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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF IGBOPHOBIA AND ITS IMPACT ON NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Igbophobia is a term that describes the discrimination and prejudice against the Igbo ethnic group. It has deep roots in Nigeria's history, dating back to the colonial period and exacerbated by several other events, including the Nigerian Civil War of 1966-1969 (Nwankwo, 2004). Employing a historical analysis approach, the paper draws on primary sources such as government reports, colonial archives, and newspaper articles from the pre-independence and post-independence periods. Secondary sources, including academic literature on Nigerian history, political science, and sociology, are also utilized to contextualize the historical events and analyze their impact. The paper critically examines the narratives surrounding Igbo economic success, perceived political ambition, and the role of ethnic nationalism in shaping the discourse of Igbophobia. The paper further analyzes the impact of specific historical events, such as the Biafran War, on the perpetuation and manifestation of Igbophobia. By creating an understanding of the historical dynamics of Igbophobia, the paper aims to contribute to dialogue for the promotion of peaceful coexistence in a multicultural society like Nigeria.

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Introduction:-

The ethnic origination of the peoples that constitute the present Nigeria dates back to time immemorial. It is well established that nations were in existence in Nigeria long before contact with the European nations (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Several states and civilizations like the Yoruba Empire, the Kwararafa Kingdom, the Borno Caliphate, the Hausa Emirates and the Benin Empire already were formidable nation-states before the arrival of the British. The British came into contact with the peoples of Nigeria with the floatation of the Royal Niger Company in 1886, a chartered company that for many years held a monopoly of trade in the hinterland (C. Eze, 2015). Trade disputes between the British and the King of Jukun culminated in the bombardment of Jukun in December 1897 (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This action by the British invited the displeasure of other contiguous nations. The appointment of Sir Alfred Milner as the Governor of Lagos in 1894 was a turning point that heralded the advent of colonization and the more focused and broader actions of the British colonialists in Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Resistance to British imperialism grew along the southern integration before its spread to the north where pulp drama against the British as seen among the chiefs of Zaria took shape (Nnoli, 1978). Following the failure of a 4-million-pound loan, the British government assumed control of Lagos and the Lagos colony in April 1865 (Smith, 2020). The major ethnic stock that ruled the seawards during this period were the Yoruba-a people said to have

migrated from Mali to Yoruba land and of ancient civilization, organized kingdoms and empires (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Law, 1977). On July 4, 1865, Lagos was declared a colony. The British characterized the Yoruba's state as "Blue State" and with a population of about half a million (Smith, 1960; Ojo, 1975). Governor Philip was appointed a colonial high commissioner with additional executive powers. Attention had then shifted to the Middle Belt where Makurdi, the confluence point of the River Benue with River Niger was identified as an alternative route to the North (Ojo, 1980; Falola, 1999).

The year 1950 was a significant period for Nigeria. It was the period in which Nigerian calls to Britain for political autonomy or independence were growing very strong. The anti-colonial agitation was triggered by a combination of social, economic and political factors, and the increased exposure of Nigerians to ideas of self-determination and democracy, following the 2nd World War, and catalyzed by the growing dissatisfaction among Nigerians about colonial rule and its impacts (Omoyibo, 1984; Falola, 1991). The establishment of the Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe-led National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in 1944 significantly mobilized public opinion against colonial rule, while demanding greater political representation (Coleman, 1958). The agitations were also fueled by economic grievances (Hopkins, 1973). Several other events, including the 1945 general strike, which at the time, was described as the largest protests in Nigeria's history, also showcased the growing discontent among Nigerian workers about unfair wages and labour conditions imposed on Nigerians by the colonial administration (Fajana, 1978). Collectively, these political, social and economic factors heightened anti-colonial sentiments among Nigerians, setting the stage for the eventual push for independence in 1960.

In discussing Igbophobia, it is imperative to provide a historical backdrop on the origins and evolution of this mindset, to understand when and how Igbophobia manifested itself in Nigeria. Indeed, when did Igbo obtain their negative tag of being a "wandering" tribe? By tracking the historical events of Nigeria, this paper examines and highlights that Igbophobia was originally, a British invention.

Understanding Igbophobia

Scholarly works abound on successive leadership challenges in the Igbo in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. Works on Igbo politics encompass the evolution of political units in Igbo land in both pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, the impact of western education and Christianity on Igbo politics and the effect of the Nigerian civil war on Igbo politics. The aftermath of the civil war in 1970 was more or less a malaise not only to the integrity of the Igbo in Nigeria but also to their descendants in other Diasporas (Nwankwo, 1984; Achebe, 1983). Ndigbo have continued to be seen and treated as indigenous-foreigners in Nigeria especially in some parts of the North. The relative deprivation theory has engendered dispossessionist tendency in the psyche of some individuals who forment ethno-religious crises in order to appropriate immovable investments of Ndigbo outside Igboland (Gurr, 1970; Ekeh, 1975). This feeling of deprivation has characterized the relationship between Ndigbo and their host community; a development which is everything but cordial. The experiences of Ndigbo in the larger Nigerian society especially in the North have remained more or less the same with those of the pre-war years (Obi, 1998; Omoigui, 2006). The vicious and unprovoked attacks on the Igbo and their property are but a subtle way of continued persecution of those regarded as indigenous aliens in their fatherland. The Igbo can be said to have developed a more federation consciousness than perhaps any of the over 350 ethnic components of the Nigerian nation (Nnoli, 1978; Ekeh, 1983). This development prompted the relative deprivation theory which had always incensed the hitherto friendly host community against the Igbo. In recent years, they have been targets of vicious and unwarranted attacks in various cities as indigenous aliens.

Historical Contexts Of Igbophobia

Igbophobia denotes the socio-cultural, legal, and economic prejudices against a people of an ethno-culture, known as 'Igbo' (C. Eze, 2015). These prejudices are ones that are widely shared and have permeated Nigerian 'statecraft' in post-colonial times. Igbophobia, like any other form of ethnophobia, could result from varying motives, such as conquest, clash of land interests, or barrage of unsolicited rivalry in socio-cultural, economic, or political domains. Such ethno-prejudices tend to obscure the humanity of others, and their loss often gives rise to socio-economic and political dichotomies which justify inequitable treatment as a means to preserving indigenous status, rights, and interests (Ekeh, 1983).

Since the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria, distrust, suspicion, defeatism, and fear have governed the relationship between the Other (Igbophobia) and the Self in both equality and inequality situations. The Igbo ethnic group, has

historically been associated with economic prosperity, political activism, and a distinct cultural identity. However, their prominence has occasionally led to marginalization and stereotyping, particularly during and after Nigeria's colonial period. During British colonial rule (19th to early 20th century), the Igbo were often viewed through a colonial lens that emphasized their entrepreneurial spirit and social organization, which sometimes fostered resentment among other ethnic groups (Okafor, 1994). The colonial administration often manipulated inter-ethnic tensions to maintain control, exacerbating divisions among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups. Because of their independent political structure in clan levels, the British regarded them as uncivilized. Before the advent of colonial rule, there was no inter-group hostility or war among them. The Igbo intermarried and conducted long-distance trade with other tribes outside of Igbo land (Nwoye, 1995; Ottenberg, 1970).

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also called the Biafran War, was a pivotal event that intensified Igbo marginalization. The war was primarily a conflict between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the predominantly inhabited Igbo-people secessionist state of Biafra. The brutal conflict and subsequent genocide led to lasting trauma and reinforced stereotypes and fears about Igbo ambitions for independence or dominance (Clarke, 2010). Post-war policies aimed at national integration sometimes marginalized Igbo economic and political interests, fueling sentiments of exclusion and suspicion. In the post-colonial era, Igbo identity continues to be viewed with great suspicion, especially during periods of political instability or economic downturn. The Igbo prominence and dominance in industry and commerce has, often been met with resentment and accusations of economic rivalry (Omeje, 2019). This stereotyping has manifested as Igbophobia—negative attitudes and discriminatory practices against Igbo individuals and the Igbo community at large.

1. Pre-Colonial Igbo Society and Identity: The history and identity of the Igbo nation on the globe has been cloaked with the veil of secrecy due to inadequate scholarly attention and coverage. This has left a vacuum of knowledge about them and a dearth of authentic information in this regard. Consequently, certain opinions have been developed about the Igbo by those who have interacted with them, which may lead to strong feelings amplified by the strong religious prejudices between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR). On the other hand, prejudices have developed based on these hearsays. A plethora of these opinions are unwarranted and stem from lack of knowledge, cultural differences, primitivity, or plain fiendishness. The Igbo is a nation with a humane character expressed in many of their cultures. This humane culture is a core identity of the Igbo, and as with all other aspects of a people's life, it is dynamic. The traditional Igbo humane character spans all aspects of Igbo social lives, political lives, and economic lives, informing the adaptability of the Igbo society and galvanizing the contributions of the Igbo nation to the socio-political and economic developments of contemporary developments around the world today.

Pre-colonial Igbo society was marked by a decentralized political structure, strong kinship bonds, vibrant cultural practices, and a resilient entrepreneurial spirit, all of which contributed to a well-defined and cohesive Igbo identity that persisted into the colonial and post-colonial periods. Igbo society was predominantly stateless and organized into autonomous communities and villages, each with their own social structures and leadership systems (Nwoga, 2000). Social organization in pre-colonial Igbo society was based on kinship and age-grade systems, which played vital roles in governance, social cohesion, and conflict resolution (Nnoli, 1980; Ekechi, 1995). The “village”, also known as “community” was the fundamental political unit, often led by a council of elders or titled leaders known as “*Ndichie*” who exercised authority through consensus rather than coercion (Madu, 2013). Religious beliefs and ancestral veneration were central to Igbo social life, reinforcing a shared cultural identity rooted in spirituality and tradition (Achebe, 1958). Igbo people engaged predominantly in farming, trading, and craft production, fostering what is now known as the Igbo entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of self-reliance (Obi, 1998; Nwankwo, 2005). They were known for their craftsmanship in weaving, pottery, and metalworking, and for their vibrant market systems that connected different communities (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). These economic activities contributed to a communal identity centered on productivity and self-sufficiency. The Igbo also developed rich oral traditions, festivals, masquerades, and rites of passage, sharing common linguistic features and customary laws that reinforced social cohesion and cultural continuity, and further unified their identity across different communities (Oguejiofor, 2017).

2. Colonial Era and the Formation of Ethnic Stereotypes: During the colonial period, Igbophobia—the prejudice and discrimination against Igbo people—began to take root and was significantly reinforced by colonial policies and practices (Achebe, 1983; Nnoli, 1980). The British colonial administration's approach to governance and resource allocation often perpetuated negative stereotypes about the Igbo, depicting them as rebellious, unruly, and

economically opportunistic (Nwankwo, 2000; Falola & Heaton, 2008). These stereotypes were rooted in colonial narratives that sought to justify control and marginalization of the Igbo and other ethnic groups (Ojo, 2004).

The British colonial government during its early governance in Nigeria adopted various indirect rules having different policy attitudes towards the various Nigerian societies. In a broad sense, however, the policy of indirect rule was resented as evil because it introduced to the Nigerian societies a subtle regionalism which has later evolved into ethnicism, or tribalism in common parlance. One of the most recognized administrative strategies was the imposition of the Native Authority system. This was done through a process which started with the appointment of more loyal native chiefs, or head-men desiring authoritarian commensurate with European interpretation of what constituted real authority (Akiwowo, 1976; Omenka, 2010). This was followed by the elevation of the native chiefs into European Courts, thus providing them with European status and creating a higher recognition of their authority over local matters. The Native Courts system was then introduced in order to give the local chiefs, or elites more recognized authority over local matters which were earlier regarded as matters of government. This was followed by the transfer of custody of some of the most important annuity revenue, the Commission on Enquiry into Native Revenue, which later became the Department of Local Government (C. Eze, 2015).

The colonial authorities often depicted the Igbo as overly individualistic and lacking respect for traditional authority structures, contrasting them unfavourably with more hierarchical societies (Eke, 1974). This portrayal fueled perceptions of the Igbo as rebellious and resistant to authority, which persisted into the post-colonial era. The colonial administration's interventions, such as the imposition of indirect rule primarily based on traditional rulers of other ethnic groups, marginalized Igbo political structures and reinforced stereotypes about their social organization and loyalty (Okojie, 2010). The civil war (1967–1970) further entrenched negative stereotypes, with propaganda emphasizing Igbo aggression and disloyalty, which contributed to widespread suspicion and prejudice. These stereotypes, rooted in colonial narratives, laid the foundation for enduring Igbophobia that continued to influence inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria even after independence.

3. The Nigerian Civil War and Its Aftermath: Colonialism, which came in the form of British Imperialism, laid the foundation for the driving factors of the Nigerian civil war. The British pitted Nigeria's various ethnic groups against one another with the amalgamation of the northern and southern parts of the territory in 1914 (Suberu, 1997). The colonizers did not account for cultural differences and expected the "Nigerian" people to replicate the colonial paradigm. After Nigeria gained its independence from the British in October of 1960, the effect of colonialism began to play out in earnest. An Igbo man became governor-general of the federation appointed by the British Parliament. In the post-colonial period, Northerners became particularly worried about Southern domination. Government posts were dominated by Southerners. The North's development remained stagnant compared to the Southern population, which had a more diverse educational background (Achebe, 1983; Sklar, 1963). The peak of contention was most evident with the Western region as violence erupted. Finally, the Northern group struck first in a coup but was immediately suppressed by the South who responded with a counter-coup (Mojekwu & Ugochukwu, 2008).

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), had profound and lasting impacts on perceptions of Igbo people and contributed significantly to the perpetuation of Igbophobia. The war was marked by widespread violence, atrocities, and a humanitarian crisis that drew international attention (Clapham, 2002). Negative stereotypes and prejudices against the Igbo were intensified. Several narratives fueled ethnic stereotypes, portraying the Igbo as troublemakers who threaten national unity. The trauma of the war, combined with propaganda that emphasized Igbo aggression, reinforced existing prejudices and fostered mistrust (Osaghae, 1995). Additionally, the war also left deep scars on Igbo identity, leading to feelings of marginalization and suspicion within Nigeria, contributing significantly in shaping enduring stereotypes and prejudices against the Igbo, influencing Nigeria's social and political landscape. The destruction of Igbo communities during the war, coupled with the portrayal of Igbo leaders as insubordinate, contributed to long-standing biases and social exclusion (Gaventa, 1980).

4. Post-Independence Political and Economic Dynamics: Igbophobia is endemic in various degrees, among the elites and among the lower classes through the agents of the elites, taking the form of economic oppression, inhuman social discrimination and outright predation on the members of the Igbo ethnic group. Post-independence Nigeria has seen episodes where Igbo political and economic aspirations have been thwarted or marginalized, leading to social tensions and conflicts. The 1966 coup and subsequent counter-coup, which were marked by ethnic violence, exemplify the heightening tensions, with some historians framing these events as manifestations of ethnic rivalry

and marginalization (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The Igbo, who played a significant role in the anti-colonial struggle and contributed substantially to Nigeria's early political development, encountered systemic marginalization.

Their push for greater political representation and economic control was often met with resistance, leading to grievances that culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Post-war policies aimed at reintegration and reconciliation, but underlying ethnic prejudices persisted, and Igbophobia continued to influence political decision-making, often marginalizing Igbo leaders and their aspirations (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). The Igbo are renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit and dominance in industry and commerce, both within Nigeria and across the world. However, post-independence economic policies often marginalized Igbo traders and businesses. During the military regimes and subsequent administrations, policies such as the restriction of certain trading activities and the marginalization of Igbo entrepreneurs contributed to economic grievances. The economic marginalization was compounded by infrastructural neglect and limited access to political power, which impeded the Igbo's economic development relative to other groups. The economic disenfranchisement also fueled perceptions of discrimination, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice—what is often termed Igbophobia (Akope, 2014).

5. Contemporary Manifestations of Igbophobia: Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse nations on earth, not only with a large number of major ethnic groups but also a myriad of smaller ones. This is not a deterrent to having a big nation; indeed, it has been the nation's pride. Not only are ethnic groups a source of cultural and developmental diversity, social-cultural integration and economic developments can thrive in an ethnically heterogeneous nation like Nigeria. However, ethnic problems that have remained for ages have continued to haunt the Nigerian nation (Obi, 2000). There are divisions and resulting mutual distrust among people of the same nation but of different ethnic groups. A situation in which members of an ethnic group in some communities cannot claim fellow Nigerians or even feel safe is the sorest wound the Nigerian nation has to worry about.

Contemporary manifestations of Igbophobia in Nigeria are multifaceted, encompassing political, economic, social, and violent dimensions. These forms of prejudice continue to hinder Nigeria's national cohesion and development, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies and efforts to foster ethnic harmony. Despite Nigeria's constitutional commitment to equality, ethnic biases continue to influence political appointments, economic opportunities, and social interactions. These manifestations often exacerbate ethnic tensions and undermine national unity. One of the most prominent contemporary manifestations of Igbophobia is the perceived political exclusion of the Igbo in national governance (Nwankwo, 2014; Obi, 2010). Many Igbo leaders and elites argue that they are systematically marginalized from key political positions, especially the presidency. For example, the recurring inability of Igbo candidates to clinch the presidency of Nigeria, despite the country's rotational political arrangements, fuels perceptions of bias. This political marginalization is often justified by accusations of alleged bias against Igbo interests, further fuelling feelings of exclusion. Socially, Igbophobia manifests through stereotypes, prejudiced narratives, and social exclusion. Media representations sometimes depict Igbo people negatively, associating them with criminality or economic greed, which reinforces harmful stereotypes. Inter-ethnic conflicts, often have ethnic undertones, with Igbo communities sometimes being perceived as outsiders or threats, especially in regions where they are minority populations (Ogunbameru, 2019).

Impact Of Igbophobia On National Integration

The general atmosphere of intolerance, aggression and violence against the Igbo which culminated in the 1967 Biafran War was re-awakened in January 2000 as issues bordering on ethnicity, political and economic domination, cultural imposition and tribalism overwhelmed the nation (Achebe, 1983; Onuoha, 2004). Apart from being tended by the British colonial administration, three nations unhurriedly assembled and conjoined to the Nigerian nation: Yoruba in the West, Hausa/Fulani in the North and the later-comer Igbo in the East. The mass mobilization against the Igbos again rekindled the ethnic rivalry that nearly finished the nation in the three years of bloodletting, havoc, tears and loss of economic viability in the then prosperous Nigeria. The Igbo philosophical notion that the world grows on the motionless of vainglorious personal interest immeasurable by greedy continental aggregates may have informed the rational approach to the modernization world order by the Igbo. The unflinching belief that modernization by chance hardens and commodifies territorial consciousness to the detriment of the weak states is repulsive to the Igbo conception of sacredness of nature, human and social universe. The untainted Igbo acquisition culture found expression in both relentless grass-root investment and skilled self-employment which would rage against the pejorative and inhibiting forces of job creation and white-collar jobs.

Several Nigerian politicians and social media 'influencers' have used inflammatory language to incite violence against Igbos. These statements by prominent figures have resulted in xenophobic beliefs in their support and validation (Ibeanu, O. (2018; Okafor, A. (2020). Resentment towards Igbos has increased as many feel it is permissible to assault or attack Igbos. Many Nigerians vehemently dislike the notion that Igbos are native Nigerians, desiring instead something dishonourable and derogatory to label them (Uchendu, 1965; Nnoli, 1981). Terming them as animals and foreign entities is now usual.

While diversity is a strength, ethno-political biases such as Igbophobia—discrimination and prejudice against the Igbo—pose significant challenges to national integration. The persistence of Igbophobia undermines social cohesion, political stability, and economic progress, impeding Nigeria's goal of being a united, peaceful nation. Historically, nation-building refers to the process of unifying heterogeneous ethnic forces into a cohesive and politically stable unit (Anderson, 1991). The promotion of national integration is crucial for nation-building. Unfortunately, national integration in Nigeria has demonstrated farce and myth as a result of Igbo-phobia. There is evidence indicating that national integration in Nigeria is fictitious. To be sure, national integration in Nigeria is a suicide mission because of Igbo-phobia (Osaghae, 1995; Ekeh, 1975).

Igbophobia has fostered social divisions in Nigeria by creating perceptions of distrust and hostility between the Igbo and other ethnic groups. Discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes lead to social exclusion, alienation, and inter-ethnic tensions, which weaken the bonds that hold Nigeria together (Ogunbameru, 2019). Negative stereotypes about Igbos being overly aggressive or ethnocentric have fuelled inter-ethnic stereotypes and misunderstandings, thereby undermining social harmony. Of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbo have endured unprecedented hardships, humiliations, ostracization and exclusion (C. Eze, 2015).

One of the most profound impacts of Igbophobia is its effect on political integration. Perceived marginalization of the Igbo in federal political appointments and national decision-making processes fosters feelings of exclusion and resentment. Such sentiments contribute to regional and ethnic claims for autonomy or secession, notably exemplified by the rise of movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). These separatist sentiments threaten Nigeria's political unity (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). The exclusionary politics driven by ethnic prejudices hinder the development of a cohesive national identity and undermine efforts at national integration.

Furthermore, the perception that Igbo entrepreneurs are discriminated against or targeted in certain regions discourages investment and economic cooperation. This economic dissonance feeds into regional and ethnic tensions, reducing interdependence and reinforcing ethnic divisions (Akope, 2014). When economic opportunities are perceived as ethnically biased, it hampers the development of trust and cooperation necessary for national unity. Igbophobia also finds expressions in violent conflicts and crises, which are detrimental to Nigeria's stability. Attacks on Igbo communities, whether in the North or other parts of Nigeria, exacerbate fears and mistrust, fuelling cycles of violence and retaliation. Such conflicts threaten the peace and stability essential for national integration (Mojekwu, 2021). Persistent violence based on ethnic prejudice hampers efforts to build a sense of shared national identity and common purpose. The cumulative effect of Igbophobia and its manifestations is a weakening of Nigeria's national identity. Ethnic prejudices like Igbophobia reinforce primordial loyalties over national allegiance, leading Nigerians to identify more strongly with their ethnic groups than as citizens of a unified Nigeria. This fragmentation hampers collective efforts toward nation-building and sustainable development (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

National Integration In Nigeria

National integration is a widely discussed issue among African leaders and scholars. Nonetheless, there has been very limited use of the term national integration in Nigeria's discourse on political development and nation-building. The term is often misused or used alternatively with national unity as if they are synonyms. National integration encompasses the coming together of a variety of cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups to uphold a common shared heritage which is meant to mitigate rivalry (Onyemelukwe, 2002; Akinboye, 2000). In contrast, national disintegration implies the disintegration of nation-states along ethnic, political, religious, regional, and cultural lines to form states more homogeneous on the aforementioned characteristics. When members of a nation-state can model themselves along a few shared belief systems, values, and interests, the state is said to be more integrated. The Nigerian project grossly fails this on all counts.

The country is beset with severe ethnic strife, especially in the core three ethnic nationalities' zones of the North, West, and East. This is manifested publicly, privately, and officially through amputation of tongues on the public platform and outright cold wars and ethnic cleansing in the background. It extends beyond the inter-ethnic sphere to

civil service, military, academia, and religious settings among Muslims of Northern extraction against Christians from Southern Nigeria, East against West, and vice versa among Christians for ethnic dominance. There are similar struggles to upstage Muslims aspirants in places like Lagos and Osun, where Muslims have historically formed the majority (Ojo, 2014; Salami, 2018).

National Integration refers to the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. Nigeria is a country that is made up over 350 ethnic nationalities distinctively isolated in terms of religion, languages, cultural norms etc (Ola, 2005; Nnoli, 2003). National integration implies that we should de-emphasize these differences and promote policies that could unite Nigeria. The introduction of Unity Schools, National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), quota system, etc, among several others are some of the policies aimed at achieving national integration (Okorie Cornelius & Greg, 2013). Unification by itself cannot develop Nigeria. It is inseparable from development. No nation can be said to be properly integrated without the citizens enjoying a high standard of living and healthy conditions of life. Development refers to any progressive changes in a society which spurs them into the next level. It encompasses the economic, political, social and psychological advancement of a society. Development is relative; it is difficult to generalize on what constitutes basic needs or essentials of development. Some criteria that could be possible to use in measuring nation development across board are; gross unemployment and job creation, inequitable distribution of wealth, social welfare system. Job creation is the engine that powers development. The issue of equity is a major factor in the development of all facets. The disobedience of an otherwise lawful and sensible social welfare system could lead to national chaos and civil war (Olanihun Mrs Ambali, 2019).

Challenges To National Integration

As with most nations, Nigeria is enmeshed in pettiness that have engendered intractable conflicts among its components. One of the conflicts that stands out is the angst against the Igbo people. It is conceived in the enclave of the majority ethnic groups as a combination of several perceptions about the Igbo and their conducts which are seen either as obnoxious or obnoxiously opportunistic. For the majority group it may be perceived from several perceptions. First, it may emanate from the Igbo survival instinct. This was the inspiration for their propensity to move outside the Igbo enclave to other parts of Nigeria where they became, in order of growth of trade, lumber traders, cloth traders, juicy drinks retailers, car spare parts dealers, building materials retailers, importation of goods from overseas, traders in different raw materials etc. In this regard, it could be inferred, the Igbo have survived the test of time, have shown resilience and have carved for themselves a niche and attained remarkable success as traders in any community they find themselves in.

This success and the ratio of goods sold to the local populations have sparked jealousy and envy which ultimately metamorphosed into resentment and hatred that form the bedrock of Igbo-phobia. Furthermore, the Igbo who have no defined socio-cultural nexus outside the Igbo enclave have made sacrifices and more than any other ethnic group contributed to the socio-economic development of their host communities and in so doing, engendered integration through commemorative christening of personal names of their children to depict their place of birth. With this pedigree in mind, it seems dubious that a people who integrated into their new homes were still referred to as foreigners. This was the crux of a thesis on African identity that ethnologists have recently derided, namely that the predominance of an ethnic group can only be in their area of demographic concentration (C. Eze, 2015). An argument was made that “no Nigerian group has been more pan-Nigerian than the Igbo.” This was underscored by the bond established and nurtured with the people among whom they lived on such a delicate matter as citizenship.

Strategies For Promoting National Integration In Nigeria

In a country like Nigeria where there are many ethnic groups co-existing but not integrating as a nation, the problem of Igbo-phobia as the ethnic phobia of the Igbo ethnic group can impede the process of integration. It is necessary to scrutinise the issues of national integration by examining the political structure, governance, and the social philosophy, as they provide the basis for how the states interact. It is also pertinent to examine the nationalities involved to determine if they are compatible or if there is a clash of civilisations (Okorie Cornelius & Greg, 2013). To truly integrate as a Nigerian nation, there is a need for the people as individuals and each ethnic group as a group to think, speak, and act like Nigerians. The two core pillars of national integration are equality and equity. Within the Nigerian practice of democracy, the stipulations of the Federal Character Act (FCA) of 1990 under a federal constitution which require an equitable distribution of federal posts, ministries, or agencies amongst the people may enhance national integration. The political structure can integrate the people as a nation, empower or disempower an ethnic group, and breed the conditions for acceptance or rejection. The implication is that where an ethnic group is

precluded from political power as a result of the political arrangement, it will be more difficult to integrate that group and mutual suspicion will ensue.

1. Promoting Multicultural Education for National Integration: An important contributor towards virtually eradicating the Igbo-phobia is education (C. Eze, 2015). Education brings understanding and knowledge. The need for educating people against Igbo-phobia should be comprehensive and should focus particularly on the readily accessible media, like the internet and newspapers. It should also provide a basis for public fora for deliberating about topics of concern and grievance, which have quite often escalated into Igbo-phobia actions. Education is a potent instrument for inducing social change. Consequently, education can be used to drive national integration in Nigeria through the subjects studied in schools, the method of instruction, teacher training and development, and the structure of educational institutions (O Ibukun & Aboluwodi, 2011). A multi-faceted approach will ensure that national integration happens because it will take care of the needs of the majority at the grass-root level while ensuring that the needs of minority groups are also met.

Education is first an agent of integration and an agent of development. Development occurs from a social structure in time and space. The traditional roles of education are reflected in the goals of Nigerian education. They are to equip citizens with knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to take part actively in the improvement and training of their physical, social, and economic environments. Educational demands are thus derived from this view of development. The responsibility of the education system in developing nations, like Nigeria, is to train manpower who will actively engage in planning and directing the process of transforming society.

2. Media and National Integration in Nigeria: The media is a powerful channel through which information is disseminated and the public is reached. Its role in the political development of Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The media, due to its mass reach, has the potential to promote peaceful co-existence among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups by presenting their stories, languages, cultural products, and histories. A mass media that reflects this plurality by promoting their diverse videos, musical and artistic expressions, would aid the development of peaceful national integration. Media representation of the culture and languages of ethnic minority groups would enhance their group distinctiveness, recognition, and visibility (Okorie Cornelius & Greg, 2013). The media should make multidimensional pronouncements that embrace all ethnic groups and promote ethnic pride in all national conversations or deliberations. The diverse ethno-religious languages in Nigeria are evidences of its diversity. The media should promote greater inclusion in matters of national interests in all languages through an equality paradigm of empowerment, involvement, and sustenance.

The liberalization of the mass media in recent years has been a blessing in disguise for Nigeria. On one hand, mass media proliferation has democratized the institution in terms of choices and offerings, but on the other, it has generated problems hitherto unknown in Nigeria. For instance, restriction or censorship of the press may compel mass media managers to exercise increased caution. The unprofessional conduct of most journalists has butchered the sacred cow of sanctity in journalism. The press is not entirely blameless. In their bid to sell their punches, they have sometimes applied the incendiary match, which ignited the ethnic inferno.

3. Decentralization of Power: The unity of the nation and the sense of belonging among all the people of Nigeria, regardless of their ethnic or geographical orientation, are embedded in the constitutionally entrenched principles on federal character. This principle is meant to curtail domination of political office by any section or ethnic group, broaden the base of government participation to emphasize equality of access, fairness in the distribution of government offices, and promote national loyalty and integration. Promoting the prospects of common citizenship and staying together as a nation; promoting equality of ethnic group and respect for mutual suspicion or intolerance as the pre-condition for social justice, a continuous search for a peculiar social contract that will keep the equilibrium in the ethnic relations among the ethnic groups are needed to guarantee thus. Based on the thorough understanding of Nigeria as a multi-ethnic state, the need for a consensus orientation is recognized and the basis for the political system is laid in the written constitution with the general agreement on the basic principles of representation and distribution of political powers. It is emphasized that the representative character of the political system must be attained by the decentralization of power. Unless the personal or party dominance is avoided on the distribution of power and necessarily to arrive at the arrangement for the political organization of Nigeria's diversity, the representation of all the ethnic groups in the composition of the governments cannot be realized. The process of democratization would impart momentum towards the consensus that promotes the need for broad-based national integration to make a success of the political process (Nwozor, 2014).

4. Cultural Exchange Programs: Culture, which refers to the learned and shared human behavior including values, beliefs, artifacts, and communication symbols, is a very effective strategy for promoting national integration. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country with over 350 ethnic groups so has diversity of culture, with varying languages and dialects, modes of dressing, lifestyles, religious beliefs, festivals and other traditional practices, food, music, arts and crafts, drama, communal living, among others. Culture can be a unifying force in promoting national integration. Culture plays a crucial role in fostering national integration in Nigeria by serving as a unifying force among the country's diverse ethnic groups. Through shared cultural practices, values, and traditions, Nigerians can develop a sense of identity that transcends ethnic and religious differences, thereby strengthening national cohesion. Celebrating common cultural festivals, such as Nigeria's Independence Day and national holidays, promotes a collective identity and pride among the citizens (Eke, 2003). Additionally, promoting inter-cultural understanding and respect helps reduce misconceptions and stereotypes, fostering peaceful coexistence (Adeleke, 2012). Cultural institutions, such as music, dance, and oral traditions, serve as platforms for dialogue and unity, reinforcing a shared Nigerian identity despite ethnic diversities. Overall, leveraging Nigeria's rich cultural heritage can enhance social bonds and promote a sense of belonging among all citizens.

Education is a vital instrument for national integration, so it is imperative to galvanize the Nigerian culture into the general school curriculum with the aim of fostering unity, peace, tolerance, cooperation and understanding among Nigerians through cultural harmony, and various subjects relating to the Nigerian indigenous culture should be introduced into the curriculum of primary, secondary and higher institutions of learning and be meticulously taught to all students and pupils irrespective of their ethnicity, religion or political background. There is the need to take it a step further so that Nigeria students are exposed to cross-cultural education whereby students and pupil from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds can be encouraged to attend schools different from theirs to understand one another's culture better (Egharevba & Aghedo, 2016). Community participation in the decision-making process of government can also be adopted to foster understanding and cooperation between ethnic groups in Nigeria, especially in development projects (O. Erhun, 2015).

5. Youth Empowerment Programs: Youth empowerment refers to the establishment of a social mechanism by which fresh and unrealistic ideas of youths find channels to reach the adult world and the social structure. Some scholars view youth empowerment more implementally as coming up with programs and policies to address the plight of youths in society. Some equate youth empowerment with youth development efforts by which government policies and programs are drawn up to tangentially manifest youth empowerment. The idea of youth empowerment is rooted in self-help. Empowerment thus speaks of being given power, authority, and means to do something else.

1) *Youth empowerment is imperative for national integration in Nigeria, especially due to the alarming socio-economic environment. Nations are built by the youths and are therefore the cornerstone of growth and development in any society. Youth empowerment is a fundamental strategy for fostering national integration in Nigeria. It encompasses providing young people with the necessary skills, resources, opportunities, and voice to actively participate in the social, economic, and political life of the nation. Given that youth constitute a significant majority of the Nigerian population, their inclusion and empowerment are vital for building a cohesive and unified society amidst ethnic and religious diversity.*

2) *Lack of opportunities, unemployment, and marginalization can lead to frustration and make youth susceptible to ethnic or religious manipulation, potentially fuelling conflict and disunity (Agbibo, 2014). Empowering youth through education, skills training, and economic opportunities addresses these root causes of discontent, giving them a stake in the nation's stability and prosperity. This reduces the appeal of divisive ideologies and promotes a shared interest in national progress (Nwankwo, 2018). Empowered youth are equipped with communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills. They can become agents of peace within their communities, mediating disputes and advocating for unity and reconciliation. By providing platforms for youth voice and participation in decision-making processes, empowerment allows young people to contribute proactively to resolving conflicts and promoting social harmony (Ugwu, 2019).*

6. Role of NGOs in Promoting Integration: The NGOs play a significant and multifaceted role in promoting national integration in Nigeria. Operating independently of the government, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) often work at the grassroots level, addressing social, economic, and political issues that can either exacerbate or mitigate ethnic, religious, and regional divides. Their flexibility, proximity to communities, and focus on specific issues allow them to implement initiatives that complement government efforts and reach marginalized populations. Many NGOs specialize in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. They create safe spaces for dialogue

among representatives of different ethnic, religious, and regional groups, facilitating understanding, addressing grievances, and building trust (International Alert, 2015). Through mediation, peace education, and trauma healing programs, NGOs help communities overcome past conflicts and build bridges across divides. NGOs implement development projects that address common needs across diverse communities, such as providing access to education, healthcare, water, and sanitation. By working together on shared goals and benefiting from joint initiatives, communities are encouraged to see beyond their differences and recognize their interdependence (UNDP, 2017). These projects can foster a sense of shared citizenship and collective responsibility.

NGOs often advocate for policies that promote fairness, equality, and inclusion for all Nigerians, regardless of their background. They can pressure the government to address structural inequalities, discrimination, and political marginalization that contribute to disunity (Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre, 2018). By promoting good governance and accountability, NGOs help build a more just society where all citizens feel valued and included. NGOs frequently work with marginalized communities, including ethnic minorities, women, youth, and people with disabilities, to enhance their participation and voice in national life. By providing training, resources, and platforms for advocacy, NGOs empower these groups to assert their rights and contribute to national development, reducing feelings of exclusion and fostering a sense of belonging (ActionAid Nigeria, 2019). Many NGOs engage in civic education, informing citizens about their rights and responsibilities, the importance of tolerance, and the benefits of national unity. They use various platforms, including workshops, media campaigns, and community outreach, to promote a shared national identity and counter narratives of division (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper provides a historical analysis of Igbophobia, a deeply entrenched prejudice and discrimination against the Igbo people, which has significantly hampered national integration in Nigeria. Rooted in pre-colonial rivalries and exacerbated by colonial policies of divide and rule, Igbophobia intensified during the post-independence era, culminating in the pogroms of 1966 and the Nigerian Civil War (Achebe, 1983). While the war officially ended, the underlying sentiment of Igbophobia has persisted, manifesting in various forms, including political marginalization, economic exclusion, and stereotypical portrayals in media and public discourse (Adichie, 2012). This historical burden of prejudice has created deep-seated mistrust and resentment, hindering genuine reconciliation and the forging of a truly inclusive national identity. The continuous experience of discrimination fosters a sense of alienation among the Igbo, making it difficult to fully embrace a nation where their safety and equal opportunities are perceived as precarious. Addressing the historical injustices and ongoing manifestations of Igbophobia is therefore crucial for fostering a more integrated and equitable Nigeria.

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