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Analyzing the Socio-Psychological Effects of the Nigerian Civil War

DANIEL ADAMU
Kampala International University

Abstract. Using the Nigerian Civil War as a case study, this paper argues that wars that have taken place in the post-colonial space confirm for some, the notion that places like Africa are still too rife with ancient tribal animosities to create stable and viable states, thus some members of the international community have been slow to respond even when the facts of people's suffering (such as in Rwanda during the Rwandan Genocide) are fully known. Chillingly, the view that people deserve to lie in the graves they dig for themselves influences some policymakers, while donor- and disaster-fatigue makes others wary of giving as generously when they think that the wound being treated is somehow self-inflicted.

1. Introduction

Conflict refers to some forms of friction, disagreement, discord within a group when the beliefs or actions of one or more members of the group are either resisted by or unacceptable to one or more members of another group. It can arise between members of the same group known as intra-group conflict or it can occur between members of two or more groups and involve violence, interpersonal discord and psychological tension known as inter-group conflict.

Ethnic conflict is defined as an episode of sustained violent conflict in which national, ethnic and religious or other communal minorities challenge governments to seek major changes in status (Bate et al., 2003) Ethnic conflict is also an armed conflict between groups. It is worthy to know that the root causes of ethnic conflict do not involve ethnicity but rather institutional, political, and economic factors.

The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, July 6, 1967 – January 13, 1970, was a political conflict caused by the attempted secession of the southeastern provinces of Nigeria as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra. Created as a colonial entity by the British, Nigeria was divided between a mainly Muslim north and a mainly Christian and animist south. Following independence in 1960, three provinces were formed along tribal lines, the Hausa and Fulani (north), Yoruba (south-west), and Igbo or Ibo (south-east). Tribal tensions increased after a military coup in 1966 which resulted in General Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, taking power as President. This was followed by a

northerner-led counter coup a few months later. Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed and widespread reprisals were unleashed against the Igbo. Fearing marginalization within the state, on May 30, 1967 the Igbo-majority province declared its independence as the Republic of Biafra. Initially, its forces pushed back the Nigerian army but after a year of fighting, a stalemate developed. Nigeria then blocked food and supplies from entering Biafra, which resulted in a humanitarian crisis of huge proportion. Images of the suffering reached the global community via the media, attracting a large relief effort. Some of the founders of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) took part, later establishing the agency as a response to the tragic war. Biafra surrendered on January 13, 1970. This was one of the first post-World War II tragedies that the media took into living rooms across the globe and it gave impetus to the development of humanitarian responses to complex emergencies, whether caused by natural calamity or by human hand.

2. Causes of the conflict

The conflict was the result of economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions among the various people of Nigeria. Like many other African nations, Nigeria was an artificial structure initiated by the British which had neglected to consider religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences. When Nigeria won independence from Britain in 1960, the population of 60 million people consisted of nearly 300 differing ethnic and cultural groups. More than fifty years ago, Great Britain carved an area out of West Africa containing hundreds of different groups and unified it, calling it Nigeria. Although the area contained many different groups, three were predominant: the Igbo, which formed between 60-70 percent of the population in the southeast, the Hausa-Fulani, which formed about 65 percent of the people in the northern part of the territory; and, the Yoruba, which formed about 75 percent of the population in the southwestern part.

The semi-feudal and Islamic Hausa-Fulani in the North were traditionally ruled by an autocratic, conservative Islamic hierarchy consisting of some 30-odd Emirs who, in turn, owed their allegiance to a supreme Sultan. This Sultan was regarded as the source of all political power and religious authority.
The Yoruba political system in the southwest, like that of the Hausa-Fulani, also consisted of a series of monarchs (*Obas*). The Yoruba monarchs, however, were less autocratic than those in the North, and the political and social system of the Yoruba accordingly allowed for greater upward mobility based on acquired rather than inherited wealth and title.

The Igbo in the southeast, in contrast to the two other groups, lived in some six hundred autonomous, democratically-organized villages. Although there were monarchs in these villages (whether hereditary or elected), they were largely little more than figureheads. Unlike the other two regions, decisions among the Igbo were made by a general assembly in which every man could participate.

The different political systems among these three groups of people produced highly divergent sets of customs and values. The Hausa-Fulani commoners, having contact with the political system only through their village head who was designated by the Emir or one of his subordinates, did not view political leaders as amenable to influence. Political decisions were to be obeyed without question. This highly centralized and authoritarian political system elevated to positions of leadership persons willing to be subservient and loyal to superiors, the same virtues required by Islam for eternal salvation. One of the chief functions of the traditional political system was to maintain the Islamic religion. Hostility to economic and social innovation was therefore deeply rooted.

In contrast to the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo often participated directly in the decisions which affected their lives. They had a lively awareness of the political system and regarded it as an instrument for achieving their own personal goals. Status was acquired through the ability to arbitrate disputes that might arise in the village, and through acquiring rather than inheriting wealth. With their emphasis upon achievement, individual choice, and democratic decision-making, the challenges of modernization for the Igbo entailed responding to new opportunities in traditional ways.

These tradition-derived differences were perpetuated and, perhaps, even enhanced by the British system of colonial rule in Nigeria. In the North, the British found it convenient to rule indirectly through the Emirs, thus perpetuating rather than changing the indigenous authoritarian political system. As a concomitant of this system, Christian missionaries were excluded from the North, and the area thus remained virtually closed to Western education and influence, in contrast to the Igbo, the richest of whom sent many of their sons to British universities. During the ensuing years, the Northern Emirs, thus were able to maintain traditional political and religious institutions, while limiting social change. As a result, the North, at the time of independence in 1960, was by far the most underdeveloped area in Nigeria with a literacy rate of two(2) percent as compared to 19.2 percent in the East (literacy in Arabic script, learned in connection with religious education, was higher). The West enjoyed a much higher literacy level being the first part of the country to have contact with Western education in addition to the free primary education program of the pre-independence Western Regional Government. In the South, the missionaries rapidly introduced Western forms of education Consequently, the Yoruba were the first group in Nigeria to become significantly modernized and they provided the first African civil servants, doctors, lawyers, and other technicians and professionals.

In Igbo areas, missionaries were introduced at a later date because of British difficulty in establishing firm control over the highly autonomous Igbo villages. However, the Igbo people took to Western education zealously. Furthermore, most Igbo eventually adopted the religion of the Christian colonialists. By the 1940s they had transformed themselves into one of the most

educated, wealthiest, and politically unified groups in Nigeria and presented a serious challenge to Yoruba predominance in the civil service and the professions. Moreover, severe population pressure in the Igbo homeland combined with an intense desire for economic improvement drove thousands of Igbo to other parts of Nigeria in search of work.

3. Conflicts during the colonial era

The British political ideology of dividing Nigeria during the colonial period into three regions North, West and East exacerbated the already well-developed economic, political, and social competition among Nigeria's different ethnic groups. For the country was divided in such a way that the North had slightly more population than the other two regions combined. On this basis the Northern Region was allocated a majority of the seats in the Federal Legislature established by the colonial authorities. Within each of the three regions the dominant ethnic groups, theHausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, respectively, formed political parties that were largely regional and tribal in character: the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the North; the Action Group in the West (AG): and the National Conference of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the East. Although these parties were not exclusively homogeneous in terms of their ethnic or regional make-up, the later disintegration of Nigeria results largely from the fact that these parties were primarily based in one region and one tribe. To simplify matters, these can be referred to as the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo-based; or Northern, Western and Eastern parties.

During the 1940s and 1950s the Igbo and Yoruba parties were in the forefront of the fight for independence from Britain. They also wanted an independent Nigeria to be organized into several small states so that the conservative and backward North could not dominate the country. Northern leaders, however, fearful that independence would mean political and economic domination by the more Westernized elites in the South, preferred the perpetuation of British rule. As a condition for accepting independence, they demanded that the country continue to be divided into three regions with the North having a clear majority. Igbo and Yoruba leaders, anxious to obtain an independent country at all cost accepted the Northern demands.

4. The Military Coup

Claims of electoral fraud were the ostensible reason for a military coup on January 15, 1966, led by Igbo junior Army officers, mostly majors and captains. This coup resulted in General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo and head of the Nigerian Army, taking power as President, becoming the first military head of state in Nigeria. The coup itself failed, as Ironsi rallied the military against the plotters. Ironsi then instituted military rule, alleging that the democratic institutions had failed and that, while he was defending them, they clearly needed revision and clean-up before reversion back to democratic rule. The coup, despite its failure, was perceived as having benefited mostly the Igbos because all but one of the five coup plotters were

Igbos, and Ironsi, himself an Igbo, was thought to have promoted many Igbos in the Army at the expense ofYoruba and Hausa officers. On July 29, 1966, the Northerners executed a counter-coup. This coup was led by Lt. Col. Murtala Mohammed. It placed Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon into power. Ethnic tensions due to the coup and counter-coup increased and led, in September 1966, to the large-scale massacres of Christian Igbos living in the Muslim north.

The discovery of vast oil reserves in the Niger River delta, a sprawling network of rivers and swamps at the southernmost tip of the country, had tempted the southeast to annex the region in order to become economically self-sufficient. However, the exclusion of easterners from power made many fear that the oil revenues would be used to benefit areas in the north and west rather than their own. Prior to the discovery of oil, Nigeria's wealth derived from agricultural products from the south, and minerals from the north. The north, up until around 1965, had had low-level demands to secede from Nigeria and retain its wealth for northerners. These demands seemed to cease when it became clear that oil in the southeast would become a major revenue source. This further fueled Igbo fears that the northerners had plans to strip eastern oil to benefit the North.

5. The Break-away

The military governor of the Igbo-dominated southeast, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, citing the northern massacres and electoral fraud, proclaimed with the southern parliament the secession of the south-eastern region from Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra, an independent nation on May 30, 1967. Although, there was much sympathy in Europe and elsewhere, only four countries recognized the new republic.

Several peace accords especially the one produced at Aburi, Ghana (the Aburi Accord) collapsed and a shooting war followed. Ojukwu managed at Aburi to get agreement to a confederation for Nigeria, rather than a federation. He was warned by his advisers that this reflected a failure to understand the difference on the side of Gowon, and that it would be revoked. When it was, he regarded this as a failure of Gowon and the Military Government to honor their agreements, and that he was acting in accord with the agreement. His advisers, meanwhile, felt that Gowon had enacted as much of Aburi as was politically feasible and that Gowon had acted in the spirit of Aburi.

6. The Civil War

The Nigerian government launched a "police action" to retake the secessionist territory. The war began on July 6, 1967 when Nigerian Federal troops advanced in two columns into Biafra. Nigeria's army offensive was through the north of Biafra led by Col. Shuwa and designated as 1 division. The division was made up of mostly northern officers. The right-hand Nigerian column advanced on the town of Nsukka which fell on July 14, while the left-hand column made for Garkem, which

was captured on July 12. At this stage of the war, other regions of Nigeria (the West and Mid-West) still considered the war as a confrontation between the north (notable Hausas) and the east (notable Igbos).

However, the Biafrans responded with an offensive of their own when on July 9, the Biafran forces moved west into the Mid-Western Nigerian region across the Niger River, passing through Benin City, until they were stopped at Ore just over the state boundary on August 21, just 130 miles east of the Nigerian capital of Lagos. The Biafran attack was led by Lt. Col. Banjo. They met little resistance and the Mid-West was easily taken over. This was due to the arrangement and agreement between Federal government and the East that all soldiers should be returned to their regions to stop the spate of killings in which Igbos soldiers had been major victims. The soldiers that were supposed to defend Mid-West were mostly mid-west Igbos and were in touch with their eastern counterpart. Gen. Gowon responded by asking then Col. Muritala to form another division (2 division) to expel Biafrans from mid-west, defend Biafra's west and attack Biafra from the west as well. Col. Muritala later became military head of state. As Nigerian forces were to retake the Mid-West, the Biafran military administrator declared the Republic of Benin on September 19.

Although Benin City was retaken by the Nigerians on September 20, the Biafrans succeeded in their primary objective by tying down as many Nigerian Federal troops as they could. Gen. Gowon also launched an offensive from Biafra's south from the delta to riverine area using the bulk of Lagos Garrison command under Col. Adekunle (black scorpion) to form 3 division which latter changed to the 3rd marine commandos. Recruitment into the Nigeria Army increased with Biafra's offensive to the west mostly among other southern ethnics especially Yoruba and Edo people. Four battalions of the Nigerian 2nd Infantry Division were needed to drive the Biafrans back and eliminate their territorial gains made during the offensive. But the Nigerians were repulsed three times and lost thousands of troops as they tried to cross the Niger during October.

However reorganization of the Nigerian forces, the reluctance of the Biafran army to attack again, and the effects of a naval, land and air blockade of Biafra led to a change in the balance of forces.
The Swedish eccentric, Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen, also led a flight of MiniCOINs in action; his BAF (Biafran Air Force) consisted of three Swedes and two Biafrans.

The Nigerians then settled down to a period of siege by blockading Biafra. Amphibious landings by the Nigerian marines led by Major Isaac Adaka Boro captured the Niger Delta cities of Bonny, Okrika and Port Harcourt on July 26, and the port of Calabar on October 18 by elements of the Nigerian 3rd Marine Commando Division. In the north, Biafran forces were pushed back into their core Igbo territory, and the capital of Biafra, the city of Enugu, was captured by

Nigerian forces belonging to the 1st Infantry Division on October 4. The Biafrans continued to resist in their core Igbo heartlands, which were soon surrounded by Nigerian forces.

7. Stalemate:

From 1968 onward, the war fell into a form of stalemate, with Nigerian forces unable to make significant advances into the remaining areas of Biafran control. But another Nigerian offensive from April to June 1968 began to close the ring around the Biafrans with further advances on the two northern fronts and the capture of Port Harcourt on May 19, 1968. The blockade of the surrounded Biafrans led to a humanitarian disaster when it emerged that there was widespread civilian hunger and starvation in the besieged Igbo areas. The Biafran government claimed that Nigeria was using hunger and genocide to win the war, and sought aid from the outside world. A Nigerian commission, including British doctors from the Liverpool University School of Tropical Medicine, visited Biafra after the war and concluded that the evidence of deliberate starvation was overplayed, caused by confusion between the symptoms of starvation and various tropical illnesses. While they did not doubt that starvation had occurred, it was less clear to what extent it was a result of the Nigerian blockade or the restriction of food to the civilians (to make it available to the military) by the Biafran government.

Many volunteer bodies organized blockade-breaking relief flights into Biafra carrying food, medicines, and sometimes (according to some claims) weapons. More common was the claim that the arms-carrying aircraft would closely shadow aid aircraft, making it more difficult to distinguish between aid aircraft and military supply aircraft. It has been argued that by prolonging the war the Biafran relief effort (characterized by Canadian development consultant Ian Smillie as "an act of unfortunate and profound folly"), contributed to the deaths of as many as 180,000 civilians.

The Nigerian government also claimed that the Biafran government was hiring foreign mercenaries to extend the war. Nigeria also used 'mercenaries', in the form of Egyptian pilots for their air force MiG 17 fighters and Il 28 bombers. The Egyptians conscripts frequently attacked civilian rather than military targets, bombing numerous Red Cross shelters.

Bernard Kouchner was one of a number of French doctors who volunteered with the French Red Cross to work in hospitals and feeding centers in besieged Biafra. The Red Cross required volunteers to sign an agreement, which was seen by some (like Kouchner and his supporters) as being similar to a gag order, that was designed to maintain the organization's neutrality, whatever the circumstances. Kouchner and the other French doctors signed this agreement.After entering the country, the volunteers, in addition to Biafran health workers and hospitals, were subjected to attacks by the Nigerian army, and witnessed civilians being murdered and starved by the blockading forces. Kouchner also witnessed these events,

particularly the huge number of starving children, and when he returned to France, he publicly criticized the Nigerian government and the Red Cross for their seemingly complicit behavior. With the help of other French doctors, Kouchner put Biafra in the media spotlight and called for an international response to the situation. These doctors, led by Kouchner, concluded that a new aid organization was needed that would ignore political/religious boundaries and prioritize the welfare of victims. They created Médecins Sans Frontières in 1971 *(Doctors without Borders)*.

In June 1969, the Biafrans launched a desperate offensive against the Nigerians in their attempts to keep the Nigerians off-balance. They were supported by foreign mercenary pilots continuing to fly in food, medical supplies and weapons. Most notable of the mercenaries was Swedish Count Carl Gustav von Rosen who led five Malmö MFI-9 MiniCOIN small piston-engined aircraft, armed with rocket pods and machine guns. His force attacked Nigerian military airfields in Port Harcourt, Enugu, Benin City and Ughelli, destroying or damaging a number of Nigerian Air Force jets used to attack relief flights, including a few Mig-17s and three out of Nigeria's six Ilyushin Il-28 bombers that were used to bomb Biafran villages and farms on a daily basis. Although taken off-guard by the surprise Biafran offensive, the Nigerians soon recovered and held off the Biafrans long enough for the offensive to stall out. The Biafran air attacks did disrupt the combat operations of the Nigerian Air Force, but only for a few months.

8. End of War

The Nigerian federal forces launched their final offensive against the Biafrans on December 23, 1969 with a major thrust by the 3rd Marine Commando Division (the division was commanded by Col. Obasanjo, who later became president twice) which succeeded in splitting the Biafran enclave into two by the end of the year. The final Nigerian offensive, named "Operation Tail-Wind," was launched on January 7, 1970 with the 3rd Marine Commando Division attacking, and supported by the 1st Infantry division to the north and the 2nd Infantry division to the south. The Biafran town of Owerri fell on January 9, and Uli fell on January 11. The war finally ended with the final surrender of the Biafran forces in the last Biafra-held town of Amichi on January 13, 1970. Only a few days earlier, Ojukwu fled into exile by flying by plane to the republic of Côte d'Ivoire, leaving his deputy Philip Effiong to handle the details of the surrender to Yakubu Gowon of the federal army.

9. The Consequences of the Conflict

The war cost Nigeria a great deal in terms of lives, money, and its image in the world. During the war, there were 100,000 military casualties and between 500,000 and two million civilians' deaths from starvation. It has been estimated that up to three million people may have died due to the conflict, most from hunger and disease. Reconstruction, helped by oil money, was swift; however, the old ethnic and religious tensions remained a constant feature of Nigerian politics. Military

government continued in power in Nigeria for many years, and people in the oil-producing areas claimed they were being denied a fair share of oil revenues. Laws were passed mandating that political parties could not be ethnically or tribally based; however, it was hard to make this work in practice.

The Igbos felt that they had been deliberately displaced from government positions, because their pre-war posts were now occupied by other Nigerians (mostly Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani). When Igbo civil servants left to join similar posts in Biafra, their positions had been replaced; and when the war was over the government did not feel that it should sack their replacements, preferring to regard the previous incumbents as having resigned. This, however, has led to a feeling of an injustice. Further feelings of injustice were caused by Nigeria, during the war, changing its currency so that Biafran supplies of pre-war Nigerian currency were no longer honored and then, at the end of the war, offering only N£20 to easterners on exchange of their Biafran currency. This was seen as a deliberate policy to hold back the Igbo middle class, leaving them with little wealth to expand their business interests.

On May 29, 2000, *The Guardian of Lagos* reported that President Olusegun Obasanjo commuted to retirement, the dismissal of all military persons who fought for the breakaway state of Biafra during the Nigerian civil war. In a national broadcast, he said that the decision was based on the principle that "justice must at all times be tempered with mercy."

Speaking to the BBC 30 years after the war, Chief Emeka Ojukwu said that "When the civil war ended, the government promised the Ibo people that there would be no victors and no vanquished." "The authorities," he continued, "were desperate to avoid a repetition of the ethnic tensions which preceded the war." Himself pardoned in the mid-1980s, he remained concerned that since the war, "Ibos have been largely excluded from power," which "could cause instability in the future".

10. Conclusion

The suffering in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War led to the development if international humanitarian agencies designed to respond to complex emergencies anywhere in the world.

During almost thirty months of fighting between the Federal Government and Biafran secessionists, the conflict received more attention from the west than any other previous African 'emergency.' From the standpoint of the international humanitarian sector, Biafra served as one of the first conflicts where issues of more contemporary complex emergencies began to develop. Biafra taught the international community how to better provide and coordinate aid and assistance to those affected by a complex emergency. From these lessons came the beginnings of

a framework for several issues, including: dealing with internally displaced persons (IDPs), negotiating humanitarian access and repatriation of unaccompanied children. However, in spite of Biafra's importance, the world seems to have little recollection of this conflict and the lessons learned.

On the other hand, this war and others that have taken place in the post-colonial space confirm for some, the notion that places like Africa are still too rife with ancient tribal animosities to create stable and viable states, thus some members of the international community have been slow to respond even when the facts of people's suffering (such as in Rwanda during the Rwandan Genocide) are fully known. Chillingly, the view that people deserve to lie in the graves they dig for themselves influences some policymakers, while donor- and disaster-fatigue makes others wary of giving as generously when they think that the wound being treated is somehow self-inflicted.

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