

IGBO TRADERS AND TRANSPORTERS IN THE PROJECT OF NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Igbo traders and transporters as crucial stakeholders in the project of nation building in Nigeria. It problematises the phenomenon of Igbo economic dominance in Nigeria without a corresponding political participation. Using the historical research methodology and primary and secondary sources of data, the paper seeks to achieve its main objective. This is that the engendering of a functional balance between political and economic rights is central to nation building. It finds that in pre-colonial and colonial times, Igbo traders through long distance trading contributed significantly to the Nigerian project. Under colonial rule, it also finds that the construction of roads and development of road transport business enabled Igbo transporters to emerge as accidental instrument of nation building in Nigeria. Igbo traders and transporters entered business mainly for profit and entrepreneurship. But this paper argues that, because of the cross regional nature of their economic services, Igbo traders and transporters accelerate nation building in Nigeria. In post-colonial Nigeria, Igbo traders and transporters are the perfect embodiment of economic nationalism. They dispassionately build businesses beyond their geopolitical zones; and integrate into their host communities without qualms. Therefore, this paper concludes that Igbo political exclusionism is the current bane of their economic contribution to nation building in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Igbo people, Traders, Transporters, Nigerianism, Nation building*

1.0. Introduction

The Igbo of Nigeria are a political economy double barrel gun of some sort. One barrel of the gun is firing secessionist contestations; while the other is triggering economic nationalism and nation building through trade and transport. This functional difference in the role of Nigeria's Igbo, in the country's nation-building project, is a crack in the wall. Through trade and transport investments, Igbo capital in the pre-colonial and colonial periods was strategic to opening up remote rural communities and interlocking Nigerians across regional boundaries and cultural divide. In Igbo studies, there exists a plethora of literatures bordering on the origin, development of trade and commerce, industrial and entrepreneurial acumen of the Igbo people. And the causations of Igbo ethno-nationalism have also received adequate scholarly attention. Conversely, there is a near lack of research on the contribution of Igbo capital and investment in fostering nation building in Nigeria. This paper

seeks to bridge this identified knowledge gap in Igbo studies; and to demonstrate the extent to which the interface between Igbo traders, transporters and Nigerianism engendered nation building. Its' discussion was anchored on the following research questions: can trade and transportation enhance nation building? Was Igbo secessionism a threat to Igbo Nigerianism? And did Igbo economic dominance make up for Igbo political exclusion in Nigeria?

In pluralistic societies, ethnic tolerance, socio-economic justice, social cohesion and political inclusion are the foundation of the social contract. They are the fundamentals and indispensable stepping stones to nation and state building in such societies. Nigeria in the twenty-first century is a pluralistic society with much to learn. Out of her over 250 ethnic groups dominated by the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo; the Igbo are the most disconnected psychologically from the nation in terms of their recurring secessionist agitations. But despite this, the Igbos are still more committed to the Nigerian nation building project than the Biafran idea presupposes. They are the true ambassadors of economic nationalism in Nigeria, with unmistakable economic presence in trade and transport across the country. In all nooks and crannies of Nigeria's 774 local government areas, Igbo capital is the most deployed in building small, medium and large scale trading businesses in different community markets. Thus, there is hardly any village or town in Nigeria where an Igbo trader cannot be found doing business. The Nigerian Vanguard explains it this way,

There is yet a zone that has shown complete and unalloyed loyalty to the nation of Nigeria... An honest check of the investments by ethnic personalities and individuals across the country takes us to one ethnic group that qualifies by reason of their investments in the state of Nigeria... In Lagos, Igbo investment is not less than ₦ 300 trillion; it is double of that in Abuja at about ₦ 600 trillion. In Kano and Kaduna, Igbo investments run up to ₦ 10 trillion respectively; while in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states, Igbo investment is hovering about ₦ 15 trillion... There is no state in Nigeria where Igbo investments in business do not exceed ₦ 5 billion (Vanguard, 2013).

Igbo traders are one of the most widespread and acculturated people in Nigeria. They are quick to learn the language and culture of the community where they settle to trade. And they build houses there, support community development, inter-marry and integrate themselves into the society seamlessly. The deep integration, acculturation and even indigenisation of Igbo businessmen into their host communities across Nigeria enhance nation building. They have even established *Ndiigbo* Communities with their own appointed paramount ruler (*Eze*) outside their geopolitical zone.

Over the years, the pattern of Igbo settlement and contributions to socio-political and economic development of their host communities paved the way for them to dominate the markets. In Nigeria, Igbo trade dominance is usually felt in the electronics, provisions, motor spare parts and building hardware businesses. In Nigerian markets, as agents of nation building, Igbo traders build

cordial relationships; and join multi-ethnic trade unions and associations with other traders. These measures contribute to Nigeria's nation building project by promoting unity in diversity in the market. More so, Igbo's investment in Nigeria's transportation sector is another indication of nation building. In ethnically diverse societies, movement of people is critical for social contact and cohesion. The role of Igbo capital in making this a reality in Nigeria is a huge plus for nation building. Igbo transporters facilitate more than the movement of goods. They enable Nigerians to migrate across their regional and cultural boundaries for business, pleasure and tourism. And this is good for acculturation and ethnic tolerance. But the economic dominance of Igbos in Nigeria's private sector is not replicated in politics and governance. The direct result of Igbo political exclusion is a compromised Igbo Nigerianism. This at present is eclipsing the gains achieved by the Igbo in the economics of nation building.

Therefore, this paper examines the extent to the actualisation of nation building in Nigeria is dependent on the functional balance between economic and political rights. It will demonstrate that true Nigerianism (loyalty and sense of belonging in Nigeria) must complement the economics of nation building for there to be success. The historicity of Nigerianism and nation building show that they thrive well, when people enjoy unperturbed political and economic freedoms. Political autonomy and satisfaction among pre-colonial Nigerian societies enabled people to engage in economic activities that brought Nigerians together. Thus, the historical lesson here for modern Nigeria is that, her post-colonial nation building project cannot be merely politically willed, legislated into existence; nor achieved through military show or use of force. This implies that the politics and economics of nation building must complement each other today. In pragmatic terms, it means that the constitutional right of Nigerians to live, own properties and do business anywhere in Nigeria (which this paper describes as economic nationalism); must be augmented with the right to vote, contest, win elections and form government. Hence, the practice of zoning political offices in Nigeria negates political rights and freedom; and undermines nation building. Consequently, the abrogation of Igbo right to be voted for is observably the core causation of their unrest and radical Nigerianism. True Nigerianism, which is the utmost goal of Nigeria's nation building project is the commitment to the Nigerian state; and the psychological bond of union among Nigerians that emanates from the freedom to live and thrive in Nigeria politically and economically. It is the dismantling of all ethnic, regional and religious barriers to nation building. Nigerianism is the prioritisation of Nigeria's interest over all other competing sectional interests. It is the belief in a one united and indivisible Nigeria in words and in deeds; and in the respect and preservation of the political and economic rights of all Nigerians.

Further, Nigerianism would be conceptualised in this paper to mean the patriotic feeling of belonging; and consciousness of unity and commitment towards growth and development of Nigeria. It is the triumph of nationalism over ethnicity, regionalism and sectional loyalties (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011). This paper would clearly demonstrate this point using the Igbo experience as a case study. It would interrogate critical thematic areas in

Nigeria's nation building project within the context of Igbo contributions and contestations. Therefore, the paper would examine the land, people and history of Igboland; Igbo traders and economic nationalism; Igbo transporters and nation building in Nigeria; and the nation building matrix between Igbo people, Igbo ethno-nationalism and Igbo Nigerianism.

1.1 Igbo: The Land, People and History

Igbo (*Ndiigbo*) is the name of Nigeria's third largest ethnic identity; and name of her south-east geopolitical zone (Igboland). The land is situated between River Niger in the west and Cross River in the east. It stretches from the delta swampland through tropical rainforests to open grassland to the north (Ohadike, 1996). Geographically, Igboland is a rainforest region with a tropical climate. It experiences seasonal rainfall and dryness. Rainfall in the region is usually 1713mm/67.4 inch; and the average temperature in Igboland using the Celsius and Fahrenheit is 27.0 °C/80.6 °F (Climate-data.org, 2020). The most arid month is December with 20mm/0.8inch of rain. But in the month of June, Igboland experiences its highest precipitation with an average rain of 392mm/15.4inch. The month of March is the warmest in the region with an average temperature of 28.6 °C/83.5 °F. Temperature is lowest in Igboland in August with an average of 25.2 °C/77.4 °F (Climate-data.org, 2020). According to Onwubiko (1973), the environment and geography of the Igbo people played a significant role in shaping the entire course of their history. The thick forested nature of the region made it difficult for one Igbo community to conquer and unite other Igbo entities under one centralised government. As a result, the Igbo developed in pre-colonial Nigeria as a decentralised society.

The Igbo of Nigeria, as at 2006, had a total population of 21, 955, 414 (National Population Commission, 2006). The group is mainly composed of the Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo peoples of Nigeria. They speak and are united by the Igbo language, which belongs to the '*kwa*' language sub-group of the Niger-Congo group of African languages (Afigbo, 1980). Afigbo (1980) maintains that the mother tongue of the Igbo people is their most important and distinguishing feature that set them apart from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Historically, Igbo linguistic evidence suggests that the people as a distinct group emerged over 6000 years ago (Afigbo, 1980). The forested nature of Igboland played a role in influencing the fragmented pattern of their settlement. The highly decentralised nature Igbos into small autonomous republic known as "clans" Afigbo (1980) posited, make the reconstruction of the early history of the Igbos as a collective much difficult. But this does not imply that historical tools for reconstructing early history of Nigerian societies such as mythology and migration theory do not apply to the Igbo.

Historically, Igbo myth and legend have been used to reconstruct the collective origin of the Igbos as people. Their historic origin in Nigeria had been traced through mythology to *Eze Nri* (the acclaimed first Igboman). *Eze Nri*, his wife, sons and daughters were said to have been created by *Chukwu* (the Almighty God). After their creation, the first Igbo family was said to be living on top of an anthill because the whole earth was covered with water. The stranded family subsequently fell into adversity and hunger. Looking down from heaven, *Chukwu* was said to have observed the plight of the Igbo family and felt pity

for them. Consequently, he provided a piece of yam for Eze Nri to feed his family. The family ate the yam and found it to be good. Hence, they prayed to Chukwu for more yams the following day when hunger struck (Ohadike, 1996). However, instead of giving Eze Nri yam to feed his family again, *Chukwu* gave him yam seedlings to plant. But since the whole earth was submerged in water, Eze Nri was reported to have asked God, how he could plant the yam. In response, *Chukwu* directed Eze Nri to summon Awka blacksmiths. The blacksmiths came with their bellow and blew the water until dryland appeared. Subsequently, *Chukwu* instructed the first Igboman to sacrifice his first son and daughter to him; and plant the yam seedling on their graves. Eze Nri obediently carried out this instruction and in time the seedling sprouted and yam was harvested and shared. Understandably, Ohadike (1996) maintained that the Igbo developed with farming. This mythology demonstrates that the Igbos have been part of Nigeria's peopling and nation building project for a long time.

Some Igbo scholars such as Ojiaku (2015) traced the origin of the Igbo in Nigeria to their migration from the Sahara between 2500 and 2300 B.C. Igbo migration theorists believe that after Igbo migration from the Sahara, the people settled in Benue or Enugu area (Iweadighi, 1997). Generally, there is a growing consensus among Igbo people in support of the Niger-Benue confluence as their original homeland. Other Igbo migration theorists use the cultural similarities between the Igbo, Jew and Egyptian to trace their historical origin. Based on this G.T. Basden (cited in Afigbo, 1980) traced the origin of the Igbo to Israel; while M.D.W. Jeffreys (cited in Afigbo, 1980) traced their origin to Egypt. But it is the Jewish origin of Igbo people that has gained popularity among them. Some of the perceived similarities between the Igbo and the Jew responsible for this include:

Male child circumcision after eight days of birth, refraining or abstinence from the eating of certain food declared as "unclean" or "taboo", mourning of the dead for seven days, celebration of New Moon, and the practice of conducting marriage ceremony under canopy, Passover celebration (oriri achicha in Igbo), and adultery as the only ground for divorce (Wellansky, 2017, pp. 13-29).

Thus, some Igbo people prefer to address themselves as the lost tribe of Israel and the Jewish people of West Africa. Chika Oduah (2013) observed that some Igbo believe they are direct descendants of one of the sons of Jacob, Gad. One Igbo tradition claimed that Gad is the father of Eri, who gave birth to Aguleri, the progenitor and ancestor of the Igbo race. Another claimed that Gad gave birth to three sons namely Eri, Arodi and Areli and they settled in southeastern Nigeria. They were believed to have established Igbo clans such as *Owerri*, *Umuleri*, *Arochukwu* and *Aguleri*. There is also the tradition that the Igbo are descendants of the Northern ten tribe Kingdom of Israel that got lost in the 8th century B.C. when the Assyrians invaded and forced many into exile. However, while the accounts of Igbo origin like that of other peoples of Nigeria have remained contentious and fluid; this historical background for the purpose of this paper is apt for contextualisation. It is further useful for understanding why Igbos generally identify themselves with Nigeria in one way or another; and are

integral part of the peoples Nigeria's nation building project seeks to forge into one patriotic fold.

1.2 Igbo and the Nigerian Project: Political Contribution and Contestations

The Nigerian project is a nation building construction work that predates 1914. Before the proposal for the amalgamation of Nigeria was submitted in May 1912, the project had been ongoing. Through the instrumentality of inter-group relations in pre-colonial times nation building was set in motion. It interlocked the Igbo people with other peoples of Nigeria (Afigbo, 1980). Hence, Igbo society and culture, like other Nigerian societies and cultures, never evolved and developed in isolation. This understanding is vital for challenging and repositioning the Eurocentric view that nation building did not begin in Nigeria until 1914. Lord Fredrick Lugard claimed that aside from the single railway and the uncertain waterway of the River Niger that connected the Northern and Southern peoples of Nigeria; there was no other literal means of communication and contact among them (Lugard, 1920). Implicit in this argument is the misconception that social contact and nation building were colonially engineered. Insisting otherwise, Ofili (2016) maintains that pre-colonial Nigerian societies were the real initiator of the Nigerian project through trade and commerce and wars of expansionism. Consequently, Attah (2011) avers that before contact with the British colonialists, the autonomous communities and peoples of pre-colonial Nigeria were on their own able to foster a relative harmonious relationship with one another.

The Nigerian project in the pre-colonial era was also politically evident in the efforts of the people to resist foreign rule. This radical Nigerianism is epitomised by King Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itsekiri, Oba Ovonramwen of Benin and Sultan Muhammadu Atthahiru I of Sokoto. James Coleman (1956) describes these resistances as traditional nationalism. The Igbos in pre-colonial times, were not direct political contributors to the rise of Nigerianism because of their lack of centralised government. But the introduction of indirect rule and imposition of centralised administration (Warrant Chiefs) in Igboland paved the way for the Igbo to politically contribute to the Nigerian project. The earliest contribution of the Igbos to the rise of Nigerianism was the Aba Women revolt of 1929. The Igbo women of Aba in this occasion did more than resist taxation; they demonstrated their consciousness of their Nigerian personality. Further, during the sixty years Nigeria spent under colonial rule (1900-1960), prominent Igbos such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nwafor Orizu, Jaja Wachuku, Kingsley Mbadiwe, Michael Okpara, Akanu Ibiam and Alvan Ikoku contributed significantly to the Nigerian project. They played pivotal roles in Nigeria's nationalism, development of Nigerian political, educational and philosophical thought and struggle for decolonisation.

However, the Igbo in no distant time metamorphosed into one of the foremost threats to the Nigerian project. Azikiwe fanned the embers of Igbo ethno-nationalism and it graduated into secessionist contestations for Biafra. In 1941, the Ernest Ikoli and Samuel Akinsanya succession tussle for the vacant Legislative Council seat of K.A. Abayomi under the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) was what set the ball rolling. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was the major

supporter of Samuel Akinsanya to win the seat, whipped up ethnic sentiments when his candidate lost the election. Azikiwe argued that the loss of Akinsanya was caused by the deep seated prejudice other Nigerians had against the Igbo and Ijebu people (Nnoli, 1978). And since then, the narrative of Igbo marginalisation stuck in Nigeria. However, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) and Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) alliance that was formed towards the 1959 general elections succeeded in re-launching Igbos into the front burners of Nigeria's nation building project. It led to Azikiwe becoming the President of Nigeria during the first Republic. Under this capacity, Azikiwe partnered with Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister, in the first post-independent effort to whip up nationalism among Nigerians. In time, the high involvement of Igbo officers in Nigeria's first military coup created political distrust towards the Igbos in Nigeria. The resultant effect of this political distrust on the Igbos was that, it cascaded them from political grace to grass in Nigeria.

Igbos moved from being front seat political actors in Nigeria's nation building project, to being political bench warmers. Thus, began the resurgence of the theory of Igbo marginalisation developed by Azikiwe in 1941. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu and Nnamdi Kanu later emerged as the bane of nation building in Nigeria fired by ethno-nationalism. The conspiracy theory of prejudice against the Igbo gained momentum in eastern Nigeria following the killing of Johnson Umunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi and other top Igbo in government in a counter-coup plotted by Murtala Muhammed, Theophilus Danjuma, Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babaginda and Sani Abacha in July, 1966. Before the coup, riots against Aguiyi-Ironsi's unification decree in the north led to killings of many Igbo (mostly traders) residents in the region. These developments played into Azikiwe's narrative of prejudice against the Igbo in Nigeria. And they gingered secessionist feelings and fanned the flame of ethnic-nationalism in Igboland that disconnected Igbo people psychologically from the Nigerian project. Under the leadership and coordination of Ojukwu, Igbo ethno-nationalism snowballed into full scale secessionism and Biafra war.

The Biafra war ended in 1970 with the defeat of the Igbo dissenters. And strategically, the Nigeria government under Yakubu Gowon adopted the post-war policy of 'No victor, No vanquished'. This posture reflected Nigeria's amnesty to the Igbo, which restrained her from imposing reparation on the vanquished, for the sake of nation building. It was complemented socio-economically with the policy of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation. Through this policy, the Yakubu Gowon administration sought to make the economics of nation building to smoothly tie-up with the politics of nation building. But this was short-lived. In post-civil war Nigeria, the return to the *status quo* triggered the rise of new disgruntled and politically displaced Igbo elements to challenge the fragile peace. Hence, Ekpo (2019) in his examination of the resurgence of Biafra radicalisation and Igbo nationalism observed thus,

Since 1999, the Igbos have perpetually agitated and craved for equity and fairness in recognition and resource allocation and distribution. Some have overtly called for a restoration of the defunct Biafra and hoped

to realise self-determination through peaceful means
(Ekpo, 2019, p. 93).

In eastern Nigeria, groups such as *Ohaneze Ndiigbo*, Igbo Concerned Citizens (ICC), Igbo Elders Forum (IEF), Igbo Renaissance Movement (IRM), Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Ekpo, 2019) are currently piloting the Igbo agenda or politics of recognition. Providing insight into this phenomenon Godwin Onouha (2008) explains that,

Politics of recognition is a global phenomenon constantly responsible for the emergence, recreation and redefinition of nationalist identities to negotiate their identities and interests in the quest for self-determination is an outcome of shifting political, social and economic contexts (Onouha, 2008, p. 2).

But in Igboland out of the groups contesting Igbo' political exclusion; and championing their quest for recognition and self-determination, IPOB is the most radical and militaristic in outlook and approach. Under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, the group had attempted to desecrate (mostly through verbal threats) Nigeria's independence celebrations. IPOB also undermines Nigeria's sovereignty by observing Biafra day, declaring sit-at-home in Igboland during elections as a form of protests, and even establishing its own militia. Therefore, it was not a surprise when the Nigerian government declared IPOB a terrorist group, proscribed it and declared its leader a most wanted person. And this action was sanctioned and reciprocated by governors of the southeastern states of Nigeria as an expression of their disdain of the excesses of IPOB and its leader. Thus, in Nigeria's modern politics of nation building, the contestations of Igbo non-state actors are a spanner in the wheel of progress in the achievement of Igbo Nigerianism. But in Nigeria's economics of nation building, Igbo traders and transporters through their dominance in the private sector are blazing the trail of economic nationalism and nation building.

1.3 Igbo Traders and Economic Nationalism in Nigeria

Economic nationalism in Nigeria and Igbo studies is arguably the least explored mechanism of nation building by scholars. The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as the grand norm of the land is the foremost instigator of economic nationalism. In a bid to promote nation building, section 15(3) mandated the Nigerian state to:

Provide adequate facilities critical for free mobility of people, goods and services throughout Nigeria. Secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the Federation... promote or encourage the formation of associations that cut across ethnic, linguistic, religious or other sectional barriers (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011).

While section 16(1d) of the 1999 constitution further fanned the spirit of economic nationalism by guaranteeing the rights of Nigerians to engage in any economic activities that are outside the major sectors of the economy. This right

was consolidated and expanded in section 41(1) as an economic right that can be enjoyed anywhere in Nigeria. It provided that,

Every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to move freely throughout the country and to reside in any part thereof, and no citizen of Nigeria shall be expelled from Nigeria or refused entry thereto or exit therefrom (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011).

It is against this backdrop this section of the paper engages with Igbo traders as economic nationalists and nation builders in Nigeria. It maintains that Igbo traders are one of the pioneers of economic nationalism, whose capital investment in trade and commerce know no boundary. Across Nigeria's 774 local government areas, Igbo traders are economically advancing the course of inter-group relations and national integration.

Trade as an economic activity in Nigeria is widespread. In pre-colonial times, it developed from trade by barter to the use of currency in trading. Thus, from time immemorial, trade had been a major vehicle propelling social contact and economic nationalism. Over time, in the economic development of Nigeria, the Igbo people successfully carved a niche for themselves as professional traders. Hence, trading as an occupation in Nigeria has almost been tagged an Igbo affair. Although the traditional economy of Igboland rested on agriculture, indigenous industrial production and trade (Chukwu, 2015); trading towered above other economic activities to become one of the hallmarks of Igbo civilisation. Igbos' excel in trading more than any other ethnic groups in Nigeria because most of them started learning trading from childhood. And because of the Igbo trading circle or tradition that requires a successful Igbo trader to train his siblings and brothers in his trade (Ohizu, 2021). Orugun and Nafiu (2014) explained this trade culture as the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System (ITAS). It is a system of informal and unstructured training programme under which prospective Igbo traders acquire the trade skills over an agreed period (Orugun and Nafiu, 2014). As traders, Igbo people have progressively become one of the main pillars on which the economics of nation building in Nigeria hangs. Chuku (2018) explains it this way,

The Igbos for centuries interacted with their Annang, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Igala, Idoma, Ijo and Ogoja neighbours through trade. And this enhanced cross-cultural fertilization. Eastern Igbos adopted age-grade system and masquerade institutions from their Efik and Ibibio neighbours; while northern Igbos adopted aspects of their monarchical institutions from Edo, Idoma and Igala. And these societies adopted from the Igbos religious rituals connected with agriculture; and the primacy of oracular institutions (Chuku, 2018, p. 18).

Ariyo (2014) observed that the Igbo people were predominantly long distance traders. And this apparently explained why they were able to have far reaching nation building effect in pre-colonial Nigeria. They built structured societies and pursued wide ranging economic relationships. According to Chukwu (2015), long distance trading enabled goods produced in Igboland to find their

way into other cultural enclaves and vice versa. Long distancing trading in pre-colonial times was the major economic catalyst that engendered cross-regional mobility and socio-cultural interactions. It is also the anchorage of modern economic nationalism. Markets in Nigeria before 1900 were common grounds for traders and buyers from different ethnic extractions to meet and bond through sales. Consequently, nation building arguably started in the markets in pre-colonial Nigeria, when mutual understanding and thrust began to develop among buyers and sellers. To the extent that, sellers were confident enough to sell goods on credit to some of their customers. Such credit worthy customers, contributed to nation building by honouring and sustaining the trade agreement by making prompt payment on the next market day.

In the colonial period, trade continued to facilitate nation building in Nigeria. The cross-cultural impact of the trade relations between the Igbo and Esan people during the period is a good example of this. Okoduwa (2018) observed that under colonial rule Esan trade tilted away from Benin towards the coastal towns by the River Niger. And Igbo traders were the biggest beneficiaries of the inward expansion of Esan palm oil trade. Onoleme (2019) reported that, Igbo traders who migrated to Esanland to participate in its palm oil economy were given warm welcome by the Uromi people. The Igbos settled there, build houses and inter-married with the people. The pattern of settlement of Igbo traders in Uromi enabled them make headway in the market. And it facilitated cross-cultural fertilisation and ethnic tolerance between both groups. The Uromi people of Esan, in the economics of nation building, learnt the art of trading from the Igbo and acquired their economic philosophy. Uromi's economic rapprochement and adoption of Igbo best economic practices is responsible for its people being called the Igbo people of Esanland (Onoleme, 2019). From Uromi, the influence of Igbo traders expanded to other parts of Esan, where they later opened shops in the market. Beyond Esanland, the nation building effect of Igbo capital was also experienced in all Nigerian communities where Igbo traders settled before 1960. And Lagos is the biggest economic beneficiary of the capital investment of Igbo traders. Igbo traders contributed immensely to the development of Lagos as Nigeria's commercial capital and centre of nation building excellence. The success of Igbo traders in Lagos is a magnet pulling other ethnic nationals there. Resultantly, Lagos became a "No man's land".

However, Nigeria's economics of nation building suffered its biggest setback during the war years (1967-1970). The theory of Igbo marginalisation made many Igbo traders to close their shops across the country and relocate to the east to support Biafra. In different towns and villages across Nigeria, the exit of Igbo traders from the markets was an economic gateway for many. It accelerated interest of their hosts in trade and entrepreneurship. For example, in Esanland the return of Igbo traders to the east enabled Uromi people to take over Igbo shops and dominate the market. But when the war ended in 1970, Igbo economic nationalism regained momentum. The economic devastation of Igboland during the war created poverty and hunger; and triggered a post-war rush to leave the region. Igbo traders en masse migrated out of the eastern Nigeria region to other parts of the country in a desperate attempt to improve their economic fortunes. By so doing, Ihejirika (2011) argued that after the civil

war, Igbos became the biggest builders of Nigeria's private sector. They regained their dominance in trade across Nigerian towns and villages; and expanded the volume of their business through diversification into import and export.

In twenty-first century Nigeria, Igbo traders have continued to drive economic nationalism amid secessionist contestations. In Benin City, the capital of Edo state Igbo traders have a strong presence in both small and big markets. In fact, as true elsewhere in Nigeria, their presence in these markets is used as a parameter to gauge their economic viability. The Igbo Union situated in Uselu, Benin City is the established Igbo community forum that in turn defends and advances the general interests of Igbos in Edo state. Hence, although Igbo traders are not the founders of Benin markets such as *Oliha*, *Oba*, *New Benin*, *Santana*, *Uwelu*, *Ewariaken*, and *Uselu* they have strong presence there. They have heavy capital investments in these markets because of the nature of the products they deal on. Igbo traders operate electronics, computer, provisions and food stuffs, furniture and fittings, and motor spare parts shops in markets across Benin City. Hence, Igbo traders in Benin City serve as economic magnet pulling both buyers and other sellers to its markets. Therefore, when they travel for the yearly December festivities, Benin markets are usually scanty, devoid of hustle and bustle and fraught with low rate of turnover. In fact, a government official working under the Edo State Inland Revenue Service (EIRS) noted that Igbo traders in Benin City are the biggest contributors to the State government's internally generated revenue. They are the bulk payers of taxation across the state (Obi, 2021). Igbos traders are also a strong force for economic change. In 2017, Collins Ohizu directed his colleagues in the trading profession boycott the Edo state government's decision to increase trade tax to ₦50,000. Through collective bargaining with constituted authorities and economic lockdown of all shops, the traders were able to influence the new tax policy of the Edo state government to favour their member. The trade tax finally reduced to ₦8,000 (Ohizu, 2021).

More so, in their economic space of operation in Benin, Igbo traders contribute to nation building by pursuing cordial relationship with traders within and outside their line of business. They also promote trade unionism and cooperation vital for price control and stabilisation. The unity and camaraderie this generates among traders enables collective bargaining with government, collective tax payment, and quickly settle disputes. Ohizu (2021) an Igbo trader and Chairman of Computer Dealers Association and of the Coalition of Traders and Artisans in Benin City observed that cooperation, peace and brotherhood among traders from different ethnic groups in Nigeria is the goal of their unionism. The coalition of traders and artisans is made up of 157 registered trade unions; while the computer dealers association has a minimum membership of 100 dealers and no maximum end. These associations contribute to nation building by encouraging their members to settle disputes using the internal mechanisms of the trader union. Among these traders, it is a law that traders must not use the police to arrest other traders nor engage one another in any sort of litigation (Ohizu, 2021). Hence, Trader-Trader conflict and Trader-Customer conflict are generally resolved through the traders Peace Committee or imposition of fine of ₦20,000 on traders caught fighting (Ohizu,

2021). But in the area of price control and stabilisation in the market, the traders' body is still encountering some challenges from their members. Some traders due to the fact that, they got their supply from cheaper source and want to increase their rate of turnover, at times have urgent need for money, or due to preferential treatment sell outside the controlled price. Yet, these challenges do not in any way diminish the good blood existing among traders in Benin City (Ohizu, 2021). Therefore, the ability to manage and resolve their differences internally and forge ahead is one lesson in nation building Nigeria's political leadership can learn from traders. This paper will now examine the contributions of Igbo transporters to Nigeria's nation building project. These transporters convey Igbo traders, other merchants and their goods. And by so doing, bridge the distance between source of supply and point of sales; and make it easy for buyers and sellers to meet.

1.4 Igbo Transporters and Nation Building in Nigeria

Road infrastructural development in Nigeria provided the foundation for Igbo transporters among others to emerge. Some of the earliest Igbo transporters to emerge on Nigeria's road transport sector were J.C. Ulasi, L.P. Ojukwu and A.E. Ilodibe (Ajaegbo, 2013). Since the arrival of the first imported car in Lagos in 1905, the Igbo had been among the biggest importers of transport vehicles into Nigeria. Providing insight into Nigeria's early importation of vehicles and development of road transport business, Olukoju (1996) wrote that,

The provision of motor vehicles to ply Nigerian was an important contribution by African pioneers notably W.A. Dawodu of Lagos, Nigeria. He imported American Ford and Dodge cars; and ran motor transport services in Lagos and in the Osogbo area in the cocoa belt of western Nigeria (Olukoju, 1996, p. 156).

Ekundare (1973) observed that by 1909, 1200 vehicles were imported into Nigeria. And by 1960, when colonialism ended the number of imported commercial vehicles, cars, motorcycles and trailers in the country jumped to 27,000. Although the Yoruba were the pioneers of transportation business in Nigeria, from the 1920's Igbo capital and investment started flowing into the industry phenomenally. Olubomehin (2012) gave a panoramic assessment of the nature and operational dimensions of early Igbo transporters. He wrote that,

One of the earliest Igbo transport undertakings was Messrs Summers Transport of Aba. It was a private European business established between 1918 and 1919. Its operation covered the whole of the eastern province. It was followed by Messrs Ojukwu Transport; and they carried bunker coal from Enugu to the River fleet at Onitsha, where they competed for share of the palm produce and carried groundnuts and other produce from Katsina to Kano... (Olubomehin. 2012, p. 231).

However, by 1937 the Anambra people of Igboland emerged as a dominant force in the sector (Ajaegbo, 2013). Consequently, it is safe to argue that investment from Nnewi was the biggest deployment of Igbo capital in the transportation business. Igbo transporters, Ajaegbo writes,

...established and operated transport business in many important towns and urban centres in Nigeria such as Onitsha, Aba, Port Harcourt, Nnewi, Enugu, Nsukka, Lagos, Ibadan, Asaba, Benin, Jos, Makurdi, Kano and Kaduna (Ajaegbo, 2013, p. 165).

The cross-regional scope of their investment and operations positioned Igbo transporters as veritable agents of nation building. Their services accelerated the rate of inter-group relations and integration in Nigeria. Based on the cross-cultural nature of their operations, it would be safe to contend that early Igbo transporters were more nationalistic in their business orientation. They differed significantly, in terms of scope of operation, from the Yoruba transport investors, who pioneered the transportation business in Nigeria. For instance, A. Dawodu, one of the earliest Yorubas in Lagos, to invest in the transportation business basically connected western Nigeria through road transport services. But the Igbo transporters, when they emerged, built a spider-web of motor parks that connected the east, west, mid-west and northern Nigeria. In the twenty-first century, new Igbo transporters such as the Young Shall Grow Motors Limited, Abc Transport, Chisco Motors, Ekene Dili Chukwu, G.U. Okeyson Motors, Peace Mass Transit, Eze Nnwanta Motors and Izuchukwu Motors among others have followed in their footsteps. Igbo transporters are the biggest importers of luxurious buses for transportation business in Nigeria. Young Shall Grow Motors alone has over 500 fleets of luxuries buses; and transports over 10,000 passengers per day (Young Shall Grow Motors Limited, 2021). ABC Transport also has over 500 fleets of luxurious buses (Opara and Nneji, 2018). These feats accounted for Igbo transporters forming and dominating the Luxury Bus Owners' Association of Nigeria (LUBOAN) (Ajaegbo, 2013). They have bus terminals in all major cities and towns in the country. It is this that makes their transport service arguably the most de-tribalised and nationalistic. Although, primarily driven by profit motives, Igbo transporters also offer day and night transport services that accidentally keep Nigerian travelers constantly on the move. More so, their cross-country operations engender nation building by making it possible for Nigerians to move beyond their cultural regions to settle, trade, marry and attend events and ceremonies in other cultural zones. Therefore, Igbo capital had transformed Nigeria into one small national village; where all ethnic groups are just a transport company away.

1.5 The Igbo, Ethno-Nationalism and Nigerianism: Rethinking the Matrix

Nigeria is composed principally of three broad ethnicities, which veil but do not exclude internal specificities. The Igbo as the third largest ethnic identity in the country is a critical contributor to its nation building project. In the context of Nigeria's economics of nation building, this paper sustain the idea that the Igbos are more Nigerian than Biafran. Since the end of the Nigeria Civil War in 1970, Biafra has remained an imaginary realm to which some Igbos prefer to pledge their loyalty. In modern times, faced with political exclusion some Igbos commonly seek solace in the Biafran idea. But in reality, Igbos live, do business and thrive economically in Nigeria not Biafia. Hence, this paper contends that despite the gains achieved by Igbo traders and transporters in Nigeria's nation building project; the psychological attachment of some Igbos to the imaginary state of Biafra is eclipsing their achievements. Igbo sectional

loyalty to Biafra must be transformed to complete devotion and loyalty to Nigeria. This is the political half of Igbo contribution to nation building that is needed to complement their economic contribution to Nigeria's nation building project. As a collective, Igbo people are exclusively found in eastern Nigeria. They are not found as indigenous natives in other African countries, just as the Hausa and Yoruba peoples are found (Ihejirika, 2011). This implies that, although there are Igbo people living in diaspora, their homeland as a distinct and peculiar ethnic configuration is only in Nigeria. Hence, their full physical and psychological commitment and loyalty to Nigeria would be to the overall good of the Igbos and the Nigerian state.

Based on the strong territorial connection of Igbo to Nigeria, it suffices to state that Igbo ethno-nationalism is essentially for a struggle to assert the political and economic rights of Igbos to live and thrive in their homestead than elsewhere (including the imaginary state of Biafra). The geographical and psychological pride of place of the Igbo to Nigeria is evident in claims in some quarters in Igboland that the Igbo people are the Jew of Nigeria. As true Nigerians, the Igbo are poised to live, settle and do business anywhere in the nation. And this had made them one of the most dispersed ethnic groups in Nigeria. Therefore, contrary to general knowledge this paper contends that Igbo agitation for Biafra in the twenty-first century is nothing but a radical expression of their Nigerianism. The Igbo people in Nigeria's modern political landscape are a people pushed to the wall politically through exclusionism. Since the return to democracy in Nigeria in 1999, the Igbos despite their majority status; and the supposed power sharing formula- zoning principle-developed by the Nigerian political elites, Igbos have been politically marginalised and denied access to the Presidency. In recent times, this is the observable Igbo grievances behind the resurgence of the unrealistic Biafra movement by some Igbo ethno-nationalists. These Igbo personalities evoke secessionism as a political masterstroke and stratagem to pursue the political rights of the Igbo under the disguise of self-determination. Therefore, modern Igbo secessionist contestation is arguably an expression of the people's loud rejection of their political marginalisation and exclusion in Nigeria. It is a means to challenge the political sidelining and undermining of the third leg of Nigeria's tripod, without which the polity cannot be stable.

Therefore, it can be said that the die-hard support for Biafra in Igboland does not necessarily amount to a die-hard rejection of Nigeria. In fact, as Balogun (1973) puts it, agitation for Biafra is actually a stepping stone to the realisation and full maximisation of Igbo Nigerianism. Biafra was a supposed political calculation and military strategy conceived by Odumegwu-Ojukwu to achieve Igbo political dominance in Nigeria. In the light of the political highhandedness, economic marginalisation, oppression and suppression of minorities that defined Nigeria's first Republic and military regime; Ojukwu conceived secession, disintegration and reintegration of Nigeria was the solution. He believed Igbo secessionism would trigger other regions to secede from Nigeria; and bring Nigeria to its end. After the disintegration of the country, Ojukwu planned to reintegrate all the breakaway republics under a new Nigeria led by him. Balogun captured the point this way,

From Ojukwu's point of view... secession was not designed to as a breakaway from the Federation; but was one more move in the power struggle for control of Nigeria. His hope was that once the East seceded the rest of the Federation would disintegrate, and that he would then proceed to regroup the Southern states under his leadership and bring the North to its heel (Balogun, 1973, p. 76).

Implicit in this understanding is the fact in relation to Nigeria the Igbo do not have any problem with the nation; but with its bad politics and governance. Hence, through secessionist agitation they were only using their left hand to point out the dysfunctionality in Nigeria's political system. Consequently, secessionism was originally resorted to as a means of fixing the problem in the system; but not to take the Igbo out of Nigeria.

Resultantly, this paper opines that once the grievances emanating from Igbo political exclusion in Nigeria is conciliated; Igbo secessionist contestations would cease. At present, events leading up to the 2023 general elections seem to point in this direction. From their unanimous rejection and proscription of IPOB and its leader Nnamdi Kanu to the clamour for true federalism and Igbo president in 2023; the governors of Igboland seem to have abandoned Biafra for true Nigerianism. When this emerging development comes to fruition and eventually complements Igbo capital investment in trade and transportation; it would activate the functional trilogy in the economics of nation building. If Biafra were to become a reality, Igbo traders and transporters risk leaving behind and losing not just their capital and business; but their goodwill as well. And this obviously portends a danger, Igbo investors might hardly recover from despite attaining Biafra. More so, the Igbo who survived the Nigerian civil war know the full cost of the war. The hunger, starvation, loss of lives and properties, businesses and livelihood, economic wreckage and the post-traumatic effects caused by the war cannot be forgotten in a hurry. Hence, a popular Igbo adage holds that 'it is a man who has not experienced war that rushes to get a cutlass at the slightest mention of war'. Therefore, this paper averred that the current secessionist contestations in Igboland mean something else. It is a radical expression of Igbo Nigerianism and a means of pursuing the right of Igbo people to live and thrive politically and economically in a united Nigeria. Consequently, Ihejerika concludes that,

Igbos are the single most important builders of Nigeria's private sector... Since Nigeria's inception, Igbos have proven to be leaders in her education sector, commerce and in many other areas of human endeavours. Demands for their services and leadership throughout Nigeria make them ubiquitous and instrument of nation building (Ihejerika, 2011, p. 3).

In the final analysis, modern Igbo secessionist contestations are arguably mere political contrivances geared towards achieving Igbo political inclusion. They do not represent nor truly connote anti-Nigerian desires. The Igbos as one of the major pillars of economic nationalism and nation building in Nigeria had more to lose than gain from secessionism. Hence, there is an observable deceleration in the movement for the actualisation of Biafra in Igboland because

of the promising prospect of the Presidency in Nigeria being zoned to the region in 2023. To this end, Igbo elders and elites have been in touch with their counterparts in western and northern Nigeria to push the Igbo bid for presidency in 2023. In this regard, Igbo Nigeriaism had been working to foster nation building in the country. The clamour and hope of Igbo presidency is re-engineering national consciousness across Nigeria. In fact, the northern and western elders and elites have openly acknowledged the need for Igbo presidency in 2023. The emergence of an Igbo president in Nigeria in 2023 is believed to be the balm that would permanently heal the wounds caused by the Nigerian civil war and years of Igbo political exclusion. In twenty-first Nigeria, it is central to the psychological reconciliation and reintegration of the Igbo with their homeland and brothers from other ethnic groups. Therefore, in studying the role of the Igbo in Nigeria's economics of nation building, we find that the political inclusion of the Igbo is the differentials that need to be balanced for politics and economics to meet.

1.6 Conclusion

The Igbo peoples of Nigeria are one of the nation's building bloc. Since 1960, Igbo traders and transporters have been the champion and embodiment of economic nationalism in Nigeria. The paper reveals that Igbo people are more economically nationalistic in disposition than other identities in the country. Propelled by economic nationalism, Igbo traders have built a spider-web of small, medium and large scale businesses across Nigeria's 36 states. It is against this backdrop, this paper examined the problem of Igbo economic dominance without a corresponding political participation in Nigeria. It finds that across Nigeria's 774 local government areas, there is hardly any town or village where Igbo capital had not been deployed in the market. In Nigeria's road transport business history, the paper found that Igbo transporters were the pioneers of transport services that cut across regional and cultural boundaries. Thus, it argued that Igbo traders and transporters are contributory to the advancement of inter-group relations, acculturation and Nigerianism. Lastly, the paper finds that Igbo political exclusion in Nigeria is the causation of their modern secessionist agitations. Therefore, the paper concluded that Igbo secessionist agitations is more of a means of challenging Igbo political exclusion in Nigeria than of achieving a separate state.

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