

## **THE IGBO AND THE QUESTION OF DECENTRALIZATION OF AUTHORITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR EASTERN NIGERIA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper interrogates the reasons the Igbo and indeed people of former Eastern region of Nigeria could not evolve a centralized system of government and its implication for the area in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Igbo inhabit the southeastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria and are intricately connected with people far beyond the immediate eastern region to include places in Igala in the middle belt, the Ibibio, Efik, Ika Ibo west of the Niger and the Niger Delta. Although some of the neighbours of the Igbo resist vehemently their Igbo identity, this paper would reveal the futility of such vehemence and call for early identity with the Igbo and an integration for a meaningful coexistence and better participation in the Nigerian politics. This paper covered the former Eastern region which has become the southeast and part of south-south geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The motivation for this work was spurred by the palpable instability, rancor and apparent hatred among the composite groups of the region, uncommon to other regions in the country or in other societies that are decentralized and the desire to see an integrated former Eastern region. The methodology adopted for this work is a critical analysis of recent works on the region and oral interview gathered from knowledgeable people both within and outside the eastern region. This paper is expected to open the mind of the inhabitants of this region on the dire need for the region to coalesce and form a formidable region that could compete favourably with the two other regions in the country.

**.Keywords:** Region, Decentralized, Governance, Integration, Formidable.

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION:**

The Igbo and her neighbours, namely, the Ibibio, Efik, Delta states and parts Igala in the middle belt were the inhabitants of eastern region following the introduction of regionalism by Arthur Richards in 1946. While the North and the Western regions had a different system of social organization – centralized system, the east which included the Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Ika Ibo, Igala and the states of the Niger Delta practiced a decentralized system of social organization variously referred to as segmentary, acephalous, stateless etc all representing a lack of centralized system of organization.

Eastern region presents a peculiar case among other stateless societies because it is sandwiched between two centralized polities which take advantage of her apparent weakness engendered by its decentralized political arrangement. Several reasons have been advanced in the bid to explain the reason this region could not evolve a centralized political organization. Much more than these reasons, we shall explore the possibilities of a regional integration which has eluded this region and made her a pawn in the hands of the better two united regions.

Despite the welding influence of the Nri, the Aro, and the trade networks within the region, the Igbo and her neighbours could not evolve a centralized system of government, not even the political and economic acumen of King Jaja could bring this about. Before the political restructuring of the country in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the British colonial administrators the people that made up these blocs were nationalities. The Oyo Empire which embraced the Yoruba speaking tribes had coalesced into a distinct people with a centralized government with the Alaafin at the head. In the same vein, the North at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been united under a central administration of the Sokoto Caliphate.

The British colonialists did not find it very difficult dealing with the West and North as they already had an administrative structure that matched their idea. It was only in the East that British officers could find no structure to begin with since each of the nations in the east constituted a strict equivalent republic even though it did not make her inferior in any way to the other centralized regions. And this agrees with the opinion of Paddington (1951, p.51), thus, “no human community is any lower, earlier, or more ancient than any other.

All represent highly specialized human adaptations, the product of millennia of traditionalized cultural life”. This notion views satisfactorily, the form of political arrangement of eastern Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century since it satisfied the needs of their day. Does this therefore indicate that no outstanding differences lay in other forms of socio-political organizations that could have served the region better had it been adopted?

It is also not controvertible that though statelessness does not connote lack of order or absence of authority; as there existed institutionalized methods, which insured an ordered society; such arrangements seemed

informal to the outsider. It is also readily observed and acknowledged that centrality of government corroborates with modern system of governance and carries along with it, in the words of Isichei (1976, p.20), “structures that promote development which is lacking in the segmentary systems”. State formation in pre-colonial Nigeria as in other parts of the world was spurred by most, if not all of the under discussed factors:

## **2.0 FACTORS THAT ENCOURAGED STATE FORMATION IN PRECOLONIAL SOCIETIES**

The innovation of agriculture released a great number of people from the job of food gathering to other occupations such as arts, craft, trade and statecraft. Eastern part of Nigeria practiced subsistence agriculture, yet it could not lead the region into an organized state formation as it did in other places. Another factor that encouraged state formation in pre colonial Nigeria was trade. As Fage (1958, p.15) rightly said, “A glance at a good historical atlas shows how closely, at any given period, the areas covered by the great states tally with the junctions, termini and tentacles of major trade routes”. From trade, people accumulated wealth and became prominent which gave them power to exercise authority over others.

Perhaps warfare may have contributed immensely to state formation as the need for prolonged period of defense stimulated the growth of little kingdoms among certain people living at the borders of large predatory states. In situations like these, people willingly gave greater powers to their community heads. Also, destructive internal divisions may have spurred state formations as in the case of Adung in Cross River state where internal problems led to formation of pockets of states, largely because, they fell back on their oracle for greater cohesion.

One of the easiest ways that led people to become states was by conquest. Rulers conquered neighbouring peoples to extend their control over trade routes, and entrepôts; to get tributes and taxes etc. Such incomes could be used to maintain a corps of sizeable administrators. Yet others could voluntarily borrow their neighbour's system of social organization. Even though social anthropologists have portrayed stateless societies as happy and contented, yet folklores of such societies show admiration and fascination, security, peace and freedom with life in the great states. Examples of voluntary borrowing of kingship were Benin tradition of Ife dynasty, western Igbo tradition of Benin dynasty etc. The western Niger Delta also has the tradition of kingship borrowing from Benin. There was also the rise of great men who rose to the occasion and imposed their supremacy over their group. Such examples abound in Yoruba land where we have Oranmiyan, Sango, etc.

We may not also deny the influence of Arabic merchants who came through Trans Saharan trade routes and introduced the religion of Islam, whose scholars helped in building the great states of western Sudan. Nevertheless, Horton in Ajayi and Crowder ed. (1971) was quick in reminding readers on the weight of indigenous factors on state formation over the external factor. In Yoruba land, state formation was inspired by the belief in a common ancestor – Odudwa who had seven sons that established the seven tribes of Yoruba land.

The institution of Kingship also developed as the group became a distinct people facilitated mostly by the rise of able leaders. In Hausa, sons of Bayajidda and Bawo were engulfed in internecine wars until Usman Dan fodio and other jihadists came and imposed Islam on them, thus united the warring states into one single state, the Sokoto Caliphate. The question this segment of the paper interrogates therefore is whether none of the factors that aided state

formation in other parts of West Africa were all lacking in Southern Nigeria or whether the region was inherently stateless. Why is it that no great man, or other factors that encouraged state formation in other parts of Nigeria and beyond, failed to bring about a centralized system of government among the Igbo and their neighbours?

### **REASONS THE IGBO AND HER NEIGHBOURS COULD NOT EVOLVE A CENTRALIZED SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT**

Robin Horton, R. (1971) has blamed the inability of some groups of Nigerians particularly the Tiv and the Igbo from evolving a centralized system of organization on their settlement patterns which he has labeled segmentary lineage systems. This settlement pattern characterized the settlement pattern of the Igbo communities and their adjoining neighbours. This system, Horton states has a strong correlation between genealogical, social and spatial relationships which is maintained by steadily expanding population by birth which provides the massive genealogical scheme.

There is a little correspondence here with what obtained in the Delta states in the sense that stranger elements joined the society as family members of 'Houses'. Segmentary lineage system was knitted by possession of same lineal land wherever they expanded while remaining in the same position relative to other segments. The settlement pattern of this system of social organization, according to Horton, must be dispersed, and scattered homesteads, rather than compact villages which were usually built as defense against external aggression. In the former, the organizational demands was that of small scale agricultural settlements where settlers sit in the middle of their farms that had no need of external defense; whereas in the compact arrangement, farm plots were located away from the compact aggregates.

An important characteristic of this settlement pattern is the relativity of political grouping in which no particular level of political cleavage is of outstanding significance compared to other group levels. Yet another trait of this segmentary unit is predominance of leadership over authority. Authority, though not totally absent, usually resides in the lower units whereas at the larger unit, leadership as represented by elders and titled men is the dominant social organization method. So under such a settlement pattern as described above, it was difficult to impose authority over other segmentary groups within the same lineal system.

This settlement pattern, dispersed in nature, coalesced in the event of external pressure against a common foe, but disbanded immediately the pressure subsides while the effective level of political integration will return to the pre-pressure segmentary units. Horton (1976) added that the implication of this was that the individual had no fixed point which he regards as the focus of his political allegiance and of his legal obligation. Therefore, the level of external pressure the people experienced was not strong enough to bring them together and impose authority over them. Concurring this point, Nwaguru in an oral interview, confirmed that there were no conclusive wars between the states that made up the region such as could have warranted imposition of authority. Such external threats, like the jihads, in the case of Hausa land and western parts of Nigeria led to a strong central state organization. It can also be deduced that the various segmentary units posed such a formidable group that was invincible to any attackers.

Horton (1976) mentioned another pertinent issue that demands attention. He stated that men who represent groups or lead them in time of external aggression, find themselves in a peculiar position when confrontation or conflict ends. This is because as soon as a large segment drops out of conflict, it tends to fall apart into its

component units and these in turn tend to fall apart into their component units until a low level of grouping is reached; and that in these circumstances, the leader no longer has a group to take charge of. If he tries to exert influence over the people he led in the conflict situation, he is likely to be accused of interfering in other people's affairs.

For as soon as the segment he led has ceased effective existence, he is seen as belonging merely to one of its several component units. And the principle of strict equivalence between coordinate units and their personnel excludes him from any right to concern himself with the affairs of units other than his own. Strict equivalence is that feeling among a people that precludes subjection of self to another. Subjection is not possible where equivalence subsists since each individual sees himself as the equivalence or rival of the next person. Consequently no one sees any point of superiority in another or anything that makes less in oneself to accord honour superseding what one deserves. This trait runs through the Igbo communities and has made some critiques of the people of eastern Nigeria to suggest that the only form of government capable of bringing cohesion among them is a form of dictatorship with a strong personality, such as obtained in the Southeast Asian countries.

Remoteness from the great long-distance trade routes is another reason that has been advanced for the existence of decentralized states in West Africa. Horton added that this fact remains the reason for their continued existence in that state. A critical examination of this fact has a correlation to the reason the Igbo could not evolve into a centralized state. A critical look at the Trans Saharan trade routes excluded the Igbo from direct impact of the trade since the trade centers were located in the northern fringes of the desert. And though they participated, it was through the instrumentalities of the northern middlemen. The reason trade was a factor in

state formation has been emphasized elsewhere. The traders with external organizational acumen assisted their host communities form organized structures that led to state organization. This could not take place in southern Nigeria which was far from the Trans Saharan trade route junctions.

Cookey (1974) noted another reason that precluded the evolution of a centralized political system among the Igbo as the unwillingness of the individual to subordinate his freedom over a long period and accept permanently the leadership of a higher authority. The Igbo man hardly accepts a subservient position and would prefer to die than subject himself to an authority. Adelu, E. in an oral interview has called this, extreme egalitarianism and says it accounts for one of the reasons the struggle for the state of Biafra was lost and remains a mirage. He further attributed this as the reason the Houses of the Delta states were always fighting each other and none was able to establish its supremacy over the other. The competition was fiercest during the era of legitimate trade when the houses competed for the comeys during the slave trade and later the legitimate trade.

The Ahiara declaration which proposed a socialist system during the Nigeria – Biafra war was detested by the Igbo and her neighbours who could not subject their sweat to a communal ownership. The above characteristics of the Igbo and her neighbours have been pointed as the reason Biafra lost the cause of the civil war. Analysts of Ojukwu's Ahiara declaration have attributed the loss of the Biafran struggle to strict equivalence. Ohaeto, E (1997) and Alumona, (2011, p.6) have argued convincingly that Ojukwu's visionary document which was aimed at using it as utopia to fire the imaginations of Biafrans and sustain them unto ultimate victory failed to achieve this objective and that reason was because it contained a "proto revolutionary and *socialist* pretensions".

Alexis, H (1991) and Alumona contended that the declaration demoralized a critical segment of the population, particularly the elite, by inducing a despondent psychological state of mind in them. In a similar vein, Adibe (2012) reports that the elites of south east and South-south geopolitical zone of the country, in commemoration of the late leader of Biafra blamed the loss of Biafran struggle on the Ahiara declaration.

Certain principles in the declaration have been found to run contrary to the particular nature of the people of Eastern region. A few of such principles include communal ownership of property as part of the document read: "...in the new Biafra, all property belongs to the community..." (Alumona, 2012, p.6) Even though the Biafran leader reiterated that the principle would not abolish personal ownership of property, but his inclusion that the state would now be acting on behalf of the community in disposition of property to the advantage of all, meant, in Alumona's judgment, to the average wealthy Igbo man and her neighbours, the loss of grip of his property that stratified that society into the rich and the poor.

The critiques hold the opinion that the average Igbo man and her neighbour do not believe in the equality of all men which the Ahiara declaration planned to establish. Another section of the declaration read thus, "Over acquisitiveness or inordinate desire to amass wealth is a factor liable to threaten social stability, especially in an underdeveloped society in which there is not enough material goods to go round". (Alumona, 2012, p.6). Moreover, the declaration stated that there is always a danger when a small group of powerful property-owners use their influence to deflect the state from performing its duties for the citizens as a whole ...." (Alumona, 2012, p.7).

It also planted in the hearts of Biafrans the dangers in some citizens accumulating large

private fortunes. "... property grabbing if unchecked by the state, will set the pattern of behaviour for the whole society which begins to attach undue value to money and property".(Alumona, 2012, p.9) These statements which were to form the philosophy of the new nation of Biafra did not augur well with the elite of the region, who, according to the analysts of the declaration, decided to withdraw their support because they thought that the new republic would not favour them. It is therefore discernible that the Igbo people lack altruistic tendencies which symbolize centralized societies.

There was no sense of pan identity among the people. For the Igbo people, external reality was sharply divided between them and us. But as Ishichei(1973) remarked, 'the sense of us grew weaker as the unit grew larger'. (p.19) For instance, the people of Owerri felt superior as warriors to their Isuneighbours who were traders. Also, between the Ngwa, Asa and Ohuhu clans of Igbo, there existed a deep seated animosity and superiority feelings that could not allow the groups to coexist. A sense of pan Igbo feeling was only felt perhaps when they were outside the Igbo land or faced with a collective calamity. This corroborates Prof. Omeonu's view that you can only get an Igbo man and defeat him when he is not prepared, but not when he is fully aware of the impending calamity. The experience of oneness, according to Isichei was an experience imposed on them by the exigencies of slave trade and colonial imposition. And once the external threat disappeared, everyone went back to his nuclear unit. Concurring this view, Baikie, W.B (1854, p.353) remarked that "in Igbo each person hails ... from a particular district where he was born, but when away from home all are easterners, [including those who do not consent to be one at home.]".

Even after independence most of the people of this region had no hope of a cohesion that could

produce the kind of political solidarity existing in the north and western parts of Nigeria because of absence of a strong external imposition such as in the case of the Usman Dan Fodio in Hausa land and the Alaafin of Oyo; absence of ambitious leaders who were able to command and sustain the respect of their subjects for long. It is also true that the settlement pattern of the Igbo and her neighbours is inherently decentralized and acephalous, and does not encourage centralized arrangement. Added to these is the extreme egalitarian spirit among the people which does not permit the recognition of any person superior to each other.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF STATELESSNESS IN THE EASTERN REGION**

Without strong political cohesion, the economy of any region would not be stable. Although it could be rightly argued that the precolonial political organizations of the region was short of centralized when the economy was vibrant, yet the continued fragmentation of the area through successive multiplication of autonomous communities has impinged on its economic development. The implication of the failed attempt at a centralized political economy within the region had severe negative consequences on the area. One of such negative consequences is bitter rivalry, disunity and lack of cohesion within the region. The absence of unity in the area is manifested in hatred among the people. Ever before the civil war, signs of discontent and cry of marginalization from the people of the Niger Delta had become a recurring theme in the region. This is however traceable to the institutionalization of regionalism in which only three major tribes of Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa were recognized as the dominant tribes in the country by the colonial masters.

For the eastern region, the Igbo was recognized by the colonial administration as the dominant tribe in the east even though recent researches have faulted this arrangement, discovering other

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tribes daubed minority that outnumber the so called majority tribes. Following from this regionalization, every other political appointment was distributed in the order of majority tribes. However, it is pertinent to mention that the cry of marginalization was not peculiar with the Southeastern region. In the West, theirs led to the creation of the Midwestern state in 1963.

In the Northern region, Middle belt and North east sought desperately for the creation of independent states but were denied because the northern oligarchy felt their exit would reduce their numerical advantage. In his narrative of the Nigerian-Biafran war, Ademoyega (1981) admitted that Ojukwu was not the most senior military officer to have been the southeastern state administrator but his appointment was a maintenance of the status quo ante. Of course, there existed efforts in the southeastern region for state creation before the civil war and this was a portentous sign for the region.

Following the creation of the Rivers state and the end of the civil war which ended in the favour of the federal government, one would have expected that the enmity created by the feeling of marginalization would have ended, unfortunately, it even exacerbated and the 'abandoned property' saga in which the properties of the Igbo in many parts of Rivers state were confiscated, only showed how estranged the region had become among its components.

Though statelessness does not connote absence of authority, yet it seemed to have equated lack of unity and distrust in the eastern region. This situation became worrisome as the eastern region became the producer of the only source of foreign exchange earner for the country since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards in the production of crude oil. It therefore seemed that the disunity and mistrust within the region was a

mastermind which facilitated an advantage to the ruling oligarchy who feasted on the misfortunes of the eastern region.

In his critique of the geographical identification of Nigeria's zones, Imotun (2020) declared that Nigeria's geopolitical nomenclature defies the rule of geography. He noted that the four geographical cardinal points are north, south, east and west and that the eight cardinal points can only be north east, north west, north central and south east. He therefore wondered how our politicians manufactured south-south even when there was no corresponding north-north.

This runs contrary to intelligible geographical nomenclature in his imagination. (<https://www.omicsonline.org>). In a similar development, Clark (2021) had decried the inequality meted on the southeast by the government. "South-east geopolitical zone has five states, while other zones, the south-south, the south-west, the north-central and the north east have six states each. In fact, the north west has seven states, what injustice against a people?" he queried. (<https://www.thecable.ng/edwinclark->). And the excise of Rivers, and Akwa Ibom from the south east is just a means of balkanizing and fragmenting the region. Clark further highlighted the inequality and injustice in federal appointment to strategic positions during Muhammedu Buhari's administration. Out of seventeen security arms in the country, he noted that fourteen are headed by northerners. Such injustices thrive because the southeast has no one voice against a common enemy and composites of this region have rarely recognized like the Ibibio has noted that the Igbo brothers are closer than northern Fulani and that enslavement by the Igbo can easily be redeemed than enslavement by the northern Fulani.

Resources from crude oil of the Southeast and parts of South-south which comprised the states of the Niger Delta sponsors the annual budget of

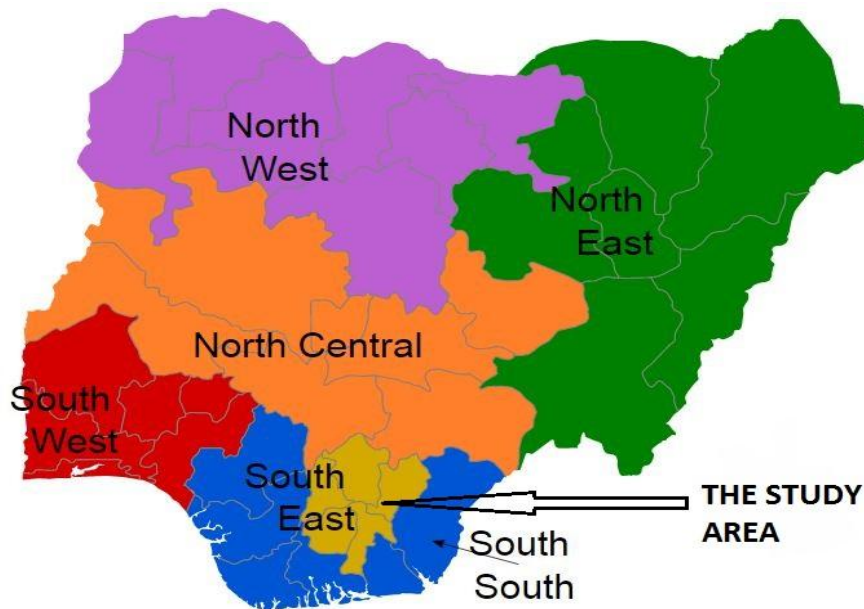
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the nation, yet the region has no voice in the decision making of the country and reason is because nations from the time past have always annexed resourceful weak states in order to utilize their wealth. It was the case in ancient western Sudanese empire of Ghana, Mali and Songhai when the gold producing region, Wangarawa was the attraction of the kings of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Each succeeding empire tried to cease this region at the collapse of the previous empire and the reason was the economic importance of the place.

In the view of this correlation, the Igbo and her adjoining territories seem like vassals of the Nigerian nation which is being milked for the sustenance of the nation. The unity of the Igbo and her neighbours can solidify the region and help throw off the yoke of Fulani led government which has sapped the region of its material and human resources.

## CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the stateless nature of eastern Nigeria, all the groups inhabiting this region have a common ancestry which is evident in migrational routes and language similarities. Time will not permit an in depth analysis of migrations of people of eastern region from a common source, but linguistic evidence abound that the inhabitants of the region belong to the same language family. Besides, the region belong to the same economic and cultural zone as was evidenced during the period of illegitimate trade and sylvan trade that replaced it.



**Figure 1: Map of Nigeria Showing The Current Six Geopolitical Zones**

**Source: Premium Times Nigeria [www.premiumtimesng.com](http://www.premiumtimesng.com)**



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The map in Fig 1 showing the current geopoliticization of the country reveals more about the proximity of the region to its components. It needs not much argument for the Niger Delta states, the Ibibio, Efik, Ika Ibo to know the importance of cohesion within the region at a time like this – a time when their resources sponsor federal projects and the region is left in abject environmental degradation. It is not a time when the other entities within the east disclaim the Igbo, their closest neighbour in preference to the far distance neighbours which portends uneasy alliance.

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