

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE NAME 'BIAFRA' IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Name is a social construct that gives identity to people in society. The name 'Biafra' has an interpretation and social context that is embedded with meanings among the Igbo of South-East, Nigeria. The name 'Biafra' expresses idea, social interpretation and value among Igbo people in their social interaction. This study explains the historical antecedents of the name 'Biafra', the contemporary use of Biafra by the Igbo for identity construction, social cohesion, and contextual symbol of the name 'Biafra' in Nigeria. Using qualitative method of data collection, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussion (FGD), twenty-six interviews were conducted with Biafra activists/representatives, Biafra war veterans and youth leaders in two selected communities namely, Aba and Onitsha in Abia and Anambra states, respectively. Data collected were analyzed using ethnographic content analysis. The findings of this study show that the name 'Biafra' holds social and cultural symbols that are presented as Biafuru (come and see) and *Bia-fara* (come and take) which is a symbol of *olile-anya* (hope) and *nzoputa* (emancipation). All these create Biafra symbolism for agitation, social identity, recognition, freedom and *ofu-obi* (social cohesion) that are associated with the Igbo society in Nigeria.

Key words: Biafra; Biafra Activists; Identity Construction; Social Construct; Igbo.

Introduction

Name is one of the most important components of identity. It influences the identity of people or individual or groups in the society. Names portray meanings that have effect on the social relations of the people (Nze, 1984). It is arguable that names are social symbols that are connected to traditions, culture, expectations, and values and linked to identity (Radding & Western 2010). It is symbolic and gives people a sense of belonging in society. This shows the social constructs and impactful effect of names and people's identity. Name promotes group cohesion and represents the remarkable categorization in the society and carries deep cultural and historical links.

Rymes (1996) and Olatunji, et al. (2015) observe that a name is a dynamic socio-cultural practice that reflects the social reality of human activities. Name is an important social phenomenon that categorizes persons and enhances social cohesion (Nze, 1984; Vermes, 2003). Mmadike (2014) argues that names have influence on people and expresses how individuals view themselves in a social environment. This is why adopting, using and projecting a name can represent and promote social cohesion among groups or individuals in the society. In this paper, the depth and symbolic use of Biafra name is elaborated and an overview of the social context among the Igbo in southeast Nigeria is greatly emphasized. In order to present the depth and symbolic use of the name Biafra, this study queries the social context of Biafra name in contemporary Igbo society in southeast Nigeria; and the symbolism of Biafra among Igbo people in Nigeria. These explain the close connection of the name-‘Biafra’ and continuous Biafra activism in Nigeria.

The name Biafra represents a socio-political context of the post-war experience among Igbo people in Nigeria. There has been an increasing agitation to reinstate the defunct Biafra nation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic and contemporary democratization process (Bassey, 2023, Okaisabor, 2023, Oloyede, 2009; Onuoha, 2011, Zhizhi & Fanen, 2020). Spearheaded by the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the year 2000 and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in 2014, *Biafra* is somewhat a social reconstruction of the contextual Nigerian Civil War experience. Lasting between 1967 and 1970, the Nigerian Civil War was a phenomenal national experience in the making of post-colonial Nigeria (Achuzia, 1986; Ademoyega, 1981, Diamond, 2007; Effiong, 2000; Ekwe-Ekwe 1990; Folade, 2011; Korieh, 2012). The preceding inter-ethnic violence and the resultant civil war created a consciousness of Igbo marginalization within the Nigerian state (Ikepeze, 2009; Ukiwo, 2009; Obianyo, 2012). Although the resurgence of Biafra consciousness in contemporary Igboland has been linked with the pre- and post-Civil War experience of the Igbo within Nigeria, it is indeed important to investigate this very ‘context’ of the name Biafra, which has largely been taken for granted.

After the Nigerian civil war, 1967-70, Biafra took a new dimension, creating different symbolic expressions that sustain the constant agitation in South-East, Nigeria. This is demonstrated in the name ‘Biafra’ that express the symbolic interpretations that tend to represent the Igbo in contemporary Igbo society. The Biafra symbolism explains an embedded context of the post 1966 Igbo nationalism, leading to the Nigerian Civil War and contemporary nationalistic agitation from about the year 2000. The representation of Biafra values and ideology independently describe the use of art, act or intent, belief and utterances targeted at projecting and sustaining Biafra consciousness. This gives credence to the embedded context of Biafra, starting as a non-indigenous Igbo nomenclature that has a symbolic ideology that connotes Igbo nationalism and sustains Biafra consciousness in South-Eastern Nigeria. Although the name Biafra is not an indigenous Igbo word, it has an indigenous interpretation that promotes social cohesion

among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria (International Legal Materials, 1967). The symbolism of Biafra name can be traced to pre-colonial Bight of Biafra (Korieh, 2000, Nwokeji, 1998), thus, there is need to examine the Igbo in the pre-colonial Bight of Biafra.

The Arochukwu-Igbo in pre-colonial Bight of Biafra

The Bight of Biafra is located in the coast of the Atlantic Ocean on the Western coast of Africa and extended to the Niger River around Nigeria hinterland, while at the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, Bight of Biafra is bordered by South-South Nigeria (see Lovejoy & Richardson, 1999; Northrup 1978; Nwokeji, 2000). The Bight of Biafra was a major base of economic activities in the pre-colonial Nigeria. The Portuguese and Spanish merchants and explorers gave the nomenclature Bight of Biafra (Achebe, 2012). This was derived from a misconception of a local language of the residents of the Gulf of Guinea called the Bight of Biafra. The pre-colonial Eastern Nigeria which comprised the Igbo people and other ethnic groups such as the Ogoja, Kwa, Efik, and Ibibio in the old Calabar, and Ijaw, Ikwere among other groups, had Igbo people, especially the Arochukwu in the majority and they were economically dominant (Isichei, 1976; Lovejoy & Richardson, 1999; Nwankwo, 1980; Nwokeji, 1998).

Before an attempt is made to further analyse Igbo in the pre-colonial hinterland of the Bight of Biafra, it is necessary to discuss, at least, the Igbo, social, political, economic and religious organization around the Bight of Biafra. It is imperative to state that the Igbo political and economic institutions played a vital role in the interaction of the Arochukwu-Igbo around the Bight of Biafra. The combination of pre-colonial political structure of the Igbo and trade with the Europeans brought about interaction with Igbo and other ethnic groups around the Biafra hinterland. Thus, the Arochukwu group influenced a large part of Southern Nigeria in the pre-colonial era. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it was certain that Igbo people predominated in the Biafra socio-political and economic expansion especially in palm oil trade (Afigbo, 1983; Chambers, 2002; Njoku, 2016). However, the socio-political disposition of this predominant Arochukwu-Igbo group explains how they exploited the use of *Arochukwu long ju ju* (Arochukwu gods) to their social and political advantage in and around the Bight of Biafra (Anene, 1956; Nwauwa, 1995).

Jones (1989) adds that in the pre-colonial Bight of Biafra, the Arochukwu-Igbo retained their lead in the economic gains in trade. They dominated in trades such as slave trade and oil palm trade; and they integrated themselves into the social structure and socio-economic activities in the old Calabar region and around Biafra coast and hinterland (Njoku, 2016). By 17th up to the 18th century, the Arochukwu-Igbo slave trade was the popular business in the hinterland and there were large numbers of Arochukwu-Igbo businessmen around the Biafra hinterland (Afigbo, 1971; Dike & Ekejiuba, 1990). With this, the Arochukwu-Igbo extended its economic and socio-political interaction with Europeans around the coast of Biafra and hinterlands, thus the Igbo influence around the Biafra. This interaction with Europeans further enhanced the domination of the Igbo in trade, religious, social, and political influences (Nwauwa, 1990). The activities of Arochukwu-Igbo symbolised the success of the Igbo people around the Bight of Biafra.

Afigbo (1971) and Njoku (2016) argue that, though the Igbo people had no centralized political structure, they enjoyed long socio-economic dominance in and around the Bight of Biafra and the hinterlands during the years of European exploration. The Igbo lived in autonomous villages and towns which were led by community elders. The pre-colonial Igbo political organization was based on community leadership devoid of any form of central kings or chiefs governing the people. This gave the Igbo power to extend politics and trade to other parts of the

hinterland of the Bight Biafra. The Biafra hinterland was a major space for the supply of trade around the Atlantic coast from the 1730s to the latter part of the nineteenth century (Korieh, 2000). This, thus, paved way for the Arochukwu-Igbo dominance in trade in the Biafra coast (Nwokeji, 2000). Arochukwu promoted the Igbo anywhere they went and they were the forerunners of Igbo dominance and trade success around the Bight of Biafra. This clearly presents the link between economic strength and political power of the Igbo in the pre-colonial Bight of Biafra.

Morrill, (1963) argues that the political disposition in Igbo society was superimposed on the kinship structure and the leaders of kinship groups were the decision makers in the political sphere. Thus, pre-colonial Igbo political organization was based on a republican system of government that guaranteed equality of citizenry in closely knit communities. This was first witnessed by the Portuguese, who arrived through the Bight of Biafra and met with the Igbo people in the 15th century (Dike, 1956; Ekechi, 1971; Isichei, 1969). The politics of a republican society, as opposed to an authoritative society, marked Igbo politics as clearly distinct from other political groups in the pre-colonial era. This created and fostered the success of the political and socio-economic activities in and around the Biafra coast.

Also, the Arochukwu religious priests were not left out in the political administration of the communities in Igboland and it extended the administration to Biafra hinterlands. Crowder, (1973), notes that, with the adoption of religious sanction of the Arochukwu oracle, the Arochukwu-Aro were able to trade with complete security through Igboland and around the coast of Biafra. Great importance was attached to them for they were believed to be the mouthpiece of the gods such as the Arochukwu long juju in the 17th -19th century (Isichei, 1969; Ekechi 1971). The Arochukwu long juju was used for certain religious and socio-political (oath taking) activities by the people. The religious activities among the Arochukwu people also strengthened the leadership of the Igbo people in interacting with European explorers and other ethnic groups around Bight of Biafra. The pre-colonial Igbo society undoubtedly created great extension in governance in the Southern region as well as the extent to which it accommodated or embraced other groups (which comprised of other ethnic groups such as the Efik and Ibibio) (Akresh, Bhalotra, Leone & Osili, 2011; Nwauwa, 1995).

The extension of Igbo socio-economic interaction with other ethnic groups in the region facilitated the realization and recognition of Bight of Biafra as a trade zone. From the coast-line of Bight of Bonny which was inhabited mostly by the Igbo especially the Arochukwu extended round the borders of Ibibio, and Efik and to its eastern hinterland around old Calabar-Cross River (Lovejoy, 1974). Igbo people in the pre-colonial Nigeria were in the frontline of the social, economic, political and religious expression of the ethnic group around the coastline and hinterlands of Bight of Biafra (Afigbo, 1971). The presence of Arochukwu-Igbo certainly had control in and around the trade-based Biafra in the pre-colonial era. Based on this, the socio-political power exercised around the Biafra hinterland shows the existence of the Igbo and Biafra. To present the activities of the Igbo people around the hinterland and coast in the pre-colonial Bight of Biafra, Cowan (1935) writes:

Apart from the Ibibio's, who occupied a stretch of country north-west of Calabar, the whole of the hinterland was peopled by the Ibos, ...the Ibos were, in effect-and may be looked upon as such to-day-the producers of South-eastern Nigeria. They were more than that, as it is questionable if the Coast communities could have survived but for an ever-increasing influx of Ibos... (Cowan, p.399).

Cowan's (1935) assertion gives credence to the population and dexterity of Igbo people, who apart from the Efik and Ibibio moved to Biafra hinterland and dominated the region. This

dominance accounts largely for movement, trade, power of the Igbo in the region. Afigbo (1983) argues that by the 18th century, there was an already existing economic activities-trade between the Igbo around the Biafra hinterland. Since trade encouraged the exchange of ideas, interaction and inter/intra-relations, it invariably facilitated the socio-economic contact within the region called Biafra until the colonial period.

The Igbo movement, trade and power in colonial Nigeria

The dominance of the Igbo around Bight of Biafra gives a greater understanding of their involvement in trade and movement in colonial Nigeria. With the abolishment of slave trade in the 19th century, the socio-economic activities of the Igbo were diversified by the 20th century and this created easy movement across Nigeria (Afigbo, 1971). The socio-economic experience of the Igbo in Nigeria demonstrated the change in the patterns of interaction through movement and trade within Nigeria during the colonial era. While the slave trade was halted around the Bight of Biafra, new method of trade such as palm oil produce business was adopted and that took an economic dimension and expanded beyond Igboland (Nwokeji, 2000; Olutayo, 1999).

The Igbo were able to settle in parts of colonial Nigeria because of their migration prowess, commercial and social dispositions (Smith, 2005; van den Bersselaar, 2005). It is believed that the pre-colonial Igbo socio-economic and political activities explained Igbo dominance and control in trade during the period of colonial era. Igbo people who dominated trade around the Bight of Biafra saw the need to expand in trade in colonial era, so they moved their socio-economic activities from the Bight of Biafra and interacted with other ethnic groups in the country.

By early 20th century, Igbo people had moved to other parts of Nigeria and established economic and social influence both in the South-Eastern and beyond. This extended the Igbo social and economic interaction and contacts with other ethnic groups, as the Igbo became a dominant group in parts of Nigeria (Mgbeafulu, 1999). These interactions characterised the trend of migration that saw Igbo people residing both in south-east and other parts of Nigeria. The colonial Nigeria saw the proscription of slave trade and movement of the Igbo from the Biafra hinterland to other parts of Nigeria and created interaction with other ethnic groups in Nigeria (Afigbo, 1971). Much of the Nigerian colonial era provided the opportunity for the Igbo to migrate to the Northern and Western Nigeria.

The colonial Nigeria presented Igbo people the opportunity to move from the then Eastern Nigeria (such as Port-Harcourt) to the Northern (especially Kano, Kaduna) and Western region (mostly in Lagos) (Smith, 2005). Igbo society was associated with trade in the pre-colonial and colonial era (Mgbeafulu, 1999; Uduku, 2002). Osaghae (1994) notes that Igbo people took up residence in the Northern and Western part of Nigeria from 1940 to 1960 after slave trade was abolished. The colonial era presented the period for the Igbo to dominate in trade in parts of Nigeria where they had migrated to. Morrill (1963) and Oriji (1987) explain that movement of the Igbo in and out of the hinterland of Eastern Nigeria increased the emergence of social network around and beyond the Calabar region and Bight of Biafra during the colonial era. In an attempt to describe colonial historical state of the Igbo around the Biafra hinterlands, Amaazee (1990) and Nwokeji (2000) add that Igbo people were the majority group in the then Eastern Nigeria while the engagement in trade presented the Igbo with the development of efficient inter-ethnic relations as well as social identity. In the course of migration, the Igbo people created distinct economic dominance and interaction with other ethnic groups (Hamiet-Sievers 2006; Howard-Hassmann 1986; Imbua, 2013; Isichei, 1976; Jones; 1989; Korieh 2000; Meagher, 2009; Northrup, 1978; Oriji, 1987).

The migration during the colonial era presented Igbo people with the opportunity to influence the socio-economic activities across the country. In the early 20th century, there was a significant of Igbo migrating to other parts of Nigeria (Diamond, 1967; Smith, 2005). Due to their large concentration and competence on commerce, many Igbo people did not find it difficult to migrate to other parts of the country for trade and employment during the colonial era. According to Diamond (1967) the widespread migration among Igbo people created a sense of perceived dominance among other ethnic groups in Nigeria. During the end of the colonial rule, the unity of ethnic groups in Nigeria was greatly affected. Ethnic schisms and interaction between the Igbo and other ethnic groups in the country became heightened (Afigbo, 1992; Akinyemi, 1972).

Biafra declaration and the symbolism of the name Biafra

The ethnic schism, the killing of prominent Northern politicians in Nigeria during the *coup de etat* of January 1966 and then the reprisal coup of June 1966, killing of Igbo migrants in Northern Nigeria in late 1965, 1966 and early 1967 resulted in the return of Igbo people to Eastern Nigeria (Achebe, 2012, Diamond 1967; Keil, 1970; Plotincov, 1971). The killings of the Igbo and their return migration facilitated the declaration of the Republic of Biafra and the quest for secession in the Eastern region (Achebe, 2012; Duruji, 2009; Effiong, 2000; Gbuile, 1989; Hawley, 2008; Madiebo 1980).

The declaration of Biafra by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, and the secession, excised the Igbo and other ethnic groups such as Ijaw, Efik, Anang, and Ibibio, in the hinterland of Bight of Biafra from the Nigerian nation. At inception, on May, 30th 1967, the Republic of Biafra comprised ethnic groups such as Igbo, Ijaw, Ikwere, Efik, Anang, and Ibibio among other ethnicities (Howard-Hassmann, 1986), a territory that spread from Onitsha end of the River Niger to the coast of Calabar.

This shows the region that was referred to as Biafra in 1967. The Igbo were the predominant population at the point of creation of Republic of Biafra. In the declaration of the Republic of Biafra in 1967, Ojukwu states:

Having mandated me to proclaim on your behalf, and in your name, that Eastern Nigeria be a sovereign independent Republic, NOW therefore I, LIEUTENANT-COLONEL CHUKWUEMEKA ODUMEGWU OJUKWU, MILITARY GOVERNOR OF EASTERN NIGERIA, BY VIRTUE OF THE AUTHORITY, AND PURSUANT TO THE PRINCIPLES, ... DO HEREBY SOLEMNLY PROCLAIM THAT THE TERRITORY AND REGION KNOWN AS AND CALLED EASTERN NIGERIA TOGETHER WITH HER CONTINENTAL SHELF AND TERRITORIAL WATERS SHALL HENCEFORTH BE AN INDEPENDENT SOVEREIGN STATE OF THE NAME AND TITLE OF "THE REPUBLIC OF BIAFRA"(International Legal Materials 1967, p.679).

The proclamation of the Republic of Biafra was documented in upper case letters (see International Legal Materials 1967, p.679) as a bold symbolic expression of Biafra's post-colonial decision for self-determination. While the adoption of the nomenclature, Biafra, was a testimonial of the Igbo dominance in and around the Bight of Biafra and the coastline down to Calabar, Port-Harcourt and Yenagoa, it allowed the ground republic of Biafra access to the coast sea. With access to the sea, Biafra nation was full of confidence of access to war weapons through the waterways and this invariably gave them the strength and willingness to fight for their independence. With the obvious sense of self-defense, the fight for self-determination and social identification became

the ideal. The war was prolonged because of the constructed ability for self-defense and sustainability before Biafra was taken over by the Nigerian Army.

The construction of Biafra value and meaning attached to the name Biafra gave impetus for the sustenance and prolonged fight during the Nigeria Civil War even when the *Biafrans* did not have sufficient fighting warheads to defeat the Nigerian Army. The embedded meaning Biafra projects, created a society for Igbo protection, self-defense and hope for safety to *Biafrans* in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Biafra assumed an identity capital that seemingly surmounted fear and the constructed capital was used to promote Biafra values and ideas during the Civil War but has a symbolic meaning that has sustained Biafra resurgence. To this end, the name Biafra assumes an embedded symbol that represents Igbo people, the geographical expression (Bights of Biafra) and creates a historical symbolic means for social identification. The name Biafra was as a re-enactment of the Igbo economic achievement and supremacy in pre-colonial and immediate post-colonial Bight of Biafra.

The pre-colonial Biafra represents the trade around the coastline, which harboured the trading activities of the Igbo and European explorer around the Bight of Biafra hinterland and giving the Igbo the ability to dominate around the region. The immediate post-colonial Biafra shows the secessionist region, during the Civil War. During the years of the Nigeria Civil War, the name Biafra bolstered the struggle for Biafra state among the people in the then Eastern region. Surprisingly, the Biafra name has continued to sustain social construction and symbolism of Biafra in contemporary Igbo social consciousness as explained in symbolic interactionism theory.

Theoretical framework

The theory of symbolic interactionism is adopted to explain the symbol of the name Biafra among Igbo people in Nigeria. Symbolic interactionism derives its name from the dual emphases on symbolism of action/words and interaction among individuals. Symbolism focuses on the meanings attached to symbolic words that are attributed to the social actors, while the interaction explains the how the words shape social actions and vice versa, and how all these interactions lead to the social construction of the self and actions (Fine, 1993; Bruce & Yearley, 2006). Symbolic interactionism paradigm explains the meaning people attach to words in their everyday life. Symbolic interactionist theory was first used by Herbert Blumer and was subsequently expanded by George Mead and Erving Goffman to explain human interaction (Bruce & Yearly, 2006; Carter & Fuller, 2015; Fine, 1993; Ritzer, 2012). This theory explains how actors create their worlds through the meanings they construct from everyday interactions for the purpose of achieving a goal.

Symbolic interactionist theory opines that individuals act in accordance to meanings they attach to symbols. Actions and meanings within an interacting community are all symbols to which interpretations are attached, and the meanings attached inform the course of a word or action to be taken (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Ritzer, 2012). Symbolic interactionism explains the meaning of actions and how people interpret words in specific interactions over space and time in a society. In Nigeria, the name Biafra remains a remarkable part of Nigeria's history, which is embedded with deep meanings drawn from the experiences the Nigerian Civil War and assumptions of Biafra agitation. The name Biafra conveys the context of contemporary Biafra symbolism. This study, therefore, uses the symbolic interactionist theory to explain the meanings attached to the name Biafra and how the Igbo people project the name to promote Biafra values in Nigeria.

The meanings attached to the name Biafra are symbolic and are conveyed by Igbo language to give deep interpretive essence. The name Biafra conveys deep symbolic meanings that create

sense of social cohesion. It conveys the meanings of unity, freedom, hope and emancipation. The meanings attached to the Biafra nomenclature highlight the construction of the Biafra in contemporary Igbo social consciousness in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative approaches in data collection and analysis. Data were collected using Key Informant Interviews (KII), In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The ethnographic analysis of the findings of this study presents the Igbo social interpretation and cultural context of the name Biafra. Data were collected from two communities in Igboland selected from states in South-Eastern Nigeria; they include Aba in Abia state, and Onitsha in Anambra state. These communities were purposively selected because of the prevalence of Biafra activism in the areas. Purposive and snowballing methods were adopted in selecting the twenty-six interviewees for this study. The interviewees include the Biafra representatives/activists (four each from the two selected communities), eight Biafra loyalists, two youth leaders and eight Biafra war veterans in the two selected communities. A total of four (4) focus group discussions were conducted for this study. There were two (2) FGD sessions in each of the selected communities. The focus group sessions were homogenous. Each FGD sessions was conducted based on gender and age group to allow free expression of views.

FGD sessions were held for the younger generation from ages 18-59 (male and female in each community). This group comprised those who were not born during the Civil War and those who were born though experienced the Civil War as teenagers and nevertheless have knowledge of it. Similar session was also conducted for the older generation 60 years and above (male and female in each of the selected communities). This session included those that had direct involvement in the Nigerian Civil War. Though they may not have fought as soldiers during the war but had experienced it as adults. Each of the FGD sessions comprised 6-12 people per group. Each session was held with discussants that were knowledgeable of the Biafra war and contemporary Biafra activism. The discussants were drawn using purposive and snowballing methods.

The interviewees and discussants were selected because of their grass root involvement in Biafra activism in southeast, Nigeria. The interviews were conducted in Igbo, Pidgin English and English languages to enable the interviewees respond adequately and provide substantial data. Data collected in Igbo and Pidgin English languages were translated to English language and the data collected were transcribed, sorted, and further subjected to interpretive content and ethnographic analysis as the results are presented below.

Results

This section presents the results of the data collected. The results of this study show that the name Biafra is adopted to represent hope, unity social cohesion, and identity among Igbo people in Nigeria, as presented below.

The Biafra name in contemporary Igbo society

The name Biafra presents a social context, interpretation and creates embedded meaning among the Igbo of South-East Nigeria. The meanings attached to the name 'Biafra' expresses the symbolic interpretations that tend to represent the Igbo. In contemporary Igbo society, the name Biafra is explained as *Biafuru* (come and see) and *Bia-fara* (come and take) which is a symbol of *olile-anya* (hope) and *nzoputa* (emancipation). All these create the symbolism for social identity,

freedom, *ofu-obi* (social cohesion) that holds symbolic expressions among the Igbo people. These contextual meanings and symbolic expressions exemplify the construction of Biafra ideology as an identity capital used to construct contemporary Igbo social consciousness. The Biafra symbolic meanings are further illustrated below, as an interviewee says:

I know the name Biafra was derived from Bights of Biafra, though it is not an Igbo language. I know that today, Biafra means more than the Bights of Biafra to me, Biafra means, *Bia-fa-ra* (come and take) (IDI/1).

Another interviewee adds:

I know that Biafra means *Bia-fara, obodo bu nke anyi* (come and take over the land that belongs to us). The name Biafra means a lot to us, *ndi Biafra* (the people of Biafra) and love Biafra. (KII/1)

The responses above, illustrate the symbolic meanings attached to Biafra. This presents the name, Biafra, as an indigenous Igbo concept and as such represents the social symbolism and adoption of social identity as a means of promoting and sustaining Biafra value and ideology in South-Eastern Nigeria.

This interviewee states that:

Well, the meaning of Biafra, I think the meaning is *Biafruru obodo oma* (come and see our beautiful homeland), yes, Biafra, *Biafuru obodo oma nke anyi*. (IDI/ 2).

While another interviewee adds:

For me Biafra is described as an ideology, is our hope... It is the only way our voice can be heard in this entity called Nigeria. You know that we have been quiet for some times, Igbo have been marginalized, side-lined, if I might use that word, so a lot of things has been happening to the Igbo people particularly in this Nigeria (IDI/3)

These responses further explain the meaning attached to the name Biafra. Here, Biafra is adopted as a structure used to present the quest for political inclusion of the Igbo in Nigeria. This explains the symbolisms of the name, Biafra. An interviewee also adds,

...today, I think Biafra means a lot to *ndi Igbo* (Igbo people). Biafra means *olile anya* (our hope). *Olile anya, ndi Igbo were na ala Nigeria* (the hope for the Igbo people in Nigeria) (IDI/4).

The narratives of the name Biafra represent that the hope that tends to intensify Igbo social consciousness. The illustration of Biafra as *olile anyai* (our hope) portrays constant social consciousness that expresses hope for a socio-economical developed Igbo society. This advertently creates upsurge in Biafra agitation and acts as a means of attracting the attention of the Federal Government in south-east Nigeria. While Nnaemeka (1997) describes the Biafra as a symbol of privilege (an opportunity to fight for self-protection) in the Igbo society after the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War, but in contemporary Biafra agitation, Biafra presents different meanings that are used as material representations of contextual symbols.

Contextual symbol of Biafra among the Igbo in Nigeria

The contextual representations of Biafra are described as hope, freedom, *ofu obi* (togetherness/oneness), *nzoputa* (redemption from neglect), and *ala nna* (fatherland). These contemporary symbolisms of Biafra and constructed ideology, therefore, describe the name Biafra. These symbolisms extend beyond the geographical composition of Biafra to *Bia-furu*, and the energetic conquest to take Biafra out of Nigeria (*Bia-fara*). This suggests that the clamour for Biafra is not just secessionist idea but a medium to which the needs of the Igbo are presented. The Igbo meaning of Biafra is not limited or directed to self-determination alone, rather it is a

contextual interpretation that shows that the Igbo Biafra is adopted in contemporary Igbo society to address perceived marginalisation in Nigeria. The problems are generally presented as: marginalisation or/and low representation in governance (political activities) (Lenshie, 2014), thus the need to use Biafra to solve these problems. Biafra is symbolic and awakens the consciousness of the Igbo people (Atata & Omobowale, 2022).

Invariably, Biafra becomes a means of achieving a set goal in South-Eastern Nigeria. This set goal is viewed as using Biafra to end the perceived socio-political exclusion and marginalization that generates hope for people in south-east region. These data below demonstrate Biafra as the symbol of hope:

Biafra is our hope in this country (Nigeria), if the Federal Government should continue like this we will suffer, but with Biafra, we have hope. It is either they include us in the Nigerian politics or we continue to look for Biafra (IDI5).

An interviewee adds:

See, let me tell you, if the Nigerian government should do the right thing/the needful today, it will just end, nobody will come out and start saying he needs Biafra. Biafra is our hope for an inclusive government (IDI/6).

These show the symbolic presentation and meaning attached to Biafra, such that Biafra represents the hope for the Igbo. Here, Biafra is used as a medium to derive hope and a means to clamour for restructuring and an inclusion of Igbo in Nigeria politics.

An FGD group presents that:

Biafra is our hope, we are saying this because of the way we are been treated in Nigeria¹. We do not feel belonged and we are not supposed to be Nigerians based on the way we are being maltreated in this country-no Federal Government presence in this town, no Igbo person in politics... (FGD/1).

A discussant in a group says:

We see Biafra as a means of getting what we want. Sometimes I feel we need Biafra, since we are marginalized in this Zoo (Nigeria). Biafra will give us what we want... like a better Igboland (FGD/2).

Another FGD group adds:

The Igbo speaking region has never had any chance to govern this country-Nigeria. It is the problem that is springing up Biafra today. For me reoccurrence of Biafra struggle will not be necessary if the Igbo people are carried along, inclusion of more meaningful Igbo people in government will help reduce this Biafra reoccurrence. In other words, Biafra will be meaningless if Igbo people are involved in the leadership of this country (FGD/3).

While other interviewees say:

...we hope this Biafra re-birth will help make government to recognize and integrate *ndi Igbo* into the affairs of this country. (FGD/4).

The data above show that Biafra is used as an identity capital and symbol that is used to achieve an intended goal. This study explains the notion that Biafra is an embodiment of hope for integrating Igbo people in the Nigerian politics. Biafra is presented as hope for Igbo people, which also produces a symbol of *nzoputa* (freedom) as a social identity. Below are data illustrating Biafra as a symbol of freedom. An interviewee state that:

If Nigeria does not want to include us (Igbo people) in the agenda of this country they should give us Biafra. With Biafra we can be free and govern ourselves (IDI/7).

While a group of discussants adds:

... we experienced the Biafran war. Then it (Biafran war) was fought for an independent state due to killings. Now I can say it is because of marginalization. ...my people (Igbo) seek for freedom from political exclusion, to be recognized so that they can at least rule this country one day (FGD/5).

Beyond the representation of Biafra name as a quest for freedom, Biafra is also projected as a symbol of *Ofu obi* (unity) among the Igbo in Nigeria. To illustrate this assertion, a Biafran veteran says:

After the war, there was a call for unity, but we (Igbo people) discovered that it did not work. So, we started another call to get Biafra... Biafra brings us together, *Biafra na e gosi ofu obi, ngikota na idi na otu, Biafra na eji ko ta ndi Igbo* (Biafra unites the Igbo identity) (FGD/6).

Also, an interviewee adds:

...Biafra is my fatherland; I do not know about Nigeria. *Ihe gba sara Biafra ka m ga eso* (I will follow the Biafra identity) (KII/2).

Etched in social consciousness of Igbo people is the attachment to the Biafra identity that has proven to be more resilient than the Nigerian identity. Individually and/or collectively, this identity disparity often presents a conduct that elevates Igbo-Biafra consciousness above the interest of the Nigerian state. Of all the various forms of Biafran name, several symbols have been pointed out as important meanings that promote Biafra in contemporary Igbo social consciousness.

Discussion of findings

The name Biafra, represents an underlying construct of a modified social identity of the Igbo people. Also presenting Biafra is symbolism of the concept, *Bia-fara*, this has meanings linked to the Igbo social interaction and it refers to the social consciousness and quest to intensify Biafra contest. Thus, the meanings attached to Biafra as *Bia-fa-ra* illustrates the 'come and take' interpretations and intensifies the social consciousness on the 'Biafra' value. According to Onuoha (2010), Biafra is presented as a political struggle, but beyond the political struggle, Biafra represents a construction of social identity of the Igbo and a tool used for achieving a set goal. This presents struggle of the Igbo as expressed in recent times as a contest to seek for recognition in Nigeria's socio-political space, which is often perceived by Igbo people as 'marginalization'. This constructs the embedded meaning and drive for Biafra renaissance among the Igbo in contemporary South-Eastern Nigeria.

Biafra assumes the strategy used to fight perceived marginalization (Bassey, 2023, Onuoha, 2014, Zhizhi & Fanen, 2020), that is, it is used by the Igbo to express the need for inclusion in prominent socio-political and economic positions in Nigeria. The *Biafuru obodo oma* (come and see the beautiful Biafra land) representation of the name Biafra also presents the call to appreciate the Biafra region, as it is described as a region that should be fully integrated into the Nigeria socio-political and economic space. Since the resurgence of Biafra activism in year 1999 (Duruji, 2009), Biafra has assumed different social values such as their hope to: achieving political and social recognition, an end to perceived marginalization, inclusive political participation, collective inclusion in the socio-economic distributions as well as an alternative independent sovereignty where the activities of the Federal Government of Nigeria is assumed to be inadequately recognised. The hope attached to Biafran is attributed to use of identity capital by the Igbo in projecting their social and political intent (Atata & Omobowale, 2022). The idea of hope is basically linked to the quest for freedom as presented in Biafra name as *nzoputa* (freedom).

Another classification on symbolism of Biafra is based on *nzoputa* (freedom). This notion is greatly inspired by the Igbo claims on marginalization and exclusion in the Nigerian political activities especially at the Federal Government level and constant crisis in regions where Igbo people tend to dominate. As posited by Adekson, (2005), Onuoha, (2011) and Uwalaka (2003), the sense of marginalization will persistent in any society unless the aggrieved group(s) is recognised and included in the social, political and economic plans in the given society. The Igbo people thus, tend to seek to be recognized, live, stay, and work freely in any part of Nigeria. This approach and use of Biafra as a symbol of freedom explains symbolism of Biafra renaissance in Igbo social consciousness.

According to Hilleary, Dudley and Marrow (1977) freedom manifests itself through cohesive cooperation, especially in giving benefit to social structure in an in-group. A symbolic and more positive suggestion for meanings attached to freedom is based on understanding of the context and concept of freedom. Freedom is not necessarily an expression of being free but it comes as an instance to people who barely participate actively in the socio-political activities of a country but want to be recognized. Thus, freedom is strengthened through different actions such as (war, protest) which arise as means of contesting to correct the sense of neglect in any society (Dowd & Macmahon, 2014). Keller (2005) and Shimrat (2003) argue that part of the struggle for freedom is the quest for liberation from neglect and the contribution it makes to the well-being of people in the society.

The name *Biafra* illustrates freedom as a quest for recognition and a call for an end to the perceived marginalization. Thus, Biafra constructs and sustains Igbo social consciousness for freedom and participation in political process. The contemporary Biafra consciousness outlines the social and symbolic value of freedom among Igbo people in South-Eastern Nigeria. It is important to note that Biafra is symbolic in the Igbo social consciousness and the role which Biafra plays is both contextual and socially constructed. This is represented in the covert and overt agitation in southeast, Nigeria. The contemporary Biafra agitation and the Igbo in their sense of freedom hope and image of the Nigerian society (in which they live), express the notion of a socially, politically and economically neglected region.

It shows that Biafra activists choose Biafra as a symbol of freedom (Atata & Omobowale, 2022). Here, freedom is not just for self-determination as presented by scholars (see, Okonta, 2012; Onuoha, 2011) rather freedom is explicitly presented as liberty from exclusion in the socio-political and economic activities of the 'host country'-Nigeria and call for adequate inclusion. Thus, Biafra is used as a means for achieving an in-group goal against the out-group. Biafra is adopted as an *identity-capital*, used in projecting the Igbo-Biafra cause.

Biafra freedom agitation confirms the submission of Shimrat (2003) and Keller (2005) who posit that freedom is the willingness of people to get better living in comparison to what they perceived as neglect. Here the context of freedom among Igbo people goes beyond the quest to be free, but a request for recognition and end to exclusion in the Nigeria socio-political structures. The perceived marginalization which is deeply presented in areas of poor infrastructure, socio-political exclusion, and absence of social amenities tend to be some of the problems faced in South-Eastern Nigeria. The south-eastern region and the Biafra activists tend to adopt Biafra identity/activism as a means of presenting these social shortcomings. The adoption of Biafra as a social mechanism, describes the social identification of Biafra as a symbol of *ofu obi* (oneness).

Biafra as *ofu obi*, in the Igbo cultural context presents group cohesion in achieving a set goal, thus Biafra adopted as an identity capital in achieving the *Biafranization* of South-Eastern

Nigeria. Biafranization explains the inclusion of all the Biafra ideology and the different meanings and values attached to Biafra especially among the Igbo.

The Biafra symbol of *Ofu obi* encourages unity and presupposes Biafra ideology, also appeals to the Biafra consciousness among Igbo people. In the struggle for freedom, unity is incorporated among the Igbo people to uphold inalienable struggle for *ofu obi* in the Biafra activism. While some Igbo people may clamour for united Biafra identity within Nigeria, some propose a united Biafra identity to achieve the Biafra objectives (end to marginalization and quest for a socio-political inclusion) by having an independent Biafra nation.

Conclusion

Name is a social construct that gives identity and enhances social cohesion among people in the society. With the meaning attached to Biafra name and the construction of depth social symbolism, Biafra value is also expressed in the social cohesion of Igbo people, the name 'Biafra' has been identified with different symbols, to construct Biafra identification and values, these meanings have been used to promote and sustain Biafra consciousness among the Igbo people in south-east, Nigeria. This study shows that the name Biafra holds a symbolic interpretation and upholds Igbo identity that is explained as Biafuru (come and see) and *Bia-fara* (come and take) which is a symbol of *olile-anya* (hope) and *nzoputa* (redemption). All these create the symbols such as, freedom, *ofu-obi* (social cohesion) that represents symbolic expressions among the Igbo in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Beyond the agitation for self-determination and secession, Biafra has assumed a social symbol translating to mean the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, it could unite them for development purpose at the same time it could be a cause of underdevelopment especially in the cause of confrontation against the Nigerian state. This study suggests that:

- (a) Effort should be made to adopt the advancement of Biafra name for the socio-economic and political development of the South-eastern states in Nigeria.
- (b) The south-east Governors, *Ohaneze ndi Igbo* (Igbo political forum) and the Federal Government should ensure that the Biafra name which has become an identity, be constructively regulated to give deeper sociological presentation to the views on Biafra in Nigeria.
- (c) More attention should be paid to social cohesion as a viable option to improve ethnic unity in Nigeria. However, by virtue of the ethnic diversity and socio-cultural configuration in Nigeria, policies mostly designed to achieve this should consider the unequal ethnic representation in the country which the Igbo-Biafra name suggests.
- (d) The Nigerian government should consider designing policies aimed at adequate/equal representation of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria's socio-economic, political and developmental spaces, to foster unity in the country. Such policies should not only focus on a particular ethnic group but should consider all the ethnic groups (majority and minority groups) in Nigeria.

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