National Integration in Nigeria and the Biafra Question: 
The Road Not Taken

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Abstract

This paper examines the Biafra question within the ambience of national integration efforts in Nigeria. The paper adopts the frustration-aggression as a theoretical framework. It is found that the quest for national integration in Nigeria can only be achieved if the Biafra question is resolved. This paper recommends that national interest should be put ahead of regional, there should be equity and fairness in the appointment of individuals into strategic positions in the country while merit should be the basis, and the establishment of South East Development Commission to boost developmental aspirations of the people of the former Eastern region and the creation of an additional state in the South eastern part of Nigeria to make it equal with other geo-political zones with six states each.

Keywords: National Integration, National Question, Biafra Question, Federalism, Ethnicity

Introduction

Fifty years after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1970-2020), questions are still being asked if the war has really ended as its impact is still being felt by generations born many years after the war. The Nigerian civil war also known as the Biafran war became one of the most divisive wars in the history of post-independence Africa (Murzik, 2020). It creates a huge division between the northern and southern Nigeria as a product of the imperialist scheme when they amalgamated the northern and southern protectorates for colonial administrative convenience. The northern and southern Nigeria existed as two distinct regions prior to the amalgamation. The northerners are mainly Muslims with a sizeable Christian population in places like Adamawa, Borno, Kaduna and Katsina while the majority of the southerners are mostly Christians, their value systems and worldviews also differ in great ways.

In Nigeria, as in most developing countries, politics is a game of promises without fulfillment, and given the limited available resources to the system, (The Cable, 2019). Certain individuals, groups and communities had their aspirations and expectations raised without the possibility of their being matched and they are the inhabitants or people of the South Eastern and South Southern part of Nigeria. After the Nigeria-Biafra war, the federal government under the leadership of General Yakubu Gowon approved the processes of integration through the three ‘Rs’ of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Many had expected that the people of the former eastern region would have been integrated into the national life, but, events which have been taking place in the country has showed that they were not and have not been properly integrated into the national life as a result of opportunities which have been absent in the region when compared to Nigerians of other extraction. Some major projects have been executed in other parts of...
Nigeria like the railway lines from Lagos to Kano, the Lagos- Ibadan Express project. (Premium Times, 2019) reported that in 2019 Zonal Intervention Projects, the North-West got N17.97 billion, the North-Central received N17.90 billion while the South-East and South-South received N14.85 and N15.14 billion respectively. For instance, the Igbo have not produced any president in Nigeria since Dr. Azikiwe acted as a ceremonial president during the first republic. The seeming exclusion of the zone from national politics gave rise to various groups of which some called for sovereign national conference while others asked for restructuring and a new set of people within the region are requesting of the independent state of Biafra of which they claimed will be a panacea to the challenges, aspirations and quests of the people of the former eastern region and citizens of the defunct Republic of Biafra. Various groups emerged towards its actualization of which the prominent ones are the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra, Biafra Zionist Movement and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra(MASSOB), etc. One can also argue that though there may be no just cause for the frequent demands by some groups in the former Biafran enclave for an independent Biafran State, and it is important to state that Biafra was made up of the South East and South South part of Nigeria who broke away from the Nigerian state on May 30, 1967 and fought a civil war with the Nigerian State between July 1967-January, 1970 (Achebe, 2012), but, it can be seen that since the war ended in 1970, strategic and sensitive positions are usually not given to the Igbo which may be as a result of lack of trust by the rest of the country till the emergence of President Goodluck Jonathan, who appointed Lt. General Ihejirika as the head of the Army for the first time since the war ended. Similarly, on the 13th of March, 2020, the Nigerian Senate approved a loan of $22.7 billion dollars for certain projects in the country but the South Eastern part of the country were excluded from the breakdown which made South Eastern Senators to question the rationale behind the exclusion of the zone in the projects; (Guardian News, 2020). Few months ago, the South Eastern members in the Senate proposed a bill called the South East Development Commission in the National Assembly but it was defeated. Similar efforts were made by the senators but the Bill is yet to materialize (Umoru, 2019). It is also believed that this disregard for the South East made it possible for the non-existence of functional Seaport in the East of the Niger. All the regions of the country have six states except the South East and North West which has only five and seven states respectively. These and other perceived form of injustices gave rise to the emergence of groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra(IPOB), Movement for the actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MOSSOB), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger-Delta (MEND), OhanezeIndigbo, among other groups who have risen to challenge the status-quo.

**National Life in Pre-Independence Nigeria**

Onyeoziri (2002:40) argues that:

>“the existence of multiple nationalities within the same nation-state tends to create problems for the stability of the state. The problems derives from two main sources: one, the national attraction which nationalities have for citizens who share their cultural identities tempts the citizens to develop more attachment or loyalty to their nationality groups than they would have for their nation-state. This near-automatic attraction for the nationalities can be weakened or strengthened by the attitude of the state authorities to these nationality groups where state treats these nationality groups with respect, justice and fairness, it stands a good chance of attracting their support and loyalty. But, where the state marginalizes the nationalities and disrespects them by
seeking to coerce their loyalty, the groups are more likely to feel estranged from the state, and therefore become a threat to the stability of the state.”

One can support the above assertion as one of the reasons why the defunct Republic of Biafra had existed. Nigeria had a functioning system prior to Independence when regions were in place. We initially had the Northern, Eastern and Western Region before the creation of the Mid-Western Region in 1963. During this time, regional premiers were in charge of the administration of the various regions in the country. In the North, we had the respected and revered Sir Alhaji Ahmadu, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was the Premier of the Eastern Region while Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the Premier of the Western Region and Chief Dennis Osadebe held sway as the Premier of the Mid-western Region.

The regions had good developmental plans and followed them fanatically. In fact, we can argue that some of the problems confronting the Nigerian state today were insignificant when compared to its enormity today as a result of the resolve, passion and dedication of the leaders of the various regions who were value-driven. For instance, there was healthy competition among the various regions. In the North, the mainstay of the economy was groundnut production and cotton which served as a tool of generating revenue for the region. It also led to the popular groundnut pyramid in Northern Nigeria as they were self-sufficient and generated required foreign exchange through exports. In the Western region, we had cocoa production as the major avenue of revenue generation which led to the popular cocoa house in Ibadan. It was the major way of generating revenue for the region and driving it, (Wahab, 2020). The people of the region were sustained by it. In the Eastern region, we had the Palm plantation which served as the major avenue of revenue generation and the regions were significantly sustained by it under the leadership of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Dr. Michael Okpara.

Similarly, there was healthy competition among the various regions. For example, in the Northern region, the Ahmadu Bello University was built under the leadership of Sir Ahmadu Bello, in the Western region, the Obafemi Awolowo University was built while in the Eastern part, the University of Nigeria Nsukka was built under the leadership of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. It is important to mention that these were pioneer universities. The leadership of that era was goal-driven, focused and value-orientated as the leaders of the regions strived to improve the lots of their people and ensure improved/high quality of living. This was taken a bit further in the Western Region when Chief Obafemi Awolowo approved free education at all levels in the region of which many generations after are still grateful to him for the opportunity it provided for them and gave the south-west an edge educationally in the country. We can call this era the period of progressive politics as service to the people was the major consideration unlike what is obtainable in the politics of today nationally. Prior to this era, we had nothing like IPOB, AREWA, OPC, etc. there was also little or no focused attention on oil and gas and allocation from the central government through the jointly held federation account as we have today.

The regions also promoted scholarship by sending their best students abroad for further studies. It was what led to the education of great minds like Mbonu Ojike, K.O. Mbadiwe, among other nationalists. It is also important to state that notable Igbo sons were Vice Chancellors in other parts of the country like Kenneth Dike and Eni-Njoku in the University of Ibadan and University of Lagos respectively, (Achebe, 2012)
Post January 1966 Decisions in Nigeria

The first military coup in Nigeria took place on January 15, 1966. It was led by military officers of Igbo extraction which led to the emergence of General JTU Aguiyi-Ironsi as the first military Head of Nigeria. Senior military officers of northern extraction and leading politicians like Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and others were killed in the coup. After the unification Decree by the military government, military officers of northern Nigeria felt aggrieved as a result of the coup of January 15, 1966 which they perceived as a one-sided and an Igbo coup. Consequently, the second coup of July 29, 1966 created problems between the Federal Government and the Eastern Regional government. Some of the causes of what later became known as the Nigeria-Biafra civil war include: the counter-coup of 1966 which led to the death of General Aguiyi-Ironsi, the claim of the governor of the Eastern Region that the appointment of General Yakubu Gowon as Head of State was wrong, the refusal of Ojukwu to recognize the directives of the federal government, the mass killing of Igbos in the North, the demand for confederalism by Colonel Ojukwu (Governor of Eastern Region), the secession of the former Eastern Region under Ojukwu saw the act of creation of states by decree without consultation as the last straw and declared the region to be the Independent State of Biafra”(Obasanjo, 2014, p.205).

Sequel to the above, it can be seen that General Olusegun Obasanjo (retired) who was a major player during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war agreed that the states were created without consulting constituted authorities in the region and this contributed greatly to the war that eventually broke out. He further stated that “while the Federal troops fired the first shot of the civil war on July 6, 1967, it was meant to be a sharp and short police action to crush rebellion and to reintegrate fully the rebel-held territory with the rest of the country” (Obasanjo, 2014, p.205) one can also deduce from the above that the hostility was started by the central government who could have explored other avenues towards peaceful resolution of the differences on both sides.

The Aburi accord which served as a veritable tool toward peaceful resolution of the differences could not be implemented as a result of the decision of general Gowon’s led government to back-down on confederal system of government which was agreed upon by both sides during the negotiation which was moderated by general Ankarh and the former Organization of African unity. Had it been the delegation of the Federal Government of Nigeria had agreed to the terms and the conditions of the Accord, perhaps, the war would have been averted as the Biafran side felt justified by their actions based on the popular slogan “on Aburi we stand” which was an indication of their willingness to comply with the dictates of the Aburi Accord had it altered the political equation and destroyed the fragile trust existing among the major ethnic groups. As a means of holding the country together in the last resort, twelve states were created from the existing four regions in May 1967 by the Federal Government. The former Eastern Region under Ojukwu saw the act of creation of states by decree without consultation as the last straw and declared the region to be the Independent State of Biafra”(Obasanjo, 2014, p.205).
been that the Nigerian side kept to the terms of the agreement. (Obasanjo, 2014, p.203)

(Obasanjo, 2014, p.204) further states that “the civil war was the single event that has the greatest on us and put the most significant imprint on our political, social, economic and military canvass”. In fact, it was estimated that about three million civilians were killed during the three years war, Falola and Heaton (2008, p.158)

**National Integration**

Though there is no generally acceptable definition of the term national integration, we shall consider the views of some scholars to aid our analysis. Though it has been seen generally as the awareness of a common identity among the citizens of a country, it shows further that though we belong to different caste, religions, and regions and speak different languages, we recognize the fact that we are all one.

(Coleman and Rosberg, 1964, p.9) sees national integration as the progressive reduction of cultural and regional tensions and discontinuities in the process of creating a homogeneous political community. Basically, they argue that for national integration to exist, harmonious living is very fundamental among the various strata of the society. There must be a sense of oneness among the inhabitants of the country thereby putting aside all ethnic, cultural, social, religious and political differences to achieve national cohesion. We can argue that this was visibly absent before the Nigerian-Biafra civil war as it was a perceived sense of injustice on the side of the Nigerian state that led to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra by Ojukwu. The killing of the Igbo men in the northern part of Nigeria immediately after the counter-coup and the burning of their properties and the inability of the Federal government to halt the killings made the Igbo insecure and hence the solution to their problem was sought (Ojukwu, 1989, p.174). Enaruna (2014) supports the above as he argues that national integration can be seen as the increasing promotion or emergence of peace through the breaking down of cultural and regional divides in the process of evolving a united state. He further posits that “a united country and people are in a better position to ably confront its crises of development, nationhood and stability.” Unity in diversity is very fundamental towards the genuine peace and harmony being desired in any modern state as political differences should not be an impediment when it concerns national interest, peace and stability.

(Ogunjenite, 1987, p.224) states that national integration relates to the building of nation-states out of disparate socio-economic, religious, ethnic and geographical elements. It can also be seen as efforts to weld together a plural society to enhance development but without necessarily jeopardizing ethnic identities. On his part, the former Biafran leader, Ojukwu sees national integration as active nation building which means forging out a nation out of our diverse ethnic groups. He also asserts that the failure to achieve this in respect of Nigeria that today, the result is that tribalism and ethnicity has become a potent source of friction, rather than diminish in the face of an emergent, virile and modern nation. (Ojukwu, 1989, p.174).

(Ojo, 2009, p.206) sees national integration as the process by which sub-national and particularistic identity with and loyalty to the state supersedes primordial loyalty”this is one of the challenges facing the Nigerian State as the forces primordial allegiances are holding the state down and if this is subdued if not defeated in national life of Nigerian State, the quest for national integration and genuine reconciliation is likely to be a mirage. We must overcome ethnic sentiments and regional biases to foster national unity and development thereby enhancing a strategic capacity for international competitiveness and possible regional hegemony.
National Question
(Igwe, 2002, p.284) argues that national question is exclusive to multi-cultural societies. He opined that national question is implicit in almost every political order especially since the rise of modern state system and class society. The issue of national question is most acute in the poor and underdeveloped societies of the third world especially Africa, where the main issues of life are still around the fundamentals, leading to often murderous competitions between ethnic groups, tribes, classes over the few available resources. The defeated, marginalized and in many other ways frustrated in these rivalries, often start by seeking a constitutional redress of the grievances, failing of which they may seek forms of self-determination sometimes violently, but, mostly through a variety of other peaceful methods such as sovereign national conference that would address the necessity of or otherwise of re-drawing boundaries or restructuring the polity along nationality lines. The issue of national question has led to the break-up of countries like Ethiopia-Eritrea, the former United Socialist Soviet Republic(USSR) and can lead to increased ethnic-based problems practically everywhere especially as was seen in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide where the Hutus led and ethnic cleansing against the Tutsi- the minority ethnic group. Unless the issues of national question are treated fundamentally, they may pose greater global challenges than we expected.

The Indigenous People of Biafra and Quest for Referendum
The Indigenous People of Biafra is a group that leads the call for Biafrans freedom from Nigeria. Its main aim is to restore an independent state of Biafra for the people of the old Eastern Region of Nigeria through a referendum. The group was founded in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, who has been in the forefront of self-determination of the Biafran people and also made claims that those who previously held the position as leaders of the Igbo race and called for equity in the distribution of resources and power had compromised and abandoned the struggle for the emancipation of the Igbo race as resurfaced the issue of independence of the Indigenous Biafran population from Nigeria. Kanu had accused the leader of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) Ralph Uwazurike of double standard and thereby was accused of betraying the struggle for a free and emancipated Biafra populace. (Akasike, 2020)

The IPOB is not a known violent organization as most terrorist nations are known but they were proscribed as one by the Nigerian government even as they have continued their agitation through various means like the Radio Biafra, protests and other tools of propaganda. They have called for a peaceful settlement of their grievances through a referendum in the Nigerian States that were part of old Eastern Region. IPOB claims that Biafrans are marginalized by the federal government through lack of equitable resource distribution, poor investment, and an unfair heavily militarized presence in the region. It will be recalled that Biafra had existed previously as the Independent State of Biafra under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu for three years between 1967-1970 which led to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war that ultimately led to the death of about 3.5 million civilian population which was caused primarily by starvation on the civilian population of Biafra.

Nigeria and the Question of Geo-political Integration
(Ikejiani, 2000, p.2) argues that “the main political problem of Nigeria is one of how to ensure harmonious cooperation between widely different cultures. It is still this problem that challenges the very existence of Nigeria as a state”. One can deduce from the above that
the major problem faced by Nigeria fifty years after the civil war and sixty years after independence can be traced to ethnicity or tribal politics. It will be recalled that after the first military coup of January 15, 1966, the counter coup of July 29, 1966 was seen basically as retaliation to the killing of prominent northern leaders in the first coup led mainly by young Igbo officers who assassinated the likes of Alhaji Ahmadu Bello (Premier of the Northern Region), Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Prime Minister), some southern leaders like Chief S.L. Akintola, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, etc and led to the emergence of General JTU Aguiyi-Ironsi as the Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This was not acceptable to the northern military leadership who planned the counter-coup that led to the enthronement of Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the Head of State.

Nigeria had an appearance of unity in October 1960 when independence was granted but this unity was largely superficial. It was based perhaps on the need for the tribal parties to show some of Nigerian unity in their relations with the colonial power, but, this phantom of unity soon began to fade when the need for it disappeared. I was seriously optimistic and did not appreciate the strength of the tribalistic loyalties and animosities (Ikejiani 2000, p.4)

Ethnic Nationalism and National Integration

In as much as ethnic nationalism is not good for a socially, politically and culturally divergent people, efforts towards national cohesion and integration by the government should not be overlooked. (Anyebe, 2016, p.1) argues that ethnicity does not by itself produce conflict but, the subjective interpretation of it does. This has been one of the challenges facing the Nigerian state today. We can also support this position by stating that though ethnicity and ethnic politics exists, but, ethnicity does not have a voice and therefore cannot speak. It is only people that amplify it. People of the various groups now look up to their ethnic leaders for direction. (Abada, 2005) argues that the leadership which has emerged from the various ethnic groups have been found to be capable of organizing collective action. It is also important to note that the founding fathers of Nigeria knew that ethnic nationalism was a big threat to Nigerian nationalism hence they advocated on how the various ethnic categories would be supported. (Azikiwe, 1946) as cited in (Ikejiani, 2000, p.5) advocated for the creation of eight states from the twenty-four provinces based on ethnic uniqueness. In a similar vein, Awolowo (1947, p.54) as cited in (Ikejiani, 2000) supported the creation of states based on ethnicity. The last Colonial Governor-General of Nigeria, James Robertson even observed in his Memoir (Robertson, 1974, p.187)’’represented throughout the country as a whole tribalism remained strong. The political parties themselves largest tribal groups in the regions: The Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) was Fulani-Hausa dominated, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) in the East mainly Ibo, while in the West, the Action Group(AG) was predominantly Yoruba. (Achebe 2012, p.51) was of the opinion that “Nigerian independence came with a British governor general in command, and one might say, popular faith in genuine democracy was compromised from its birth”. Events that followed afterwards can give credence to the fact that the nation actually began on a faulty foundation. (Achebe 2012) also criticized the role played by northern leaders towards a united Nigeria when he said “the original idea of one Nigeria was pressed by the leaders and intellectuals from the Eastern Region. With all their shortcomings, they had this idea to build the country as one. The first to object were the Northerners, led by the Sarduana, who were followed closely by the Awolowo clique that had created the Action Group. The Northern
Peoples Congress of the Sarduanians was supposed to create a national party, yet it refused to change its name from Northern to Nigerian People’s Congress, even for the sake of appearances. It refused right up to the end of the civilian regime.

We therefore posit that the major challenge of the Nigerian State which is fundamental is the structure. The composition of the country, the allocation of values, indiscriminate creation of States at will without consulting with the people, the military dictatorships we have had, the expensive presidential system which Nigeria copied as against parliamentary system which we recommend and a part-time legislature which will not make the National Assembly so attractive as only competent, resourceful and skilled persons based on expertise and competence will be elected into our legislative houses. We also are of the view that the regional system which existed before Independence should also be considered as it will address some of the agitations by the various ethnic based organizations would have been addressed.

(Murzik, 2020) posits that Nigeria’s ethnic diversity with over 250 ethnic groups was a crucial factor in re-enforcing these regional divisions. Unification fused together culturally and ethically distinct regions, which would continue to influence political alignments after independence. We can deduce also that since democratic government began in Nigeria, it has been based on ethnic lines or alignments. Voting behavior is usually based on the direction that sectional leaders are going. For instance, when Alhaji Ahmadu Bello was in the Northern People’s Congress, majority of the northern populace or voters were in the NPC. Likewise, the voters in the South-East and South-West followed the leadership Dr. Azikiwe and Chief Awolowo in the NCNC and AG respectively without asking questions. This marked the politics of the era and it is still so till today. We also support the position of (Murzik, 2020) when he suggested that Nigeria must be commended for still being together as a strong nation despite the heinous war is a remarkable resilience of African nationhood despite the socio-economic, political and cultural diversities.

Conversely, in developed countries, the deprived citizens use pressure groups and lobby extensively as an instrument towards addressing societal problems which were glossed over by the government, (Mbagwu, 2004,p.211). The rise of numerous groups clamoring for equity, fairness, justice and transparent leadership portends danger for democratic consolidation. It is also important to state that the history of Nigeria before and since independence is the history of pervading ethnic animosities and antagonisms, (Ikejiani, 2000,p.16). The rise of militant ethnic organizations and the failure of the Nigerian State to be equitable to all, protect the lives and properties of its citizens and to give every citizen a sense of belonging has led to the recent upsurge in ethnic militias across the country. After several years of grumbling, petitioning and protesting against injustices, many ethnic groups have taken their destinies into their hands. Some of the grievances of these groups include unfair revenue sharing formula, political emasculation, the domination of the security outfits by a particular group, denial of appointments into offices, parastatals and agencies. The frustration-aggression theory which was used in data collection for analysis. (Gurr, 1934:24) as cited in Anifowoshe (1982) asserts that:

“the central premise of the frustration-aggression theory, put simply is that aggression is always the result of frustration. Given the requisite conditions, an individual, whose basic desires thwarted and who consequently experiences profound sense of dissatisfaction and anger is likely to react to his condition by directing aggressive
behaviour at what is perceived as being responsible for thwarting those desires or at a substitute. He further asserts that relative-deprivation represents a state of mind of discrepancy between what men seek and what is attainable. For Gurr, when we feel thwarted in an attempt to get something we want, we are likely to become angry and when we become angry, the most satisfying inherent response is to strike at the source of the frustration.

In conclusion, we can support the assertion that the causes of the Nigeria-Biafra crisis can therefore be located at the confluence of British colonial manipulation of ethnic differences and the failure of Nigerian nationalists to implement political arrangements that would foster political and economic equality. The war has ended but the scars remained in the public memory. The constant reference to the civil war as the source Nigeria's lack of unity and periodic instability as we do see in various parts of the country like the Igbo in the killing and sending the Hausas back to the north and the northerners also killing the Igbo in the north and dispossessing them of their properties suggests that the federal government won the war but lost the peace (Murzik 2020). Yet, if Nigeria succeeded in preventing the dismembering of its parts, it is due to the tenacity of all Nigerian leaders and people who worked hard to maintain the union against all odds.

Subsequent attempts at creation of states have led to where we are today. The road not taken has led to defective fundamental structure or framework, making the whole edifice defective. Once the edifice is defective, it will eventually topple or fall years after independence, Nigeria has not advanced one bit as a nation due to irrational determination of political social and economic policies as well as priorities all because of the road not taken.

**Recommendations**

Some of the remote and immediate causes of the Biafran agitation like resource control cum review of revenue sharing formula, appointments into key national positions and other considerations should be made for the people of the South East and South-South and if truly implemented, it will lead to a road which hitherto was not taken.

Similarly, the inability to put national interest above regional interest is one reason we are not seeing holistic advancement as it should be despite various efforts by previous administrations in promoting national integration. One can argue that some of the regional based groups in Nigeria can be attributed to the failure of leadership in addressing some of the socio-economic cum political concerns.

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