

## Public Narrative

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Nde-ewo unu! (I greet you all)

Both my parents were born and bred in eastern Nigeria but eventually moved westwards to Lagos for economic reasons. I was born in Lagos and spent the first 16 years of my life there. In primary school, I recall one of the first times I had to fill out a form. I put down “Lagos” as my “state of origin”. My teacher observed a discord between what I had written and my surname. She then asked me where my parents were from? I responded, “Enugu state”. She continued “Charles, Enugu is your state of origin, not Lagos.” I accepted the correction and moved on. Today, however, I realise that this experience left me with concerns that I had never really reflected over.

First of all, a quick geography: Nigeria is made up of three dominant tribes: in the North, we have the Hausas; in the west, Yorubas; and in the east, Igbos. To put things in perspective, each of these tribes are as different in culture, language, food, and clothing as France, Russia and Ireland. Though courtesy of the British, we have a common language in English...or the Nigerian brand of English.

The issue that bothers me is that in Nigeria, you cannot associate with your place of birth, either legally or casually. Your state of origin is implicitly and explicitly taken to be that of your parents. Even if you’ve never set foot in that land and do not know the first thing about the language. As an Igbo living in Lagos, you would get reminders from your neighbours, whether playfully or sternly, that you are not from here – even if ‘here’ is the only life you’ve ever known.

When I was 17, I decided to move to the east for my University studies. For me, it was less about running away from Lagos, than it was about connecting with my roots. I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the Igbo culture. I wanted to perfect my speaking of the language. And the landscape there is just something else...Enugu, where my father is from means a city ‘on a mountain’. It is circled by an impressive mountain range such that when you take a look around you get the feeling that nature herself built a fortress there. I ended up spending the next 9 years in and around eastern Nigeria.

So what is my state of origin? I am from Enugu state – and frankly I am very happy with that. However, I have friends who wish that Lagos – where they were born and bred – was recognised as their place of origin. These persons find themselves in a cultural limbo because they don’t associate with the distant land to which they have been anchored, and yet are not acknowledged in their birthplace. Identity should be a matter of choice, not of compulsion.

More still, this singular separation of birth and origin has concrete, far reaching implications for the individual and community. People are deprived of basic benefits, from university scholarships to jobs in the civil service to eligibility to run in state elections. And because Nigeria is a place of tribal identity politics; even when you run for federal elections the first question asked is “what state is he from” not “is he competent”. These exclusionary policies and conduct reinforce the already thick lines of cultural divide among Nigerians. Which, in turn, serves as a repeated trigger for unending pockets of conflict and bloodshed around the country.

The questions I ask myself now are: how can we upgrade our mindset and our state laws in acceptance of the already multicultural reality of our cities? Can we redefine Nigeria’s concept of identity and how we engage with our diverse groups? This is important not only for each individual, but also for the community that is Nigeria. I believe that this is vital to moving us towards a more equal and peaceful nation.