

Innovations

The Challenge of Ethnicity to Nigerian Technological Breakthrough: The Case of the Nigerian Civil War Innovations

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Abstract: *The Nigerian state has been fraught with ethnic antagonism since independence. The Nigerian Civil War fought between the Nigerian Government and the Biafra was not without ethnic interest. When the war broke out, the effective blockade of the Nigerian forces resulted in a shortage of supplies on the part of the Biafra. At this point, the Biafra developed its technological innovations to prosecute the war. In the Nigerian Civil War publications, a great emphasis seems to have been placed on ethnic issues. Ethnic coverage has not adequately covered ethnic impediments in harnessing the civil war technological discoveries. Therefore, to fulfill this fundamental objective, this paper examines the challenge of ethnicity in Nigerian technological breakthroughs using the Nigerian Civil War as a case study. The paper argues that if not for ethnic antagonism, the Biafra technological discoveries during the war would have been the best time for Nigeria's technological takeoff. Similarly, the negative employment of ethnicity by the political leaders to advance regional interest at the detriment of national one was a factor in the inability of Nigeria state to harness the war's technological discoveries. Using a qualitative research method, the paper concludes that absorbing the ex-Biafra military personnel would have technologically determined the essence of Nigeria today.*

Keywords: *Civil War, Ethnicity, Technological discovery, Nigeria and Biafra*

Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with over 250 ethnic groups and the ethnography of the various ethnic nationalities instilled in the people a sense of identity. Ethnic identity and consciousness and inter-ethnic tension among the different ethnic groups have threatened the unity of Nigeria. Scholars are unanimous, to a large extent, that the attempt by one ethnic nationality to short-change the order was a significant factor in the cause of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967. (Okonkwo Eze, 2015) notes that ethnic bigotry was not only a substantial factor in the collapse of the First

Republic but also orchestrated the Nigerian Civil War. There is a connection between ethnic consciousness and the Nigerian Civil War.

The root of ethnic tension in Nigeria can be attributed to the amalgamation of the Eastern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. One of the aftermaths of the amalgamation was ethnic antagonism, which Nigeria had to contend with in her journey towards nationhood. At independence, there was inequality in the political structure. (Ejemheare Ighodalo, 2023) notes that the imbalance in the political structure was due to the disparity in the regional composition of the country, which gave rise to regional domination and political crisis. Five years after Nigeria's Independence, ethnic tension led to explosive conditions that metamorphosed into the breakdown of law and order, and the end was the Nigerian Civil War between the Nigerian Government Led by Col. Yakubu Gowon and the Eastern Region (Biafra) led by Lt. Col. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. (Emordi & Oseghale, 2008) attributed the crisis that led to the civil war was attributed to January 15 and July 29, 1966, Coup. The Northerners perceived the outcome of the January coup as an attempt by the Igbo to eliminate the Hausa/Fulani from the political structure of the country. The thinking emanated from the fact that the casualties were mainly politicians from the North. In the riot that followed, thousands of Igbo and other Southerners in the North were killed. According to (Emordi & Oseghale, 2008):

The riots were unleashed upon the people of Eastern extractions for spilling the blood of prominent Northern personalities in the January coup, which was assumed to have been organized by Igbo military officers for specific ethnic reasons.

(Udida Undiyaundeye, 2008) maintains that the coup was initially welcome all over the country, but when the nature of killing was known, the North felt short-changed. The feeling of being swindled by the Igbo would have been cleared if Aguiyi Ironsi, an Igbo who was handed over, had punished the coup plotters who were in detention in different parts of the country. The promotion in the military shortly after Ironsi came to power was important in this narrative. Out of the Twenty-one (21) officers promoted, eighteen (18) were Igbo, which heightened the Northern fear of domination by the Igbo.

The January 15 coup led to the event that led Nigeria to the part of ethnic tension and civil war. (Oluleye cited in Ejemheare, 2025) notes that the Yoruba in the group were faithful to the plans by killing Akintola. Never the less, the Igbo among the group were unfaithful; they spared Dr. Michael Okpara. Major Nzeogu planned to overhaul the country, but a few Igbo senior military officers among the coup plotters betrayed the group. (Elechi Amadi, 1973) maintained that from the outcome of the January 1966 coup, he had a strong feeling that there would be serious ethnic conflict in the country.

The July 1966 coup was in revenge for the January coup. (Olusegun Obasanjo, 1980) notes this when he said the purpose of the July coup was to “revenge upon the East by the North.” The coup was meant to bring in Northern leadership. Brigadier Ogundipe, from the Western Region, was the most senior officer in the army, and since he was not of Northern extraction, the coup plotters rejected his leadership. Lt. Col. Gowon was the most senior officer from the North, and since the coup was meant to install Northern leadership, the country's leadership was handed over to him.

According to Ojukwu, by 1966, over 50,000 Igbo were killed in Nigeria (Ahiara Declaration, 1969). As a result of the vengeance directed at the Igbo, other Nigerians from the South, like the Midwesterners, Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik, and the Yoruba, were killed. The Igbo started reprisal attacks on Northerners living in the East as retaliation for the massacre of the Igbo in the North (National Archive Enugu, 1967). The social and political atmosphere in the country continued to degenerate as time went on until May 27, 1967, when Gowon created 12 States to destroy the economic base of the Eastern region with the hope that it would put a stop to the crisis. The state creation separated the oil-rich Niger Delta from the Eastern region. On May 30, 1967, the Eastern Region was declared a sovereign state of Biafra under the leadership of Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. The war started as a move to resist the country's disintegration.

The Biafra's inequippedness at the beginning of the war and the effective blockade of the federal forces made it develop its technological innovations to prosecute the war. Therefore, this study aims to discuss ethnic impediment as a factor that militated against the Nigerian Government's harnessing of Biafran technological discoveries during the Nigerian civil war.

Conceptual Clarification

Ethnicity

Etymologically, ethnicity comes from *ethnos*, a common culture and language group. Scholars have recently agreed that ethnicity and tribalism have no dividing line. Defining ethnicity has attracted attention from scholars, and to this end, it has been defined in many ways. (Nnoli cited in Orngu, 2014) sees ethnicity as:

A social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal characters of their boundaries. The relevant communal factors may be language, culture, or both. In Africa, language has been the most crucial variable.

According to (Sanda cited in Eze, 2015), ethnicity is "the active sense of identification with some ethnic unit whether or not this group has the institutional structure of its own or whether it has only real existence in the pre-colonial approach." (Ifidon cited

in Eze, 2015) notes that "ethnicity is not merely the fact of belonging to an ethnic group, or of sharing the consciousness of the identity with others. It is also the willingness to act on its behalf and limit one's vision, scope, and activity to the group. The social formation of ethnicity must not necessarily be homogeneous in cultural and linguistic settings. Slight cultural and linguistic dissimilarity is not adequate ground to break the attribute of ethnicity (Orngu, 2014). Ethnic consciousness is intense devotion towards one's ethnic group, which is aimed at protecting the interests of other ethnic groups at the expense of others. This is what is obtainable in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

Ethnic interests dominate the Nigerian civil war. The war initially started as a war between the Hausa/Fulani and the Igbo of the Eastern region. It was initially intended to be fought with troops from the North. This was to address the problem of the lack of sincerity on the part of the other regions, like the Midwest and the West, to fight with the East. To this end, Gowon ordered the repatriation of troops to their region of origin on August 9, 1966.

Technology

Since time immemorial, man has found a way to improve his quality of life. Early man discovered how to make tools from stone and iron to add value to his life. The complete application of man's knowledge, skills, and materials represents technology today (Emmanuel Egbogah, 2015). Technology not only plays a basic role in wealth creation but also advances the quality of life and economic growth in modern society. Technology is the application of knowledge or science for practical purposes.

The Yardstick for measuring a country's strength is the technology level. Whether in agriculture, military, health, or industrial contexts, technologically backward nations are at the mercy of technologically advanced nations. In the military, the automation of warfare has made the battlefield unnecessary in today's warfare. The mechanization of agriculture resulted in the mass production of food for humanity. Medical tourism is a mode of trade between developing countries and developed Western nations, and this is possible because of the advanced health technology of the West. The application of science and technology in today's globalized world determines nations' economic development. Science and technology are instruments of power that can influence people's social, economic, and cultural conditions. (Uzodigwe et al., 2021) notes that the desire for innovative ideas is not new in Africa. During the Nigerian civil war, the economic blockade of the Nigerian Government became a catalyst that brought out the technological ingenuity in Biafra. The technological innovations of Biafra in the war demonstrated that the black man could be self-reliant with determination.

The Issue of Ethnicity in the War

In the Nigeria Civil War, the real enemies of the Biafra were the Northerners, while the Northerners were the real antagonists of the Biafra. In Biafra, their defensive effort was geared towards protecting the northern borders, and the Federal Government concentrated on protecting the northern border between Nigeria and the East (Alexander Madiabo, 1980). The war initially started as a conflict between the Hausa/Fulani and the Igbo of the Eastern region. The Nigerian Government planned to attack the Biafra with their troops that originated from the North. (Olusegun Obasanjo, 1980) notes that "in planning and concept, the war was intended to be fought by the troops located in the North, and they were to be supplied mainly from Kaduna. The strategy was to handle the challenge of lack of integrity on the part of other Southerners to fight with the East.

The pogrom was perpetrated by the Hausa/Fulani against the Igbo in particular and Southerners in general. Consequently, other parts of Southern Nigeria suffered from the Hausa/Fulani onslaught. According to (Ejemheare Ighdalo, 2019), every Southerner was a target at the peak of the killing in the North. This factor initially made the Southerners sympathize with the Biafra. For Example, the military Government of Midwest Brigadier David Akpode Ejoor had initially refused to let the Midwest be used as a launching ground against Biafra (Ademoyega, 1980). However, Ojukwu's pronouncement that the non-Easterners should vacate the Eastern region and the Biafra invasion of the Midwest on August 9, 1967, estranged Southerners from the Biafran cause. The people of the Midwest regarded the Biafran invasion as an unwarranted attack, especially after Ojukwu appointed Major Albert Okonkwo, a Western Igbo military administrator of the Midwest. Biafra declared the Midwest a republic from Nigeria without consulting the people, worsened the matter.

The people of the Midwest regarded the Declaration of Independence as an attempt by Biafra to deny them the right of self-determination in her pursuit of the same right of self-determination. The people of the Midwest believed it should not be the responsibility of outsiders to pull them out of Nigeria. After the invasion of the Midwest, the Biafran forces were heading to the West before the federal forces crushed them. This raised fear on the part of Southerners regarding their role under Biafra. This intensified the desire of the Southerners to join the federal forces to crush Biafra (Ejemheare Ighodalo, 2022). The Biafran invasion of the Midwest and heading towards the West gave other ethnic groups in the South the impression that Biafra's aim was not only to defend itself but also nurse the ambition for territorial expansion. "Ojukwu was in pain to placate the non-Igbo majority of the Midwest and to assure them that he bore them no harm" (Forsyth cited in Ejemheare, 2022). By the end of the war, almost all parts of the country were united against the Biafra.

The Challenge of the Biafra

In May 1967, the Consultative Committee was summoned by Ojukwu and, after reviewing the event in Nigeria from 1914-1967, mandated Ojukwu to declare the sovereign state of Biafra (Iwueze Olisa, 1991). After the war broke out, the Nigerian Government, after accessing what Biafra had on the ground regarding personnel and ammunition, told the world that the Biafra rebellion would be crushed within an hour (Biafra News Letter, 1967, October 27). The Nigerian Government strategically created an armed imbalance between the Biafran forces and the Nigerian forces. When Gowon ordered the army to go to their region, the Eastern army that returned to the East did not come with guns, but the Northern soldiers that left the East went with their guns. According to (Fredrick Forsyth, 1969):

The Northern born of Garrison of Enugu was repatriated to the North by rail. By the term of the August 9 concordat, they were allowed to take with them their arms and ammunition as a protection against being waylaid en route. These arms were then supposed to be returned after the troops got home. Nevertheless, once in Kaduna, the troops from Enugu kept their weapons, and no more was heard about them. Elsewhere, the Eastern-born troops were clamoring to return home. Apart from the fugitives of July 29 and the succeeding days, other groups were still intact from the North; some of them were sent home but without arms or escort and were forced to submit to repeat molesting on the way.

They used the policy of the soldiers relocating to their region to disarm the Biafra. It was to the advantage of the Nigerian army. The challenge of lack of ammunition was acknowledged by (Philip Effiong, 2000) when he declared:

Very little ammunition was available for a planned counter, and there was precisely little one could do without ammunition. The promised artillery pieces and heavy mortars by Ojukwu were nowhere to be found, and the few weapons available lacked even the first-line ammunition to feed them. It was a very gloomy picture. This specter of lack of adequate ammunition was to haunt the planning staff of Biafra high command till the end of the war.

With the challenge of the lack of ammunition on the part of Biafra, the Nigerian Government envisaged the Biafra prosecution of the war would depend heavily on the importation of arms through the Atlantic Ocean. It took the necessary steps to frustrate it. The Nigerian Navy was used to blockade the sea to prevent the shipment of arms and other necessary supplies to the Eastern region. The Nigerian

Government canceled all flights to the Eastern region and even notified the international community that there should be no flight without clearance from Lagos (Atofarati, (1992). Some of the Biafran troops that invaded Ewohimi in the present Edo state had no gun or uniform (Philip Ekeoba, 2019). In the same vein, (Fredrick Forsyth, 1969) declares that the Biafran forces that invaded the Midwest were not well equipped militarily for the Midwest operation.

When the war started, the Biafra had many problems to contend with. Some of the problems were artificially created by the Nigerian Government. The creation of states shrank the Biafra's economic bases. The policy of soldiers returning to their region created an arm imbalance in favour of the Federal Government. These challenges forced the Biafra to look inward for survival; as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention.

Biafran Technological Innovation

The total blockade by the federal Government rendered the economy of the Republic of Biafra very weak, and it could not contribute towards the needs of the Biafran army in terms of food, clothing, and weapons. (Ogumika Oparah, 2014) notes that:

Right from the beginning of the war, hunger was identified as a hindrance to the fighting spirit of the forces, the Biafra, and the people's will to continue to support the fight. This is a direct consequence of the economic blockade imposed on the region by the Federal Government.

The Biafra was ill-equipped at the beginning of the war. The technology wizardry of the Igbo predated the war. The technological feats of the Awka blacksmiths were well-known in Africa before the war. (Augustine Igwe, 2024) remarks that communities embarked on a long-distance journey to Awka to buy arms even before Nigeria gained independence to fight inter-tribal war. (Philip Effiong, 1983) the second in command to Odumegwu Ojukwu made this remark about the Igbo:

I have made specific concrete proposals to the Government. The Government should get hold of the Igbos and use them in its sacred duty to win peace. Nigeria needs the Igbos to achieve a lot because they are ingenious, hardworking, and resourceful. I don't think there is any nation in the whole world that can beat them.

It was the ingenuity and technological wizardry of the Igbo that they used to sustain the war for thirty (30) months, even though the Nigerian Government initially underrated the Biafra. When the war breaks out, the Nigerian Government sees the Biafra as a group that will be crushed within an hour.

Before the war broke out, Ojukwu remarked that Biafra had only 150 guns. They envisaged the challenge of arms shortage early enough. This was why Ojukwu put forward the concept of military-industrial research even before the war broke out. The secretary to the Biafra government, N. U. Akpan, declared that scientists and engineers had prepared to face the challenge of arms shortage (Emordi & Oseghale, 2008). Consequently, Biafra's Research and Production Department was established to conduct research and produce materials to prosecute the war. According to (Dan Chukwu, 2008):

The Research and Production Department comprised Biafran engineers, scientists, technicians, and local blacksmiths. All kinds of artisans and craftsmen were also in the unit's service. The unit for efficiency was divided into several branches, with production centers established at various strategic places for raw materials and the dimensions of the war.

The research department produced pistols, revolvers, dane guns, flint-lock guns, single and double-barrel guns, automatic rifles, and artillery guns. Other products included rockets, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and armored vehicles. The personnel armored carriers were made for soldiers' deployment to the battlefield and to carry armored tanks (Dan Chukwu, 2008).

The homemade Booby trap produced by Biafra was second to none. The Booby trap can only be operated by the Biafra soldiers who are trained to handle it. The most devastating weapon invented by the Biafra was the rocket-propelled missile popularly called Ogbunigwe. There was great apprehension on the part of the federal forces when Ogbunigwe is mentioned as it killed many Nigerian soldiers. The RAP went beyond military technological innovation to establish an edible salt factory in Ozuakoli, now Abia State. The effectiveness of the federal blockade by air, land, and sea led to a salt shortage in Biafra Land. The salt factory provided the salt needs of the Biafra citizens during the war. (Uzodigwe Et al. 2021)

The federal blockade caused challenges in fueling Biafran war vehicles, prompting the RAP to invent a refinery plant in Oziakoli. The plant converted palm oil to petroleum. Another refinery was set up in Owerri in Imo State (Uzodigwe Et al. 2021). The Biafra local refinery processed petrol, diesel, kerosene, and aviation fuel. The Biafra also made technological feats in aviation. The Eastern region had two airports before the war. One was located in Port Harcourt, and the other was in Enugu. The Nigerian Government prevented the two airports from being operational during the war. RAP built two airports. The airports were in Uga and Uli, both in the present Anambra state. The two airports were constructed with local raw materials. The two airports were useful as Biafran used it to communicate with the international community. Through the airports, foreign donors sent relief material to the Biafra.

The Biafran Technological feat was also apparent in the telecommunication system. Biafran scientists established the voice of Biafra, a radio station that became one of the Biafran sources of strength. According to (Emordi and Oseghale, 2008), the Biafran radio station was the best propaganda radio station globally at that time. The radio station was used to instill a sense of no surrender in the citizens and sensitized them that the war was for the survival of the Biafra citizens. Radio Biafra was used as a propaganda tool to portray the war as genocide to the international community. By portraying the war as genocide, Radio Biafra sustained the resistance and support of the Biafra citizens until the end of the war. (Stephen Temitope, 2023, July 23) wants us to see radio Biafra "beyond its propagandistic image and recognize it as a dynamic technology of memory. According to (Immanuel Ezedife, 2024), the rapidity of the Biafra radio's engineers establishing a new radio station when the federal forces destroyed the station was novel. The air, sea, and land blockade became a stimulus that brought out the creativity of the Biafra to the limelight.

Ethnic bigotry remained the primary factor that militated against the harnessing of the technological innovations of the Biafra. Ndubuisi Kanu, former military administrator of Lagos and Imo State, bemoans the Nigerian Government for not taking advantage of Biafran technological innovations. He laments that the inability of the Nigerian Government to harness Biafra's technological discoveries denied Africa a country that would have been the continent's economic, political, and technological giant (Alakam Japheth, 2011, March 10). If the Nigerian Government had absorbed ex-Biafra armed forces personnel, the civil war innovations would have determined the essence of Nigeria. In desperation to get to the peak of their military career, the Biafra ex-fighter would have used their skills and technological innovations in the war to get promotion in the Nigerian army. Philip Effiong raised the absorption of the Biafra armed forces personnel before General Gowon after the Biafra surrender. Gowon did not make a categorical statement on the issue. The Civil War would have catalyzed Nigerian development if the Biafra innovations had been harnessed.

Conclusion

This paper examined the challenge of ethnicity to Nigerian technological developments using the Nigerian civil war as a case study. Biafra demonstrated that war remained "the greatest catalyst for human development and progress" (Dan Chukwu, 2008). A close examination of the paper revealed that the air, land, and sea blockade of Biafra, which was meant to make life difficult and hastened Biafra's surrender, became constructive. This is because it became the stimulus that brought out the ingenuity in Biafra. The technological feats of Biafra in the Nigerian Civil War demonstrated that African nations could be self-reliant with determination.

The Nigerian Government has envisaged that the Biafra would be crushed in an hour when the war started. They believed they had strategically created the atmosphere to hasten Biafran's surrender. The Nigerian Government was surprised when the Biafra resulted in using local materials to produce the needed materials to prosecute the war. The technological discoveries of Biafra were deliberately left to rot away, perhaps out of a feeling that a recognition of the talent would amount to acknowledging the talents of the conquered.

The Nigerian Government's effort to deliberately destroy Biafra's technological innovation started with not absorbing the ex-Biafran fighters who would have wanted to excel. Since promotion in the army is based on achievement, they would have used their ingenuity to get to the top. By this, Biafra's technological innovation would have determined the essence of Nigeria today.

Nigeria should focus on national integration in its journey to nationhood. Talent, skill, and knowledge should be recognized no matter the ethnic group. Even though war can be a catalyst for national development, the importance of peace for national advancement cannot be compromised.

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