

INTERROGATING THE INVOLVEMENT OF AFRICAN STATES DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR 1967-1970

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian civil war lasted for about three agonizing years (from 6 July 1967 to 12 January 1970). Countless numbers of lives were lost on both sides of the war and there were mass destruction of properties. The war attracted international attention due to the desire of both the Biafran regime and the federal military government of Nigeria to secure diplomatic support as well as military assistance from the outside world and due partly to the individual reasons various countries of the world had for their involvement in the war. The focus of this study is to interrogate the involvement of African states during the Nigerian civil war. This is to find out what propelled the African states to declare support for either the federal military government of Nigeria or the Biafran regime, the nature and dimension of such involvement and to analyze the implications of such involvement. While it is argued that the activities of the African states that supported the Biafran regime in combination with other external influences, contributed to the prolongation of the war, there were also certain internal forces at work in Nigeria which also contributed to the prolongation of the war.

Keywords: Involvement, African states, civil war, military assistance, Biafran regime.

INTRODUCTION:

The recurrent theme in Nigeria's international politics is that Nigeria is destined to play a dominant role on the African continent. One is therefore often reminded that 'Africa remains the centre-piece of Nigeria's foreign policy'. But the question might be raised as to what unique characteristics make this pre-eminent status inevitable for Nigeria. Political observers often point to the importance of the country in terms of population, geographical space and the abundance of natural resources. According to Aluko (1981) with a population of about eighty million, (as at 1981), Nigeria had about 20% of the total African population. Nigeria, therefore possessed an immense supply of human resources as well as a high market potential. In fact, it has the fastest growing market in Africa (Aluko, 1981). "With a military strength of about 250,000 men, she also has the largest number of men in the armed forces. Although the number is being reduced, it is also possible to regard it as the strongest force in Africa as efforts are being heightened to improve its quality". (Aluko, 1981: 33).

Nigeria's high-level manpower and the size of the population coupled with her economic advantage are indicators of a leadership potential. Another significant factor was the exploitation of crude oil which incidentally has acquired a prominent position in world politics since the 1970s even till now. It is against such a background that Alhaji Balewa, Nigeria's First Prime Minister declared on the eve of independence that "As the country of the African continent having by far the largest population, we shall inevitably occupy an important position from the moment we become independent... I am confident that Nigeria will prove to be a stabilizing force in Africa" (Balewa, 1964). In fact, Nigeria has portrayed an enviable image on the international scene after independence.

Nigeria made an exemplary contribution to the United Nations Peace Keeping Force in Congo during the first Congo crisis (Agbi, 1986). Indeed the entire United Nations Force in the Congo was commanded by a Nigerian Major General named J.T.U. AguiyiIronsi. It also lent a battalion of troops to Tanzania in 1964 while that country's army was being re-organized.

Furthermore, Nigeria had been one of the largest contributors to the Organization of African Unity's (O.A.U.'s) freedom fighter funds and was therefore one of the heaviest benefactors of liberation movements like FRELIMO in Mozambique, the PAIGC in Guinea Bissau, the MPLA in Angola, the ANC in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) and a host of others (Aluko, 1981).

Finally, Nigeria had also used various fora like the United Nations, Commonwealth Prime-Ministers meetings, Non-alignment meetings and inter-governmental dialogues to canvass support for the freedom fighters. Whatever Nigeria's weaknesses, it was a good neighbour whose influence in the world was beneficial and the disintegration of such a country could not fail to have repercussions all over Africa.

AFRICAN STATES:

Most of the African states exhibited the attitude that the disintegration of Nigeria could not fail to have repercussions all over Africa when the war broke out on July 6, 1967. These African nations believed that secession and balkanization had been the curse of Africa for a long time. As a matter of political realism, after independence, African governments were virtually unanimous in agreeing that respect for existing European – delineated boundaries should be a guiding principle in inter-African relations. It was felt that any attempt to redraw them could plunge these states into internecine conflicts. "However overtime, the principle of respect for the geographical status quo is expected to proscribe not only irredentist demands at the level of inter-state relations, but also secessionist attempts by purely domestic groups"(Kamanu, 1974). Not surprisingly, therefore, the majority of the African states backed the federal military government of Nigeria during the civil war.

The support for the federal military government of Nigeria (by most African states) was justified by the argument that the break-up of Nigeria would spell the break-up of every other African state. According to Cervenka (1975), since the boundaries of these states are all artificial and as they contain different tribal groups that have often been in conflict in the past, it was argued that secession of one tribal group in Nigeria would encourage the Somalis in Ethiopia and Kenya, the Ashanti in Ghana, the Baluba in Congo, the Ewes in Dahomey, Togo and Ghana and so on to make similar attempts (Cervenka, 1975).

In Africa, there are strong feelings about secession. For loosely united states, some still economically and politically unstable, to admit the validity of Biafra's cause would have given rise to trouble and reopened the disputes on the definition of boundaries and the regrouping of ethnic and tribal groups. This eventuality would have multiplied the difficulties of the continent and jeopardized its economic development (Cervenka, 1975).

However, apart from the above argument, several African States had individual reasons for the stand they took in the Nigerian war. As Cronje (1977) has indicated there were links between Islam and the support given to Nigeria by some African States. Arab support was invaluable to the Nigerians both materially and diplomatically. Egypt supplied pilots and technicians for the air force. Sudan and Libya who are traditional users of British weaponry, sold to Nigeria some of the equipment which Britain refused to provide (Jorre, 1972). Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia also supported Nigeria. Niger's support for the federal government was perhaps dictated largely by its economic dependence on Nigeria (Cervenka, 1977). This is because for land-locked Niger, the Nigerian railway was vital for getting access to the sea. Similarly for landlocked Chad, some of her external trade is carried through Nigerian ports (Ajibola, 1978).

Ethiopia's stand on the Nigerian crisis was severely political. This is because for Ethiopia according to Agbi (1986), there was a greater need to see secession crushed as at the time of the Nigerian crisis, Ethiopia was also resisting the Eritrean secessionists.

Again, Aluko(1977) has indicated that internal political pressures contributed to the stand of some African States. For instance, in the case of Senegal, it was the pressure of the leaders of a powerful religious brotherhood, the Marabouts, on whom President Senghor had been largely dependent for his political survival that held him back from recognizing the Biafran regime in 1969.

Finally, Ghana's role and that of Kenya's towards the Nigerian war could be classified as neutral. Both countries believed that awkward aid or ill-timed action might serve to facilitate intervention of United Nations or some other third party (Uku, 1978, Aluko, 1976). Besides, Ghana has been noted for interfering in the internal affairs of other African States under Nkrumah. For instance, according to Gardiner (1965) and West Africa (23/05/59) during the times of preparation for internal self-government in the Cameroons, the *Union des populations du Cameroun* (UPC) which was a radical anti-colonial party was banned in the Cameroons in 1955 but continued to receive diplomatic and military assistance from Ghana and Guinea even after 1960, with the goal of overthrowing the pro-French Ahidjo regime.

It was the fear of this 'subversion from outside' that has made African leaders to insert the clause of non-interference in the internal affairs of member-states into the O.A.U. charter. Therefore the new regime of General Ankrah was not trying to repeat the mistakes of its predecessors. The policy of support for the federal government of Nigeria by most African states was staunchly backed by the O.A.U. which frowned at succession in Africa. The O.A.U. made some frantic efforts at settling the Nigerian crisis. For instance, it set up a consultative mission to this effect during the O.A.U. summit meeting in Kinshasha in September, 1967. There were also peace negotiations at Niamey (July, 1968), Addis Ababa (August-September, 1968), Algiers (September, 1968) and some other places (Cervenka, 1975).

However, "all these efforts turned out to be exercises in sheer futility, as the O.A.U. could not take any concrete action apart from resorting to the diplomacy of persuasion which failed" (Akinbi, 2012: 294); and given the non-interference provision of its charter which has been seen as preventing any active mediatory role for the organization in internal conflicts (Kamanu, 1974). For instance, the OAU's charter specifically prevents it from interfering in the internal affairs of member countries and its principal article emphasizes the respect for the territorial boundaries (as defined by colonial powers) of member states (Cervenka, 1969).

"However, it is germane to point out the O.A.U. situation was compounded by the irreconcilable position of Nigeria and Biafra during the war, while the recognition of Biafra by four African states basically did not help the situation either" (Akinbi, 2012: 297).

THE SUPPORTERS OF THE BIAFRAN REGIME:

Four African nations-Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia – supported Biafra, and in addition, officially recognized the enclave as a sovereign State-Tanzania on April 13, 1968, Gabon on May 8, 1968, Ivory Coast on May 14, 1968 and Zambia on May 20, 1968 (Uku, 1978). Many writers like Uku (1978), Uwechue, (1971) and Jorre (1972) argued about the Nigerian civil war that the motivational basis of the recognition of Biafra by the four African states was humanitarianism-their sympathy for the enormous civilian suffering caused by the war (in Biafra). Though it is true that there were many reported cases of starvation and other forms of civilian suffering, Akinbi (1991) does not share the above contention. This premise is anchored on the ground that humanitarianism was merely presented by those countries as a façade to cover up their ulterior motives– of preferring a divided Nigeria. According to Hartman (1968), Keeton and Swarzenberger (1964), the decisive factor in international relations is power – politics and not humanitarianism. This stand can be backed by some reasons.

Firstly, there is no doubt that a united Nigeria constitutes a formidable political and economic unit. It was this fact that had at first aroused the misgivings, and even fears, of the smaller West African and Francophone States at the prospect of Nigerian independence (Gowon, 1984). The Ivory Coast in particular and France were both anxious about the growing economic strength of Nigeria and were not averse to exploit her internal tensions (Gowon, 1984). President de Gaulle of France harboured the fear that Nigeria in view of its potential might upset the balance of power in the region to the detriment of French influence, by presenting a strong pole of attraction to the impoverished Francophone states around it. After several meetings with Houphouet Boigny in Paris, Albert Bongo of Gabon also declared in May 1968 that “it was utopian to believe that Nigeria with its fifty million inhabitants could remain in its present form” (Le Monde, 11/05/1968). It came as little surprise then that both Gabon and Ivory Coast provided the outlets through which French arms poured into Biafra, since they shared similar misgivings about Nigeria and wanted its disintegration. Even in July, 1968, Sekou Toure of Guinea openly criticized the action of the four African States that recognized Biafra, maintaining that, but for the discovery of oil in Eastern Nigeria, “there would not be so many ready to talk of humanitarian problems in Nigeria, when those same people could be apparently, and with a good conscience, remain silent over Vietnam” (Le Monde, 10/09/1968). It is apposite to also indicate that even after the war, some of the Francophone states, notably Ivory-Coast and Senegal, still viewed Nigeria with suspicion as exemplified in the great reluctance with which the CEAO states entered into ECOWAS in 1975 (Gowon, 1984).

Smock (1979) reported that Ivory Coast and Tanzania contributed some amount to relief efforts at Biafra, and recognized the enclave as an independent nation. Humanitarian considerations were not sufficient basis for their action. For instance, other countries that contributed immensely to the relief like U.S.A., Britain, West Germany and even Ethiopia and Liberia among others did not extend recognition to Biafra on the grounds of humanitarianism. Clearly Ivory Coast and Tanzania were acting in line with what they perceived as their national interest.

Apart from the fact that the Ivory Coast and Gabon provided channels through which French arms poured into Biafra, it was also known that Tanzania helped the Biafrans marginally in purchasing Von Ronsen’s ‘minicon’ fighter planes and that Zambia gave Ojukwu two DC 3 transport aircrafts (Jorre, 1972). This action could not reduce the suffering of the Biafrans; it only escalated the crisis further.

Finally, it has been shown by some writers such as Jorre (1972), Cronje (1977), that Ivory Coast and Gabon dislike large federations. They wrote that just as Ivory Coast was very instrumental in the breaking-up of the old French West African Federation, so as Gabon in the destruction of the French Equatorial Federation at independence. Some statements even made by these two Countries supported this stand. For instance in 1968, while the Nigerian war was still raging on, the Gabonese Council of Ministers remarked that “Federal groupings inherited from colonization or imposed by force have not shown from experience to be viable...” (Markpress, 10/05/1968:1). President Bongo himself even stated at Paris Conference that “... large political federations are not viable in Africa. They are only possible in economic terms.” (Africa Research Bulletin, 10/05/1968:1073). Thus in view of the fact that Nigeria too is a large federation, these two countries would definitely see the rationale in backing

Biafra, so that the federation would disintegrate. The question here was not so much the size of Nigeria as its bargaining power as a potential associate of the common market.

Thus from the above points, it is clear that four states that recognized Biafra only issued words that suggested altruism in order to cover up the fact that they had any vested interest in the disintegration of Nigeria (Akinbi, 1991). For instance, Houphouët Boigny of Ivory Coast declared that “what we want is peace. This should be our one guiding light. The Biafra problem is a human rather than a political one” (The African Scholar, 1968). And Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia declared that: “The heritage of bitterness stemming from this horrifying war will make it impossible to create any basis of political unity between Biafra and Nigeria” (Africa Research Bulletin, 1968).

The recognition by the four had a momentous impact on the course of events as it had contributed to the prolongation of the war in one way or the other (Akinbi, 1991). In the first place, and as already indicated above, Libreville and Abidjan (capitals of Gabon and Ivory Coast) provided the outlets through which French weapons poured into Biafra, which kept the Biafrans going. Libreville was particularly significant in helping Biafra to survive after the fall of Uli (the last major town and airport), which ended any direct communication between Biafra and the outside world except for the precarious air bridge to Uli at night.

Secondly, the recognition by the four provided Biafra with open diplomatic support and credentials. Again, it boosted Biafran morale as it suddenly injected new hope into Biafra just when everything seemed without hope in view of the military reverses they had suffered. Thus Ojukwu was expecting more recognition and military assistance which never came.

Furthermore, the recognition paved the way for non-African involvement which the previous lack of public support for Biafra had not wholly excluded but certainly drastically inhibited (Jorre, 1972). The recognition was meant to persuade Lagos to a cease-fire and adopt a more flexible negotiating position, and to warn Britain and the Soviet Union that their military support for the federal side was not making a very favourable impression throughout Africa. However, reverse was the case, as the war did not stop and British and other arms supplies to Lagos began a sharp climb in May 1968 (Cronje, 1977).

More importantly, the recognition strengthened Biafra's claim to independent existence and its demand to be treated, on an equal basis with the federal government at the peace talks. (Cervenka, 1975). This made Biafra intransigent, consequently leading to the failure of all attempts to resolve the conflict through compromise and thereby contributing to the prolongation of the war.

To corroborate the above argument that the recognition of Biafra by the four African States prolonged the war, a Biafran Diplomat, Ralph Uwechue (1971:89) wrote:

It is a lamentable irony that rather than bring the war to an end and so terminate the sufferings of the Biafran masses, recognition provoked an intensification of both. Like most acts born of reaction, it produced unexpected counter-reactions. Not only did it encourage the hawks on the Biafran side to unnecessary intransigence as far as peace negotiations are concerned, it also provoked in the federal military government an increased determination to make nonsense by military means of whatever gains, Biafra may have scored diplomatically.

SOUTH AFRICA AND RHODESIA AND THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR:

Nigeria's relations with South Africa and Rhodesia before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war were far from being friendly. Nigeria was one of those who hounded South Africa out of the Commonwealth and the Economic Commission for Africa, while the very Commonwealth Conference which Balewa chaired just before his death, was convened to discuss ways of terminating the unilateral declaration of independence by the illegal Rhodesian regime (Akinyemi, 1977).

Secondly, as indicated above, Nigeria being the biggest contributor to the funds of the O.A.U. liberation committee was the heaviest benefactor of those committed to a violent overthrow of the political systems in both South Africa and Rhodesia.

Finally, in the world press, Nigeria was presented as the answer to South African and Rhodesian charges that Black Africa was incapable and not ready for self-government. (Akinyemi, 1977). Because of these factors, it was hardly a surprise that South Africa and Rhodesia backed the Biafran regime during the Nigerian civil war.

Their support stemmed from obvious motives. By helping to enkindle a civil war in Africa's most populous and potentially strongest nation, those white supremacist governments undermined African unity, weakened the African liberation movements against themselves and nourished their own propaganda message portraying Black Africa's congenital and incurable instability.

It has been indicated that the Rhodesian government was the source of the rockets for Biafran B-26 bombers and other weapons and that South Africa was supplying arms to Biafra during the war (Jorre, 1972). Even then, Jorre (1972) indicated that Rhodesian and South African aid was limited and was not enough to ensure victory for the Biafrans thereby contributing to the prolongation of the war. Perhaps the reasons for this were because of distance and the fear of exposure as the O.A.U. was dead set against South Africa and Rhodesia.

It has also been alleged and proved that there were South African and Rhodesian mercenaries on both sides of the Nigerian war (Jorre, 1972). On the federal side, they were mainly pilots, while in Biafra they included both airmen and soldiers. The appearance of South Africans among the mercenaries especially on the federal side has caused some surprise in view of apartheid. However, it is note-worthy that they were recruited on a strictly commercial basis to train Nigerians. The help Biafra received from South Africa and Rhodesia coupled with the Portuguese connection cost the Biafrans a great deal of African goodwill. Thus, the interplay of all these developments coupled with others far from quickly ending the Nigerian crisis, had only contributed to its prolongation.

INTERNAL FORCES AT WORK IN NIGERIA:

It is also germane to stress that apart from external influences, there were certain internal forces at work in Nigeria which also contributed to the prolongation to the war. For instance, the sheer determination of the Biafrans to survive was one factor. Biafrans believed that they were fighting a just cause. One of the things which hardened their determination was the use of air raids by the federal side – for the greater part of the war (Akpan, 1971). It was not until the last few months of the war that they relented somewhat in the bombing of civilian populations and concentrated on the war fronts and military targets. As a matter of fact, markets, schools, churches, hospitals, refugee camps, wherever the pilots could discern any large concentration of people – were the targets of the federal war planes. It was these indiscriminate and mass killing of helpless people, women and children, the sick and the maimed that made the majority of the people to come to accept the propaganda of “genocide”, which no assurances from the federal side could mitigate. According to Akpan (1971), because of the raids, mothers decided to send their sons to fight, and girls to help in whatever ways they could. Those with money surrendered as much as they could, whether in local or foreign currency for the government to use in buying air crafts and weapons. It was the activities of the federal war planes which won most sympathy in the world for Biafra and which also brought in Count Von Rosen, a humanitarian pilot flying in relief into the secessionist area (Akpan, 1971).

Then came the effects of the federal blockade. Like air raids, the federal blockade had a paradoxical effect on the people and their morale. It brought the effects of the war to every single individual resident in Biafra. It was used to convince the people that the aim was to kill everyone without exception – a belief intensified when the federal government tried to stop relief flights into Biafra (Akpan, 1971).

CONCLUSION:

The study has examined the involvement of African states in the Nigerian civil war during the period 1967 to 1970. It has analyzed factors that propelled the African States to declare support for either the federal government of Nigeria or the Biafran regime. The nature and dimension of such involvement as well as its implications were also examined. While the activities of the African States especially those

that supported Biafra, in combination with other external influences, contributed to the prolongation of the war, there were also certain internal forces at work in Nigeria which also contributed to the prolongation of the war.

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