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THE "NO VICTOR, NO VANQUISHED" MANTRA AND THE CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA SINCE THE END OF THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR IN 1970

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Abstract
This study interrogates the "No Victor, No Vanquished" mantra proclaimed by General Yakubu Gowon at the end of the Nigeria–Biafra War in 1970, with particular attention to its implications for post-war reconciliation and national integration. The research aims to examine how the Federal Military Government's post-war policies—embodied in the programmes of rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconciliation—sought to translate the rhetoric of unity into practical governance and to evaluate their success and shortcomings in rebuilding inter-group trust. The study adopts a historical–analytical methodology, relying on qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary documentary sources such as government decrees, policy statements, academic monographs, and archival materials. Findings reveal that while the slogan "No Victor, No Vanquished" was conceived as a moral and political instrument for healing national wounds, its implementation was fraught with contradictions. Policies such as the Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970, the Banking Obligations (Eastern States) Decree, and the handling of abandoned properties generated perceptions of marginalisation and inequality that undermined genuine reconciliation. The study concludes that the mantra, though rhetorically unifying, failed to produce substantive national integration due to weak institutional follow-through, uneven policy enforcement, and the absence of inclusive justice mechanisms.
Keywords: National Integration; Nigeria–Biafra War; Reconciliation; Post-war Policy; Gowon Mantra.

Introduction

The proclamation "No victor, no vanquished," delivered by General Yakubu Gowon at the end of the Nigeria–Biafra War, has become the emblematic phrase for the Federal Military Government's post-war strategy of reintegration. Ostensibly a moral and political injunction to close the chapter of armed conflict and restore a unitary national identity, the mantra also served as the rhetorical fulcrum for a suite of policies—rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation—intended to neutralise wartime divisions and resume the normal business of state. Rehabilitation covered urgent humanitarian relief and the short-term resettlement of refugees and war-disabled persons; reconstruction directed attention to the rebuilding of roads, schools, markets and industry; reconciliation addressed the political and symbolic work of restoring citizenship rights, property claims and a shared historical narrative.

These were not mutually exclusive tasks, and the success of one depended on the others. For example, material reconstruction without credible processes for restitution and accountability risks reinforcing perceptions of injustice; conversely, symbolic amnesty without material support may leave large segments of the population socially and economically marginalised. The literature on post-conflict statebuilding thus warns against treating these pillars as cosmetic or compartmentalised: rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation must be integrated and mutually reinforcing if national reintegration is to endure.[1]

Empirically, the Nigerian experience offers a classic illustration of the difficulties inherent in this integrated approach. The state created institutional instruments—the National Commission for Rehabilitation and later implementing committees charged with abandoned property, compensation and the re-absorption of public servants—but those instruments operated in a political environment marked by suspicion, securitisation and, in several instances, the legalising of exclusion. Decrees and administrative measures, however legally framed, produced outcomes that in many cases undermined the spirit of universal reintegration. The Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree (No. 46 of 1970) and related financial and banking directives illustrate how measures framed as regulatory can have explicitly exclusionary effects on former combatants and on communities associated with rebellion; such measures contributed to the perception among many in the Igbo population that the post-war settlement was partial rather than universal. The article therefore pays careful attention to the legal architecture of post-war policy and to the lived consequences of these laws and administrative acts.

The theoretical lens for this study combines Social Identity Theory with contemporary approaches to conflict transformation. Social Identity Theory illuminates how policies that differentiate treatment on the basis of group association can harden in-group/out-group cleavages, thereby impeding the emergence of a common civic identity. Complementarily, Conflict Transformation Theory insists that sustainable peace requires inclusive processes that address structural grievances, reparative justice, and the re-establishment of legitimate institutions—rather than short-term pacification alone.[2] Applying these lenses to Nigeria's post-1970 programmes reveals why certain official acts—however well intentioned in rhetorical form—had the unintended consequence of reifying group identities and embedding grievances that later resurfaced in political mobilisation and contestation.

Policy of Rehabilitation: Implementation and Shortfalls

The policy of rehabilitation, as initiated by the Federal Military Government (FMG) after the Nigeria–Biafra War, was designed to restore normalcy to a war-torn society, aiming to address the immediate humanitarian needs of the millions affected by the conflict. In the early post-war months, General Yakubu Gowon's federal government declared that "There are no victors, no vanquished", and that every Nigerian, regardless of ethnicity, would be restored to full citizenship and economic opportunity.[3] According to General Gowon:

There is an urgent task to be done. The Federal Government has mounted a massive relief operation to alleviate the suffering of the people in the newly liberated areas. We are mobilizing adequate resources from the Federal government to provide food, shelter and medicines for the affected population. Rehabilitation and reconstruction will follow simultaneously to restore electricity, water, transport and communications. We must, as a matter of urgency, resettle farms and reopen factories to ensure that normal economic life is resumed by everyone as soon as possible.[4]

This proclamation was intended to set the tone for a national healing process, yet its implementation was met with considerable challenges. The establishment of the National Commission for Rehabilitation (NCR) by Decree No. 41 in 1968 was a central element of this policy, with its mandate to coordinate food relief, compensate for property losses, and to assist in the resettlement of refugees.[5] It was initiated in anticipation of eventual federal victory in the war. The Federal Ministry of Finance produced a document containing the directive principles of a post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction programme in Nigeria. Among other items, it listed the following as its guiding tenets:

1. The surviving victims of past disturbances and present military operations shall be cared for with utmost compassion.
2. All soldiers, no matter on which side they had fought shall be rehabilitated and faithfully employed at the end of military operations. It must be noted that one good thing about the present emergency is that it has helped to reduce unemployment throughout the country. It would be a mistaken policy of the worst kind to allow federal troops and rebel soldiers to go unemployed.
3. Those whose property has been destroyed or damaged as a result of civil disturbances shall be reasonably compensated.
4. All those who had fled from their normal places of residence or business shall be resettled and, if possible, helped to make a new start.
5. All roads, bridges, and public buildings destroyed shall be reconstructed.[6]

The relief and rehabilitation of the East-Central State was coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Development and Reconstruction. Various governmental and non-governmental bodies had to report to it, including the Nigerian Red Cross.[7] The National Rehabilitation Commission's formation was based on the assumption that systematic rehabilitation of displaced persons would serve as the foundation for national reconstruction. However, the commission's activities were later criticized for being more rhetorical than practical.

In the area of foods and medicines which are often the most urgent needs for war victims, the Federal Government, through the National Commission for Rehabilitation (NCR) and the Nigerian Red Cross Society, provided some relief supplies. By January 1970, the Red Cross had stockpiled 13,000 tons of food and was arranging for an additional 7,000 tons.[8] These supplies helped feed approximately 700,000 war victims in the former Biafra enclave within the first quarter of 1970.[9] However, the government's efforts were insufficient. With an estimated Igbo population of 7.5 million and nearly 14 million people in the entire former Eastern Region (Biafra), only a small fraction of those in need received aid.[10] Mokwugo Okoye observed that more Igbo people died from starvation after the war than from actual combat, largely due to the mismanagement of relief distribution by government agencies.[11] Essential food supplies such as dried milk, stockfish, and maize, which were donated by humanitarian organizations, often failed to reach their intended recipients. Many relief materials were stolen or mysteriously disappeared en route from Port Harcourt to Enugu. As Chairman of the Rehabilitation Commission in the East Central State, Mokwugo Okoye implemented measures to curb theft, including routing supplies through railways.[12] Nevertheless, aid primarily reached urban centres, leaving the majority of rural

populations without support. Lacking access to transportation, many rural dwellers faced severe hardship, with starvation and inadequate medical care likely leading to significant loss of life.

The Transitional Justice Theory is anchored on the belief that a truly transformative post-conflict society must address both material losses and the psychological wounds inflicted by war.[13] Yet, many scholars have argued that the rehabilitation measures in Nigeria were superficial and failed to bring about substantive justice for the Igbo and other affected groups.[14] The Social Identity Theory also explains that the rehabilitation process, when not inclusive, may inadvertently reinforce group boundaries rather than dissolve them, as victims of war continue to identify with the grievances of their ethnic community.[15] In practice, while the National Commission for Rehabilitation was tasked with the distribution of relief and compensation, delays in implementation, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and allegations of corruption hampered its effectiveness.

The rhetoric of rehabilitation was further complicated by the expulsion of foreign humanitarian organizations that had initially provided essential support, thereby curtailing external assistance. During the early months after the war, numerous humanitarian organizations and international agencies rushed to provide food, medical supplies, and other critical relief to war-affected populations in the former Biafran territory. However, the Federal Military Government, wary of the role these organizations had played during the war, often viewed them with suspicion and sometimes even hostility. This resulted in a series of measures that curtailed the activities of these organizations, including expulsions and restrictions on their operations. According to John de St. Jorre:
All the countries, like France, South Africa, Portugal and Rhodesia which had supported Biafra, were told to keep their aid and stay out. Relief organizations in a similar position, notably Caritas and the World Council of Churches, were also barred. 'Let them keep their blood money,' Gowon cried. 'Nigeria will do this itself. The Catholic priests and nuns in the enclave were gradually rounded up and expelled.[16]

The government's rationale was that these organizations had, in many cases, supported the Biafran war effort by facilitating the mobilization of resources and providing platforms for propaganda. As a result, the Nigerian state prioritized its own controlled relief operations through the National Commission for Rehabilitation, which undermined the effectiveness of international humanitarian aid. The Conflict Transformation Theory posits that sustainable post-conflict recovery requires an inclusive approach that integrates both state and non-state actors.[17] But in this instance, the Federal Military Government's exclusionary practices not only limited the reach of humanitarian assistance, but also deepened mistrust among war-affected communities. Many survivors viewed the federal government's actions as a further betrayal, as the promised support turned out to be insufficient and marred by politicization. The Social Identity Theory further suggests that when communities are denied access to external assistance because of political bias, their sense of identity as marginalized groups is reinforced.[18] The Nigerian government's failure to effectively collaborate with humanitarian organizations resulted in a humanitarian crisis that persisted long after the cessation of hostilities, with millions of refugees and displaced persons continuing to live in precarious conditions.[19]

On the immediate needs of war refugees and displaced persons, the federal government launched a series of initiatives intended to resettle communities and restore livelihoods. In theory, these initiatives were meant to transform vast refugee camps into viable, integrated communities where displaced persons could rebuild their lives. However, the practical challenges of this task were immense: entire regions that had been reduced to makeshift camps faced severe shortages of housing, sanitation, and employment opportunities. The government's resettlement programmes were often characterized by inadequate planning and a lack of coordination between federal and local authorities. Take the fate of ex-Biafran soldiers who had sustained severe injuries for instance. In the Owerri Division alone, 200 soldiers who had lost their sight during the war were left without adequate medical care.[20] The government failed to provide necessary support, and the financially strained East Central State administration struggled to offer meaningful assistance. The State Commission for Rehabilitation identified 6,000 amputees in need of aid, leading the government to allocate 1,000 bags of cement to the Marist Brothers, a Roman Catholic charitable organization, to expand its amputation rehabilitation centre in Uturu near Okigwe.[21] Spinal cord injury victims also faced neglect. Initially housed at Government Technical College (G.T.C.) Enugu, they were treated by Federal troops, often without compassion. Food was rationed, and those who missed a meal had to wait for the next. Complaints were met with abuse. Their situation improved when Igbo nurses and doctors took over their care, ensuring regular meals.[22] A significant turning point in their rehabilitation came when they were provided with wheelchairs, enabling them to move around and interact with others. However, as time passed, the Government Technical College authorities demanded their relocation.[23]

The federal government proposed establishing a rehabilitation center for ex-Biafran soldiers in Enugu, but upon completion, it was converted into an orthopedic hospital instead.[24] Efforts by the Society for Aid to the Disabled (SAD) to resettle them at Emene also failed.[25] Eventually, on July 11, 1975, armed federal soldiers forcibly

evacuated the war-disabled individuals from Government Technical College and relocated them to a settlement at Oji River, now known as the Wounded Soldiers Camp.[26] They were promised a chalk industry as a means of livelihood, but before this materialized, the Gowon administration was overthrown on July 29, 1975. Since then, there has been no government initiative to equip them with sustainable means of survival. Many are dead while the remaining are now too old and feeble to even beg along the road as they use to.

Many of these war-disabled individuals were left to fend for themselves. The Department of Welfare in Enugu provided minimal support until 1985, after which funding ceased.[27] The government advised them to return to their respective Local Government Areas and seek employment. While some secured jobs, many did not. Those who remained at the camp now rely on charitable organizations and individual donations. With families to support and children in school, they struggle without a stable source of income, often depending on alms from travelers along the Enugu-Onitsha Expressway. In 2011, the leader of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Ralp Uwazurike, built 20 units of two-bedroom flats in Okwe, Onuimo, Imo State and resettled some of the war veterans who had lived in the Oji River Camp since July 29, 1975.[28] Despite their sacrifices in defense of Igboland, they receive little government stipends or medical support. The five Igbo state governments of Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Imo, and Abia, have not provided adequate financial aid or vocational training. This neglect stands in stark contrast to the establishment of the National War Museum, which preserves artifacts of the Nigeria-Biafra War while ignoring the plight of Biafran veterans.

Beyond wounded soldiers, the war also displaced thousands of children. Many were airlifted out of Biafra to prevent mass starvation. After the war, efforts were made to reunite them with their families. On November 9, 1970, the first batch of eighty children returned from Côte d'Ivoire, welcomed at Ikeja Airport by General Gowon.[29] Another 160 children arrived from Gabon, accompanied by Gabonese officials who expressed relief at their safe return.[30] While some children found their parents, many became orphans, requiring state care. The Marist Brothers Orphanage in Ngor-Okpala housed 132 orphans.[31] Yet, due to financial constraints, many could not begin school, lacking even basic clothing. According to Ezekiel Uwamadu "The promise of resettlement soon turned into an ordeal of bureaucratic delays and chronic underfunding," leaving many refugees in prolonged states of limbo."[32] The Social Identity Theory highlights that resettlement processes, when poorly managed, can reinforce a sense of isolation among displaced communities, as individuals are forced to live in segregated environments that mirror the divisions that led to conflict in the first place.

Another aspect of the rehabilitation policy was the attempt to reintegrate former Biafran combatants and public servants, particularly those of Igbo extraction, into the national fabric. Immediately following the war, there were promises made by the Federal Military Government to reabsorb civil servants and military personnel who had been sidelined during the conflict, assuring them of a smooth transition back into public service. These promises were based on the principle of national unity and the ideal that all Nigerians should be given a fair opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of the state.[33] However, the practical reality soon diverged from these lofty promises. Many Igbo civil servants and military officers found that they were subject to suspensions, dismissals, or relegated to lower positions as a result of policies like the Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970, which labelled them as accomplices in the war effort. According to John de St. Jorre, "Senior army officers and civilians intimately associated with Biafra's secession were screened and some detained for varying periods of time, but the worst known sanction taken against them was the refusal to re-employ them in government service."[34] On its part, the Ohanaeze ndi Igbo stated that:
By the "Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970," thousands of Igbo officers were denied reinstatement in the Armed Forces, Prisons and the Police, were denied reabsorption into the Nigeria Public Service. In the Police Forces alone, 4000 personnel were dismissed…. Besides mass dismissals, there was silent but evident policy of exclusion that ensured that no Igbo man emerged in any commanding position in the armed forces, police and other paramilitary forces.[35]

This policy, instead of promoting reconciliation, institutionalized a form of exclusion that deepened the sense of alienation among the Igbo community. The Social Identity Theory elucidates that when members of a group perceive that they are being unfairly treated or marginalized by state institutions, their identification with their ethnic group becomes even stronger, thereby reinforcing an "us versus them" mentality. Consequently, what was intended as a rehabilitative measure ended up becoming a source of deep-seated grievance that fuelled further discord in post-war Nigeria.

Another dimension of the rehabilitation policy was the government's approach to compensating for the loss of property and assets incurred during the war. As earlier stated, the Federal Military Government established mechanisms through the National Commission for Rehabilitation to assess and compensate for the extensive damage to private property, public infrastructure, and communal resources. In theory, this process was meant to

restore the economic foundations that had been shattered by the conflict and to provide a measure of justice to those who had suffered significant material losses. However, in practice, the compensation schemes were plagued by bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of transparency. Many claimants, particularly among the Igbo community, found that the compensation amounts were grossly inadequate, and that the process was fraught with delays and political interference. According to Ezekiel Uwamadu "The promise of compensation has become nothing more than a paper shield, offering no real relief to those who lost everything".[36] The Conflict Transformation Theory underscores that for a post-conflict society to heal, there must be a fair and transparent process for addressing past wrongs, including the material losses incurred during the conflict. Instead, the compensation process under the National Commission for Rehabilitation often served to exacerbate feelings of injustice, as survivors perceived that the state was more interested in pacifying dissent than in delivering genuine reparations. The government's decision to implement policies such as the "Twenty Pound Policy" and the Banking Obligation (Eastern States) Decree of 1970 further eroded trust in the compensation process, as these measures were widely criticized as attempts to undervalue the property and contributions of the war-affected communities. According to Ohanaeze ndi Igbo:

Some hard-liners in Gowon's regime, successfully got the regime to adopt a banking policy which nullified any bank account which had been operated during the war. A flat sum of twenty pounds was approved for each Igbo depositor of the Nigerian currency, regardless of the amount of deposit. It should be noted that only a microscopic fraction of Biafrans had Nigerian currency, and even of this number only few were able to deposit their money with the Central Bank of Nigeria representatives supervising the exercise. The injustice of the whole exercise is obvious. An equitable arrangement, if the period from 30 May 1967 to 15 January 1970 during which Biafra existed was assumed to be a period of illegality, would have been to restore all bank accounts to the status quo ante-Biafra that is, to their balances as at 29 May 1967.[37]

The Federal Government's actions were primarily punitive toward the Igbo, leading to significant social discord within the community. As Emmanuel Onovo noted, many individuals who had collected large sums of Biafran currency from relatives for exchange—along with their own savings—were ultimately given only twenty pounds (£20), regardless of the total amount deposited or the number of contributors.[38] This policy fostered deep mistrust in Igboland, as accusations of deceit emerged, with less-educated individuals suspecting their educated relatives of defrauding them.[39] The differential treatment of property claims not only deepened the economic disparities between regions but also contributed to the narrative that reconciliation was a façade under which the victor's interests were prioritized. The Social Identity Theory explains that when members of an ethnic group feel that their economic rights and historical grievances are being ignored, their collective identity is further hardened, leading to long-term polarization. In this context, the inadequacies of the compensation process played a pivotal role in undermining the rehabilitation policy's legitimacy. The failure to effectively and equitably compensate those who had suffered losses during the war left a legacy of bitterness that continued to shape intergroup relations in post-war Nigeria.[40]

A further dimension of the rehabilitation policy was its impact on social cohesion and national identity in the post-war era. The Federal Military Government's rhetoric of "no victor, no vanquished" and its promises of universal citizenship were intended to foster a sense of national unity and to heal the wounds of a brutal conflict. However, the practical shortcomings of the rehabilitation policies—such as the inadequate compensation for property loss, the marginalization of Igbo public servants, and the exclusionary handling of humanitarian aid—undermined these lofty proclamations. As a result, many members of the Igbo community felt that the state's efforts at rehabilitation were largely symbolic as they failed to address the underlying structural inequities that had contributed to the war. The Social Identity Theory offers a lens through which to understand these dynamics, suggesting that when state policies do not align with the lived experiences and expectations of marginalized groups, those groups are likely to retreat into a more insular identity, reinforcing the "us versus them" divide. In practice, while the Federal Military Government sought to project an image of national reconciliation, the inconsistencies in its rehabilitation measures contributed to a lingering sense of injustice and exclusion among many Igbo Nigerians. The failure to deliver on promises of reintegration and economic opportunity deepened the historical grievances that had fuelled the war of 1967-1970, thereby weakening the foundation for long-term peace and unity. According to E. E. Osaghae "The rhetoric of rehabilitation was undermined by the realities on the ground, where many saw the state's efforts as a cover for retributive policies."[41] This disconnect between official pronouncements and lived experiences had a lasting impact on Nigeria's social fabric, as the scars of war continued to influence political behavior and intergroup relations.

Policy of Reconstruction: Economic Recovery, Infrastructure and Structural Biases

The policy of reconstruction in the aftermath of the Nigeria–Biafra War was conceived as an ambitious attempt to rebuild the nation's physical and economic infrastructure that had been devastated by years of conflict. The

East-Central State bore the brunt of the Nigerian Civil War, serving as the primary battlefield. A report described Igboland at the end of the civil war thus:
The main theatre of the Nigerian civil war, the East Central State (Igboland) emerged from the conflict with a severely battered economy. Battered were her industries, schools and public utilities and even the basic economic infrastructure. In both the public and private sectors, the picture was the same - one of ruin and devastation.[42]

The war left extensive devastation, with approximately 53,732 commercial and private buildings destroyed, 750 km of roads and 65 bridges damaged, and about 781 primary and secondary schools reduced to ruins.[43] Immediately after the war, the Federal Military Government launched initiatives aimed at restoring destroyed infrastructure, revitalizing industries, and reconstructing communities that had been reduced to ruins. The reconstruction policy was presented as a holistic strategy to transform the ravaged Eastern Region, and it encompassed projects in housing, transportation, education, and health services. The government argued that the rebuilding of roads, bridges, public buildings, and utilities would not only restore basic services but also serve as a foundation for long-term economic development.[44] The reconstruction programme in the East-Central State was implemented through a decentralized approach. The Federal Government allocated funds to the National Commission for Rehabilitation, which then distributed resources to its regional offices for direct execution. The Ministry of Works and the Ministry of Agriculture were primarily responsible for implementing the reconstruction efforts. The Ministry of Works, in particular, oversaw the design and rebuilding of roads, bridges, water facilities, and public buildings.[45]

In the area of education, the East-Central State government, under Ukpabi Asika, prioritized the reopening of schools and the reconstruction of educational facilities. Despite the challenges, primary and secondary schools resumed operations by March 1970, just three months after the war ended. The state government, in collaboration with humanitarian organizations like United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, facilitated the restoration of school buildings, libraries, and educational materials. UNICEF alone contributed N2.4 million toward the rebuilding efforts.[46] By the end of 1971, over 3,596 primary schools, 209 grammar schools, 24 commercial schools, nine trade schools, seven trade centers, and a college of technology had resumed full operations.[47] This rapid reconstruction enabled over one million children to return to school, helping to rebuild the region's educational foundation.[48]

However, the Federal Government employed various subtle but deliberate strategies to undermine the strong educational heritage of the Igbo. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for instance, suffered severe neglect and continues to endure a policy of systematic marginalization. Additionally, new educational initiatives were quietly stifled. During his first tenure, President Obasanjo established six polytechnics across Nigeria, but deliberately excluded the East Central State (Igboland) from this development.[49] The technological advancements achieved by the Igbo during the war were similarly suppressed. According to Ohanaeze ndi Igbo:
[The] University of Nigeria, Nsukka received total neglect and has, to-date, been subjected to a policy of benign neglect. There was also silent embargo on new educational projects: during his first tenure of rule, Obasanjo established six polytechnics, sited them all over Nigeria and located NONE in East Central State (Igboland). The war-time technological achievements of Ndi Igbo were allowed to rot away. The Federal Government took over Biafra's war-time scientific outfit (which made such famous inventions as remote-control bombs (ogbunigwe), refined petrol and petroleum products and distilled wines and spirits, among other break-throughs) and stifled its growth.[50]

This led to the loss of an entire generation of brilliant Igbo youths, some of the most talented minds in Black Africa. Further exacerbating this deprivation, churches and foreign Christian educational institutions, which had historically managed many post-primary and secondary schools in Igboland, were not allowed to resume their operations and contribute to post-war rehabilitation. Additionally, key channels for international educational engagement were severed. The U.S. Embassy was barred from reopening its library in Enugu, and the U.K. High Commission's consulate in Enugu met the same fate.[51] These calculated actions collectively stifled the intellectual and educational resurgence of the Igbo people. Additionally, in many instances, newly constructed schools were plagued by poor maintenance, and the quality of education remained suboptimal. Social Identity Theory explains that when public services fail to meet the needs of a community, it reinforces a sense of marginalization and can exacerbate intergroup tensions. Many Igbo communities, in particular, felt that the allocation of resources to educational and was biased in favor of regions that were politically favored by the Federal Military Government. This perception further deepened the grievances that contributed to a long-term sense of injustice among the war-affected populations.

Another component of the reconstruction policy focused on the revitalization of commerce and local industries as engines of economic growth. The war severely disrupted commerce and industry in Igboland, leaving market

infrastructure and major industries in ruins. The East-Central State government, with financial support from the Federal Government, initiated a structured reconstruction plan. A total of £656,000 was allocated for the rebuilding of markets, including the Onitsha Main Market, one of West Africa's busiest trading hubs.[52] Communities also played a vital role, independently funding and rebuilding local markets across Anambra and Imo States. The revival of industries was equally crucial in combating unemployment. Industries like Aba Textile Mills, General Cotton Mills, Golden Guinea Breweries, and the Nigerian Mineral Water Industries were reactivated with state and federal support.[53] These efforts restored economic activities.

However, most other commercial and industrial businesses destroyed during the war like Enyigba Salt Mine, Abakaliki, had not been reactivated. Again, the pace of reconstruction was very slow and biased when compare with the South-Eastern State and the Rivers State. According to Michael Crowder:
In the East-Central State, the slow pace of reconstruction and rehabilitation compared with that in the Rivers and South-Eastern States, evoked fears among the Igbo that despite the Federal government's avowed intention of re-integrating them into national life, it was in fact discriminating against them.[54]

The Social Identity Theory suggests that economic exclusion reinforces group divisions, as marginalized communities become locked into cycles of poverty and resentment. In Nigeria's case, many Igbo entrepreneurs felt that the reconstruction policies favored regions or groups that were already politically dominant, thereby limiting opportunities for genuine economic renewal. The implementation of economic reconstruction programmes was further complicated by corruption and mismanagement of funds, as well as by political interference in the allocation of resources. According to Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton "The post-war economic policies in Nigeria were more about consolidating power than about equitable development,"[55] a sentiment that resonated with many war survivors. Despite these challenges, the reconstruction policy did achieve some successes in revitalizing key sectors, albeit unevenly across different regions.

One more aspect of the reconstruction strategy was the restoration and development of housing and urban infrastructure in the devastated regions, particularly in the former Biafran territories. The war had left entire cities, towns, and villages in ruins, and the reconstruction policy sought to rebuild homes, public buildings, roads, and utilities that were critical for daily life and economic activity. The East Central State Government, despite its lean resources, embarked upon the construction of some housing units in Enugu. The East Central State Housing Authority constructed about 104 low and medium-income houses at Riverside Estate, Abakpa-Nike, Enugu. The buildings were in two categories: a two-bedroom duplex set, and a three bedroom bungalow type. The housing authority had spent about £300,000 on these buildings by 1972.[56] There were about 600,000 habitable houses in the State for a population of more than seven million persons. It was estimated that another 800,000 new housing units were needed to adequately house the entire population of the State.[57] Moreover, no attempt was made to build houses in other urban areas of Igboland, let alone rural areas. Also, the reconstruction of housing and urban infrastructure was fraught with challenges, including corruption, inadequate planning, and a lack of technical expertise. The Social Identity Theory argues that the failure to rebuild housing equitably reinforces a sense of disenfranchisement among the communities most affected by the conflict, as their living conditions remain a constant reminder of neglect. Many residents in the former Eastern Region, particularly among the Igbo, felt that the government's efforts were superficial and did little to address the deeper issues of economic and social marginalization.

An additional element of the reconstruction policy was its long-term impact on national economic development and the redistribution of resources, particularly through the reorganization of the national revenue-sharing formula. In the aftermath of the war, the federal government implemented new policies, such as the modification of the Distributive Pool Account (DPA) in 1970,[58] which were designed to ensure that federal resources were allocated more equitably among the states. However, rather than fostering genuine economic integration, these policies often reinforced existing regional imbalances. Under the new revenue-sharing arrangements, fifty percent of the Distributive Pool Account resources were distributed equally among states, while the remaining fifty percent was allocated proportionally based on population—a formula that tended to benefit regions that had been divided into more states, often at the expense of the Igbo-dominated East-Central region. This reallocation of resources further deepened the economic grievances of the Igbo, who felt that their contributions to the nation's development were not being recognized or rewarded. The Social Identity Theory posits that when a group perceives that it is being economically deprived relative to others, it strengthens its collective identity and is more likely to pursue separatist agendas. The legacy of the reconstruction policy, therefore, was mixed: while it did contribute to the restoration of some aspects of national infrastructure and economic capacity, it also entrenched regional disparities that would continue to fuel political tensions for decades.

The Policy of Reconciliation

The policy of reconciliation was announced in the immediate aftermath of the Nigeria–Biafra War as part of a grand narrative of "no victor, no vanquished" by the Federal Military Government. General Yakubu Gowon's proclamation in his national broadcast, "The Dawn of National Reconciliation," was intended to signal a new beginning where past hostilities would be forgiven and unity restored. According to Matthew Hassan Kukah:

Sadly, the climate to enable the elite from both sides to build a consensus was not there. People who had been united along party lines could no longer relate with one another on those lines as the war created a chasm and intensified interethnic hostilities between the Igbo and others. There was bitterness between the Igbo and the Southern minorities. The latter accused the former of taking them to war by force. The Igbo were bitter against the Yoruba for seemingly reneging on an unwritten agreement to follow them into war. The ascent of the Yoruba leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, to the position of federal minister of finance was seen as the height of this betrayal. Then of course, there were the Hausa /Fulani along with the Northern minority ethnic groups who had formed the bulk of the Federal Government's fighting forces. The Northern minorities felt betrayed.[59]

Reconciliation was envisioned as a process that would integrate all former adversaries, reinstate civil and military personnel regardless of their ethnic background, and guarantee the safety and security of all citizens, especially the Igbo, who had suffered immensely during the conflict. An aspect of the reconciliation policy involved specific measures aimed at reintegrating former combatants and public servants into the national fold. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Federal Military Government promised that all former Igbo public servants and military personnel would be reinstated, that their properties would be protected, and that general amnesty would be granted to those who had been involved in the conflict. These measures were meant to restore a sense of normalcy and to signal that the state was committed to treating all citizens equally. However, in practice, the reabsorption process was fraught with inconsistencies. For instance, the enactment of the Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970, which provided that where the appropriate authority was satisfied that between 15th January, 1966, and 15th January, 1970, a public officer was involved in any hostile or subversive act or rebellion against any of the governments in the Federation, such an officer would be dismissed, removed or compulsorily retired from service.[60] Predictably, many top-ranking Igbo civil servants and military officers were either dismissed or relegated to lower positions, a policy ostensibly justified by the need to reward loyalty among those who had remained in the federation during the war. The military tribunals that tried Igbo officers resulted in a patchwork of outcomes: some were discharged without benefits, others were detained for years, and a few were reabsorbed only on probation.[61] Such discrepancies created an environment where the reconciliation policy, rather than bridging divides, reinforced perceptions of bias and injustice. Social Identity Theory helps explain this phenomenon: when a group feels that its members are being treated unequally by state institutions, the collective identity of that group is further solidified in opposition to the perceived injustice.[62] The gap between promise and practice in the reintegration process not only deepened grievances but also hindered the emergence of genuine national unity.

Another facet of the reconciliation policy was the handling of property and economic assets in the immediate post-war period, which was managed through the establishment of the Abandoned Properties Implementation Committee (APIC). The committee was tasked with overseeing the sale of properties left behind by Igbo residents in territories outside Igboland and in parts of the former Eastern Region, such as Port Harcourt. This policy was ostensibly designed to redistribute assets fairly; however, in practice, it led to the transfer of property at very low prices to indigenes of other regions. According to Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo:

The decision of Murtala's government as announced on 3rd February, 1976, shocked Ndi Igbo. The government arrived at the following decisions: The allocation of N14 million to enable Rivers and South-eastern States to pay a flat rate of N500 a year on every building property confiscated from the Igbo as rent arrears for a period of five years from 1970-1975. The Federal and State governments were to purchase compulsorily some of the building properties concerned for their respective use. The remaining ones were to be sold to the indigenes of the state who would require to pay a fair price to respective owners. The government white paper also authorised the Rivers and Southeastern State which they have had to face since the end of the war. Those who dared return to claim their homes after the war were killed and buried in mass graves.[63]

The Gowon regime adopted a dual approach to the abandoned property issue. On one hand, efforts were made to return most Igbo properties located outside the former Eastern Region to their rightful owners, along with any rent collected. For instance, in Lagos and the Mid-Western State, Igbo property owners were allowed to reclaim their properties. In Lagos alone, over £250,000 in rent was accrued from more than 3,000 properties managed by the State's Abandoned Properties Committee between December 1968 and January 1970.[64] The then Lagos State Governor, Col. Mobolaji Johnson, assured property owners that the process of returning their properties was ongoing, though questions remained about the fairness of the rent collected. In the Mid-Western State, more than 400 Igbo property owners were able to reclaim their homes in Agbor after presenting proof of ownership.[65]

Similarly, forty-two (42) abandoned Igbo houses in the North-Central State were returned to their owners.[66] However, many Igbo people had been forced to sell their properties at drastically low prices during the 1966-67 crisis and after the war, with little recourse for legal redress.

In contrast, the policy in Rivers and South-Eastern States was exclusionary, preventing Igbo property owners from reclaiming their assets. Stringent conditions were imposed, requiring property owners to present building documents, even though many had lost these records during the war. In Rivers State alone, Igbo losses were estimated at £56 million, encompassing thousands of buildings, undeveloped land, industrial plants, plantations, petrol stations, hotels, and other valuable assets in Port Harcourt, Bonny, Eleme, and surrounding areas.[67] The then East Central State Commissioner for Economic Development and Reconstruction, Mr. Sam Ikoku, noted that Igbo individuals denied access to their properties suffered a combined monthly financial loss of over £150,000 and lost bank credit worth £5 million.[68] The Federal Government's failure to intervene reinforced the perception that the policy was designed to economically marginalize the Igbo, reducing them to second-class citizens. Many who lost their properties never recovered financially, and some succumbed to heart attacks due to their losses. The Rivers State Government, aligned with the Federal Government during the war, appeared to act with tacit approval from the central authorities. This fueled suspicions that the Federal Government sought to deepen the divide between the Igbo and their neighbors in Rivers State, enabling continued manipulation through a divide-and-rule strategy—an approach that shaped subsequent political alignments in civilian regimes.

The implementation of the so-called "Twenty Pounds Policy" and the Banking Obligation (Eastern States) Decree of 1970 further exemplified the state's inconsistent approach to economic reconciliation. These policies were seen by many as punitive measures that deliberately devalued the economic contributions of the Igbo during the war. As the Transitional Justice Theory argues, effective reconciliation must include genuine reparations and a fair distribution of resources to restore the dignity of all affected communities; in this case, the economic measures taken by the Federal Military Government did little to repair the economic damage or address the imbalance in resource allocation. According to Kukah:
Unfortunately the country has not been sincere enough to admit the mistakes made through both the Indigenisation Degree and the Abandoned Property Edicts after the war. These two policies perhaps well conceived, had the opposite effect in dealing with the problems of national integration… Did the rest of Nigeria expect the Igbo to buy into the gains of the Indigenisation degree or reclaim their abandoned property with the proverbial sum of twenty pounds?[69]

The adverse economic impact of these policies was long-lasting, as it not only deprived the Igbo of their rightful economic assets but also reinforced the perception that the state favored certain groups over others. The manner in which property and assets were managed contributed significantly to the erosion of trust in the federal government among the Igbo, and it fuelled a sense of economic injustice that persists to this day.

In addition, Gowon's government, in its naivety, believed that Biafra could be erased from Nigeria's history. However, Biafra was a historical reality for which millions sacrificed their lives, making its memory indelible. Many nations and empires throughout history have struggled for statehood, with some achieving their aspirations centuries later, while others, despite collapse, retained their historical identity. Yet, Gowon sought to obliterate Biafra's memory by renaming the Bight of Biafra to the Bight of Bonny (See Appendix I). He also approved the destruction of the Uli Airport aimed at wiping Biafra's most powerful symbol of resistance of the face of the earth. According to de St Jorre:

At a press conference in Lagos I remember Gowon, quite uncharacteristically, losing his temper when Uli was mentioned. "Let us forget about it", he cried. "Uli has been too involved in international politics". A few days' later bulldozers and giant scrappers were ripping up the pock-marked runaway, literally wiping Biafra's most powerful symbol of resistance of the face of the earth.[70]

Also, journalist Agwu Okpanku argued that suppressing Biafra's memory was futile, warning that any group facing injustice in Nigeria could rise in rebellion. His bold critique led to his detention, along with his editor Henry Onyedike, until Gowon was overthrown in 1975. Years later, Okpanku died under mysterious circumstances, allegedly struck by a train; though suspicions of political intrigue remain.[71] His tragic end highlights the perils faced by those who challenge the dominant narratives of power and memory in Nigeria.

The Nigerian state has actively shaped historical memory to enforce a singular national identity, often at the expense of alternative perspectives. This effort is evident in education policies, where government-approved history textbooks have been made to minimize the civil war's ethnic dimensions, glossing over the pogrom against the Igbo, and the war's humanitarian toll. By fostering collective amnesia, the state appears bent on delegitimizing

opposing narratives and memorializes only federal soldiers, excluding Biafran fighters from national remembrance. Institutions like the National War Museum and Armed Forces Remembrance Day serve to reinforce official history while silencing sectional memories. This selective historical framing perpetuates injustice, denies war victims recognition, and suppresses ongoing discourse on the war's impact, ultimately impeding genuine reconciliation and nation-building.

A further component of the reconciliation policy was the state's approach to transitional justice, which involved the absence of formal prosecutions or trials for wartime atrocities. In many post-conflict settings, transitional justice measures such as truth commissions, reparations, and trials are seen as critical for addressing historical injustices and facilitating healing. In Nigeria, however, the Federal Military Government chose a path of general amnesty and the avoidance of reprisals, a decision that was widely publicized as part of the "no victor, no vanquished" policy. While this approach was praised by some as a means of rapidly restoring peace, it also led to criticisms that it effectively allowed perpetrators to avoid accountability for their actions. The Transitional Justice Theory contends that the absence of formal mechanisms for accountability can hinder long-term reconciliation, as unresolved grievances continue to simmer beneath the surface. Many in the Igbo community felt that the lack of legal redress for wartime atrocities undermined the moral foundation of reconciliation and left open the possibility for future conflicts. The decision to forgo trials or punitive measures was justified by the Federal Military Government on the grounds that it would prevent further bloodshed and foster immediate stability, but in practice, it contributed to a sense of impunity that has had lasting ramifications for Nigerian politics. The Social Identity Theory further suggests that when a group perceives that justice has not been served, its members are more likely to cling to their distinct identity and mobilize against perceived injustices. In this light, the FMG's approach to transitional justice is a critical factor in understanding the long-term challenges of reconciliation in post-war Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate the "No Victor, No Vanquished" mantra proclaimed by General Yakubu Gowon at the close of the Nigeria–Biafra War, with the central objective of examining how it shaped post-war policies of rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconciliation, and how far these measures advanced national integration. In doing so, the research sought to evaluate both the philosophical underpinnings of the slogan and its translation into tangible state actions, focusing on whether it fostered equality, justice, and inclusion among Nigeria's constituent groups. The findings confirm that, while Gowon's declaration was a well-intentioned political gesture designed to signal magnanimity and national healing, it lacked the institutional and administrative grounding necessary to produce genuine reconciliation. The policies that followed—though couched in the language of national unity—were often implemented unevenly and under conditions that favoured bureaucratic expediency over equity. Consequently, measures such as the Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970 and the Banking Obligations (Eastern States) Decree inadvertently entrenched a sense of exclusion among many citizens of the former Eastern Region. The overarching conclusion, therefore, is that Nigeria's post-war leadership failed to convert a noble slogan into a transformative framework for justice and integration, resulting in the persistence of regional grievances and uneven development across the federation.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that the challenge of national integration in Nigeria transcends rhetoric and requires consistent structural, legal, and moral commitment to fairness and inclusivity. The mantra "No Victor, No Vanquished" may have symbolically ended a fratricidal conflict, but without deliberate and equitable policy follow-through, its reconciliatory power remained largely superficial. The study's findings reveal that post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts were hampered by administrative lapses, economic inequities, and political exclusion, factors which continue to manifest in contemporary ethno-political tensions and separatist agitations. It becomes evident that authentic national integration cannot be decreed by proclamation but must be nurtured through transparent governance, equitable distribution of resources, and sincere efforts to redress historical injustices. Thus, the research underscores the continuing relevance of Gowon's ideal as a moral benchmark, even as it exposes the gulf between that ideal and Nigeria's political realities. The study concludes that only by confronting the contradictions of its post-war experience can Nigeria hope to achieve the unity and reconciliation that the "No Victor, No Vanquished" mantra originally promised.

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