

The language factor in the politics of ethnic identity among the West Niger Igbo of Nigeria

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Received 27th December 2022; Accepted 21st February 2023

ABSTRACT: The West Niger Igbo forms one of the six sub-cultural groups of Igboland. The other five sub-groups include: Northern, Southern, Northeastern, or what Afigbo called *Ogu-Ukwu*, Southeastern or Cross River, and Riverain. In fact substantial parts of West Niger, Northern, and Southern sub-groups constitute the Riverain sub-group. Although all the six sub-groups have cultural interfaces at their borderlands with neighbouring ethnic groups which often generate multi-cultural identity characteristics, yet in most cases Igbo remains the major spoken language. Under such circumstances there has always been the question of identity definition founded on the three ethno-historical variables of origin, culture, and language. And among the six sub-groups there is nowhere this question of identity definition runs higher than among the West Niger Igbo. This question has often been centred on which among the three variables forms the fundamental basis of identity definition. In other words, what defines a man as an Igbo by ethnic classification? In this paper, we have decided to look into this fundamental question of identity definition among the West Niger Igbo in the midst of denials and counter-denials of Igbo identity by some members of the sub-group. It is expected that the work will go a long way in resolving some fundamental aspects of this intractable controversy. In pursuing this objective, the work adopts historical methodology constructed on diachronic approach within the circles of linguistic and ethnographical sources.

Keywords: African languages, ethnic identity, ethnic politics, Igbo language, Igboland, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The Igbo situated on the Western part of River Niger popularly known variously as Western Igbo, West Niger Igbo, Ika Ibo, and currently known in political parlance as Anioma form one of the six ethnographical sub-groups of the Igbo ethnic nation (Forde and Jones, 1950, p. 13). The other groups include: Northern Igbo, Northeastern Igbo, Southern Igbo, Southeast Igbo, known also as Cross River Igbo, and Riverain Igbo. Ironically, a substantial section of the area defined as Riverain Igbo equally forms part of the West Niger Igbo sub-group. These are mainly found among the towns situated along the West Bank of the River Niger from Ebu in the North to Asaba Ase in the South.

The West Niger Igbo is separated from the Igbo east of the Niger River by the River Niger. The West Niger at its northern limit has boundary with Esan sub-group of the Edo-speaking group; on the western limit, it has the Bini

Sub-group of the Edo-speaking group, while southwards it is bounded by the Isoko and Urhobo sub-groups of the Edo-speaking groups. Additionally, just at the tip of its southeast limit at Asaba Ase town it shares boundary with the Ijaw-speaking group.

However, it is important to note that the above definitions are by no means conclusive when considered in the light of extant ethnographic evidence since much of the above boundary definitions are constructed on political exigencies. In other words, ethnographically the West Niger Igbo extends further west into what is today politically defined as Edo State. In the same light a number of Igbo-speaking communities are today defined as inclusive of the Isoko and Urhobo sub-groups. Thus, between the West Niger Igbo and their Edo neighbours it is impracticable to draw a straight-line of ethnic boundary without strong ethnic interfaces. As would be expected,

these characteristic ethnic interfaces consequently gave rise to an equally characteristic cultural watershed that tends to generate what seems to be a conflict of ethnic identity. This conflict of ethnic identity appears more profound when some sections of the mainly Igbo-speaking sub-group deny their Igbo identity, which tends to question the role of language as a fundamental factor of ethnic identity definition.

There is no doubt that within the intellectual contraptions of anthropology that both language and culture are subjects of human evolution and thus further subject to change over time. Thus, in order to fully understand the identity question of the West Niger Igbo, a deeper understanding of the relative impacts of their neighbours on their culture and language is needed. In other words, what are the factors that define the West Niger Igbo as a distinct sub-group of the Igbo ethnic nation that seem to redefine their identity as an Igbo group?

The above question can be answered from the two pedestals of external influences and cross-cultural interactions. On the factor of external influences, one should however make a distinction between cross-cultural interaction and external imposition of a perceived superior value system and culture. Whereas cross-cultural interactions envisage a mutual exchange of certain elements of the cultural traits of relatively equal but distinct groups, external imposition expresses itself by definition of an invading cultural trait as being superior to the existing one. Evidence of cross-cultural interactions are found in the common traits between the West Niger Igbo and their Edo and Igala neighbors, the Nsukka and Omambala (Igbo-Adegbe) sub-groups and their Igala neighbors (Boston, 1960), the Cross-River Igbo and their Efik/Ibibio neighbors, the Ikwerre and related groups with their Ijaw neighbors, as well as the North-Eastern Igbo and their Tiv and Ekoi neighbors (Forde and Jones, 1950). What this means is that there are certain Efik/Ibibio cultural traits found among their Igbo neighbors which cannot be defined as original Igbo culture. The same applies among the Efik/Ibibio on the other side of the ethnic divide.

On the other hand, an invading culture comes with the force of superiority over and above the existing one. Often associated with a conquering nation, it presents itself as the *raison d'être* of the invader's superiority and thus the only basis of ascendancy designed for the conquered. By this approach therefore, it does not strive to discern the positive elements of the conquered culture. Among the modern agents of this cultural imperialism are Christianity, Islam and colonialism.

Looking at the ethnic and historical demography of West Niger Igbo, three factors appear to constitute the foundation base of their distinct sub-group identity. The first factor is the presence of linguistic commonality and its associated cultural interface which tends to build bridges of inter-ethnic understanding rather than conflict zones of mutual misunderstanding. The second factor revolves round the widespread historical traditions of common

origin from Benin, while the third factor concerns the imperial legacies of the pre-Colonial Edo kingdom of Benin in constructing obviously enduring historical bridges of inter-ethnic sentimental relationship throughout the length and breadth of Southern Nigeria. Unlike the first factor however, the other two factors cannot be treated in isolation since it was indeed the rise of Benin imperial legacy that sprouted the traditions of Benin origins, migrations, and settlement among the West Niger Igbo and even beyond.

THE NIGER-BENUE CONFLUENCE THEORY AND ETHNO-LINGUISTIC DETERMINANTS OF SOUTHERN UNITY

Of all the important body of evidence connected with determining the identity and origin of a people, linguistics offers the most probable approximation to what seems the most viable evidence. This is the case with most of the ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria where their primordial origin is explained by the Niger-Benue Confluence theory of origins of Nigerian peoples. According to this theory, the *Kwa* language family, which is a branch of the larger *Niger-Congo* language family of Africa, gave birth to such languages as the Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Idoma, Igala, Igbira (Ebira), Gwari (Gbagi), Ewe, Akan Fon, Nupe, Ebira, Bassa, Igede, and Itsekiri among others, most of which are domiciled in the West African sub-region. It is believed that the original home of the *Kwa* language was within the vicinity of the Confluence of Rivers Niger and Benue from where it branched off to form those separate and distinct languages.

The Niger-Benue Confluence theory is hinged on the linguistic theory of glottochronology and lexicostatistics. Hymes (1960, p. 4) explains glottochronology as the evolution of a language in terms of rate of change of its basic vocabularies over a thousand years, and lexicostatistics as "the study of the statistical calculation of vocabularies of languages arising from glottochronology for the purpose of historical inferences."

In an earlier classification, Greenberg (1963, p. 8) identified five distinct language families of considerable importance in the Continent of Africa to include the Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, Macro-Sudanic, Central Saharan, and the Click families. He further identified seven individual languages that possess relatively insignificant characteristics that qualify them to be defined as distinct language families. Greenberg (1950, p. 17) further noted that these include Songhai, Maban, Fur, Koman, Kordofanian, Temainian, and Nyangiya, thus arriving at a dozen language families.

From the Niger-Congo family, seven sub-families were identified. They include West Atlantic, Mandigo, Gur, Kwa, Ijo (Ijaw), Central, and Adamawa-Eastern. The central thesis governing this classification in respect of glottochronology is that, at a point in the history of Africa Continent, a Proto-Niger-Congo language was spoken by

almost all the peoples in Africa. This Proto-Niger-Congo language later diverged into several other groups of languages of which the Niger-Congo was among. This was again followed by the separation of the Niger-Congo into yet another set of sub-groups of which the Kwa and Ijaw (Ijo) were part. It was from this Kwa sub-family that the Edo, Igbo and Yoruba with other Nigerian languages of the same family emerged as distinct languages.

According to Armstrong (1964, p. 13). the language ancestral to the Niger-Congo family, that is the proto-Niger-Congo language, is believed to have been spoken about ten thousand years ago. Subsequently, Igbo and Yoruba were believed to have separated from a common ancestral Kwa language between, 4,000 and 6,000 years ago; while Edo was also believed to have diverged from Yoruba parent-stock between 3,200 and 4,000 years ago. Although Armstrong (1962, p. 284) has suggested as did Hymes, that there exists an inherent error in the use of glottochronology through the under-estimation of the time depths. Having been considered in the light of the above instances vis-à-vis the close relationships of the related languages, we cannot, but accept the facts as the probable approximation of the time depth of the separation of the languages given the characteristic small margin of error. But Bradbury (1964, p. 150) in agreeing with Armstrong however disagreed with the Yoruba origin of the Edo language, believing instead that the Edo language is closer to Igbo than the Yoruba, thereby hazarding the belief that the Edo language might have instead diverged from Igbo against the earlier assumption of divergence from Yoruba.

This theory no doubt explains the closeness between the Igbo, Edo, and Idoma, as well as the Igala, Itsekiri and the Yoruba, suggesting that they might have separated from the other in more recent times than between the Igbo and Yoruba. It also explains the existence of some common vocabularies among the Igbo, Idoma, Igala, Yoruba, Edo, Bassa, Igede, Igbira (Ebira), Gwari (Gbari) and Itsekiri among other neighboring languages of the same family. Thus, among the Igbo, Yoruba, Edo and other Kwa sub-family languages, there have always been frequent occurrences of common vocabularies. For instance, the common food item of tropical origin with one common name among the Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Igbira, Edo and Yoruba, is *Ogede* (Plantain/Banana) Among the Igbo, Igala, Idoma and Edo, one equally finds almost identical names for their traditional four-market-day week. Hence the Igbo four market days – *Eke, Olie, Nkwo, and Afor* are similar to those of the Igala, except *Olie (Oye)* which is called *Ede*. Other similar common vocabularies include rock (stone) which is commonly known as *Okwute* in Igbo and *Okuta* in Edo and Yoruba. The Igbo *Onu* which stands for the mouth is also similar to Yoruba *enu*.

In fact, Thomas (1914, p. 7), one of the most celebrated British Colonial anthropologists could not rightly explain the occurrence of common vocabularies in Yoruba, Edo and Igbo languages. While he tried to explain these occurrences in both Edo and Yoruba in terms of dynastic relationship, for the Igbo

and Edo he found it difficult to explain. Thus, he stated:

Among the words common to Edo and Yoruba are such terms as Oke (hill), Okuta (stone), and the like, and the reason for their appearance in both families of languages is firstly, that the line of kings which formerly ruled the Edo came from the Ife country; and that, secondly, hills and stones being virtually unknown in the Edo country, terms for them would naturally be adopted from the language of the immigrants.

Concerning the Igbo and Edo Thomas (1967, p. 7) continued:

There are certain resemblances between the Edo and Ibo languages which are more difficult to explain. Parts of the body for example, like the mouth (*unu*), are known by identical names and here it is difficult to suggest an explanation.

All these similarities in vocabularies tend to point to one direction— that the Igbo, Edo, Yoruba, Igede, Igala, Idoma, Nupe, Bassa, Gwari (Gbari), Ogori and Igbira (Ebira) among others once lived together as one people in one common area in the remote past where they spoke one common language. The Niger-Benue Confluence Theory is the one riddle in Igbo origins which if followed to its logical conclusion could terminate at the *Biblical Tower of Babel*. But then in explaining this riddle, one must first take note of the distinction between the origin of languages and the origin of peoples. The question here is can each exist in isolation of the other? The explanation here is that while it is not possible to isolate a people's origin from the origin of their language, since communication is the essence of being, either of them could go into extinction, or both could jointly go out of existence.

Equally notable is the fact that a new language could evolve as a result of circumstances arising from cultural and environmental confrontations. Examples of the latter occurrences could be noted in the existence of virtually unintelligible dialects in a given language. For instance, among the Igbo, the *Ikwerre*, Abakiliki, Nsukka, and Ika dialects of Igbo language which are mainly spoken at the fringes of the ethnic boundaries assume distinctively dialectal tones which make first-time Igbo visitors from the central zone assume that they are not part of the wider Igbo linguistic group. From this dialectal inference one can look at Igbo origins in relation to the peopling of Southern Nigeria by the other ethnic groups.

One fact is clear from the foregoing linguistic analysis—the continuous settlement of Southern and by extension Central parts of Nigeria goes back to antiquity with evidence of Stone Age cultures. In this case we are greatly indebted to the copious evidence of archaeology which provided material evidence of human occupation of the areas presently defined as Southern and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria, of which the Niger-Benue Confluence forms the central radiating point of dispersal. Sowunmi (1991, p. 4) aptly basing her findings on palynological evidence, suggested that as early as

3,000 years ago, there were already settled populations in parts of what is today Southern Nigeria, who were already engaged in agriculture. Fagg (1959, p. 291) equally revealed with evidence from Nok by means of Carbon-14 Dating Method that the Middle Belt region was already in continuous occupation by the manufacturers of the historic clay-caked figurines— the bearers of the Nok Culture around 3,500 B.C.

Coming to Igboland, Hartle (1967, p. 136) had in his marathon archaeological excavations in different parts of Igboland revealed copious evidence of antiquity of continuous occupation of what is today defined as Igboland. The most spectacular of these archaeological sites was the excavation carried out at the University of Nigeria Agricultural farmland which yielded artefacts of Pottery Shards among other finds. Here, two Carbon-14 dates associated with some of these pottery materials were shown to read 2,555 B.C. ± 130 and 1,460 B.C. ± 115. (Hartle, 1967, p. 137) Thus from the above body of evidence, it could be inferred that by about 4,500 years ago, pottery-making was already in vogue in Southern Nigeria which further suggests an earlier date of settlement.

BENIN EMPIRE AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY DEFINITION

Beyond the ethno-linguistic evidence of commonality between most of the ethnic groups of Southern Nigeria lies the super-structural political influence of Benin Kingdom, which by far stands out as the most effective and most enduring legacy of primordial unity of Southern Nigeria bequeathed by the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Benin was the most all-time powerful Empire in what is today the modern State of Nigeria, up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the peak of its imperial exploits it embraced most of the eastern Yorubaland, the Niger Delta, Western Igboland, the Igala, deeper into the Ebara and adjoining Nupeland, Lagos, and extending westward to the present Badagry with considerable influence over the Ajda kingdom of Dahomey. It was the only Empire that developed, sustained, and diffused its indigenous culture of sophisticated state-craft, unrivalled material culture in arts, and streams of uterine links beyond its traditional ethnic boundaries

The Oba of Benin by the fact of this uterine links remains up till this day the shadow imperial overlord of many traditional kings outside the present traditional Edo Kingdom of Benin. Indeed the Oba of Benin is the only monarch in Nigeria with the highest preponderance of multi-ethnic claimants of origin from his root accompanied with strong sentimental pride and dignity of historical connection. To state therefore that the old Benin Kingdom was the only effective bridge that once united the greater part of Southern Nigeria is not to exaggerate the known historical facts.

Oluda Equiano gave us a vivid picture of the extent of Benin influence among the inhabitants of Igbo hinterland in the second half of the 18th century, as quoted *ipso facto* by Jones (1967, p. 70):

That part of Africa known by the name of Guinea, to which the trade for slaves is carried on, extends along the coast above 3,400 miles, from Senegal to Angola, and includes a variety of kingdoms. Of these the most considerable is the Kingdom of Benin, both as to extent and wealth, the richness and cultivation of the soil, the power of its King, and the number and warlike disposition of the inhabitants. It is situated nearly under the line, but runs back into the interior part of Africa, to a distance hitherto I believe unexplored by any traveler; and seems only terminated at length by the empire of Abyssinia near 1,500 miles from its beginning. This kingdom is divided into many provinces or districts: in one of the most remote and fertile of which I was born, in the year 1745, situated in the charming fruitful vale, named Essaka. The distance of this province from the capital of Benin and the sea coast must be very considerable; for I had never heard of White men or Europeans, nor of the sea; and our subjugation to the king was little more than nominal; for every transaction of the government, as far as my slender observation extended, was conducted by the chiefs or elders of the place.

Writing on the extent of Benin power Dike (1956, p. 21) graphically state:

Throughout medieval West Africa the kingdom of Benin was the dominant power in southern Nigeria and extended its conquests from Lagos in the West, to Bonny River in the east, and northward to Idah. It was the one state with which the Portuguese, during their early visit to Delta, maintained diplomatic relations. The persistence and universality of the claims to Benin origin in Delta traditions is evidence at least, of the powerful influence which this kingdom exerted over the imagination of her neighbours, particularly south eastern Nigeria, where her military power was felt by Ibos and the Ibo-speaking peoples east of the Niger.

Dike's view no doubt appears more economical with the facts of the myth and legend of Benin influence and power than that of Oluda Equiano, yet the facts seem to be supported if not by outright military conquest but by

copious traditions of migration from Benin Kingdom and royal links with the Benin monarchy. Afigbo (1986, p. 1) described such traditions as “a vain search for a noble cultural ancestry; an over-reaction to the cultural snobbery of the West.” Ryder (1969, p. 3) while emphasizing on the same aspect believed that while it could be probable to regard some of these claims as “the product of hankering after prestige” it was obvious that some of such claims could lay credence to a certain degree of truth owing to the fact that the Benin monarchs occasionally used settlements as a way of consolidating their hold on power. Be that as it may, extant traditions whose authenticity might not be easy to question seem to defy the above hypothetical assertions. Even Afigbo (1975, p. 46) seems to have paradoxically accepted this fact of Benin tradition among the non-Bini groups by acknowledging the wide influence of the Benin Kingdom among the Igbo of the West Niger, when he stated:

Of all the neighbours of the Igbo mentioned above, the Edo Kingdom of Benin and the Igalala State of Idah would appear to have had far-reaching impact on the evolution of Igbo culture. The influence of Benin was most felt in the Western Igbo area, the riverain region around Aboh and Onitsha. Benin influence was largely political and could be seen in the institution of village monarchies which exist all through the area. It is also seen in the character of the title systems as in the name of some of the titles.

There are in fact some traditions which are so popular that one does not need repeating them here—such as that of Lagos, the West Niger Igbo, Itsekiri, and Eastern Yorubaland consisting much of what we have today as Ekiti and Ondo States. Nzimiro (1972, p. 7) has given us a vivid account of the respective traditions of Ezechime whom he described as “Chima Ukwu” and, Esumai Ukwu, both of which culminated in the foundation of Umuezechime Clan West of the Niger of which Onitsha forms a part, and Aboh and Oguta. On the other hand, Ikime (1968; p. 9) equally provided us an account of the origin of *Olu* of Warri dynasty from Benin through Prince Ginuwa. Akintoye (1971, p. 26) on his own account noted that Benin armies first entered Akoko and Ekiti regions during the reign of Oba Ewuare in the fifteen century and, by the sixteenth century had overrun the entire territory pegging the limit of the Empire at Otun Ekiti. Smith (1976, p. 65) in supporting Akintoye went further (p. 66) to reveal the strong influence of the Benin Kingdom over the people of Akure through which are settled the large population of indigenes of Benin origin.

Beyond Benin military exploits are the copious traditions of migrations of waves of people out of the centre of Benin power to several places. In fact, is no ethnic group in the Niger Delta which does not have accounts of migration

from Benin. On Urhobo-Benin connection, Adjara III (1977, p. 3) linked the origin of Urhobo people to one Prince Urhobo son of Oba Egbeka. On the other hand, Ikime (1972, p. 1) divides the Isoko Clans into two migratory groups—Benin and Igbo in which he linked Aviara, Emevo, Iyede, Okpe, Owe, and Uzere to Benin origin; while Enwe and Ume claim Igbo origins. According to him, Erohwa, Igbide, and Olomoro claim to have no links with either Benin or Igbo. But he added that while Igbide might have been originally Benin in origin, it appeared that their ancestors first settled briefly in Igboland before coming to their present location, Olomoro might have originated from the Olomu Clan of the Urhobo.

Both Anene (1966, p. 6) and Alagoa (1972, p. 53) have given us copious accounts of several waves of Ijo migration out of Benin to the Niger Delta Zone of which space constrain will not permit us to recount. But the underlying fact of the traditions is that most Ijo-speaking settlements in Niger Delta today trace their origins to the Kingdom of Benin. The dominance of Ijo traditions of Benin origin without noticeable accounts of autochthones seems to support the earlier assertion that the present set of Ijo settlements in the Niger Delta was the result of continuous southward pressure of the Igbo group, which made it difficult for an autochthonous tradition to develop among the people.

The interesting account of the Benin origin of the Igbo Kingdom of Ogba in the Niger Delta which has become a household tale tends to support Dike’s definition of the extent of the influence of Benin Empire. But one other tradition which although looks sensational but helps us to fully understand the extent of Benin influence that strongly guided Dike’s assertion is that of the present Abam-Ohafia head-hunter warrior clans of Southeastern or what is also referred to as Cross River Igbo in the present Abia State. The Abam-Ohafia head-hunters were indeed the power behind whatever influence the Aro claim to have exerted in the body history of Igboland. Njoku (2018) narrating from the evidence of Ejituwu, both of Abam-Ohafia Clan stated that the Abam-Ohafia people migrated from Benin Kingdom to their present abode at the extreme Southeast Igbo borderlands.

According to the tradition they moved through Owa, possibly the present Owa-Riuwo Idu (Owa on the road to the Benin Kingdom) in the present Orhionmwon Local Government Area of Edo State, an account of the journey which is preserved in Ohafia war poetry and song. Their leader was named Uduma Ezema, who might have left the Benin Kingdom about the same time of the mythical Ezechime of the Umueze Chima Clan, and Esumei Ukwu of Aboh and Oguta traditions. Their movement took them probably through Ndoni and Ibeku before arriving at their present destination where the earlier settlers referred to them as “Ndi Mben”, which was a corruption of “Ndi Bini” (Bini people). It would therefore appear that their present names—“Abam” and “Ohafia” developed overtime as honorific warrior titles given to them by neighbours.

It should be recalled that the emergence of the Aro as a distinct Igbo sub-group was the consequence of the revolt of erstwhile Igbo slaves against their Ibibio masters through the support of Jukun (Akpa) invading forces—see Jones (1967), Ekejuba (1972), and Nwaezeigwe (2013). It could therefore be right to state that one of the far-reaching consequences of the Aro revolt is that it marked a vivid confrontation of Benin influence represented by the Abam-Ohafia settlers, and Jukun influence marked by the Jukun (Akpa) elements involved in the Aro revolt. In other words, it could rightly be stated that not only did the presence of Abam-Ohafia settlers define the Northern Cross River Basin as the probable limit of Benin influence east of the Niger; it equally seems to have stopped the possibility of Jukun intrusion into Igboland through the Jukun-Aro elements.

A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF BENIN ETHNO-HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE IGBO AND YORUBA

As earlier noted from the studies of Bradbury (1964, p. 150) the Edo language is significantly closer to the Igbo than to the Yoruba. Bradbury in the same report suggested that the Yoruba, Edo and the Igbo might have started to diverge from about four thousand years ago. In laying further credence to the wide dissimilarity between the Yoruba and Edo, Armstrong (1964, p. 127) added by stating that “it comes as a surprise to many students to learn that Tiv, spoken in the Benue Valley, is far closer to Zulu than Yoruba is to Edo, the language of Benin.” Osadolor (2001, p. 62) seems to sum up this distinctiveness in language and culture between the Edo and Yoruba when he noted that “comparative ethnography in Benin and Yoruba points that while Ife and Oyo belong to same linguistic and cultural bloc, the Benin Kingdom was part of an entirely different one.” He further pointed out that the Edo and the Yoruba differed markedly in their principle of organization.

Going further, a closer look at Edo socio-political structure, particularly that of Benin suggests a much closer affinity to the Igbo than the Yoruba. Indeed, beyond the super-structural political edifice defined as the “Oba institution” which clearly suggests Yoruba origin evidently only in title and not by the principle of organization, everything else at the Edo village level wears the garb of the socio-political structure of the traditional Igbo society. As in the case of the Igbo, the Benin society is structured on the pattern age grade system—*Iroghae* which is made up of youth between the ages of 15 and 30 years, *Ighele*—made up of adults between the ages of 30 and 50 years and the *Edion* who constitute the elders, beginning from the age of 50 years or thereafter and above, with clearly defined roles. In this case the *Edion* stands for *Ndichie* among the Igbo in which the oldest among the elders assumes the title of *Odionwere* which again stands for

Okpala or *Diokpa* as the case may be among the Igbo. Like the case of the Igbo too, *Odion* represents the spirit of the ancestors, playing the same Spiritual and political guiding roles among the living in line with the concept of *Ndichie* among the Igbo.

Strikingly, the *Esogban* of Benin Kingdom, who is the second in rank among the town chiefs after the *Iyase* of Benin Kingdom, is the *Odionwere-Edo* (*Odionwere* of Benin Kingdom) holding the custody of *Odion-Edo* (Ancestral Deity of Benin Kingdom), of which the Oba is subject to. Indeed, the first four town chiefs of Benin Kingdom—*Iyase*, *Esogban*, *Osuma*, and *Osodin* are known as the *Edion-Nene* (Four Elders) or Four Pillars of Benin Kingdom. This pattern of socio-political organization based on gerontocracy permeates down to the base village level where the roles of the *Odionwere* as a political institution in Benin society are strongly manifested. As Osadolor (2001, p. 66) noted at length:

One important influence of the social system on the evolution of political culture was the pre-dynastic development which took the form of a rapid growth of gerontocratic rules. The head of the village was the eldest man known as *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo*. The criteria for selection as an *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo* were the following conditions: first, membership of the village community; second, membership of the *edion* grade; third, the actual age of the candidate; and finally, must be the oldest free-born man in the village. There was no election or selection process of candidates. Once an *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo* has been named as the village headman, he immediately took responsibility for internal affairs and external relations. The village headman was assisted by four elders known as *edion nene*, who were ranked in order of seniority. They were set apart from other *edion* in status and respect. Any of the *edion nene* acted for the village head in his absence. Hence, relative seniority between those at the highest level in the age-grade organisation was thus, at any particular time, rigidly defined.

In addition to the above graphic representation of an ideal socio-political structure of the traditional Igbo society in Edo form, the *Ezomo* of Benin Kingdom holds the custody of the *Ikegabo* (the War Cult Deity) of Benin Kingdom, which is the replica of the Igbo *Ikenga* with similar roles and significance assigned. It is clear from the socio-political structural definition of Benin society that not only is the monarchy tied to the traditional apron-string of gerontocracy, there is very strong convincing evidence of primordial Igbo root which tends to support the tradition of Edo-Igbo origin. Indeed, apart from the existence of the

social title system as a form of status-defining stages of ascendancy in Igbo society, there is no much difference between the Edo and Igbo socio-political structures at the material base level. It therefore becomes possible for one to hazard the theory that the present Edo-speaking peoples of South-Central Nigeria in the remote past once formed part of the wider Igbo ethnic complex but later diverged to become a distinct ethnic group through the gradual intrusions of such other groups as the Ijaw, Yoruba, Igala, Itsekiri, and probably Epira. The Nupe intrusion in this regard only emerged lately around the 19th century as a consequence of the Fulani Jihad, which led to massive Nupe presence and consequent islamization of the Northern Edo group.

THE LIMITS AND POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AS A FACTOR OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Under conventional definition of ethnic identity, language forms a fundamental if not the only basis of one's ethnic identity definition. In other words, Igbo ethnicity is defined by Igbo language whether one so defined does not speak or understand Igbo language, so long as such a person is able to trace his paternal ancestry to those whose original language is Igbo. Even though exceptions exist the historical foundations of such exceptions must be founded on historical languages, whether extinct or forgotten.

An example in this instance is the Ngoni ethnic group of southern Africa who are found in Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania who formed part of the Nguni-speaking group of the present South Africa but had to migrate northwards following the Mfecane crisis of the 19th century. According to Nwaezeigwe (1997) in his study of the Ngoni of Malawi, the Ngoni while retaining substantial traits of their original cultural identity which make their ethnic identity as Nguni ethnographically valid have virtually lost their original Nguni language, speaking instead the language of their hosts. In other words, the Ngoni is an ethnic group without ethnic language.

The second group is found among many Nigerian groups particularly the Igbo, Ijaw and Yoruba speaking groups and includes those who claim to be either Benin or Igala in origin but have lost both their original language and fundamental cultural traits to their host communities. The third group includes those who, while retaining their original language and cultural traits claim the identity of their host communities. Both the second and third categories are found mainly among the West Niger Igbo and their Edo and Igala neighbours.

It is on the basis of the last two classifications that the factor of language in West Niger Igbo ethnic definition is predicated. In approaching the analysis one fact which needs to be pointed out is that the traditions of origin, migration, and settlement between the Igbo and their neighbours were never a one-way traffic in which only the Igbo were always at the receiving end. Even though

original Igbo migrations into their outlying cultural zones appear to long predate the rise of the Benin and Igala Empires which was the major spur to later migrations outside the dominant political zones, there were instances of counter-Igbo migrations within the same period.

Among this group is the Ezechime group of communities who claim Benin origin. For this group however, while their Igbo identity remains unquestionable based on their unquestionable linguistic affiliation and cultural traits, the claim of Benin origin remains a subject of debate. Among the Ezechime and groups with related Benin tradition of origin, migration, and settlement, whatever Benin cultural traits they seem to possess which is mainly institutionalized monarchical framework, is universal among many West Niger Igbo communities including those with no tradition of Benin origins. The Ezechime controversy centres more on the fact that their putative forebear bears an etymological Igbo name "Ezechime" which readily makes his Edo ancestry doubtful. However if one decides to accept this tradition valid then it could rightly be said that the group belongs to what could be defined as non-Edo-speaking Igbo group. In other words they constitute an absolutely assimilated group whose accounts of traditions of origin, migration, and settlement are the only sources of advancing their possible extinct identity.

There is another group within the second category which is mainly found among the communities of Igala origins situated along the two banks of the River Niger. But within the purview of the present study mention will only be made of those communities situated along the west bank of the Niger. Notable among this group are Asaba and Illah whose ancestors are linked with Igala origin but have lost Igala language while retaining strong traits of Igala culture.

The third category like the second group of the second category presents a more valid historical background to authenticate their original identities even if being denied. From the Igala angle the town of Ebu presents a good instance. Ebu is an Igala-speaking community of the West Niger Igbo sub-group which forms one of the complex pedestals of West Niger Igbo identity. In addition to Igala which forms their principal language, the people are also Igbo-speaking with more personal Igbo than Igala names. For this group, they regard themselves as Igbo by ethnic extraction by official classification and goes by such identity once they step outside their community.

Another perfect example of this category is the six Yoruba towns that form part of the Igbo of the West Niger which are collectively known as Odiani Clan or Olukumi, and whose indigenous language has remained for centuries Yoruba. These towns include Ukwunzu, Ugbodu, Ugboba, Ubulubu, Idumuogo and Ogodo, all belonging to Aniocha North Local Government Area of the present Delta State. Confirming the historicity of this tradition, His Lordship Justice AYO GABRIEL IRIKFE— Justice of the Supreme Court (1982) in his Lead Judgment in *SUIT NO: SC.85/1982* affirmed thus:

The traditional evidence produced at the hearing shows that the two communities in this case came into existence as the result of migrations by people either from the ancient Kingdom of Benin direct or from AKURE or IFE in the YORUBA Kingdom through Benin. The respondents herein come under the category of those who came from Benin while the appellants represent the second group. While the Benin immigrants now have Ibo as their sole language, the YORUBA immigrants speak both YORUBA and Ibo. There is evidence that the descendants of the YORUBA immigrants refer to themselves as well as their own brand of YORUBA dialect as OLUKUMI. The OLUKUMI settlements as revealed by the evidence are: UKWUNZU, UGBODU, UGBOBA, UBULUBU, OGO DO and IDUMUOGO.

The above instance clearly establishes the fact of pre-colonial contacts between the Igbo and Yoruba. Like the Ebu situation, these Yoruba towns lying within traditional Igbo ethno-political sphere speak Igbo as their second and official language. They equally adopt Igbo names as their personal names thus making it difficult for outsiders to easily determine their Yoruba root.

His Royal Highness Ayo Isinyemeze, the *Oloza* (King) of Ugbodu Kingdom and Prince Adebowale Ochei of Ugbodu's Royal House in describing the process of their transformation to a bilingual Yoruba community in a traditional Igbo society stated:

We began to acculturate and over time we had adopted largely the way of life of our neighbours. We now bear Igbo names. Me, for instance, my name is Isiyemeze but that's not Olokumi name, that's an Igbo name. It is a tribute as it were to my family because, I bear an Olokumi name as a first name. My children all bear Olokumi names. I think there is renaissance, an effort of going back to our roots. So, most of the children being born these days are named Olokumi names. "Outside from that, our dance, dress and food we have basically adopted our neighbour's lifestyle in those regards. Interestingly, practically everybody here speaks Igbo but only as our second language. Our primary tongue is Olokumi and everybody born here speaks that language (Nairaaland, 2016).

Most Olokumi-speaking people are indeed faced with what could be described as reversed deniable of identity. Reversed denial of identity under this circumstance occurs when a person who is quite aware of his root identity in the midst of a domineering culture tends to unknowingly deny

the same root identity in the bid to construct universal identity with his dominant host communities. In other words, most Olokumi people will deny their Yoruba identity to claim Igbo in one respect and in another respect deny both Igbo and Yoruba to claim Olokumi identity. This pattern of reaction to dual ethno-linguistic identity was well noted by Aluko (2015) at Ugbodu. As he narrated:

HELLO, this writer said, while knocking at the door, and a young lady, emerging from the building, replied, *ta ni yen?* When the writer heard the reply, he thought it was a mere coincidence or that his ears were deceiving him. Of course, he had every reason to be surprised since he was not anywhere near the Yoruba enclave where such a reply can only be anticipated. After all, he was more than 100 kilometres away from the nearest Yoruba community; he was in Ugbodu, a town in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State. While trying to decipher why the lady gave such a reply, what further followed put the writer in a more confused position. A girl of about five appeared and said, "*mo fe ra biscuit.*" Perhaps, the people are part of the Yoruba community living in the town, the writer guessed as he tried to find out from the lady. Are you a Yoruba woman; what is the meaning of *ta ni yen?*" The writer asked the questions at once. Reluctantly, she answered, "I am not Yoruba, o, I am just speaking my language." Apparently, she was not unaware of the similarity between her language and Yoruba language. The lady refused to entertain any further question about her language and asked him to go to the king's palace or to the elders if he wanted to know more about the language.

The Olokumi experience is therefore one of the paradoxes of Igbo identity among the West Niger Igbo, which poses a complex of definition problems that rest solely on dominant linguistic affiliation.

Among the Isoko and Urhobo sub-groups of the Edo speaking group there are various accounts of Igbo tradition of origins associated with a number of communities, as noted earlier by Ikime (1972, p. 1). Ekeh (2007, p. 16) in addition has noted a number of such communities which include: Ewvreni among the Urhobo, and Igbide, Emede and Enhwe. Quoting Foster in respect of Iyede, he continued:

The threat of elephants caused Iyede to hire some Igbo hunters and allow them to settle on Iyede land.... It is significant to note that the [Igbo] hunters who settled in Iyede land built the town of Ewvreni. It now borders on Isoko-speaking area. Its inhabitants speak Urhobo.

The next important settlement of historical importance is the town of Orogun situated in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. Like Ewreni and Iyede it has a tradition of origin, migration and settlement linked to one Efe. According to Odivwri (2014, p. 115) before finally settling in the present site of Orogun, Efe had settled in such settlements as Ogelle, Andoni, and Aboh. Linguistically the community is bilingual speaking both Igbo and Urhobo with equal fluency. However, culturally, the people tend to tilt more towards the Igbo. For instance, the traditional political structure is fashioned along the line of the Igbo which is based on Okpala-Ukwu gerontocratic tradition. This is against the practice of some of the people to prefer identifying themselves as Urhobo by ethnic identity rather than their dominant Igbo character, and this goes to explain why they mostly bear Urhobo personal names.

Although even if the people prefer to be ethnically defined as Urhobo, their traditions of bilingualism and primordial Igbo political structure seem to betray the fact of their primordial Igbo root. This further explains why as a cover-up they tend to associate the reason for their bilingualism with mythology rather than ethno-linguistic factor. As Odivwri (2014, p. 16) noted:

Mythology has been used by the people to explain the occurrence of bilingualism in Orogun. The Orogun people believe that they speak two languages in the kingdom today because the "Ogborigbo" (Monitor Lizard or Iguana), one of their totemic animals has two tongues. Ogborigbo or Iguana are found all over Orogun kingdom, moving leisurely and entering people's houses swallowing eggs. They are never harmed nor eaten by any indigene of Orogun whether maternally or paternally related. It is believed that when you harm it by beating it with a stick you receive pains on the part of the body beaten and if killed or eaten by an indigene, the victim is afflicted by a disease akin to leprosy. It is not uncommon among the Orogun to make such statements like: "Ogborigbo vwe erevwi – ive" (Urhobo) or "Ogborigbo nweni ere nebe" (Orogun) meaning the monitor lizard has two tongues, which the indigenes allude to during some occasions in the kingdom, signifying the bilingual nature of the people.

Explaining their bilingualism in mythological terms seems therefore to be the most convenient means of downplaying their Igbo identity under the circumstance of dominant Urhobo neighbours. The fact however remains that the people of Orogun are Igbo-speaking and of Igbo origin with Urhobo as a secondary lingua franca. It could therefore be concluded in respect of Orogun that although the town is situated administratively in the Urhobo-dominant Ughelli

North Local Government Area of Delta State, its dominant Igbo character in both culture and language remains a valid testimony of an original Igbo settlement.

The Igbo-Isoko borderland displays a more diluted ethnic interface than the Igbo-Urhobo borderland. Several Isoko and Igbo communities are not only bilingual but claim mixed Isoko-Igbo origins. The ethnic fluidity of this borderland consequently gave rise to several communities of mixed identity. For instance, among the Igbo-dominant Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State, the following communities: Ibedeni, Utuoku, Ibrede, Onogbokor, Iyowu, Alinakwo, and Umuti claim mixed Isoko-Igbo origins (Bendel State Government, p. A157). The Igbo-Bini borderland seems to be the most controversial of all Igbo interfaces with their neighbours. This is quite understandable since that was the route through which the imperial power of Benin flowed into Igboland. Here also there are many Igbo-speaking towns situated in Edo State which are officially classified as Edo communities. Among these towns are Ogan (Uga) and the six towns of Igbanke (Igboakiri) Clan namely: Ake, Odin, Oligie, Igbon, Omolua, Idumu Odin, and Otta. Others include: Inyelen, Owanikeke, Ute Obagie, Owa-Riuo Idu, Igbogili Iru and Ekpon.

Although some of these towns, including the main ones in Delta State tend to deny their Igbo identity, but the fact cannot be denied that the Ika are part of the West Niger Igbo. For instance Onyeakagbu (2020) in making an ambiguous claim to a distinct Ika origin outside both the Edo and Igbo stated:

The Ika tribe is not Igbo or Benin, but shares similarities with them. For instance, the Ika language is very similar to Igbo, as even their names bear the same semblance. Ika people also share so much in terms of culture and lifestyle with the Benin people as most of the Ika communities were discovered by Benin Prince's and chiefs.

Driving the above claim further into the arena of linguistics, she stated:

The Ika people do not trace their ancestry to common origin. The various clans that make up Ika have many origins. Similarities of the language with Igbo suggest there might be Igbo connections but oral accounts and cultures as well as ancient Ika name suggests bini origin. Ika historians have argued that changes in language can occur due to large migrations or trade or due to other factors.

The case of Ekpon town is one such particular instance of attempts to deny Igbo identity while at the same time reluctant to accept Edo identity. In other words, there is always the tendency of these communities to construct a

distinct identity as a response to the complex problems of identity often associated with interfacing cultures at most ethnic borderlands, as noted by one commentator in Naira Forum (2021)

The socio-political status of Ekpon people is one that is rooted in Esan culture. This is a society of people whose origin is traceable to Ekpon in Esan west local government area of Edo State while they live in Esan South – East Local Government Area of the same Edo State but linguistically they belong to Ika dialect of Igbo language and live at the linguistic boundary between Ika (Igbo) and Esan languages. Their traditional institution is rooted in Esan culture. They have no Obishop or Eze system of leadership like Igbos but an Onogie who is appointed or approved by the Oba of Benin. To rule with the Onogie are Chiefs Ehinze – Ogele, Ihiami etc who help the Onogie to carry out his royal functions and tributes to the Oba who made all of them who they are in the land. The mode of obtaining chieftaincy titles in Ekpon is synonymous with Esan ways. Every festival taking place in Ekpon is according to Esan tradition. For instance, ceremonies like marriage, child naming are in no way similar to Ika culture. The burial ceremony for example which runs for seven days in Ekpon is what obtains in Esan land contrary to four days burial activities in Ika/Igbo culture. This shows that apart from language, the Ekpon life style is similar to that of Esan.

From this point one could rightly discover the complexity of the ethnic identity question of the West Niger Igbo. There is no doubt that when broadly defined in ethnographical terms that the West Niger Igbo form part of the wider Igbo ethnic group. However, when approached from detailed point of view there is no doubt that some sections would appear to possess the historical basis to question their Igbo identity. In other words, among the people there are those who have the valid historical and ethnographical reasons to claim that they are not Igbo and should therefore not be regarded as such.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the rise and consequent influence of the old Kingdom of Benin more than any other factor created the political field of identity conflict among the Igbo of the West Niger. Take for instance the Ezechime Clan made up of the towns of Obior, Onicha-Ugbo, Onicha-Ukwu, Onicha-Olona, Issele-Uku, Issele-Mkpitime, Issele-Azagba, and Ezi, among the West Niger Igbo, and Onitsha

East of the Niger, whose tradition of Benin origin is woven round the influence of old Benin Kingdom through on eponymous progenitor named Ezechime. It is on account of this tradition that Onitsha, the hometown of Nigeria's famous nationalist and first President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe bears the honorific title of "*Onicha Ado na Idu*" which tends to create a distinct ethnic identity within the wider Igbo group. Thus, if it is taken that Ezechime was of Benin origin, it therefore follows that the Great Zik of Africa Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who is regarded as the symbol of Igbo personality was indeed a Bini by ethnic extraction. However, for political reasons as conditioned by the incidents of ethno-linguistic identity the Ezechime Clan seems to have found their claim of Benin origin on the weaker side.

The cases of Olukumi, Igala, and Isoko language speakers situated within the dominant Igbo group present the major dilemma that created the complexity of West Niger Igbo identity. How best could the identity of an Olukumi be explained in the context of being an Igbo while maintaining his Yoruba identity? For instance, how would an average Yoruba be aware that Nduka Ugbabe, a one-time Captain of Nigeria's National Junior football team from Ugboodu town is an Olukumi and not Igbo? The same question applies to the likes of former *Miss Nigeria* Helen Anyamelune, Prof. Francis Nduka of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and Prof. Chinedu Mordi of Delta State University, Abraka.

The question also applies to the likes of the former Acting Secretary General of Organization of African Unity (OAU) Peter Onu who was from Ebu and thus Igala by ethnic extraction but had to adopt Igbo identity by the incident of geography. Indeed, like the case of Peter Onu but in a rather reversed order, the current Nigeria's Deputy Senate President Ovie Omo-Agege who hails from Orogun is definitely an Igbo by ethnic extraction but had to adopt Urhobo identity for political reasons. On the other hand, while the attempt to declassify the Ika sub-group of the West Niger Igbo as Igbo is not worth the time of the present paper, since such assertion is not founded on any ethnographical fact, the tendency of some Ika towns situated within Edo State to claim Edo ethnic identity could be understood in the context of the Olukumi and Orogun experiences.

There is no doubt therefore that the problem of ethnic identity definition and re-definition among the West Niger Igbo is embedded in a web of complex factors of historical experiences, ethno-linguistic interfaces, and politics of historical relevance. Such a complexity would therefore require deeper a study for deeper understand before any value judgment is passed on the subject of denial of ethnic identity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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