

## **Marginalization of Some Ethnic Nationalities in Nigeria: The Igbo Experience**

**Godwin Okaneme**

Department of Philosophy and Religions  
University of Abuja, P.M.B 117, Abuja, Nigeria  
E-mail: godack76@yahoo.com

(Received: 6-7-14 / Accepted: 3-9-14)

### **Abstract**

The Igbo people are found mainly in the South Eastern parts of Nigeria and also in parts of 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 but got to a climax immediately after the Nigerian civil war in 1970. 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 in Rivers State immediately the civil war ended in 1970. It suggests that Igbo people should not chicken out as a result of the orchestrated marginalization against them. It 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, Nigeria, Igbo, Experience.

### **Introduction**

The Igbo race 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 against them in the northern part 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, 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.

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 unfavorable 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.

The paper chronicles these cases of 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 Nigeria.

## 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 tribe 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 Igbo 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 unfavorable conditions. Ohaike and Ikonne (2007:17) say equivocally

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: An Analysis**

In a paper of this nature, it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to catalogue effectively the many issues concerning the marginalization of the Igbo people in Nigeria. It could be right perhaps to argue that even if the Igbo were marginalized before the 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 and ridiculously given twenty pounds irrespective of how much of Biafran pounds they brought for exchange. This deliberate, wicked, heartless, obnoxious and outrageous policy was master-minded by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then Finance Minister purposely to cripple Ndigbo economically. That the Igbo people survived that outrageous economic onslaught against them was due to their sheer courage, willpower and dexterity as well as ingenuity and dogged determination to survive 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 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.

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.

Till date, there is no substantial Federal investment in the South East. Even in leadership roles in the country, Ndigbo are utterly 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 no 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**

Ndigbo have truly been marginalized in Nigeria and it is an incontrovertible fact. However, there is a new source of worry among Ndigbo especially the elites among them and that is the problem of self-marginalization or 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.

Another 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 knowing full well that it is their brothers and sisters that are returning to the hinterland to celebrate with their families? Again why should our governors not use substantial portions of revenues accruing to the states in the South East to develop their states? If the federal government marginalizes the South East, must our own governors also marginalize us through non-performance?

### **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*’ (what 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 Nigeria. 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, 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.

## References

- [1] C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (1958), London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- [2] B. Diara, *The Igbos and their Hebrew Relations*, (2001), Enugu: Computer Edge Publishers.
- [3] F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1965), Middlesex: Penguun Books Ltd.
- [4] B. Mullaly, Oppression: The focus of structural social work, In B. Mullaly, *The New Structural Social Work*, (2007), Don Mills: Oxford University Press.
- [5] T.U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*, (1985), Lagos: Literamed Publications (Nig.) Limited.
- [6] N.B. Ohaiké and U.H. Ikoné, Tradition and change in the moral values of the contemporary Igbo society, *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture*, 9(2) (2007), 17.
- [7] C.B. Okolo, *Squander Mania Mentality: Reflections on Nigerian Culture*, (1994), Nsukka: University Trust Publishers.
- [8] U.R. Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo Traditional Religion*, (1994), Obsi: Pacific Publishers.
- [9] K.C. Osudibia, *Challenges to the Fourth Republic: Nigerian Connexion*, Enugu: Snaap Pres Ltd.
- [10] I.M. Young, Five faces of oppression, In M. Adams (Ed.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, (2000), New York: Routeledge.