

## **ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE AS THE GATHERING STORM TO NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR UP TO 1967: A CAUSAL ANALYSIS AND PROPOSALS**

**Ezedinachi, Ifeoma Edith**

Department of History and International Studies  
Godfrey Okoye University, Ugwuomu-Nike, Enugu- Nigeria  
08037420431 ifeomaezedinachi@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*Nigeria with over 250 ethnic groups, distributed among the two major religions of Christianity and Islam was engulfed in a catalogue of ethnic and religious resentments up to 1967 which eventually culminated in a thirty month Nigeria –Biafra war (1967-1970). This paper examines the manifestation of ethnic tension and resentments and sectarian violence in Nigeria up to 1967, their causes and proposals for new management strategies for the control of this social phenomenon, which is fast becoming a permanent feature of the Nigerian social map is proffered. The paper relied on qualitative research methodology sustained by ubiquitous secondary sources.*

**Key Words:** *Ethnicity, Religion, Violence, Nigeria-Biafra War.*

### **Introduction**

The gathering storm to Nigeria-Biafra war cannot be traced back to a single focal point but rather was a consequence of a combination or confluence of historical events and forces. The historical causes of the Nigeria-Biafra War can only be fully understood in the context of several processes that include political, economic, social and sectarian relationship among Nigerian peoples and societies.

An understanding of colonialism in the Nigerian context is imperative to fully comprehend the causes of the Nigeria-Biafra War as well as the challenges that faced the economy and government. The fact that such seemingly historically disparate ethnic groups coalesced and formed one nation illustrates the prodigious impact that colonialism had on the continent, region and country in particular. (Okigbo, 2011:12) The events that led to the war and contributed to its legacy have roots in Nigeria's historical conditions. The British pitted Nigeria's various ethnic groups against one another with the amalgamation of northern and southern parts of the territory in 1914. (Korieh,2012:14) The general argument in most literature on Nigeria's nation is that the nation was a product of coercive integration of varied and heterogeneous cultural groups who, prior to the amalgamation of 1914, had lived as separate and independent groups. To administer the different areas, British administrators fostered a divide and rule system pitching the north against the south; thus two distinctly different systems evolved in the two areas.

The division facilitated administrative convenience as the North, unlike the South, was centrally administered before the colonial intrusion. (Oyeniyi,2016:120) For G.N Uzoigwe, the new society was politically and administratively divided because the 1914 amalgamation confirmed the idea of two 'Nigeria's', thus making nonsense of the very essence of amalgamation. (Uzoigwe,2016:22) The amalgamation of the two different areas saddled post-colonial Nigeria with a difficult problem of building a nation out of the component nationalities. Consequently, the relationship between the North and the South since amalgamation has been contentious.

(Anyanwu, 2016:41) Though Nigeria existed as a 'latent' community before the imposition of imperial rule, she became 'manifest' only with the legal order that came with colonialism. (Dudley, 1973:24) For Micheal Crowder, the North and south, though united, continued in their separatist tradition. (Crowder, 1968:202)

The misgivings between the North and the South manifested more prominently during the constitutional conference of 1950. Although the three regions agreed on regional autonomy, they differed on the rate of regional representation at the national assembly. While delegates from the East and the West demanded for equal representation, delegates from the Northern Region demanded a 50-50 representation ratio between it and the other two regions in the south combined. Demand by the northern delegates was born out of fear of potential domination by the more advanced south. As Mallam Sani Dingyadi, a spokesperson for the North stated,

The North has a different religion and different standards of education; so the North must stand alone by itself. Therefore, in any matter of importance one would find the East, West, and Lagos... On one side leaving the North on the other side. Therefore, I do not think it is fair and cannot tolerate it that equal representation should be given to each region. What we would recommend is at least one-half representing for the North and one-half for what I call the south. (Anyanwu, 2016:45)

Historically, identities have played a significant role in the Nigerian political process during the colonial period and in the post-colonial era

up to 1967. During the colonial period, the administrators allowed the emergence and aggravation of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ syndrome, where Muslims were pitted against Christians, Northerners against the Southerners, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo against each other, and so on. (Okpanchi 2010) Therefore, the differentiating outcomes of colonialism became the forerunner of the ethnic and religious resentment among the different regions, and then this became an important factor in the stimulation of identity awareness so as to efficiently ‘divide and rule’. However, the paper opines that internal factors are more determinant than the external ones in the gathering storm that led to Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-1970.

## **Violence**

Violence as a concept encompasses a number of connotations. According to Echoes, violence connotes “... an encounter with life threatening forces that affects millions of people in their communities and in the global economy”.(Echoes:2004) Dzurgba (2006:31) defines violence as the exercise or use of force that causes damage, injury, or abuse to people, property, principle or anything of value.<sup>10</sup> He went further to say that value is associated with the attitude of aggression, hostility, cruelty, brutality, harassment, threat, force, etc. and these violent tendencies are nurtured in words and actions. Dame Deaux and Wrightsman (1963) defines violence as “any behavior directed towards harming human being”. Violence is considered as any behavior in which an organism intentionally seeks out to harm any other organisms. Intention to inflict harm, be it physical harm or verbal affront, is therefore an important element in identifying violence.

Deducing from the above, violence can be defined simply as a behavior that is executed with the intention of hurting other people either directly or indirectly and which is capable of inflicting physical and emotional pains on the affected person (Ani, 2012). The working definition recapitulate the fact that violence causes physical damage, injury ,pains (both physical, emotional and psychological) and destruction to human kind and when this happens, the person violence is directed upon suffers serious and emotional pains.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Ethnicity as used in this paper refers to differentiation of groups of people who have shared cultural meanings, memories and descent, produced through social interaction. Nnoli (1978:5) defines ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of the largest possible competing communal groups (ethnic groups), seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. Ethnicity is a situation when an ethnic group sees itself as ‘we’ and sees others as ‘they’ and psychologically consider themselves as pitched in a perpetual battle of survival against all these others. Ethnicity is a social phenomenon that is manifested in interactions among individuals of different ethnic groups within a political system where language and culture are the most prominent attributes. Many scholars agree that Nigeria comprise over 250 ethnic groups. Subsequently, it may seem like many people embrace ethnic diversity, tolerance and respect for the diverse groups. Rather than promote harmony and dynamism as product of diversity, the reverse was the case since the period of colonialism to independence up to 1967 which invariably became one of the gathering storm that led to the war.

Religion, a derivative of Latin ‘relegere (to unite or link) and religio (relationship, bond) (Sani2007:12)’ has no general or widely accepted definitions. Morreal and Tamara (2013), observed that there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitute religion. Malver and page (2013) defines religion as a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and the higher powers. It therefore means a link or a relationship between man and a being that exists which is greater than man. Man and religion are inseparable in all human cultures. Emile Durkheim (1991:5) sees religion in the same vein as a unified system of practices relative to things separate and taboo (forbidden) which unite in one moral community... all those who adhere to it. African Traditional Religion(ATR), Christianity, and Islamic religion are the three main religion in Nigeria and they share the characteristics of the aforementioned definitions. In Nigeria, the adherents of Christians and Muslims are influenced by fanaticism and the inability to recognize and accommodate views and opinions of others is therefore one of the major sources of religious resentments.

### **Ethnic Tension**

At the end of colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria was a conglomeration of various ethnic nationalities whose loyalties lay with their various ethnic groups. The country was carved into three Region-North, West, and East- With three dominant ethnic groups-the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, respectively. Thus political consciousness developed along ethnic lines. Nigeria’s independence in 1960 marked the beginning of attempts to build a strong, united, and prosperous nation in Africa’s most populous pluralistic country. Yet the tension arising from the conflicting interests and aspirations of the country’s diverse ethnic

groups intensified. The British had made little effort to unite the different ethnic groups in a collective consciousness during the colonial period. Its indirect rule system of administering Nigeria under-cut any chances of promoting social solidarity among various ethnicities. Worse still was that the forced amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 was not successful in narrowing the entrenched historical, cultural, and religious differences in the country. Due to the mistrust and fear of domination and deprivation that dominated Nigeria's politics during the colonial period, it was only a matter of time before the country's fragile unity would be tested. That test came at independence. (Anyanwu, 2016:40)

After its independence from Great Britain in 1960, Nigeria began to experience political crisis associated with ethnicism and managerial malfeasance. (Obiezu, 2012:190) The pluralistic structure of post-colonial Nigeria and the inherently suspicious relation between ethnic groups led to perpetual disagreement and enhanced ethnic tension. The new political elites relied on ethnocentric systems of loyalty, making national integration difficult. This structure also posed challenges at the regional level- for instance, during the western regions political crisis, when contending political interest's sought to establish or expand their support bases. These competing interest clearly affected the stability of the nation and its constituent parts. (Korieh, 2012:4) One of the greatest obstacles to the nationhood was the wide spread mistrust that existed among Nigeria's different ethnic groups and that manifested itself in the crisis of 1966. The failed British imperial policy that amalgamated Nigeria's multiple nationalities and sub

nationalities into a single nation is seen as the genesis of Nigeria's post-colonial problems. British imperial design succeeded in Nigeria as long as British rule welded different groups together with an iron hand, but it began to collapse soon after Britain disengaged from Nigeria in 1960. (Korieh, 2012:4-5)

Post- colonial Nigeria as demonstrated earlier inherited a colonial arrangement in which three regions were created along ethnicities with three dominant groups: Igbo in the East, Hausa-Fulani in the North, and Yoruba in the west. Before independence in 1960, and in the years following it fear of domination and deprivation had shaped inter-regional autonomy established by the Macpherson constitution in 1951. (Anyanwu, 2016:46) Northern leaders feared that a Yoruba and Igbo alliance from the south could swamp them, threatening their ways of life and their political dominance. The Northern People's Congress leader, Sir Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, expressed these fears thus, "A sudden grouping of the eastern and western parties might take power and so endanger the north; this would of course be utterly disastrous" (Schwartz, 2009:13-14). Bello's fear was not without justification and Northerners for their part resented the condescending attitude of Southerners. Some Southerners regarded Northerners as backward, un-educated and un-sophisticated and Northerners felt Southerners were no more than ill-mannered infidels. (Siollun, 2009:13-14)

The northerners preferred Europeans to their countrymen from the south, and the people they disliked most were the Igbo. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:20) This was reflected quite clearly in the preoccupation shown by most members of the Northern Legislature. For instance,



during a debate in the House of Assembly in Kaduna in March 1964, the regional government was asked to revoke forthwith all certificates of occupancy from the lands of Igbo residents in the region. Another member wanted the number of the Igbo working in the post offices reduced; 'There are too many of them in the north...I think they were just too dangerous to the region'. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:20) Others protested about the allocation to Igbo of government contracts, market stalls and land.

One representative simply called for all Igbo to be sent back to the East; 'We do not want to have another trouble leading to bloodshed as we hear happening in other places'. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:20) The Northern Region Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello replied to the debate by reassuring the House that it was his most earnest desire that every post in the region, however small, is to be filled by a Northerner, and the minister of land and survey, Alhaji Ibrahim Musa Gashash, said he would do all he could to see that members' demands about Igbo land holdings were met: 'How to do this, when to do it, all this should not be disclosed. In due course you will all see what will happen' (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:20) According to Chinua Achebe,

The denial of merit is a form of social injustice that can hurt not only the individuals directly concerned but ultimately the entire society. The motive for the original denial may be tribal discrimination, but it may also come from sexism, from political, religious, or some other partisan consideration, or form of corruption and bribery. It is unnecessary to examine these various motives separately, it is sufficient to state that whenever merit is set aside by prejudice of

whatever origin, individual citizens as well as the nation itself are victimized. (Achebe, 2012:78)

The inability to resolve the disagreements between the Federal governments, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, and the Eastern Region, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Ojukwu, compelled the latter to secede from Nigeria by proclaiming the independent Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. 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, 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 people welded together in the interest and for the benefit of European power. (Anyanwu, 2016:40) Swiftly, the federal government declared a war designed to keep the country together. A civil war ensued, lasting from July 6, to January 15, 1970.

The animosity, confusion, ill-feeling and violence brought about the pogrom directed against mainly Igbo that was planned and executed by their compatriots. Other factors include the murders of the Prime Minister and the Premiers of Northern and western Regions during the ill-fated January 15, 1966 abortive coup and the inability of the military head of state, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi to bring the coup plotters to justice. It is true that Ironsi did not bring the coup leaders to justice, but the reason was because the terms of their struggle granted them amnesty. (Nnabuike,2015:170-180)

The estimated fifty thousand civilians—men, women, young, and unborn children, and several hundred army and police officers who were Nigerians of Igbo extraction were massacred in the melee. (Nnabuike, 2015:170-180) This massacre failed to assuage the deep-seated bitterness in the minds of the assailants. The plan to exterminate the Easterners and the west Niger Igbo kinsmen culminated in the July 29, 1966 counter coup. The dethronement of the military head of state, Aguiyi Ironsi, and the military governor of western region, were fallouts of the second coup. The success of the counter coup and the murder of the supreme commander, who was an Igbo man, did not placate the North and the west who continued the hostility against their fellow citizens. As a result, an estimated two million Easterners who survived the pogrom in their various places of abode raced homeward to the East whole or maimed. (Silloun, 2009:135-136)

It was in this situation that Igbo people throughout the country embarked on a massive exodus from the North. Those who were lucky to come home alive came back with little money and properties while others came back with nothing because of the urgency and precarious condition with which they left their abode.

The mass killing of Igbo in many northern and western cities, following the July 1966 counter coup, was a demonstration of long-held plots to emasculate the ethnic group. Mobs (assisted in many cases by Northern soldiers) massacred tens of thousands of Igbo residents in the Northern region. The resentment of Igbo that had simmered beneath the surface for years was released in a violent burst of volcanic rage and extreme blood loss. The massacres were too

widespread and intense to have been spontaneous. Some civilian agent provocateurs were active, assisted by some of the less disciplined Northern soldiers. (Miners, 2009:136) A Northern Corporal gave a plausibly simple rationale for the pogroms ``Igbo(s) killed our leaders in January they were taking all the top jobs, we had to get rid of them. Now we have only got northerners in this barracks; all the southerners have run away.’’ (Silloun, 2009:135-136)

The result was the vengeful killings of Igbo civilians and soldiers particularly in the North between May and October 1966 that international observers were convinced reached genocidal proportions. (Forsyth, 1969:48) The coup and counter-coup as well as the major massacre of July 29, September 29, and October 29 in 1966 completely destroyed the military’s esprit de corps. The fact that the northern and southern protectorates were never effectively united has tended to perpetuate the sharp cultural differences between the peoples of the north and the south. The struggle for dominion eventually was reduced to a contest between the Igbo and the North. This led to ‘pogroms’ or ethnic cleansings against the Igbo. (Uzoigwe, 2016:21)

The ad hoc constitutional conference which convened in Lagos on September 12, 1966, was interrupted by a second wave of massacres of the Igbo which swept the North. From the 28<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> of September in the northern towns of Markurdi, Gboko, Zaria, Gombe, Jos, Sokoto and Kaduna. Igbo men, women and children were surprised and murdered and others were slaughtered at their places of work or in the market places. At the Kano international Airport, the Igbo waiting to be airlifted to the Eastern Region were surrounded by

armed northern soldiers and civilians and killed. Those who took trains ran into ambushes of northern soldiers and civilians who looted their belongings and maimed thousands. (Uzoigwe, 2016:26)

These disturbances were directed principally against the Igbo very many of whom were indiscriminately killed even in churches and hospitals. For instance, on 29 September 1966-`Black Thursday`- mob violence broke out against Igbo shopkeepers and civil servants in the North, resulting in as many as 50,000 deaths and two million refugees. (Stremlau, 2015:53) These pogroms resulted in the deaths of thousands of Igbo men, women and children, as well as in the maiming of thousands more.

This massacre, more than any other event, severed the psychological ties that bound the Igbo to the concept of "one Nigeria," and gave Ojukwu a popular mandate to seek secession. Lt Col. Yakubu Gowon in a broadcast to the people of the North in September said `` I receive complaints daily up till now that Easterners, living in the North are being killed and molested and their property looted. It appears that it is going beyond reason and is now at a point of recklessness and irresponsibility". (New Nigeria Newspaper,1966, September 30) The *Daily Times* of 28 September 1966 wrote: ` There are many mad and lunatic- fringe men roaming about today, acting on their own, without any authority or instruction from either the army authorities or any civil organization. (Daily Times Newspaper, 1966, September 28) Chinua Achebe avers,

What terrified me about the massacre in Nigeria was this: If it was only a question of rioting in the streets and so on, that would be bad enough, but it could be explained. It happens everywhere in the world. But in this particular case a detailed plan for mass killing was implemented by the government- the army, -the police- the very people who were to protect life and property. Not a single person had been punished for these crimes. It was not just human nature, a case of somebody hating his neighbor and chopping off his head. It was something far more devastating, because it was a premeditated plan that involved careful coordination, awaiting only the right spark. (Achebe, 2014:82-83)

The killings resulted in the secession of the Eastern Region and its invasion by Nigeria. Fearing that Biafra's independence would be fatal to Nigeria's existence because other powerful groups might follow the Igbo example, the federal government declared war on Biafra, accusing the Igbo of breaking the socio-political compact. The Igbo leadership dismissed the fear as essentially bogus because no other Nigerian group was being ethnically cleansed. (Uzoigwe, 2016:26)

### **Religious Resentment**

In Nigeria, the difference in social identities was already in existence before the imposition of imperial rule, thus making the nation of Nigeria as a creation of the British so extremely misleading. First, the religion of Islam and the Hausa language were already creating a common political culture and way of life for much of the area that became Northern Nigeria. (Dudley,1973:22-23) In the North, the greater uniformity brought about by Islam and the Fulani conquest of

the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant that Islamic law specifically, the Sharia law prevailed. In the south, where cultural discontinuities still persisted, it was easier to impose a legal system which derived from the principles of English common Laws, principles and practices. The net effect was thus the creation of a hierarchy of law; a three-tiered system with customary Law at the bottom, Islamic law, and English common law at the top but such that, given the area, where the principles of a lower tier were found to be inconsistent with those of a higher tier, the latter prevailed. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:19)

The largest ethnic group in the north of the country were the Muslim, traditional and socially conservative, Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups. The south was dominated by two competing ethnic groups. Hemmed in between them were approximately another 250 disparate ethnicities. The difference between them were accentuated by religion. The south of the country is predominantly Christian and the north predominantly Muslims. The general outlook of the people in the north and south is as different as to give them practically nothing in common and to make physical confrontation between them a virtual certainty. There is difference between a Muslim northerner and a Christian southerner, with their diametrically opposed religions, language, food, manners, dress and culture. The cultural differences between the ethnic groups made it virtually impossible for Nigerians to have any commonality of purpose. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:19)

Lugard promised to interfere as little as possible with Northern traditional authority mainly because of short of administrative officers

and fund, and in particular that he would respect their Moslem religion and way of life. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:19)

Christian missionaries were restricted to the pagan areas of the North. The effect of all this was to stop the clock. Emirs, who before the advent of British rule had had to keep the demands they made on their subjects within the bounds of public tolerance, became tyrants when their positions were made secure by the armed strength of the colonial forces. They no longer needed the consent of those they governed, and any threat to their status quo was interpreted by them as a threat to Islam, the Moslem way of life, which Lugard had promised to respect. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:19-20) In this way no outside influence was allowed to impinge on the growing stagnation of their parochial domains. As late as 1958 the Members of the British Willink Commission remarked that;

the Northern region has remained behind the protective wall of the colonial government as an Islamic society, singularly unaffected by change in the rest of the world; Islamic law of the Maliki school is administered, purdah is observed by women, and western innovations are in some quarters regarded with disfavor. As most fatal effects of this policy were on education, which for a long time had remained exclusively in the hands of the missionaries, whose activities were restricted in the North. Thus while the south was comparatively well provided with schools, the Moslem North had practically none until World War II. Much of the clerical and technical staff required in Northern Nigeria had therefore to be imported from other regions, and the presence of these foreign clerks gave rise to



`friction' which became acute when southerners were appointed to senior civil service post formerly occupied exclusively by the British. (Waugh & Cronje, 1969:19-20)

Thus, religion may also have played a part in the increasing hostility. Muslims had since independence controlled the government. The new Supreme Military Council (SMC) after the January coup was now dominated by Christians. Aguiyi-Ironsi, and three of the four military governors were Catholics (Fajuyi, Ejoor and Ojukwu). Lt-colonel Kastina toured the Northern region in an attempt to dampen wild speculations that Aguiyi-Ironsi had banned Muslim from pilgrimages to Mecca. (Silloun, 2009:84)

### **Proposals for Management of Ethno-Religious Resentments/ Crises in Nigeria**

According to Omorogbe and Omohan (2005:557), only two major strategies of conflict management are often adopted by governments in Nigeria to tackle the problem of ethno-religious conflicts each time they occur which are coercive and judicial methods. Because of the military nature of coercive method of intervention associated with rape, beatings, shootings, it has not been successful as a mechanism (Ani & Chukwu, 2014). In the same vein, the judicial method of conflict management in Nigeria failed to resolve the problem consequent of lack of cooperation of parties to the conflict, non-implementation of white paper or recommendations submitted to the government by the panel of inquiry among others. (Omorogbe & Omohan, 2005:557)

Invariably, to manage ethno-religious conflicts aside adopting judicial and coercive methods, government at all levels must encourage, in their domains, effective and functional platforms for ethno-religious leaders so that through them it would be possible to establish a network for conflict prevention and management. This proposal is necessary because in Nigeria, the various political, Religious, traditional and ethnic leaders in most areas of conflict hardly sit together to discuss the causes of ethno-religious violence and how to prevent future conflicts. What this means is that Nigeria, with a bad history of Ethno-religious conflicts, leaders hardly met to build bridges of understanding that could lead to the establishment of mutual confidence that could sustain a multi-ethnic society. Thus, as discussed in the earlier section of this paper, rather than being part or initiators of the solution, they often become part of the conflicts, which they are supposed to resolve.

## **Conclusion**

Placing the social and sectarian variables at the center of analysis of the causes of the Nigeria-Biafra war, as demonstrated in this chapter, provides a much more comprehensive understanding of its complex causes, which made the declaration of Biafra irresistible, federal response predictable, and war unavoidable. It is generally accepted that the inefficacy of politicians in Nigeria at the points of good governance, national consolidation and economic development has caused social disintegration. This together with political cleavages which has stimulated ethnic and religious resentments culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra of 1967-1970.

The nation-state model is in danger in Nigeria, as in many other so-called nation –state. The majority of modern states consist of different groups and usually one of them tries to rule the system while provoking the objections of others. Consequently, in Nigeria, the ethnic and religious groups compete for dominance and weakens the basis of any achieved unity. This is seen as the inevitable character of heterogeneous nation-states. (Anderson,2010:290). Since ethno religious conflicts are inevitable in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria, the paper suggests the following mechanisms of conflict management: establishment of functional and effective platform for ethno-religious resentment/insurgence; establishment of functional and effective platform for ethno-religious leaders where grievances can be discussed before they escalate into ethno-religious crises/war; involvement of the civil society which will intervene in some critical areas of ethno-religious conflict; government should resolve to be pluralistic, representative, and just in dealing with ethno-religious issues; and above all, the government should strive to reduce poverty among the Nigerian citizens.

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