

**IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE IGBO NATION AND MARGINALIZATION OF THE ANIOMA
PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE**

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of group-based agitations that has intensified in Nigeria since the commencement of the Fourth Republic largely reflects the widespread perception of ethno-sectional marginalization within the country. As a developing nation where both objective and subjective factors that promote nationalism and national consciousness remain relatively weak, and where diverse ethnic groups often interact in an atmosphere of intense competition, suspicion, and mistrust, ethno-sectional marginalization has become a reality that is more apparent than imagined. There is substantial evidence to indicate that identity crises and marginalization are closely linked, with each phenomenon reinforcing the other. This study examines the condition of the Anioma people in present-day Delta State and finds that they have been significantly marginalized within Nigeria's political and socio-economic landscape. The study further observes that the crisis surrounding Igbo identity has contributed to this marginalization and argues that, until the Igbo people establish a strong and positive collective identity, the marginalization of the Anioma people, as well as other Igbo-related groups in Nigeria, is likely to persist. The paper therefore envisions a Nigerian society free from ethno-sectional identity crises, where community marginalization is eliminated through practical, logical, and empirically grounded recommendations that have been tested and validated by relevant theories.

INTRODUCTION

The Anioma people are a sub-Igbo group who live at the western side of the lower Niger River (Isichei, 1976; Afigbo, 1981; Onyesom, 2020). Recent but heated debate regarding whether or not they rightly belong among the Niger-Delta communities have led to the discovery that the River Niger started throwing up its Delta outlets from the Anioma area of Delta State (Odia, 2019; Nwankwo, 2021).

With a population of about one million, three hundred thousand people (NPC Report, 2006), a figure that has been roundly criticized as underestimation (Okecha, 2006:1&3), the Anioma people constituted about 30.7% of the population of the entire Delta State (NPC, 2006; Okecha, 2006).

The Anioma's stand on an ethno-cultural tripod—the Enuani, the Ukwuani and the Ika—and depending on the era in question, have been variously referred to as the Midwestern Igbo, the Bendel Igbo or at present, the Delta Igbo (Afigbo, 1981; Isichei, 1976; Nwaezeigwe, 2017).

The word "Anioma" did not exist until the agitation by indigenes for their own separate state to be created out of the Midwest Region in the mid-1960s (Nwaezeigwe, 2017; Onyesom, 2020). Deriving its first four letters "ANIO" as representative alphabets for Aniocha, Ndokwa, Ika and Oshimili, the last two letters "MA" were added to create the symbolic word "ANIOMA" which literally means "A Blessed Land" in the 1960s (Nwaezeigwe, 2017).

Numerous historical facts regarding the diverse ancestral origins and multiple geographical homes of the present-day Anioma groups exist (Isichei, 1976; Afigbo, 1981). Regarding their migration into Anioma land, Isichei (1976:51–56) made an elaborate classification according to their places of origin. She identified the present-day Anioma communities which claim origin from Benin, those which claim origin from Igala, as well as those which claim origin from Nri (Isichei, 1976; Talbot, 1969).

With regard to Umuezechima dynasty, the Obior oral tradition and genealogy tree corroborated Isichei's position (Onyesom, 2020). Jones (1963) highlighted the diverse ancestral origin of the Western Igbo communities when he noted that it seems likely that two principal Igbo emigrations were across the Niger to occupy some of the country between the River and Benin and southward towards the Isuama area (Jones, 1963; Afigbo, 1981).

It is, however, imperative to note that migrations into Anioma communities may have taken place over a considerable period of time and that none of the communities was founded in an unoccupied area (Jones, 1963; Isichei, 1976). In some of these communities, noted Jones, the original inhabitants still retain their separate identities (Jones, 1963).

Even though the process of "Igbonisation" of the various Anioma communities by the aggressive commercial Eastern Igbo resulted in group cohesion and the emergence of one large sub-Igbo group with varied linguistic dialects in Anioma land (Isichei, *ibid*), Nigeria's experiment at political administration would not allow for a cohesive large Igbo nation (Afigbo, 1981; Osaghae, 1998).

The result was that while the Eastern Igbo became the dominant group in the newly created Eastern Region, the Anioma or Western Igbo constituted one of the several minority groups in the Yoruba-dominated Western Region (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001).

Subsequent restructuring of the Nigerian state has seen the Western Igbo permanently separated from their kinsmen in the East (Suberu, 2001; Nnoli, 2016). It was one of such restructuring which took place on August 27, 1991, that saw the creation out of the former Bendel State, of a multi-ethnic but minority Delta State with Anioma people as one of its component groups (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1991; Suberu, 2001). The other groups in the Delta State arrangement include the Urhobo, the Isoko, the Ijaw and the Itsekiri peoples (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998). The severance of geopolitical identity between the Eastern and the Western Igbo by the Nigerian state began to alter the perception of the Anioma people on two fronts: first, about themselves and second, about the extent of their relationship with the Eastern Igbo (Nnoli, 2016; Nwaezeigwe, 2017). Also, the perception by other ethnic groups in Nigeria and in particular Delta State regarding who the Igbo are, with its accompanying phobia, set the stage for identity crisis among the enlarged Igbo nation and their predictable marginalization in Delta State (Nnoli, 2016; Osaghae, 1998; Mustapha, 2021).

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Identity

Strictly speaking, identity denotes who or what something is (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1985). Identity could be associated with individuals and also adopted in explaining group feeling in society (Jenkins, 2014; Fearon, 1999). For instance, a claim that the Idomas had identity crisis in the old Northern Region of Nigeria would presuppose their lack of a feeling of group role or place in the old Northern Region (Nnoli, 2016). Identity, therefore, will mean the state of being closely involved with or part of something (Jenkins, 2014). For instance, to what extent were Idoma people involved with other ethnic groups in the old Northern Region of Nigeria in terms of collective aspiration? (Nnoli, 2016).

Crisis

Crisis explains a period of great difficulty or danger (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1985). It also denotes a time when an important decision must be made (Boin et al., 2017). Crisis could be witnessed in almost all spheres of human activity (Rosenthal et al., 2001). For instance, crisis theorists have studied such crises as political, domestic, economic, financial, religious, health, ethnic and even marital among others (Boin et al., 2017). When, therefore, any phenomenon is qualified with the concept of crisis, it implies that such is passing through a period of great difficulty, a catastrophic period that would need urgent attention and intervention (Rosenthal et al., 2001).

Marginalization

While the OALD (ibid) conceives marginalization as making a person or group become or feel less important or less powerful, the New Webster Dictionary of English Language defines marginalization as causing individuals or groups to live on the margins of society by excluding them from participation in collective efforts (Olawepo, 2004).

For Mullaly (2007:252–286), marginalization is a social process of becoming or being made marginal; that is, to relegate or confine to a lower social standing or to the outer limits of society. It involves people being denied degrees of power (Mullaly, 2007; Young, 2000).

Marginalization encompasses domination, maltreatment, intimidation, suppression, deprivation and alienation as inflicted on an individual or a group by another individual or group (Young, 2000; Mullaly, 2007). Marginalization is injurious and carries, in addition to a series of deprivations, immense emotional and psychological pains for the affected group (Mullaly, 2007).

Material deprivation is the most common result of marginalization when considering how unfairly material resources such as food and shelter are distributed in society (Young, 2000; Sen, 1999). Along with material deprivation, marginalized individuals and groups are also excluded from services, programmes and policies (Young, 2000:35–49).

Marginalization has the potential to result in severe material deprivation and, in its most extreme form, can lead to the elimination of groups (Mullaly, 2007). Marginalization can be understood at different levels. While Lessa (2006:283–298) extensively researched individual marginalization, Baskin (2003:65–78) and Yee (2005:87–104) elaborately investigated community marginalization. Sewpaul (2006:419–434) and Alphonse et al. (2007) have also studied global and structural marginalization in the history interethnic relations in Nigeria..

MARGINALIZATION OF ANIOMA PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE

Governor Ibori's parochial meeting with traditional rulers from Urhoboland on Sunday February 5, 2006, during which time he told the Urhobo royal Fathers that the people of Delta North are Igbo and must not be supported to produced the Governor of Delta State (Eyinnaya, 2006:16), is a clear testament to the anti-Anioma sentiment in the State (Nnoli, 2016; Osaghae, 1998; Mustapha, 2007).

Even if Anioma people had suffered marginalization from their days in the Western region, Midwest and Bendel States, their current situation in Delta State remain most pathetic (Suberu, 2001; Nwaezeigwe, 2017). The reason for this is obvious. The Delta State arrangement which lumped together the Anioma people of old Benin Province with the ethnic groups old Delta province (the Urhobo, the Isoko, the Ijaw and the Itsekin) into one state did not seem to enjoy popular support (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001). Worse was the announcement of Asaba, a fringe Anioma town as the capital of this new state (Suberu, 2001; Omozuwa, 2019).

While the event that followed the creation of Delta state shows that people of the old Delta province were not favourably disposed to the arrangement, they also took turn to tongue lash President Babangida's government accusing it of unjustly favouring the Anioma people in the Delta state arrangement (Osaghae, 1998; Mustapha, 2007). All over the old Delta province, there arose a feeling that the Anioma people have used their contact in the government of the day to scuttle the dream of a true Delta State (Nwaezeigwe, 2017). The argument is that since Anioma does not have large crude oil deposit, its people preferred and have in-fact worked towards their inclusion in Delta state (Suberu, 2001; Ukiwo, 2007).

Writing as recently as 2004 Amaju Ejuwa corroborated the mind of the people of old Delta province when he stated that Deltans were stunned when more than a decade ago the Babangida administration announced the creation of Delta state and named Asaba, a far flung rustic settlement as its capital (Amaju, 2004). Whatever the reason for this action argues Amaju, it is baffling why the Aniomans are opposed to the creation of the real Delta State which is supposed to be favourable to them as they would have their own separated state under their leadership. As for

the Urhobos, Itsekiris, Ijaws and Isokos, there are all brothers in the true sense of the word (Amaju, 2004; Osaghae, 1998).

While rejecting the notion of power shift to Anioma land in Delta State politics, Gbagi (2006) had questioned the wisdom behind Babangida's lumping together of the Anioma people of old Benin province with the ethnic groups of the old Warri province to form one state (Gbagi, 2006). Also, in a most intimidating gathering of Urhobo traditional rulers, technocrats and academics, Chief Benjamin Okumagba, president general of the UPU lamented the mischievous excision of Anioma land from the former Benin province to which it rightly belonged and annexing it to the former Delta province (Eyoboka, 2006:19).

Similarly a Thursday Vanguard advertorial of December 22, 2003:39 placed by Core Delta Cohesion Group related these developments to the larger Ndigbo agenda of having their sixth state so as to level up with the Yoruba (Core Delta Cohesion Group, 2003). They threatened that as the fifth largest nation in the Nigerian state, the Urhobo can never be enslaved and can never be represented by a governor who attends Ohaneze meeting (Core Delta Cohesion Group, 2003; Nnoli, 2016).

All these were reflective of the state of mind of the Urhobo political class in particular and those of other ethnic groups in the old Warri province in general the moment Delta State was announced in August 1991 (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001). This probably explains why the pioneer military administration of the state spent his tenure managing multiple conflicts thrown up by the ill feelings in the Delta State arrangement (Suberu, 2001).

Ahead of the 1992 competition for political relevance in Delta State, the aggrieved but more aggressive Urhobo political class was able to galvanize other minority groups in the old Warri province against the Anioma people (Osaghae, 1998; Ukiwo, 2007). A major consequence of this ethnic gang up in Delta State during the moribund third republic was the loss of power and political relevance by the Anioma people (Nnoli, 2016).

The first civilian governor of Delta State Chief Felix Ibru assumed office carrying into governance the anti-Anioma sentiment of his people (Eyinnaya, 2006; Osaghae, 1998). The fact that in his almost two years of administration, he was neither certain of what to do with Asaba, the state capital nor the entire Delta north senatorial zone and its people is enough evidence of ethnic marginalization (Suberu, 2001).

Thus, escalated marginalization of the Anioma people of Delta state is rooted in the identity crisis of the Igbo nation in Nigeria (Nnoli, 2016; Mustapha, 2007). Then is because when former governor James Ibori canvassed that Anioma people are Igbo and should not be allowed to rule Delta state; when Urhobo intellectual Amaju Ejuwa informed that the Urhobo, the Isoko, the Ijaw and the Itsekiri are all brothers in the true sense of the word and have a stake in Delta state but that the Anioma people being alien in the Delta state arrangement would have benefited more in their separate Anioma state where they will actualize their quest for self determination, the reasons for Anioma Marginalization becomes glaring (Amaju, 2004; Nwaezeigwe, 2017; Nnoli, 2016).

SPHERES OF ANIOMA MARGINALIZATION

Despite their abundant human and material resources, despite parading big names in all fields of human endeavour, the ugly faith of Anioma people remains a puzzle to watchers of inter group relationships in Delta state (Osakwe, 2008:12; Nwaezeigwe, 2017). As observed by Osakwe (2008:12) wherever two or three Anioma indigenes are gathered, they complain of marginalization, poor quality representation in government, representatives answerable to support bases outside the district, lack of amenities, relocation of infrastructures outside Anioma land among others (Osakwe, 2008:12). The list is endless.

So much damage has been inflicted on the psyche of the Anioma person that men and women with vision have clearly isolated activities of ethnocentric bigots, self aggrandizing office holders and incredible leadership in Anioma land as the main cause of denials the Anioma people have

suffered over the years in Delta state (Mullaly, 2007; Young, 2000). Empirical cases of marginalization of the Anioma people are enumerated under Political, Economic, Socio-cultural and Psychological spheres (Young, 2000; Nnoli, 2016).

POLITICAL

- Unwillingness of the political leadership of Delta state particularly the political class of Delta central and Delta south senatorial districts to support the emergence of an Anioma indigene as the governor of Delta state (Enyinnaya B., Opcit:16; Nnoli, 2016).
- Denial of Anioma people appointment into key political offices since the creation of Delta state. For instance, Anioma people have neither been appointed nor supported to occupying juicy political positions. It is for such things that Osakwe (Opcit:12) wrote that a people who gave the nation its most outstanding minister of finance cannot aspire to any such strategic position in its state government (Osakwe, 2008:12; Mustapha, 2007).
- Delta state government under the former governor, Chief James Ibori building and equipping the Electoral Institute at Oghara his home town and handling it over to the Independent National Electoral Commission INEC (Sunday Vanguard April 1, 2007:7). This was impunitively done with no regard to Asaba as the capital of Delta State (Sunday Vanguard, 2007; Nwaezeigwe, 2017).
- The relocation of Delta state NYSC permanent Orientation camp from Isselle-Uku in Delta north Senatorial district to Oghara, the former governor's village in predominant Urhobo Delta central district. It took a high powered protest team of Anioma Indigenes to the presidency to jettison this plot (Osakwe, 2008; Nnoli, 2016).
- Imposition of candidates who represents the various Anioma communities in government by the political cabals from outside Anioma land. For instance observes Osakwe (Opcit:12) poor quality representation and representatives answerable to support bases outside Anioma land remains the major bane to the political emancipation of Anioma people (Osakwe, 2008:12; Suberu, 2001). Also reports Ogwuda (2007) a delegation of Asaba community led by the Asagba of Asaba Obi Chike Edozie yesterday expressed unhappiness over some actions of the outgoing governor James Ibori (Ogwuda, 2007).

Specifically mentioned among numerous others includes:

- The practice of holding the weekly Security Council meetings in Warri instead of Asaba which is the capital of the State (Ogwuda, 2007).
- The relocation of the headquarters of the Internal Revenue Board from Asaba to Warri (Ogwuda, 2007).
- Attempt made by the outgoing governor Ibori to frustrate the establishment of the Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN in Asaba, among others (Ogwuda, 2007).
- Asaba people called on the incoming government to redress these anomalies and accord Asaba the befitting status of a state capital that it deserves (Ogwuda, 2007; Nwaezeigwe, 2017).

ECONOMIC

- Leadership of the state in collaboration with its Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) parading false statistics backed by dangerous propaganda against Anioma land as contributing only marginally to the resources of Delta State (Osakwe, 2008; Nwaezeigwe, 2017; Nnoli, 2016).
- Leadership of the state deliberately denying Anioma land meaningful economic projects that could generate economic activities such as manufacturing firms, processing firms, cottage industries etc. Empirical data on government distribution of industries in Delta State over the years places Delta North (Anioma land) last (Osakwe, 2008; Suberu, 2001; African Development Bank, 2023).
- Deliberately politicizing the proposed Airport project in Asaba by the immediate past government in the state which even used up part of the airport site in resettling the Fulani cattle sellers, fleeing Onitsha (Ogwuda, 2007; Nwaezeigwe, 2017).

- Politicization by the Ibori administration of the proposed Asaba International Market (Osakwe, 2008; Nnoli, 2016).

SOCIO CULTURAL

Discriminatory pattern in the distribution of social and infrastructural amenities against Anioma land. For instance, more development projects such as construction of bridges, roads and housing development have taken place in Delta Central and Delta South senatorial districts than in Delta North since the creation of the State in 1991 (Suberu, 2001; Osakwe, 2008; African Union, 2023). Duplication of almost every key project that counts in both Asaba and Warri. For instance, for Government House at Asaba, there is a Government House Annexe in Warri. For governor's lodge in Asaba, one was established in Warri. We have a Delta State Television at Asaba and another in Warri. The same is with Radio Stations. Regrettably, the offices in Warri and their corresponding personnel are treated as superiors to those in Asaba (Osakwe, 2008; Nwaezeigwe, 2017; Mustapha, 2007).

No functional sports stadium in Asaba after almost seventeen years of existing as the capital of Delta State. Yet, an edifice has been erected in Warri, prided as the only stadium in Africa that enjoy full spectator protection from rainfall. Besides, other mini stadia in Anioma land (Agbor, Ogwashi-Uku, Kwale, Iselle-Uku) remain uncompleted whereas their counterparts in Delta South and Central (Ughelli, Sapele, Oghara, Oleh, Burutu etc.) have all been completed and are in-fact hosting both national and international events (Osakwe, 2008; African Development Bank, 2023).

Marginalization of Anioma people in Delta Civil Service is also glaring. Empirical evidences abound showing that even though Delta North turn out annually, the highest number of school leavers seeking employment, its people are proportionally speaking, the least employed in the state service (Osakwe, 2008; Nnoli, 2016). The Urhobo leadership of the state have worked to ensure the "Urhobonisation" of Delta Civil Service. This is evidenced by the fact that the concept of "Migwo" an Urhobo word for "good day" has been reduced to a sycophantic concept all over Delta Civil Service (Osakwe, 2008; Mustapha, 2007).

The idea of wedging of kola-nut with money being practical all over Anioma land today is a clear case of Urhobo cultural imperialism (Nwaezeigwe, 2017; Young, 2000; Nnoli, 2016).

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Forceful infliction on the average Anioma man's psyche through conspiracy and false propaganda by a union of other ethnic groups the status of a minority in a state where numerical strength would have seen them as a major ethnic group (Nnoli, 2016; Young, 2000; Mullaly, 2007).

Employment of the concept of "Core Deltans" and "Uplanders" as segregating tools against the Anioma people and also the refusal or grudging acceptance of the status of Asaba as the capital of Delta State (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998; Mustapha, 2007).

Alienating the Anioma people from the South South Peoples' Assembly but rather associating them with Ohaneze Ndigbo by other Delta ethnic groups (Nwaezeigwe, 2017; Nnoli, 2016).

Flagging off of the ruling party's (PDP) 2007 presidential and governorship campaigns in the state from Warri and Oghara respectively. Asaba remains the only state capital in Nigeria that experienced such humiliation (Ogwuda, 2007; Osakwe, 2008).

Marking of the 2007 Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) Day in Delta State in a college playground rather than in a stadium or a square (Ogwuda, 2007; Osakwe, 2008).

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