

Igbo

Profile

There are approximately 25.2 million Igbo in the country. Their traditional homeland straddles the Niger River in the south-east and is one of the most densely populated areas of the African continent. Igbo are predominantly Christian. Traditionally, Igbo were subsistence farmers of yams, taro and cassava. Today many are well educated and work as civil servants and in business. Over a period of many years, over one million Igbo have migrated to other parts of Nigeria.

Historical context

Igbo are believed to have originated as a people several thousand years ago in the area where the Benue flows into the Niger River. The Igbo were active slave traders, selling captives from the interior to European traders. The British established control over the region in the 19th century, made easier by the Igbo's decentralized political organization. Christian missionaries also found Igboland to be fertile ground for proselytizing.

Regional tension in Nigeria became acute after independence as politicians fought ruthlessly for the spoils of office. The problem was exacerbated by the discovery of large oil deposits, and many Igbo came to fear that oil-producing areas would be carved out of their area of control.

In January 1966, Igbo army officers carried out a coup. There were reprisal killings of Igbo in majority Hausa areas of northern Nigeria, and six months later, a counter-coup brought a northerner, General Yakubu Gowon, to power. In September 1966, Radio Cononou in neighbouring Benin broadcast a rumour that northerners had been killed in the Igbo-dominated south-east. Northern mobs went on a rampage, brutally killing thousands of Igbo civilians, while Igbo soldiers were hacked to death in army barracks. Those who survived fled east, many injured and destitute, posing massive problems of relocations.

There followed a major exodus of skilled Igbo from other parts of Nigeria towards the east. The federal government made little effort to heal the wounds or condemn the atrocities. Rather, President Gowon presented a plan to replace the four regions with twelve new states, meaning the break-up of the Igbo-dominated east. Control of rich oil deposits would be placed in the hands non-Igbo minorities.

In 1967, the Igbo, under the leadership of Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared the independence of the east as the Republic of Biafra. The federal government responded with full military force and isolated the Igbo in their heartland. The violence and starvation led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Igbo before Biafra surrendered in January 1970.

Following their defeat, Igbo have been excluded from significant representation in the higher echelons of the military and government.

Current issues

In May 1997, the International Crisis Group (ICG) reported that the failure of the electoral process has deepened the separatist sentiment in the south-east. In a year which marked the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the Biafran war, ICG said that perhaps more than any other region, the poll in the Igbo heartland was 'poorly conducted and mindlessly rigged'. This boosted the position of the separatist group, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), that Igbos would never 'realise their political aspirations with the Nigerian federation'. However, there was a question-mark over the MASSOB's tactics, after a 'sit-at-home-strike' failed to mobilize widespread support, showing that many Igbos did not want to publicly associate themselves with the separatist cause.

The 1960s Igbo separatist leader, the now-elderly Odumegwu Ojukwu, contested the 2007 presidential elections, coming sixth. He later told the BBC that the Igbo had more reason than ever to seek independence - basing his comments on the widespread electoral irregularities. Throughout 2007, there were protests from Igbo associations that Chief Ralf Uwazuruike, leader of MASSOB, remained in jail - although other separatist or rebel leaders had been released. Uwazuruike and other alleged MASSOB supporters had been arrested in 2005, charged with treason. But at the end of October 2007, Uwazuruike was released from detention. His message of independence for Biafra, however, remained constant. IRIN reported him saying 'All we want is our Biafra. We want to secede.'