Identity Politics: Issues and Interests in South Eastern States of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
This study is a critical examination of the activities of the indigenous people of Biafra with a view to finding out what may be responsible for the social disorder in South Eastern region of Nigerian. This is one of the regions that may be referred to as the Japan of this country given its technological interest and achievements in terms of wealth and job creations. However, in-spite of this enormous achievement the region surfers' institutional discrimination in a country the inhabitants would love to call their own. To correct this, the region now adopts through the platform of identity politics to seek interaction with the federal government in-order to ensure the recognition and acceptance of 2014 national conference decision which accorded the Southeastern Nigeria a befitting placement in the country. By identity politics, we mean "all forms of sectional interests aimed at achieving recognition and liberation of individuals and designate groups whose members are regarded as "insiders" to the exclusion of all others considered as "outsiders". Contextually the indigenous people of Biafra fit into this definition and therefore negate the derogative "terrorist" which the president "Muhammadu Buhari" earlier called them. Again, we discovered that there is an interface between peace and development, therefore recognition of all regional interest will be necessary in ensuring even development and peace in Nigeria.
Keywords: Identity politics, Indigenous people of Biafra, South-South eastern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION
The nature and current trend of social movement indicates that all may not be too well in the state of South-South Nigeria. In intellectual discuss, identity politics has gained ground in the discipline of the social sciences from late 1960s-1970s (Kelly, 1997). Its practical usefulness is embedded in its explanations of issues on social discrimination. It draws attention to the problems of equity in sharing of available resources in multicultural societies as depicted in the activities of social movements aimed at recognition, reclamation and possibly redefinition of stereotypes against certain groups in society.
According to Cohen, (1977),

> "The different symbolic forms as Flags, Anthems, Emblems
> or body markings as generalized may function in different
> shares of social life in asserting a people's identity or mobilize
> them to action, or to facilitate the organization of people into
> conflicting groups over access to same scarce resources".

Such social movements include that formed by the African American known as Black Civil Rights and movement by the American Indians, all in the United States of America. In pre-independence Nigeria, the C.O.R. of South Eastern Nigeria, the middle zone league, and presently, the movement for the survival of Ogoni People (MSSOP), movement for survival of Ijaw ethnic nationality (Mosued) and movement for reparation to Olabiri are all steeped identity issues.
A study of the basic assumption of political theories reveals that it is very vital for a proper appreciation of the formulation of polities of identity. Liberal political thoughts believe in the equality of all citizens. This tends to create the impression that people are at liberty to associate freely as

members of any association depending on his interest, therefore his affiliation to any group is considered voluntary. For example, members of a neighborhood vigilante group or any social club are assumed to have certain interests in common which are not necessarily disadvantageous to the nation. On the contrary, identity politics contend that such theorization allows a nation to give freedom of choice for all citizens does not provide adequate insight for understanding problems of peculiar groups to the society, be it racial, ethnic or gender. When the distinctiveness of such group is ignored, there is often, poor representation of the group in national issues. As stated in (New politics 1977), the Anti-liberal critics are of the opinion that these assumptions are enough reason for repeated failure of even older democracies to find solution to problems of marginalization.

Identity politics emphasizes the assumption of the existence of inequality, injustice and oppression in society. It considers the assumed equality of all citizens as emphasized in the principle of freedom of choice as an "identity" of the ruling class and a façade that conceals covert attempts by controllers of political power to maintain the status-quo.

Dixon (1999), as politics of identity emanates from a multiple of sources, the particular identity that is projected at any given point in time depends on the interest of its proponents.

Identity politics places priority on the affairs of the group. Attempts are usually geared towards not to study these groups in abstraction but in their historical circumstances in relation to a bigger whole. Therefore, it is the contention of the identity politician that each group is better understood within their lived experiences. This however buttresses the earlier statement that adherents of identity politics reject the nation of Universality of stand and push aside such claims as attempts to subsume others experiences which are not in consonance with the view of the power brokers in society. In consonance with this, the Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology (1977), observes that from 1914 when Nigeria as one country of a state became a legal and constitutional fact, the various ethnic and cultural groups sought ways to use their symbolic forms to maintain and assort their exclusiveness and identify themselves in the new wider network of social relations. A dominant symbol is capable of creating the strongest pool of sentiments, attitudes and emotion amongst members of one ethnic grouping. As observed by Boyles (2000), it is conceptually impossible to create a coherent Universalist theory of life, justice and education at least without constantly making the kind of particularized contextual, historical and political judgment above which liberalism seeks to raise". In furtherance of this argument Boyle (2004), emphasizes that groups have their own identities, and that generalizations can only be made, based on common indices emanating from particular studies of different groups.

Thus the above discussion denotes that studies in identity politics are in many facets slated towards an understanding of the marginalized, those who suffer low status in society (Etteng, 1996). Those who constitute the major focus of the marginalized group are within the cadre of those who are usually economically and politically powerless in the society. This includes all of those who are alienated from the mainstream of socio-political activities and are asking for self determination and relative autonomy within a larger constituency. The demands of the minority in Nigeria fall within this discourse. Thus the indigenous people of Biafra's question revolve around numerous rights, which are presented as inalienable to the Igbo man. Some of these rights include rights to self-determination in geographical areas where they are in majority. Other time, they ask to be allowed to preserve their culture, the mark of their distinctiveness against assimilation into dominant culture. They demand for equity in the allotment of economic benefits and participation in governance. This is more pronounced in the international scene amongst the nation states of Western Europe. Immigrants into France, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, can hardly evade minority status because they often prefer to maintain their culture and distinctiveness. This always becomes noticeable in the form of their dressing, religion, like the Algerians and Pakistan Muslims would want to do in France and the United Kingdom respectively.

Conceptualisation

Identity is more pronounced in a situation of deprivation. It gives the people a sense of common problem; such that there exist a unity of purpose. The situation under this current is not short of a keg of gun powder-with nearby fire may lit, it could lead to crisis. Bagura (1994) opines that identity grouping becomes more pronounced in crisis situation. For instance, the protest against domination by Russia is believed to be the so called expression of nationalism by the smaller states (Decan 1979). It was on the relevance of identity grouping that gave credence to the balkanization of the forma

socialist states to the extent that the new Common Wealth of Independent States is affiliating very closely to the West up to the point of considering to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization NATO (Decon, opcit, 1979).

It is obvious that many may see politics of identity to be inherently characterized by disintegration, but this is not true. This are must understand that identity politics serves as a platform through which those marginalized could be heard and attempt to seek redress. This becomes possible through the mobilization of the larger constituency so that through the acknowledgement of the lived experiences of the sub nits, a more inclusive pattern of inter group relationship will emerge to buttress claims to nationhood and political stability. In view of this, the usefulness of identity politics cannot be overemphasized in a situation of deprivation and socio-economic injustice that is very prevalent in the state of Niger-Delta. More so, its relevance soars beyond every imagination, especially now, when international politics is intensifying to checkmate human rights violations in all its ramifications. Identity politics, thus locates human rights within their social and local context. This is quite timely for Nigeria and could mark the beginning of a new match to democracy and an unfolding process of true federalism.

This discourse, sofa; had elaborated on the point that issues seen as politics of identity, either internationally or locally are multifarious. The single, reason that necessitates it, is oppression, injustice and the desire for recognition and empowerment. It is hoped that this exposition of the features of identity politics will create an understanding to the ongoing crisis in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

The Land and People of South Eastern Nigeria

The South Eastern Nigeria is also known as Igbo land. It is the home land of the Igbo people. It is a cultural and common linguistic region in Southern Nigeria (Origi, 2007).

Geographically the Igbo people are divided into two sections by the lower Niger River. According to Uchendu (1965), the Eastern part is the larger of the two and it comprises Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Abia and Enugu States, while the Western side is smaller and is located in Delta State and Kogi State. However, they all share the same culture and the speakers of equally diverse Igbo languages.

Politically, Igbo Land is divided into several Southern Nigerian States (Edeh, 1988), Igbo Land is surrounded on all sides by large rivers, and other Southern and Central Nigeria indigenous tribes namely Biri, Whobo-Isoko, Ijaw, Ogoni, Igala, Tv, Yako, Idoma and Ibibio. Igbo people homeland extends East and West, from the old Calabar River to the banks of the Kwara, Niger River and some territory at Aboh, an Igbo clan located within the West-side of the Niger River.

On the North, it borders on Igala and Akpoto, and it is separated from the sea only by petty tribes, all of which trace their origin to the Igbo race.

The South Eastern Nigeria (the Igbo land) is primarily situated in the lowland forest region of Nigeria, with parts in the Niger-Delta. During the late 19th Century, Igbo land was made part of the Southern Nigeria protectorate of the British Empire and was amalgamated into modern day Nigeria in 1914. Shortly after Nigeria gained her independence; the Igbo land was involved in its biggest war as a result of the Biafra's movement for secession. The war was mainly fought by the Southern Easterners and it ended in 1970 when Nigeria government forces prevailed in the conflict.

More than 30 million people inhabit Igbo land and with a population density of 140 to 390 inhabitants per square kilometer (350 to 1000/sqmi).

According to Olfokaja (2012) observed that it could be the most densely populated area in Africa after the Nile Valley. Put together, Igbo land has an area of some 40,900 to 41,400km^2 (15,800 to 16,000sqmi).

In trade, ndi-Igbo in the past traded with neighbors, allies and with Europeans. It was during one of his trading mission that he (W.B. Backe) told King Chukwuma Obi through his interpreter that

> "We had come to make your acquaintance and your friendship
> and to ascertain if the people are willing to trade with us".

On the strength of this request, trading agreement was eventually reached and signed with the great King Chukwuma Obi from Aboh clan, one of the leading Igbo clans then, who was engaged in early active trading with Europe (Iiogu, 1974).

So trading as an occupation in Igbo land did not begin just recently but an aged long activity. Couple with this was also some Anthropological findings. These findings revealed that Ndi-Igbo also were

engaged in making and trading of Arts works, such as pottery making, metal and precious artifacts. Igbo-Ukwu for instance was the site of an early indigenous bronze industry that was later rediscovered in the 20th century (Matthews, 2002).

Along with the foregoing, in Igbo land farming is a traditional occupation amongst the people. Presently in the eastern states, home garden by the women constitute about 60% of food consume in the region annually so Ndi-Igbo can be said to be hard working and self sufficient people. However, in spite of this achievement the people of Eastern region are institutionally discriminated against in country they love to call their own.

Characteristics of Identity Politics

The escalation of controversies over issues such as poverty, insecurity, use and the control of natural resources, environmental degradation amidst call for sustainability, equitable gender participation in governance are all indications of the need for a reappraisal of social policies in multi-cultural societies. The propagation of these issues are usually the brain child of these groups whose freedom, welfare, society livelihood and the total reproduction of the self are impinged upon by non-actualization of policies that resolves imbalances arising from the aforementioned.

According to Dixon (1979), in his contributions to the problem of identity politics and conflict the "Wars of today are mainly between family and family". And set street against street, town against town. Wars of this nature are not nations against nations but instead they are wars within nation. Dixon (Opp. Cit, 120), much of these wars are no doubt manifestations of politics of self-preservation as an overriding factor for future political alignments. The upsurge in the number of these social movements and the attention they create both at national and internal scenes cannot be dismissed as inconsequential.

Movements on social activism like the demand for resource control, Notternization policy, movement for the survival of the Ogoni People (MOSSOP) that demand for new rights and reclaim old ones are identity based. Boyle (2000), Opines that the phrase "Identity Politics" was coined from the activities of such social movements by Michael Lerner and Peter Gabriel.

One important fact that is peculiar with identity politics is that it revolves around issues that are specific to an individual or particular group social experiences.

Joseph in his own contribution (1999), emphasizes that identity politics is not strictly an ethnic phenomena. Besides ethnicity, social identities can also be expressed in the form of religious, class and race. Thus identities are often politicized by politicians who usually resort to such sentiment for support and solidarity to enable them get appointment and distribution of benefits. In this vein, religious and ethnic expressions of identity are seen as veritable instruments which mutually reinforces each other in the process of mobilizing support from the constituencies concerned.

Heyes (2002:3) defines the subject of

> "Identity politics as a mode of organizing intimately
> connected to the ideas that some social groups are
> oppressed…. Identity politics starts from analysis of
> oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming
> redescription or transportation of previous stigmatized
> accounts of group membership".

This definition explains some salient characteristics of identity politics. A critical examination of the highlights emphasis the fact that identify are socially constructed. Besides, that as a mode of analysis, identity politics offers a complete package which begins with identification of particular problem of a smaller group within the large group. Identity politics sometimes manifest in the demand in language equality. This is an area of special protest by some minority groups against federal government colleges in Nigeria. Cohen (1977) draws our attention to the impacts of identity politics as a tool. In his argument he reasons that, in Nigeria, particularly in the 1950s and early 1960s; such ethnic group-political party identifications eased the success of some traditional rulers, powerful chiefs and local leaders, in soliciting and obtaining votes for particular candidates. In the same vein Gergen (1995:4), talking about the importance of the characteristics of which amenities politics of identity, submits that politics and personal being are virtually inseparable. According to him this is attributable to "the natural production of the political categories". Thus this fact as it were reminds us that unlike the national choice, an individual possesses in assuming membership of a social group or class; adherents

of identity politics are to a large extent victims of ascribed status. Nationally they become members of the group they find themselves. The singular understanding that the positions of the participants in identity politics are ascribed creates between and amongst members of the group the conviction of entitlements to some inalienable rights. This is the type of impression that encourages the marginalized people of the Niger-Delta region to intensify their demands for a short at the relevant leadership positions in the country.

On account of the forgoing it will be necessary to say that although given the expression of identity politics, one will be tempted to reason that it aims at creating homogenous societies irrespective of the source of its generation. In the view of Ibrahim (1991) and Young (1976), politics of identity is located in a history which relates the individual and group to a collectivity. For instance, the following under mentioned, are some of the basic features of identity politics. It is on the basis of the foregoing that the activities of the indigenous people of Biafra is factored within the umbrella of identity politics.

Indigenous People Of Biafra-IPOB
The indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) is an organization formed within the aim of bringing back the honour and the glory of Ndi-Igbo. This organization was founded in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, a British Nigerian political activist popular for his prominent advocacy of the contemporary Biafran independence movement (Maya, 2016).

Ostensibly, the reason behind the formation of this organization was to restore an independent State of Biafra in the Eastern region of Nigeria through an independence referendum. However, latently; the indigenous people of Biafra became an option to correct the institutional discrimination currently ongoing in Nigeria which Jonathan government was dragging its foot to put right. This untold reason is apparently more obvious when we examine IPOB cities of the Nigerian Federal Government for its poor investment, inequitable resource distribution, ethnic marginalization, Igbo man not allowed to occupy contain positions in Nigeria, and heavy military presence in the Eastern region. In recent years, it has gained significant media attention as it has gradually become a target of political crackdowns by the federal government of Nigeria.

It is important to note that the indigenous people of Biafra rose to prominence in mid-2010 but did not do more than just that as the than federal government made some effort to correct some of the anomalies. The federal government of Nigeria then organized national conference in-order to satisfy the wishes and aspirations of every region with any grievances. However, after the dethronement of the then government of Jonathan, Mohammadu Buhari, the head of the ruling APC federal government choose to distance himself and his government from the decision of the national conference held in 2014.

It was on the strength of this connation that the leaders of IPOB and their members who are largely Igbo extraction felt was wise to call the federal government of Nigeria to order. It is essential for us to know that the Ndi-Igbo had people to take their proper place in the country from the decision reached at the 2014 national conference which supposedly would correct the placement of all the regions in the country in-order to ensure a united Nigeria.

It is interesting to know that when this did happen the indigenous people of Biafra did what they did to know the place of Igbo people in Nigeria bearing in mind the nature of the discrimination against Ndi-Igbo in the country (Ibeanu, Iwuamadi, Nkwachukwu, 2016). Thus, this was the bait which Kanu and his followers needed to strangle Buhari and his government. Buhari swallowed this bait without knowing its implication and today after he had been told the implication of his action against the indigenous people of Biafra; he now sees them as a terrorist group which Nigeria must not allow to exist.

To ensure credence to his claim, the leadership of the indigenous people of Biafra were arrested on 19ᵗʰ October 2015 on charges of sedition, ethnic incitement and treasonable felony. Whereas, the leadership of the dreaded Fulani herdsmen and their followers roam freely in every nook and cranny of Nigeria killing innocent Nigerians and nobody is saying anything: what baffles Nigerians is that the president does not see them as terrorists but instead they are seen as legitimate Nigerians doing their legitimate business by killing people and destroying their farms and other properties (Bybee, 2017).

It is on account of the foregoing that the indigenous people of Biafra with its supporters protest became aggravated giving rise to the political disenfranchisement among the Igbo people and the present trauma which the people are experiencing today. It is so therefore very essential for us to

begin to see the activities of the indigenous people of Biafra at the instance of bad governance presently in Nigeria and also appreciate the fact that; the indigenous people of Biafra are simply identity politicians who think that this is the best channel of reaching out to federal government in particular and the entire world in general.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this study, we have carefully understudy the activities of the indigenous people of Biafra- through listening to their argument and interest and upon that arrived at the conclusion that they are not terrorist group as pronounced by the government of Buhari.

Again we gathered that IPOB intentions are geared toward actualizing the dream of every Igbo man, the dream of being treated as a desired and deserving position as an Igbo man in a country you call your own so that the idea of institutional discrimination in Nigeria would be a thing of the past.

Finally, that the indigenous people of Biafra are just, identity politicians who seek recognition through the platform of identity politics as a medium to ensure even development in the country and until the federal government of Nigeria come to terms with the need of every region not just the eastern region in this country; issues of identity and victim politics will not end.

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