

State Creation and Nigerian Unity: The Case of Igboland Since 1967

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Abstract: The structural imbalance of the Nigerian nation at independence was a major hindrance to national integration and nation-building. A situation where some sections of the country were denied access to participation in governance created a sense of marginalization and domination in such quarters. This development gives rise to agitations for restructuring of the polity in the form of state creation as a panacea for building a virile and cohesive nation. In Igboland, emergence of states has created contradictions and sowed the seeds that undermined their long-standing and cherished unity. The creation of five states in Igboland has created five persons in one and therefore a 'divided-self'. The subsequent introduction of state of origin phenomenon in place of state of domicile has abnegated the Igbo spirit of brotherhood as a step towards pan-Nigerian integration. This paper contends that the creation of states has tended to be a self-defeating exercise that has set in motion disintegrative forces of indigene and non-indigene problems in Igboland in particular and in Nigeria in general.

Key words: States • Unity • Indigene • Non-indigene and discrimination

INTRODUCTION

According to Ogoh Alubo, "since the creation of the Nigerian nation by the colonial powers, the process of nation-building has remained a priority of its various post-colonial governments" [1]. In as much as there were agitations for greater participation or share in the nation-wide affairs, there also existed the same plethora of cries at the regional and local levels. The colonial policies that legitimized major ethnic groups' rule over others imbued some sections with separatist instinct which was antithetical to centripetal forces needed for integration and nation-building. Various military governments had consequently brandished efforts at social engineering and societal cohesion in order to build a community of people – a nation. This work is an attempt to analyze this drive by both the military and the civilian governments in Igboland since the end of the Nigerian civil war. The paper postulates that although the Igbo are a homogeneous group, the state creation exercises have brought about a 'divided self'; a development that has compounded integration process at a micro level and therefore nation-building.

Conceptual Analyses

National Integration: A good way to start an interpretative account of a discourse on national integration and nation-building is perhaps to conceptualize the term 'nation'. Nation which has its root in Latin word *nasci* means to be born or a people of common origin or birth. The meaning and scope of the term have widened significantly over time. Leopold S. Senghor may have had national integration in mind when he argued that "a nation groups different ethnic fatherlands together in order to transcend them unlike them, it is not a natural determination and therefore an expression of the milieu, but a conscious will to construct or reconstruct" [2]. He further contends that "the nation is not a given. It can only arise as a result of conscious effort, an existential choice which enables man to escape from natural determinants" [3]. In this paper, national integration can be said to be a conscious will to pull down all known barriers to societal cohesion and institute durable bonds of unity devoid of injustice, inequality and discrimination.

Nation-Building: Just as the concept of national integration has become increasingly dynamic both in scope and application so has nation-building. It has, therefore, different meanings to a mono-ethnic and cultural nation like Somalia; and Nigeria with multiple ethnic nationalities and cultures. To A.M.M. Hoogvelt, nation-building

is the search for collective identity which is co-extensive with the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, a collective identity, furthermore, that can become the basis for consensus, solidarity and the shared acceptance of a patterned normative order [4].

In the opinion of Ehimika A. Ifidon:

nation-building under a condition of cultural pluralism would mean the melting down of cultural boundaries into a neutral common culture where there is no dominant group, and where there is a core culture, the universalization of its practices in the state [5].

This paper conceptualizes nation building as a process that instill a strong sense of national pride and shared expectations among the citizenry as well as equal commitment to constructing a more broad, virile and indivisible nation-state.

Because the focus of this paper is the integration of the Igbo nation as a prelude to macro-integration and nation-building, it has set out to look at the prevailing challenges to the unity of *Ndi Igbo* since 1967. Igboland just like the Nigerian nation has experienced both military and civilian regimes with each leaving a mark on the process of integration. It may therefore be permissible to observe that “the problems... (integration) are exacerbated as much by the military as by civilians” [6].

State Creation and The Challenges of Integration:

The way the Nigerian nation-state was constructed and run excluded some ethnic groups or sections from participation in governance and the economic benefits thereof. This exclusion by the state would appear to have given rise to cries of marginalization and agitation for a place under the sun. The political elite that took over from the erstwhile colonial rulers used the policy of ‘inclusion and exclusion’ to strengthen their position. As it were,

they counted on the bloc votes of their ethnic groups in order to advance their popularity yet some sections of these ethnic groups were denied participation in governance. This created minority question not only in the Nigerian nation-state but even within ethnic nationalities. It has been argued that “a true federation where all categories of citizens and component units were to be adequately protected and provided for could only be founded and sustained within the frame work of crating additional states in the polity” [7].

There is no doubt that the suppressed agitations for separate states were to find expressions in violence in some parts of Nigeria, a development that heralded the military incursion into the political scene on January 15, 1966. As Isidore E. Eyo has noted, “it is known historically and accepted worldwide that the military are trained and payed (sic) to safeguard the fatherland through defensive or offensive action whenever the need arises but not to take on the role of political governance” [8]. The military, in an effort to stem the tidal wave of disintegrative tendencies that trailed the January 1966 coup, embarked on state creation exercise. In other words, the creation of 12 state structure on May 27, 1967 by the General Yakubu Gowon Administration was for all intents and purposes to enhance national integration and nation-building. According to Gowon, the main obstacle to the future stability of this country is the present structural imbalance in the Nigeria federalism. Even decree no 8 or confederation or loose association will never survive if only one section of the country is in a position to hold others to ransom” [9]. As C.A. Onifade *et al* have contended, “immediately before the Nigerian civil war, as a way to strengthen the reversion of the country to federalism, General Gowon resorted to the creation of more states in a bid to keep the county united” [10].

From this exercise, the Igbo, in spite of their size and population, were lumped in defunct East Central State. However, this exercise exacerbated the clamour and agitations for more states in Igboland because that determined the volume of resources made available to the Igbo, their representation at the federal level and location of projects. As S.C. Chukwujekwu puts it “thereafter, agitators for state creation shifted their reason from ‘minority fears’ to that of the need for even development at the grassroots.” [11]. The various military regimes created more states as a way of forgoing “a sense of nationhood and belonging such that all can proudly experience unity in diversity” [12]. The state creation

exercises gave Igboland five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo with a substantial Igbo presence in Delta and River States. These exercises have tended to enhance equal participation in the sharing and allocation of revenues to all the Igbo states and were therefore consistent with “the very concept of nation-building process (which) demands that every unit should count” [13]. Put differently, the exercises stemmed the trend of diminishing opportunities for some sections *vis-à-vis* the steeply expanding opportunities for others as a way of building a cohesive nation-state.

It may be observed that state creation exercises rather than enhance the Igbo concept of brotherhood and homogeneity have introduced in their wake a disintegrative phenomenon euphemistically called ‘statism’ or indigene syndrome. It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that it has been posited that “as laudable as the policy was there was a yawning gap between intent and actual ... benefits of the policy, thus making it counterproductive” [14]. The creation of five states in Igboland has produced a ‘divided self’ in the Igbo man. The exercises have produced unintended small and unintegrated groups of people with separatist tendencies and individuality. Contrarily it was aimed at promoting and enhancing “regional political integration ... (as) as necessary first step to national political integration” [15].

On the other hand, the Igbo spirit of oneness appeared replaced with that of state of origin which in itself was antithetical to national integration drive. What was more, the regional civil service that hitherto provided a bond of unity and integration was now split into five in accordance with the number of states in Igboland. This development was invidious to civil servants in the states other than theirs. With this, integration and nation-building become difficult to achieve because, “the unity of Nigeria is the unity of the individuals in it. The individuals are bound together by political ties of nationality....” [16].

State creation exercise can therefore be said to have added a new dimension to the extant ethnic-religious cleavages that have militated against national integration and nation-building. In Igboland, as in the larger Nigerian society, state of origin rather than state of domicile has become a determining factor in the rights and privileges of the citizens. This suggests that state creation seems to have weakened the integrative bonds among the Igbo and unsettled the age-long spirit of oneness and understanding.

The Politics Of Non-Indigenes And National Integration:

The exploitation and expropriation of coal mineral in Enugu in the early 20th century undoubtedly drew the Igbo of various backgrounds to the area. This was probably because coal occupied a centre-stage in the colonial export economy and the tax inducement from the Colonial Government. S.U. Fwatshak contends that “six years after Government discovered large quantities of coal in Enugu, production started in 1915” [17] What was more, “the establishment of the Eastern (railway) line (Port-Harcourt-Enugu) in 1916... meant to exploit the coal deposits in Enugu” [18] turned the area into an entrepôt and a melting pot for not just peoples of the defunct Eastern Region but the entire country.

Understandably, this provided a great source of national integration for not just among the miners but also traders and other artisans who made Enugu their home. As Dons Eze has aptly argued

In 1929, the administrative headquarters of Southern Provinces of Nigeria were moved from Lagos to Enugu, and this, in addition to the discovery of coal earlier and the establishment of the Eastern Wing of the Nigerian Railway, brought in many immigrants from different parts of the country and even beyond to Enugu, not only to participate in the exploitation of the mineral, but also to take up other jobs in the colonial service [19].

As was to be expected, Enugu became synonymous with the Igbo nation and the home for all the Igbo irrespective of their sub-cultural zones. Since all the Igbo were virtually of the same mega, cultural and historical backgrounds, there was homogeneity among them. It remains to be said that the beauty of this development was not just in pooling the various segments to the whole but also ensuring that each and every one of them played complementarily valued role for the survival of the Igbo nation.

However, the structural engineering epitomized in the state creation would appear to have brought with it some disruptive and disintegrative tendencies to the spirit of oneness among the Igbo. In other words, the indigenization policy of the various Igbo states did not engender harmony and promote the spirit of *Igboness* among the people. Such obnoxious and anti-Igbo policy was first experimented upon by the Military Administration of Col. Sule Ahman of Enugu State in

January 1997. The Military Administrator claimed to have inherited over-bloated workforce and consequently disengaged over 4000 non-indigenes 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 states [20]. Although, the military administration of Col. Sule Ahman is credited with the introduction of the divisive and destructive policy, it is a fact of history that “the military... constitute (d) serious contradictions and distractions in the nation-building process” [21] in Nigeria. The impact of the policy was not only the social cost to individual workers but the threat to Igbo agenda.

It seems clear that the state was more concerned with its financial involvement than the clarion call for a virile and indivisible nation. In one full swoop, the Administrator had regrettably turned Igbo man a non-indigene in Igboland rather than integrating him with his kith and kin. For instance, Enugu State daughters married to Igbo men from sister Igbo states were considered non-indigenes in their homes. This policy can therefore be said to have threatened the long-standing links and relationships between families, in-laws, and Enugu State indigenes and the Igbo of sister states. One more dysfunctional result of the policy was that it abnegated the old dictum of the Igbo which preaches oneness and shared aspirations *onye aghana nwa nneya* just as it raised anti-wawa* sentiment across the Igbo nation. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC's) reaction to this controversial policy appears instructive here. This is more so because the policy was claimed to be a panacea for the irregular payment of workers' salaries in the state.

The NLC argued, among other things, that “the policy was ill-conceived, disgraceful and anti-Igbo unity and Igbo concept of brotherhood” [22]. The policy had tended to promote ‘diversity in unity’ as it was aimed at denying other citizens of Nigeria their right to work and earn a living in a state within the country. In the words of O. Alubo, “this distinction between indigenes and settlers is at the root of some of the recent challenges to nation-building project” [23]. There is little doubt that the policy was but an unconscionable vortex to derange Igbo nationalism as a prelude to the realization of one united Nigerian nation-state. Nothing can be farther from the truth than the insinuation that it was to enhance the living conditions of workers as well as quality service delivery in the State. At best it was a smokescreen as the workers' salaries continued to run in areas just as their conditions remained stagnant.

*(Wawa is a minor linguistic variable of Igbo language spoken mainly by Enugu and a part of Ebonyi states which has become their distinct identity)

All considered, the policy can be said to have short-circuited “a better knowledge of ourselves and of our interconnections ...(which) is bound to make us more cosmopolitan in outlook, less parochial, less insular in our thinking as well as advance our group nationalism into the nationalism of the integrated whole or nation” [24]. There is hardly any doubt that the policy sacrificed the cohesion for which the Igbo were known on the altar of ‘statism’. It stands to reason to argue that the policy exposed the double standardness of the military in politics which claimed that state creation exercises were an aspect of national integration but bent over backwards to employ the same to perpetuate division in a hitherto homogenous group. In other words, with this, the military did not give a good account of itself in engineering social cohesion and advancing national unity.

In a bid to demonstrate the difference between military dictatorship and democracy, Dr Chimaroke Nnamani, on assumption of office as the Governor of Enugu State reinstated those who were hitherto disengaged from the State Public Service but had interest in working and earning a living there from. This reversal was probably informed by the constitutional provision in Chapter II, section 15(2) of the 1999 Nigeria Constitution which states *inter alia* “... national integration shall be actively encouraged, whilst discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties shall be prohibited” [25]. The regime would appear to have looked askance at the policy that regarded some Igbo groups as ‘settlers’ or ‘indigenous aliens’ in Igboland. This was probably because “they might have been born, lived, schooled, worked and paid their taxes in the place for decades, yet they were not recognized as indigenes” [26]. This policy somersault by the Enugu State Government brought back essentially daughters of the State *Umuada Enugu* whose husbands were employees of Federal Establishments in the state [27]. On the strength of this, the policy can be seen to be an act of injustice and contemptible disregard to the drive towards building a virile and all-embracing nation.

Politics of Indigenous Aliens In A Democracy:

The restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria on May 29, 1999 would seem to have rekindled hope and optimism among the Igbo that the new leadership of the Igbo nation would be able to mobilize for national integration.

This was probably because the leaders, having been chosen by the people, would not only respect and uphold the provisions of the Constitution of Nigeria but also carry everybody along, irrespective of the state of origin, in the national integration and nation-building project. The new leadership had enormous responsibility in building consensus as against the military that was not just an aberration but was as well dictatorial and perversion of constitutionalism. The introduction of N1800 minimum wage for workers across the country would appear to have set in motion a factor malintegration of the Igbo nation. The case of Abia State under the leadership of Chief Theodore A. Orji can be cited. The Governor embarked on “cost-saving” strategy of ‘backloading’ 2000 non-indigenes in Abia State payroll.

This was in pursuance of the directive from the Abia State Head of Service, G.C Adiele in a circular dated August 25, 2011 which instructed “all heads of ministries, departments, agencies and the Local Government Service Commission to submit the names of all non-indigenes in their employ...failure of which or any connivance thereto shall attract strict sanctions by government” [28]. Although the State Government argued that other states in the South-East had earlier done a similar thing, there is hardly any doubt that the policy did not engender accommodation, co-operation and a cultivated willingness to uphold the Igbo spirit of brotherhood. It may be reasonable to state that the subsequent implementation of the policy which turned an Igbo man an ‘indigenous alien’ in Igboland is worrisome because of the prevailing democratic rule that should pursue inclusive policies that are people-friendly.

It should also be noted that during a well-attended meeting of Abia Stakeholders convened by Dr Ogbonnaya Onu, the first civilian governor of the State, he was given a blankcheque by an Abiriba businessman, Mazi Oji. He was told to “go to Mbaise in Imo State or even Japan to hire people who will do the work in the state civil service while the rich business people would contribute funds with which the government would pay workers’ salaries” [29]. In a situation where workers hired under this circumstance, had lived in the state for years, paid their taxes there, contributed to its economic development and voted in the government in power, were still regarded as ‘indigenous aliens’ in their old age is anti-Igbo and a threat to national question. Their lot can be likened to the proverbial vulture whose feather is good for administering oral drug but its carcass is never meat. This is a demonstration of “a poor history of citizenship culture this nation has experienced from its beginnings” [30].

As was to be expected; “people are worried that this will worsen the indigene/settle social problem of this nation and may not augur well for the unity of purpose many canvass among Igbo people” [31]. The implication of the policy was not only in the social cost to individual workers and their families who were plunged into untold hardship but because it also stood at variance with the spirit and principle of state creation in Igboland. Thus, the politics of non-indigenes has taken Igbo people further away from each other in spite of the fact that in the pre-1976 days, they were all indigenes of the same state and remained homogenous both in culture and language. The idea of sending pensioners to their ‘home’ states where they never worked would appear to be a double tragedy. This is because it was in the new place that they would be ‘aliens’ after having spent all their productive age outside there and thereby become bats. In cognizance of this, it can be asserted that instead of emphasizing what “unites us in order to surge ahead with new vigour, hopes and aspirations” [32], the state creation exercises have turned out to be a source of malintegration in Igboland in particular and Nigeria in general.

In is an irony that some Igbo people who had made no mean contributions to the vibrancy and cosmopolitan outlook of Igbo urban cities were later to be treated as indigenous aliens in such cities and states. One Igbo adage directs a blacksmith who cannot forge a metal gong to take a look at a kite’s tail *uzu amaghi akpu ogene, lee egbe anya n’udu*. It may be instructive to draw inference from States such as Ekiti and Lagos in the promotion of national integrative and nation-building project. In the spirit of national integration during the 2013 Merit Award of Ekiti State, the Governor, Dr. Kayode Fayemi, included Chief Daniel Okoli, an Igbo business mogul, among the list of awardees. The Governor also “commended Chief Okoli a non-indigene who has been resident in the state for over five decades and who got the award for making Ekiti his home” [33]. In the same vein, Governor Babatunde Fashola of Lagos State also appointed Chief Benjamin Akabueze, an Igbo, the Commissioner for Economic and Budget Planning in his administration [24]. These actions that were laudable, judicious and pragmatic nationalism could be done with greater success among the Igbo.

In practical terms, these were steps to ensure national integration and building a virile and indivisible nation. Regrettably, the various Igbo States, taking after the military with its penchant for anti-people policies, discouraged the unity of the Igbo people through the implementation of a retrogressive and divisive non-indigene policy. Their actions contravened

chapter II, section 15(3a-b) of the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 which states *inter alia*, “for the purpose of promoting national integration, it shall be a duty of the state to (a) provide adequate facilities for and encourage free mobility of people, goods and services throughout the federation; (b) secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the federation” [15]. National integration among the Igbo should transcend lip service and rhetoric as a prelude to that of the Nigerian nation. After all, *esi n’ulo ama mma apu n’ama*.

CONCLUSION

The creation of states in Nigeria, though it somewhat has allayed the fears of domination and/or marginalization of the minority ethnic groups, has remained a source of challenge to national integration and nation-building. There is no doubt that the exercises have created the problem of indigene-non-indigene phenomenon with the attendant stress and strain on the unity of *Ndi Igbo* because of its emphasis on state of origin rather than on state of domicile. The unity of *Ndi Igbo* is a *since qua non* for effective representations and greater participation in the national affairs. The states in Igboland are expected to some sacrifice in order to accommodate other people in the interest of Nigerian unity. The Igbo share a common historical background and identity and should therefore work for the Igbo unity and by extension the Nigerian unity.

This is more so because “our turnaround lies in tolerating one another, understanding and harnessing our diversity to foster unity and establish prosperity” [17]. A system that thrives on segregation and divisive tendencies can only promote primordial and parochial loyalties rather than propel the engine of national loyalty and unity. *Ndi Igbo* do not need such a system because “the achievement of national integration depends upon a just government for all citizens” [21]. In fact, there should be freedom for all citizens to contribute maximally to the nation-building project because a nation is “... cultivated and created through informed, deliberate, and integrative policies, broad-minded statesmanship anchored on an understanding of the ties that bind people together and propped up by a knowledge of one another” [29]. The policy of non-indigenes undoubtedly bred contempt for talent, skill and competence required to galvanize the potentials of the citizens in order to advance and sustain a stable polity in Igboland.

The founding fathers made enormous efforts and sacrifices for Nigerian unity. The Igbo leaders also did not spare themselves in working for the unity of the Igbo

nation. It is sad and unfortunate that current political leaders have generally not followed the shining example of the past ones.

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