
**THE INDIFFERENT ATTITUDE OF THE IBIBIO TO THE BIAFRAN ENTERPRISE
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR, 1967-1970**

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ABSTRACT : *The Nigerian civil war (6th July, 1967 – 15th January, 1970) that plunged the entire nation into chaos and devastation involved various ethnic nationalities. The conventional wisdom has been that the Ibibio fought on the side of the Biafra. This study examined the role the Ibibio played in the civil war. The study revealed that a larger proportion of the Ibibio population participated in the war on the side of the federal troops. Few that supported Biafra were former federal military officers and some in the civil service. The support to the federal troops by the Ibibio was as a result of their marginalization and oppression by the Igbo in the Eastern Region of Nigeria. The Ibibio played a significant role in the collapse of the Republic of Biafra. The study had corrected the persistent misconception that the Ibibio fought on the side of Biafra. The study made use of primary and secondary sources, the primary sources included oral interview, archival materials and government publications while the secondary sources were mainly books, articles in journals and unpublished thesis.*

KEYWORD: Civil War, Biafra, Nigeria, Ibibio, Apathy

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria during the period under focus comprised of three regions, namely: Northern, Western and Eastern Regions. The geopolitical structure placed the three regions that came into existence through the enactment of Richard's constitution of 1946 firmly in the control of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo respectively. Regionalism inculcated political chauvinism, thus eclipsing the diverse interest of the ethnic minorities.¹

In the Eastern Region, the ethnic minorities, especially the Ibibio viewed this constitution as a fashioned strategy aimed at promoting inter-ethnic colonization. The Ibibio under the Igbo hegemony in the Eastern Region were deleteriously marginalised and oppressed in all areas of life. According to Akpan in 1953, Prof. EyoIta, an Ibibio man, was denied the opportunity of becoming a leader of Government Business in the Eastern House of Assembly. He was humiliated and expelled from the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (later National Council of Nigerian Citizens N.C.N.C) by Dr. NnamdiAzikiwe because he was not an Igbo man. This act by Dr.

¹I. Nzimiro..*Nigerian Civil War: A Study in Class Conflict*, Enugu: Frontline Publishing Company Ltd. 1982, p. 36

Azikiwe aroused the anger of the Ibibio-speaking people and other minority ethnic nationalities in the Eastern Region.²

Moreover, the Igbo used their overwhelming majority to monopolise the economic resources and factors of production to the exclusion and detriment of the non-Igbo minorities, especially the Ibibio.³ In Ibibioland, the presence of Federal or Regional Government was not felt such as good roads, pipe borne water, electricity, government schools, business supports etc., but the Igbo were enjoying all these amenities.⁴

As the marginalisation and discrimination of the minorities by the Igbo was unabated, at the Eastern Regional House of Assembly meeting held at Enugu, the representatives from Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers provinces met and discussed together on how to form a united front to fight for the survival of their people. The idea of the creation of Calabar – Ogoja – Rivers (C.O.R.) State out of the Eastern Region was suggested by Dr. UdoUdoma – an Ibibio man, and the idea was unanimously agreed upon.⁵

The state of affairs in the Eastern Region during this period was tumultuous and chaotic. The colonial government, therefore, set up a commission headed by Sir Henry Willink to see to the fears of the minorities and how their fears could be allayed. The mid-west was the immediate beneficiary of the agitation as the Mid-Western Region was carved out of the Western Region in 1963. However, the Ibibio were persistent in their agitation and on 27th May, 1967, Lt. Col. Gowon pre-empted the declaration of Biafra by Lt. Col. Ojukwu (Governor of the Eastern Region) and announced the creation of 12 states to torpedo his (Ojukwu) secession bid. On 30th May, 1967, Lt. Col. OdumegwuOjukwu, declared the entire Eastern Region a sovereign and independent nation to be known as Biafra.⁶

The Ibibio's reminiscence of their past experience of marginalisation and oppression under Igbo domination immediately took a quick decision of being indifferent to the Biafran enterprise and applied the fifth column theory at the outbreak of the war. The former federal military officers that were autochthons of Ibibioland sent back to their region on the order of the Head of State and Commander of the Armed Forces – Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, on his ascendancy and official speech on 1st August, 1966⁷, and few civil servants supported Biafra while a good proportion of the Ibibio population gave supportive hands to the federal troops. The supportive hands given to the federal troops by the Ibibio aided their victory. According to Obasanjo in my command, he opines that “the presence of federal troops in Calabar immediately triggered off spontaneous loyalist reaction

² U. J. Akpan. “Resource control controversy and federation in Nigeria.” Unpublished M. A. Thesis Department of History and International Relations, University of Calabar, 2006, p. 76

³ Ibid, p. 77

⁴ A. N. Udo., *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970*, London: Frankcass, 1971, p.

⁵ U. E. Udo., *The Story of Ibibio Union*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books. 1987, P. 107

⁶ O. Balogun., *The Tragic Years: Nigeria in Crisis, 1966 - 1970*, Benin City; Ethiope Publishing Corporation. 1973, P. 61

⁷ P. Effiong., *Nigeria and Biafra; My Story*, Princeton: Sungai Books. 2004, P. 138

from the population. There was jubilation all over the city and general assistance was offered to the federal troops.”⁸

According to IsamaAlabi Godwin, the Ibibio’s participation in the Civil War on the side of the federal government was in the provision of logistics and information for the Nigerian troops through reconnaissance. He (Alabi) opines that the Ibibio also contributed personnel to the Nigerian troops through mobilization of the vigilante groups, victuals were also provided to the 3MCDO troops of the Nigerian army by the Ibibio natives especially their women while their husbands provided palm wine, Isama states that the morale of the federal troops was highly boosted by these supportive hands from the Ibibio.⁹

However, the Ibibio, one of the ethnic minorities in the Eastern Region under Igbo domination ought to have joined the secession bid and fought the war together but they exhibited indifferent attitude to the Biafran enterprise and gave supportive hands to the federal troops which aided their victory. This study will therefore unveil the rationale behind this act by the Ibibio.

THE IBIBIO AND IGBO IN PRE-CIVIL WAR NIGERIA

The Ibibio are semi-Bantu migrants who first settled in a village in Cameroon and named it UsakEdet before travelling through Southwestern Africa and crossed into the Southeastern portion of Nigeria. Amaury Talbot, a British scholar/Administrator in his anthropological research in Southern Nigeria opines that the Ibibio thereafter settled in the district of Aro-chukwu and named it Ibom where they erected a shrine called the “long juju” of Arochukwu. He (Talbot) estimates that between 1300 and 1400, the Igbo invaded the Ibom village and drove the Ibibio aborigines away.¹⁰

The Ibibio migrated Eastward from Ibom village in Arochukwu and formed IkotAbasi, Eket, IkotEkpene, Uyo, Etinan and Abak. Those that moved to the Riverine area formed Oron, Itu, Calabar, Eket, Ibenu and so on. The riverine Ibibio were referred to by other sub-groups as Efik. The reason was that they occupied a very strategic position (access to the rivers) and this heightened their economic activities and allowed them to be wealthy and prosperous. Efik in Ibibioland means “oppressors”¹¹ for the fact that they had early contact with the European traders and missionaries and this triggered their preponderancy.

The Ibibio country abounds in rivers; from west to east Andoni, the Imo, the KwaIboe, the Ikang, the Akpayafe, the Calabar and the Cross River which is the longest and which forms international boundary between the Cross River State of Nigeria and Southwest Cameroon. The river rises in the Rumpi Mountains in Western Region of Cameroon and runs in a northwesterly direction to the Obubra axis in the Cross River State. The main tributary (the Aboine) rises in the Udi Hills in

⁸ O. Obasanjo., *My Command*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nig.) Ltd. 1980, P. 48

⁹ I. G. Alabi., *The Tragedy of Victory On-The-Spot Account of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited. 2013, Pp. 96-103

¹⁰ P. A. Talbot., *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. 1969, Pp. 182-83

¹¹ E. A. Udoh *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana-Feb Publishers Limited. 1983

Enugu in the Anambra State; other tributaries which flow into it rise from nonprominent highlands in the Plateau State and rivers from Imo State of Nigeria also flow into the Cross River.

However, the Cross River and many other smaller rivers in Ibibioland formed commercial centres for people from various ethnic nationalities. The Igbo, the Ijaw, the Ekoi and many from Western Cameroon came for trading activities. According to Dike in his book “Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta”, he opines that “Every item of export trade in the Port of Bonny was a product of the tribal interior, and the carrying trade on which the prosperity and greatness of the Delta States rested, linked their fortunes decisively with those of the producers in the tribal locations.”¹²

The influx of people into Ibibio riverine areas for trading activities allowed Ibibioland to be heterogeneous. The Ibibio at the coastal areas played a middleman role for traders from many ethnic nationalities in Nigeria especially the Igbo in the trade with the Europeans. The Europeans were not allowed to penetrate into the hinterland. Hugh Goldie, one of the Scottish United Presbyterian missionaries who worked among the Efik and had a thorough knowledge of Efik people and Efikland, wrote that slaves greatly outnumbered the freemen in Old Calabar¹³ that Creek Town was the leading trading community of Old Calabar. Dike opines that Igbo slaves formed more than half of the Ibibio population in 1853.¹⁴ Goldie in 1890 wrote that about thirteen different ethnic nationalities, including the Fulani of Northern Nigeria, were represented in the population of Calabar.¹⁵

The fact that the Ibibio had early contact with the Europeans and first engaged in trading activities, first in slaves and in legitimate commodities, the fame, wealth and prestige of the Ibibio became heightened. The Igbo and other ethnic nationalities came to Ibibioland with their articles of trade meant for domestic usage and export. During the era of slave trade, the Igbo, Ijaw, Ekoi and so on, formed the bulk of the slaves exported to Europe by the Ibibio.¹⁶ Hope Masterton Waddell, the leader of the Scottish missionaries who introduced Western education, Christianity and social services among the Efik in 1846, and who had an intimate knowledge of the Efik people and their land, opines that King Eyo Honesty II of Creek Town had many thousands of slaves, and four hundred canoes with a captain and crew for everyone. Besides this extensive trade which amounted to several thousands of puncheons (of palm oil) annually, he employed his people (slaves) reclaiming waste lands, founding towns and planting farms in well-selected positions, which gave him command of rivers and channels of trade.¹⁷

¹² K. O. Dike., *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* , London: Oxford University Press. 1956, P. 20

¹³ Hugh Goldie., *Old Calabar and its Mission*, Edinburgh. 1980, P. 18

¹⁴ K. O. Dike. *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, London: Oxford University. 1956, P.20

¹⁵ Hugh Goldie., *Old Calabar and its Mission*, Edinburgh. 1980, P. 18

¹⁶ An Oral Interview with Chief Edward Wilson Umoh on 25/04/20. 109, Aka Rd., Uyo , Age : 79yrs, a retired teacher

¹⁷ H. M. Waddell., *Twenty-nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. 1970, P. 320

According to Jones, “in the course of time, slaves outnumbered the freemen in some Efik towns, Duke Town and Creek Town for example, citizenship came to depend not on descent but on residents. Lineage (Ekpuk) disappeared and with it title of ObongEkpuk (lineage head)”¹⁸ However, since the head of a commercial canoe was also the head and founder of the association (house) and the head of a fishing canoe is called by the Ibibio “EteUbom” or “Etubom”, (“Ete” for father, “Ubom” for Canoe), the Efik Head of House was also called “Etubom” and that has continued till today. In 1842, when slave trade was abolished in Ibibioland and in Nigeria and slavery in 1901, the Ibibio community was completely heterogeneous, the Igbo slaves forming the majority.¹⁹

The Ibibio acted as middlemen between the European traders on the coast and the Igbo and other ethnic nationalities in the interior and many other communities that could not have direct contact with the Europeans during the slave trade era. The ending of the slave trade among the Ibibio in 1842 and the turning of the Ibibio to legitimate trade (in palm oil and kernels) did not end the control of the Ibibio over the Igbo and other ethnic nationalities in the Eastern axis of Nigeria and those in the Western Cameroon. The Ibibio also controlled western education and prohibited its spread into other ethnic nationalities in the interior including the Igbo.

In 1846, the United Free Church of Scotland arrived in Calabar and began their evangelical, educational and social services.²⁰ The Ibibio had the opportunity of going to missionary school and discovered that it was a source of power and wealth greater than the one they were receiving by their Ekpe society. They therefore restricted the spread of these social amenities to other communities in the interior. In 1888, Mary Slessor – one of the missionaries opened a school at Okoyong and thenceforth Christianity and western education started to spread to many ethnic nationalities including the Igbo.²¹ The Igbo vehemently detested the monopolistic attitude of the Ibibio.

THE INDIFFERENT ATTITUDE OF THE IBIBIO TO THE SECESSION AND THE CIVIL WAR

The Richard’s constitution of 1946 which divided Nigeria into three regions,²² (Northern, Western and Eastern), each region with a majority ethnic nationality at the top with several minority ethnic nationalities under it, directly place the Ibibio and many others under the Igbo as their majority ethnic nationality. The Ibibio under the hegemony of the Igbo were highly oppressed and discriminated against. The presence of the federal or regional government was not felt at all in

¹⁸ G. I. Jones., *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers*. London: Oxford University Press. 1963, Pp. 54-55

¹⁹ E. A. Udoh. *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana-Feb Publishers Limited.1983, Pp. 9-10

²⁰ NAI, No. 27689. *Intelligence Report on Oku Clan*, vol. 3, P.17, 12th October, 1926.P. 17

²¹ C. P. Groves. *The Planning of Christianity in Africa*. London: Lutterworth Press. 1953 P. 216

²² I. Nzimiro, *Nigerian Civil War: A Study in Class Conflict*, Enugu: Frontline Publishing Company Ltd. 1982, P. 36

Ibibioland. The roads in Ibibioland were bad, no pipe borne water, no political appointment for the indigenous people of Ibibio country and so on.

In 1953, the civilian coup d'etat plotted by Dr. NnamdiAzikiwe in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly, Enugu, which resulted in the removal of Professor EyoIta as the leader of Government Business of the region, precipitated the crystallization of the irreversible advocacy of the Eastern minority groups under the auspices of the Ibibio State Union, for the restructuring of the Nigerian polity through the creation of states. The Calabar-Ogona-Rivers (C.O.R.) State Agenda was vigorously propagated. However, the colonial government in 1957, responded to the request by instituting the Willink Commission to enquire into the fears of the minorities and the means of allaying such fears.²³

However, the commission in its submission acknowledged the fact that fears of the minorities of perpetual domination, discrimination and marginalization were indeed genuine. The coup led by a young Igbo military officer, Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, enthroned General AguiyiIronsi as the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. On 29th July, 1966, a counter coup led by Major Muritala Mohammed terminated the hegemony of General Ironsi and Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon became the new Head of State and gave his official announcement on 1st August, 1966.²⁴ Lt. Col. Gowon's ascendancy was not acceptable by Lt. Col. Ojukwu (the Governor of Eastern Region) who planned secession of the Eastern Region from the federation. During this period, the Ibibio State Union was persistent in its demand for the creation of a C.O.R. State. on the 27th May, 1967, the Federal Military Government preempted the declaration of Biafra and announced the creation of 12 states in the country. The result of this exercise showed that two states, South Eastern and Rivers were carved out of the C.O.R. State area.²⁵

It is crystal clear that the rationale behind the Ibibio's agitation for a state of their own was as a result of the domineering attitude of the Igbo over them and other ethnic nationalities in the Eastern Region. They were deleteriously oppressed and discriminated against. This and aforementioned reasons precipitated the Ibibio's exhibition of the attitude of indifference to the secession bid by the Igbo. They saw it to be a new form of enslavement which will be worse than the European imperialism. However, what further allowed the Ibibio to view secession as Igbo project was the attitude of ordinary Igbo men and women to the non-Igbo especially, the Ibibio resident in the east when the crisis developed as though the east belonged to them alone, and that others should be contented with second class position. There were occasional threats of massive attack against the non-Igbo in Igboland. These threats prompted leading personalities from the Old Calabar province resident in Enugu to write the Military Governor concerning the inhumane treatments the Ibibio and other ethnic nationalities were receiving from the Igbo in the Eastern Region.

²³ J. O. Ojiako *Nigeria Yesterday, Today and ...?* Onitsha: Africana Educational Publishers (Nig.) Ltd. 1981, P. 40

²⁴ E. O. Ojukwu., *Because I am involved*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd. P. 164

²⁵ O. Obasanjo. *My Command; An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967 - 1970*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Ltd., 1980, pp. 11 - 12.

The Military Governor who outrightly ignored the welcome address prepared for him by his secretary-chief N. U. Akpan, advised the Ibibio how to behave, he (Ojukwu) in his impromptu address, likened them (the Ibibio) to wives, while the Igbo were husbands, and this he said was the principle by which the relationship between the two groups should be governed. The Governor's speech actually left the Ibibio people with the impression that the Igbo regarded them as inferiors, perhaps chattels, which were what wives in certain areas of the region were supposed to be. Every day as the crises deepened, the molestation of the members of the minority nationalities increased, non-Igbo speaking people could not move freely without insults and embarrassment through different checkpoints manned by civil defenders.²⁶

Also, the affirmation of the suspicion of personal and ethnic agenda of the secession and the Civil War which led to the indifferent attitude of the Ibibio, Ojukwu declared at the Supreme Military Council meeting held between 4th - 5th January, 1967 at Aburi-Ghana, that "he is presenting Igbo Cause"²⁷ The implication is that if the Biafra cause was a regional one, then the interest of other ethnic nationalities within the region would have been tabled in Aburi also.

Ojukwu also indicated that "after being chased back to their homes, from the North, the alternative as perceived by the Igbo was to resist and I stood at their head to resist."²⁸ This further implies that if secession and war were the most viable options to the massacres in the North, then certainly there were entirely Igbo options. And because these options were not favourable to the Ibibio, negative attitudes were bound to manifest which were not in the overall good of the Biafran enterprise. Also, the declaration of the Republic of Biafra was viewed by the Ibibio as an Igbo agenda and a manifestation of Lt. Col. Ojukwu's premeditated resolve. Ojukwu did not discuss it with any representative council of the minority ethnic nationalities in the Eastern Region except his Igbo Consultative Assembly. To buttress the suspicion that the decision to secede and subsequently go to war were personal resolves, Ojukwu presented the Biafran anthem, flag, emblem and standard on May 29, 1967, barely 24 hours after the "mandate" to secede was endorsed. The point to note here is that the presented symbols of Biafra being outcomes of rigorous, time consuming exercise must have been done much earlier and kept secretly without the knowledge of the Ibibio elites and people, and other minority ethnic nationalities in the Eastern Region pending the most auspicious time to declare Biafra a republic.²⁹

However, this point is a convincing evidence that the secession and the Civil War was purely Igbo agenda. That explained the reason why the Ibibio refused to be part of the project. According to Alabi Isama, the supportive hands the Ibibio gave to the 3MCDO division of the Nigerian Army was very impressive. Isama says the Ibibio provided logistics and information for the federal troops through reconnaissance. They equally contributed personnel to the Nigerian troops through mobilisation of the vigilante groups. Alabi opines that the Ibibio women were the ones preparing

²⁶ U. Udo., *The Story of Ibibio Union*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books. 1987, P. 587

²⁷ N. U. Akpan *Struggle for Secession*, London : Frank Cass & Co Ltd. 1971, Pp. 153-158

²⁸ See Aburi Report. pp. 5 - 10. NAI, CWR 3/1/29.

²⁹ E. O. Ojukwu., *Because I am Involved*, Ibadan: Spectrum Book Limited. 1989, Pp. 177-178

their meals while their husbands provided palm wine. This gesture boosted the morale of the federal troops.³⁰

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is evident that the reason for the indifferent attitude of the Ibibio to the Biafran enterprise was as a result of the ill-treatment they (Ibibio) received from the Igbo in the old Eastern Region of Nigeria. Prior to the era of slave trade, the Igbo and Ibibio were relating together socially and commercially. In the nineteenth century, the Ibibio first had contact with the European traders because Ibibioland abounds in waters. The Ibibio played the middlemen role in the trade between the Europeans and traders from several ethnic nationalities in the interior including the Igbo.

The regional structure in Nigeria that made the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo the majority ethnic nationality in the Northern, Western and Eastern Regions respectively, directly placed the Ibibio under the rulership of the Igbo. The Ibibio were dehumanised, marginalised and discriminated against. Ibibioland was devoid of the presence of the Federal and Regional Government in terms of electricity, good roads, pipe borne water, infrastructural amenities, schools, funding and so on. The ascendancy of Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon as the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces and his official speech on 1st August, 1966 changed the tune of music for the Igbo.

Lt. Col. Ojukwu detested this enthronement and planned the secession of the Eastern Region from the Federation of Nigeria. The Ibibio were indifferent to this gesture, they (Ibibio) viewed it as a new form of enslavement which will be worse than the European imperialism. Few of the Ibibio that reluctantly supported Biafra were civil servants and former federal military officers who came back home on the order of the Head of State (Lt. Col. Gowon) on his ascension to power on 1st August, 1966. They were referred to as “reluctant” Biafrans by the generality of the Ibibio. The Ibibio did not join the secession bid by the Igbo and at the outbreak of the war, they gave supportive hands to the federal troops. Lt. Col. Philip Effiong, the second-in-command to Lt. Col. Ojukwu, received the mantle of leadership of Biafra from Ojukwu on the 10th January, 1970 and surrendered the Biafran troops to the 3MCDO division of Nigerian army on the 12th of January, 1970. This act by Lt. Col. Effiong (an Ibibio man) has given credence to the fact that the Ibibio supported the federal troops and the few Ibibio autochthons that supported Biafra did that reluctantly.

³⁰ Godwin Alabi Isama., *The Tragedy of Victory: On-The-Spot Account of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited. 2013, P. 191