

# **CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES IN THE INTERGROUP RELATIONS AMONG THE PEOPLE OF THE IMO RIVER BASIN UP TO 1970**

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## **Abstract**

From the earliest times, there existed harmonious intergroup relations among the people of the Imo River Basin. This cordiality continued until the early 1970s when the exigencies of the civil war and the bequeathed colonial structure sowed the seed of discord among the people of this region. This paper submits that the interjection of colonialism and the civil war disrupted the good neighbourliness that existed in the Imo River Basin. The study attempts to examine factors that once united the region that made it strong and cohesive in pre-colonial time. Such factors include common ancestry, language similarities, intermarriages, trade etc. It is believed that a consolidation of the ties that once bound this region would engender positive development and make them relevant in the present political dispensation. The methodology employed in this work is basically analysis of extant literature and oral tradition. The findings of this research points to the urgent need for the people of this region to redefine their philosophy and consolidate their region as this would make them compete favourably with their counterparts in the north and west.

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### **Introduction**

The inhabitants of the Imo River Basin comprising of the Igbo, east and central delta states, Ibibio and the Efik of Cross River states had the best of intergroup relations before the colonial period. The Imo River was the link that connected these people in trade, intermarriage and wars. They also shared similar languages and political organizations. This fact makes the assertion of Hugh Trevor Roper and his cohorts that there was no purposive movement in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans obsolete. Ayandele, E.A. had relished in bold relief that “from the earliest times Nigerian people have neither been incorrigibly insular... nor have they been amateurishly unpractised in the art of neighbourliness. Even a casual perusal of the records would reveal in bold relief the judicious inclinations of Nigerians to maintain harmonious relations with other peoples.” (1980, 367)

The Imo River provides a natural link between the nationalities that inhabit the former eastern Nigeria. Although the region has been defaced in the multiplicity of states creation, one fact remains that the Imo River continues to provide a link within the region for the mutual advantage of its component groups. The effect of this natural link, though modified by the experience of colonialism and the Nigerian civil war could still be rekindled in the search for cohesion in a region that has suffered malignity in the national project. This truth nonetheless, lies the solution to Nigeria’s recurrent political and economic problem, for not only the Imo river basin needs to rediscover the cords of unity that existed between them before colonialism but indeed all the regions and nationalities that make up the present day Nigeria need to reflect on the myriads of relationships that existed between them in the pre-colonial time, so as to fashion a better and more enduring future. The crux of this paper is to examine the changes and continuities in the intergroup relations between the constituent groups of the Imo River Basin.

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Scholarly works on the Imo River Basin are disparate and diverse. However, there are found few ones that attempt linking the changes that have been brought about by the two factors that this study examines, that is colonialism, and especially, the civil war. Njoku (2008), for example, focuses on the origins of antagonism in the region, in the light of the commercial revolution of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that saw the determination of the 'new men' to rise above their class. The revolution in the legitimate commerce allowed small producers in the export trade and enabled them create the material base for a greater share in the political power. (2008, pp. 27-52). This rise did not augur well with the existing merchant-political class who managed to adapt to the new system as long as they recorded no diminution of their wealth and power. It therefore goes without saying that once their wealth and power was affected, they rose up against the 'new men'. Afigbo (1972), examines the significance of rivers in the transport and communication of Eastern Nigeria before and during colonialism before the construction of roads and railways (1972, pp27-49). Although he concentrated on the Cross River, which he said occupied a very important place as a highway by which 'light and civilization' penetrated the former eastern region; It is not only the Cross River within this axis that performed such important role of bringing light and civilization, the Imo river also occupied a similar place of importance in the political and economic lives of the people of the Imo river basin. It was to the region what the Niger was to the western Igbo and the Nile to the Mediterranean people; linking the coast and its people to the Igbo hinterland. Afigbo's submission based on the work of Talbot that there was restricted intergroup activities among the people of Cross River seemed to have been long dispelled as recent researches have thrown light on the myriads of intergroup relations between this people and their neighbours. Ozigbo, I.R.A., Cookey, S.J.S., Dike, K.O. and others have pointed areas of intergroup relations among the former Eastern Region, the host region of Imo River Basin. They also reveal that the various people that made up Nigeria did not exist in isolation and that they had mutually beneficial commercial and social relationships with their respective

neighbours. The missing link in all the literatures so reviewed is that whereas they identified the areas of interrelatedness among the peoples of this region none pointed to the dastard effect of colonialism and the civil war on the region and the significance for their cohesion. The paper is broadly divided into five sections, which in part discusses the main focus of the paper – the precolonial, the colonial and the civil war.

### **Markers and Agencies of Pre-Colonial Intergroup Relations**

Within the Imo River Basin, intergroup relations have been of socio-economic sort. There also existed political relations which provided a junction between the past and the present and also has the ability to influence current politics. (Ikime, 1980, p.26). The people of the Imo river basin falls within the group classified as Western Igbo, the Northern or Onitsha Igbo, the Southern or Owerri Igbo, and the Northeastern Igbo. (Fordes, D. 1956 & Jones, G. 1963). According to Cookey, S.J.S., although these groups may have distinctive features peculiar to each, yet they shared common characteristics, “in addition to their language, which has given them an identity as a national group”. (1974, p.2). For Horton, J.A.B, “all the coast dialects from Oru to Old Calabar are either directly or indirectly connected with the Igbo”. (1868, p.171). He is also of the opinion that the Igbo are separated from the sea by small tribes all of which trace their origin to the Igbo race. Leonard (1906) also found out that the languages spoken by Ibibio, Efik, Andoni and most ethnic groups of the region were derived from the Ibo [sic] and concluded that there is a distinct dialectical affinity between the Ijo, Ibani, and New Calabar and the Isuama dialects of Ibo [sic]. These conclusions were based on contemporary analysis of linguistic relationships and oral traditions collected from certain Ijo and Efik –Ibibio communities. Afigbo, (1987, p.97) asserts that the reason such affinities are moribund, is “a classic example of the trick which time and political consciousness play on historical writing”. Oral tradition among surviving elders of the Niger Delta states appear to corroborate Afigbo’s submission. Among the agencies and markers of intergroup relations of the Imo river basin

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in precolonial are migration, trade, intermarriage, war and identical political organization.

### **Migratory Accounts**

While there remain divergent views about the origin of nationalities east of the Niger, yet an undeniable fact remains, as Jones put it, that the Igbo lack any tradition of external origin as some have postulated of “eastern” origin. (1963, p.21). Lending credit to this view, Talbot and Mulhall, are of the opinion that the Igbo have no tradition of migration from elsewhere and appear to have settled in the thickly populated parts of Nri-Awka and Isuama from where they spread to other places. (1962, p.117). This assertion cancels the idea of migration from anywhere. Anthropologists have supported this view by propounding the Nri-Awka-Orlu complex as the earliest centre of Igbo settlement in southern Nigeria and that it is from here that further waves of migration took place. Hence, Jones has described this region as the Igbo “centre or core” and further alludes that from here, migrations spread through Nsukka-Udi highlands in the east, and then towards the south to the coast (1963, p.21). The descendants of the latter wave of migration, Jones, asserts became the ancestors of Oratta, Ikwerrri, Etche, Asa, and Ndoki tribes. From the eastern Isuama area, took off the branch of Igbo that inhabit the south east part of Nigeria and occupied the Aba division to form the Ngwa group of Igbo. Another group of this tribe moved into the Umuahia area and thence to Ohafia-Arochukwu ridge. Other subsidiary movements went north east and settled at the west of the Niger area and formed the Edda, Item and related groups today.

Among the Niger Delta, there exists strong inclination towards the claim of Benin origin more than from the Igbo. Earlier writers had ascribed Ibo origin of the delta states as people driven to their present home by the coastward moving Ibos. However, after the comparison of accounts of earlier writers especially on the origin of the Ijos, it seemed plausible to conclude that the Benin descent of the Ijo must have taken place before the 15<sup>th</sup> century and that the settlement differed remarkably with what followed the rise

of the Atlantic trade. (Dike, 1956, p.23). The claim of Benin descent for most of the delta states is not surprising as groups have preferred to claim descent from powerful empires than infamous entities. Ikime (1980) pointed this out when he alluded that some western Igbo including Urhobo claim Benin descent. But to Alagoa E.J., while mentioning the evidence of bronze objects discovered at the lower delta that suggest early contact with Benin, never failed to point to the insignificant evidence of Benin connection comparable to the massive evidence pointing to account of the delta states originating from central delta through the Igbo hinterland. He avers that “the leaders of Elem Kalabari and Bonny are said to have taken routes through the Igbo hinterland before turning back into the delta, finally settling much closer to the sea....”(Alagoa, 1976, p.336). In the same vein, he confirmed that the leaders of Ibani (Bonny) claim that their ancestors came from the central delta through Igbo land. After a period of sojourn in Ndoki territory, they came down the Imo River and through the Andoni country to their coastal location. Alagoa has also testified that a large number of Igbo slaves formed the bulk of Ijo population, and this Igbo population received deliberate acculturation (Alagoa, 1976, p.337). Having settled for a common origin of the people of the Imo river basin, it seemed plausible that as these groups moved farther south, the fact of geography and economic realities of the regions introduced certain differentiations that seemed to have estranged them from each other. It is therefore safe to conclude that the people that inhabit the present day Imo River basin had had contact with each other in their migration routes and the evidence of this is more glaring in their language.

### **The Aro Oligarchy**

Afigbo (1976, p.52), recorded three significant influences on the people of the Imo river basin which linked them together within the period our study covers, namely Benin empire, Igala and the Atlantic trade. Of the three, we shall dwell more on the Atlantic trade. One of the impact of the trade according to him was the rise of trade oligarchies, the chief of which was the Aro oligarchy. Exploiting their strategic location on the border between Igbo,

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Ibibio and the Cross River, they acted as trade and oracle middlemen up till the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They built up an intricate trading network covering most of former eastern region of Nigeria and even penetrating into the area of the middle belt. Another significant role of the oligarchies as listed by Afigbo (1976, p.52) was effective integration of the various Igbo communities with their neighbours. He noted that the Aros operated as commercial and ritual agents among the Ibibio, the Ijo, the Cross River peoples, Igala, Idoma and Ariba. In concluding this section, it is observed that the states of the Imo river basin did not evolve in isolation from neighbouring societies. It is also noted that the impact of the Igbo on their neighbours were nonetheless insignificant.

### **War**

Wars featured prominently in the intergroup relationship among the delta states. And these wars were provoked, by piracy, head-hunting, and slave raids. Piracy was practiced by the Ijo *ibe* of the central and western delta. (Alagoa, 1976). It is pertinent to point out here that no wars were recorded between the Niger delta states and their Igbo neighbours, except perhaps the slave raids from which they procured slaves for the Atlantic trade and which populated their states subsequently. However, between Opobo and Ndoki and any other community that refused to cooperate with Opobo in trade terms, there were war threats. Such threats or intertribal skirmish could not be said to be war per se as it was meant to coerce Opobo neighbouring communities into cooperating with her. Similarly, between the Igbo and their Ibibio and Efik neighbours, inter-ethnic conflicts especially among the border communities, which primary cause was mostly trespassing on farm boundaries were recorded. But it is pertinent to mention here that whether between the Igbo and Efik, or Ibibio and Igbo or delta and Igbo, such wars were not conclusive as to warrant the over lordship of one state over another. This may account for the reason the delta states never established their house rule over any of their rival Igbo states, or the Ibibio or Efik over the Igbo. It is therefore safe to conclude that peaceful coexistence for most of the time covered in

this work pervaded the intergroup relations between the states of the Imo river basin.

### **Trade and Trade Routes**

On a general note, trade relations between Nigerian peoples and other parts of Africa save North Africa was neither strong nor ever existed. Ekundare (1973, 21) noted that “there is no evidence of regular contact with any part of southern Africa”. He attributed this to lack of any trade incentive in the south. One thinks the particular trade incentive in question here must have been communication link such that the Sahara desert provided between the North and West Africa. In a similar vein, Afigbo (1981) seems to be of the opinion that trade relationship among the nationalities of the Imo River basin was restricted and limited within their region. According to him, “the Igbo and their neighbours got all the salt from the brine of the lakes and springs of the upper Cross River basin and from the abundant sea water of the Bights of Biafra and Benin.” The need of the riverine delta states for cereal and tubers were met by the hinterland Igbo neighbours, while they exchanged their fish with these food compliments from their Igbo neighbours. The boats were gotten from the big mangrove trees within the rainforest region of the Imo River basin. The need for Iron was met by the Awka smith’s men; cloth was gotten from Akwette, and salt was gotten from the brines of the Delta Rivers. So it seems the region was self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the source of Igbo Ukwu bronze objects have been linked with Nok, in Southwestern Kaduna, where the earliest discovery of this technology was made. There was also evidence of Benin cloths in Bonny and Opobo and other delta states. States of the Niger delta also raided Igbo communities like Ndoki, Asa and Akwette for the lucrative trade in slaves. The Atlantic slave trade, if for any other thing, brought the Igbo and their Efik, and Ijo neighbours in closer relations, as the slaves were exported through them. In fact, Afigbo mentioned the swamping of Ijo culture by the servile Igbo elements, a trend the Ijo fought to overturn. He continued to say that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century,



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many Ijo families had Igbo blood in their veins and that in Degema, many of them spoke Igbo as their second language.

At the close of the nineteenth century, trade had developed to the point that it knitted south eastern Nigeria, into a “single nexus”. (Nwabughuogu, 1993, 23). Records of the early European visitors reported of Opobo men not only navigating the rivers but carried goods to Uzuakoli market in Bende and visited countries as far north as Okigwe. In such markets were found assorted products which brought about improvements in the social and economic lives of the people. Apart from the trade in slaves, Isichei, (1973, 5) has listed the following trade items that were exchanged at the market at Ndoki: corn, palm wine, ram, fish, deer’s flesh, dog’s flesh, cats, fowls, tobacco, yam, eggs, spices, pineapples, palm oil, bananas, plantains, cassava, cloths, gins, powder and pipes. At the onset of colonialism, the volume of trade in this and other markets increased including the varieties of stocks exchanged in them. By 1905, metal wares in addition to the goods already mentioned above added to the list of goods exchanged in the markets of Imo River Basin. Such goods included, razor, knives, clothing materials, beads, confectionaries, kitchen utensils etc. So there existed a symbiotic trade relationship which complemented the needs of the region.

Trade routes, markets and traders contributed to intergroup interactions among people of the Imo river basin. The communities of Owerrinta, Omuma, Akwette, Umuagbai, Etche, Egwanga, Esene were all linked to each other by the Imo river and its rivulets. The roads were narrow footpaths through which traders on foot travelled. There were local roads connecting close communities and there were also international highways linking many territories. Construction and maintenance of these roads drew the communities together as a collective responsibility. Security of traders along the trade paths was also the responsibility of the communities which trade routes ran across their territory. Each community maintained the security of traders who passed along their territory, while the cleaning of the paths was a combined responsibility of close neighbours. By these measures, different communities were

brought together for a common cause. Falola T., asserts the profitability of the cooperation of communities in maintaining and securing the trade routes that passed their communities. (1989, p.124). Such benefits include tolls and sale of provisions to traders such as food. As the routes and their maintenance drew communities together, the traders themselves were another source of intergroup relation both within the region of our consideration and beyond.

### **Inter marriage**

One of the ways the traders of the delta secured their trade relations with their Igbo, Akwette, and Ibibio neighbours was through intermarriage. Thus, in addition to oaths taken with the communities of trade partners, they intermarried with the communities to seal their trade relationships. This was an important means of ensuring security while passing through neighbouring communities. Uchacha Joseph confirms of many Ibibio women married to his Onicha Ngwa community. In the same vein, Manilla Emmanuel mentions of greater number of women in his Ogwumabiri community in Opobo as consisting of more of Igbo women of Akwette and Ndoki. As earlier mentioned, these marital relationships were vital for the success of trade in the region. So marital relationships with the host communities in addition to the existence of age sets that have been commissioned for the security of the caravans was invaluable to the trade in the Imo river basin.

### **Linguistic Correlations**

Language similarities between the Igbo, Ibibio and Delta states were not lacking. The following words sound alike and mean similar things among the people of Imo River Basin.

**Table 1: Language correlations in the Imo River Basin**

<b>Words (English)</b>	<b>Meaning in Igbo</b>	<b>Meaning in Ibibio</b>	<b>Meaning in Efi</b>
God	Chukwu	Abasi Ibom	Abasi Ibom
Husband	Di	Ebe	Ebe

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Vegetable	Ukazi	Afang	Ukazi
Ekpe	Ekpe (Ekpo)	Ekpe	Ekpe
Okonko	Okonko	Okonko	Okonko
Seat	Oche/agada	Akada	Mkpoitie
Plate	Efere	Usan	Usan
Groundnut	Ahuekere	Mansang	Mansang
Child/children	Nwatakiri/umu	Eyen	Eyen
Time	Oge	Ini	Ini
Night	Abali	Okoneyo	Okoneyo
Morning	<u>U</u> tutu	<u>U</u> san obok	<u>U</u> san obok
House	<u>U</u> lo	<u>U</u> fok	<u>U</u> fok
Money/wealth	Ego/aku	Aku	Oku
Road	Uzo	Usun	Usun
Bicycle	I <u>g</u> w <u>e</u>	U <u>k</u> w <u>a</u> q	U <u>k</u> w <u>a</u> g
Wife	Nwunye	Anwan	Nwan

**Source: Author's field compilation**

A careful look at these words show a close similarity with both the Igbo and some delta states or similarity in all the languages of the Imo river basin. It is evident that contact promoted bilingualism among people of different groups. Borrowing from the biblical account of language differentiation in Genesis Chapter 6,

people who understood one another's language began associating together. And it is a truism that one of the closest things that encourage interaction is language, otherwise relationships would be impossible. To buttress this fact, the border ethnic spoke and still speak freely the language of their neighbours. For example, the Ohafia spoke freely Efik language; the Ngwa neighbours of Ibibio, interact freely in Ibibio language, while the Ogba, Opobo, Etche, Ikwerre, Ahoada, etc. speak and understand appreciable degree of Igbo language. But it is interesting to note that though Abali Chituru, speak Igbo language freely, she refuses to be identified with Igbo. She vehemently says that she hates Igbo even though she claims to love the interviewer, who is Igbo. Not only Mrs Abali, Prof. Mbon, from Annang, in one of his lighter moods confessed to have a deep hatred for the Igbo. And Chief Okechukwu Ujeh, an Igbo man that has spent most of his life in Calabar swore that his daughter would never marry an Efik or Ibibio, even if such could be his church pastor. The hatred between these groups is this much.

### **Indigenous Industries**

There were developed centers of specialization in certain manufacturing activities which encouraged not only buyers but also migrants from other regions. This may account for the presence of Igbo in the northern and coastal regions. It is therefore likely that the metallurgical workers in Abaala in Ngwa may have been descendants of Awka smiths who may have established trade posts and finally established a settlement there. They may have also been major suppliers of weapons to Opobo, Bonny, Kalabari, who were fighting various wars. Another prominent indigenous industry of the region is textile industry – the Akwette cloth weaving industry. Akwette cloth was sold both within the region and all over Nigeria.

### **The Impact Colonial Rule on Intergroup Relations among the Imo River Basin**

It seems as some authors believe that inter group relations within the composite groups that made up Nigeria increased with the

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imposition of British rule. Such authors allude to a common central government, increased trade among the various groups in the country, internal migrations (in search of white collar jobs) with its concomitant effect of inter-ethnic marriages. Nevertheless, Okeke, et al (1998, 3) have noted that “the colonial period was a period of serious conflicts among them”. These conflicts, they noted arose as a result of competition among the groups for the advancement of their business interests. Okeke listed such conflicts as one between the Yoruba and the Hausa in 1934 when the Yoruba tried to enter the kola nut trade between their homeland and the northern region. In the south east, another crisis was noted between the Igbo and the Kalabari, when the latter chased the Igbo traders away thinking the Igbo would dominate the fish trade at Abonema. The conflicts were not peculiar to the tribes of eastern Nigeria as such conflicts were also experienced in the west and northern regions as well.

The conflicts had taken the turn they did because there was no concerted effort on the colonialists to integrate the various groups inhabiting the Nigerian state. Their philosophy was to make do with whatever convenient system they found on ground. Thus in the Northern part of Nigeria, they had no problem establishing indirect rule using the emirs that Usman Dan Fodio and his successors have put in place. In the West, the Oba and his administrative organogram was amenable to the new system, though with some initial resistance. But when in the east, they decided to impose a system similar to what was obtainable in the north and west, it met with a strong resistance. One would have expected them to work with the *Opara* and the *Amanyano* without imposing political agents that were not familiar to the people. In addition, the colonial administration introduced regionalism from 1939, which picked from each region, the tribe they considered the majority and invested every authority on such tribes. The rest of the tribes within each region felt marginalized, or so it seemed. In the North, it was the Hausa/Fulani that was handpicked, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. When independence came, the succeeding politicians sought to maintain this arrangement. In this lay the root of minority agitation in Nigeria, Federal Character, Quota system

and limitless agitation for state creation in Nigeria. Each group wanted its own person to occupy strategic political positions because whoever that was in power had the opportunity to control resources at the federal and regional levels. This seemed to be the genesis of the quest for the “National Cake”. Such was intergroup relations in Nigeria before independence and following after independence, intergroup relations between Nigerian groups including those of the Imo river basin were never to remain the same. The Western regional party, the Action Group, sensed this inequality before time and then pressed hard at the constitutional conferences held before independence for these regions to be broken into smaller units. The AG, wanted states to be created for the minority groups of each region. Unfortunately, AG’s agitation did not win the consideration of either the north or the east as the size of each region offered numerical advantage.

As independence approached, the fear of domination by any of the regions became the primary focus of Nigerian politics. Fearing southern domination, the north wished to postpone independence and would want it to be possible when it was practicable. When it became practicable, it made sure it dominated the federal government as it produced the first and indeed the last prime minister while the east produced the President. Unfortunately, the crave to dominate governance was not limited to the federal sector of governance, it also dominated the regional governments.

In the east, inter group relations after independence centered on the fear of the minority groups of Igbo domination. Hence there was the agitation for the creation of the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers state that would comprise of all the minority groups of the east. Like the AG position in the constitutional conference, the quest for the creation of Calabar-Ogoja-River failed the acceptability of the eastern region which saw it as an anti-Igbo sentiment. In addition to being a demand based on an anti-Igbo sentiment, the Igbo felt it would make them lose control of Port Harcourt and the benefit they expect to gain from it especially on the basis of derivation from the revenue accruing from the federal

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government from export of crude oil which came mainly from the minority areas of the eastern region. The demand for the creation of this state and other agitations for state creation were assuaged by Dr. Azikiwe's persuasion on the people that agitation of state creation would be a distraction and should be postponed until after independence. After independence, the agitation for state creation did not abate, yet the demand was met for the West in 1963 when the Mid-West state was created. One could call this action of NCNC the very undoing of the eastern politics, and coupled with the fact that the East, unlike the North, did not possess any strong strategy that unified or held the east together; the unfolding political situation in Nigeria meant for the east the proverbial 'to your tents O Israel'.

### **The Civil War and Intergroup Relations in the Imo River Basin**

The Nigerian civil war has been ill conceived as Igbo coup, but this was not so. A critical analysis of the philosophy of the coup plotters reveal the objective of the plotters. For they aimed at excising corruption, greed and avarice that had started eating deep the fabrics of the nascent nation. Nevertheless, that is not the crux of this paper, but suffice it to say that both the cause and the course of the war affected negatively the intergroup relationship of not only the people of Imo river basin but the whole intergroup relationships in the country. At the onset of the war in 1967, the minority agitation of the eastern region was met by the creation of Rivers state and the southeastern state that later became Cross River state in 1976. By this act, the shaky solidarity of the region was shattered as the minority groups of the region felt liberated and hence contributed to the loss of the war by the Eastern region. As if that was not enough, the philosophy of the war received the disapproval of the elites of the region. The Ahiara declaration has been termed as one of the factors that dealt the final blow to the war effort of Biafra.

The Ahiara declaration which proposed a socialist system during the Nigeria – Biafra war was detested by the Igbo and her neighbours who could not subject their sweat to a communal ownership. It has been argued convincingly that Ojukwu's

visionary document which was aimed at using it as utopia to fire the imaginations of Biafrans and sustain them unto ultimate victory failed to achieve this objective and that reason was because it contained “proto revolutionary and *socialist* pretensions”. (Alumona, 2011, 12). It is contended that the declaration demoralized a critical segment of the population, particularly the elite, by inducing a despondent psychological state of mind. Certain principles in that declaration have been found to run contrary to the particular nature of the people of southeastern region. A few of such principles include communal ownership of property as part of the document read: “...in the new Biafra, all property belongs to the community...” (Alumona, 2011, 15). Even though the Biafran leader reiterated that the principle would not abolish personal ownership of property, but his inclusion that the state would now be acting on behalf of the community in disposition of property to the advantage of all, meant, in Alumona’s judgment, to the average wealthy person in the eastern region, the loss of grip of his property that stratified that society into the rich and the poor. The critiques held the opinion that the average person in this region does not believe in the equality of all men which the Ahiara declaration planned to establish. Another section of the declaration read thus, “Over acquisitiveness or inordinate desire to amass wealth is a factor liable to threaten social stability, especially in an underdeveloped society in which there is not enough material goods to go round”.(Alumona, 2011, p.16). It also planted in the hearts of Biafrans the dangers in some citizens accumulating large private fortunes. The statements which were to form the philosophy of the new nation of Biafra did not augur well with the elite of the Igbo and her neighbours, who, according to the analysts of the declaration, decided to withdraw their support because they thought that the new republic would not favour them.

Perhaps the nail in the alienation of the region was fastened after the civil war when according to Okeke, O., the federal military government connived with the governments of the south eastern states to alienate the properties of the Igbo in their states and sold them to the indigenes. (2018, 18). Parden had noted that in other



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states of the federation, properties of the Igbo had been given back to them after the civil war and had been allowed to collect the arrears of their rentals. (1986, pp.135-141). But in Port Harcourt, and the south eastern state, the alienation of Igbo property helped to “deepen the animosity and widen the political gulf between the Igbo and the minority groups of former eastern Nigeria”. (Okeke, O. 2018, p.24). Hence, in the delta states, some of the communities that had Igbo prefixes to their names, had them removed soon after the civil war. For example, places like Rumuola, Rumukurushi, Rumuibekwe etc were called Umuola, Umukurushi, Umuibekwe etc (representing Igbo identification) before the civil war. In fact even though they speak Igbo, they deny vehemently of belonging to the Igbo race. A few interview conducted by the researcher among the Ogba, Ahoada and Opobo indigenes revealed that these Igbo neighbours, who are closer to Igbo than Benin, claimed Benin descent which we have seen earlier on that Alagoa, tilted evidence of their origin and migration more to the Igbo than Benin. This can only be interpreted as one of the negative effects of colonialism and the Nigerian civil war on the region. The same is applicable between the Igbo and their Ibibio neighbours who address them derogatively as *owo uneghe*. This paper gathered that following the creation of Akwa Ibom state in 1987, some portions of Onicha Ngwa lands were ceded to Ikot Umo Essien, the immediate neighbours to Onicha Ngwa. It was reliably gathered that the Police station immediately after Onicha Ngwa was formerly called Nwaigwe police station, but due to the boundary dispute that frequently erupted between them, the federal government ceded that portion of land to Ikot Umo Esien in Akwa Ibom without compensation. (Ujeh, O.2019, Oral Interview). And that makes the Onicha Ngwa people always seek to farm their lands now in Ikot Umo Essien village. This results to wars between both communities and is reminiscent of the partition of Africa in faraway Berlin by scrambling powers of Europe without recourse to ancient boundaries. The effect of boundary disputes among African states is a common theme in African historiography which had impeded development in the affected areas.

### **Conclusion**

Intergroup relations is the hub of any meaningful development and this has eluded the Imo River Basin and her neighbours since the advent of colonialism in Nigeria as a result of inherited colonial economic and political structures that failed to take appropriate consideration of the myriad of nations except the Igbo within the region. The indigenous industries of the region were abandoned and neglected. The Akwette weaving industry, metallurgical works of Abaala, palm oil production which was the bedrock of the region's economy and indeed that of the nation, all died a natural death with the onset of colonialism. Besides, the groups that inhabit this region became alienated as the struggle for national appointments and positions for the individual states of the region superceded their quest for collective will. Matters came to a head with the discovery of oil in the delta areas in the 1950s, which proceeds have failed to improve the living standards of the inhabitants of this region as incessant oil spillage has robbed them of whatever living environment that used to be theirs. Furthermore, statistics of workers in the Multinational oil companies in the delta states reveals more marginalization by the MNCs and Federal government than the inhabitants of this region assume they were mistreated the Eastern regional government and their Igbo neighbours. A critical reappraisal would reveal that the exit of some parts of the region, no thanks to the civil war, has not favoured them either. Or how else can one explain the siphoning of oil from Rivers state to Kaduna? And the dominance of political appointments by the North and the frequent retirement of civil servants of the eastern origin? The people of Imo River Basin can have no better neighbours than themselves. Through its thick and thin, they have managed to remain neighbours and could be better at that. The onset of colonialism and its concomitants may have severed the best of relationships among them, yet statistics of good relationship among them such as their common ancestry, language, intermarriage and identical traditional political systems, outweigh whatever bitter experiences they may have had in the distant past. Besides, in view of the rapprochement between the North and the

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West, the Imo River Basin which is a microcosm of the former Eastern Region has no choice than to coalesce in order to compete favourably in the present Nigerian politics. Whether secession or striking for a better deal, no part of the Imo River Basin can successfully do that without the collaborative efforts of all the members of the region, if for no other reason, the geographical encapsulation in which they have found themselves.

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