

I Know Where I Belong: An Exploration of Notions of Home within the Igbo Identity

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Home elicits a sense of belonging. It has come to compose a significant aspect in identity formation. Its physical manifestation is one that brings about notions of safety and comfort, yet home itself is a notion that transcends its temporal or spatial limitations. For some home constitutes a physical presence and for others its simply a maintenance of relational ties, however 'home' does not have to be an either or of the two. In the context of Nigeria, home while ties to its physical implications it is also a signifier of ancestral bonds that form a wider understanding of self. The pre-colonial existence of Igbo's in Nigeria, with the physical demarcations of varied ethnic identification found the relationality and spatiality of home very much interlinked, but with the onset of colonial rule and increased industrialization and migration, home found itself altering yet remaining constant in belief. With an increased population building their formative years outside of Igbo homeland, the link to home created an existential shift. While the East maintained its status as "home" for Igbos elsewhere that status was simply a maintenance of traditional beliefs that had little physical implications. The Biafran War, however, would alter that conception. Home necessitates a physical presence as much as it did the mental and traditional recognition. Therefore, in this paper I aim to analyze the shift that occurs during and post-Biafra that necessitates the solidification of the physical and spatial through the use of literature as an observatory ethnography.

For an individual, a sense of belonging is formative in ones understanding of themselves. A sense of belonging creates an awareness of place within a broader global context; it provides as a source of comfort. This sense is often established through the mechanism of collectivization. In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa particularly, it is important to note the significance of the collective; for an individual is little without the group. If home is to be understood as a source of identification and belonging, then the collective is the method through which home formation belongs. While tied to ideas of land, ethnic affiliation has strong implications towards identify formation and connections to a homeland. In a pre-colonial setting these connections could be understand as having stronger holds than the physical space through which home was established and even stronger understandings in the state of colonization. With colonization functioning as a pseudo experiment for colonial masters, the idea of home

is fraught with notions of comfort. The colonization process was a process of both mental and physical unease and abuse. The racialization of colonized states that worked in collaboration with the colonial process of extraction and benefit to specified powers, functioned to disrupt any sense of comfort in self that could be established by a non-racialized, non-gendered, non-sexualized, non-colonized being. It is not to say that colonization itself brought a gendering or sexualization that did not occur previously however, the very nature of colonization is defined by a sense of ownership and entitlement. This ownership was particularly horrendous in that it encapsulated land, mind, and body; the colonial subjects no longer belonged to themselves. Chinua Achebe, put it succinctly when he said: “Because colonialism was essentially a denial of human worth and dignity”(Achebe 2010, 44). As comfort can be registered through the familiar, colonization necessarily necessitated a battle with the familiar (ethnic and traditional beliefs/ways) in maintaining comfort with the perception of progress (oft associated with Westernization). This tension encapsulates the colonial experience and has been particularly well documented in a literary understanding of Igbo culture.

Igbo pre-colonial culture while characterized by its non-centralized government, functioned as networks that were essentially broader extensions of the familial landscape with the male at the head:

“But the Igbo, numbering over ten million, are a curious ‘nation’. They have been called names like ‘stateless’ or “acephalous” by anthropologists...But what the Igbo are is not the negative suggested by such descriptions but strongly, positively, in favor of small-scale political organization so that (as they would say) every man’s eye would reach where things are happening, So everyone of the thousand towns was a mini state with complete jurisdictions over its affair.” (Achebe 2010, 40)

While the Igbo are an ethnic group that can be characterized by their constant migration the pre-colonial relationship to the Eastern Nigeria (primarily Igbo homeland) is one of constancy. While trade may have occurred outside the region, Eastern Nigeria, for Igbo’s, remained at the center of Igbo ethnic identification. Not only was the region the area where Igbo’s were primarily housed and collaborated with each other, it was the place through which traditional belief and values would be passed from generation to generation. The village through which one was from, specifically, functioned as home. The village, the patrilineal inheritance of all children, was home in the sense that their work would contribute to the growth of that place (particularly the men) and as it was for them, it too would be an inheritance to be kept for future generations. The village in many ways was one’s duty (Smith 2011, 323). The understanding of home was a strong result of an Igbo duty to their ancestors and future children

This sense of duty is one that is integral to the Igbo mindset and can be seen in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. It is the duty of Okonkwo to maintain his Igboness in opposition

to the growing westernization and colonization. As previously alluded to, the colonial project added the idea of progression equating Westernization and the implications that westernization thus comes with. This added dimension and the onset of mass migration during the colonial period altered this sense of duty. Nigeria's colonization, like much of Africa, was a product of little care or consideration about the multiplicity of identities that existed within the relatively small landmass.

“Thus the territory of present Nigeria was defined, not on the basis of its peoples' shared historical, economic, or social experiences, but merely by arbitrary amalgamation of a number of disparate ethno-cultural units which happened to occupy contiguous land areas that were then under British colonial administration.” (Graf 1988, 7)

This is not to say that prior to Nigerian colonization the various ethnic groups did not have any sort of peaceful interaction with one another”:

“...what British colonialism brought together were not previously isolated and mutually hostile groups but rather peoples who over centuries had established various types of links between themselves. Colonization introduced new elements in the structure and pattern of relationship between Nigerian peoples but it did not- indeed it could not-totally obliterate old patterns.” (Ciroma 1994, 9-10)

However though these varied ethnic groups were not necessarily isolated they did each inhabit particular spaces that constituted as their homeland. With any sort of mechanism of modernization, the colonialism of Nigeria brought along an industrialization that necessarily needed the bodies of colonial subjects to come to fruition. British administrators required the aid of male and female servant helpers in their daily functioning, the role of railway workers and such were taken up by migrants; those had left their villages for better opportunities in the cities that were experiencing these industrialization:

“Igbo migrants came from a densely populated area in Southeast Nigeria. In comparison with most other parts of Nigeria, the population of this ‘Igbo homeland’ migrated in larger numbers to the railways, mines and colonial cities looking for employment. This development was not so much the result of a particular attraction of the colonial townships, or of an inherent Igbo tendency towards ‘modernity,’ but rather the consequence of a combination of demographic, economic and social factors, which forced the rural population to look for opportunities outside their home communities.” (Van den Bersselaar 2005, 55)

Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* documents this migratory pattern beautifully. The story of Nnu Ego's husband is one that was not simply a story of fiction; rather it represented an actualized migratory account for younger Igbo population that looked to opportunities outside of the Igbo homeland. Though the moves were often considered temporary, with home largely remaining the Southeast, many that lived in farther areas that would require more effort

to return to this homeland spent the entirety of their working lives and family lives in those migrated areas:

“As elsewhere in Africa, Igbo urban migrants generally regarded their stay in the city as temporary. Some moved between the city and the rural home quite frequently, spending time at both places, while others resided in the city for many years. But even those who spent their entire working life in the city intended eventually to return to their hometowns. This is reflected in the visits that many of the more permanent migrants made to the village, usually around Christmas.” (Van Den Bersselaar 2005, 62)

However, while young Igbo men functioned as migrants often to assume wealth to pay bride prices, as their working lives were primarily in colonial cities outside of the rural homeland, their family rearing necessarily occurred outside of the rural homeland. Therefore, while the understanding may have been that their migratory status was a temporary one, they often created permanent establishments in those ‘temporary habitations’. As the colonial landscape was changing, the rural one was also growing towards ideas of modernity and the establishment of permanency in the temporary was at the cost of creating permanent physical status in the perceived permanent home. The Biafran War, the ethnic struggle that resulted in the temporary session of the southeast from the rest of Nigeria, exposed these dilemmas. The violent pogroms that were implemented in the North and the harsh discrimination that Igbos faced in the West and North resulted in a mass migration of Igbos from all over Nigeria back to the East. (Achebe 2012, 95). Millions of Igbos outside of the East rushed back for fear of their lives. They left their homes (physical), livelihoods, friends, and community for safety. In many ways, they left their homes, in its metaphysical understanding, to go back to an area that for many served as home only in terms of ethnic identity. As noted by Ode S. Ogede in “Exile & the female imagination: The Nigerian Civil War, Western Ideology (Feminism) & the poetry of Catherine Acholonu,” “Conventionally exile is commonly considered to be one of the most harrowing feelings a human being can ever endure because it evidences total ousting from the native land, a sense of physical ostracism.” (Ogede 1999, 90) This exact exile is what makes Biafra so fascinating, in that the refugee crisis returned people back to their perceived homeland; the ostracism that took place was from a land that considered temporary not one that was home.

Egudu and Okigbo, Mother My Home

This seeming contradiction was not lost on the people, which this topic was of most importance, Igbo men and women themselves. Christopher Okigbo, Biafran hero and Romanus Egudu are both prolific writers who wrote of their experiences during the war. Though they did not live in the North, both wrote about the dispossessed, return, and home with such eloquent beauty. In his article, “Life after the Fall: Poetry from Nsukka since the

Biafran War,” Peter Thomas focuses on Romanus Egudu and his poetic power after the fall of Biafra. In his poem “The Land Owner,” Egudu brings out the images of mother and land that alludes to the importance of a grounding that is home. In line three and four he states “the woodpecker became/ foolishly dumb the day its mother died” (Thomas 1981, 41). The importance of the mother in the Igbo culture should not be lost. The mother is the source of comfort but also the base in any understanding of home. It is from the mother's womb, the mother's body that the first home is established and it is the mother's nurture, love, and care that resolve to establish a home outside of her body. Mother, in this instance, is symbolism of Biafra. Egudu writes of the demise of Biafra as the demise of one's mother. The Igbo people are at a loss the day Biafra dies as a mental manifestation of resistance and home. In opposition to this Egudu speaks of the landowner. The landowner is “wise” because unlike the woodpecker who takes flight; the landowner maintains a home, maintains the physical. The importance of this maintenance of the physical given the disaster that was the refugee crisis becomes a cemented ideology. While Egudu questions in the last lines whether the landowner has control over the land or land over him, he notes the necessary relationship between the physicality of land to the identity of self.

Okigbo elicits the same mother imagery. In his poem “The Passage” he states “Before You, Mother Idoto/Naked I stand, /Before your watery presence/A Prodigal/Leaning on an oilbean...” (Okigbo 1971, 14) This imagery of mother though spiritually symbolic, persuades the reader to imagine the birthing of Okigbo or rather a rebirth because of his reference to the biblical prodigal son. As Okigbo is being reborn in the presence of the mother figure, one can make the assumption that like Okigbo Igbo refugees upon their return to Igboland went through a rebirth of sorts. For the children of those who had migrated away and had not had the same contact with a village life, Igboland was a rebirth of their identity within the context of a return and comfort for their parents.

A New Generation, Repeated Feelings

While war time poetry gave an understanding of perceptions of home of generations who lived through the war from the views of lauded Nigerian poets like Okigbo and Egudu, the impact of intergenerational transmission should not be lost on how the new generation have come to terms with their Igbo identity in a Nigeria that has been united for the better part of forty-five years. In her novel, *Half a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the Biafran War as a member of the generation who lived in the demise of the failed state and the reunification of the colonial one. She fictionalizes a story that serves to bring out the reality of war that both humanizes a group of people understood as victim in the sense of an everyday and elicits human emotion from their struggle. In thinking about the significance of the Igbo identity and the question of tribal identity in a broader context, Adichie often places this conversation in

the context of a semi-roundtable. Scenes of individuals, with varying though obvious intellect, gather to discuss the matter of their nation, of their state. In one particular scene, Odenigbo and his fellow intellectual friends gather in his home and engage in their weekly debates and this centers on the role of decolonization and tribal identity. Odenigbo very clearly marks himself as an Igbo man signifying that his Igbo identity will always supercede any identity marker placed on him by the white man:

“...my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe...I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came.” (Adichie 2006, 25)

This sense of pride in his Igbo identity not only signifies an understanding of how he views himself but also serves as a resistance to outside labels of how he should view himself. Though not a direct correlation to home, this idea of his “Igboness” being known to him before the white man made him black is also a signifier to the significance of an Igbo homeland to the Igbo identity. In essence, while Odenigbo is talking about his Igbo identity, it cannot be lost that he a man living in a colonial city must value an Igbo homeland that for him would serve as a purity to his Igbo identity before colonization.

One of Adichie’s title characters, Olanna, also faces this understanding of the physicality of home. Though a native of Lagos, a central colonial city, the rise of Biafra proves to be not just a safety mechanism but also a rise in Igbo nationalism. In Adichie’s work, Biafra stands for much more than a struggle rather it marks the start of this need to be connected to something larger than oneself and in a diverse African nation that something has often been the nation that has been composed around a similarity.

What Biafra served to do was create a permanency in the understood temporality of ‘village life’ with the physical manifestation of a home while still understanding that the Diasporic community had created lives outside of the village. Pre-colonial Igbo life was characterized by the centrality of the village, the village order, and village community. As urbanization and modernization proliferated in the colonial state of Nigeria, the opportunity to move outside of the village society became both expected and valued. This rise in migration lead an alternation of understanding of an Igbo homeland with a growing diasporic community that raised its children outside of those walls and created a sense of understanding of an Igbo identity within the multiplicity of a colonial state. Biafra altered that relationship again as a result of a need for safety. Safety became the reasoning behind a Biafra but it soon served to create an relationship to the village that is still present today. The regard of the village as the central point of ethnic identity consumption and understanding in relation to the physicality of a presence in that village life has given way to understandings of home in its most powerful sense as belonging outside of any diasporic community but in an ancestral space.

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