

# Nigerian Civil War Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: A Philosopher's Evaluation

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## Abstract

Using a qualitative research method, this paper evaluates Nigerian civil war post-conflict peacebuilding. It highlights that the reason for the unsuccessful implementation of the policy of reintegrating the victims of the war is the underlying factor for the consequent agitations for separation and protests in the country. The monstrous misconception of the state and its arrogation of, using the words of Akinwale, “ubiquity, omniscience and omnipotence” to itself has made the state, its institutions and its functionaries unaccountable to the citizens, thereby, leading to citizens without sovereignty. The negligence of this fact and the Nigerian state’s jackboot approach towards maintaining peace and post-conflict peacebuilding will only elicit more agitations for separation and protests.

## Keywords:

Nigerian civil war, Rebuilding; Rehabilitation; Reconciliation; Reintegration, Post-conflict peacebuilding

## Introduction

The wave of nationwide protests in the early months of October 2020, demanding an end to police brutality and bad governance, stimulates our minds to reflect on post-conflict peacebuilding in Nigeria. “Some reports of the events support the claim that soldiers opened live ammunitions on unarmed peaceful protesters at Lekki and Alausa while they waved the Nigerian flag and chanted the national anthem” (Obananya, 2020a). The aftermath of this protest provokes retrospection on how Nigeria has handled post-conflict peacebuilding.

A second wave of protest was planned. “Following the approval to reopen Lekki Tollgate by the Judicial Panel of Inquiry set up by the Lagos State government to investigate the October 2020 Lekki shooting incident, many Nigerians have taken to Twitter to protest that those who

carried out the alleged shooting of innocent citizens must face the law before the tollgate can be reopened” (Vanguard, February 8, 2021).

The events of the #EndSARS protest point to the fact that the state which ought to be accountable to the citizens has arrogated to itself, in the words of Anthony Akinwale (2017) “ubiquity, omniscience and omnipotence” leading to citizens without sovereignty (Obananya, 2020b). I will draw examples from the context of the reintegration of the victims of the Nigerian-Biafran war using the policy of the three Rs: “Rebuilding, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation” to show how post-conflict peacebuilding has, in a way, led to citizens being without sovereignty. But before discussing the reintegration of the victims of the war, I shall give a background of the war.

## I

Nigeria as a country is located on the western coast of Africa. This land comprises different ethnic groups. In the year 1914, under the rule of Lord Frederick Lugard, the Northern and the Southern protectorates were amalgamated, hence the state, Nigeria. With the rise of the Pan-African Movement, in the 1950s, many African countries sought independence and on 1 October 1960, Nigeria became independent as a sovereign state. The citizens had hope in the new Nigeria but it did not take long for their hopes to be dashed.

The high level of corruption in government, the formation of political parties along ethnic lines, the affluent lifestyle of public office holders and their diversion of public funds for personal use made young military officers, led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, to intervene in Nigerian politics on January 15, 1966. This led to a counter-coup, since some reports claim it was an Igbo coup, and the killing of the Igbos in the northern part of the country (Achebe, 2012: 82). This eventually degenerated into the Nigerian thirty-month civil war, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran war, which spanned from July 6, 1967 through January 15, 1970 (Hurst, 2009).

At the end of the thirty-month war, Biafra was vast smoldering rubble. The head count at the end of the war was perhaps three million dead, which was approximately 20 percent of the entire population.... The worst had happened, and we were now forced to re-organize our thinking, expectations, and hopes. We (the former Biafrans) had to carry on in spite of the great disaster. We would have to adjust to the realities and consequences of a Nigeria that did not appeal to us any longer. Nigeria had not succeeded in crushing the spirit of the Igbo people, but it had left us indigent, stripped bare, and stranded in the wilderness (Achebe, 2012: 227).

## II

After Major General Effiong had negotiated an armistice with the federal government, for General Ojukwu had left the nation, on January 15, 1970 he led the Biafran delegation and formally surrendered to the federal troops after a thirty-month war. “The end of the Nigeria-Biafra war was marked by the magnanimous proclamation of ‘no victor, no vanquished’ by the General Yakubu

Gowon-led Federal Military Government (FMG)” (Onuorah, 2018). Gowon made a broadcast to the nation in which he set the stage for post-conflict peacebuilding.

.... The tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have an opportunity to build a new nation. Now, my dear countrymen, we must recommence at once in greater earnest, the task of healing the nation's wounds. We have at various times repeated our desire for reconciliation in full equality, once the secessionist regime abandoned secession. I solemnly repeat our guarantees of a general amnesty for those misled into rebellion. We guarantee the personal safety of everyone who submits to Federal authority. We guarantee the security of life and property of all citizens in every part of Nigeria and equality in political rights. We also guarantee the right of every Nigerian to reside and work wherever he chooses in the Federation, as equal citizens of one united country. It is only right that we should all henceforth respect each other. We should all exercise civic restraint and use our freedom, taking into full account the legitimate rights and needs of the other man. There is no question of second-class citizenship in Nigeria.... (Excerpted from A. H. M Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook* quoted in *The American Historical Review*, Volume 78, Issue 5).

As a follow-up to the armistice and to foster the transition from negative to positive conditions, the Gowon-led administration introduced the policy of the three Rs: “Rebuilding, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation” towards the victims of the war. The policy of the three Rs of the Gowon-led administration, according to Kukah (2011), was a very imaginative and unprecedented development in Africa. But sadly, he continues, the three Rs were not properly implemented to yield the expected result due to military interventions in Nigerian politics which did not help create or sustain the basis for implementing the policy.

Had the military withdrawn, political affiliation would have made communication easy. Instead, we suffered another nine years of military rule. The wounds were still fresh and there was no attempt at creating a platform for dealing with past memories. (Kukah, 2011: 18).

I associate myself with Kukah's submission that the nine years of military intervention in Nigerian politics weakened the framework for a successful implementation of the three Rs. The reason for this unsuccessful implementation of the three Rs, which is the underlying factor for the consequent agitations for separation and youth protests, which is often neglected and not spoken about, is what this response will attempt to address.

While I admit that I quite agree with some of the points made by Kukah, it must not be mistaken for essential agreement. Our essential divergence comes from what I consider the root of the matter. It is my contention that the root of the matter, as far as the unsuccessful implementation of the three Rs is concerned, is the monstrous misconception of the state, its institutions and its functionaries (both during military and civilian rules) that makes them fail to understand that they are accountable to the citizens to whom the power of sovereignty belongs. The monstrous misconception of the state, its institutions and its functionaries, as is experienced in Nigeria and much of African nations, makes it difficult for them to be checked by the citizens; and “even when

citizens freely submit themselves to such a state, their effort amounts to self-inflicted tyranny....” (Akinwale, 2017). The result of this is evident in that fifty years after the civil war the Nigerian youths are still demanding accountability of the country’s leaders to the citizens to whom the power of sovereignty belongs.

The narrative of how the submission of the eastern region (the Biafrans) amounted to self-inflicted tyranny is exemplified, as Onuorah (2018) would put it, in a more sensational way than the real implementation of the three Rs.

It is worthy of mention that this paper is not about the marginalization of the Igbos or the easterners, but about the marginalization meted out to Nigerians of the eastern part of Nigeria. It is not about what happened to the Igbos or easterners. It is about what happened to Nigerians (of the eastern region). Though both suppositions are similar, they differ in their consideration and relation with the whole. The second, though using the Nigerian-Biafran war reconstruction as a case study, particularly speaks about the marginalization of Nigerians, the making of Nigerian citizens without sovereignty. But the first would lead us to nothing but tribal and religious sentiments which the recent “youths’ protests across the Nigerian states have, in a way, [made known that they are] ...not our fundamental problem, but a monstrous misconception of the state, its institutions and its functionaries” (Obananya, 2020b).

### III

In his book *Post-Civil War Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983*, Obi-Ani (2009) tells the story as follows:

At the end of the civil war in January 1970, most of the achievements had been shattered in the war: the war had uprooted much of the economic infrastructure of Igboland, claimed the lives of the cream of the society and disabled many. Confusion, a feeling of insecurity and despair prevailed among the Igbo. All of Igboland was studded with innumerable roadblocks mounted by the victorious Nigerian Army.

With the use of starvation as a weapon of war, there resulted a massive shortage of food in the eastern region. The conclusion of the war manifested all the more the reality of the situation, that many people were in need of food and medication. “However, the cessation of hostilities did not bring starvation and diseases to an immediate end in Igboland. Rather the sudden stoppage of the war brought to the fore the stark realities of the time: the thousands of the sick and the hungry, the virtual disappearance of means of transport, lack of farming implements and agricultural inputs — in short, the total collapse of the social and economic base of the Igbo people<sup>1</sup>” (Obi-Ani, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> “There was mass unemployment in East Central State — the Igbo State — created by General Gowon in May 1967 in an attempt to undermine the solidarity of the peoples of the old Eastern Region. The State could only reabsorb 34,000 workers at the end of the civil war. About 800,000 people in the State remained unemployed. These included returnees to the State from other parts of the country before the Nigerian crisis and some traders whose capital investments were lost during the civil war. These unemployed people posed a great

The need to rebuild the social and economic base of the eastern region was obviously needed. The urgency of this need was shared by the Gowon administration. But this intention was poorly translated into action. Speaking about the situation, Mokwugo Okoye, who was later made the Chairman of the Rehabilitation Commission in the East Central State, in an interview on July 24, 1995, argued that besides the fact that relief materials were not sufficient,<sup>2</sup> more people lost their lives to hunger at the end of the war due to the mishandling of relief materials as some were diverted and also because of the government's selection of the humanitarian organizations and countries permitted to assist the Igbo people.

Those the regime felt had meddled in the internal affairs of the country by their support of the Biafran cause were told to keep their 'blood money'... The lukewarm attitude shown by the Federal Government to the plight of the Igbo people at the end of the civil war was replicated by some affluent Nigerians. This prompted the Christian Council of Nigeria Rehabilitation Commission to openly express concern about the uncaring attitude of this group. The association asserted that this group of people netted a fortune out of the civil war but lacked the conscience to spare part of their wealth towards alleviating the sufferings of their fellow countrymen rendered destitute by the war... (Obi-Ani, 2009).

On whether or not the Gowon-led administration's proclamation of "no victor, no vanquished" was a mere populist slogan and pious pronouncement is left for the reader to decipher and can be argued till tomorrow. But one thing was clear as Onwuka N. Njoku, a Professor of History, puts it in his foreword in Obi-Ani's book (2009): The efforts towards the implementation of the "Rebuilding, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation" policy were "halfhearted, superficial and double-edged. They scratched the thin veneer of layers of a huge problem."

As already mentioned, the easterners' submission to the Nigerian state amounted to self-inflicted economical tyranny. The currency exchange whereby "the Igbo people who deposited the old Biafran currency got a paltry sum of twenty pounds (£20) each irrespective of the amount of the Biafran currency an individual deposited" and the indigenization of companies in Nigeria at a time when the Igbos were economically disenfranchised were instances of indirectly making the easterners pay for the war (Obi-Ani, 2009). Achebe (1983) blames the then Federal Commissioner for Finance, Obafemi Awolowo, for this economic tyranny meted out to the Igbos.

Nothing has been said about the Abandoned Property Edicts – how the government handled the properties abandoned by the Igbos at the outbreak of the Nigerian war in different parts of the country, especially in Port Harcourt, and how this has generated a lot of conflicts afterwards as in

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social problem to the State as there was no fund to rehabilitate damaged industries in the State or start new ones. Many people indulged in all kinds of vice in a desperate attempt to survive. The state of despondency was such that a 32-year-old pregnant woman was arrested at Ochanja motor park, Onitsha, while negotiating for the sale of her one-year-old baby girl for £15.18. This woman hailed from Ohaji village near Owerri" (Obi-Ani, 2009).

2 "The Federal government, through its National Commission for Rehabilitation (NCR) and the Nigerian Red Cross Society, provided some relief supplies to the people shortly after the war. The Nigerian Red Cross had stockpiled 13,000 tons of food and was making arrangement for another 7,000 tons by the end of January 1970. The foodstuffs were used in feeding about 700,000 war victims in the Eastern States within the first quarter of 1970. But the effort of the Federal Government did not go far enough. The estimated population of the Igbo at the end of the war was 7.5 million and that of the entire Eastern States was estimated at nearly 14 million" (Obi-Ani, 2009).

some places like in the Southern state (now Rivers state and Cross Rivers state) where some Igbos could not reclaim their properties. Professor Olutayo Charles Adesina, in his paper presentation titled, “Abandoned Properties: Re-engaging a Post Nigerian Civil War Narrative” at The West African Transitional Justice Centre, says “It is quite amazing to see the kind of passion that this has continued to evoke several years after the civil war. The civil war appears not to have ended.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Adesina highlights that the government made the reclaiming of properties difficult, first, as those whose landed property was leased to them and expired, found it difficult, and in most instances impossible to renew them; second, by the categorization of abandoned properties into four groups.

What the government did was to categorize the properties into four classes: a) those whose legal ownership was established beyond reasonable doubt and were returned to the owners; b) those for which the original owners could not provide documents to establish lawful ownership but were put in a distributable pool; c) those whose ownership, were lawfully established but were acquired and put in the distributable pool by the government; d) those whose ownership was established but which were compulsorily acquired for public purposes (Adesina, 2021).

Apart from class a) the categorization of the other classes amounted to conflicts; hence a panel was set to investigate the issue. The Daramola Panel at the end of its exercise recommended: the payment of 500 (five hundred Naira) to any previous owner, regardless of the size of the property, as the accumulation of the rent arrears from July 1967 to 1976 and that 75% of the abandoned houses should be sold to the indigenes of Rivers and 10% to other Nigerians excluding the Igbos. This decision amounted to a lot of conflicts, questions and court cases. But despite these, the Obasanjo-led administration identified with the implementation of the decision by the Abandoned Property Implementation Committee whose execution some challenged as being corrupt, and went ahead to make the decisions unchallengeable in court by Decree 90 of 1979 (Adesina, 2021).

Unfortunately, the country has not been sincere enough to admit the mistakes made through both the Indigenization Decree and the Abandoned Property Edicts after the war. These two policies perhaps well-conceived, had the opposite effect in dealing with the problems of national integration. It is impossible not to be moved by the sentiments expressed by the Igbos in expressing their predicament regarding the negative impact of these policies on delaying their integration into the mainstream of the nation's economy. Did the rest of Nigeria expect the Igbos to buy into the gains of the indigenization decree or reclaim abandoned property with the proverbial sum of twenty pounds allegedly given in exchange for all that any Igbo man possessed? We must be sincere to ask whether with hindsight we may not have done certain things differently. We cannot turn back the hand of time, but we can at least check to ensure that the hands of the

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<sup>3</sup> It is worthy to mention that many Igbos reclaimed their properties in the Western and Northern parts of the country as those who received the rent of the properties handed the returns to the Igbo owners upon their return after the civil war. But in Port Harcourt, the issue of abandoned property became a very big issue, according to Adesina, because of the over politicization of ethnicity as some people (“the so-called natives of Port Harcourt”) felt they were being ousted by the Igbos.

clock really work (Kukah, 2011).

A true retrospection shows that the Gowon-led administration and subsequent administrations could not actualize the policy of the three Rs. The Igbos felt excluded. Speaking at the CISLAC-FES Multi-Stakeholders Forum on Peace and Security Challenges in Nigeria, in Abuja on the 20th of June 2019, Oseloka H. Obaze opines that presently, despite exhortations and protestations, little or no attention is being accorded to the ethnic proclivities of the Nigerian state. He argues that the incisive calls for restructuring and separatist agitation are indicative of simmering discontent. A lingering sense of exclusion, real or imagined, according to Obaze, induces the agitation for separation.

In April 2015, Oba Rilwan Akiolu of Lagos threatened that Igbo residents of Lagos State should be ready to ‘perish inside the lagoon,’ if they do not vote for the ruling APC government in the State. The agitation and push back reached a new zenith on 17 June 2017, when Arewa Youths, in the so-called Kaduna Declaration, gave the Igbo people resident in the north a “quit notice.” These events underpin existing separatist fault lines (Obaze, 2019).

It is difficult to say but must be said, that the political will to address the separatist agitations exhaustively seems lacking in the present and previous administrations. “The increasing despondency and the tempo, with which separatism is being discussed, even if in hushed tones, should worry Nigeria’s policymakers.” But the jackboot approach – Nigeria’s preferred policy response to such national interest issues – has always yielded limited results. Its ephemeral impact of momentarily quelling such agitations, only elicits more fervent agitations further down the road. (Obaze, 2019).

Consequently, it would not be unreasonable to agree with Onuorah (2018) that the policy of the three Rs “turned out to be more sensational than real. It gradually became apparent that there were, indeed, those who emerged as ‘victors’ and others who were really ‘vanquished.’ The institutional and structural context of Igbo marginalization and alienation as reflected in subsequent developments and events in post-war Nigeria explain this point.” But objectively, we must also acknowledge that not only did Gowon’s proclamation of “no victor, no vanquished” seemed a mere pious proclamation, but the surrender of Biafrans and Major General Philip Effiong’s speech: “that the Republic of Biafra hereby ceases to exist” for it bears the same imprint, as the spirit of Biafra and its agitations continue to be on the rise (Adesina, 2021).

This paper has gone down memory lane to discuss the unsuccessful implementation of the reintegration policy so that the Nigerian state, with the benefit of hindsight, may learn from its past and turn the present challenges of the agitations for secession, protests for an end to bad governance and police brutality, the many insecurities and the need for state policing into opportunities to excel.

It is clear that the Nigerian state lost its opportunity of setting a sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding strategy. Yet again, in October 2020, another opportunity came knocking on its doors as Nigerian youths started online and offline protests against bad governance—against a

monstrous misconception of the state, its institutions and its functionaries. It was an attempt to redress the ubiquitous allocation of power to the state—one which does not take into consideration that the power of sovereignty ultimately belongs to the people. But just as in former times, the Nigerian state lost this opportunity as it unleashed its military power on unarmed civilians.

But all opportunity is not lost. The Nigerian state should desist from fatal and brutal methods towards sustaining peace and curtailing protests. This is because, as Momoh (2020) puts it, “Protests have always been part of political development. Resistance has been an important part of getting heard. Taking the people seriously is a principal part of national development. From ancient times [it has] been shown that the people want the best for themselves. The interests of the people are downplayed at the peril of the ruling class. Consequently, oppression sparks off resistance.”

To avoid an impending danger and to set the nation towards the roadmap of post-conflict peacebuilding, the Judicial Panel of Inquiry inaugurated by the Lagos State for the examination of the Lekki Tollgate incident of October 20, 2020, should deliver justice to the hearings presented before the panel of inquiry. Although the government in constituting the Judicial Panel of Inquiry has become a judge in its own cause, which is against the principle of natural justice and fairness, let it be the resolution of the Judicial Panel of Inquiry that the heroes and heroines who lost their lives at the Lekki Tollgate incidence have not died in vain. Let their blood on the Nigerian flag direct our noble cause and guide our leaders to recognize that the power of sovereignty belongs to the citizens so we may build a nation where peace and justice reign.

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