

THE NIGERIAN-BIAFRA WAR: DISSATISFACTIONS, DESTRUCTION AND THE ENGAGING PHILOSOPHIES

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we argue that the avoidable Nigerian-Biafran war of 1967-1970 was unnecessary. This is because the level of dissatisfaction and destruction of lives and property on both warring sides is still hurting the development and unity of modern Nigeria. However, it is incontrovertible that modern Nigeria came into being as a result of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by Lord E.D. Lugard in 1914, without laying any solid foundation for the political unity of the heterogeneous Nigerian society. The roots of the Nigerian Civil War can be located in the colonial period involving the policies of the British colonial authorities as well the roles played by the Nigerian nationalists, politicians and the military in the immediate pre and post-independence eras of Nigerian history. Therefore, we argue that a non-violent approach is recommended in dispute resolutions. According to Mahatma Gandhi, in resolving disputes and disagreements, it is needless to apply violence instead of dialogue. Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and socio-cultural entity should learn to tolerate each other and whereby their differences could not improve their unity, a non-violent approach becomes necessary for any group that wants to secede.

Keywords: Nigerian-Biafra War, Northern Nigerian, Peace, Colonial, Non-Violence, Violence

INTRODUCTION

One of the main complaints made against the policy and people of Biafra, and in support of the Nigerian war policy to crush them, was that the breakaway of Biafra wrecked the unity of a happy and harmonious state. This claim by the Nigerian military side was supported by the British colonialists against the people of Biafra. According to Forsyth, in fact, through all the years of the pre-colonial period, Nigeria never was united, and during the sixty years of colonialism and the sixty-three months of the First Republic, only a thin veneer hid the basic disunity (Frederick, Forsyth. 1977: 13). Ethnic and religious politics of the Nigerian nationalists and politicians did not promote national consciousness and cohesion. Thoroughbred historians of Nigerian specialty are aware that different sections of the country had threatened to secede from the Nigerian federation at one time or the other before 1967. The Biafran secession is significant in that it went beyond mere threat to the use of force. Oyeweso was apt in describing the late Ojukwu as “representing a new era in the political history of Nigeria- the era of secession action as against the previous era of secession threats (Siyan, Oyeweso. 2012:20).

According to Forsyth, by 30 May 1967, when Biafra seceded, not only was Nigeria neither happy nor harmonious, but it had for the five previous years stumbled from crisis to crisis, and had three times already come to the verge of disintegration. In each case, although the

immediate spark had been political, the fundamental cause had been the tribal hostility embedded in this enormous and artificial nation. For Nigeria had never been more than an amalgam of peoples welded together in the interests and for the benefit of a European Power (Fredrick, F. 13). Although amalgamation had taken place, official pronouncements and attitudes of British officials continued to work against national unity among the Nigerian groups. Hugh Clifford, Nigeria's governor from 1919 to 1925 stated that the idea of a Nigerian nation was both inconceivable and detrimental to British interest. In addition, the policy and practice of indirect rule and the creation of strangers 'quarter (Sabon Gari) for Nigerian groups resident outside their cultural homes, particularly in the Northern region, only fostered ethnic parochialism and disunity at the expense of national integration (Nnamdi, Ajaebili. 2015:318).

Such acts by the British were against the interest of a united Nigeria as some ethnic groups were favoured more than others but as a conduit pipe to promote the British interest. Here, Forsyth says, at the time of Nigeria's independence, the British were pleased to claim much of the credit for the seeming early success of the experiment; British cannot now avoid much of the responsibility for the failure, for Nigeria was essentially a British and not a Nigerian experiment. For years Whitehall's political thinking on Nigeria had been based on a resolute refusal to face the realities, an obstinate conviction that with enough pulling and shoving the facts can be made to fit the theory, and a determination to brush under the carpet all those manifestations which tend to discredit the dream. It is an attitude that continues to this day (Fredrick, F. 34).

ROOTS OF THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR

The roots of the Nigerian Civil War can be located in the colonial period involving the policies of the British colonial authorities as well as the roles played by the Nigerian nationalists, politicians and the military in the immediate pre and post-Independence eras of Nigerian history. British colonial policies of divide and rule, uneven educational development, unequal economic development, ethnic politics of the Nigerian nationalists and politicians as well as the politicization of the Nigerian military no doubt, generated the ugly circumstances that ultimately precipitated the war. According to Onuoha, "The British intervened to halt the constitutional conference of the late 1950s and sold us the notion of federation...(Sylvanus, Onuoha. 2014: xxii). The clear interest of the British colonialists in the political and economic affairs of the Nigerian people could not be less than a disaster to the Nigerian people. Social integration of the various Nigerian groups was made difficult in the North as this was seen as a threat to the Islamic religion, culture and customs. The British divisive tendency was further reinforced by encouraging the emergence of privileged aristocracy in the North through the establishment of separate schools for the sons of Emirs and those of the Talakawa (Fredrick, 9).

Differences in the educational development of the sections of Nigeria should also qualify as one of the underlying factors in the civil war. Arising from the desire to conserve money, the British did very little to promote the development of Western education in Nigeria. "Furthermore, British experience in India and Egypt had taught them to play down educational development in the colonies (Nnamid:319). By this measure the pace of socialization of the people was greatly reduced and by extension,

the ability to agitate for their political rights. A combination of these reasons plus the religious and cultural practices in the Muslim Northern Nigeria accounted for the remarkable setback in the development of Western education in that region of the country. It was, therefore, glaring that a significant yawning gap existed in the pace of educational advancement between the North and South of Nigeria. Even female education was terribly restricted more in the North than in the South. Between 1907 and 1960 when Nigeria achieved independence, about 20 percent of the annual budget for education was spent in the North, while the remaining 80 percent was domiciled in the South for educational development. Thus, although the general financial investment in education in the country was low, it was worse in the Northern region throughout the colonial era.

The effect of the above situation was that at independence most of the educated workforce in Nigeria came from the South, while the Northern hope to get its manpower requirement before self-government became a pipe-dream. For instance, in the 1960/61 financial year, out of a total of 3,318 employees in the senior service establishment, only 53 were Northerners. At independence, the Easterners occupied 70% of the senior public service positions in the Eastern region, while the Westerners accounted for 96% of the workforce of the senior public service positions in the Western region. The same was true of the military as there were only six Northern officers in the army as against twenty-four Southern officers, although more than 70% of the combatant non-officer corps in the army were Northerners. It was therefore evident that the North was not ready for independence in 1960 as a result of the educational backwardness of the region.

This situation, no doubt, was to increase the North-South tensions, and it is against this backdrop that the drift into regional dichotomy must be understood. Given this predicament of educational backwardness, the North became jittery of the anticipated domination of their region by the much better-educated Southerners. A panacea the Northern leaders found to their problem was to delay the time of Nigeria's independence from 1956 to 1960. Forsyth says: What the Northerners were demanding and apparently with the will of the overwhelming body of Northern opinion behind them, was a confederation of Nigerian States. This was what Colonel Ojukwu, Military Governor of the Eastern Region, asked for at *Aburi*, Ghana, on 4 January 1967, after 30,000 Eastern people had been killed and 1,800,000 driven back to the East as refugees. Even then, he only asked for it as a temporary measure while tempers cooled. If the Northerners had got their wish in 1953, or the Easterners in 1967, it is likely that the three Regions would today be living in peace (Fredrick:22).

Mahatma Gandhi and the Philosophy of Non-Violence Theory

Gandhi took the religious principle of ahimsa (doing no harm) common to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism and turned it into a non-violent tool for mass action. He used it to fight not only colonial rule but social evils such as racial discrimination and untouchability as well. Through the pages of his weekly paper, the *Harijan*, he expounded the nonviolent approach to military aggression and political tyranny.

According to Gandhi, and so we argued on and on. It was impossible for us to agree. I told him that I intend to address a meeting on Chaupati and to ask the people to keep the peace, and took leave of him. The meeting was held on the Chaupati sands. I spoke at length on the duty of non-violence and on the limitations of Satyagraha, and said, Satyagraha is essentially a weapon of the truthful. A Satyagraha (truth force) is pledged to non-violence, and unless people observe in thought, word, and deed, I cannot offer mass in Satyapraha (Mahatma, Gandhi. 1927:430). His position offers humanity another opportunity to learn how to resolve issues non-violently. Humanity should note Gandhi's position and adopt such in resolving internal and external issues. Gandhi says, there were, however, others who were unhappy over the decision. They felt that, if I expected peace everywhere and regarded it as a condition precedent to launching Satyagraha mass, Satyagraha would be an impossibility. I was sorry to disagree with them. If those amongst whom I worked, and whom I expected to be prepared for non-violence and self-suffering, could not be non-violent, Satyagraha was certainly impossible. I was firmly of the opinion that those who wanted to lead the people to Satyagraha ought to be able to keep the people within the limited non-violence expected of them. I hold the same opinion even today (Mahatma:431)

Non-violence theory does not just mean not doing violence, it is also a way of taking Non-violence positive action to resist oppression or bring about change. According to Gandhi," the essence of the non-violent technique is that it seeks to liquidate antagonisms but not the antagonists (Internet Source: <https://.mkgandhi.org>. Accessed: 31 March, 2022).

The aim of non-violent conflict is to convert your opponent to win over their mind and heart and persuade them that your point of view is right. In this case, the Nigerian-Biafran civil war could have been averted if any of the warring sides had thought of the immediate and remote effects. No matter the level of victory recorded in any war, losses always overwhelm victory. An important element is often to make sure that the opponent is given a face-saving way of changing their mind. Non-violent protest seeks a win-win solution whenever possible.

In non-violence conflict, the participant does not want to make their opponent suffer; instead, they show that they are willing to suffer themselves in order to bring about change. Non-violence has great appeal because it removes the illogicality of trying to make the world a less violent and more just place by using violence as a tool.

1. According to Gandhi, "my non-violence does not admit of ruing away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly fight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. I can no more preach non-violence to a coward than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scenes (Mahatma, Gandhi. 1924:28).

Non-violence in Gandhi's thinking is a tool anyone or group could or should apply in any dispute.

Reflections and Lessons of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War

The Nigerian federation, arising from the British amalgamation of the former Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, produced a crises and corruption-ridden polity with flagrant abuse of universally acclaimed basic human rights. These legacies of the British colonial onslaught reared their ugly heads in the January and July- military coups of 1966, the massacre of the Igbo in parts of Nigeria, particularly in the North, and eventuated in the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970 which claimed millions of Igbo lives in an unprecedented genocide in human history.

After the war, what has become of the Nigerian state could only be described as regrets and blame from both sides. “Although the civil war had come and gone, the bitter memories of the horrors and devastations would appear to be a lingering nightmare among Nigerians, particularly the Igbo. The war would have been avoided if certain precautions had been taken (Nnamdi: 327).

In the case of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, it would be unreal to say that there was no victor and no vanquished. History has shown that the Igbo had more casualties than their opponents. According to Uraih, all hell was let loose. A good number of the men and boys fled into the surrounding bushes, many of them were cut down as they fled. The rest of us fell to the ground in utter hopelessness. I lost count of time. The soldiers turned their guns on those of us lying on the ground and the staccato bursts of bullets continued into the late evening. To this day, I live with the smell of the blood of my brethren who died that day, with the cries of those of them who had lost hope and stood up and begged the soldiers to end it all. Maybe they were the ones who saved the lives of those of us who survived the slaughter, because as they begged to be killed and the soldiers obliged them they disrupted the flow of the massacre as the killers now concentrated on them (Ifeanyi, Uraih. 2015:473).

In any case, the Igbo people were the worst hit and victims of the Nigerian –Biafran Civil war. However, it seems that the human mind has been so polluted that people still sing and beat drums of war. Today, what we hear on the media are countries building up ammunitions in anticipation of war. Nigeria also seems to be less interested in building up a united state. What is seen happening in Nigeria today are worst that what lead to the civil war. We do not want war again in Nigeria but good governance and a non-violent approach in resolving disagreements. Gandhi says, non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all-children, young men and women or grown-up people, provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When non-violence is accepted as the law of life, it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts (Mahatma: 37).

Conclusion

Humanity seems to have forgotten that life is sacred. People no longer respect and protect lives. Today, Russia is threatening to fine Google and Wikipedia for not removing what it describes as misinformation about the war in Ukraine. “Communications regulator Roskomnadzor announced on Thursday March 31, 2022 that it had asked online encyclopedia to remove a

page containing “unreliable socially significant materials, as well as other prohibited information” about its operations in Ukraine (See Chris Delmas/AFP. 2022. Internet assessed).

Russian government under the leadership of Putin wishes that history spares the atrocities it has committed in its neighbouring country, Ukraine. History will always remember Russia for invading Ukraine. In the Russian–Ukrainian war, one would ask if the causes of these unwanted killings of innocent civilians and destruction of properties could not have been resolved through non-violent means? Did Russia consider the negative impact and psychological trauma of military operations in Ukraine on Ukrainians, the number of casualties and human rights abuses and violations, and economic consequences before declaring war against Ukraine? History would always remember Russian government led by President Putin for the killings of innocent citizens of Ukraine.

Federalism has proved to be the best political system for multi-ethnic, socio-cultural societies the world over. Though the Nigerian federal system is questionable one and this explains in part, the numerous socio-political and economic marginalization that besiege sections of the country. Economically and structurally, the pre-colonial Nigerian political system seems better and productive in its impact on its citizens. The current Nigerian political structures could be described in the words of Hobbes, as brutish nasty and short. This is because the Mightier continues to oppress and intimidate the less privileged.

Evidence and statistics has shown that multi-ethnic and cultural States that were not able to manage their internal tensions and dynamics could resolve to disintegrate in a non-violent approach. (See defunct USSR, and Yugoslavia). Therefore, Nigeria should and as a matter of urgency learn and adopt useful lessons from the experiences of these countries and conduct timely reforms on the national question, bordering on the fundamental structure of the country; these reforms should give every section of the country a sense of belonging, otherwise the only alternative would be to toe the paths of the above countries; after all, necessity is the mother of invention.

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