The Spectre of Biafra

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The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria, by Michael Gould

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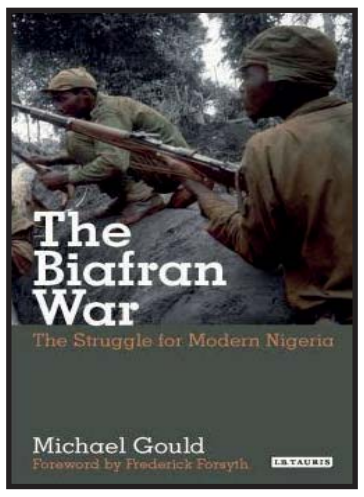
Many existing narratives of the Nigerian Civil War remain as contentious as ever. Usually, authors of such accounts of the war were participants in the conflict interested only in soothing their own egos or self-validation. Or else, they have an undisguised ethnic agenda in mind, either as victims or heroes of the war. As such, it is difficult to glean an unbiased picture of what really transpired. Alas, the Nigerian Civil War is a wound that refuses to heal; instead, it becomes really sore at the slightest provocation.

It is quite refreshing to read an account by Michael Gould who is obviously not motivated by the all-too-familiar ethnic sentiments. It would seem that, for a Nigerian, it is impossible to think straight once plunged into the murky historical pool of the war. For many Nigerians, writing about the war is still a deeply troubling exercise and there is usually a partisan dimension to it.

The first *coup d'etat* in Nigeria took place on 15 January 1966, and that date is often adopted as the point at which to commence a historical investigation of the causes of the war. The five army majors who hatched the putsch – Alexander Modiebo, Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Hillary Njoku, Ademola Ademoyega and Chukuma Kaduna Nzeogwu – all have their followers and advocates within Nigerian historical circles. Most of them, with the exception of Nzeogwu, have written about their experiences and involvement in the coup. However Ifeajuna's controversial account remains unpublished. The coup plot was eventually perceived in Northern Nigeria as an Igbo attempt at political dominance. A retaliatory coup plot was hatched six months later in July during which the head of state, General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, together with his host, Colonel Fajuyi, were assassinated. In Northern Nigeria, pogroms directed against Igbo indigenes occurred leading to their mass exodus to the East. Lt. Colonel Emeka Ojukwu, entertaining exaggerated fears of genocide, masterminded the secession of Eastern Nigeria from the rest of the country. The war commenced in 1967 and lasted for thirty months.

Indeed, the cumulative effects of the events leading up to the war were quite intense. Equally, the dramatis personae that played various roles in the conflict were colourful and have ended up imbuing the lore surrounding the war with considerable suspense and melodrama.

On the eve of national independence, three political parties dominated the landscape, the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), formed by the indomitable Herbert Macaulay and later led by Nnamdi Azikiwe; the Action Group (AG), led by Obafemi Awolowo; and the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), headed by the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello. During the 1959 national elections, the NPC won 142 of the 312 federal seats, the NCNC acquired 89 while AG secured 73 seats. The NPC and NCNC formed a coalition government and the AG became the official opposition party. But, as the 1964 elections approached, the alliance between the NPC and the NCNC broke down and a breakaway faction of AG led by the premier of the Western region, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, moved to become the NPC's major alliance partner. Akintola's actions were conceived as treacherous by another faction of the AG which had Awolowo as its leader. Akintola's faction was declared winner of the Western regional elections and this sparked off widespread riots and mayhem in the region. The federal government pronounced a state of emergency while Awolowo was hurled off to jail on charges of treason. Handing out a ten-year sentence to Awolowo only seemed to worsen the unrest in the West and the federal government resolved to quell the riots through armed action named 'Operation no mercy'. The military operation was to occur on the 17 January 1966. This was not to be, as Nigeria's first military coup happened just two days before. Several reasons have been adduced for the putsch:



> […] the 1962 Action Group and parliamentary crisis, the 1962-3 census crisis, the 1964-65 Western region crisis: added to these were the Tiv minority riots in 1960-61 and 1964-65, both being ruthlessly suppressed, and the quota system in the army, favouring the recruitment of Northern Nigerians which allowed for political bias and patronage. These together with the underlying historic causes of ethnicity, religious diversity, British divisive rule and political instabilities after the colonial period, all added up to the potential for coups and revolution (p. 27).

'Operation Damissa', which is the name for the coup, failed partly because it was carried out by a rebellious faction of the army as opposed to an overwhelming majority. However, the political turmoil in the West abated. The five rebellious majors who hatched the coup plot were more or less left off the hook by General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who assumed the helm in the affairs of the country following the demise of the First Republic. Ironsi has been described as a simple, poorly educated soldier lacking the degree of political acumen necessary to lead an entity as conflict-prone as Nigeria. Part of his undoing stemmed from his inability or unwillingness to persecute the coup plotters. In addition, by enforcing Decree 34, which sought to transform the country from a federation to a unitary state, he fanned fears concerning a perceived Igbo drive to dominate other ethnic groups. Ahmadu Bello, Tafawa Balewa, the prime minister, and Samuel Akintola, who were all key political figures, lost their lives during the coup. No Igbo leader of similar stature was sacrificed, thereby subsequently provoking the ire of Northerners. Incidentally, the plotters had intended to install Awolowo as the country's leader had they succeeded. This intent has tended to imbue the plot as a whole with genuine radical or revolutionary fervour.

On 28 July, Ironsi and his Western Nigeria host, Lt. Fajuyi, were arrested and then assassinated by a posse of soldiers led by Lt. Yakubu Danjuma. This was seen as a retaliatory coup by the North to resume its dominant position on the Nigerian political landscape. After much haggling inside a barrack, Yakubu Gowon defeated Murtala Mohammed, 'a rather hot-headed and unpredictable Northern officer' (p. 32) and assumed the mantle of leadership of the country. Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern region, felt Gowon had no authority to rule over him. Immediately, it became evident that the two military leaders were not about to get along. Ojukwu was clearly confrontational while Gowon's more compliant nature only seemed to embolden the former. Ojukwu's blatant insubordination definitely made matters worse; Ojukwu reportedly remarked: 'Militarily Gowon is not my superior and the question of acknowledging him does not arise' (p. 32). Ojukwu was not prepared to serve under Gowon and could only treat him as an equal, which from the point of view of running a country was quite untenable. Ojukwu's aggressiveness enraged Murtala Mohammed, who was serving in Gowon's military council. Meanwhile, in Northern Nigeria, the massacres of Igbo indigenes continued, which in turn gave Ojukwu a lot to rail about.

After Isaac Adaka Boro attempted to get the Niger Delta region to secede from the federation during the rule of the recently killed Ironsi, Gowon was compelled to create additional states bringing the total number to twelve. This measure was meant to counteract the administrative and political inflexibilities of a unitary state. This did not go down well in the Eastern region, which made public its own intention to secede. But even before this disconcerting declaration of intent, in the early shaky days of Gowon's rule, Northern Nigeria had also wanted to sever itself from the federation and only the intervention of Francis Cummings-Bruce, the British High Commissioner, dissuaded the emirs and political leaders from embarking on such a move. Gould avers that had Cummings-Bruce not intervened, Nigeria would likely have become a confederation in a manner Ojukwu would have found acceptable. As political wrangling as to what to do with the country persisted, the killings of the Igbo occurred in towns and cities such as Makurdi, Minna, Gboko, Gombe, Jos, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kano, Zaria, Oturkpo, Bauchi and Zungeru. There were conflicting accounts as to the actual number of Igbo killed during the spates of mass violence, with Ojukwu claiming that as many as 7000 Igbo indigenes were murdered. Chinua Achebe, in *There Was a Country*, provides the figure of 30,000. These contradictory figures were employed for propaganda purposes in underscoring the plight of Easterners within the supposedly hostile federation of Nigeria. Easterners were then called upon to return to their homeland to avoid being killed in other parts of the country. Again, the number of returnees or, in this case, refugees who complied remains controversial. Some accounts claim a figure of 150,000; some others put it at 300,000, while Ojukwu held on to a figure of two million.

In March 1967, Aburi, Ghana, was chosen as the place to trash out the misunderstandings between the Igbo people led by Ojukwu and the Nigerian government represented by Gowon. Ojukwu went to Aburi with a well-defined agenda in mind. He and his colleagues wanted to secure recognition of Eastern independence on the part of the Nigerian federal government. Gowon, on the other hand, arrived at Aburi with no such fixed agenda but rather a willingness to confer informally with the aggrieved Easterners. Unfortunately, Gowon failed to understand let alone abide by the spirit of the Aburi Agreement which was meant to guarantee the relative independence of Eastern Nigeria.

Finally, the existence of the Republic of Biafra was announced on 3 June 1967. Neither Biafra nor Nigeria can be said to have been prepared for war. Biafra had more Sandhurst and Mons trained military officers, a factor which certainly resulted in the prolongation of the conflict. Much-needed and valued manpower had been lost during the two coups preceding the war. On both sides, the actual men who fought the war were usually poorly educated and ill-equipped. In addition, the field commanders who led troops on both sides often lacked combat experience.

On 9 August, a Biafran offensive led by Colonel Victor Banjo attacked the Mid-West region. Banjo's rag-tag troops encountered virtually no resistance from the region then governed by Lt. Colonel David Ejoor. Ejoor was not able to resist the Banjo-led offensive because he was out-voted by his Igbo-dominated cabinet. But in only securing the region and not venturing farther afield, and instead seeking some sort of rapprochement with the federal government, Banjo departed from the Biafran script.

It has also been pointed out that he harboured personal ambitions that did not augur well for the overall Biafran objective. Judging from Wole Soyinka's account (*You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006)), Banjo represented a 'Third Force' that would have saved Nigeria from itself. Soyinka acted as a go-between between Banjo and Olusegun Obasanjo (later, at various intervals, military and civilian ruler of Nigeria) in passing on their respective views and positions, a role which earned him a twenty-seven month incarceration from the federal authorities. In the long run, Banjo failed to head for Lagos, the then capital of the country, and the Biafran offensive collapsed. Ojukwu and the Easterners generally felt betrayed and the term 'saboteur' came to acquire a particularly ominous ring. Banjo was subsequently recalled to the Eastern region, where he was executed for treason. Gould argues that Banjo's dithering had proved costly in that he could have easily succeeded in over-running the Western region and Lagos, which would have profoundly altered the outcome of the conflict. The federal side seized upon Banjo's failure to launch its own concerted offensive. Biafra, on its part, never attempted to conduct an all out campaign through the Nigerian lines and instead stuck to the strict policy of defending its territories.

As casualties mounted on the Biafra side, its war propaganda machinery kicked into gear, branding military action by the federal side as calculated acts of genocide. It did this by displaying droves of kwashiorkor-ridden infants on the verge of physiological collapse across graphic white and black TV screens. For the most part and for a while, the global media bought this largely overblown propaganda which played well for Biafra. It was hard to substantiate most of Biafra's claims regarding genocide but there were a couple of notable reprehensible acts of brutality by federal forces. In Benin and Asaba, federal troops were said to have machine-gunned all identified Biafran males for no reason other than their ethnic origin. These extreme cases have continued to linger in the minds of survivors, casting a shadow over the tortuous path to reconciliation and total collective healing.

Oftentimes, the lines of battle kept shifting, with people residing on either side conducting their lives on which ever part of the divide they chose. What were termed 'attack markets' emerged to establish new lines of interaction between Biafra and Nigeria:

> Indeed as dusk approached both sides would lay down their arms, a local market would be set up and trading for locally produced food and drink for both sides would take place. These 'attack markets' were endemic throughout the war and throughout Biafra's borders, satisfying Federal troops' demands for food, drink and local women and creating income which helped sustain the Biafran economy (p. 83).

Gould reveals several instances of Biafran resilience and inventiveness. However, he equally recounts 'the lack of co-ordination and communication within the state through all the functions of government filtering across all strata of Biafran society' (p. 88). In a similar vein, mistrust and suspicion existed between the civilian population, the bureaucracy and the officer corps, with a large part of it stemming from the Mid-West invasion debacle. Gould goes to considerable lengths to describe the Biafran chains of command and bases of authority, taking care to explain their particular characteristics and weaknesses. If a lack of understanding could be said to have existed between the military corps and the civilian population, the same cannot be claimed to have existed within intelligence services, which were quite efficient in penetrating federal lines and gathering useful information.

The war created a couple of notable war heroes. Colonel Joe Achuzia, an unconventionally trained officer (his prior war experience came from his involvement in the Korean War courtesy of the British, although no records of his being commissioned were ever found) who caused a lot of havoc on the federal troops. Achuzia was very popular within Biafra for his boldness and resourcefulness and for fanning hopes that Biafra could actually emerge victorious. On the federal side, Colonel Benjamin Adekunle came across as a daring, flamboyant soldier who was distant and harsh to his troops, especially if they happened to be insubordinate. Adekunle had to assemble the Third Commando Division out of an unsavoury assortment of convicts, ex-convicts, students and different social miscreants, which of course would have made the task of maintaining discipline particularly difficult. Before the war was concluded, the immensely popular Adekunle was recalled from the front on account of what many perceived to be his growing fame.

Murtala Mohammed, on the other hand, proved to be costly in terms of the lives of troops and in being unable to circumvent the wily Achuzia. Before the outbreak of hostilities, Mohammed had bragged that he could successfully run through Biafran troops and territory in a matter of weeks. Of course, this remained a mere boast. Biafra enjoyed some strategic advantages over the federal side in that it had the support of the local population and its troops had a more in-depth and reliable knowledge of the topography. The federal troops on the other hand stuck to the main routes in Biafran territory, thereby making them considerably more vulnerable. Another weakness of the federal troops that Biafran soldiers were able to exploit was the lack of co-ordination amongst the three major formations. Given this state of affairs, Biafran troops were able to infiltrate federal ranks almost at will and cause significant damage. Miscommunication and rivalry among the federal divisions resulted in severe setbacks. Accordingly:

> … as the war progressed the divisional commander's style of independence proved to be ambivalent. Undoubtedly Adekunle enjoyed some spectacular successes at Calabar, Port Harcourt and Aba, but in an attempt to take Umuahia and Uli, in competition with his rival, Murtala Mohammed, the commander of the First Division, he lost Owerri. Murtala also exercised autonomy from Lagos over his command, but he enjoyed less success than Adekunle. On three occasions he failed to take Onitsha against the redoubtable Joe Achuzia's forces (p.105).

By mid 1969, Gowon had recalled all three divisional commanders of the federal side whose independence had become a threat to the federal authorities. Adekunle was bitter until the very end at his removal, which he perceived as an act to deny him the ultimate fruits of victory at the termination of the conflict. The conflict itself was eventually a long drawn-out one owing to Biafra's employment of 'attack markets', boy soldiers and what has been described as a 'superb intelligence network'.

On the international front, Tanzania, Gambia and Ivory Coast all recognised the existence of Biafra which provided an important moral boost. Sudan and Niger, both predominantly Islamic states, also sympathised with Biafra probably due to its being the underdog. As for the federal side, Britain remained supportive for a while. However, seeds of disintegration were sown in the Biafran resistance when Nnamdi Azikiwe, the former Nigerian head of state, proposed a fourteen-point plan in 1969 as an alternative to Ojukwu's uncompromising stance. Within the Biafran enclave, Azikiwe's position served to undermine Ojukwu's previously unquestioned authority. In spite of the setback to Ojukwu's dominance, throughout the war, his position was considerably more secure than that of Gowon, who had to contend with a fair range of hostile forces and interests on the federal side. In Biafra, a unit called the Research and Production (RAP) under the leadership of Colonel Ahanya was established to assist in the war effort. The unit was responsible for the invention of a reputably lethal mine, the 'Ogbunigwe', which literally means 'kill them plenty'. Such resourcefulness on the part of Biafra served to prolong the conflict. It has also been advanced that Biafra received military supplies from Portugal and France, which must have had a significant impact on the conflict. Ojukwu's consistently skilful manipulation of Biafran propaganda also brought along useful humanitarian assistance and support within international circles.

Gould then turns to the principals of the conflict – Gowon and Ojukwu. Gowon is described as 'unassuming, diligent, preserving, compromising, religious, a "doer" rather than a "creator", a great family man, not endowed with a great intellect, but intelligent and caring' (pp. 152-53). Perhaps these were the qualities a complex political entity such as Nigeria needed during the trying times of the civil war. The very diverse nature of the country undoubtedly required personalities who were able to find common grounds amid ceaselessly brewing conflicts. Gowon's pacifist inclination might have been unduly exploited by Ojukwu but it was what most certainly undermined whatever genocidal intent the federal side might have harboured. After the war, Gowon was ousted from power by his rival Murtala Mohammed in 1976. Six months later, Mohammed himself was assassinated in a coup plot and Gowon, being suspected of involvement in the coup, had to spend several years in exile in Britain. When he returned to Nigeria, he resumed a simple life devoid of ostentation.

Ojukwu's character and lifestyle could not have been more different from Gowon's:

> His new home is very imposing, with large reception rooms, richly furnished and well appointed, indeed the dining room could accommodate some fifty people and the main reception room could comfortably hold a social occasion for 100. He has a substantial number of servants tending vistors' needs and his home gives the impression of ostentatious wealth, but tempered by his delightful, beautiful, and gracious young wife and his precocious young children (p. 155).

Ojukwu's haughty demeanour undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown of relations between himself and Gowon. Gowon, on the other hand, was perceived as weak in many quarters, which was why he was seen to be unable to control his ruinously ambitious and independent-minded divisional commanders. But the reality was that Gowon had to tread on very slippery grounds, not having properly established his authority within the military command structure after a very hard fought coup d'etat. There were moves within the army to unseat him; there was an aggrieved Northern political elite that was still reeling from the deaths of Ahmadu Bello and Tafawa