

State Creation and its Impacts on Igbo Unity and Identity

Okoji, Ugochukwu Anokwuru

Department of History and International Relations
Abia State University, Uturu
Email: igbopictures@gmail.com

&

Chukwu, Hamuel Oti

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
E-mail: ho.chukwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Without doubt, structural imbalance is one of the major absurdities of Nigerian federalism. This has resulted to the calls for state creation to address this abnormality. Consequently, from 1967, the structure of the federation has been reconstituted five times, with its attendant effects. The paper seeks to appraise the impact of state creation on Igbo unity and identity. The research method employed was the qualitative analytical method which involved content analysis of relevant documentary data on the subject. The approach adopted was also thematic. It argued that *statism* has set in motion disintegrative forces through the creation of indigene-non-indigene, as well as core-Igbo and non-core-Igbo phenomenon, which is antithetical to a sense of common nationhood, and abnegated the Igbo spirit of brotherhood. This has adversely affected Igbo unity and identity.

Key words: State Creation; Igbo; Unity; Identity

Introduction

On December 30, 2015, President Muhamadu Buhari in his maiden media chat, referred to Ibe Kachukwu and Godwin Ifeanyi Emezie, Minister of State for Petroleum and Central Bank Governor respectively as Igbo people in response to question on the marginalization of the Igbo in his government.¹ Why did he not mention Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, the Transport Minister? In a related manner, Chidi Offodili recount how Chibudom Nwuche and Austin Opara, who were Former Deputy Speaker of the House of Representative claimed that they are not Igbo. According to Offodili:

One of the things I enjoy is harassing my colleagues from Rivers State, Chibudom Nwuche and Austin Opara by insisting that they are Igbo...Austin used to be very angry with me over the matter but these days he has relaxed and just waves me off when I tease him. Chibudom has gone as far as telling me that his people of Ekpeye are actually Ijaw. I had a good laugh and asked him a crucial question, "Do Ijaw people consider you as one of them?" And I pointed out to him that his late father, Eze C. C. Nwuche, was a prominent member of Ohanaze Ndigbo.²

The example of Chibudom and his father illustrate the difference in attitude and orientation of the older generation of the Igbo of Rivers and Delta States and the younger post-war generation. There is undoubtedly that State creation exercise in Nigeria between 1967 and 1976 were not unconnected with the search for legal instrument of the then Federal Government "de-Igbonization Project". According to Ayode:

The creation of States in the Eastern Region was a part of the strategy to win the civil war; it was a deliberate act of ethnic differentiation which was not meant to bring about unity because unity was not the design purpose. The South Eastern and the Rivers States were created...to momentarily domesticate the vanquished Igbo.³

The paradox and contradiction of State creation exercise is that it can unite people of seemingly different by making them conscious of some form of similarity; or alienate brothers by blinding them of any common or shared characteristics. The latter is why an attempt to create a Wawa State (otherwise referred to as Enugu State) by Murtala Mohammed Administration in 1976 was abandoned by some Igbo leaders.

There was a strong fear that “abandoned property” might feature in Igboland if the East Central State was split into three units. A few indiscreet statements by some prominent members of the proposed Wawa State, to the effect that upon the creation of their own State, they would seize the property of their Southern brothers (Ijekebe), prompted Igbo leaders to fight against the creation of Wawa State.⁴ Contemporary events, such as the disengagement of over 4000 non-indigenes from the Enugu State public service in 1997 tends to justify the actions of some of the Igbo leaders then.

This is the crux of the matter: The State creation exercise and its impact on Igbo unity and Identity. The paper does not purport to be an exhaustive synopsis of all the impacts of state creation on Igbo unity and identity but rather a brief discussion on certain adverse effects of statism on Igbo concept of brotherhood and identity.

This study is anchored on the Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals derive part of their identity from the social groups to which they belong.⁵ In the context of Igbo unity and identity, this theory suggests that the creation of new states may alter the salience of Igbo ethnic identity by redefining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within the newly delineated political entities. As a result, individuals may identify more strongly with their state or local government area, leading to a potential dilution of pan-Igbo solidarity. This theoretical framework allows for an examination of how state creation influences intergroup relations, collective identities, and perceptions of belonging among Igbo people. It also considers the role of political elites, institutional arrangements, and historical narratives in shaping identity dynamics within the context of state creation.

The Igbo identity formation

The Igbo are the occupants of the present South-East geo-political zones of Nigeria. They also occupy the North eastern part of Delta State and the Southeast of Rivers State. According to M. A. Onwuejeogwu, the Igbo cultural area encompassed “an area enclosed by an imaginary line running outside of the settlements of Agbor, Kwali (West Niger Igbo), Awada, Diobu, Umuabayi (Port Harcourt), Arochukwu, Afikpo, Isiagu (Abakaliki) and Ebu (West Niger area)”.⁶

The history of Igbo identity formation dates back to the twentieth century. Before the colonial period, the Igbo had no consciousness of a unified cultural and political identity. Each community is independent from each other, though there are socio-economic and religious linkages. Cross-cutting institutions, such as oracular religious title societies and home-based occupational specialization linked Igbo communities together through trade, ritual and juridical practices.⁷ the colonial era encouraged the consolidation of this socio-economic matrix into a unitary ethnic identity. A combination of many factors, including the struggle for scarce economic and political opportunities in the colonial regime, the introduction of indirect rule system and the native administration system, led to the formation of a Pan-Igbo identity. However, the subsequent pogroms of 1966 and the Nigeria-Biafra war redefined the Igbo identity and increased its salience. According to Chinue Achebe:

The duration of awareness of consciousness of an identity, has really very little to do with how deep it is. You can suddenly become aware of an identity which you have been suffering from for a long time without knowing. For instance, take the Igbo people. In my area, historically, they did not see themselves as Igbo. They saw themselves as people from this village or that village... And yet, after the experience of the Biafran war, during a period of two years, it became a very powerful consciousness. But it was real all the time....But the

moment came when this identity became very powerful... and a very short period.⁸

It should be stressed that the Igbo identity is at a cross road since the fall of Biafra. Some Igbo-speaking people domiciled in the periphery of Igboland have denied their Igbo identity. The Ikwere people of Rivers State of Nigeria provide an interesting example of a sub-Igbo group who openly rejected their Igbo identity especially since the post- Biafra war. There are also some Agbor people in Delta State who will rather be classified as Edo than Igbo. It must be noted that in pre-independence Nigeria, the Ikwere people did not object to their classification as a sub-Igbo group. Report of the commission appointed to enquire into the fears of the minorities and the means of allaying them (popularly called the Willink Report) stated that:

Port Harcourt is an Igbo town; it is growing rapidly and the indigenous branch of the Igbo (Ikwere) who were the original inhabitants are already out-numbered by Igbo from the hinterland.⁹

Brief history of state creation exercise in Nigeria

The history of State creation in Nigeria dates back to the Richards constitution of 1946 which divided the country into three administrative regions, namely, Eastern Region, Northern Region and Western Region. The Macpherson constitution of 1951 raised the status of the regions from mere administrative units to semi-autonomous political units, each with its own government headed by a chief executive officer designated as leader of government business at first, and as premier later.

It should be stressed that the agitation for the creation of state or region in Nigeria started in 1943, when Nnamdi Azikwe advocated the split of the country into eight protectorates, whose boundaries roughly followed ethnic lines.¹⁰ He was followed in 1947 by Awolowo who suggested a re-division of the country into nine states, created along linguistic lines.¹¹ Awolowo used the Action Group to champion this course. In 1950s, some political parties and associations were formed mainly to fight for the creation of states. Some of these included the united middle belt congress for the creation of a middle belt state; the United National Independence Party (UNIP), for the creation of a Calabar-Ogojo-Rivers (COR) Regions, *etcetera*. Most of these groups were from the minority linguistic groups which feared the prospect of marginalization with the regions to which they then belonged.

These were the background that led the British colonial government to set up in 1957, a four-man minorities' commission, under the chairmanship of Henry Willink. The commission recommended against the creation of more regions on two grounds; the regions would not be viable, and the creation would create new minority problems.¹² Thus, Nigeria remained a country of three regions until after the independence in 1960.

In 1963, the mid-western region was created out of the Western region to assuage the demands of the minorities. As the threat of Biafra war became imminent, the military again thought that state creation was the means to ensure stability. Thus, Yakubu Gowon, in Decree No 14 of 1967 (State creation and Transitional Provisions) created 12-States, namely, North-Western State, North-Eastern State, Kano State, North Central State, Benue-Plateau State and Kwara State. The former western region was split into two States: the Western State and Lagos State. The former mid-western region became the Mid-Western State, while the former eastern region had three new States carved out from it. These were the East Central State, Rivers State and the South-Eastern State. In 1975, the Mohammed/ Obasanjo regime set up the Irikege panel to look at the agitation for state creation. However, the regime created only seven new states to bring the total number of states in the country to 19 in 1976. These were: Anambra, Bauchi, Benue, Imo, Niger, Ogun and Ondo. In 1987, the Ibrahim Babangida's administration created two more States, namely, Akwa Ibom and Katsina. This brings the total number of states to 21. Babangida also in August 1991 created nine additional states to bring the total number of states to 30. These were: Abia, Enugu, Delta, Jigawa, Kebbi, Osun, Kogi, Taraba and Yobe. In October, 1996, Gen

Sani Abacha created additional 6 states, bringing the total number of state to 36. These were: Bayelsa, Ebonyi, Ekiti Gombe, Nasarawa, and Zamfara.

TABLE 1: STATES/REGION CREATED IN POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA, 1963-1996.

Tafawa Belewa, 1963	Yakubu Gowon, 1967	Murtala Mohammed, 1976	Ibrahim Babangida, 1987	Ibrahim Babangida, 1991	Sani Abacha, 1996
Mid-Western Region	East Central	Anambra	Akwa Ibom	Abia	Bayelsa
	Benue-Plateau	Bauchi	Katsina	Enugu	Ebonyi
	Kano State	Benue		Delta	Ekiti
	Kwara State	Borno		Jigawa	Gombe
	Lagos State	Gongola		Kebbi	Nasarawa
	Mid-Western	Imo		Osun	Zamfara
	North-Eastern	Niger		Kogi	
	North-Central	Ogun		Taraba	
	North-Western	Ondo		Yobe	
	Rivers State	Oyo			
	South-Eastern	Plateau			
	Western State	Sokoto			

Igbo Unity and Identity before 1967

1967 was the first time the Igbo nation and people were split in different States. The creation of the 12-state structure by Col. Yakubu Gowon was an act of expediency aimed primarily at frustrating Igbo survival and struggle for self-determination. It dismembered the Igbo as they were split into fragments and put into different non-Igbo states. Thus, there were the Igbo of Port Harcourt, Ahoada, and Ikwuerre/Etche divisions placed in Rivers State, the Igbo of Asaba, Aboh and Ika placed in the Midwest, and other Igbo from Azumini and Opobo put in Cross River State. The rest of the Igbo were isolated and land-locked in East central state. This act was calculated to paralyze the Igbo and incite their neighbours against them.

Before the State creation of 1967 the Igbo unity and identity was not in question. They Igbo act in unity and were the envy of all. Intra-ethnic or personality clashes were easily settled, internally. Scholars, including Arthur Nwankwo¹³ and Joe Irukwu have written in great details the unity and solidarity the Igbo enjoyed before the creation of twelve-States by Gowon. According to Joe Irukwu:

Before the creation of States, the Igbo saw themselves as one unit and behaved accordingly, to the extent that the Igbo State Union was regarded as an effective unifying agency in many respects. In the early days of state creation, such great Igbo leaders as Dr. Akanu Ibiam and Sir Louis Mbanefo, former Chief Justice of Eastern Nigeria, who believed in the sanctity of Igbo as one unit were reported as having resisted the breaking up of Ndigbo into various states because they feared that this may have the effect of weakening Igbo unity. They had to give in to the concept of several Igbo states when they were convinced about the development and other benefits derivable from the creation of states.¹⁴

Impacts of state creation on Igbo unity and identity

The State creation exercise appears to have brought with it some disintegrative tendencies to the spirit of brotherhood among the Igbo. It has provided a “divided self” in the Igboman. First, it created the core and noncore Igbo phenomenon. It has created a sub-Igbo who now denied their Igbo identity especially after the Biafra war. For instance, some of the Ikwere people of Rivers State and some

Anioma people of Delta State. For instance, the Igbo of Port Harcourt, Ahoada, and Ikwuerre/Etche divisions placed in Rivers State, the Igbo of Asaba, Aboh and Ika placed in the Midwest, and other Igbo from Azumini and Opobo put in Cross River State became noncore Igbo. Some of these groups of Igbo started denying their Igbo identity, especially during the unfair Igbo marginalization policies of the federal government following the defeat of Biafra in 1970. These Igbo people went as far as changing their names, and actively participated in the abandon property saga. According to A. O. E. Animalu:

Surely, the corruption of the names of familiar Igbo towns beginning with “Umu” to “Rumu” in Rivers State in order to disguise or obliterate the natural link with Igbo in that state is a rejection of any elements of Igboness and signifies hatred.¹⁵

In fact, there was a strong fear that abandon property might feature in Igboland if the East Central State was split into three units in 1976. A few indiscreet statements by some prominent members of the proposed Wawa State, to the effect that upon the creation of their own state they would seize the property of their southern brethren (ijekebe), prompted Igbo leaders to fight against the creation of Wawa state.¹⁶

More so, through the politics of “non-indigene”, the State creation exercise produced “indigenous Aliens” in Igboland. The issue of non-indigenous was first experimented in Igboland by the military administrator of Enugu State, Col. Sule Ahman in January, 1997. The military administrator claimed to have inherited over-bloated workforce and consequently disengaged over 400 non-indigenous of all categories in the State public service and also ordered the suspension of payment of pension benefits to a total of 1,481 pensioners from neighbouring State.¹⁷ The impact of the policy was not only the social cost to individual workers but the threat to Igbo agenda. The policy turned Igbo man a non-indigene in Igboland. Even Enugu State daughters married to Igbo man from sister Igbo States were considered non-indigenes in their homes. According to the Uchenna Nkwota, a chieftain of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), “the policy was ill-conceived, disgraced and anti-Igbo unity and Igbo concept of brotherhood”.¹⁸ Other Igbo State government had since toed the line of Enugu State. For instance, the Abia State government under the leadership of Theodore A. Orji, sacked non-indigenes from Abia State public service. The Abia State Government had in a circular of August 25, 2011 titled, “Back-loading on transfer of non-indigenes in the Abia State services to their states of origin”, disengaged over 4,000 workers.¹⁹ Most of the victims are Igbo from neighboring Ebonyi and Imo states, especially women married to men from Abia State. The women fell victim to the indigeneity rules because administrative regulations by the Federal Character Commission regard women as belonging to their natal local government, and not that of their husbands. This policy did not go down well with other sister states from the South East zones, with some threatening to retaliate. For instances, the Imo State Government described the policy as “anachronistic, obsolete and reprehensible” and said it might be compelled to retaliate by sacking Abia indigenes in its employ.²⁰

In addition, as a matter of government policy, many States refuse to employ non-indigenes in their State civil servants, and most deny them the right to compete for academic scholarships. State universities generally discriminate against non-indigenes in their admissions policies, students who do manage to secure admission. These discriminatory policies and practices effectively relegate many non-indigenes to the status of second-class citizens, a disadvantage they can only escape by moving to their State of origin.

Conclusion

The work sets out to examine the impacts of state creation on Igbo unity and identity. It also considers Igbo identity formation. It is observed that though the formation of Igbo identity started in the early twentieth century, the pogroms of 1966 and the Nigeria-Biafra war redefined the Igbo identity and increased its salience. In addition, the study found out that Igbo unity and identity before the creation of the 12-state structure by Col. Yakubu Gowon was not in question. The state creation exercise had adverse effects on Igbo unity and identity. The study, therefore, argued that state creation exercise has

set in motion disintegrative forces through the creation of indigene-non-indigene, as well as core-Igbo and non-core-Igbo phenomenon, which is antithetical to a sense of common nationhood, and abnegated the Igbo spirit of brotherhood.

Endnotes

- ¹ Chudi Offodili, *The Politics of Biafra and the Future of Nigeria* (Ibadan: Safari Books Ltd, 2016), 15.
- ² Offodili, *The Politics of Biafra and the future of Nigeria*, 18-19.
- ³ J. A. Ayoade, "Federal character principle and the search for National Integration." In *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria*, edited by Kunle Amuo *et al* (Ibadan: spectrum Books, 1998), 104.
- ⁴ Arthur Nwankwo, *The Igbo leadership and the future of Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing co. ltd, 1985), 24.
- ⁵ H. Tajfel, M. G. Billig, R. P. Bundy and C. Flament, "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behavior." *European Journal of Social Psychology* Vol. 1 (1971); 149-178.
- ⁶ Kate Meagher, "The Informalisation of Belonging: Igbo Informal Enterprise and National Cohesion from Below" *African Development*, vol 34, No1, 2009, 31-46 Accessed 28 October, 2019.
- ⁷ Karen Amaka Okigbo, "Identity formation, Ethnic Conflict and the Nigeria-Biafra war" In: Apollos O. Nwauwa and Chima J. Korieh (ed), *Against All Odds The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria* (Owerri: Goldine and Jocobs Publishing, 2011), 128.
- ⁸ G. N. Uzoigwe, "The Igbo and the Nigerian Experience: A prospectors for future Association" in Apollos O. Nwauwa and Chima J. Korieh (ed), *Against All Odds The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria* (Owerri: Goldine and Jocobs Publishing, 2011), 31.
- ⁹ See Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMO), London, Cmmd, 505, Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the fears of the Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them, Chapter 7, July 1958. See also G. N. Uzoigwe, "The Igbo and the Nigerian Experience..." in Nwauwa and Korieh (ed), *Against All Odds....* (Owerri: Goldine and Jocobs Publishing, 2011), 31.
- ¹⁰ James S. Coleman, *Nigeria Background to Nationalism* (Binin-city: Broburg & Wistrom, 1986), 324.
- ¹¹ Coleman, *Nigeria Background to Nationalism* (Binin-city: Broburg & Wistrom, 1986), 388.
- ¹² Okonkwo C. Eze *et al*, "The politics of state creation and national integration in Nigeria." *Journal of Politics and Law*. Vol. 8, No. 1 (2015).
- ¹³ Arthur Nwankwo, *The Igbo leadership and the future of Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing co. ltd, 1985).
- ¹⁴ J. O. Irukwo, *Nation Building and Ethnic Organisations: The case of Ohanaeze in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 2007), 261.
- ¹⁵ A. O. E. Animalu, P.O. Ngoddy and P. A. Nwachukwu, *The Southeast today: The way forward* (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd., 2003), 68.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Nwankwo, *The Igbo leadership and the future of Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985), 24
- ¹⁷ M. F. O. Eze, *Government statement on indigenization in Enugu State Military Administrator, Col. Sule Ahman: One year in office* (Enugu: Fiac Printers, 1997), 14-15; see also Okonkwo C. Eze *et al*, "The politics of state creation and national integration in Nigeria." *Journal of Politics and Law*. Vol. 8, No. 1 (2015).
- ¹⁸ Interview with Uchenna Nkwota, a chieftain of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Umuahia, February, 22, 2023.
- ¹⁹ "Backloading of non indigenes: The true facts..." <https://abiastate.gov.ng/backloadi...> Accessed 23 January, 2024.
- ²⁰ "Abia, Imo in verbal warfare over sack..." www.vanguardngr.com/2011/10/abia-imo.. Accessed 23 January, 2024