

Esan Response to Benin Draconian Legislation in Pre-Colonial times: Historical Lessons in Secession for Modern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines secessionism as a problem of Nation and State building in Nigeria. It chronicles the warning historical lessons inherent in the 15th century Esan secession from Benin among others. Since the end of Nigerian civil war in 1970, the study finds that the threat of secession has continued to haunt the country. Political highhandedness and economic marginalisation in modern Nigeria have fueled secessionist tendencies beyond the pre-1967 level. More so, the frustrations and grievances of disgruntled Nigerians against the State are being expressed in militancy, terrorism, and other acts of criminalities that erode peace and unity. In the circumstance, nationalism has become the opportunity cost of maladministration and corruption in Nigeria. Therefore, the study juxtaposes the causations of revolution and secession in history with current happenings in Nigeria. And it concludes that there is a strong re-birth of injustice and oppression; which makes the threat of disintegration plaguing Nigeria very real. Consequently, the paper demonstrated the utility of historical knowledge as a political compass for guiding leadership in Nigeria to eschew past mistakes that bred secession.

Keywords: Esan, Benin, Nigeria, Secession, Nation Building

Introduction

In post-civil war Nigeria, the threat of secession and complete disintegration of the country is real and dangerously imminent. The phenomenon of ethnic-nationalism, ethnic militarism, minority and majority agitations are fuelling social disharmony in twenty-first century Nigeria in an unprecedented scale. Their causations have arguably towered above the pre-1967 factors that birthed the Nigerian civil war. Today, the drums of terrorism, insurgency and secessionism are sounding louder in Nigeria than ever before. Psychologically, Nigerians as a people are growing apart. The political elites of the nation have positioned themselves as the enemy of the State. At a time, some threatened to make Nigeria ungovernable and open the floodgates of terror. Understandably, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2006) forecasted the abortive disintegration of Nigeria by 2015. But the nation is not yet out of the woods with ethnic intolerance and suspicion on the rise. The Northerners feel they are born to rule over

the Southern infidels; and the Southerners are suspicious of a supposed insidious Islamisation or Fulani agenda. The undeclared war among Nigerians is concerning and unsettling. Across Africa, the disintegration of Nigeria, it can cause can trigger secessionist tendencies. And this is demonstrable with the 2010 protest in Tunisia that spiraled into the Arab spring (QadirMushtaq and Afzal 2017: 1); and the xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and others known as *Amakwerekwere* in South Africa (Ilesanmi 2008: 3-5) that propelled xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in Ghana.

More so, it would be recalled that sub-Saharan Africa's first military coup d'etat of 1963 in Togo, in no distant time fanned the embers of military revolution and insurgency across the region. And in Nigeria, it cannot be divorced from the motivations behind the January 15, 1966 military coup. Hence, it is safe to maintain that the Togolese coup interacted closely with the existing socio-political and economic imbalances in Nigeria to spur Civil War and secessionism in the nation (1967-1970). However, since the end of the war, secessionist threats in Nigeria have grown in leaps and bounds. Secessionism currently dwarfs other challenges to become the biggest threat to Nigeria's unity and sovereignty. Consequently, this paper seeks to interrogate the problem and expand the frontiers of existing knowledge on secession studies.

In modern Nigeria, secession as a means to an end was first conceived in the North. Secessionist ideology in the region emanated as a result of the introduction of the unification decree No. 34, by the Aguyi Ironsi military regime, in 1966. The unification decree threatened Nigeria's fragile federalism of the time that was adopted to protect the unity in diversity of her peoples. It is against this backdrop, anti-unification demonstrations and protests aimed at protecting the status quo were carried out in Kano and Kaduna in July 1966. They gradually gained momentum and spiraled into the July 1966 counter-coup. The coup was arguably geared towards containing Igbo hegemony (Balogun 1973: 27) in Nigeria when Northern secession was not feasible. Although short-lived, unbeknownst the philosophical appeal that whipped up secessionist clamor for the creation of the Arewa Republic in the North paradoxically transplanted the seed of secessionism elsewhere in Nigeria. And it began germinating in the Niger Delta in 1966, when under the leadership of Isaac Adaka Boro the region fantasied the creation of Niger Delta Republic as a way of ending the economic marginalization of Niger Deltans.

In time, the idea of secessionism spilled into Eastern Nigeria where it produced the most catastrophic effect. Secession from Nigeria was strongly believed by the Igbos as the most assured means of protecting their lives and properties. Its rise was caused by the high Igbo casualty and losses during the Northern riots and counter-coup. This development generally fanned feelings of marginalisation among the Igbos (Balogun 1973: 62-63). Hence, in a meeting held to look into the issue of marginalisation in

August 1966, the Consultative Assembly and the Advisory Committee of Igbo Chiefs and Elders resolved that the security of lives and properties of Igbos in Nigeria is no longer guaranteed. Following the resolution was the immediate psychological of Igbos from Nigeria and the birth of the '*Biafran idea*' that was the hallmark of Igbo secessionism. However, in 1967, when the Biafran War broke out, the Igbo leadership envisioned that, the secession of the Eastern region would be the catalyst that would trigger the secession of the other regions of Nigeria (Balogun 1973: 76). But this Biafran aspiration was dashed when the Federal government gained victory in 1970, and received the unconditional surrender of the Igbos. Although the war is long gone, secessionist desires in Igboland and elsewhere have become its' ghost haunting Nigeria. It had made the task of Nation and State building in Nigeria more herculean than the task of amalgamating the peoples in 1914. Hence, Uma Eleazu observed that,

Nigeria is in a very real sense still a nation in the making ... It is one thing to gain independence and gain a territory. It is quite another to hold it together in a framework of law and order (Eleazu 1988: 11-14).

Therefore, it is against the backdrop of the unending secessionist tendencies reverberating across Nigeria that this paper seeks to interrogate the Esan example in pre-colonial times as a framework for understanding and pre-empting secessionism in modern Nigeria. To this end, the study demonstrates the good that can come out of history (Ikime 2018: xiii) when the leadership of Nigeria takes into sharp political and administrative cognizance the historical lessons in secession replete in inter-group and international relations history. And specifically, from the political highhandedness of the Benin monarchy, under Oba Ewuare, that gingered the secession of some of the ancestors of Esanland from the Benin. It insists that when people and leaders fail to learn from past mistakes, they will continue to drive their nation to the verge of secession. Hence, in their day-to-day administration and governance of modern Nigeria, the enactment, interpretation, and implementation of laws leadership owes it as a duty to the nation to be guided by knowledge of historical antecedents.

Secession in Historical Perspectives

The earliest records of succession and secession struggle in human history are found in the Scriptures. The Biblical account of the feud between Ishmael and Isaac lends credence to this fact; and epitomizes how succession tussle can quickly turn to secession. In the history of nation and state building, both sons of Abraham are reputed to be the founders Israel and Arabia. Hence, the tussle between both societies over dominance dates back to antiquity. *Insight on the Scriptures* reveals that,

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In 1913 B.C.E., on the day of Isaac being weaned, Ishmael's poking fun at his younger half-brother was no innocent child's play. Rather, as the Scriptures implied in the next verse of the account, it may have involved a taunting of Isaac over heirship (Insight on the Scriptures 1988: 1225).

And this arguably set the ball rolling for revolution and secession struggles across the globe. Ismael's resentment towards Isaac led to the first secession in history, when Ishmael and Hagar, his Egyptian mother, were sent away. This enabled Ishmael and Isaac to thrive separately and become the pillar of two great societies. Since this development, down to the time of Nimrod nation and state building efforts have been plagued by secessionism. The differences among peoples and national groups within a stock have set them at loggerheads and daggers drawn due to domination, oppression, suppression and marginalisation. And this is evident in the succession and secession tussle between Esau (the Edomites) and Jacob (the Jews); which took sibling and ethnic rivalry among humans to an epic height. According to the Scriptures, the tussle between both nations originated before they were formed. Genesis account reports that,

...Rebecca became pregnant. And the sons within her began to struggle with each other, so that she said: "If this is the way it is, why should I go on living? And Jehovah said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from within you; and the one nation will be stronger than the other nation, and the older one will serve the younger."(New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures 2013: 73)

Overtime, in the public administration of politically organized societies, secession has emerged as a measure of last resort in the fight against injustice and tyranny. This point in ancient times is crystal clear under the reign of King Rehoboam of Judah. During the period, the social contract that bonded the Jewish nation was broken because of the political highhandedness of the monarchy. The Southern Jewish tribes adopted secession as their weapon to fight against oppression when dialogue and negotiation failed. Diplomacy broke down when the King arrogantly rejected the passionate appeal of the people for better treatment. He declared thus,

My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father punished you with whips, but I will punish you with scourges (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures 2013: 502-503).

Consequently, the Southern ten tribes of Israel headed by Jeroboam seceded to form a new Kingdom with Samaria as the capital. Along this line, in organised societies across the globe, revolutions and secessions have dotted the political landscape of Nations, Kingdoms and Empires. Starting with the Protestant secession from the Catholic

Church in 1648, people and national groups have increasingly asserted their right to self-determination and autonomy. In 1776, the declaration of independence by the Thirteen American colonies of Britain ended their 169 years (1607-1776) of domination and suppression (Lemay 1988: 599) and consolidated revolution and self-determination in the modern international system. In that, it became a model and motivation for oppressed and colonised peoples everywhere to resist the injurious domination of man by man.

In Europe, France emerged as the first epicentre of the anti-tyrannical and freedom struggle. In 1789, inspired by the American War of Independence, the French peasants revolted against their monarch, King Louis XVI, in an attempt to establish a new political order characterized by liberty, equality and fraternity (Peacock 1982: 43-44). And this epochal historical event produced far reaching effects in Europe and beyond. It encouraged the rise of ideological based revolution movements against oppressive and suppressive regimes. Consequently, Ian Beckett's "*Modern Insurgency and Counter Insurgency: Guerillas and their Opponents since 1750*", observed that modern resistance struggles are now fired by ideology, nationalism, and religious fundamentalism (Beckett 2001: vii). Subsequently, in 1871 nationalism and ideology safely guided the German and Italian quest for unification and secession from France and Austria's domination to fruition. And in the twentieth century, Communist ideology fired the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and coloured the Cold War politics that began in 1945. And since 1945, religious and ideological extremism have become the force driving insurgency and terrorism worldwide (Beckett 2001: viii).

When the wind of secession blew into Asia, India was one of the places where it affected lives and politics. The Indian example is instructive because it provides a perfect demonstration of the role of religion in propelling succession and secession within a stock. In the region, the people's rejection of British domination and quest for self-determination was religiously determined. In colonial India, the population was predominantly Hindu and Muslim. Hence, nationalism was divided along religious lines. The people adopted different religiously motivated strategies to combat foreign rule. The Hindu struggle was led by Mahatma Gandhi; while that of the Muslims was led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Explaining the lack of cohesion in the Indian struggle for independence, John Stoessinger writes that the Hindus and the Muslims hated and feared each other more than they British (Stoessinger 2001: 111). In the fight against imperialistic oppression, Hindu nationalism was anchored the doctrine of *ahisma* or non-violence; and this ideology progressively developed into the political doctrine known as passive resistance or civil disobedience (Stoessinger, 2001: 115). And the Muslim nationalism was anchored on the Muslim League. The goal of the League was to press for the creation of a separate state out of India for the Muslims. They were afraid of

Hindu majority domination and persecution after the independence of India (Stoessinger 2001: 116).

Resultantly, in 1947 when Britain was forced to grant independence to the Indians in exchange for their support in the Second World War, two countries emerged, India and Pakistan. In the newly formed Pakistan, political domination and economic exploitation of Muslims by Muslims gave impetus to renewed secessionist desires. Secessionist tendencies developed in Eastern Pakistan because of the inequality and injustice that pervade the country. The Western Pakistani majority treated the Eastern Pakistanis as their poor cousin and monopolised the economic resources of the nation. And Western Pakistanis also dominated the central government. But after the 1970 election, the Eastern Pakistani emerged with the upper hand politically. The Easterners secured 169 seats in the country's National Assembly; while West Pakistan won 90 seats. This gave rise to fear among the Westerners that the Easterners would use their majority in Legislature to give themselves self-government (Stoessinger 2001: 123-126). Hence, Western Pakistan made frantic efforts to revert to status quo and suppress the Eastern Pakistanis; and this led to a bloody conflict that ended in the secession of Eastern Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In the twenty-first century, secession played out in Africa when South-Sudan seceded from Sudan for similar reasons as Bangladesh. Implicit in this historical reconstruction, is the fact that the high incidence political and economic exclusionism in Nigeria means the nation is sitting on a keg secession gun powder. And her leadership must learn from the Benin antecedent in pre-colonial times to defuse the ticking time bomb.

Geography and Political Organisation of the Benin Kingdom

The Kingdom of Benin was one of the oldest and most stable political organisations built in the forest region of West Africa. It had wide international exposure because of its over four and a half centuries interface with European nations (Bradbury 1973: 3). The Benin Kingdom was one of the first African societies to have direct foreign relations with European powers in the pre-colonial era; and to be integrated into the then international system. Consequently, Benin enjoyed a thriving diplomatic relation with Portugal before the arrival of the British. The Kingdom of Benin in modern Nigeria is located in the South-South geo-political zone of the country. It is geographically situated in the Bite of Benin, where it lies beyond the net of Creeks and Mangrove swamps in the fringes of the tropical forest woodland belt. It occupies an area spanning approximately 3,491 square miles; and bordered in the South by Kwale, in the West by Ondo, in the North by Owo, and in the East by Agbor (National Archives Ibadan 1948: 1-4).

The topography of Benin is characterized by many small hills and slopes; and is divided by deep valleys and various rivers. These rivers are the Osse, Ossiomo, Ethiopie, Siluko, and Jameison (N.A.I 1948: 4). In pre-colonial Nigeria, the people of Benin Kingdom comprises the Binis, Ika, Sobe, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Isoko, Yoruba, Esan, Afenmai, Aboh, Urhobo, and the Igbo speaking people or the West bank of the Niger and Onitsha (Egharevba 1968: 5): who were once under the shadow of Benin, before their emigration from Benin. Hence, R.E. Bradbury (1973) writes that, within Southern Nigeria, Benin occupies a geographical position between the non-centralised, though structurally complex, Igbo societies to the East; and the urbanised and centralised Yoruba Kingdoms to the West (Bradbury 1973: 3). Funso Afolayan (2000) observes that, the rise of Benin Kingdom to prominence by the end of the fifteenth century in West Africa; and emergence as the most powerful state in the forest region was exceptional. This is supported by the fact that most of the states built in the lower Niger region were characteristically small scale political formations; where the settlement (clan) was the basic political unit (Afolayan 2000: 161). Benin City was the administrative capital and socio-economic hobnob of the Kingdom before 1900.

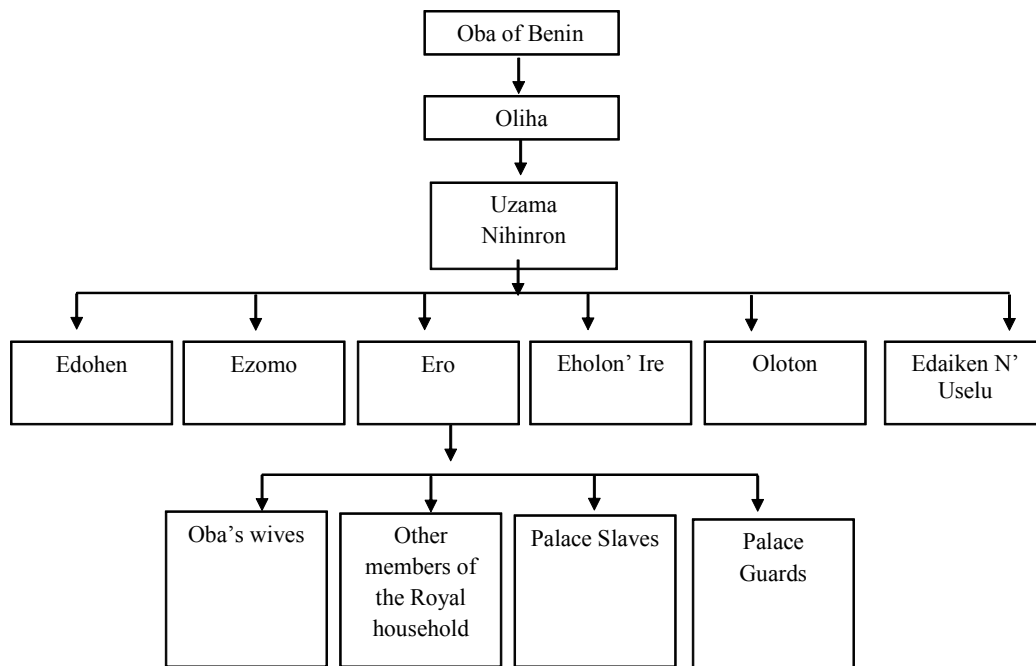
Benin City is currently the capital of Edo state. In Benin studies, the origin of the people of Benin remains shrouded in myths and traditions. The Benin mythology, popularly known as the Snail-shell tradition, traced the origin of the people to the youngest child (Benin) of *Osanobua* (the Supreme God) in Heaven. It was believed that, when Osanobua wanted to send his children to the earth to make home for themselves; He asked them to request for anything that would arguably aid their nation and state building quest. Joseph Osagie (2002) writes that while the other children asked for wealth, magical powers and material wellbeing; Benin the youngest son, on the advice of a bird, asked for a snail shell (Osagie 2002: 14). Subsequently, when all the delegates from heaven reached the earth they found that it to be waterlogged. Once again, heeding the advice the bird, Benin turned his snail shell upside down and sand poured out from it and covered some of the earth's watery surface to produce dry land (Osagie 2002: 14-15). Thus, Benin the tradition holds became the rightful owner of all lands on earth; which he generously shared with his brothers to build their nations. Jacob Egharevba (1968) on the other hand maintained that, the Binis migrated from Egypt and settled in the Sudan temporarily, from Sudan they migrated to *Uhe* (Ile-Ife) from where they moved to their present location (Egharevba 1968: 1). However, Osemwegie Ebohon (2005) has debunked the migration account of Benin origin claiming that,

The Bini culture shows a clear uniqueness and no elaborate similarities with other cultures; it is a fallacy to say that they (the Binis) migrated to their present abode from other places (Ebohon 2005: 5).

Therefore, he insisted the Benin tradition holds that '*Edo Orisiagbon*' meaning that Benin (Edo) is the cradle of civilization; and that "*Oba yan oto se evbuebo*" meaning that the Oba of Benin owns all the lands in Benin and abroad, demonstrate that the Benins have independent origin (Ebohon 2005: 80).

In pre-colonial Nigeria, the Kingdom of Benin practiced a centralised political system. The Benin monarchy was headed by the Oba, who according to Philip Aigbona Igbafe was the pivot around which everything in the state revolved, as the supreme religious and civil authority in the land (Igbafe 1976: 1). It followed from this that during the period that the Oba Benin exercised full legislative, judicial, and executive powers in the society. Although there was a council of semi-independent Chiefs called the *Uzama Nihinron* comprising the *Oliha*, *Edohen*, *Ezomo*, *Ero*, *Eholor*, *Oloton* and *Edaiken*, who acted as advisers to the Benin monarchy on important issues; and independently administer their respective villages in the pattern of the central monarchy in Benin: with their own individual royal court and appointed chiefs. However, as a rule, they were not allowed to intervene in the internal affairs of Benin, and the Oba was not obligated to heed their advice (Igbafe 1976: 5-6). Arguably, it was the lack of a functional check and balance system in pre-colonial Benin that created the room for the Oba to exercise arbitrary and dictatorial powers.

However, there was also a group of town chiefs called the *Eghaevbo n' Ore* headed by the *Iyase*, who featured prominently in the central and village administration of Benin Kingdom. According to Igbafe, the *Iyase* was the spokesman of the group and was the only person, who had the traditional right to criticize the Oba of Benin publicly. Thus, aside from being the adviser of the King, he was at times his most potent antagonist (Igbafe 1976: 7-8). Despite this, the *Eghaevbo n' Ore* consisting of other prominent Chiefs such as the *Ologbosere*, *Esogban*, *Eson*, *Osuma* and *Osula* remained highly subservient to the wishes of the Oba of Benin on issues of statecraft. But their submission to the throne contrasted significantly with that of the *Eghaevbo n' Ogbe*, who were mere Palace Chiefs and thus completely submissive to the Benin monarchy (Igbafe 1976: 7-8). These chiefs formed the bedrock of the Benin royal court during the period of study; but were joined in this capacity by other members of the royal family and critical palace workers such as guards and messengers, who were low in the hierarchy. The Benin royal court ensures the complete observance of all Benin's customary and traditional palace protocols and procedures. And expedite the decisions of the Oba of Benin. The structure of the political machinery of Benin Kingdom in pre-colonial Nigeria is shown below.

Figure 1: Political Structure and Courtiers of Pre-Colonial Benin Kingdom

Source: Adapted from Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968, pp. 8-17.

Hence, it can be logically deduced that the political organisation of pre-colonial Benin did not constitutionally create the enabling environment for separation of power, checks and balances, rule of law and constitutionalism to thrive. More so, it is discernible from the anatomy of the Benin political structure that by default the Kingdom of Benin was an elitist society that prioritises the interests of the royal house and Chiefs of the Kingdom. It gave minute attention to the fundamental human rights and freedom of its subjects. Therefore, it could be said that, it was this existing political reality in Benin that fueled the enactment of the Benin draconian legislation during the reign of Oba Ewuare that sundered the people.

The Rise of Oba Ewuare the Great in Benin

The King or *Oba* was the political head of Benin centralised government. He reigned supreme as a demi-god over his subjects. But as head of state, the King was assisted in the day-to-day administration of the Kingdom by his council-of-chiefs. It was on this

note Philip Igbafe argued that the Oba of Benin is not, and should not be conceived as an absolute autocrat on the grounds that:

If an Oba decided to ride roughshod over his people, a subtle boycott by Chiefs' refusal to perform well-known rituals would virtually paralyze his power as well as the political machinery. The Oba could not deprive Chiefs of titles he had earlier conferred on them, and attempts to abolish important titles would produce a united stand of the title-holders against an Oba, who could easily lose his grip of the political system (Igbafe 1976: 4).

But this argument does not suffice for one to attribute constitutionalism to pre-colonial Benin, and especially the reign of Oba Ewuare. However, Igbafe's position only help to paradoxically portray Benin Kingdom as an elitist society, where the rights and interests of the elites are protected and secured; but not those of the people of Benin during the period. The Benin scholar buttresses our point by noting that the Benin elites (Title-holders) only act in concert to check the power of the Oba, when they are directly affected or threatened by his actions. Thus, in the political history of Benin, absolutism triumphed over constitutionalism, especially under Oba Ewuare, who ruled the Kingdom with an iron fist. To this end, Jacob Egharevba writes that: "The *Oba's* decision on any matter was unalterable" (Egharevba 1968: 79).

The road to the rise of Oba Ewuare was paved with the end of the *Ogiso* era in Benin. The end of the *Ogiso* rule set in motion a dynamic and intricate turns of political events in the land of the *Igodomigodo* that culminated in the emergence of Eweka I, as the first *Oba* and commander-in-chief of the Benin armed forces. It happened that, during the period of interregnum that followed the banishment of *Ogiso Owodo*, the people of Benin appointed Evian to rule over them in thrust. However, Evian in time breached the social contract between him and the people; by appointing his son *Ogiamwen* as his successor against the expressed wishes of the Binis, who wanted him to return power back to the people (Egharevba 1968: 5-6).

Consequently, the succession tussle that erupted in Benin culminated in the rejection of *Ogiamwen* as King. Resultantly, the people sent a message to *Oduduwa* in Ile-Ife for political assistance (Egharevba 1968: 5-6). In response to Benin request, *Oranmiyan* was sent to Benin and his arrival in Kingdom was trailed by different unexpected turn of events that gave Benin its name (*Ile Ibinu*); and laid the foundation for the emergence of the Eweka dynasty, whose throne Oba Ewuare later inherited as heir. However, it is instructive to note that from the rise of Oba Eweka I, about 1200 A.D. to the rise of Oba Ewuare, about 1440 A.D. eight successive monarchs ascended the Benin ancestral stool (Egharevba 1968: 18-13). But it was Oba Ewuare the Great that led Benin into its golden era; and whose maladministration marred the unity of Kingdom.

Oba Ewuare was a great magician, physician, traveler, and warrior. He expanded Benin City, built good road networks, and streets in Benin. He also constructed walls and ditches (moat) around Benin. In other words, he modernized Benin, and this earned him the title ‘*Ewuare Ogidigan*’ meaning Ewuare the Great (Egharevba 1968: 13-14). Further, Ewuare was the one, who changed the name of the Kingdom from Benin to Edo; and was the first acclaimed Oba to have relations with the Europeans; and encouraged wood carving in Benin (Egharevba 1968: 17). However, the reign of Ewuare was characterized by political highhandedness and despotism. Oba Ewuare murdered Ekobe, the richest woman in the South of Benin, and carried off all her treasures and slaves. He was also a trick-star, who used magic and deceit to gain advantage over his opponents (Egharevba 1968: 14).

Hence, R.E. Bradbury (1973) writes that the Oba of Benin was not a constitutional monarch; but a political head, who actively engaged in competition for power. To this end, the Oba heavily manipulated the palace and town chiefs to achieve his interests (Bradbury 1973: 70). Therefore, the Oba of Benin arguably devolved power in Benin not to promote good governance, but mainly to prevent his Chiefs from being too powerful to challenge his rule. Put differently, he created and appointed Title-holders (Chiefs) to check other Title-holders (Chiefs) and not the King. Bradbury captures the trend thus,

By making appointments to vacant titles, creating new ones, transferring individuals from one order to another, introducing new men of wealth and influence into positions of power, and redistributing administrative competences, the king tried to maintain a balance between competing groups and individuals (Bradbury 1973: 70).

Consequently, Bradbury surmised that the Oba of Benin had more political security in office than elsewhere in pre-colonial Africa. The Oba was not in theory and practice chosen on the basis of his fitness to rule, so whatever he does in his administration of society could not be used to remove him from office... Nor was there any institution in Benin that corresponds with the *Ogboni* society of Oyo that could coordinate public opinion, and bind the Chiefs to a common action against the Oba: because he was conceived to be a god-king upon whom the continuity of Benin Kingdom depends (Bradbury 1973: 73-74). Thus, it was the autocracy this development promoted in Benin, especially under Oba Ewuare, that prepared the stage for enactment of the draconian legislation in Benin that triggered the succession of some of the founding fathers of Esanland. Regarding autocracy in Benin, Jacob Egharevba (1949) in his “*Benin Law and Custom*” observes that,

The King is the head of the nation and his person is held sacred. He was the source of law. He could make and repeal laws, pardon or punish offenders by the death penalty, if necessary, and declare war and peace (Egharevba 1949: 21).

The Tragic Years in Benin: The Making of the Draconian Legislation

The loss of the two sons of Oba Ewuare, *Kuoboyuwa* and *Ezuwarha*, ushered in what we described as the tragic years in Benin history. This is a period of great sadness and grief in the Kingdom of Benin; but with a corresponding tragic consequence. The path to this period was paved by the turn of events that followed the rapprochement between Oba Ewuare and Iken, the powerful chief and great warrior of *Urelu* (Egharevba 1968: 14). According to C.G. Okojie (1994), Oba Ewuare having tricked *Iken* into being his ally; sent him to war against the rebellious people of Owo. After his departure, Oba Ewuare replaced him with his first son, *Kuoboyuwa* (Okojie 1994: 19). Hence, following the death of *Iken* in the battle of *Owo*, *Kuoboyuwa* emerged as the substantive heir to the *Urelu* throne with the title *Edaiken* (*Edayi n' Iken*) of *Urelu* (Okojie 1994: 14).

Subsequently, Oba Ewuare appointed his second son, *Ezuwarha* as the chief of *Iyowa*. However, in the course of time, the relationship between *Kuoboyuwa* and *Ezuwarha* fell apart due to distrust and misunderstanding. This was the case when the *Edaiken* of *Urelu* sent his brother farm tools as gifts in appreciation for the yams he frequently sent him (Okojie 1994: 14). *Ezuwarha*, on the hand, felt indignified and insulted by his brother's gift. He conceived them to mean that his elder brother's way of calling him a bushman. Consequently, intense hatred and resentment developed in his heart towards his brother. This culminated in the two sons of Oba Ewuare poisoning each other and dying the same day (Okojie 1994: 14). This tragedy brought untold grief to the monarchy and people of Benin. The disenchanted Benin monarch, as mourning rites for his deceased sons, promulgated and imposed draconian laws on the people. This draconian legislation that created a rift in the Benin metropolis forbade the following:

- Sexual intercourse in the Kingdom.
- Washing, sweeping of the houses or compounds, drumming, and dancing.
- And the making of fire and cooking of food.

These laws were made to last for three years, and all subjects of the Benin monarchy were obligated to obey them as a mark of respect for the dead sons of Oba Ewuare (N.A.I. 1942: xiii). But the laws paradoxically fanned secessionism in the Kingdom. Because they gave rise to untold and unnecessary hardship and caused the outbreak of diseases in pre-colonial Benin; as the general population was prevented from bathing, maintaining good sanitation and hygiene, and eating cooked food. Hence, it was the

unpleasant consequences of the draconian laws in Benin that made this period more tragic than the death of the King's sons.

Esan Response to Benin Draconian Legislation

From earliest times, the political stability and national cohesion of societies across the globe have always been anchored on law, rule of law, and respect for the social contract. John Austin explains that law is a series of commands or orders issued by a sovereign, and back by sanctions if the commands are disobeyed (Austin cited in Bazuaye 2006: 3). However, St. Augustine contends that since rulers do not have divine right, their legislations or decrees and the obedience to them should be relative; and they should not pass unquestioned. Thus, he opined that: "An unjust law is no law at all" (Augustine cited in Reed 2018). Implicit in this understanding is the historical fact that, the inhabitants of a society have the right to resist any unjust or draconian legislation. Therefore, Augustine writes that: "The dominion of bad men is hurtful chiefly to themselves who rule" (Augustine cited in Reed 2018). In pre-colonial Benin, this fact is demonstrable in the Esan response to the King's draconian legislation.

According to Samir Amin, the displacement of people is not peculiar to modern West Africa. History and legends of creation remind us that many of the peoples of contemporary West Africa came from regions sometimes far removed from those they are presently occupying (Amin 1974: 65). But as Aderanti Adepoju puts it, the phenomenon of internal migration is the least investigated in demographic enquiries in Nigeria (Adepoju 1974: 127). This implies that secession historiography is not popular among scholars. Hence, this academic effort would bring the problem of secession and human displacement to the limelight of intellectual discourse. Using the Esan secession from Benin in pre-colonial times as our case study, this section of the paper will highlight the role political highhandedness and marginalisation causing secession.

In the 15th century, the response of some of the ancestors of Esanland to Oba Ewuare's authoritarianism was secession. The action was an apparent expression of the desire of the Esan people to live and thrive under just laws that guarantee their human freedom and happiness. Therefore, as obtainable in other societies where the populace rose against bad governance and injustice, in the Esan secession history once again teaches that maladministration anywhere and anytime would always beget secessionist tendencies. Therefore, Benin experienced serious demographic change because of violations of people's right by the government. At the height of the emigration of Esans, Oba Ewuare summoned a meeting of the various quartres. But some quartres were found almost empty; and when enquiry was made about the resident's whereabouts, the King was told that the people had fled (N.A.I.: xiii). Jacob Egharevba (1968) puts it this way,

The law... caused great confusion, for a large number of the citizens migrated to various places. The Oba, seeing the country was gradually being depopulated, revoked his law on the advice of an aged man known as Omaen n' Erokhin (Old man chameleon). But this had no effect because the emigrants refused to return home (Egharevba 1968: 15).

Today, the Esan secessionists that seceded from Benin are generally described as “*Esan ne San fuo-Ha*” meaning the Esan people who fled into the bush (Okojie 1994: 22). Anthony Okoduwa (2018) claims that the separation of Esan and Benin people and languages took place about 500 and 1000 years ago (Okoduwa 2018: 1-2). Further, he maintained that the name Esan was derived from the word *Esanfua* which describes the manner people fled from Benin into the rich farm lands of the dispersed communities in the forest (Okoduwa 2018: 3). Osagie (2004) explains that dissidents from Benin settled and integrated with autochthonous peoples in the forest with a functional political economy (Osagie 2004: 1-8). However, in modern Nigeria, the Esan people comprises the following thirty-five communities of Edo State created in 1991: *Uzea, Uromi, Ewu, Ekpoma, Irrua, Ubiaja, Udo, Opoji, Ogwa, Ebelle, Ewosa, Ewohimi, Ugun, Ekpon, Emu, Okhuesan, Ori, Illushi, Ugboha, Ido, Egoro, Ewatto, Igueben, Ohordua, Ujiogba, Ugbegun, Uroh, Onogholo, Urohi, Amahor, Orowa, Okalo, Ifeku, Iyenlen, and Ukhun* (Okoduwa 2018: 1). And they are politically organized under five Local Governments namely Esan West, Esan North-East, Esan South-East, Esan Central, and Igueben; and one senatorial district, the Edo Central senatorial district.

Okojie (1994) writes that some of the founding fathers and builders of Esanland seceded from Benin to avoid dysentery and other unbearable health issues that might arise from their eating over-ripe and unripe fruits for one year. Further, he explained that the secession was informed by the need for a new environment where the secessionists will be free to cook and eat their food without harassment and arrests. This implies that sought the freedom of conscience to be able to cook their food without fear of the smoke from the fire being seen by the King's agents. Basically, it is safe to maintain that the Esan secessionists seceded to enjoy freedom from want and fear. Thus, Okojie insists that the secessionists migrated farther into the forest, where they would be free to roast their meat without fear of Oba Ewuare's cronies perceiving the aroma (Okojie 1994: 21).

However, based on the Esan-fua tradition of Esan origin, which Simon Ehiabhi (2017) describes as the ‘*escapist theory*’, it would appear on the surface that the Esan people are Binis. Therefore, it is expedient for this paper to emphasize here that, the Esan secession from Benin Kingdom only partly accounts for the peopling of Esanland. Hence, it is instructive to point out that the Esan people have their own independent traditions

of origin. And like the peoples of other Nigerian societies, their independent origin can be traced to the dispersal of humanity to different parts of the globe that dates back to the 'Tower of Babel'. Accordingly, the ancient ancestors of the Esan people called the *Ihoholele* were a collective of people believed to have migrated from the East to the Sahara; from where they migrated to their present location 80km, North-East of present Benin City, Edo state Nigeria. They spoke the same language known as 'Esan' and aided their nation building effort. The population received a fillip in the 15th century, when large number of disgruntled secessionists from Benin moved into Esanland and integrated with the aboriginals. So far, it is discernible that secession of Esan from Benin had political and economic undertones. Herein lies the anti-secession antidote for Nigeria.

Historical Lessons for Modern Nigeria: Political Re-Organisation

At a time, when Nigeria's unity is increasingly embattled by social disharmony, ethno-religious militancy and radicalism, and threats of secession, Nigeria needs all the help she can get. And the academia must rise up to this national emergency. To this end, this paper emphasises the secession lesson inherent in Esan secession from Benin and others in modern societies as very helpful. It argues that the Esan secession, the failed Biafran secessionist attempt, French Revolution, Bolshevik Revolution among others constitutes the modern administrative playbook for curbing insurgency and secession. Hence, modern Nigeria characterised by political and economic injustices currently fueling youth restiveness, militancy, terrorism and insurgency in the country needs to learn from them. This presupposes that leadership needs to be historical in their administration of society. In other words, political leaders in Nigeria in the discharge of their duties need be guided by the knowledge of past leadership mistakes and their impacts on society. This is the lesson nation building secession history offers as its contribution to improving the present. Understandably, Obaro Ikime (2018) observed that,

The value of History is in a sense eternal. The issues which the historian decides to concentrate on are thrown up by the challenges which confront the society in which he/she lives, as well as the age in which he/she lives... It enables man to understand the society of the past, and increase his mastery over the society of the present... (Ikime 2018: 3).

Further, Ikimi (1985), pointed out that,

No one (Nigerian) is going to become truly committed to a state that does not promote his interest, his overall well-being. The challenge before the present regime therefore is the devising of strategies that will visibly guarantee the interest and overall wellbeing of all groups in the country (Ikime 1985: 28).

Consequently, for Nigeria to derive any comparative advantage from her multi-ethnic configuration, the leadership of the nation must strive to hold them together under a political framework that promotes and respects the fundamental human rights and freedoms of its citizenry. Today, the historical cognition of the factors promoting insurgency and secessionism signals the need for political reorganisation in Nigeria. Her legislature, judiciary and executive arms of government need to be expunged of any trait of arbitrariness and autocratic tendencies. When these political institutions are recalibrated, it would entrench separation of power, rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and checks and balances in government into the polity. And ensure that the delicate balance between the power of leadership and the rights of followership needed for social justice and national development are maintained in Nigeria. To this end, Kalu Ezera (1964) maintained that,

The greatest problem that faces Nigeria as a country is that of unity... The nature of this problem has been how to organize together within the framework of a single state the various peoples making up Nigeria without interfering unduly with the particular ways of each (Ezera 1964: 244).

Hence, this study insists that secessions such as the division of India into Pakistan and Bangladesh highlights the need for inclusive politics and governance as the safest means of allaying fear of domination and insecurity in a federation. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the Nigerian state to take drastic political re-organizational measures to curb the current undemocratic and totalitarian leadership dispositions plaguing her federalism (Ezera 1964: 244). This need is reechoed in the historical lesson inherent in the Esan response to Benin draconian legislation in pre-colonial times. Here it can be discerned that when societal laws conflict human want, the whole nation boils. Therefore, this demonstrates the need for caution and wider consultation in the making of legislation. When this is done draconian legislations will be pre-empted and checkmated.

More so, the centrality of political re-organisation as means of quashing secessionism in Nigeria was alluded to by the Willinck Commission report. Under colonial rule, the desire for state creation was very strong across Nigeria. Resultantly, the colonial government set up a Commission of Inquiry on November 23, 1957, under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Willinck, to interrogate the problem. After detailed study of the situation, the Commission recommended that,

The creation of new states will not remedy the fears of the minorities... Such recourse would only create more fresh problems, as each of the existing regions is not heterogeneous, that there would be no end to agitations for further fragmentation (Ezera 1964: 252).

Further, it recommended the entrenchment of constitutional safeguards for the minorities in the constitution, and the strengthening of the Federal police as a means of securing Nigeria's unity and checkmating abuse of power by the majority (Ezera 1964: 252). Therefore, it is along this line that this paper argues that restructuring of Nigeria's federalism, establishment of state and community police, local government autonomy, and a strong people-centric constitution are essential measures for reforming the political landscape of Nigeria; and for whipping up nationalism and nipping secessionist tendencies in the bud.

Wither the Secession in Post-Colonial Nigeria: The Role of the Economy

In pre-colonial Benin, economic considerations such as what to eat were a strong force that propelled the Esan secession. Put simply, foreseeable hunger and economic hardship and their implication for survival informed the movement. This highlights the role of economic injustice in modern societies in gingering revolution, insurgency and secessionism. It would be recalled that the economic exploitation of the people of France by the royalty, bourgeoisie and clergy; coupled with hunger caused by the scarcity of bread were critical to factors behind the French Revolution in 1789. And in 1971, the economic marginalisation of the Eastern Pakistanis contributed immensely to their secession and creation of Bangladesh. Hence, in twenty-first century Nigeria, the growing economic exclusion and marginalisation of the minorities and other less privileged in the society is a recipe for disaster. More so, the high incidence of poverty, unemployment, industrial and infrastructural neglect of rural areas are whipping up resentments and secessionist desires. Consequently, this paper maintains that the equitable distribution of Nigeria's economic resources and even development of the nation are keys to withering secessionist desires.

Under colonial period, merging and keeping Nigeria together mainly required the political will power of the British. However, in post-civil war Nigeria, keeping the peoples of the country together requires more than political will. Nationalism today depends more on the level of Nigeria's economic growth and development. Nigerian economic development and balancing is germane for guaranteeing the welfare and happiness of the people. And the welfare and happiness of Nigerians are keys to making them patriotic and loyal to their country. Further, economic development is vital for expanding rural economies and creating even employment opportunities across board in the nation. This will engage rural dwellers in productive economic activities; and prevent them from being the devil's workshop. But since independence the attainment of this ideal economic status has been elusive.

Thus far, the bane of economic justice and balancing in Nigeria had proven to be corruption and the politicisation of the economy. The wanton embezzlement and

misappropriation of public fund in the country meant for development have left majority of the people in poverty and disoriented. Consequently, the citizenry in growing proportion are psychologically detached from country. Resultantly, they severely detest the leadership and machinery of the Nigerian state; and daily denounce and castigate them in words and deeds. This development does not augur well for nation building; because it creates an army of frustrated people easy to be enticed and recruited as mischief makers (terrorists, ethnic militia, bandits and secessionists) in Nigeria. Little wonder, groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Boko Haram have continued to experience increase in their membership. Thus, since 2015, the activities of disgruntled sects have heightened secessionist tendencies across the Nigerian federation.

In Eastern Nigeria, discontent over Federal appointments into key economic positions since 2015 is currently fast tracking the consolidation of ethnic-nationalism. Although being one of the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Easterners are currently agitated over what they conceive as the economic marginalisation of Igbos under the Buhari administration. And this is reawakening the spirit of Biafra; and giving fresh breath of life to their secessionist desires in twenty-first century. And in the Niger Delta and Northern Nigeria economic injustice is partly responsible for the rise of militancy, terrorism, banditry and cattle rustling. However, the Nigerian government in its effort to protect the unity and sovereignty of the country overtime has been relying more on military power to suppress and douse restiveness in anywhere in the country. This is evident in the active military operations across Nigeria such as “*Operation Python Dance*” activated to quell and suppress IPOB, “*Operation Crocodile Tears*” activated to combat militancy in the Niger Delta, and “*Operation Lafia Dole*”, “*Operation Crackdown*”, “*Operation Safe Corridors*”, “*Operation Gama Aiki*”, “*Operation Sharan Daji*”, and “*Operation Harbin Kunama*” among others activated to fight Boko Haram terrorists, bandits, and cattle rustlers in the North.

Without doubt, youth restiveness and social disharmony in Nigeria stem from the economic irony that defines the nation. The country is acclaimed to be the largest economy in Africa and richest. Yet, Nigerians are among the poorest people in the world. In fact, according to the *Corruption Perception Index* (2019) report, the high incidence of corruption in public life is making life difficult for Nigerians. And the *World Poverty Clock* (2019) reports that half (50%) of Nigeria’s population lives on less \$1.90 (USD) per day. This makes the nation the new world headquartes of poverty. Consequently, Fred Ayokhai and Peter Naankiel (2016) write that vast majority of Nigerians are languishing in poverty because they lack employment and economic opportunities (Ayokhai and Naankiel 2016: 537). Hence, it is safe to assert that the economic displacement, deprivation, and marginalisation of less privileged Nigerians; despite living in a land supposedly flowing with milk and honey have left them at their

wits end. Resultantly, most of them now conceive armed struggle and secession as the most viable means of expressing their economic grievances.

Understandably, insurgents, militants and secessionists generally see Nigeria as a failed state. Mike Omilusi (2013) observes that across the Nigerian federation the State is looked up to as the provider of all goods and services, social insurer, wealth distributor, moral guardian, entrepreneur, keeper of the currency, banker, and economic planner (Omilusi 2013: 1). But in many quarters in Nigeria, the people are convinced that the performance of the State in discharging these responsibilities is nothing to write home about. The failure of the state is caused by the politicisation of the Nigerian economy. Politics in Nigeria has become the lucrative economic activity. It has been converted into a means of enriching the elites and their cronies; and an instrument of exploitation and underdevelopment in Nigeria. Hence, politics in the nation has become a dog-eat-dog struggle for the control and privatisation of Nigeria's economic resources. Thus, who gets what, when and how is determined by the side of the political fence one is on. People out of favour with the ruling party because of non-electoral support risk losing everything. They are conveniently neglected economically in term of employment opportunities, infrastructural development and provision of social amenities. Therefore, faced with such economic discrimination, economically marginalised Nigerians are forced into the conclusion that secession from Nigeria is the permanent solution to their problems.

Hence, the silent secessionist clamor for the creation of Biafra Republic, Oduduwa Republic, Arewa Republic and perhaps the elevation of the six geopolitical zones into sovereign states is portentous. They bring to mind the historical lesson in secession inherent in the Esan response to Benin draconian legislation. Further, they demonstrate the utility of the economic induced Bolshevik Revolution and Arab spring as warnings to Nigeria. Therefore, based on the roles economic discontent and marginalization in fuelling secessionist tendencies in the twenty-first century Nigeria, this paper argues that welfarism and equitable distribution of national resources are essential for withering secession. Since the end of the Nigerian civil war, it is a truism that the ethnic and partisan politics have denied the nation's Minorities equitable access to the economy. Roads, pipe borne water, health care services and even economic institutions such as banks provided in communities as dividends of party loyalty. And their scarcity in rural areas had continued to incite the people towards violence against the country. Hence, we maintain that a happy people, equals a united and prosperous nation. And that guaranteeing the happiness and wellbeing of Nigerians is not rocket science; but a matter of economic justice.

Conclusion

Indeed, History is a storehouse packed with vital lifesaving lessons for Nations. Leadership of failing states like Nigeria must learn from the different events of insurgencies, revolutions and secessions replete in history. This is crucial for enabling political office holders and policy makers avoid repeating the administrative mistakes and policy somersaults that tore societies apart in the past. In modern Nigeria, this paper had established that the threat of secession is by far one of the biggest problems of nation and state building. From the Esan secession from Benin, the paper maintained that Nigerian leadership must learn that political highhandedness anytime and anywhere is a recipe for insurgency and secessionism. In modern Nigeria, the study finds that undemocratic tendencies and economic marginalisation are encouraging insecurity and violence around the country.

From the North to the South, Nigeria is arguably at war with herself. And her peoples are pitted against one another. Can a nation divided against itself stand as one? There are increasing internal wrangling between farmers and herders, Niger Delta militants versus the Federal government, IPOB versus the Nigerian state, and Boko Haram versus the Nigerian state all advertising the weaknesses and failures of government in Nigeria. And they are unfortunately fanning the embers of secessionism in the country. Therefore, this historiographical study on secession contends that secessionist desires are not predetermined; but driven by unbearable political and economic exigencies. And its prevalence in Nigeria is indicative that the country's political economy is lopsided. This means that the threat of Nigeria's disintegration can come to fruition if not meticulously guarded against. Hence, we ask, if the Historian does not warn the nation, who will?

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