

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB): A Revitalized Social Movement in Nigeria

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Author Note

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on the July 7, 2017 Washington Post article written by Eromo Egbejule, and entitled “Fifty years later, Nigeria has failed to learn from its horrific civil war.” Two elements caught my attention as I was reviewing the content of this article. The first is the cover image that the editors chose for the article which was taken from the *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images* with the description: “Supporters of the Indigenous People of Biafra march in Port Harcourt in January.” The second element that caught my attention is the date of the publication of the article which is July 7, 2017.

Based on the symbolism of these two elements – article cover image and date -, this paper seeks to accomplish three goals: first, to explain the major themes in Egbejule’s article; second, to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of these themes from the perspective of relevant theories and concepts in social movement studies; and third, to reflect on the consequences of continuous agitation for the independence of Biafra by the revitalized eastern Nigerian social movement - Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

### **“Fifty years later, Nigeria has failed to learn from its horrific civil war” - Major themes in Egbejule’s article**

A Nigerian based journalist focusing on West African social movements, Eromo Egbejule examines six fundamental issues at the heart of the Nigeria-Biafra war and the emergence of the new pro-Biafra independence movement. These issues are the Nigeria-Biafra war: origins, consequences, and post-war transitional justice; cause of the Nigeria-Biafra war, consequences and the failure of the transitional justice; history education – why the Nigeria-Biafra war as a controversial historical issue was not taught in Nigerian schools; history and memory - when the past is not addressed, history repeats itself; the revitalization of the Biafra independence movement and the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra; and finally, the

response of the current government to this new movement as well as the success of the movement so far.

### **The Nigeria-Biafra war: Origins, consequences, and post-war transitional justice**

Seven years after the independence of Nigeria from Great Britain in 1960, Nigeria went to war with one of its key regions - the southeast region – located in an area formally known as the Biafraland. The Nigeria-Biafra war started on July 7, 1967 and ended on January 15, 1970. Because of my prior knowledge of the date when the war started, I was attracted by the July 7, 2017 publication date of Egbejule’s Washington Post article. Its publication coincided with the fifty years memorial of the war. As it has been narrated in popular writings, media discussions, and families, Egbejule traces the cause of the war to the massacre of the ethnic Igbos in northern Nigeria which occurred both in 1953 and in 1966. Although the 1953 massacre of the Igbos living in northern Nigeria occurred during the colonial, pre-independence era, the massacre of 1966 was after the independence of Nigeria from Great Britain, and its motivation and the events that surround it may have been the drivers for Biafra session in 1967.

Two important catalyzing events at that time were the January 15, 1966 coup d'état orchestrated by a group of military officers dominated by the Igbo soldiers which resulted in the killing of top civilian government and military officials mainly from the northern Nigeria including a few south-westerners. The effect of this military coup on the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group in the northern Nigeria and the negative emotional stimuli – anger and sadness – fueled by the killing of their leaders were the motivations for the counter coup of July 1966. The July 29, 1966 counter-coup which I call a coup of attrition against the Igbo military leaders was planned and executed by the Hausa-Fulani military officials from the northern Nigeria and it left the Nigerian head of state (of Igbo ethnic origin) and top military Igbo leaders dead. Also, in revenge

for the killing of the northern military leaders in January 1966, many Igbo civilians who were residing in northern Nigeria at a time were massacred in cold blood and their bodies were brought back to the eastern Nigeria.

It was based on this ugly development in Nigeria that General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the then military governor of the eastern region decided to declare the independence of Biafra. His argument was that if the Nigerian government and law enforcement were unable to protect the Igbos residing in the other regions – northern and western regions – then it is better for the Igbos to return to the eastern region where they will be safe. Therefore, and based on available literature, it is believed that the secession of Biafra was caused by safety and security reasons.

The declaration of the independence of Biafra caused a bloody war that lasted almost three years (from July 7, 1967 to January 15, 1970), because the Nigerian government did not want a separate Biafran state. Before the end of the war in 1970, it is estimated that over three million people died and they were either directly killed or starved to death during the war most of whom were Biafran civilians including children and women. To create the conditions for the unity of all Nigerians and facilitate the reintegration of Biafrans, the then military head of state of Nigeria, General Yakubu Gowon, declared “no victor, no vanquished but victory for common sense and the unity of Nigeria.” Included in this declaration was a transitional justice program popularly known as the “3Rs” - Reconciliation (Reintegration), Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. Unfortunately, there was no trusted investigations into the gross violations of human rights and other atrocities and crimes against humanity committed during the war. There were instances where communities were completely massacred during the Nigeria-Biafra war,

for example, the Asaba massacre at Asaba located in the present-day Delta state. Nobody was held accountable for these crimes against humanity.

### **History and Memory: Consequences of not addressing the past – history repeats itself**

Because the postwar transitional justice program was inefficient, and failed to address the human rights abuses and genocidal crimes committed against the southeasterners during the war, the painful memories of the war are still fresh in the minds of many Biafrans even fifty years after. War survivors and their families are still suffering from intergenerational trauma. In addition to trauma and yearning for justice, the Igbos in the southeast of Nigeria feel completely marginalized by the federal government of Nigeria. Since the end of the war, there has not been an Igbo president in Nigeria. Nigeria has been ruled for over forty years by the Hausa-Fulani from the north and the Yoruba from the southwest. The Igbos feel they are still being punished because of the aborted session of Biafra.

Given that people vote along ethnic lines in Nigeria, it is highly unlikely that the Hausa-Fulani that constitute the majority in Nigeria and the Yoruba (the second majority) will vote for an Igbo presidential candidate. This makes the Igbos feel frustrated. Because of these issues, and given that the federal government has failed to address the issues of development in the southeast, new waves of agitation and a renewed call for another Biafran independence have emerged both from the region and within the diaspora communities abroad.

### **History Education – Teaching controversial issues in schools – why was the Nigeria-Biafra war not taught in schools?**

Another interesting theme that is very relevant to the revitalized agitation for Biafran independence is history education. Since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war, history education was removed from the school curricula. Nigerian citizens born after the war (in 1970) were not taught history in the school classrooms. Also, a discussion on the Nigeria-Biafra war was

publicly regarded as a taboo. So, the word “Biafra” and the history of the war were committed to eternal silence through the policies of oblivion implemented by the Nigerian military dictators. It was only in 1999 after the return of democracy in Nigeria that the citizens became a little bit free to discuss such issues. However, due to lack of accurate information about what really happened before, during and immediately after the war, as history education has not been taught in Nigerian classrooms until the time of writing this paper (in July 2017), highly conflicting and polarizing narratives abound. This makes issues about Biafra very controversial and highly sensitive in Nigeria.

### **The revitalization of the Biafra independence movement and the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra**

All the points mentioned above – failure of the postwar transitional justice, transgenerational trauma, removal of history education from the school curricula in Nigeria through the policies of oblivion – have created the conditions for the reawakening and revitalization of the old agitation for the independence of Biafra. Although the actors, the political climate, and the reasons may be different, the goal and propaganda are still the same. The Igbos claim that they are the victims of an unfair relationship and treatment at the center. Therefore, a complete independence from Nigeria is the ideal solution.

Beginning in the early 2000s, new waves of agitation started. The first non-violent social movement to gain public attention is the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) formed by Ralph Uwazuruike, a lawyer who was trained in India. Although the activities of MASSOB led to confrontations with the law enforcement at different times and the arrest of its leader, it received little attention from the international media and community. Worried that the dream for the independence of Biafra will not be realized through MASSOB, Nnamdi Kanu, a Nigerian-British based in London and who was born at the end of

the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970 decided to use the emerging mode of communication, social media, and online radio to drive millions of pro-Biafra independence activists, supporters and sympathizers to his Biafran cause.

This was a smart move because the name, *Radio Biafra* is very symbolic. Radio Biafra was the name of the national radio station of the defunct Biafran state, and it operated from 1967 to 1970. At a time, it was used to promote the Igbo nationalist narrative to the world and to mold the Igbo consciousness within the region. From 2009, the new Radio Biafra aired online from London, and has drawn millions of Igbo listeners to its nationalist propaganda. To draw the attention of the Nigerian government, the director of Radio Biafra and self-proclaimed leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra, Mr. Nnamdi Kanu, decided to use provocative rhetoric and expressions, some of which are considered to be hate speech and incitement to violence and war. He continuously aired broadcasts that portrayed Nigeria as a zoo and Nigerians as animals without rationality. The banner of his radio's Facebook page and website read: "The zoo called Nigeria." He called for the supply of arms and ammunitions to wage war against the northern Hausa-Fulani people if they oppose to the independence of Biafra, stating that this time, Biafra will defeat Nigeria in war.

### **Government Response and the success of the movement so far**

Because of hate speech and violence inducing messages that he was spreading through Radio Biafra, Nnamdi Kanu was arrested in October 2015 upon his return to Nigeria by the State Security Service (SSS). He was held in detention and released in April 2017 on bail. His arrest charged the atmosphere in Nigeria and within the diaspora abroad, and his supporters protested in different states against his arrest. President Buhari's decision to order the arrest of Mr. Kanu and the protests that followed the arrest led to a rapid spread of the pro-Biafra independence

movement. After his release in April 2017, Kanu has been in the southeastern part of Nigeria calling for a referendum that will pave the legal way for the independence of Biafra.

In addition to the support the pro-Biafra independence movement has gained, Kanu's activities through his Radio Biafra and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have inspired a national debate about the nature of the federal structure of Nigeria. Many other ethnic groups and some Igbos who do not support the independence of Biafra are proposing a more decentralized federal system of government whereby the regions or the states will have more fiscal autonomy to manage their affairs and pay a fair share of tax to the federal government.

### **Hermeneutic Analysis: What can we learn from studies on social movements?**

History teaches us that social movements have played vital roles in making structural and policy changes in countries around the world. From the abolitionist movement to the Civil Rights movement and to the current Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, or the rise and spread of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, there is something unique in all social movements: their ability to audaciously and fearlessly speak out and draw public attention to their demands for justice and equality or for structural and policy changes. Like successful or unsuccessful social movements around the world, the pro-Biafra independence movement under the umbrella of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has been successful in drawing public attention to their demands and attracting millions of supporters and sympathizers.

Many reasons could explain their rise to the center stage of national public debate and the front pages of major newspapers. Central to all the explanations that could be given is the concept of "emotion work of movements". Because the experience of the Nigeria-Biafra war helped in shaping the collective history and memory of the Igbo ethnic group, it is easy to see how emotion has contributed to the spread of the pro-Biafra independence movement. Upon

discovering and watching the videos of the horrific massacre and death of the Igbos during the war, Nigerians of Igbo descent born after the Nigeria-Biafra war will absolutely be angry, sad, shocked, and will develop hatred toward the Hausa-Fulani of the north. The leaders of the Indigenous People of Biafra know it. That is why they include such horrific images and videos of the Nigeria-Biafra war in their messages and propaganda as reasons why they are seeking independence.

The arousal of these emotions, feelings or strong sentiments tend to cloud and suppress a rational national debate on the Biafra issue. As the pro-Biafra independence activists leverage on the affective state of their members, supporters and sympathizers, they also confront and suppress negative sentiments directed against them by the Hausa-Fulani and others who do not support their movement. An example is the June 6, 2017 eviction notice given to the Igbos who are living in the northern Nigeria by a coalition of northern youth groups under the umbrella of Arewa Youth Consultative Forum. The eviction notice enjoins all Igbos residing in all the northern states of Nigeria to move out within three months and asks that all Hausa-Fulani in the eastern states of Nigeria should return to the north. This group openly stated that they will engage in acts of violence against the Igbos who refuse to obey the eviction notice and relocate by October 1, 2017.

These developments in the ethnically and religiously polarized Nigeria reveal that for social movement activists to sustain their agitation and perhaps become successful, they will have to learn how to not only mobilize emotions and feelings in support of their agenda, but also how to suppress and deal with sentiments directed against them.

### **Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)'s Agitation for the Independence of Biafra: Costs and Benefits**

The continuous agitation for the independence of Biafra could be described as a coin with two sides. On one side is labeled the prize that the Igbo ethnic group has paid or will pay for the Biafra independence agitation. On the other side is engraved the benefits for bringing the Biafran issues to the public for a national discussion.

Many Igbos and other Nigerians have already paid the first prize for this agitation and they include the death of millions of Biafrans and other Nigerians before, during and after the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970; destruction of property and other infrastructures; famine and kwashiorkor outbreak (a terrible disease caused by starvation); political exclusion of the Igbos at the federal executive branch of government; unemployment and poverty; interruption of the education system; forced migration leading to brain drain in the region; underdevelopment; healthcare crisis; transgenerational trauma, and so on.

The present-day agitation for Biafra independence comes with many consequences for the Igbo ethnic group. These are but not limited to intra-ethnic division within the Igbo ethnic group between the pro-Biafra independence group and the anti-Biafra independence group; disruption of the education system due to youth involvement in protests; threats to peace and security within the region which will prevent external or foreign investors from coming to invest in the southeastern states as well as preventing tourists from traveling to the southeastern states; economic downturn; emergence of criminal networks that may hijack the non-violent movement for criminal activities; confrontations with the law enforcement that could result in the death of protesters as it happened in late 2015 and in 2016; reduction of Hausa-Fulani or Yoruba confidence in a potential Igbo candidate for presidential election in Nigeria which will make the election of an Igbo president of Nigeria more difficult than ever before.

Among the many benefits of a national debate on the agitation for Biafran independence, it is important to state that Nigerians can see this as a good opportunity to have a meaningful discussion on the way the federal government is structured. What is required now is not a destructive argument with respect to who the enemy is or who is right or wrong; rather what is needed is a constructive discussion on how to build a more inclusive, respectful, equitable and just Nigerian state.

Perhaps, the best way to start is to review the important report and recommendations from the 2014 National Dialogue convened by the Goodluck Jonathan administration and attended by 498 representatives from all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. As with many other important national conferences or dialogues in Nigeria, the recommendations from the 2014 National Dialogue has not been implemented. Perhaps, this is the right time to examine this report and come up with proactive and peaceful ideas on how to achieve national reconciliation and unity without forgetting to address issues about injustice.

As Angela Davis, an American civil rights activist, has always said, “what is needed is systemic change because individual actions alone will not solve the problems.” I believe that sincere and objective policy changes starting from the federal level and extending to the states will go a long way to restoring citizens’ confidence in the Nigerian state. In the last analysis, to be able to live together in peace and harmony, Nigerian citizens should also address the issue of stereotypes and mutual suspicion between and among ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.