

## 6

# Settling accounts with Biafra

(**The Guardian**, May 4, 2000)

The young Nigerians now threatening to actualise Biafra should forget or shelve the plan. In place of "actualisation" they should, through research and study, reconstruct the Biafran story in its fullness and complexity and try to answer the unanswered questions and supply the missing links in the story. This is a primary responsibility you owe yourselves: you should at least understand what you want to actualise. If 30 years after Biafra, you want to produce its second edition, you need to benefit from the criticism of the first. History teaches that a second edition of a tragic event could easily become a farce — in spite of the heroism of its human agencies. On the other hand those who enjoy ridiculing Biafra — instead of studying it are politically short-sighted. My own attitude to Biafra is neither "actualisation" nor ridicule. I propose that accounts should be settled with Biafra.

The road to Biafra was opened on Saturday, January 15, 1966. Early that morning, a small group of young army officers, variously reported to be between five and eight, led detachments of troops to seize the government of Nigeria. They operated in Lagos, the Federal Capital and the four regional capitals: Ibadan (Western Region), Benin-City, (Mid-Western Region), Enugu (Eastern Region) and Kaduna (Northern Region). In Lagos, the attempt was crushed before sunrise but not before

the death of the Federal Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, his Minister of Finance, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh and a number of senior army officers; the operation was also defeated in Ibadan, but it claimed the life of the regional premier, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola; in Benin-City and Enugu, the rebels were immobilised before they could go far; the rebellion succeeded in Kaduna for three days and claimed the lives of several people, including the regional premier, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, several members of his family and a number of senior army officers mainly of Northern origin.

After three days, Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, **the** 28-year-old officer who had led the Kaduna operations and had ruled the region for those three days was persuaded to surrender to Major-General Thomas Aguiyi-Ironsi, head of the Nigerian army - the argument being that the former's position was no longer tenable, politically and militarily. By the end of the fourth day, Ironsi's military and governmental authority was firmly established across the land, with his military governors effectively running the four regional governments. Col. Ojukwu who had been the commander of the Fifth Battalion stationed in Kano, was Ironsi's military governor for the East.

On May 24, 1966, the Federal Military Government promulgated a decree which essentially abolished Nigeria's federal structure and replaced it with a unitary one. Anti-Igbo riots immediately erupted in the North. Multiply the February 2000 Sharia tragedy in Kaduna by a factor of 100 in casualty figures and property loss and you begin to have an idea of what happened. The decree was suspended. On July 29, 1966, while Ironsi was attending a national conference of traditional rulers at Ibadan, his government was over-thrown in a military *coup d'etat* organised and led by officers of Northern origin. Colonel Gowon who had been Ironsi's Chief of Army Staff, became Head of State. Ironsi, his host, Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, the Military Governor of Western Region, and several army officers, mainly of Igbo origin, lost their lives. Mass killings resumed, but now not only in the North, but all over the country, except Eastern Region. Now, multiply the May 1966 tragedy by a factor of 50, add to it the fact that the killings were now led by armed soldiers whose commanders were now in power and add to this again the fact that the killings did not abate for at least five months and

you begin to have an idea of what happened. The rebellious officers first made a move to pull the Northern Region out of Nigeria; but when they were advised that they were now in a military situation to rule the whole country instead of a part of it, they dropped the idea of secession and became champions of "One Nigeria." Colonel Ojukwu refused to recognise Gowon as Head of State.

Early in 1967, the Supreme Military Council, with Ojukwu in attendance- his first since the July coup-was held in Aburi, Ghana. In April 1967, as Ojukwu started a unilateral implementation of the Aburi Agreements (on decentralisation of power) some federal civil servants successfully persuaded Gowon to repudiate the agreements. Every honest person ought to have known at this point that the crisis had reached the point of no return; that if dialogue and reconciliation were still possible then they would come not to prevent a war, but to end it.

At 2.00a.m. on Tuesday, May 30, 1967, the 33-year-old military governor of Eastern Region of Nigeria, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu addressed a gathering of civilian authorities, military leaders, journalists and diplomats at the State House in Enugu, proclaiming the birth of an "independent sovereign state of the name and title of Republic of Biafra." Four days earlier, on May 26, 1967, a joint conference of the consultative assembly and leaders of thought, also holding at Enugu, had "unanimously passed a resolution mandating Ojukwu to declare the sovereign Republic of Biafra at an early practicable date." Between these two dates, precisely on May 27, Colonel Yakubu Gowon, had declared a state of emergency, assumed wide emergency powers and carved the country into 12 states. The Nigeria-Biafra war broke out on July 6, 1967 and ended 30 months later with Biafra's surrender.

Now, to a number of personal recollections. One: The politics of the First Republic (1960-1965) was heavily characterised by ethnicity, especially towards the end of that tragic period. Two: Of the five army majors that are more frequently mentioned as leading the coup attempt, only one, Major Adewale Ademoyega, was non-Igbo by ethnic origin. Three: No Igbo political leader died and the only Igbo military casualty occurred not because he was a target but because he was considered a "nuisance." Four: The attempted coup was the culmination of a long period of political crisis in Nigeria, a crisis whose centre of gravity was Western Region where,

before the military intervention, the crisis had become an armed popular uprising. As a schoolboy at Ilesha in the present Osun State I had witnessed, and taken part, in some of the operations. Five: The military take-over, starting from Nzeogwu's rebellion and ending with Ironsi's appropriation of power, was understandably very popular, especially in Western Region and Lagos.

Six: In Eastern Region a militant group in the present Bayelsa State, led by Isaac Boro, rose in armed rebellion against the coup. They wanted political autonomy for the minorities, not the replacement of Dr. Michael Okpara (an Igbo) by Col. Ojukwu (an Igbo). Boro's rebellion was defeated after 12 days. My studies and reflections convince me that this rebellion was the authentic position and voice of the minorities of Eastern Nigeria at the time. Seven: The initial wave of popularity enjoyed by Ironsi's government soon stabilised and, with time, began to decline especially in Eastern Region where, for no clear exceptional reasons, the military government adopted a generally hostile, rude, insensitive, arrogant and arbitrary mode of government and communication. This attitude did not change significantly throughout the crisis and the war that followed. This was a major factor in Biafra's defeat. Eight: The young army officers who led the January 1966 operations (or rather, those of them who were still alive by May 30, 1967) did not support secession. They preferred a war against the Gowon government to conclude the January project.

Nine: Biafra was opposed not only by its declared enemy, the "North," but more crucially and devastatingly by its expected allies and sympathisers in Nigeria. The rest is known.