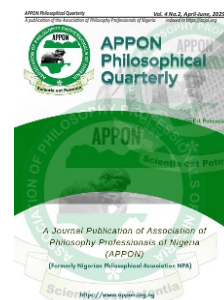


**IGBO BLACKSMITHS AND OTHER
ARTISANS IN WEAPON PRODUCTION
DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR:
TOWARDS A SELF-RELIANT ARMY**



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ABSTRACT

The huge invention and manufacture of the needed weaponry by the scientists, blacksmiths and other artisans of the Research and Armaments Production (RAP) of the Industrial Military Complex of the Biafran Army necessitated by the Nigerian civil war reveals that the need for the Nigerian Army, Nigeria and indeed Africa to look inward cannot be overemphasized, essentially bearing in mind the current challenge of insecurity in Nigeria, the overreliance on other States for the supply of weaponry to tackle the menace amidst suspicions that it is being sponsored by some of those States expectedly relied on for the supply of weaponry. Although so much encomiums have gone for the scientists of the Research and Armaments Production (RAP) for their enormous contributions to the war-efforts of the failed Republic of Biafra, not much has been said about the role of the blacksmiths and other artisans involved in this great milestone, which truly deserves recognition, knowing that no State can be stronger than the one she depends on for weaponry and others. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that self-reliancism is the *sine qua non* for Africa's development. The African continent truly needs to look inward, develop and produce her weapons, food, etc, if she must be respected among comity of nations. A strong

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army, food security, etc, are essential for the advancement of the economic and political frontiers of a State. The paper is of the position that thinking and indeed scholarship should be problem-centric as demonstrated by Plato, the quintessential Greek philosopher as an essential ingredient for the overall advancement of society. The work adopts the descriptive and analytical-historical approach. The paper submits that galvanizing, harmonizing and utilizing the knowledge of the scientists/elites, the skills of the artisans and the support of everyone are needed for a State to develop and be self-reliant. It therefore recommends the embrace of self-reliance as the underlying philosophy of development.

Keywords: Development, Artisans, Smithing, Self-reliance, Weaponry.

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War was a major fillip that necessitated the establishment of the Biafran Military Industrial Complex for the production of weaponry during the war. The scientific and technological innovations that were achieved by the defunct Republic of Biafra during the Civil War have continued to generate debates among historians, scientists, scholars and commentators both within and outside Nigeria many years after the end of the Nigerian conflict.⁵ A few scholarly works on the history of weapon project in Biafra during the Civil War appear to glorify and celebrate only the educated Biafran scientists, engineers and technologists who were a part of the weapons production industry.⁶ However, not much is known about the role of the

indigenous “uneducated ‘blacksmiths and other artisans in the war efforts of the Biafrans, especially in the areas of weaponry and allied services during the war.’⁷ In the candid consideration of this paper, the blacksmiths and other artisans that played a very key role in the making of the weapons and the provision of allied services during the war, but were not mentioned deserve full recognition as well.

Besides the question of recognition, the activities of the artisans of the defunct Biafran army also throws up a fundamental issue bothering on the need to look inward to galvanize both human and material resources for self-reliance. Going by the activities of the blacksmiths and other artisans in the making of weapons and provision of allied services in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War *vis-à-vis* the challenge of over dependence on the United States of America, Europe and others, the need for us as a people to look inward has become more important now than ever before. In this regard, E. K. Ogundowole’s self-reliance as a philosophy of development of the new State and in this case the African continent has become even more imperative. Ogundowole inadvertently establishes the fact that this approach is necessary if Nigeria and any nation at that must build a viable army that can drive its economy since no nation can be stronger or greater than the one on whom she depends for arms and even food.

Having established the historical fact that the blacksmiths and other artisans of the defunct Republic of Biafra were able to produce weapons independently that aided,

⁵ Francis Asika, “Scientific and Technological Innovation in Warfare: A Case Study of Biafra (1967-1970).” PhD Thesis submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Ojo, (2023): 100

⁶ Francis Asika, “Scientific and Technological Innovation in Warfare,”: 100

⁷ C.B.N. Ogbogbo and O.O. Okpetheds, *Nigerian History: From the Earliest Times to the Twenty-First Century* (Lagos: LANUV, 2021): 137-136.

enhanced and sustained the Biafran army during the civil war that sustained them, not minding the short period of their emergence and training, it becomes incontrovertible that given the ambience of modernity and advancement in technology, it is even more doable and important for Africa to embrace the option of self-reliance and not depend on foreign powers for her weaponry and other areas of life concerns considering the huge endowment of the continent in both human and mineral resources. This is particularly important considering the level of insecurity, food scarcity and other vices pervading the continent and the inability somewhat to deal decisively with the issues essentially as we have to depend on others for weapons to tackle the challenge and the fact that those from whom we acquire weapons also dictate when and how they are deployed. It could be said without any fear of equivocation that the blacksmiths and other artisans provided invaluable services independently and indirectly to the Biafran war efforts during the Nigerian civil war or conflict.⁸

The paper is structured in such a way that shows both the historical reality of the importance of inward looking and the philosophical analysis of the relevance of self-reliance as a driving philosophy of development and the imperative for the African continent to embrace it roundly. Our analysis would include the clarification of some of the important and key concepts and relate them to the central focus of the paper which is to advance the course of looking inward with a view to promoting self-reliance of the African continent.

The Blacksmiths

In a simple term, a blacksmith is a person that works on iron to produce different types of objects and tools for various purposes.⁹ Blacksmith could also refer to someone who fabricates objects out of iron by hot and cold forging on an anvil. Blacksmithing, according to Nancy Neaher, is an age-long industry among the people of Nigeria such as Chamba, Bata and Mbula peoples of North-Eastern Nigeria as well as the Yoruba, Benin, and some Igbo communities such as Awka, Nkwerre, Abiriba and others, particularly Udi Division in Southern Nigeria. As Neaher remarked, various Nigerian smiths had attained the enviable height of “sophisticated traditions of blacksmithing as far back as the 17th century,” but among the various pre-colonial Nigeria people, “the only region of significant size and population lacking technology was the coastal fringe. The coastal regions, that is, Niger Delta lacked local sources of iron ore hence they depended on smiths from the interior for their supply of metal objects and tools.”¹⁰

Early observers such as W. B. Baikie, F. A. Talbot, G. T. Basden and A. E. Afigbo among others, referred to the Awka, Nkwerre, Udi and Abiriba blacksmiths known as “Uzu” in Igbo land as the dominant and professional smiths.¹¹ Accordingly, Basden remarked: “There are some towns which practically monopolized certain specialized professions. For example, Awka and Nkwerre and a few other places manufactured nearly all the metal works produced in the Ibo country ...”¹²

⁸ Francis Asika, “Scientific and Technological Innovation in Warfare,”: 107.

⁹ *Merriam Webster English Dictionary*

¹⁰ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions.” Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies, Stanford University, (1976): 67.

¹¹ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions,”: 68.

¹² Osita Ebiem, *Nigeria, Biafra and Boko Haram: Ending the Genocides through Multi-State Solution*. (New York: Page Publishing, 2014): 126-127.

Due to the intricate nature of the metallurgical industry and the high demand for metal objects, many Igbo smiths had to travel or migrate to other Igbo and non-Igbo villages, towns and communities such as Owerri, Mbano, Calabar, Bonny and Warri, among others to trade their wares. Besides, the Awka smiths engaged in long distance trade which is a major characteristic Igbo predilection – to travel away from the homeland for trade and occupational specialisation. The blacksmiths produced various iron implements such as “hoes of all descriptions, machetes, knives and cooking stands, spears for fishing and traps ... ritual items such as *Ozo* staff and iron bells (*Ogene*) and Dane guns were produced in their workshops.”¹³ Apart from Igbo land and the Niger Delta areas where they dominated the trade in metal objects, Awka blacksmiths also established themselves in some parts of Yorubaland. According to Oloidi, Awka smiths were among the early Igbo sojourners in Yorubaland, particularly in Okitipupa area of modern day Ondo State around 1890-1904. Their skill in gunsmithing enabled them to penetrate Yorubaland. Besides the manufacture of guns, the Oka smiths were reputed to have pioneered the production of knives, cutlasses, hoes and others in large quantities for sale in Okitipupa.¹⁴ In addition, it was said that “while the Yoruba gunsmiths used nails and riveted their gun parts, Oka smiths used screws. Oka guns could thus be taken apart, cleaned and re-assembled.”¹⁵

Furthermore, Oloidi noted that, “... these Oka people performed their smithing ability by producing for the first time heavy

duty double-barrel guns that could kill two to three animals at once ... and a district if there is war”¹⁶ This does not imply that it was Igbo blacksmiths that pioneered the science of blacksmithing in Okitipupa or other pre-colonial Yoruba States. Rather, it shows that the arrival of the Oka smiths contributed tremendously to the growth and expansion of blacksmithing in Okitipupa and its environs.

The smiths in Igbo land also functioned as *Dibia* (native doctor or priest and purveyor of local religious cults) and as itinerant traders.¹⁷ Thomas provided an insight into the warm reception various communities accorded the smiths, particularly the Awka smiths when he asserted thus:

The smiths’ reputation made it possible to travel without serious threat of harm. They travelled in groups when possible, carrying their tools of trade with them. The frequency of their travels, the visible signs of their occupation on their backs, and the distinctive Awka dialect distinguished them from other transients and permitted them safe passage through alien territory.¹⁸

To attain the status of master *Uzu* – blacksmith, one had to undergo a regulated period of apprenticeship at a tender age. The first task of an apprentice known as *Nwauzu* was to handle minor duties such as pumping the bellows and making simple tools like sewing needles, barber’s knives and razors

¹³ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions,” 75.

¹⁴ J. Oloidi, “Economic History of Ekiti People in Nigeria 1900-1960.”

¹⁵ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions,” :87.

¹⁶ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions.”

¹⁷ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions.”

¹⁸ N. C. Neaher, “Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions.”

used for body scarification.¹⁹ A prospective apprentice was discouraged from learning under his father because it was believed that he would be treated with levity by his father, hence, he was sent to a kinsman from the same village for thorough training.²⁰ When the apprentice had mastered the trade, his master would organise a graduation ceremony known as *Mmaotutu* for him and also establish him by providing him with his first set of tools, such as bellows (*eko*) anvil (*oshiama*) and large hammer (*otutu*).²¹ The hammer was the major tool that symbolised his accreditation as a professional. In addition, the blacksmiths had a distinct cult known as *Akputakpu* from which they sought protection for themselves and their families.²²

Nadel and Jagger observed the following traits among the blacksmiths in Nupe and Kano: (i) Membership was closed, usually limited to kin groups, (ii) Outsiders could only join after formal adoption and a period of apprenticeship, (iii) The group was characterized by centralized control, with a hierarchy of ranks and grades, and (iv) The group was defined politically, as well as economically, and enjoyed special social privileges.²³ Our research corroborates this while interacting with the blacksmiths in Agulu-Awka and Udi in Enugu State and Awka in Anambra State respectively. However, there appears to be a divergence of opinion on the origin of the various blacksmithing communities in Igbo land. On one hand, Paul Amalu claimed that the Awka

blacksmiths in Anambra migrated from Agulu-Awka.²⁴ Major Obienyem on the other hand, argued that Awka-Anambra was the ancestral home of most blacksmithing communities in Igbo land including Agulu-Awka.²⁵ The Awka-Ugiri blacksmiths in Isiala Mbano, Imo State, may have migrated from Agulu-Awka, Enugu State or Awka, Anambra State.²⁶ Further field investigation by historians and anthropologists would be necessary to verify the authenticity of these claims.

The Artisans and Technicians

An artisan or crafts person is a worker who practices a trade or handcraft. On the other hand, a technician is a person that has acquired the technique of an art or other area of specialization.²⁷ According to Eric Umeh, a technician is:

the factory hand or attendant that keeps the process line going by operating, maintaining and repairing faults; he is the skilled hand on the assembly line; he is the craftsman who repairs your watches, he is the motor or bicycle mechanic, he repairs or maintains your generating plant, your air-conditioner, and refrigerator; he is the mason, the plumber, and the carpenter, he is the technologist in the science laboratory or engineer who ensures your instruments and installations are in good working condition. He maintains aircraft;

¹⁹ Oral Interview with Kelechi Onuorah, ex- blacksmith, Umualikpa, IHEME Mbano, Imo State, 76 years. 23rd February, 2021.

²⁰ N. C. Neahe, "Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions."

²¹ N. C. Neahe, "Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions."

²² N. C. Neahe, "Bronzes of Southern Nigeria and Igbo Metalsmithing Traditions," :90.

²³ Interview with Paul Amalu on 20th June 2021.

²⁴ Interview Major Obienyem, on 17 August 2020.

²⁵ Oral Interview with Kelechi Onuorah, ex- blacksmith, Umualikpa, IHEME Mbano, Imo State, (76 years old), 23 February, 2021.

²⁶ Oral Interview with Kelechi Onuorah, ex- blacksmith

²⁷ Merriam Webster English Dictionary

the ship and train and ensures they are in good working order. He installs and maintains telephone, the electricity supply system, and the gas lines and related instruments. He is the skilled engineer/builder or construction expert who interprets and practically, with his hands and other appliances, transforms the architects' drawings into concrete structures and long bridge spans and highways. He is also the craftsman who sews your clothes, binds books, makes and mends your shoes ...²⁸

The above definition and examples of artisans and technicians show that some of the inventions of Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War were not undertaken by the RAP scientists alone. The blacksmiths and other artisans made huge contributions in the areas of bunker construction, production of alcoholic drinks and refining of crude petroleum, among others. Moreover, some of the workers who contributed to the making of the Biafran mines and other weapons had acquired experience in operating crude equipment in the past where they worked in places such as Enugu coal mines.²⁹

During the Nigerian Civil War the contribution of the technicians was felt in the Biafran Army, Navy and Air Force. The technicians were involved in fitting the B25 and B26 Biafran³⁰ aircrafts with machine guns and locally made bombs. Of a truth is

that at the beginning of the civil war, the Biafrans fought with machetes due to lack of guns and ammunition. However, the machetes were in-effective and were no match for the Nigerian soldiers who were armed with automatic rifles. While the machete could be described as an obsolete weapon of warfare, nevertheless, it formed an integral part of Biafra's weapon arsenal at the beginning of the civil war despite their limitations.

Prior to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, the blacksmiths that had been hounded by the Eastern Region government for engaging in illicit production of firearms became the very people the Biafran government relied on for the production and repairs of local guns and machetes at the beginning of the civil war. Their knowledge of the production of iron and steel proved invaluable to the Biafran government while the civil war lasted.³¹

The production of iron and steel is a specialized knowledge. The local blacksmith works with bellow, anvils and other tools in workshops which are powered manually by applying force on them to generate heat or energy. The modern or conventional blacksmith works with a blast furnace which is powered by electric energy. Other common methods of steel production are the oxygen converter and the Bessemer converter. The technical term for iron production through non-conventional method is called 'direct reduction process'.³² In summary, the intricate process of iron and steel production involves: (i) The conversion process; a process of converting iron ore into pig iron; (ii) The conversion of

²⁸ Eric Umeh, "The Role of Trained Technician in the Technological Development of Nigeria", being a paper presented at the Graduation Ceremony of the Government Technical College, Enugu (Tuesday, 8th July, 1981): 4.

²⁹ A.A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution*, :100.

³⁰ Ogbudinkpa, *The Economy of...* p28.

³¹ Ugwuja, *The Nigeria-Biafra* pp.109-110.

³² C.N. Ntamere, "The Feasibility of an Integrated Iron and Steel Industry in Nigeria and Biafra." Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Notre Dame, (1970): 46.

pig iron into steel and (iii) The production process in which the pig iron is processed into finished products such as blooms, billets, slabs, plates, sheets, bars, rails and structural shapes.³³

Before going into production, the blacksmith must also procure the basic materials such as iron ore, fuels and energy (coke and flux stone), water, alloys and refractories. Refractories are non-metallic materials that withstand severe or destructive service conditions at high temperature.³⁴ Ntamere writes that iron is a chemical compound in which the iron content is of sufficient commercial importance.³⁵ The various classes of ore are Hematite, Magnetite, Limonite, Siderite, Taconite and Jasper. The quality and production cost of iron is determined by the chemical contents of the ore. Hence, the higher of the Fe content the better the quality and the less the production costs. Fe refers to the chemical contents present in ore.³⁶

This brief information about the production process of iron and steel reveals that those who possess the local knowledge of its production and refinement into finished products – the blacksmiths, provide important services in the society. Armed with such knowledge, the blacksmiths who are also artisans and technicians fashioned various weapons including machetes. Machetes are produced by blacksmiths from iron ore and they serve the same purpose as sword in combat. They are both offensive and defensive weapons used by soldiers in warfare. Richard Dugate noted that the warriors of Hausaland in Nigeria fought the British Army with swords and scored

several victories before they were finally defeated by the European adversaries.³⁷

Having carefully studied an Ohafia war machete produced by local blacksmiths, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that a machete that is made for warfare has certain distinctive qualities and uses which include:

- (I) a machete is a blade combat weapon;
- (ii) a machete is used by soldiers in close combat battle;
- (iii) a machete is used on the chest to damage the heart, kidney and lungs and break the ribs of an enemy;
- (iv) a machete is used on the head to damage the skull and face of an enemy;
- (v) a machete is used to cut off the hands and break the arm or leg of an enemy;
- (vi) a machete is used on the stomach to slash open the intestines of an enemy;
- (vii) the quality of a machete depends on the iron or steel used in producing it and the expertise of the blacksmith;
- (viii) the sharpness of the blade of a machete depends on the expertise of the blacksmith and the owner of the machete;
- (ix) During combat, the striking force of a soldier that is armed with a machete is important. A poor or weak strike will do little or no

³³ C.N. Ntamere, "The Feasibility of an Integrated Iron and Steel Industry," 44-45.

³⁴ C.N. Ntamere, "The Feasibility of an Integrated Iron and Steel Industry," 46.

³⁵ C.N. Ntamere, "The Feasibility of an Integrated Iron and Steel Industry," 47.

³⁶ C.N. Ntamere, "The Feasibility of an Integrated Iron and Steel Industry," 48. According to Dr. Chukukere neither the local blacksmiths nor RAP produced steel based on the intricate process described by Dr. N.C. Neaher. During the Nigerian Civil War, RAP only manufactured steel and iron weapons by melting and moulding steel and iron metals to desired shape for specific weapon projects.

³⁷ C.N. Ntamere, "The Feasibility of an Integrated Iron and Steel Industry."

- damage to the enemy while
a hard strike will
incapacitate the enemy;
- (x) it is better for a machete to
bend than for it to break in
the hand of a soldier during
combat;
- (xi) A soldier armed with a
machete is defenceless
when fighting an enemy
that is armed with a gun
particularly an automatic
gun.

It is in the light of the above that the use of
machetes by civilian volunteers from some
villages near Enugu to defend the city at the
beginning of the Nigerian Civil War should
be seen and understood.

It was said that the blacksmiths and other
artisans involved in the Biafran weapon
project were scattered all over Biafra in
areas such as Akwa and its environs,
Onitsha, Udi, Ndegwu, Bende, Ohafia,
Ngwa,³⁸ as well as Mbano, Uzuakoli, and
Nkwere, etc.³⁹ It was also said that artisans at
Otuocha, Okwulu and Nog were responsible
for the production of explosives, rocket
launchers, cylinders of homemade bombs
and a number of other military equipment⁴⁰
while those at Awka and environs were
responsible for the production of guns and
tanks.⁴¹ Meanwhile, according to
Chukukere, none of the units of RAP was
involved in the production of any of the
celebrated Biafran made weapons
independent of other units. Rather, all the
units worked as a team at various stages of
weapon and allied products production.⁴²

The implication and possible conclusion
that could be drawn from that position is that
the blacksmiths/forgers were fully involved
in the operations of RAP, the artisans and
especially the technicians and technician
engineers were involved in everything that
had to do with metals and iron, they helped
to produce and repair guns, produced
bullets, bolts and screws. They were fully
involved in the construction and technical
works of RAP during the civil war. All the
conventional Biafran-made weapons were
made from iron and steel and the technicians
and technician engineers were fully
involved in all the stages of production,
especially casing and casting. In the words
of Chukukere:

RAP did not use blacksmiths and
artisans in the archaic sense of
ironmongery in crafts; they were
well-trained. RAP used well-
trained, highly skilled and
experienced technicians in the
indispensable key areas of iron
and steel metal working called
into play in the manufacture of
conventional weapons. These
are foundry, forge and
fabrication... Without our
technicians RAP would not have
flown, especially in mass
production of weapons.⁴³

Other specific significant contributions of
artisans and technicians to the war efforts of
the Biafran government are also evident in
the various directorates that were
established to provide civil and
administrative services for the Biafran Army
and civilian populace in 1967. General

³⁸ *The West Africa*, (News Magazine), "Nigerian Civil War Intensifies," (September 30, 1967):1432.

³⁹ Oral Interview with Nicholas Ibeh, ex- technician RAP, 94 years, Obodo, Amaimo, Ikeduru, Imo state, July, 7, 2016.

⁴⁰ *New Nigerian*, (Newspaper, August 6, 1969):1.

⁴¹ *Morning Post*, Newspaper, "Awka, Amansi Captured," (February 20, 1968): 1.

⁴² Interview with Dr. Chukukere, on 20th February 2021.

⁴³ Interview with Dr. Chukukere, on 20th February 2021.

Madiebo recorded the following directorates:

- (i) The Food Directorate: It was responsible for the purchase and distribution of food, drinks and cigarettes.
- (ii) Transport and the Transportation Directorate: It was set up to provide land transportation services for the Biafran Army. It was responsible for the distribution and servicing of all vehicles needed by the military to function during the war.
- (iii) Fuel and the Fuel Directorate: It was responsible for the production and processing of crude oil into refined products and onward distribution to various Biafran Army units and to the civilian population.
- (iv) Clothing and the Clothing Directorate: It was responsible for the purchase, sewing and distribution of uniforms, boots and helmets for the Biafran Armed Forces, especially the Army.⁴⁴

Nelson Ottah, Frederick Forsyth and General Alexandra Madiebo, among other writers, agreed that the Biafran Army also lacked basic military kits such as uniform,

boot and helmet throughout the civil war. This shows that RAP and the various directorates did not produce enough of materials and weapons for the BAF and civilian population during the civil war. In the course of fieldwork, it was from Major Clement Nwajagu who was interviewed that the problem of lack of uniform for the BA was so severe that they resorted to the use of “Obasara” (condemned white clothes) made from calico materials to sew uniform for the Army. The “Obasara” materials were dyed into light-green colour, starched and ironed. Thus, the problem of shortage of uniform was partly solved by the clothing directorate. The uniform of a soldier serves two purposes. First, it is a symbol of identification from an enemy soldier. Second, it differentiates a soldier from a civilian.⁴⁵

General Madiebo noted that the Nigerian soldiers observed that the Biafran soldiers walked bare footed and without good clothes and began to surround their positions with broken bottles to discourage the Biafran infantry from charging at them.⁴⁶ The problem of lack of boots was also solved by the technicians and artisans who made sandals out of old tyres for the Biafran soldiers.⁴⁷ Opara also noted that the Awka blacksmiths and other artisans made helmets and iron boots for the Biafran Army.⁴⁸ In the same vein, the artisans were involved in the construction of modular petroleum refineries in Biafra during the civil war.⁴⁹

These are testimonies to the undeniable contributions and invaluable roles of the blacksmiths and artisans to Biafran army and the military industrial complex during

⁴⁴ Interview with Dr. Chukukere, on 20th February 2021.

⁴⁵ A.A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution*, 109, 116.

⁴⁶ E. K. Ogundowole, *Self-reliance: Philosophy of a New World Order*. (Lagos: Correct Counsels Ltd, 2011): 72-73.

⁴⁷ E. K. Ogundowole, *Self-reliance*, 75.

⁴⁸ Oghenekaro Moses Ogbinaka and Jumoke Ibidapo-Obe, “Re-imagining Plato as a Nigerian Philosopher within a Problem-centric Canon,” *APPON Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 3, No. 2, (April-June, 2024): 52-53.

⁴⁹ Oghenekaro Moses Ogbinaka and Jumoke Ibidapo-Obe, “Re-imagining Plato,” :53-54.

the Nigerian Civil War.

Self-Reliancism: Towards a Strong, Self-reliant Nation through a Problem-centric Philosophy

The concept of self-reliancism is derived from the word and principle of self-reliance, which despite having some elements of materiality, leans more and foremost towards immateriality. Self-reliance expresses a state of ability, capacity and liberty to act or do things or determine and conclude a line of action without necessarily relying on or being influenced by others. There is a very high tendency to misunderstand or equate self-reliance with self-sufficiency which therefore calls for the need to clarify, demarcate and distinguish between self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Whereas the idea of self-sufficiency connotes the ability to provide everything needed by an individual or a State as the case may be, that of self-reliance simply points to the principle that prioritises and emphasizes the proper mobilization, harnessing and optimal utilization of all available resources within the ambit of comparative advantage of those things that they have the capacity to produce or provide in a manner that does not make the individual or State vulnerable or susceptible to injustice, manipulation or exploitation by others.

In essence therefore, self-reliancism is not about self-sufficiency which is more inclined to materiality, but much of a principle or an ideology that promotes autonomy essentially of decision making that promotes full mobilization by a State of her own resources based on her own initiatives, direction or control and not on imposition by foreign influences or powers. In the case of self-sufficiency, a State might not need others in terms of material needs in those areas in which she is self-sufficient such as food items, technological equipment or tools, among others. In the case of self-reliancism however, there is nothing like isolationism, at best it abhors dependence or

reliance on others particularly in areas where an individual or State has capacity or competence to provide what is needed by the individual or State. It is a philosophy that promotes looking inward as against over reliance on others particularly with respect to things that one has capacity or ability to do.

The relevance of this philosophy to the Nigerian civil war essentially displayed by the Biafran Army in respect of the contributions of the blacksmiths and other artisans in terms of development and production of weapons. Probably, were it not for the war, the artisans might not have been considered to be of any value or relevance. More fundamentally, the role played by the blacksmiths and other artisans on the side of the Biafran army during the war in terms of acquisition of weaponry points to the fact that where a State has an attitude of over dependence or over reliance on others, it would hardly explore the possibility of looking inward to develop her areas of strength. Self-reliancism therefore becomes a philosophy of self-development as it promotes the idea of looking inward to explore and develop areas of strength.

Self-reliancism essentially aligns with Plato's problem-centric philosophy. Plato demonstrated that philosophy is somewhat problem-centric in the sense that his philosophy of ideal leadership and governance as encapsulated in his *Republic* was borne out of the desire to solve the problem of corrupt and inept leadership and governance of his society which, in this case, was the ancient Athenian City-State of Greece.

Against the backdrop of Socrates' execution, the accessory challenges of Athens occasioned by the Peloponnesian war and the general manifestations of corruption, ineptitude and all the vices and maladies witnessed by the Athenian and indeed the Greek society in antiquity, Plato who was initially being trained to become a politician especially considering the huge

political assets at his disposal having come from an aristocratic and well-entrenched politically involved family both maternally and paternally, veered off that path based on what he considered the problems of the Athenian society which he summarily reduced to ignorance being the fundamental bane of a just society or challenge of humans in society be it in terms of leadership, governance and what have you. The various theories and arguments of Plato in the Republic be it about the world of forms, the allegorical myth of the cave, the Philosopher-king or leadership and the ideal State, and so on were all geared towards the attainment of a just or ideal society.

Interestingly, some of the challenges experienced by the Athenians of Plato's time are being experienced today in Nigeria and indeed the entire continent of Africa thereby pointing to the fact that they are indeed problems associated with human nature and society. In particular, the challenges in Nigeria which is a microcosm of Africa ranges from economy, corruption, leadership, political system, statehood, insecurity, among others. As Ogbinaka and Ibidapo-Obe succinctly put it:

Today, Nigeria is burdened with numerous socio-political problems. Apart from the downturn in the Nigerian economy as reflected in high inflation, unemployment, low productivity among others, she is also faced with the high dependence on imports, including food and other basic necessities. Nigeria has security challenges in the form of terrorism, kidnapping and various threats to life of citizens. The very existence as well as the necessity of the Nigerian State is also being challenged by a few citizens with secessionist disposition. Consequently, there is also the question of the

legitimization of the Statehood of Nigeria. The philosophical challenge that would face a today's Plato in Nigeria would include proffering philosophical solutions to questions bothering on the type of State should Nigeria be? What should constitute good citizenship given the high level of corruption at all levels? What is the role of the military in the Nigerian socio-polity? ... Plato strongly believes that an essential task of any society is to develop a healthy city.

Going by the example of Plato whose concern was the enthronement of a just society through proper or ideal organization and leadership of society based on knowledge, the path to thread in this circumstance of insecurity, economic and political maladies, and going by the example of the blacksmiths and other artisans of the Biafran Army, our candid consideration is to advance or propose looking inward to galvanize every resource at our disposal to confront the challenges of our society. For too long, Africans have adopted alien philosophies and practices that are either imposed or copied.

Despite the exploit of the blacksmiths and other artisans of the defunct Biafran Army, Nigeria and indeed African governments still rely on Europe, the United States of America and other foreign powers for the supply of weaponry and others. Even in agriculture where Africa naturally has comparative advantage, we still import food items among others from Europe, the United States of America, China, and so on thereby constituting an object of ridicule whose pride, politics, economy and destiny is in the hands of others. As a result of overreliance on others, even Africa's cultural heritage that expresses their essential nature or

defines who Africans are is gradually being eroded and replaced by alien values. For instance, the value of communitarian training of children and leadership has gone extinction.⁵⁰ Even our various systems of justice that focuses on and emphasizes truth have been replaced with Western judicial system the overemphasize evidence and technicalities, thereby promoting perjury, manipulation and perversion of justice or “cash and carry justice”.⁵¹

Self-reliancism remains the vehicle that would carry Africa from the world of dependency to self-reliance. It is self-reliancism that would provide the impetus for mental decolonization to break the barrier of overreliance or dependence on others. Mental decolonization could be said to be

the overturning of the entrenched alien mentality, and the realization, retrieval, regaining and entrenchment of the consciousness of the people in their indigenous socio-cultural world-view. It fosters the appreciation of a people's cultures, traditions, beliefs, etc, but not necessarily without criticism and evaluation, especially bearing in mind the dynamism of culture.⁵²

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, it could be seen that the blacksmiths, artisans and technicians played important roles in the various scientific and technological accomplishments of RAP during the

Nigerian Civil War. The design, construction and production of several weapons such as bullets, guns, bucket *Ogbunigwe*, the coffin *Ogbunigwe* and the shore batteries, among others, had ‘the midas touch’ of the artisans. The same thing can be said of their roles in the construction of modular refineries in Biafra during the civil war. It is therefore important to stress that the refusal to give the requisite attention and atmosphere for these highly skilled groups of professionals is disastrous and has adversely affected the economy of Nigerian and indeed Africa as their skills would have been advanced beyond production for domestic consumption to export of technology. In the same manner, Africa would have overcome most of the teething political challenges if she had retraced her steps long before now and developed her autochthonous economic and political systems and structures instead of Western models. It is therefore recommended that Nigerian State as well as the military industrial complex make extensive use of this group to in our quest for industrialised Nigeria.

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⁵⁰ Okpowhoavotu Dan Ekere, “Attaining Good Governance: Lessons from Isoko Indigenous Philosophy of Leadership,” in John Ayotunde Ishola Bewaji, Kenneth W. Harrow, Eunice E. Omonzeje and Christopher E. Ukhun, eds, *The Dynamics of African Culture in the 21st Century*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017): 64.

⁵¹ Okpowhoavotu Dan Ekere, “Attaining Good Governance,”: 73-75.

⁵² Okpowhoavotu Dan Ekere, “Mental Decolonization: Towards a Self-reliant Africa,” in Edwin Etieyibo, Obvious Katsaura and Muchaparara Musemwa, eds., *Africa's Radicalisms and Conservatisms volume 2: Pop Culture, Environment, Colonialism and Migration*, (Leeiden; Boston: Brill, 2023):328.

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