
**THE ROLE OF BRITAIN IN INTERNAL CONFLICT IN POST-
COLONIAL NIGERIA: THE CIVIL WAR AS A CASE STUDY**

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DOI <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.2746>**1.1 ABSTRACT**

The work covers majorly on the involvement of Nigeria's former colonial master, in major conflicts that met the nation during the end of colonial rule and in the early years of independence. Using the theory of war and objective analysis to interrogate historical events, the study makes sense of how Britain's policies tampered with the unity and coexistence constituents within the West African nation. It was revealed that the activities of Britain prior to independence were, by design, so far-reaching that they lingered in palpable ways even after colonial administration ceased. It also discusses the significance of amalgamation, the indirect rule and divide and rule system in bringing Nigeria into being and in shaping Nigeria's social reality. This study encourages wider scopes of study for subsequent research and suggests that stakeholders use the findings herein to remedy not just the Nigeria's political flailing, but also the status quo in the part of ethnic group..

KEYWORD: Civil War, Internal Conflict, Amalgamation, Colonial Master.**1.2 INTRODUCTION**

The history of the world is a chronicle of oppression. Man, therefore, is born oppressed. His life is a struggle and his fulfillment freedom. Thus, history is sadly replete with such traumatic experiences of misfortune such as civil wars. These sometimes resulted from attempts by young sovereign states to attain virile and dynamic nationhood. Most countries thriving today as strong nations like the United States of America have experienced one form of civil strife or the other in the past, in their endeavour to free themselves from the harsh

treatment meted on them by stronger nations. In this direction, Nigeria Nigeria was colonized by Britain from late 19th century to 1960 when the country gained independence. Nigeria's colonial antecedent elicited a series of complexies which remain within the African context long after the colonial administration ceased to have direct contact. "The colonial power having found itself undisturbed, spreads its contagion, and concentrates all its efforts towards the achievement of its main objective...of economic exploitation", (Ojukwu, 1969). The idea of a truly African worldview depends entirely on the ability of Africans to overcome their own colonial mentality, which permits former colonialists to manage and manipulate their impulses generated from a remote control station, usually locations in Western countries. The subject of this study is colonial-influenced conflicts in Nigeria within the context of how Africans attempted to resist continued and foregoing interference. From the perspectives of political and social history, the study uses the Nigeria-Biafra civil war as a case study.

1.2.1 The Nation at The Beginning

British imperialism was the hand behind the creation of Nigeria. The nation was as a result of the coming together many and diverse ancient nation states. Two regions that were initially independently administered regions, were combined together in 1914, They were Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria. All through the period from 1914 to 1966, Nigeria was yoked by the consequences of the amalgamation. Instead of uniting the Nigerian peoples, it severed the thin bond of unity binding them together and Nigeria from that period became a disjointed mass, even till the moment of independence and beyond. From the colonial times to independence, all forms of problems in public life emerged: ethnic strifes, injustice, oppression, discrimination, rivalry, suspicion, controversies and hate. The country heaved and groaned. Chaos began to grow as lives and property were destroyed. All these were to satisfy political ambitions and fulfill sectional interests. The census of November 5th to 8th 1963 which was announced on February 24th 1964, and the 1964/1965 federal and general elections brought all these acts and manifest actions to their heights, and the inevitable consequence was a civil war with its damning aftermath. This section highlights Britain's colonial role in Nigeria, the post-colonial atmosphere which starts from the independence of Nigeria on October 1st, 1960, the crisis and conflicts that ensued in the newly independent country which later culminated into war. The declaration of independence by the eastern region of the country to become Biafra did not happen out of vacuum on May 30th, 1967. The southern region was made up of two loosely wholesome entities: Yorubas in the west and Igbos in the east. The northern region constituted mostly of Hausas and Fulanis. Other

minority groups existed in all these regions. Essentially, the tribes had their kings, unique traditions, languages, political culture and worldview in the pre-colonial times. Amalgamation meant that these hundreds of heterogeneous societies were bundled together in a crude bunch. The presence of the British managed to make them governable, having successfully tamed their religious and political systems. Under normal circumstances, the amalgamation ought to have brought the various peoples closer together, and provided a firm basis for the arduous task of establishing closer social, religious and linguistic ties—ties which are vital for true unity. For colonial Britain, such a union, if allowed to develop, would have amounted to major threat to the very economic interests it was striving to protect, thus it introduced the divide and rule system, which led to emphasis on the differences among the peoples, while encouraging social apartheid.

After the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates, the resulting Nigeria was seen as a unitary colony but was divided into twenty four provinces — 12 in the north and 12 in the south. This was altered by the establishment of the Richard's constitution of 1946. Thereafter, ethnocentrism, tribalism and regionalism became embedded in Nigeria federalism which threatened unity, progress, prosperity and stability. The political struggle and the consequent drifting apart of the various sub-nationalities of Nigeria went over the years unchecked. By 1962 the tension created by the disturbances in western Nigeria and the trials that followed were still fresh in many minds when the federal election became due in 1964. The election was marred by manipulation and brazen disregard for democracy. The dust raised by the census fiasco of 1963 had not completely settled, and that, coupled with allegations of gross election malpractices forced the eastern Nigeria regional government to rather boycott the elections in exasperation (Madiebo, 1980). All these crises and political struggle prompted the military to take over the government by force because they considered a coup d'etat as the only way of restoring the country to normalcy. Many scholars and survivors have written about the Nigerian civil war which claimed many innocent souls/lives. This has been done for reasons ranging from debunking misinformation to providing enlightenment and unbiased perspective on the war. However, this study focuses on the war in the context of Nigeria's colonial past and history with the British. Unlike many other studies, it attempts to reveal the external force behind Nigeria's internal crisis as at that time.

1.2.2 The Genesis of Nigeria Conflict

The genesis of the Nigeria conflict dates back to the years before 1914, according to Onwubiko (1973). Britain's indirect rule during the colonial era sowed seeds of separation which have frustrated Nigeria's unity till today, and brought about conflicts among the ethnic groups in Nigeria, which later generated into civil war in 1967 (Onwubiko, 1973). Similarly, Madiebo (1980) traced the origin of the war to its roots in tribal antagonism and the master plan of the colonial masters. After independence, the north increased efforts to consolidate political and military dominance over the rest of the federation as initiated by Britain pre-1960s (Madeibo, 1980). This struggle eventually degenerated into coup d'etat of January 15th, 1966 and the counter coup of the July 6th, 1966 against the Igbos of the eastern Nigeria, which brought about their secession from the Nigeria government and resulted in the civil war. Ojukwu accepted to help Gowon to bring back the country to normalcy but refused to recognize the northerners as head of state. To Ojukwu, the idea of being subordinate to a junior, less educated, less experienced officer of Gowon's caliber — he had a low estimate of the latter's intelligence — was an athema. "Gowon is not my superior and the question of acknowledging him does not arise", Ojukwu stated flatly (John De St. Jorre, 1972). As war was brewing, the two warring factions (Ojukwu and Gowon) were invited to a settlement meeting in Aburi, Ghana. Eventually, the Eastern state government delegate refused the communiqué of the Aburi Accord. "When Gowon reneged on the Aburi Accord, he and Ojukwu wrangled over the phone on the matter. The harm had been done, the cat was out of the bag. The confidence engendered at Aburi was under mined and was replaced by awakening suspicious. A group of top federal civil servants met to scrutinize the decisions and arrived at firm recommendations for their rejection. The storm began to gather turbulent and fast", (Akpan, 1971). Forsyth (1982) documented that Gowon declared a state of emergency in the east which was unconstitutional in the Aburi context as this was an action exclusive to the unified military council. Soon, Gowon abolished the regions dividing Nigeria into twelve states, an unconstitutional move since multi—lateral consultation was necessary on internal border changes. "...on May 30th, the Eastern Region formally pulled out of Nigeria. Gowon had already accorded himself full power for the short period necessary to carry out the measures which are now urgently required". (Forsyth, 1982). When the Igbos seceded, the federal government of Nigeria felt insulted and thus on the 6th of July, 1967, the federal troop started attacking the Biafran soldiers. War had been declared.

1.2.3 Nigeria's Ethnic Groups

Nigeria's ethnic composition is vastly diverse. Given the tribally tensed past, when people from various parts of Nigeria started migrating to the urban centers, they had to look for their kinsmen for protection and support. As tribesmen clustered together, they started nursing tribal sentiments. The federation of Nigeria as it exists today has never really been one homogenous country, for its widely differing peoples and tribes are yet to find basis for national interests. The growth of nationalism and the subsequent emergence of political parties were based on tribal rather than national interests and, therefore, had no unifying effect on the peoples against the colonial master. Rather, it was the people themselves who were the main victims of the political power struggles which supposed to be aimed at removing foreign domination. The various nationalities in the three regions could hardly be expected to be loyal to the Nigerian nation state. Nigeria's major ethnic groups bickered until 1967 when it reached its crescendo as a result of the centre which would no longer hold, leading to the foiled attempt by the east to secede. Before the independence of the Nigeria, however, there was growth of nationalism and nationalist movements which were based on the agitation for the decolonization of the country. The politics of decolonization and of the first republic (1960-1966) involved essentially a struggle between the elite of the three large sub-nationalities (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) and for themselves. As Dudley (1982) puts it, "for the political elite, power was an end in itself and not a means to the realization of some greater 'good' for the community and whatever the instrumentalities were legitimate". He argued that there was no rule of game. The British tilted federal power to the north. Understandably, the southern politicians have not stopped talking about "northern domination", a phenomenon they could have tackled at the pre-independence constitutional conferences. Electoral campaigns and behavior became fraught with endemic problems which were often compounded by poor communication system.

In 1963, Nigeria's fourth region—the mid west region—came into being. It was carved out of the western region which was the smallest of the three regions and encompassed virtually all the non-Yoruba parts in the former western region. This creation can be seen as a response to the yearnings of the minorities in the old western region. However, it was, in fact, a calculated action designed to weaken the western regional party, the Action Group, and reduce its sphere of influence.

This was a politics of conspiracy at its best. If the creation of the Midwest region brought joy to the peoples of the new regions, it exacerbated tension between the Yorubas and the two other major nationalities. This had its negative impacts on the fledgling Nigeria nation state (Ikime, 2006). Furthermore, the 1964 federal elections which was the first to be conducted after independence revealed the fragility of the republic of Nigeria and intensified the ethnic differences of the people. Also the 1962/1963 census helped to sharpen the regional rivalries. The census produced returns which gave the north a state of emergency declared in the west due to the rigging of election there, which was followed by wide spread violence, and the crises over the elections of 1964 greatly weakened the bonds of trust among the peoples (Falola, 1991).

On October 1, 1964 in his independence anniversary broadcast, the president

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, asked if, four years after independence and a year after becoming a republic, Nigeria was still a group of tribes or a nation. In an uncompromising language, he described what seemed to him Nigeria's main present and very dangerous weakness. "Throughout the vast expanse of our country, a crop of evangelists have arisen, steeped in bigotry, sowing seeds of disunity, emphasizing our differences... "let it not be said of us that we struggled all these years to win independence for our people and when we had the chance to build heaven for them on earth, we made a colossal mess of our country because in our self materialism, we allowed our private prejudice and partial affection to distort our interests to our motherland" (Ojiako, 1985). Even Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the opposition at the time of Nigeria's independence stated: "Nigeria is not a nation: the word Nigeria is merely to distinguish those who live within Nigeria from those who do not"(en.wikipedia.org/.../Nigeria civil war).

1.2.4 The Cause of the Civil War

The factors identified here as remote causes could also be referred to as other historical factors responsible for Nigerian civil war. Apart from Britain's divisive indirect rule which fostered parochial and tribal loyalty at the expense of national integration, the British policy of creating Sabon Garis (strangers quarters) for Nigerian groups resident outside their cultural areas, particularly in the northern part of the country, had the same effect of promoting disunity and discord among Nigerian groups. There was also religious differences as was encouraged by British colonial officials — Islam versus Christianity, or Muslims versus Christians. Thus Nigerian's political problems sprang from the insensitive manner in which

the British took over, administered, and abandoned the government and people of Nigeria. This does not imply that British administrators did nothing good in Nigeria. Far from it. Many positive records stand to their credit, and it is clear that present day Nigeria owes certain achievements to the colonial development. Nevertheless, there was one evil that outlived British administration, namely, political non-advancement. When the British came, they forcibly rubber-stamped the political state of the ethnic groups of Nigeria, and upon their departure, the people resumed fighting for their political rights (Ademoyega, 1981).

It is noteworthy that the British did very well to promote the development of western education in the whole of Nigeria even though because of their exploitation of the religious or cultural variance in the Muslim northern Nigeria, the development of western education in that part of the country experienced a unique set back. Consequently, there is significant gap in the pace of advancement compared to the other parts of the country (Falola 1991). This came with implications. For instance, the north was excluded from the legislative council up till 1947. This did not augur well. It also was why when, in 1953, the proposition for self government for Nigeria in 1956 was brought up, the north was unprepared and rejected it. When the leaders of the AG and NCNC undertook to tour the north to campaign for self government in 1956, it led to a chain of events culminating in four days of rioting in Kano which resulted in hundreds of casualties including dozens of deaths.

This was the beginning of the shedding of Nigerian blood by Nigerians over their political differences. It would assume fearful and traumatic dimensions in 1965 (Falola, 1991). Also, the political parties formed by the Nigerian leaders and intellectuals compounded the problem as the years rolled by. The west under Chief Awolowo formed the Action Group, the east under Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe led the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon, and the northern emirs, wary of being sidelined by the southerners, formed the monolithic Northern People's Congress led by the Sarduana of Sokoto, Alhaji Ahmedu Bello (Tandon, 1969).

1.2.5 The Origin of the War

Before the advent of the military in Nigerian politics, there was a general belief that the military was a puritanical institution. They were perceived as capable of reducing the high level of corruption than the politicians. Latter events would bring disillusion. The military coup d'etat of January 15th 1966 brought Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo to power as the head of the military government. Although his regime received the goodwill of many Nigerians, he made the costly mistake of not putting the coup plotters (who were believed to

be Igbos) on trial and this proved disastrous (Falola, 1991). Perhaps his greatest mistake was Decree 34 of May 24th, 1966, which abrogated the federal structure. Nigeria was to become a unitary state in effect and regional civil services were scrapped, thus any civil servant could be posted to serve anywhere in the country. This infuriated the north, because it was feared that a unitary system would lead to southern dominion of the civil service even in the north, given the educational imbalance between the north and the south. The reaction was violent demonstrations directed at Igbo-speaking people in the north, some killed and their properties destroyed. While the rioting in the north was going on, certain army officers and men of northern extraction were planning how to topple the Ironsi regime. They struck on the July 29th 1966 which led to the death of Ironsi and other nine other military officers (all Igbo or easterners). The July revenge coup was also accompanied by renewed genocidal killings of Igbos and easterners in the northern region, thereby deepening the crisis (Ikime, 2006). Eventually Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon emerged as the new head of state. Among his first decisions was the abolition of the military government and the restoration of federal form of government. After the counter coup came the exodus of the Igbos which was partly induced by Ojukwu's call to Igbos all over Nigeria to return to the east. A cloud of uncertainty hung over the country. Every move made by the federal government, including the establishment of an ad-hoc constitutional conference in September 1966, was rendered ineffective by the military governor of eastern region, Lt. Colonel Ojukwu. The crisis now took the form of personality tussle between Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon and Lt. Col. Ojukwu. All efforts to bring them together to iron out their differences were in vain. Eventually a meeting was held in Aburi Ghana (Falola, 1991).

1.2.6 The Ghana Conference

One of the most remarkable attempts to resolve the conflict was the meeting of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) at Aburi, Ghana on January 4th 1967. Ghana's General Arthur Ankrah, attempted reconciliation by convening this meeting. After two days of lengthy and intensive discussions, agreement was reached. The highlights: immediate resumption of ad-hoc committee to work out a constant future for Nigeria payment of salaries until March 31st, 1967 of all staff and employees of government statutory corporations and others who were forced to leave their job as a result of the disturbances the setting up, in the meantime, of a committee to look into the problems of rehabilitation of displaced persons and the recovery of their property the repealing of all decrees which tended to centralize powers at the expense of regional autonomy in not later than January 21st, 1967. This would be followed by an

enactment of a decree before January 12th, to restore the regions to their previous position as it was before January 15th 1966 (Ojukwu, 1969).

In contradiction, on January 26th in Lagos, without any forewarning to the East, Gowon gave a press conference, where he point by point, rejected the four main points of the Aburi agreements (Forsyth, 1982). Early May, Gowon imposed economic blockade. It was the final straw. On May 26th 1967, Ojukwu converged 335 members of the eastern consultative assembly in Enugu. In a marathon address, he outlined the history of the crisis and asserted that the east was fully prepared to defend itself. The assembly took the hint, and on May 27th unanimously passed a resolution for Ojukwu to declare the sovereign republic of Biafra at an early practicable date.

1.2.7 The Secession

Within few hours after the announcement of the consultative assembly, Gowon immediately activated his own contingency plan. He assumed full powers, declared a state of emergency, abrogated Decree No. 8 and, most far-reaching of all, divided the country into 12 new states, abolishing once and for all the old regions. The north was carved up into six new states, the east into three and the west lost a slice of its southern section to join with the federal capital to form Lagos state. This move reduced the monolithic power of the majority tribes, gave the minorities a place and was, as John De St. Jorre (1972) put it, "the third coup". On May 30th, Ojukwu proclaimed to journalists and diplomats at the state house in Enugu that "the territory and region known as Eastern Nigeria, together with her continental and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title, the Republic of Biafra". (Falola, 1991). This act of secession, of course, made civil war in Nigeria inevitable. Thus the month of June was used by both the federal government and Biafra to prepare for war, which eventually broke out on July 6th 1967 (Falola, 1991). It would last two and a half years, cost nearly a million lives and plunge the West Africa nation into unparalleled disarray (John De St. Jorre, 1972). The federal slogan during the civil war was "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done".(en.wikipedia.org/./Nigeria civil war).

The Nigerian civil war which followed Biafran's secession was a gruesome one that lasted for thirty months. The daily dosage of starving children on European and American television screens heightened the sensitivity and sympathy of most Europeans and Americans for Biafra—a seemingly innocuous act of humanitarianism on their part (Obasanjo, 1980). Economic and commercial activities were paralyzed. People in rural areas who planted in

fear, occasionally were lucky to harvest crops and in some cases, never lived to harvest the fruits of their labour. Labour productivity was low, hunger and starvation took their tolls, and disease and malnutrition killed many people. Millions of Igbos living in all parts of Nigeria were forced to return home and abandoned their businesses leading to plundering of their assets. Civil servants and those in the private sector were displaced which severely affected their standard of living and that of their families and dependents. In fact, unemployment escalated to worrisome proportions. After the war, estimates of war casualties for Biafra were between one million and three million. The end of the fighting found more than three million Igbo refugees crowded into a 2,500-square-kilometer enclave. Reconstruction, helped by the oil money was swift. However, the old ethnic and religious tensions remained a constant feature of Nigerian politics. Accusations were made of Nigerian government officials diverting resources meant for reconstruction in the former Biafran areas to their ethnic area. The people in the oil-producing areas claimed they were being denied a fair share of oil revenue. Igbos who ran for their lives during the pogroms and war returned to find that their positions had been taken over, and when the war was over the government did not deem it fit to re-instate them. At the end of the war, Chief Awolowo, the initiator of "hunger as a legitimate instrument of warfare" was the federal commissioner for finance and he directed that all the old currencies (Nigeria and Biafra) should be paid into the bank for exchange with new currency notes. To the consternation of people, a decree called the banking obligation (Eastern states) decree 1970 was issued by the Gowon-led administration. The decree cancelled all bank deposits in the old Eastern region with the exception of Calabar between May 31st, 1967 and January 12th, 1970. No matter how much an individual had in the bank, a stipend of twenty pounds was all they got.

1.3 Methodology: The data used in the study was collected through meditative reading of secondary origins of the various events. In the lists include text books, journals and web sources. The methodological approach to the extracted historical data is not only objective and but also factual analysis. Some recourse is also made to the theory of war because of its relevance to the thematic preoccupation.

1.4 The Findings/Conclusion: While Lt. Col. Gowon was fighting to preserve the territorial integrity of Nigeria, the Biafrans were fighting for the survival of the Biafran people and nation, since they perceived that they were no longer secure in Nigeria. Infact the Nigerian civil war was a war of wills. Even if there had been no secession, there were bound to be

continuous internal crises in Nigeria. The killings in the north, particularly those of September 1966 and afterwards had understandably so enraged and embittered the Igbos that they were bent upon revenge again. (Akpan, 1976). This war lasted from July 1967 to January 1970, with the collapse of Biafra and a lot of lost lives and properties. The political consciousness of the people became polarized along ethnic lines. The civil war left behind trails of a corroded cultural and social society as values and norms which were hitherto dear became meaningless for most people. The British colonial policies and processes contributed to the wrong and ineffective foundation on which the Nigeria nation was built, leading to its quick collapse.

Major General Gowon had argued that the objectives of the Nigeria civil war were to crush the rebellion, to maintain the territorial integrity of Nigeria, to assert the ability of the black man to build strong, progressive and prosperous modern states and to ensure respect, dignity and equality in the comity of nations. Thus, he called on the Biafran delegation, — "Gentlemen, let us join hands to rebuild this country, where no men be oppressed". (Zdenek, 1972). But over the decades, the best that can be said of Gowon's statement is that the rebellion according to him was crushed and the territorial integrity of Nigeria was upheld. As for asserting the ability of the black man to build a strong progressive and prosperous states, those that look to Nigeria, do so in vain.

A widespread feeling in the country that political demands cannot be accommodated within the framework of the existing arrangement, the rejection of dialogue as a means to finding solutions to nagging problems, monumental corruption, insensitivity to the yearnings of the mass of people, total disillusionment with government at all levels and doubts about the disillusionment with government at all, reveal that lessons were not learnt. A civil war is a terrible thing, but if important lessons on group harmony, justice, equity and a sense of humaneness can emerge from it, one could argue that the agonies and losses were not entirely in vain.

1.5 Recommendation: This study will fix biased perspectives and information in the history of the Nigerian civil war by presenting authentic data on not just the chronology of events but the motivations and resultant implications. It is as well a robust reference point for scholars and citizens, especially those who did not experience the times, to have a panoramic view of Nigeria's age long problems. The analysis here is highly relevant to the context of other African countries with similar heterogeneous make up and colonial history. This will be

useful for comparative observation. Subsequent studies can take the comparative approach for the role of Britain in the pre-colonial and post-colonial era of other West African states. Lastly, there is a lot to be done with the findings in this study, especially for governance enthusiasts and stakeholders. Nigeria cannot continue to hold on to its grudge with Britain. Consensus must be had, one and for all, to decide how to get out of the yet-to-end existential crisis in its social life.

Difficult

Questions must be asked and answered as to whether staying together has advanced the aftermath of the civil war, since the Biafran grievances is still very much alive in the present generation (and likely future ones) of easterners.

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