

Igbo Women Seek Biafra, Voice Nigeria's Bleak Future

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Nigeria is one of the largest by territory with population (estimated currently at 206 million) and huge economy in Africa. Situated on the southern coast on the Gulf of Guinea in the Atlantic Ocean, this country most often referred to as the "Giant of Africa" has never-ending multiple and complicated internal problems ranging from politics (system of federal governance) to widening economic disparity to cultural differences. The country has 36 states and it is officially called the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Early July, Kester Kenn Klomegah had the chance and interviewed Chief (Mrs) Marie Okwo, President of the Igbo Women Assembly (IWA), about the impact of the civil war, the current politics and the role of the church in Nigeria. She is one of the remaining few Nigerians who have seen Nigeria from the struggle for independence through the development of its democracy. Mrs Okwo, who is an associate of the late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, is now the leader of the Igbo Women Assembly and one-time member of Advisory Council of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

Established as an NGO in 2006, the Igbo Women Assembly focuses on women empowerment and the youth, it consistently encourages moral values particularly among young graduates. Headquarters in Enugu, Enugu State of Nigeria.

Here are the interview excerpts:

The Nigerian civil war (1967-70) was a bitter experience, and has also affected expected development in the Biafra State. What are your views about this, especially from women's perspectives?

The war of 1967-1970 war was a pogrom; a war of attrition meant to wipe out a whole race for no just cause. It reminded me of the Holocaust against the Jews. Those who died of hunger starvation, bombings were numerous in number. Malnutrition killed many children who developed a disease called "kwashiorkor" - medical experts explain as lack of protein in the body and the belly fills up with fluid. I feel very emotional as I speak about this.

Suffice it to say, that the war could have been avoided, had Nigeria kept her end of the agreement at Aburi, in the Republic of Ghana, which came to be called "the Aburi Accord" that was reached in 1967. This venue offered the delegates security guarantee and that meeting was billed to be the last chance of preventing all-out war. The accord finally broke down because of differences of interpretation on both sides. This led to the outbreak of the war. Markets and places of worship were not spared from bombings and strafing. As a matter of fact, one of my domestic staffs lost her mother in one of the market bombings had been hurt by a shrapnel; she bled to death since medical facilities were scarce.

The effect of the war on the State of Biafra was deplorable: So much destabilization as the seat of government had to move from place to place and so could not settle down to the business of governing the people effectively. There were so many things to worry about, such how to get arms and ammunition. There was also the issues food insufficiency. Lack of concentration on the part of the Administrators and the Biafran military officers and soldiers had adverse effects on the Biafrans. As each area fell to the Nigerian military and their superior military weapons, civilians also had to relocate to safer areas. It was really rough and tough especially for nursing mothers most of who lost their babies. So so sad an experience.

Assessing the effects of the civil war today, especially from gender perspectives, what else can you say in this regard, will women play a more critical role in the administration of a Biafran state?

Before I comment on the role women can play in the administration of a Biafran state, let me mention the important roles they played during the war. It will be recalled that most men were in war fronts fighting to defend Biafraland. Others had lost their jobs and were forced to stay idle at home. The duties of catering for the needs of the rest of the families, therefore, fell on the women/ wives. In short, they became the bread winners.

On the roles women can play in a Biafran state, let me say, without fear of equivocation that without the contributions of women in governance, success will be difficult to achieve. Women have great potentials that should be harnessed in order to move the state forward.

How do you look at the political governance in the country in relation to Biafra State?

The government of Nigeria is vehemently averse to the name Biafra. Mere mention of that name makes them chilly. This government would rather have Biafrans remain under servitude of the Caliphate North. The slogan after the war was "No victor, no vanquished." That was the greatest deceit of the century. Biafrans have never been re-integrated.

The basis for unity no longer exists. Biafrans struggle for their survival without depending on any one. Since Nigerian government has refused absolutely to accept Biafrans as a component part of Nigeria, it stands to reason that they should be allowed to go and develop on their own at their own pace. It is pertinent to mention that the North contributes little or nothing to the development of the country. Rather resources from Southern Nigeria are controlled and squandered by Northern Elements.

On security in Nigeria, I wish to make it categorically clear that in Nigeria, security is at its lowest ebb. The Fulani Herdsmen are the cause of the unprecedented insecurity in Biafraland. They move about freely with their cattle carrying sophisticated AK 47. They destroy farmlands and crops, kill farmers, gang-rape and kill female farmers in their farmlands. The resultant effect of the destruction of farms and crops will be devastating as there will be monumental scarcity of food soon, this will spell doom for the masses.

Government and the security operatives are fully aware of the perilous situations but prefer to look the other way. Sometimes the police offer to pay compensations. A few days ago, a middle-aged woman was gang-raped by Fulani Herdsmen in a farm till she went into a coma she was taken to a hospital and later pronounced dead. The insult by these Fulani Herdsmen is a great insult to Biafrans. Why will these Fulanis not allow us peace in our space? Enough is enough! When people are pushed to the wall, they have no alternative than to fight back.

Igbo Women Assembly call for a Referendum to settle the issue, once and for all. Our children have no future in Nigeria. We feel like the Israelites while in bondage under the Pharaohs of Egypt. We desire freedom to follow our own designs and practice our Christian Religion without let or hindrance.

Are people really satisfied with the current government? What, in your objective view, are some of their political mistakes?

Nigeria has never been so polarized or rancorous as it is now. There's so much unrest which stems from oppression, corruption wrong choices of appointees to important governing bodies. Square pegs are placed in round holes indeed. The bitterness existing in Nigeria, at the present time, is unequalled. Security is non-existent. The reality is that there is unchecked anarchy. As things stand now, Nigeria may just disintegrate without gunshots.

Almost all of Nigeria's intractable problems emanate from imposition of candidates during elections; no free, fair or credible elections are conducted. The situation gets worse with every election.

In the first place, the Constitution under which elections are held is a fraud. Far from being the "People's Constitution." We have faced these mistakes since the inception of presidential system of governance in Nigeria. The system under reference is wasteful, encourages corruption and dictatorial tendencies.

In spite of the flaws in the Constitution, the ruling party has ignored most of the clauses which might enhance the peaceful co-existence of the citizens. Impunity is rife with this current Administration. There is therefore an urgent need for intervention by concerned people of the entire world. Any adversity that befalls a Nation will have adverse effects on other Nations if not nipped in the bud.

This is a clarion call by the Igbo Women Assembly for assistance by all who abhor oppression and bad governance. No justice, no peace! No peace, no progress!

As a highly devout Catholic, how would you argue that the church could be a tool to fight against all injustices and state maladministration, most probably corruption in the Federal Republic of Nigeria?

The church in Nigeria, irrespective of denominations, has a vital role to play in addressing the ills of Nigeria. It is the duty of the church to do all in her power to restore the dignity and moral values of our societies.

All of a sudden, acquisition of wealth has taken precedence over integrity, justice and fair play. The church has a duty to inculcate the congregations with a sense of responsibility moral values and discipline. Most criminals and corrupt members of the society are not pagans but Christians driven into such negative behavioral tendencies by the system. It is interesting to say that wrong leaderships beget wrong followers.

Unfortunately, some pastors preach the gospel of prosperity instead of salvation, thereby driving people into acquiring filthy lucre through any means whatsoever. People quickly forget that greed and avarice lead to destruction. They do not remember that whatever one has on earth cannot accompany him/her to the great beyond. Others will enjoy the ill-gotten goods. Corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of the nation and the church must make concerted efforts to bring the menace to the barest minimum.

And the Biafra diaspora outside Nigeria, especially in the United States and Europe...are they optimistic about break away of the Biafran State?

Biafrans in the Diaspora are even more enthusiastic about an independent nation than some Biafrans at home. Any sign that a Referendum is on hand will see a deluge of Diaspora Biafrans flying back home. They will contribute in no small measure to bring rapid development to the new nation-state. Surely, this new nation will overtake Nigeria, which regards herself as the so- called largest country, in Africa. Yes! Largest in all types of vices like kidnappings, rape, sleeze oppression, abuse of human rights and so forth.

What are your recommendations here, what should or must be done under the current circumstances in Nigeria?

My perspective on the future or the way forward for Nigeria, the country has expired and cannot be revived, neither can it be reactivated.It is my well-considered opinion that any group or ethnic nationality, which wants to leave this contraption, should be granted their peace and freedom. Nigeria is too large to be one country since there are too many differences in religion, cultures and traditions, food and languages and other factors. Nigeria has never and can never be one. Unity has eluded the country.

If, however, Biafra becomes unattainable then we should go back to the parliamentary system of governance. A weak center with regional autonomy. As things are now, the country is rudderless and groping in the dark. If no positive action is taken soonest, Nigeria will take a nosedive into a deep precipice, in this case, the name will become irreversibly extinct.

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