

IGBOPHOBIA: A DIALECTICAL DECONSTRUCTION OF ETHNIC PREJUDICE AND PROFILING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The Igbo constitute one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the other two being the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba. Over the years, the Igbo, unlike the other majority ethnic groups, have had to contend with ethnic prejudice and profiling within and outside Nigeria. This study interrogated the origin, basis, and impact of the fear of and hatred for the Igbo by other Nigerians. In order to achieve the set objectives, the historical descriptive research method of content analysis was adopted. The sequence of events followed a chronological order. Among other things, the study revealed that there are certain aspects of the Igbo personality which some non-Igbo find disconcerting and opprobrious. These attitudes were manipulated by the colonial regime to inspire anti-Igbo feelings in Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, subsequent Nigerian governments have sustained this negative stereotyping, encouraging, in the course of time, ethnic biases and discrimination against the Igbo. The implications include a lingering clamour for separation from Nigeria by the Igbo, and the federal government's high-handed clampdown of Igbo protests.

Keywords: Colonialism, Igbophobia, ethnic groups, ethnic profiling, prejudice.

Introduction

The Igbo are concentrated in southern part of Nigeria and are found mostly in the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo (the South-East geopolitical zones), as well as in Benue, Kogi, Rivers, Cross River, and Delta states. Both the people and the language they speak are referred to as "Igbo". There are, however, dialectical variations in their language, though a standard Igbo dialect has been developed by Igbo scholars to facilitate communication among the Igbo, irrespective of their regions. This has also served to engender greater bonding among the people.

Known for their highly competitive social and economic orientation¹, the Igbo have a political culture that is both democratically republican and egalitarian in nature. Thus, in the village assembly, every sane adult Igbo male is allowed to contribute to the debate on matters affecting the village. Decision at any meeting are reached by consensus and unanimity. In essence, there is no one individual whose views or opinions are imposed on the assembly².

Unlike the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba who have different traditional political orientations that allows the Emir or Oba to wield substantial powers, the Igbo are not used to any form of authoritarianism or despotism. They are, therefore, less likely to obey the commands of any individual whose authority does not derive from the community as a whole. That explains why the Igbo are sometimes misrepresented as obtrusive and disrespectful by members of other ethnic groups who have a different traditional orientation.

But the Igbo also have traditional social and cultural institutions that regulate the conduct of individual members of the community in their day-to-day interactions and activities. One of these is the powerful age grade associations which have laid-down rules that can only be ignored or disobeyed at great costs. The women, as mothers, also have social control mechanisms in place to ensure that there are no serious breaches of the community's moral codes.³

It has to be pointed out that the general impression, prior to the 20th century, was that Igbo had no serious consciousness of a unified cultural or political identity. But the British conquest and annexation of Nigeria led to a radical change in the people's world view. Not only did the Igbo come to evolve a new cultural identity under the Igbo State Union, they also became politically conscious of the need to come together as one in the struggle for the political and economic advantages which British colonial rule introduced.⁴ The consciousness of oneness and unity, though tenuous before the 20th century, did exist among the Igbo. But it became manifest in the context of Nigerian politics under British colonial rule.

The Igbo personality and Igbophobia in historical perspective

Igbophobia refers to the fear of and hatred for members of the Igbo ethnic group by non-Igbo peoples and individuals. Its origin predates even the colonization of Nigeria by the British in the 20th century. It also has to do with the Igbo personality, that is, those qualities and distinctiveness of character with which the Igbo were known both by their pre-colonial neighbours and by early European visitors. These character traits are to be found in references to the Igbo by non-Igbo groups as well as in the views and opinions of the Igbo themselves.

For example, both Olaudah Equiano and Archibald John Monteith, two young Igbo boys who were captured and sold into slavery, have in their separate narratives, made copious references to such attributes of the Igbo as dignity, honour, hard work, and creativity⁵, as well as a sense of brotherhood and communalism, justice, perseverance, patriotism, courage, and determination. Their recollections of the practice of scarification (Mgbirichi) in pre-colonial Igboland are similar in their emphasis on dignity, endurance, honour, valour, courage, and determination.⁶ Similarly, early European visitors to the interior of Igboland also have accounts of the Igbo that are replete with these common traits .

For instance, writing in the late 18th century, Hugh Crow referred to the Igbo as being of an honest and engaging disposition, and of having a sense of communalism⁷. For John Adams who also wrote in the late 18th century, the Igbo sense of dignity was such that when captured and sent aboard a slave ship to the New World or Europe, the Igbo would rather commit suicide than become a slave⁸. That was why, in 1803, there was a mass suicide by some seventy-five captured Igbo persons who took control of the slave ship. This action, which occurred on the Dunbar River in St. Simmons Island, Georgia, in the United States of America⁹, is a testament to the value which the Igbo have always placed on honour, courage, and justice. Now popularly referred to as the "Igbo Landing", the account of the courage of the captive Igbo to embark on mass suicide instead of enslavement by strangers is currently part of the curriculum for coastal Georgia schools¹⁰.

In Haiti where many of enslaved Africans were Igbo, they played important roles in slave revolts and the movement towards emancipation and independence. In 1791, for instance, an enslaved Igbo known as Boukman Duty, initiated the Haitian Revolution which resulted in independence from French rule in 1804. Another Igbo, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, became Haiti's first President after independence¹¹. In Jamaica, which also had a substantial number of slaves from Igboland, about two hundred and fifty enslaved Igbo

revolted in Saint Elizabeth Parish in 1815, an action that fast-tracked the abolition of the slave trade and slavery¹². Similarly, in Richmond Virginia in the United States of America, Gabriel Prosser led a slave rebellion. He is largely believed to be of Igbo origins, though he was born in the plantation. Enslaved Igbo women are known to have killed their new-born babies to save them from slavery.

In all, Igbo resistance to enslavement was consistent with their traditional background of justice, honour, and equality. Their pattern of revolts made the European slave traders and plantation owners to perceive them as difficult to control. Thus, many avoided buying them. Despite the associated risk of rebellion, plantation owners still valued their resourcefulness and resilience. They were highly valued in the southern United States, especially in Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, Georgia, and in Jamaica in the Caribbean. In these places, Igbo slaves were present in large numbers, and were reputed to be physically strong and skilful in agricultural activities.

The colonial origins of Igbo-phobia and ethnic prejudice in Nigeria.

The British conquest and annexation of Nigeria began with the 1861 annexation of Lagos. Subsequently, a number of processes and dynamics combined and contributed to the emergence of Nigeria as a country. These date back to the days of Company Rule, the Protectorate System, the Crown Colony System, and the era of Commissions and Committees. While these process constitute the administrative aspect of the evolution of the Nigerian state, the establishment of the Lagos Legislative Council, the introduction of the Indirect Rule System, the Amalgamation of 1914, as well as constitutional and political developments, form part of the political evolution of Nigeria¹⁴.

There were two forms of resistance to British presence in several parts of what came to constitute present-day Nigeria. The first form is usually referred to a primary resistance and involved efforts to prevent the British from establishing a foothold on the land of indigenous peoples. Between 1851 and 1897, they had succeeded in conquering and occupying Yorubaland. In the North (Hausaland), British conquest and occupation started with the conquest of Bida in 1897 and ended in 1903. In Igboland, the first wave of conquest began from the 1890s to 1918, while the second wave lasted up to 1929. Primary resistance to British encroachment was common in Igboland, and include the Ekumeku Movement in Western Igboland (Anioma) and the Anglo-Aro war. While the Ekumeku resisted the British from 1883 to 1914, the war on Arochukwu lasted from 1901 to 1902¹⁵.

Although there were various forms of primary resistance to the British presence in Hausaland and Yorubaland, these did not linger as long as did the resistance in Igboland. For instance, the resistance of the Sokoto caliphate under Sultan Attahiru I lasted for only four years (1900-1903), while the Satiru rebellion and the Mahdist revolt lasted from 1906 to 1910. In Yorubaland, the resistance of the Ijebu Kingdom to British penetration began in 1892, while the Egba uprising occurred in 1918. Both rebellious were relatively short, actually within a year. But the situation in Igboland was different: resistance to British presence lasted for several decades as evidenced by the Ekumeku revolt which lasted for thirty-one years. A major reason for the prolonged resistance in Igboland was its non-centralized political structure. Each community was autonomous. In other words, unlike among the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, there were no central political authorities in charge of any large concentration of villages and clans. Thus, the British had to contend with conquering each community instead of a group of communities. In fact, Igbo resistance to the British began from the late 19th century and continued till 1929, the year of the Aba Women's War (which was caused by the introduction of new taxes by the colonialists).

The secondary form of resistance began after the British had firmly established their presence as the colonial power in Nigeria. It involved opposition to certain colonial policies and programmes by enlightened Nigerians who began to form political parties to coordinate their activities. This is commonly referred to as nationalism, and it is basically a 20th century phenomenon that came on the heels of discriminatory economic, political, and social policies and programmes introduced by the colonial regime. For instance, profits made by British firms in Nigeria were repatriated to Britain instead of being invested in Nigeria. Similarly, racism was made manifest through the creation of residential areas meant exclusively for Europeans in various Nigerian urban areas. These reserved areas had all the paraphernalia of modernity, such as good roads, electricity, adequate supply of potable water, among others. Politically, educated Nigerians were denied participation in the political decision-making process that impacted on their lives and of those who looked up to them.¹⁶

Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo, formed the Nigerian Reconstruction Group in 1942. It was a small private study group of like-minded Nigerians who were interested in researching into the possible or likely economic, social, cultural, and political problems which Nigeria would have to contend with at the end of World War II. The members of the Group included teachers, trade unionists, as well as students and senior government clerks. There was collaboration between the group, the Nigerian Youth Movement, and the Nigerian Union of Students, which ultimately resulted in the formation of a political movement that later metamorphosed into the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). The NCNC was led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, and it was the leading all-inclusive nationalist party in Nigeria from 1944 to 1957.¹⁷

The colonial regime saw Azikiwe as a stormy petrel because of his militant political activities. He exhibited the inherent Igbo trait of not to be subdued by an outsider, and his pioneering radical nationalism and his newspapers' virulent criticism of British rule became a source of pride to the Igbo and other Nigerians. The boldness he showed in challenging the colonial regime had a revolutionizing psychological impact on Nigerians¹⁸. Other Igbo, such as K.O. Mbadiwe, did not feel inferior to the British colonial officers, many of whom were far less educated than these Igbo political elite (who had acquired good university education in Europe and the United States of America). The exposure of these Igbo personalities to Western democratic ideals and principles armed them adequately to challenge British colonial rule in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the innate stamina of the Igbo for hard work, industry and competitiveness made many of them to leave their local communities in Igboland for the urban centres of colonial Nigeria. It was in these cities that employment and commercial activities could be exploited. Being adventurous in nature, many of the migrant Igbo soon began to prosper. Also, some members of this migrant community in Lagos decided to form the Igbo State Union in 1936. Starting first as the Igbo Federal Union, it became an umbrella union for all other less-inclusive Igbo communal associations scattered all over Nigeria. Prior to the formation of the Igbo State Union, the Igbo migrants in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria were mostly uneducated and worked mainly in menial jobs. However, the Igbo State Union accepted and greatly encouraged the people to embrace education along the lines prescribed by the colonial system.¹⁹

Alarmed by the pace of Igbo advancement in education, commerce, and politics, the British colonial regime began to instigate a new culture of hatred for them. Firstly, based on their experience with the people in the course of trying to subdue them, the British labelled the Igbo as recalcitrant and ungovernable²⁰. This was not helped by the leadership role of Azikiwe in the anti-colonial struggle of the 1950s. Secondly, the economic and educational progress recorded by the Igbo vis-à-vis other ethnic groups who had the advantage of encountering western education earlier, jolted the colonialists and emboldened the Igbo to become more assertive. For instance, the first set of Igbo university graduates from European and United States' universities came back to Nigeria in 1936, namely, Dr. S. E. Onwu, Dr. Akanu Ibiam, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe²¹. Their modest achievements made it all the more imperative for the Igbo to embrace western education because it held the golden way to the gate of all possibilities. Thus, at the prompting of the Igbo

State Union, many Igbo communities began to build their own primary and secondary schools to complement the few Christian mission-owned schools.

The result of this self-help approach to development was encouraging, such that the Yoruba, who had a head start over the Igbo in education (especially university education) became alarmed at the insatiable appetite of the Igbo for western education. As a matter of fact, the Igbo gradually came to be the most prosperous and upwardly mobile group in colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria. Education was an indispensable tool in this march, and before 1967, the officer corps of the Nigeria Armed Forces and the top echelon Federal Civil Service were virtually dominated by the Igbo. By 1952, the number of Igbo students enrolled at the University of Ibadan was 115 compared to 118 for the Yoruba. Meanwhile, in the early 1920s, the Yoruba already had eight medical doctors and 12 lawyers while the Igbo had none. But by the early 1950s, there were 76 Yoruba and 40 Igbo medical doctors.²²

In order to contain the Igbo who they perceived as aggressive and difficult to manage, the British colonial regime began to conjure and sustain negative stereotypes of an otherwise hard working people. They started by abolishing the derivative principle in revenue allocation which they had introduced previously. Its abolition followed the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities in the Igbo-dominated Eastern region and its exportation beginning from 1958. That way, the Igbo and other ethnic groups in the former Eastern region were deliberately denied the opportunity of using their God-given resources to better the lot of their people. Other measures adopted by the colonialists to cut the Igbo to size include the manipulation of population census figures to give undue advantages to the North. For instance, in the 1952/53 census, the Igbo population represented 17.5% of the national figure. But out of the blues, it declined to 16.6% in the 1963 census exercise. The politicization of population census figures has continued, with the Igbo being ascribed lower figures every time a census exercise is undertaken. Meanwhile, the Igbo have one of the highest population densities in Africa. These range from 300 to over 1,000 persons per square mile,²⁴ ranking third to the Nile River area in Egypt and Rwanda in East Africa (which rank first and second, respectively).

The promulgation of both the Richards' and Macpherson's constitutions in 1946 and 1951, respectively, were also intended to punish the Igbo and to reward the less aggressive and more loyal and accommodating Northern Nigerian oligarchy. By introducing regionalism through the creation of the Eastern, Northern, and Western regions, the Richards' constitution institutionalized ethnic rivalries, given the fact that the three major ethnic groups (the Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba) dominated in the three regions. Also by creating a House of Chiefs for the Northern region, the constitution displayed a bias in favour of the North. On its part, the Macpherson constitution of 1951, introduced a House of Chiefs for the Western region without creating any for the Eastern region. That constitution also provided for Regional Houses of Assembly, and gave the Northern region the right to have 68 elected members from the House of Assembly in the Federal House of Representatives, while the Eastern and Western Houses of Assembly produced 34 members each for the House of Representatives. This anomaly has continued to affect subsequent political developments in the country, because one region was allowed to produce more representatives than the other two.

It has been rightly observed that British paternalism towards the Northern Nigerian oligarchy was such that the political arrangement which was put in place by the colonial regime in the twilight of its presence in Nigeria and under which independence for Nigeria was framed, was deliberately skewed to ensure Northern domination of post-independence national politics.²⁵ Coming from an aristocratic background, the British colonial elite enjoyed easy rapport and camaraderie with the Fulani-dominated Northern aristocracy. This was not with any parallel in Igboland and other parts of Nigeria. The colonial officials were resentful of the increasing influx of educated Igbo and other Southerners into the Northern region, and adopted a policy of insulating that region from any form of positive interactions with the South.²⁶

On the other hand, the Igbo were hated and seen as an unwanted germ by the colonialists. The negative impression which the British had of the Igbo was routinely transmitted to and eagerly accepted by other Nigerians. It could, therefore, be said that these other Nigerians shared a harmony of interest with the British in regarding the Igbo as a menace in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, and targeting them for ethnic prejudice and profiling. In other words, there were preconceived negative opinions and stereotyping of the Igbo and targeting them for suspicion of all forms of imaginable and unimaginable anti-social behaviours and crimes.

The formation of two regionally-based political parties in 1951 (the Action Group and the Northern Peoples Congress) were a direct outcome of the introduction of regionalism²⁷. More importantly, they were intended to break the Azikiwe-led NCNC's monopoly of Nigerian politics. In fact, it has been asserted that the formation of the Northern Peoples Congress was at the instance of the colonialists. Its formation was to protect the Northern oligarchy's interests, given the fact that the clamor for independence had reached a crescendo. It was, therefore, in the interest of the British to hand over to their preferred successors. Even if they were not directly involved in forming the party, the British did, without doubt, create the enabling environment for the Northern Nigerian elite to come together and create a political platform. For the British, maintaining political stability in the North could best be achieved through a political party that would protect the tradition and interests of their friends there. Such a party, it was reasoned, would also serve to oppose the domination of the North by Southern politicians after independence. They, therefore, mentored and advised the Northern elite on the imperative of having a political party of their own vis-à-vis the NCNC and the Action Group.²⁸

Misperception and stereotyping of the Igbo identity in post-colonial Nigeria

The fault lines between Northern and Southern Nigeria remains among the most contentious issues since independence in 1960 because despite their acknowledgement of the manifestly different cultural, political, and religious background of the two regions, the British decided to amalgamate them in 1914.²⁹ Another very important and easily discernible issue in post-independence Nigeria is the misperception and stereotyping of the Igbo identity over the years. The British colonial regime had already taken the lead in this direction. Since many members of other Nigerian ethnic groups had already perceived the Igbo as naturally aggressive, bigoted, uncompromising, and pushy, it was all too easy for the British to sustain and, in fact, reinforce such misperceptions. Stereotypes among Igbo individuals were never in short supply, and they readily fitted into the images already perceived by other Nigerians. Indeed, resentment against perceived Igbo domination in politics, commerce, and the federal civil service, found expressions in many urban areas in the country. Igbo traders were often accused of profiteering and engaging in unscrupulous business practices, while the educated and politically exposed among them were accused of trying to dominate Nigeria.³⁰

However, the main reason for anti-Igbo sentiments in Nigeria since 1960 is to be found in the fact that whether they are traders or civil servants, the Igbo have a natural tendency to strive for personal achievement and glory. The traders among them have been known to, because of their competitive lifestyle, prosper materially above their hosts who may have a more leisurely attitude to life. In the words of Richard Sklar "The industrious qualities of the Igbo are proverbial and widely respected throughout West Africa"³¹ While domiciled outside their ethnic homeland, many Igbo have continued to be subjected to various forms of discrimination, ethnic prejudice, and profiling by other Nigerians. This is more often than not, due to insecurity and inspired fear on the part of their host communities.

In fact, Igbo-phobia in Nigeria is not only systemic, but has practically been institutionalized. In other words, prejudice and discrimination against members of the Igbo ethnic group has, over time, been embedded not only in the attitude of other Nigerians towards the Igbo, but also in the structures and institutions of the Nigerian state. As a result, the Igbo have come to develop their own frames of mind to uphold and fight the misperception and stereotyping of their ethnic identity by both the Nigerian state and other Nigerians.

Inevitably, there is, today, a renewed strong sense of consciousness among the Igbo occasioned by the hostile pressure exerted on them by the Nigerian state and members of other ethnic groups in the country. Nonetheless, the Igbo are still modernistic and achievement motivated.³²

Unfortunately, and regrettably too, the Igbo have continued to attract negative criticisms from other Nigerians. For example, it is on record that in the opening years of Nigeria's independence from Britain, there were expressions of anti-Igbo sentiments and write-ups in both the Northern and Western regions. In the Northern House of Assembly, members had, in their contributions to the budget session in 1964, verbally attacked Igbo people resident in the region. They advised that no more land should be leased to the Igbo, and that even their existing property should be confiscated.³³ There were also anti-Igbo cartoons of a vulgar and insulting nature in the Northern region's official newspaper (The Nigeria Citizen) which alleged that the Igbo were cannibals.³⁴ The Northern Peoples Congress which was the party in power in that region, did, on its part, publish a document titled "Salama: Facts must be faced", in which it set out its own case against the alleged greed and ambition of the Igbo.³⁵ The situation in the former Western region was not different regarding ethnic r\prejudices and profiling of the Igbo. In particular, Ladoke Akintola's party – the New Nigerian Democratic Party, had as its stock-in-trade, the exploiting of Yoruba cultural themes as a counter to their perceived Igbo political ascendancy. The party's campaign was virulently anti-Igbo. It accused the Igbo of trying to eliminate the Yoruba from the business and commercialfields.³⁶ Igbo leaders were also maligned and accused of trying to perpetuate a permanent domination of Nigeria by the Igbo people³⁷.

In spite of these unfavourable tendencies towards the Igbo before 1966, there is however, no denying the fact that of all Nigerian, the Igbo have, since the early days of British colonial rule, been the most mobile, the most receptive to the changes introduced by British colonialism, and the most pan-Nigerian in outlook and orientation.³⁸ Any argument to the contrary, notwithstanding, the Igbo, prior to 1966, were very eclectic and tended to show positive feelings towards their hosts in the urban areas. They also had a higher inclination to marrying and living with non-Igbo groups and individuals.³⁹ Their relative tolerance and attitude towards others were (and are still) informed by Igbo liberal customary practices.⁴⁰ That is why it has been asserted that the Igbo, unlike the other major ethnic groups in the country (the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba), had always been for a united and integrated Nigeria until the events of 1966 to 1970, namely, the January 15, 1966 coup d'état, the counter coup d'état of July 1966, the large-scale planned massacre of Igbo and other Easterners (especially in Northern Nigeria)⁴¹, the unwillingness or inability of the Gowon-led federal government to protect them⁴², and the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970.

The Nigeria-Biafra war and the exacerbation of Igbophobia

As a result of these and some remote factors, the former Eastern region, on May 30, 1967 declared itself as the Republic of Biafra. This meant seceding from Nigeria. Thereafter, Nigeria declared war on the nascent Republic on July 6, 1967. What followed was a 30-month brutal war that ignored and disrespected all the provisions of international humanitarian law (or the law of armed conflict). Due to enormous civilian casualties, widespread famine and the targeting of non-combatants, the war of 1967-1970 has been described as one of the most brutal in modern history.⁴³

The Nigeria-Biafra war ended with the surrender of Biafra on January 12, 1970. Though the federal government led by General Yakubu Gowon ended the war on a laudable reconciliatory note of "No victor, no vanquished", that proclamation was more rhetorical than real. In other words, it was more of a deceit because what followed after the war (and which has continued) is nothing short of an intensification of Igbophobia.⁴⁴ This is because the Igbo are today still treated as rebels for fighting to defend themselves from annihilation.

The end of the war has, indeed, reduced the Igbo to worse than third class citizens in a country which they have sacrificed a lot to build. Soon after the end of the war, the Gowon-led regime embarked on policies that were nothing short of war indemnities against the Igbo. These include the introduction and enforcement of such policies as the Banking Obligations (Eastern States) Decree of 1970 which provided for the forfeiture of all monies lodged in Biafran banks during the war if part of such money was ever withdrawn or any addition made to it in the course of the war;⁴⁵ the Nigerian Business Indigenization Decree of 1972, which provided, among other things, for Nigerians to become full or part-owners of twenty two designated foreign-owned enterprises in the country; and the Abandoned Property and Implementation Decree which gave legal backing to the appropriation by other Nigerians of Igbo-owned landed properties located outside Igboland. There was also the 1975 Boundary Adjustment Commission led by Justice Mamman Nasir which was set up to review and adjust state boundaries following the creation of new states by the regime of General Murtala Mohammed. As a result of the activities of this commission, some oil-bearing communities in the Igbo-speaking states of Abia and Imo were handed over to Rivers State.

With regard to federal government-owned projects and infrastructure in Igboland, the situation since 1970 has remained worrisome. From 1970 to 1975 when the Second National Development Plan was initiated and implemented, there was a deliberate exclusion of Igboland from the location of high technology and large employment-generating heavy industrial establishments.⁴⁶ Similarly, in the area of political appointments, states and local government creation, employment in federal government Ministries, Agencies, and Departments, admission into federal government-owned secondary and tertiary institutions, the Igbo have continued to be marginalized.⁴⁷ They have also been the targets of violent civil, political, and religious disturbances in other parts of the country, a situation that has practically assumed a cyclic pattern and has often led to the loss of Igbo lives and investments. In the Armed Forces and the Police Force, the Igbo have not been fairly treated. For instance, there was a quota system in recruitment into the Armed Forces through the Direct Short Service Commission which was stopped because it favoured the Igbo and other educated Southerners who were desirous of enlisting in the Nigerian military. Igbo military officers were also habitually excluded from key positions in the Armed Forces. In 2020, for instance, following allegations of bias against the Igbo in recruitment into the military, the Nigerian Senate decided to investigate the low representation of the South-East in particular⁴⁸.

Following the return to democratic governance, first from 1979 to 1983 and now under the current dispensation (1999-2024), national politics has continued to consign the Igbo to the periphery of national decision-making. Each time there appears to be a glimmer of hope of an Igbo being elected president of Nigeria, such plans are usually thwarted. For example, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which won the 1979 presidential election in 1979 had a Fulani, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, as President, while Dr. Alex I. Ekwueme, an Igbo, was the Vice President. The NPN introduced the zoning formula or rotational presidency which would have allowed Dr. Ekwueme to succeed Shagari after the latter's second term in office in 1987. But the Northern-dominated military did not like power going to the South, especially to the Igbo. Thus, barely three months after he began his second term as President, General Muhammadu Buhari and his fellow Northern military officers overthrew the Shagari-led federal government on December 31, 1983. While Shagari was placed under house arrest, Ekwueme was thrown into jail and left to languish there for two years by the Buhari-led military junta. According to Mkie A. Ozekhome, the major reason for the 1983 coup d'etat was to frustrate the zoning arrangement of the NPN and to prevent the Igbo from assuming leadership of Nigeria.⁴⁹ Ekwueme's presidential ambitions in both the 1999 and 2003 elections were also thwarted by the northern oligarchy and military elite, with one of them quoted as threatening to call in the military for a coup should Ekwueme be allowed to become President of Nigeria.⁵⁰

Buhari's anti-Igbo attitude was once again exhibited when, as a democratically-elected President (2015-2023), he referred to the Igbo ethnic homeland (the Southeast) as a dot in a circle⁵¹. He also promised to deal with Igbo separatist agitators "in the language they understand"⁵² This was in addition to his

exclusion of the Igbo in political and board appointments into such Federal agencies as the NNPC, even when the three states of Abia, Anambra, and Imo are oil-producing states.⁵³ The 2023 presidential election also witnessed a heightened intensity of Igbo-phobia in Lagos following the electoral loss by the former Governor of the state (Alhaji Bola Ahmed Tinubu). Some of Tinubu's close and trusted friends, including Bayo Onanuga (his spokesman) threatened and warned the Igbo people resident in Lagos never to interfere again in the politics of Lagos state.⁵⁴ This was after the APC's humiliating electoral loss of Lagos to the Labour Party in the 2023 presidential election. Tinubu who was eventually elected President, was the APC flag bearer. Peter Obi, the Labour Party presidential candidate, is a very charismatic Igbo politician who was massively voted for by the youth.

Other anti-Igbo comments before 2023 include those of the Oba of Lagos, Oba Rilwan Akiolu who, in 2015, threatened to drown the Igbo people resident in Lagos in the lagoon should they refuse to vote for the APC;⁵⁵ and the hate-speech in 2022 by Senator Adanu Bulkachuwa from Bauchi state who referred to the Igbo as rebels, arsonists, and criminals that deserve death and elimination.⁵⁶ The most recent hate speech directed against the Igbo was made by Prof. Ahmed Bako of the Usmanu Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, in his inaugural lecture where he discussed the Igbo factor in the history of inter-group relations and commerce in Kano. In the said lecture, he displayed ethnic bigotry when he accused the Igbo of having aspired to dominate Nigeria since the 1950s. He also referred the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization (the Ohaneze Ndi Igbo) as a separatist group⁵⁷. Earlier in July 2017, the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum had issued a quit notice to Igbo people resident in the 19 Northern states, asking them to leave the North before October 1, 2017, or face death⁵⁸. Their position was supported by Prof. Ango Abdullahi, the leader of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF).⁵⁹ Also, a faceless social media page on Twitter, who goes by the name "Lagospedia" started an #Igbo-must-leave campaign. Coming on the heels of the #EndBadGovernance protests of August 20-30, 2024, Lagospedia asked all Igbo to leave Lagos and all other states in the Southwest geopolitical zone.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the Igbo did not participate in the protest in question. There is also the recent comment by an Islamic cleric, Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir, that the Igbo are responsible for the fuel scarcity in Nigeria under the Tinubu administration. According to him, it is because the Igbo were against the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket of the APC that they masterminded the fuel scarcity in order to overthrow Tinubu's government.⁶¹ In fact, hate-speeches against the Igbo since 1970 is region.

These represent how deeply fractured the Nigerian polity is, and how inept the political leadership has been in addressing the challenges of statehood. The Igbo have, in all honesty, practically become the whipping boy of other Nigerians because maligning and denigrating them offers such other Nigerians a psychological relief. However, neither the stirring up of the polity with so much hatred, nor constant concerted moves to subjugate, intimidate, prosecute a particular ethnic group, can ever help in the process of nation building. The pervasive visibility of the Igbo in commerce and other sectors of the Nigerian economy and other fields of endeavour is a result of hard work, and there is no brazen desire on their part to dominate other Nigerians.

Conclusion

Inter-group relations between the peoples of present-day Nigeria predated the colonization of the areas by the British in the 19th century. As has been rightly observed:

...these who became citizens of British-created Nigeria in 1914 were not entirely strangers brought together by British fiat. In other words, before the advent of British colonial rule, people in the geographical areas that became Nigeria coexisted, engaged in inter-ethnic trade, and practiced good neighborliness and cultural borrowing.⁶²

However, the British conquest and amalgamation of Nigeria brought these peoples together into much closer contacts than previously. In the urban centres where these contacts were more common, ethnic distinctiveness became manifest and stereotypes began to be created of each other by members of the various ethnic groups. This, in the main, was as a result of the struggle for space and resources in the colonial urban setting. The in-group and out-group syndrome became the parameter for association in the struggle for the scarce socio-economic resources of the time, especially in the urban areas. Ethnic labels based on language and culture as well as a shared sense of peoplehood, began to be used to differentiate members of different ethnic groups.

When independence was achieved in 1960, the struggle for political power exacerbated ethnic prejudices. According to Donald Rothchild,⁶³ the exit of the British meant that there was no longer a cushioning force in the struggle for power by the inheritors of the Nigerian state. Thereafter, ethnicism and religion began to be used extensively to coordinate political participation, irrespective of whether it was under a civilian government or a military regime. But the Igbo have been the major targets and victims of ethnic hatred and stereotyping, especially since 1970. Today, therefore, Igbophobia is no longer a product of historical conflicts and political tensions, but also a tool for maintaining hegemonic power dynamics, reinforcing socio-economic disparities, and legitimizing the marginalization of the Igbo.

There is a compelling need for Nigeria to face its past and acknowledge that the Igbo have been unjustly and unfairly treated. One way of addressing the many historic wrongs against the Igbo is to engage in a genuine process of reconciliation through policy reforms, including social justice initiatives. There should also be put in place, programmes to inspire transformative change towards a more equitable and just society where the Igbo and other ethnic groups can thrive and prosper.

If these are done, the Igbo will, no doubt, be given a sense of belonging. After all, it is the pervasive sense of alienation that led to the formation of separatist groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the more militant Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Giving them a level playing ground in both corporate business and national politics will ultimately douse tensions among Igbo youth who have inherited a generational poignant hatred and injustice. Not doing so can only intensify insecurity not only in the Southeast but in Nigeria as a whole.

Endnotes

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