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ARTICLE



Identity overlap and context-dependent instrumentation of territorial belonging: an interrogation of multiple levels of indigeneship mobilisation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The subject of territorial belonging remains one of the regular flashpoints of conflicts in contemporary politics. With identity overlap and context-dependent instrumentation of belongingness, the question of how one identity classification attains preponderance over others in the overlap and the character of the associated conflicts compel studying every instance as a unique case. This paper interrogates the instrumentation of multiple levels of indigeneship mobilisation in inclusion politics in tertiary education institutions in Nigeria. Qualitatively drawing from vice-chancellor's selection politics in University of Nigeria, this paper found that four incentives drove the preponderance of ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation over other levels of indigeneship mobilisation in the institution. First, politically, the collective interests of the dominant Igbo ethnic group were held paramount in the ethnic territory. Second, the rationales for the collective interest of the ethnic group were widely acknowledged by all communal settlements on the ethnic territory. Third, democratically, the phenomenon ensured the rule of the majority in vice-chancellors' selection politics. Fourth, the merit prerogative of the academy, breached in inter-ethnic struggle, remained sacrosanct in intra-ethnic competition for the choice position. These exemplify the situation of many federal tertiary education institutions in Nigeria and become their prominent trademarks.

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Introduction

Identity and territorial belonging are issues that regularly agitate human interactions across the globe. Globally, much research has been conducted on the historical processes of the formation of nations and collective identities, the negotiation of individual and collective belongingness, and their impacts on political mobilisation in different regions. These have been done via different academic disciplines such as social and cultural anthropology, history, political science, international relations, sociology, psychology, cognitive science, and biology. Hence, the literature on identity and belongingness is fragmented, compartmentalised, and regionalised (Becker, 2015). Across regions, the different studies on the various identity classifications, such as citizenship, race, ethnicity,

and indigeneity; and their various interrogative compartments, such as nation-building, racism, autochthony, nationalism, inclusion, social movements, transnational movements, multiculturalism, class, religion, post-modernisation, regional integration, globalisation, etc., which are often approached from particular academic disciplinary points of view, have all implicitly accentuated that these identity classifications overlap. The studies also emphasise that belongingness is an instrumented political resource and social deixis, and therefore context-dependent (Widloc, 2015).

In many developed nation-states, except for some recurring instances of racial sensitivity and discrimination, the question of the superiority of one identity classification over others is largely resolved in favour of citizenship via post-modernisation, globalisation, and the relatively gratifying performances of those political systems (Isin & Wood, 1999). However, in developing nation-states, particularly societies that have remained relatively traditional, coupled with the abysmal performances of their political systems, nation-building efforts face the challenge of multiple sub-national identities competing amongst themselves for preeminence, with implications for national citizenship development (Kendhammer, 2014). In addition to those listed identity classifications, the conflicting instrumentation of the different levels of sub-national identities and their overlap complicate the already bad situation.

With the confusion associated with sub-national identity overlap, and given the context-dependent instrumentation of belongingness, much knowledge needs to be accessed on the complex interactions of the different levels of sub-national identities, particularly as regards the peculiar institutional features and the socio-political dynamics in inclusion politics that make one level of sub-national identity to predominate over others in the overlap. To exemplify an African situation, many pieces of literature, such as Alubo (2009), Arowosegbe (2016) and Egbokhare (2017), among others, have underscored the prevalence of different levels of indigeneship mobilisation in socially contrived inclusion politics in leadership selection processes in different tertiary education institutions in Nigeria. However, there is a dearth of literature interrogating the atypical internal dynamics of, and the peculiar external influences on, the different tertiary education institutions to ascertain the 'why' and the 'how' of the preponderance of one level of indigeneship identity over other co-overlapped levels of indigeneship identity in inclusion politics in that sub-sector of the public space.

Indigeneship primarily refers to a claimed identity status of being a native of a defined communal settlement/geopolitical territory, as secondarily certified by the government's administrative instrument mostly at the sub-national level of a nation-state (Fourchard, 2015). This is unlike ethnicity, a logical derivation from 'ethnic group' which is a social group of people who identify with each other based on some common ancestral, cultural, social, or national experience (Alubo, 2009). Ethnicity as a concept is commonly used to describe the politics of, as well as actions taken, presumably in the pursuit of agendas founded on the notion of common language, decent, or tribe 'to gain an advantage in situations of competition, conflict or co-operation' with others outside its social group (Osaghae, 1995, p. 11). However, indigeneship is considered an atypical brand of ethnicity, both being terms of relational identity instrumented for political purposes (Egwu, 2003). Observably, indigeneship's instrumentation draws strength from indigeneity, an abstract concept that is predicated on aboriginal rights and traditional entitlements in inter-group claims and contestations for public spaces and state resources, with the contenders

employing the emotive tendencies in primordial attachments to land in geo-ethnic spaces as tools of contests (Pelican, 2009).

In Nigeria, ethnicity remains resilient as a political tool in the struggle for access to public spaces, and indigeneship, its atypical brand, observably presents two categories of fragmented levels of microidentity classification. The first category includes what can be classified as primary-level indigeneship, such as 'sub-ethnic' (village/town/city), 'local government area', and 'states-of-origin' indigeneships. By official recognition, someone that is certified as an indigene of a sub-ethnic communal settlement (i.e. village/town/city) is taken as an indigene of the concerned local government area and state (Egwu, 2003). In the administration of inclusion in government agencies in Nigeria, this primary-level indigeneship category has stronger lawful claims of access to public spaces given the constitutionality of the federal character principle and the catchment area policy of the government which both emphasise local government and states-of-origin indigeneship identities as tools for appropriating federal resources.

Nevertheless, by social contrivance, indigeneship mobilisation in Nigeria also observably presents a second category of fragmented level of micro-identity classification. These include 'geopolitical zone', 'geo-regional', and 'ethno-territorial' indigeneships. This category may be construed as the secondary level indigeneship classification given their dependence on the primary-level indigeneship classification for their sustenance and their wider sub-national spans. This category does not have statutory recognition, and they do not require any official certification except the documentation derived from belongingness to a specific communal settlement in a local government area and/or state as aforementioned. However, observably, these secondary-level indigeneship identities enjoy bureaucratic recognition and are sometimes patronised, without recourse to their primary-level indigeneship roots, by the operational ingenuity of Nigeria's Federal Character Commission (FCC) in its superintendence over the administration of the federal character principle. Logically, its implications short-change some primary-level indigeneship identities and give others some undue advantages, thus exacerbating the conflicts in the struggle for access to some strategic placements in public spaces. To clarify the main concern of this paper, a critical question is: why and how is sub-ethnic indigeneship mobilisation the hegemonic platform for leadership selection in one tertiary education institution, while ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation is the mainstay for leadership appointment in another tertiary education institution in that same sub-sector of the public space in Nigeria?

Therefore, with a focus on the instrumentation and overlap of different levels of indigeneship mobilisation and the context of federal tertiary education institutions in Nigeria, the specific questions that this paper addresses are as follows: what socio-political incentives drive the different levels of indigeneship mobilisation? How is the Nigerian state implicated in the political framing of the profiles of different levels of indigeneship mobilisation? What peculiar feature(s) of public institutions suit one particular level of indigeneship mobilisation over other levels? What political negotiations promote the preponderance of one level of indigeneship mobilisation over other levels? What are the characters of the consequential infringement, infractions and conflicts, if any, in socially contrived inclusion politics?

To engage those questions, this article is divided into six sections. This introductory part is the first section. The second section presents the pressing contexts for

interrogating the prevalence of indigeneship mobilisation in leadership selection politics in tertiary education institutions in Nigeria. The third section explains the theoretical framework for the interrogation. The fourth section provides the details of the research materials and approach to the interrogation. The fifth section discusses the findings which come in different sub-sections. The sixth section is the conclusion.

Pressing contexts for interrogating the prevalence of indigeneship mobilisation in leadership selection politics in tertiary education institutions in Nigeria

Due to federalists' demands and the nature of the primordial plurality of the Nigerian society, it is apparent that the operational scope of indigeneship mobilisation has spread beyond the territorial scale of its traditional or primary setting, namely: villages/towns/city, local council areas and state units of the nation-state. It has spread to socially contrived geo-political zones and geographical regions which vastly cross multiple villages, towns, cities, local government areas and state units of the nation-state, thus giving vent to an ethno-territorial concept of indigeneship (Isumonah, 2006). Contemporary literature on indigeneship issues in Nigeria has largely been concerned with how the discriminatory practices associated with the phenomenon have impacted citizenship notions, practices and development. This may have diverted scholarly attention from other salient issues required to expand the cerebral understanding of other elements of the phenomenon, and the dynamics of its operation in different public spaces. Parts of such salient issues are the dynamics of micro-identity overlaps, and why and how some levels of indigeneship mobilisation attain superiority over others in socially contrived inclusion politics in leadership selection processes in different federal tertiary education institutions in Nigeria.

For this paper, there are two pressing contexts for interrogating the prevalence of indigeneship mobilisation in leadership selection processes in tertiary education institutions in Nigeria. First, there seems to be a scholarly disregard for the dynamics of the overlap of fragmented levels of indigeneship identities, and particularly how superiority is resolved in favour of one level over other levels in the overlap in inclusion politics. Second, while ethnicity and indigeneship mobilisations are widely noted as prominent political variables in leadership selection politics in Nigerian tertiary educational and research institutions (Alubo, 2009; Arowosegbe, 2016; Egbokhare, 2017), there is the challenge of the artificial incongruity of ethnicity and indigeneship politics to staff and leadership appointment processes in the institutions. This presumably precludes a massive scholarly investigation of the interferences of those issues with the leadership selection politics in those institutions.

Rich pieces of literature exist on leadership selection issues in public tertiary education and research institutions in Nigeria. However, they have focussed largely, differently, on the issues of power relations between the constituent status-conscious segments of those academic communities (Van den Berghe, 1973); aspiring leaders' campaign rhetoric (Akinwale & Adegaju, 2013); institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Onyeonoru, 2008); leadership qualities and the propriety of certain subjective selection requirements (Fajonyomi, 2008), and the influence of politics on the management of higher educational institutions (Akpakwu & Okwo, 2014). From

amongst the different categories of tertiary education and research institutions, universities stand out as the foremost bearers and mentors of innovations and development in society. Hence, leadership issues in Nigerian universities deserve regular attention.

Theoretical framework

Rational choice institutionalism provides the theoretical guide for this paper. Generally, institutionalism offers a leading conjectural explanation for individual and group behavior, and organizational actions. It is premised on the belief that institutions play important political roles in life because they offer actors with vital incentives as well as fundamental restrictions. In this regard, institutions make available to actors important resources and behavioral motivations and hindrances, with diverse types of normative and ideational codes which influence inclinations and conducts (Bell, 2002). The concept of institution in this sense includes prescribed organisational arrangements instructed by rules; a variety of conducts expressed through positions and functions guided by regulations; and custom-molded or industry-shaped behavior. In essence, institutions are 'any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape action' (North, 1990, p. 4). Examples in these regards include formal constraints, such as laws and regulations; informal constraints, such as principles and custom-shaped conducts; and processes, procedures and methods, which all combine to give form to human and organizational behavior. Unambiguously, institutionalism is about how the institutional contexts in which political actors find themselves influence and determine their behavior and actions (Bell, 2002).

Specifically, rational choice institutionalism postulates that actors are rational. The theory also proposes that actors are selfish, utility-maximising individuals, meaning that self-interest is their principal motive. In addition, rational actors' preferences are assumed to be shaped or determined by the contexts of the institutions in which they pursue their selfish motives. The rational choice approach to understanding human actions and organizational behaviours accentuates that institutions are both an important cause and a vital effect of behaviour. In this regard, it is maintained that while institutions are being constructed by individual actors for rational purposes, individual actors are also engrossed with changing, shaping, manipulating and annexing institutional rules and settings to suit their goals. Under this approach, the rational actor's key question is: 'how do I maximise my utility in this situation?' For opportunities and constraints, the rational actor examines his subsisting institutional contexts, and manipulatively annexes the existing opportunities and constraints therein to suit his aspirations (North, 1990).

For this paper, the theory helps to throw light on the rational balancing of key actors' appreciation of Nigeria's identity politics with their penchant for the merit prerogative of the university system, both being the opportunities and constraints that shape the fusion of the actors' objective dispositions and their subjective preferences in the leadership selection politics in the institutions. Clearly, the deployment of merit assessment instruments, the corporate interest representations in the selection organs, the 'electoral college' semblance of the selection and election processes, and the identity politics in multi-ethnic Nigeria are parts of the critical features of the institutional contexts of the politics of leadership appointment in federal universities in the nation-state.

Materials and approach

In interrogating the multiple levels of indigeneship mobilisation in leadership selection politics in tertiary education institutions in Africa, federal universities in Nigeria are deliberately focussed considering the image of Nigeria as the giant of Africa, and as the most populous single nation-state considered as one of the biggest economies on the continent, whose internal dynamics sometimes have implications for other African nation-states. Data were generated from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were extracted from interviews conducted in 2017 and updated in 2021. The study engaged the perception of respondents selected via the purposive sampling technique from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The rationale for selecting respondents from that federal university is predicated on the historical and contemporary situations of the institution. The institution, a first-generation university, was established by the then Eastern Regional Government of Nigeria as a regionally owned university in 1960 but was later annexed as a federal university in 1977. The university is located in Nsukka, in Enugu State, in the south-east geo-political zone of Nigeria. The south-east geo-political zone, encompassing Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, is home to the homogenous Igbo ethnic group that has a long history of secessionist agitation against the Nigerian state. Those situational profiles, that is, the institution's founding history and the phenomenon of ethnic homogeneity in the south-east geo-political zone of Nigeria make the federal university suitable for the issue engaged in this paper.

In the institution, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with seven members of the Governing Council, namely: Vice-chancellor (VC), Deputy Vice-chancellor (DVC), Registrar, Senate Representative, Congregation Representative, Joint Council & Senate Selection Board (JC&SSB)-Member, and Search Team-Member; and one Federal Character Commission-Observer. In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were also conducted with seven other persons, including the leadership of three staff unions, namely: Academic Staff Union of Universities, Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities, Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities; two staff ethnic associations (one indigene and one non-ethnic), and two VC candidates that were not appointed (one indigene and one non-ethnic).

The difference between the KIIs and IDIs was a matter of designing and classifying the interview system according to the types of data expected and eventually extracted from two different categories of purposely selected respondents. The KII was exclusively for those categories of respondents who had insider knowledge of the real internal workings of the organs, namely: Search Team, JC&SSB and Governing Council, responsible for VC's selection in the university in the period under study, and who could provide the actual political and bureaucratic metrics of the leadership selection decisions in specific editions of the processes. The IDI was for those other categories of respondents that could provide detailed descriptions of the campus political mobilisations and other features of the environments that impacted the selection organs, processes and decisions. Secondary data were generated from university records and publications. The entire data engaged, which was thematically analysed, covers the period from 1980 to 2021.

Findings and discussion

Multiple indigeneship levels and the complicity of the Nigerian State in the framing of the preponderance of one indigeneship level over others in the South-east geopolitical zone

As extracted from established records and respondents' submissions, the historical and contemporary issues underpinning the preponderance of one level of indigeneship mobilisation over other levels in the leadership selection politics in UNN followed a path anchored on the inadvertent consequences of the absence of effective statehood in Nigeria. The interrogations revealed that consequent to the passing of a law to establish a university in the Eastern Region of Nigeria in 1955, the University of Nigeria was formally established in 1960, in Nsukka, in the then Eastern Region of Nigeria based on the concept of service to the needs of Nigeria as a federation (UNN Calendar, 1964/1964). Nsukka, the host town of the university, in present-day Enugu State, is part of the present south-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria, a zone noted for its ethnic homogeneity, the Igbo ethno-linguistic family, whose different sub-groups are distributed into the present five states in the south-east geopolitical zone. The five states include Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. Although there is a high degree of Igbo ethnic homogeneity in the South-east, the geo-political zone is replete with Igbo sub-ethnic identities and venerates such almost to the level of different ethnic groups depending on the issue in contention (IDI, June – October 2017).

Respondents recalled that at independence in 1960, the Nigerian state was organised into a federation that had a national government, with its seat in Lagos; and three regional governments, namely: the Northern Region with its capital in Kaduna, the Western Region with its capital in Ibadan and the Eastern Region with its capital in Enugu. In 1967, the old Eastern Region was broken into the Rivers, East Central, and South Eastern States. By 1976, Imo, Anambra, and Cross River States were created from these three. In 1987, Akwa Ibom State was created out of Cross River State, while in 1991, Abia State was carved out of Imo and Anambra States, and Enugu State was carved out of Anambra State. In 1996, Ebonyi State was created out of Enugu and Anambra States, while Bayelsa State was created out of Rivers State (IDI, June – July 2021).

In the opinion of respondents, through these state creation activities, coupled with ethnicity and resource agitation politics associated with the clustering of ethnic identities, a clear distinction became firmly established between Nigeria's South-east and the South-south geopolitical zones. The South-south geopolitical zone, noted for its ethnic multiplicity, comprises Rivers, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Edo, and Delta States, while the south-east geopolitical zone noted for its ethnic homogeneity comprises Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states. Despite the ethnic homogeneity in the south-east geopolitical zone, Igbo ethnics in the zone recognise the incidence and importance of sub-identities within the Igbo ethnic group (IDI, June – July 2021). This aligned with Ibeanu and Onu's (2001) view that the rising preponderance of sub-ethnic identities in Igboland was a consequence of the frequent creation of states and local government areas which raised the profiles of those identities and increased their role in political mobilisation.

Many respondents were of the view that apart from the widely acknowledged republican nature of the traditional Igbo societies that impinged on their political behaviour, the

civil war experience also impacted the individualistic postures of the Igbo sub-groups in regional and national politics. While UNN reportedly took off in 1960 with multi-ethnic and multi-national compositions, particularly with the intention to cater to the needs of Nigeria as a federation, the Nigerian civil war perceptibly altered that international/multi-ethnic concept. During the war, Igbo ethnics in other parts of the country were forced to return to their ethnic region, and many were absorbed into the employment of the university. Many non-Igbo ethnics in the employment of the university have also relocated to their respective ethnic regions (IDI, June – July 2021).

As explained by a number of respondents, after the war, many Nigerians did not return to their former places. Many who attempted to return could not gain acceptance back in those former places in the post-civil war united Nigeria. As inferred from the interrogations, the post-war 3-Rs program of *Reconciliation, Rehabilitation, and Reconstruction* embarked upon by the General Yakubu Gowon regime could only scratch the surface of the gravity of the myriad of socio-economic dislocations, poverty, hunger, and starvation that pervaded post-war *Igboiland*. A respondent narrated that:

After the war, Igbo individuals had to struggle on their own for survival, sustenance and prosperity, and many had to fall back on their nuclear families, close relatives, and clans for support during the post-civil war period. This gave further prominence to clan identities, and added value to the utility of sub-group identities for socio-political mobilisations. (IDI, June – July 2021)

However, in the opinion of the majority of the respondents, despite the existential utilities of the Igbo sub-group identities, Igbo ethnic homogeneity emerged stronger than the sub-Igbo identities for two reasons. First, as generally narrated by all the respondents, there were the unending historical recollections of the pogrom unleashed on Igbo ethnics in different parts of Northern Nigeria in the aftermath of the first Nigerian military coup in January 1966, which was widely taken as an Igbo coup; and the second military coup in July 1966 which was considered as the Northerners' revenge coup against Igbo ethnics. The genocide against Igbo ethnics culminated in the Nigerian civil war (Nigeria/Biafra war) spanning between 1967 and 1970. That pogrom, the trauma faced, the losses experienced by Igbo ethnics in the war, and the eventual defeat of secessionist Biafra in 1970 remained a collective injury whose scar refused to fade away, providing the first rallying point for strengthening Igbo ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation (IDI, June – July 2021).

Second, according to the majority of the respondents, in the post-civil war era, there was seemingly an unofficial disrespect for the status of the Igbo nation as the third major ethnic group and a disregard for its significance as a homogeneous identity group occupying a whole geopolitical zone, the South-east, in the nation-state. This seeming contemptuous disregard for the significance of the Igbo ethnic group in the politics of leadership ascension in Nigeria thus reportedly constitutes another source of collective pain for the ethnic group. The political marginalisation of the Igbo nation was assumed to be evident by the perceived tactical exclusion of Igbo ethnics from the topmost leadership hierarchies in Nigeria from 1970 to date, most particularly for the position of president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The pain of this political exclusion reportedly provides the second rallying point, which further strengthened Igbo solidarity and created a gigantic stature for Igbo ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation (IDI, June – July 2021).

Vice-chancellorship candidates' strategies and the characters of inclusion politics in UNN

An unequivocal take from the interrogations with all respondents at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), was that in the politics of leadership selection in the institution, the political strategies of vice-chancellorship candidates included influencing the composition of the vice-chancellors' selection organs and identity mobilisation for communal acceptance. Identity mobilisation in the vice-chancellor selection politics in the institution revealed three prominent overlapped levels of indigeneship mobilisation. These were as follows: sub-ethnic (village/town/city), ethno-territorial, and states-of-origin indigeneship mobilisations (IDI, June – October 2017).

As generally gathered from all respondents, in the area of sub-ethnic indigeneship mobilisation, there had been recurring agitations by the indigenes of Nsukka city for the concession of the vice-chancellorship position, claiming that since the inception of the university on their land, they had never produced any vice-chancellor for the institution. However, the agitation had always reportedly been sabotaged by the strength of Igbo ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation. Similarly, irrespective of the heights of the different states-of-origin indigeneship mobilisations trumped up by some of the respective indigenes of the five Igbo-speaking states in the selection politics, ethno-territorial indigeneship was a strong hegemonic platform for the appointment of vice-chancellor in the institution (IDI, June – October 2017).

As extracted from all respondents in the institution, the distinctive character of Igbo ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation in the vice-chancellors' appointment politics in the institution was the Igbo ethnic nationalism's unequivocal quest for social justice for Igbo ethnics in the context of the widely alleged inequity in the access to public spaces abetted by the assumed faulty structure of the Nigerian federation. According to a respondent:

The available leadership positions in UNN were not enough to go around the Igbo sub-groups/Igbo states that are perceived to have been marginalised by the Nigerian state, leaving no reason to consider non-Igbo ethnics for placement in leadership positions in the university. (IDI, June - October 2017)

This was corroborated by data in the university records which showed that the vice-chancellor and principal officers' selection had always revolved around the Igbo ethnic group, mainly from the five core Igbo-speaking states of the south-east geo-political zone, i.e. Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Imo, and Ebonyi States. Where few of the officers had come from Delta State in the South-south geo-political zone, it had only been from the Igbo-speaking section of Delta State (University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Registry Records, 2017).

The majority of the respondents explained that to make Igbo sub-group identity plays critical roles in the politics associated with the selection of principal officers in the university, initial alignments were usually made along the states-of-origin or sub-groups for support for candidates vying for vice-chancellor position. As generally reported by the respondents, such alignments usually collapsed along the way. A respondent said that:

There had been some moves for the distribution of all the seven principal officer positions in the institution across the five core Igbo-speaking states, resembling a 'regional character', a geopolitical variant of Nigeria's federal character principle. The idea was enthusiastically put

into practice at some point, but the arrangement was short-lived and it collapsed due to its constriction by the inviolability of the merit principle deployed in the selection processes, and also by the personal vision, mission and idiosyncrasies of the respective vice-chancellors that emerged over time. (IDI, June - October 2017)

Generally, it was expected that the three deputy vice-chancellor positions in the university were available to play inclusion politics because the appointments to the positions were dependent on the incumbent vice-chancellor's nomination of his preferred candidates. However, with the inclusion politics being restricted by the sanctity of the merit principle and by the personal vision, mission, support base, and idiosyncrasies of the respective vice-chancellors that emerged, many respondents affirmed that the appointments to those positions had no consistent inclusion agenda (IDI, June – October 2017). Available university records did not point otherwise.

There were divergent opinions amongst respondents about the character of inclusion politics in the appointments to the vice-chancellor and the principal officer positions in the institution between 1980 and 2021. Some respondents claimed that the appointments were representative of the five states in the south-east geo-political zone. Some other respondents viewed the appointments as being representative of the coalition of non-ethnic, corporatist interests associated with the selection politics over time, irrespective of towns or states of origin in the south-east geo-political zone. Some other respondents believed that the appointments were representative of the appointees' academic and professional merit heights, goodwill, and personal pedigrees in the different shades of institutional and resource management. As affirmed by the respondents, whatever shades of ethnicity that showed up in the politics were inconsequential to the appointments. Rather, the cumulative merit scores of the appointees, in terms of the heights of their academic, professional, and managerial aptitudes, determined the appointments (KII, June – October 2017).

A respondent, however, gave what looked like a mid-way between those divergent opinions. Subject to, however, one may want to interpret other available pieces of evidence as they unfold in this paper, his testament can be taken as the character of inclusion politics in the leadership strata of the institution. He said:

UNN happened to be the first university in Igboland whose establishment was championed by our foremost nationalist, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo man. Sustaining this institution in international standing is the pride of Igboland and Nigeria. The clan of origin of the principal officers is irrelevant as long as they are Igbo ethnics whose appointments are based on merit. What matter is their capacity to deliver the expected benefits for the good of Igboland. And we all know that irrespective of differences in the clan of origin, we are all indigenes of Igboland. (IDI, October 2021)

Corroborating the above stance is the fact that the most regular issue that featured prominently in the records of the institution is the *Igbo* ethnic predomination of the vice-chancellor and other principal officer positions from 1980 to 2021. Furthermore, an issue that stands out is the spread of the appointments to other States in Igboland irrespective of the situation in which Enugu State indigenes constituted a larger majority of the institution's workforce throughout the period under study. For instance, even though indigenes of Enugu State constituted 53.4% of the institution's workforce, of the eight vice-chancellors appointed between 1980 and 2015 in UNN, two were indigenes of Enugu

State, two were indigenes of Anambra State, two were indigenes of Abia State, and one was an indigene of Delta State. All were Igbo ethnics. The eighth appointee was an indigene of Plateau State of the Ngas ethnic extraction in the north-central geo-political zone of Nigeria, having been appointed as Sole Administrator of the university from 1995 to 1997 by the federal military government of General Sani Abacha during a leadership crisis in the institution (UNN Registry records, 2017).

Non-ethnics' presence in vice-chancellorship candidates' pool in UNN

The volume of non-indigene candidates' participation in the appointment politics was generally very low. Three issues were central to the interrogation of the presence of non-ethnics in the VC candidates' pool in UNN. The first was to know if non-indigenes applied for the position and their statistics in relation to those of indigenes. The second was to compare the number of indigene VC candidates that were not appointed with the number of non-indigene VC candidates that were also not appointed, in relation to the total number of VC candidates' pool in a selection edition in the federal university. The third was to ascertain the reason(s) behind the very low number of non-indigene applicants for the vice-chancellor position in the university. As generally claimed by respondents, the low presence of non-Igbo ethnics in the vice-chancellorship candidates' pool in the institution was a function of the fact that Nigerians generally lack the confidence to exercise their political rights to seek elective/selective appointments outside their ethno-territorial constituencies because of the denial of ownership of that territory or constituency by indigenes or government. This was assumed to be due to the identity politics and the inter-ethnic hostilities that pervade Nigeria's political landscape (IDI, June – October 2017).

Interrogating the university records, in the 2009 vice-chancellor's selection edition in UNN, of the 10 applications submitted, eight (constituting 80%) were those of Igbo indigenes (indigenes of the South-east geo-political zone), while one (10%) was that of a Delta State indigene (Delta State is in the South-south geopolitical zone), and one (10%) was that of a Kogi State indigene (Kogi State is in the North-central geo-political zone). Under a controversial circumstance, two of the 10 applications were not shortlisted for final consideration by the JC&SSB. The two applications that were not shortlisted were those of the indigenes of Delta (from the non-Igbo section of Delta State) and Kogi States. The eight applications that were shortlisted for the final interview were those of indigenes of the south-east geo-political zone, that is, Igbo ethnics. Thus, for that final interview, 100% of the shortlisted candidates were Igbo ethnics. At the end of the exercise, one Enugu State indigene, an Igbo ethnic, was appointed as vice-chancellor in 2010 (KII, June – October 2017).

Viewed from the perspective of the total number of applications submitted (i.e. 10), two non-Igbo candidates (Delta State and Kogi State indigenes) (20%) and seven Igbo indigene candidates (70%) were not favoured by the outcome of the exercise. Viewed from the perspective of the eight shortlisted applications, seven Igbo indigene candidates (87.5%) were not favoured by the outcome of the exercise. These translate to mean that the statistics of Igbo indigene candidates that were disfavoured by the outcome of the exercise were higher than those of non-Igbo indigene candidates that were disfavoured by the outcome of the exercise (KII, June – October 2017). Although, on the surface, these

metrics might imply that there was no deliberate political exclusion of non-indigenes (non-Igbo ethnics) in the selection politics; however, the fact that only all Igbo ethnics that applied for the position made the shortlist suggest otherwise.

From these analyses, two arguments can be advanced. First, viewed from the perspective of the high percentages of ethno-territorial indigenes in relation to the low percentages of non-ethnics that were disfavoured in the selection politics, it can be argued that merit was the prime consideration in the leadership selection politics in the institution. Second, viewed from the giant posture of ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation which made the vice-chancellor's selection politics look prohibitive to non-ethnics, it can be argued that the phenomenon of ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation in the appointment politics in the institution mediated between inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic competition, conflict and cooperation, to assure better deals that considered the primordial interests of the natives of the ethnic territory.

Indigeneship's interferences with the merit principle and process in UNN

In interrogating the issue of indigeneship's interferences with the merit principle and process, this paper relied on data drawn from vice-chancellors' selection processes held between 2003 and 2015 in UNN. The interferences of the different levels of indigeneship mobilisations with the merit principle in the processes of the appointment of vice-chancellors in the institution within that time frame were discerned from some of the fundamental issues connected with the leadership selection politics. The political metrics betray the undercurrents.

First, the giant statures of state-of-origin and ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisations made the institution's leadership selection politics look prohibitive to all the sub-ethnic (villages/towns/city/local government area) indigeneship levels and other ethnic identities. In this regard, by state-of-origin indigeneship, indigenes of the host state (Enugu state indigenes) alone constituted 53.4% of the university staff between 2003 and 2015, leaving paltry fractions for indigenes and ethnicities of the remaining 35 states and the Federal Capital Territory in the nation-state. By ethnicity, Igbo ethnics constituted 96% of the workforce of the university (indigenes of the south-east geo-political zone), leaving insignificant metrics (4%) for all the remaining about 400 ethnic groups in the remaining five geopolitical zones in Nigeria, namely: North-west, North-central, North-east, South-west, and South-south (KII, June – October 2017).

In essence, the metrics of the ethno-territorial/geo-political zone indigeneship mobilization greatly overwhelmed the combined population of all non-ethnics, while the host state indigeneship mobilization weighed down those of other fragmented and overlapped sub-ethnic (villages/towns/city/local government area) indigeneship mobilisations. As affirmed by all the respondents, these were made possible by the inadvertent consequences of the political dynamics of the administration of the federal character principle for the distribution of federal resources and the catchment area policy of the government for students' admission and junior staff recruitment as they applied to tertiary education institutions in the country. Observably, these represent the situation of all federal tertiary education institutions in the nation-state (KII, June – October 2017).

Furthermore, those different shades of indigene/non-indigene identity distributions of university staff found some relative expression in the identity distributions of the

members of the vice-chancellors' selection organs. For instance, between 2003 and 2015, Enugu State indigenes constituted 40% of the members of the JC&SSB in the institution's VC selection processes. Due to the geopolitical zone of origin, the indigenes of the south-east geopolitical zone (Igbo ethnics) constituted 100% of the JC&SSB members. The identity distributions of the Search Team and the Governing Council also followed the same pattern, with implications for the issue of the neutrality of the members of the selection organs (KII, June – October 2017).

Second, there were some subjective items on the institution's governing council's guidelines on the merit instruments for assessing the aptitudes of vice-chancellorship candidates. On those instruments, items that attracted discretionary scoring by the members of the JC&SSB ranged between 28% and 30%. Although, from the institution's records, there was no conclusive evidence that the selection organs officially adopted indigeneship as one of the variables that determined the appointment of the vice-chancellors; however, the composite elements of the merit criteria which factored candidates' academic/professional and managerial aptitudes, straddling the objective and the subjective items, were widely believed to have been actively pronged to capture three issues. These included: the 'academic/professional excellence', 'managerial acumen', and 'communal acceptability' of candidates (KII, June – October 2017).

The majority of the respondents agreed that the *communal acceptability* factor was the window through which indigeneship politics interacted with the merit criteria of the appointment. According to them, the window served the twin purposes of politically excluding non-Igbo ethnics, and at the same time giving the selection processes a tint of participatory democracy in appointing an indigene that had the highest goodwill amongst stakeholders and the immediate environments of the institution. However, after tactically excluding non-ethnics by the political metrics, the heights of ethno-territorial indigene candidates' academic, professional, and managerial aptitudes reportedly determined the final appointments. As explained by a respondent:

In our leadership selection politics in this institution, we are constrained by two factors. The first one is our sense of ethnic ownership of this university. In our relationships with other ethnic groups in Nigeria, we cannot trade away that sentimental attachment for any reason. The second is our commitment to the merit prerogative of the academy. In our relationships with ourselves as Igbo ethnics, we cannot violate the standard merit prerogative of the university system for any reason. Our internal dynamics thus maintain a balance between our collective sentiments and our penchant for quality and capacity anchored on objective merit. Hence, at any point in time, it is only one of our own best ethnics that can be appointed as our vice-chancellor, irrespective of his clan of origin. (KII, June – October 2017)

Thus, the aggregated primordial interests of the ethnic territory, given expression via ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation, significantly influenced the final appointments to the position of vice-chancellor in the institution. It was obvious that an unpopular candidate could not emerge as vice-chancellor under that selection and election system irrespective of the heights of his academic excellence and managerial aptitudes. Logically, the popularity of candidates was determined, first, by Igbo ethnicity anchored on Igbo ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation, and second, by academic and professional qualifications, and third by personal reputation for good management of resources and interpersonal goodwill acquired overtime in other positions of responsibility on-campus and the larger society.

Conclusion

Clearly, by the rational choice of key actors, institutionally shaped by the need to balance the merit prerogative of the academy with the identity politics of multi-ethnic Nigeria, in relation to their selfish interests/preferences, ethno-territorial indigeneship became preponderant over other sub-national levels of indigeneship identities in the leadership selection politics in UNN. At an identity level, Igbo's ethno-territorial indigeneship underscores belongingness that is both biologically and socially determined. Its biological aspect pertains to being a native of a communal settlement within the Igbo ethnic territory, with claim of rights to joint ownership of the ethnic land, while its social aspect pertains to collective identification and external attribution as a member of the Igbo ethnic group. The concept emphasises two lines of prejudice.

The first is its intolerance of fragmented indigeneship mobilisations within the Igbo national indigeneship sentiment. Operationally, Igbo's ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation in UNN seems to be about harmonising the collective interests of the Igbo ethnic group and galvanising the sentiments of communality against divisive politics within the ethnic group. The phenomenon underscores the sentimental attachment of all Igbo ethnics to the ethnic land as co-owners, and consequently establishes the collective rights of Igbo ethnics to determine the rules of engagement in inter-ethnic relations within the entire ethnic territory, and the right to dictate the pecking order for enjoying political and economic resources associated with the Nigerian nation-state as they pertain to the Igbo ethnic territory.

The second is its unequivocal discrimination against non-Igbo ethnics. In that sense, ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation can be taken as a full-blown ethnicity dressed in its other costume. As a tool of inter-elite political struggle for public spaces, it is deployed as a power relations weapon with the pretext of promoting the primordial interests of the ethnic territory in relation to those of non-ethnics. But quite remarkably, it also mediates between intra-ethnic competition, conflict, or cooperation to assure better deals for the ethnic territory. Apart from playing decisive political roles by presumably breaching the merit prerogative of the academy to exclude non-ethnics, the phenomenon also served as a merit-enforcer in the institutions' politics of vice-chancellor's appointment by ensuring that the heights of ethno-territorial indigene candidates' academic, professional, and managerial aptitudes determined the final appointments.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria's identity-based politics, with incidences of political marginalisation and allegations of ethnic discrimination that pervade all units of the public sector in relation to the respective collective primordial interests of the different ethnic groups, gave prominence and vigour to ethnicity and the respective ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisations in many regionally domiciled federal establishments across the nation-state. Understandably, in an attempt to tame ethnic-related politics in the Nigerian university system, the federal government, during the Olusegun Obasanjo military era, transferred some vice-chancellors to federal universities outside their ethnic regions of location by executive order after it had taken over the then existing 12 Nigerian universities by a military decree in 1977. While that action was in clear violation of the established guidelines for vice-chancellor's appointment in Nigerian universities, its actual contribution to the vision for national outlook in the operation and management of universities has remained

unappreciated given that it was a short-lived experiment that had no future because of the volatility of Nigeria's identity politics. Nevertheless, the federal university system in Nigeria provides a context that favours the preponderance of ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisations over other micro/sub-national identities in inclusion politics. Two issues abet the phenomenon.

First, by the dynamics of the administration of the federal character principle and the catchment area policy of the government which favours indigenes of the marked territories of tertiary education institutions for students' admission and junior staff recruitment, the predominance of indigenes in the workforce of the UNN became unavoidable. Relying on the philosophy of those federalist principles behind the distribution of national resources, indigenes see the university as their own resource tool assigned for the development of their ethnic enclave, hence the socially contrived ethno-territorial appropriation of the institution. This same disposition applied to all federal universities in Nigeria.

Second, the merit prerogative of the academy is considered sacrosanct by academics and other allied professionals associated with the university system. For them, given the rigour of their training and intellectual acumen acquired via international exposure, merit is not only an ideal but has become a way of life. Therefore, after satisfying the demands of ethnic nationalism through a systematic political exclusion of persons considered non-indigenous to the ethnic territory, the need to satisfy the merit demands of the academy becomes inviolable and urgent. The concept of ethno-territorial indigeneship thus offers a steady pathway towards a united front for a merit-driven process of leadership selection in the institution exclusively involving the so-called ethno-territorial indigenes.

The political incentives that drove ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation in leadership selection politics in the context of the federal university system in Nigeria were thus quite compelling. For UNN, four incentives can be specifically referenced in this regard. First, politically, the collective interests of the dominant Igbo ethnic group were held paramount in the entire ethnic territory. Second, the rationales for the concern for the collective interest of the Igbo ethnic group were widely acknowledged by members of all communal settlements on the ethnic territory. Third, democratically, the phenomenon ensured the rule of the majority in vice-chancellors' selection politics. Fourth, the merit prerogative of the academy, which may be breached in inter-ethnic struggle, remained sacrosanct in intra-ethnic competition for the choice position. These exemplify the situation of many federal tertiary education institutions in Nigeria and become their prominent trademarks.

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