

NIGERIAN-BIAFRAN WAR: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON THE NIGERIA IGBOS.

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Abstract

A section of the country, the eastern region (Biafra) declared secession and was thus branded 'rebel' by the rest of the nation. Hell therefore let loose as chaos became the order of the day. This plunged Nigeria into the most turbulent period in her history resulting in a bloody and deadly thirty month civil war known today by non Nigerians as 'Nigerian Biafran war' or the 'Nigerian Civil War' but popularly among Nigerians known as the War of Nigerian unity'. Others see it as madness. What happened to Nigeria between June 1967 and January 1970 was a civil war. Its dimensions were deep and varied. Some of its outcomes were general while some were particular. The remote cause of the war lay in the amalgamation of the 1914 as well as counter coup that brought in then Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon in 1966. the economic effect of the war tended more towards poverty while the social effects were many people were killed or disabled and Individual and group animosity also increased. Moreover, various families were broken down as a result of the war. The treatment being meted to the Igbos since after the war shows that they were defeated and also the war made manifest the problems of Nigeria, though they remain unsolved till today

Introduction

Prior to 1914, there was no definite geographical or political entity called Nigeria. The popular belief had been that Flora Shaw, the colonial correspondent of the Time of London and who later married Lord Lugard suggested to her husband in 1898 that the many British protectorates on the Niger be known collectively as Nigeria. Obi (1976) has however argued that the name had been used by William Cole as early as 1859 to describe the people and territory on the Niger. William Cole himself was a member of the 1859-1860 expedition on the Niger led by Dr. W.B. Baikie.

Although the Nigerian nation formally came into existence on 1st January 1914, the entire territory which came to be known as Nigeria consist of over 250 ethnic groups, prominent of which were the Igbos', Hausas', Yorubas', Fulanis', Kanuris', Igallas', Tivs', Edos', Ijaws' etc. each with its ethnic ties. The Igbo's constitute the dominant ethnic group in the Sourthen-Eastern Nigeria. Today, the Igbos locates mainly in Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo States. A reasonable percentage of Igbo people also live in delta and rivers states. The Igbo people have two main traditions of origin while one claims that that the Igbos were created where we now find them, the other traces the original homeland to the people of Isreal.

The Eri tradition of Igbo origin claims that Chukwu, the Igbo high God created the first Igbo man along Anambra river basin at Aguleri, from there, waves of Igbo people migrated to settle in different parts of Sourthen-Eastern Nigeria and beyond. Another origin of the Igbo people tries to link the Igbo people with the people of isreal. Reverend G.T. Basden of the Anglican Church who propounded this theory claims that the word Igbo is a corruption of the word Hebrew. He claimed that the Igbos is one of the lost tribes of Isreal. According to him, Igbo and Hebrew customs share a lot of similarities. Major occupation includes farming eg. Cultivation of yams, cocoyam, cvassava, palm oil and kernel, rice, vegetables etc and arts and crafts eg. Basket making, mat making, carving, blacksmithing and trading.

Many gods were worshipped among the people before the Christian era. Today, most Igbo people have become Christians. A small percentage still worships other gods. Islam has no hold in Igbo land (Ibezim, 1994).

In the light of this, one could understand that our problem started immediately after the amalgamation of northern and southern protectorates of 1914. this is because the country is made up of different peoples and tribes who have strong intra-ethnic loyalties, tribal sentiments, different cultural background and languages thus resulting to hatred which gave rise to compound counter coups in this country after its six years of independence which eventually culminated into a bloody civil war from 1967-1970. it was a full scale war wanton destruction of life and property. Some of its outcomes were general while others were particular.]

Cause of the War

The remote cause of the war lay in the amalgamation of the 1914, the three regional structures of 1946 Richards constitution for Nigeria which granted greater autonomy to regions, the tribal crises that followed the 1960 independence manifesting themselves in the different elections and parliament of the 1960 and the January 15, 1966 coup led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu which led to the ascension of General Aguiyi Ironsi as the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces. This coup was een to have benefited mostly the Igbos in the army at the expense of the Yorubas and Hausas officers and promotion of many in the army which led to jealousy, which also gave rise to the war.

The immediate causes could be found in the same counter coup that brought in then Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon in 1966. When general Ironsi was killed and Lt. Col. Gowon who was not the most senior army officer took over instead of Brigadier Ogundipe who was next in command to Ironsi, Lt. Col. Ojukwu viewed it as a slight and as a result, Ojukwu was not ready to take orders from Gowon whom he saw as a military mate and therefore did not recognize his leadership. Ojukwu equally saw Gowon as a symbol of Northern domination which was considered as a threat to the very existence of the Igbos. Ojukwu felt that the solution to this problem was not to remove Gowon from the position but the best alternative would be to break up from the country.

According to Ekpu (1990), he said that while politics ids the beginning of war, war is often the conclusion of politics. The Biafran war was as it were, the conclusion

of a bitter political muscle-flexing between the federal government led by the Sandhurst-trained young head of state, Yakubu Gowon and the Eastern Nigeria government led by Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Oxford educated bearded historian soldier of aristocratic background. Throughout the period, northern speeches and writing revealed a steadily growing hatred of the easterners in their midst. This growing hatred and dislike later developed into many massacres of easterners residents in the northern part of Nigeria. The increasing massacres and insecurity of the lives of Igbos. The killing brought further influx of Igbo refugees into eastern Nigeria in pathetic and shocking conditions. Uncountable large number of Igbos corpses was brought back, others lucky enough were merely amputated or disabled. Women were raped and some pregnant ones had to be disemboweled. Eastern soldiers in Lagos and elsewhere flew home either naked or in underpants. However, Ojukwu tried some conciliatory processes. He attempted many peace conferences in order to find solution to the problems. He even attended the 'Aburi conference' which the non-implementation of its accord gave rise to the war.

Nonetheless, the very immediate cause of the war was Gowon's declaration of a new constitution and its new twelve states on May 27, 1967 (Ajaegbo, 2001). Easterners saw this as a bid of spit their unity. Thus, the British sowed the seed, Nigerians tended the crops, and crisis was inevitable (Anim, 1980). The Governor sovereignty of Biafra (the Eastern Region) as a nation but could the East be inevitably to the outbreak of the civil war. Obasanjo pointed out that the declaration of secession made war not inevitable but imminent (Obasanjo, 1960). At this therefore, the federal government under Gowon declared 'political action' against Biafra which blossomed to a full scale war. It was a full scale war with wanton destruction of life and property. Some of its outcome was general while others were particular.

Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation

At the end of the war, the federal government had declared the immediate post war era as a period for three R's- Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation. It is no longer news that after the war, people came back from their temporary exiles to meet their belongings destroyed including private and community buildings, homes, churches etc. it is natural that these belongings should at least be replaced immediately in the reconstruction.

The Nigerian government after the war has announced that people should assess their loss and submit same to the relevant official quarters. This was done but nothing meaningful was done by the government. Reconstruction was done by individual families on their own. What happened therefore was that reconstruction and rehabilitation was slow and according to each persons capabilities. Those who sold in Biafran currency during the war were most in difficulty while those who sold in Nigerian money were better off and able to reconstruct quicker.

The issue of reconciliation was quicker for despite the ill treatment meted on Biafrans by Nigerians, the end of the war did not take long before the Igbos got themselves scattered once more all over the country in search of jobs and business.

Social and economic effect of the war on the Igbo People of Nigeria

Social Impact

The massacres in the North and the subsequent war made many people to become disabled. Some were victims of the unprovoked attacks and massacres. The war merely aggravated these tendencies through military action, bombing or other forms of accidents. It was a credit to Biafra medical ingenuity that these people did not die of their disability in spite of the inadequate medical services.

Another negative effect on the people was psychological fear the war induced on the Igbo people. While the war lasted by enemies attack and there was a fear of conscription for the young men, the tension created the constant fear of losing a relative in the battle field. The fear that arose during the war continued even at the end of the war as a result of anti-social and criminal activities forced upon the demobilized soldiers by joblessness. With firearms at their beck and call, many easily resorted to robbery and corruption.

Individual and group animosity also increased. Many people became mortal enemies to each other because of war experiences. The major cause of this lay particularly in the anger which arose from forced conscription into the war by aggrieved individuals and families. The situation is worsened in causes of death of victims. The alleged individual responsible for such tragedy is held in perpetual enmity

Moreover, various families were broken down as a result of the war. The separation of husbands from their wives as a result of the war led to broken families either as a result of death or directly on the part of one partner. Some people lost their social standing because of war impoverished them while others fared better due to enhanced war opportunities

Few positive social effects arose from the war. It seems that people learnt to have strong mind to face their problems following war experiences. They also inherited a sense of pity from their experiences with the refugees. Apart from this, it would appear that the Igbos have learnt after the war that 'charity begins at home' considering the way people invest at home now (think home philosophy), but ironically, a greater setback for the Igbo is the war guilt and marginalization.

The war united the Igbos more with the progeny of the Igbos in the Northern Nigeria; they all rushed back to their base with a few properties they could carry. They united for first of its kind under one leader-Ojukwu and fought the war which they believed would give them safety, their rights and privileges. With this spirit of unit of the civil war, Igbo leaders of thought and ordinary citizens are united today under one umbrella via 'Ohaneze ndi Igbo'. Under this umbrella, they still continue to pursue their common goal. Today, in the whole world or country anywhere Igbos are, they are united and treat one another as brothers and sisters irrespective of state of origin.

Economic Effect

The economic impact of the civil war tended more towards poverty. When particularly Nigerian soldiers came in, they had to cut down bushes and even economic trees around them so as to have a clear view of their enemy. There was

also the destruction of houses through bombings, shelling and even deliberate removal of roofs. These roofs (zincs) they used to provide bashers for themselves. As they destroyed, so they looted valuables items. The federal government further impoverished the war returnees by granting them as a matter of policy the paltry and insulting sum of twenty pounds for accounts in banks operated during the war. There were cases of people the war stopped their businesses and workers who automatically had to stop work. Again, certain individual enterprises that existed before the war died at the end of it bringing with them mass poverty for their former owners. Consequently, they could not go into their various businesses again. They lost what they could have acquired from daily transaction or payment for their service to the nation. The economic effect that heated Biafra most was the change of currency by the federal government in January 1968. Biafrans faced financial disaster, if not a total collapse as a result of the change which was the most important single reason why we lost the war.

On the positive side, however, some people who were clever made their way to new riches while some fell completely

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the war of Nigerian unity was fought with bravely. It is a war with lots of lessons. The fact that there was reconciliation after the war does not mean there was reintegration. The clause that says “No Victor No Vanquished” in the Nigerian war is a fallacy for there was the Victor and there was the Vanquished. The treatment being meted to the Igbos since after the war shows that they were defeated. If not, why was much made about reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation. Yet, the government offered no tangible assistance for the people to reconstruct and rehabilitate themselves instead their accounts in banks were frozen and a man with many problems was forced to collect only twenty pounds to face these problems. It was a lost war, if not why were the easterners particularly the Igbos being marginalized in subsequent national governments. When Ojukwu questioned this in the 1993 formation of National government why was he cautioned that the ministerial post was not a compensation for the civil war. According to Nwankwo (1980), Biafrans lost the war. Indeed Biafran lost the revolution before the war. It also lost survival as a nation. But it has left behind it an ideal. This ideal remains the only hope for Black Africa and what is the hope? Indigenous development and lessons of the war in general. This is the challenges of Biafra For Biafra had the qualities to win the war but a large heart had to be supported by large armies and ranks to win major wars. The later qualities Biafra lacked.

The war made manifest the problems of Nigeria, though they remain unsolved till today. These are unfaithfulness to the nation and to each other in particular, tribalism, nepotism, corruption, unnecessarily optimism, power dominances, avarice, irrationalism, insecurity and richness of our resources. All these dominate present Nigeria’s social, political and economic life. What is heart-breaking, the geniuses made manifest in Biafra were thrown into the dustbin of history for unnecessary political fear. The optimism of Gowon over what he thought would end with a police

action ended in a full blown thirty months war and what Ojukwu thought was the greatest power in black Africa was dragged to the mud. Both Gowon and Ojukwu underrated the capabilities of each side.

As a nation, we are yet to build within our political ethos honesty, tolerance and patriotism. The future continues to be annulled and mortgaged in the interest of the few and to the detriment of the majority (Okafor, 1995).

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