

## **Managing Multi-Ethnic Societies and Legitimate Grievances of the Igbo Nation in Nigeria (1999 – 2018)**

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### **Abstract**

Conflict remains an important aspect of ethnicity. This becomes inevitable under conditions of inter-ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources. Competition follows the fear of being confined to the bottom of the inter-ethnic ladder of inequality. Aggressive behaviour may then be used by the deprived group to seek out better sources for fulfilling their socio-economic needs. The Igbo group in Nigeria have been expressing grievances over marginalisation and continuously been agitating to put an end to this. The paper observes that the group has suffered neglect with deliberate policy of their non-inclusion in the power structure. It also notes that no government had properly addressed the issues rather every policy of these governments seemed to be anti-Igbo. Negotiations under proper bargaining process hold the key towards the resolution of these problems. But unfortunately, the governments and special interest groups have weakened the process which reflects on the negative development of the Nigerian society. This paper sets out to critique and evaluate the effective control and management mechanisms put in place by various governments in dealing with these issues. The paper provides possible answers to improving these social questions.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Ethnicity, Ethnic groups, Public policy, Revenue sharing and Tension management.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria like India, Canada, Malaysia, Gambia, Kenya is one of the countries that owe her existence to the imperialistic activities of Britain. The pursuit of British economic ambition and expeditions through conquest crystallised into the rather artificial creation called Nigeria in the famous amalgamation of 1914. This led to the subjugation of people from diverse culture, traditions and ethnic nationalities to construct a Nigerian state.

This is problematic in the sense that plural and segmented societies see themselves as distinct from each other and most often in potentially antagonistic in nature. The result is usually a crisis of state power which leads to ethnic unionisation, to seize the apparatus of the state (Otite, 1996). In such set up, no group wants to be considered as the bottom of the ladder. Hence the group uses every means at their disposal to exploit the state resources in a bid to remain at the top. In a democratic society, where the fight to choose is a guiding

principle, ethnic groups may show undue interest in who gets what, how and when (Anugwom 2000). This often leads to fierce struggles that escalate into ethnic conflicts which have hindered the socio-economic and political development of ethnically plural societies (Otite, 2001; Nnoli, 1980). The Biafra's declaration of Independence from Nigeria was based on grievance factors that range from ethnic rivalry and ethnic dominance, polarisation and regionalism, perceived tribalism, nepotism and regionalism as well as perceived income inequality. The current two prominent organisations that are in the vanguard of the demand of a sovereign state of Biafra are the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Some of the arguments of the Igbos in post war Nigeria were marginalisation, economic strangulation, politico-bureaucratic emasculation, military neutralization and ostracism. Also, of note the post-war Igbo marginalisation was the deficient infrastructural development in their homeland resulting in the mass migration of the Igbos to other cities of the country for economic survival. There were also cases of discrimination against the Igbos in the location of industries and the attendant loss of benefits of linkages that came from such locations, the deliberate neglect of ecological problems in the east, especially the problem of soil erosion that results in loss of agricultural lands and settlements, and couple with the claim that the zone has the least number of states and local governments compared to the other major tribes (Ojibara, 2016).

Other aspects of their arguments bother on excluding them from economic and political powers at the centre, that is, the "tokenist" appointments to strategically insignificant positions in administrations, marginal presence in the administrative and headship of ministerial and extra-ministerial departments and parastatals. Also of note is the distortions of the federal structure to the disadvantage of the Igbos, that implying smaller resources and representation, because number of states and local government areas are the main basis for resource allocation and representative at the federal level. This paper therefore, is motivated by the incessant violence that is endemic in ethnically plural societies particularly in Nigeria in spite of several ethnic management mechanism and policies as coping measures. Odeyemi (2011) posits that the failure of the various tribal groups to negotiate their amalgamation is the root of many tribal wranglings and agitations in the country. Therefore, the extent to which ethnic nationalities are able to effectively manage the interplay of ethnic differences determines to what extent a multi-ethnic nation develops without crisis.

The objective of this study is to critically determine how scarce valuable resources had led to conflict and the formulation of some policies and management mechanism to ameliorate the volatile conflictual relationship that characterises ethnically diverse societies. The paper would look at the behaviour and actions of Igbo group toward government policies in sharing resources from the centre. The grievances expressed by the Igbo nation through the MASSOB, IPOB and other society groups would be discussed in this work.

## **Method**

The data used in this study is mainly secondary source of data. It implies that the work would obtain data from records of national archives, governmental documents, professional journals, textbooks, newspapers, conference papers and other printed materials published and unpublished.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Most theoretical formulations on ethnicity has been linked with the development approach. Scholars representing the modernisation and development approach have taken the view that the role of the ethnic factor would be gradually diminished with the increasing pace of industrialisation and related development. A common assumption has been that ethnicity is destined to wither away as an anachronism to give way to a totally secular social order (Thompson & Ronen, 1986). However, things have hardly proceeded along these lines. Instead, the more rapid the development, the more modernised its infrastructure, the greater ethnic identities seem to deepen and ethnic conflicts seem to intensify. The usual explanation for ethnic conflicts when one goes into history of clashes is to assume that developmental difference breed conflict.

Murphree while discussing ethnicity and development in developing societies argued that ethnic problems tend to persist in spite of modernisation because ethnicity, serves a purpose for the group involved (Murphree 1986). Scholars, while examining it in the context of Nigeria, suggest that modernisation does not necessarily undermine ethnic distinctions, rather, it tends to sharpen and intensify ethnic identities. The creation of additional states in the country in the wake of ethnic tensions has sharpened and intensified ethnic identities (Ugoh, 2008).

Ethnic intensity may indeed increase significantly with worsening economic situation or when the civil status of certain groups is being challenged. It can be deemed as the emergent expression of primordial feelings long suppressed but now reawakened or as a strategic site chosen by disadvantaged persons as a mode of seeking political redress in the society. Nnoli (1998) while explaining ethnic conflicts in Africa argues that ethnic conflicts are often perceived of in negative terms and could be traced to not earlier than colonial period, although it has been aggravated in the post-colonial period. Egwu (1999) points out that what needs to be done is to specify the material and political conjectures under which ethnicity assumes saliency in the process of social interaction. The picture that emerges, given the actual and potential cases of violent confrontations among competing ethnic groups, provide a clear indication that the level of ethnic awareness is on the rise, suggesting very strongly that ethnic fetishism is here to stay.

The reality here is that whatever the level of development of the state, ethnicity and politics need to be viewed as part of an ongoing process which has to be coped with and managed, but cannot be resolved once and for all, except through the total assimilation or elimination

of a particular group. While the former has not been a large-scale success as is evident historically, the latter can only be a genocide and therefore, an affront to human value and dignity. Human kind, therefore, will be more and more engrossed in costly conflicts in future unless we all embark now on an honest and collective endeavour, first, to understand the various roots of conflicts and then adopt a common approach towards solutions (Adefemiwa, 1993)

The question that arises here is what steps therefore could prove effective in containing these diverse forces? Or, how could ethnic tension be managed in multi-ethnic societies? Some scholars like Lijphart have argued that consociational democracies provide a model of conflict management for segmented societies (Lijphart, 1977). This model assures that political stability can be successfully maintained when the political elites representing major ethnic groups enter into various kinds of accommodative arrangements such as constitutional governments, conflict management understanding and conventions, small extra-constitutional coalition committees, etc. to stabilise the system. This is borne out of the fact that in a plural society, it is the behavioural trend of sticking fast by policies by certain elites against the views and cooperative attitude of the leaders of the different ethnic groups of the population that frequently leads to conflict. In this case, it is the conscious and moderating role played by the political elite who, recognising the threat posed by the fragmented political cultures, try to neutralise it by a positive action. This action should aim at accommodating ethnic differences by moderating these excessive demands of the ethnic groups as well as providing some rationally acceptable arrangement for satisfying them through the principle of proportionality, mutual veto and other forms of tension management. This model also provides a useful perspective in understanding the conditions under which this kind of case can succeed as well as point out why it can fail.

Likewise, certain writers have stressed that 'self-determination could also prove fruitful in reducing ethnic division forces. The principle of self-determination is the belief that each nation has a right to constitute an independent state and choose its own government. This principle was derived from a set of old doctrines of which the most important is the proposition that government must rest on the consent of the governed. It is regarded as a state of mind in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is attached to his country or nation-state. In the Marxian view, the right to self-determination means that a nation may arrange its life in the way it wishes (Lenin, 1954). In the course of this contribution to the discussion on the national question, Lenin greatly developed in the Marxist theory based on the fundamental slogan of national self-determination. According to him, denial of the right to self-determination to the opposed nations would lead to distrust among oppressed nations and the rise of chauvinism among the dominant nations (Lenin, 1954).

### **Ethnic Group**

An ethnic group constitutes social formulations which are identified by their communal factors that include mainly language, religious or culture or both. They are marked, according to Unojim (1999), by distinct linguistic and or cultural similarities with common

consciousness and identity which expose them to a consciousness of being one in relative difference to other ethnic groups. Ethnic groups with more effective tactics and strategies normally gain competitive advantage over the other groups. Similarly, Odeyemi (2011) asserts that ethnic groups are political, economic and social action groups formed for a particular purpose that is to obtain something that is more easily attained by belonging to an ethnic group than as an individual or as a member of some other ethnic group. Ethnicity can also be viewed as the characterisation of ethnic relations per time in any multi-ethnic social system and which usually are frictional and opposing. Some scholars argue that Ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different people of diverse backgrounds (Nnoli, 1980; Ugoh, 2008). They further note that relations between ethnic groups within the same political system produce ethnicity. Consequently, most multi-ethnic states in Africa are in what Odeyemi called “a flux of nagging competitions” (Odeyemi, 2011). Hence, in this type of scenario, the need for conscious inculcation of national identity and patriotism cannot be overemphasised.

### **Tension Management**

Tension management denotes those activities which aim to impact positively on relations between and among individuals and groups. As could be seen from the definition by Miller and King, tension management are interventionists efforts towards preventing the escalation, and negative effects, especially of no-going conflicts (cited in Ezirim, 2009). Tension management also refers to measures that limit, mitigate and or contain a tension without necessarily solving it (Swanstrom & Weissman, 2005). With tension being an affiliated facet of the human reality, tension management is seen as all efforts, measures and processes aimed not only at reducing to the barest minimum the prospect of violent expression of disagreements, but also mitigating the effects of such expression with a view of preventing its eruption in the future. This position was corroborated by Best (2006) who defined the concept as the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict. It covers the entire area of handling conflict positively at different stages, involving those efforts made to prevent conflict by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and mitigation.

### **Historical Background to Ethnic Groups Agitations in Nigeria: The Igbo in Perspective**

Nigeria is a plural multi-ethnic and segmented society in all ramifications. Some scholars attributed it close to 400 ethnic-linguistic groups, some of which are bigger than many independent states of contemporary Africa (Suberu, 1996; Otite, 1996). Of these languages, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo are the three dominant ones. This makes Nigeria the most unique and complex country in the world in terms of ethnic composition and country of extraordinary diversities and complexities. Before the British rule, the various ethnic and cultural groups existed as independent political entities with distinct social, political,

economic and religion from the other groups. The pursuit of British economic ambition and expeditions through conquest crystallised in the rather ‘artificial’ creation called Nigeria in 1914, subjugating people from diverse culture, traditions and ethnic nationalities and organising them to construct the Nigerian state.

With the adoption of Richard’s Constitution in 1946, Nigeria was divided into three unequal regions (North, West and East). Political parties were thus, formed and maintained throughout the colonial era on regional and ethnic basis. During this era, Nigerians only spoke with one voice perhaps to fight the common enemy “colonialism”. Thus, ethnic pluralism in Nigeria can be traced to this time of British rule. The British has adopted a federal structure to neutralise the political potential threats and put a system in place which would accommodate the divergent interests of the various ethno-religious configurations that existed today (Suberu, 2007; Ugoh, 2016).

In fact, the colonial style of administration emphasised the cultural distinctions of the disparate kinship groupings as the centre of political organisation, thus providing a limited space for inter-ethnic interaction before independence in 1960. The doctrine of indirect rule which restricted the administrative action with each locality made inter-ethnic political interaction difficult (Ekeh, 1996).

Post-independence Nigeria was turbulent and was marked by a succession of socio-political crises, as parties and ethnic groups violently struggled for political power and resources of the centre; embroiling the institutions of the state in a battle against each other. Due to paucity of tolerance among ethnic groups and their unwillingness to abide by the rule of fair play in governance, political uncertainty overwhelmed the newly independent state of Nigeria. This development has been linked to the Nigerian national question which revolves around how a country made up of diverse ethnic groups should order relations among its constituent parts. The main issue on the Nigeria question revolves around how to structure the Nigerian federation in order to accommodate groups in a way that can guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources (Osaghae, 1995).

To minimise this inter-ethnic rivalry, the government has resorted to multiplying centres of political competition through state and local government creation. Nigeria today is made up of 36 states and 774 local government areas with Abuja as the Federal Capital Territory (FTC). For administrative convenience, and the sharing of political office, the country is sub-divided into six geo-political zones, namely South-West, South-South, South-East, North-West, North-Central and North-East. Nevertheless, the insincerity in the application has not helped matters; rather, the process seems to compound the issue as these new divisions expose the heterogeneity that replicates ethnic politics at that level making the situation uncontrollable (Duruji, 2008). Indeed, the somersaults of the performance in areas such as football, management of national oil wealth, principle of federal character and quota system, politics, revenue sharing, etc. has been the result of bad management of ethnic issues in Nigeria (Udegbe, 2014). Consequently, the country has been plagued by multiple crises.

Apart from the three years of civil war (1967 – 1970), the political competition among the ethnic groups has led to violent cleavages and communal crises. These include the Tiv and Jukun in Taraba State, Zango-Kataf in Kaduna State, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani in Lagos State, etc. Others are in the form of intra-ethnic such as Aguleri – Umuleri crisis, in Anambra State, the Ife-Modakeke in Osun State, Warri-Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo conflicts in Delta State, Yelwa-Shendam clashes in Plateau State, etc (Ugoh, 2016; Duruji, 2008).

These conflicts have raised doubt about the future of the Nigerian state. The structure of the state is defective, and thus, engenders a sharp competition for control of power at the centre into a zero-sum game. As a multi-ethnic society, the competition takes place along ethnic lines. In fact, the dominant groups that captured power ensured its security while the others have constantly resisted this dominance. The Igbos have been pushing for restructuring of the country after 58 years of marginalisation from dominated Hausa-Fulani government. But the elites within the corridor of power continue to frustrate the idea without the consequences of punitive policies being formulated against the move. As Chinua Achebe eloquently puts it, “we cannot trample upon the humanity of others without devaluing our own”. An Igbo proverb expresses this thought more starkly as *onye ji onye n’ani ji onwe ya* which means “He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down” (Achebe, 1984). The proclamation of the Republic of Biafra on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1967 reflected a number of convictions by eastern leaders that secession was a legitimate and necessary action. Before the declaration of Biafra, General Yakubu Gowon on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1967, proclaimed the division of Nigeria into twelve states. The decree carved the Eastern region in three parts (South Eastern, Rivers and East Central). The Igbos which concentrated in the East Central State lost control over most of the petroleum, located in the other two areas. This triggered Lt. Col. Ojukwu’s declaration of Republic of Biafra which resulted into a civil war with the belief that the security of their lives and property could not be maintained if they were subjected to the Nigerian government as it was then constituted (Ake, 1996). They also believed that the orderly processes of negotiation aimed at the re-establishment of a workable pattern of political relationship between the eastern region and the rest of the country had been effectively frustrated by the central government and could not practically be resumed (Ojibara, 2016).

The fact that the presidency has eluded the Igbo for too long added to their disaffection towards the Nigerian state. While some believe that the renewed agitation for Biafra is the manifestation of the long-cemented marginalisation of the region, others argue that the agitation is merely a political weapon of distraction by the opposition to the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC). The lopsided appointments by President Buhari has also fanned anger of the people of the region. Commenting on this, Ohaneze Ndigbo, the pan Igbo social-cultural organisation, says the lopsided appointments have shown the Buhari presidency deep rooted hatred for the Igbo (Ujumadu 2015 cited in Ojibara, 2016).

Thus, the resurgence of Igbo nationalism expressed in the renewed demand for Biafra is connected with the democratic transition that occurred in 1999. Indeed, the marginalisation of the Igbos since the end of the civil war have renewed their demand for Biafra. Put differently, the belief of the Igbo extraction that the Nigerian state is oppressing them is a sufficient condition to embrace any idea that suggests a way out of the situation of marginalisation. This partly accounts for the success of the group in shutting down the south-east when it called for a sit-at-home on August 26, 2004 and September 29, 2005 which was widely adhered to notwithstanding government campaign to the contrary (Ojibara, 2016).

Therefore, a strong argument to demonstrate that the renewed demand for Biafra as manifested in the activities of organisations like MASSOB and IPOB led by Chief Ralph Uwazurike and Chief Nnamdi Kanu respectively is related to the manner affairs were handled immediately after the war. The main factor is the military that fought the Biafran army were eventually the elements that captured and controlled levers of power in Nigeria for a long time. In fact, these military juntas ran the affairs of the country with the bitter memories of their war time experiences which reflected in some of the policies of marginalisation targeted at the Igbo group who were in reality seen as losers. The case of the Igbos was made worst because within the military, representation of the Igbo ethnic group especially at the top echelon was very negligible partly because of the dismissal of the former Nigerian officers that defected to the Biafran army and so they lacked an effective voice in the military councils (Ojibara, 2016).

The issue of marginalisation is what the Igbos had hoped would be mitigated by an inclusive democratic government against an authoritarian military regime. Therefore, when the democratic dispensation surfaced, it became an opportunity for the people to participate in the political transition that ushered in the Fourth Republic in 1999. They thought that the opportunity of the openness and freedom which democracy offers would lead to efforts aimed at redressing the marginalisation of the group (Ajayi and Duruji 2008). Chief Ralph Uwazurike was one of such optimists, who was very active in the Obasanjo presidential campaign of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and so expected recognition by way of juicy appointments for his ethnic group. Unfortunately, the Igbos are not getting a fair deal when compared with other major ethnic groups in Nigeria except the little period of President Goodluck Jonathan who appointed General Ihejirika, an Igbo, as Army Chief of Staff (Nwosu, 2012). Broadly speaking, there were deliberate marginalisation of the Igbo people because the areas are suffering total neglect in the sense that issues like erosion menace are not checked nor industries provided, all these compounded by the deliberate policy of their non-inclusion in the power structure of the country. Moreover, the south-east has the least number of states and local government areas, an index that is used in revenue sharing. This implies that the amount of revenue that accrues to the Igbo states is small compared to what accrues to other areas of the country from the central pool.



Today, the world knows that the Igbos are suffering in Nigeria. Looking at the other facets of the Igbo marginalisation as a result of the war which ended with “no victor and no vanquished”, one can count a number of areas where they have almost lost perpetually. Thus, the physical aspect like shooting by soldiers may have ended in 1970, the reality is that the war has been going on in other fronts namely economic, political, socio-psychological, policies, etc.

### **Efforts made by the Government**

Government’s initial belief was that activities of MASSOB and other groups will fizzle out with time but subsequent developments have forced the government to have a rethink especially after the 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2000 re-declaration of Biafra at Aba and the IPOB’s activities since 2015. Government has since changed its approach at curtailing activities of the group. However, some of the measures adopted by government tend to be brutal hence recording several casualties as a result of the clashes between security operatives and the activists demanding for the revitalisation of Biafra.

In the early 2000 when the agitation about the re-declaration of Biafra heightened publicity, the Obasanjo administration announced a pardon and conversion from dismissals to retirement of all the former Nigerian servicemen in the Armed Forces and Police who defected to Biafra during the war, with a promise to pay all their entitlements. The statement was actually implemented in 2006. With the height of neglect and deprivation these men encountered for several years and the lackadaisical attitude of the government to their predicament, MASSOB and other organisations alike used the opportunity to generate sectarian support for their cause. But of course, government has not taken the “fight” with levity.

### **The Way Forward**

It is evidently clear that the many years of deprivation coupled with domination of the military government in Nigeria are part of the reasons for the emergence of ethnic militia groups in the country. The democratic dispensation that commenced in 1999 which ought to alleviate the agitations of the various pro-Biafra groups has not had much impact in addressing the social challenge. Therefore, government should have a rethink and formulate effective policies that will help to end this long-overdue social crisis. The paper, thus, suggest the following:

- i. Government should embrace dialogue with militia groups like the MASSOB and IPOB, to enable both parties arrive at options that will yield positive result.
- ii. Government should ensure the practice of an inclusive form of governance and see every tribe and culture as important in the growth and development of the country.
- iii. The Nigerian constitution should be reviewed such that the use of referendum would be provided for in order to add some national issues.

- iv. There is need to urgently restructure the country into true federalism that will guarantee social justice, equality, equity and fundamental freedom of the citizens. The practice of true federalism and resource control will not only reduce its attraction but will rescanned the dissipated energies of the various federating units to resource creation.
- v. There is the need to adopt peaceful measures such as conflict management, conflict prevention, provision of adequate and effective use of force and violence to quell promptly to any ethnic conflict.
- vi. There is need to involve the civil society organisations which will intervene in some critical areas of ethnic tension.

## Conclusion

Borrowing from the words of Marina Ottaway (1999) about the Nigerian state that ethnicity is a fact of life that is very strong in the African context and cannot be easily washed away. Though it might not be a social force that can act in isolation, it has been entrenched deeply into the fabric of the Nigerian political system to the extent that any search for a solution must find accommodation for ethnicity. It is therefore imperative that dialogue be reached to calm any form of agitation and an inclusive form of governance be practiced in Nigeria, where every tribe and culture is not left in isolation but allowed to partake in the political system in order to positively develop the Nigeria state in spite of its cultural diversity. It is also important to note that the aftermath of violence does not augur well on the economic, social, cultural and political structures of any country just like the case of South Sudan or the Arab spring that swept through some parts of Northern Africa like Egypt. It is therefore important for government to ensure that it formulates policies that will ensure peaceful coexistence of every tribe in the country.

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