

NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: THE BIAFRAN INVASION OF MIDWEST AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN THE REGION

Published online: 30-06-2022

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Abstract:

Peaceful coexistence is a major challenge in a multi-ethnic region like the Midwest. After the creation of the region in 1963, ethnic distrust dominated the region's body politics. The Biafran invasion of the Midwest remained one invention that heightened ethnic distrust in the region. Although, scholars have examined the invasion, the need to re-examine it arises from the fact that the event made ethnic antagonism among the groups in the region more intense than ever before. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the Biafran invasion of the Midwest and its implications on inter-group relations in the region. Relying on primary and secondary sources, the paper thinks that the intense group antagonism and suspicion emanated from the fact that the Biafran incursion into Midwest caused division among the groups in the region. The groups that were loyal to the Nigerian Government opposed the groups that supported Biafra. The paper further argues that the ethnic tension was also a result of the assumption by the non-Igbo groups in the region that Biafrans were in the region to promote the interest of the Igbo groups.

Keywords:

Nigerian Government, Region, Midwest, Biafran, Invasion.

Introduction:

The Midwest became the fourth region in Nigeria on 9th August 1963. "The creation of the region was sequel to the report of the Willink's Commission set up in 1958 to examine the desirability of creating more regions from the existing three regions" (Ejemheare, 2020, P.297). Following the creation of twelve states on May 27, 1967, by Gowon, it was later constituted as Midwestern State. It is noted that:

The State stretches from the Bight of Benin in the south to the north, where it maintains boundaries with the then Western, East Central, Kwara and Rivers States. Before the creation of the Midwest, the area formed part of the then Western region with Ibadan as the capital. The area comprised Edo, Urhobo, Western Ibo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Etsako, Esan and Owan. The present Edo and Delta States made up the then Midwest. The coming together of the people under one region did not eliminate the identities of these groups which formed the region (Ejemheare, 2020, p.297).

The Nigeria Civil War initially started as a war between the Hausa/Fulani and the Eastern Region. "The Biafran forces had to focus on their Northern border in their defensive efforts since their real enemies were the Northerners (Ejemheare, 2020, p.297)." In the early period of the war, the town of Ogoja, Nsukka and Bonny fell to the Federal forces. The Federal force's next target after this achievement was to capture Enugu, the Biafran's capital. To divert the attention of the Federal forces from capturing Enugu, Ojukwu invaded the Midwest State under the command of Brigadier David Ejoor. Ejoor and the political leaders of the region had earlier declared before Gowon that the region would be neutral in the event of any hostility (Achebe, 2012).

The Biafra incursion into the Midwest Nigeria and the re-conquest of it by the federal forces

militarized the region. The non-Igbo groups which initially had sympathy for the Biafran cause swung from this position and became a strong protagonist of the Federalists as a result of the Biafran incursion. This created hostility between the Midwest Igbo groups and the non-Igbo groups as a result of the suspected role played by the Western Igbo in aiding the Biafran to invade the Region. Another reason for the hostility was the belief by the non-Igbo groups that the Biafrans were in the Midwest to promote the interest of the Igbo groups. The non-Igbo groups had expected the Biafrans to direct their forces toward their enemy (the Hausa/Fulani). Thus, there was fear on the part of the non-Igbo groups about the role they would play under Biafra since the interest of the Igbo groups loomed largely. This resulted in a situation where the groups that were loyal to the federal government opposed the groups that were loyal to Biafra (Ejemheare, 2019). This paper examines the Biafran incursion into Midwest Nigeria and its implications on inter-group relations in the region.

Clarification of Civil War

For a proper understanding of the concept of a civil war, we must understand the concept of war. Many scholars have seen war from different perspectives. Hoffman Nickerson states that "war is the use of organized force between two human groups pursuing contradictory policies, each group seeking to impose its policy upon the other" (Norman, Palmer and Perkins, 2010, p.186). In other words, the goal of war is to implement a group policy by force. War can also be defined as an act of violence intended to make an opponent act to fulfil one's will. The most famous concept of war was put forward by Karl von Clausewitz. He states that "war is a continuation of politics by other means" (Waldman, 2018). It is not only a political act but also a political instrument. The political goal is the object of the war, while the means of attaining the goal is the war. This means that the use of violent force is a means to an end. It means war is a tool used to achieve a particular objective.

War can be categorized into two, intra-state war and inter-state war. Interstate war is a war between or among nation-states. For example, Iran and Iraq War, 1980-1988 (Izuagie, 1999; Ejemheare, 2016), Iraq and Kuwait (1990), and Vietnam War, 1954-1975 (Spector n.d.). Intra-state wars on the other hand are wars within the confines of a state or country. Intra-state war is what is referred to as civil war. Civil war can also be seen as when a country is at war with itself. Joshua and Jon see civil war as:

The war between factions within a state trying to create, or prevent, a new government for the entire state or some territorial part of it. The aim may be to change the entire system of government, merely replace the people in it, or split a region off as a new state (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2012, p.155).

The 1860 U.S. Civil War, Eritrea and Ethiopia of 1980 (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2012) and the Nigerian Civil War are examples of civil war. Civil wars are the most brutal wars and this is because, in most civil wars, there is an ethnic dimension to them. Furthermore, people fighting their fellow citizen act cruelly than those fighting people from another country (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2012). The Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967-1970 was a war between the Eastern Region and the Federal government of Nigeria.

Biafra Incursion into Midwest

After the declaration of the Eastern region as the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967, Biafra and Nigeria were feverishly ready for war. The Biafran concentration was on their Northern border since they perceived the Northerners as their major enemies and the Nigerian Government also concentrated on the northern border between Nigeria and the East. "Consequently, the war broke out in Garkem, a town on the northern border" (Ejemheare, 2020, p.298). It became inevitable that the northern border would be a focal point at the beginning of the war since the Military Governor of the Midwest has declared before the Nigeria Government that the

Midwest will not be used as a launching ground against Biafra. Ademoyega thus:

The Military Governor of Midwest state... Brigadier Ejoor, assiduously held his ground, refusing to let his state be used as a launching ground for Federal Military operations against Biafra... This was proof of courage in a situation where many stooges would too quickly bow down to a superior authority under the pretext that they had no choice (Ademoyega, cited in Ejemheare, 2020, p.298).

The troops from the North were mainly prepared for the war. It was observed that:

In planning and concept, the war was intended to be fought by the troops located in the North and they were to be supplied mainly from Kaduna (Obasanjo cited in Ejemheare, 2020, p.298).

These troops were the greatest enemy of the Easterners and were perceived to be the formation that can fight the East with determination since the sincerity of the Midwest and the West were still in doubt to fight the East. This made it inevitable that the battle will be between East and North. It is affirming that:

This reason forced the direction of the war to be between North and East. The Federal Government had named the operation Unicord which means solving a problem between brothers and sisters and had underrated Biafra by promising to use police action to crush the rebellion. The town of Ogoja, Nsukka and Bonny fell to the Federal forces in the early period of the war. Consequently, Enugu became the next target since Bonny and Nsukka had fallen to the Federal troops (Ejemheare, 2020, p.299).

After the fall of Opi junction, the advance toward Enugu by Federal troops was progressing slowly but steadily (Efiong, 2000). To divert the attention of the Federal troops from capturing Enugu, "Ojukwu played a masterly trump card and invaded Midwest

State under the command of Brigadier David Ejoor on the morning of August 9, 1967" (Size, cited in Ejemheare,2020,299).

Biafran Incursion and Inter-group Relations

The Biafran troop's invasion of the Midwest surprised the state as there was no resistance from the Federal Army in the 4th Area Command dominated by Western Igbo officers. The Non-Igbo group like Esan, Owan, Etsako, Benin, Ishekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw regarded it as a deliberate plan by the Western Igbo to dominate the state. They regarded the early statement made by Col. C. D. Nwawo, the commander of the 4th Area Command as "a political statement intended to give the people a false sense of security" (Ogbemudia,1991, p.88). Col. Nwawo had earlier assured the people of the region of their preparedness to resist any attempt to invade the region. Alexander Madiebo reported that "the troops available for the operation were grossly inadequate for the enormous task before them, but the chances of success were excellent as little or no opposition was expected for some time..." (Madiebo,1980, p.123).

The above indicates that the Biafrans had expected cooperation from the 4th Area command dominated by the Western Igbos. Omoigui notes that "weapons were withdrawn for a routine check from non-Igbo soldiers in the 4th Area command " (Omoigui n.d.; Ejemheare, 2019). The withdrawal of weapons from the non-Igbo soldier is a reflection that this group would resist or oppose the Biafran incursion into the State. Even Ojukwu had entertained the fear that the non-Igbo groups would resist the Biafrans in Midwest. The report by Madiebo that Benin was taken over "amidst frantic jubilation by the entire local population" (Madiebo, 1980) cannot be correct. In a broadcast to the people of the Midwest, Banjo announced:

Fellow citizens of Mid-Western Nigeria, this is Brigadier Adebukunola Banjo, commander of the liberation Army from Biafra speaking to you. Sometimes in the early hours of yesterday morning, some of you might have

woken up to the sounds of some minor firing in the capital city of Benin as well as in some other area of Mid-Western Nigeria, and they thought it was in the process of being invaded by Northern troops. I am happy to reassure you that you have not been invaded by hostile troops. As some of you have found out within the last 48 hours, the soldiers amongst you are disciplined troops of the Liberation Army from Biafra which I command acting in close cooperation with troops of Mid-Western Nigeria to ensure that the territory of the Mid-West is adequately protected from invasion by Northern troops. This action is consistent with the desired intention of Biafra to assist in the Liberation of the people of Nigeria from domination by the Fulani-Hausa feudal clique. I would also like to reassure the people of Mid-Western Nigeria that this is neither an invasion nor a violation of the integrity of the Mid-West. This action of the troops under my command, in close cooperation with their Mid-Western counterparts, is designed to insulate the people of the Mid-West from the coercive threats of Northern Military presence in neighboring areas and occasionally in the Mid-West from declaring its true stand in the Nigeria crisis of the last 18 months. I hope that by our presence, the people of the Mid-West will have incomplete freedom from any restraint either direct or implied, and be able to seek their rejection of the fiction that peace in Nigeria is only possible under the conditions that the entire people of Nigeria should be dominated by the Fulani-Hausa feudal clique (Efiog, 2000, pp.188-189).

Brigadier Banjo declared the Midwest an independent region and expressed a lack of support for the concept of an independent Biafra. Midwest is the fourth region created in Nigeria by the Act of Parliament and if the region wanted to break away from Nigeria, it should not be an obligation to

outsiders. It is a right of self-determination. John Stuart Mill, while recognizing the right of self-determination suggested that it is a human right but, not an obligation on outsiders (Ejemheare, 2013). For the sixth week of Major Okonkwo's administration, approval for expenditure came from Enugu (Ogbemudia,1991).

Lt. Col. David Ejoor declared that he would not allow the Midwest state to be used as a battleground which was taken to mean neutrality by the Biafran. In as far as the 4th Area Command was still being financed and paid for by the Nigerian Government, the neutrality of the State cannot be guaranteed. Although Col. Ejoor supported the Federal Government, he also played the role of mediator. Ogbemudia declared that there were some Midwestern Igbo who wanted the Igbo-speaking parts of the Midwest to be merged with their Eastern counterpart. Major Albert Okonkwo who was appointed as Military administrator of the Midwest by Ojukwu was one of them. Ogbemudia declared thus:

Major Albert Okonkwo was no doubt, one of those who had worked and hoped for an Igbo 'Risorgimento' in the Midwest. This is the group that favoured the merger of the Igbo-speaking area of the Midwest with their kith and kin of the East. Several notable traditional rulers in the Igbo-speaking area confessed to me later when I became the Military Governor that they had subscribed to a petition calling for such a merger out of fear and persuasion by some army officers who felt that a merger was the only logical arrangement (Ogbemudia, 1991, pp.97-98).

The non-Igbo group rejected such a merger. This became an area of disagreement between the Igbo and the non-Igbo groups in the region. The non-Igbo groups wanted the state to remain as it was carved out from the Western region.

The Biafran invasion of the Midwest gave non-Eastern Nigerians the impression that Biafra's objectives were not limited to self-defense, but that

it also had ambitions for territorial expansion. Frederick Forsyth declares that 'Ojukwu was at pain to placate the non-Igbo majority of the Midwest and to assure them that he bore them no harm" (Forsyth, 1969, p.118). The non-Igbo groups regarded the Biafra invasion of the Midwest as an army of occupation meant to bring about the domination of the state by the Igbo element of the state. Ogbemudia declared that the Biafra forces invaded the Midwest with the collaboration of Western Igbo officers in the 4th Area Command in Benin (Ogbemudia 1991; Alabi-Isama, 2013).

Resistance Movement

When the appointment of Major Albert Okonkwo was announced from Enugu, the non-Igbo groups regarded it as a realization of the dream of most Midwestern Igbo. This notwithstanding, some Midwest Igbo Military and civilians were against the Midwest invasion but were afraid to make their position known. The announcement was followed by the imposition of a dusk to dawn curfew and other measures inimical to the freedom of the people. Ogbemudia affirms thus:

A dusk to dawn curfew was immediately imposed in major cities and towns of Benin City, Sapelle and Warri... only those loyal to the Biafran had passed to come out at night. There were fears of abduction, torture, detention and even murder of opponents... freedom of speech was greatly curtailed (Ogbemudia,1991, p.98).

The new Biafra dispensation favoured the Western Igbo, while the non-Igbo groups lived in fear as torture, abduction and death of non-Igbo groups increased. The Biafran onslaught on the non-Igbo groups pushed them to form underground local resistant groups (Jorre, 1972).

Resistance movement according to the United States Department of Defense, is an organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability (Lee, 2017). The movement is common

among those who cannot further their cause by legal and peaceful means. In the resistance movement Omoigui declares thus:

Many resistance groups may have operated in the Midwest, but one, in particular, was organized and very effective. This group was the one formed by Chief Michael A. Ojomo in Benin on August 18th...In a short time, recruitment and training started and volunteers came in hundreds. Soon afterwards, an effective system of hits and runs was in operation... By the 26th of August, we had assembled a reliable force of about 600 men and 180 women... supportive citizens, who were too old for action donated their Single- and double-barrel cartridge guns. Recruits performed armed and armless Combat, isolating and capturing Biafran sentries. Night raiders spat salt into the eyes of the soldiers, while attractive girls distracted them with sex, obtained intelligence and even stole their weapons (Omoigui n.d.).

Contrary to earlier views that the resistance group was formed by Samuel Ogbemudia, the movement was formed and financed by Chief Michael A. Ojomo from Uromi and he was the chairman. Ogbemudia was very instrumental in the area of tactical training of the group. The non-Igbo groups voluntarily joined the resistance groups to resist the Biafran despite the early attempt to win the heart and minds of the non-Igbo groups. The attempt to win the heart became inevitable because of their limited resources both in manpower and equipment (Jorre, 1972). Fredrick Forsyth reported that:

There were no Military vehicles in the column, no armour, no artillery. The actual weapon consisted of two mortars and very limited ammunition for them, half a dozen light machine guns (no heavies available) some submachine guns, bolt-action rifle, a newly arrived Russian AK-47 assault rifle, plenty of home-made hand-grenades and

commercial quarrying explosives (Forsyth, 1982, p.89).

Jorre affirms that in Benin, the Biafra "in early days, in particular, behaved well, bought rather than stole, cajole rather than command and treated the local population humanely" (Jorre, 1972, p. 163). Northerners were killed, but some were hidden by the local populace. But even though some local leaders visited Enugu to discuss the matter with Ojukwu, it became obvious that the Biafran was not wanted.

When the resistance movement began to be noticed, the secessionist began to move away from areas predominantly occupied by non-Igbo groups. The Igbo civil servant began to move away from Benin to places like Agbor and Asaba even though their fellow Igbo were in control (Jorre, 1972). The resistance of non-Igbo groups in the state resulted in hostile reactions from Biafrans toward the non-Igbo groups. On September 25, 1967, a plan to kill non-Igbo groups in the Midwest was uncovered in Benin. According to the report:

A plot by the rebels to kill all non-Igbo speaking people in the Midwestern state has been uncovered by Military authorities in Benin, following the recapture of an important town in the state. According to the plan, the rebel was to kill non-Igbo in the state today, September 25 and identity cards had been issued to Igbo in the state which they could produce when asked to do so by the rebel soldiers (New Nigerian 1967, p.1).

The plan to kill the non-Igbo groups was due to resistance and mass disobedience against the Biafran occupation. Other Midwesterners outside the state also joined in rejecting Biafran occupation of the state. The leader of the Midwestern state in Kaduna, Mr J. A. Ameh denounced and condemned the Biafran regime in the Midwest. The leader maintained that Midwesterners had not mandated Biafra to pull the state out of the federation (New Nigerian 1967).

The non-Igbo Midwesterners in Lagos vehemently rejected and denounced the Biafran occupation. More than 20,000 Isoko and Urhobo people residents in Lagos identified with other non-Igbo Midwesterners to pledge their support to the fight to liberate the state from the Biafran occupation (New Nigerian, 1967). The Esan and other non-Igbo groups in the state regarded the Biafran incursion as an act of colonialism that must be resisted. John Locke posited that "he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power does thereby put himself into a state of war with him... to be free from the such force is the only security of my preservation."(Wootton, 1993, p.269).

Conclusion

This paper examined the implications of Biafran incursion into the Midwest on inter-group relations in the region. It has also critically analyzed the motive behind the incursion. The Biafran forces invaded the Midwest to divert the attention of the Federal forces from capturing Enugu. The Biafran invaded the Midwest with the collaboration of the Igbo groups in the region and this made the non-Igbo groups believe that the Biafran are in the region to promote the interest of the Igbo groups. Consequently, the non-Igbo groups became a strong protagonist of the Federal government and resisted the Biafran forces to the extent that they formed a resistance movement against the Biafran forces. This made the Biafran soldiers carry out acts of brutality against the non-Igbo groups. When the federal forces arrived Midwest, the fleeing Biafran soldiers intensified their acts of Brutality against the non-Igbo groups and this reason tempted the non-Igbo groups to seek revenge against the Igbo groups when the Federal forces arrived (Ejemheare, 2019). The Biafran incursion into Midwest created hostility between the Igbo groups and the non-Igbo groups. The Igbo groups like Ika and Aboh became opposed to the non-Igbo groups like Esan, Urhobo, Edo, Itsekiri and Western Ijaw.

A harmonious relationship is germane to the process of nation-building. There is a need to put aside ethnic antagonism to promote the economic, political and social advancement of the people. To allay the fear of ethnic domination, there is the need for a constitutional conference where the various groups that made up the nation would negotiate and come up with binding terms.

Recommendations

Government should come up with policies that will instill a sense of belonging and integration in all Nigerians. Ethnic domination which was a major factor that led to the Nigerian civil war is still with us. Lack of equity in the distribution of the resources of the country can lead to serious ethnic tension. The groups that are not favoured in the distribution of both political offices and resources will oppose the groups that are favoured. The then Midwest is today Delta and Edo states located in the Niger Delta geopolitical zone. The two states and other Niger Delta states are agitating over the neglect of their region despite the oil resources from the area. There is a need to pay attention to the rights of the Niger Delta group and this will go a long way to strengthen individual rights. Another way the right of Niger Delta can be guaranteed is through the reformation of the existing federal system with over-centralization of power through high decentralization of power. Decentralization will ensure more power and resources are possessed by the region and this will ensure broader participation of the citizens at the local level.

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