1 The Road to War and Massacre

To understand how so many Asaba families, like Celestina's, came to be devastated in 1967, we must briefly review the long chain of events that culminated in war. It was a conflict that eventually claimed up to two million lives, before ending in 1970 with the collapse of secessionist Biafra.[1]

THE ROOTS OF NIGERIA

The origins of the Nigerian Civil War lie in the country's colonial past.[2] Starting at the end of the nineteenth century and over a period of 40 years, the British took control of previously independent territories with distinct languages, religions, and customs that represented over 200 ethno-linguistic groups from the Bight of Benin on the Atlantic coast to the fringes of the Sahara desert to the north. Both topography and culture had created historical divisions between the northern and the southern parts of what would later become Nigeria. Trade routes crossing the Sahara Desert linked Northern Nigeria to Muslim North Africa, the Middle East, and Southern Europe, eventually leading to the spread of Islam among the majority Hausa population between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Fulani pastoral nomads began to enter the north at about the same time; by the beginning of the

[1] The most comprehensive history of the war, written soon after its end, is John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972. The most recent account is Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012. Other accounts, written from various points of view, are listed in the Sources Consulted.

[2] The name by which the war is known is contentious. Depending on point of view, it may be known as the Nigeria-Biafra War (which suggests a conflict between two sovereign entities), the Biafran War (which places the emphasis on the struggle for Biafra), or the War of Nigerian Unity (which underlines the purpose of keeping Nigeria as one). We chose to use the term Nigerian Civil War because it is the most common and arguably the most neutral.

nineteenth century, they had asserted their dominance over multiple Hausa kingdoms and established the powerful Sokoto Caliphate, which exerted control over the vast area that comprises present-day Northern Nigeria. In contrast to the southern part of the country, dominated by the Yoruba to the west and Igbo-speaking groups to the east, the environment allowed for the development of cattle-herding and agriculture, and a more decentralized power structure in which local chieftains exerted control over discrete areas.[3]

The divisions between the two parts of what would become Nigeria were exacerbated by interaction with Europeans. Starting in the sixteenth century, the arrival of European merchants redirected economic and trade routes away from the Mediterranean area to the Atlantic coast. Slave trading was a central component of this relationship. After it was abolished by Britain in 1807, it was gradually replaced by palm oil, the main cash crop of the colonial era, and other forms of "legitimate" commerce. The expansion of trade, with the Niger River providing the locus of contact with European merchants, in turn led to an influx of missionaries. Christianity was first introduced with the arrival of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, but it truly began to gather momentum in the first half of the nineteenth century, when evangelical fervor led to an increase in missionary activities that were channeled through churches and mission schools offering Western-style education.[4]

During the second half of the nineteenth century, competition increased between British, French, and German trading companies in the area. In order to protect and develop its commercial interests from the expansionist aims of other European powers, Britain annexed Lagos as a Crown colony in 1861, and starting in 1886, the newly formed Royal Niger Company was granted a monopoly over trade in the Niger River basin. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, Britain's colonial ambitions led to

[3] Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 21–37; Michael Gould, *The Biafran War*, Chapter 2.

[4] Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, Chapters 2 and 3.

a series of successful and often punitive military campaigns to expand its sphere of influence and commercial opportunities throughout Yorubaland in the west, the kingdom of Benin in the center, Igboland in the east, and the Sokoto Caliphate in the north. In 1900 the British government revoked the charter of the Royal Niger Company, dividing its territory into the newly formed Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Niger Coast Protectorate. In 1906, with the addition of the Lagos colony, the latter was renamed the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria.

NIGERIA UNDER COLONIAL RULE

In 1914 the Colonial Office amalgamated this complex ethnic mosaic into a single entity called "Nigeria" by joining these separate jurisdictions into a single colony. Existing economic, political, and social differences between the various sections of Nigeria were exacerbated as a result of British policies. In order to limit expenditure, foster political stability and protect trade, Britain followed a policy of "indirect rule." Outlined by Frederick Lugard when he served as first High Commissioner of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria between 1900 and 1906, indirect rule enabled British authorities to govern by relying on existing local power structures. Operating under firm British supervision, traditional rulers oversaw day-to-day administration; in exchange for prestige, security, and limited colonial interference into local political, social, and even legal matters, they would agree to submit to British authorities and relinquish control over matters of trade, taxation, and finance. In 1914, with Lugard as the newly appointed Governor General of a united Nigeria, indirect rule was extended to the southern part of the new colony.[5]

While protecting British commercial interest and preserving the power of a small oligarchy, indirect rule fostered localism based on religion and ethnicity which, in turn, shaped a representative system

[5] See Frederick John Dealtry Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, London: William Blackwood, 1922; Penelope Hetherington, *British Paternalism and Africa, 1920–1940*, London: F. Cass, 1978.

that increased internal political tensions and led to uneven economic and social development between Northern and Southern Nigeria. Colonial emphasis on regionalism and ethnicity was challenged by nationalist leaders such as Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe, who sought to create a party based on a pan-Nigerian identity. However, these efforts were undermined by colonial policies and successive constitutional changes that favored a representative system that combined a national legislature with regional assemblies representing different ethnic groups. By the time of independence, this blended representative system had led to the formation of political parties each representing a separate region and its dominant ethnic group. The Action Group Party was led by Yorubas from the Western Region; the National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons, initially established by Macaulay and Azikiwe as a national political party, had evolved into an organization supported mainly by Igbos[6] of the east. The Northern People's Congress drew on a core of support from the Hausa-Fulani, led by the Sardauna of Sokoto, although some Hausa also supported other parties, such as the Northern Elements Progressive Union.[7]

Another major consequence of indirect rule was Britain's policy toward access to formal Western education and, in turn, its role in encouraging regional prejudice. In the north, in order to avoid estranging the local feudal Islamic hierarchy comprised of Emirs, colonial authorities curtailed Christian evangelizing and the establishment of Western-style missionary schools in that area. Consequently, there were never enough Western-educated Northerners to fill expanding colonial government jobs, or to take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities and professional advancements that required familiarity with colonial bureaucratic and commercial structures. The result was that the area remained economically, socially, and educationally less developed. In contrast, Southerners, particularly the Igbo because

6 The spelling "Ibo" was predominant until recent years; we use the current preferred spelling (Igbo) unless quoting directly from older sources.

7 Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 148–154.

of their presence along the main trade routes, such as the eastern portions of the Niger, and their relatively non-hierarchical political structures, had been exposed early to European-style entrepreneurial practices and education. As the country approached independence, British authorities turned to South-Easterners with the necessary education and skills to take over administrative and commercial responsibilities. In addition Igbos became increasingly represented in business activities and professions throughout the country, including in the north. Here, in spite of their crucial role, and even though many had lived in the area for generations, Igbo were required to live in segregated *Sabon Gari* or "strangers' quarters."[8] Thus British "indirect rule" had fostered a lopsided situation that fed Northern fears of Southern intrusion, with the relatively wealthy Igbo being especially suspect. By the mid-1960s, across Nigeria,

> Ibos filled urban jobs at every level far out of proportion to their numbers, as laborers and domestic servants, as bureaucrats, corporate managers, and technicians. Two-thirds of the senior jobs in the Nigerian Railway Corporation were held by Ibos. Three-quarters of Nigeria's diplomats came from the Eastern Region. So did almost half of the 4,500 students graduating from Nigerian universities in 1966. The Ibos became known as the "Jews of Africa," despised – and envied – for their achievements and acquisitiveness.[9]

INDEPENDENCE

Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, and in the immediate post-independence years, it was a three-region Federal state. While the Hausa/Fulani dominated the Northern Region, the south had been divided into the Yoruba-dominated Western Region separated by the Niger River from the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region. A fourth, smallest, and most ethnically diverse region, the Midwest, was carved out

8 Douglas Anthony, *Poison and Medicine: Ethnicity, Power and Violence in a Nigerian City, 1966–1986*, Oxford: James Currey, 2003.

9 Pauline Baker, "Lurching toward Unity," *The Wilson Quarterly*, 4, 1980, 70–80, 76.

MAP 1.1 The four regions of Nigeria, 1963–1967. Cartography by Bill Nelson.

of the Western Region in 1963. Its capital, Benin City, was ethnically Edo; the state also included a substantial Igbo-speaking population, along with many other smaller groups, and was governed by an NCNC (National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons) majority.[10]

Each region – and by extension its dominant party – was allocated seats in the Federal House of Representative based on its total population. The North, with approximately 50 percent of the population, enjoyed the largest parliamentary representation, setting up

[10] Nowamagbe A. Omoigui, "Benin and the Midwest Referendum of 1963," http://www.waado.org/nigerdelta/ethnichistories/egharevbalectures/Fifth-Omoigui.htm

a highly competitive environment that led to major conflicts around national censuses. In particular, the census count of 1962–1963 was tainted with extensive charges of fraud.

Immediately after independence, the Federal Government was controlled by a coalition of the predominantly Hausa-Fulani Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the largely Igbo-supported National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC), with the predominantly Yoruba and socialist-leaning Action Group (AG), led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, in opposition. Ideological differences and exclusion from national power led to dissention within the AG, which climaxed in the formation of a new political organization, the Nigerian National Democratic Party, led by former AG premier of the Western Region, Samuel Akintola. The new party not only unseated the Action Group from power in the Western Region but also formed an alliance with the Northern People's Congress in the elections of 1964, excluding the Eastern NCNC. The campaign was fraught with violence and intimidation, and when the vote was announced, the NCNC and what was left of the Action Group unsuccessfully tried to boycott the election. A similarly contested election in the Western Region led to renewed chaos and violence in October 1965, claiming many lives. Growing unrest within the country was the product of fear that one region, through its dominant party, would prevail over the others, gain control over federal assemblies, and divert allocation of development resources, while fostering patronage, corruption, and nepotism.[11]

THE COUPS

This volatile combination of regional tensions, claims of electoral fraud, and widespread corruption provided motivation for the overthrow of civil rule on January 15, 1966, by a group of military officers, prominent among them Major Patrick Chukwuma Nzeogwu, a Midwesterner from the area around Asaba. The coup failed, and

[11] Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 164–172.

most of its leaders were arrested, but not until several prominent Northern leaders had been brutally killed, among them the Federal Prime Minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa; the Northern Region Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello (the Sardauna of Sokoto); and the Western Region Premier, Samuel Akintola. The fact that the instigators were mostly Igbo convinced many Northerners that the coup was an attempt to impose Igbo domination over the country. This perception was reinforced by the facts that the coup leaders spared several prominent Igbos, including the premiers of the Eastern and Midwestern Regions, and the commanding officer of the Nigerian army, Maj.-Gen. Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who was then appointed as the new head of state. Federal President Nnamdi Azikiwe was out of the country at the time and, thus avoided being caught up in the coup events. Once in power, in spite of having played a central role in putting down the coup in the south, Ironsi resisted pressure to swiftly prosecute its ringleaders.

Northern suspicions grew when Ironsi, in an attempt to undermine regionalism and corruption, and to foster a stronger unified rule, then adopted several measures similar to those originally advocated by coup leaders. Specifically, he abolished the federal system, creating a centralized structure in which regions were replaced by provinces, and their civil services amalgamated and placed under the direct control of the government in Lagos. In addition, in order to undermine the power of ethnically based parties, all political activities were banned for two years, and military governors were appointed to run each region. Among this group of new appointees was the Igbo governor of the Eastern Region, Lt.-Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.[12]

The failed coup, along with Ironsi's actions, provided the opportunity for many to act on a long-festering animosity against the Igbo.

[12] Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 172–174; John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 29–58; Mohibi Amoda, "Background to the Conflict," in Joseph Okpaku, ed., *Nigeria, Dilemma of Nationhood. An African Analysis of the Biafran Conflict*, 1972, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 14–75.

A series of mob riots directed against the Igbo broke out in Northern and Western Nigeria in May 1966. This outburst of bloody violence set the stage for a second coup, this one led by Northern officers, which in turn led to the revenge killing of scores of Igbo soldiers, including Ironsi. On July 29, 1966, Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon emerged as Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Armed Forces and new head of the Federal Military Government. One of his first decisions was to reestablish the federal system based on Regions. Gowon was a Christian Northerner from the small Angas ethnic group, and thus represented a compromise choice acceptable to most military leaders from the North and the West. However, this choice was challenged by other officers who felt senior to him and questioned his fitness to lead. Chief among them were Lt.-Col. Murtala Muhammed, backed by Northern leaders, and Eastern Governor Ojukwu.[13]

Far from decreasing ethnic tensions, the second coup led to an escalation of violence, again mostly directed against Igbos. Killing, looting, and burning of property escalated into systematic massacres of several thousands of Igbo living in the Muslim north. These bloodbaths (which the Igbo commonly referred to as "pogroms"[14]) lasted through October. In at least some cases, soldiers actively joined civilian mobs; on October 2, 1966, the *New York Times* reported that soldiers, defying the orders of their officers to keep the peace, opened fire on a large group of Igbos trying to board an airplane at Kano.[15] These Igbos were attempting to join the many thousands who, in fear for their lives, were fleeing to their ancestral homes in the east, which included both the region east of the Niger and portions of the Midwest, such as Asaba. Later in October, the same reporter wrote that Nigeria "had reached the brink of dissolution and despair" as the massive population movements continued – not only were Igbo fleeing east,

13 Gould, *The Biafran War*, 40–48; de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 58–81.

14 The term "pogrom" was first used by the Ministry of Information in Enugu, Eastern Nigeria, in 1966. A book, *Pogrom* (Ministry of Information, Enugu 1966), includes graphic photographs and firsthand accounts of attacks and killing.

15 Lloyd Garrison, "300 Ibo Tribesmen Killed by Troops and Nigerian Mob," *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1966, 1; 17.

but non-Igbos living in the east were rushing home.[16] Garrison pointed to the "lonely task" of Gowon: "to reinstall discipline among his northern troops who not only joined civilian mobs in the anti-Igbo massacres, but defied their own officers to the point of mutiny."[17] This "breakdown of the army as a responsive cohesive force,"[18] along with the apparent unwillingness or inability of the military government to protect the Igbo, provide support for those forced to relocate, or more generally to ensure Igbo of their rights as Nigerians, was to have further bloody ramifications in the year to come.[19]

The combination of the widespread killing of Igbos and the erosion of military discipline led to the decision to order soldiers to return to their region of origin and to the establishment of a military structure that corresponded to the country's regions at the time: the Northern, the Western, the Midwestern, and the Eastern Regions.

SECESSION AND WAR

In early January 1967, at a two-day summit in Aburi, Ghana, between federal authorities and the country's regional governors, Gowon and Ojukwu were unable to reach a compromise over whether Nigeria should become a loose confederation of semi-independent states or remain a federation. The failure of the Aburi summit accelerated the Eastern Region's movement toward secession. Faced with this possibility, Gowon declared a state of emergency on May 27, 1967, and proclaimed that the country would be divided into 12 states. Under this new system the East would be broken up into three separate states, only one of which was Igbo-dominated, which could effectively cut off the Igbos from the oil-producing areas of the region and dilute the influence of an administratively unified East.[20] In the end, the combination of the persecution of Easterners in the North, failure to

16 Lloyd Garrison, "Nigeria Totters on the Brink," *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 1966, E3.
17 Ibid. E3.
18 Ibid., E3.
19 de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 84–88.
20 Gould, *The Biafran War*, 48–53.