

The Quest for Self-Governance: Rethinking the Igbo Identity in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study interrogated post war interethnic relations in Nigeria with particular focus on the fate of the Igbo ethnic nationality. It is also predicated on the fact that despite the past war policies implemented by the successive administrations since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war to drive national integration, the Igbo has persistently agitated for a separate nation. The objective of the study therefore is to address the causes of Igbo agitation. The work utilizes qualitative method with data gleaned essentially from secondary and primary sources. It also adopted the Relative Deprivation theory to justify the reason the Igbo took to agitation for independence. Findings showed that systemic exclusion of the Igbo has defined governance since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970. This is manifested in a carefully orchestrated political structure that denied the Igbo the Nigerian presidency or any substantial federal presence compared to the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba. The study concludes that the unjust marginalization of the Igbo has foisted a sense of alienation in them, hence the clamour for separate existence. And that the exclusion of the Igbo in the Nigerian political economy has hindered national integration. The work recommended among others that for the sake of equity, national integration and stability of Nigeria, the Igbo should be conceded the Nigerian presidency in 2031.

Keywords: Nigeria, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Agitation, Self-determination

Objectives of the Study

The core objective of the study is to address the causes of Igbo persistent agitation for separate nations. Consequently, the work seeks to:

- i. establish the ratio of the Igbo presidency of Nigeria to that of the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba,

- ii. compare the number of states in the South-East region with the South West and the Hausa-Fulani dominated North,
- iii. compare the number of local government areas in the North East with the South West and the North, and
- iv. determine the ratio of Igbo leadership of Nigeria, Navy, and Airforce with the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba.

Justification for the Study

The problem of national integration in Nigeria has exacerbated since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970. The war end, contrary to expectation that it will bring reconciliation and harmony, rather entrenched a political order which the Igbo are excluded in Nigeria's political economy, a situation that has foisted a feeling alienation on the people. This study is further conversation on the issue of national integration focusing on addressing the causes/ elements of the Igbo agitation.

Introduction

The Nigerian state with its nature of cultural pluralism and cleavage has been swamped with claims of marginalization from various ethnic groups that make up the state at one time or the other. This situation has been sustained by the presence of an astounding degree of ethnic nationalism, (Ignatieff and Dibie, 2007:174). and relatively low presence of civic nationalism, (Ignatieff and Dibie 2007). An aspect of marginalization is resource control in which the Nigerian political trajectory has been characterized with the utilization of state powers in appropriating resources and offices in a manner that put some ethnic nationalities at a disadvantaged position thereby making the politics of marginalization an important political question in the Nigerian political system. The point being made therefore is that the politics of marginalization is entrenched in the Nigerian political life and such tendency has the capacity to destabilize the state and sap it of development.

The Nigerian state consists of the majority ethnic groups, such as, Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo and a host of other minorities. The minority ethnic groups especially from the oil resource areas in the South have been agitating for more emphasis to be given to derivation in the sharing of federal allocations. Thus, the Niger Delta people are saddened by the fact that those that control political power at the national level use political power to the advantage of their people and disadvantage of the oil host states. The perception of marginalization by the Niger Delta people gave rise to rebellion championed by Isaac Adaka Boro in 1967. It is imperative to state that the fear of marginalization by the minorities had become an issue even in the colonial period as the fears expressed by the

minorities resulted in the setting up of the Willink Commission of 1957-1958, (Onwubiko and Ugoji, 2022: 36-53).

Consequent upon the foregoing and indeed simultaneously energized by the latter centralization tendency occasioned by the advent of military in politics of Nigeria, the central government which arrogated huge powers to itself became the source of problem to the minorities who started seeing the federal government as the villain superintending an unjust authoritative allocation of values. The incursion of the military into the Nigerian polity ruptured the growth of democratic philosophies and institutions and opened doors for more challenges to nationhood. The coup of January 15, 1966 which the Igbo were in the frontline and the counter coup of 29th July, 1966 championed by military officers of northern extraction divided both the civilian and the military classes and raised ethnic nationalism to an unprecedented height. The massacre of the Igbo in the north and other circumstances relating to the ill treatment of the Igbo culminated in the declaration of the Biafran republic by the Governor of the Eastern region, Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu on 30th May 1967. The secession bid of the Eastern region did not go unchallenged as the federal side deployed forces to challenge the declaration.

Inevitably, a civil war ensued and this lasted until 1970. The war ended but its psychology has continued to inform events in the Nigerian national politics hence the cry of marginalization has become synonymous with the Igbo ethnic nationality. The Igbo have been tactically sidelined in key national positions and even in the evolving federal structure of the Nigerian state; the Igbo have obviously been unfairly treated. The end of the war and beyond saw an increased anti-Igbo sentiment, distrust and suspicion, stripped of rights to some public offices in Nigeria by the Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani groups. These characters exhibited by the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba towards the Igbo truncated national integration policies geared towards total assimilation of the Igbo into the national political order. The contemporary issues of marginalization of the Igbo have found expression in the incessant call for restructuring and resource control as well as the agitations of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) for the restoration of the sovereign state of Biafra. The paper discusses possible grounds and manifestations of marginalization of Igbo among the Nigeria groups and how that has generally affected national unity and peace building.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the theory of relative deprivation. The theory holds that when people feel that they are being deprived of certain necessities in the society whether it is materialistic or socio-political, they will organize into social movements that would

agitate for the things of which they are deprived. Michaela Schulze and Rabea Kratschmer-Hahn aver that “Relative deprivation theory is a widely discussed field of contemporary sociology. A common assumption of this field of research is the fact that the feeling of being disadvantaged is related to a reference group. This feeling will arise from the comparison of oneself to others,” (Michaela and Rabea, 2019). Besides Dibie, (2000) explains vividly that:

The theory of relative deprivation began in the early 1960s with the publication of James Davies book “Towards a Theory of Revolution.” The theory states that revolutionary events are likely when a prolonged period of rising expectations and increasing gratification is following by a short period of sharp reversal. During this time, the gap between expectations and gratifications quickly widens and becomes intolerable, (Dibie, 2000).

Dibie (2000) further maintained in line with Gurr’s work “Why Men Rebel,” that the primary causal sequence in political violence is first the development of discontent; second the politicization of that discontent and finally its actualization in violent actions against political objects and actors. Discontent is the product of relative deprivation, which is defined as a perceived discrepancy between men’s value expectations and value capabilities, (Dibie, 2000: 172). It is therefore glaring that the gap between expectation and realization of what is expected has the tendency to crystallize in conflicts.

In the Nigerian State, there is rising claims of marginalization from various quarters though this study limits its scope to that of the Igbo people over a range of socio-political issues which include but is not limited to being sidelined and not being given a chance to clinch the Presidency and hold high public offices at the national level as well as having the least number of states and Local Governments compared to other zones. These deprivations in the Nigerian state have at one time or the other culminated in militant ethnic nationalism which found expression in the formation of groups such as MASSOB and IPOB. The circumstances that predisposed Nigeria to militant ethnic nationalism and even civil war have scarcely changed even in the fourth republic as the north-western political power bloc have whether in power or not maintained their hegemony in Nigerian politics to the disadvantage of the Igbo under review. Nigerian politics is therefore characterized with scheming against the aspirations of those already disadvantaged by the existing power framework.

The Rise of Ethnic Agitations in the South East

The political disempowerment of Igbo people especially since the return to democracy is alarming to the people. Although the Second Republic made few considerations in respect

to political appointment, the Igbo people have been crying of political exclusion and marginalization since the end of the civil war, as no Igbo has occupied the apex position (presidency) of the country. During the 1979 and 1983 general elections, the Igbo people were made to play the second fiddle; Vice President Alex Ekwueme was assisting President Shehu Shagari, 1979-1983. It could be argued that political disempowerment of the Igbo people's quest for the number one position in the country is a systematic attempt to dislodge the Igbo politically, (Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo, 1999). As already noted, the several creations of state did not favour the Igbo nation as they remained the region with the least number of federating states. For instance, 5 states and 95 local governments were created for the Igbo, while the North has 19 states and 437 local government areas, and the South West got 6 and 137 local government areas respectively. It is only the Southeast zone that does not have up to six states in contemporary Nigeria; thus, in all the state creations, the Igbo people got only five states. Several military appointments and political appointments from 1979 have put the Igbo at marginalization status, thereby retaining the Igbo in peripheral politics.

The injustices and way the Igbo felt about inclusion in national politics especially in respect to the immediate removal of Ekwueme at Jos PDP Convention in 1999 (Presidential aspirant) as well as the several killings of Igbo people in the Northern Nigeria at the wake of 1999 gave rise to the re-emergence of pan-Igbo groups such as the Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo, Igbo National Assembly (INA), Igbo Youth Movement (IYM), World Igbo Congress (WIC) and Pan Ndi Igbo Forum (PNIF), Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), among others. The breach of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) zoning formula in 2003 lent credence to Igbo nationalism. The South East supposed to be given presidency by rotation, but Obasanjo took over again. The mainstream political marginalization of the Igbo remained a principal cause of Igbo nationalism. This is because anywhere marginalization and oppression persist the people are bound to resort to ethnic nationalism and self determination to secure freedom from the domineering state.

The Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was flagged off by Chief Ralph Uwazurike on 27th May, 2000 at Aba, (The News, 2005: 6). It was a movement with the primary focus of addressing the issues raised at Ahiara Declaration in 1969 by Dim Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu, which bothered on post-civil war injustice, control of fair share of natural resources, a reaction against the massacre of the Igbo people in the north in May and September 1966, the killing of Aguiyi Ironsi, the then Head of State in July 1966 counter-coup as well as the oppression of the Igbo in particular and the people of eastern region in general. Madu (2005) documented that at the inaugural ceremony of MASSOB, the movement encapsulated the following objectives:

1. To secure political freedom and sovereign state of Biafra;
2. To negotiate with federal government on how to end the plight of the Igbo;
3. To redress all injustice against the Igbo people;
4. To adopt and use non-violent approach in all negotiations with the government.

It was the injustice perpetrated against the Igbo people that led to the formation of MASSOB as a nationalist movement to fight for the Igbo and resuscitate the defunct Republic of Biafra. MASSOB was used by Chief Ralph Uwazurike and other Igbo political elite to pursue their brand of Igbo nationalism. The federal government, taking it as another Biafra militant proscribed the MASSOB's offices at No. 15 Ajoku Street, Owerri, Imo State and harassed and killed its members in shootouts in both Okigwe, Onitsha and other parts of the country for the celebration of Biafran day, (Thisday, 2005). The federal government reacted negatively to MASSOB's sit at home protest on 26th August, 2004 by describing the activities of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra as amounting to treason against the Nigerian State. It further alleged that the group is plotting to break up the country. The government said MASSOB was championing insurrection. Responding to the growing agitation for Biafra state by MASSOB, the then Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Chief Akintola Olujimi (SAN) said the group was championing a course that could lead to the breakup of the country, (Thisday Newspaper, 2004).

Again, the Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu laid the foundation for the contemporary revolutionary nature of Igbo nationalism. His emergence as an influential leader of millions of the Igbo is a historical reality that threatened the unity of the Nigerian State. The emergence of his leadership, which got global audience, was made popular because of the effectiveness of his manipulation of the international communication media. Before returning to Nigeria, Kanu has used the influence of the media to mobilize thousands of Igbo people in different parts of the globe to rise up against the suffering of the Igbo people in the Nigerian State. He travelled to many parts of the globe, demanding for support towards the emancipation of the Igbo people. However, his return to Nigeria was immediately welcomed by his arrest championed by the security agencies. He and his co-protagonists of independence of Biafra were accused or alleged to have committed the crime of treason against the Nigerian State. While they held him in maximum prison, members of IPOB and his rich legal team as well as the international supporters were busy demonstrating, approaching courts of different jurisdiction both in Nigeria, ECOWAS and beyond to make a case against the Nigerian government, especially over the heinous killing of the Igbo people in the Nigerian political space.

In the midst of the IPOB rallies in Nigeria and oversea, the Nigerian government invaded the Igbo nation with their Operation Python Dance II (Egwu Eke II), which created unimaginable fear of a second civil war, mass killing of Igbo people in Aba and beyond as well as the proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organization by the military (that was later ratified by a court of competent jurisdiction) in Nigeria. It was in the course of the military invasion of Aba and the international uproar that went with it, which led to the disappearance of Nnamdi Kanu as well as the reduction of the tempo of IPOB rallies. However, he was later arrested in one of the African countries and held till today in prison custody.

Addressing Ethnic Agitations in Nigeria: The Way Forward Toward National Unity

The Nigerian federalism obviously has characteristics that foster marginalization and these tendencies have remained potent even in the fourth republic which started on 29th May, 1999. The Igbo and minority groups are undergoing these experiences in diverse ways. The experiences of marginalization have the resultant effect of creating underdevelopment in various dimensions. The federal dominance in the Nigerian politics which grew out of the dominance of the center for a long time by military officers of northern extraction, who built a framework that sustained northern hegemony, is the root cause of the marginalization of several ethnic groups, giving rise to ethnic nationalism. The military regimes broke the backbone of the earlier Nigerian federal structure that was founded in regionalism by creating states that are not very effective to make any case against the center.

The experience of marginalization that the Igbo are passing through stems from the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967-1970 in which the Igbo felt defeated but the Nigerian government under Gowon declared 'no victor, no vanquished.' The aftermath of the war has been the formulation of policies that did not favour Igbo people, which was targeted at keeping them in a state of perpetual subservience and servitude in the Nigerian politics. The indigenization policy at a time the Igbo were emerging from war with the psychological low ebbs of defeat coupled with the financial/economic policy of the Nigerian federal government that sapped them of funds through payment of only twenty Nigerian pounds for any amount of Biafran pounds each Biafran possessed was a deliberate ploy to incapacitate the Igbo. State creation in Nigeria painted a good picture of the marginalization of the South East as the South East zone has the least number of states and local government in the present Nigerian federal arrangement. The structure and the politics of the Nigerian state have been deliberately crafted to keep the Igbo man out of contention: hence the agitations the Igbo for the wrongs of the Nigerian federalism to be remedied are germane and an offshoot of their experiences of deprivation which is propounded by the deprivation theorists. In the face of hypersonic micro nationalism threatening national unity, peace and development of the country, the followings are hereby recommended:

- i. The Nigerian federalism should be restructured to reflect a federal arrangement with strong federating units and relatively weak centre;
- ii. That considering the Nigerian peculiar experiences the six geopolitical zones as presently constituted should become the federating units, with governments similar to the regional governments constituted thereto and given constitutional powers to superintend the states while the states shall be a lower government under the zones;
- iii. That there should be a balance in relation to the number of states and local government in the geopolitical zones;
- iv. That the federating units should have the powers to harness the resources in their areas and pay an agreed percentage of royalty to the federal government.

Conclusion

Marginalization of the Igbo entrenched in the Nigerian politics has intricately retarded national unity, peace and development, thereby creating a feeling of alienation among the Igbo people which found expression in Igbo agitations. The marginalization and deprivations of the Igbo are as a consequence of the civil war, which they lost to the federal side. The character exhibited by the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba towards the Igbo truncated national integration policies geared towards total assimilation of the Igbo into the national political order. Thus, the continuous distrust, suspicion and exclusion of the Igbo from some sensitive positions in Nigeria since the end of the war, has given the Igbo some sense of community rejection indicating that they are not needed in Nigeria. This understanding which gives vent to this title “The Quest for Self-governance: Rethinking Igbo Identity in Nigeria,” creates a notion among the people (Igbo) who, for many years, felt they have accepted and supported the course administration of the Hausa-Fulani/Yoruba led administration but have not been given equal opportunity to assume the highest political office of the country; hence, the Nigeria State should let go of the Igbo to create a state of their own. To that extent, some aggrieved Igbo calls for separate nation, where they would have freedom to aspire to any office in the land. Their agitations have attracted brutal, stiff military and police response from the Nigerian state against the agitators. The continuous barring of the Igbo from sensitive national political equation has made the Igbo lose faith in Nigeria and resort to self-determination that has affected national cohesion and constantly threatened the Nigeria’s fragile unity; hence, a time to address these issues by the federal government of Nigeria through restructuring.

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