

Intra Ethnic Conflicts Among the Igbo People: A Functionalist Analysis.

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Abstract

His study examines how the assumptions of functionalism have influenced prevailing social conflicts among the Igbo people of south eastern Nigeria. It is argued that behind the value consensus position of the theory in the analysis of social system exists social institutions that predispose Igbo society to fission. Data for the study were gotten using secondary sources. Identified social conflicts like that between traditional rulers and Presidents-General of town unions, associational bodies like: Ohaneze, association of traditional rulers, presidents of town unions are related to the inability of the theory to recognise the place of history in creating institutions for social development. The study recommends bottom-top model approach in policy formulation and implementation processes by the state. This is at variance with the top-to-bottom approach inherent in functionalism and which is a source of social conflict among the Igbo people.

Key Words: Functionalism; Igbo people; Intra-ethnic conflict social conflict and social development

Introduction

Most ethnic groups in Nigeria claim that they are marginalized from active involvement in the country's mainstream political process. Many complain of economic exclusion or non-reasonable involvement in the country's resources production and distribution. Igbos as one of them buttress their claims on such ground as: Abandoned Property Policy of the Federal government in 1970, (Nzimiro, 2001); periodic aggression to the Igbos by non-Igbos during strained social relationships in many parts of the country, the poor condition of federal roads in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria etc.

Proponents of the above marginalization thesis are often confronted with endemic contradictions and marginalization amongst the Igbo themselves. These are intra-ethnic, for example, what internal factors led to the collapse of Biafra? What led to increased agitation for separate states among the Igbo-speaking states? Even in the newly created states, why are many communities clamoring for autonomous status? If the concept of Igbo unity is as real, as it is being presented by such an organization as the 'Ohanaeze' (a Pan-Igbo cultural association), why do we have violent and silent communal clashes in such places as Aguleri and Umuleri, Nkpor and Ogidi, Onitsha and Obosi, Awka and Amawbia etc, all in Anambra State alone? Anambra state is politically unstable. None of the indicators of the Millennium Development Goals MDGs have been reasonably accomplished [ANSG, 2009]. Town Unions, which are important agents of development, are becoming crisis infested (Obiajulu & Nnabugwu, 2015). Many Igbo indigenes feel reluctant to return to their village enclaves as before.

Ethnic and Intra Ethnic Conflict Defined

Contributing to the encyclopedia of sociology, R.D Alba (2000:840) opined that "no agreement exists on the definition of ethnicity" because of many indicators used to operationalize it. Some of these are "a peoples subjective belief in their common descent" (Weber 1968); race or similarity of physiological types (Kuper, 1975; Rushton 1999) common language (Nnoli, 1980); common residential pattern, (Cohen, 1980:4) etc.

Albas' view is that all the indicators don't necessarily have to be in existence simultaneously before a people becomes an ethnic group. Important however, in the definition process, is that there must be in existence among a people so classified, a feeling of what Shibbutani and Kwan quoted in Sanda (1976:29) called "consciousness of kind". It is a feeling that is validated or affirmed by the out of group.

As a social construct, ethnicity refers to the character of social relationship existing between members of different ethnic groups in a plural society. It is an expression of the type of values, sentiments, attitudes that characterize their interaction dynamics within the social system. Ethnicity can be benevolent or malignant in character. Whereas benevolent ethnicity is characterized by mutual respect, co-operation and supportive inter group relationship, malignant ethnicity, is characterized by strained, suspicious, "in-group" versus out-group" social relationship or what Nnoli (1980:6) called 'ethnocentrism'.

It is malignant ethnicity, which is a potential source of social conflict in any plural society (Selznick, 1973). Because malignant ethnicity has a tendency to discriminate against the out-group, It negates the anthropological fact that man is a hologram(the same) in the animal kingdom (Nzimiro,1976). Here lies its source of appeal to sociological enquiry.

Intra-Ethnic Conflict

Social conflict is about the inability of two or more social actors to pursue compatible goals often due to value incongruence between them (Coser, 1957; Best, 2007; Obiajulu & Nnabugwu, 2015). According to Alba (2000:840), "few societies are ethnically homogenous, even when they claim to be so". Intra-ethnic conflict is about how an ethnic group that presents an image of itself as being socially a monolith, is not so sociologically. It is about how group differences within such an ethnic group propel the people to fission as opposed to fusion.

The place of theory in sociological analysis

A theory is an idea or a set of ideas, shared by members of a given scientific community on the essence of a given problem. It is not an individual opinion, although it may have arisen from an individual -its proponent. Blumer (1977:242) defined it as` an array of

ideas or concepts existing to explain social facts'. His view is not at variance with that given by Abanihe and Alonge (2002:92) that "a theory is a set of inter connected abstract principles or propositions, that have the same form as laws, but more general than a law".

Every theory has its assumptions or an array of ideas it has used to explain the ontological basis of the problem it addresses, According to Merton (1976); Skidmore (1975), the assumptions of a theory must look logical to its adherents. In his *Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Khun (1964:3) argued that "a theory reigns as a model of explaining social reality, as long as its assumptions look convincing and remains unchallenged in the explanation of the problem it addresses". Its normal reign can be challenged when its assumptions are confronted by irreconcilable observations or anomalies. Anomalies spur scientists to further theorizing. Emergence of new theories, Khun maintained, is associated with emergence of its adherents. Some of the adherents of the old model still retain the crisis infested theoretical path of explaining the problem in question. The two approaches co-exist. The new theoretical frame soon develops its anomalies and the process continues. This to Khun is how science grows (Alubo, 2014). Ritzer(1976) using this analysis explained how theories in sociology which scholars Nzimiro(1976), believed is in a state of crisis, can be compartmentalized into three paradigmatic frame works namely: The Social facts, the Social Behavioural and Social Definitionists paradigm. Each of these has its core reasoning which is addressed by specific theories that may vary in their basic assumptions. Theory construction is an abstract process. It is one of the indicators of the fact that all knowledge springs from philosophy. That attempt by man to understand the world around him, in order to "act rationally and consistently, to take wise decisions, based on certain scales of values, as they affect matters of truth and falsity, of beauty and ugliness and of right and wrong" (Anikpo, 1986:3). Theory guides scientific researchers in every academic discipline. It informs what is to be studied, how this is to be done, especially with regards to selection of subjects of the study, respect to ethical issues, report writing and even the utilization

of research findings. In fact the value-free science debate in sociology is revolving around this issue. Scholars like Nzimiro(1976), (Obono, 2005) have discussed this. I will however, recast Nzimiro's view on the place of theory in social research to recapture and reemphasize issues raised so far. For him:

When any social theory cannot give man any insight into the working of his society and cannot, therefore guide his action, then that theory is in crisis. It is the crisis of irrelevance. In such a situation, a re-examination of the existing theory and the substitution of old ideas ~~with~~ the new, become imperative otherwise the human society will decay mentally and therefore, culturally (Nzimiro,1976:10).

Functionalism and Intra-ethnic conflict among the Igbo People

Evolutionary theories were advanced in the early 19th century and reigned up to the end of First World War. Before the emergence of the theory, scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment (Notably Adam Smith 1723-1790); Adam Ferguson (1723-1816; John Miller (1735-1801) and William Robertson 1723-1816) had argued, that beneath what might appear to be a chaotic social situation lies a definite structure which has to be understood for a meaningful resolution of social conflict. (Swingewood, 1991:17). As we noted earlier, philosophers of Enlightenment took interest in debunking Medieval philosophy (which to them is at variance with critical reasoning). They were bent on challenging the immutability of nature and its inherent social arrangements.

Early evolutionary thinking, regarded all societies as progressing from an undifferentiated to a highly differentiated and complex social forms, in which there is increased division of labour specialization and functional inter dependency of the differentiated parts. The process is unidirectional and non-reversible (Nzimiro, 1976; Mitchell, 1979; Ake, 1996).

Against this background, evolutionary theorists have classified the development of human societies as a structural process capable of being compartmentalized into two polar opposites as can be seen in the works of: Ferdinand Toennis-Gemeinschaft (community) and Gessellschaft (association) dichotomy. Robert Redfields' folk society and urban typology, Henry Mains' society of status and that of contract, Emile Durkheim' mechanical versus organic solidarity etc (Olmsted, 1995:19 Nwanunobi, 1992).

Whereas; finer cultural accomplishments of man were associated with European cultural forms, those traditionally in use, in their acquired colonies, were described and ranked derogatorily. Concepts like 'primitive', 'barbaric', 'savage', 'tribe' and 'uncivilized' were used to qualify African people's culture. The qualification process was accompanied by a corresponding glorification of European cultural values(Nnoli,2008). Nzimiro,2001;Ibeanu and Onu,2001) discussed how this culture conflict led to the polarization of Igbo communities like Aguleri-Umuleri, Onitsha because those earlier exposed to western influences regarded later migrants as culturally backwards. Works like Ifemesia (1980); Anigbo (1987) have tried to show endemic anomalies in the evolutionary theoretical frame work especially its racist undertone and the existence the detested cultural values, attributed to the backward societies, in the so called developed nations. The theory influenced the emergence of functionalist theory.

The Functionalist Theory

According to Mayanaski& Turner (2000) functionalism is sociology's first theoretical orientation, which was advanced by western anthropologists charged with the responsibility of explaining the dynamics of societies with no written culture, within the world capitalist system. Turner (1977:20) believed that "Auguste Comte is qualified to be called the founder of functionalism". This Mayanaski (2000:1030) attributed to Comte's introduction of "organismic reasoning in the study of sociology". Comtes analogy assumes that certain components of the social system can be likened to

biological organisms for example; he equated families with (cells); classes or castes with (tissues) and cities and communes with gang. Comtes division of sociology into social statistics and social dynamics is based on this affinity (Turner,1977). This emphasis on structural differentiations is the bedrock on which other theorists within the school have contributed their views. H. Spencer, in his *Principles of sociology* (1874-1896) used the principle of 'organismic analogy' to explain the concept of functionalism. In so doing, he tried to show the relationship between ecological processes (variation, competition and selection) and societal development. He saw this process as driven by war. Spencer talked of functional prerequisites, by arguing that super organic systems reveal some similarities in their arrangement, just like biological organisms.

Herbert Spencer's functional system is characterized by the need to secure and circulate resources; the need to produce usable substances and the need to control and administer system activities. This is the pivot on which most functionalist sociological analysis revolves.

Although Auguste Comte, H. Spencer, Charles Darwin and Emile Durkheim can be called precursors of functionalism, the first three, did not shed much light on how the social system can be studied empirically in establishing this systemic relationship (Nisbet&Bottomore, 1979; Obiajulu,1997).

It was Emile Durkheim (1885-1917) who provided this missing link, in the study of human society. In his *Rules of Sociological Method*, he established what Labinjoh (2002:38) aptly described as "a 'founding fathers' blue print for research". In the work, he formulated procedures to be followed, in the collection and interpretation of evidence in the construction of explanatory hypothesis and in their validation (Labinjoh, 2002:38).

Durkheims' emphasis on empiricism is borne out of his conviction that the approach is a tributary to a scientific understanding of how individual and groups in society are held

together (integrated) by what he called social facts. This is the basis for his argument that sociological analysis must be capable of showing how “phenomena function to meet the need of the social structure for integration” (Alba, 2000:1030).

Using Durkheim's blueprint, Radcliff Brown (1881-1955) analyzed how kingship functions to meet integrative needs of the Andaman society. An exponent of what he called 'Comparative sociology' Brown emphasized the need for the discernment of structural principles governing human relationship, derived from comparative study of social systems (Mitchell, 1979). Many sociological studies still take to this tradition. In a similar vein, Bronislaw Malinowski, posited that a scientific study of human society should embrace fieldwork, if the sociologist should appreciate how cultural forms, enhance social integration. Culture system here implies existing social institutions especially those with the following four attributes: “production and distribution, social control and regulation, education and socialization and finally organization and integration” (Alba, 2000:1030). In this way, Malinowski, not only seemed to be anticipating Talcott Parsons and his AGIL model, but became the first theorist to visualize cultural systems as one in which “each of the parts, was equally important, each playing a role in the final outcome” (BealsHoijer 1971:40).

It is against this background that functionalists talk of functions as contributions, which the sub systems (institutions or enduring roles) make in the sustenance of the social system (integration) e.g. Parsons' functional prerequisites (Skidmore, 1979). Emile Durkheim's theory of social facts, refer to variables like beliefs, norms, mores (non material social facts and artifacts (material social facts) which man has created and shares in meeting his interpersonal needs. He sees social facts as “external to the individual, general to the society and constraining man in expressing his individual free will (Durkheim in Giddens (1977:293). Human problems can be better understood by analyzing how social facts affect man, for it is the social structure that determines the problems (Labinjoh, 2002). In doing so, the unit of analysis has to be the social group,

which he saw as a reality transcending individuals comprising it. For this reason he focused on problems of cohesion of groups and how variation in group behaviour is a function of the social structure influencing the group (Labinjoh, 2002). In Durkheim's view, ethnic conflict whether at the inter or intra level of analysis is not only socio structurally determined, but also influential on the harmony of the social system. It is a deviant act that indicates how anomic social condition is perceived and expressed by groups in conflict.

Beyond Durkheim's emphasis on how the structure of a social group can affect the action of individuals in society, exists the view of Robert Merton often described as a neo-functionalists. Merton, often called a critique within the functionalist school, argues that his predecessors had not been scientific enough in using the concept of function. This to him can affect "clarity of sociological analysis" (Merton, 1968:74-5). Minimizing such errors, to him, entails that sociologists must be capable of using middle range theories (abstracted from grand theories) in conducting focused research. Through the abstracted middle range theory, collection of data is easier for the researcher who at that level, looks for specific type of data covered by the middle range theory (Turner, 1977). For example, within the functionalism as a grand theory of ethnicity Alba (2000:841) abstracted middle range theories like: "theory of assimilation; ethnic mobilization and ethnic group resources". Each of these is concerned with a particular type of data that can ultimately be linked to ethnicity at a higher level of abstraction. Merton's definition of functionalism amply illustrates this point. A method of building, not only theories of middle range, but also the grand theoretical schemes, that will someday subsume such theories of middle range (Turner, 1977:71).

Because of his passion for precision, Merton also argued that not only is the integration of the society a variable concept, even the issue of function has to be holistically viewed. For this reason he talked of functions and dysfunction (negative roles) of an institution of a social phenomena, as well as manifest (intended) and latent (unintended)

consequences of an action. This submission is very relevant in our appreciating how the very idea of 'common cause' as championed by the opinion leaders can be used to undermine the developmental processes of the people being led. For example Nzimiro (1996:234) strongly argued that "the concept of Igboness is a hoax and a smokescreen for Igbo elite to pursue their selfish motives". Using his closeness to the former Biafran leader, he argued that what Biafrans complained about in Nigeria, were evident in the defunct republic as the war progressed. This is attested by the fact that: the Biafran leader, the governor of the Bank of Biafra; commandant of Biafran airport, Biafras' ambassadors at large, the country's potential prime minister, the leader's ghost speech writer and closest associate were all from Nnewi, Ojukwu's home town. Achebe (2012) did not agree less with this view point. Discussing the ethnic question therefore requires looking at the problem holistically.

In summary, one can say that functionalism as a thought frame in doing sociological research assumes that: the society exists as a holistic entity, within which exists identifiable parts (institutions) that exist because of their usefulness (functions) in the system. The institutions are inter related and in equilibrium. They are structurally restored to normalcy should a change occur within the social system. In effect, "social conflict is a normal social process that does not constitute a serious threat to the continual survival of the social system" (Ritzer, 1976:48; 1997:208).

Functionalism and intra-ethnic conflicts among the Igbo people

There are institutions among the Igbo at the moment which are associated with championing the resolution of conflicts facing the people in Nigeria's political process. At the fore front of these is the Igbo pan-cultural association, *The Ohaneze*. At the state levels traditional rulers' council exist and are associated with preservation of primordial cultural values of the Igbo people. Traditional rulers are supposed to work hand-in-hand with Presidents-General of town unions. The latter are charged with day to day administration of component communities in Igboland.

In keeping with the assumptions of functionalism, the function of these organizations are statutorily defined. Unfortunately most Igbo communities at the moment are conflict infested (Ibeanu,2003; Onwuzuligbo,2009; Onwuegbusi,2011; Obiajulu&Nnabugwu,2016).

Variables associated with intra-ethnic conflict among the Igbo include : inability of thestate government to pursue the demands of inclusive government (Obiajulu& Nnabugwu,2016); Igbo leaders proclivity to primitive accumulation (Joseph, 1991; Obiajulu,1994; Achebe,2012); leadership struggle (Obiajulu & Nnabugwu, 2015); ethnogenesis (or politicization of identities) Okonkwo, 2007; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Functionalism has not been able toexplain satisfactorily, these developmental problems facing the Igbo people. Part of the reason is that functionalism is a-historical in the analysis of social realities.

To structural functionalist theorists, every society is held together by shared norms, values, roles, and people in context. The social solidarity which this social reality sustains is punctured by social conflict. Talcott Parsons quoted in Coser (1957:21), sees social conflict as a 'disease', and Durkheim, cited in (Weirviorka, 2010:3) contends that "conflict has a disruptive effect on the functioning of the social system". Even Simmel (1903: 490) opines that "if conflict has broken out, it is in reality, the way to remove the dualism and to arrive at some form of unity". Wierviorka (2010:3) observes that "conflict attests to the fact that although human beings are sociable, they are equally capable of opposing one another. This manifests when the interests of individuals and groups are at variance".

Unlike these western scholars Anigbo (1985) noted that, Igbo people have a rigid mindset during conflict situation. Obiajulu & Nabugwu (2015) aver that traditional methods of conflict resolution are preferred among the Igbo in place of the functionalist favoured Criminal Justice System or modern method. Nwosu (2009:3) opines that the

relationship between the traditional rulers and the town unions is one of the sources of conflict in most parts of Igbo land.

There is conflict over the relationship between the town union (or its president) and the *Eze* (or traditional ruler). There is conflict over the accession and succession to the *Eze* stool which has tended to destabilize the town union. There is also conflict over the *Eze's* area of jurisdiction and the town union's area of jurisdiction. The gravity of the situation is perhaps evidenced by the numerous litigations on these matters pending in the law courts all over Igbo land.

Not many scholarly works have investigated how communal conflict influences field work during a social survey. In Obiajulu (2014) it is found that study participants in a conflict-infested community can decide not to fill questionnaire they were given because a researcher gave the same instrument to the other party in conflict. Neither Malinowski nor Radcliff Brown anticipated this field work experience. Durkheim on his *Rules of Sociological methods* was not wonderful in this regard.

Conclusion

Intra-ethnic conflict among the Igbo people is real and a very disturbing social experience. It constrains many from active involvement in the development of their societies. Many have abandoned their country sides and taken to the already over-urbanised cities. The state which from the functionalist viewpoint should pursue politics of inclusion takes to pre-bendal equivalent (Joseph, 1991). Associational bodies championing the Igbo cause are very unserious and self-seeking creations of Igbo elites. The problem is theoretical because in going about social development matters, Igbo leaders jettison core Igbo values like honesty, clean reputation, live and let live as they take to primitive accumulation (Marx & Engels, 1968). Modernisation theory which agents of foreign monopoly capital use to plan for and contain societies in the lower evolutionary ladder, continue to influence how social life among the Igbo prevails. It is with caution that Igbo should embrace secessionist ideas that are associated with

marginalisation of the ethnic group. It is good governance that can give Igbo people a sense of belonging in the country. This is challenged by intra-ethnic conflict within them.

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