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# THE WILLINK'S COMMISSION OF 1957 AND THE MINORITY QUESTION IN EASTERN NIGERIA: THE IBIBIO PERSPECTIVE

BY

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## **Abstract**

*In 1957, the minority question in the Eastern Region of Nigeria and other parts of the country came to the front burner and culminated in the appointment of the Willink's Minority Commission by the British colonial government to enquire into the fears of the ethnic minorities and the means of allaying them. Although the commission did not recommend the creation of states as strongly advocated by the minority ethnic groups, especially the Ibibio, it however, accepted the fact that genuine fear of domination existed among the minorities. The paper links the marginalization of the ethnic minorities, particularly the 1953 impeachment of Prof. Eyo Ita, a minority from Calabar Province, who was the first Leader of Government Business and Minister of Natural Resources in the Eastern Region, to the upsurge of the minority question in the region. It critically examines the position of the Ibibio during the sitting of Commission to ventilate the justification for the creation of Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) State, in a bid to bring succor to the marginalized minorities. We noted that even though Nigeria eventually adopted the state creation agenda to stabilise the polity, particularly during the Nigerian Civil War, the minority question which now manifests in the quest for the restructuring of the Nigerian polity, seems not to have ended, 60 years after the inauguration of the Willink's Commission. Adopting a historical analytical method, we suggests the entrenchment of "true federal" principles to manage ethnic diversity in the country.*

## **Introduction**

The minority question in Nigeria is an offshoot of the colonial enterprise because it was the colonial rule that established the geo-political entity known as Nigeria and transformed autonomous political entities of diverse proportions into component parts of a new whole, and in the struggle to gain advantage within the colonial state, ethnic identification became more explicit. Ikime (2006) rightly opines that in terms of relations between the multifarious peoples, colonial rule was something of a paradox. In some ways it brought people together in new ways and for new purposes, providing "new integrative factors". In other ways it emphasised already existing differences and introduced new ones. He posits further that the ethnic groups that exist in Nigeria today did not begin to identify themselves in these terms until the emergence of the colonial state of Nigeria because it was the European visitors who first began to refer to whole conglomerates in terms of the language they speak.

Ethnic minorities became part of the political vocabulary in Nigeria after the process of regionalisation in the mid-1940s. The regions contained groups of unequal sizes and this afforded the elite of the majority groups the opportunity for transforming their "groups-in-themselves" to "groups-for-themselves". They did this because it was clear to them that only groups which were preponderant could hope to control power in the regions and at the centre. In other words, the ethnic nationalism instigated by the elite in the majority groups brought about the problems of the minorities. For instance, the unifying effort of the Igbo State Union for the Igbo in the East sharpened the "us" (majority) vs. "them" (minority) dichotomy and propelled the latter into a largely "protective" nationalism resulting in the agitation for separate states (Osaghae, 1991).

In the Eastern Region, the Igbo constituted the majority ethnic group and dominated over the smaller ethnic groups in the region including the Ibibio. One clear incident of domination was the impeachment of Prof. Eyo Ita as the Leader of Government Business in the Eastern Region in 1953. This incident precipitated the crystallization of the irreversible advocacy by the Eastern minority groups under the auspices of the Ibibio State Union, for the re-structuring of the Nigerian polity through the creation of states. From that time, the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) State agenda was vigorously propagated; hence, the colonial government in 1957, acknowledged the agitation by instituting the Willink's Commission to enquire into the fears of the minorities and the means of allaying such fears. However, the exercise was marked by intrigues and



sabotages by the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led Eastern Regional government, which never wanted any state to be created out of the region (Akpan, 2015).

The paper is divided into seven sections. Section one is the introduction, section two discusses colonial administrative structure in Eastern Region, section three takes a look at the 1953 Eastern Regional crisis and the upsurge of the minority question, section four discusses the aftermath of the crisis, section five examines the COR memorandum to the Willinks Commission, section six is the findings of the commission while chapter seven is the conclusion.

### **The Colonial Administrative Structure in the Eastern Region**

Although with the appointment of John Beecroft as the British Consul in 1849, various efforts had been made to set up some machinery of administration for the peoples of the Eastern Provinces, the area became part of the British colonial empire on the 5th of June 1885, following the declaration of a protectorate over the Niger Districts. The establishment of a regular administration in the area began with the appointment of Sir Claude Macdonald as Consul-General of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1891. After choosing Old Calabar as the headquarters, Macdonald grouped the communities of the Oil River into administrative districts called vice-consulates, each of these being centered around one of the major rivers of the Protectorate for purposes of easy communication with the interior. The first vice-consulates were Calabar, Bonny, Opobo and Brass (Abasiatai, 1991).

The abrogation of the charter granted the Royal Niger Company in 1900 added an extra-territory to the size of the Eastern Provinces and resulted in its reorganisation. Four divisions were created, three of these belonged to the area of study. These were Eastern Division, centered in Calabar, encompassing Opobo, Qua Iboe, Bonny and Degema; the Cross River Division, centered at Ediba and embraced much unspecified territory and the Central Division centered at Onitsha and included territories like Akassa, Brass, Agberi, Oguta and Asaba. This remained the basic administrative structure of the area until 1906, when the Southern Nigerian Protectorate was amalgamated with the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos. The new unit was grouped into three Provinces with the Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw and Ogoja peoples east of the Niger falling under two of these – the Eastern Province with the capital in Calabar and the Central Province with the capital in Warri. The bulk of these people came under the Eastern Province and were further split into 18 districts, each under a district commissioner (the officer, who before 1900, was known as the vice-consul) (Afigbo, 1980).

In 1918, non-Igbo communities like Idoma and Igala were carved out of Onitsha Province. Onitsha Province was made up of four divisions, namely: Owerri, Awka, Udi and Nsukka, while Owerri Province comprised Owerri, Aba, Okigwe, and Degema (non-Igbo communities of Eastern Ijaw and part of present Rivers State). With the creation of Rivers Province in 1947, Degema and Ogoni became part of it, Abakiliki and Afigbo were included in Ogoja Province (Okoro, 2014). The Ibibio mainland (present Akwa Ibom State) being part of the Old Calabar Province consisted of six political divisions namely, Uyo, Eket, Abak and Ikot Ekpene, Itu (which included Arochukwu, an Igbo group), and Opobo (now Ikot Abasi, which up to 1947, consisted Ogoni, now in Rivers State) (Afigbo, 1980; Essien, 2007).

### **The 1953 Eastern Regional Crisis and the Upsurge of the Minority Question**

After the general elections held in December, 1951, Professor Eyo Ita, an indigene of Akwa Ibom State, who represented Calabar constituency under the platform of the NCNC, emerged as the Leader of Government Business and Minister of Natural Resources (a position which was later styled, Premier of the Eastern Region). It would appear that a number of factors aided Eyo Ita's selection to the exalted office. First, he was the most highly esteemed among his fellow nationalists with a very amiable personality. Secondly, he scored the highest votes during the election of ministers and finally, he was the first national vice-chairman of the NCNC, which had "decisive" majority in the Eastern House of Assembly and was virtually in control of the party in the Eastern Region. He was also highly educated with two masters degree from Columbia and London universities. As Leader of Government Business, Eyo Ita was also returned as a member of the House of Representatives. He thus had the privilege, as the Leader of Government Business in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly and leader of the newly formed NCNC party of the Eastern Region of Nigeria to lead the elected members of the House of Representatives as a team to Lagos, just as

Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Alhaji Ahmadu Bello had to lead their teams from Western and Northern Regions respectively (Undiyaundeye, 2004).

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the arrow head of the 1953 Eastern Regional political crisis at the time resided and did business in Lagos where he contested the elections. He had nursed the hope of becoming a member the central legislature (House of Representatives) in Lagos, for which he sought to be elected from the Western House of Assembly. All the members of the NCNC who contested the election won the five seats in Lagos. By provision of the Macpherson's Constitution, Lagos was entitled to two seats in the House of Representatives, two of the five NCNC men were to be elected from the Western House of Assembly in Ibadan to the House of Representatives. The remaining four were Yoruba who, within the NCNC, agreed to ensure the election of Dr. Azikiwe, the leader of the party. The only way they could achieve this was for three of them to agree not to contest the elections. The three of them did. However, shortly before the elections, the three, obviously, under ethnic pressure from the Yoruba majority in the Western House of Assembly, reneged on their agreement and Dr. Azikiwe lost the election (Ikime, 2006).

Angered and frustrated, Dr. Azikiwe resigned his seat in the Western House of Assembly and went back to his kith and kin in the Eastern Region where they constituted the majority. Dr. Azikiwe became convinced that it was the Macpherson's Constitution that had brought about his woes. If there had been direct elections into the House of Representatives, he would have stood and won the elections in Lagos. So he decided that the constitution must be wrecked. As the leader of his party, he asked the NCNC central and regional Ministers to resign. The refusal of these Ministers forced Dr. Azikiwe to drum up enough (largely Igbo) support within the party to have the dissenting Ministers expelled from the party. Dr. Azikiwe, being neither a member of the Eastern Regional House of Assembly nor the House of Representatives, eventually succeeded in staging a "civilian coup d'etat" against Professor Eyo Ita led government (Udoma, 1988; Ikime, 2006).

### **The Aftermath of the 1953 Eastern Regional Political Crisis**

By 1928, the Ibibio Union had been formed. In 1938, the Union among other remarkable achievements had sponsored six Ibibio sons to study overseas. One of the scholars who later championed the Ibibio course and became the arrow head of the minorities' right in the Eastern Region was Dr. Egbert Udo Udoma. Being the first Nigerian to obtain a PhD in Law, and probably the first African to have achieved such a remarkable feat, he was unanimously elected as the National President of the Union in 1948. In the same year, the Union changed its name and particulars to "Ibibio State Union" and also adopted a written constitution. The introduction of the word "state" into the name of the Union introduced a new dimension into the nation's landscape (Esen, 1982; Akpan, 2015).

When the "Eyo Ita saga" occurred, the Ibibio people had been effectively mobilized to react to the oppression. They mobilized all the Ibibio and Efik speaking members of the NCNC to resign en-mass from the party in protest and formed a new political party known as the National Independence Party (NIP), with Professor Eyo Ita as the president. This party later merged with another political party known as the United National Party (UNP) led by Dr. Alvan Ikoku to become United National Independence Party (UNIP). Moreover, at a meeting of the representatives of the minority groups (from Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers Provinces) in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly, held at Enugu, it was agreed that the representatives of the people of Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers Provinces should form a united front to fight for the survival of their people. For that purpose, the idea of the creation of Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State out of the Eastern Region was proposed by the Ibibio Union, through their leader, Dr. Udoma (Udoma, 1987).

In December 1953, Dr Udo Udoma in furtherance of the COR State agenda convened a conference of the representatives of the minorities in Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers Provinces in Uyo. The Conference unanimously agreed to submit a memorandum to the resumed Constitutional Conference in Lagos, demanding that the whole of Calabar Province, the four minority divisions of Ogoja, Obudu, Ikom and Obubra in Ogoja Province should be grouped together with the whole of the Rivers Province to constitute a state for the minorities before the British imperialist government should consider the grant of independence to Nigeria. The memorandum on the creation of the COR State was eventually presented to the Secretary of State for the Colonies while a copy was forwarded to Her Majesty, the Queen of England (Udoma, 1987).



At the 1957 Constitutional Conference held in London, the leaders of the COR State Movement held a private meeting with Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, Mr. Lennox Boyd. Also present at the meeting were, the Governor-General of Nigeria, Sir James Robertson as well as the Governor of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, Sir John Stapledon. The Secretary of State for the Colonies assured the COR State advocates of the sympathy of the Colonial Office on the issue of the creation of states. Eventually, at the Conference, the decision to set up the Minorities' Commission of Enquiry to look into the fears of the minorities and the means of allaying such fears, including the exercise of the creation of states, was reached (Udoma, 1988).

Sir Henry Willink was named as the Chairman of the Commission. Other members of the Commission were, Gordon Hadow, Philip Mason, J.S. Shearer and K.J. Hilton who served as the Secretary. On the 26th of September, 1957, the Commission was inaugurated with the following terms of reference:

1. to ascertain the factors about the fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying those fears, whether well or ill-founded;
2. to advise what safeguards should be included for the purpose in the constitution of Nigeria;
3. If, but only if, no other solution seems to the Commission to meet the case, then as a last resort to make detailed recommendations for the creation of one or more new states, and in that case:
  - a) to specify the precise areas to be included in such state or states;
  - b) to recommend the governmental and administrative structure most appropriate for it; and
  - c) to assess whether any state recommended would be viable from an economic and administrative point of view and what the effect of its creation would be on the region or regions from which it would be created and on the federation.
4. to report its findings and recommendations to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The Commission began its work in November 1957. Its sittings were held in all parts of the country and sat in Calabar for seven days in January 1958.

#### **The COR State Memorandum to the Willink's Commission**

In its memorandum to the Commission, the COR advocates defined the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) area to embrace 15 administrative divisions, seven of which were located in the administrative province of Calabar, three in Ogoja and 5 in the Rivers Province.

1. Calabar Province – Abak, Calabar, Eket, Enyong, Ikot Ekpene Opobo (Ikot Abasi) and Uyo
2. Ogoja Province – Ikom, Obubra, Ogoja and Obudu
3. Rivers – Ahoda, Brass, Degema, Ogoni and Port Harcourt.

The "minorities" anchored their arguments for the creation of a distinct geo-political entity on the already existing legal status of the peoples of the COR area in relation to British Protectorate over the Federation of Nigeria and established that:

*The 15 administrative divisions formed a contiguous and continuous territory, cover an area of some 18, 174 square miles and contained a population of 2,649,291 people...it was both a political as well as legal error, though perhaps administratively expedient to merge the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers area with the rest of the Eastern Region, whereby an amalgam was constituted an autonomous unit. The merger...an artificial creation – a marriage of convenience – which could not endure but was bound to result in disaster because the people of the 15 administrative divisions constituted a minority against the major ethnic bloc which dominated the Eastern Region. By this artifice, designed to satisfy the political ambitions of the major ethnic group, the minorities were practically consigned to eternal servitude in the circumstance they found themselves, in view of the fact that a high sense of morality and justice was pushed to the wall and injustice, discrimination and political immorality took the field (Udoma et al, 1957: 11).*

It was explicitly stated that the people of Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) area were bound to the British Crown by Treaties of Friendship and Protection. To that extent, they considered themselves different from the rest of the population of the Eastern Region, some of whom had been brought under the British Crown by conquest and cohesion. The evolution of the British connection with the COR area followed a regular

pattern: first came travelers, traders and missionaries; then treaties of commerce and friendship; afterwards a declaration of a protection by virtue of which only external sovereignty was exercised, and finally the establishment of government according to law; and this involved the creation of consular courts, the appointment of consuls and later administrative officers.

The memorandum traced the origin of the establishment of colonial government infrastructure in the COR area and added that:

*...it is quite clear that "protectorate" as conceived by the British Government implied that the COR area embraced by the term "Oil Rivers Protectorate" was a semi-sovereign entity not being dominion whose external relations was by virtue of treaties under the control for the time being of Great Britain but whose internal sovereignty was vested in the people...it has thus conclusively been established that the relationship between Britain and the people of the COR area originated in friendship, mutual trust, confidence and commercial alliance. It is manifest and crystal clear therefore that such relationship is distinguishable from that existing between the British Government and the peoples of Owerri and Onitsha Provinces whose territories came under British administration by conquest, and cession to the British Government and absorption into the COR area (Udoma, et al, 1957: 11-12).*

It was posited also that the Eastern Regional government by 1957 was dominated by the peoples of Onitsha and Owerri Provinces to the detriment of those from the COR area. Such level of dominance exercised over the people of COR area was viewed by its leaders as a breach of trust and confidence and a flagrant disregard of the provisions of the Treaties of Protection with the British Government. It was also reasoned that such was contrary to the principles of self-determination which had been recognised by the British Government. It also amounted to, not only an abdication of power, but also a grave dereliction of duty on the part of the British and a breach of the undertaking given under the hand of Consul Hewett as contained in his declaration made by King Jaja. It was again noted that the proper course to be adopted by the British government was to constitute the COR area, described as a "Treaty State" into a state of its own with its own government as a part of the Federation of Nigeria.

Issues that relate to the cultural and historical relations between the peoples of the COR and the Igbo majority were also raised in the COR memorandum. The people of the territory, the COR area, though comprising a multitude of linguistic groups, had long cultural, historical and commercial associations among themselves. The Efik-Ibibio and Ekoi of Calabar Province, the Yakur-Ekoi-"tribal" complex which inhabit the non-Igbo areas of Ogoja Province and Ijaw, originally formed part of the negro population that once inhabited the open terrain of the Western Sudan. Despite their physical separation and linguistic differences, these Negro Populations have retained a number of basic cultural features which distinguished them culturally from their neighbours. Thus, their social organization is marked by the existence in their communities of a "priest king" and a "civil political head". Another feature of the social organization common to the people as was pointed out was the "House System", an institution built around a corporate king group, and which, with the introduction of external trade, developed into an economic and even fighting corporation. Government by secret organisation was also identified (COR Memorandum, 1957).

Historically and commercially, the people of the COR area had long and continuous contact dating from the 16th century. They played a leading role not only in the slave trade but in the trade in pepper, elephant tusks and palm oil which developed along the Bights of Benin and Biafra towards the close of 17th century. The Ijaw and the Efik along the coast were in close contact with the peoples of the country along the Cross River Basin and beyond as early as the 16th century. This fact is supported by evidence of the widespread use of manilla or copper-bar currency which was found all over the COR area by the Portuguese traders from the coast and exchanged for slaves and other trade goods by itinerant Aro middlemen over a great distance northeast of the Bight of Biafra.

It was pointed out that the Eastern Region had a population of about 4.5 million Igbo, while the ethnic minorities in the area numbered about 3 million. The allocation of seats in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly, Enugu, as contained in the COR memorandum is presented below.



Division	Ethnic Group	No. of Seats
Onitsha	Igbo	5
Awka	Igbo	3
Awgu	Igbo	3
Nsukka	Igbo	4
Owerri	Igbo	4
Bende	Igbo	6
Aba	Igbo	3
Okigwe	Igbo	5
Orlu	Igbo	4
Port Harcourt	Igbo	2
Ogoni	Ogoni	2
Degema	Ijaw	2
Brass	Ijaw	2
Ahoda	Igbo/Ijaw	3
Calabar	Efik	2
Opobo	Ijaw/Ibibio& Annang	2
Eket	Oron/Ibibio	3
Enyong	Ibibio/Ekoi	2
Ikot Ekpene	Annang/Ibibio	3
Abak	Annang	3
Uyo	Ibibio	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>84</b>

The table above summarising representation based on ethnic groupings, shows that the Igbo had 51 seats while the ethnic minorities had 33 seats.

According to Udoma *et al* (1957), the fears of the minorities were listed as:

- (1) Igbo domination in all spheres of public life in the Eastern Region
- (2) Nepotism and corruption in appointments to the public service, statutory boards and corporations and awards of contracts and scholarships
- (3) Discrimination against minorities in the distribution of amenities in the Eastern Region
- (4) Igbo dictatorship in place of parliamentary democracy
- (5) Cultural extinction of the minorities.

**Igbo Domination:** The COR advocates alleged that the Igbo were in absolute control of the executive council, the legislature and the public service commission, the public service and statutory boards and corporations, the judiciary and the legal departments and the police force in the region.

**The Executive Council:** Out of 15 Ministers in the Executive Council, 12 were Igbo (six from Onitsha Province, five from Owerri Province and one from Ogoja Province, one from Rivers Province one from Calabar Province). Only three Ministers came from the minority group. In the Executive Council therefore, it was pointed out that the Igbo out-numbered non-Igbo in the ratio of 4 to 1. Out of 14 parliamentary secretaries, 13 were Igbo, leaving only one parliamentary secretary from Calabar Province. In the Council of Ministers in Lagos, three ministers and three parliamentary secretaries from the NCNC party represented the Eastern Region. The three Ministers were all Igbo, two of the parliamentary secretaries were Igbo, and the remaining one parliamentary secretary came from Calabar Province. Also, the commissioner for Eastern Nigeria in the United Kingdom was an Igbo, from Onitsha Province.

**Legislature:** 51 out of 84 members of the Eastern House of Assembly were Igbo. The speaker, the Deputy Speaker, the Clerk and the Assistant Clerk were also Igbo.

**Public Service:** The Igbo held all the key posts in the public service of the region including the post of permanent secretaries. An Igbo was also the director of the Medical Services and two Igbo were specialists in the Medical Department. Out of 35 Nigerian medical officers, 23 were Igbo. There were 57 Easterners holding senior appointments in the administration department: of these 46 were Igbo – 36 from Onitsha Province, 10 from Owerri Province. Out of the remaining 11, eight came from Calabar Province, one from Ogoja Province and two from Rivers Province. This figure 57 as at October 1957 was made up of 33 direct appointments and 24 promotions within the service. The 33 direct appointments were as follows: 22 from Onitsha province, seven from Owerri Province and four from Calabar Province. The 24 promotions within

the service were as follows: 14 from Onitsha Province, three from Owerri Province and four from Calabar Province, one from Ogoja Province and two from Rivers Province. In the Education Department, there were 68 Easterners in the senior cadre grade as follows: 21 from Onitsha Province, 21 from Owerri Province, 15 from Calabar Province, eight from Rivers Province and three from Ogoja Province

Statutory Boards and Corporations: with the exception of the printing, the tourism and Information Corporation and the Library Board, Igbo were chairmen of all the statutory boards and corporations in the Eastern Region namely: the Eastern Region Development Corporation, the Eastern Region Marketing Board, the Eastern Regional Scholarship Board, the Eastern Regional Board of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, the Cinema Corporation and the Pharmaceutical Corporation.

Udoma *et al.*, (1957) also submitted that membership and appointments to these boards and corporations were filled by Igbo with very few exceptions. Indeed, no member of the opposition parties in the region was appointed to any of the boards and corporations. It was the policy of the NCNC government to fill all the appointments (membership and staff) with NCNC party supporters. In pursuance of this policy, the NCNC supporters in the Western Region, who were personal valets of Dr. Azikiwe, were made Chairmen of the Printing and Information Service Corporations. Mr. Fashanu, chairman of the Printing Corporation, was the President-General of the Zikist National Vanguard and political secretary of Dr. Azikiwe. A.K. Disu, Chairman of the Information Service Corporation, was the former sub-editor of *The West African Pilot* (Dr. Azikiwe's newspaper) and studied journalism in the United States of America, under Dr. Azikiwe's scholarship.

Besides the regional boards and corporations the Igbo represented the Eastern Region on all boards and corporations of the Federal Government namely: the Central Marketing Board, the Nigerian Marketing Company, the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (an Igbo Chairman), the Railway Corporation, the Coal Corporation, the University College Council, the Board of Directors of the Nigerian Cement Company, the Ports Authority. In the case of the Ports Authority, one of the two Eastern members was an Igbo and the other from Calabar Province.

The Judiciary: The only Nigerian judge in the region was an Igbo. Easterners who held the posts of Chief Magistrate were all Igbo. Of all Easterners who held the post of Magistrate, only two were non-Igbo and came from the Rivers Province

Legal Department: The newly appointed Attorney-General (1957) of the Eastern Region was an Igbo from Onitsha and only Igbo held the posts of Senior Crown Counsel, with only one from the Rivers Province.

The Police Force: More than 70 percent of the Police Force in the Eastern Region were Igbo.

Scholarships: Between 1952 and 1957, the Eastern Regional government awarded 604 post-secondary scholarships. Of these, 393 went to the Igbo and 211 to Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers Provinces. The details submitted to the Willink's Commission by the COR advocates showed that scholarships of higher quality went mostly to Igbo. This was regarded as a subtle attempt by the scholarship board dominated by the Igbo to perpetuate the dominance of Igbo in the region's public service. For instance, all trainees selected from the Eastern Region for the nucleus of the Nigerian Foreign Service were all Igbo.

Award of Contracts: Government contracts and contracts awarded by the various statutory boards and corporations went to the Igbo. In very rare cases had contracts been awarded to non-Igbo in the region.

Loans: Government loans and loans given by the Eastern Region Corporation went to Igbo. In very rare cases had loan been given to non-Igbo.

Development: As far back as 1950, there was a proposal by the central government to generate electricity at Kwa Falls in Calabar Division to supply electricity to parts of the Eastern Region. But in 1952, the then Minister of Mines and Power, who happened to have been an Igbo, dropped the proposal for Calabar and chose Oji River in Onitsha Province instead. By 1957, the Electricity Corporation of Nigeria had a power station at Oji River that supplied electricity to Onitsha, Enugu and Abakiliki, with a proposal to extend it to Owerri and Umuahia-Ibeku in Owerri Province. Thus, Calabar and Rivers Provinces were denied the amenity. The loan of £500,000 to Onitsha enabled Onitsha to build the largest market in West Africa and all trade in the Eastern Region was directed from Onitsha and Aba (COR Memorandum, 1957).

Corruption: Prior to this period, two ministers, both Igbo, were found guilty of corruption by a commission of enquiry and removed from their ministerial posts, but despite repeated demands, the Igbo who dominated NCNC government of the Eastern Region stoutly refused to publish the reports of the commission.



Following widespread allegations of bribery, corruption, nepotism and fraud in the Eastern Regional Development Corporation, which handled some £6, 500,000 of public money, two commissions of enquiry were set up by the government to investigate and report on these allegations. But, because almost all those holding key posts in the corporation, and who would be adversely affected by the findings of the commission, were Igbo and supporters of the government party, the reports of the two commissions were shelved by the government (COR Memorandum, 1957).

### The Findings of the Commission

The whole exercise, especially in the Eastern Nigeria was marked by intrigues by the NCNC in an attempt to frustrate the creation of state. The NCNC leadership resorted to the use of "divide and rule" tactics to break the ranks of the minorities. In the course of doing this, they succeeded in setting one minority ethnic group against the other. One consequence of this was that many new groups suddenly emerged demanding for the creation of Cross River State, Ogoja State separately, in addition to COR and Rivers State. Consequently, the NCNC used the fact of many voices from the sidelines to mar the chances of the COR State Movement (Akpan, 2004).

The Commission in its report noted part of the position of the Eastern Regional Government to thwart that COR agenda thus:

*The government adhered to the view, which has always been the doctrine of the NCNC party, that Nigeria needs a strong federal government and should consist of an increased number of smaller states with lesser powers than the present regions; if this principle were accepted and other regions were to be treated in the same way, they would agree to the creation of smaller states within what is now the Eastern Region. They insist, however, in the first place that this process must apply equally to all regions and secondly, that no state should be created unless it satisfied the four outlined principles (Willink's Report, 1958: 46-47).*

The principles were as follows:

- a. the principle of self-determination; each state should wish to be separate and to be one single state
  - b. the principle of ethnic homogeneity; each state should be as nearly as possible homogenous
  - c. the principle of geographical contiguity; each state should consist of one continuous and compact territory
  - d. the principle of viability; each state should be large enough to administer itself and as nearly as possible a self-contained economic unit.
- In applying these four principles, "the Eastern Region Government stated that it would not object to the creation of an Ogoja State, nor of Rivers State, nor of Cross River State, provided only that similar states were created from other Regions. It however objected in strongest terms to the creation of the COR State, which satisfied none of the first three principles". The government opined that the COR demand "was motivated by a negative dislike of the Igbo, and would do much harm to the rest of the region" (Willink's Report, 1958).

The Commission reports cited the personal intrigues of Dr. Azikiwe, through his "hurried" announcement of the creation of Cross Rivers State out of the Eastern Region thus:

*...discovered that the agitation for the creation of Cross River State "has no history of continuous pressure or strong popular support behind it. We received no evidence of any support for the proposal from Ogoja. Counsel on behalf of the Cross River State and the signatories to the memorandum we received came from Calabar and were supporters of the NCNC party...when asked whether the government approved of the proposal for this state, its principal exponent replied that 'he had the personal approval of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Premier of the Region; we were shown a telegram from the Premier: "Memorandum- Cross River, excellent, go ahead". We asked to see the covering letter with which this memorandum had been sent to Dr. Azikiwe, and found that it stated that the motive for submitting the memorandum was to 'break the atmosphere in the unanimity of the COR demand on the one hand and to 'hide our faces with our people on the other hand", we believe this to be the truth (Willink's Report, 1958: (48)*

Following widespread allegations of bribery, corruption, nepotism and fraud in the Eastern Regional Development Corporation, which handled some £6, 500,000 of public money, two commissions of enquiry were set up by the government to investigate and report on these allegations. But, because almost all those holding key posts in the corporation, and who would be adversely affected by the findings of the commission, were Igbo and supporters of the government party, the reports of the two commissions were shelved by the government (COR Memorandum, 1957).

### **The Findings of the Commission**

The whole exercise, especially in the Eastern Nigeria was marked by intrigues by the NCNC in an attempt to frustrate the creation of state. The NCNC leadership resorted to the use of “divide and rule” tactics to break the ranks of the minorities. In the course of doing this, they succeeded in setting one minority ethnic group against the other. One consequence of this was that many new groups suddenly emerged demanding for the creation of Cross River State, Ogoja State separately, in addition to COR and Rivers State. Consequently, the NCNC used the fact of many voices from the sidelines to mar the chances of the COR State Movement (Akpan, 2004).

The Commission in its report noted part of the position of the Eastern Regional Government to thwart that COR agenda thus:

*The government adhered to the view, which has always been the doctrine of the NCNC party, that Nigeria needs a strong federal government and should consist of an increased number of smaller states with lesser powers than the present regions; if this principle were accepted and other regions were to be treated in the same way, they would agree to the creation of smaller states within what is now the Eastern Region. They insist, however, in the first place that this process must apply equally to all regions and secondly, that no state should be created unless it satisfied the four outlined principles (Willink's Report, 1958: 46-47).*

The principles were as follows:

- (a) the principle of self-determination; each state should wish to be separate and to be one single state
- (b) the principle of ethnic homogeneity; each state should be as nearly as possible homogenous
- (c) the principle of geographical contiguity; each state should consist of one continuous and compact territory
- (d) the principle of viability; each state should be large enough to administer itself and as nearly as possible should be self-contained economic unit.

In applying these four principles, “the Eastern Region Government stated that it would not object to the creation of an Ogoja State, nor of Rivers State, nor of Cross River State, provided only that similar states were created from other Regions. It however objected in strongest terms to the creation of the COR State, which satisfied none of the first three principles”. The government opined that the COR demand “was inspired only by a negative dislike of the Igbo, and would do much harm to the rest of the region” (Willink's Report, 1958).

The Willink's Commission reports cited the personal intrigues of Dr. Azikiwe, through his “hurried” sponsorship of the creation of Cross Rivers State out of the Eastern Region thus:

*...discovered that the agitation for the creation of Cross River State “has no history of continuous pressure or strong popular support behind it. We received no evidence of any support for the proposal from Ogoja. Counsel on behalf of the Cross River State and the signatories to the memorandum we received came from Calabar and were supporters of the NCNC party...when asked whether the government approved of the proposal for this state, its principal exponent replied that ‘he had the personal approval of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Premier of the Region;’ we were shown a telegram from the Premier: “Memorandum- Cross River, excellent, go ahead”. We asked to see the covering letter with which this memorandum had been sent to Dr. Azikiwe, and found that it stated that the motive for submitting the memorandum was to break the atmosphere in the unanimity of the COR demand on the one hand and to save our faces with our people on the other”, we believe this to be the truth Willink's Report, 1958: (48)*



In its report dated 30th of July 1958, the commission acknowledged the fact that fears of the minorities of perpetual domination, discrimination and marginalisation were indeed genuine. It, however, refused to create states. Instead, it made the following recommendations:

1. *That Calabar Province should be constituted a Minority Area to be known as the Calabar Area.*
2. *That in the Minority Area, there should be a Council with a chairman from the area nominated by the regional government and a membership of which a substantial number be elected or nominated by local bodies*
3. *That the council should make an annual report to the House of Assembly of the Region and House of Representatives*
4. *That the duties of the Council should be to foster the well-being, cultural advancement, economic and social development of the Minority Area and to bring to the notice of the Regional Government any discrimination against the area.*

As a result of this development, the Ibibio State Union had a meeting to deliberate on the report, and consequently, passed a unanimous resolution rejecting it and also described it as a fraudulent document (Udoma, 1987).

The NCNC moved further to inject divisive tendencies among the people of the six Ibibio districts, particularly between the Ibibio and Annang. In 1959, the party ignored a well articulated request for the creation of a distinct Ibibio Province out of the Old Calabar Province, to include the Ibibio and Annang, which had received the approval of the colonial government since 1951. Rather, the Eastern Regional Government with Dr. Azikiwe as the Premier, created the Ibibio which he later renamed Uyo Province and Annang Provinces, out of the Old Calabar Province. Remarkably, only Annang Province was named after an ethnic group and not the town that served as the headquarters of the province, like Owerri, Ogoja, Afikpo and Degema. By not naming the new province "Ikot Ekpene" Dr. Azikiwe deliberately created a schism between the Ibibio and Annang (Abasiattai, 1991; Brown 2008).

The NCNC government did not appoint any Ibibio as a Minister in the Eastern Region, but favoured the Annang with such positions. Moreover, it focused development in Ikot Ekpene and not in Uyo. This was done to punish the Ibibio for their role in agitating for the COR State and for forging an alliance between the UNIP and the AG, a dominant party in the Western Region (Brown, 2008).

In the general elections of December 1959, the NCNC unleashed its arsenal to "demolish" Dr. Udoma, the vanguard of the minorities' emancipation in the Eastern Region and frustrated his re-election bid into the House of Representatives under the platform of the UNIP/AG alliance. The result of the general elections in Opobo-South Federal Constituency (Udoma's constituency) was unquestionably rigged. In fact, there was no election properly so-called in the constituency as there was organized rioting everywhere in the constituency during the whole period of the election, the NCNC party took advantage of the fact that the majority of registered voters in the area were non-Ibibio elements. The Chief Electoral Officer and Returning Officer was Mr. Tagbo, an indigene of Onitsha. He was hurriedly transferred to the constituency by the NCNC led-government at Enugu to replace Mr. Hammond, an expatriate administrative officer, who was known to be fair and honest. The results of the elections were therefore a foregone conclusion. Ironically, apart from Dr. Udoma, all the candidates belonging to UNIP in alliance with the AG swept the polls in the whole of the constituencies in Calabar Province, including the newly created Annang Province. The impression was thus, wrongly created that Dr. Udoma, with his robust pedigree in community mobilization was not a very popular candidate (Udoma, 1987; Brown, 2008).

The NCNC candidate who defeated Dr. Udoma in the said election was one unknown person, one Chief O.U. Ekenekot from Obolo (Andoni). His victory was facilitated by the Igbo dominated NCNC to spite the Ibibio. Obviously, without the rigging effort of the NCNC, he would not have won the election. The fact that his victory was a big surprise to all is documented by Ejituwu, an Obolo (Andoni) scholar thus:

*This victory at the polls catapulted Obolo (Andoni) into prominence...it put them on the map of Nigeria as the people asked and wondered about the defeat of Dr. Udoma, one of the greatest men in Nigeria. He was the first West African to earn PhD in Law from a university in Britain and his defeat was revolutionary...Chief Ekenekot was a favourite of the NCNC leaders in the First Republic. As a favourite, he was carried along by the leaders of the*

party. He frequently toured the federation with the Prime Minister and the President, separately. In 1962, the parliamentary team toured the USA....(Ejituwu, 2010: 43)

To dissuade Dr. Udoma from contesting the 1959 general elections, the government had offered him a slot in the Supreme Court. After losing the election he again turned down the offer to the Supreme Court in 1960; he thought of remaining in private business and taking part in public debates of a political nature (Udoka, 1996). However, Dr. Udoma eventually, joined the bench as judge of the High Court of the Federal Territory of Lagos in May 1961, preparatory to joining the Supreme Court of Nigeria (Udoma, 2008). According to Udoma's account, he did not have any prior knowledge that the government had decided to appoint him as a judge. He records the account thus:

*...In May 1961, I received a message from Justice L.N. Mbanefo, Chief Judge of Eastern Nigeria, that I was wanted in Lagos and that it was very important that I must be in Lagos the following Monday...the purpose for which my presence was required in Lagos was not stated...I drove all the way throughout the night and arrived in Lagos at about 7.30 a.m. on Monday. I met the Prime Minister that morning in his office. He welcomed me... and then directed me to see the Honourable Chief Justice of Nigeria, Sir Adetokunbo Ademola. I called on the Honourable Chief Justice who directed me to see the Chief Judge of the High Court of the Federal Territory of Lagos, Sir Clement de Lastang, which I did. Immediately, on receiving me, Sir Lastang exclaimed with excitement, "Thank God you are here at last!". Without having any discussion with me at once sent for his chief registrar. On arrival of the chief registrar, he instructed me to get in touch at once with the Governor-General's Office for my swearing in as a judge of the High Court of the Federal Territory, Lagos (Udoma, 2008: 117-118).*

Udoma notes further that:

*...Sir Lastang, in conversation, asked to know my relationship with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Governor-General. In answer, I said "somewhat cordial". I then pointed out to him, however, that Dr. Azikiwe had a high opinion of me, just as I had of him, but that often times we agreed to disagree on issues and that was all. On arrival at the State House, the Governor-General greeted us with a smile...shortly thereafter we were sworn in....we were said to be the first judges to be sworn in by the Governor-General since his assumption of office. During the entertainment, the Governor-General in conversation with me asked what I felt like to be a judge. Without hesitation, I answered that having just been sworn in, I did not consider myself a judge as yet since I had then not tried a single case. We both laughed it off but I believe that, in his heart of hearts, Dr. Azikiwe, the Governor-General was saying "thank God they have caught this man at last". That must have been so because when Dr. Azikiwe was the Premier of the Eastern Region, it was his desire that I should abandon politics and accept judgeship. He would have preferred to see me a judge than a politician in parliament in the opposition (Udoma, 2008: 118-119).*

## **Conclusion**

Regionalism as a phenomenon associated with colonialism consolidated the majority/minority syndrome in Nigeria and became very corrosive in Eastern Nigeria after the introduction of regionalism by the Richard's Constitution. In the region, the Igbo ethnic group formed the majority; while there were other minority groups among them. The Ibibio, whom this study examines, were subjected to unfair treatment by the majority ethnic group. The ignominious removal of Prof. Eyo Ita, an ethnic minority from present-day Akwa Ibom State, as the Leader of Government Business (a precursor of the Regional Premier) in 1953, resulted in the escalation of tension in the region.

Following this unhealthy development, the Ibibio people mobilised the other minority ethnic groups and resolved to secure a distinct state for themselves within the framework of the Nigerian federation. The



minorities outlined their fears to include Igbo domination in all spheres of public life in the Eastern Region, nepotism and corruption in appointments to the public service, statutory boards and award of contracts. Discrimination against them in the distribution of amenities by the Igbo-led Eastern Regional Government and Igbo dictatorship in place of parliamentary democracy and threat of cultural extinction (Udoma *et al.*, 1987).

As noted, the colonial government responded to the call by the minorities in the country with the appointment of the Willink's Minority Commission. The Commission did not recommend the creation of state as stoutly canvassed by the Ibibio, but agreed that genuine fears existed in the Eastern Region. It, however, recommended that the Calabar Province be constituted as a Minority Area to be known as Calabar Area as well as the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board, to address the issue of development. Unfortunately, issues of underdevelopment of the Niger Delta have lingered for 60 years after the Willink's Commission fueling the spate of insurgency in the region. The solution to the nation's problems can be found in the practice of "true federalism" where federal character principle as enshrined in the constitution is upheld to protect the interests of the minorities.

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