

NDIGBO AND ENDLESS STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION: ANYWAY OUT? BY

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is a conglomeration of different ethnic nationalities by the British Colonialist. Since her independence in 1960, the national unity and integration has been under serious challenges, following agitations for secession and self-determination by its constituent groups, notably the Igbo ethnic group, which led to the civil war in 1967. Although the war has ended; and the territorial integrity of Nigeria kept intact, the struggle for self-determination by the Igbo has not ended. This is seen in the continuous emergence of neo-Biafran movements. Hence, the big questions: what is/are the reason(s) for the endless struggle for self-determination by Ndigbo? What do they want, and anyway out? Adopting the historical method of documentary analysis, the above research questions were discussed. The paper, therefore argued that the struggle for self-determination by Ndigbo hinges on their perceived injustice and marginalization of the group in Nigerian socio-political economy. This struggle cannot be quenched by intimidations or suppression of the group but by a call for referendum through which the people' choice in the Nigerian Project will be determined. In addition, restructuring could be a strategy for an ultimate self-determination agenda.

Keywords: Ndigbo, Self-determination, Restructuring, Referendum, Nigerian Project.

Introduction

On the front burner for the quest for independence by the Nigerian Nationalists, perhaps, was the desire for peace, development, reconstruction and national integration. This sounded reasonable following the colonial masters policies of suppression, intimidation, exploitation, division and ultimately, "their lack of commitment to the development of the Homo Africanus" (Onwu, 1996 p. 6 – 18). Consequently, Nigerian earliest nationalists likes of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmedu Bello, Ehahoro etc combined strength and resources together to

pursue this noble course until it became a reality. In October 1, 1960, Nigeria gained her independence from the colonial rule.

Sadly enough, it was not long after the independence, the nation was plunged into a plethora of crisis such as corruption, indiscipline, ethnocentrism, nepotism, discrimination, religion intolerance, ethnic restiveness among others. The preponderance of these problem hinges on issue of social justice and the pluralism of the Nigerian state. The outrageous and horrendous injustice suffered the people, mostly the *Igbos*, exacerbated the upsurge of ethnic military and resistant group seeking for self determination. The struggle for self-determination has prompted great concern for peace, unity and national integration.

For over four decades, there has been an intense struggle for self determination by the Igbo ethnic group. The struggle for self-determination has generated great debates as there is no consensus as to the legitimacy of the struggle, the content as well as method of realization. The struggle has given birth to Eastern Security Network (ESN), compulsory Monday sit-at-home within the region and unknown gunmen etc. To this end, this paper using the historical method of documentary analysis seeks to explore the reasons for this endless struggle for self determination by *Ndigbo*, and the way out, if any.

Conceptual Clarifications

i. *Ndigbo*

Ndigbo (literally means Igbo people) is one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria, after Hausa and Yoruba. Although the exact population of the people is not known, the CIA World Factbook puts the Igbo population of Nigeria at 18% of the total population of 190 million; approximately 32 million people (CIA, 2017).

Ndigbo are indigenes of the southern part of Nigeria, mostly on the eastern part of River Nigeria. They are native of five states of the federation: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. The Igbo, however, claims that their territory extend to the present day Delta State on the West and Cross-River, Akwa-Ibom and River States on the South. This is backed up by the heavy traces of Igbo culture and languages in these states.

Igbo is the language of the people. Igbo language has numerous regional dialects and Igboid languages such as the Ikwerre, Ekpeye, and Ika among others (Farden and Furniss, 1994,p.66). The language has approximately 24 million speakers, who are primarily of Igbo descent and live mostly in Nigeria, and can also be found in other countries like Equatorial Guinea, where it is recognized as a minority language (Isichei, 1976,p.96).

Ndigbo are one of the religious people on earth. This is evidence in the richness of religious ritual and rites of passages in their culture. Igbo are mostly Christian. A few of them practice Islam, Judaism and Igbo traditional religion known as *odinani*. Politically, pre-colonial Igbo society operated a decentralized system of government, characterized by the principle of aceplalous

(absence of a central government). It is therefore a chief less society which was sedimentary and egalitarian in nature.

The origin of Ndigbo has been subject of many speculations, as there is no consensus account on the origin of the people. However, archeological, linguistics, botanical and anthropological evidences suggest that the Igbo and their ancestors had lived in their present home from the beginning of human history. They came to worldwide attention in the 1960 when they attempted secession from Nigeria to form their independent state of Republic of Biafra.

ii. Self-determination

According to oxford Dictionary of Law, self-determination is “the right of a people living within a non-self governing territory to choose for themselves the political and legal states of that territory. This may choose independence and the formation of a separate state, integration into another state or association with an independent state, with autonomy in internal offers”(Grant and Barker, 2009,p.245).

Self-determination could be said to refer to the practice by which group of people freely express their political well by choosing their own government. Most often this concept is interchanged with secession. But it is important to note that they are not the same. Secession is the process by which a group seeks to separate itself from the state to which it belongs, and create a new state on part of the territory of that state. Unlike self-determination, secession is not a consensual process and thus need to be distinguished from the process by which a state confers independence on a particular territory by legislative or other means, a process which may be referred to as devotion or great of independence(<http://www.justice.gc.ca>).

Historical Background of the Struggle for Self-determination by Ndigbo

Prior to 1914, there was no Nigeria. The people within the geographical territory known as Nigeria today existed as tribal groups in the name of Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Urhobo, Tiv, Kanuri etc. Nigeria came into being in 1914 through the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria. The amalgamation of 1914 was pivoted to the struggle for self determination by *Ndigbo*. In the amalgamation the British colonist through fireworks brought together people and nations with distinct, cultures, values, and cosmologies into a marriage of convenience under a unitary geo-political economy known as Nigeria. The merger was to facilitate a functional political and economic control over the Nigerian people.

Soon after the independence, the incongruity of the merger began to manifest in ethnocentrism, nepotism, and religious intolerance, social injustice, ethnic persecution as evidenced in TV riots of 1964, Federal and Regional election crisis of 1964, the killing of the Igbo in Northern Nigeria in 1966 among others. The series crisis that befall Nigeria shortly after independence dramatically led to the first military coup in January 15, 1966, championed by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, and Igbo senior military officer. The coup, which led to the demise of many Northern elites saw the installation of General John Aguiyi Ironsi, as the head of Nigerian government.

Given the ethnic coloration of the casualties of the coup and the failure of the Ironsi government to address the accusation, there was a counter coup in July 1966 masterminded by Martala Muhammed, which led to the death of over 185 Igbo officers, and the installation of Yakubu Gowon as the new head of Government, despite the fact that he was not the most senior military officer in the Nigerian army. According to Achebe, the crisis which led to the massacre of many Igbo in the Northern was a state policy to exterminate the Igbo and their dominance in Nigeria affairs (Achebe, 2012p.92). Madiebo, (1980,p.14) noted that before now Igbo dominated the army (ranked officers), educational institutions and the federal civil services.

The failure of the government to ensure the safety of the Eastern in the North, and the directed incrimination of the government in the murder of its own citizens triggered the move for secession by the *Ndigbo* to form their own nation state of Biafra. Less than two months of the declaration of the independent state of Biafra by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, and following the failure of the diplomatic effort to resolve the crisis on what is known today as Aburi Accord, the federal government of Nigeria on July 6, 1969 launched a full-scale invasion into Biafra land. The war which lasted about 36 months saw over one million Biafrans' death. At the end of the war; when the Nigerian government had prevailed over Biafran, in a peace accord, there was a declaration of 'no victor, no vanquish'.

Ever since the end of the civil war, the effort of the Nigerian state for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of the Igbo-secessionists into the post civil war Nigeria through the three Rs policy of rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation to promote national unity and nationalism through scheme and policy of Federal Character, Catchment Area, National Sport Festivals, Quota System etc have yielded little or no effect (Isa, 2016,p.54).

Presently, the indices that triggered off the civil war have assumed an unprecedented dimension. There is massive social injustice, suppression, oppression, dehumanization, marginalization and pauperization of the Igbos. For instance, *Ndigbo* has been politically weed out of the ranks of the Nigerian army, there is structural imbalance in the number of states in geopolitical zones; while others have six and seven, *Igbo* has five, there is lack of federal infrastructural investment in the East; most of the federal roads in the East have become dead traps.

Moreover, whenever marginalization is mentioned in Nigeria, the picture that appears is the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria or "Ndigbo". The way and manner appointments are being given in this country is one of the major reasons for marginalization in Nigeria (Asogwa, 2021).It has been observed that major political positions are not given to the Igbos. When it comes to security meetings in this country, not even one person is from South east of Nigeria and this have been making the Igbos uncomfortable in the country. They are seen as second class citizens, dejected, and betrayals etc. Imagine that since Nigeria Civil War, Igbos have been denied of being the President of this country even when other zones have been given the opportunity to rule the country. Any Igbo man that tries to come out during general election is seen by the public as a failure already as he is not going to win by any means. The Igbo, in honesty, without harbouring any animosity against any person or section of Nigeria, have been forward-looking to a time an

Igbo blood would be allowed to become President in Nigeria. This is despite the fact that in terms of making sacrifices to build Nigeria, the Igbo have been in the forefront. All these are injustice meted on Igbos is what leads to agitation for referendum, and demand for Biafran Country. The 2023 general election is around the corner, but the question is, will they allow an Igbo man to become the President even when it is an open secret that it is the turn of an Igbo man. Some Igbo politicians have started indicating interest but people are watching to know where it will lead them to.

This blatant neglect of the south eastern enclave of Nigeria and the massive injustice met on its inhabitants since the end of the civil war by the Nigerian government has rekindled the agitations for self-determination through a propagation of Neo-biafra Movements, notable among them are MASSOB and IPOB.

The New Agitation of MASSOB and IPOB

MASSOB was a secessionist movement, established by Raph Uwazuruike on 13th September 1999, four months after Nigeria returned to democracy. The advent of MASSOB was a direct response to the failure of the Nigerian state to address the predicament of the Igbo since the end of civil war. Onuoha (2011) noted that unlike other ethno nationalist movement in Nigeria, MASSOB does not only seek a radical and fundamental social transformation of the Nigerian public space but if also the exits of the Igbo nation from the Nigerian project into an alternative political and administrative arrangement(P.402 – 422).

IPOB on the other hand is a separatist organization led by Nnamdi Kanu. This group aims to make the South Eastern state to break everything from Nigerian and form the independent nation of Biafra through a peaceful means of referendum to settle the issues of Biafra in a civilized and democratic manner. Interestingly, IPOB has been largely peaceful; it has not adopted violence as means to achieve its end. However, on 20th September 2017, a federal High court in Abuja generated the federal government an intern injunction proscribing the activities of the group (Igbonedion,2017).

Moreover, Asogwa and Okeke (2021) observed that marginalization of the Igbo people that degenerated to conflict and the attack by Fulani herdsmen in South East, IPOB establish another group called Eastern Security Network (ESN) and Unknown gunmen. These brought unrest both to civilians, security agencies and government establishments. They set public institutions on fire; they seize arms and ammunition belonging to security officials and kill them in the process. They also introduced every Monday as sit-at-home in all the Southeast State after the rearrested of their leader in June, 2021 in Kenya and remanded in DSS custody. Before his rearrest, Kanu fled the country in September 2017 after an invasion of his home by the military in Afara-Ukwu, near Umuahia, in Abia State (Ameh, 2021). The Nigerian Army planted bombs and explosive in and around the compound waiting for the bombs and explosives to explode to justify their plans to label Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and the innocent members of IPOB as terrorists/group (Mama,2017). In the whole of the Southeast, no business of any sort is allowed to open, not even the government workers do go to work on Mondays. Every Monday at Southeast is seen as Sunday as everybody

observed it judiciously. Though the news circulating around shows that the leaders of IPOB have instructed that the sit-at-home be stopped every Monday and should only be observed on the day their leader Namdi Kanu will go to court, but for the fear of the unknown, it still holds. The IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu was rearrested this year, 2021 and he is facing trial on seven-count charge bordering on terrorism and treasonable felony, in the law court. He has gone to court twice without any tangible judgement. Recently, highly respected Igbo elders led by First Republic Minister of Aviation, Chief Mbazulike Amaechi and others visited President Buhari and interceded for the unconditional release of the leader of separatist movement leader, Kanu who has been in the custody of the Department of State Services (DSS). The response from Buhari was positive and states thus;

“You have made an extremely difficult demand on me as leader of this country. The implication of your request is very serious. In the last six years, since I became President, nobody would say I have confronted or interfered in the work of the judiciary. Kanu is already standing trial; his intervention would go against the doctrine of separation of powers between the executives and judiciary. He recalled that when Kanu jumped bail, got arrested and brought back to the country, I said the best thing was to subject him to the system. Let him make his case instead of giving negative impressions of the country from outside. I felt it is even a favour to give him that opportunity, but turning to 92 years old Chief Amaechi, he said, God has spared you, and given you a clear head at this age, with very sharp memory. A lot of people half your age are confused already, but the demand you made is heavy, I will consider it” (Saharareport, 2021).

With the above statement, it is believed that Kanu’s release is near. Few days after the visit, the court had a sitting, the trial was originally adjourned till January 19, 2022, after his defence team staged a walk-out on the judge on November 10. Following a complaint by Kanu’s lawyer, Ifeanyi Ejiofor. Binta Nyako, the trial judge also advised the SSS to allow the IPOB leader to practice his Jewish faith, and that he should be given possible maximum comfort etc (Ameh, 2021). The case was later adjourned to January 18, 2022.

The Way Out

Ndigbo’s struggle for self-determination will not stop the government of Nigeria, calls for national dialogue, where the people would collectively decide on the issue of oneness and peaceful co-existence, and consequently come up with a constitution on how they must be governed. The quest for national integration must begin with social and political consensus, which recognizes the multicultural characteristic of the Nigeria society, and the people’s acceptance of co-existence, mutual tolerance, social justice as *sine qua non* for peace and development. It is only through collective willingness to accommodate, tolerate and develop a sense of respect, flexibility, inclusion and relatedness that we can produce the true spirit of oneness and unity in Nigerian multi-diversified polity.

The government of Nigeria must sincerely address the issue of social injustice and inequality through restructuring, if true peace and reconciliation is to be achieved. Social-economic inequalities across the nation fuels fear and suspicion, which keeps the nation divided.

Consequently, *Ndigbo* are less interested in the Nigerian project since they do not feel the society is adequately concerned about their welfare. Nkom cited in Okpeh therefore notes:

The problem of national integration resolves around the issue of building a just democratic social order which gives every individual a sense of belonging, which guarantee each person a satisfactory level of participation and development and which ensure for a people a share of resources of society commensurate with descent acceptable living (Okpe, 1977).

An integral application of justice and equality is the building of a common citizen status (beyond ethnic and religious identity), which ensure a base line of social and economical status and equal opportunities for all. Status equality in social-political and economic structure will bring to a minimal decimal the cry of magnetization and inequity. This will enhance national development and bring to an end current mutual mistrust that is sliding the foundation of the nation's existence.

Conclusion

The feeling of deprivation of some desired benefits relative to the other ethnic group and the failure of the leadership of the federation to address these perceived socio-economic marginalization and deprivation, inequalities in the distribution of power, massive youth unemployment, cum perceived pauperization of the people, engendered the agitations for self-determination by *Ndigbo*. The activity of the group, which was borne out of frustration, are carried out as a last resort towards making the government sit up and address the issue, and does not boarder on criminality as Government always claims. Taking the activities of the militia group as criminal is a diversionary tactics by the state in diverting the attention of the exploited.

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