

THE BIAFRAN WAR: LESSONS FOR NIGERIA**Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, PhD**Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
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Precious Onyekachi OKOYEDepartment of History and Diplomatic Studies
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prcsokoye@gmail.com**Abstract**

The Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, lasted from 1967 to 1970 in Nigeria. The war was fought between the Nigerian government and the secessionist state of Biafra, which was primarily made up of Igbo people from eastern Nigeria. The conflict arose as a result of economic, ethnic, and religious tensions between Nigeria's various regions and groups. The war had significant consequences for Nigeria and its people as the conflict is reported to have killed over one million people. The war also disrupted economic development and accelerated the breakdown of Nigeria's already precarious political system. Unfortunately, despite the ceasefire five decades ago, the issues that led to the Biafra War have not been fully addressed. Tensions between different ethnic and religious groups continue to be a source of conflict in Nigeria, and there are ongoing debates about the appropriate distribution of resources and political power within the country. Tensions between different ethnic and religious groups remain a source of contention in Nigeria, as do ongoing debates about the appropriate distribution of resources and political power within the country. This study seeks to unearth the lessons of the Nigerian civil war for the country, as well as to better understand how these lessons can influence governance and the management of national diversity. One of the most important lessons for Nigeria is that intolerance and chauvinism have severe repercussions, and that no region of the country can impose itself on another without consequences. Furthermore, the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and historical knowledge cannot be overlooked without making a slew of errors. For the purpose of this essay, the historical, thematic, critical, and analytical methods of inquiry were employed. The ecological model and the scuffle framework, consider conflict as a situation resulting from a people's behavior and experiences, serve as the theoretical framework around which the work is woven. The argument of this essay is that the Nigerian Civil War has significant lessons for Nigeria that cannot be brushed aside.

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

Introduction

Civil wars are not peculiar to Nigeria. Most countries of the world have experienced internal conflicts that erupted into full-fledged wars at some point in their history. Civil wars have raged from the early mediaeval period - the Roman Civil War (between 100 BC and AD 400) to the present day, for example, the Tigray war (2020-2022). Civil wars can occur for a variety of reasons, such as coups, ethnic persecution, economic deprivation, religious differences, political agitations, and so on.

The Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, was a conflict in Nigeria that lasted from 1967 to 1970. The conflict was driven by the desire of the Igbo people, who are based in southeastern Nigeria, to secede from the country and establish an independent state of Biafra. The war resulted in significant loss of lives, with estimates putting the death toll at over one million. One of the key factors that led to the Biafran War was the perceived marginalization of the Igbo people by the Nigerian government and other ethnic groups in the country. Following independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria was ruled by a series of military governments that were dominated by members of the northern ethnic groups. This resulted in a lack of representation for the Igbo people in the government, which led to feelings of political exclusion and resentment.

In addition to political marginalization, the Igbo people also faced economic discrimination in Nigeria. The country was heavily reliant on the export of oil and other natural resources, which were primarily found in the country's southeastern region. Despite this, the Igbo people received little economic benefits from the exploitation of these resources, as the profits were primarily controlled by the northern-dominated government. The conflict was ignited in 1966, when a group of southern military officers staged a coup against the Nigerian government. The coup failed, and the coup leaders were executed. This particular event was perceived by the Northern part of Nigeria as a ploy by the Igbo to forcefully take ownership of the country; and triggered a wave of violence against the Igbo people in northern Nigeria, with thousands being killed in ethnic clashes. The violence and discrimination against the Igbo people led to the declaration of Biafra as an independent state by Ojukwu in 1967. The conflict that followed was brutal and devastating, with both sides committing atrocities against civilians. The Nigerian government, backed by the military, launched a full-scale invasion of the newly declared Biafran state. The Biafran forces were outmatched, and the war quickly became a one-sided affair. The Nigerian government imposed a naval blockade of the Biafran coastline, which cut off food supplies and caused widespread famine. The lack of food and medical supplies resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths from starvation and disease.

The Biafran War ultimately ended in 1970, when the Biafran forces surrendered to the Nigerian government. The conflict had a profound impact on the region, and the scars of the war are still felt today. The war was a turning point in Nigeria's history, and it highlights

the importance of addressing the underlying social, political, and economic issues that can lead to conflict.

Why did the War Happen?

According to an Igbo proverb espoused by Chinua Achebe in his book, 'There Was a Country', a man who does not remember where the rain began to beat him will also forget where he dried his body¹. This means that in order to win in the future, one must understand and accept the past without prejudice, as this is the only way to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future. To live in peace with her ethnic diversity, Nigeria must first understand why the war occurred.

Historians attribute the war to several factors, including the 1966 military coup in which mutinous Nigerian soldiers led by Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and Emmanuel Ifeajuna killed 22 people, including the Prime Minister of Nigeria - Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, many senior politicians, senior army officials, their families, and sentinels on protective duty.² The military coup of January 1966 welcomed the July countercoup led by Lt. Colonel Murtala Muhammed³. This was in response to the January coup, in which top northern politicians and soldiers were killed. After the first military coup that installed Major General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi as Nigeria's first military Head of State on January 16, 1966, the Northern soldiers had started planning, by May 1966, the revenge of their leaders who had been murdered in January⁴. The northerners were the major casualties⁵ of that coup that was carried out by soldiers mainly from the East. To them, it was an eastern-favored coup as Aguiyi Ironsi's regime was believed to be extremely partisan.

194 days after taking office, Aguiyi Ironsi was murdered in a Northern counter coup on July 29, 1966, and for three days, the nation had no leader until Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon succeeded the late Head of State on August 1, 1966. The July mutiny that resulted in the assassination of Nigeria's first military Head of State, General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, and Lieutenant Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi by disgruntled northern non-commissioned officers⁶ paved the way for the ethnic pogroms that soon followed. Following the demise of Ironsi's government, the July 1966 coup appointed Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon as Head

¹ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country*, Penguin Books, 2012

² Kirk-Greene, Anthony Hamilton Millard, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook, 1966–1969*. Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook, 1966-1969. Vol. 1 (1st ed.). New York City, New York, United States of America: Oxford University Press. p. 124

³ Siollun, Max (2009). *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)*. Algora. pp. 98–102

⁴ Ayomide Akinbode, *Aburi Accord: What really happened in Ghana in 1967 that led to the Nigerian Civil War?*, HistoryVille. <https://www.thehistoryville.com/on-aburi-we-stand/>. Accessed on February 6th, 2023.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Siollun, Max (2009). *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)*. Algora. p. 110.

of State.⁷ The immediate significance of the July coup was that the slender confidence that remained between the Igbo and the Northerners was shattered; resulting in the mass killings of the Igbo in the North

According to some scholars, the Biafra war arose from anti-Igbo pogroms in Northern Nigeria⁸. The 1966 anti-Igbo pogrom was a series of massacres committed against Igbo people and other people of Southern Nigerian origin living in Northern Nigeria starting in May 1966 and reaching a peak after 29th September 1966.⁹ It is estimated that between 8,000 and 30,000 Igbos and easterners were killed in mass murders¹⁰. In response to the genocide, an additional 1 million Igbos fled the Northern region to the east. These events culminated in the secession of the eastern Nigerian region and the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Lieutenant Colonel (later General) Odumegwu, the head of the Eastern Nigerian region.¹¹

Nigerian Historian, Max Siollun records that the January coup plotters (Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Timothy Onwuaturgwu, Chris Anuforo, Don Okafor, Humphrey Chukwuka, and Adewale Ademoyega) planned the coup because the men at the helm of affairs were running Nigeria aground with their corrupt ways. Ministers under them were living extravagant lifestyles and looting public funds at the expense of ordinary citizens.¹² The coup was an attempt to rid the country of corrupt politicians and replace them with a more responsible government.

However, the January coup failed to achieve its goal because Northerners saw it as a strategic ploy by the Igbo to seize control of the country. It also did not help that four of the five Army Majors who executed the coup were Igbo, as was the General who took power (General Aguiyi Ironsi). According to Max Siollun, the northern soldiers had a slew of grievances.¹³, some of which were:

⁷ 1966 Nigerian Counter Coup, Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966_Nigerian_counter-coup. Accessed on January 4th, 2023.

⁸ Last, Murray (October 2005). "Poison and Medicine: Ethnicity, Power and Violence in a Nigerian City, 1966–1986 by Douglas A. Anthony Review by: Murray Last". *The Royal African Society*. **104** (417): 710–711

⁹ Last, Murray (October 2005). "Poison and Medicine: Ethnicity, Power and Violence in a Nigerian City, 1966–1986 by Douglas A. Anthony Review by: Murray Last". *The Royal African Society*. **104** (417): 710–711.

¹⁰ "Civil War". <https://countrystudies.us/nigeria/23.htm>. Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. 1991. Retrieved January 4, 2023.

¹¹ "Nigeria – Independent Nigeria". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria> Retrieved 4th January 2023.

¹² Bolashodun, Oluwatobi (15 January 2016). Akinrujomu, Akinyemi; Ebhomele, Eromosele; Ishaq, Mudathir (eds.). "50 Years After: 8 Facts To Know About The January 15, 1966, Coup D'état". *Legit.ng*. Lagos, Nigeria: Naij.com Media Limited Read. Retrieved 25 May 2020.

¹³ Siollun, Max (2009). *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966 - 1976)*. Algora. p. 97

- The murder of Northern civilian leaders and military officers in the aborted 15th January 1966 coup d'état
- The failure of the Ironsi regime to try the January coup plotters for treason as it was rumoured that the majors were still being paid while in detention
- The adoption of the Unification Decree of 24th May 1966 (Decree 34) by General Aguiyi Ironsi which transformed Nigeria from a federal to unitary state was believed to be intended to promote Igbo ambitions, mainly at the expense of Northerners, since they were behind the rest of the nation in education and commerce.¹⁴
- The promotion of several Igbo majors to Lieutenant Colonel.
- Rumours of General Aguiyi-Ironsi's ethnic favouritism toward Igbos
- Plans to swap the 1st and 4th battalions and plans to rotate the military governors of the different regions.¹⁵

These grievances led to the July counter coup and pogroms directed against the Igbo. It is also important to examine some of the reasons that led to the secession of Biafra from Nigeria:

- Lt. Colonel Gowon's (later General) violation of the Aburi accord
- The massive targeted ethnic genocide of Igbos in Northern Nigeria following the first coup.
- Marginalization and exclusion of the Igbo people: The majority of the Biafran population were the Igbo people, who felt that they were marginalized and excluded from the Nigerian political and economic system.
- Ethnic tensions: There were deep-seated ethnic tensions between the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, particularly between the Igbo and other groups, which contributed to the desire for Biafran independence.
- Regional imbalances: The distribution of resources, power, and wealth was uneven in Nigeria, with certain regions feeling neglected and exploited, which led to a sense of injustice and the desire for separation.
- Different cultural and historical backgrounds: The different regions in Nigeria had distinct cultural, historical, and linguistic traditions, which contributed to a sense of distinct identity and the desire for self-rule.
- Military intervention in politics: The military coup of 1966 and the subsequent political repression fueled the desire for independence, as the Igbo felt that their political and cultural rights were being suppressed.

Lessons for Nigeria

¹⁴ The Journal of Modern African Studies [Vol. 26, No. 2 \(Jun., 1988\)](#) , pp. 361-363 (3 pages) Published By: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

¹⁵ 1966 Nigerian Counter Coup, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1966_Nigerian_counter-coup. Accessed on January 4th, 2023.

The Biafra war of 1967 remains one of the most defining moments in the history of Nigeria. The conflict, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, had far-reaching consequences for the nation, including the loss of thousands of lives and the displacement of millions of people. For such a significant event, it is important to examine the key lessons that Nigeria can learn from the Biafra war and how these lessons can help the nation to avoid similar conflicts in the future.

Lesson 1: The Importance of Unity and Diversity

The formation of the country known as Nigeria was a rapid union of various ethnic groups, differing in culture, language, ethnicity, and religion. Prior to the new nation gaining self-awareness and unity, it gained independence and faced internal conflict with one region seeking independence from the merged entity. The Biafran War provides valuable insight into the significance of unity and diversity in Nigeria. The conflict was largely driven by long-standing ethnic and regional tensions. To prevent future conflicts, it is imperative for Nigeria to acknowledge and celebrate its diversity instead of allowing it to divide the nation. This requires a steadfast commitment to national unity and the desire to strive towards a common purpose, disregarding differences in ethnicity, religion, or regional origin. The Biafran War was a manifestation of deep ethnic and regional divisions within Nigeria, largely stemming from the sense of marginalization and exclusion felt by the majority Igbo population in Biafra. The war serves as a powerful reminder of the need for national unity and the promotion of a sense of belonging among all citizens.

Lesson 2: The Need for Inclusive Leadership

In the opening paragraph of the Late Chinua Achebe's book, *'The Trouble with Nigeria'* – the trouble with Nigeria is a problem of leadership¹⁶. Another important lesson that Nigeria can learn from the Biafra war is the need for an inclusive leadership at the centre; one that unifies the different regions of the country through development policies and projects that benefit each region regardless of language, ethnicity or political affiliations. The Biafra agitation for independence from the Nigerian state was predominantly born by feelings of exclusion and isolation in the governance and issues of uneven wealth sharing. The then southern Nigeria, which constituted of the present south east and south south states felt neglected in the wealth control that emanated from the oil rich southern states. Hence, the failure by the Gowon's government to address these issues solidified the desire of the South to secede.

Again, the skewed administrative, socio-economic and political arrangement of the Nigerian state, occasioned by the merging of different ethnic nationalities in 1914 by the British gave undue advantage to particular ethnic nationalities in the polity in terms of size,

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*

population, land mass, geographical spread and revenue sharing at the expense of others¹⁷. This further generated insecurity, suspicion, and fear.

Lesson 3: The Consequences of Political Injustice:

The Biafran War was also a result of political injustice, including widespread corruption, rigged elections, and a lack of accountability by political leaders. To address the issue of political injustice in Nigeria, the government must take a proactive approach towards combating corruption, ensuring fair elections, and holding political leaders accountable. Regarding corruption, it is widely recognized that this phenomenon acts as a hindrance to development and erodes the credibility of the state's institutions. The period leading to the January coup in particular, was characterized by rampant corruption that led to distrust and mistrust between various ethnic groups. Thus, the Nigerian government must take measures to improve transparency, reinforce institutional structures, and prosecute corrupt officials in order to win back the people's confidence in the government.

With regards to elections, it is imperative that Nigeria ensures that free and fair electoral processes are upheld. Rigged elections compromise the legitimacy of the government and breed discontent among the citizenry. As earlier pointed, rigged elections and electoral irregularities were a contributing factor to the conflict. To prevent political injustice, the government must establish impartial election monitoring, as well as increase transparency in the entire electoral process. A lack of accountability by political leaders engenders an environment of impunity and facilitates corruption and other forms of political injustice. In the case of the Biafra war, political leaders evaded accountability for their actions, leading to a further escalation of the conflict. To prevent political injustice, the Nigerian government must hold political leaders accountable for their actions and uphold the rule of law. The Nigerian Civil war serves as a reminder that political injustice has serious consequences and that it is essential to ensure fair and transparent governance.

Lesson 4: The Role of the Military:

The Biafran War was marked by the deployment of military forces by both the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Biafra. The conflict showed the devastating effects of military intervention in political disputes and the need for civilian control of the military. Several historical examples have shown that military intervention is not an effective solution in resolving conflicts. The use of force only leads to increased violence, loss of lives and destruction of property. In the case of the Biafra war, the military intervention only worsened the situation and resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent people. The use of force did not address the root causes of the conflict and merely served to exacerbate the situation.

¹⁷ Uwaifo Samuel Osaretin, Biafra Agitation and Politics of Imbalance in Nigeria. *Journal of Civil and Legal Sciences* Vol 8(2), 2019, pg. 1.

Nigeria should also learn that military intervention undermines the principles of democracy and rule of law. By using the military to suppress political opposition, the government sends a message that dissent will not be tolerated and that those in power will use any means necessary to maintain their hold on power. This undermines the fundamental principles of democracy, such as the right to freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Furthermore, the economic implications of military intervention were damning on both sides of the divide in terms of financial resources and human lives. The resources used to fund military operations in the Nigerian and Biafran side could have been applied to address the root causes of the conflict and provide much-needed development and infrastructure.

Lesson 5: The Need for Genuine Dialogue and Negotiation:

The Biafran War could have been avoided if there had been a genuine effort to engage in dialogue and find a peaceful solution to the conflict. The Aburi Accord of 1967 is a clear representation of this point. On January 4th and 5th, 1967, delegates and representatives from both the federal government of Nigeria and the Eastern region, led by Lieutenant colonel Emeka Ojukwu, met in Aburi, Ghana to agree on what is now known as the Aburi Accord. The meeting at Aburi was supposed to be the last opportunity to avoid any conflict or civil war. The Aburi meeting, hosted by Lieutenant General Joseph Arthur Ankrah of Ghana was attended by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon representing the federal government, the military governors of the four regions: Hassan Usman Katsina of the Northern Region, Robert Adeyinka Adebayo of the West, David Akpode Ejoor of the Mid-West and Chukwuemeka Ojukwu of the Eastern region, amongst others. Aburi was significant because both leaders agreed that force would not be used to settle internal conflicts. There was also the question of the disposition of Nigerian troops and the reorganization of the Army after the second coup on July 29, 1966, and the subsequent killings that followed in May and September. However, contrary to the Aburi agreement, and Gowon's promise on August 9, 1966, which all soldiers would return to their region of origin, northern troops still occupied the western region. Gowon replied that his promise of August 9, applied to the repatriation of soldiers of Northern origin stationed in the East back to the North and those of Eastern region stationed in the North back to the East. He had fulfilled his promise, he said. He then emphasized that soldiers of Northern origin would remain in the West since there were only a few Yoruba in the Nigerian army. Ojukwu was not satisfied and further insisted on a reorganization of the army on a regional basis. Gowon was also firmly opposed to splitting up the army. Ojukwu then proposed that the situation in the nation necessitated a drawing a part of the regions to avoid further friction and further killings. The renegation of the Aburi agreement still haunts Nigeria till this day, and fuels mutual suspicion between the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. This lesson highlights the importance of negotiation and the need to resolve political disputes through peaceful means.

Lesson 6: The Human Cost of War:

It is imperative for Nigeria to reflect upon the human toll of the Biafran War and strive to prevent similar devastating conflicts in the future. The war was characterized by widespread

violence, famine, and disease, which had a disastrous effect on the civilian populace. The plight of the civilians, which included starvation and forced displacement was felt by individuals across the country, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or racial backgrounds. In addition, the Biafran War had a significant impact on the country's economy and social structure. The conflict disrupted trade and commerce and resulted in the destruction or closure of many businesses. Furthermore, the war strained relationships between different ethnic and religious groups, which continues to be a challenge in contemporary Nigeria. The human cost of the Biafran War serves as a testament to the destructive impact of war on ordinary people. Hence, it is vital for Nigeria to remember the lessons of the conflict and to work towards peace and reconciliation both domestically and with its neighboring countries. This necessitates a commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict, including economic, political, and social issues, and promoting cooperation and understanding between diverse groups.

Conclusion

The Biafran War stands as a seminal moment in Nigerian history, reflecting a tragedy that had far-reaching consequences for the nation and the region as a whole. As such, it is imperative that the lessons learned from this conflict are remembered and utilized in order to prevent similar devastating events from occurring in the future. To this end, the promotion of national unity, fair governance, and the establishment of civilian control over the military, as well as peaceful negotiation, are essential components of building a more peaceful and prosperous future for all citizens.

Efforts have been made in the aftermath of the Biafran War to comprehend its causes and impact on Nigeria, leading to the realization that regional and ethnic tensions must be addressed to prevent outbreaks of violence. The conflict was largely driven by perceptions of marginalization and discrimination among Biafrans by the federal government, which highlights the need for the government to address such grievances and promote a sense of national unity and inclusivity.

The Biafran War also highlights the importance of effective conflict resolution mechanisms. The conflict was marked by intense fighting and widespread human rights abuses and attempts to negotiate a peaceful resolution were largely ineffective. This underscores the need for the development and implementation of strategies for resolving conflicts in a peaceful and constructive manner.

Overall, the Biafra War serves as a cautionary tale for Nigeria and other nations around the world. By addressing regional and ethnic tensions and developing effective conflict resolution mechanisms, it may be possible to prevent similar conflicts from occurring in the future.

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