Back home in the East, the Igbo began a rebuilding process also, as infrastructure such as personal properties in the urban areas, roads, bridges, schools and hospitals were utterly destroyed during the war. Nnoli gave credence to the above when he submits thus;

Civil wars wreak havoc on the physical infrastructure for development. Bridges are blown, roads and rail links are destroyed, airports and seaports are destroyed. In many cases, telephone, telegraph, postal and electricity systems are disabled... ongoing development projects such as manufacturing enterprises, agricultural activities, commercial establishments, and school and hospitals may be abandoned or destroyed in the course of the war.⁸¹

The Igbo lived in this state of infrastructural dilapidation for almost a decade before the Shehu Shagari administration built Enugu-Port Harcourt and Enugu-Onitsha Federal High ways which connected the East with other ethnic region in 1979-1983. Yakubu Gowon's rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation (3-R's) policy at the end of the war in 1970 became an embellished political statement to soothe the wounds of the defeated. It was during the reign of Shehu Shagari that the Igbo felt the inclusiveness of government when Alex Ekwueme became the Vice President of Nigeria. Apart from this golden era in Nigerian political history, every other subsequent administration had shown strong ethnic bias to the Igbo people. All these developments were regarded as the consequence of losing the war.

Five Decades after the Civil War: Nigeria

Five decades after the civil war, with all the above lessons learnt through various turbulence the country had gone through, it is still painful to observe that the Nigerian nation is more divided than united. Other primordial issues have gained wide currency than matters that would have united the country. In recent times, activities of ethnic associations such as Arewa, Odua, Massob, Ohaneze, Egbesu of the Niger Delta, and the IPOB have also led to crisis. Especially, where there is a generational gap within the social group. The elders seemed to abide by the constitutional means and peaceful resolution of conflicts, while the younger generations are more violent. For instance, the Niger Delta youths had to resort to the use of military force against the Federal government to attract attention to their deplorable and neglected environment. On the other hand, the Arewa youths issued a quit notice to the Igbo in the north regardless of the constitutional provisions. The elders of Arewa took a more peaceful approach to ensure that peace reigns. Also among the Igbo, the Ohaneze believe in the unity of Nigerian federation, while the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) believes in separation. In recent past also, such issues as “indigenes, non-indigenes, or migrants, herdsmen and settlers”, have created more serious crisis across the nation that have heated the polity negatively.

Issues like this tend to create divisions even among the Igbo nations as an ethnic group struggling to survive and make meaningful impact on other ethnic groups in Nigeria. In the same vein, Igbo living in the other parts of the country are discriminated against on the basis of non-indigene. Children, whose parents live in the north for over thirty years (30 years) or more, cannot enjoy free education or other social benefits in such states, despite their parents living and doing legitimate business, as well as paying taxes to the government. With such primordial issues still being accommodated, Nigeria still remained very far to be united. A non-indigene born in an American soil automatically becomes an American citizen, with all rights and privileges duly given to him, including the right to aspire and become the President of America. The tripod political system bequeathed to Nigeria by the colonialist became more divisive and separatist,

and has continued to plague and question our national interest and unity. Nigeria has not learnt any lesson on unity, what separates us, is more than what unites us.

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