

## **Ethnic Resentment, Tension and the Nigeria – Biafra War: A Theoretical Approach**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the role of ethnic resentment and tensions in the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970). The study explores how deep-seated ethnic divisions, fueled by historical grievances, political marginalization, and competition over resources, led to the outbreak and escalation of the war. The objectives of the study are to investigate the evolution of ethnic resentment in Nigeria, the role it played in course of the war, and its consequence on nationhood. A descriptive methodology was employed and primary and secondary sources were consulted to assess the socio-political and economic factors underlying ethnic tensions. The study also integrates Kenneth Waltz's levels of analysis to evaluate the interplay of individual decisions, national dynamics, and sub-national influences on the conflict. Findings reveal that the colonial legacy of arbitrary boundaries and preferential treatment of certain ethnic groups laid the foundation for resentment. Post-independence political and economic policies encouraged these divisions, with the Igbo-led secessionist movement showing deep frustrations over perceived marginalization. Furthermore, external interventions and ideological politics (Cold War) complicated the efforts at peaceful resolution and reconciliation. The study concludes that ethnic tension and resentment in Nigeria remains an equipotent force which need a deliberate policies to foster inclusivity through equitable distribution of resources. Besides, the lessons of the Nigeria-Biafra War will help to address contemporary ethnic tensions and also promote sustainable peace in Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

One untenable imprint which the colonial administrators left on the African continent was the carving out of boundaries that split territories inhabited by indigenous societies and consequently, the juxtaposition of different ethnic communities into a single central structure. For administrative reasons, the British colonial administrators created three regions that inherently explains the evolution of ethnic sentiments or simply put, 'ethno-genesis' and later 'ethno-tension.' The Eastern region was occupied by the Igbo, the Western region by the Yoruba

and the Northern region occupied by the Hausa/Fulani. Within this parochial colonial structure, ethnic tensions emerged between the unequally developed groups primarily in the 1950s. From the foregoing, one would not totally be wrong to argue that the British administration intentionally prevented the success of Nigerian nationalism. This is evident as she (Britain) instead promoted ethnic nationalism in a bid to gain more political power and keep influencing the affairs of the country.

It is worthy of note that amongst the federating units in Nigeria which comprises over 250 ethnic groups, the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo have always been at the front of national politics. This could be as a result of their greater numbers in population as well as their somewhat active involvement in successive governments since the independence of the country in 1960. Such domineering presence has always enervated other ethnic groups. These other ethnic groups who could be referred to as 'minorities' feel obliterated in the politics of the country, a situation that has promoted hatred and distrust thus, leaving them with no option than seeking for identity, which when denied, can trigger violent conflicts. Ironically, the Igbo can also be categorized as 'minority' among the three major ethnic groups.

With appropriate illustrations, the study seeks to adumbrate on the Nigeria-Biafra War, rationalizing that ethnic resentment and tension played a climacteric role in the outbreak of the war.

### **Clarification of Key Concepts**

The concepts that needs brief clarification for the purpose of this study are ethnic tension, ethnic resentment and ethnic conflict.

1. **Ethnic Tension:** This indicates the stressful relationships that arise between various ethnic groups because of resource competition and discrimination and historical conflicts. This study examines the tensions between the ethnic groups of Nigeria including Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani which led to the Nigeria-Biafra War while intensifying the distrust among various ethnic groups.
2. **Ethnic Resentment:** Ethnic resentment emerges as a strong sense of hostility which develops when one ethnic group feels excluded because of discrimination or discrimination or marginalization practices toward them. The work discusses the feelings of discrimination and political and economic rejection of the Igbo people that eventually led them to separate from Nigeria and start the Nigeria-Biafra War.
3. **Ethnic Conflict:** This arises from ethnic groups entering violent or non-violent confrontations to obtain control over resources and power while preserving dominance over culture. The term appears in this passage to describe the Nigeria-Biafra War which began as an ethnic conflict between groups before it expanded into an all-out battle to represent Nigerian societal problems of inequality and political alienation.

### **Evolution of Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria**

Categorically, for one to gain clarity on how ethnic tension and resentment resulted in series of conflicts in Nigeria, the topic under discourse would be explained in two phases - colonial and post-colonial rule.

The account of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonially influenced union which brought together different ethnic groups of the Northern and Southern provinces together into an entity called Nigeria in 1914. It should also be remembered that these ethnic groups were not consulted or informed regarding the proposed union and so, in a bid to keep them loyal even at the point of anger, the British imposed on them a policy which was not only so autocratic but also undemocratic as well. The strange policy was aimed at segregating the people, thereby hampering the peace and progress of the people in disguise of birthing a United State. The separate governments introduced in the North and South were created to maintain colonial influence on the Nigerian society and also weaken the people's potential for resistance.

Subsequently, the introduction of indirect rule in Nigeria by Frederick Lugard which mainly was for British administrative convenience ended up rekindling ethnic divisions in Nigeria. This policy created a wide gap among these ethnic groups. Lugard handpicked amateur traditional rulers to assist him in governing these provinces. However, these traditional rulers ended up corruptly exercising their powers over villages whom they exploited. This act of insensitivity on the part of the warrant chiefs subsequently gave rise to nepotism.

The segregation of the Nigerian colony, which was also reinforced by the colonial laws that limited the mobility of Christian Southerners to the Muslim Northerners, created a distinct settlement for non-indigenous citizens in the North, and even limited the purchase of land outside one's own region. With these, resentment rose to an increased height in the provinces as different ethnic groups nurtured grief, disloyalty and prejudice against one another. It would not be forgotten that while adequate developmental attention was paid to some part of the country, others were abandoned. This, of course, created inequality in the political cum infrastructural development between Northern and Southern Nigeria.

After Nigeria had gained the sovereign right to become independent, she witnessed some political changes, the foremost being the introduction of the three regions with the camouflage of ethnic colouration. The struggle for independence was taken over by the quest for ethnic supremacy. At this time, ethnic loyalties threatened the survival of both the East and the West while the North was split on religious grounds into Muslims and Christians. It was indeed a period when ethnic groups competed for political recognition and resources and this was in no way good for a nation that just gained independence. Also, there was incessant corruption in the polity, anarchy and insecurity that bedeviled the country at the time, resulting in the demise of the first republic.

Further, military intervention aided the Nigeria Biafra War of 1967-1970, when the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria felt deprived of security and social justice. They did not only threaten to secede, but also practically seceded from the Federation. This was owing to the fact that they felt aggrieved by the government's non-compliance with her own part of the social contract, which fundamentally was to provide the basic human need such as security, right to life and

religion, equality and citizenship autonomy and the like. Whenever, such needs which are quite ontological are denied, conflict often becomes imminent.

While the politicians tried to cope with the colonial legacy that lumped incompatible groups together into one country, the military staged coups (which to them, were a means to purge the polity of corruption and instability). By and large, the corruption and confusion that marked the military regimes, landed Nigeria into poverty, ethno-political and ethno-religious conflicts until 1999. It is said that the military intervened because they saw the civilian leaders as indecisive and incompetent, but the question remains: after they had controlled the affairs of the country from 1966 to 1999, were they able to make the polity better than they met it? What happened to poverty, corruption, abuse of human rights, among others? On the other hand, Nigerians in the South distrusted the military regime because they believed it was trying to stabilize a Hausa/Fulani hegemony in Nigeria. Subsequently, on June 12, 1993, Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba from South Western Nigeria, supposedly won Nigeria's presidential election, but his victory was revoked by the military regime of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. This went ahead to confirm the Southerners' belief of a Hausa/Fulani hegemony in Nigeria. In retaliation, Nigerians in the Southern part of the country began to form militant organizations to protest against unfair treatment and demanded for a democratically elected government. Also, when General Sani Abacha, a Muslim from the North ruled the country, Southerners increasingly feared political marginalization and thus, demanded for an end to the Hausa/Fulani domination of the political arena. This development signifies the weakness of the government and their inability to manage ethnic tension in the country.

Ethnic resentment, tension and conflict continued through the democratic transition. Violence continued to erupt as different ethnic groups requested for the political reorganization of the country in such a way that their interests would be protected. What is most perturbing is the religious dimension of ethnic competition for power and oil wealth in Nigeria.

The vast level of animosity that existed between the Igbo and her Hausa-Fulani counterparts can be traced back to the military coup of January 15, 1966 led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. The coup was viewed as an Igbo plot to dominate Nigeria and as well, stage her hegemony on the country. Conversely, it can be argued that even though the Igbo officers were in the majority of the coup plotters, there were also officers from other ethnic groups who joined too. Some of them include Major Ademoyega, Lieutenant Colonel Fajuyi, Sergeant Daramola, among others. The coup attracted a counter coup organized by Northern officers few months later (July 29, 1966). The countercoup was a direct retaliation of the January 15, 1966 event. And it led to the assassination of General AguiyiIronsi who was then, the Head of State. It was not only a countercoup, but also a well-organized plot to exterminate the Igbo people all over the country beginning from the North. Fearing that the Federal Government could no longer safeguard their life and property, on May 30, 1967, the Eastern region, with the Igbo as majority, declared her independence from Nigeria and it was against this background that the Nigeria-Biafra war broke out.

### **Causes of the Nigeria-Biafra War**

So many historians and scholars have written extensively on the causes of the Nigeria-Biafra War. While some wrote on the remote causes, others wrote on the immediate causes. Be that as it may, in the course of this study, we would consider applying Kenneth Waltz's levels of analysis of images. The theory will better explain the individual leadership choices together with the internal state factors of ethnic conflict, resource disputes and also the external Cold War political dynamics revealing how personal political factors connect to national forces and global affairs.

The first level of image argues that wars are often caused by the nature of a particular statesman and political leaders such as Napoleon, or by human nature more generally. The second level of image contends that wars are caused by the domestic makeup of states. A prime example that Waltz referred to was Lenin's theory of imperialism, which posits that the main cause of war is rooted in the need for capitalist states to continue to open up new markets in order to perpetuate their economic system at home. The third level of image posits that the cause of war is found at the systemic level, the anarchic structure of the international system is the root cause of the war. In this context, anarchy is not defined as a condition of chaos but rather one in which there is no sovereign body that governs the interaction between autonomous nation-states.

Applying this approach in the explanation of the causes of the Nigeria-Biafra War, the following should be examined.

### **The First Level of Image**

By January 1966, Nigeria had become a nation and not just a geographical expression, but the principle of Nigerian nationhood was yet to be tried and tested. It was this scenario (the test of nationhood) that causes a lot of disposition which eventually led to the outbreak of the civil war. The differences between Ojukwu's and Gowon's lines of action in the months ahead hinged very much on their different personalities. In other words, the clash of personalities, apart from that of interests and principles culminated into a war. Born on November 4, 1933, in Zungeru, in Northern Nigeria, to Sir Louis Odumegwu Ojukwu and Grace Oyibonanu, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu was privileged to be raised in an environment of affluence. He was educated in one of the leading schools in the nation, King's College, Lagos. Later he was sent to Epsom College, England and then on to Lincoln College, University of Oxford. When he returned to Nigeria after his studies in England, he joined the colonial armed forces known as the Queen's own Nigeria Regiment against the wish of his father, who wanted him to attend law school and join the family business in some capacity. Joining the army after he had attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, he rapidly rose through the military ranks. He was accorded a great deal of respect by his military colleagues, who admired his pedigree and education. Frederick Forsyth, Ojukwu's close friend, while explaining Ojukwu's personality maintained that *"he developed a private philosophy of total self-reliance, an unyielding internal sufficiency that requires no external support from others."*

With the foregoing, it is therefore clear that Ojukwu was a realist who believed in himself alone. He never gave up in achieving whatever he wanted at any time he deemed fit. He was stubborn, yet courageous and this trait explains the reason behind his collision with Nnamdi



Azikiwe, Michael Okpara, Okechukwu Ikejiani and even Yakubu Gowon. These men were concerned about Ojukwu's tendency towards introversion and independent decision making.

Further, it is worth noting that Ojukwu received a mixed reaction among the expatriate, mainly British population in Nigeria. Many admired him for his background, as well as his oratorical skills, and took great pride in the fact that he had been educated extensively in England. There is a story of how Ojukwu's professor at Oxford enjoyed taking a spin or two in his sports car while he was a student there. Others, in contrast, felt that Ojukwu was some sort of spoiled rich kind. This impression made it more difficult for him to be seen as a sympathetic figure in the Western media when the war broke out. It was also on this note that David Hunt, the British ambassador to Nigeria during the war, and the British journalist, John de St. Jorre believed Ojukwu looked down on Gowon since he felt that as an Oxford man, he was far better prepared for leadership. By and large, it is obvious that Ojukwu's personal views for good or bad, influenced the decisions he made throughout the war and during much of what many believed was an individual war and collision of ego with Gowon.

Yakubu Gowon on the other hand was born in October 1934, in Pankshin, Plateau State, under circumstances very different from those of his military colleagues like Ojukwu. His parents were Christian missionaries and his family spent several years during his early development in Zaria, Hausa land, where he received his early education and learnt to speak Hausa language fluently. Upon receiving his military training in Ghana and Eaton Hall in England before proceeding to the legendary officer training school in Sandhurst, he attended the Young Officers' College, Hythe Warminster in 1957, Staff College, Camberley England (1962), and Joint Services College, Latimer, England (1965). He returned to Nigeria later on and became a star officer.

He was a particular favourite of the queen and other members of Britain's royal family. He was a charismatic, eloquent and personable soldier who utilized his skills to impress General Aguiyi Ironsi who appointed him Chief of Army staff during his regime. It is instructive to note that the internal rivalries that existed between Gowon and Ojukwu and the pathological intra-ethnic dynamics that plagued the Nigerian military and wartime government contributed in no small amount to the war.

When Gowon became Nigeria's Head of State, there was a stiffing anger at the dissolution of the Nigerian State with all its ramifications. Both Gowon and Ojukwu were so obsessive to seeking positions of strength and avoid being seen as weaklings throughout the war. Both had pride in themselves. Also, it is noteworthy that Gowon's and Ojukwu's civilian advisers worsened the conflict by transforming themselves into sycophants as they massaged their ego.

### **The Second Level of Image**

Prior to 1966, ethnic tensions and resentment had already existed among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is against this background that Waltz's second level of analysis will be utilized to assess and understand the domestic set-up of the country. These ethnic groups, as a matter of interests, competed for political recognition and the control of power. This was consequent upon their domestic policies and programmes which were to dominate and rule. Bringing this closer to the 1960s especially the events of the first Nigerian coup, which was followed by a counter coup (when Northern officers carried out revenge on Igbo people, killing

both military officers and civilians in large numbers), the refusal of General Yakubu Gowon to respect and implement the agreement of Aburi, the creation of twelve new states by Gowon and the official declaration of the secession of the republic of Biafra by Ojukwu, one should be able to conclude that all these represented the domestic policies of the belligerent groups and thus, since these policies antagonized the interests of the groups, the war remained inevitable. To Nigeria, if Biafra was allowed to secede, then a number of other ethnic nationals within Nigeria would follow suit. The Nigerian government therefore had to hinder Biafra's secessionist plans to prevent the dissolution of Nigeria, and Biafra, on the other hand, needed to leave the Federation in order to be free.

### **The Third Level of Image**

At the systemic level as proposed by Waltz, it should be noted that the selfish interference of the great powers such as Britain, France, Soviet Union, Portugal, China, among others led to great despair and a prolongation of the tragedy that wrecked the war. It could be argued that the British official response to the conflict was more humanitarian based on the premise that it was her former colony. This is evident as Michael Lipman's report in 1998 uncovers a far more distrustful attitude.

The report was also supported by a Commonwealth office briefing documents to the Prime Minister which reads thus: *"The sole immediate British interest is to the Nigerian economy back to a condition in which our substantial trade and investment can be further developed."*

Also, the BBC's Rock fountain in a story on Monday, January 3, called "Secret Papers Reveal Biafra Intrigue," confirms that oil interests and competition among Britain, France and the United States played a far more important role than the "United Nigeria" position. On July 31, 1968, French council of ministers released a statement of approbation in support of Biafra, though it fell short of a full recognition of the secessionist republic:

The Government of France considered the bloodshed and suffering endured for over a year by the population of Biafra as a demonstration of their will to assert themselves as a people. Faithful to its principles, the French Government therefore considered that the present conflict should be solved on the basis of the right of people to self-determination and should include the setting in motion of appropriate international procedures. However, Paris wanted the French Oil Company ELF Aquitaine (which had a smaller market share Nigeria's oil industry) to have a greater footprint in the African region consistent with Jacques Foccart's vision of French dominance.

The Portuguese did not openly back one side over the other during the conflict. The Biafra relationship with Portugal was a quiet one as they allowed Biafran planes to land in the Portuguese territory of Sao Tome. The Chinese also joined in the contest even though they came late. On the side of the Biafran, reports of Chinese technical and military assistance were cited.

### **Effect of the Nigeria-Biafra War**

The war cost the Igbo people a great deal in regards to casualties, money and properties. It has been estimated that about three million people may have died due to the conflict, most from hunger and diseases which were used as strategies against the Igbo people by the Nigerian forces. It is on record that more than five hundred thousand people died from the famine

imposed deliberately through blockade throughout the war. Also, thousands of people starved to death everyday as the war progressed. The international committee of the Red Cross in September 1968 estimated eight thousand to ten thousand deaths from starvation each day.

The war resulted in the continuous feelings of victimization and marginalization as well as the obvious demonstration of ethnic resentment among Nigerians. The sentiments of the war have ended up dividing the country the more as no Igbo group would agree to, on a clear conscience, relate with the Hausa/ Fulani group without recourse to tribal grudges which arise as a result of reflections on the events of the war as they even at present, feel marginalized in the polity. This notion is being passed on to their children, who live with it. What this does is that it further creates a sense of division and hatred in young minds and this dampens any thoughts of future progress the country intends making. In addition, minorities in Biafra also suffered atrocities in the hands of those fighting on both sides of the conflict.

The Igbo who ran for their lives during the war returned to find out that their positions had been taken when the war was over, the government did not reinstate them rather it preferred to regard them as having resigned. Also properties: houses, shops and the like belonging to the Igbo people in the North and elsewhere were considered "abandoned properties." Their monies in the banks were seized, (and if at all, they were released, only twenty pounds was be given to them) and their military officers were involuntarily retired with no settlement. This however, culminated to a feeling of injustice as government's policies continue to economically cripple the Igbo people long after the war.

When the war broke out, majority of the oil mills stopped functioning. People became unemployed, educational establishments were abandoned and closed, millions of children became orphans, prices of goods increased incessantly, among other horrendous effects. Conversely, the war led to great innovations by the Biafran side who did all they could in order to succeed. One was the political division of her administrative provinces from eleven to twenty. Two was the establishment of the Bank of Biafra which was located in Enugu, until the city fell in 1967, and then it was moved several times to different locations all over Igboland. The bank's first governor was Dr. Sylvester Ugoh. The legal tender produced by the institution in January 1968 was designed by Simon Okeke and other talented local artists. The different denominations of the currency included one pound, five pounds, ten pounds, five shilling and the like. The currency was not a recognized legal tender outside Biafra. Three was the Biafran flag which was based on the Pan-Africanist teachings of Marcus Garvey. Fourth was the Biafra national anthem. The economic blockade enforced by General Yakubu Gowon against Biafra led to great ingenuity as Biafran scientists from the Biafran Research and Production unit produced a great number of rockets, bombs and telecommunication gadgets, and devised an indigenous strategy to refine petroleum. Of great importance was one of the weapons of warfare called "Ogbunigwe" produced by the Biafran scientists which struck great terror in the hearts of many Nigerian soldiers and was used to great effect by the Biafran army throughout the war. However, it is so unfortunate that the brains behind these tactical innovations were not given adequate recognition after the war. Their expertise were ignorantly undermined and the things they built were left unkempt and unmaintained because of pride and ethnic resentment.



**Theoretical Approaches to Ethnic Tension and Resentment and the Nigeria-Biafra War**

Many scholars such as Ted Gurr, John Burton, among others have tried to develop theories that would aid the explanation of ethnic conflicts. Ethnicity has persisted in many parts of the world including Nigeria and this has ended up disrupting peace and harmony in the country. It is therefore on this note that Thomas Hobbes' Social Contract theory, Ted Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory, John Burton's Human Needs theory and John Dollard, Neal Miller, Leonard Doob, Orval Mowrer and Robert Sear's Frustration Aggression theory are used to explain why ethnic groups take to conflict against one another using the Nigeria-Biafra war as focal point.

In moral and political philosophy, the social contract is a theory or model that originated during the Age of Enlightenment and usually concerns the legitimacy of the authority of the State over the individual. Further, the theory asserts that individuals have agreed to surrender some of their freedom and submit to the authority of the leader in exchange for the protection of the remaining rights. Giving credence to this, Thomas Hobbes' defines contract as the mutual transferring of rights. In the State of nature, everyone has the right to everything – there are no limits to the right of natural liberty.

He further states:

The purpose of a government is to enforce law... whenever the government turns to favour the strong, over the weak, one might say that the government has exceeded its legitimate function.

Yes, the counter-coup of July 29, 1966 may be regarded as reaction to the first coup on January 15, 1966, but the question remains, is such reaction which was even termed "Pogroms" justifiable? Owing to this horrible experience, Achebe writes:

What terrified me about the massacre in Nigeria was this: if it was only a question of rioting in the streets and so on, that would be bad enough, but it could be experienced. It happens everywhere in the world. But in this particular case, a detailed plan for Mass killing was implemented by the government, the army, the police, the very people who were there to protect life and property... it was not just human nature, a case of somebody hating his neighbor and chopping off his head. It was something far more devastating because it was a premeditated plan that involved careful coordination awaiting only the right spark.

With the assassination of not only 185 Igbo officers in the Nigerian Army, but also 3,000 Igbo civilians, the Easterners felt the government had failed woefully in keeping her own part of the Social Contract and therefore in a bid to guarantee their security, secession was very crucial.

Ted Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory offers an explanation based on ethnic groups' access to power and economic resources. With the creation of twelve States in 1967 by General Yakubu Gowon (which mainly was a plan to disarm the Easterners by keeping them afar from States that bore much oil) and subsequent sporadic killing of Igbo people, they felt deprived of both the right to life and belonging and for this reason, a breakup became imminent.

According to John Burton's Human Needs Theory, ethnic groups fight because they are denied not only their biological needs, but also psychological needs that relate to growth and development. These include peoples need for identity, recognition, participation and autonomy. The Nigeria-Biafra war broke out because the Eastern region felt unsafe and cheated and thus needed to break away from the Federation.

The Easterners were being frustrated with the high handedness and punitive acts of the Northern region and this got them aggrieved. On May 30, 1967, Ojukwu, citing varieties of malevolent acts directed at the mainly Igbo Easterners – such as the Pogrom that claimed over thirty thousand lives, the Federal Government's failure to ensure the safety of Easterners in the presence of organized genocide, and the direct incrimination of the government in the murder of its own citizens, proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria, with the full backing of the Eastern House Constituent Assembly. These events confirm the Frustration Aggression Theory which asserts that aggression is the result of frustrating a person's or group of people's efforts to achieve a plan.

### Conclusion

The denial of merit is a form of social injustice that can hurt not only the individual concerned, but also the entire society. The motive for the denial may be ethnic discrimination, sexism, bribery and corruption, among others. It is sufficient to state that whenever merit is set aside by prejudice or whatever origin, individual citizens as well as the nation itself are victimized. This study therefore concludes that ethnic resentment and tensions were the determinant factors of the Nigeria-Biafra war, which maybe, could have been resisted if only the issues bothering on competition and quest for political cum economic control and dominance of one ethnic group over the others were seriously looked into. Also, the war could have been averted if not for the prideful and egoistic show off between the leaders of both Biafra and Nigeria.

Be that as it may, the theories used in the study explained that the war broke out because the Nigerian government refused to keep to their own part of the Social Contract and this made the Easterners feel deprived of their needs and right to life. They were frustrated and aggrieved by the horrific treatment they got from the Northerners.

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