NEO-BIAFRANISM IN GUANGZHOU: SOCIOPOLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The Igbo diaspora is one the factors transnationalizing the agitation, raging in Nigeria, for the establishment of an Igbo-dominated country to be called Biafra. Diasporic support for the agitation has been open and vehement in countries like South Africa, Italy, Spain, Britain and the U.S. On the contrary, diasporic support in countries like China and Malaysia has been mostly restricted to the generosity of the financial donations pro-Biafran migrants discreetly make to Biafra movements like the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Independent People of Biafra (IPOB). Diasporic support for certain activities and movements in the origin countries can have far-reaching implications for the host countries. In this paper, the potential impact of separatist activism by pro-Biafra migrants in Guangzhou on China's sociopolitical stability as well as China-Nigeria diplomacy are discussed. On the Mainland, Biafranism can stoke political activism among human rights and pro-democracy campaigners as well as ethnic nationalism among ethnic minorities, particularly Uighurs and Tibetans. In Hong Kong, it can stoke independence agitation. With regard to foreign policy, it can strain China's diplomatic relations with Nigeria if Nigeria should accuse China of harbouring political subversives. The paper is sourced with the data from literature and fieldwork in Guangzhou during 2015-2017.

Key words: Igbo diaspora, Biafra, diasporic support, neo-Biafranism, China, Guangzhou.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has been menaced many times with disintegration since it became independent in 1960.

Many times, it has been pushed to the edge of disintegration; and many times, it has been

solicitously pulled back from the edge. It is a testament to its resilience and will to remain a

united political entity that it has survived its many crises. Ethnic politics and ethnic nationalism

have been the greatest obstacles to its efforts at nation building. Those two obstacles have been

virile since the colonial times. Due to the mutual antagonism of its ethnic groups, the federation

can be likened to one chaotic, loveless marriage. Its problem of ethnic antagonism predates its

independence (Forsyth, 1977) and has been attributed to the divide-and-rule policy of the colonial rulers (for example, Nnoli, 2008) and "fear of unity" (Odumegwu-Ojukwu, 1991).

The country's will to remain as one entity have been most violently tested by the civil war of 1967 -1970 and the conspiratorial assortment of ethnic, religious and political violence, Boko Haram insurgency, Fulani pastoral banditry and ethnic nationalism with which it has been grappling since 1999 when the military receded from power. The civil war was instigated by the abortive attempt by the Igbo-dominated eastern region to secede from the federation. But the matrix of the civil war was the mutual antagonism that has dominated ethnic relations since the colonial period. As noted by Forsyth (1977), "By 30 May 1967, when Biafra seceded, not only was Nigeria neither happy nor harmonious, but it had for the five previous years stumbled from crisis to crisis, and had three times already come to the verge of disintegration. In each case, although the immediate spark had been political, the fundamental cause had been the tribal hostility embedded in this enormous and artificial nation. For Nigeria had never been more than an amalgam of peoples welded together in the interests and for the benefit of a European Power" (p.13). In fact, there were other crises that were spiked with ethnic animosity that could have equally triggered a civil war, such as the controversy over elections and census. The war did not fragmentize the country because the abortive secession involved only one major ethnic group. If the Yoruba had supported Biafrans, the country would have fragmentized into two or three or even four countries.

It is axiomatic that the country tended to be more stable under military rule. This axiom underpins the thesis of the assortment of crises with which the country has been grappling since

1999 when the current democratic rule started. The factoid of 'unity in diversity' has been crumbling since 1999; and the realness and persistence of the present crises has stripped the country of all the pretensions and falsehoods of its espousal of indivisibility. Democracy appears to be a volcanic vent in that it has made the country look like a metaphysical playground for the various problems that were repressed under military rule. As Agbu (2004) puts it, "The democratic opening presented by Nigeria's most recent transition to civil rule (June 1998-May 1999) has unleashed a host of hitherto repressed or dormant political forces. The Nigerian state has been at the receiving end of a dramatic upsurge of ethnic militias." Transition to democracy has been associated with the unintended consequence of aggravating conflicts in some divided states (Sandbrook, 2000). In Nigeria, democratization has been spawning or energizing violent ethnic militias. The crises buffeting the country have had a high profile in recent years, courtesy of their rapidity of escalation and seeming intractability. Karl Maier was among the first to engage the crises. As he has noted, "Nigerians from all walks of life are openly questioning whether their country should remain as one entity or discard the colonial borders and break apart into several separate states. Ethnic and religious prejudices have found fertile ground in Nigeria, where there is neither a national consensus nor a binding ideology" (2000). Since 1999 the country has been in the vicious grip of security and socio-political crises: ethnic, religious and political violence, Boko Haram terrorism, Fulani pastoral banditry, kidnapping and ethnic nationalism. Those crises have far-reaching implications for Nigeria and many of the countries with which it interacts in the arena of international relations. This paper engages the problem of ethnic nationalism, focusing on the implications of neo-Biafranism for China's sociopolitical stability and China-Nigeria diplomatic relations.

NEO-BIAFRANISM

Neo Biafranism is one of the ghosts that are haunting Nigeria because of its disinclination to accede to the demand for equity and restructuring (a reversion to the pre-civil war federal system which had made the federating units competitive, self-supporting entities). The disinclination is a deadweight for the country. As defined by Gaffey (2015), it is "a revival in secessionist sentiment in southeastern Nigeria, among supporters of the historical state of Biafra." According to Musa (2017), the failure to reintegrate the Igbo into the scheme of things is a trigger for the sentiment. The stridency of the agitation by the Igbo for separation from the federation or restructuring is one of the issues undermining the government's efforts to negative the prediction that the country is precariously close to violent disintegration. It is a necessary consequence of the levity with which some of the issues that caused the 1967-1970 civil war have been treated. Fact, fiction and fantasy have so freely intermingled in the historiography of that war that it has become exceedingly difficult to identify the actual causes of the war. Thus, while the Igbo would argue that "a government that failed to safeguard the lives of its citizens has no claim to their allegiance and must be ready to accept that the victims deserve the right to seek their safety in other ways---including secession" (Achebe, 2012), the other Nigerians would blame the war or its needless elongation on the personal ambition of Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, the man who led the abortive secession (for example, Uwechue, 1971). The war ended forty-nine years ago with the unconditional surrender of Biafrans, the majority of who were Igbo. However, many Igbo see it subtly continued in the peripherisation of Igbo interests in the national scheme of things (Achebe, 1983, 54-64; Nwankwo, 1985, 19-30).

The "no victor; no vanquished" proclamation by Yakubu Gowon (Head of State, 1966-1975) formed the basis for the post-war relationship between the two sides of the war. Its object was to curb triumphalism among the federalists and mitigate the sense of defeat as well as fear of

retribution among the secessionists. In fact, by that proclamation the country committed itself to policies and measures that would foster the harmony of its ethnic diversity. It was oxygenated and firmed up with the launch of a three-goal programme called "Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction" which sought to reconcile the two sides of the war, rehabilitate Biafra war victims and reconstruct infrastructure damaged in the war. It is believed that Gowon's "moderating influence" prevented the Igbo who constituted the majority of Biafra being punished to the maximum after the war (Achebe, 1983).

The extent to which the Igbo have been reintegrated into the national scheme of things has been a subject of acrimonious debate since the civil war ended forty-nine years ago. The vast majority of the Igbo discount the claim about their reintegration. For example, while refuting the claim, Nwankwo (1985) states thus: "The efforts of all previous governments towards the full integration of the Igbos since the end of the civil war have been half-hearted." Their refutation, however, has been dismissed as mendacious by some non-Igbo Nigerians. For example, Ojukwu's second in command Philip Effiong (an Efik), has argued that the Igbo has been fully reintegrated. Faulting Ojukwu's claim to the contrary, he states, "I was reluctant to believe that Chief Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Ikemba of Nnewi, could voluntarily gloss over the incompetence, mismanagement and economic misery plaguing the people of Nigeria with the cry of "integration" … In fairness to the Ikemba one would have thought that after 13 years of absence he would not embark on a campaign of "integration", a subject of which he is most ignorant and conspicuously unskilled…[L]et me once and for all dispose of this false claim of a grand scheme for reintegration by someone who in my opinion is the only one that needs reintegration. After all of the top four citizens of this country now two are Ibos---The Vice President and the Speaker of the House of Representatives" (1983).

The political reintegration of the Igbo began during the first decade of the end of the war. For example, during the Second Republic (1979-1983) two Igbo politicians namely, Alex Ekwueme and Edwin Ume-Ezeoke held very important positions at the centre. Ekwueme of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was Vice-President while Ume-Ezeoke of the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) was Speaker of the House of Representatives, courtesy of a short-lived alliance between NPN and NPP. According to Osaghae (1989), the alliance was a gambit against the Opposition, whose combined number was enough to frustrate the ruling party in the parliament (Osaghae, 1998) and NPP agreed to it because "[its] Igbo leaders were desperate to be reintegrated into the mainstream of national politics, i.e. to have access to political patronage and benefit (from which alliance with the UPN would have excluded them)" (Osaghae, 1998). The alliance was equally an effort by the Igbo to avenge both the political subterfuge allegedly orchestrated by Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the Yoruba-dominated Action Group (AG), which prevented Nnamdi Azikiwe becoming the first premier of the Western region in 1951 and the decision by the Yoruba to fight on the federal side of the war. In addition, Odumegwu-Ojukwu received a presidential pardon after only twelve years of exile in Ivory Coast. His membership of the northern-dominated National Party of Nigeria (NPN) contrasted with his people's support for the Azikiwe-led NPP (Ndujihe, 2011). According to Ezechukwu (2012), he joined that party "to disabuse people's minds that he came back to reactivate his ethnic struggles" and "to demonstrate that he was really ready to reintegrate into the mainstream of nationalism." Expectedly, they rejected him when he contested for Senate in 1983. He was defeated by Edwin Onwudiwe of NPP. That electoral defeat, however, did not diminish his popularity among his people, as evidenced by their effusions of grief and affection when he died in 2011. (Why was he pardoned in 1982 by President Shehu Shagari? Did the ruling party want to use the amnesty

to win votes in Azikiwe's stronghold? Or was the amnesty actuated by the need to further the cause of reintegration? The principal motive will remain susceptible to interpretations).

Economic reintegration has been comparatively slow, as evidenced by the fact that the Igbo have not regained the prominent position they had in the pre-war economy. The economic measures that were taken against the Igbo contrasted with the commitment of the "Reconciliation, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction" proclamation. It was an oxymoron that the government that had promised forgiveness would pursue policies that compounded the economic strangulation of the Igbos. The harshest of those policies are as follows. Firstly, it dispossessed the Igbo, labelling their lands and buildings in Rivers State "abandoned property".

Indigenes of that state were provided with the funds with which they purchased the so-called abandoned properties (Nwankwo, 1985). (The properties were sold at ludicrously low prices). Secondly, it also implemented a policy that allowed the Igbo access to only twenty naira (₦20) of the bank deposits they operated prior to the war. The policy "had the immediate result of pauperizing the Igbo middle class and earning a profit of £4 million for the federal Government Treasury" (Achebe, 1983). That policy of financial strangulation was the major reason why the Igbos could not participate competitively in the indigenization programme of the 1970s (Nwankwo, 1985). According to Achebe, that programme "completed the routing of the Igbo from the commanding heights of the Nigerian economy, to everyone's apparent satisfaction" (Achebe, 1983). Banished to the margins of the economy, the Igbo began to emigrate and to steep themselves in import trade. Their dominance of import trade is one of the reasons for their predominance in the Nigerian diaspora in Guangzhou.

Neo-Biafranism commenced in 1999, when Indian-trained lawyer Ralph Uwazurike launched the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), one of the ethno-

nationalist movements formed following the restoration of democratic rule in the country in 1999. It appears that MASSOB and similar movements like the Odu'a People's Congress (OPC) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) were formed to contest the power void created by the military's recession from power. MASSOB's espousal of non-violence contrasts sharply with its occasional use of violence against those who do not support its modus operandi. Similarly, its espousal of political non-partisanship contrasts sharply with its support for the Igbo-dominated All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), especially during Odumegwu-Ojukwu's lifetime. The movement remained hugely popular with the Igbo until the formation, in 2009 by Nnamdi Kanu, of the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB). Courtesy of factionalism in MASSOB, effective propaganda and espousal of armed struggle, IPOB is currently the most popular neo-Biafra movement. (Biafran Independence Movement (BIM) which is allied to MASSOB and Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM) whose members attempted the seizure of the Lion Building (Enugu State Government House) in June 2012 are two of the lesser-known neo-Biafra movements). The claim, by the separatist movements, of Jewish ancestry for the Igbo in their construction of ideological identity seeks to create the myth of divine imprimatur for neo-Biafranism. The claim is the major reason for the rising popularity of Judaic churches among the Igbo. Apart from courting Jewish/Israeli support, the movements also court the solidarity of the other ethnic nationalist groups in the southern part of the country such as MEND and OPC. Support for the separatist movements by the churches is immense and steady. On the contrary, support by the political and economic elites is exiguous and sporadic. (The political elite fear that the agitation would erode their influence in Igbo politics. Likewise, the economic elite fear it might jeopardise their investments in the non-Igbo parts of the country. The virulent denunciation of the elites as saboteurs has further alienated the elites from the movements). The agitation abated under President Goodluck Jonathan, arguably

because of the visible presence of the Igbo in his government. On the other hand, it has gained momentum under President Buhari because of his palpably clear marginalization of the Igbo in the distribution of resources.

Neo-Biafranism is strongly supported by the Igbo diasporas too. The nature of diasporic support, however, varies from country to country. For example, while the support by the diasporas in countries such as the UK, South Africa, Italy and Spain is strident and open, support by the diasporas in countries like Malaysia and China is muted and hushed. Diasporic support for the agitation can have far-reaching implications for Nigeria as well as those countries that have sizeable Igbo migrant populations. The potential impact of neo-Biafranism in Guangzhou on China's sociopolitical stability and on Nigeria-China diplomatic relations is discussed in the following.

NEO-BIAFRANISM IN GUANGZHOU

Neo-Biafranism in Guangzhou is a classic example of transnationalized separatism. Most Igbo migrants supporting it had been members of either the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) or Independent Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) during the time prior to their migration. Their transnationalization of secessionist agitation reinforces Bodomo's postulation that people never migrate empty-handed (2010). When people migrate, they migrate with skills, values, beliefs, emotions, cultures, political orientations, etc. Intensity of support to the agitation may vary according to economic and residency status. Thus, it appears to be more intense among migrants without legal residence or stable means of livelihood (fieldwork observation, 2017). Overwhelming compliance with the directive by IPOB that Biafrans stay indoors ("sit-at-home") on May 29 every year is evidence of strong support for neo-Biafranism by Igbo migrants in Guangzhou.

Apparently neo-Biafranism in Guangzhou is constrained by three factors. The first factor is the deterrent effect of the host country's illiberal attitude towards political activism. Unlike their 'comrades-in-arms' at home or in countries such as South Africa and the UK, pro-Biafra migrants in Guangzhou are deterred by predictable repercussions for any activities associated with the secessionist agitation raging in their home country. Thus deterred, they can only operate covertly, meeting in secret and refraining from activities that could rouse the law enforcement agencies, such as street protest and solicitation. The second factor is the fact that only about thirty per cent of the partisans can meaningfully support their separatist cell. A respondent, who identified himself as 'co-coordinator of IPOB cell in China', attributed the problem to the fact that majority of the partisans do not have a residency permit or cannot afford their 'commitment fees' (membership fee and voluntary donations). The third factor is the tendency by intermarried and well-to-do migrants to shun activities that can jeopardize their marriage and good standing with the law enforcement agencies.

IMPLICATIONS OF NEO-BIAFRANISM FOR CHINA

Migration has obvious implications for both the origin and host countries (UN, 2002). For example, as for the origin or sending country, it can reduce the population and cream off talents. As for the host or receiving country, it can increase the population, strain infrastructure, impinge on social cohesion and stability (for example, see Katseli, Lucas, & Xenogiani, 2006) and strain diplomatic crisis. With regard to China, the paper argues that support by Igbo migrants in Guangzhou for neo-Biafranism can adversely affect the host country's sociopolitical stability as well as its diplomatic relations with Nigeria.

SOCIOPOLITICAL INSTABILITY

Migration is one of the factors shaping how countries organize their security (Babatunde, 2009). The assumption that migration threatens national security is a reason for the rise in xenophobic

violence and the minatory ascendancy of anti-migrant parties in some countries. The securitization of migration is not new, anyway (Koser, 2011). For example, Japanese-Americans and German citizens were interned during the Second World War in the U.S. and the UK respectively. Securitization has intensified since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. (IOM, 2010). The characterization of migration as a security issue is due, in large part, to the increasing difficulty in distinguishing between bona fide migrants and potential terrorists sponsored by extremist groups many of which have honed the ability to rig migrant identity, passing off cadres as bona fide migrants or refugees or asylum seekers. It is, also, due to what has been called the transfer of experience in professional risk and fear management from legitimate risk groups such as terrorists, criminals, counterfeiters, and spies "toward other targets, most notably transnational political activists, people crossing borders, or people born in the country but with foreign parents" (Bigo, 2002).

According to Sowell (1996), migration is a phenomenon involving people who migrate, the places to which they migrate and their impact on those places. Sowell's thesis that migrants impact on their hosts is a good tool to anatomize the potential impact of neo-Biafranism in Guangzhou on China's sociopolitical stability and diplomacy. It is arguable that neo-Biafranism can undermine China's sociopolitical stability in two important ways. Firstly, it can bolster political activism both on the Mainland and in Hong Kong. On the Mainland, it could be injected into the growing swell of agitation for human rights. Any attempt by human rights activists to defend it as right to self-determination could further inflame animosity between the migrants and their hosts. In Hong Kong, it could bolster the agitation for independence from the Mainland. Secondly, it can bolster separatism by ethnic minorities, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet. The ideal of self-determination could bond the migrants and Uighurs and Tibetans, encumbering the efforts to curb external support for ethnic nationalism in the country.

DIPLOMATIC DISCORD

Migrants may remit money in order to support relations and infrastructure development in their origin countries. They may also benefit their home countries with the expertise they have gained from living abroad. Such remittances tend to strengthen relations between countries. On the contrary, diaspora support for anti-government activities in the origin country can strain diplomatic relations (Weiner, 1995). For example, Turkish-American diplomacy was strained by America's refusal to repatriate Muhammed Fethullah Gulen to face a charge of allegedly sponsoring the abortive July 2016 coup against President Tayyib Erdogan. Likewise, support for Tibetan nationalism by Tibetan exiles in India and elsewhere has been a source of misunderstanding in China's relationship with neighbouring India.

Nigeria, like every country else, regards all forms of external support for secession as an effort to subvert its sovereignty, hence it broke off diplomatic relations with those countries that extended diplomatic recognition to Biafra: Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon and Haiti. It is arguable that diplomatic relations with China would be strained if Nigeria should accuse China of harbouring political subversives. Failure to take measures to deter or suppress neo-Biafra agitation by Igbo migrants could induce Nigeria to not only reconsider its "One China" policy and attitude towards its Chinese population but also extend support to ethnic nationalism in places like Tibet and Xingjian. Post-Mao China has no history of supporting nationalist agitation in other countries (habouring dissidents, sending arms, etc.), so many migrants who had hoped that the country would be conducive to their secessionist agitation are bitterly disappointed. Non-interference in other countries' internal affairs continues to occupy centre stage in its foreign policy.

CONCLUSION

Migration between Africa and China is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it is furthering

the cause of economic and cultural cooperation between Africans and the Chinese. For example, migrants from Africa do not only export 'Made-in-China' goods to their respective home countries they also give their hosts the opportunity to acquaint themselves with African culture.

On the other hand, it is becoming problematic for policy makers. For example, both Africa and China are grappling with the problems of xenophobia and visa overstay. Chinese migrants in African countries are scattered over the countries, which is cramping the emergence of Chinese diasporas in the continent. On the contrary, African migrants are concentrated in the major commercial cities such as Guangzhou, Shanghai and Yiwu, which has resulted in the emergence of commercial enclaves in those cities.

China has been sucked into neo-Biafranism by the conspicuous presence of pro-Biafra Igbo migrants in Guangzhou. The presence of such migrants in that city can aggravate ethnic nationalism and political activism on the Mainland as well as independence movement in Hong Kong. Separatists in the restive parts of the country such as Xinjiang and Tibet could bid to harness their transnationalization of their agitation for separation from Nigeria. In harness with each other, the separatists could force a fundamental change of policy in the country's internal security and diplomatic relations with not only Nigeria but also with any other countries that are also grappling with separatist agitation.

China is certain to take measures to cramp not only contact between the migrants and its own separatist activists but also migration from Nigeria. It might even securitize the agitation, scheduling the migrants as terrorists. And it will be right in conceiving a connection between the migrants and fundamental threats to its internal security and foreign policy. Since the Cold War ended thirty years ago, terrorists and separatists have enhanced their ability to transnationalize their activities through migration. They may sponsor the migration of cadres

to targeted destinations. As noted by Castles and Miller (2009), "The centrality and pervasiveness of perceived connections between migration and security demarcate the present era from the Cold War era in which, whether rightly or wrongly, migration did not figure centrally in security thinking." The crackdown, however, may not suffice to gratify any demand by Nigeria for maximum action against a group of people it considers to be a risk to its unity.

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