

Reconsidering the Nigerian Civil War*

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The events leading to the Biafran secession and the Nigerian Civil War itself were the most tragic and important in the history of Nigeria. They have also been silenced. Much is forgotten; what little is remembered is selectively constructed, as was much written at the time. There were fine analytical accounts and copious documentations of these events published in the early 1970s. Since then accounts have mainly been revived to serve current political purposes. It may be that the sadness, bitterness and bravery of the times can only be captured by poets and novelists.

Sequences of events appear with hindsight to have been inevitable; we ask what made them happen rather than what made them possible. Historical explanations contextualise complex processes of different kinds across overlapping periods of time. The origins of the civil war may, with reason, be traced back to the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, to the electoral conflicts over political spoils from the 1950s, to the Action Group crisis of 1962, to the census 'counts' of 1962 and 1963, to the 1964 federal election or to 1965 elections in the West. More can be added; each of these can be seen as following from the preceding histories and as creating the conditions for the coups of January and July 1966 and the killings by civilians and soldiers in May and then August and September 1966. But to understand these events, we must bring all of them and their connections into play.

Political alignments changed between, within and across regions, provinces, and communities. The authority of the Federal Government and the terms of political association were brought into question at various times by politicians and soldiers from each of the regions. and by politicians from both the North and the East. The government of Eastern Nigeria was not the first to threaten secession. Northern officers and soldiers demanded separation in July 1967. But the Eastern government was the first to be in control of civil government and armed forces within its own territory.

If there was a decisive moment, it may have been when the negotiations at the Constitutional Conference were adjourned on 3 October. In the subsequent months the Government of Eastern Nigeria and the Federal Government followed comparable strategies. Each was willing to find agreement but on their own terms; otherwise they would assert their own sovereignty. Lagos and the West were important in the calculations of the North and the East. So too was the creation, or not, of new states. Apparent agreement among soldiers at broke down when its ambiguities were revealed. The key negotiators on both sides were civil servants, intent on securing their governments' sovereignty.

The war itself was the pursuit of politics by other means. Biafra seceded on 31 May 1967. The outcome of the war was clear by 4 October. A Biafran attack across the Niger with the aim of reaching Ibadan and Lagos had been repulsed; Nigerian troops had taken Bonny; Enugu, the Eastern capital had fallen. Yet the war continued until January 1970. The ability to defend a core Igbo area, despite Ojukwu blaming all setbacks on saboteurs; the incompetence of Nigerian commanders; and external military and humanitarian supplies enabled the Biafrans to sustain resistance with no chance of winning the war.

Biafra was imagined initially as the antithesis of the tribalism and corruption of Nigeria, as an idea of Eastern civil servants and academics, returning from Lagos and Ibadan in the face of anti-Igbo discrimination in federal institutions. The refugees from the massacres in the north provided the popular basis for Biafra. Support for the Federal Government was more conditional but it was able to secure civil and military alliances and to claim, successfully, the authority of the sovereign state.

The events of 1966 to 1970 were most easily explained by grand theories: the Igbo plot, or the northern conspiracy. Evidence can be adduced for either account by incorporating them into the grand narratives. The coup-makers of January 1966 blamed the failures of Nigeria on tribalism, regionalism and politics, arguments which resonate in subsequent and contemporary Nigerian politics. 'Their solution was a to reject tribalism, abolish regions and exclude politicians. 'Tribalism' cannot deal with the ambiguities of Nigerian politics. 'Regionalism' emphasises the institutional bases of political power but does not explain why they could not be accommodated with one another or why Nigeria did not break up into its constituent regions. To explain political conflicts we must ask why politics took the forms that it did. Nigeria's political class depended on the state's control of funds and its regulation of economic activities, and by the relative dependence of the economy on imports and exports.

The post-war expansion of oil production expanded the money and opportunities controlled by the state, but accentuated its dependence on fluctuating export revenues. The war and military government provided the 'super permsecs' with the opportunity to centralize fiscal resources in the hands of the federal government. Their promised revolution from above did not materialise. Oil rents were appropriated by civilian and most spectacularly by military rulers. The turnover of political leaders and senior military officers enabled rulers to marginalise rivals and to extend patronage to new generations. The allocation of oil rentals from the top down meant that state and local politics came to be about claims to multiply points of access to and increase shares in oil revenues. Political violence is most common at local or state rather than federal levels; for most people, Abuja is a long way away. Political elites have sought to rebuild regional alliances across state boundaries under new or old names.

'Minorities' have made collective claims for political recognition, the more effective for no longer being within the control of regional governments. Religion has been added to the repertoire of political tools and the fault lines of social divisions. Communal violence and military suppression have claimed far more victims than the violence of 1966. The redemocratization of Nigeria was followed by the 'generals elections' and military arbitration of presidential succession. Political interests are incorporated and electoral rivals repressed within the dominant party state. Perhaps the 2007 election shows that electoral politics has come back full circle. Or has it changed from 'competitive' to 'coercive' rigging.

Does re-examination open up political wounds and stand in the way of reconciliation? This raises the question: reconciliation among whom and for what? The attempts to interrogate past injustices opened the way for political elites to claim and defend their own shares of Nigeria's resources. Ohaneze's complaint was that the defeat of Biafra excluded them from military and political positions in the 1970s so they did not get a fair share of the spoils in the 1970s. Northern elites responded by recreating an Arewa Congress. The War raises more fundamental questions. If nobody can be held to account for murder provided it is on a large scale or by current rulers, what constraints are there on fears of exclusion and the politics of spoils and expropriation? Why does Nigerian politics break down into electoral rigging and political violence? Why, bluntly, are governments at all levels run by avaricious crooks? Have academics and writers the obligation and now the opportunity to break the silences that surround the civil war? The events of the war were the result of decisions made by different people, often without regard for the likely consequences. People were killed in coups, wars and on the streets. Ojukwu led the people of Eastern Nigeria into war without the means to fight it. The federal government and army preserved the unity of Nigeria, but killed many fellow citizens to do it. As Luckham comments at the end of his study of the Nigerian military and the origins of the war, both sides and many others before them 'contracted with the means of violence. They all bear the responsibility for the consequences'.

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