

## Contextualizing the International Dimensions of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

<sup>1</sup>Dr. M.S. Audu

<sup>2</sup>Osuala, Uzoma S.

<sup>3</sup>Ibrahim, Baba Isaac

1, 2, 3 Department of History  
Federal University Lokoja,  
Kogi State, Nigeria.

### Abstract

*War is a phenomenon which has ravaged human society. At anytime war erupts, efforts are geared towards stemming it. Attempts to forestall such occurrence could be internally induced or externally motivated. In 1967, Nigeria was embroiled in over two and half year's war. The civil war in the country was the offshoot of the myriad of problems which had confronted the nation in the early 1960s. It ranged from census crises, ethnic politics, federal election crises, electoral manipulations to economic and political sleaze. The consequence – was the Civil War which began in 1967. The war resulted in intervention from 'outside'. However, the involvement of international actors had been said to have been dictated by economic as well as political reasons. Thus, the protracted war that lasted for almost three years. The discourse, therefore, revisits, re-examines and reflects the international dimensions to the Nigerian Civil War. It posited that the motives for intervention was dictated by economic neo-imperialism and therefore, Eurocentric. The paper submits and recommends that Nigeria and Africa's problems could only be solved from within through devoted leaders rather than leaders who enslave themselves to the West.*

**Keywords:** Contextualizing, International, Civil war, Nigeria

### 1. Introduction

Nigeria's independence in October 1, 1960<sup>1</sup> created overtures for the entire international communities to establish diplomatic relations with the new nation. The British colonial policies and overriding influence to some extent were largely restrained. Thus, as a sovereign nation, Nigeria could institute diplomatic relations with any nation in the world as well as determine her foreign policies without absolute external control. Hence, many countries in the world were keen on establishing political ties with the country *cum* initiating economic investments. This was necessitated by the fact that Nigeria was the most populous nation in Africa and her potentials for economic growth were tremendous. In addition, the country was buoyed largely by the discovery of commercial quantities of petroleum in the Niger-Delta region located then, in the Eastern Region in 1956. Consequently, Nigeria bagged the sobriquet, *the Giant of Africa*<sup>2</sup> and peoples both inside and outside the country were expectant that Nigeria would soon rise to claim a leading position in Africa and world affairs.<sup>3</sup> However, this was a figment of the imagination as the nation was marred and stagnated by a decade of what could be described as political violence, electoral crises, ethnic politics, politicization of the army, corruption as well as economic underdevelopment.<sup>4</sup> It was this hopeless and pensive state of the country that however, culminated in the imbroglios of a two and half year civil war from May 5, 1967 to January 12, 1970. The war rent the country along regional and ethnic lines, killed between one million and three million people and nearly destroyed the fragile federal bonds that had held together the Nigerian state.<sup>5</sup>

The outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War enhanced opportunity for international infiltrations into the Nigeria's polity. International involvements in the domestic or internal affairs of other nations usually begin with diplomatic ties as well as economic relations. However, there might be other factors. Olayiwola had argued that,

*at other times, conflicts usually fuelled the involvement of 'international actors' in the political-economy of other nations. The global dimensions and involvements in domestic crises of others is(sic) equally provided by **ROGUE STATES** (capital letters mine) and crime syndicate networks of **ILLEGAL TRADE OF ARMS**, drugs and trafficking of illegal goods across international borders.<sup>6</sup>*

This argument could be brought to fore and sustained considering the involvement of Britain, France the U.S.S.R. among others during the Nigerian civil war. This scenario was visible in Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Burundi among others. It was expected that with intervention of the *Great Powers*, the civil war would end in a shortest possible time. Nonetheless, it lingered on for more than one had expected. For whatever reason, it cannot be gainsaid that these *Powers* had contributed to this protracted conflicts. We shall return to details on intervention anon. It is in the light of this that the discourse revisits, re-examines and reflects on the *raison d'être* for international dimensions to the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 -1970.

## 2. The Political Prelude to the Nigerian Civil War

The political crises that engulfed the country in the early and mid 1960s could be traced back to the amalgamation of 1914. The country was artificially created by the British colonial power without the consent of the people being herded together. Over 250 ethnic groups were arbitrarily fused together into an unwieldy and non-consensual union by the United Kingdom. Nigeria was so ethnically, religiously and linguistically complex that even some of its leading politicians initially doubted if it could constitute a real country. Tafawa Balewa, a northern politician who later became the first prime minister once stated that,

*Nigeria existed as one country only on paper. It is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country.*<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, another prominent Nigerian politician from western region of the country, Obafemi Awolowo stressed that,

*Nigeria is not a nation, it is a mere geographic expression.... On top of all this, the country is made up of a large number of small, un-integrated tribal and clannish units who live in political isolation from one another.... But they are divided into a number of tribes and clans, EACH OF WHICH CLAIMS AND STRIVES TO BE INDEPENDENT OF THE OTHER.*<sup>8</sup>(capital letters mine)

These utterances and views held about the composition of the nation by her political leaders were later to fuelled up ethnic politics of widened division that marred the first republic thereby, ushering in the military coup of January 1966 and its attendant civil war.

The largest ethnic groups in the north of the country were the Muslims, traditional and socially conservative, Hausa/Fulani ethnic group. The south was dominated by two competing ethnic groups: the proud and culturally rich Yoruba in the South-west, and the energetic, industrious and vibrant Igbo in the South-east. In 1939, the British carved the country into three regions along the predominant ethnic lines.<sup>9</sup> Hemmed in between them were approximately another 250 disparate ethnicities. The differences between them were accentuated by religion. The South of the country is predominantly Christian and the North is largely Muslims. Added to the above, the cultural differences between the ethnic groups made it virtually impossible for Nigerians to have any commonality of purpose. Thus, in the 1950s, when it was obvious that the British would relinquish power to the leading Nigerian political leaders, the polity to have control of the central government exhibited the clear differences of the separate regions. Hence, ethnic politics towed party formations. In addition, ethnic conflicts were equally infiltrated into the army, the Nigerian police, the civil service as well as in the educational sector.<sup>10</sup>

The formation of political parties assumed the ideology of each of the three geo-political regions in the north, south-east and south-west. The dominant and largest in the northern part was the Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.) whose motto of *One North, One People* gave an insight accurate description of its objectives. The western region dominant party was the Yoruba led Action Group (A.G.) and the eastern region was prevailed by the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C.), which was controlled by the Igbo. These regional based parties assured two things: firstly, that no party could govern Nigeria on its own, and secondly, that ethnic conflict was only a matter of time.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the separate parties in each region began to canvass for party alliances from the other regions amidst political intrigues, electioneering manipulations and manoeuvrings.

Consequently, at independence in 1960, the NPC took control of the federal government with the NCNC as the junior partner in a shaky and shallow coalition. The NPC's deputy leader, Tafawa Balewa, became Prime Minister and the NCNC's eloquent leader Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe assumed the ceremonial role of Governor-General until 1963, when the country became a Republic, upon which his title was changed to *President*.<sup>12</sup>

The AG formed the opposition with the energetic Obafemi Awolowo as leader of the opposition. The political marriage alliance between the NPC/NCNC existed amid mutual mistrust and suspicion. Thus in 1963, following the impending Federal election of 1964/65, it collapsed. The NPC, subsequently, united with NNPP, a break-away branch of AG to form the Nigerian National Alliance (N.N.A.) while the NCNC united with AG to form the United Progressive Grand Alliance (U.P.G.A.). As the NNA and the UPGA prepared for a mammoth federal election showdown in 1964, it was embroiled with vitriolic vituperation and violence. The 1963 Western Crisis was a case in point.<sup>13</sup> Political parties regarded elections as a *do or die* affair. Tensions and insecurity reached unprecedented level during the heated federal election campaign. Many of the politicians were little more than ethnic champions who were uninterested in a national outlook. The campaign was conducted not on platforms of policy or ideology, but on the basis of personal abuse, abusive ethnic chauvinism and party and ethnic aggrandizement. The first republic and the situation in Nigeria in the mid 1960s is regrettably described as scandalously corrupt, dominated by electoral malpractices and arson as well as maladministration cum wild speeches by politicians that marred and threatened the corporate existence of the new nation and republic.

It was in the midst of such preposterously political perplexity with its pervasiveness across the country that prompted the military coup d'état of January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1966.<sup>14</sup> However, considering the ethnic composition of the coup plotters and the ethnic composition of the victims of the coup, it was regarded as an attempt by the Igbo to prevail over the polity of the nation. This opinion was infiltrated into the country by the British media. As usual, it was generated in line with its colonial policies towards the country – *divide and rule*. Consequently, there was a reprisal counter coup in July 29<sup>th</sup> of the same year executed by the northern military officers and encouraged by the British government in which many Igbo top military officers were killed and thousands were on the move as refugees. Similarly, surrounding the political confusion in the nation was the extant mutual distrust on the supposed constitutional conference convened to resolve the lingering political stalemate and military crises that bedevilled the country. To this end, all efforts made to proffer solutions to these problems was heavily laden with mistrust and inveterate bitterness.<sup>15</sup> As the country was almost dragged to the brink of the abyss, after several abortive attempts to meet locally, the Nigerian military leaders representing the Federal Military Government (FMG) and the Biafran Government journeyed to *Aburi* in Ghana in the hope of finding a lasting solution to the protracted menace that had confronted the country.

### **3. The Aburi Accord: The Turning Point That Never Turned**

On January 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 1967, all members of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) met for the first time in six months since the conflicts began at *Aburi* in Ghana under the auspices of the Ghanaian Head of State, Lt. General Joseph Ankrah who had overthrown the first Ghanaian President, Kwame Nkrumah who was in China.<sup>16</sup> At this juncture, this was the first formal international dimension in the Nigeria crises. In other words, it was the first time the differences between the FMG and the Eastern Regional Government were taken outside the shores of the country. The journey to *Aburi* on the wake of the discord between the FMG led by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon and the Eastern Regional Military Government led by Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu was expected to be a landmark in the Nigerian conflict resolution. Nonetheless, the parley ended up in a discordant accord. Returning back home in Nigeria, however, both parties gave different interpretations to the *Aburi* agreements.<sup>17</sup> To this end, opinions held in some quarters had attributed the incalcitrant nature of Gowon after the meeting at *Aburi* to the British creation. Hence, endless haggling over the *Aburi Accord* led to mounting tensions which resulted in the secession of the Eastern Region to form the Independent Republic of Biafra with Odumegwu Ojukwu as Head of State. The FMG refused to recognize the Eastern Region secession eventually led to the Civil War in 1967.

To this end, and it must be emphasized that the failure of the Ghanaian government under Ankrah who had hosted and witnessed the *Aburi Accord* to urge the Gowon regime to adhere to the agreement reached was a mockery and weakness of the international system at resolving conflicts in troubled-African nations. In addition, and on the part of African leaders, it portrayed insincerity and lack of commitment to confront and tackle African colonial-created problems.

It is equally necessary to revisit and re-evaluate the international mediation of the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U.) in the Civil War. From the outset of the war, the position of the OAU was predictable. The organisation had insisted and rigidly too, on the principle of settlement within the context of one Nigeria.

Hence, at its summit meeting in Kinshasa in September, 1967, the OAU made timid and uncoordinated efforts to settle the war, however, the outcome was imaginable. Raph had proffered explanation to the African leaders' attitude when he remarked that:

*African leaders had opposed to secession on the ground that any Biafran success at secession would trigger off similar movement in the continent.*<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, many African leaders were contented and satisfied with their newly positions and inherited powers from the colonial masters even if it means sacrificing Africa's future peace and stability for personal aggrandizement. In other words, African leaders were gratified with the arbitrary states' creation bemused and bedevilled with ethnic animosity decided at Berlin Conference of 1884/85 when the continent was partitioned. The consequences precipitated a protracted and unending ethnic conflicts and border disputes on the continent. The Nigeria Civil War, the Rwanda Conflict in 1994 between the Tutsi and the Hutu, the Sudanese crises are cases in points.<sup>19</sup> The position of the African leaders and the decision of the OAU in this regard on the Nigerian Civil War was short-sighted and auto-centric. Thus, incessant conflicts and civil wars bordered on the same problems gnawed across the continent in subsequent years.

Another international outlook in the Nigerian Civil War was the international recognition for the Republic of Biafra. In the course of the war, the following African countries: Tanzania, April 13, 1968; Gabon, May 8, 1968; Ivory Coast, May 14, 1968 and Zambia, May 20, 1968 had accepted and recognized the Biafra right to self-determination.<sup>20</sup> The recognition spurred and propelled the intransigence of the Biafran government not to relent in its struggle for survival even in the face of annihilation. On the other hand, the recognition provoked and infuriated the FMG to decide that more force should be adopted in order to crush the Biafra rebellion. In addition, the support the Biafran government received from several international charitable organisations such as International Red Cross, Joint Church Aid, CARITAS<sup>21</sup> and a number of the national Red Cross Organisation emboldened the Ojukwu *khaki boys* to fight on.

#### **4. The Great Powers' Intervention – What Motives?**

Besides the role of African leaders and the Organisation of African Unity, there was another international perspective to the civil war. To this end, the activities of the *Great Powers* (Britain, France, the USSR among others) shall be re-examined. The U.S.A. on her part was embroiled with the Vietnam War, thus she was minimally involved, nevertheless, she could not be completely insulated from the civil war. The U.S.A. provided technical support. Britain's contributions were dictated by economic interest as well as for national interest and glory. In the words of Frederick Forsyth,

*for those inside Britain who concerned themselves in any way with Nigeria, that country (NIGERIA) represented, like others, not a land with a population of real people, but a market.*<sup>22</sup>

A market for economic exploitation provided the traditional colonial policy of *divide and rule* is maintained. This had been the British traditional economic interest in Nigeria borne by small concerns of British politicians, civil servants and businessmen, and it was purely imperialistic – OIL. The British interest in the country was deemed necessary at the time considering the closure of the Suez Canal against Britain by the Egyptian Revolutionary government led by Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser. Thus, the need for Britain to keep the economy of the country (Nigeria) in a single unit as well as retain her privileged place in the nation remained paramount. This was stressed by David Morris thus:

*the Arab denial of supplies (oil) to Britain and the U.S.A. makes Nigerian oil of potential importance.*<sup>23</sup>

Nigerian oil had low sulphuric content which made the petroleum to Britain salient. Hence, the British total determination to see a single economic unit no matter what the cost in suffering to the people of Nigeria through the grossest interference in the internal politics of that country. Therefore, Britain chose to ally itself not with the people or their aspirations but with a small clique of army mutineers<sup>24</sup> even in the face of genocide in Biafra.

Added to the aforementioned British interest in the civil war, her concern was equally borne out of national interest and glory in order to refrain other European nations ( France and the USSR in particular) from extending their economic imperialism on Nigeria. Angela Stent stressed that the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson justified the continued sale of arms to the FMG by maintaining that,

*if Britain stopped supplying them (FMG with arms and ammunitions) its influence in Nigeria would end, and the Soviets contacts would increase.*<sup>25</sup>

Thus, without gainsaying, the British interest in the civil war was for economic domination not necessary for peaceful co-existence.

Like Britain, the involvement of the USSR was no less than economic imperialism, political aggrandizement as well as for national glory. Having lost her place in the earlier Congo crisis and her intervention in Ghana a still-born,<sup>26</sup> the Russian government began to extend her diplomatic overtures to the FMG by supplying her with arms. The USSR had expected that if the British and the Americans were reluctant to supply arms to the FMG, she would, thereby replacing the Western influence in Nigeria. Angela Stent had pointed out that the Russian intervened in the Nigerian civil war quietly and gradually, with little ideological commitment, stressing the *commercial* nature of the arms deal.<sup>27</sup> Another fundamental reason for the Soviets support for the FMG was that Nigerian government controlled one of the most important countries in the sub-region. To Russia, Nigeria is strategic in West African political-economy. Thus, the Soviet military equipment and aircraft began to arrive in Nigeria, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967. Apparently, the first shipment included twenty (20) MIG-15 fighter trainers, six (6) Czech L-29 Delphin jet fighters, together with some two hundred (200) Soviet technicians who left Nigeria on completing the assembly and testing of the aircraft.<sup>28</sup> Prior to the USSR support for the FMG, she had always championed the course of the Eastern Nigeria (the Igbo) as progressive entity. However, this changed when it was obvious of the British and Americans support for the Gowon regime. The USSR's experience in Congo gave room for this impromptu change of foreign policy. The Russian government oscillation here was dictated by economic interest, political hegemony and influence in the region rather than by stable mutual co-existence for the nation.

In the ideology of interventionism, the French government sympathized and supported the Biafran secession. However, France role was prejudicial – she was driven by national glory and neo-imperialism. The French government intervention was pretentious guided by the Atlantic Charter of 1941 which emphasized *the right for self-determination*. The Charter's declaration was made on August 14, 1941 by the then president of the U.S.A., Franklin D. Roosevelt and the British Prime Minister, Sir, Winston Churchill.<sup>29</sup> The proclamation stressed the rights of all peoples to choose their own form of government and not have boundary changes imposed on them. Impressive and promising this was, nonetheless, France perceived it as an ideal opportunity to undermine the geographical size of the nation in the face of smaller countries in the French West African sub-region. This was contained in the French public thinking as expressed by Raph:

*the war devitalizes a vast and potentially very rich commonwealth (British ) country which happens to be surrounded by far weaker and smaller francophone states.*<sup>30</sup>

Thus, in order to maintain political equilibrium in the sub-region, the Biafran Republic ought to be technically and militarily assisted. Therefore, for the French government, the Biafran struggle should be sustained on the pretext of *rights to self-determination*. In essence, the size and economic power of the nation (Nigeria) as it stood prior to the civil war in 1967 constituted a threat to the French neo-imperial activities in West Africa. Hence, the necessity to weaken the strength of the country on the stratagem of Biafra rights to self-determination. This situation could only explain the traditional opportunism and lack of predictability in the international system as determined by the *West*.

## 5. Some Caveats and Conclusion

The failure to reasonably address the conflicts that confronted Nigeria by her leaders escalated into the Nigerian civil war. The failure of the OAU and African leaders to address the challenge and resolve the ethnic and border conflicts in the 1960s after independence of many African countries resulted in the spate of civil wars, ethnic conflicts and border disputes in the 1970s through 1990s. The reason without doubt was that African leaders were satiated to accept and maintain the arbitrary states' creation imposed on Africa by the colonial masters.

So, the fear of self-determination and secession by any of the African ethnic composition was thought to threaten the power of the African leaders as well as spark off waves of secession in some other African States. Therefore, the Biafran determination to secede must be crushed in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the inability to contain the conflicts resulted in the intervention of the *Great Powers*. Their objectives were to continue the tradition of political domination, economic exploitation as well as neo-imperialism.

Hence, Africa was embroiled in wars in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This explained the preposterous and unpredictability of the *Outsiders* in resolving African conflicts. The *West* interest in Africa is primarily economic, and every necessary measure has always been taken to sustain those motives. Notwithstanding the intervention from outside, African problems have never ceased to be solved. Instances abound everywhere in the continent – Sudan, Congo, Sierra Leone, Rwanda among others. Therefore, I shall suggest and conclude in the words of Olayiwola to Nigerian and African leaders thus: ‘The 21<sup>st</sup> century African leaders should wake up and realize that no outside power is going to fight African course any more. African problems must be confronted and address by the Africans themselves. African leaderships and their government should stop the attitude of self-enslavement to the West... The survival of Africans is in the hands of Africans themselves... African leadership and their governments should be committed and determined to confront and address African problems with African solutions.’<sup>31</sup>

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