THE BIAFRA QUESTION: A SOCIO-CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF THE IGBO NATION OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is largely a tripod comprising the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba ethnic nationalities. For political expediency and inclusiveness, six geo-political zones were introduced to subsume different parts of the federation. The attempt by the Igbo to secede in 1967 based on perceived injustice led to the Nigerian-Biafra civil war that lasted for two and half years and claimed about three million lives. In the light of the resurgence of Igbo self-determination, the paper analysed the origin, world view, ethics and governance structure of the Igbo. The paper maintains that the growing agitation by the Igbo for independence is a reflection of the imbalance of the Nigerian federation as currently structured. It recommends that the Nigerian federal government should look into the cry by the Igbo of marginalization and injustice. The paper further recommends that the federal government of Nigeria should implement the report of the 2014 National Conference which provided a road map for the restructuring and efficient running of the Nigerian state. The implementation of the report is expected to put an end to agitations from the pro- Biafra groups, the Niger Delta militants and other such organizations.
**KEYWORDS**

*Biafra, Igbo, Socio-cultural, World View, Nigeria.*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The Igbo is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the other two being the Hausa and the Yoruba. They are located in the South East geo-political zone of Nigeria. The other zones are South South, South West, North East, North Central and North West. The Igbo currently have five states out of Nigeria’s thirty-six states structure. These are Imo, Abia, Enugu, Anambra and Ebonyi. Each of the other zones has a minimum of six states. There are also Igbo speaking parts of Delta and Rivers states which are in the South South geo-political zone. As Omeire (2015) points out, the Igbo are industrious, adventurous and independent-minded. This paper is an attempt to analyse the Biafra question and examine the Igbo ethnic nationality, especially in the light of the renewed clamour by many Igbo groups for the independence of their people from Nigeria as presently structured.

1.2. **The Biafra Question**

Biafra is the name used by the Igbo for the sovereign state that covered the present day South East and South South Nigeria during the unsuccessful attempt to secede from Nigeria. For thirty months (May 30, 1967-Jan.15, 1970) the Igbo, under the aegis of Biafra, withstood the military might, economic blockade and territorial edge of the Nigerian state before capitulating in her quest for secession. The arrow head of the Biafra secession was the then military Governor of the Eastern Region, Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. He became the Head of State of the Republic of Biafra and was General in the Biafra army. The secession was largely a reaction to the massive slaughter of Igbo people living in Northern Nigeria following the military coup and counter coup of 1966 and the failure of peace talks to resolve the crisis. Based on the pogrom, the Igbo reasoned that a government that failed to safeguard the lives of its citizens has no claim to their allegiance and must be ready to accept that the victims deserve the right to seek their safety in other ways-including secession (Achebe, 2012).

The first military coup by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu occurred on 15th January 1966 and led to the murder of the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and the Governor of Northern Region, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello. The coup, which was perceived by the Northerners as being targeted at their leaders, failed, and Maj. Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi became the military Head of State and appointed military Governors for the regions. Gen. Ironsi, an Igbo, was murdered in 1966 in a counter coup led by some officers from the North and Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon was made Head of State. What followed the coup and counter coup was large scale killing of the Igbo residing in Northern Nigeria. According to Legum (2012) about thirty thousand Igbo were massacred and hundreds of thousands were wounded in the pogrom that took place in the North. A Sierra Leonean living in Northern Nigeria at the time wrote home in horror: “The killing of the Igbo has become a state industry in Nigeria.” (Achebe, 2012). The inability or unwillingness of the then federal military government to protect the lives and property of the Igbo living in Northern Nigeria gave impetus to the declaration of Biafra as a sovereign state. According to one of Africa’s renowned and foremost writers, Chinua Achebe (2012:2), “the Biafra war which claimed about three million lives changed...
the course of Nigeria...It was a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa”. As Amaeshi (2014:31), points out in addition to those that died in the war front, many died of starvation. In his word “Thousands of men, women, children and the aged were written off, signed off and finally delivered to the grave by kwashiorkor”.

At the end of the civil war, the Nigerian federal government announced a policy of “no victor, no vanquished”. It went further to proclaim a policy of Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (3RS). Some analysts are, however, of the view that the 3RS was more of a paper tiger than an action plan implemented by the post-war Nigerian federal government and subsequent regimes. In recent times, there has been a resurgence of agitation for independence by some Igbo organizations. Prominent among the groups calling for Igbo self-determination is the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State Of Biafra (MASSOB) founded by Raphael Uwazurike.

The other more aggressive, well-coordinated group with mass following is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). This organization has been a thorn in the flesh of the present Nigerian federal government and its leader and Director, Radio Biafra, Nnamdi Kanu, has been detained since October 2015 and charged with treason. The continued detention of Kanu has attracted massive protests in South East and South South Nigeria which led to some deaths. Some world leaders have also called for the release of Nnamdi Kanu.

Taiwo- Obalonye (2016) reported that on 30th May, 2016, a bloody clash between security agencies and pro-Biafra groups (MASSOB, IPOB, and BIM-Biafra Independent Movement) in South East and South- South left about thirty people dead, including three police men. It was further reported that over 300 pro- Biafra agitators were arrested in South East and South South geo political zones. The groups were commemorating the 49 years anniversary of the declaration of the Republic of Biafra.

Some prominent Igbo leaders such as Prof Ben Nwabueze, Dr Chukwuemeka Ezeife, Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu and Senator Ike Ekweremadu while not openly endorsing secession of the Igbo from Nigeria, have decried the marginalization of the Igbo by the present federal administration led by President Muhammadu Buhari. They point to the non-inclusion of the Igbo in strategic federal appointments such as the Service Chiefs (Army, Navy, and Air Force) and the President’s kitchen cabinet among others. Beyond the exclusion of the Igbo in the mainstream of the current political dispensation, the Igbo leaders also point to the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation which is skewed against them. For example, while each of the other geo-political zones has a minimum of six states, the South East has only five. The Igbo leaders advocate that the present administration should implement the report of the National Conference of 2014 which provided a road map for the restructuring of Nigeria and operation of true federalism.

Supporting the views of the Igbo leaders, a scholar from Northern Nigeria, Dahiru (2017:35) indicates that “the resurrection of the spirit of Biafra...is as a consequence of the heightened marginalization of the Igbo ethnic group under the current administration. Buhari’s political scorched earth policy of 97 percent and 5 percent patronage distribution formula directly proportional to the percentage of vote cast for him is made real and the Igbo appear to be punished for freely making democratic choice, as guaranteed by the constitution”.

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A pertinent question that arises is “what is the cultural background of the Igbo, their origin, world view and governance structure”? This is the focus of the current discourse which seeks to shed light on the Igbo nation, particularly in the context of the resurgence of the quest for Igbo self-determination.

2. ORIGIN OF THE IGBO NATION

As Arinze (1982:23) points out: “Every people has its peculiar customs and traditions, its own code of moral laws, and its own view of the universe and man’s place in it. In short, every people has its own culture. The Igbo people are no exception; they have their distinctive language, way of life, traditional moral code, religious beliefs and practices and general philosophy of life”.

Isichei (1976) argues that no historical question arouses more interest among present-day Igbo than the enquiry “where did the Igbo come from”. Three theories have been generated to explain the origin of the Igbo nation. One of such is the Niger-Benue confluence theory which is predicated on the linguistic theory of glottochronology and lexicostatistics. Glottochronology deals with the study of languages to determine when they diverged while lexicostatistics relates to the statistical estimation of the degree of linguistic divergence between two languages based on population of cognates. As Nwaezeigwe (2007) points out, according to this theory, the Kwa language family which is a branch of the larger Niger Congo language family of Africa, gave birth to such languages as Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Idoma, Igala, Igbiru, Ewe, Akan and Nupe. Basden (1966), Isichei (1976), and Hartle (1973) belong to this school of thought. Isichei (1976:3) asserts that “the first inhabitants of Igbo land must have come from areas further north-possibly from the Niger confluence”. Similarly, Hartle (1973) maintains that the Igbo began to diverge from other related languages such as Edo and Yoruba, perhaps four thousand years ago. On his part, Afigbo (1982) indicates that the history of Igbo as a distinct group goes back some five or six thousand years from the present.

The second theory of Igbo origin is the Jewish theory or Oriental hypothesis which indicates that the Igbo migrated from Israel. This theory is based on the cultural similarities between the Igbo and the Jews. It was formulated in the era when the Jews were still in bondage in several countries of the world like the African. A member of this school of thought Onuoha (2016), points to the similarity in Igbo and Jewish names as indicators of common descent. According to him, such names include Abia, Asa, Ahia, Abba and Naze which is short form for Nazareth.

The third is the autochthony or independent origin theory which maintains that the Igbo did not migrate from anywhere but were created in their present location. The proponents of this school of thought tenaciously assert that the progenitors of the Igbo race lived in the cultural area where the present generation Igbo people are living.

3. IGBO WORLD VIEW

As Isichei (1976:24) limpidly points out “the Igbo were nothing if not profoundly religious, and all accounts of their life reflect the fact”.

Barrett (1984) indicates that chi is central to the Igbo worldview. Ezeh (2012), points out that the Igbo believe that one’s total existence is determined by chi which is particular to each person, and which as an expression is untranslatable. The Igbo have the maxim: Otu nne na-amu ma na otu
chi anagh eke (one mother may give birth to more than one person, but the same chi does not create them). Chi is immanent in everything that involves someone in life.

Nwala (1972) indicates that the Igbo world-view recognizes three “orders of existence”, namely muo, the spiritual order of the dead; madu, the human order of living human beings; and ihe, the material order of things. According to Nwala, these interact daily and continuously. Similarly, Uchendu (1965) points out that the Igbo world is a world peopled by the invisible and visible forces, by the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. It is a world in which all these forces interact affecting and modifying behaviour.

The pre-colonial Igbo society was deeply religious. Arinze (1982) states that the Igbo traditionally believe in God, in spirits, good and bad, and in ancestors. Their worship evolved generally around the worship of the ancestors and spirits, although God was often invoked at prayer and names were given to children in His honour. According to Arinze the traditional Igbo society was not secularistic, it was alive with the spirit of religion. Religious celebrations marked such social occasions as birth, marriage, death, the building of a new house, the eating of first fruit and even the drinking of wine. Streams, village squares, and trees, dances, masquerading, title-taking etc were all connected with the spirits or ancestors and their worship.

As Echeruo and Obiechina (1971) maintain, the Igbo regard the spiritual order as complex. The gods that inhabit it and interact with men are benevolent and generous. Yet they are capricious, malicious and deceitful. Hence the Igbo believe they must avoid offending the gods, and both the gods and men should avoid cheating each other. According to Uchendu (1965) based on this perception, the Igbo make regular sacrifices to the spiritual order, “feed” the gods whenever the living eat or drink, and expect from the gods assistance in promoting the prosperity and continuity of the lineage, securing protection against wicked men and spirits and in gaining wisdom to manage their affairs well.

Uchendu (1995), summarized the Igbo worldview in seven propositions. First, it is an integrated one in which all created beings, the living and the dead, are in communion through symbolic interactions and other communication channels. Lineage continuity is a cooperative enterprise between the world of man and the world of the spirits.

Second, the Igbo world is a dynamic world which demands that cosmological balance be maintained at all times to sustain the social structure. When this balance is threatened by evil men, women or evil spirits, the cause must be ascertained through divination and the appropriate ritual remedy must be put in place.

Third, the Igbo world is conceived in market terms. It is a “market place” involving a bargaining strategy but guaranteeing only “equality of opportunity” but not “equality of outcome”. Individuals as a party and the spirits as another are subjected to this bargaining process. The socially deprived individual is not denied alternative opportunities to demonstrate his talents and abilities. He can still negotiate a more rewarding status for himself during the next cycle of reincarnation.

Fourth, in a world of status instability, status seeking in Igbo society is cyclical and therefore a never-ending quest. Every elder tries to live a transparent life to guarantee for himself a place of honour among the ancestors. The elder “confesses” his transgression every morning as he breaks the morning kolanut and does not spare those who wish him and his family any evil. On the other
hand, the ancestors try to bring prosperity to the living lineage because they have a vested interest in reincarnating into it. To die young in Igbo society is to die unfulfilled, and for the family an unbroken series of such deaths is a corporate disaster.

Fifth, in a world where life processes are delicately balanced and where individuals enjoy a wide latitude in manipulating human relationships, it is necessary for individuals to “live a transparent life”. To live a secret life from family, from the kin and social groups, is to court the charge of sorcery or other anti-social activities, personality traits that spell disorder in Igbo communities.

Sixth, the Igbo seek explanations for social disasters through the medium of divination and impose a strict code of conduct for all with penalty for infraction that may stretch into many generations. In Igbo worldview, accountability enjoys no time limit, the individual is held accountable for his wrongs and he face retribution in this life if he can be detected or in any number of his cycles of reincarnation.

Seventh, the Igbo live in a world of constant change and are socialized to adapt to it where possible or take a courageous exit by suicide where society or the forces do not permit individual dignity. The ethnographic history of Igbo slaves in the various, parts of the New World confirms that many Igbo committed suicide rather than live with the indignity and humiliation of slavery (Herskovits, 1941).

4. IGBO ETHICS AND LAWS

Opara (2014) defined ethics as a: Code or set of principles by which men live. It deals with the morality of human conduct or actions. What a man ought to do. From normative sense, ethics prescribes the rules and regulations regarding the rightness and wrongness of human action. It deals with moral judgment, norms and standards, judgment of moral obligation, goodness and badness of actions and moral values. From non-normative perspective, it deals with the description of ethical concepts, human actions, definition and clarification of human thoughts.

Ofoegbu (1982) points out that ethics, laws, and morals of Igbo culture are encapsulated in Omenala, the approved and accepted ways of behaviour. According to him, Omenala encompasses the following category of beliefs and values: The accumulated wisdom of the Igbo people as handed down from generation to generation through Igbo traditions, laws, beliefs, myths, rituals, ceremonies, taboos and proverbs. Whatever is ascertained by the Dibia as the will of the spiritual order and sanctioned for obedience.

Ofo na ogu which are concepts of truth, purity, justice, and fidelity at all times and in all circumstances.

Another aspect of Igbo culture worth highlighting is the development of oracles which was an integral part of the Igbo social, religious and judicial processes. As Ottendberg (1958) points out, these oracles contributed in no small measure to the maintenance of law and order and preservation of the social systems of the Igbo. The prominent and awe-some oracles that existed in Igbo land included the Ibini Ukpabi of Arochukwu, the Amadioha of Umunoha, the Agbala of Awka, Odo shrines of Udi and Omabe shrines of Nsukka. Igbo oracles reinforced obedience to authority, respect for laws and customs, deference to lower levels of the Igbo judicial and arbitration processes and social stability.
5. GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE IN IGBO LAND

Regarding Igbo political governance and structure, Isichei (1977:21) maintains that “Igbo political institutions were designed to combine popular participation with weighting for experience and ability”. Similarly, Olisa (2002) indicates that the largest social and political unit is the community or town (Obodo, Ala) which can be briefly described as an agglomeration of lineage groups occupying a territorial area and bound together by a belief in one common ancestor, one common Ani (the Earth Goddess). Iheriohanma (2003:127) provides a more comprehensive characterization of Igbo traditional socio-political system.

According to him the Igbo operates a segmentary political system with the Village or General Assembly as a political supreme body. The “Ama-alá” or Council of Elders remains the second major political institution of government next to the General Assembly. The General Assembly is made up of every taxable male member of the village unit called the “Umunna”. While the “Ama-alá” or Council of Elders rule by proclamations, consults with the General Assembly in political, economic and religious matter, on issues of history and antecedence, the General Assembly as the first major political institution remains the final source of the strength of the people’s authority. It is supreme in matters of legitimacy as every member of the political unit irrespective of opinion and dissension, bows to its collective decision and will. The Igbo till date practice a kind of democracy called “Ohakarasi” which means “The people have said”. “Ohakarasi” epitomizes collective will and decision of the people. It refers to the general consent of the members. The will or collective decision is binding and the whole society frowns at disobedience or disregard to this will. This democratic governance eats deep into the moral fabric of the Igbo people and their social and political structure.

A point worth noting in any discourse on Igbo traditional governance system is what Isichei (1976:23) refers to as “the fluidity of Igbo institutions”. A good example of this could be found in the fact that in spite of being essentially republican in orientation as highlighted above, a noted orator could influence the outcome of a debate. Similarly, a warrior of proven courage and judgment would have a leadership role in warfare. Also in times of crisis some communities tried the rule of one man and gave it up as soon as the crisis was resolved.

Also pertinent is the assertion by Dahiru (2017) to the effect one group of people who embraced the modern state of Nigeria without reservation was the Igbo. The pre-colonial egalitarian socio-political system of the Igbo is consistent with the concept of a modern constitutional democracy. The independent spirit and unbridled republican nature of the Igbo pre-colonial society where feudalism and serfdom were almost absent entirely fostered in them the spirit of competition, culture of hard work and a societal reward system that was based on merit.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper noted the current agitation among a growing number of persons from the Igbo nation of South East Nigeria for self-determination. It shed light on the origin of the Igbo nation, highlighted their world view and examined the people’s governance structure and ethics.

In conclusion, it might be pertinent to submit that the Nigerian federation as presently constituted is overdue for restructuring. The agitation by the Igbo for independence is symptomatic of structural imbalance of the current Nigerian federal arrangement. For example, out of the six geo-political
zones in the country, the South East (Igbo states) has only five states whereas the others have a minimum of six. This imbalance should be addressed. Also, the cry by the Igbo of neglect, marginalization and maltreatment should be looked into. As Dahiru (2017:35) points out “The Biafra spirit is as alive today as it was in 1967 because Nigeria is as divided today as it was then. The Igbo ethnic group, which is one of the largest in Nigeria, with over forty million people, is the most marginalized and politically disadvantaged. The marginalization of the Igbo is systematic and far reaching”. The government should also handle with consideration and not brutality, the desire for self-determination, considering that such quest is legitimate. As the Daily Sun (2016) points out in its editorial, Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights holds that: “All people have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”.

It is further recommended that the federal government implements the report of the 2014 National Conference which made far-reaching recommendations regarding the restructuring of Nigeria, operation of true federalism and revenue allocation formula among others. The implementation of the report will put an end to agitations from the pro-Biafra groups, the Niger Delta militants and other such organizations.

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