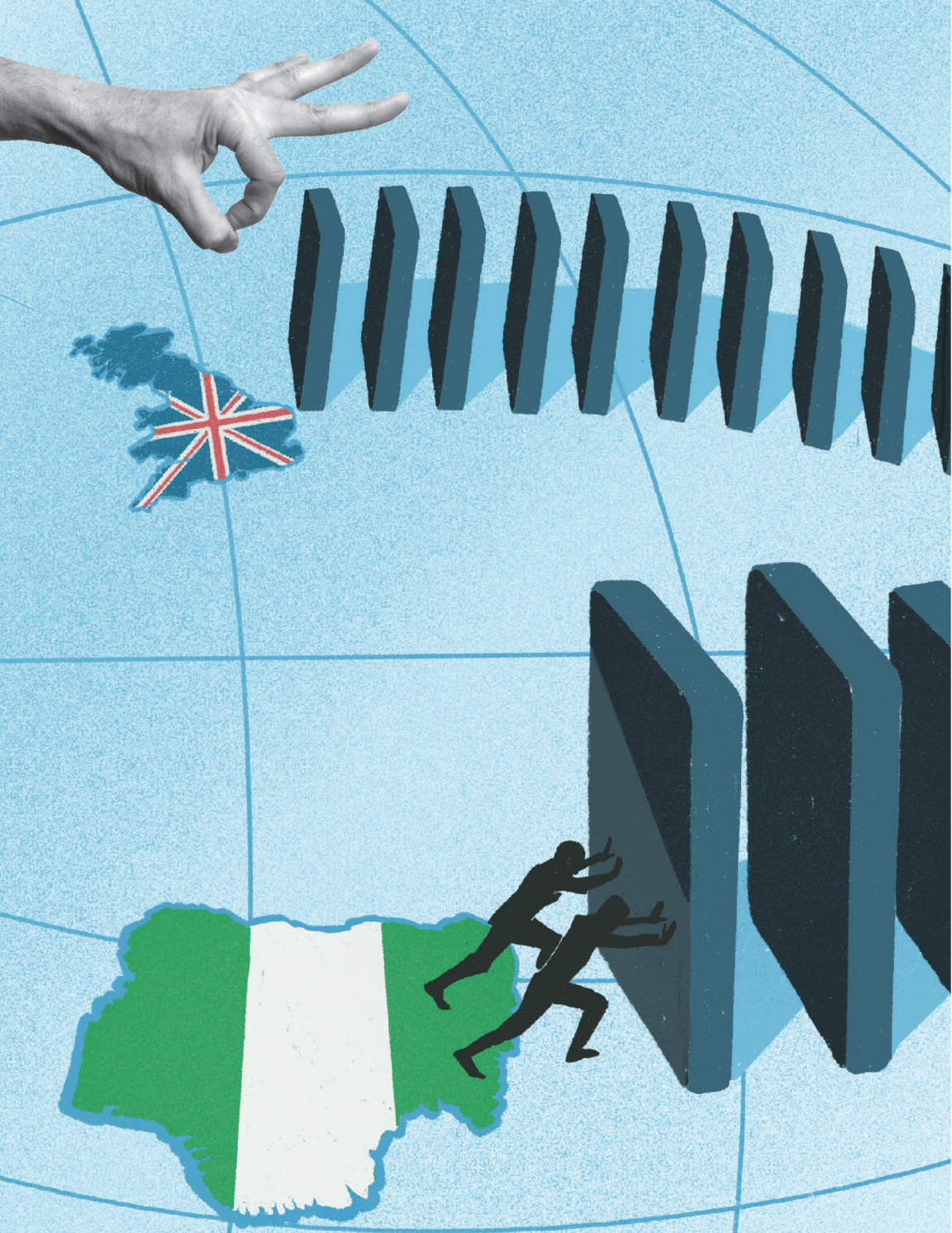

Determination Met with Marginalization: A Case Study on The Nigerian Civil War

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

"History will one day have its say: it will noy be the history taught in the United Nations, Washington, Paris or Brussels, however, but the history taught in the countries that have rid themselves of colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history, and both North and South of the Sahara, it will be a history fill of glory and dignity"

- Patrice Lumumba (First Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, assassinated in Belgian led coup d'etat, c. 1925-1961)

I would like to thank the whole team at Flux for allowing me to publish my essay on the history of the Nigerian Civil War. Once I began learning about the Igbo and Biafran people, as well as the atrocities committed by the British and French, I simply had to write about it and spread awareness on the topic as it's one of the most incredible stories I have ever come across. Lastly, for anyone interested I would like to recommend the writings of Chibuike Uche and Christopher Griffin (which I cite in my paper) as their findings are exceptionally eye opening and inspired me to continue researching into the history of Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 caused the deaths of over two million people and produced mass starvation in the region known as Biafra. This article seeks to explain how such a terrible tragedy could have occurred after Nigeria had been granted independence from the British. The evidence shows that the British and other Western states were both indirectly and directly responsible for the occurrence of the war. In the mid-twentieth century, Nigeria was a leading exporter of rubber and oil — essential resources for Western economies. The British were keen on retaining their grasp on these strategic products and used divide-and-conquer techniques to separate the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Igbo ethnic groups of Nigeria. This kept them in a position of control over the country and caused intense ethnic conflicts between the three groups. The escalation of these ethnic tensions led to mass-scale racial violence and the secession of the region of Biafra — the final straw that led to complete civil war. The paper itself addresses the history of both Nigeria as well as the British Empire, and it ultimately questions Britain's culpability with regard to the conflict.

Introduction

For centuries, European empires have been fixated on controlling Western Africa due to its abundance of strategic natural resources, and the area known today as 'Nigeria' has fallen victim to this pattern. Since the 1700s, the British Empire sought control of the region to fuel its economic and political desires, and these activities still continue. Fueled by their desire to dominate the continent, the British used their colonial administration to establish long-term control. This began with the Royal Niger Company, eventually transforming into the Protectorate of (Northern and Southern) Nigeria, and finally becoming the state of Nigeria. Its colonial state was "the largest of England's African holdings, as well as the most profitable, and its 'moderate' transition, under England's 'enlightened' tutelage, was the pride of the Colonial Office" (Diamond 1970, 345).

In order to unify the country to generate greater profits, the British devised a plan — the strategic enforcement of dividing and conquering. Throughout the twentieth century, the British orchestrated a socio-economic fracturing of Nigeria's three main ethnic groups — the Yoruba in the Western part of the country, the Igbo in the East, and the Hausa-Fulani in the North — all of whom continue to harbour contempt for one another. The colonial administration achieved this through suppression of local resistance and the development of regional states designed to isolate ethnic groups (Garba and Garba 2005, 92).

The Igbo people of Nigeria were the main victims of the country's fragmentation, facing constant discrimination due to the country's asymmetrical economic and political structure. Though the British were keen to reform certain legal structures to better appease certain groups, their efforts truly only served the aims of the Empire. The result of these British failures culminated in the Igbo secession from Nigeria, and on May 30th, 1967, the Republic of Biafra was born. Shortly after, the Nigerian state declared war, starting the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, costing the lives of approximately two million people (Aremu and Buhari 2017, 68).

This paper demonstrates how the British and French were complicit in the emergence and prolongation of the civil war through constant meddling in domestic politics, with the aim of gaining political and economic power in the region. This paper argues in three parts that the amalgamation of Nigeria, the creation of the Native Authority System, the Clifford, Richards, and MacPherson Constitutions, and the international profiteering of oil generated a dangerous political asymmetry within the country, ultimately leading to the mass systematic victimization of the Igbo people, and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War.

British Rule: Divide and Conquer

As noted earlier, in the beginning of the twentieth century the region of Nigeria had three main ethnic groups located around the different parts of the territory: the Igbo of the Southeast, the Yoruba of the Southwest, and the Hausa-Fulani of the North. The Hausa mainly practiced Islam, while the Igbo and Yoruba were majority Christian. It is important to note that "except for occasional wars of conquest, the interethnic competition had previously been minimal" but "the processes of political and administrative modernization radically changed this" (Stremlau 1977, 32). As the British gained dominance over Nigeria through colonial conquest, they instituted several legal and political arrangements that caused unprecedented socio-economic asymmetry within the country, and created a disturbing political power imbalance between the Hausa and the Igbo. As well, the Igbo occupied the region of Nigeria that was the most well-endowed with valuable resources in comparison with the rest of the country, and the extraction of materials from this area became the main agenda for British interests. Since the Igbo were more democratic and less centralized in the past while having a collective urge towards entrepreneurship, the exploitation of their resources and labour was not well received (Ohadike 1998, 190).

The first political arrangement of significance which contributed to the civil war was the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914. This unification of the country fully combined the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo populations all into one state, but its purpose was not rooted toward an ideal of secure state-building. Instead, the Amalgamation "would allow the central administration to divert resources as it saw fit – allocating southern revenue to the north as necessary" (Falola et al. 2008, 117). This redirection of revenue from the South to the North gave the Hausa a lot of power and wealth, and this specific distribution of colonial affection and revenue created conflict between the three governments of the North, East, and West (Lawal 1998).

Furthering Hausa empowerment, the British created the Native Authority System (NAS) in 1914 to institutionalize Britain's indirect rule over the country by appointing officials to local government who best served the interests of the Crown. In the Northern Hausa-Fulani regions, "the Native Authority system under the indirect rule found a very congenial environment to thrive," as their pre-colonial society was based on a centralized government founded on Sharia law, and they already had a form of taxation installed within their system (Egbe 2014, 115). The opposite was true in the Eastern Province where pre-colonial Igbo society lacked centralization and taxation, and the integration of the NAS became an extreme failure which continued to cause tensions between the Igbo and the British. Additionally, colonial rulers would provide and grant certain favours to rulers to achieve their goals, which further fueled regional and ethnic division. All in all, "the aggregation of hitherto independent people to meet the demands of colonial administration, with no regard to their pre-colonial context, created ethnic asymmetry" and " the majority–minority divide, the major manifestation of ethnic asymmetry, came to be defined by struggles for identity and autonomy, rendering ideas of nationhood, citizenship, and patriotism problematic" (Garba and Garba 2005, 93).

Three sets of constitutions were enacted between 1922 and 1951: the Clifford Constitution, the Richards Constitution, and the Macpherson Constitution, which all continued to negatively impact the ethnic and regional cleavages within Nigeria. The main reason that these constitutions left behind a political fracturing is that they were economically beneficial to the British, who were finally able to secure the Hausa as the dominant ruler of the state and could therefore continue their export business. The Clifford Constitution was enacted in 1922 and established the Northern province (Hausa dominated) as the leader of the Western and Eastern provinces, which developed even deeper administrative segregation. The "segregation was so entrenched that when the

central administration in the 1930s sought to narrow the gaps between the North and the South through integration, British officials in the north resisted successfully", and "the division of the Southern region into East and West regions created a three-region administrative structure that created further antithetical forces, struggles and conflicts" (Garba and Garba 2005, 94). The British attempt to link ethnicity and regional politics together was slowly working, and the Richards Constitution of 1946 only solidified the drive for ethno-regionalization.

The ethnic-based structural change that occurred continued to make the North the dominant political region, which was doomed to be unstable, as the country lacked significant political players from its other populous regions (Garba and Garba 2005, 96). By the 1950s, more reforms and constitutional conferences were being arranged; however, the stage was set for internal failure. The power of the North prevailed when reaching conclusions for the MacPherson Constitution, but the original conference outlining it in 1950 was dominated by ethno-regional rivalries, and the 1950s saw reforms being overshadowed by squabbling that was "so intense that often agreement on even minor issues was impossible" (Egbe 2014, 116).

These constitutions and arrangements "countered the development of a national consciousness, the development of national institutions, common citizenship, a cohesive approach to decolonization, and, ultimately, the building of a modern state" and were all the product of a strategy devoted to maximising colonial exporting efficiency (Garba and Garba 2005, 96). All of these arrangements and institutional asymmetries were key in causing the crises of the 1960s in Nigeria, as respectful political debate and Nigerian diplomacy faded. What is striking is that the British seemed unaware of how self-determined the Igbo would become over the course of the twentieth century due to the Empire's decision-making, and how the Igbo fight for liberty would soon lead to civil war.

The Catalysts for Secession and The Collective Trauma of the Igbo People

An analysis of the historical and political build-up leading to the Nigerian Civil War demonstrates that "the Igbo elite have historically responded to the perceived victimization of the group in two principal ways: by advocating for either more inclusion or for more separation" (Ibeanu et al. 2016, iii). The government's reforms and institutions that created ethno-regionalism also culminated into brewing hatred among the Igbo people towards the Hausa, and vice versa.

During the formulation of these agreements, riots and protests such as the Aba Women's riot in 1929, and the October 1945 riots in Jos were common. In Jos, many were injured and killed, and this riot constituted the "first major inter-ethnic violence involving the Igbo" (Ibeanu et al. 2016, 12). These riots were a direct reaction to what were aptly described as laws that promoted 'taxation without representation,' and the asymmetry of political power in the hands of the Hausa and the colonial government. Directly after the 1950 Constitutional Conference, the western Action Group (AG) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) were formed based on ethnic lines, and "in the 1951 regional and 1952 federal elections, AG won in the West and the NPC won in the North, while the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) won in the East" (Garba and Garba 2005, 96). Soon, political activists and leaders emerged around the country, including Nnamdi Azikiwe, who "accused the British colonialists of masterminding acts of systematic discrimination against the Igbo and stated that: 'it would appear that God has specially created the Ibo people to suffer persecution and be victimized because of their resolute will to live" (Ibeanu et al. 2016, 11). As the British were preparing to grant Nigerian independence, the federal election of 1959 showed the public that nothing was going to change post-independence. Each party in the federal election was still basing their objectives on winning the support of their ethnically based platforms and consolidating

power in their respective regions (Stremlau 1977, 33). By October 1st, 1960, Nigeria gained its independence from Britain, but this was a mute victory as the general perception of the new government was negative, and rumours of corruption worsened the state of affairs.

A breaking point came in January of 1966 when an Igbo military officer, Major Nzeogwu, staged a coup d'état to depose the government (Uche 2008, 115). The coup failed, allowing Army Chief Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi to take power, only to be overthrown by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon of the North. After the coup and counter-coup, the anti-Igbo sentiment erupted into full-blown violence towards the group. These attacks are known as the 1966 Igbo Pogrom — many believed that the Igbo coup d'état was part of a conspiracy to establish Igbo hegemony in the country. In parts of the North, thousands were killed during the months after the first coup, and between September and November of 1966 over 50,000 Igbo were killed (Ibeanu et al. 2016, 13). In addition to this, Northern troops massacred over 240 Southern officers and men on July 29th, 1966 (Nixon 1972, 475). These actions culminated in the mass exodus of thousands of Igbo from the Northern region back to their homelands as sentiments towards them worsened.

As a result of this, Chukwuemeka "Emeka" Odumegwu-Ojukwu, who served as the military governor of the Eastern region, was determined to stop the massacre of his people and finally bring institutional change to Nigeria. By now the idea of the East as a separate republic had formed in the minds of many, and Ojukwu's political interests lay in acquiring freedom for the Igbo people and the Eastern region known as Biafra. Ojukwu, Gowon, and other stakeholders eventually met from late 1966 toearly 1967 to bargain for an agreement known as the Aburi Accord, which would bring an end to the hostilities. Ojukwu did not hesitate to ask for greater political autonomy, the restructuring of the army, and a greater share of the oil revenues that came from the Eastern deposits. At first, the Accord seemed successful, and both sides agreed on respectful terms. However, "on 27 May, 1967, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon announced the creation of twelve states in Nigeria and thereby abrogated the regional political structure," and "the Northern Region was divided into six states, the Eastern Region into three states, the Western Region into two states while the Mid-Western Region became the Mid-Western State" (Aremu and Buhari 2017, 65). This decision from the North was made without the consent of Ojukwu, and he saw this as a conspiracy against the Igbo and a declaration of war. On May 30th 1967, Ojukwu declared independence for the Republic of Biafra and shortly after, the Nigerian Civil War began. The collective trauma of the Igbo had culminated into the state of Biafra, and Ojukwu was the honorary captain who represented the region's long-forgotten interests.

The Role of International Interests During the Conflict

For Ojukwu and the Biafran people, this war was a turn in the direction they had always hoped for. However, for the British it served as a huge obstacle in its centuries-old conquest for domination over Western Africa. It is important to note that the economy of Nigeria had changed drastically since oil was discovered in 1958. The country was becoming a powerhouse in regards to its exporting of oil during the 1960s, and "aside from the fact that a British company was the major producer of oil in Nigeria, Britain was also the major recipient of Nigerian oil. About forty percent of the total oil production in Nigeria ended up in Britain at the time" (Uche 2008, 122). Prior to the civil war in 1967, Nigeria was producing around 580,000 barrels of oil a day, which ultimately garnered the interest of other Western powers to increase their investments into the resource's extraction. Especially for the British and French, this interest in oil led them to covertly interfere with the Civil War's trajectory by employing propaganda, bribery, and secret arms dealings to secure the victory they wanted.

The British were initially ambivalent about which side they supported, considering that

the Biafran's response to the war seemed promising at the beginning. However, this middle ground position would not last, as "the British government calculated that supporting Nigeria was its safest option if it were to preserve its oil interests in the country, largely because the Cold War and the rivalry among some Western European states made it likely that other foreign powers would wade into the conflict," and "although the British government may have believed that Biafra had strong grounds for secession, it was not in a position to guarantee its success even if it supported the rebels" (Uche 2008, 125). Additionally, the British Crown was motivated to act fast, as the Six-Day War in the Middle East had a significant impact on the oil imports into Britain. For the British and Shell-BP, they made blunders trying to cover up their royalty payments to both sides of the war but were ultimately forgiven by the Nigerian army as they paid a requested £5.5 million in advance, in order for the army to purchase arms from Britain (Uche 2008, 132). Britain's final strategy was to unify Nigeria by backing Gowon, and along the way they would continue to supply covert assistance and recommendations for his army.

The French took an interest in Nigeria for two reasons: firstly, they wanted to see if their support of the Biafrans could result in a take over of a portion of its oil revenues, and secondly, it was important for De Gaulle to, as he stated, "destroy these enormous machines created by the English, such as Nigeria, which cannot support themselves" (Griffin 2014, 119). Similarly, De Gaulle's right-hand man Foccart was also keen on expanding his *Françafrique* agenda in Africa and saw a potential for Nigeria to build on his portfolio of vassal states. French officials and Foccart strategically manoeuvred funds owed from the Elf-Aquitaine into the hands of Ojukwu so he could use this money to buy weapons from Portugal and continue the war (Griffin 2014, 120). Additionally, the SDECE, (the external French Intelligence agency), was able to make sure the media reported the war throughout the West as a genocide committed by the Nigerian Government, to pull greater public support for the Biafrans (Griffin 2014). Ultimately, France could no longer maintain its position in Biafra, as it was experiencing a monetary crisis domestically, as well as in its colony Chad, which made De Gaulle and Foccart weary about the war and its profitability. In the end, with over two million of its people starved to death, "Operation Tail-Wind" led by Olusegun Obasanjo would decisively lead to a Biafran surrender to Nigeria on January 14th, 1970.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence provided above, "the Nigerian civil war is best understood as a historical event, the consequence of historical forces (colonization) and its ramifications" (Garba and Garba 2005, 97). Beginning with Britain's conquering of Nigeria by force and its amalgamation of the Southern and Northern regions, it started a domino effect of hatred and ethnic-regionalism which dominated the country's politics. By creating the Native Authority System, Clifford Constitution, Richards Constitution, and MacPherson Constitution, the indirect rulers of the country solidified the country's future catastrophe and eventual breakdown. The international role of the French and British during the 1960s add to the insurmountable evidence that the West was not only responsible for creating the Civil War, but also prolonging it for their own gains. Though reformations and deals were made, there was nothing that could stop the eventual victimization of millions of Igbo. Today, the fight for Biafra continues, and will carry on indefinitely until action takes place to reconcile with its people.

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