

THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR AND THE EVOLUTION OF CIVIL MILITARY RELATIONS AND COOPERATION IN BIAFRA (1967-1970)

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Abstract

The history of the Nigeria-Biafra War covers a broad spectrum of topics namely politics and government, economy, humanitarian crisis, conflict management, health and medicine, weaponry, international aid, religion, military relations among others. Although, some of these topics have been investigated by historians and scholars of diverse academic backgrounds, however, there is little literature on civil military relations in pre-conflict Igboland. This paper examines the evolution of civil military relations in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra War. Materials for the study are obtained from primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data include archival materials and oral interviews. Majority of the archival materials were obtained from the National Archives, Kaduna (NAK) while interviews were held with informants with a profound knowledge of the history of the civil war. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, conference papers, periodicals, among others. All of these were subjected to historical analysis. The paper concludes that civil military relations played a significant role in the general commitment of both civilians and the Biafran soldiers to the secession project. Both the civilians and Biafran soldiers saw each other as partners and collaborators in the struggle against a more numerous and equally determined Nigerian forces.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations; Evolution; Nigeria-Biafra war

Introduction

Warfare is arguably one of the greatest tests of the national character of a state.¹ This simply means that in times of war or national crisis, the three great human components of the state namely; the civilian population, the government and military institutions are challenged and are also collectively responsible for the victory or defeat of the state by the enemy.² Therefore, to win a war, the government and military institutions of a state must do everything necessary and possible to win the heart and support of the civilian population.³ However it should be pointed out that the attitude of the government and military institutions of a state towards the civilian population especially in peace time, goes a long way in determining the nature of support and cooperation they will receive from the civilian population in times of national crisis such as war.⁴ It should be noted that during warfare, while the government and military institutions are busy strategizing on how to overcome the enemy either by force or diplomacy, the civilians are the ones that provide the government and military institutions with the

necessary allied support such as weaponry, clothing, food, generating revenue and provision of general services such as laundry, logistics, mail dispatch, etc.⁵

The outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1967 brought great distress and anxiety to both the Federal Government of Nigeria and the secessionist Republic of Biafra. As both states mobilised for war, it became apparent to their respective governments that they needed to recruit more men and purchase more weapons for their armed forces. To achieve these tasks both the Nigerian and Biafran governments sought the co-operation of their civilian population. The history of civil military relations can be traced to the declaration of the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967 by its military administrator, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Chukwuemeka Ojukwu.⁶ The advent of civil-military relations was aimed at strengthening relations and co-operation between the civilian populace and the Biafran soldiers against the Nigerian forces who were bent on destroying the secessionists regime. The idea of civil-military relations in Biafra land was implemented with the advent of institutions such as Biafran land forces and food directorate, Biafra militia, recruitment of land forces, funding, among others. Undoubtedly, these relations and cooperation was demonstrated in both Federal Republic of Nigeria and the defunct Republic of Biafra during the war.

Specifically, this paper discusses civil military relations and cooperation in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra War. Throughout the 30 months that the defunct secessionist Republic of Biafra existed, the state was under military rule and by implication could be said to be under a state of emergency. Thus, the relationship between the military and civilian population in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra War helped both sides to remain active for as long as the conflict lasted. Despite the fact that the military government and institutions in the defunct Republic of Biafra were hurriedly established immediately the war broke out in 1967, the active collaboration between the Biafran civilian populace and the soldiers contributed immensely to some of the successes recorded by the secessionist forces over their Nigerian counterparts in some of the battles.

Conceptualising Civil-Military Relations

The term civil-military relations refer to the interactions, dynamics, and balance of power between civilian institutions namely government, society and political structures and the military.⁷ Similarly, civil-military relations has been defined as the nature and impact of existing relationship between the civilian populace and the military institutions of a state in peace time and in war.⁸ Also the term is used to denote the relationship between civilian authorities (elected officials, government institutions and the general public) and the military establishment comprising the armed forces and defense institutions within a state.⁹ In general terms, civil military relation is a significant concept in international relations, political science and military studies. In a broader term, civil military relations entail the recruitment, education, organisational structure, welfare, budget and professionalism of the armed forces as well as its control by the civilian authorities.¹⁰ It also denotes the collaborative efforts of the civilian population, military institutions and government of a state during national crisis such as emergency, disaster and war.¹¹ Civil military cooperation could be seen as an aspect of civil military relations. The subject of civil military relations covers a wide range of subjects such as democracy, security, human rights, war and weapon projects, engineering, education, among others.¹²

The works of scholars such as Huntington and Janowitz have sparked strong debates about the role and control of the military institutions in a state. While Huntington posits that the military institutions of the state should be devoid of strong civil control by the political leaders,¹³ Janowitz on the other hand argues that the political class should exercise greater authority over the operations of the military.¹⁴ Despite their divergent views, their works provide deep insight in understanding the subject matter of civil military relations and

cooperation in a state. Among other things, it demonstrates how civil military relations help to shape the national character of a state.

The Evolution of Civil Military Relations and Cooperation in Biafra

Leadership Training Corps

The evolution of civil military relations in Biafra could be traced to the formation of the Leadership Training Corps (LTC) of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in February, 1967 by Dr. Edward Chukukure and Dr. Samson Ukpabi.¹⁴ According to Chukukure, the Leadership Training Corps was established to mobilise, train and prepare the young students of the University of Nigeria Nsukka ahead of time for the imminent challenges in the Eastern Region. Dr.Chukukure affirmed:

By January 1967, all efforts within and outside Nigeria to end the Nigerian crisis ended in a political deadlock. Dr.Ukpabi and myself became convinced that the nation was heading towards war. We then met to form the Leadership Training Corps with the aim of mobilizing, train and prepare the youths, particularly the young undergraduate students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka for the challenges of citizenship and nation-building should the Nigerian crisis blossom into a full blown war. Eventually that was what happened in July 1967. When the Nigerian Civil War broke out, the Leadership Training Corps became a major rallying point for support for the Biafran government and Army, shortly after, it was renamed the Biafra Militia.¹⁵

The Leadership Training Corps was a voluntary civilian organisation. However, when it was transformed to the Biafra Militia, the members were given quasi- military training which include spying on the enemy and sabotage of vital institutions, installations, weapons and equipment of the enemy.¹⁶

Sources and Forms of Civil-Military Relations

The Biafran Militia

The Biafran military institutions which evolved at the outbreak of the war comprised several civilian militia organisations.¹⁷At the outbreak of war, the various Biafra militia organisations were merged to form a single militia outfit known as the Biafran Militia and was placed under a single command, led by Brigadier (later General) Philip Effiong and later Police Commissioner Chinwuba.¹⁸The reason for merging the various militia organisations into a single militia was due to the inability of the Biafran Army to hold back their Nigerian counterpart. Thus, the Biafran Militia was established to provide strategic back up support for the Biafran Army.¹⁹Specifically, the task of the militia was to provide a ready source of man power reinforcement for the regular Army, assist in military administration immediately behind the frontlines, protect all areas captured or regained from the enemy, and help to educate the population on the reasons why Biafra was fighting.²⁰The Biafran Militia was a voluntary organisation whose members were not paid or treated like the Biafran regular Army. They were trained by local leaders and ex-servicemen in the use of locally made and imported weapons.²¹Madiebo noted that at the battle of Nsukka in 1967 when the 53 Brigade fell back from Nsukka and left all routes and flanks undefended, the militia from Enugu moved in with their shot guns, dane guns and locally made mines and explosive devices and with support from the Biafra Police, they managed to hold the enemy back for several days.²²

However, it should be noted that the Biafran Militia comprised of young men and women who were determined to join, support and fight for the Biafran cause. The Biafran Militia was indeed one of the major attempts towards civil military relations in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra War. Nevertheless, the Biafran Militia soon became factionalised into two groups namely; the National Militia and the Port Harcourt Militia and at a point it was perceived as a threat to the Biafran Army by some top officers and eventually it was disbanded.²³

Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters

After the disbandment of the Biafran Militia, a new civilian outfit known as the Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) was established immediately after the fall of Port Harcourt in 1968.²⁴ Both Madiebo and Colonel Aghanya played important roles in the formation of BOFF. Madiebo noted that after the disbandment of the Biafran Militia, General Ojukwu muted the idea of launching “guerilla warfare against Nigeria in addition to the conventional warfare being fought by the regular Biafran Army.”²⁵ Madiebo was said to have voluntarily drawn up a blue print for a new civilian militia organisation that would not be as influential as the defunct Biafran Militia. The new militia organisation would consist of a “controllable group of dedicated Biafrans that were prepared to operate in enemy territory without pay, clothing, food, accommodation and even arms and ammunition by the government of Biafra.”²⁷ The volunteers from BOFF, “regularly operate behind enemy lines to prime and deposit weapons at the required locations instead of exposing aircrafts to the usual hazards of operating at low heights within close range of hostile forces ...”²⁸

In his assessment of the contributions of BOFF to the Biafran war effort, Madiebo noted that it did extremely well but towards the end of the war, it was, ‘infected with the same political and psychological disease that plagued its predecessor – the Biafran Militia. The Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters was not disbanded until the end of the war, nevertheless, it was reported that it was doomed to end up like the Biafran Militia had the war lingered beyond January 15, 1970.’²⁹

Recruitment into the Biafran Military Institutions

Another area where civil military relation was demonstrated in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra War was in the recruitment process into the Biafran armed forces; the Army, Air Force and Navy. Apart from the practise of forceful conscription of young men of 18 years and above into the Biafran Army to boost its manpower,³⁰ available records show that the Biafran Army regularly advertised and recruited young adults to join its war campaign voluntarily. For example, the *Biafran Sun* contains adverts for enlistment into the officer cadre of the Biafran Army for young men of 18-30 years³¹ and for other ranks it was pegged at 17-22 years respectively.³²

However, others such as Major Obienyem³³ and Captain Clement Nwajagu³⁴ joined the Biafran Army voluntarily and not by conscription. Engineer Anyanwu also noted that he joined the Biafran Air Force voluntarily.³⁵ Nonetheless, both Obienyem and Nwajagu affirmed that many Biafran soldiers were recruited by conscription.³⁶ This shows that the military institution in war torn Biafra was not abhorrent and offensive to the civilian population. The ordinary people, particularly the youths co-operated with the government by making themselves available for service in the Biafran Army.³⁷

Biafran Land Army and Food Directorate

The formation of the Biafran Land Army in 1968 to address the problem of food crisis was another aspect of civil military cooperation in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. The

Biafran Land Army which comprised mostly of young farmers attacked the land with hoes just as the military attacked and shot people with guns.³⁸ Furthermore, “the Land Army fought hunger as starvation seemed to be featuring more and more as a subtle weapon of war.”³⁹ The produce of the Land Army includes yams, maize, okro, groundnuts, beans, cassava, plantain, cocoyam, and paw-paw, as well as ingredients for industrial food processing.⁴⁰ Rather than Land Army; Madiebo used the term, Food Directorate⁴¹ to describe the civilian support for the Biafran Army in the area of food production, preparation and distribution during the war. According to Madiebo, the Food Directorate was responsible for the purchase and distribution of all foods, drinks and cigarettes to the Army and the nation. Specifically, Madiebo noted that these items were sent in bulk to civilian organisations established to support each major military field unit. From there they were prepared for consumption and sent up to the frontline troops. The first problem identified with this system was that military operations had to be timed to fit in with meal timings as determined by various civilian cook houses, over which the Army had no authority.⁴² Besides serving the Biafran Army, the Food Directorate also catered for many Biafran refugees.⁴³ Unfortunately the Food Directorate was riddled with controversies as cheating became the order of the day. Food Directorate officials made generous allowances for their dependants and by the middle of 1969 the Army was getting not more than 10 percent of all food available in the Directorate and this amounted to a meal of four days for each soldier.⁴⁴

The establishment of the Land Army could be seen as a response to the effect of the economic blockade policy of the Federal Government of Nigeria which was strategically designed to weaken the resolve of the Biafran populace, government and Armed Forces to secede from Nigeria.⁴⁵ Despite its challenges and short comings, the composition and operations of the Land Army helped the Biafran state to solve some of its food crisis during the Nigeria-Biafra War.⁴⁶

Moral Support and Funding

Civil military cooperation in Biafra also manifested in the area of moral support and funding from the civil populace and various communities in support of the Biafran cause prior to and after the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War. To support the war effort of the Biafran government, several communities in the defunct old Eastern Region embarked on public demonstrations as well as gave generous financial contributions to the Biafran government.⁴⁷ For example, it was reported that as a result of Colonel Yakubu Gowon’s refusal to implement the *Aburi Accord*, about 20,000 people embarked on a protest march against Gowon at the Owerri provincial headquarters on March, 25, 1967.⁴⁸ Similarly, there was public demonstrations in Amawu and Isikwuato in March, 1967.⁴⁹ Also, in Isoba near Port Harcourt, the people held a solidarity rally in support of the Eastern Region Military Government and the Akokwa Town Union and Okigwe Division in the old Eastern Region pledged their support to the Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu led military government, while Amawu community supported the Eastern Region government with the sum of £57 pounds.⁵⁰

In addition, there was anti Gowon protest in Nnewi, the home town of Colonel Ojukwu by over 50,000 protesters.⁵¹ Similarly at Abonema, Bonny and Degema, a large crowd demonstrated with placards against Colonel Gowon.⁵² Also, the Oratta Civil Defence Committee, a branch of the Defence Committee of Owerri Province supported the Eastern Region Government with the sum of £742:51.⁵³ In a similar vein, it was reported that the government workers in Biafra pledged five percent of their salary for the month of April, 1968 to the Defence Fund of the government.⁵⁴ However, in 1968, there was a spike in financial contributions to the Biafran government by many communities such as Ethinan,⁵⁵ Orlu⁵⁶, Ogoni

Division (£10,000),⁵⁷ Degema Province (£300)⁵⁸ and Aba Province (£172,177.17.3d) as at March 20, 1960⁵⁹ and it was increased to £190,000 by May 30, 1968.⁶⁰

Research and Armaments Production

Specific mention must also be made of the role of the Research and Armaments Production (RAP) in fostering civil military cooperation in Biafra during the war. RAP which was indeed the military industrial complex of Biafra was a civilian initiative and its members such as scientists, technologists, engineers, and other artisans were all civilians who worked independently of the Biafran Army.⁶¹

The activities of RAP could be likened to the Mahattan Project of the United States that developed the atomic bomb during World War II. The director of the project was Robert Oppenheimer and he led a team of scientists such as Albert Eistein, Neils Bohr, Leo Szilard among others to demonstrate the importance of civil military relations in weapon project.⁶² However, the major difference between the Mahattan Project and RAP is that while RAP was involved in the invention of various weapons such as guns, rockets, bullets, mortars, bombs and grenades among others, the Mahattan Project was solely established for the development of the atomic bomb.⁶³ It is on record that without the role, contribution and support of RAP to the war efforts of the Biafran armed forces, the war would not have lasted up to three years (1967-1970).⁶⁴ During the war, while the Biafran soldiers were busy at the war front fighting their Nigerian counterpart, RAP was busy fashioning various weapons such as guns, bullets, shore battery, rockets. Mines, hand grenade, mortar, and the dreaded Ogbunigwe bomb, among others that helped the Biafran soldiers to prosecute the war for three years before they finally capitulated to the Nigerian Army on January 15, 1970.

In addition, during the war, the Biafrans composed several jingles in an attempt to raise the morale of the military and civilian volunteers in their war efforts. One of the popular war time jingles that was composed to appeal for the support and sympathy of the civilian population in Biafra was rendered thus:

*Why do you delay, (3x)
Come and save your country,
Biafra is burning while you delay.*⁶⁵

Assessment of Civil -Military Relations in Biafra

Relations between the Biafran civilian populace and the soldiers during the war were tremendous. There was massive support from populace to the Biafran soldiers in the area of food supply, information gathering, funding, etc. The moral and financial contributions provided by the Biafran civilian populace to the soldiers helped in boosting the moral of the Biafran troops against the federal troops.

Despite this, there were also cases of abuse by some personnel of the Biafran military forces against the civilian population. One of these abuses includes forceful military conscription of teenagers into the Biafra Army during the war. Sergeant Cletus Ejike affirmed that he was conscripted into the Biafran Army along with his elder brother James Ejike in 1967.⁶⁶ Also, Ibeh Cyril informed that he was conscripted into the Biafran Army as a teenager in 1968.⁶⁷ It was also reported that anyone (particularly youth) that was 18 years and above that came close to 40 kilometres radius from Biafra Army formations was conscripted into the Army.⁶⁸ Another area of abuse by men of the Biafran Army was forceful dispossession of vehicles from their civilian owners on flimsy excuse that they were urgently needed for military operations.⁶⁹ It was said that sometimes cars were hijacked from civilians for the personal use of soldiers and in some cases, criminal elements disguised in Biafran Army uniform to hijack vehicles from helpless civilians.⁷⁰

A major breakdown in relations between the Biafra soldiers and civilians was also evident in the acute food shortages that adversely hit both the soldiers and the civilians during the conflict. On several occasions men of the Biafran Army were said to have entered into people's farm to harvest crops such as yam and maize for their personal consumption.⁷¹ Specifically, Madiebo notes that in August 1969, four hungry soldiers from Biafran Army Garrison at Isu entered into a farm and harvested some yam for their personal consumption but they were lynched by the local farmers, unfortunately two of the soldiers were killed while the other two escaped. The soldiers threatened reprisal attack but were restrained by a top military official.⁷² Similarly, it was reported that some personnel of the Biafra military forces became power drunk to the point that they began to physically abuse the civilians particularly the youths in their host communities at the slightest provocation.⁷³ It was also said that such incidence became rampant towards the end of the war in 1969.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, there were also complaints of extra judicial killings preferred against some officers of the Biafra Army by some individuals and communities during the Nigeria-Biafra War. For example, it was said that sometimes anyone that refused to be conscripted into the Biafran Army could be brutalised or even shot by an ill-tempered soldier with little or no consequence.⁷⁵ It was also reported that sometimes a community could be attacked by the Biafran Army on suspicion of aiding the enemy-Nigeria Army.⁷⁶ However, Akpan wrote that in one particular incidence at Biakpan in the Calabar Province, the elders of the community petitioned the Biafran Army for extra judicial killings of its members because they were said to have acted as informants to the Nigerian Army. General Ojukwu, the Biafran Head of State commissioned a Panel of Inquiry to investigate the matter but the Panel could not carry out its investigations and submit a report because Umuhia, the Biafran capital fell to the Nigerian Army during the period.⁷⁷

It should be pointed out that majority of the cases of abuse against the civilians were perpetrated mainly by the soldiers of the Biafran Army, many of whom were poorly and hurriedly trained. Despite this, it should also be noted some measure of co-operation existed between the Biafran civilian populace and the soldiers. This is evident in the conferment of prestigious awards to the civilian members of the RAP for their efforts in the war. Indeed, in recognition of the priceless support of the civilians to the Biafran war effort, the Biafran government conferred the prestigious Biafran Medal on some distinguished members of RAP in 1968. Recipients of the priceless awards include Dr. Benjamin Nwosu, William Achuku, Edward Chukukere, Gordon Ezekwe, Mark Chijioke, Augustin Njoku Obi, Chimere Ikoku and Iyke Ozigbu.⁷⁸

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that civil-military relations and cooperation was demonstrated in various ways in the defunct secessionist Republic of Biafra during the Nigeria Biafra War. Findings show that civil military relations and cooperation in Biafra began with the civil population voluntarily. While some were forcefully conscripted into the Biafran military forces, others merely volunteered to join the war. In addition, many educated and non-educated Biafran men and women as well as youths presented themselves for service to the state in return for little or no reward. On a final note, it is incontrovertible that without the support and cooperation of the civil population in Biafra, the Biafran armed forces would not have survived and sustained the 30 months old war.

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