

The Quest for Biafra's Nationhood: Reality or Chimera

Prof. Dan O. Chukwu

Department of History and International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

Brendan O. Aroh

Department of History and International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Abstract

There is no gainsaying the fact that Biafra's agitation for nationhood has been of great concern to the Nigerian state. This has attracted the attention of scholars who have written profusely on the Biafran agitation. Notwithstanding this plethora of works, none has attempted to examine the feasibility of the agitation. This paper undertakes this task by relying on data available from secondary and primary sources in which the analytical and qualitative methods of research were employed. This paper argues that the Biafran vision for nationhood appears largely untenable. This is on account of a blend of subversiveness from some Igbo political elite, the suppression by the Nigerian state as well as indifference from the international community and organisations.

Keywords: Nationhood, Irredentism, Contested Statehood

Introduction

The fall-out of the 1966 military putsch in Nigeria was the re-establishment of a military government led by Major-General Johnson Umunnakwe Aguiyi Ironsi. His regime adopted the Decree 34, which introduced a unitary government. He could not bring the perpetrators of the *coup d'état* to book. These, among others, painted his regime negatively before a certain section of Nigeria's military and political class as one destined to advance Igbo ethnicity in Nigeria.¹ This culminated in a counter-*coup* in July 1967. Major casualties of the war were Major General Aguiyi Ironsi and colonel Adekunle Fajuyi (Governor of Western Nigeria), and scores of top officers of the Nigerian armed forces of Igbo-Igbo-ethnic extraction. Yakubu Gowon emerged as the new Head of state. The angst directed against the Igbo in 1966 reared its ugly head in organised pogrom targeted against the Igbo resident in the northern Nigeria. The gruesome murder of civilians was of a genocidal proportion. This further gave impetus to the feeling that the Igbo ethnic group was no longer wanted in northern Nigeria. The dastardly act directed against the Igbo tended to alienate the Igbo from the mainstream Nigerian politics and society. The disagreement between the Governor of Eastern Nigeria and the Head of State led by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon defiled all attempts at diplomatic resolution. The Gowon-led federal Military Government reneged on the key issue of the Agreement symbolised on the Aburi Accord. In the face of these military and diplomatic maneuvering, Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, on the advice of Eastern Nigeria Consultative Assembly, declared an independent state of Biafra. In other words, the eastern region of Nigeria seceded from Nigeria. The effort to bring the seceding Biafran Republic back to the Nigerian state resulted in a civil war.

The people of the defunct Biafran Republic, remained emotionally attached to the Biafran nationhood and harboured an inherent desire for the attainment of Biafran nationhood. This found vent in a hand-full of organisations (Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra-MASSOB; Biafran Zionist Movement-BZM; Indigenous People of Biafra-IPOB), fervently committed to the Biafran goals. These movements even though noticed by the International community, do not enjoy their endorsements as they have their own interests to sustain. Their experiences during the Nigerian civil war, from the Biafran side, left a bitter pill in their mouths. This paper seeks to examine the extent these movements could attain nationhood for Biafra. After an indepth study and analysis, this paper opines that despite the popularity of the movements and enormous followership it enjoys in its operational area, the attainment of independence for the Biafran may remain chimerical.

The Nigeria-Biafra war, and in particular the resurgence of the demand for an independent state of Biafra, indeed, have been of interest to scholars of diverse academic persuasions. A few examples could suffice with respect to the Nigerian civil war. J.J. Stremlau's work, with the title, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* and John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*,² provide in-depth information on the Nigerian-Biafran war. However, these did not focus on the workableness or practicability of Biafran nationhood. Other works related to the subject matter include Chudi Offordile's work with the title, *The Politics of Biafra and the Future of Nigeria*,³ which analyses the significance of history in addressing present realities and future cohabitation of the multi-ethnic groups in Nigeria. He addresses issues arising from the pseudo-federal arrangement which failed to birth inclusive equitable and proper federal structure which could have put paid to the fissiparous tendencies that characterise Nigeria's political landscape. This book provides useful insights to the rise of separatist movements in Nigeria. Yet, it does not discuss the feasibility of Biafran agitation which is the thrust of this paper.

Another article relevant to this paper is Imaobong Basse's "Biafra agitation: Analysis and Implications for Nigeria".⁴ It discusses the economic and social disruptions in Southeast Nigeria precipitated by the Biafra agitation and their effect on regional and national security. Much as the article specifically addresses issues relating to the resurgence of agitation for Biafra's nationhood, it did not discuss the possible outcome of the Biafran disquiet. R. Meshach and Fanen A, in their article "Politics of Divisiveness and the Resurgence of Biafra Agitation in Nigeria"⁵, attempt to unearth those warped Nigerian political culture that gave birth to the Resurgence of Biafra agitation. This again does not provide insights to the possible outcome of agitation which is the focus of this present paper. Furthermore, Okechukwu Ibeanu, Nwachukwu Orji and Chijioke, K. Iwuamadi in their paper "Biafra Separatism: Causes, Consequences and Remedies"⁶, discusses the causes, consequences and remedial actions to assuage the Biafran agitation.

Eric I. Ibeh, "Agitations of the Indigenous People of Biafra and the Right of Self-Determination"⁷, establishes a nexus between self-determination and the agitations of the Indigenous People of Biafra. It is his considered opinion that self-determination which the IPOB agitation represents is, by any stretch of imagination, an inalienable right.

From the Literature reviewed so far, it does seem that Biafran agitation has attracted the attention of scholars who have delved in different perspectives of the agitation. However, the feasibility of the Biafran agitation has not attracted attention of scholars, thus leaving a gap that the present paper seeks to fill.

The Legality of Biafra's Secession

The legal undertones of independence proclamation by states have been a subject of much debate among legal luminaries.⁸ Most legal pundits support the idea that the act of secession/breaking away from parent nation, on its own, cannot be held as an illegal act because strictly speaking, the UN does not have secession or its recognition as a condition for admission into her membership. Rather "it requires a positive vote from the Security Council and a positive 2/3 vote in the General Assembly, that is to say, recognition from a large number of states is a practical necessity".⁹ The General Assembly Resolution 2625, and later the Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation Among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations marked the limits to the right of self-determination. However, directly, or remotely, such declaration could still moisten the grounds on which possible recognition by member states of UN is possible.¹⁰ African leaders, on their part, were clearly against any remapping of the colonial designated boundaries fearing that could stir regional disturbances.¹¹ Consequently, maintenance of sovereignty and territorial integrity became sacrosanct for AU in her role of ensuring the survival of the African States alliance. To consolidate its position, it was agreed that: acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Biafra's secession would have induced the breakup of states into ethnic components.¹² The above position technically justified the illegality of Biafra's claim to self-determination and gravely inhibits any modern movement towards the realization of Biafra's Nationhood.

Generally, the challenges facing the Igbo are both internally and externally generated. Internally generated challenges are problems brought upon the Igbo by the Igbo themselves; external challenges are conceived here as representing those that originate from outside the Igbo people's domain.

External Challenges from within Nigeria

The pre-war Igbo nation demonstrated a high degree of achievement and attainment. Discountenancing its subordination in comparison with at least two other ethnic nationalities in the country, the Igbo group elevated itself on the ladder of success, politically and socially. The Igbo had entered into the Nigerian enterprise first as traders, shopkeepers, domestic servants and clerks. Before long they had erupted into the consciousness of others as intellectual, military and bureaucratic elites. It is true that the Igbo matched the achievements of the Yoruba within a twenty-year period between 1949 and 1969; this lightning-like upward mobility remains the Igbo's nemesis, as evidenced in the expressions with which others, within the federation, described them. Indeed, multiple scholars have recorded these rather contemptuous and pejorative descriptions, which included adjectives like "individualistic, opportunistic, rebellious, bellicose and contumacious",¹³ among others.

The economic challenges, that confronted the Igbo, for instance, were of herculean proportions. The objective of the Nigeria-Biafra war was to permanently cripple the Igbo ethnic group and thereby make their re-emergence, in human history, impossible. A Gowon-devised scheme meant to weaken and demobilise the Igbo included a policy that returned twenty Nigerian pounds to male adults, irrespective of the sums their bank accounts had held before the commencement of hostilities in 1966.¹⁴ This policy immobilised an Igbo economic recovery. At the same time, the federal government commenced the indigenisation programme, which gave Nigerians the opportunity to buy shares in foreign-owned companies, when the Igbo had no money to buy stocks.¹⁵

At the end of the war in 1970, most people from the present minority groups of the former Eastern Region (now Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Rivers and Bayelsa states) day would rather vote for an Hausa or a Yoruba presidential candidate than for an Igbo contender. People who had lived in harmony for many years, despite cultural and linguistic differences were now seen demonstrating a post war bitterness that resulted in several boundary clashes and violent disputes. Below is the painting made of this situation by Phillip Efiog:

Along the drive from Aba to Ikot Ekpene, for instance, there were once areas where people intermingled, married, and freely learned and spoke each other's languages. Harmony that once existed among these people was eaten up by the war, since which they have practically lived as sworn enemies, fanatical about the cultural and ideological borders separating them.¹⁶

Even more intriguing was the way the unfolding ethnic divide and resentment have, over the years, played out in the present day Rivers State. One of their foremost spokespersons, Elechi Amadi, alleged that the Igbo had tried to drag the Rivers people into Biafra, annex their homeland and destroy their lives during the war.¹⁷ One of the initial self-assertive moves undertaken by the people of the Rivers State sparked the abandoned property controversy, through which the Igbo have endured an unconscionable and underhanded seizure of their pre-war property in PortHarcourt. To further re-assert themselves and "re-claim" their communities, the Rivers people painstakingly pre-fixed the names of some of their towns with an "r" in order to eliminate any notion that these towns had some semblance of the Igbo. Subsequently, Umuomasi became Rumuomasi; Umuobiakani became Rumuobiakani; Umukurusi became Rumukurusi; and Umuigbo became Rumuigbo. The tensions between the Igbo of the South eastern states and the people of Rivers State were certainly exacerbated by the conflict.¹⁸

There has been a very intricate web of ideas generated by people trying to weaken the Igbo in their battle for unity with their Igbo brothers outside the core Igbo states which appeared not to have been noticed by the Igbo people. Mr. Chidiebere Nwobodo, a political analyst, represented the above issue in an article in *The Vanguard Newspaper* where he, after describing the ideologues as "divide-and-rule agents", asked the following questions:

Why are the major ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria always referred to as Hausa/Fulani-giving the impression that they are one indivisible people, instead of Hausa and Fulani? Why do we have South-South as a geo-political zone carved out of old Eastern Region, but there is nothing like North-North in Northern Nigeria? How did the creators of this South-South mantra come about something that questions all the principles of Geography? How come there is Niger-Delta in the South but nothing like North-Sahara in the North? Where is there one Northern Governors forum in the North but coming down Southern Nigeria, we have South-East, South-West and South-South Governors Forums? Why do we always hear about Northern Elders Forum and 19 Northern states as one socio-political bloc and one North but we hardly talk of Southern Elders Forum, 17 Southern states or one South?¹⁹

No matter how strong the Igbo people appear to be, Nwobodo seems to believe that they cannot win any battle from a hostile home front or in isolation from other Igbo. Their inability too, to counter the ideological currents emanating from the opposite divide is a strong weakness. He continued by pointing out that the Yoruba, one of the major tribes in Nigeria, have roots in North-Central states of Kwara and Kogi-which are outside Yoruba-dominated region of South-West. Yet, the Yoruba in Kogi and Kwara are all seen and respected as full-fledged Yoruba-speaking people with their rights and privileges protected in line with Yoruba customs and traditions. There is nothing like Kogi and Kwara Yoruba being inferior to Yoruba in Lagos or Ogun or other South-Western states. Yet, he notes the “divide-and-rule propagandists keep on referring to Igbo in Delta and Rivers as not being “real” Igbo by branding them Delta or Rivers Igbo with the sole purpose of creating division between them and their brothers and sisters in the South east. He notes that

as a result of years of propagating these wicked falsehood and deceits via the media owned and run by divide-and-rule proponents, these baseless conjectures and unproven innuendos have ended up sinking deep into the psyche of majority of Igbo people from these states born after the civil war, who now ignorantly view their brothers as strangers or even enemies. If Yorubas in Kogi and Kwara states are “true” Yorubas like their brothers and sisters in Osun and Ekiti, why on earth would the Igbo in Rivers and Delta states-who are of Igbo origin, bear Igbo names and speak its languages-be made to believe unconsciously using the media that they are “half-caste” Igbo in other not only to divide old Eastern region but to limit the so-called “real” Igbo to five states of South-East-thereby consolidating and deepening the seeds of division and discord in the region. Could the ill-conceived purpose of this segregation and creation of anti-geography mantra called South-South be to reduce the size of Igbo-speaking people in the old Eastern region...?²⁰

An opinion leader in the Niger Delta, Andy Wabali, for instance, believes and has even clarified that the Ikwere of Rivers State are not Igbo, irrespective of language similarities. In a chat with *The Vanguard*, Wabali, maintained his position when he said: “clearly, the Ikwere in Rivers State which I am one of them are a very distinct people. We are very different from the Igbo. Yes, there are similarities in language but that does not make us Igbo”.²¹

Earlier in September 2020, on Njenje Media Tv, the same Wabali seemed to have spoken from both sides of the mouth when he acknowledged his Igboness by saying “I see myself very much as an Igbo man”.²² Even some of the people of Delta North in Delta state, made up of nine local governments and who speak Igbo, answer Igbo names, among other Igbo features, deny that they are Igbo. By this Wabali seems to uphold what Nwobodo pointed out in the indented cut above.

A multitude of other inter-related problems and challenges also arose from this state creation exercises. For instance, the allocation of national resources was based on the state structure as the Igbo disempowerment came through curious boundary adjustments, population manipulation, and the delineation of federal constituencies and senatorial districts. Previous attempts at conducting population census exercises in Nigeria have been beset with challenges. They were conducted in an environment fraught with political interference as there was an incentive to inflate population figures.²³ For instance, the 1973 population census was believed to be manipulated. Coming a few years after the civil war, Nigeria's population grew by 44 per cent in 10 years, making northern Nigeria's population jump to 64 per cent compared to 53.7 per cent in 1963. The bloated population advantage has the consequences for the creation of states, local governments, and the sharing of accrued revenues at the centre.²⁴ As Arthur Nwankwo has argued: "Nigeria has been more than unfair...Igbos have been effectively shut out from every sphere of our national life". He notes that none of the service chiefs at the time he spoke was Igbo and that no major power-generating station was located in Igboland.²⁵

Internal Factors

The foregoing external factors are known to pose serious problems for the Igbo people. But beyond, the Igbo, it does appear, also impede their own progress. One challenge and burden the Igbo have brought upon themselves is their disunity, which is evidenced in their inability to collectively pursue set objectives. Reuben Abati, a television broadcaster, observed that:

despite their single mindedness, Igbos are easily the most disorganised group in this country, Igbo political leadership is diffuse, self-contradictory and usually of little effect. What is broadly referred as the Igbo agenda suffers from a crisis of interpretation.... And my point is simply that the moment the Igbo politics is freed from the shackles of expediency and opportunism, Nigerian politics as played in Southern Nigeria would become more effective as a broad platform for the solution of the Nigerian Dilemma.²⁶

The lack of effective leadership in pursuing the Igbo agenda is clearly a problem. In her admonishment to the Igbo leaders, Sarah Jibril admonished Igbo leaders to "stop using their people to bargain for personal needs. There is a lot of sell-out, a lot of selfish politicking".²⁷

The Igbo have been hoping for a day Nigeria will produce a president of the South-east extraction, but they (the Igbo) are not united. The Igbo nation, according to Uzodinma Nwala, is:

politically weak, very weak indeed vis-à-vis other nationalities, hence, their inability to protect themselves politically. The Igbo fail to appreciate the nature of the Nigerian political terrain in which the major actors are ethnic nationalities. Ndigbo tend to focus exclusively on the structural defects of the federation, ignoring the vital elements of political will-power, planning and strategy.²⁸

The Igbo hardly engage in self-criticism; there are weak leadership institutions; absence of Igbo intelligentsia from politics and their failure to provide much needed collective intellectual leadership in terms of strategic planning, thereby abandoning the field to the commercial and contractual class, among others. According to Chioma Gabriel of *The Vanguard Newspapers*:

The Igbo, whose position have been precarious in the Nigerian political landscape, do not seem to know which way to go. Igbo have been hoping for a day Nigeria will produce a president of south-east extraction but they are not united. On top of it, Igbo play bad politics. They support others blindly and emotionally without negotiating, believing power to be given to them on a platter.²⁹

The Igbo people's level of disorganisation and lack of sense of direction and inability to focus on the essentials showed themselves on the recent Sit-at-home order, in a bid to force government's

hands to release Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. The attitude of the Igbo continues to draw mockeries or ridicules to the entire Igbo nation. Reno Omokiri showed his frustration in his assessment of the current Igbo approach to the detention of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. According to him:

when Abiola was in jail, the Yorubas did not destroy their region to force Abacha to release MKO Abiola. Rather, they used diplomacy to turn Abacha into an international pariah until Abacha was forced to offer Abiola bail (which Abiola ultimately refused). Muhammed Abacha was in prison for three years...Kano elders sought an audience with Obasanjo in 2002 and publicly prostrated to him. The next month, the court freed Muhammed. Asari Dokubo was in prison for treason for two years until Niger Delta elders used Diplomacy to get president Yar'adua to release him in 2007. What militancy could not do, diplomacy did.³⁰

Without accepting that the Igbo's condition is similar to the situations that Reno referred to, there is a grain of truth in not engaging in an outlook that brings retrogression and wanton destruction of lives and property. The victims after all are the Igbo themselves.

There is this understanding that everything must have an economic approach or must be an investment from which profits are expected. David Hundeyin described this as one of the crippling weaknesses of the Igbo. For him, in an economically and culturally progressive group that the Igbo are, their total aversion to investment in things that do not create a direct financial return has further pushed the Igbo away from the frontiers of Nigerian politics. Things like media and public relations, arts and culture, lobby groups and think tanks, among others, help project the aspirations of a people. One cannot invest one naira in these things and directly trace how they return five naira to one, yet, they do have substantial intrinsic returns but not direct or clearly visible. Hear him:

Have you ever wondered how the UK government always seems to be aligned politically with the Northern establishment? It is because of several organisations like the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). These think tanks and lobby groups spend millions of dollars annually on local and foreign political astroturfing on a scale you cannot begin to comprehend. For example, the ACF is funding a Muslim candidate (Mahamudu Bawumia) in Ghana's 2024 election. You already know why. Is there any kind of equivalent Igbo-funded organisation whose job is to further the social, cultural, economic and political goals of the Igbo, locally and internationally?³¹

Aside Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Dr. Alex Ekwueme of the earlier periods, the present crop of Igbo political leaders appears to be weak, lacking what it takes to negotiate profitably for their people. In January of 2018, for instance, a delegation of Igbo APC leaders, made up of Ogbonnaya Onu, at the time Minister of Science and Technology, led a delegation to Muhammadu Buhari and endorsed him for another term of four years in office. That delegation was comprised of the Deputy Governor of Imo State, Eze Madumere, who represented the governor, Rochas Okorochoa; serving members of the National Assembly, former governors, all the ministers from the South-east geo-political zone, members of the National Working Committee and national executive committee of the APC. At the meeting, the delegation told Buhari that he had performed creditably well to deserve a second term. Members of the delegation, therefore, endorsed him without negotiating terms of endorsement. For instance, the visit should have been an opportunity for them to elicit information as to the conditions and terms for supporting the president for his re-election bid in 2019. In other words, it was to have been an opportunity to ask him (Buhari): what would you do for our Igbo people for voting for you?³²

It was not the first time Igbo leaders would play daft. During the time of Goodluck Jonathan, the South-east blindly endorsed him without negotiating what would benefit the Igbo. Just like the delegation that met Buhari, the Igbo endorsed Jonathan before his party even did so. At the end of the day, Jonathan did not construct a single road in Igboland. He only rewarded individuals who backed him. Jonathan postponed development of the South to his anticipated second term and put in all resources to the

rehabilitation of the almajiris and Emirs' palaces from Sokoto to Maiduguri. He built Abuja-Kaduna rail line when Lagos-Ibadan Expressway was impassable, East-West Road was a mere historical concept; he built and completed federal universities in Katsina, Jigawa, Otuoke and other zones and nothing was done for the Igbo. As a matter of fact, he rolled back the Igbo presidency.³³

By the time Jonathan was warming up for another term in office, he made a million promises which he hoped would be fulfilled in his second term. To strategise for this, former governor of Anambra State, Mr. Peter Obi, was believed to have decamped from All Progressives Grand Alliance, (APGA), to the People's Democratic Party, (PDP). The Igbo leaders made up of then Secretary to the Federal Government, Chief Anyim Pius Anyim; Deputy Senate president, Ike Ekweremadu; then Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, Emaka Ihedioha; Senator Hope Uzodimma; then Minister of Labour and Productivity, Emeka Wogu; the then National Publicity Secretary of PDP, Mr. Olisa Metuh; Mr. Ifeanyi Ubah and former Governor Peter Obi, assembled at Dover Hotel at Lekki Phase 1, Lagos, to woo Ndigbo in Lagos for President Jonathan's 2015 presidential bid. At Dover Hotel, they met eminent and prominent Igbo leaders, namely, then President General of Ohaneze Ndigbo, Chief Gary Enwo-Igariwey; President of the Igbo in Lagos, Professor Anya O. Anya; President Aka Ikenga, Chief Goddy Uwazuruike; former Chairman Diamond Bank, Chief Paschal Dozie; former governor of Lagos State, Rear Admiral Ndubuisi Kanu(rtd); former President of Nigeria Stock exchange, Dr. Raymond Obieri; Eze Ndigbo of Ikeja, Eze Uche Dimgba and the President Ohaneze Ndigbo in Lagos, Fabian Onwughalu and many other eminent Igbo in Lagos. They campaigned and garnered support for Jonathan's second term in office. Jonathan lost the election. The South-east lost out, also. The Pharaoh who did not know Joseph came into power and the fate of the South-east deteriorated from playing third, fourth fiddle to playing no fiddle at all.³⁴

The pronounced disunity and infighting among the Igbo would make it difficult for them to make any kind of progress in politics. While major ethnic groups have always schemed to dominate the political space, the Igbo have failed to make that influence count, politically, at the centre. Even as the presidential candidates emerged from other ethnic groups, they are known to have always carefully avoided picking an Igbo as deputy. Obasanjo picked Atiku Abubakar from Adamawa State; Shehu Musa Yar'Adua picked Goodluck Jonathan from Bayelsa State. Jonathan picked a northerner, Namadi Sambo from Kaduna State. The south-east has been nowhere in the political equation of the country since the return of democracy in 1999. The Igbo were avoided like a plague.

All of the above could only be gleaned from the agitation for Biafra's nationhood. When the agitation started years back, the idea was to bring the Igbo question to the forefront and many supported them but along the line, it was clear that the Igbo problems were mixed up with the central idea and the whole idea seems to have become a charade. Rochas Okorocha, a former governor of Imo State, is among the living Igbo political gladiators who have played the game at both local and national levels. At one occasion, Okorocha noted that the Igbo were derailing in their approach to Nigerian politics, hence his advice for a rethink on the part of the Igbo. As he would put it:

Igbo have to change their strategy in order to reclaim their relevance in Nigeria's power equation. Quote me anywhere, Igbo play the worst politics in Nigeria. Today Hausa have realised they can win an election without Igbo. Now they believe with the combined massive populations of Lagos and Kano, they no longer need Igbo to win, hence, the latest alliance between Hausa and Yoruba.³⁵

The migratory tendencies and attitude of the Igbo, advantageous though, they might, it seems, have done much harm in eroding the little confidence their hosts have in them. Economic migration, per say, is not the issue, nor is it necessarily detrimental, but the attitudinal bravado that accompanies it as evidenced in the Igbo people's desperation to buy up all of Lagos, Kano, Abuja, and Kaduna in the most audacious manner. This behaviour supports the point the ACF (Arewa Consultative Forum) at the Oputa Panel to the effect, that the Igbo are "unduly aggressive and ethnocentric".³⁶ This perception may explain curious legislative enactments meant to curtail Igbo entrepreneurship in non-Igbo areas of Nigeria.³⁷

On the other hand, the tendency to settle and have nothing much in his original Igbo town is also a challenge of its own. Okorochoa refers to it as “Feeling of abandonment”. Hear him:

I have always said Igbo have this feeling of abandonment. Check it out, no Hausa man living in the South-east owns a duplex neither can you see a Yoruba man who lives in a room and parlour apartment of his own or an investment worth 20 million naira in Igboland. But should Nigeria break up today, Igbo will lose trillions in property and other investments in Lagos, the North and other parts of the Country.³⁸

The foregoing statement credited to Owelle Rochas Okorochoa, is a sad reminder of what the Igbo suffered in Port Harcourt, Calabar, Lagos, among others, in Nigerian urban cities following the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967, and its aftermath, resulting in the loss of the Igbo property in what was tagged as the “Abandoned Property”.

The founder of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and later the United Progressives Party (UPP), Chief Chekwes Okorie, reacting to the ugly scenario, expressed dismay over the political position of the Igbo in Nigeria. Speaking to *The Sunday Vanguard*, Okorie said among others:

It’s been the concern of the mainstream Igbo leaders. The only time Ndigbo got something out of Nigeria was in the first and second republics because the great Zik and Ekwueme negotiated. Since then, nothing has happened to benefit Igbo in Nigeria. It was for this reason that I founded APGA and practically dragged Dim Emeka Ojukwu to contest on its platform after others refused to contest. We supported the PDP presidential candidates in the time of Yar’Adua and Jonathan without negotiation.³⁹

The Igbo person of yesteryears was morally a good person. The Igbo man of today is struggling to and working very hard to enhance his economic power to meet his basic needs of food, clothing and shelter in post-war Nigeria. Regrettably, in that pursuit, the Igbo have strayed into the vast arena of idolatry, worshipping all sorts of gods, the most prominent of which is the god of money. The Igbo are now prepared to sell themselves, their mother or their political rights and freedom for cash. The worship of money has driven some Igbo into all sorts of crime and evil. Rife are disrespect for elders, armed robbery, rudeness, prostitution, ritual murders, Kidnapping, greed, jealousy and a host of other vices.⁴⁰ Not all Igbo are pro-Biafra, even if they are not bold enough to say so openly, possibly, because they could be attacked on the streets. The anti-Biafra Igbo would rather be part of Nigeria despite their misgivings and reservations. Some want a restructured and not a balkanised country. Despite the disenchantment with Buhari’s presidency, there is yet no clear-cut consensus among the Igbo on the way forward.

There is no consensus on what constitutes Biafra, which is a challenge as well. The Biafra declared by Dim Chukwuemeka Ojukwu in 1967 was the Eastern Region, made up of today’s Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo plus what we now have as Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers States in the South-South region. The original Biafra, therefore, was not just for the Igbo. The concept “Biafra”, by the way, was the name of the Bight of the coast of Calabar, the Cross River capital, in the Gulf of Guinea. The Bight of Biafra is now called the Bight of Bonny, but the political Biafra has survived the name change. The map of Biafra, as drawn by the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) seems to encompass all the South-east and South-South States. There does not seem to be unanimity among the South-South states to be part of the envisaged Biafran State. This was also a thorny issue when Biafra was declared in 1967: the eastern minorities were not fully on board. The South-South minorities in present Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers States seem to have always politically aligned with the core north since 1960. They only broke ranks in 2015, apparently because President Goodluck Jonathan, from Bayelsa State, was on the ballot.⁴¹

The common campaign in the South-South Region of Nigeria, specifically since 1998, has been for resource control, not Biafra or another break-away country. The region is rich in oil, the oxygen that has kept Nigeria breathing for decades. Everybody knows how strategic the region is to the survival of

Nigeria-in the absence of any significant source of public revenue and foreign exchange earnings. The Biafra Republic needs the South-South Region not only for the oil but also to avoid being landlocked: not having a direct access to the sea may be a massive disadvantage for any economy. It would be complicated for IPOB to draw a Biafra map without the South-South, yet there is no strong indication that the minorities want to be on the Biafra train. Many, like Aloy Ejimakor, in an article in Sahara Reporters titled, "It's A Lie: Igboland is not Landlocked", have argued that the River Niger and Oguta Lake, among others, can be dredged and linked with the Atlantic Ocean".⁴²

It may be worthy of note to state that the World Bank economists working on trade logistics issues, held that being landlocked is a major reason why 16 of the world's 31 landlocked developing countries are among the poorest in the world. According to the report, of the 15 lowest-ranking countries in the Human Development Index (HDI), eight have no coastline.⁴³ All these are in Africa and they include the Central African Republic, Burundi, Niger, Chad, South Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso.⁴⁴ First, how close is the Atlantic Ocean to Igboland? So, the most obvious handicap of the Igbo who are known for international trade, would be moving goods to and from ports. International treaties can promise access to the oceans but the responsibility for implementing them lies with the government of the "transit states".⁴⁵

How happy and eager would the minorities in the Niger Delta region be to help build infrastructure that would mainly help their landlocked Igbo neighbours? They may have little incentive for this. Transit states can interrupt commerce, making the economic viability of landlocked Igboland difficult.⁴⁶ For Nigeria with known civil strife between ethnic nationalities, Landlocked Igboland will have to re-route trade at exorbitant cost, reducing their competitiveness. Churchill Okonkwo warns that:

Landlocked Igboland should not be deceived by the success of the few rich landlocked countries like Switzerland that specialises in finance, which does not travel by boat, and its high-end manufacturing is integrated with Europe's single market. Also, Botswana, a middle-income landlocked country, exports diamonds, which are shipped by air. Pointing at such countries offers little hope to a landlocked Igboland without similar natural resources and with people that are heavily involved in the importation of heavy goods in containers.⁴⁷

There is also the burden of relocation. Igbo people are spread all over the country. It is estimated that there are over 11 million Igbo in northern Nigeria alone.⁴⁸ When that is added to the figures in the South-west and South-south, the sum may be gargantuan. Would they remain in Nigeria if Biafra is actualised? It may lead to similar experiences of India/Pakistan and North/South Sudan. It may lead to another pogrom whose experience the Igbo have not been proud to recount. There was a forced exodus to the east when war was about to break out in 1967. If over twenty million Igbo (my estimate) would stay back in a new Nigeria after the actualisation of Biafra, would that not defeat the purpose? Would the Igbo feel at home in a new Nigeria or would they be better off going to live in Biafra?

It may get complicated considering the investments the Igbo have made all over Nigeria. Is it in Lagos, where they co-dominate commerce and are founders or managing directors of big companies, or in Abuja, where they have the largest footprints on real estates? One of the sad highlights of the civil war (of 1967-1970) was the issue of the "Abandoned Property". The Igbo returned to their former abodes, after the war in 1970, to discover that their assets had been expropriated. Although, their savings in Nigerian banks were intact, they were unhappy that the government only offered them a flat rate of twenty Nigerian pounds as a compensation for the bundles of the Biafran pounds they had returned with.⁴⁹

Should the dream of actualising a Biafran republic come through, it would, at best, be a novel political experiment. This is yet another challenge, a big one at that. The Igbo were never under one political system or central authority before colonial rule. A national integration for which Nigeria has been struggling since 1914, may turn out to be one of the biggest challenges for Biafra as well. As with other ethnic groups in Nigeria, there are internal divisions among the Igbo that require deft political management. Otherwise, they would become a distraction to the building of Biafra. In almost all Igbo states, one zone or the other is complaining of marginalisation in the sharing of political offices and projects. It is human nature. For instance, Enugu North senatorial Zone in Enugu State wanted to keep the governorship in 2023 after Rt. Hon. Ifeanyi Lawrence Ugwuanyi would have done eight straight

years. Some others insisted it was the turn of Enugu East Senatorial Zone. The Igbo Nsukka United Forum (INUF) at the start of 2023, issued a statement claiming that Nsukka has 60 per cent of the state population but that part of Enugu North has been marginalized by successive governors. So, Enugu North should keep the governorship, but this time it will be for the Nsukka part.⁵⁰

In Imo State, for instance, the Owerri Senatorial zone argues that it has been marginalised by the Okigwe and Orlu Senatorial zones. In the end, Biafra may have to adopt a form of “federal character” in order to address glaring internal inequalities.⁵¹ It is no gainsaying the fact that the Igbo nation has experienced and kept experiencing marginalization in almost all spheres of Nigeria’s political life. Yet it is a truism that the Igbo also marginalize themselves as deeply as possible and with much venom, melancholy, frustration, pillory and high-level vehemence and acrimony. According to B.O Anazie:

the problems of the Igbo nation are the Igbo people themselves as one must be internally organized and ready in order to face external attacks. A situation whereby the Igbo people have no unity among themselves, no trust, rather hatred, betrayal, sycophancy, hypocrisy, envy, jealousy, nepotism and even favouritism exist among the five states that the Igbo tribe are located.⁵²

Few years ago, it was an Igbo man that masterminded the abduction of Dr. Chris Ngige (the then governor of Anambra State) and the concomitant burning down of public property including the Anambra State Government House at Awka in order to syphon the economy of the state either by hook or crook. According to Godwin Obiekwe:

It was a former Igbo governor that gave a shoot-at-sight order to kill fellow Igbo men by the law enforcement agency originated by the northerner, who saw it as a fantastic avenue to revenge. Why the Igbo are marginalized is because we have been unable to stand together, act together and speak together. They do not believe in a core set of values and principles, which would earn them the respect of the other groups in Nigeria.⁵³

The situation is such that today most of our leaders are nothing but some glorified errand boys. Yes, messengers for the northern Hausa or Fulani Alhaji or Yoruba Political chieftains. Nevertheless, the pro-Biafra Igbo feel convinced that it was high time the Igbo left Nigeria. They are of the opinion that the Igbo have been systematically marginalised since the war ended in 1970. Ironically, they have proffered their reasons. Nigeria used to be a shining example of accelerated reintegration after the civil war. By 1977 and 1978, Ndubuisi Kalu and Ebitu Ukiwe— two Igbo military officers who fought for Biafra — had been appointed governors of Lagos State respectively. In 1979, Dr Alex Ifeanyichukwu Ekwueme had become the Vice-president and in 1979 (too), Chief Edwin Ume-Ezeoke had become the Speaker of Nigeria’s House of Representatives. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the Igbo had aligned with the north in the first and second republics. In fact, Alhaji Bashir Tofa had picked, as his vice-presidential candidate for the 1993 presidential election, Dr. Sylvester Ugoh. Tofa (from Kano) had run on the platform of the National Republican Convention (NRC).⁵⁴

In the past the Yoruba used to tease the Igbo for playing the “second fiddle” to the Hausa/Fulani in Nigerian politics. But Chuba Okadigbo rose to the occasion and replied thus: “Second fiddle is better than no fiddle.”⁵⁵ So, what went wrong between the Igbo and the northern Fulani/Hausa? Perhaps, the emergence of the Niger Delta as a frontline political force may have significantly altered the equation between the south-east and the north. Going by the traditional tripod convention, an Igbo man would probably have emerged a vice-presidential candidate to President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, a Fulani, in 2007 after Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba, had been president for eight years (1999-2007).⁵⁶

Concluding Remarks

This paper has demonstrated that several efforts and movements developed to realise the Biafran dream. A dispassionate assessment of these developments would tend to suggest that the attainment of

nationhood for Biafra, so far is chimerical. This could be explained partly by international politics which does not seem to favour the split up of African countries into several nation-states unlike what obtained in the defunct USSR in 1991, which birthed several Republics in Eastern Europe. The western powers would appear to be driven by the uncertain future of their economic interest in Nigeria should Biafra's nationhood stand. In a similar vein, Nigeria's leaders would ensure that country does not dismember because of the enormous wealth from oil and massive homeland remittances from the Igbo diaspora which it stood to lose. The attitude of other ethnic groups in Nigeria and the internal wranglings and other dynamics among the Igbo themselves are all dampeners to the realisation of Biafra's nationhood. In a nutshell, the future of the attainment of an independent Biafra republic appears bleaker than it is illuminated.

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