

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Unforgotten shadows: exploring the dynamics of Biafra agitation in south-east Nigeria

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## Abstract

Since 2015, the south-eastern region of Nigeria has experienced sporadic outbursts of aggression spearheaded by Biafran separatist agitators. However, the latter part of the 2010s has witnessed a marked increase in the fervent endeavours of Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) activists within the same area as they passionately pursue their aspirations for self-determination. Central to their approach is enforcing a compulsory weekly ‘sit-at-home’ policy, effectively establishing a quasi-sovereign enclave within the region. The prevalence of social media has provided a prominent platform for propagating secessionist sentiments. IPOB also advocates vigilante justice against individuals who dare to flout the mandated Monday sit-at-home order. An alarming manifestation of this stance can be gleaned from a tweet containing a chilling threat: ‘[I]f you come out, we will kill you, hang your head, and upload it.’ In response to these developments, the Nigerian state has assumed a resolute stance, taking action to proscribe IPOB and declaring any social gatherings of south-eastern youths a ‘state of exception’. As this article examines IPOB’s sit-at-home directive and the escalating focus on fear and retribution against transgressors in the south-eastern region, it adopts a comprehensive methodology that integrates oral interviews, focus group discussions, analysis of newspaper editorials, books and journal articles, and the tracking of relevant online hashtags for the purpose of data generation and analysis. Adopting securitization theory, this article offers an interpretative lens to comprehend the intricate issues at stake.

## Résumé

Depuis 2015, la région du sud-est du Nigeria connaît des flambées de violence sporadiques menées par des agitateurs séparatistes du Biafra. Cependant, la fin des années 2010 a été marquée par une montée de l’activisme de l’IBOP (Indigenous Peoples of Biafra) dans cette région, fervents partisans de l’autodétermination. Au cœur de leur approche se trouve l’application d’une obligation hebdomadaire de « rester à la maison », établissant de fait une enclave quasi-souveraine au sein de la région. La prévalence des réseaux sociaux a fourni une importante plateforme pour propager les sentiments sécessionnistes, et l’IPOB préconise également une justice d’autodéfense contre les personnes qui osent bafouer l’injonction de rester à la maison le lundi. Cette position se manifeste de manière alarmante dans un tweet contenant une menace glaçante : « Si vous sortez, nous vous tuons, nous vous couperons la tête et l’exposerons en

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ligne ». En réponse à ces développements, l'État nigérian s'est montré ferme en prenant des mesures pour interdire l'IPOB et en déclarant tout rassemblement social de jeunes du Sud-est comme un « état d'exception ». Cet article examine l'injonction de rester à la maison de l'IPOB et l'accent croissant mis sur la peur et les représailles contre les transgresseurs dans la région du sud-est, en adoptant une méthodologie globale qui intègre des entretiens oraux, des discussions de groupes de réflexion, une analyse d'éditoriaux de journaux, de livres et d'articles, ainsi qu'un suivi des hashtags en ligne pertinents à des fins de génération et d'analyse de données. En adoptant la théorie de la sécuritisation, cet article propose une perspective interprétative pour comprendre les enjeux complexes.

## Resumo

Desde 2015, a região sudeste da Nigéria tem enfrentado explosões esporádicas de agressão encabeçadas por agitadores separatistas do Biafra. No entanto, na última parte da década de 2010, assistiu-se a um aumento acentuado dos esforços fervorosos dos activistas do Povo Indígena do Biafra (IPOB) na mesma região, que perseguem apaixonadamente as suas aspirações de autodeterminação. No centro da sua abordagem está a imposição de uma política semanal obrigatória de 'ficar em casa', estabelecendo efetivamente um enclave quase soberano na região. A prevalência das redes sociais tem proporcionado uma plataforma proeminente para a propagação de sentimentos secessionistas, e o IPOB também defende a justiça vigilante contra indivíduos que se atrevam a desrespeitar a ordem de ficar em casa às segundas-feiras. Uma manifestação alarmante desta posição pode ser constatada num tweet que contém uma ameaça arrepiante: 'Se saíres, matamos-te, penduramos a tua cabeça e divulgamos.' Em resposta a estes desenvolvimentos, o Estado nigeriano assumiu uma posição resoluta, tomando medidas para proibir o IPOB e declarando qualquer reunião social de jovens do sudeste como um 'estado de exceção'. Este artigo examina a diretiva do IPOB de se sentar em casa e a escalada do medo e da retribuição contra os transgressores na região sudeste, adoptando uma metodologia abrangente que integra entrevistas orais, discussões em grupos de discussão, análise de editoriais de jornais, livros e artigos de revistas, e o rastreio de hashtags online relevantes para efeitos de geração e análise de dados. Adoptando a teoria da securitização, este artigo oferece uma lente interpretativa para compreender as intrincadas questões em jogo.

## Introduction

The demand for the separation of Nigeria and the establishment of an Igbo-dominated Republic of Biafra has become a permanent fixture within the Nigerian political landscape, with varying degrees of seriousness. The beginning of instability in Nigeria began with a significant event several months before the war. This event was the first military coup, which took place on 15 January 1966. This single event plunged Nigeria into a state from which it has never fully recovered. Most of the Nigerian populace initially greeted the coup with jubilation due to the prevalent corruption in the nascent country's political landscape. However, when the names of the coup plotters (mainly Igbo officers) and the victims of the coup (mainly Hausa Fulani and Yoruba military officers and politicians) were revealed, an ethnic dimension was attached to the coup. In a country where sectarianism was deeply ingrained, the notion of an 'Igbo coup' began to take hold (Achebe 2012: 65; Nnaemeka 2021: 216). Shortly thereafter, on 29 July 1966, a counter coup occurred, resulting in the assassination of the head of state, General J. T. U. Aguiyi Ironsi, forty-two officers and over 130 other ranks,

predominantly Igbo (Achebe 2012: 66). Within three days of the July outbreak, every Igbo soldier serving outside the east was either dead, imprisoned or fleeing eastward for their lives (Iloegbunam 2016). Subsequently, the Igbo faced widespread reprisals and became victims of killing sprees in the northern part of the country, leading to a mass exodus of Igbo people to the east. An attempt to quell the tensions was made through the signing of the Aburi Accord (Ezeani 2013: 21–54) on 4–5 January 1966 by General Ojukwu (the governor of Eastern Region) and Yakubu Gowon (the Nigerian military head of state) (Harnischfeger 2019). Unfortunately, the Nigerian federal government failed to implement the agreements<sup>1</sup> of the Aburi Accord, leading to frustration and anger among Ojukwu and his eastern compatriots, who felt cornered. Consequently, on 30 May 1967, Ojukwu declared the Eastern Region of Nigeria the Republic of Biafra. The subsequent armed conflict between Nigeria and Biafra endured for almost three years (1967–70), and the East Central State, predominantly inhabited by Igbo ethnic groups and other ethnic minorities, bore the brunt of the human and infrastructural devastation as the primary theatre of war. Since the end of the war, the Igbos have accepted their loss, but the fall-out of the war and the subsequent perceived discriminatory policies (Obi-Ani 2009: 170–89) implemented by the Nigerian state haunt them still. The survivors became docile and reluctant to share their war experiences after the war. Unofficial memories are shared horizontally – that is, through family, kinship or other social networks (Kuppens and Langer 2023: 408). Obviously, as argued by Shesterinina (2016: 422), ‘it is within the quotidian networks of family and friends that this information was typically consolidated into collective notions of threat and transferred into mobilization decisions’. This context can be gleaned from Dilorah Chukwurah’s childhood memories of the Nigeria–Biafra war, in what he captured as his parents’ method of remembering, transmitting and forgetting:

Our parents got on with their lives when the war ended and were reluctant to share the Biafra story with their children and grandchildren. From the day the war ended, I recall neither of my parents using the word ‘Biafra’. It seemed almost as if it was something to be embarrassed about or like it had become a taboo. Instead, they chose Igbo terminologies, such as *oge ugu*, and *naaya*, implying ‘during the war’, to refer to anything related to Biafra. (Chukwurah 2015: xx)

In the same vein, Chimamanda Adichie, as a second-generation war survivor, recollected that:

on the margins of my happy childhood, there was a shadow: the Biafra war. The war was a seminal event in Nigeria’s modern history, but I learned little about it in school. Biafra was wrapped in mystery. At home, parents spoke of it

<sup>1</sup> The Aburi conference produced the following resolutions, among others: (1) no use of force in settling the crisis; (2) all regions to have a confederal status without boundary adjustments; (3) all members of the supreme military council to have a veto, requiring unanimous agreement from the regions before major decisions are made; (4) salaries of all displaced persons to be paid until 31 March 1967; and (5) the head of the federal military government to assume the title of commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

rarely and obliquely: I heard many stories about my grandfather's wisdom and humour, but few stories about how they died. (Nnaemeka 2021: 224)

Volkan (2001) explains that, in large groups, individuals who have gone through trauma often share a common mental representation of the tragic events that have impacted them. This mental representation includes their damaged self-images, which are linked to the shared traumatic event. Additionally, they often pass on these self-images to the developing self-representation of the next generation, hoping that they will be able to grieve the loss or overcome the humiliation.

The formation of neo-Biafran movements in the recent past concurs with Adebayo's argument that 'the past is not merely present. Instead, it survives and lives on because of the continuous presence of the past and lingering injustices in the present' (2023: 4). The subsequent generation, however, refused to accept the prevailing status quo, feeling aggrieved by the shared memories and perceived injustices perpetrated by the Nigerian state in contemporary times. Consequently, the ranks of Biafran agitators swelled among the populace. This bottled-up anger exploded in the late 1990s and early 2000s into renewed agitation for secession, mostly by Igbo youths who were born after the Biafran war. They found the political and economic choices facing them insufferable. This research examines the changing dynamics of Biafran questions in south-east Nigeria under the directive of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) – the most vociferous of the Biafran groups. While earlier studies focused on pre-war, wartime and post-war activities, this article sheds light on the enduring impact of the war and its legacy on the Igbo people and youth in contemporary times. It also examines the escalating focus on fear and retribution against transgressors of their directives in the region and government responses to their activities.

## Methodology

This study primarily focuses on the south-east region of Nigeria, which comprises five states and boasts a population of 21,619,400, as documented by Merem *et al.* (2019). The south-east region holds historical significance as the birthplace of Biafra and the epicentre of the Nigeria-Biafra war, which spanned from 1967 to 1970. This qualitative inquiry started with an online survey involving the participation of 476 individuals, with an equal representation of men and women. The age groups of these participants spanned from eighteen to fifty years and they were identified as secondary victims of the Nigerian civil war. They belong to the second and third generations following the primary victims of the war between Nigeria and Biafra. These age statistics categorize them as part of the 'social media generation'. Social media platforms play a crucial role in rebuilding and enhancing the feelings of national belonging, citizenship and identity (Ndlovu 2021: 119). Post-war Igbo youths, who are part of this social media generation, are deeply concerned by several of Nigeria's official policies, such as the federal character, quota system, educational disadvantages, and the unequal distribution of government appointments. This perceived marginalization has eroded their faith in a unified Nigeria. Social media has now evolved into a significant platform for articulating, reproducing and mediating historical memories related to Biafra. In addition to the online survey, I interviewed

individuals in Enugu, Onitsha and Aba, three prominent cities in south-eastern Nigeria. Aside from the oral interviews, being an observing participant contributed valuable data to the study. I observed the social media space contestations and everyday debates while living in south-east Nigeria.

The data generation for this research made me a participant observer with regard to issues evolving in the south-east region. Agbiboa (2022: 34) observed that ‘participant observation’ – or what Clifford Geertz (1983: 127) refers to as ‘the dialectic of experience and interpretation’ – necessitated continuous movement between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the relationships under study (Baviskar 1995: 8). It further helped me to situate my informants within the contexts with which they are most familiar, but also to experience their lived realities (Agbiboa 2022: 34). This assisted me in reconciling divergent views, feelings, nuances and opinions on the locations of disillusionment across south-eastern Nigeria. Agbiboa (*ibid.*: 36) further stated: ‘Participant observation is most authentic and reliable when the researcher can be unobserved because it provides much-needed access to “naturally” unfolding events.’ I visited places such as ‘*ogbo mmanu*’,<sup>2</sup> where unskilled labourers await to be hired daily for day-wage work. They are the most frustrated about their economic realities, realities in which daily feeding is their primary challenge. There are days when some of them come to the *ogbo mmanu* sites without being hired for a day or a week. During one of our focus group discussions (FGDs) in one such site at Onitsha, Anambra State, the man who became the spokesman rhetorically asked the others: ‘Do you feed well? Do you have money? What is working as it is supposed to in Nigeria?’<sup>3</sup> This site reveals how economic hardship is fuelling the recollection of Biafra war memories. These people show their frustration during interviews in which their body language reveals their resentment towards the government. The participants interviewed were aged twenty to fifty and fifty-five to seventy-one; twenty-five individuals participated, comprising twenty-three men and two women. There were also two FGDs.

Reliable informants identified within the FGDs were followed up for more information. We occasionally accompanied them to their daily workplace, if they had been hired for the day. This was to avoid disrupting their daily activities. This ethnography method is what Kusenbach (2003: 467) refers to as ‘going along’. This method facilitates the exploration of interviewees’ social realms (*ibid.*). Finding them in those sites and sometimes accompanying them to their places of work as artisans who depend on daily hire helped us to understand why the recollection of Biafra war memories matters to them. The ‘go along’ research strategy revealed how informants situate themselves in their local social landscape by highlighting the links between places and life histories, thus uncovering how individuals lend depth and meaning to their mundane routines (*ibid.*). Meeting and interacting with informants in their everyday settings also revealed how the strengths and advantages of participant observation, interviewing and ‘go along’ accumulate when they are pursued in

<sup>2</sup> *Ogbo mmanu* are located across Igboland and are places where one can hire artisans for menial jobs at a relatively affordable rate. Specifically, these menial labourers rely on a daily display of their work tools to attract attention, identify their trade and possibly get hired by those who need their services.

<sup>3</sup> FGD, 2021. The FGDs comprised men aged between twenty and seventy-one years. They were men from different parts of south-east Nigeria: Ebonyi, Enugu, Anambra and Imo. The city’s cosmopolitan nature makes it ideal for people from different parts of Igboland to ply their trades.

combination (*ibid.*). It also opened up my understanding that some older generations who are frustrated with the everyday life of their generation are supporting the neo-Biafran agitations.

Secondary sources such as books, magazines and periodicals were also consulted for comparative analysis. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the unfolding events while specifically focusing on the case of Biafra to gain insight into participants' lived experiences, resilience and underlying sources of discontent. Also, different neo-Biafran groups' Facebook pages, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) accounts were used for comparative insight. This is because social media is now a space for showing and encouraging secession and jungle justice against those who flaunt the weekly sit-at-home protests (on Mondays).

### Theoretical framework

The application of securitization theory and approaches framing social isolation and collective threat provides a framework to analyse the complex issues that have led to fear and insecurity in Igboland recently. According to securitization theory, a 'securitizing actor' strategically portrays a sense of vulnerability, leading the populace to perceive and respond to the presented threat. This process usually starts with a significant speech, where an authoritative figure turns an issue into a critical threat, necessitating urgent security measures. Former President Muhammadu Buhari's speech in August 2017, where he referred to certain elements as 'irresponsible', is an example of such a speech act (Ekpo and Agorye 2019: 2; Nyiayaana and Nwankpa 2022: 194). This discourse set the stage for the subsequent government-sanctioned Operation Python Dance I and II, executed by the Nigerian army, which targeted and engaged the members of IPOB in confrontation. Gade (2020) noted that, in Hebron, the Israeli government built an environment of conflict with checkpoints, closure obstacles, guard towers and surveillance networks. This has led to individual and collective resistance by Palestinians and has disrupted community life and economic productivity. Similarly, in Nigeria, military and police checkpoints have been established in south-east Nigeria following the rise in Biafran agitation. The proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organization and the army's Operation Python Dance aimed to flush out IPOB members from parts of south-eastern Nigeria. President Buhari's controversial metaphor branding the group and the Igbo ethnic community as 'a dot in a circle' (Uzoaru 2021) has further legitimized the group's terrorist identity despite the speech act's failure to suppress the group.

The malicious branding of the Igbo nation as 'a dot in a circle' further underlined the deliberate use of state policies to marginalize the people through political gerrymandering of their natural boundaries with contiguous neighbours in order to justify the 'fictitious landlocked' nature of Igboland. To further emphasize the image of a 'dot nation', the people are denied international airports in Igboland, save for the semblance of an airport – the so-called Akanu Ibiam International Airport in Enugu, where only one plane flies in twice a week from Ethiopia. Those who did not experience the war point to these injustices as unacceptable and unbearable. Government actions and speech, according to Nwangwu *et al.* (2020: 546), made Nnamdi Kanu, the IPOB leader, worry about his safety during an active military operation; he stated that the IPOB leadership was rethinking the viability of

continuing the struggle in a non-violent manner, especially following the securitization of the group and subsequent attacks by the Nigerian state. Like the Abkahlz group in Shesterinina's (2016) study, the shared understandings of history and identity invoked by the Igbo were related to their pre-war and post-war experiences in Nigeria. The decision to mobilize for a second secession by the post-war generation exacerbated regional fragility. It inadvertently galvanized IPOB, alongside its factions steered by the self-styled Biafran prime minister, Simon Ekpa, intensifying the precariousness of peace and security within the region.

### Neo-Biafra redefined: unpacking the modern push for secession

The Igbo people have been in political limbo since their defeat in the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970. There appears to be a glass ceiling politically and bureaucratically for the Igbo parvenu. The generation that experienced the war appears to bear the consequences of defeat stoically; those born after the war are exasperated by their second-class status. To them, either they are accepted as full citizens or allowed the quest for an independent Biafra. Indeed, the collective trauma expressed in hushed tones in the safety of their homes was successfully transmitted from generation to generation as a loss of family and home, of a feeling of belonging and security in the country, bleeding from one generation to the next (Hirsch 2012: 112). As Ndlovu (2018a: 296) noted, 'We cannot fully understand what victims went through, partly because the impact of the traumatic event cannot be adequately captured in words.' The past has metamorphosed into an overpowering presence, too present, cannibalizing the future (Ncube 2021: 145). However, the government's efforts at controlling the narratives and silencing the memory have resurrected the violent past, which is now archived on social media platforms. Barkan (2016: 10) said that, 'in post-conflict societies, the question of acknowledgment of the memory of historical violence remains vexing'. Structural injustices fan the crisis in Igboland, aggravated by the absence of recognition of historical violence in contemporary politics and peacebuilding (*ibid.*: 10). Thus, Bardizbanian (2019: 45) is of the view that 'silence does not have the power to erase what lies in memory'. For Henry Greenspan, for some survivors, the attempt to find 'human terms' for memory involves more than stories that are told. It also involves stories that are lived (*ibid.*: 50). The trauma of the war resonates in the present volatile nature of the south-east today, where violent non-state actors are creating a state within a state. This is summarily understood as the second Nigeria-Biafra war, as all wars are fought twice in history: on the battlefield and in memory (Adebayo 2023: 24). The secondary victims are fighting the Nigerian culture of silence and are revisiting the hegemonic memory narrative (*ibid.*: 23) through different social media platforms. In this way, the past shared by the older generation, apart from being experienced, is also learned and interpreted (Popov and Dèak 2015: 39). The survivors' children are found among the different Biafra movements that have evolved with names such as the Biafra Zionist Movement, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Biafra Independent Movement, as well as Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB). However, IPOB has been the most influential of all these groups in recent times and constitutes the focus of this article.



The hurt of Biafra and the lingering Igbo question in Nigeria's socio-political space was shifted out of the public domain and became a dimension of private memory (Last 2000: 378). The selective memorialization and historical amnesia that distance the present generation from history fuel revivalist movements that draw inspiration from the collective memories of the past (Korieh 2012). Akachi Odoemenam (2012: 170) believes that, 'for these leaders (subsequent Nigerian governments), it became expedient to kill that history and erase human memory about it by keeping such topics off the country's history curriculum. These views reinforce the official position that downplays the gravity of what happened between 1967 and 1970. For them, Biafra never existed.' Ian Baucom's observation (cited in Adebayo 2023: 12) highlights that time does not simply pass but accumulates. This supports the opinion of Jacques Derrida, as cited by Adebayo, who argued that:

the dead no longer lives in himself or herself and that the only being of the dead is 'in us' and in our 'bereaved memory'. We, the living, bear the grave of the dead within us, and it is in this process of interiorizing the deceased 'other' that the past is kept alive. (Adebayo 2023: 31)

The Nigerian government's attempts to suppress the memory of Biafra have not succeeded; instead, they have led to the emergence of fragmented memories of the war, viewed through biased lenses. As Popov and Dèak (2015: 38) opined: 'The process of selecting memories is important. This is because what is remembered is also constituted by what was, or was made to be forgotten.' Official denial of the Biafran experience equates to denying individual and collective memories. Collective memory denotes a social group's remembrance of past events. Our recollection of past events is 'socially framed' as it is shaped by socio-political and historical events (Ndlovu 2018b: 114). For the generation of the survivors, 'Biafra, in and of itself, is a site of an interminable mourning and a narrative of an inconsolable loss for the victims and survivors of the war' (Adebayo 2023: 31). To create national memory recollection about the past, the younger generations of the Igbo ethnic nationality have found new avenues to relive and share memories through media spaces such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, blogs and YouTube, socializing in mnemonic discourses through the internalization of knowledge of their predecessors. Through these complex engagements, the young generation of Igbos are able to understand, interpret and act out the society's past (Popov and Dèak 2015: 39), as social media platforms become focal points for contestations regarding Biafran independence. The internet, accordingly, is a terrain for the performance of 'long-distance nationalism', as diasporic communities are using online spaces to express, imagine, strengthen and contextualize their national identities (Ndlovu 2018b: 114). Igbo youth are using the internet to invoke their own histories, memories and identities in order to subvert the dominant nationhood discourses and express their understanding of their parents' traumatic past. Neo-Biafran movements align with Adebayo, who posits that 'the past survives and lives on' (Adebayo 2023: 4) – injustices lingering from the past fuel narratives of post-conflict memory in Africa, portending a future under siege. This article sheds light on the enduring impact of the war on Igbo youth in contemporary Nigeria.



### Tensions rise: neo-Biafran movements and government crackdown

As the Nigerian state remains fractured along ethnic and class fault lines, the pursuit of neo-Biafran secession has taken a toll on its participants, as protests are often met with hostility from the Nigerian government. The neo-Biafran movement advocates for the separation of the Igbo ethnic group from Nigeria, even over fifty years after the civil war. In response, the Nigerian state proscribed these groups, viewing social gatherings of south-east youths as a 'state of exception', where their deaths are not considered homicides but a duty to preserve the state. In October 2005, the leader of MASSOB, Ralph Uwazurike, and several others were arrested, and in November of the same year, they faced treason charges in court.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, MASSOB alleged that over 2,000 of its members had been killed since 1999, while over 1,000 languished in various prisons across the country (Ibeanu *et al.* 2016: 16). These unlawful detentions primarily affected the lower-class members, causing immense hardship for their families. Many members believe they will be rewarded with influential positions in the Republic of Biafra, which contributes to their commitment.

While doing fieldwork in 2015 at Ikpa Market Nsukka, I encountered a young woman selling puff-puff (a snack). She tearfully shared her distressing story of not seeing her husband for over five years. He was arrested while she was pregnant, and now their son was five years old and without a father. Her husband's crime was his association with MASSOB. She sadly conveyed that neither the government nor MASSOB supported her and her son. Her husband's release seemed hopeless, leaving them in a desperate situation. This poignant tale exemplifies the plight of victims and their families who bear the brunt of the neo-Biafran movement's consequences, facing hardship and uncertainty without a support system to rely on. Observing the everyday hardships of ordinary people in the south-east, one wonders why they prefer to suffer rather than ignore IPOB's call for a sit-at-home protest. According to many of the participants in an FGD of ten men aged between thirty and forty years at Onitsha in Anambra State, one of the hotbeds of the Biafran protest:

We like the sit-at-home lifestyle. It is better that we suffer for our father, Nnamdi Kanu. He should not be the only person suffering alone. Every Monday is not too much for us to sacrifice for the betterment and actualization of Biafra.<sup>5</sup>

In a follow-up question, 'Is the sit-at-home not affecting you?', they chorused their response:

It is affecting us. We have children to pay their school fees and house rent, but staying at home is better than going to school where, after studying, you walk around the streets with the file. Look at this man! I am a graduate of the University of Nigeria, yet no job for me to profess what I studied in the school

<sup>4</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 'Responses to information requests (RIRs)', 14 August 2009 <<https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/12/18/NGA103196.FE.pdf>>, accessed July 2023.

<sup>5</sup> FGD (ten men, aged approximately thirty to forty-seven), interviewed at post office, Onitsha, 20 October 2021.

for five years. Is it not wasted years? I will sit down at home until Biafra. I will lead a fight against anyone who disobeys our leaders. It is better we stay home and get what we want than open our shops to receive marginalization in goods importation.<sup>6</sup>

The above interactions show the dynamics of the quest for Biafra. The issues connote the insensitivity of the federal government to political reforms in the country. Issues such as a truly federal structure, revenue based on derivation principles and a state police will allay the fears of marginalization and douse the clamour for secession by the Igbo. Secessionist sentiments are expressed according to people's feelings about their difficult conditions or what they make of their difficult past. For the unemployed, there is a sense of marginalization, which was reinforced by government appointments and infrastructural developments in each region of the federation to the detriment of the south-east. For instance, Buhari's now infamous announcement during his civilian debut on 29 May 2015 of 'belonging to everybody and to nobody' was contradicted by his actions and inactions during his eight years in office. His appointments and siting of physical infrastructure across the federation, according to Nwangwu *et al.* (2020: 539), 'suggest adherence to his dishonourable 97% vs 5%' principle of political consideration. This principle was his way of rewarding the various ethnic groups for their voting patterns during the campaign. The disgruntled Igbo ethnic group gave Buhari only 5 per cent of their votes and must be rewarded suitably. Indeed, President Buhari's statement about rewarding the region that gave him 97 per cent of the votes and emasculating the region that gave him 5 per cent (Olubajo 2021) stokes secessionist feelings among Igbo youths.<sup>7</sup> Although the statement underlines the poor leadership qualities of the president, it hardens the stance of neo-Biafrans – that the Igbo have no chance in Nigeria either in politics or in reforms. They are victimized for their political choice in a so-called democracy and cannot obtain a remedy in a flawed judicial system or in an electoral process routinely rigged and manipulated by officialdom. To many young Igbo, they have no business sharing the nation with people of different tongues. They blame the British for the contrivance called Nigeria. These negative sentiments against colonial legacies are not peculiar to them; the Ndebele youth whose parents experienced the Gukurahundi genocide in Zimbabwe share the same thoughts. Mphahisi Ndlovu reiterates that:

such secessionist sentiments are anchored upon an assumption that African borders are 'artificial' and 'arbitrary' as they were forged by European colonialists during the 'scramble for Africa'. As disparate ethnic groups were bundled to form nation-states, there is a belief that these boundaries do not reflect African societies' historical and cultural realities. (Ndlovu 2018b: 112)

The rise of the neo-Biafran movement was an indictment of the reconciliation process of the Nigerian government. After the war, official policies that discriminated against

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See also 'Buhari's statement at the US Institute of Peace that made everyone cringe', Sahara Reporters, 25 July 2015 <<https://saharareporters.com/2015/07/25/buhari%E2%80%99s-statement-us-institute-peace-made-everyone-crige-0>>, accessed 22 August 2024.

the Igbo included those that related to the quota system, abandoned property, educational disadvantage and federal character (Obi-Ani 2009: 90–102; 2002). These policies upset the secondary victims of the war, who articulated their frustration and despair about the nation in our FGD:

When will things get better in Nigeria? We fix our light, water, security and shelter, yet the country is in dire straits. We are marginalized; we last ate in the morning. My people, have you eaten? Noooooooo! [people chorus] Why? Because we don't have any work. I am a bricklayer and cannot boast of N30,000 [US\$20] for three months. We are living in fear. Biafra is the best. Sitting at home is the best of it all. This generation is witnessing another height of hunger and starvation and is deprived of the nation's resources.<sup>8</sup>

Another informant stated:

I strongly support the [pro-Biafran] movement because in Nigeria we, the Igbo, are discriminated against in politics. Only the Hausa Fulani and Yoruba populate Nigerian politics, while ministerial appointments are restricted to their kinsmen. More so, we are different from other ethnicities in Nigeria, and because of that, we don't understand each other; hence, intermarriages are quite challenging. Our federal roads are terrible. We have no functional seaport or airport in Igboland. Even the soldiers sent down to Igboland treat us like animals. Over a little issue, they treat you with hatred, order you to roll in the mud or gutter, whip you like a thief, or instruct you to spin yourself while standing.<sup>9</sup>

IPOB was formed in 2014 with Nnamdi Kanu as its leader (Chrisent *n.d.*).<sup>10</sup> Similar to its predecessor, the organization engages in agitation through unarmed protests, media messages, radio broadcasts and civil disobedience. On 2 December 2015, soldiers shot protesters at the Onitsha Head Bridge during a march. Six people were reportedly killed, and twelve were said to be injured during the event (Amnesty International 2016). On 9 February 2016, several IPOB members gathered at the national high school in Aba, Abia State, to pray for their leader Nnamdi Kanu, who was being arraigned in court that day. However, it was reported that as soon as they commenced, four policemen and several soldiers came to the event and arrested the coordinators. While they were being taken away, shooting started. Four days later, on 13 February, thirteen corpses were discovered in a shallow pit along the Aba–Port Harcourt expressway (Okonkwo 2016; Obi-Ani *et al.* 2020). These are some of the aggressive responses of the federal government to the group's secessionist activities, and Operation Python Dance became the most remarkable of these responses.

Sunday, 10 September 2017 was presumed to be the kick-off of Operation Python Dance II in the south-east; it was supposed to have commenced officially on

<sup>8</sup> FGD (twenty men, aged twenty to seventy-one), interviewed at post office, Onitsha, 20 October 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Chukwuonu (aged approximately sixty, trader), interviewed at Aba, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> See also 'Biafran leader Nnamdi Kanu: the man behind Nigeria's separatists', BBC News, 5 May 2017 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39793185>>, accessed 22 August 2024.

15 September and was expected to end on 14 October 2017 (Obi-Ani *et al.* 2019: 116; Ujumadu and Okoli 2017). IPOB, on the other hand, alleged that during the confrontation of 10 September, its members were killed by the Nigerian army. A video that displayed soldiers maltreating a group of young boys who had gone to show solidarity with the IPOB leader surfaced during this time.<sup>11</sup> On 18 September 2017, IPOB was proscribed as a terrorist group by the acting chief judge of the Federal High Court under the Terrorism (Prevention) Act 2013 (Obi-Ani *et al.* 2019: 116; Aborisade *et al.* 2019). Before this event, however, there had been severe clashes between IPOB and security agents in which protesters either lost their lives or were seriously injured. What is even more worrisome is that the more highhanded the government becomes, the more intransigent the group is. Thus, the best approach would have been dialogue with the neo-Biafran movements and political reform to assuage those on the margin of state policies. Those who assume that the state is omnipotent and, therefore, can trample on its citizens are living in the past, while the resisters who resort to the use of force by targeting vulnerable citizens soon lose sympathy for their cause.

The then chairman of the South-East Governors' Forum and governor of Ebonyi State, Chief David Umahi, acknowledged the fact that the south-east had been greatly troubled by the presence of the Nigerian military and called on the military to remain neutral and maintain a high level of professionalism in the discharge of their duties while the operation lasted (Olowoloagba 2019). The proscription of IPOB was viewed by a majority of Igbo as an extension of their marginalization in Nigeria. Many respondents saw the federal action as hatred towards the Igbo. An informant noted:

Have you seen any soldier punishing someone in the East before? You will instantly pity the person. Most times, these soldiers flog people, order them to roll in the mud or even jump inside the gutter, most times over little things that aren't worth such punishments. Such would never happen in the North [of Nigeria].<sup>12</sup>

The point might have been exaggerated. Nigerian soldiers are brutal in suppressing protests by citizens against the government. The followers of a Shiite Muslim leader in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria, Ibrahim Zakzaky, who confronted the convoy of the chief of army staff, were massacred in their thousands. Although the army is not supposed to be used in internal security, since the police has been reduced to a shadow of itself, the government regularly drafts in the army for internal security. Whether in Odi, Bayelsa State, in 1999, or Zaki Ibiam, Benue State, in 2001 (Obi-Ani 2008; Human Rights Watch 2001), the brutality of the Nigerian army is well documented. Thus, the violent behaviour of the army towards IPOB or MASSOB is not due to their being Igbo.

The protests led by both MASSOB and IPOB to secede from Nigeria have encountered vehement resistance from the government. These movements have faced grim consequences, with members often subjected to violence, injury or

<sup>11</sup> 'MUST WATCH! Nigerian soldiers torture IPOB members, force them to sleep in and drink dirty water', 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GyATiitWKM&rco=1>>.

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Chika (aged approximately forty, trader), interviewed at Aba, 18 September 2017.

imprisonment during protests. Nevertheless, their demands have shed light on the deep-seated grievances of Igbo youth in Nigeria. This article contends that every region in Nigeria has had a turn at the presidency since the civil war's conclusion. However, the Igbo perceive a covert plot to deprive them of the opportunity to occupy the highest office in the country. This perception perpetuates a sense of continuous retribution following their defeat in the war, which profoundly affects the minds of the younger generation, who have not experienced the conflict first-hand. Consequently, they have adroitly harnessed the power of social media to voice their profound discontent. The Igbo's deep sense of marginalization and exclusion from the upper echelons of political power fuels their resolute determination to advocate for change and seek acknowledgement of their legitimate grievances. The strategic use of social media provides a potent platform for articulating their aspirations and mobilizing support for their cause. Indeed, it is curious that the Igbo masses have been fed with this opium that producing a president of Igbo extraction would cure their sense of marginalization in Nigeria. However, the political leaders they send to the national assembly or as ministers or governors are a caricature of true leaders. They are servile, corrupt, selfish and utterly despicable, eager to trade Igbo interests for porridge. The Igbo should put their house in order before angling for national leadership.

#### **'No one fights in his mother's kitchen': a reflection on the sit-at-home protest**

In accordance with the Igbo adage, it is ingrained wisdom that only a fool would bring war into his mother's kitchen (*usekwu*). The kitchen, being the central hub for sustaining the family, shields people from hunger and starvation and symbolizes a mother's source of power and authority. It represents a place of economic security and well-being, where vulnerability and powerlessness are unwelcome. Bringing a fight into the kitchen can lead to disastrous consequences, as many vital elements essential for the family's survival may be irreparably damaged. Here, the kitchen serves as a metaphor for one's homestead; introducing conflict directly into one's living space can lead to catastrophic outcomes. The profound impact of such actions on human lives and material possessions is immeasurable. The survivors of the Nigeria-Biafra war, being the primary victims, offer valuable counsel on exercising caution in pursuing the Biafran agenda. They are acutely aware of the devastating consequences of war and the losses it brings. Hence, they emphasize the importance of employing tact and wisdom in navigating the path forward.

In June 2021, with the aid of the international police, Nigerian security operatives arrested Nnamdi Kanu, the IPOB leader, in Kenya, bringing him back to Nigeria for prosecution. The use of international police to arrest Mazi Kanu followed the flouting of his bail conditions, and he left the country under the watchful eyes of the Nigerian security forces. His rendition back to Nigeria sparked off protests and weekly sit-at-home demonstrations in south-east Nigeria (Obi-Ani 2022: 5). In the face of this growing tension, many people have been killed and properties destroyed or burned for flouting IPOB's sit-at-home order, which was widely accepted by the post-civil war Igbo youth. An informant gleefully stated thus:

The best thing that came to the south-east is this every Monday sit-at-home. Even though there is no money in the region, especially among us unskilled labourers, I enjoy sitting at home to support our father Nnamdi Kanu. We won't allow him to suffer alone. It is a mark of solidarity and respect for our father's land. Even if we stay ten years at home to achieve Biafra, I will not mind staying home. If I die, I die. I am not bothered about my finances, and God will provide.<sup>13</sup>

This suicidal and fatalistic attitude could be born out of brainwashing and deep frustration. An uncritical mind is open to heretical views. Thus, many IPOB followers believe that by self-annihilating, sit-at-home Biafra could be actualized. The economic cost of such self-abnegation is stifling the Igbo nation.

Another participant who experienced the war expressed her misgivings about the sit-at-home protest:

The most useless thing that came to Onitsha was this uncalled sit-at-home. I wonder where an Igbo man will go with this sit-at-home. At times, I see youths shouting for Biafra as the majority without sense. What will sit-at-home bring for you? Force or coercion is the worst form of arranging people's minds for revolution. Revolutions don't come with one-month sit-at-home or everyday sit-at-home. Revolutions are education. I am a retired civil servant; it is not affecting me but I pray for these artisans looking for who to work for to get daily payment.<sup>14</sup>

Non-violent movements have been used by those who felt oppressed under colonial systems or conquest. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi used non-violent resistance to demand Indian independence from the British. In apartheid South Africa, non-violent movements were often met with severe violence from security forces, leading to casualties. It is important to note that non-violent movements can sometimes escalate into violence if not properly managed. In 2017, IPOB attempted a non-violent street demonstration, which unfortunately turned violent, leading to the use of live ammunition by security personnel to disperse the demonstrators and resulting in casualties. (It is also essential for non-violent demonstrators not to disrupt the journeys of other road users.) The military killings of the protesters birthed the sit-at-home strategy (Igwebuike and Akoh 2023). Nonetheless, sit-at-home was a passive resistance adopted to countermand the violent proclivity of Nigerian security operatives towards the issue of Biafran secession. However, the chaos in the south-east has been aggravated by the orders, counter-orders, inflammatory statements and tweets of the self-acclaimed Biafra prime minister in exile Simon Ekpa, a Finland-based faction leader of IPOB. Their activities have jeopardized security and led to the emergence of 'unknown gunmen' in the region (Nwangwu 2022; Orjinmo 2021).

<sup>13</sup> C. Oge (aged approximately forty-six), interviewed at Cobbler Place, 1 Nwosu Lane, Onitsha, 19 October 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Ngozi Ezeani (aged approximately sixty-five, retired civil servant), interviewed at 13b Old Cemetery Road, Onitsha, 19 October 2021.

A sit-at-home day in south-eastern Nigeria is characterized by no vehicle movements and the closure of schools, business activities, banks and government offices (Chijioke 2021). The orders continue to record widespread compliance across the south-east, forcing many business establishments to relocate to other regions and strangulating the informal sector. The actions of ‘unknown gunmen’ or violent non-state actors ensure full compliance with the sit-at-home order. Simon Ekpa issues orders at will, ranging from week-long sit-at-home protests to the threatened two-week sit-at-home from 31 July to 14 August 2023 (Ogunseyin 2023). The violent non-state actors enforcing these orders have been caught destroying the wares of market women and scaring away commercial cabs, *keke* (tricycle operators) and motorcycle taxi operators. These are people who depend on their daily income for survival.

Towards late 2021, Madam Maria Ekeleme lost her life at Onitsha to the activities of the ‘unknown gunmen’. She had worked at the University of Nigeria for over thirty years and had retired. I usually met her in the church or at our community service (St Monica Sweeping Group), cleaning the church and its environs once every month.<sup>15</sup> She left Nsukka for a short visit to Onitsha. Unfortunately, there was a gun duel between the ‘unknown gunmen’ (believed to be the security forces of IPOB) and Nigerian security operatives. In the crossfire, Maria was hit by a stray bullet that killed her instantly in a stall where she was hiding for safety. This traumatic episode of ordinary people and their families getting caught up in this saga underlines the fatality of the Biafran quest for autonomy. Also, a recent video surfaced online from the one-week sit-at-home protest of 6–12 July 2023, where schoolchildren and their teachers were made to kneel down and were beaten by these violent non-state actors enforcing the sit-at-home order. The question remains: who does this chaos serve? The interests of the Igbo, or who else? Many observers believe that these activities alienate the agitators from most people. A study in 2022 documented that the economic losses on account of insecurity and the self-destructive sit-at-home protests in the south-east amounted to over 3.8 trillion naira (DevEast 2022). The *Guardian News Nigeria* observed that, by 9 August 2023, it would be 760 days since the sit-at-home protest started in the south-east. The newspaper estimated that the loss in productivity and investment in two years amounted to 7.6 trillion naira (Njoku 2023). It summarily stated:

[S]ince the commencement of the exercise in 2021 through 2023, 105 Mondays of the 520 working days have been lost regarding productivity or any actual economic activity. This leaves the southeast region with 415 days in which her people are expected to go to work. Of the remaining 415 days, public holidays declared by the government further depleted the available productivity period in the region. (Njoku 2023)

Overall, productivity has seriously dwindled in the region, jobs are threatened, investors are losing confidence, insecurity has increased, and the region’s infrastructure is nearing collapse – and there has been an attendant spike in

<sup>15</sup> I am the group’s vice president, and it allowed me to share life experiences with Madam Ekeleme. She was relatively strong, with occasional bouts of age-related illness.



social vices (Njoku 2023). The aggregate economic loss in the five Igbo states is enormous, leading to an increasing poverty rate due to the region's economic stagnation.

A sit-at-home protest was conceptualized to bring the federal government to the negotiation table and effect the release of Nnamdi Kanu. To ensure full compliance, the violent non-state actors have engaged in attacks on people, businesses and government institutions as they attempt to create 'a state within a state'. The feeble order from various state governments to disregard the sit-at-home order by IPOB is yet to yield fruit, as people live in fear. The group threatens people, and its daredevil enforcement members shoot guns at will on these days to scare people. This situation was succinctly captured by a respondent:

We are sitting at home because of the fear of the unknown gunmen. No one is sure of the next action from wayward youths. Some people use such means to loot me, extort, and steal people's properties. The majority of the semi-skilled and unskilled labourers are very tired of the sit-at-home and worry about how to feed. Last week Monday, we were asked to come out only for us to witness massive gunshots on Sunday, threatening the community with a loud voice to sit at home on Monday. Thus, Monday's sit-at-home is to be regarded as a careful arrangement on frustrating the economy of the south-east.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, if the idea was to force the Buhari regime to rethink the detention of Nnamdi Kanu, then they read Buhari's character upside down. Buhari is dogmatic, a religious zealot with a rigid mindset. He knows the Igbo mistrusted him, and at every opportunity he demanded a pound of flesh from them. It was a huge gamble for IPOB to draw such a vindictive character to dialogue. There is a worsening poverty rate, untold violence, and insecurity owing to the stagnation of the region's economy. The activities of the irredentists and their untold hardships on ordinary men and women of Igboland make an observer rhetorically question if the neo-Biafran agitators are not turning the sword on themselves.

### **IPOB trolling: the thorn in the side of Igbo leadership**

In hindsight, the unfortunate loss of lives could have been avoided had IPOB been open to engaging high-ranking Igbo officials in Nigeria as intermediaries with the Nigerian government. Such synergy would have been prudent to check cataclysmic events and facilitate a more amicable relationship between the organization and the government, fostering peaceful dialogue. This approach could have created an opportunity to explore alternative pathways, including reforms, to address the challenges confronting the Igbo people, even if the idea of secession was not embraced. Regrettably, this vision of collaboration remains distant from reality, as there exists an egregious antipathy towards Igbo politicians and government officials among IPOB members. This antipathy, which may have existed to some extent previously, has been further solidified by the perceived indifference of Igbo

<sup>16</sup> Ngozi Ezeani, personal communication, 2023.

governors and politicians towards the killings of IPOB members in their respective states. The lack of cohesive support from the mainstream Igbo leadership profoundly impacts the agitators, eliciting feelings of discontent and frustration. This absence of unified backing hinders the movement's progress and exacerbates internal tensions within Igbo society. The group, in turn, refers to Igbo leadership as 'Fulani slaves'. An excerpt from Nnamdi Kanu's Twitter page reads:

Governor Dave Umahi and his fellow quislings are the first to host the Fulani army to occupy Biafraland for Python Dance III. These Fulani slaves never called the Army when Fulani herdsman attacked Nimbo & others. Igbo Governors are more interested in serving Fulani than their people; time will tell. (Olowoloagba 2019)

Furthermore, in a statement signed by its media and publicity secretary, the organization asserted that the speed with which the governors announced the proscription of IPOB activities had proved that the governors would remain slaves in the hands of their Hausa Fulani masters (Ujumadu 2017). Preceding Operation Python Dance II, Nnamdi Kanu had accused Ike Ekweremadu, Nnia Nwodo, Dave Umahi, Okezie Ikpeazu, Rochas Okorocha, Willie Obiano and Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi of plotting with the army to kill him and his people (Nwaiwu 2019). It was alleged:

These men mentioned above instigated, financed, and defended a full-scale bloody military invasion of Biafra land they tagged Operation Python Dance that led to the torture and untimely death of over 600 Biafrans, 28 of whom fell in my compound. These men sanctioned the desecration of the home of an Igbo traditional ruler by Fulani soldiers and did not care if my father HRM Eze Israel Okwu Kanu and my mother, who were home with me during the unprovoked invasion, is [sic] killed or not. All these desperate Igbo politicians ever wanted was my death, the death of IPOB and its members, and the death of our dream of freedom for all. (Nwaiwu 2019)

Consequently, while attending a new yam festival at Nuremberg, Germany, by invitation, Ike Ekweremadu, the embattled former deputy senate president, was attacked by pro-Biafrans who tore his clothes, dragged him out of the event and pelted him with stones and yam (Aborisade *et al.* 2019). In the video clips, the angry youth were seen preventing the lawmaker from escaping, but he was later whisked away in a Mercedes-Benz car, even as the mob beat him, tagging him a traitor (*ibid.*). The IPOB spokesman, who asserted that he had been authorized by Nnamdi Kanu, said:

This should serve as a warning to Nnia Nwodo, Dave Umahi, Okezie Ikpeazu, Willie Obiano and others that they will be humiliated any day we find them in a public event abroad. IPOB is strategically located in over 100 countries around the world. Anywhere we find them, they will be dealt with. (Aborisade *et al.* 2019)

Their anger towards the Igbo leadership was due to their perception that the leadership hobnobbed with the federal government, which deprived the south-east of basic essentials – road networks, and human and food security. On the other hand, these leaders were not to be blamed because they were made up of the generation of those who witnessed the war. No one wishes to experience war twice in a lifetime. They cautioned peaceful solutions to the Biafran question in contrast to IPOB's violent retorts on social media against the federal government of Nigeria.

Some pan-Igbo groups intervened in the uneasy peace existing between the IPOB leadership and Igbo politicians, which made Nnamdi Kanu withdraw his order<sup>17</sup> on Nnia Nwodo (the Ohaneze chairman at the time), stating that, after having talks with Mazi Enyinnaya Abaribe and some other Igbo elites, he had no option but to call his members to order (Ropalia 2020). Subsequently, the *Daily Post* reported that the pan-Igbo socio-cultural group, Ohaneze Ndigbo, and the separatist Igbo group, IPOB, had mended fences, with a promise to work together for the common good of Igbo people (Chukindi 2020). Chief Mbazulike Amaechi, in whose house the meeting was held, asserted that the two bodies must realize that it is the same battle they are fighting: marginalization, killings, and the refusal of the federal government to develop the south-east and Igboland in general (*ibid.*).

As this peace was brokered between the groups, another killing happened on 23 August 2020, when combined security operatives made up of the Nigerian army, the air force, the police, the Department of Security Services (DSS) and the Nigeria Security and Defence Corps extrajudicially killed no fewer than twenty-two youths at Emene Nike in Enugu East. The youths, who were suspected of being members of IPOB, were playing football and other games at the community high school. Passers-by who were returning from early morning Sunday services were caught up in the ensuing fracas (Obi-Ani *et al.* 2020: 115; Okoli and Adonu 2020; Ede 2020). The governor of Enugu State was silent about the killings despite his visit to the scene. It took a court order delivered by Justice C. C. Ani, instituted by a group called Registered Trustees of Christian Network and Community Development, to mandate the governor to hold a judicial commission of inquiry (Ede 2021). The silence of other eastern governors was egregious. The chairman of the Alaigbo Development Committee, Professor Uzodinma Nwala, resigned, citing the alleged nonchalance of the south-east governors and top-ranking Igbo officials over the killings. He stated in his resignation letter:

All those horrors, rather than abating, have been rising in crescendo with our helpless people wondering if they have any Government or Leaders who care for their plight. It is to be observed, very unfortunately, that immediately following this declaration of the South-East Governors, 21 [reported numbers varied] unarmed Igbo youths have been gruesomely mowed down in Enugu State by combined forces of the army, DSS, SARS, police, and other Security forces. Most of the personnel of these forces are no doubt non-Igbos. Moreover, while this is happening, none of our Governors is saying anything. (Uzendu 2020)

<sup>17</sup> IPOB and Igbo politicians have been at daggers drawn, with the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu, calling on his members to attack Igbo politicians and the leader of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Nnia Nwodo, anywhere he is seen (Chukindi 2020).

He further added, '[I]f the Governors decide to abandon their responsibility over the security of our people, we, as organized patriotic forces in our land, must continue to courageously play our role to ensure that our people overcome the present dangerous siege over our land' (Uzendu 2020). His resignation was quickly followed by a violent clampdown on IPOB members at Enugu, during which IPOB alleged that the security agencies killed twenty-two of its members and injured forty-two others in the shooting. At the same time, the DSS also alleged that two of their men were killed in the pandemonium (Orji 2020). Moreover, in a letter addressed to the governor of Enugu State, Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi, dated 30 August 2020, a socio-cultural Igbo think-tank, Nzuko Umunna, urged the governor to set up a judicial panel to look into the 23 August massacre of twenty-two unarmed Enugu youths; they threatened to seek legal redress against the governor in court if he failed to do so (Agbo 2020).

At this juncture, it suffices to note that successive Nigerian governments have deployed the carrot and stick in their bid to tackle irredentism in other parts of Nigeria. However, the same measures have never been extended to Biafran movements. The marauding armed Fulani herders and their activities have been treated with kid gloves, especially by the Buhari administration, making them an unofficial army of occupation in various communities in Nigeria, thus defeating the Sustainable Development Goals for food security. The proscription of IPOB as a terrorist group by the Buhari-led administration was and still is a misplaced priority, although this act was annulled by Enugu high court in October 2023. The Enugu high court ruling made it clear that the IPOB proscription was unjustified, faulty, a transgression of the right to self-determination, and discriminatory against an ethnic group, which contravenes Articles 2, 3, 19 and 20 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ukpong 2023). Again, even when an appeal court quashed the fifteen-count terrorism charges against the IPOB leader, the federal government, through the attorney general, embarked on a process of punishing the justices who had ruled against the government by transferring them (Nnochiri 2022). It is disquieting that the Nigerian government could not obey the court ruling, yet it often uses a sledgehammer against its own citizens when it feels that they have allegedly contravened the law. The government exhibited dictatorial tendencies and high-handedness through its disregard for court rulings and its continued detention and suppression of the IPOB leader and all those who advocated for Biafran secession.

If President Buhari had shown any sincerity of purpose, his security torchlight would have been directed more at the mayhem caused by armed Fulani herders across the country. The Fulani herders left untold hardship, displacement and food insecurity in their wake. The mayhem in southern Kaduna was an indictment of this parochial leadership. The continual killings of young Igbo persons and the apparent marginalization of the Igbo in the president's political appointments will keep the drums of Biafra beating – a situation that finds acceptance among the younger generation. Indeed, IPOB's relevance in Igbo is anchored on the claim that its armed wing, Eastern Security Network (ESN), has stalled the overrunning of Igboland by Fulani herdsmen and their ultimate Islamization of the zone. It appears, rightly or wrongly, that since the emergence of ESN, the menace of Fulani herdsmen has reduced quite considerably in Igboland. The Nigerian government's

failure, whether Buhari's or Tinubu's, to nip in the bud non-state actors has exacerbated insecurity across the country.

## Conclusion

The unwavering persistence of the Igbo's agitation for secession, decades after the brutal Nigeria–Biafra civil war, resonates with the lingering inadequacies of the post-war reconciliation scheme. While the civil war achieved partial unity for Nigeria, the subsequent endeavour of reintegration, which ought to have been fought on the stage of policymaking and implementation, wielding the potent tools of reason, justice and fairness, faltered. Lambourne (2004) posited that the imperative to surmount or transform the enmities forged during violent conflict and establish a bridge of understanding among ordinary people underscores the dire need for genuine reconciliation. The Igbo residing in other parts of the country are often labelled as unpatriotic, while simultaneously they perceive different ethnicities as unworthy of being their fellow countrymen. Consequently, a more nuanced and reciprocal approach will yield more effective outcomes. The continued emphasis by the Igbo and certain ethnic groups on diversity as a justification for secession constitutes compelling evidence for the lack of proper reconciliation after the war. Indeed, many of the Igbo's demands unequivocally point to the failure to adequately reconstruct the war-torn region. Some of these demands, including the development of seaports, airports and roads – many of which remained closed or devastated during and after the war – serve as manifest examples of the failures of the reconstruction efforts in Igboland. This gradual accumulation of shortcomings has fuelled the Igbo's perception of marginalization since the postbellum era, intensifying their sentiments of being overlooked and underserved within the national fabric.

A genuine and comprehensive apology for war crimes would foster reconciliation and harmony among ethnicities. Such an apology would also pave the way for a more equitable and unified approach to development nationwide. By implementing a well-structured post-civil war reconciliation process, there would be reduced apprehension about discussing the war or educating citizens about it. This apprehension has partly contributed to the historical neglect of the Nigerian civil war over the years. Ignoring such a catastrophic part of a nation's history and attempting to shield the younger generation from it only sets the stage for a potential reoccurrence of such tragic events. Some of the agitators in the present day have embraced the notion of resorting to armed conflict as a swift path towards secession. However, it is evident that some are unaware of the horrors and cruelties associated with war, hence their misguided call for violence.

Once again, while other regions have received a certain level of federal presence, the eastern part has been either neglected or only partially included. Consequently, considering the evident reasons provided by these agitators, it is imperative that the Nigerian state attentively listens to their demands and takes appropriate action where necessary. The resounding outcry of the Igbo ethnic community in Nigeria, stemming from feelings of marginalization and alienation, necessitates a deeper examination if this issue is to be overcome within our lifetime. It is crucial to find ways to dialogue with the pro-Biafran agitators and encourage them to lay down their weapons. Since the end of the Buhari administration, the issues in the south-east have

not improved, as the Tinubu government is yet to release Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB, from prison. His continued incarceration adds fuel to the dynamics of the Biafran question in Nigeria.

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