

Research article

# DIPLOMACY OF WAR AND PEACE; THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

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## ABSTRACT

Most civilized people have throughout the Ages condemned conflicts or wars as inhumane, uneconomic and in every way regrettable. Groups or nations have continued to practice it in pursuit of dynastic interests and of national interest respectively. Conflict situation is the anti-thesis of diplomatic harmony primarily because of the failure of human community to learn from lessons of the past. The Nigeria civil war evoked a great controversy, not only in Nigeria itself but in Britain, France, Portugae, Russia, United States and South Africa. The position of these foreign countries including, Tanzania Cote d'Voir, Gabon and indeed the organization' of African Unity OAU (now AU) were of crucial military ' and diplomatic importance to the conflicting sides. The battle field end of the Nigerian - Biafran conflict led commentators to conclude that the OAU peaceful settlement efforts were ineffective. The paper posits that the ineffective performance of the OAU in the conflict was a function of a cluster of factors which include the OAU chartes, strategies and tactics of the body, and the attitudes of the disputants and major power intervention. **Copyright © WJPDIR, all rights reserved.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The coup against the Ironsi regime caused deep resentment in the Eastern Region. In July 1966, Ibo resentment was sufficiently strong for Ojukwu, -who had been appointed military Governor of the Eastern Region after the January 1966 Coup. The outbreak of violence in September 1966 in Northern Nigeria in which there was a brutal massacre of the civilians provided powerful reasons for Ibo leaders who were already demanding the secession of the Eastern Region from Nigeria. The Imo University lecturers at university of Nigeria Nsukka have been reported as pressing for secession of the Eastern Region (Akpan 1971:15).

Concerned about the worsening political situation in Nigeria, the British government tried to mediate

between the two sides on October 10 1966. For instance, the Head of the West African Department in the Commonwealth Relations office (as it then was) Eric Norris arrived in Lagos for talks with Nigerian officials during which he passed on British offers of mediation (Sunday Times 23 October 1966).

At the same time, the British Deputy High Commissioner in Enugu, James Parker, and his American Colleague, Robert Barnard, intervened with Ojukwu, who pretended that there was no intention of seceding, refused to attend any constitutional talks in Lagos obviously for the personal safety of his life as Major General Ironsi has been killed (Kirk-Green 1971:39-43).

After having arranged for General Ankrah, Head of the Ghana Government; to invite Gowon and Ojukwu to a meeting in Ghana, the British Government sent its special representative in Africa, Malcolm Macdonald to Lagos OR 20 November 1966. He persuaded Gowon to accept Ankrah's invitation to a reconciliation meeting of Nigeria's military leaders (British's view central office 1969:13).

In Aburi, Ghana from 4-5 January 1967 it appeared as if the disputes between Gowon and Ojukwu has been brought under control. But later, the terms of the agreement were disputed by Gowon and Ojukwu who has demanded for confederal system of government.

The federal permanent secretaries soon pointed out to the Federal authorities that the implementation of the Aburi terms would leave the federal military government with virtually no functions (Kirk-Green, 1971).

Ojukwu who earlier on disclaimed any intention of secession began to insist that his own interpretation of the Aburi agreement should stand, implying that he would otherwise take the necessary steps towards secession. In order to forestall secessionist moves by Ojukwu, Gowon announced on 27 May 1967 that Nigeria had been divided into twelve states, three of them in Eastern Region namely, East central state, South Eastern state and Rivers State. On 30 May 1967, Ojukwu declared the Eastern Region the New Independent Republic of Biafra.

The control of Nigeria's oil in Ogoni in particular and the Niger Delta Region was at the centre of the scenario. The name Biafra was derived from the imaginary belt or line drawn by colonial Geographers namely "The Bight of Benin any Biafra" it is far remote from the heartland from where one would have thought a suitable historical name could have been taken. The importance of oil as a factor in the crisis had been fore shadowed in November 1966 when the Federal Government had unsuccessfully pressed the oil companies for a guarantee that, in the event of succession, it would continue to receive oil royalties.

Reports on July 3, 1967 that shell had agreed to a token payment of £250,000 to Biafra further created a serious concern in Lagos and was directly responsible for the decision to impose an oil blockade on the East. Colonel Ojukwu responded to the division of the four semi-autonomous regions into twelve states by unilaterally pulling the Eastern Region out of the federation on May 30, 1967.

The federal military government reacted in two ways. First, it moved to build and solidify internal political support for itself. The government appointed eleven military Governors each representing the new states except the East central state that had a civilian sole administrator, namely Akpabi Asika (Kirk -Green, 1971:374).

Other civilian commissioners some of whom were opposition politicians such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo with seemingly radical views on foreign policy were appointed. The other reaction of the federal military government (FMG) to the secession was diplomatic and this was very significant because it showed federal government recognition that the impending war if it came would have two battle fields. Mainly the war theatre in Nigeria and the diplomatic arena in Africa including other international organizations, especially the Organization of African Unity OAU now African unity (AU). Following this line of action, in early June 1967, the

Federal Military Government sent messages to the African and international legitimators, the O.A.U. and UN respectively cautioning against the recognition of Col. Ojukwu's Biafra (Daily Sketch, June 3 1967:793).

The Federal Government notes warned that Nigeria would regard:

*any attempt at recognition of the so-called Republic of Biofra, as a sovereign state... (as) interference in the internal affairs of Nigeria which will be regarded as an unfriendly act. (Daily Sketch June 3, 1967: 793).*

In June 1967, for instance, Ojukwu appealed for African and World wide recognition of Biafra. In August 1967, he made a losing plea to the O.A.U to be invited to the Congo Kinshasa in September 1967 summit. At its summit meeting in September 1967, the OAD had expressly reintegrated its condemnation of secession in any member state and throughout the war, it consistently opposed Biafra's secession. The exception were Gabon, the Ivory Coast now Cote d'Voire, Tanzania and Zambia, all of whom accorded Biafra, their recognition and dissented from the OAU line (Fatowaro 1990:11).

Furthermore, it was due to the pressure from British diplomatic circle that in May 1968 the Federal authorities agreed to peace talks with the secessionists in Kampala Uganda. The British role in getting the federal authorities to agree to the Kampala talks was acknowledged by Dr. Iko Arikpo in his press statement of 25 April 1968 issued by Nigeria in the Kampala summit, many African leaders who presided over unstable ethnic states, saw the secession of "Biafra" as a challenge to the existence of their own states and Ojukwu was ignored.

The war actually broke out on July 6, 1967, but before the shooting started, Nigeria alarmed at the repeated call of the East and Southern Africa for unauthorized mediation, dispatched the then commissioner of trade, Dr. Okoi Arikpo and the Deputy Permanent secretary in the ministry of external affairs Mr. Victor Adegoroge to East Africa to keep these states in line (Daily Times, June 21, 1967).

Furthermore, on the diplomatic plane, the Nigerian delegation made representations to the head of state of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, who reluctantly met Dr. Okoi Arikpo. "The later also met President Milton Obote of Uganda, Lomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Emperor Selassie of Ethiopia. Back home in Nigeria, the two man delegation of Dr. Arikpo announced that the East and South African leaders supported the Federal Military Government and recognized the conflict as domestic affairs of Nigeria (Daily times, June 26, 1967).

### **The Friends of Biafra**

The Friends of Biafra Association was the first of the extra-parliamentary groups formed specifically with the aim of lobbying the British parliament and public opinion in support 'of Biafra. Apart from that the presidents of Tanzania, Cote d'Voire, Gabon and me Britons who had lived and worked in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria before the outbreak of hostilities, and who had been forced to leave Nigeria on the outbreak of the civil war, these people formed a platform for the moral support of Biafra. There was also the Biafran office at 30 Collingham Gardens in London. James Udo-Affia the leader of a Biafran delegation in London, under the auspices of the Movement for Colonial Freedom convened a meeting (Kirk-Green 1967:190). A number of British were invited to this meeting and at the end of the press conference there was a promotion of public good will for Biafra.

An important element in the disposition of Britons who had worked in Eastern Nigeria before the crisis was their intense loyalty to the region they had worked in virtually all the British staff of University of Nigeria (UNN) sided Biafra. They adopted a method of mass assault technique, of pressure. They also organized public marches, rallies and sleeping at Tafalgar square, Whitehall, West Minster and up and down the country. In doing so, they tried to campaign against arms loading to Nigeria.

After a cabinet meeting on July 31, 1968, the French Government issued a statement of support to the Biafrans. The French secretary of state for information, Joel Le Theule announced that France wished to recognize Biafra (Africa Report October 1968:34). On August 13, President De Gaulle himself lent weight to the French government statement, saying that he thought the only way to end the Nigerian civil war was through a political arrangement which took into consideration the personality of the Biafran people. Expanding on his statement in September, he declared that in this affair "France has aided Biafra" as far as possible (Akuchi 1968).

The French backed up their diplomatic support with military weapons. Air Gabon was transporting a mixture of arms, ammunition and food for the Biafran Army. In planes flown by French pilots with the approval of the Gabonese government. The Nigerian Daily Times of August 10, 1968 also reported that the French government's declaration of support for the rebels had been followed by substantial military assistance. Indeed col. Steiner and Major Mordi were placed in charge of training Biafran commando. With the French arms, the Biafran were able to fight back vigorously, thus the fighting was intensified on both sides. Nevertheless, before the summit, Nigeria geared up its foreign policy machinery from which there had already been defections of most Igbo diplomats and wielded it to the task of keeping Nigeria as one state.

To this end, the war time period was the time the foreign ministry -was headed by Dr. Okoi Arikpo. He presided over the external affairs ministry during and after the war. He became Gowon's foremost and perhaps most important adviser. Gowon's cabinet, the Federal Executive Council which theoretically had the constitutional function to formulate foreign policy was more often a ~ stamp for Gowon and his External Affairs Commissioner.

At times though, the Federal Executive Council (FEC) would oppose Gowon as on the issue of the invitation to the international observers Team suggested by the British Government; Gowon overruled the majority and invited this team to examine Nigeria's conduct of the civil war.

If foreign policy was made by Gowon and Okoi Arikpo, what was the role of the foreign policy bureaucracy? The foreign policy bureaucracy under Gowon performed its traditional function of data collection and analyses. The permanent secretary was only allowed to sit at the meetings to supply and clarify information in the form of position. He did not have a vote in the Federal Executive Council (FEC) during the war. The information collected by the ministry of External Affairs originated from Nigeria Foreign missions which forwarded this information to the relevant desk officer in Lagos. A copy of the dispatch from the foreign missions would go directly to the commissioner while the one addressed to the Lagos desk officer went through the regular bureaucratic channel; that is, from the Lagos desk officer to the relevant Deputy Permanent Secretary who would comment on the dispatch and then forward it to the permanent secretary.

In yet another development, the permanent secretary, performed the same routine and forwarded the various comments and recommendations to the commissioner. The commissioner read the dispatches, the accompanying comments and recommended a decision to Gowon which sometimes differed from the recommendation of the foreign ministry, though their advice may have been rejected, the foreign policy

bureaucrats were regularly consulted for advice and their view point given great weight.

The jealousy of bureaucratic and jurisdictional conflicts which characterized the relationship between Jaja Wachuku and the foreign ministry under Belewa was absent under Gowon. Infact sources disclosed that the relationship between the foreign policy bureaucracy and the commissioner was very cordial. The civil servant regarded very highly the office of the commissioner and the commissioner in turn respected the bureaucrats.

### **How OAU take a position: the support for the Status Quo**

Nigeria as a bearer of the status quo gave strict legal interpretation of the OAU charter, based on the principle of non-interference in the internal activities of member states. Nevertheless, the principle of the right of union to intervene in a member state pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances like war crimes, genocide and crime against humanity which the AU now stands for was adopted. The Position was affirmed by the Nigeria's Ambassador to Ethiopia, Mr. Adedokun Haastrap who said that;

*Nigeria could not be discussed at the OA U conference without General Gowon 's approval (Cronje, 1972: 35).*

This of course was Arikpo's view and this position was echoed by many Federal Nigeria diplomats who were not opposed to any intervention provided it was not the subversive type; that is intervention that does not receive Nigeria's blessing (Modelski 1964:23).

Nigeria Government was Cognizant that there was always intervention in a domestic war. From the diplomatic efforts it made ensure the support of all states in Africa and the international system. Unilateral OAU intervention which would grant the secessionist state of Biafra de facto recognition was what Ojukwu wanted. Consequently, on August 27 1967, Ojukwu cabled the O.A.U (now AU) that Biafra was ready to present its case before the African Organization (Ojukwu 1967:843).

However, Ojukwu's cable was ignored because the then OAU secretary - General, Diallo Tell had earlier in Lagos, stated that the conflict was Nigeria's internal affairs. It was hardly surprising that when the O.A.U council of ministers met (preparatory to the annual summit), the federal delegation was the only one seated as the representative of Nigeria. The secessionist representative, former Eastern Nigeria Premier, Dr. Michael Okpara lobbied to persuade the African states to give Biafra a hearing. The effort not only failed but he was expelled (Daily Times September 8, 1967).

Other representatives were Francis Ellah who was succeeded by Ignatius Kogbara also lobbied by granting interview to Britain - Biafra Association (BBA). Meanwhile, Emperor Heillie Selassie whom the Nigerian delegation met ostensibly to assure his support for the FMG, opened the summit. The emperor made an un-headed plea to the Nigerian combatants to find a lasting solution to the conflicts (Daily Times September 8, 1967).

In his own speech, however, the leader of the Nigerian, Chief Awolowo, conspicuously ignored the country's civil war. Awolowo only focused on African economic dilemmas and the ineffectiveness of the OAU social and economic commission. Not a word was mentioned about the civil war (morning post, September 22, 1967).

However, African states could not be silent on Nigerian conflict. Their silence would expose them to the outside world as hypocrites, quick to point out the iniquities of apartheid in South Africa but less eager to pay the

same Zealous attention to the fratricidal war in black Africa or Nigeria in particular. The OAU (AU) Assembly therefore chose to involve itself in the Nigeria conflict (we of Africa, 23 1967 p. 1223).

The OAU subsequently agreed on a draft resolution and consulted Awolowo as to its wording. Awolowo consulted Gowon by phone and they agreed on the draft resolution. The resolution minced no words about the OAU support for Nigeria. It condemned secession in general. It also reaffirmed the principle of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of any member - state, and agreed with Nigeria that the conflict was within a domestic sphere. The OAU resolution was regarded diplomatic level, people saw French support of Biafra as a display of the opportunism that had seemed to characterize de Gaulle's diplomacy in Nigeria it was felt that French intervention was a plot to create a new French sphere of influence in Nigeria.

The Federal Military Government saw the assistance of the Euro-American organizations as covert support for Biafra. Some of these agencies Nigeria believed, served as conduits for Biafra's guns and foreign exchange requirements. The Federal authorities also alleged that France coveted Nigeria's deal in which, in exchange for an outright grant of £6 million, the Roths child Bank of France was granted exclusive right of exploitation of all mineral in Biafra especially oil (Kirk-Green 1968: 246-37).

It was also General de Gaulles Chief intelligence officer, Jacques Foccart, the trouble shooter in Africa that was responsible for organizing the arms supply through Gowon, Ivory Coast to Biafra. Other Biafran sources of the arms well Portugal, Israel and South Africa. Despite the exertions of powerful Biafra lobby in the United States which featured Senator Edward Kennedy McCarthy and Vodd, the United States government refused to give way, with the secretary of state Dean Rusk stating very early in the crisis that Nigeria was the primary responsibility of Britain (American Embassy Lagos, 26 July, 1967).

### **Biafran demand during the Kampala Peace Talks**

Negotiations with representatives of totalitarian states at international conferences and foreign capitals have frequently degenerated into endurance contests, usually ending in complete frustration. When agreements have been reached, they have often been violated, on spirit or in letters as a Fiasco by Biafran leaders but this was a secret diplomacy concealed from the public.

Furthermore, the organization established a consultative mission of six heads of state namely Emperor Hellie sellasie of Ethiopia General Ankrah of Ghana, General Mobutu of Congo (Kinshasa) President Tubman of Liberia. President Diori of Niger and President Ahidjo of Cameroon to visit the Nigeria Head of State, General Gowon "to assure him of the Assembly's desire for the territorial integrity, Unity and Peace of Nigeria [AHG/RES 51(iv)]

The resolution which bore Nigerian approval represented a significant diplomatic victory for the Federal Military Government. Hence forth, the OAU became a weapon for Nigeria in the diplomatic aspect of the war. More significantly, the position of the OAU on the Kinshasa resolution would provide a smokescreen for many international actors to give active as well as passive support to Nigeria. Besides, judging from the composition of the committee, the chairman of the OAU mission to Nigeria to hold talks with Gowon, Heile Selassie, had secessionist upheavals of his own Eritrea and Ogaden. He was not likely to endorse Biafra claims to self-determination regardless of the merit of the case. Second, two members of the mission - Cameroon and Niger have linguistic and ethnic affinity to Northern Nigeria. President Ahijo of Cameroon was a Fulani like the ruling

aristocratic elites.

Besides, there was also the hostile intervention of Euro-American humanitarians and religious organizations. From July 1967, when the commonwealth secretary general Arnold Smith, and his deputy, A.L. Adu visited Lagos, there was continuous contact with both the British and Nigerian governments on the conflict. For instance, French intervention in support of Biafra added another dimension to the crises and caused considerable concern in London and Lagos. At the obsessed by the diplomatic recognition and on the basis of previous instructions that Biafra was not negotiable, Sir Louis Mbanefo made the following demands in Kampala.

- 1) An immediate cessation of hostilities.
- 2) Is mantling of the federal military government coercive instruments such as the end to economic blockade of the East.
- 3) The withdrawal of Federal military government troops to pre-war boundaries.

### **The Federal delegation position**

The leaders of the federal delegation offered a twelve point peace plan which among other things called for a cease fire to be preceded by the renunciation of secession.

- That Biafra enclave would be policed by an observer force which would subsequently hand over to the federal military government.
- That the federal government will grant amnesty in appropriate cases in respect of persons connected with the rebellion, grant general amnesty

### **Conclusion**

The battlefield end of the Nigeria - Biafra conflict led commentators to conclude that the GAD peaceful settlement efforts were ineffective-Emperor Haile Selasie admitted failure. The former secretary general of the OAU Mr. Diallo Tell conceded that the peace efforts have not succeeded.

Having failed diplomatically to get a sympathetic endorsement of its case in Africa particularly from the OAU Biafra stood no chances of getting recognition elsewhere.

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