

BIAFRAN AGITATION: AN EVALUATION

OKOLO, ROMANUS OBIORA

Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies,
Tansian University Umunya, Nigeria

Email: romchristus@yahoo.com; Phone No.: +2348068451412

REV. FR. IGNATIUS C. UZONDU, PhD.

Philosophy Department, NnamdiAzikiweUniversity Awka, Nigeria

Email: ic.uzondu@unizik.edu.ng; Phone No.: +2348066461924

ABSTRACT

This paper is entitled “Biafran Agitation: An Evaluation.” It critically evaluates the resurgence of Biafran agitation within the broader context of Nigeria's post-colonial political development. Drawing on the historical antecedents of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), it explores the continuity of separatist sentiment among the Igbo ethnic group and the evolving strategies of pro-Biafra movements, particularly the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Employing expository analytical and evaluative methods of research that integrates political history, conflict studies, and federalism theory, the study investigates the root causes of agitation-including perceived marginalization, identity politics, and institutional failure-and assesses the Nigerian state's policy responses ranging from militarization to selective dialogue. The paper argues that the persistence of the Biafran question reflects deeper structural flaws in Nigeria's federal arrangement and highlights the inadequacy of coercive state strategies. It concludes by advocating for constitutional restructuring, equitable governance, and sustained dialogue as essential steps toward de-escalation and long-term national integration. The study contributes to current scholarship on post-colonial secessionist movements and the challenges of nation-building in plural societies or multi-ethnic states.

Keywords: Biafra Agitation, Nigerian Civil War, Root Causes, Marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

No doubt, the Biafran agitation represents one of the most enduring and contentious separatist movements in post-independence Africa. Rooted in the historical trauma of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the agitation for the creation of an independent Biafran state has persisted for decades, with fluctuating intensity depending on political and economic conditions. Initially sparked by ethnic tensions, economic disparities, and political marginalization following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Biafran cause culminated in a bloody three-year war that claimed over a million lives, mostly through starvation and disease (Achebe, 2012; Madiebo, 1980). Despite the official end of the conflict in 1970, the underlying grievances that led to the secession attempt

remain largely unaddressed.

In recent years, the agitation has re-emerged with renewed vigor, spearheaded by groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which advocate for self-determination through both civil disobedience and international lobbying (Onuoha, 2016, p.308). Beside, Chief Ralph Uwazurike in September, 1999 suddenly appeared and re-declared the Eastern region of Nigeria the Sovereign State of Biafra to be. Of course, there were different reactions from different quarters, especially considering the horrifying consequences that followed such a venture in 1967 when it was first declared. As people were still in doubt of his seriousness he cleared their doubts by hoisting the Biafra flag and inaugurating the movement for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra (MASSOB), not very long after that. In late 2014, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu (MNK) came up with Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and "IPOB was created to rejuvenate the drive for secession when the head of MASSOB, Ralph Uwazurike, was thought to have compromised in his commitment to the goals of the movement," (Adango, 2018, p.144). These movements argue that the Igbo and other Southeastern ethnic groups continue to experience systemic exclusion, economic marginalization, and political underrepresentation within the Nigeria federation (Nwankpa, 2014, p.69). The Nigerian government, on the other hand, has predominantly adopted a securitized response, branding the agitators as threats to national unity and deploying military force to suppress dissent (Ugwueze & Onuoha, 2019, p.560).

Nevertheless, the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) distinguishes between indigenous people's rights within the realm of their right to self-determination, and their rights in the larger political order of the state. The Declaration affirms indigenous peoples' right to develop and maintain their own decision-making institutions, parallel to their right to participate in "external" decision-making process which affects their rights. In relation to this, the article three (3) in paragraph one (1) of the Declaration affirms that indigenous peoples such as the Biafrans; have the right to self-determination, including the right to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (ILO Convention, 2007, No. 169). Also, the article four (4) in paragraph one (1) of the Declaration addresses and affirms the internal aspects of this right which states that indigenous peoples like the Biafrans, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions (ILO Convention, 2007, No. 169). Hence, indigenous peoples' right to retain and develop their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions is a fundamental right under international human rights law. It was the deprivation of these rights that brought about the Biafra agitations leading to the 1967 – 1970 Biafran Civil War in Nigeria.

Consequently, this study seeks to evaluate the Biafran agitation through a multidisciplinary lens, situating it within broader discourses on nationalism, federalism, and post-colonial state-building in

Africa. By critically examining historical antecedents, the evolution of pro-Biafran movements, and state responses, the paper aims to illuminate the structural challenges confronting Nigeria's nationhood. The evaluation also explores the prospects for conflict resolution through constitutional reform, inclusive governance, and national dialogue, thereby contributing to scholarly and policy-oriented discussions on managing ethno-political agitations in plural societies or multi-ethnic states.

BIAFRAN CONFLICT AND ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN BRIEF

There is a saying, "No smoke without fire." In other words, there could be some elements of truth in the remote causes of the Biafra declaration. By the remote causes, the researchers mean those errors committed, mistakes made, events, etc., which in one way or the other contributed to Nigeria's political instability, which are often ignored, but form the bedrock of the conflict that led to the attempted secession. Notably, these remote causes trace back to the pre-amalgamation era, and equally too, their negative consequences persist as freshly as ever till today. Meanwhile, before the arrival of the colonial masters, the different peoples that make up what we now call Nigeria lived as independent kingdoms, empires, republicans, caliphates etc.

These peoples had their different socio-political structures, cultures and religions, which in most cases differed greatly from one another's. In the North, for instance, it was a highly centralized socio-political structure, with the caliph at the head possessing an absolute power both in political, judicial and religious matters. It was a theocracy with Arab oriented culture and the official religion was Islam. In the South, the case was quite different. One can see diverse political administrative systems and cultural orientations with some little similarities among some groups. In the Yoruba-dominated South-West, it was another form of centralized system of government, which was more democratic and largely less totalitarian than the one in the North. Their orientation was African both in religion and culture. The most prominent among the Yoruba kingdoms was the old Oyo Empire. Moving eastwards from there you meet Benin kingdoms in the Mid-West, which had some similarities with the Yoruba kingdoms but were politically independent of them. There are equally some other smaller independent political entities and kingdoms in places like Bonny, Kalabari, Lagos etc (Okpala, 2006).

Coming to the Igbo-dominated East, the system of government was mainly republican. This is so because, the small political units scattered everywhere independent of one another. Thus, the system was decentralized and no one had the power to lord it over the other (Njoku, 2002, p.46). Yet, they had leaders who just had the mandate to represent their people the way the people wished. Everybody was involved in the political life of the community and everything was by consensus; thorough republicanism.

After everything, the summary is that there was no unity of purpose. There has always been a strong

division between North, East and West, but the division has been stronger between North and South in general. Therefore, the people we now parade as Nigerian nationalists were ethnic nationalists, except in some cases. But after everything, they got their so-called independence as a country. How come that this could happen? At least from the story so far, there is no basis for unity. Instead, there have been some separatist signs. The Muslim North had never wanted to associate with the Christian South and had at least once made a bold step to secession but that was neutralized by the British.

In a nutshell, there are certain things glaringly clear to any thinking mind. The totality of the Nigerian political structure is a product of the British mind, imposed on the people, for the former's future use, despite protests by the latter. They had all this while putting things in positions for use, mainly after the so-called independence. Now look at it. The British strongly wanted to lock these peoples together as a country, not in a real sense, but in a formal sense, so that they would be at one another's throats as had been institutionalized. For this, they cleverly neutralized every move towards disintegration because they felt they could always deceive the North than the South, they put everything in the control of the North, through the regional imbalance by which the North would always control every political decision in Nigeria through their population domination, and then they would now make the North their mouthpiece and hence control Nigeria through them. That was why they hypocritically played romance with the North to the detriment of other sections, to deceive them into believing that they were friends, and always inspired every one of their political moves. But the North is only a means to an end; we are all looked at together as Africans. Therefore, Nigeria is not real; instead, it is a mere economic institution of the British. The so-called "Independence Day" was the day everybody in Nigeria 'gloriously' matched into the tract of the race to perpetual dependence and slavery, otherwise called neo-colonialism (Okpala: 2006).

KEY EVENTS AND FIGURES IN THE BIAFRAN WAR

The Biafran War saw several key events and figures that shaped its course. The initial declaration of independence by Ojukwu was a pivotal moment, leading to the outbreak of hostilities. Major battles included the Siege of Port Harcourt, which resulted in significant casualties and the eventual capture of the city by Nigerian forces, (Madiebo, 1980, p.67).

General Yakubu Gowon, as the head of the Nigerian government, played a crucial role in directing the military campaign against Biafra. His leadership was instrumental in the eventual defeat of Biafran forces and the reintegration of the region into Nigeria. On the Biafran side, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu emerged as the leader of the secessionist movement, advocating for the independence of Biafra and resisting Nigerian forces until the very end (Uwechue, 2004, p.89). However, let us consider and determine some major factors of the conflict in belief.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

The causes of the Biafran War are multifaceted, involving ethnic rivalries, economic disparities, and

political instability. Nigeria's colonial history and the arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers contributed to ethnic tensions between the major groups, including the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani (Osaghae, 1998, p.34.).

Economic factors also played a significant role, with the discovery of oil in the Southeastern region fuelling competition for control of resources. The Eastern Region, home to the Igbo people, felt marginalized and excluded from the benefits of oil wealth, leading to demands for greater autonomy and, eventually, secession (Nafziger, 1997, p.56).

Another notable factor is political instability, which including coups and counter-coups, further exacerbated tensions. The military coup of January 1966, led by predominantly Igbo officers, and the subsequent counter-coup in July 1966, which resulted in the killing of many Igbo officers, created a climate of mistrust and fear that ultimately led to the declaration of Biafran independence (Afigbo, 1981, p.78).

THE OUTCOME OF THE BIAFRA WAR: ITS CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

The Biafran War also known as the Nigerian Civil War, took place between 1967 and 1970. It was a secessionist conflict in which the Southeastern region of Nigeria attempted to form the independent state of Biafra. The war resulted from ethnic, political, and economic tensions within Nigeria, exacerbated by the discovery of oil in the Southeastern region (Nwankwo, 1972, p.12). The conflict began when Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region, declared the independence of Biafra on May 30, 1967. This declaration was in response to the perceived marginalization and targeted killings of Igbos and other ethnic minorities in the eastern region, who felt threatened by the central Nigerian government. The Nigerian government, led by General Yakubu Gowon, refused to recognize Biafra's independence and launched a military campaign to reintegrate the region into Nigeria. The war was marked by brutal fighting, significant civilian casualties, and widespread famine, particularly in Biafra (Achebe, 2012, p.45).

In his dissertation, Okpala (2006) claimed that as secession was the only remaining alternative for self-defence, the Easterners wrongly believed that the world having seen how greatly they had been treated unjustly, would not support any attack on them by the Nigerian government (p.19). But this was not to be true for international politics is a game of gain and not of conscience. Moreover, some of the so-called powers had all these while collaborating with the Nigerian government immediately after the war broke out, they threw their weight behind Gowon. Britain was actively supporting Nigeria while America, though claimed neutral, did not recognize Biafra. Most of the jets used by the Nigerian troops were Russian jets. Even though these people posed as their reasons that secession was illegitimate, it was all for selfish motives. Muslim African countries like Egypt pitched their tent with the Nigerian government perhaps, on religious grounds. Thus, Egyptian pilots were very active in the Nigerian Air Force during the war. The most outstanding European

power on Biafran's side was France and Black African countries like Ivory Coast, Gabon, Zambia and Tanzania recognized Biafra (p.20), but their total help was far from being sufficient. Faced with extreme difficulties, the creative ingenuity of the Biafrans shone out. Thus they could invent in the areas of Agriculture, armament etc.

The natures of the war made Biafrans see it as genocide, because from every indication there were serious moves to exterminate every human being on the Biafran side. The Russian jets were spreading explosives in every place indicative of human lives, like hospitals, marketplaces, schools, houses etc. The total blockade from foreign contact and the starvation measure, which took more lives than ammunition did, were targeted at civilians. There was equally an alleged poisoning of food coming into Biafra by the Nigerian government. However, this war dragged on for thirty months and Biafrans unable to withstand the pressures any longer, surrendered shortly after Ojukwu had left for Ivory Coast. The total death estimate is about three million.

Following the Biafran surrender, the Nigerian military head of state, Yakubu Gowon, declared that there was 'No Victor No Vanquished' and declared the move of the federal government towards reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction concerning the war (Okpala, 2006, p. 21). Babangida (2025) also stressed that "the Nigerian government's policy of "No Victor, No Vanquished" aimed to facilitate the reintegration of the Biafran region and heal the nation's wounds (p.75). In reality, the opposite became the case for the war continued in a worse form; no longer as two independent sovereignties but as a conqueror nation and the conquered territory.

Contrary to the expectation of the Easterners, there was a systematic further blockade of relief materials immediately after the Biafran surrender by the Nigerian government, causing more civilian deaths even more than recorded within the last weeks of the war. Many Biafran soldiers were shot by Nigerian troops after their surrender and those who survived were dismissed from the forces like the army, police etc. Many people's last drop of hope for survival in the extremely dehumanizing war-caused conditions was destroyed when they were allowed only twenty pounds each from all they loaded into Nigerian banks before the war ended, while those paralyzed by the war have since then been languishing at Oji uncared for. Again, the reconstruction propaganda has not been matched with action as the wanton destructions of the war have remained forgotten by the federal government. To ever increase their sufferings and equally create disunity among the Easterners, the properties of the Igbos in some places, especially in Port-Harcourt, were declared abandoned till today (Okpala, 2006, p.22). Besides making life ever more difficult for the Igbos, this was meant to create disunity between the Igbos and the inhabitants of Port-Harcourt, who being desperate beyond control would most likely accept the offer of inheriting the properties of the Igbos in their midst. To facilitate the destruction of Igbo solidarity and identity, many Igbo communities have been forced into states dominated by Igbo-hostile communities, which made these Igbos deny their Igbo identity to escape maltreatment. As these people were still desperately battling with these blood-sucking and dehumanizing situations, indigenization policy was introduced to sell the

indigenized foreign companies to the 'real citizens' of Nigeria; like the Yorubas who benefited most and are now the sole controllers of the economic sector of the federation. This was systematically done to permanently nail the Easterners to poverty and a state of total exclusion, while the 'real citizens' overtook them and permanently maintained control of every sector of the federal government. Thus after everything, the Hausas control power, Yorubas control the economy, and the Igbos are labourers (Okpala, 2006, p.23).

These and so many other steps continually being added to systematically and completely shatter the 'Biafrans' have continually and increasingly been the case for more than fifty years after their surrender. This ever-worsening situation of perpetual slavery and dehumanization becoming increasingly unbearable and without any hope for a future change, these people remembered Biafra again and bounced back to it but in a new way; it is now a new Biafra.

CAUSES OF THE AGITATION

The agitation for Biafra stems from a combination of historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. The primary cause is the perceived marginalization of the Igbo people in the Nigerian state. Post-independence Nigeria has been marred by ethnic tensions, political instability, and economic disparities, with the Southeastern region feeling particularly disenfranchised.

Achebe (2012), in "There Was a Country," discusses the deep-seated historical grievances and the psychological impact of the Nigerian Civil War on the Igbo people. This trauma has continued to fuel the desire for an independent Biafra, as unresolved grievances from the civil war persist. Economic disenfranchisement, due to the uneven distribution of national resources, especially oil revenue, has exacerbated the agitation. The Igbo people feel that despite contributing significantly to the nation's economy, they have been systematically excluded from political power and economic benefits (p.178). The civil war's unresolved grievances, including the loss of lives, property, and psychological trauma, continue to fuel the desire for an independent Biafra.

Cultural identity also plays a crucial role. The Igbo people have a strong sense of ethnic identity and pride, which has been bolstered by historical narratives of their ancient civilization and resilience. This cultural nationalism reinforces the call for self-determination and sovereignty (Okeke, 2015, p.112).

In addition to Uwazurike's reasons for the agitation as contained in the August 1999 communiqué, his various speeches, interviews etc, can be summarized as saying the following: The total exclusion of the Igbos from Nigeria's important affairs especially in politics shows that they are not real citizens and therefore not wanted in Nigeria. Nigeria has not been able to reabsorb the Igbos since the end of the war. The promises of the Nigerian government after the war have not been matched with action and the Igbos have since then been largely marginalized, and there is a total infrastructural neglect in the East as a result. The abandoned property and the twenty pounds policy

after the war were meant to destroy the Igbos economically.

Furthermore, the similar situation that led to the war is present again. The unprovoked organized killings of the Igbos, which make their lives and properties insecure, have remained unabated. There are strong indications of the move to Islamize Nigeria. Nigeria has lost its secularity by being a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Besides, there is Sharia law adopted by some Nigerian states, which equally jeopardizes the security of Igbo lives and properties in those states. All these Igbo marginalizations are deliberate and come from the age-long anti-Igbo sentiment in Nigeria. Even if the present government makes a change, there is no guarantee of its maintenance in future. Therefore, there is no going back to the Biafra project. The Igbos want a place of assured security and justice. Nigeria belongs to the North which uses the oil in the East and marginalizes the East. With all these, the Igbos, therefore, say that they cannot continue this way since Nigeria has rejected them. Having seen the causes of the agitation, let us also look into the already recorded achievements.

CURRENT STATUS OF IPOB AND THE BIAFRAN AGITATION

Since Kanu's re-arrest, there have been reports of divisions within the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB's) leadership. Some factions have called for a more peaceful approach, while others continue to advocate for a confrontational stance. These divisions have led to questions about the future direction of the movement (Daily Trust, Sep. 19, 2017). The continued agitation for Biafran independence has had significant social and economic impacts on the Southeast region. Frequent sit-at-home orders, clashes with security forces, and a general climate of unrest have disrupted life in the region.

Internationally, the Biafran agitation remains a contentious issue. While some human rights organizations have condemned the Nigerian government's handling of the situation, most countries remain committed to the principle of Nigeria's territorial integrity. The agitations of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), rooted in the earlier movement led by Ralph Uwazurike, represent a significant challenge to Nigeria's unity. The movement has evolved from the non-violent advocacy of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) to the more radical and confrontational approach of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) under Nnamdi Kanu (Adetula, 2015, n.p.). As of now, the situation remains unresolved, with continued tensions between the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) supporters and the Nigerian government. The future of the Biafran agitation is uncertain, but it continues to be a critical issue in Nigerian politics and society.

In summary, the Biafran agitation, a movement for the secession of the Southeastern region of Nigeria to form an independent Biafra, has been a significant socio-political issue since the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). In recent times, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), led by Chief Ralph Uwazurike, has rekindled these secessionist aspirations.

Uwazurike, a charismatic and controversial figure, has emphasized non-violent methods, drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of civil disobedience.

Under Uwazurike's leadership, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) has organized peaceful protests, civil disobedience campaigns, and international advocacy to push for Biafra's independence. Uwazurike's approach contrasts sharply with the violent methods of the past, aiming to achieve legitimacy and moral high ground in the international arena (Nwankwo, 2016, p.245). However, his leadership has faced criticism for alleged authoritarianism and the movement's sporadic internal conflicts. Scholars such as Judith Butler argue that non-violent resistance can often be more effective in achieving long-term political goals compared to violent rebellion, as it tends to garner broader support and avoid the cycle of retaliation and repression (Butler, "Frames of War"). This resonates with Uwazurike's strategy of non-violent resistance.

EVALUATION

From the discussion so far, the Biafra agitation is deeply embedded in Nigeria's historical, political, and socio-economic landscape. At the heart of the movement are longstanding grievances over marginalization, unequal resource distribution, and perceived political exclusion, particularly among the Igbo ethnic group in Southeastern Nigeria (Nnoli, 2018, p.224). These grievances are not merely historical artifacts of the Nigerian Civil War but are continuously reinforced by systemic inequalities in governance, representation, and infrastructural development (Suberu, 2001, p.198). The re-emergence of the Biafran cause through groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) demonstrates a shift from conventional secessionist warfare to more decentralized, media-savvy, and transnational activism. Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), for example, utilizes social media, international advocacy, and diaspora networks to mobilize support and bring global attention to its cause (Nwaubani, 2017, n.p.). However, this modern iteration of Biafra agitation has also been met with intensified state repression, including arrests, proscription, and military operations such as "Operation Python Dance" (Egwu Eke)—measures that have arguably escalated tensions and further alienated the Southeastern populace (Okoli&Iortyer, 2016, p.16).

Critically therefore, the Nigerian state's securitized approach to the agitation often neglects the root causes of the unrest. While the federal government insists on preserving national unity at all costs, its reliance on coercion over dialogue has had limited success in diffusing separatist sentiments (Uadiale&Alabi, 2020, p.56). Scholars argue that this approach perpetuates a cycle of mistrust and radicalization, as seen in the hardening rhetoric of Biafran agitators and the increasing volatility in the region (Akinyele, 2001, p.637). Furthermore, Nigeria's flawed federal structure is frequently cited as a key driver of secessionist agitation. The centralization of power and the uneven allocation of national resources have left many ethnic groups feeling disenfranchised, creating fertile ground for ethnonationalist movements (Osaghae, 1998, p.51). Without a sincere effort to restructure the

federation to accommodate regional autonomy and ethnic plurality, movements like Biafra are likely to persist.

CONCLUSION

Above all, the Biafra agitation is not merely a relic of Nigeria's civil war history but a contemporary expression of unresolved structural, political, and cultural grievances. The endurance and evolution of the movement underscore the urgent need for a more inclusive and equitable Nigeria federation. This evaluation has shown that the Nigerian government's predominantly militarized response has proven counterproductive; often intensify the very discontent it seeks to suppress. Rather than treating agitation as a threat to sovereignty, the state must engage in constructive dialogue, implement constitutional reforms, and promote genuine national integration. Therefore, addressing the Biafra question offers a broader opportunity to re-imagine Nigeria's unity, not as enforced silence, but as negotiated consensus among its diverse peoples.

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