IMPACT OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR ON THE COUNTRY’S FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria belongs to a comity of nations which means that she is not an island. The 30 months civil war which occurred between 1967 and 1970 exposed the fragility of her foreign policy with other countries of the world. There is the need to re-examine the impact of the civil war on Nigeria’s foreign policy. The objectives of this research is to: Analyze the major events that took place outside Nigeria during the civil war and how it changed the way Nigerian leaders conduct external relations. The study relied much on primary sources especially government publications, correspondence and interviews. The study revealed that the various ethnic groups in Nigeria need one another; so also, that Nigeria should harness the lessons of the civil war to build her foreign policy with other world countries, especially in the West African sub-region.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The history of Nigeria since 1914 is deeply rooted in major political issues which are violently contested along the lines of ethnic, religious and regional boundaries in the country.¹ Webster, Boahen and Tidy (1979) noted that Nigeria inherited a constitution from the British government which gave absolute majority to one region thereby promoting regional politics and political division in the country. Thus the events that led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) cannot be separated from ethnic and religious distrust between the three major groups: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani.

Prior to the civil war, Nigeria had witnessed series of political crises. The most prominent were the Kano Riot of 1953, the Census Crisis of 1962, the Federal Election Crisis of 1964 and
the Coups and Counter Coups of 1966. Some analysts have argued that these are major remote causes of the Nigerian Civil War. For instance, the 1953 Kano Riot occurred as a suspicion on the part of the Northern leaders that the Southern leaders were trying to force them into a national integration which they were not prepared for. In an attempt to educate the Northerners about the benefits of self-government, the Southerners led by Chief S. L. Akintola of the Action Group went to Kano to gather support. This eventually led to a four days rioting at Sabongari, Kano between 16th and 19th of May, 1963. The implication of this riot apart from loss of lives is that it worsened the relationship between the Southern and Northern leaders.

Moreso, the Census Crisis of 1962 was based on ethnic suspicion where the Southerners assumed that the Census Director had been influenced to perpetuate Northern agenda. While the Federal Election Crisis of 1964 centered around regional politics in which United Progressive Grand Alliance
(comprising of NCNC and AG) and Nigerian National Alliance (comprising of NPC and NNDP). UPGA is south dominated while NNA is north dominated. Conversely, this pattern of political setting was crisis and on the large scale, full of blown coup d’etat.\textsuperscript{7}

On January 15, 1966 a small group of army officers, mostly Southeastern Igbos, overthrew the government and assassinated the Federal Prime Minister and the premiers of the Western and Northern regions. The Federal military government that assumed power was unable to calm down ethnic tensions or produce a constitution acceptable to all sections of the country. Its efforts to establish the Federal structure greatly increased tensions and led to another coup in July, 1966. The coup related massacre of thousands of Igbo in the north prompted hundreds of thousands of them to return to the Southeast where increasingly strong Igbo secessionist emerged.\textsuperscript{8}
Fakayode (2003) reported that the July 1966 counter coup was followed by further civil disturbances in both the North and Eastern parts of the country. The Military Governor of Eastern Region, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu refused to recognize Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon as Head of State in succession to Aguiyi Ironsi who was assassinated in previous coup. Lt. Col. Ojukwu had preferred a senior military officer in the person of Brigadier Ogundipe to succeed Ironsi instead of Gowon.

According to Ajetunmobi (2001) hostilities broke out between Lt. Co, Ojukwu, the military Governor of Eastern Region and General Gowon, Head of the Federal Military government when the latter divided the four regions into 12 States in 1967. Soon, Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu declared the independence of the Republic of Biafra. The ensuing civil war was bitter and bloody ending in the defeat of Biafra in 1970.9

The attention of this researcher was drawn to the key events that took place in Nigeria’s external relations during the
civil war. During the fratricidal civil war, Nigeria had thought that by turning to her traditional friends in the West for assistance, the war would be expeditiously prosecuted. Unfortunately, this did not work out as the so-called traditional friends turned her request for arms and ammunitions down thus introducing a new dimension to the country’s perception of friends or enemies in external relations. Consequently, Nigeria turned towards Eastern Europe for assistance and was able to defeat the armies of the Biafran secessionist group.

The impact of the civil war on Nigeria’s foreign policy was significant causing the Nigerian leaders to draw some vital lessons from the thirty months civil war. The lessons derived are:

a) It taught Nigerians that the country’s survival could not be taken for granted;

b) It exposed Nigeria’s enemies such as France who gave military assistance to Biafra
c) It taught Nigerian policy makers that it was dangerous to depend disproportionately on one power bloc for survival for the supply of arms to maintain internal security;

d) It opened a new set of diplomacy to Nigerian diplomats that propaganda should be fully exploited in conducting external relations in the West African sub-region.\(^\text{12}\)

**Statement of the Problem**

Although, much has been written on the Nigerian Civil War, little is known concerning the impact which the war has had on the bilateral and multilateral relations which Nigeria has towards other countries in the international community. It is on the basis of the above that this research work seeks to fill the vacuum which is yet to receive the attention of scholars of International Relations.
Objectives of the Study

The purpose of carrying out this research is to:

a) Analyze the major events that took place outside Nigeria during the civil war and how it changed the way Nigerian leaders conduct external relations;
b) Discuss the role which the Nigerian Civil War played in defining the country’s foreign policy;
c) Examine the impact of the civil war on Nigeria domestic policies in regional diplomacy;
d) Discuss the challenges which the civil war placed on Nigerian leaders in choosing key allies after the war; and
e) Analyze the role which the civil war played in the creation of ECOWAS and subsequently, Nigeria’s major multilateral relations in the Commonwealth, EU, AU and the UN.
Literature Review

The Nigerian Civil War marked a significant milestone in the military history and diplomatic relations of an independent African State. For the first time, 20th century technology reached a battlefield where Nigerians met with Nigerians in conventional combat. The quantities of modern weapons in the Nigerian-Biafran War were not substantial, but their impact was great. There were no tanks or heavy artillery (122 mm Russian Guns were the largest), so the individual battle lethality cannot compare to the Arab-Israeli conflicts or other technology intensive campaigns in war torn zones. However, the Nigerian Civil War caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, primarily through the starvation associated with siege warfare.

As a result of Gowon’s declaration of a state of emergency and Ojukwu’s later announcement of secession and the birth of the state of Biafra, the following month of June witnessed mobilization for war on both sides. The series of border
provocation on both sides of Eastern and Northern Region culminated in a shootout on July 6, 1967. The much expected war had started. The factors that led to the war can only be understood in the complexity and labyrinth of Nigerian political system and history. It also brought into sharp focus the issue of what constitute Nigerian national interest in the international system.

According to Osuntokun (1984) ‘the question of raison d’etat obviously centered first of all on maintaining national unity and taking all appropriate measures to prevent the territorial disintegration of Nigeria. This was the ultimate national interest. But national interest cannot be taken in isolation.’ Of course there was the very important need to first identify what constitute Nigeria national interest both domestically and international wise. African heads of states are guilty of personalizing their countries foreign policy formulation, in their power drunk statue as the head of their respective government,
they often take actions that is contrary to the rules and regulations that guide the international organizations to which they respectively belong and which in the long run works against the interest of their respective countries.

This irrational decision in foreign and internal policy could be seen in the administration of Balewa and that of Gowon that later followed after Nigerian civil war and here could be found some of the reasons for the general instability that characterize African policy, Bernard Cohen in his book had stated that rationality in the formulation of foreign policy means the:

Concern for the organization and structure of policy-making which generally (but not exclusively) reflects a belief that certain policy making relationships or arrangement can be found that are for one reason or another more “rational” than any others — that is better designed to implement the
values and intelligent and responsible foreign policy

Consequently, irrationality is the opposite of the above statement by Cohen and this was what characterized foreign policy of some African states during the Nigerian civil-war. The need for Nigeria to identify what her national interest is include creating an enabling environment for the happiness and prosperity of all Nigerians and this can only be done through correct political and economic policies. A situation where rampant corruption and ethnic political aggrandizement in which certain groups seize national power and manipulate it for group interest as opposed to national interest will never augur well for the country. In the battle between group and national interest, those in power seemed to be prepared to sacrifice the national interest for private and group interest. Events which led to the civil war graphically illustrated this point and provided international
intervention to complicate the already serious national problems.  

Much has been written about the Nigerian Civil War. There are many researches, personal account (published and unpublished ones), and military documentaries detailing the development of the country and the factors that led to the outbreak of the war in 1967.

For instance, Luckham Robin in his book, *The Nigerian Military* provided a detailed analysis of the development of the Nigerian army during the period 1960 to 1967. Luckham outlined the factors which put the Nigerian military in a position to seize power; examined both 1966 coups and counter coups; and studied the Nigerian military as a social system that has been politicized and heading towards disaster in 1967. His work was great but did not give full details on the operations of the Biafran Army to make a complete study of both the Nigeria army and the Rebel group during the 1967 to 1970 civil war.
Oyewole Fola wrote the *Reluctant Rebel* and gave his own personal account of the civil war as a Biafran staff officer. This work was included in this review because of its first-hand insight into the conduct of the war in Biafra. It gave an objective military operation in Biafra and thus, mentioned the backup which the Rebel army had from France.

Olusegun Obasanjo, the immediate past civilian president of Nigeria also published his own account in *My Command*. The autobiography outlined causes of the civil war and gave a full account of what was going on at its early stage. This continued even when he assumed division command and provided information on what happened until the end of the war.

during and after the war, they did little or nothing to discuss what was going on among other countries concerning the war.


However, as authoritative as these works were, there is much to be covered on the long term implications of the civil war on Nigeria’s foreign policy and how other countries view or relate with Nigeria since the end of the war. This research work therefore seeks to update and cover such areas such as the long term effect of the civil war on Nigeria’s foreign policy and external relations.
Scope of the Study

This study covers the Nigerian Civil War, especially the events that took place during the war which at the end shaped Nigeria’s foreign policy. It also covers strategic areas such as Nigeria’s diplomacy during the civil war; Nigeria’s relation with the United States, France, Russia and other countries of interest to Nigeria; and lastly, the impact of the civil war on the conduct of Nigeria’s foreign policy afterwards.

Limitations of the Study

In producing such a work like this, the problem confronting the researcher is not the scarcity of materials but its availability some of which I presumed are bias in their presentation. Moreso, this research work is ethnic sensitive as some of those who fought during the war are still alive among whom we have Rtd. Odumegwu Ojukwu, General Yakubu Gowon and Former President Olusegun Obasanjo. The
researcher therefore is confronted with the problem of interpretation of the actions of some of the actors mentioned above.

Finally, there is the question of time, fund and accessibility to the living actors who engaged actively during the civil war and subsequently, in conducting external relations with other countries during the war. However, their autobiography and interviews granted to men of the press will be used. But the problem here is that of distortion which this researcher fears greatly.

Nevertheless, these limiting factors will greatly be managed to make the research work objective.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is of paramount importance to decision makers and the would-be diplomats for it traces the historical development of Nigeria foreign policy since the civil war.
Furthermore, this research work will help in providing information on the domestic factors that has been influencing Nigeria foreign policy since Independence.

Apart from the personal satisfaction which this study will give the researcher, I hope that it will be a source of reference to other researchers in similar area.

**Research Methodology**

This study will make use of findings from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include written documents such as Government publications, letters, correspondence, documentaries and newspapers. Added to these are descriptive accounts of some Nigerians who experienced the civil war. Interviews will also be conducted with those considered authorities in the field of History, Political Science and International Relations to complement the other sources.
Furthermore, this research work depends largely on archival materials both online and offline—visiting embassies of countries that were regarded as actors during the civil war to gather relevant materials on the study. Official publications published on the websites will also be used in interpreting the events and actions of countries that were involved.

Books, journal articles, conference proceedings, seminar papers and other related publications will be used in gathering secondary information for this research.
End Notes


4. *Ibid*

5. *Ibid*


7. *Ibid*

8. [http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2836.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2836.htm), April 2009


12. Ibid

13. IPA, Nigeria’s Foreign Policy After the Cold War: Domestic, Regional and External Relations, UK., 2005


15. Ibid

17. Ibid
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