



Boroism and Liberalism in Contemporary Izon Political Thought

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ABSTRACT

Social Scientists from the 19th and 20th have argued that the driving principle, idea or philosophy in any organized society is responsible for the direction of that society akin to the Hegelian Absolute spirit manifesting through different epochs. For instance Marx argued that the Social Condition of a people determines their consciousness and he ended up with the principle of class struggle. The social contractarians led by Locke and Hobbes believe that the idea of a social contract is the only solution to the horrible life in the state of nature. It is in this direction that societies are classified as advanced or backward. Societies that are guided by well-articulated principles of justice are described by Rawls (1970) as well ordered and we can infer therefrom that the opposite are disordered. Well-ordered societies hardly apply social coercion to get cooperation from their citizens and obedience or compliance is voluntary. On the other hand, coercion and force are applied for compliance in disordered societies where policing is more than normal. Many African societies fall into this category of social organization which makes governance very difficult and ends up leading to weak social structures and ultimately weak governments. The resultant implications include social-political insecurity, crime, social injustice, proliferation of arms and armed groups and many social ills that can easily overwhelm the state. To solve this problem, different ideas, principles and philosophies must be employed to help the people and their governments articulate themselves and live to meet their life goals.

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One of such principles and ideas examined in this article is Boroism as articulated by the late Isaac Adaka Boro of Ijaw. His ideas center on the inalienable rights of a people to Liberty and Equality and are seen as God-given rights that must be demanded by the people through agitation. This article examples the merits of these Boro Ideas and believes that the application of these principles in society can guarantee social and social peace.

Introduction

Wikipedia succinctly describes Isaac Adaka Boro (September 10, 1938 – May 9, 1968): “as a Nigerian nationalist, Ijaw, and soldier. He was one of the pioneers of minority rights activism in Nigeria”. Boro can arguably be seen in many parts and means different things to different people. He was one time a university students’ leader, a teacher, policeman and Nigerian army officer. Wikipedia still reports that as an undergraduate student of chemistry and student union president at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Boro left school to lead an armed protest against the exploitation of oil and gas resources in the Niger Delta areas which benefited mainly the central government of Nigeria and the Eastern region with capital in Enugu and nothing was given to the Niger Delta people. In starting his agitation, Boro argued that the people of the area deserved a larger share of proceeds of the oil wealth. He formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, an armed militia with members consisting mainly of his fellow Ijaw ethnic group and declared the Niger Delta Republic on February 23, 1966 and later fought with federal forces against Biafra separatists for twelve days before being defeated.

In his autobiography, "The Twelve-Day Revolution", Boro wrote about his early life thus:

"I am reliably informed that I was born at the zero hour of twelve midnight on 10 September 1938, in the oil town of Olobiri along humid creeks of the Niger Delta. My father was the headmaster of the only mission school there. Before I was old enough to know my surroundings, I was already in a city called Port Harcourt where my father was again the headmaster of another mission school. This was in the early forties. The next environment where I found myself Awas in my home town, Kaiama. My father had been sent there to head a school yet again." (Boro 1968)

Boro and his comrades were jailed for treason. However, the federal regime of General Yakubu Gowon granted him amnesty on the eve of the Nigerian civil war in May 1967. He then enlisted and was commissioned as a major in the Nigerian army. He fought on the side of the Federal Government but was killed under mysterious circumstances in active service in 1968 at Ogu (near Okrika) in Rivers State. This symbol of emancipation, liberty, and freedom to the Ijaw man was killed by unknown enemies. Unknown, because, till this day we don't know who killed him and why he was killed; but we know that he died as a national hero basically because the issues he lived and died for yesterday remain universal and national ideals today. We still grapple with the issues of social injustice, poverty, and underdevelopment in the midst of plenty and this is not too different from what Boro observed about the events of 1964: 'It was a time when everything that was right became wrong; a time when two wrongs made a right and two rights a wrong. The political poise of the country was in a riddle of uncertainties' (1968. 72)

The Boro Philosophy

Having observed the less-than-average life the Ijaws lived under the government of the Eastern Region, Isaac Adaka Boro was not satisfied and was seen as a young man who stood for and symbolized the dream of a just society in calling for insurrection against the government to change the situation. We can categorize Boro as one who believed in and promoted violent resistance which

Nelson Mandela also represented. As Rawls (1970) would argue, a just society is a society that is well ordered and regulated by a set of principles of justice, while the people are the reason for governance and development.

Boro believed strongly that if citizens fail to agitate for their God-given inalienable rights, those rights would not be enjoyed and injustice would continue. And like Nelson Mandela, Boro saw that the only language the Eastern region would understand was violence. He argued that it was inevitable that he must lead an agitation: *'where the strength of evil is great, good gives way...my sharp sensibility to injustice in my fellow creatures made matters worse and only aggravated my resolve to right all wrongs that lie within my reach'* (Boro 1968, 9, 31). The question would then be, was violence the only way to push an idea forward? Judging from great philosophies such as Marxism, violence was not a sine qua non.

In examining the ideals of Boro, we draw the attention of our readers to the fact that it is more important that we remember the philosophy of his struggle than the outcome or benefits of his struggle. This is because the ideals and the benefits are completely two different things. While many have benefited from the outcome of the struggle in becoming famous, rich, governors and president, the ideals are still not realized and the weak, vulnerable and least advantaged in our society remain with. The benefits of what Boro fought for include state creation, wealth creation, more infrastructures, and more billionaires, but how have these benefits changed the society in morals and order? We still grapple with the vices of corruption, injustice, sickness and disease, greed, crime and gross indiscipline across the board. Research shows that life in Nigeria was better yesterday than today, reminding me of what a professor said of Nigeria: The story of Nigeria is the story that yesterday was better than today and today is better than tomorrow. Isaac Boro (1982, 9) captured this yesterday thus: *Shortly after Nigeria's attainment of independence, this vast country of 55,000,000 people (in the 1960s) was besieged by almost all known social vices: tribalism, corruption, avarice, falsehood etcetra. These vices undermine national cohesion and progress. It was a debauched society into which a Christian or an Islamic youth was born unprotected.*

What we see today in most African societies such as Nigeria is not different from the events of the 60s, meaning that nothing has changed in our polity. Boro noted that under some kind of circumstances democracy was raped thereby affecting the foundation of the country. He argued that the country's foundation was on shifting sand and the result is what we see today. People rise from extreme poverty to opulent aristocracy and fame in the twinkle of an eye; and they were held together and protected by the clique and club they belonged to and the club *'like a colossus held the fortunes of the nation in its palm'* (Boro, 1968,74) *...Today is a great day, not only in your lives but also in the history of the Niger Delta. Perhaps, it will be the greatest day for a very long time. This is not because we are going to bring the heavens down, but because we are going to demonstrate to the world what and how we feel about oppression. Remember your 70-year-old grandmother who still farms before she eats; remember also your poverty-stricken people; remember, too, your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins; and then fight for your freedom.'* (Oriola 2016, 49, 80)

As we ponder and philosophize about African societies and their contradictions, we must go back to the ideals of Isaac Boro and reexamine them, because the ideals remain the bedrock and solid foundation of any society and we are examining Boroism from the broad perspective of liberalism and freedom. Without the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Welfare for the least advantaged, there is no future for society. In any sane society, the people must be free and must be at liberty to set life goals for themselves and achieve those goals while the state serves them by providing the right enablement

for this. Today in Africa, the state only serves the interest of the state while the people have become conquered people under nationalized colonization by the ruling elites. The change we seek today through the liberal principle upon which Boro founded his Philosophy is the change Isaac Boro sought in his days yesterday that will give us a better tomorrow. The summary of Boro's ideas as we see them is that Liberty, Equality and Welfare (LEW) remain the three principles that hold the key to social justice and political stability in Nigeria.

THE THEORY OF LIBERTY, EQUALITY AND WELFARE

The urgent need to restructure the social-political structure of the Nigerian society as available literature suggests accentuates the essence of these three principles which puts a premium on liberty and emphasizes the ideals of equality and the wellbeing of the less privileged. These, emanating from the political philosophy of John Rawls in his two principles of justice can be understood as a strong and unbreakable link with the liberal school. The three principles which will apply only to the basic structure of the Nigerian society would regulate some of the contentious issues earlier identified such as distribution of rights, duties, privileges, etc. The principles would also govern the distribution of social and economic advantages but it is important to state that until Nigeria becomes a liberal society, these principles would make no meaning.

Liberty stresses the importance of the inviolability of individual members of society without any exception. The liberties necessary for the proper governance of society cut across religious, moral, philosophical and political (the right to vote and hold public office), and promotes such fundamentals such as freedom of speech and assembly; liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. Liberty also encourages freedom of individuals: 'freedom from psychological oppression and physical assault and dismemberment (integrity of the person), it encourages the inalienable right to hold personal property including oil & gas bearing land, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law. These liberties are to be equal to all citizens by the first principle' (Rawls 2001, 53). But in a country that is so obsessed with material acquisition, do people really care about liberty again? Isaac Boro thought differently: *we discovered that most of the youths were so frustrated with the general neglect that they were ready for any action led by an outstanding leader to gain liberty*' (75).

But how important is the liberty principle in society? Between the two principles, Rawls categorizes the first higher than the second, meaning that in lexical order, liberty is more important than equality. Is he right in doing this? No doubt liberty, freedom and individual rights for citizens are universal and uncompromising. In elevating and emphasizing the primacy of liberty, John Stuart Mill (1987) like Rawls in his first principle advocated that no central authority or members of society ought to have any right to interfere with the liberty of any individual as individuals are free to enjoy what rightly belongs to them as long as it is their private property. If society has no jurisdiction whatsoever to interfere with an individual on matters that concern him or her, does it then mean that individuals can act with impunity? Will this not breed anarchy, chaos and confusion in society? The liberty of an individual must not be to the detriment of any other individual. Freedom goes with responsibilities and an unregulated regime of rights and liberties may be counter-productive. Can the State at this point interfere?

The duty of the State at this point is to arrest cases of breach of liberty of members of society by offenders. The State is also to enforce the responsibilities that enhance the enjoyment of these liberties. Outside this, members of society have perfect freedom both legal, and social to carry out actions as

they deem fit and face the consequences of such actions. No member of society is therefore allowed an absolute liberty that carries no responsibility but there are cases of persons in society carrying out actions that may not affect the interest of other members, as Mill wants us to believe, but may be injured themselves by those actions; is it not proper for there to be an intervention by either the State or other members? The liberty principle for Mill is that such intervention must be at the instigation of the individual and the individual must be the final judge:

Neither one person, nor any number of persons is warranted in saying to another human creature of ripe years that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it. He is the person most interested in his own well-being; the interest which any other person except in cases of strong personal attachment can have in it is trifling, compared with that which he himself has; the interest which society has in him individually is (except as to his conduct to others) fractional and altogether indirect; while with respect to his own feelings and circumstances, the most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by anyone else (Mill, 1987, 133)

The need for the participation of the people in the running of their society also presupposes the liberty of these people to enter into all kinds of contracts, treaties and alliances as they deem fit. This means clearly that change in our polity can only occur through the agency of the people, connoting the active involvement of the people in the actualization of the dream for a just society. Nigerians, however, are divided on ethnic, tribal, social, political, and economic lines, thus creating a big dilemma for advocates and activists for change. Boro in this direction categorized the people this way:

*However there was a second category of people who belonged to the privileged class of the big politicians and civil servants who did not want to have anything to do with a freedom movement or even have emancipation discussed in their presence. This they felt would jeopardize their position with either their parties or their civil service attainments. The third belonged to the reticent, non-committal group who felt their lot was beyond redemption and did not care whether their birthrights were given to the dogs or not. The aim of emancipation was neither for the privilege nor the reticent but for the poor and oppressed. Although all **might in the long run enjoy the outcome**' (75)*

Current arguments by government easily make the people look like puppets and non-participants in the interplay of the construction of structural institutions such as the constitution. The reality is that it is actually impossible to separate social structure from personal agency (Giddens 1984, Fuchs 2001, Sewell 1992). While the structural-functionalists see society as a unit working together to maintain equilibrium, the position of conflict theorists that society is a competition of the classes in society resonates well and more with the reality of the Nigerian experience where there is an invisible conflict among the different interests for the control of the system for their own satisfaction. The relevance of this is that because of the weak social structure in the Nigerian society, people think more of themselves than the whole and this has led to the scramble for power for the development of self-interest which also means ethnic interest rather than the development of institutions and processes.

This dual understanding of structure which ties it to agency explains the fate of the social structure of the Nigerian society as both a creation of the Nigerian people but also their 'Achilles' heel'. The structure put in place and sustained through the means of political leadership by the elites is now the cause of the draconian system of organizing the society that has created so much social injustice and political instability. Proponents of structural theories claim that individuals are born into societies that are already constituted and they are merely individuals in a system of associations involving many

others.

This system of thought undermines the way societies emerge because the natural emergence of society is a function of existing individuals in different communities pulling together based on some agreements for the common good of all of them. Individuals are the main initiators of society and should remain the fulcrum irrespective of when they are born into society. Primarily, individualist sociologists as opposed to structuralists believe that society is nothing but a body of individuals bound by interdependence with characteristics such as national, local or cultural identities, social solidarity, language or hierarchical organizations. It is individuals that create society and not the other way round.

Part of the effects of such an unjust system in Nigeria is the fact that in 1960, the British 'arranged' and 'installed' a parliamentary Westminster type of democracy, but because the system was weak and cosmetic, it could not function effectively in the '*highly combative political environment*' and in 1966 it collapsed (Wright 2008). Under the same weak state and societal structure, the country has been divided into thirty six states in a bid to stem ethnic, tribal and religious contradictions. *These failed efforts indicate the challenges of building a democracy in what Wright (2008) refers to as 'a severely fractured state'.*

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY: THE NEW IDEA

The main essence of extrapolating the social contract theory as a way out of the Nigerian social problem, is the need for social and national integration and as Efemini (2002) argues political integration is relevant due to the existence of ethnically plural and diverse society in which each group holds on to its own language and other self-conscious cultural qualities. Political integration is also germane when there is a political system that is composed of formally distinct independent political units that people identify with. Just as Rawls (1993) argued that society is artificial, Maathai (2010, 184) in the same vein but dwelling on the subject within the African context equally argued that '*the modern African state is a superficial creation: a loose collection of ethnic communities or micro-nations, brought together in a single entity or macro-nation by the colonial powers*'.

The fact remains that at the inception colonization many African countries were multi-ethnic and multi-tribal societies. For example, Kenya has 42, Cameroun 200, Mozambique has 10+, Gabon 40+, Zimbabwe less than 10 and Burundi and Rwanda 3 (Maathai 2010). The problem, however, as examined in chapter one, is that nation-states are yet to emerge from these mosaic of people living together in one political nation. Maathai (2010) argues that because national integration is yet to be achieved in most of these countries, the people still identify more with their ethnic groups and tribes:

Most Africans did not understand or relate to the nation-states created for them by the colonial powers: they understood, related to, and remained attached to the physical and psychological boundaries of their macro-nations. Consequently even today, for many African people, a threat to their macro-nation or those they consider their leaders within their micro-nation carries more weight than a threat to the nation-state (Maathai 2010, 184)

The normal and usual thing to do therefore is for all stakeholders concerned to assemble and agree on some basic principles and institutions. Conflicts in many Africa countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe as recorded recently have a direct bearing with failure to do this. For example, Maathai (2010, 216) relating the issues to the Kenyan perspective notes that: '*if at the outset of independence in Kenya, a conference had been held of the 42 micro-nations and they had all negotiated a constitution under which they agreed to co-exist and work together while honoring a set of agreed-upon rights, the*

community violence that has periodically wracked Kenya since then might not have occurred'. The absence of such a practice rightly equates with the idea of state of nature and the need for a social contract of all the micro-nations involved.

Based on this argument it can be alluded that Nigeria from the Hobbesian perspective is still in the state of nature so to speak and this is manifested in the ethnic and tribal selfishness and rivalry exhibited daily in the society*. The fact of the country's history when interpreted from the perspective of social relations and social union reveals that the absence of a social contract between the component parts of the geographical entity called Nigeria in 1914 validates the assertion of many scholars that Nigeria is yet to be a nation-state (Udogu 2005, David-West 2002, 2010 and Awolowo 1947). The country, according to Awolowo (1968), is synonymous with a Hobbesian society as Hobbes in his theory describes this state of affairs as being a state of anarchy. But can this analogy be justified when Nigeria is not in a state of war and has a common political power? Nigeria in its fifty-one years of independence fought a bitter war between 1967 and 1971, experiences ethnic and religious crises regularly and some opinions interpret this to be a reflection of the Hobbesian legacy.

This situation for self-preservation at all cost in Nigeria gives rise to social and political conflicts among the people on both religious and political grounds as these actions and desires are not exclusive to any one part of the country but identified in all parts. In a state of nature there is no property, no justice or injustice, there is only war; and force and fraud are, in war, the only two cardinal virtues. Though it may not be as graphic as it is being portrayed, the Nigerian society is predominantly non-liberal and still presents a situation similar to this and the reality is that where the views of liberalism are down played, this condition is inevitable. It was in the light of this that the US intelligence unit in 2005 predicted that Nigeria would be a failed state in fifteen years but they ignored the fact that Nigeria was already a failed state as it lacked every sense of statehood and had failed since 1914 when the British created a country from abroad (Nicolson 1969, Awolowo 1947).

If the noble ideals of Adaka Boro are to be fully appreciated in the dynamics of social and political life in Nigeria, we must see social Justice as a matter of individuals in the social contract, after coming together to further their interest, putting all their rights in the hands of the sovereign and allowing him to protect and preserve those rights. The sovereign on the other hand, exist to carry out those responsibilities. Achieving social justice in society, therefore, is this order. In other words, justice is a matter of leadership and authority in society within a structure and in the commonwealth so created.

Society in a liberal understanding is primarily initiated by the voluntary union between men and women in a given environment such as the state of nature who wish to cooperate. It is in this sense that Maathai (2010) sees society as a social machine in which individuals play their part and the smooth and proper working of the machine depends on the proper workings of the individuals. The situation in Nigeria is, however, exceptional because the citizens are absolutely at the mercy of the state or the government. It is so bad that even the power to choose their leaders is taken away from the people. Today in Nigeria as in many other societies, contrary to the dictates of the constitution, the state literally dictates the terms of life including rights and powers to the citizens and the citizens are now at the mercy of the state.

Social Justice for liberals and libertarians is the ability of the Nigerian State to protect the individual rights of the people in their property and private interest. The growth of individual rights is paramount in the tenets of liberalism and the only reason for the State is for the implementation of the social contract in the area of securing the lives of the people. The people retain all other rights and justice can only be ensured when the people are allowed to own their property and do what they wish with it. This is a kind of advocacy for small government. This means that the people are more important than the government, making it possible for them to continue to hold the power to retain sovereignty.

John Locke can be viewed from his emphasis on the citizen's right to life, liberty and property to be the precursor of modern day liberal democracy and capitalism. And any observer of the on-going global crisis would agree that its origin is in the inordinate and excessive greed for profit and economic capital by man. The problem of unchecked liberty and unregulated acquisition of property is one that is living with man and has continued to trouble him. Men have grown to use their liberty to limit society and their fellow men so many times. And the hunger to own property has also led many men to be immoral in their ways. The position of Locke on big individual and small State is a not bad idea after all but in contemporary times when societies have grown so big and so powerful, it is almost impossible to have small governments as we are confronted with individuals and corporations that are so big that if care is not taken they can become more powerful than government. In the days of Locke, merely mixing labor with a piece of land automatically makes it your own as long as there is enough for others. Good, this was in a small world with plenty of land.

Conclusion

In these days where nothing is enough and the inequalities among men have grown beyond imagination, the place of government cannot be over emphasized. Society is made up of different men with different conditions of living and the lack of a strong State would breed more dichotomies and will climax one day in the 'have-nots' rising against the haves. To avoid this, therefore, a strong government that protects individual and societal interests is necessary. Individuals are free to have rights to life, liberty, property etc., but there is need for a strong government that also has the right to moderate these rights, especially, when they tend to be a danger to society. To totally strip the state of such powers would make the state naked, powerless, and not able to protect some weak individuals and this leads back to the state of nature.

In these concluding lines on Isaac Adaka Boro, it is pertinent to ask ourselves what the philosophy of Boroism means to Africans as a people and as a nation bearing in mind that he was an intellectual who came before his time and saw beyond his time. Was it a philosophy that promoted violent resistance, insurrection or war? The lesson to be learned must not be lost on readers of this article as societies make progress through the application of knowledge. In the words of Franz Fanon, "those who make peaceful changes impossible, make violent changes inevitable". The argument can be made clearly that Boro in his quest for liberty and development was forced into violence as the state operators then made no room for the attainment of his ideas peacefully. He had a vision and a dream that made him lose his life: *However only those who do not know what a revolution is care about their careers. A true revolutionary principally cares for the realization of his plans. Any discussion which does not touch on emancipation becomes boring and he scarcely has time of his own. It is always devoted to others. Dangerous though this is, he cannot avoid it because it is born in him. Any attempt to divert him from his desire to liberate his people disconcerts his entire set up. A difficult life it is* (1982, 81)

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