

British Journal for Military History

Volume 11, Issue 1, February 2025

Nigeria: Fifty Years After the Civil War

Ojong Echum Tangban & Eugene Obiora Eugene

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 28 February 2025

Citation: Ojong Echum Tangban & Eugene Obiora Eugene, 'Nigeria: Fifty Years After the Civil War', *British Journal for Military History*, 11.1 (2025), pp. 141-159.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Nigeria: Fifty Years After the Civil War

OJONG ECHUM TANGBAN & EUGENE OBIORA EUGENE*

Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria

Email: ojongechumtangban@yahoo.com , obiakune@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The thrust of this article is Nigeria: 50 years after the civil war. The end of the war in January 1970 heralded an era of measures by successive governments at re-integrating the Igbo and forging national unity. As laudable as the measures are, there exist gaps in many of them between intent and practice. Many people continue to raise concern as to when the Igbo will be truly integrated into Nigeria and the centrifugal forces of ethnic and religious chauvinism tamed within Nigerian society. Using primary and secondary sources, this article concludes that true re-integration of the Igbo remains a mirage and to avert another civil war, successive leaders need to demonstrate genuine commitment to patriotism and national unity.

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War, from 6 July 1967 to 12 January 1970, followed the attempted secession of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra.¹ Nigeria, a colonial creation by the British, consists of a predominantly Muslim North and mainly Christian South.² At independence in 1960, Nigeria had a three region political structure Northern, Western and Eastern Regions with the last two making up Southern Nigeria.³ In terms of ethnicity, the Hausa and Fulani dominate the North while the Igbo and Yoruba are dominant in the south-east and south-west, respectively.⁴ Ethno-religious rivalry and tensions characterised relations between the

*Prof. Ojong Echum Tangban & Dr Eugene Obiora Eugene are Lecturers in the Department of History and War Studies, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria.

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v1i1.1876](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v1i1.1876)

¹O. Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 350.

²P. C. Lloyd, "The Ethnic Background to the Nigerian Crisis", in S. K. Panter-Bricks (ed.), *Nigerian Politics and Military Rule: Prelude to the Nigerian Civil War*, (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 1-6.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 1-12.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 1-12.

major ethnic groups even before independence.⁵ Indeed, ethno-religious divisions and tensions were common amongst the majority ethnic groups in almost every sensitive national issue.⁶

Ethno-religious tensions intensified following the January 1966 coup masterminded largely by military officers of Igbo extraction.⁷ Some key politicians from the north were killed in this coup while their counterparts from the south-east were spared thereby giving the impression that the coup was ethnically biased. The coup was foiled and Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo, became the Head of State; and his ascension ushered in military rule in Nigeria. The counter-coup of July 1966 organised by military officers from the north, eliminated Aguiyi Ironsi who was later replaced by Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon.⁸ Several other military officers from the south-east were also killed in the counter-coup.⁹ This was closely followed by the mass killing of civilians from the former Eastern Region who were resident in the north which prompted a mass exodus of the survivors back to their region of origin.¹⁰ As these events were going on, attempts at making peace between the leadership of the former Eastern Region, headed by Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, and the Federal Government under Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, later Major General Yakubu Gowon, collapsed.¹¹ Following failed attempts to broker peace between the two sides, Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra. With this declaration, the stage was set for war between the new state and the Federal Government. The war was fought in five main phases.¹²

Perhaps no other conflict in Nigeria has generated as much interest and documentation as this war. Indeed, the amount of literature on it keeps growing by the day. The majority of these studies deal with the causes of the war, the trajectory and the impact.¹³ This article focuses on the aftermath of the war in terms of attempts

⁵E. A. Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1974), pp. 130-142.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 130-143.

⁷J. O. Akintunde, "The Demise of Democracy in the First Republic of Nigeria: A Causal Analysis" *Odu*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1967, pp. 1-13.

⁸O. Ikime, *History, the Historian and the Nation: The Voice of a Nigerian Historian*, (Ibadan: Heimann, 2006), pp. 300-305.

⁹O. Ikime, *History, the Historian and the Nation*, pp. 300-305.

¹⁰A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Source Book 1900-1970*, Vol. 1, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 48-49.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp 48-49.

¹²O. Obasnjajo, *My Command*, pp. 1-35.

¹³See, for instance, G. O. Olusegun, "Constitutional Development in Nigeria 1816-1960", in O. Ikime (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (Ibadan: Heinmann, 1999), pp.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

not only to re-integrate the Igbo and other Easterners, but also to create and strengthen institutions that promote national identity fifty years after the conflict. These efforts are intended to avert a recurrence of secession. To execute this task meaningfully, it seems appropriate at this juncture to explain the methodology adopted in amassing data for this study.

Methodology

Information used in writing this article came from primary and secondary sources. For primary sources, the authors of this article and their research assistants engaged and conducted oral interviews with the proceedings recorded in an electronic device. Unstructured and structured interviews were adopted in eliciting information from respondents. The former approach was used by our research assistants in engaging interviewees, mostly young school leavers, on the basis of random sampling technique. High profile interviewees were carefully identified considering their strategic positions in Nigerian society. The interviews held with high profile interviewees were structured, properly scheduled and executed by the authors because of the positions of the individuals involved. In all, five hundred interviews were conducted in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria and Abuja, the nation's capital. The age-range of the young school leavers was between eighteen and twenty years, and locations of interviews with them were popular tertiary institutions in the geo-political zones of the country and Abuja. Preference was given to students in their first year of study because they had just left the secondary school system where attempts at inculcating national values in students are rigorous.

In the case of secondary sources, the authors consulted a wide range of relevant materials sourced from private and public libraries and government establishments. The authors subjected the information in both sources to scrutiny and cross-checking for authenticity before use. With the methodology explained, the paper now focuses on the measures put in place to re-integrate the Igbo and ensure a unified Nigeria fifty years after the civil war.

Post-Civil War Era

Nigeria since the end of the civil war remains a country in search of unity. This search largely informed the Gowon administration's policy of Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation popularly known as the 3Rs.¹⁴ An attempt will be made to discuss

253-7; P. C. Loyd, "The Ethnic Background to Nigerian Crisis", pp.1-27; O. Obasajó, *My Command*, pp1-35.

¹⁴See Appendix 'Document No. 37 The Dawn of National Reconciliation; Broadcast to the Nation on 15 January, 1970 cited by T. N. Tomuno, "Introducing Men and Measures in the Nigerian Crisis", in T. N. Tomuno & Atanda (eds.), *Nigeria Since* 143

the 3Rs policy in relation to the Igbo presently beginning with the concept of reconciliation.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation as a concept has been defined by Albert as the process by which people who have been separated or have had psychological hatred for each other begin to work together after judiciously addressing the issues that brought about their hostility and differences.¹⁵ Reconciliation is a post-conflict exercise, the main object of which is to prevent a relapse of hostility between former adversaries. The end of the civil war and the declaration of 'No Victor, No Vanquished' by Yakubu Gowon meant that the Nigerian polity was set for peace which the end of the war made it imperative that the former warring parties be reconciled. Reconciliation was to follow a practical step-by-step approach. To achieve this, the Federal Military Government (FMG) of Nigeria at the end of the civil war declared that: '... we must recommence at once, in greater earnest, the task of healing the nation wounds.'¹⁶

To the Gowon-led administration, reconciliation meant reunification of brothers, and the granting of amnesty to all those assumed by Nigeria to have been misled.¹⁷ It was also to guarantee equality, safety, and security of lives and property in every part of Nigeria in all spheres of lives. Therefore, reconciliation in post-civil war Nigeria entails reuniting the Igbo and other Easterners with the rest of Nigeria on the basis of the safety and security of lives and property, as well as equality in political rights. All this was the reconciliation component of the 3Rs policy. What then has been the practice of it? A few cases may be cited to illustrate the government's commitment or lack of it to the idea of reconciliation.

The first case is the freezing of the assets of the Igbo and other Easterners in 1970.¹⁸ This Federal Government decision tended to run counter to the whole idea of the reconciliation Gowon declared would be pursued. As some of the author's interviewees noted that 'by ordering the freezing of the assets of former Biafrans, the

Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years: Government and Public Policy, (Ibadan: Heinmann, 1989), p. 291.

¹⁵I. O. Albert, "The Myth, Reality and Challenges of Nigerian Reconstruction with Ndigbo", in E. E. Osaghae (ed.), *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath*, (Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Limited, 2002), p. 308.

¹⁶T. N. Tomuno, "Introducing Men and Measures in the Nigerian Crisis", p. 291.

¹⁷General (Dr) Yakubu Gowon, "No Victor, No Vanquished: Healing the Nation" (Convocation Lecture Delivered at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Formerly Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus, 25 March 2015), p. 6.

¹⁸Chukwu Ogor, 77years, Retired Civil Servant, interviewed in Enugu, 15 April 2020; Charles Ndubisi Anake, 79years, Businessman, interviewed in Enugu, 17 April 2020.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

government was sending a clear signal that it was just paying lip service to the idea of reconciliation.¹⁹ Another case worth examining here is the twenty pounds flat fee refund policy. By this policy, the sum of twenty pounds was given to any former Biafran who wished to exchange his old currency.²⁰ Like the freezing of assets, the twenty pounds flat rate policy, did not help the reconciliation programme as some Igbo people viewed it as government attempt to stop them from recovering from the economic devastation of the war.²¹

Yet another case worth mentioning is the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree or Indigenization Decree Policy promulgated in February 1972 and to come into effect in April 1974.²² The legislation was planned to give Nigerians more access to surplus income of businesses, shift foreign investment to highly technical areas and promote indigenous businesses. Commenting on the indigenization Decree, P. Achuzie notes that 'the policy was laudable as it sought to enhance the income generation capacity of Nigerian enterprises, but the timing was inauspicious in terms of the interest of the Igbo who were at the time financially too weak to take advantage of it'.²³ Many other Igbo informants share Achuzie's view.²⁴

There was also the issue of abandoned property that needed resolution after the end of the civil war. During the war, the Gowon regime had set up Abandoned Properties Committees in various states of the Federation to manage the properties left behind by the Igbo, and prevent them from being vandalised.²⁵ These committees collected rents on the houses and other property on behalf of their rightful owners and ensured that the property remained in good condition.²⁶ After the war, attempts by the Igbo to reclaim their property had varying degrees of success across the states largely because the claimants were required to tender proof of ownership, and where they

¹⁹John Okoro, 82years, Entrepreneur, interviewed in Awka, 5 October 2020; A. Anozie, 79years, Retired Banker, interviewed in Onitsha 15 October 2020.

²⁰A. Duru, "Dangerous Memory", in C. J. Okorie (ed.), *The Nigeria Biafra War, Genocide and the Politics of Memory*, (New York: Cambridge Press, 2012), p. 245.

²¹Mathew Ogbonna, 82years, Retired School Teacher, interviewed in Umuahia, 8 December 2019.

²²P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland: 1970-1983*, (Nsukka: Great AP Publishers Ltd., 2009), pp. 111-112.

²³P. Achuzie, 82years, Entrepreneur, interviewed in Onitsha, 9 October 2019.

²⁴Everitus Enosike, 85years, Retired Teacher, interviewed in Enugu, 12 October 2019; James Ekeriowu, 79years, interviewed in Enugu, 14 October 2019; Daniel Chimezie 78years, interviewed in Abakaliki, 11 November 2019.

²⁵P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland*, p. 111

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 111

could not, such property was forfeited to the state.²⁷ However, in the South-Eastern and Rivers States which were carved out of the now defunct Eastern Region, anti-Igbo sentiments may also have played a role in forfeiture of property by the Igbo.²⁸ The point to note is that the two states were home to minority ethnic groups who complained of Igbo domination in the pre-civil war era.²⁹ Therefore, for the ethnic groups in the two states, the war liberated them from Igbo oppression, and they naturally would want to work against attempts by the Igbo to reclaim their property.³⁰ In any case, after the initial resistance to some Igbo house owners' claims, about 177 abandoned houses in Calabar, the capital of South Eastern State were released to their Igbo owners following their showing proof of ownership.³¹ There was no change of mind on the part of Rivers people on the issue.³² The abandoned property issue remained unresolved until the ousting of the Gowon regime, and the succeeding regime of Murtala Mohammed which resolved it by asking state governments to pay the affected Igbo property owners a flat rate of 500 Naira a year on every building confiscated as rent arrears for a period of five years from 1970 to 1975.³³ Such rent arrears were paid to Igbo property owners who had not during the period recovered their property.³⁴ The Federal and State Governments were also allowed to purchase some of the property concerned on a compulsory basis for official use.³⁵ The remainder was to be sold to the indigenes of the states who were required to pay a fair price to the respective owners.³⁶ What seems clear from the narrative on Igbo assets and abandoned property is that in some cases, the people were not fairly treated by either the Federal or the State Governments.

Reconstruction

The end of the civil war left the eastern part of the country with severely damaged physical infrastructure which required reconstruction. For this reason, reconstruction was made part of the Federal Military Government's 3Rs policy. The scale of destruction has been aptly captured by a report as follows: "The main theatre of the

²⁷Ibid., p. 111

²⁸Joseph Okonta, 86years, Retired Civil Servant, interviewed in Port-Harcourt, 10 January 2020; O. Basse, 83years, Retired School Teacher, Interviewed in Calabar, 13 January 2020.

²⁹J. Okonta.

³⁰J. Okonta.

³¹*The Renaissance*, February 25, 1974, 16.

³²J. Okonta.

³³P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction in Igbo Land*, p. 100.

³⁴Ibid., p. 100.

³⁵*Daily Times*, March 14, 1967, p. 3.

³⁶Ibid., p. 3.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

Nigerian Civil War, the East Central State, Igboland, emerged from the conflict with a severely battered economy. Battered were the state's industries, schools and public utilities and even the basic economic infrastructure. In both the public and private sectors, the picture was the same, one of ruin and devastation".³⁷

Given the level of wartime devastation in the region, reconstruction after the conflict was perceived by the Gowon regime as one of the strategies for re-integrating the Igbo and other Easterners into Nigeria. Reconstruction in this study, therefore, entails the process of rebuilding what has been damaged or destroyed. The worst hit infrastructure were the communication facilities. Trenches had been dug in the middle of roads and bridges blown up. Railroads, telephone and postal services, airport and electrical installations were badly damaged. Private transport services suffered damage and neglect owing to a lack of maintenance during the war.³⁸ Obi-Ani observes that 'post-war reconstruction in Igboland had strong communal self-help effort input'.³⁹ Similarly, some of the authors' interviewees state that "the bulk of reconstruction work in Igboland after the civil war was largely undertaken by the Igbo themselves and not by state and Federal Governments".⁴⁰ Thus, like reconciliation, the government did not meet the expectations of the Igbo in the aspect of reconstruction. It remains to be seen how the government performed in terms of the rehabilitation component of the 3Rs policy.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation simply means to rebuild or restore in good condition; to restore someone or a group to a former state; to bring something back into a good state.⁴¹ The civil war experience left the people of Nigeria, especially people from the eastern part of the country where the war was more acutely felt, with mixed feelings. While the non-Igbo speaking part of the East considered it the end of a tragedy and hoped for a better tomorrow, some Igbo, especially the elite had ill feelings and were filled with fear of the unknown and of an uncertain tomorrow.⁴² It was against this background that the Gowon regime introduced the policy of Rehabilitation to restore the confidence of Easterners in Nigeria.

³⁷East Central State Ministry of Information and House Affairs, *Progress in Reconstruction*, (Enugu: Government Printer, n. d.), p. 1.

³⁸P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction in Igbo Land*, p. 53.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁰P. Azubuike, 79years, Retired Civil Servant, interviewed in Aba, 22 January 2022; D. Amadi, 77years, Retired School Teacher, Interviewed in Aba, 23 January 2020.

⁴¹A. N. Thomas, *Beyond the Platitudes of Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Reconstruction in Nigeria: Revolutionary Pressure in the Niger-Delta*, (Pennsylvania: Clerian University Press, 2007), p. 56.

⁴²S. C. Ukpabi, 80years, Retired Lecturer, interviewed in Enugu, 4 March 2019.

After the end of the war, the Gowon regime had promised a general amnesty to all the Igbo people, especially the public servants and armed forces personnel who had been involved on the Biafran side. However, this was not to be, the government reneged on its promise of an unconditional restoration of the former Biafra working people to their previous posts, citing some reasons including, among others, not creating a situation in which it would appear that secession had paid.⁴³ Non-restoration of Easterners to their former posts in Nigeria after the war was a negation of the policy to rehabilitate former Biafrans. Rehabilitation entails many elements including restoration of Easterners to their previous posts, the return of abandoned property to the bona-fide owners, and the repair of infrastructure damaged during the civil war. But as shown already, the performance of the Federal Government in all these areas fell short of the Igbo expectations raising doubt as to the government's seriousness in following its 3Rs policy.

The 3Rs policy is akin to the post-conflict peace agreement in Rwanda. In Rwanda, the Arusha Accords paved the way for reconciliation between the Hutus and the Tutsi ethnic groups.⁴⁴ However, unlike the 3Rs policy in Nigeria, which was entirely the initiative of the Federal Government, the post-conflict peace agreement in Rwanda was an outcome of negotiations between the parties to the conflict. However, in terms of the spirit and content, there are similarities between the Rwandan peace agreement and the Nigerian 3Rs policy.

There are also other formal policies and programmes that can be seen as outcomes of the civil war and aimed at promoting national unity and averting another secession. They include reforms in the education sector, state creation, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme, and the Federal Character Principle. In discussing these measures, attempts will be made to indicate the extent to which the interest of the Igbo is served. We begin with reforms in the education sector.

Reforms in the Education Sector

As with the 3Rs policy, Nigeria since the civil war, has been confronting centrifugal forces by using the agency of Western education in the belief that education has the

⁴³J. I. Elaigwu, *Gowon: The Biography of Soldier Statement*, (Ibadan: West Books Limited, 1986), pp. 142-143.

⁴⁴Ervin Staub, "The Challenging Road to Reconciliation in Rwanda". *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, Vol. 2(1), 2014, pp. 505-517.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

potential to foster national unity and development. Fostering of national unity through education is not unique to countries worldwide.⁴⁵

The first major step taken by the Government to make education serve as a tool for national unity was the 1977 National Policy on Education. The policy was intended to ensure access to education by children across the country which would enable them to develop an outlook that would transcend their immediate communities.⁴⁶ The 1977 Education Policy was revised in 1981, and an aspect of the 1981 policy was the adoption of the 6-3-3-4 system which allows a child to spend six years at the primary level, three years at the junior secondary school level, another three years at the senior secondary level, and four years at the tertiary level.⁴⁷ Under this system, History was replaced by Social Studies, Government, and Civic Education at the primary and junior secondary school levels on the grounds that the three new subjects would cater for all aspects of History.⁴⁸ The removal of History from the basic education curriculum meant that a rigorous study of the subject was lacking in the school system until a child attained the senior secondary school level. Consequently, students tended to avoid History at the senior secondary and even tertiary levels. Thus, the school system turned out people who knew little or nothing about Nigeria's past.

Also worthy of note among the pro-national unity reforms in the education sector is the National Pledge. The Pledge was entirely the initiative of Felicia Adebola Adedoyin who published it in one of the country's national dailies under the title Loyalty to the Nation Pledge.⁴⁹ At the time, Nigeria had no National Pledge and Felicia Adebola Adedoyin who was already familiar with such a policy during her schooling abroad, thought it worthwhile to sensitise the Nigerian public and government on the desirability of such a policy.⁵⁰ Her effort paid off when the then Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo on learning about it modified it, and then in September 1976

⁴⁵D. C. Woolman, "Educational Reconstruction and Post-Colonial Curriculum Development: A Comparative Study of Four African Countries; *International Educational Journal*, 2(5), 2001, pp. 27-46.

⁴⁶Federal Republic of Nigeria, *National Policy on Education*, (3rd ed.) (Lagos: Nigeria Educational Research and Development, 1981), pp. 7-14.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.

⁴⁹F. A. Adedoyin, "Loyalty to the National Pledge", *Daily Times*, 15 July, 1976, pp. 12-14.

⁵⁰B. O. Adenekan, "Domestic Policy of Olusegun Obasanjo Regime, 1976-1979" (Unpublished B.A Project, Department of Political Science, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, 1994), pp. 27-31.

issued a decree for its adoption within the school system because of its potential to foster national unity.⁵¹ The lyrics of the National Pledge are as follows:

I pledge to Nigeria my country
To be faithful, loyal and honest
To serve Nigeria with all my strength
To defend her Unity and uphold her
Honour and glory.⁵²

The second National Anthem of Nigeria also deserves discussion here as an instrument for forging national unity. The first anthem composed by a British expatriate, Lillian Jean Williams with the title 'Nigeria we hail thee' was adopted at independence in 1960.⁵³ After the civil war, the first anthem was severely criticised and agitations for it to be changed were rife. The basis of criticisms and agitations was that it was deficient in pro-unity lyrics.⁵⁴ The then government response was to hold a national competition in 1978 for the purpose of choosing the best entry.⁵⁵ At the end of the exercise, the committee chose entries from five winning contestants and fused them to make one national anthem.⁵⁶ In 1978, the second national anthem replaced the first one and has two stanzas, the first is,

Arise, O compatriot, Nigeria's call obey
To serve our father land
With love and strength and faith
The labour of our heroes past
Shall never be in vain
Serve with heart and might
One nation bound in freedom, peace and unity.⁵⁷

In the school system, the National Anthem is sung at assemblies followed by recitation of the National Pledge. Both are aimed at inculcating in children the spirit of national consciousness and patriotism in a highly plural society like Nigeria.

⁵¹Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Nigerian National Anthem and Pledge*, (Lagos: Government Printer, 1918), pp. 2-3.

⁵²*Daily Service*, 10 June, 1978, pp. 1-2.

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁴B. O. Adenekan, "Domestic Policy of Olusegun Obasanjo Regime 1976-1979", pp. 40-42.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁶Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Nigerian National Anthem and Pledge*, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

The reforms in the education sector discussed in this article were and still are geared towards building a sense of Nigerianness in the children. Random interviews conducted by the authors with 120 school leavers between the age of 18 and 20 years, and at popular tertiary institutions in the six geo-political zones of the country, revealed that about 90% of them did not see themselves first and foremost as Nigerians but as members of their ethnic nationalities, while 10% of the interviewees indicated their Nigerian identity first, and this apparently because they were children of cross-cultural marriages, a background which makes encourages them to feel a sense of Nigerianness. A few examples can illustrate this point. For example, at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, when one was asked who he was, he said 'I am Musa Audu, a Hausa from Kano State'; another from the same University responded, 'I am Aliyu Yaro, a Fulani from Adamawa State'.⁵⁸ Similarly, at the University of Ibadan, the same question elicited the same response. One, for example, said 'I am David Alabi, a Yoruba from Ekiti State'.⁵⁹ Yet another from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, responded to the same question with, 'I am Charles Okonkwo, an Igbo from Enugu State'.⁶⁰ Interviewees of cross-cultural marriages responded to the same question differently. For example, one at the Federal University of Abuja responded to the same question as follows: 'I am Peter Eboji, a true Nigerian',⁶¹ implying that his parents came from different ethnic backgrounds.

The outcome of the interviews would seem to suggest that the pro-unity reforms in education are not having as much impact on the school leavers as had been expected. Indeed, for most of the school leavers interviewed, the National Anthem and the Pledge were mere routine rituals within the lower school system. This is surprising after twelve years of familiarity with the reforms in the lower school system - the primary and secondary schools – where one would have expected the school leavers to be imbued with a sense of Nigerianness. The seemingly minimal impact of the reforms can be explained in terms of the effect of the ethnic and religious chauvinism prevalent in Nigerian society on the school leavers. Such societal divisive influences tend to dilute the values of national consciousness and patriotism the children are taught within the lower school system.

⁵⁸Musa Audu, 20years, student, interviewed in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 23 May 2019; Aliyu Yaro, 19years, student, interviewed in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 23 May 2019.

⁵⁹David Alabi, 20years, student, interviewed in University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 10 July 2019.

⁶⁰Charles Okonkwo, 20years, student, interviewed at University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 07 July 2019.

⁶¹Peter Eboji, 19years, student, interviewed at University of Abuja, Abuja, 20 June 2019.

Creation of States

The creation of states began with the Gowon regime, but the need for it existed even before Nigeria's independence. In 1957, the colonial authorities set up the Willink Commission to look into the minority fears of domination by the major ethnic nationalities, namely, the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East, and the Yoruba in the West.⁶² After a nationwide tour, the commission confirmed the minority's fear of domination, but stopped short of recommending the creation of additional states.⁶³ Thus, it was that at independence Nigeria had three regions. The defunct Mid-Western Region was carved out from the then Western Region in 1963.⁶⁴ In the pre-civil war crisis, the Gowon-led military government, apparently for strategic reasons, announced on 29 May 1967 the creation of a twelve state structure and the abolition of regional government. Gowon created the twelve states partly to address the minority question and partly to secure the support of the minority groups in Biafra for Nigeria.⁶⁵

The twelve state structure was followed by the creation of more states by subsequent military regimes. Seven, eleven and six under the Murtala Mohammed, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha regimes in 1976, 1987, 1991, and 1996, respectively.⁶⁶ Thus bringing the number of states in the country to thirty-six. Far from putting to rest the issue of marginalisation, state creation has remained a national issue as each round of state creation has given rise to a new set of demands by ethnic groups. This has left many wondering if the creation of more states is really the solution to the vexed issue of marginalisation which tends to undermine national cohesion and stability. Also, state creation has resulted in structural imbalance within the polity as some parts of the country appear to have been favoured over others. The Igbo control five states, the Yoruba six, and Hausa-Fulani seven, while minority groups in the south and north have six each, which suggests discrimination against the Igbo⁶⁷. Similarly, no Igbo has been president since the end of the war, even though they have been active in the political scene like other major ethnic groups which have produced presidents more than once

⁶²O. Babalola, "History of State Creation in Nigeria", *Dawn Commission*, February, 2016, 2-6, <http://dawncommission.org>. Accessed 12 July 12, 2019.

⁶³O. Babalola, "History of State Creation in Nigeria", pp. 2-6.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 2-6.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 2-6; Kelvin Etta, Retired Professor, interviewed in Calabar, 10 February 2020.

⁶⁶O. Akinwumi, "Before We Set the House Ablaze, Let Us Consult Our Oracle" (Inaugural Lecture, Keffi, Nassarawa State University, 2009), pp. 20-27.

⁶⁷Tom Lodge, "Conflict Resolution in Nigeria after 1967-1970 Civil War," *African Studies*, 77:2018, LB, DOI:1080/20020184.2018.1432125.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

since the end of the civil war. If no Igbo has been president since the end of the war, it raises a suspicion of bias as has been suggested.⁶⁸

The criteria used by the military regimes in state creation is unknown. Assuming that population was the overriding factor in the exercise, one wonders why, for instance, the Yoruba, the demographic rival of the Igbo, have more states than the Igbo. Since states form the basis of financial allocation from the Federal Government, it does mean that the Igbo are disadvantaged. Little wonder that the Igbo have time and again called for the creation of another state in the South-East geo-political zone.⁶⁹ But such calls have often fallen on deaf ears, thereby creating a feeling of being discriminated against by the federal authorities. In a Channels Television programme, John Nwodo expressed this sentiment bluntly when he asked 'how can you achieve national integration when a segment of the country, the Igbo, are discriminated against in virtually all spheres of our national life?'⁷⁰ It should be noted that discrimination in any form is not conducive to national unity.⁷¹ The discussion of state creation suggests that the Igbo are yet to be genuinely re-integrated into Nigeria. We now proceed to examine National Youth Service Corps (NYSC).

National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme and National Unity

The NYSC Scheme was initiated by the administration of Yakubu Gowon as part of its measures to forge national unity after the civil war. The scheme was established in 1973 for the promotion of national unity and the development of Nigerian youth and Nigeria into a great and dynamic economy. The scheme entails the young graduates of tertiary institutions below the age of 30 years compulsorily serving in states other than their own for one year. Inter-tribal marriages and other forms of social interaction amongst NYSC members speak to the 'usefulness of the scheme as a

⁶⁸J. D. Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everybody Deception and Population Discontent in Nigeria*, (New Jersey: Princeton University, 2010), p. 21; and A. Amadi & Mai-Bornu, "Democracy, Separatist Agitation and Militarised State: Repose in South East Nigeria", *Review of African Political Economy*, DOI:10.1080/1030562442023.2174846.

⁶⁹C. Oputa, *Human Right Investigation Commission of Nigeria, Report*, Vol. 3, 2002, 55758 <http://www.nigerianmuse.com/nigeriawatchpoptal>. Accessed 21 September 2024; see also John Nwodo, President General of *OhanaezeNdigbo*, Igbo Socio-Cultural Association called for restructuring of Nigeria which includes state creation on Channels Television on Monday, 7 October, 2019.

⁷⁰John Nwodo.

⁷¹Abba Moro, 63years, Senator, interviewed in Abuja, 21 January 2021; Victor Ndoma-Egba, 65years, former Senator, interviewed in Abuja, 15 January 2021.

vehicle for national unity'.⁷² Although the circumstances and realities of today's Nigeria such as some corps members influencing their posting to states of their own choice and joining the scheme with faked academic credentials, but with insecurity and unemployment conspiring to dilute the essence of the scheme at inception, the spirit of the programme remains alive and well.⁷³ The next measure to consider in government efforts to forge national unity is the federal character principle.

Federal Character Principle

One of the strategies adopted by government after the civil war was the enshrinement of the Federal Character Principle (FCP) in Nigeria's 1979 and 1999 Constitutions.⁷⁴ In keeping with the FCP:

The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner to reflect Federal Character of Nigeria, and the need to promote national unity and also command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall not be predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies'.⁷⁵

To drive the FCP, an organisation called the Federal Character Commission was established in 1996.⁷⁶ The Federal Character Commission works out an equitable formula, subject to the approval of the President of Nigeria for the distribution of all cadres of posts in the civil and public service of the Federation and states, the armed forces, the Nigeria Police Force and other security agencies and corporate bodies owned by the federal and state governments.⁷⁷

As laudable as the federal character policy appears, it has been observed that there exists a wide gap between intent and practice. P.O. Okolo, for instance, notes that the appointments made under late President Umaru Musa Yar-Adua reignited the perception about the applicability of FCP because the appointments tended to tilt in

⁷²Brigadier General Shuaibu Ibrahim, 47 years, Director General of National Youth Service Corps, interviewed in Abuja, 16 December 2019. Also, there is a general belief among Nigerians that the scheme is a veritable tool for forging national unity.

⁷³Brigadier General Shuaibu Ibrahim.

⁷⁴The *1979 Constitution and 1999 Constitutions*.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, Section 14, sub-section 3 of the *1999 Constitution*

⁷⁶H. Shinkafi, 56 years, Acting Executive Chairman, Federal Character Commission, interviewed in Abuja, 15 December 2019. See also, Federal Character Commission, *Handbook*, (Lagos: Government Printer, 1918), pp. 2-5.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 3.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

favour of a particular section of the country namely, the northern segment.⁷⁸ The same is true of the Muhammadu Buhari-led administration whose appointments were largely pro-north.⁷⁹ Based on these claims, it would appear that Nigeria has not been consistent in the enforcement of the policy. The FCP like other pro-unity measures are formal in nature; but there are also informal measures that foster national unity.

Informal Pro-Unity Measures

Apart from the policies adopted by successive Nigerian leaders since the end of the civil war to strengthen the federation and prevent a repetition of secession, there have also been informal ways of conflict management. One such informal approach is presidential rotation whereby the leadership of the country rotates between the northern and southern segments every eight years.⁸⁰ Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, attempts have been made to uphold the principle beginning with the second presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba southerner, followed by Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, a Fulani northerner. However, Yar'Adua died before completing his first term and was succeeded by Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijo southerner and Vice President at that time.

Goodluck Jonathan ruled for a term of four years to complete Yar'Adua's four years, and handed over power to President Muhammadu Buhari, a Fulani northerner who ruled for eight years. In keeping with the rotational principle, we now know where the seat of power went in the south, as presidential elections were held over a year ago. It is noteworthy that no Igbo southerner has been president since the end of the civil war.⁸¹ The fact that the rotation principle has not constitutionally been sanctioned, makes it more susceptible to manipulation.⁸²

The funeral of Odumegwu Ojukwu, the former Biafran leader, provided yet another opportunity for the Nigerian leadership to explore an informal way of managing conflict. The event came on 12 March 2012, at Nnewi, during the Presidency of

⁷⁸P. O. Okolo, "Influence of the Federal Character Principle on National Integration in Nigeria", *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, Vol. 4, No. 6, June (2014) pp. 121-132.

⁷⁹Tom Lodge, "Conflict Resolution in Nigeria after 1967-1970 Civil War," p.15.

⁸⁰C. O. Udeh, O. O. Augustine & O. E. Chris-Santus, *International Journal of Innovative Legal and Political Studies*, 11 (2), April-June, pp. 59-72.

⁸¹The narrative on presidential rotation is based on the knowledge and observation of the happenings in Nigeria by the writers of this article.

⁸²Mathias Ogbonna, 82 years, Retired School Teacher, interviewed in Umuahia, 8 December 2019; H Yerima, M. Ibrahim and I. Terwase, "Peace and Conflict Resolution: Agitation and Zoning of Presidency in Nigeria". *Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6 (2), 2016, pp. 167-171.

Goodluck Jonathan.⁸³ Ojukwu was accorded a state funeral attended by dignitaries from across the country including President Goodluck Jonathan, several members of the then federal executive council, the Governors of the South East and South-South geo-political zones, and the Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka.⁸⁴ Ojukwu's state funeral and the attendance of high profile dignitaries including Goodluck Jonathan from across the country were a positive gesture of reconciliation.

The approaches to conflict management since the end of the civil war relate to both military and democratic regimes. There has been a difference in approach between the two regimes. Military regimes institutionalise policies and programmes initiated by them with appropriate legal backing. This has not been the case with approaches by democratic regimes. Indeed, the democratic regimes approaches have, so far, remained informal. How can this difference between the two approaches be explained? One explanation may be the military operating a command structure approach to governance during their incursions into politics. In such a structure, the commander, in this case the Head of State, has a wide latitude to make things happen with little or no delay. The adoption of this form of governance may account for the legal backing given to all the policies initiated under military regimes.

Democratic regimes, on the other hand, are by their nature subject to lengthy processes of legislation, even if the president has a military background. And in a country as factionalised, on ethnic and religious grounds, as Nigeria, it is hard for federal legislators to reach consensus on sensitive national issues. It could also be argued that since the military regimes approaches were initiated by war veterans who know what war entails, the military leaders would be more committed to the sustainability of policies that would prevent a recurrence of war. Federal legislators, most of whom have no military background, may not have the same level of commitment to peace as military leaders. Moreover, a large proportion of the federal legislators were not even born, or at best were in their infancy during the civil war, and have no familiarity with the history of Nigeria due to the relegation of the teaching of History into the background within the school system.⁸⁵ For close to four decades, as noted earlier, they would not appreciate the necessity for the kind of legislation that fosters national unity and would prevent a repetition of secession. These informal measures supplement formal pro-unity measures. But to what extent have these

⁸³Fidelis Mbah, BBC News, "Report on Ojukwu Funeral", 2 March, 2012; and Tony Edike, "Ojukwu Funeral," *Vanguard*, 2 March, 2021, p.1.

⁸⁴Tony Dike, I; B. Anosike 79years, Retired Civil Servant, interviewed in Nnewi, 18 December 2019.

⁸⁵O. E. Tangban, "History and the Quest for Unity in Nigeria", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (2014), p. 379.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

measures impacted Igbo re-integration and national unity? The answer to this question lies in an examination of recent social and political environment.

Recent Social and Political Environment in Nigeria

A close look at the recent socio-political environment of the country indicates some of the pre-civil war conditions. For one thing, ethnically and regionally aligned political parties dominate the political landscape despite attempts at forming a few parties with a semblance of a national outlook. During the Second Republic, 1979-83, for example, political parties that emerged were the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) whose stronghold was in the North; Nigeria's National People's Party (NPP) seen as an Eastern Nigeria Party though it had some support in Plateau and Rivers States as well as Lagos; and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which was dominant in Western Nigeria and had an ethnic leaning.⁸⁶ This trend of ethnic and regional-based politics has continued since the Second Republic. Also, ethnic chauvinism has continued to rear its ugly head in almost every sensitive national issue in the post-war period. For example, such issues as national census, control of power at the centre and the restructuring of the country have caused intense ethnic rivalry within the country.⁸⁷ Unlike the pre-civil war era, this post-war ethnic rivalry has given rise to ethnic militias and pressure groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in south-eastern Nigeria, the *Odua* People Congress (OPC) in South-western Nigeria, and the *Arewa* Youth Movement (AYM), a pressure group, in the north.⁸⁸ These ethnic militias and pressure group see themselves either as the military wings of, or as the mouthpiece for the ethnic groups or region they represent.⁸⁹ There are also frequent cases of militancy in the Niger Delta, and ethno-religious and farmer/herder conflicts across the country in the post-war period.⁹⁰ However, some of these centrifugal forces like the militancy in the Niger Delta, the farmer/herder tension, and ethno-religious conflicts are unrelated to the war.

For the Igbo, the post-war era has been a period of frustration arising partly from poor implementation of the 3Rs policy and partly from discrimination against them with respect to sensitive national issues. As one of the authors' respondents aptly put it, 'we are back in Nigeria today after the failed secessionist bid only to be treated like second class citizens contrary to assurances of fair treatment at the end of the war; it

⁸⁶Joseph Wayes, 79 years, Former President of the Senate in the Second Republic (1979-83), interviewed in Abuja, 12 December 2019.

⁸⁷Joseph Wayas.

⁸⁸O. E. Tangban, "History and the Quest for Unity in Nigeria", p. 374.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 374.

⁹⁰A. N. Thomas, *Beyond Platitude of Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation*, p.56.

pains'.⁹¹ Many Igbo share this feeling. Some are even of the view that the resurgence of Biafra agitation is due in part to the mismanagement of the Gowon's 3Rs policy.⁹²

This renewed Biafra agitation has hurt peace and security in south-eastern Nigeria with cases of kidnapping and even killing.⁹³ It is hard to say when and how the agitation will end in the absence of concrete political efforts, beyond a kinetic security approach by government that address their concerns. Amidst this agitation, there is a semblance of peace in the country, provided one overlooks threats such as terrorism, insurgency, banditry, militancy and farmer/herder conflicts that are unrelated to the civil war and are, therefore, not discussed in this article. Some of the post-civil war events suggest a replication of the issues that played out in the pre-civil war era, and which threatened the unity of the country.

Nigeria's post-civil war experience seems to suggest parallels to post-war reconciliation in Rwanda. In Rwanda, it has been observed that government has made considerable progress towards promoting ethnic harmony and national unity, but 'ethnic prejudice, mistrust, perceived and real discrimination continue to plague the country and hence the possibility of relapsing into violence remains real'.⁹⁴ This claim suggests that in Rwanda, both in principle and practice, government is giving ethnic nationalities therein a sense of belonging even though on inter-group relations, unspoken animosity persists. In Nigeria, however, there seems to be a disparity between government intent and practice in reconciliation. Thus, the Igbo, for example, are yet to be truly re-integrated as the discussion above indicates. Also, as in the pre-conflict era, ethnic and religious chauvinism persists in Nigeria's post-war period leaving many wondering if Nigerians have learned any lessons from the civil war.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Nigeria in the fifty years after the end of the civil war. The war resulted from many factors including ethnic and religious chauvinism, ethnic-based polities and so on. The war was fought in five phases resulting in huge damage to lives and property including public infrastructure. The end of hostilities ushered in a period of attempts by successive governments at re-integrating the Igbo and other Easterners, and fostering an overall national unity. First was the Gowon's 3Rs policy aimed at re-integrating the Igbo. Though laudable in intent, the implementation of the 3Rs policy

⁹¹Patrick Ndukwe, 79 years, Retired Civil Servant, interviewed in Abakaliki, 17 January 2020.

⁹²The *Guardian*, "Failure of Gowon'S Three Rs, Cause of Separatist Groups", 08 June, 2017, pp.1-2.

⁹³James Anosike, 56 years, President Nigerian Union of Journalists, Enugu Chapter, interviewed in Enugu, 18 November 2020.

⁹⁴Ervin Staub, "Challenging Road to Reconciliation in Rwanda," p. 294.

NIGERIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

was poor. The other measures include reforms in education, the National Youth Service Corps Scheme, the Federal Character Principle, and the creation of additional. These measures have potential for fostering national unity if they are properly implemented, but there have been challenges with their implementation resulting in some groups notably the Igbo being discriminated against. Also, there is the problem of negative societal influences which tend to dilute the positive impact of some of the measures on national unity. Some of the events in the post-war era suggest replicas of the forces of disunity which contributed to outbreak of the civil war. Finally, an unquestionable commitment to patriotism, and national unity by successive leaders is seen as the only viable option to avoid a repetition of secession.