

# CHAPTER 6

## RESOLVING BIAFRA POST-1999: HOW SHOULD WE LOOK BACK TO REACH FORWARD?

Romola Adeola\*

---

A man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body

- Chinua Achebe 'There was a country: A personal history of Biafra'

### 1 Introduction

The question of Biafra post-1999 has become an issue of significant political debate in Nigeria testing the moral firmament of the Nigerian state as a sustainable endeavour in a post-colonial era. When Chinua Achebe released his personal memoir of Biafra in 2012,<sup>1</sup> the diatribes that followed not only unveiled a rift on how Biafra is remembered,<sup>2</sup> it underscored the fracture of the post-colonial narrative of Nigeria as a nation-state and the place ethnicity as a driver of 'national' identity. What was clear from the elocutions that stormed the public debate was that

\* LLB (Lagos State) LLM LLD (Pretoria); Post-doctoral Fellow, Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria, South Africa; romola.adeola@gmail.com

1 C Achebe *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra* (2012).

2 N Saro-Wiwa 'There was a country: A personal history of Biafra by Chinua Achebe - A review' *The Guardian* 5 October 2012; 'Biafra: Awolowo replies Achebe from the grave' *PM News Nigeria* 6 October 2012; F Fani-Kayode 'Obafemi Awolowo and Chinua Achebe's tale of fantasy' *Premium Times* 7 October 2012; IEkott 'Igbo, Yoruba at war over Chinua Achebe's criticism of Awolowo in new book' *Premium Times* 8 October 2012; J Verissimo 'Chinua Achebe reflects on Biafra, but for whom?' *Africa is a Country* 8 October 2012; A Adebajo 'Between a non-Igbophobic Awolowo and an Awophobic Achebe' *Premium Times* 12 October 2012; T Nwaezeigwe 'In defence of Awolowo: Matters arising from Achebe's civil war memoir' *AFRIPOL: Africa Political and Economic Strategic Centre* 24 October 2012; T Ogunlesi 'There was a country: Chinua Achebe makes peace with Nigeria' *African Arguments* 25 October 2012; O Ofeimun 'The Achebe controversy: Awolowo and the forgotten documents of the civil war' *Vanguard* 27 October 2012; AC Godwin 'It is unfortunate Achebe accused me and Awolowo of starving Igbos to death during civil war' - Gowon' *Daily Post* 31 October 2012; T Oriola 'Achebe, Awolowo and the spectres of the Biafran war' *Sahara Reporters* 2 November 2012; CN Adichie 'Chinua Achebe at 82: 'We remember differently'' *Premium Times* 23 November 2012; U Kalu 'Chinua Achebe had nothing personal against Awolowo, others - Ike, son' *Vanguard* 23 June 2013; MH Msiska 'Imagined nations and imaginary Nigeria: Chinua Achebe's quest for a country' (2014) 2/3 *Journal of Genocide Research* 401.

Biafra had become an aphorism for a broken union – one which dovetailed into conversations on restructuring Nigeria, but appeared to have been unresolved due to geopolitical persuasions on how the union should be rebuilt. While some argue for true federalism, others for a confederated state, Biafra is about outright secession for one could only justify the former two options where there is a real resolve to do either. Though the outlier-stance from which Biafra operates may be contested, its grievances cannot. Indeed, its position is shared by other groups that also contest the political marriage on which Nigeria emerged and who seek an Oduduwa Republic, Arewa Republic and a Niger Delta Republic. However, Biafra remains the premise on which the separatist agitation oscillates.

Although the political structure of Biafra has mutated both in political organisation and geographical coverage,<sup>3</sup> its rhetorical persuasion has always been events that occurred between 6 July 1967 and 15 January 1970. Unlike its manifestation with the civil war in the 1960s, the quest for Biafra in the wake of the Fourth Republic was passive resistance advanced through the Gandhi-styled ideology of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). While MASSOB has continued to be a rallying point for non-violent conversations on Biafra,<sup>4</sup> the Biafran agitations have been most visibly captured in recent years by the radical expressions of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB).<sup>5</sup> While scholars have extensively engaged in the histories of the civil war

- 3 On the issue of political organisation, a plethora of groups have emerged in response to Biafra including Coalition of Biafra Liberation Group; Biafra Peoples' National Council; Biafra National Liberation Council and the Biafran Liberation Front; Biafran Zionist Federation; Indigenous Peoples of Biafra; Movement of Biafrans in Nigeria; Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra. While the ethnic region of Biafra has included the south-east, there have been contestations as to the inclusion of the south-south region. See RJ Julius-Adeoye 'Nationhood and the struggle for Biafra' *Africa is a Country* 7 April 2017; C Akasike 'South-south not part of Biafra, IYC tells MASSOB' *Punch* 6 June 2017; '13 Secessionist groups vow to celebrate Biafra's 51st anniversary despite military presence in South-East' *Sahara Reporters* 28 May 2018.
- 4 Although MASSOB's strategy has been to leverage on passive resistance to secure the interests of the Ibos, its members were severally arrested, jailed and in 2013, the movement was categorised as an extremist group by the Nigerian government. See FI Agbara *The possibility of convivence in Nigeria: Towards intercultural hermeneutics and religion in dialogue* (2010) 71; G Onuoha 'Contesting the space: The 'New Biafra' and ethno-territorial separatism in South-Eastern Nigeria' (2011) 17 *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 402; RK Edozie 'Nigeria's non-Western democracy: A post-colonial aspiration and struggle with opportunity, conflict and transformation' in AC Levan & P Ukata (eds) *The Oxford handbook of Nigerian politics* (2018) 425 434.
- 5 There is something to be said about the naming of this group. Although the use of the phrase 'indigenous peoples' does not cohere with the global narrative on which the rights of indigenous peoples is being advanced, its presence in the naming of the group presupposes a national mainstream at the helm of affairs against a historically-marginalised group. However, IPOB is not alone in this tactical move. The Biafran Zionist Federation (BZF) has also leveraged on alleged territorial connections with Israel. While it is not generally accepted that these groups speak for the Ibo as a whole, their agitations are not without significant premise. Common themes run through these agitations, such as marginalisation, political exclusion and the systemic failure of successive governments to address the agonies of the Biafran war.

through fictional and non-fictional accounts,<sup>6</sup> this chapter contextualises the narrative in its nascent future. The chapter takes a varied dimension to the issue by arguing that the protraction of the realisation of Biafra derives from the fact that there are proximate and ultimate causations that need to be understood from the ethnic formations of the Nigerian state and that need to be tackled by acknowledging the dimensions in which they resonate post-1999.

As a start, the chapter argues that to resolve the issue of Biafra post-1999 Nigeria, it is imperative to look back to reach forward. In looking back, one is immediately confronted with the question of whether the agitation for Biafra post-1999 reflects the ethnic formations of the Nigerian state and how with an understanding of such formation, solutions may emerge in addressing the issue of Nigeria post-1999. In engaging the discussion, this chapter argues that it is imperative to begin from an understanding of ethnicity in Nigeria's formative epoch up until the Biafran war. This is important to reach forward in proffering solutions to the question of Biafra.

## 2 The 'Biafran' question: How did we get here?

The premise from which this part engages the subject of Biafra is on the point of history with an understanding that the ethnic formation of the Nigerian state is imperative in understanding how to address Biafra, for as an Ibo saying goes, 'a man who does not know where the rain began

6 T Falola & O Ezekwem 'Scholarly trends, issues, and themes: Introduction' in T Falola & O Ezekwem (eds) *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war* (2016) 1-3. See generally N Azikiwe *Origins of the Nigerian civil war* (1969); DC Osadebay *Building a nation: An autobiography* (1978); VG Fanso 'Leadership and national crisis in Africa: Gowon and the Nigerian civil war' (1979) 109 *Présence Africaine, Nouvelle série* 29 39-40; J Igbokwe *Igbos, twenty five years after Biafra* (1995); see EE Osaghae, E Onwudiwe & RT Suberu (eds) *The Nigerian civil war and its aftermath* (2002); CO Ojukwu *Because I am involved* (1989); AO Uzokwe *Surviving in Biafra: The story of the Nigerian civil war: Over two million died* (2003); CN Adichie *Half of the yellow sun* (2006); H Ekwe-Ekwe *Biafra revisited* (2006); AG Garba & PK Garba 'The Nigerian civil war: Causes and the aftermath' (2005) *Post-Conflict Economies in Africa* 91; OG Nkwocha *The Republic of Biafra: Once upon a time in Nigeria: My story of the Biafra-Nigerian civil war – A struggle for survival* (1967-1970) (2010); F Forsyth *The Biafra story: The making of an African legend* (1969); P Baxter *Biafra: The Nigerian civil war 1967-1970* (2014); L Heerten & AD Moses 'The Nigeria-Biafra war: Postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide' (2014) 16 *Journal of Genocide Research* 169; P Baxter *Biafra: The Nigerian civil war 1967-1970* (2015); AO Omaka *The Biafran humanitarian crisis, 1967-1970: International human rights and joint church aid* (2016) 37; P Efiog *The caged bird sang no more: My Biafra odyssey, 1966-1970* (2016); C Offodile *The politics of Biafra and future of Nigeria* (2016); O Ibeanu, N Orji & CK Iwuamadi 'Biafra separatism: Causes, consequences and remedies' (Institute for Innovation in Development, 2016); I Johnson & A Olaniyan 'The politics of renewed quest for a Biafra republic in Nigeria' (2017) 33 *Defence and Security Analysis* 1; OP Cato *Biafra: My beloved country home* (2017); RJ Julius-Adeoye 'The Nigeria-Biafra war, popular culture and agitation for sovereignty of a Biafran nation' *African Studies Centre (ASC) Working Paper* 138, March 2017; R Akresh et al 'First and second generation impacts of the Biafran war' *IZA Institute of Labor Economics Discussion Paper* 10938, August 2017; T Mbeke-Ekanem *Beyond the execution: Understanding the ethnic and military politics in Nigeria* (2018); D Anthony "'What are they observing?'" The accomplishments and missed opportunities of observer missions in the Nigerian civil war' (2018) 2 *Journal of African Military History* 87.

to beat him cannot say where he dried his body'.<sup>7</sup> This part begins with a narrative examination of ethnicity in Nigeria's formative epoch and how the issue of Biafra emerged in post-colonial Nigeria.

## 2.1 Ethnicity in Nigeria's formative epoch

Central to the scholarly discussion on ethnicity are often issues of trust and social cohesion.<sup>8</sup> It has been argued that in culturally heterogeneous communities, levels of social cohesion are usually lower given that members of groups tend to confine their trust to their members. This phenomenon, which Putnam explains as constrict theory presupposes that 'people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to "hunker down" – that is, to pull in like a turtle'.<sup>9</sup> In Africa the ethnic diversity of nation-state not only defines the social capital within the context of resources but also the political and national formations. Conflicts and political loyalties have also thrived on the wheels of ethnicity. As with many African societies, the infusion of ethnic patterns into democratic governance in Nigeria was strengthened in the wake of independence. However, while the fires were lit during colonial rule, their effects in the post-colonial state has emerged as an assiduous challenge in many parts of Africa. A prominent manifestation of this in Nigeria is the issue of Biafra which has become a recurrent challenge in post-1999 Nigeria. To understand Biafra, it is pertinent to engage the subject of ethnicity in the formation of Nigeria as a nation state. While the quest for Biafra reflects an inherent tension in the formation of a collective identity, it lies at the heart of a much broader issue which is the emergence of a united Nigeria against ethnic polarisation and divided identities. But to understand how Biafra emerged against this backdrop, it is pertinent to first examine how ethnicity has significantly shaped the political landscape of Nigeria. This formation, which really begins three decades before independence, will be examined employing a narrative technique in this part.

7 Achebe (n 1).

8 See RD Putnam 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and community in the twenty-first century' (2007) 30 *Scandinavian Political Studies* 137 149; R Wickes et al 'Ethnic diversity and its impact on community social cohesion and neighborly exchange' (2013) 36 *Journal of Urban Affairs* 51; M Ssavelkoul, M Gesthuizen & P Scheepers 'Explaining relationships between ethnic diversity and informal social capital across European countries and regions: Tests of constrict, conflict and contact theory' (2011) 40 *Social Science Research* 1091; C Wang & B Steiner 'Can ethnic-linguistic diversity explain cross-country differences in social capital formation?' *Department of Border Region Studies Working Paper Series* 3/15, 2015; AL Robinson 'Ethnic diversity, segregation and ethnocentric trust in Africa' (2017) 50 *British Journal of Political Science* 1-23; J Laurence et al 'Ethnic diversity, ethnic threat, and social cohesion: (Re)-evaluating the role of perceived out-group threat and prejudice in the relationship between community ethnic diversity and intra-community cohesion' (2019) 45 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 395.

9

### 2.1.1 Echoes of rift pre-independence

When the National Youth Movement (NYM) was formed in 1937, its central theme was to unite indigenes of Nigeria in the furtherance of their well-being under the colonial administration.<sup>10</sup> The NYM was not ethnically driven. It was motioned on the wheels of a Youth Charter which defined its principal aim as ‘the development of a united nation out of the conglomeration of peoples who inhabit Nigeria’ and described the NYM as a ‘constructive critic of the colonial government’, which would work towards the ‘removal of inequality of economic opportunities as well as for the correction of those abuses which militate against the cultural progress of the Nigerian peoples’.<sup>11</sup> Given its ethnic inclusivity and pan-Nigerian focus, the NYM defeated the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in the Lagos Town Council and Legislative Council’s elections winning ‘all but one of the seats in the Lagos Town Council and the three seats in the Legislative Council in 1938’.<sup>12</sup>

However, the pan-Nigerian agenda that united NYM caved in shortly afterwards following a personal rift between its members which degenerated from an internal scuffle to an ethnic battle. It began with the vacation of Dr KA Abayomi from the Legislative Council. With this vacancy came the need for replacement but party members were divided on who should secure the nomination. Ernest Ikoli, an Ijaw man and the President of the NYM following Abayomi’s resignation, sought to gain the seat and in his quest was supported by other prominent leaders of the movement. However, he was opposed by Nnamdi Azikiwe who, rather, supported the Vice-President of the NYM, Samuel Akinsanya, an Ijebu Yoruba from Remo in today’s Ogun state, South West of Nigeria. Though the opposition was not ethnically grounded but rather premised on ‘an

10 The NYM emerged from the Lagos Youth Movement, which was founded in 1934, in opposition of what was perceived as sub-standard education of the local population ‘designed to keep Nigerians in subordinate positions in the public service’ of the colonial administration. The Yaba Higher College had been initiated to provide locals with technical training. However, it had no affiliation with a British school and was regarded as ‘inherently inferior’ by the elites. Gann notes that ‘Yaba offered no courses on either public administration or economics, which were prerequisites for colonial administration positions’. See A Adeleke ‘Saro nationalism and the roots of elite political culture in Nigeria’ (2008) 14 *Lagos Notes and Records* 135 141-143.

11 Nigerian Youth Movement Charter (1938) quoted in O Abegunrin *The political philosophy of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (2015) 189.

12 The NNDP was the first political party established by Herbert Macaulay in 1923. The NNDP was dominated by the Saros who were the freed African slaves and their descendants. The Saros were educated and were mostly part of the colonial administration. Given that their attitude towards the locals was often elitist, the indigenes regarded them as part of British imperialism. Although the NNDP was formed as a national party, Adeleke observes that it was so ‘Nigerian’ only in name’. To the locals, Saros were perceived as ‘collaborators’ of the colonialists in the dismantling of traditional political structures. Hence, the NYM thus enjoyed popular support when it challenged the NNDP in 1938 given that it cut across the various ethnic divide and advocated for greater involvement of local indigenes in the administration of Nigeria. See JS Coleman *Nigeria: Background to nationalism* (1958) 220 225; Adeleke (n 10) 135 137 144; See also T Falola & MM Heaton *A history of Nigeria* (2008) 141; K Whiteman *Lagos: A cultural and literary history* (2012).

incipient challenge'<sup>13</sup> of Ikoli's Daily Post and Azikiwe's West African Pilot, the battleground soon turned ethnic following Akinsanya's defeat.<sup>14</sup> While Ikoli had secured nomination through the Central Committee of NYM which had a 'pre-existing policy that gave preference to its President' in the selection of electoral candidate,<sup>15</sup> his emergence was contested as tribally motivated. In support of Ikoli were prominent members of NYM including Obafemi Awolowo, HO Davis and Samuel Akintola. Azikiwe and Akinsanya alleged that 'the latter had been rejected only because the dominant group of Lagos Yorubas would not countenance the nomination of an Ijebu Yoruba'.<sup>16</sup> However, this assertion did not seem to hold much water as Awolowo was an Ijebu Yoruba from Ikenne. In fact, following the trajectory of their support, both Azikiwe and Awolowo could not have accused each other of ethnicity given that Azikiwe, in supporting Akinsanya, was supporting a Ijebu Yoruba and Awolowo in supporting Ikoli, was throwing his weight behind an Ijaw man against his own kinsman.<sup>17</sup> Much to Azikiwe's credit, however, the reasoning that he might have defected from the NYM on intertribal grounds is speculative at best, also in light of the fact that this was also never truly confirmed by Azikiwe.

However, the consequence of his move as with Akinsanya from NYM became ethnic with the mass exodus of Ibos and Ijebu Yorubas and the formation of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). Although the NCNC had a nationalist outlook and included Yoruba, Hausa and members, it was regarded as an 'Ibo party'<sup>18</sup> primarily due to the weight of Azikiwe's presence.<sup>19</sup> In 1944, Awolowo formed the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* – a cultural ethnic group which literally translates to the society of Oduduwa's children (that is, the Yoruba people) – later transformed to the Action Group in 1951. While scholars have argued that this was in response to an apprehension of Ibo dominance,<sup>20</sup> what was clear is that Awolowo wanted to 'see to it that the Yorubas evolved an ethnic solidarity among themselves just as the Ibibios and the Ibos had done, in order to ensure a strong and harmonious federal union among the

13 G Onuoha *Challenging the state in Africa: MASSOB and the crisis of self-determination in Nigeria* (2011) 66.

14 As above.

15 According to Ademola, '[t]he Movement's policy, adopted in 1938, was that when the President declared his interest to contest an election he should be selected automatically. On the basis of this policy, only two of the three seats in the Legislative Council had been thrown open to the party members in 1938. The third seat had been granted to the President, Dr Abayomi.' Ademola (n 10) 145; S Gbadegesin 'Politics of principle or division?' *The Nation* 8 March 2019.

16 RL Sklar *Nigerian political parties: Power in an emergent African nation* (1963) 53-54.

17 EO Ojo 'Minority groups: Bridgeheads in Nigerian politics, 1950s-1966' in U Usuanlele & B Ibhawoh (eds) *Minority rights and the national question in Nigeria* (2017) 61-67.

18 BO Elufiede *Labour unions and politics: The experience of Nigerian working class* (2010) 74.

19 Coleman (n 12) 344.

20 L Diamond *Class, ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria: The failure of the first republic* (1988) 47; Elufiede (n 18) 74; NJO Ijeaku *The Igbo and their Niger Delta neighbours: We are no second fools* (2009) 56; Sklar (n 16) 68.

peoples of Nigeria'.<sup>21</sup>

While *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* regarded itself as a neutral organisation, its neutrality was questioned from the start 'by partisans of the NCNC [who regarded the organisation] as an overt political threat'.<sup>22</sup> Statements that began to emerge from its members smeared the neutrality of the group. In a December 1948 issue of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* monthly bulletin, one of the leaders of the organisation alleged that the British 'bunched [people] together'.<sup>23</sup> What he seemed to allege was the presence of difference and this came quite clearly in his assertion that '[w]e never knew the Ibos, but since we came to know them we have tried to be friendly and neighbourly'.<sup>24</sup> He went on to state that '[w]e have tolerated enough from a class of Ibos and addle-brained Yorubas who have mortgaged their thinking caps to Azikiwe and his hirelings'.<sup>25</sup> Amid mounting tensions, the Ibo-Yoruba cleavage deepened and found full expression in Ikoli's *Daily Post* and Azikiwe's *West African Pilot*. The *West African Pilot* called out *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* as a 'fascist organisation' to be 'dismembered'.<sup>26</sup> The election of Azikiwe as president of the Ibo State Union during a Pan-Ibo conference at Aba in 1948 and his statement that 'it would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages',<sup>27</sup> led his oppositions to conflate the Pan-Ibo movement with his person and suggest that 'the NCNC was determined to impose Ibo domination over Nigeria'.<sup>28</sup> This rhetoric also seemed to have been enhanced through the legal arrangements of constitutional processes. The Richard Constitution of 1946 effectively introduced a tripartite division of Nigeria (into West, North and East) which effectively arrested efforts towards fostering collective nationality.<sup>29</sup> The division of the country into three regions strengthened the base of ethnic divisions which cultured political processes and made erstwhile nationalists appeal to their ethnic bases for political support. However, it subsumed other minority groups in the southern territories to the west and east, hence assuming homogeneity, which for many of these groups did not exist. In later years this would deepen ethnic cleavages between minority and majority groups.

While these political developments were occurring in the south, a political awakening was brewing in the north. With the emergence of regional autonomy strengthened through the Richard Constitution, the need for the north to be represented on the political scene started to emerge. However, due to indirect rule, much of the governance of this region fell to the traditional rulers. However, in the early 1940s young educated

21 O Awolowo *Awo: The autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (1960) 168.

22 Sklar (n 16) 69.

23 Coleman (n 12) 346.

24 As above.

25 As above.

26 As above.

27 Coleman (n 12) 347.

28 As above.

29 M Crowder *The story of Nigeria* (1962) 242; Agbara (n 4) 86.

northerners, including Aminu Kano, Tafawa Balewa, Sa'ad Zungur and Aliyu Dikko, began to build political momentum. Although this movement started with the establishment of cultural organisations,<sup>30</sup> such as the Bauchi General Improvement Union in 1943 (later defunct due to the absence of support Emir of Bauchi), the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) in 1949 (initially formed to assist the northern rulers 'in the proper discharge of their duties') and the Northern Elements' Progressive Union in 1950 (a more radical organisation that broke from the NPC desirous of 'radical political reforms' and ended up making the conservative NPC of 1949 moribund), the northern political awakening morphed from cultural platforms to a political union with the revival of the NPC prior to the 1951 elections.<sup>31</sup> The revival was borne out of a need to transform the north into a democratic space and also consolidate the northern identity in national government. Prior to this time, the rhetoric of countervailing southern domination had been chorused in the northern region. This was because the southerners dominated colonial administration in the region and the northerners were significantly disadvantaged both in terms of education and political opportunities. The north was particularly wary of the south and unification in general due to the fear that southerners will 'take the place of the Europeans in the north'. In response to Azikiwe's call for unification in 1948, Tafawa Balewa put this northern sentiment strictly in emphasising that '[t]he southern tribes who are ... pouring into the north in ever increasing numbers and ... do not mix with the northern people ... [are regarded in the North] ... as invaders'.<sup>32</sup>

The northern wariness of the south as a whole was most evident during the conflict that ensued following the motion for Nigerian independence by Anthony Enahoro in 1953. The conflict, which culminated in the Kano Riot of 1953, brought to the fore the resentment of the north towards the south in areas of education, jobs, socio-economic conditions and political opportunities.<sup>33</sup> Enahoro had called for the independence of Nigeria by 1956, but the northerners opposed this call for independence, arguing first that it was imperative for the north to catch up with the south and get rid of southern control. The northern leaders were booed in Lagos and vilified in the southern press. Embittered, they called for secession. However, in a bid to counter this call, a southern delegation led by Samuel Akintola was sent to the north to mend fences, while putting the call out for self-government. In Kano, this culminated in an inter-ethnic conflict between the north and the south. Although this tension was subsequently quelled and independence was eventually agreed, the north-south ethnic cleavage was to be seen in a plethora of other areas leading up to independence such as population census.

In the ensuing rhetoric, minority groups also began to clamour for

30 Coleman (n 12) 356-363.

31 Coleman (n 12) 363.

32 Coleman (n 12) 361.

33 Diamond (n 20) 49.

autonomy given that the ethnic plurality of these three regions made it daunting to regard the political administration as a function solely of the three dominant groups. In the northern region there were Igalas, Kanuris, Idomas, Igbirras, Nupes and Tivs. In the south there were Ijaws, Urhobos, Efiks and Itsekiris. However, the creation of states within these regions were contested by the dominant groups and often supported by the opposition. For instance, the formation of the Middle Belt State in the north was supported by the Action Group<sup>34</sup> on the basis that the Yoruba-populated northern provinces of Ilorin and Kabba would be merged with the western region.<sup>35</sup> The Action Group had also supported the creation of the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State (COR State) in the eastern region but was less sympathetic towards the formation of Mid-West State in the Western Region. On its part, the NCNC contested the creation of the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State (COR State), but sympathised with mid-westerners in the formation of a Mid-West State within the western region. With the Action Group in crisis in the early 1960s, the formation of the Midwest State could barely be contested in 1963. The ethnic tensions shaped the character of political alliances post-independence. In the wake of independence, this alliance was between the NPC and the NCNC against the AG. Shortly afterwards in 1964, the NPC broke ranks with the NCNC and alliance was formed between Samuel Akintola's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and the NPC. As a result, the formation of Nigeria was incubated in an ethnic hub between east and west; north and south and whenever so convenient, cross-patterns emerged.

### ***2.1.2 The ethnic quest for Biafra in post-colonial Nigeria***

The ethnic tensions that curated democratic processes in many post-colonial African states set crevices in the existence of the nation-state. National identities that emerged on the heels of ethnic allegiances soon began to demonstrate fractures. Democracy was soon tailor-made to fit the dynamics of party loyalties and patronage along geopolitical zones. And in some cases, elections became ethnic battlefields.

Amidst such high-stake ethnic tensions that characterised the political process in post-colonial Nigeria, the military stepped in on 15 January 1966. While one might have hoped that the intervention premised on the need to instil democracy and good governance would have lived up to its promise, the ethnic composition of the officers invested in reorganising the Nigerian state only fomented tensions, primarily mostly in the north. The fact that the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa, the premier of the northern region, Ahmadu Bello, and the western region, Samuel Akintola, were killed while the premier of the eastern region, Michael Okpara, was spared, positioned the north against the south, with the

34 VC Okafor *A roadmap for understanding African politics: Leadership and political integration in Nigeria* (2006) 102.

35 BJ Dudley *Parties and politics in Northern Nigeria* (1968) 97.

east mostly in the line of attack. In the north thousands of Igbos were killed, and while a counter-coup, led by Aguiyi-Ironsi, sought to restore national unity, the coup was regarded in the north as an Igbo-led coup 'motivated by the desire of Igbo officers to attain regional domination.'<sup>36</sup> In July 1966 Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed in a counter-coup by a group of northerners. However, the installation of Yakubu Gowon as head of state and his promise to 'review the issue of national standing' did little to instil trust in the easterners. Following the killings of easterners in the north and the seeming lack of adequate response from the federal government to assuage this grievance either through extensive compensatory schemes, inquiries or the provision of aid, the belief of many easterners in national entity was gravely shattered. At the helm of governance in the eastern region was Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, who was faced with the displacement crisis in the east as the military governor of the eastern region.

In 1966 Gowon decided to organise a constitutional conference to chart the path of Nigeria's future. At the *ad hoc* constitutional conference organised by Gowon in August-September 1966,<sup>37</sup> a confederation was generally favoured by the north, east and west. However, the mid-west states wanted a federated state with the creation of new states. While the creation of more states was initially opposed by the north, it was subsequently accepted supposedly from 'pressure exerted on the constitutional conference by influential personalities like Joseph Tarka, leader of the UMBC [United Middle Belt Congress]'.<sup>38</sup> The west supported state creation along ethnic and linguistic lines.<sup>39</sup> However, the east rejected the idea of state creation by the national government requiring that such decision should be left to the regional government. On the issue of whether a plebiscite should be conducted to ascertain the wishes of people within regions on the subject, the eastern delegates did not commit in light of a conference that was to be held in the eastern region that would discuss the matter. The constitutional conference was subsequently adjourned. However, before the next meeting date on 24 October, violence erupted in the north against the easterners sparked by a report that northerners were being killed in the east. The meeting was adjourned from 24 October to 17 November. However, the eastern delegation insisted that northern troops should be withdrawn from the west prior to their attendance of the constitutional conference.<sup>40</sup> Regarding this as a mere excuse but knowing that the participation of the east was integral to the legitimacy of the process, Gowon suspended the constitutional conference *sine die*.<sup>41</sup>

Seeking to assuage the crisis, Gowon and Ojukwu agreed to a meeting

36 T Falola *The history of Nigeria* (1999) 116.

37 Falola (n 36) 119.

38 U Okupu 'The politics of state creation and the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war' (1982) 11 *Transafrican Journal of History* 147-154.

39 JI Elaigwu *Gowon: The biography of a soldier-statesman* (1986) 112.

40 Elaigwu (n 39) 113; JO Ihonvbere & T Shaw *Illusions of power: Nigeria in transition* (1998) 63.

41 Elaigwu (n 39) 114.

in Aburi convened by the Ghanaian President at the time, President Joseph Ankrah.<sup>42</sup> The meeting was held in Aburi and attended by the military governors of the regions including Lagos. The outcome of the meeting was the Aburi Accord which, among others, denounced the use of force, sought to re-establish regional autonomy, cede more powers to the Supreme Military Council and protect displaced populations. However, the interpretation and implementation of the Aburi Accord soon created tensions. Upon Gowon's return to Lagos, government officials soon punched holes in the Aburi Accord regarding it as a strategy to weaken the centre and destroy the federation.<sup>43</sup> For instance, one of the consequences of the Aburi Accord was that it changed the structure of Nigeria into a confederation establishing regional commands under the control of the regional governors and a military headquarters with equal representation to be 'headed by a Chief of Staff' – hence weakening the role of the head of state. Also, the Aburi Accord vested executive and legislative control of the state in the Supreme Military Council (comprised of the regional governors) – a departure from Decree No 1 (Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree) of 1966 which placed the executive control in the head of the federal military government as supreme commander.<sup>44</sup>

For Ojukwu, the Aburi Accord granted a much-needed regional autonomy. Ojukwu enacted three significant edicts: the Legal Education Edict, the Court of Appeal Edict and the Revenue Collection Edict.<sup>45</sup> The Legal Education Edict sought to break the east's educational ties with the rest of the country. The Court of Appeal Edict sought to end the right of judicial appeal to the Federal Supreme Court. The Revenue Collection Edict sought to collect all revenue from the east into the Eastern Regional Treasury. Disagreements on the meaning and content of the Aburi Accord soon degenerated and on 30 May 1967, Ojukwu declared the Republic of Biafra as an autonomous state given the failure of the federal military government to comply with the agreement reached in Aburi, Ghana.<sup>46</sup>

The ethnic cleavage that ensued from the dynamics of the war pitched the east against the rest of Nigeria but mostly the north. Earlier at the *ad hoc* constitutional conference, the west had demonstrated a commitment to national dialogue with Awolowo presenting some of the grievances and perceived injustices that had to be addressed. Though Awolowo had mooted that the west would secede if the east seceded from Nigeria,<sup>47</sup> the west was ready to pursue national unity if their grievances were

42 See JO Aremu 'Ghana's role in the Nigerian war: Mediator or collaborator?' (2014) 1 *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1.

43 FA Baptiste 'Constitutional conflict in Nigeria: Aburi and after' (1967) 23 *The World Today* 301-306; PO Nwaogu *Politics and political behaviour: Nigeria in focus* (2017) 47.

44 *The Aburi Accord* 1967.

45 See Falola (n 36) 121; EE Osaghae *Crippled giant: Nigeria since independence* (1998) 64-65.

46 See 'Biafra: Proclamation of the Republic of Biafra' (1967) 6 *International Legal Materials* 665.

47 Chief Awolowo's speech to Western Leaders of Thought in Ibadan, 1 May 1967. See also CR Nixon 'Self-determination: The Nigeria/Biafra case' (1972) 24 *World Politics* 473-478-479.

sorted. Prior to the civil war Awolowo had tried to dialogue with Ojukwu leading a National Conciliation Committee on 6 May 1967. However, this conciliation failed to achieve its aim. At the commencement of the war, the ethnic cleavage between the west and east emerged from the decision taken by Awolowo as finance minister to stop food supply. Noting that humanitarian food supplies that should have been for the victims of the war were being diverted by soldiers on the Biafran side, Awolowo mooted the idea to 'stop sending the food there'.<sup>48</sup> The economic blockade, proposed by Awolowo and implemented by the federal government was the strategy that effectively ended the war.<sup>49</sup> Although fighting ceased and the war ended in favour of a united Nigeria, the ethnic cleavage precipitated by the question of Biafra has continued to linger for more than five decades.

The lingering nature of this quest thus precipitates the need to draw out lessons on what issues are imperative in redressing Biafra. From the discussion in this chapter, the factors that precipitated Biafra may be categorised into proximate and ultimate causations. On proximate causation, three significant factors are responsible: the inadequate protection of human rights including inadequate redress of the plight of the displaced populations (the Ibo pogrom); the absence of consensus on the structure of political governance (the Aburi Accord); and the failure to provide justice for losses and grievances (remediation). On the ultimate causation, three factors are responsible: the conflation of personal and group interests with national governance (the premise on which the NYM fell apart and on which political party structures emerged in the post-colonial state), the fixation on fears of tribal dominance (the premise on which much of the ethno-phobic rhetoric emerged); and the persistence of the *status quo* (stalemate of national dialogue on how to move forward which led to military intervention and breed the fertile ground for the war). A relevant question from a consideration of these factors is whether these causations still resonate, albeit in a nuanced form in the Biafran agitation post-1999.

### 3 Biafra post-1999: How should we reach forward?

In reaching forward it is imperative to resolve the causations around which Biafra has emerged. In the previous section, these causations were identified and the issue which became of relevance to determine is whether these causations still exists, in a nuanced form in the Biafran agitation post-1999. In engaging this discussion, it is relevant to consider the proximate and ultimate causations.

The first proximate causation is the inadequate protection of human rights including inadequate redress of the plight of the displaced

48 'Obafemi Awolowo in own words responding to issues Achebe raised' *Premium Times* 8 October 2012.

49 BA Oyeniya 'Beyond the blame game: Theorising the Nigeria-Biafra war' in Falola & Ezekwem (n 6) 111 112.

populations. In the 1960s the inadequate protection of human rights as a precipitant derived from the killings of Ibo people in the north and the absence of protective measures which resulted in significant population displacement to the east and absence of compensation and adequate support. At present, inadequate protection of human rights as a precipitant of the nascent Biafran agitation resonates in the use of force and arbitrary detention of pro-Biafran agitators by government machineries through military operations.<sup>50</sup> The second proximate causal factor is the absence of consensus on the structure of political governance. In the 1960s this was demonstrated through the failure to implement the Aburi Accord which led Ojukwu to declare the independence of Biafra. Post-1999, the absence of consensus on the structure of political governance as a precipitant of the nascent Biafran agitation derives from the absence of consensus on restructuring governance in Nigeria. Citing issues of trust and failures of past efforts in addressing the inequities in the political governance, pro-Biafran agitators have called for a referendum as a means of furthering the discussion on political governance.<sup>51</sup> Given that the recommendations of the 2014 Sovereign National Conference are yet to be implemented,<sup>52</sup> cautious optimism has trailed conversations on political governance. The third proximate causal factor is the failure to provide justice for losses and grievances. In the 1960s, this was demonstrated through the absence of adequate compensation for those who lost their lives and properties during the May to September 1966 killings. After Biafra the inadequacy of compensatory schemes served to conflate perceptions of marginalisation with grievance.<sup>53</sup> Pro-Biafran agitations post-1999 have expressed this. Although it is noteworthy that the Buhari-led government agreed to pay compensation to victims of the Biafran war in 2017,<sup>54</sup> delivering on such promise is imperative as yet victims have not been paid.<sup>55</sup>

The first ultimate causal factor is the conflation of personal and group interests with national governance. This was the premise on which the NYM was disintegrated and lost its definitive place as a platform for furthering nationalism. In the formation of the post-colonial state, these interests were essentially how national governance was organised both in the formation of party membership and political alliances. At present, the conflation of these interests with national governance has increasingly led

50 'Nigeria protests over Biafra activist's arrest' *BBC* 10 November 2015; Amnesty International Nigeria: 'Bullets were raining everywhere': Deadly repression of pro-Biafra activists' (2016).

51 E Mamah 'We'll accept restructuring from referendum – IPOB' *Vanguard* 17 May 2018.

52 E Njoku 'Jonathan to Buhari: Implement 2014 confab recommendations' *The Sun* 3 February 2017; E Akinkuotu 'Restructuring: I expected Buhari to implement Confab report – Jonathan' *Punch* 20 November 2018.

53 See generally P Obi-Ani *Post-civil war political and economic reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983* (2009); B Maiangwa 'Revisiting the Nigeria-Biafra war: The intangibles of post-war reconciliation' (2016) 4 *International Journal of World Peace* 39.

54 '47 years after Biafra civil war, Nigerian govt agrees to pay victims N88 billion' *Premium Times* 30 October 2017.

55 I Nnochiri 'N88bn compensation: FG yet to pay us – Biafra war victims' *Vanguard* 8 January 2018.

to allegations of Ibo marginalisation by their representatives in government and the elite political class in national government. The second ultimate causal factor is the fixation on fears of tribal dominance. Fears of tribal dominance catalysed political tensions between the east and west and between the north and south in the formation of the post-colonial state. Among principal actors in Nigeria's formative epoch, issues of tribal dominance curated political conversations. Post-1999, tribal undertones are increasingly fuelling agitations and also brewing conflicts. Against this causal factor, the Biafran agitation has oscillated. The third ultimate causal factor is the persistence of the status quo – primarily, the stalemate on how to move forward has given strength to these agitations. This persistence locates Biafra within the broader agitations of groups such as the Oduduwa Republic, the Arewa Republic and the Niger-Delta Republic, to mention a few. The fact that the government is yet to unveil a conclusive plan to address these issues begs the question as to the future of 'unity and faith, peace and progress'.<sup>56</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

Post-1999, one of the issues that has significantly impacted on the furtherance of democratic governance in Nigeria has been the issue of Biafra. Through the optics of history, this chapter revisits the issue. The pertinent question which this chapter interrogates is: How should we look back to reach forward in addressing the issue of Biafra? Essentially this chapter seeks to connect the dots on how the sub-stratum of Nigeria's formation moulds the current wave of agitations. This chapter goes into the ethnic formations of the Nigerian state and argues that in (re)solving the question of Biafra, it is pertinent to address the proximate and ultimate causations that have prolonged the existence of the issue. On proximate causations, this chapter identifies three main factors: the inadequate protection of human rights including inadequate redress of the plight of the displaced populations; the absence of consensus on the structure of political governance; and the failure to provide justice for losses and grievances. On ultimate causation, this chapter further identifies three causal factors, namely, the conflation of personal and group interests with national governance; the fixation on fears of tribal dominance; and the persistence of the *status quo*. Engaging in a meaningful resolution of these issues is pivotal to (re)solving Biafra post-2019.