

MARGINALIZATION OF SOME ETHNIC NATIONALITIES IN THE NIGERIAN STATE: THE IGBO EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The Igbo people are found mainly in the South Eastern parts of Nigeria and also in some parts of present Delta and Rivers States. It is an established fact that Igbo people have been marginalized for a very long time in Nigeria but the marginalization actually got to a real climax immediately after the Nigerian civil war in 1970 with the abandoned properties policy which was deliberately formulated by the powers that be to dispossess the Igbo people of their legitimate properties mainly in Port Harcourt and other major cities. This paper chronicles some of these orchestrated cases of marginalization against the Igbo people, including the celebrated case of the 'Abandoned Property' saga that was perpetrated against them immediately the civil war ended in 1970. It suggests that Igbo people should not chicken out of the Nigerian federation as a result of the orchestrated marginalization against them. It also suggests that Igbo people should stand up for their rights in Nigeria in order not to be relegated to the background entirely in the nation's social, political and economic spheres.

Keywords: Marginalization, Ethnic, Nationalities, Nigerian state, Igbo

Introduction

The Igbo ethnic nationality is the third largest ethnic nationality in Nigeria after Hausa and Yoruba ethnic nationalities. There is no other ethnic nationality in the country that has suffered tremendous and orchestrated marginalization like the Igbo people. Indeed Igbo people have suffered great frustrations and reverses in Nigerian history. Beginning with the infamous pogrom of 1966 in the north where Igbo people lost up to one million lives which were followed by their bid for a separate and independent state of Biafra, a move that was necessitated by endless acts of wickedness and man's inhumanity to man meted out to them in the northern parts of the country. This culminated in a costly and gruesome civil war and a defeat, the story has remained unpleasant for Igbo people in Nigeria till date. To worsen the already bad and uncomfortable situation of the Igbo people in the Nigerian federation, many of the religious crises in the north have

always had their kits and kins as targets where they are always killed at the slightest provocation in the name of religious disturbances or crises.

Today, Igbo people have been wholly and truly marginalized in Nigeria which is the only country they can rightfully call their own and this is simply unjustifiable. They have been economically emasculated and strangulated through deliberate unfavourable political, social and economic policies. They have also been marginalized in the politics of the country, in the public services, the armed forces and the police in terms of recruitment and promotion.

This paper chronicles some of these cases of perceived marginalization against the Igbo people in Nigeria. However, the paper also admits and laments as well that Igbo people in some cases have become the architects of their own misfortune through self-marginalization. It further suggests ways through which the Igbo people can rescue themselves from the unfortunate web of marginalization in the Nigerian state.

Definition of Concepts

The major concept in this topic is marginalization. The word “*marginalize*” means “*to treat someone or something as if they are not important*”. Marginalization is the social process of becoming or being made marginal. It involves people being denied degrees of power. According to Mullaly (2007:252), “*marginalization has the potential to result in severe material deprivation, and in its most extreme form can exterminate groups*”. Alluding to this assertion, Young (2000:35) opines that “*along with material deprivation, marginalized individuals are also excluded from services, programmes and policies*”.

Characteristics of the Igbo People

Every nation or race all over the world has distinguishing characteristics or traits for which it is known and recognized. The Igbo people are not left out of this phenomenon. One of the rare distinguishing traits of the Igbo nation is that they are an achievement-driven society. The desire and drive to achieve and excel make them a highly mobile people. There is hardly any known country in the world today where you will not find an Igbo person doing one legitimate business or the other to earn a decent living. According to Onunwa (1994:11) “*inherent in any Igbo irrespective of sub-culture area is the spirit to achieve and excel where others fail. In order to excel, the Igbo continue to look for spheres or areas of influence*”. Supporting this assertion, Diara (2001:10) states that “the

Igbo people migrate to different parts of the country and even beyond in pursuit of greener pastures”.

The Igbos are exploration-oriented people and the reason for their exploration is to improve their lives socially, politically, economically and educationally. Any achievement-driven society is obviously an industrious society and the Igbo are known for their proven hard work and industry which has stood the test of time over the years. Hard work is reflected in all facets of their life. They always strive to achieve excellence even under very difficult and unfavourable conditions. Ohaike and Ikonne (2007:17) say equivocally that:

In the traditional Igbo society, wealth did not come in dreams or overnight, it is acquired by dint of hard work. Even the source of wealth, when it did come to the industrious is scrutinized and should be seen to be transparently honest.

Igbo people’s belief in hard work is demonstrated in Chinua Achebe’s Okonkwo (1958:3-152) Okonkwo, the main character in Achebe’s celebrated and renowned work *“Things Fall Apart”* wholly embraced hard work. He was a warrior, a wealthy farmer, a great wrestler, a winner of two titles and so on. He never wanted to be associated with failure like his father Unoka, who was a debtor, weakling and a fiddler.

Igbo people are known for their deep reverence for age because reverence for elders is a culture that is not toyed or joked with in Igbo land. According to Nwala (1985:151)

There are elaborate practices relating to respect for seniority including rank. Certain forms of greeting and address are appropriate for seniors and elders. In the breaking of Kola and in the sharing of things, seniority is respected among individuals, towns and families. Running errands for elders is a very important duty, and the young ones see it as an obligation on their part.

Other notable characteristics of the Igbo people include among others egalitarianism, justice, rich cultural heritage, cooperation and perseverance. These salient characteristics have kept the Igbo people together over the years leading to a strong bond of unity and togetherness among the people.

Marginalization of Ndigbo: A Critical Analysis

In a paper of this nature, it will be extremely difficult if not really impossible to catalogue fully, totally and effectively the many and varied issues concerning the marginalization of the Igbo people in the Nigerian state which many people of Igbo extraction believe is done purely on purpose to undermine the people of the South East region. It may be right perhaps to argue that even if the Igbo were marginalized before the Nigerian civil war, it was not so pronounced. Real, pronounced and full-scale marginalization of Ndigbo could be said to have begun immediately after the end of the civil war in the country in 1970.

One of the worst and brazen cases of such marginalization of Ndigbo occurred in 1970, immediately the Nigerian civil war ended. Ndigbo were merely, callously, outrageously and ridiculously given twenty pounds irrespective of how much of Biafran pounds they brought to the banks for exchange. This deliberate, wicked, heartless, obnoxious and outrageous policy was allegedly master-minded by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then Finance Minister of the Nigerian federation purposely to cripple Ndigbo economically and weaken their strong will and resolve. It was meant to wipe them out from the surface of the earth in droves. That the Igbo people survived that outrageous economic onslaught against them in their own country was due to their sheer courage, willpower and dexterity as well as ingenuity and dogged determination to survive in a purely hostile environment despite man-made odds placed on their way. It may not amount to an overstatement to state that no other tribe in Nigeria whether major or minor would have survived that kind of highly orchestrated and sophisticated economic onslaught and blockade against them.

Osudibia (2001:117) laments that:

One of the problems and in fact a major obstacle on our way to true nationhood is that of marginalization. No one can truthfully, and without error of denying the obvious proclaim that Nigeria is not without a marginalized people or section. I have noticed, on my own part, that the East has been apparently, imperiously and without qualms by the powers that be, marginalized in Nigeria.

The above lamentation does not translate to crying wolf where there is none but stating the obvious and sad truth and reality.

Another bizarre and glaring case of marginalization against the Igbo people is the infamous and inhuman 'Abandoned Property' saga that was perpetrated against the Igbo people in Rivers state immediately the civil war ended in 1970. The Igbo people had a very rosy relationship with the people of Rivers state prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1967. The Igbo people felt so comfortable with them that they bought land from them and built houses massively. In fact the development of Rivers State in general and Port Harcourt city in particular is attributed to the Igbo people.

As hostilities during the war became intense and unbearable, the Igbo people had to run for their dear lives, leaving behind their houses and other precious properties. When the war ended in 1970, they enthusiastically returned in droves to Rivers state to reclaim their properties which they left behind at the peak of the war. To their greatest chagrin, they were told that their properties were abandoned by their owners and were therefore inherited by their hosts. Though many prominent Igbo lawyers took up the gauntlet and fought the legal battles and at the end recovered some of the houses, some of them were still not recovered. It is indeed astonishing that such a strange thing could happen in Nigeria where we claim to uphold the human rights of our citizens. It is a national disgrace and a serious dent on our purported unity in diversity.

How do we explain the bad nature of federal roads in the South East except to say that they are deliberately left unfixed to remind us perpetually that we lost the civil war and must pay the maximum price of that loss by having dilapidated roads? Indeed it will amount to belaboring the obvious to state that the South East has the worst road network in Nigeria, no thanks to the impassable federal roads that dot the entire landscape of the south East. The Second Niger Bridge has been highly politicized. It is continuously used as bait for political currency in the South East. Till date, there is no substantial Federal investment in the South East.

Even in leadership roles in the country, Ndigbo are utterly and maximally neglected. The minor positions are merely assigned to them in the armed forces and police, the civil service and the three arms of government. It is on record that since the end of the civil war in 1970 till date, no Igbo person has been appointed

the Chief Justice of Nigeria and yet we have eminent and erudite justices of Igbo extraction at the Supreme Court. Even in terms of state creation in Nigeria, the South East is highly marginalized as the geo-political zone has the least number of states of five among the six geo-political zones in Nigeria.

The Issue of Self-Marginalization

Ndigo have truly been marginalized in Nigeria and it is an established fact. It is indeed a well-established and incontrovertible fact which is beyond rhetoric. However there is a new source of worry among Ndigo especially the elites among them and that is the problem of self-marginalization or what can be called internal marginalization. A clear-cut case of this type of marginalization is the Osu caste system in Igbo land whereby some people are ostracized due to religious or ancient beliefs. Such people are vehemently segregated against. Surely that is a crass example of man's inhumanity to man which should be redressed for the entire Igbo nation to have total cohesion and to be able to speak with one voice at all times and in all circumstances.

Another major area of concern is that of their unbridled quest for economic fortunes at the expense of their kits and kins. A vivid example will suffice. Why do our transport magnets hike transport fares during festive periods like Christmas and Easter periods knowing full well that it is their brothers and sisters that are returning to the hinterland to celebrate with their families at home? Again why should our governors not use substantial portions of revenues accruing to the states in the South East both from the federation allocation and the internally generated revenues to develop their states? If the federal government marginalizes the South East, must our own governors also marginalize us through non-performance and massive embezzlement of such funds meant purely for the development of states in the region? Perhaps it may not be out of place to ask Ndigo to demand for good governance from their governors and other politically elected people holding different political offices in the region.

Igbo Marginalization and the Challenge of Credible Leadership

Leadership remains a very portent element in the advancement of social or political group. According to Elaigwu (2011:48) "leadership is very important in the dynamics of governance in any nation - state". Just like political leadership has been a problem and indeed a major challenge in the Nigerian state, it has also

been a major issue among the Igbo people of South East and South South Nigeria.

During the hey days of Igbo state Union, Igbos were very strong in terms of having strong leadership as well as political and social cohesion. However with the event of the 1966 coup leading to the banning of the Igbo State Union and other regional groupings in the country, things nosedived for the Igbos in terms of having a credible and cohesive leadership that could galvanize the entire region into a credible and formidable force.

The seeming confusion has further been compounded and aggravated by a new class of Igbo social and political leaders who have emerged from the traditional institution and the political class who are highly morally challenged thus making selflessness which is a very cogent ingredient of political leadership a very scarce commodity in the Eastern region.

The emergence of Ohaneze Ndigbo, the apex Igbo social and cultural organization which came to light in 1976 despite all the lofty hopes and high expectations from the Igbo people has unfortunately not lived up to its billing. In fact some notable Igbo personalities have in recent past accused the leadership of the organization of working against the interests of the Igbo ethnic nationality on countless occasions. If Ohaneze Ndigbo is to capture the hearts of Ndigbo, and command loyalty among them, then it must be ready to provide the much needed credible leadership for Ndigbo and shun self-centered and egocentric interests that will subvert the interests of the Igbo people at any and every given time. Once they are able to do that, then it can rightly be said to have provided the much needed leadership platform for the Igbo people and the mass of Ndigbo will be ready to listen to them and follow them at all times and in every circumstance.

Overcoming the Challenge of Marginalization

Many Igbo people erroneously believe that the marginalization of the South East geo-political zone will come to an end when eventually the region produces a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction. While clamouring for a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction is not a bad idea entirely, the truth is that it is not the magic wand that will totally and completely eliminate the obnoxious practice of marginalization against the Igbo nation in this country.

One sure way to overcome the challenge of marginalization of the Igbo race is for Ndigbo to stand up and be in the vanguard of the struggle to enthrone an egalitarian state where peace, progress and even development will be the watchword.

Nigeria was structured from the very beginning to favour a certain section of the country to the utter disadvantage of other sections. That is why it is a near impossibility for some sections of the country to produce the president of this country. The current deafening calls and clamour for the restructuring of the country makes a whole lot of sense in this direction. The Nigerian state needs to be restructured in such a way that all sections of the country will have equal stake in the running of the country. Restructuring the country from both the political and economic perspectives could give equal opportunity to all sections of the country to develop according to their potentiality and natural ability and reduce the excess, unbridled and acrimonious politicking in the country which is usually along ethnic and religious lines and therefore detrimental to the overall peaceful coexistence of the country.

One other way out of the present dangerously dangerous logjam in the polity of the Nigerian state is to ensure equitable distribution of the resources of the country. One sure way to help develop the country evenly is to keep a substantial percentage of the internally generated revenue of the various regions in such regions to be used in developing the regions. This confederal arrangement will obviously eliminate the current parasitic nature of some of the states who go cap in hand begging for funds from the nation's seat of power at Abuja every month end in the name of collecting federal allocation. If the confederal system of government is adopted in the country, it will be highly beneficial to Ndigbo as they are naturally a very hardworking people and can produce enough local resources to take care of their region without much stress and without much dependence on the federal government and its monthly allocation.

The Way Out

Fanon (1965:166) succinctly states that *"each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it"*. This should be a food-for-thought for Ndigbo. Ohaneze Ndigbo, the apex socio-cultural umbrella organization of Ndigbo should rise up to the onerous and herculean responsibility of providing credible, effective, efficient and resilient leadership for the entire Igbo nation. They should be in the very forefront of clamouring for

the Igbo nation to come together as one body and fight collectively and vigorously for their common interest. Unless Ndigbo come together to pursue their collective interests, they will continue to be marginalized in Nigeria. Unfortunately, it is a matter of regret that Ohaneze Ndigbo in recent times has been thorn-apart by internal bickering and wrangling. That has left Ndigbo in a state of frustration, despondency and near hopelessness.

Having a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction is realizable through careful and painstaking planning and reaching out effectively to other ethnic nationalities in the country. However Ndigbo must appreciate the obvious fact that political power is not easily acquired or handed over on a platter of gold and since politics is the struggle for power, Ndigbo should strenuously struggle for it in order to get it.

Finally there is every need for Ndigbo to remain resolute and have an unwavering faith in one Nigeria. They should not chicken out as a result of marginalization against them. They should stand up for their rights in Nigeria.

Conclusion

According to Okolo (1994:1), "Nigeria may truly well be the gaint of Africa but equally great are her problems". Whether we like it or not, part of Nigeria's problem is marginalizing Ndigbo, an ethnic nationality that has sacrificed greatly towards the peace and development of the country. The wrongs done to Ndigbo should be redressed. You cannot beat a child and at the same time ask the child not to cry as a popular adage says.

Until the crass marginalization of Ndigbo in Nigeria is redressed, Nigeria as a country cannot develop fully. Also such lamentable expressions like '*ihe agha mere Igbo*' (the unfortunate misfortune the war inflicted on the Igbo people) will continue to be a sad reminder of our estrangement in a country where we ought to have real freedom just like people from other ethnic nationalities in the country. The clamour is not just for the eradication of all forms of marginalization against the Igbo people in Nigeria but for bringing to an end all manner and forms of marginalization against other ethnic nationalities in the country since marginalization is antithetical to national development for an injury to one is an injury to all.

If Nigeria must develop as a strong and indivisible nation and frontally confront her numerous challenges, we must lay strong emphasis on peace, progress, development and egalitarianism. We must put to an end all manner of marginalization against some ethnic nationalities whether directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly. Unless that is done and effectively too, it will be difficult if not impossible to bring to an end the current and deafening calls for self-determination by some of the ethnic nationalities that make up the Nigerian state and this will surely hinder nation-building which the country has been laboring over the years to embark upon.

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