

THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR AND BORDER QUESTION: 1966 -1981

OKECHUKWU AUGUSTINE NWALU, Ph. D

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EVANGEL UNIVERSITY, AKAEZE,

EBONYI STATE,

 nwalu@evangeluniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

The Nigerian Civil war captured the sympathies and interest of the whole world for thirty months from July 1967 to January 1970. The secessionist enclave Biafra drew attention to itself by the manipulation of emotional evocative propaganda made more effective by the fact that the beleaguered peoples fought to sustain the doomed republic with incredible tenacity. Both Nigeria and the seceding Biafra spent nearly three years fighting, fighting for a cause, fighting to the finish... for freedom. Both groups also lobbied for support from their neighbours to disallow their opponents from making use of their territory as a staging point for military operations, or as a supply corridor for weapons. This article investigates the January 15, 1966 coup d'état, through the counter-coups (staged mainly by the Northern Nigeria officers, the program of May 1966, the secession of the Easterners, and the Nigerian general civil war which resuscitates boundary dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon. It argues that tribalism has more than any other factor frustrated a number of our development efforts. It helped to cause the breakdown of the first Republic and equally led to the failure of a number of Nigeria socio-economic programmes. Above all, what had been subjected to several decades of neglect suddenly became a center of increased attraction only after the discovery of huge oil and mineral reserves on the Peninsula and its maritime waters. This falls as an important source of conflict between most countries in Africa.

Introduction

Nigeria's post-independence era was followed by political instability as a result of coups and counter coups. Chima Korieh and ifeanyiEzeonu have noted that since its political independence from Britain, Nigeria has been staggering from one political crisis to another. It has fought a civil war, undergone several fundamentalist religious and ethnic riots, survived many military putsches and has been ruled by some of the most asinine, eccentric brutal, and sadistic leaders of contemporary Africa.¹ The perennial problems of the Nigerian state are well –documented in Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria*; Karl Maier's, *This house Has Fallen*; and Wole Soyinka's, *The Open Sore of a continent*, among other accounts.² Looking back, the naively idealistic coup of January 15, 1966, proved to have ended as a terrible disaster. It was interpreted with plausibility as a plot by the ambitious Igbo of the east to take control of Nigeria from the Hausa /Fulani North. Six months later, however, Northern officers carried out a revenge coup in which they killed Igbo officers and men in large numbers. If it had ended there the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, or a horrendous tit for tat. But the northerners descended on Igbo civilians living in the north and unleashed waves of brutal massacre that Colin Legume of the Observer (UK) was the first to describe as a pogrom. Thirty thousand civilian men, women and children were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned and no one asked any questions. A Sierra Leonean living in northern Nigeria at that time as observed by Achebe wrote home in horror “The killing of the Igbo has become a state industry in Nigeria.³ The herculean task of resettling the

refugees who were pouring into the East in the hundreds of thousands was a challenge to Eastern Region. It is confounding to note that the number of displaced Nigeria Citizens fleeing from other parts of the nation back to Eastern Nigeria was close to a million. As early as October 1996, some Igbo intellectuals were calling for outright war.⁴

It is worth observing that the absence of a concerted plan to address the eruption of violence throughout Nigeria against Easterners, and the inaction around the refugee problem amplified the anger and tensions between the federal government, now led by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, and the Eastern Region. Calls from the east for independence grew louder, and threats from the federal government grew more ominous, in a vicious cycle.

The Clamour for Secession and the Aburi Accord

From January 4 to January 5, a last –ditch summit known as Aburi Accord was held in Aburi in Ghana to discuss the areas of conflict.⁵ Great optimism was expressed that this would be an instrument to bring lasting peace to the deteriorating Nigeria. The gathering was attended by senior military and police officials,⁶ and government secretaries.⁷ Issues for discussion included: a committee to work out a constitutional future for Nigeria, the payment of arrears to Igbo government employees who were forced to leave their post as a result of the surging turmoil; the need for a resolution renouncing the use of force, and the refusal of the Eastern Region to recognize Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon as supreme commander. The predicament of displaced persons following the pogrom in the North, the fate of soldiers involved in the disturbance on January 15, 1966, and the planned distribution of power between the federal military government and the regional government also required urgent attention.⁸ The goal of Gowon- led Nigerian government was to emerge from these deliberations with Nigeria intact as a confederation of the regions. Apparently the two parties- members of Ojukwu's cabinet in the East and Gowon's Federal cabinet could not reach a consensus and therefore left Aburi with very different levels of understanding of what a confederation meant and how it would work in Nigeria.⁹ By March 1967, two months after the summit, resolutions were yet to be implemented and there seemed to be growing weariness in the East that Gowon had no intention of doing so. In reaction to the warning of the government of Eastern Region to secede if issues pertaining to the Nigerian security were not adhered to, Gowon issued a decree, Decree 8, which called for the resurrection of the proposals for constitutional reforms promulgated during the Aburi conference. But for reasons other than egotistical self-preservation, members of the federal civil service galvanized themselves in energetic position to the compliance with the provision of the Aburi Accord. Seeing this development as a strategic political opening, it was an opportunity for resuscitation of ethnic conflict in Nigeria. Obafemi Awolowo, the kingpin from the western Region heretofore nursing political grudges himself, including prior imprisonment for sedition, aligned with Ojukwu and insisted that the federal government remove all northern military troops garrisoned in Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, and throughout Western Nigeria. Awolowo warned Gowon's federal government that if the Eastern Region left the federation, the western Region would not be far behind.¹⁰

On the other side of the coin, meanwhile the Northern leaders never had any intention of implementing the settlement negotiated at Aburi. Ojukwu at this point exasperated by what he saw as purposeful inaction from Gowon, reacted by instituting a systematic process that severed all Biafran ties to Nigeria.¹¹ The subsequent movement towards a declaration of independence was very clear and vivid, because it was a result of a particular group of Nigeria citizens from the Eastern region attempting to protect themselves from the great violence that had been organized and executed by the arms of the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

There was a strong sense and belief that Nigeria was no longer habitable for the Igbos and many other people from Eastern Nigeria. Efforts were made by the National Reconciliation Council (NRC) to invite Ojukwu and other Eastern leaders for a peace talk at Enugu, the capital of the Eastern Region. By this time, as it were, majority of Easterners had grown contemptuous of Gowon's Federal government for its failure to bring the culprits of the mass murder in the north to justice; they saw this as the latest in a series of insincere overtures. More so, senior Igbo military officers at this time also openly expressed concern over the leadership of Gowon who it was argued was not eligible for the position of the head of South East.¹²

Earlier in May, a mandate had been granted to Ojukwu to secede from the Nigerian Federation by the Eastern Regional Assembly. May 26th, 1967, saw an emergency meeting of Ojukwu's special advisory committee of Chiefs and Elders in Enugu. The consensus reached was that secession was the only viable path. As it were, On May 27th of that very year, the Consultative Assembly mandated Colonel Ojukwu to declare at the earliest practicable date, Eastern Nigeria a free sovereign and independent state by the name and title the Republic of Biafra.¹³

It is extremely important to note that the decision of the Igbo people to leave Nigeria, did not come from Ojukwu alone but was informed by the desires of the people and mandated by a body that consisted of some of the most distinguished Nigerians in history, and included Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's former governor general and first ceremonial president, Dr Micheal Okpara and Sir Francis Ibiam, former premier and governor of Eastern Nigeria respectively and Supreme Court justice Sir Louis Mbanefo. Others were the Educator Dr AlvanIkoku, first republic minister, Mr. K.O. Mbadiwe. Also on the list were Mr. N.U. Akpan, Mr. Joseph Echeruo, Ekukinam-Basse, Chief Samuel Mbakwe, Chief Jerome Udoji, and Chief Margaret Ekpo.¹⁴ Ironically, the same consultative Assembly and members of legislative Arm urged Gowon to create 12 new states in the country. In a speech delivered to the nation on May 27, 1967, Gowon responded to Ojukwu's "assault on Nigeria's unity and blatant revenue appropriation," as perceived by the federal government by calling for a state of emergency and dividing the nation into twelve states.¹⁵ Interestingly, the creation of states led to the emergence of South – Eastern States which were carved out the Eastern States, with the Ibibio and the Efik who though resident in Bakassi Peninsula secretly nursed the idea of rejoining with Nigeria despite their active participation in the 1961 referendum against Nigerian State meanwhile, the consul-General at the time, S.J.King who coincidentally is native to the South – Eastern state got transferred from Southern Cameroon (Buea) to the South – East where he later became the Permanent Secretary.¹⁷

The Border Question

On May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern region of Nigeria declared the independence of the "Republic of Biafra". Ojukwu led the breakaway of Republic of Biafra which composed primarily of ethnic Igbos who had suffered persecution and massacre

in the northern parts of the country. Refusing to acknowledge the secession, the Federal Military Government, led by Major General Yakubu Gowon, invaded Biafran territory in July, 1967, commencing a brutal war that would last nearly three years and claim the lives of between five hundred thousand and two million Igbos and others Easterners.¹⁸ The breakout of the Nigerian civil war led to an “international rat race for support and recognition”¹⁹ by both the federal government and the Biafra. In the course of the war, Nigeria lobbied for support from her neighbors to disallow Biafra from making use of their territory either as a staging point for military operations or as a supply corridor for weapons, since an earlier military strategy for the campaign was to simultaneously attack Biafra from the north and the sea. More specific diplomatic exchanges with Cameroon to clarify Nigeria's intentions became imperative during the campaign to take Calabar between October 17 and 19. This stemmed from an increasing threat by Biafra to use the Bakassi Peninsula to surprisingly outflank Nigerian forces and dominate the approach channel to the Calabar estuary.²⁰ Moreover, as indicated by Bernard Odogwu, the Bakassi Peninsula was considered more critical because “nearly all-available ammunition which was never enough to begin with-was sent to that front.”²¹

The Nigerian government was reassured by the Cameroonian government that the Bakassi Peninsula that Nigeria had recognized earlier on in 1962 as Cameroonian territory and therefore outside her control “would not be used by hostile elements”.²² This reassurance was easily obtainable because late President Ahmadu Ahidjo of Cameroon was a Fulani man whose father originated from Kano in Northern Nigeria, while his mother was from Garoua Cameroon. Also he grew up around Yola and Mubi in Nigeria and had been a playmate of Senator Iya Abubakar. In order to make ties stronger, his former district head in Nigeria, Ambassador Malabu, was made Ambassador to Cameroon. Thus, Nigeria was able to preempt contingency plans for “hot pursuit operations across the border and safeguard the rear as federal troops slowly pushed eastwards against initially determined Biafra troops.”²³ Also when Equatorial Guinea gained independence in October 12, 1968 she stood in support of the Nigerian federal government and eventually terminated all relief flights to Biafra. The end of the civil war began to raise more issues. Border questions resurfaced, partly as a result of wartime border patrols that aimed to prevent illegal entry and exit. Besides, there were increasing reports that Cameroon had been carrying out oil explorations during the war along portions of the maritime borders that were not demarcated. In response to this a meeting was held in Yaoundé between August 12 and 14, 1970 involving Border commissions of the two countries. After a great deal of deliberation, the joint commission agreed to use the 1913 Anglo-German treaty by which Britain and Germany reached an agreement on their borders from Yola to the sea. This was made complete after the signing of two treaties, the first of which was signed in London on March 11, 1913, titled “the settlement of the frontier between Nigeria and the Cameroon, from Yola to the sea.”²⁴ This put Bakassi proper under the jurisdiction of the Germans (then colonial master of Cameroon) and the second, “the Regulation of Navigation in the cross River”²⁵ signed at Obokum on April 12, 1913 ceded the “navigable portion” of the offshore border of the peninsula to Britain. A case in point at the Yaoundé meeting was the presentation of boxes of tax receipts by the South Eastern delegation providing evidence of tax payments that had been made by residents of the Bakassi area to the Nigerian government in a bid to lay claims over the peninsula. It was later discovered that the same residents also paid taxes to the Cameroon authorities and that many did not only have homes on both sides of the border but also had fishing villages with exactly the same name on both sides of the border.²⁶ With this development, both parties agreed to demarcate the border. By that time, the Nigerian Attorney General advised Gowon to consider taking appropriate steps that would lead to the clarification of vague sections of the land boundary as the delimitation of the offshore boundary in order to demarcate the parts that were

navigable from those that were not, with respect to previous treaties.²⁷

It is worth observing that some interest groups in the Nigerian delegation to Cameroon were not satisfied with the outcome, on the basis of the 1913 Anglo-German treaty. These groups approached the Foreign Minister, OkoiArikpo, an Anthropologist and lawyer from the Eastern Region. He in turn approached the Attorney General, Teslim Elias for some formal and legal opinion that would enable him make appropriate recommendations to Gowon. Simultaneously, the Nigerian mission at the UN was contacted for clarifications on whether the Bakassi Peninsula residents had participated in the 1961 plebiscite. On September 3, 1970, Elias made his formal legal opinion stating that:

The ministry has given a most careful consideration to the whole question in the light of all the available evidence, and the conclusion is that there is no legal basis for Nigeria's claims to the Bakassi Peninsula for the reasons stated herein ... According to the information received from the Federal Directorate of surveys, the Bakassi Peninsula has never been included as part of Nigeria in the administrative maps of Nigeria since the then Southern Nigeria ceased to be part of Nigeria in 1961. Also, the Northern region, Western Region and Eastern Region (Definition of Boundaries) proclamation 1954 (L.N. 126 of 154) showed the Bakassi Peninsula as forming part of the then Southern Cameroons. Moreover, by a Diplomatic Note No., 570 of March 27, 1962, from your ministry to the embassy of the Cameroons in Lagos, to which was attached a map prepared by the Federal surveys, Nigeria recognized the Bakassi Peninsula as forming part of the Cameroons.²⁸

On the basis of this, Elias received Arikpo's backing by advising Gowon to rather focus on Maritime border issues than the peninsula itself when he meets Ahidjo. This standpoint from the Nigeria ministries of Justice and External Affairs, alongside the UN's concurrence attesting that residents of the peninsula actively participated in the 1961 plebiscite, left no other dependable platform for Gowon than the 1913 treaty. To this effect, a joint Expert-Committee was held in Lagos in October 1970 between the two countries. After tough discussions, the two parties failed to reach an agreement on how to define the “navigable channel” of the Akpayafe River up to its joining point with the Calabar Estuary. The primary reason for this outcome was the unavailability of an Admiralty map expressly delineating the navigable channel of the Akpayafe. On the other side, the Nigerian delegation insisted that the navigable channel of the Akpayafe River had to be seen as laying entirely eastwards to the channel of the Calabar and Cross Rivers, as indicated in the 1913 treaty. Therefore, considering that the larger and stronger Calabar Estuary was bound to displace the flow of the smaller and weaker Akpayafe River eastward towards the Bakassi shore, the maritime boundary up to the 3-nautical mile limit had to be much closer to the Cameroonian Bakassi coast than to the Nigerian Calabar Estuary coast. This had been the British's original intent when they signed the treaty with Germany in exchange for ceding the peninsula. Though the Nigerian higher authority was in favour of a compromise with Cameroon, their Head of Boundaries thought differently and as a result, negotiations could not proceed. “This internal technical disagreement within the surveys-which would cost Nigeria several miles of Maritime territory in the estuary and beyond-did not come to the attention of General Gowon until it was too late”²⁹

Yaounde II Declaration

Following the failure of the already stated Lagos meeting, a summit meeting was scheduled in Yaounde the

Cameroon capital in April 1971 between presidents Gowon and Ahidjo but without the presence of the Nigerian Heads of Boundaries. It was at this meeting that the two leaders agreed to define the navigable channel of the Akpayafe River up to point 12. In the course of their negotiation on the agreement of the maritime boundary, Ahidjo demonstrated his maturity in conflict management by asking the Cameroonian Survey expert to remain silent and at the same time allowed Gowon to draw the line where he felt would be acceptable. Gowon unintentionally succumbed to this cajole by depending on his own technical expert for guidance. For some reason, the line Gowon drew upon clear advice from the Director of Federal Surveys, was not the true navigable channels of the Calabar and Cross Rivers, which the British had intended (with German agreement) to be completely on the Nigerian side, West of the Akpayafe Channel.³⁰ Gowon and Ahidjo signed on both sides of the 3-nautical mile line. This line is what is referred to in the ICJ judgment as the compromise line.

Excited that he had fiercely glared down Ahidjo and negotiated a good deal, Gowon returned to Nigeria initially unaware of the error. Two months later in June, the Joint Boundary Commission met in Lagos, led by Chief Coker for Nigeria and Mr. Ngo for Cameroon. They extended the already faulty Gowon-Ahidjo “compromise line” outwards to sea in what is now known as the Coker-Ngo Line. Among those in the delegation were Honourable Justice Sam Endeley of Cameroon; Mr. S.G. Ukot, permanent secretary and solicitor General South Eastern State; Mr. Jeriyo, Principal State Counsel Federal Ministry of Justice, Lagos etc. The head of Boundaries at Federal Surveys, who was not on the delegation for the Yaounde meeting, was back this time. Other prominent experts from the Federal and South Eastern State Civil services were also in attendance.³¹ The Signing of the Coker-Ngo Line became subject to murmurs of disapproval a few weeks later. As a result of back channels infiltrations, Yakubu Gowon finally discovered his errors. In August of the same year and in the bid to undo the Gowon-Ahidjo, now the Coker-Ngo line, Nigerian experts toured the area in a survey ship with the aim to carefully take measurements and look for low water marks based on certain provisions of the law of sea. Thereafter, the Director of Federal Surveys was not allowed to take part in Nigeria-Cameroon boundary negotiations until Gowon left office in July 1975. The Head of Boundaries took over his technical role as the principal government adviser at international summits involving both heads of state.

Maroua Declaration

In June 1975, at Maroua Cameroon, just over a month before his overthrow as Nigeria's Head of State, Gowon and Ahidjo signed the maritime border up to point G that led to a partial extension of the 1971 line. During the meeting held from May 30th to June 1st 1975, the two Heads of State of Cameroon and Nigeria agreed to extend the delineation of the maritime boundary between the two countries from point 12 to point G on the Admiralty chart no 3433 annexed to this declaration. The two Heads of State further reaffirmed their commitment to freedom and security of navigation in the Calabar/Cross River channel of ships of the two countries as defined by international treaties and conventions. On July 29, 1975 General Gowon was overthrown in a coup. This marked a turning point in the relationship binding Post-Colonial Cameroon and Nigeria as the new regime primarily aimed to question both the domestic and foreign policy decision with the impression that Gowon had given away the “Bakassi Peninsula”, an unfortunate and totally false notion which persists in many quarters to this day. Murtala Mohammed's decision to nullify Gowon's agreements with Ahidjo was welcomed by a part of the population who had been impatiently waiting for an opportunity to get rid of its commitment to Cameroon as a consequence of the 1884 colonial heritage. Many commentators

still do not comprehend the difference between the maritime and land components of the dispute. Nor do many realize that the peninsula had been ceded by a series of actions and inactions beginning as far back as 1913, reconfirmed when Nigeria became independent in 1960, finalized with the 1961 plebiscite and affirmed with the 1964 OAU declaration.³² With Yakubu Gowon out power, the Coker-Ngo line declared null and void by the new administration and the discovery of offshore oil in the area, the stage was set for dramatic incidents. Joe Garba noted that Nigerians in the small fishing villages along the “porous border” were not properly treated. In his words, he further indicates that: “Nigeria resisted the temptation to use force with the conviction... that Nigeria's African policies would be seriously damaged if she took any retaliatory action against border violations by either Cameroon or Chad. Quiet bilateral diplomacy was the best course with essentially local problems that were bound to keep recurring.”³³

Meanwhile, the government of General Olusegun Obasanjo that came to power on February 13, 1976 had refused to ratify the agreement. During his state visit to Cameroon in 1977, General Obasanjo tried to reopen the issue with a view to correcting what Nigerian government presumed to be an unfair deal but President Ahidjo did not consider it worthwhile revisiting an issue his country's parliament had already ratified. Nevertheless, in the same year, tension began to ease as Obasanjo became more accommodating. At this point, the Nigerian National Atlas in which Bakassi Peninsula was shown to be on Cameroon's side was published for the first time and its forward was written and signed by Olusegun Obasanjo.³⁴ This uneasy relationship persisted even after the assumption of office by President Shagari. During his state visit to Cameroon in January, 1981 President Ahidjo wanted to discuss important issue with President Shagari. But President Shehu Shagari proposed that officials of both countries should in the first place negotiate and then present brief on the outcome of their negotiation. Cameroon officials however refused to discuss the boundary problem, insisting that it was a closed matter. Shagari therefore informed his host that Nigeria could not accept the Coker-Ngo Line as a legal instrument and would take every measure to repossess what it considered her territory. President Ahidjo suggested that both leaders should treat the disputed area as a neutral. Apparently, Shagari concurred but on the condition that Cameroon removes her oil rigs from the area. When Cameroon failed to comply, Nigeria placed her own oil-rigs in the same territory and took necessary measures to protect her interest. The atmosphere in the disputed area was tense as both sides intensified naval patrol. It was against this background that Cameroonian *gendarmes* murdered five Nigerian soldiers on Patrol duty on May, 16, 1981 along the Akpa Yafe River in Cross River State which of course led to skirmishes between the two countries.³⁵

Conclusion

It has been contended and it seems possible that there is a natural impulse even among brothers to struggle for supremacy. Most times, leaders tend to calculate on what their ethnic groups stood to gain or lose in any conflict or crises. As observed by P. Obi Ani, Nigeria should have common interest and not ethnic or regional interest if we are to pursue a purposive foreign policy³⁶. On the border question, it would be pertinent to underscore that dispute along the Nigeria-Cameroon border has been a matter of historic proportions especially with the Bakassi Peninsula and the contemporary claim of some parts in Cross River Nigeria by Cameroon. This is so because boundaries can be regarded as the geographical limits of a state as well as the extent of its sovereignty in a strategic feature of nation's survival. The strategic importance explains why nations protect and defend their political boundaries. The implication of this protection in international relations is incessant territorial disputes among nations all over the continents of the world. Examples are not far-fetched from the Nigeria-Cameroon disputes over Bakassi Peninsula.

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