

BIAFRA: from colonial roots grew an inevitable modern tragedy...

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Today we are witnessing the gradual extermination of a nation. The war in Nigeria/Biafra has so far caused the deaths of nearly two million people, and as yet neither side has shown a willingness to give up. The federal government of Nigeria, confident of its own supreme military capacity, feels sure that in time it can defeat Biafra. But general Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, claims his people will fight to the last man rather than return to Nigeria.

Why are these former national brothers fighting? Why can no compromise be found? Where, if anywhere, does the blame lie?

The war started in the summer of 1967, a month after the eastern region of the Nigerian federation seceded and formally declared itself the republic of Biafra, under the continued leadership of its former regional military governor, Odumegwu Ojukwu. His people have since promoted him to the rank of general. But the secession actually began long before that, in a complicated series of tragic events.

Since the late 19th century, for the purpose of profit, the British had attempted to form a single administrative unit out of disparate lands and peoples in west Africa. The area did not even have a name until it was called Nigeria, or 'black land', by Lady Lugard, the wife of a Britisher who seized control in 1898. Boundaries were drawn when the British could expand no further and were obliged to sign a treaty with the French concerning their African colonial possessions.

With the cultural incompatibility of the conquered tribes, it took the British 60 years to institute a single administrative structure, complete with railroads, highways, postal service and telegraph lines. But they never succeeded in bringing the three tribal regions together politically. The three — north, west and east — were separated not only by land barriers and life styles, but by language. And the Islamic archconservative northern tribes wanted nothing to do with the south unless they could control it completely.

Before independence the southerners and especially the ibos, had migrated to the north, where their talents were needed in junior clerical and management positions in the British administration. The fear and bitterness this caused among the northerners erupted after the British departure in a series of bloody pogroms, culminating in 1966 with the massacre of nearly 30,000 ibos living in the north.

Meanwhile in the federal capital of Lagos, two coups took place in 1966 which were designed to change the structure and personnel of the government. The first in January 1966, was mounted by a group of junior military officers, about half of whom were easterners. The coup failed, but caused the deaths of the principal powerholders before being stopped by Major-General Ironsi.

Ironsi then asked for, and received, the support of the tribes of all three regions and their federal representatives, amid general rejoicing that the old regime was deposed. His government also received immediate recognition from all African states and all of the western powers including Great Britain. An Ibo himself, Ironsi was careful not to excite tensions by showing favor to the region of his birth. But although he was a good administrator, he was not an adept politician. He managed to upset the north by investigations of all existing political frameworks.

The general also appointed military governors to each region. Among these new appointments was Col. Ojukwu, the new eastern governor, a careful choice

since he had formerly been a commander of a northern garrison, and was a convinced federalist who had played no part in the January coup.

But Ironsi was headed for trouble. Attempting to reform the public service, and under strong pressure from all southern factions, he announced in May 1966, a "unification decree", which involved abolition of the regions and their conversion into groups of provinces with the same boundaries, governors and administrations. He noted that the change was completely provisional but the move was a political error as it in fact changed nothing, to the disappointment of the south. But it seemed to be portent of drastic changes to come — causing deep consternation in the north.



The move was reluctantly accepted publicly by northern leaders after careful explanations, but it kick off plans among northern junior officers and deposed politicians for a counter-coup. Planned jointly as a revenge on the ibos and as a movement towards either secession of complete control over Nigeria, the second coup followed roughly the same plan as the previous one, except that it was much more violent and directed in large part toward eliminating the ibos from the military in the north, west and Lagos. It was during this coup that Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon assumed power, after the death of Ironsi and for 18 days the flag of the republic of northern Nigeria flew over the federal army barracks outside Lagos.

It was now clear that the goal of the successful coup, besides revenge on the ibos, was the secession of the north, a course strongly supported by a vast majority of northerners, but shattering to the British, who continued to take pride as well as profit from the success of their prize African colony. Intense pressure was brought to bear on both Gowon and the northern leaders to remain in the federation at the price of forming the government as they saw fit, and this was agreed to. Thus a break-up of the unstable federation of Nigeria was temporarily averted, at the high price of outright domination of the north.

It was this point that Biafra was conceived, though it did not become a separate political entity until ten months later. Colonel Ojukwu, who had remained in power in the east refused to recognize Colonel Gowon's right to federal power, and urged that legitimately constituted supreme military council meet to name a successor to Ironsi. This was not done, and Ojukwu's course of action after this was two-fold.

His first job was to attend to drastic regional problems, and quell the growing clamour for secession, as the population was overwhelmed with grief and anger. An influx of refugees during the fall of 1966, after a massacre of 30,000 ibos in the north, west and Lagos spurred the migration of 1,800,000 dispersed ibos to their home. His second job was to do all in his power to change the course of events in the interests of both one Nigeria and his people's security and welfare.

It was an uphill battle. Gowon had become a pawn in the hands of the north and minority tribe civil servants, and the British high commission. For the first time in history, as northern leaders saw the opportunity for complete control, they advocated partition of Nigeria into twelve states while effectively emasculating the east.

Ojukwu called for a loose federation of semi-autonomous states when the supreme military council met in January 1967, at Aburi, Ghana. All agreed to Ojukwu's plan.

It made no difference. When Gowon returned the plan to his civil servants, they rewrote it in reverse, so that all of Ojukwu's demands were turned down. Furthermore, Gowon imposed a partial blockade on the east — cutting off all postal services and other means of communications as well as airtickets — and stated that the federal government could unilaterally declare a state of emergency in a region and send in federal troops.

It was this combination that led to secession, though Ojukwu did not act on his people's mandate until Gowon had in fact declared a state of emergency and simultaneously published another unilateral decree dividing Nigeria into twelve states. Thus the eastern region did not in fact become Biafra until Nigeria had denied its full integrity as a part of Nigeria. Or as the Biafrans have said they did not secede until they were kicked out.

The story after 30 May 1967 is well known. Both sides prepared for war, both under grave misconceptions. Gowon told his people and the world that he had undertaken "a short, surgical police action"; Ojukwu felt that if Biafra could resist for a few months the Nigerians would realize the folly of the war and go home, or negotiate. Tragically neither proved correct.

After two years and two months of fighting, Biafra has been reduced to about a fourth of its original area, and almost two million people have died. But reliable reports have it that since last year at this time, Biafra has expanded the circumference of its control by a third.

The most important, and possibly most tragic factor is related by Frederick Forsythe in his *Biafra Story*. "What has started as a belief was transmuted to total conviction: that they could never again live with Nigerians. From this stems the primordial political reality of the present situation. Biafra cannot be killed by anything short of the total eradication of the people who make her. For even under total occupation Biafra would sooner or later, with or without Ojukwu, rise up again."

In the face of such a painful evidence, what can we conclude? Where can we lay blame? Possibly with Gowon, possibly with Ojukwu.

But surely the principal outrage and blame must go to the producers and directors — to the governments of Britain and Russia, who have cynically fanned the flames of this conflict for their own purposes; and to France, which has readily taken up with Biafra against Britain, evidently in competition for oil concessions. And with the United States for her unequivocal, active support of Britain's terrible role. And of course Canada, for once again failing to do anything. And ourselves, if we fail to do something where governments have failed.

VARIATIONS

by john blaikie

The Left (whatever the hell that is)

"The capitalist imperialist warmongering swine and the economic and social structures they initiated and control must be destroyed. Well — at least the structures."

"What'll we do?"

"One thing — let's liberate women."

"What does that mean?"

"They must be given opportunity for equal participation in the capitalist system."

"I thought we were going to destroy the capitalist system."

"That comes later."

"We love everybody regardless of race, colour, or creed. We even love cops and soldiers and corrupt governments and engineers with red jackets and the stupid mindless people who go to football games to watch other people mangle each other — but we laugh at them a little bit."

Politics: "There's a war between Nigeria and Biafra. That's a place in Africa. It seems that Biafra is blockaded and millions of people are starving to death."

"What'll we do?"

"Let's fly food to the people that are starving."

"Are you sure we can do that?"

"In Africa there's this guy Smith who's practicing discrimination against black Rhodesians."

"What'll we do?"

"Let's quit trading with them. We'll destroy their economy. They'll have to start rationing and then the bastard'll . . ."

"Wait a minute. Say we don't trade with them and they have to start rationing things like oil and steel and they can't harvest their crops — whatever the hell they grow over there — and they run short of food and . . ."

"I see your point. We can't be sure we're going to get the goddamned bigoted whites."

"The SRC decided not to send \$1,000 to Canairelief. They think the money could be better spent on problems closer to home."

"Hey, that's great. The food here's the shits."