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# Biafra and the Politics of Blame

The Neo-Biafran Consciousness and Its Challenges

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**I**n recent years, there has been an upsurge in campaigns advocating for the recognition and reinstatement of a Biafran State. The demands have come from individuals and groups alike, stirring renewed interest in the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War. Such interest, while unprecedented, should be expected. After all, the conflict was significantly swayed by ethnic bigotry, regional loyalty, greed and abuse of power, and, ultimately, culminated in an estimated two million deaths, most of which were of innocent children, men and women. Representing diverse social and professional backgrounds, these victims have a right to be recognized, mourned and celebrated, even as others must be held responsible for their vicious pre-war, war and post-war crimes.

While I don't belong to any of the pro-Biafra movements that have emerged in recent times, from ages 6 to 9 I was a Biafran citizen. Meaning, I can hazard a guess as to what the modern pro-Biafran concerns—which remain unresolved and largely unrecognized—might be. These concerns are rooted in historical antecedents steeped in frustration from feeling sidelined and defrauded, and have evolved from protest (a yearning to be heard) to action, both peaceful and confrontational. The cry of today's pro-Biafra agitators for renewed autonomy is not a declaration of war neither does it necessarily signify enmity between ethnicities, even if elements among the agitators may occasionally display such ideals. It is, also, not predicated on a desire for egotistical disintegration as their detractors would charge, but is a consequence of feeling excluded.

Notwithstanding, current exponents of a revived Biafran nation are championing a cause that, though not always explicitly, digresses from the principles espoused by those who fought for Biafra from 1967 to 1970. Both groups of “Biafranists” may share feelings of betrayal, insecurity, fear and ostracism, but the earlier Biafrans, like the archetypal cornered rat, had been mauled in Western and Northern Nigeria and, arguably, had no option but self-defense when once more confronted by their assailants on their home turf.

Today’s pro-Biafran agitators can claim a series of economic, political and, more recently, military onslaughts on its members, and that, consequentially, they reserve the right to make demands for autonomy. However, these activists must recognize that they exist out of and are perpetuating a Biafra model that departs significantly from the original Biafran ideology. Their overriding clamour for a Biafra comprising only current Igbo States, for instance, excludes the peoples of current Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers States, who were ‘within scope’ during the ideation of the original Biafran State. Granted, indigenes of these states would likely demonstrate erratic confidence in a renewed Biafran dream, but it remains that recent crusaders for a revived Biafra display a characteristic disregard for non-Igbos, who, incidentally, played fundamental administrative, military and leadership roles in the Biafra of the 1960s.

Such deviation from the original Biafran vision not only raises important questions about the credibility of those that flaunt themselves as noble defenders of the Biafran cause. It also challenges those on both sides of the fence, whose views on the Civil War typically deteriorate to obsessions with ethnic allegiances rather than an objective quest for, and the preservation of, truth. At the heart of this deficiency is tribalism, a key factor in the nurturing of the various socioeconomic, military and personality clashes that eventually culminated in the vicious war.

I experienced this narrow-mindedness first-hand at a recent conference on Biafra where I was scheduled to speak. Not surprisingly, some members of pro-Biafra organizations arrived at the conference with erroneous thoughts on the event’s purpose. They expected the conference to celebrate them, enlarge their recognition and provide a platform for their views to be aired. One of them, whom I believe holds a leadership role of sorts, having seen my name as a participant and speaker, asked one of the organizers why a “Calabar man” was speaking at this conference.

I should point out that the general reference to the indigenes of Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers as “Calabar people” is derogatory and condescending in its homogenisation of these people, and in the history of its being a way to delineate these people as inferior. When some participants heard of this remark, they immediately pointed out that the gentleman was clearly unaware of the role my father played during the war. And while I appreciate their indignation on my behalf, I believe the more pressing issue was the swift and blatant prejudice meted out by an individual supposedly pushing for the creation of an exemplary, sovereign nation.

I certainly do not want to be a citizen of this man's "Biafra" and, furthermore, I do not believe that his ignorance, bias and narrow-mindedness are isolated traits. If such a person is in a position of leadership, then, presumably, his followers and fellow leaders share his philosophies. The fact is, regardless of whose 'son' or 'daughter' participates at such conferences, and despite their racial, ethnic or national backgrounds, they should be welcomed to contribute their thoughts on a vital experience that needs to be analysed extensively to understand its cause and consequences, the lessons to be learned and potential preventative measures against similar tragedies.

The problem with those who view the Biafran experience as an opportunity to reaffirm their ethnic commitments and biases, such as this gentleman, is that they restrict the narrative to their parochial perspectives and, ultimately, ignore or distort salient truths and topics.

### REVISITING THE HISTORY OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

As ethnic politics gained momentum during the 1960s, political personalities such as Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, emerged as leaders that would secure the wellbeing and stability of the eastern, northern and western regions respectively, and, more specifically, their ethnic nationalities. The notorious [interview](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_odAy4rVz8) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5\\_odAy4rVz8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_odAy4rVz8)) with Sir Ahmadu Bello, in which his resentment of Igbos is palpable, is one of the more overt displays of the heightened ethnic consciousness and suspicion of that era. Momentarily excluding the first Nigerian coup of January 1966, it is not clear which direction the ethnic tensions would have taken; neither is it clear that the ethnic tensions would have assumed the massive violent proportions that they eventually did. However, it is evident that the coup of 1966 facilitated the eventual eruption of such tensions.

Initially, three principal players—Major Kaduna Nzeogwu (with ethnic roots in Ika-Igbo, Midwest), Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna (Igbo, East) and Major Adewale Ademoyega (Yoruba, West)—led the coup. Other key participants were Major Timothy Onwuatuwegwu (Igbo), Major Chris Anuforo (Igbo), Major Don Okafor (Igbo) and Major Humphrey Chukwuka (Igbo). Besides the majors, a significant number of commissioned and non-commissioned officers from diverse regions and ethnicities played different roles in the coup, not least being Captain Emmanuel Nwobosi (Igbo) and Lieutenant Atom Kpera (Tiv, North). Kpera would later serve as Governor of the states, Anambra and Benue.

Despite the original objective of the coup, the coup raised serious concerns about nepotism when the names of its victims began to emerge. Its victims were from every region of the country with only one, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Unegbe (Igbo), from the East. It is for this reason that non-easterners and many non-Igbo easterners have concluded that the first coup was orchestrated by Igbo officers to eliminate top military and civilian personnel from other ethnic groups, with the ultimate goal of controlling military and political power. This widespread view, though erroneous, was also the justification for the arbitrary murder of Eastern officers (mainly Igbos) during the second coup of July 1966, the massacre of thousands of Eastern civilians (again, mainly Igbos) in northern Nigeria before, during and after the second coup, and the irrefutable atrocities that characterized the subsequent war.

While a significant number of Igbo officers were among the chief architects of the first coup—and must, therefore, take at least partial responsibility for the ensuing pre-war, war and post-war tragedies—accusing the entire Igbo ethnicity of this coup is as baseless as accusing all Muslims of every Islamist terrorist attack. The inherent contradictions are further apparent in the fact that the man largely responsible for foiling this coup, Major General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, was himself an Igbo man.

It is important, nevertheless, to reflect on how longstanding ethnic sentiments may have been inflamed by the first coup. Conspicuous, in this regard, is the fact that all top northern military officers—Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari, Colonel Kur Mohammed, Lieutenant Colonel Abogo Largema and Lieutenant Colonel James Pam<sup>2</sup>—were murdered, some of them quite brutally, causing northerners to be inconsolably devastated and incensed. Despite obsessions with the influence of ethnicity in the first coup, the coup's justification, or lack thereof, should not be dependent on the ethnic composition of its participants. It was vengeful, spiteful, indignant and largely driven by a desire to gain and sustain power.

The above historical facts have given ammunition to those who would reduce the complexities of the Civil War to a 'we-good' versus 'you-bad' analysis based on a theory of ethnic sanctity. For this reason, the war's narrative has often been fragmentary with different factions dwelling on what best advances their 'innocence', 'dignity' or 'victimization'. Until this tendency is discarded, and the issues are addressed objectively, the crucial lessons of the Biafran War will never be learned and there will be no resolution. As noted previously, we can no longer ignore the consequences of the ill-advised coup of January 1966. We can no longer overlook the role of the coup in aggravating ethnic tensions that may otherwise not have escalated to such wanton destruction of life and property, and to the materialization of current widespread ethnic distrust.

#### **REASSESSING SOME FACTS ABOUT BIAFRA**

We can not ignore, also, the implications of a component of the war's history as salient as the Aburi Accord, without addressing suggestions that the Accord was not entirely discarded by General Yakubu Gowon's administration, even if Nigeria reneged on some (perhaps, the majority) of its stipulations. The Aburi Accord resulted from a meeting scheduled on January 4, 1967 in Aburi, a town in Ghana, under the chairmanship of former Ghanaian head of state, General Joseph Ankrah. The goal of the meeting was to broker a peace agreement between the Eastern Region and the new military government that had succeeded Ironsi's regime. Besides rejecting violence as a means of resolving ongoing disputes, key components of the agreement endorsed the existence of a Supreme Military Council that would still serve as a central governing body. A proposed military headquarters would also have substantive regional representation, thereby reducing powers at the centre. This would be reinforced by the executive role of military governors who would have control over their area commands as it related to internal security. In all, representatives of the East envisaged more autonomy for the region.

While it is true that, largely due to the scrutiny of the document by federal permanent secretaries, the federal side failed to adhere to all provisions of the Accord, those who are quick to emphasize this fact are seldom detailed in their criticism. One fundamental point that they typically ignore is the fact that the

permanent secretaries [had recommended amendments \(https://g.co/kgs/Rv6JDu\)](https://g.co/kgs/Rv6JDu) as opposed to a complete negation of the contract. This, therefore, means that the East was still in a position to consolidate some of the gains of the Aburi meeting. The late Colonel Joseph Achuzia, a former Biafran officer, reiterated this point in a conversation I had with him in 2011. Essentially, we can only speculate on how Nigeria's history and inter-ethnic relations would be different if the Eastern Region, under General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's command, had agreed to work with the federal side on whatever was left of the Aburi Accord. This is because, at the end of the war, all tenets of the Accord were essentially abandoned. The alternative might have been no war, a prevention of the massive loss of life and property and some compliance with the agreement. None of this, however, exonerates Gowon's regime for not adhering to the mandates of the agreement to the letter.

In critically reassessing the Biafran War, we must also revisit the executions of Lieutenant Colonels Victor Banjo and Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Mr. Philip Alale and Mr. Sam Agbam. Their insurrection charges against Ojukwu demand more substantiation, especially against the backdrop of [Biafra's self-delineation as a nation of justice, even-handedness and security \(https://g.co/kgs/an9un1\)](https://g.co/kgs/an9un1). Those familiar with popular Biafran marching songs will recall the one that identifies Ifeajuna as a traitor that attempted to "sell" his kith and kin for money, despite controversies surrounding claims of his betrayal of Ojukwu and his fellow Igbos.

#### IGBO VERSION

Ewo, na mu na nwannem je lu ogu

Akpiri ego, Ifeajuna le nwanne ya

Ewo, na mu na nwannem je lu ogu

Nwannem puta n'uzo le nwanne ya

#### ENGLISH TRANSLATION

*Ewo*, my brothers and I went to battle

Out of greed, Ifeajuna sold his brother

*Ewo*, my brothers and I went to battle

## My brother shamelessly sold his brother

Interestingly, though there is no disputing the fact that Ifeajuna murdered his brigade commander, Maimalari, during the first coup, there are no songs vilifying him or even acknowledging this horrific act. From my research, I am yet to discover any comprehensive documentation of the trial of Ifeajuna or the other men that were executed along with him. Accessing such information or at least individuals familiar with the details would be beneficial in reinforcing or challenging Biafra's claim of being a model nation structured on equity and the welfare of its citizens as showcased in the Ahiara Declaration.<sup>2</sup>

As governor, Ojukwu was saddled with the onerous task of dealing with the massacre of thousands of citizens that came from the Eastern Region. The welfare of their families and loved ones was his responsibility, as was the welfare of thousands of easterners that subsequently returned to the East in search of refuge, which marked the beginning of a refugee crisis. Without trivializing these facts or Ojukwu's unenviable leadership role, we can no longer ignore clashes between him and key Biafran leaders. Disagreements between Ojukwu and Brigadier Hilary Njoku resulted in Njoku's incarceration through most of the war, which was euphemistically referred to (<https://g.co/kgs/an9un1>) as "protective custody".

Major C. Nzeogwu, one of the ringleaders of the January 1966 coup, was openly against secession. In an interview with *Africa and the World* (1967), Nzeogwu stated (<https://g.co/kgs/an9un1>), "...secession will be ill-advised, indeed impossible. Even if the East fights a war of secession and wins, it still cannot secede. Personally, I don't like secession and if the country disintegrates, I shall pack up my things and go". Brigadier George Kurubo, who later defected to the Nigerian side, was also against secession (<https://g.co/kgs/an9un1>) even though he was opposed to the murder of Aguiyi-Ironsi.

Major General Philip Efiogwu's ironic stand on the issue of secession also raises some controversy. In his book, *The Caged Bird Sang No More: My Biafra Odyssey*, he writes:

Even though I fought on the Biafran side, I have always held the view that the civil war could have been avoided and that secession was not the only solution to the crisis of 1966. I also do not regard fighting in self-defense to be tantamount to rebellion as some have tried to suggest. (Pg. 18)

On the same subject, according to Efiogwu, prior to relocating to the East in 1966 before the war commenced:

...some disturbing news had filtered through to Lagos. Governor Ojukwu was contemplating a secession of the Eastern Region from the rest of the country.... I immediately dispatched a letter to Ojukwu through an emissary, one Mr. Victor Vonnick, an Itsekiri friend of mine, in which I strongly advised him against secession as I did not believe it was the answer to the problem.... Three days later, Mr. Vonnick came back from seeing the Governor. The latter had read my note and asked Vonnick to tell me that he was not contemplating secession. (Pg. 120)

Most of the disagreements between Ojukwu and other key Biafran figures, excluding those related to war strategy, debated the wisdom in pursuing a rash—possibly even suicidal—war for secession. This is, perhaps, best exemplified (<https://g.co/kgs/m98tgc>) by the efforts of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe to secure a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Having disagreed (<https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/my-role-in-the-civil-war-by-zik/119382.html>) with Ojukwu that “the civil war would be won on the battlefield and not on the conference table”, Azikiwe finally resigned his position as peace envoy for Biafra. Before resigning, he had written a letter (<https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/my-role-in-the-civil-war-by-zik/119382.html>) to the Biafran leader stating:

Since you refuse to go to the conference table to negotiate for peace, since you prefer that the civil war should end on the battle field and not on the conference table; since you said that the sovereignty of Biafra is not negotiable, I am afraid I cannot continue as a peace envoy because you have destroyed all the vestiges of any optimism for peace.

Even more ominous than Azikiwe’s resignation was his renunciation of Biafra in 1969, after which he decided on self-exile and was granted asylum in London. At the time (according to him), he had made 46 cross-Atlantic trips to meet with African Heads of State in search of peace for Biafra (<https://g.co/kgs/m98tgc>) through the Organization of African Unity.

It would surprise many, not least current pro-Biafrans, that secession was not Biafra’s original goal. And even as the war raged, many in leadership positions viewed the Biafran cause as more of a struggle for security, which required protection and detachment from a ruthless and uncompromising enemy. If the factors that necessitated secession were addressed, then inclusion and, ultimately, unity, would have been the preferred solution for many, including the likes of the respected Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe.

#### **OTHER INTERNAL PROBLEMS THAT PLAGUED BIAFRA**

Secretary to the Biafran Government, Mr. Ntienyong Udo Akpan, has sarcastically remarked (<https://g.co/kgs/bheGZd>) that Ojukwu’s final departure just before the war ended, albeit self-seeking, ultimately served for the good of war-weary Biafrans. In his book, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, Akpan goes on to suggest that Ojukwu should have left earlier, claiming that “...leadership is not worth its salt if the leader is not prepared to pay the price of that leadership”. Akpan, in essence, accuses Ojukwu of lacking the leadership mettle required to embark on a self-sacrificial war, claiming Ojukwu was unwilling to sacrifice himself but encouraged others to do so.

Like the Commander of the Biafran Army, Major General A. Madiebo, Akpan also depicts Ojukwu as living in a make-believe world in which he possessed a vast military arsenal and a grand fighting force that never really existed. In their opinion, Ojukwu continued to sell this deceptive image (<https://g.co/kgs/bheGZd>) to his loyal followers, even from the comfort of his sanctuary in the Ivory Coast where he found asylum at the end of the war.

We cannot continue to ignore the brutality non-Igbo Biafrans suffered at the hands of Igbo Biafrans during the war—a particularly disturbing and contradictory phenomenon for a nation largely founded on the principles of resisting ethnic prejudice. Two of my Annang friends, for instance, lost their fathers during the war; both men were murdered by Biafrans. My uncle, Sergeant Gabriel Efiang, who fought passionately for Biafra until the bitter end, was almost murdered at a checkpoint set up by a local vigilante group because he could not speak Igbo. Fortunately for him, there were those who recognized him and confirmed that he was Major General Efiang's younger brother.

On the same issue, Alexander Madiebo openly admits (<https://g.co/kgs/TYwjW6>) that Biafrans burned the homes of Annangs in “an exercise to ‘comb’ out saboteurs” amid a series of actions that led to one Major Oji's dismissal from the army. In *The Caged Bird Sang No More...*, Philip Efiang highlights the problem when he refers to hostilities against non-Igbos seeking refuge in Igbo communities in 1968:

Refugees from the minority areas were not readily welcomed into the Igbo heartland. In fact, a number of refugees, particularly those coming from Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and Abak, were attacked and killed as they tried to cross into Aba and other Igbo towns. The situation...had degenerated to such an extent that it became necessary for me to personally intervene. I gave a speech at Aba Town Hall, drawing the attention of the Aba provincial administrator, chiefs, elders, and leaders of Aba community to the enormous harm their attitude could do to the Biafran cause. I put the blame for the killings squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of Aba community. (Pg. 173)

Today, surviving Biafran veterans, many maimed and dying, occupy Oji River in Enugu State where they have been practically abandoned since the end of the war. In their destitute state, it is curious that these veterans face such neglect despite residing in the heart of Igboland and former Biafra, and not Northern or Western Nigeria where critics could cite their proximity to “enemies” as the reason for their neglect. These veterans, however, live among their kin. What future Biafran nation should we anticipate, then, if those who were willing to sacrifice everything during the war are left to wallow in misery, denied basic care by their own brothers and sisters?

#### **PRO-BIAFRAN ACTIVISTS: THE NEED TO RE-EVALUATE GOALS AND STRATEGIES**

The sidestepping of the aforementioned controversies is one of the serious flaws of current pro-Biafran activists, in addition to the fact that they assume the label “Biafran” while pursuing an agenda that deviates significantly from the original vision of the now defunct nation. A more informed clarification of their goals, even if they choose to retain the label, as well as a reappraisal of hard facts that would compel self-re-examination, would go a long way in earning them the recognition and credibility that some of them are in desperate need of.

It does not help that pro-Biafra factions themselves are often at loggerheads, or that some factions display a dearth in diplomacy and professionalism that would be expected of potential leaders of a new nation. I must point out that I do not wish to generalize. Many of these individuals and groups are dynamic and thoughtful, have made profound and valid cases to prove their marginalization and should never be subjected to the levels of brutality and killings that some have been victims of.

On the other hand, some of these individuals also pass themselves off as little more than rabble-rousers and channels for comic relief. Earlier this year, in an online publication, Mr. Benjamin Onwuka, a leader of the Biafra Zionist Federation (BZF), declared himself the new President of Biafra and appointed a number of individuals to various offices. I was made the Minister of Health, an announcement I found to be perplexing, given that I had never had any contact with Onwuka, much less expressed interest in this position. I also found it offensive that I was falsely represented as a member of one of these organizations, which I am not, or that I define myself as a Biafran, which I currently do not. I advocate keeping the Biafra story and legacy alive. Indeed, I will always be grateful for the security that the nation provided to my family and millions of others during the war. I will always subscribe to the Biafran spirit that has been eternally deposited in me. However, I am not a Biafran, even as I respect the right of others to define themselves in this regard.

#### **AGENTS OF DISUNITY, WHY IGBOS MUST REJECT THIS IMAGE**

At the onset of the war, Igbos, perhaps more than any other Nigerian ethnic group, had proven to be a people of great cultural and commercial adventure. They achieved this by significantly integrating into and assimilating with other cultural groups. To date, there are few ethnic groups that have explored the Nigerian landscape and blended with other ethnicities (culturally, religiously, linguistically and professionally) like the Igbos. The example of historical interactions between Igbos and the people of present-day Akwa Ibom State is pertinent here. Though the Aro people, for instance, are generally identified with Arochuku in Abia State, Aro communities exist in different parts of Akwa Ibom State, an indication that the people have had longstanding cultural and linguistic interactions with Ibibios. Both ethnic groups share traditions like the Ekpo and Ekpe male-only secret societies, as well as the form of symbolic writing known as Nsibidi.

The Jaja descendants of King Jaja of Opobo in Rivers State trace their roots to Amaigbo in Imo State. The former king and founder of the Opobo city-state, though formerly enslaved, exemplifies the exploratory, itinerant and adventurous lifestyles of Igbos, which has been largely informed by impressive industrious and commercial goals. I attended secondary school with some members of the Jaja family who still retained their Igbo heritage by speaking the language fluently. Linguistic connections between the Ikwerre people of Rivers State and Igbos further illustrate a tradition of widespread influence on other cultures by the Igbos, and further demonstration of their adventure into other lands and cultures.

In places like Port-Harcourt, the post-war rejection and “removal” of Igbos was not only physical but also symbolic, as it was done through the addition of ‘R’ to communities like “Umuobiakani” and “Umuomasi,” making them “Rumuobiakani” and “Rumuomasi,” thereby altering their original Igbo names.<sup>3</sup> This is in addition to the deliberate seizure of businesses and homes previously owned by Igbos in a callous exercise widely described as the “abandoned property” project.

It is, therefore, ludicrous that Igbos are widely and unfairly faulted as agents of disunity, whereas they have performed incomparably in their efforts at attaining one of the key components of unity, which is integration. Sadly, some pro-Biafran agitators, in revisiting and re-inventing the Biafran narrative, have

opted to portray themselves from this erroneous perspective. It is important for these agitators to reinvestigate and reassess the values that defined Biafra, even as Biafra had no other option than to defend itself when it was attacked. But even in the heat of military battle, a significant number of its leaders still battled for peace and must not be sidelined in a narrative in which Biafra is boxed into a separatist fever. It is reassuring that majority of Igbos reject the latter impulse and are, consequentially, opting for an ancestral philosophy of intercultural cooperation, one that can only be achieved through constructive and equitable integration✳

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1. While colonels Pam and Largema would currently be Middle Belt indigenes, it should be noted that as at 1966 the Middle Belt was part of the North.
2. The Ahiara Declaration of 1969 highlighted Biafra as being founded on ideological principles like equity, progress, unity, diligence, industry, resourcefulness and innovation. It was a significant departure from what was portrayed as Nigeria's lack of accountability.
3. In Igbo, "Umuobiakani" and "Umuomasi" mean the "People of Biakani" and the "People of Masi" respectively.

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