

THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: LESSONS FOR THE IGBO PEOPLE

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Abstract

The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Nigeria-Biafra war, was a civil war fought in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970. The conflict was sparked by the desire of the south-eastern region of Biafra to secede from Nigeria, and the war resulted in the deaths of an estimated one million people. In the years since the war, there have been a number of efforts to understand its causes and its impact on the South-eastern part of Nigeria. The underlying goal of this research is to examine the Nigerian Civil War in order to glean important lessons for the Igbo people. The study's key questions are: what are the lessons of the Biafran War for Ndi'gbo as a people with a unique historical experience? And what values can these lessons have on the current management of the Igbo marginalization issue? It may be necessary to revisit history in order to better predict the future course. The historical, thematic, critical, and analytical methods of inquiry were adopted for this study. The scuffle framework and the ecological model, which understand conflict as a context arising from a people's behavior and experiences, form the theoretical framework around which the work is woven. This piece contends that the Igbo will need to reconsider their approach to national issues in order to avoid repeating past mistakes.

Keywords: Nigeria Civil War, Biafra, Lessons, Ndi'gbo, Ojukwu, Gowon, Governance

Introduction

The Nigeria-Biafra war, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, is a historical conflict of significant importance to Nigeria and the Igbo people. From 1967 to 1970, this violent conflict resulted in the death of approximately one million people. Given the magnitude of the conflict and its consequences, several attempts have been made to comprehend its underlying causes and the implications for the Igbo people, who were at the center of the conflict. This research aims to offer a comprehensive exploration of the Nigerian Civil War to derive valuable lessons for the Igbo people.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the lessons of the Biafran War for the Igbo people with a unique historical experience. Specifically, the research seeks to investigate the values that can be derived from these lessons to guide the current management of the

Igbo marginalisation issue. This research employs a multi-method approach that includes historical, thematic, critical, and analytical inquiry.

To understand conflict as a context arising from people's behaviour and experiences, this study adopts the scuffle framework and the ecological model as theoretical frameworks. These frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to exploring the causes and implications of the Nigerian Civil War for the Igbo people. The study argues that the Igbo people must reconsider their approach to national issues to avoid repeating past mistakes. By examining the conflict through a historical lens and identifying its lessons, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the current challenges facing the Igbo people.

The findings of this research will offer a deeper understanding of the root causes of the Nigerian Civil War and its implications for the Igbo people. Additionally, the research will provide important lessons for the management of conflicts in the future, particularly in the Southeastern region of Nigeria. Overall, this study aims to contribute to the literature on the Nigerian Civil War, its impact on the Igbo people, and the lessons that can be derived from this tragic event.

Lessons for Igbo People

The Biafran War had a profound impact on the social, economic, and political landscape of southeastern Nigeria, and the region has yet to fully recover from its aftermath. The examination of the lessons to be learned from the Biafran War is a topic of utmost significance for the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria. It is imperative that the Igbo people learn from past mistakes in order to prevent the repetition of similar events in the future. By thoroughly examining the lessons to be learned from this historical event, the Igbo people can develop a better understanding of how to build a more inclusive and sustainable future, and work towards a future where all ethnic groups can coexist peacefully and work together towards common goals. Most importantly, it is essential for the Igbo people to learn from the Biafran War in order to fully comprehend their place within the larger Nigerian society

1. Need for the Igbo to Learn from History:

The Igbo people have much to learn from their history in order to plan for their future. At the end of the Biafran War, promises made by General Gowon for reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction turned out to be empty. Biafran soldiers found themselves marginalized, jobless, and without pay or pension, regardless of their years of service in the Nigerian army. Biafran properties were declared abandoned and acquired illegally with only token payments made. The 1967-68 Nigerian currency switch also had a significant impact on Biafra as all of their assets were in Biafran currency. Efforts by Effiong to redeem the currency were unsuccessful, as General Gowon stated it was impracticable. The excerpt below is from a memo between Philip Effiong and General Yakubu Gowon at the end of the Biafran War:

Effiong: One of the sorest problems seems to be the question of currency. The people have suffered many losses, including the dispossession of their property both movable and immovable as a result of the 1966 crisis and the war. They were also severely hit by the Nigerian currency switch of 1967 – 68. All their present assets seem to be only in the form of Biafran currency. If, as is rumored, the Federal Government should fail to redeem this in its entirety, it will be tantamount to a further dispossession of the masses of the people. Apart from the fact that this cannot be calculated to endear them to the Federal Government, if they are so dispossessed, relief by way of gifts or foods, etc. cannot make good this loss. To redeem the “Biafran” currency in its entirety by an arrangement which does not savour of mass dispossession will ensure that the people will be enabled to help themselves a bit, by what they can. This will be a more effective and satisfying form of relief. If the Federal Government should find some difficulty in doing this, recourse could be had to the relief money being offered, part of which could be used to redeem the currency, a gesture which will tremendously reassure the people.

Gowon’s Comments: It is impossible to exchange pounds per pounds for a so called ‘Biafran’ currency. No, it is impracticable. We will never beg foreigners money for this sort of thing.¹

One important historical lesson that the Igbo can learn from the Biafran war is the importance of developing their home; this is widely espoused in the Igbo philosophy of ‘*Aku ruo uno*’. There is a proverb in Igboland that says, ‘*Aku Luo Uno, Okwuo Onye Kpataluya*’, it is when one’s wealth reaches home that the source of the wealth and the individual so blessed with the wealth manifests². The Igbo can learn an important lesson from this experience, which is the importance of developing their own communities, as espoused by the philosophy of “*Aku ruo uno*.” This translates to bringing one’s wealth home where it is needed, allowing one’s kinsmen to benefit from the resources that God has blessed them with. The Ikeji Festival of Arondizuogu and other Igbo ceremonies serve as a yearly reminder for the Igbo people in diaspora to return to their hometowns in Nigeria to celebrate and reignite their values³. During these events, the community appeals for funds for development projects, such as constructing town halls, civic centres, rural roads, skill acquisition centres, and awarding scholarships. It is important for the Igbo to remember that it was through such self-funded community development projects that Ndigbo were able to quickly bounce back and re-develop Ala Igbo after the destructions suffered during the Nigeria/Biafra war. In fact, the concept of *Aku ruo uno* was the predominant, if not the only secret to the Igbos reclaiming their economic viability after the dispossession they suffered from the Nigerian civil war. A new call has emerged for “*Ka Aku muo nu ulo*,”⁴ which

¹ Philip Efiang, *Nigeria and Biafra: my Story*. Nigeria: Business Forum Publishers, 2000. P. 302.

² Abs story, *The Igbo Aku Luo Uno Philosophy*, <https://www.absradiotv.com/2020/12/29/commentary-the-igbo-aku-luo-uno-philosophy/>. Accessed on February 11th, 2023

³ Ibid

⁴ Ikem Okuhu, FROM “AKU RUE ULO” TO KA AKU MUO N’ULO: TIME TO REDEFINE AN IGBO PHILOSOPHY. *Ikem’s Journal*, <https://ikemsjournal.com.ng/from-aku-rue-ulo-to-ka-aku-muo-nulo-time-to-redefine-an-igbo-philosophy/>, 2022.

suggests investing wealth for procreation. The Igbo wealth must not only be brought home for business purposes, but it must be intentionally invested in all enterprises and interests, including political leadership in Nigeria⁵. According to Kanu, the Igbo have always prioritized the community over the individual, even before the Nigerian Civil War, and this philosophy is evident in the saying "Onye aghana nwanne ya" or "No one should leave his brother/sister behind"⁶. If an Igbo person is not known in their hometown, then they are not truly known at all. The Nigerian Civil War resulted in the dispossession of the Igbo people's property and wealth by the Nigerian government, forcing them to start over. However, their philosophy of "Aku ruo uno" remains a crucial part of their culture, allowing them to rebuild and reclaim their economic viability. According to Kanu, the Igbo, even before the Nigerian Civil War has never forgotten home. If a person is known all over the world but not known in his hometown then he is not known at all. If a person does not make an effort to return home, he or she is referred to as an *efuru efu* (which means the lost one). The Nigerian Civil War resulted in significant loss of property and wealth for the Igbo people. This led to the widespread popularity of the philosophy of CHERUO UNO, meaning "think home". The Igbo culture places a strong emphasis on maintaining a connection to their hometown, regardless of their current location or status. This cultural value is so deeply ingrained that even those who are born and reside in other cities still consider their hometown to be their true place of citizenship. Furthermore, the importance of home is evident in the presence of Igbo associations in various cities, where members can maintain a connection to their cultural heritage. This strong attachment to home extends even to death, as the tradition dictates that a deceased individual's corpse must be returned to their hometown for proper rest.

The Igbo people can learn a valuable historical lesson regarding the importance of thoughtful decision-making in critical situations. The survivors of the Biafra war contend that the conflict was, in fact, not well-planned. The inadequacy of the administrative support for the Biafran army has been thoroughly discussed, as military administration encompasses more than merely manufacturing weapons and ammunition. Madiebo warns against managing an army in wartime through independent civilian organizations, as such a system is likely to decrease the army's efficiency and impair its operations due to the inevitable loss of flexibility⁷. Furthermore, the civilian population bore the brunt of the unpreparedness, suffering even more than the army due to the complete lack of any administrative arrangements to guarantee their basic necessities were met. Consequently, civil support for the war waned as their administrative difficulties intensified.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, IGWEBUIKECONOMICS: The Igbo Apprenticeship System for Wealth Creation. New Trends in Science, Technology, Management and Social Sciences in Africa; 1st International Conference of Villanova Polytechnic, Imesi-Ile, 10th & 11th July, 2019.

⁷ Alexander A Madiebo, The Nigerian Revolution and Biafra War. Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980, P. 383.

The historical events experienced by the Igbo should serve as a reminder that the only place they can truly call home is Ala Igbo. In light of this, it is imperative for the Igbo to direct their efforts towards fostering the development of Ala Igbo, with the aim of transforming it into an economic powerhouse, similar to the successful growth they have accomplished in cities such as Lagos.

2. **Prioritise Dialogue, not secession, upon provocation:**

In recent times, the question of self-determination and independence for the Igbo people has been a topic of much discussion and debate. While the idea of secession is often presented as a solution to the challenges faced by the Igbo, it is important to consider the alternatives and implications of such a drastic action. Negotiation is a critical tool in resolving conflicts and achieving mutually beneficial outcomes. By engaging in dialogue and compromise, parties can reach a resolution that addresses their concerns and interests while also taking into account the perspectives and needs of others. Negotiation allows for a peaceful and non-violent resolution of disputes, which is not only morally just but also more sustainable in the long term. While the idea of secession may seem attractive, it is important to consider the alternatives and implications of such a drastic action. Rather than resorting to secession at the slightest provocation, the Igbo should prioritise negotiation as a means of resolving conflicts and achieving their political goals. By engaging in dialogue and compromise, the Igbo can advocate for their rights and interests within the Nigerian state, and work towards a peaceful and sustainable resolution of their political challenges.

The events of the Biafran war hold valuable lessons that must be critically examined and incorporated into historical discourse. During the war period, there were several opportunities for negotiation that could have resulted in peace, albeit at the expense of the Biafran dream. The Aburi Accords serve as a notable example, where the Eastern region was faced with the challenge of retaining the gains made at Aburi, despite discovering a plot by the Federal Military Government to renege on the agreement. However, it was the all-or-nothing stance of Ojukwu that ultimately led to the loss of all gains made at Aburi⁸. It is crucial to note that while standing on Aburi was commendable, a heightened level of flexibility was necessary to disengage from the situation when the foundation of the Aburi Accords was no longer tenable.

The people of Biafra were thrown into a war that would have long-lasting effects, without adequate preparation and the failure of Gowon's administration to honour the agreements made at Aburi, Ghana, coupled with Ojukwu's hasty decision to secede and declare independence, resulted in a high number of casualties in the South. Effiong's commentary in his book, 'Nigeria and Biafra: My Story' highlights Ojukwu's superficiality towards the war, which contributed to the lack of proper planning and execution of the conflict⁹. For instance, Ojukwu's assertion that "no power in black Africa can defeat Biafra"¹⁰ can be

⁸ Philip Effiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, P. 308

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Philip Effiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, P. 305

considered as an indulgence in self-deception. Additionally, the absence of long-term strategic planning with clearly defined objectives meant that planning was largely ad-hoc and relied heavily on the goodwill and support of Ojukwu as the Head of State.

3. Reintroduction of History in Academic Curricula:

The study of history plays a crucial role in shaping the future of a people. As A.E. Samaan aptly stated, "writing history is like holding a conversation across the ages, responding to people long gone and posing questions to individuals yet born"¹¹. History provides us with valuable lessons and insights into the past, allowing us to understand its impact on the present and prepare for the future. This is why it is essential to reintroduce history into the academic curriculum in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. James Baldwin's observation that "people are trapped in history and history is trapped in people"¹² highlights the importance of studying history. No matter how much we try to escape our past, it will always catch up with us. Therefore, it is imperative that we gain a comprehensive understanding of history to prepare for the future.

In Nigeria, the civil war period holds valuable lessons that should be incorporated into the academic curriculum. The Biafran war was the result of a complex interplay of political, economic, and cultural factors, and its impact was far-reaching, affecting not only Nigeria but the entire African continent. By studying the root causes of the conflict, students can develop critical thinking skills and historical perspectives, enabling them to make informed decisions in the future. For example, by examining the Biafran war, students can learn about the consequences of conflict, and how to prevent future wars by addressing the underlying political, economic, and cultural factors. The Aburi Accords, for instance, demonstrate the potential for peaceful resolution through negotiation, and the consequences of failing to honor agreements made.

The government of Anambra State has undertaken a significant initiative by incorporating the study of Igbo history into the academic curriculum for secondary school students¹³. This academic discipline represents a comprehensive examination of the historical narrative of the Igbo people, extending from pre-colonial times to the present day. The integration of this subject into the curriculum serves as a means of fostering an appreciation of the cultural heritage of the Igbo people among the youth. The curriculum provides students with a nuanced understanding of the historical experiences of the Igbo people, including their

¹¹E. Samaan Quotes on Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10321354-writing-history-is-like-holding-a-conversation-across-the-ages>. Accessed on February 17th, 2023.

¹² James Baldwin Quotes on Goodreads, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/117214856-people-are-trapped-in-history-and-history-is-trapped-in-them--james-a?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=n0Mr2rQdtI&rank=1. Accessed on February 17th, 2023.

¹³ National Light, Anambra reintroduces History in Schools. <https://www.nationallightngr.com/2022/08/11/anambra-re-introduces-history-in-schools/>. Accessed on February 11th, 2023.

experiences during the colonial period and their postcolonial developments. This initiative reflects a commitment to promoting and preserving the cultural heritage of the Igbo people.

4. **Revamping of Biafra war sites for Tourism:**

As a society, it is imperative that we preserve and honour the historical events that have shaped our collective experiences and cultural heritage. In recent years, the importance of this task has become increasingly evident through the proliferation of memorial sites and museums that commemorate significant historical events. One notable example of such a site is the Murambi Genocide Memorial Site in Rwanda¹⁴, which has become a popular destination for tourists and has contributed to the country's thriving tourism industry.

According to data from the Rwanda Development Board in 2019, Rwanda recorded a significant increase in tourism revenue, with over 1.63 million visitors visiting the country and generating \$498 million in earnings¹⁵. This demonstrates the significant economic benefits that can be derived from preserving and promoting historical sites and monuments.

Similarly, the Igbo people of Nigeria boast a rich history, including several historical war sites related to the Biafran War. These sites, such as the Biafra Memorial Museum located in Aba, No Return Memorial in Onitsha, Biafran War Cemetery in Enugu, the Ibeku Unumke Shrine in Umuahia, and the Uli War Museum in Uli, serve as powerful reminders of the experiences and sacrifices of the Igbo people during this significant historical event.

Revamping these historical sites serves multiple purposes. First, it helps to preserve the history of the Biafran War and ensures that future generations are aware of the events that took place and the experiences of the Igbo people during that time. Secondly, it honours the sacrifices of those who lost their lives during the conflict and ensures that their memories are preserved for posterity. Finally, revamping these sites has the potential to boost tourism and generate economic benefits for the local community, much like the impact seen in Rwanda.

5. **Advancement of Igbo Indigenous science:**

Felix Nwankwo Oragwu was a physics lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, UNN when the war began. For the next 30 months, he headed the Research and Production (RAP) group comprising Igbo scientists from various fields. Its primary responsibility was to provide technological support to the Biafran army, which was poorly equipped.

When the war started, there was not a single weapon either in a store or anywhere throughout Biafra. They only had knives and cutlasses. No gun, no bomb, no nothing¹⁶.

¹⁴ Rwandan Genocide Tour, <https://www.explorerwandatours.com/travel-blog/rwanda-genocide-tour.html>

¹⁵ Fola Folayan, How Rwanda is building a sustainable economy through tourism, <https://gazettengr.com/fola-folayan-how-rwanda-is-building-a-sustainable-economy-through-tourism/>. Accessed on February 11th, 2023.

¹⁶ Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, Remembering the Biafra War that many prefer to forget. BBC News: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51094093>. Accessed on February 11th, 2023.

Oragwu notes that had the Igbo paid less attention to the scramble for power at the centre, and instead distinguished their region by advancing the technological gains of the war, Biafra would have been a technological nation and would have been able to compete with anybody¹⁷.

As the economic blockade of the Biafran region took its toll, the people were forced to adopt innovative strategies for survival. In addition to extracting and refining petroleum, they also made their own improvised armoured tanks and even developed their own aircraft. In the face of these challenging circumstances, a team of talented scientists and engineers, led by the esteemed Professor Gordian Ezekwe, rose to the occasion. This group, known as the Biafran Research and Production Unit, was a leading think-tank dedicated to the development of advanced technology, including rockets, bombs, and telecommunications devices.

One of the key products developed by the Biafran Research and Production Unit was a weapon known as Ogbunigwe, which was also known as "Ojukwu's Bucket."¹⁸ This weapon was based on the physics of the Munroe or Neumann effect and was designed to kill and maim through the wave effect percussion and dispersal of shrapnel¹⁹. It was either shaped as a cone or cylinder and could be used as a land mine, a ground-to-ground projectile against troop concentrations, or as a ground-to-air anti-personnel cluster bomb²⁰.

The impact of Ogbunigwe was significant, with estimates indicating that it was responsible for a significant proportion of the casualties inflicted during the conflict. This demonstrates the remarkable ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Biafran people in the face of adversity, and the crucial role played by the Biafran Research and Production Unit in supporting their efforts.

One of the lessons for Ndi Igbo from the Biafra war is not to neglect the ingenuity of the Igbo man and his grit for innovation in the face of adversity.

6. Importance of international bilateral and multilateral alliances:

Igbo must build on their international relations and alliances through the igbo diaspora although we are not anticipating war, it is good to have allies in time of need: The Biafra war should teach the Igbo the importance of alliances in international relations. During the Biafra war, support and recognition of Biafra was minimal; with support from few African countries – Tanzania (April 1968), Gabon (May 1968), Cote d' Ivoire (May 1968), and

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Ayomide Akinbode, Ogbunigwe: The Scientific Wonder of the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-1970), <https://www.thehistoryville.com/ogbunigwe/>. Accessed on February 17th, 2023.

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ *Ibid*

Zambia (May 1968)²¹. The final recognition came from the Republic of Haiti in March 1969. However, these supports were largely psychological rather than material²². For example, due to the superficial understanding between Biafra and France, there was no bold attempt on the former's part to negotiate for military support on the basis of a mutual economic understanding²³; therefore the relationship could not go far enough to have a decisive military impact in favour of Biafra. Effiong asserts that the initial blunder made by the newly independent Biafra state, on May 30th 1967 where an avalanche of spurious diplomatic recognitions were announced by Radio Biafra, had the effect of alienating the interest of those countries genuinely interested in recognizing the statehood of Biafra²⁴.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Biafran War stands as a momentous episode in the annals of the Igbo people and Nigeria as a whole. The noteworthy insights garnered from this tragic event ought to be steadfastly retained, particularly by the Igbo people. The imperative for erudition from history, the prioritization of dialogue as against secession, the reintroduction of history into academic curricula, the revitalization of Biafra war sites for tourism, the advancement of Igbo indigenous science, and the fostering of international alliances, are indispensable strides in the direction of a promising future for the Igbo people. It is only by undertaking these steps that the Igbo people can gain a comprehensive understanding of their role in the larger Nigerian society and chart a trajectory towards a more auspicious future. The timeless adage, "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it," underscores the criticality of our learning from past experiences and striving towards a flourishing future for all.

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²¹ Philip Effiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: my Story*. Nigeria: Business Forum Publishers, 2000.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Philip Effiong, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*, P. 305.

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