Aftermath of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970): The struggle for peaceful coexistence between parties in post-war Nigeria

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Abstract. Fifty years ago, the Nigerian civil war, one of the bloodiest conflicts occurred in Africa, ended but its echoes are still an abiding presence today. It was a fratricidal war ensued between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria headed by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon and the secessionist Eastern Region of Biafra headed by Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu, between July 6, 1967 and January 15, 1970.

The main focus of this paper is to analyze the aftermath of the civil war on the post-war Nigeria, focusing in particular on the consequences that the conflict had as a threat to national security, unity and peace, in present days Nigeria. This thirty-month war had devastating consequences for the country, including death, displacement of people, and destruction of public infrastructure as well as physical and social capital. After the secessionist forces surrendered, Biafra was reincorporated into Nigeria as the East Central State. The Civil War left a legacy of death and destruction, particularly in the war-torn eastern region.

Many of Nigeria's post-war problems still plague the nation today. In fact, ethnic tensions and military dictatorships continue to pose a threat to Nigerian unity. Additionally, this study will put its attention on the reasons why, half a century later, the war's legacy continues to hold Nigeria captive. It simultaneously brings the country together and pushes it apart. In this scenario, it's fundamentally important to find peacebuilding solutions and politic actions to maintain peaceful coexistence between parties, in order to avoid the incurrence of new conflicts.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War, Aftermath, Peaceful Coexistence, Ethnic Conflict, Biafra, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The African continent has witnessed a number of bloody conflicts leaving in their tracks serious consequences including political, social, economic and humanitarian problems. The Nigerian civil war, popularly known as the Biafran War, was fought from 6 July, 1967 to 15 January, 1970 between the then Eastern Region of Nigeria and the rest of the country. The Eastern Region declared itself an independent state which was considered as a secessionist act by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria.

Since independence in 1960 the country was characterized by a fragile peace and stability condition, which culminated with the outbreak of the war.

In fact, many of the conflicts which rage today have their roots in the events which took place whilst Nigeria was under colonial rule. The eruption of the Nigerian civil war was as a result of political, economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions which preceded Britain's formal decolonization of the country. According to the Federal Military Government of Nigeria the war was fought to reunify the country, for the Biafrans instead it was a war for independence, that marked the climax of a series of unfolding turbulent events that began in January of 1966. The civil war posed the greatest challenge to the continuing existence, unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria.

The immediate cause of the civil war itself may be identified as the coup and the counter coup of 1966[1], which altered the political system and destroyed the trust existing among the major ethnic groups. In order to disallow the country from disintegration it was divided into twelve states from the original four regions in May 1967. The former Eastern Region under Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu (1933-2011) saw the act of the creation of states by decree "without consultation" as the last straw and declared the Region an independent state of "Biafra". The Federal Government in Lagos saw this as an act of secession and illegal. Several meetings were held to resolve the issue peacefully without success. To avoid disintegration of the country, the central government decided to bring back

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[1] On January 15, 1966, the first military coup d'état led by Lt. Col. Ch.K.Nzeogwu and E.Ifeajuna, which overthrew the first Nigerian Republic, killed 22 people (including the Prime Minister of Nigeria at the time A.T.Balewa, many senior politicians, many senior Army officers (including their wives), and sentinels on protective duty). As a result, in the same year, some soldiers majorly from the northern part of Nigeria, reacted with a counter coup.

the secessionist region to the main fold by force. However, while it is true that the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) succeeded in taming the secession attempt, the war seems to have failed to resolve the remarkable issues that brought it about.

The Nigerian civil war appears like a paradox. On the one hand, the war restored the political map of Nigeria that had been redrawn by the seceding Eastern Region. At the same time, death, destruction of property and estranged relations among Nigerian nationalities, among other results or war, were very common [1].

THE AFTERMATH OF CONFLICTS

As stated by Siyan Chen (American University and a management analysist) [2] war has devastating consequences for a country, including death, displacement of people, and destruction of public infrastructure as well as physical and social capital.

One of the most recent and comprehensive reports, World Bank's World Development Report [3], shows that the economic and social costs of civil wars are not only deep but also persistent, even for years after the end of the conflict. Among scholars there are not enough evidence on the costs of civil war after peace agreements are signed. In fact, they kill people, destroy infrastructure, weaken institutions, and erode social trust. Moreover, the aftermath of any conflict if not well managed could leave the population under conditions that increase the risk of disease, crime, political instability, and could also encourage further conflict to rise in the future.

According Nwanne W.Okafor (from Nigeria who wrote in his master thesis at the Tilburg University in the Netherlands) wars have profound effects on the economy as they drain wealth, disrupt markets and depress economic growth of participating parties [4]. As a consequence, they fuel inflation as prices are pushed up, which invariably leads to a reduction of living standards. Wars also affect the inflow of foreign investments as the instability and the risks of investing during conflict may discourage business relationships. In addition, resources that could have been used by the government for the development of infrastructures in the country are diverted to contribute towards the growing costs of the conflict. Parties involved suffer extreme destruction of capital such as factories, cities, farms, hospitals and livestock, which further reduces the level of economic growth. Wars may lead to the internal displacement of people, due to insecurity or loss of their homes during the conflict, the breakdown of health and the spread of diseases owing to lack of medical care and medical facilities; all of these can also have a negative impact on the peoples' wellbeing and on the economy.

After 30 months of fighting, the Nigerian civil war ended in January 1970 after the Biafran army surrendered to the Nigerian army. In accepting the suspension of hostility, the Head of state Yakubu Gowon declared that there would be "no victor no vanquished" and granted a general amnesty for people who had fought on the Biafran side [5]. His "no victor no vanquished" policy was designed to complete the integration of the Igbos back into Nigerian society following their defeat in the war. By virtue of the policy, the Biafran soldiers were neither tried nor executed for fighting against the federal army while some of the Igbo officers who served in the Biafran army were reabsorbed with loss of seniority [6].

REUNIFICATION OF THE COUNTRY

According to Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu and Lateef Oluwafemi Buhari (Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria)the Nigerian civil war had also a significant benefit: the unity of Nigeria was restored, and its territorial integrity was sustained. During his official surrender speech on 12 January, 1970, Biafra's Chief of Army Staff, Major General Phillip Effiong declared openly that the "people of Biafra" consent to the "authority of the Federal Military Government," and accept the "existing administrative and political structure of the Federation of Nigeria" [1].

To Gen. Yakubu Gowon, the end of hostilities marked the end of the "futile attempt to disintegrate the country" and was no more than a "great moment of victory for national unity" (New Nigerian Newspaper, 13 January,1970). Additionally, it should be noted that the war saw to the reunification and liberation of some Nigerian people who may not have subscribed to the Biafran dreams of Ojukwu [7]. In fact, aside from the Igbo, the Eastern Region is home to the Efik, Anioma, Ibibio and other ethnic minority groups who vehemently resented the idea of living under an Igbo dominion[2].

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[2] Igbo is the tribe of the leader of the defunct Biafra republic Col. Emeka Ojukwu. For the minority ethnic groups living in the Eastern part of the country, rather than liberate them from the Northern oligarchy, a victory for the Biafra state would have turned the country into Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu's personal empire in which he would easily partitioned amidst his loyalists.

Ojukwu's defeat marked an end to this imperial ambition thereby providing an opportunity to re-fashion the country into a more stable polity. Ultimately, the war was brought to an end by both parties for the sake of preserving the unity and territorial integrity of the country.

RECONCILIATION, REHABILITATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

With the end of the civil war, one of the most immediate demands on Gowon's government was one of providing relief for the suffering masses of the newly affected areas. The need for shelter, food and medicines for the war affected population became more glaring than ever. To further complicate issues was the simultaneous necessity for rehabilitation and reconstruction; to restore electricity, water, transport and communications. There was also the urgent need to resettle farms, reopen factories, and facilitate the resumption of normal economic life.

It was against this backdrop that the Federal Military Government immediately adopted the policy of 3Rs: Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. The main aim of the 3Rs was to create an atmosphere conducive for resettling the displaced and those who had fled their homes; to reunite families and friends; to rebuild damaged physical facilities and demobilize armed forces personnel in gainful employment in civilian life [8].

The program was initiated with the intention to appease the hostilities between Nigeria's ethnic groups, restore infrastructure and homes, relocate internally displaced people and tackle the socio-economic challenges of poverty, disease and malnutrition among the victims. In other words, the plan aimed to reconstruct the infrastructure damaged by war and promote economic and social development throughout the nation in the post-war period [8, p. 76]. N120 Million ($300 000 in today exchange rate), was allocated for this task in the first fiscal year after the war (1970-1971), and Gowon ensured that there were no summary trials or executions of Biafran war veterans.

In principle, the program was a laudable scheme but in practice it left much to be desired in its implementation, as he was unable to successfully implement his program [9], and its impact was hardly felt within the Igbo community. There was little or no true reconciliation or rehabilitation that took place, and the Igbos were perpetually reminded that they were a defeated people [10].

Financially, the civil war victory led to the reinstatement of the country's ownership and control of rich oil fields in the Niger Delta. The 3R policy came at a time when the country was enjoying an "oil boom" as this was the period when oil prices spiraled and reached unprecedented heights, which brought and influx of revenue to the federal government that was bigger than expected [8, p. 7]. Revenue from oil would go on to define Nigeria's post-war policies. Domestically, oil rents were used to embark on ambitious infrastructural projects and to reconstruct some of the state infrastructures destroyed during the fratricidal war [6].

This significant income encouraged the government to spend money ambitiously on schools, clinics and hospitals across Nigeria. But, although the country became wealthy as a result of the oil boom, revenues were not distributed to all parts of the country as the people of Biafra were still suffering in poverty [7, p. 145].

In fact, while the country was going through a rapid development and undergoing various reconstruction projects, the reconstruction in the Biafran region was far from becoming a reality. During the war, many private and community buildings had been destroyed and the government had advised the people to assess and submit their losses to the relevant official quarters. Nothing meaningful was done by the government therefore, and the people had to embark on reconstructing their property by themselves [11].

Subsequently, the implementation of the 3Rs policy was funded with money set aside for the Second National Development Plan (1970-1974). This suggested that funds meant for further development of infrastructures were additionally committed to rebuilding structures and facilities destroyed during the civil war.

It is distressing to many observers that the N3.192 billion ($8 million) earmarked for the Second National Development Plan were used for reconstruction. In fact, as stated by Ojeleye (University of Calgary), civil wars destroy the structures that are needed for the development of the society.., such wars divert much needed 'scarce' resources away from development projects" [8].

CREATION OF STATES AND THE UNRESOLVED NATIONAL QUESTION

After the civil war, the country was re-engineered to prevent another secession and halt any other attempt of insurrection by Nigeria's ethnic groups. In fact, between 27 May 1967 and 1 October 1996, to find a way for

Nigerian 250 ethnic groups with almost 500 different spoken dialects to live together peacefully, the country was split into 36 states, most of which coincided with the location of a major ethnic groups.

In addition to that, the postwar desire to prevent another secession generated a near obsessive ethnic micromanaging of national life and created a nation that exists almost simply to share money and jobs. As a matter of fact, each new state originally assembled to satisfy the desires of a nationality, started to create new "neglected" minorities, new tensions, and fresh activism. As reported by Max Siollun, a Nigerian historian [12], rather than working as a glue for unity, the fixation on ethnic sharing of national opportunities and resources made Nigerians more aware of their ethnic differences.

In addition to that it should be noted that, instead of being an enabling factor for the extension of political and economic self-governance to distinguish tribal and ethnic communities, state creation became a tool for administrative strategy for the devaluation of federal munificence to an array of territorial communities and coalition with no formal structure. This further explains why the politics and idea of states creation in the nation has not considered the ability of these different states to manage or otherwise sustain their existence. Also, the politics of state creation has been an exercise mainly employed as a legitimate force or means for military regimes in the nation to encourage or galvanize support for regime elongation as well as to compensate close allies. Nevertheless, the creation of states in Nigeria has not meant the satisfaction of all interest groups in the country [1, p. 72].

Important to note is also the fact that the civil war left the country with a set of federal war veterans who continued to impose their will on the country in form of indestructible political cabals[3]. Murtala Muhammad, Olusegun Obasanjo, Theophilus Danjuma, David Mark, Hassan Katsina, Muhammadu Buhari, to mention a few, are some of the civil war veterans that fall into this category [13]. Occasionally, a few have successfully transformed from military dictators to elected government officials. This has prevented the influx of fresh ideas by forestalling a radical transformation of the country's political landscape.

Although all the good intentions to contribute to peaceful coexistence between parties in the post-war Nigeria, the Nigerian civil war did not resolve what Prof. Remy Oriaku (University of Ibadan), defined the "national question". By the national question he refers to "the claim by various nationalities that they were being denied their rights to equitable participation in governance and national life in general" [13]. Moreover, according to the Russian scholar P.N.Fedoseyev, as reported in the 4 June 2012 edition of the *Leadership* newspaper, the national question "is first and foremost a question of solving vital problems of social development, abolishing national oppression and inequality, eliminating obstacles to the formation of nations and assuring freedom for the development of people, including achievement of factual equality" [14].

Evidently, the issue of nationality question and instability have gained resonance in Nigeria's national political discourse non only before but also after the civil war. Nigeria indeed provides a framework for examining the central paradox in postcolonial nation-building projects in Africa, namely, the tension between majority rule and minority rights. It has also been used to refer to the totality of problems and challenges emanating from the discrepancy between the political structures of the Nigerian federation and the nature of inter-ethnic relations among Nigerian peoples [15].

It is important to consider that, even if the nation survived the brewing conflict between the Igbo and the Hausa - Fulani ethnic groups and the following civil war, it has nonetheless succeeded in exacerbating mutual distrust, suspicion, hatred and disunity among the many ethnic groups in the country. These grievances have been largely unaddressed by the country's political leadership and the consequent negative impact of these conflicts on the level of development of the country was and is considerable even today.

PROLIFERATING OF ARMS

The trafficking and wide availability of Small and Light Weapons (SALW) is encouraging the escalation of communal and ethnic conflicts, that has also posed a threat to the security, the political stability included as well as to sustainable development. The ease accessibility of small and light arms by many in deferent quarters in the country is contributing to increase level of armed crime and militancy that have great consequences for Nigeria's socio-political and economic stability [16].

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[3] Cabal: a small group of people who plan secretly to take action, especially political action. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/cabal

Oyetimi (journalist of the *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper), citing the consultant criminologist Dr Moses Ikoh, traced the origin of proliferation of arms in Nigeria to the end of the civil war. He substantiated his claim by stressing that incidences of violent crime associated with arms increased substantially from 2,315 as at 1967 to 12,153 after the war [17]. In addition to that, proliferating of arms together with decades of marginalization and unequal distribution of democratic benefits by the Nigerian state has allegedly contributed to the rise of militant groups as extra-constitutional means for negotiation.

For these groups, it is a way by which they can redress the dehumanizing political and economic conditions of the people with great desire for self-determination as argued by some scholars [18]. As stated by Prof. Gilbert (Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria), these ethnic militant groups have exacerbated the challenge of internal insecurity and have continued to weaken the corporate existence of Nigeria as a united and powerful nation-state [19].

THE STRUGGLE FOR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN PRESENT DAYS NIGERIA

After having considered the aftermath of the civil war and its impact on the Nigerian society, it is clear that some of the critical issues related to ethnic tensions and political set-up that have marked the postwar period are still in place in present-days Nigeria. Agitations in Nigeria, in fact, continue to take different dimensions from the cries of power sharing, economic and infrastructural development distribution, states and local governments' creation, resource control, religious manipulation to restructuring of the current federal construction.

To have a clearer idea on the nature of agitations and armed conflicts in present-days Nigeria they can be analyzed from different angles with a combination of theories on peace and conflict resolution. In fact, to better examine the conflicts that occurred in the aftermath of civil war and whose consequences and resentments are still in place today, we can use the "liberal structural theory" combined with the "frustration-aggression theory".

The first one propounded by Ross, Scarborough and Galtung, leading figures among conflict theorists' scholars, sees conflict as a phenomenon related on how human societies are structured and organized. They agreed that conflict appears as a result of deep-rooted structural disorder, such as political and economic inequality, corruption, injustice, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, disease, overpopulation and exploitation [20].

Johan Galtung argues that "whenever economic and political discrimination and lack of tolerance in plural societies are embedded in such human social relationship, conflicts are bound to occur higher than in societies where opposite social relationship is established" [21].

In the latter one, scholars as L.Berkowitz [22] and A.J.Yates [23] (psychologists who studied human behaviour in different scenarios) consider conflict as the direct response to accumulate frustration and anger particularly in societies where scarce resources hardly satisfy human needs. It is therefore assumed that to be a natural reaction or a matter of instinct as postulated by frustration aggression theory. In most cases a conflict happens as a result of denying the individual basic rights, necessities of life, justice or access to other values.

Although about 60% of Nigeria's population is a youth with all their potentials, contemporary Nigeria has become a violent conflict-ridden society with youths at the heart of this crisis. It appears that lack of proper management of resources and state power is at the root of violent extremism in most parts of Nigeria. Moreover, the continual ongoing secessionist agitations in different regions of the country by some militant and separatist groups - the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), together with Boko Haram terrorist group as well, remain potent threats to peaceful coexistence of Nigerians in the country.

The maintenance of peace and security is critical to the responsibility of the state. Thus, Section 14 (1) of the Nigerian constitution states that: *"The security and welfare of the people shall be a primary purpose of government"*.The inability of the state to effectively perform its core functions of providing or guaranteeing security for the people as well as act as regulator has led to a weakening of its bargaining strength and capacity in relation to the ethnic and religious groups in society, which poses a serious challenge for national security.

It is imperative that peacebuilding efforts encompass medium and long-term conflict intervention efforts aimed at reconciling opposing ethnic interests, addressing the structural causes of violence and providing enabling environments for peaceful and equitable development across the different regions. Accordingly, it is essential to shape effective pace-building and conflict management strategies in order to prevent both state failure and ensure lasting peace, security and stability in Nigeria.

First of all, state and institution building, essential to meet the on-going public safety and social-economic welfare, must be considered a central goal of conflict management and peacebuilding that should be put in place and strengthened in the whole country.

For this reason, it is significant to make sure that political, social and economic development strategies are seen as integral parts of a well-focused approach to conflict prevention, management and peacebuilding efforts.

Peaceful coexistence of parties in the country must go beyond the application of coercive power of the state to ensuring that economic, social, cultural and humanitarian structures are put in place to create a stable society. Amongst other things, these peacebuilding efforts which entail the establishment of nonviolent modes of conflict management/interventions, will help to promote reconciliation among warring parties and heal psycho-social trauma of victims of grave crimes committed during such agitations.

Secondly, in order to reduce ethnic and religious based conflicts and promote pluralism throughout the country, efforts should be made by the state and its institutions to ensure the safeguarding of inclusivity in the task of nation building, equitable political representation, social justice, mutual respect and tolerance among the diverse groups that make up the state. Nigerian political, religious, ethnic and traditional elites must stop playing the role of conflict generators to become conflict preventers and managers, in order to help re-establish mutual trust among the people and their communities.

Moreover, the government and other stakeholders should strengthen state institutions and assure that the existence of majority or minority ethnic and religious groups are not threatened by exclusion in terms of access to power, space and resources. In fact, they should promote equitable and balanced socio-economic development in the country by ensuring that resources are distributed in a manner that favors all the ethnic and regional homelands. Moreover, all those exercising legislative, executive and judicial powers at all levels of governance should demonstrate greater commitment to respect for human rights and due process of law consistent with Nigeria's constitutional and treaty obligations.

This objective can be achieved through equality, justice, tolerance by imbibing the good values, norms of our cultures such as fairness, social justice and accommodation.

Much work needs to be done to educate the public on the need for tolerance and peaceful coexistence in a multireligious society such as Nigeria. Furthermore, to design effective conflict prevention and peace-building strategy, government needs to put in place the structure, requisite personnel and equipment for monitoring conflicts and transform existing conflict situations into enduring and sustainable peace.

Peace education and advocacy in conflict resolution would hence be necessary to maintain a lasting peace and to promote peaceful coexistence in the society for development to take place.

CONCLUSION

Though the civil war ended on the battlefield 50 years ago, the underlining factors that propelled the Igbo secession is yet to be ironed out. However, in the post-war, some new policies and strategies were introduced to restore after peace and unity nationwide. Despite that, the country is still plagued by corruption, nepotism, ethnic conflicts, religious riots, mutual suspicion and rivalry. This because political elites have continued to gloss over these blights, resulting in the emergence from sectarian and religious insurrection across the country.

Even though in most cases conflicts are not avoidable, they can be wisely prevented. This requires, however, that potential sources of conflicts which threaten national cohesion need to be identified and analyzed with a view to their early resolution, and concrete preventive steps taken to forestall armed confrontation or violence. A respected culture of peace is also needed to be developed from good values, attributes, behaviours and ways of life based on non-violence, respect for life, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human right, cultural differences, and respect for human dignity.

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