

## The Impact of the Nigerian Civil War on the Esan People of Midwestern Nigeria, 1967-1970

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### Abstract

In the Nigerian Civil War study, major ethnic groups such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo gained prominence. Perhaps the source material, more readily available in the major ethnic groups than the minority ethnic groups, may be the determining factor. However, it is indisputable that minority ethnic groups have received some attention in the civil war publications. Compared to the large number of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria, the coverage seems inadequate as this does not demonstrate the impact of the war on minority ethnic groups. Hence, it is the attempt to fulfill this aim that this paper examines the impact of the Nigerian civil war on the Esan people of Midwestern Nigeria. Using the qualitative research method, the paper believes that the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from May 1967 to January 1970, had positive and negative impacts on the socioeconomic and political lives of the Esan people. The paper concludes by recommending that Nigerian political leaders should eschew ethnic prejudice and prioritize the interest of the country rather than sectional interest.

**Keywords:** *Impact, Civil War, Minority, Ethnic Group, Interest*

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### **Background to the Study**

The Nigerian Civil War lasted from 1967 to 1970 and was fought between the Nigerian Government under Colonel Yakubu Gowon and the Eastern Region (the Biafra Government) under Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu. According to Osakwe and Itiri, "the war was a fallout from the inability of the Nigerian government to reach a truce over some grievances expressed by the people of the Eastern Region."<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have come up with different accounts of the causes and consequences of the war.<sup>2</sup> When the war broke out, the Esan people under the then Mid-West Region regarded it as a battle between the Hausa and the Igbo. Thus, perhaps Esan recorded no or low military presence until the Biafra incursion into the Mid-West on August 9, 1967. Before the Biafra invasion of the Midwest, Esan land was filled with displaced returnees from the Northern and Eastern regions.<sup>3</sup> The result of the Biafra incursion into the Midwest was the spread of the war to Esan, Agbor, Auchi, Benin, Warri, Sapele, Asaba, and other towns in the Midwest.

The Esan people had initially sympathized with the Biafran, and this was a result of the ill-treatment they went through during the 1966 pogrom and other crises preceding the war in the North. Ighodalo notes that "at the height of the killings in the North, every Southerner was a target. A lot of people from the Midwest were forced to come home."<sup>4</sup> Geographically, Esanland was located in the northeast of Benin, the capital of the Mid-Western Region. Esanland was under the Mid-West region, and in the course of the war, the Mid-West region, which Esan was part of, was under the federal government's control. The Biafra invasion of the Mid-West on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1967 drew the region into the war.<sup>5</sup> This prompted the federal government to put machinery in motion to liberate the Mid-West from Biafra incursion on September 21, 1967.<sup>6</sup> The Mid-West, including Esan, became militarized as a result of the Biafra invasion, and because of this, life was no longer the same in Esanland during the war. Thus, this paper examines the impacts of the war on the Esan people of the Midwestern Region of Nigeria.

### **Brief History of Esan People**

Esan is the second major ethnic group in the present Edo state of Nigeria. The area is located on a Plateau about 134 meters above sea level. The Esan people have a mass of about 1,858 square kilometers and are located northeast of Benin, the Edo State capital.<sup>7</sup> In Edo State, Esan people are in five local government areas - Esan South East, Esan North East, Esan West, Igueben, and Esan Central. Ighodalo notes that Esan is bounded in the West by the Orhionwon local government area while on the North by the Etsako East and West local government area. On the South, the area is bordered by Ika, Aniocha, and Oshimili North local government areas of Delta State, and on the East by River Niger and Ibagi local government area of Kogi State.<sup>8</sup> The people of Esan are mainly farmers, although they also engage in other economic activities, such as hunting, basket weaving, blacksmithing, and cloth weaving.<sup>9</sup> The British colonized the area and the area was under the Benin Province in colonial times. Esan was located in the Western Region, when Nigeria had three regions, and in the Mid-West Region, when the country became four regions. The area was under the Midwestern region when the Nigerian-Biafran war broke out in 1967.<sup>10</sup>

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Civil War**

For a proper understanding of civil war, we must understand the concept of war. Many scholars have seen war from different perspectives. Hoffman Nickerson states that "war is the use of organized force between two human groups pursuing contradictory policies, each group seeking to impose its policy upon the other."<sup>11</sup> In other words, war aims to implement a group policy by force. War can also be defined as an act of violence intended to make an opponent act to fulfill one's will. Karl von Clausewitz's most famous concept is that "war is a continuation of politics by other means."<sup>12</sup> It is not only a political act but also a political instrument. The political goal is the object of the war, while the means of attaining the goal is the war. This means that violent force is a means to an end. It means war is a tool used to achieve a particular objective.

War can be categorized into two parts: intra-state war and inter-state war. Interstate war is a war between or among nation-states. For example, Iran and Iraq War (1980-1988),<sup>13</sup> Iraq and Kuwait (1990),<sup>14</sup> Vietnam War (1954-1975).<sup>15</sup> Intra-state wars, on the other hand, are wars within the confines of a state or country. Intra-state war is what is referred to as civil war. Civil war can also be seen as when a country is at war with itself. According to Joshua and Jon, civil war is:

*The war between factions within a state trying to create or prevent a new government for the entire state or some territorial part. (The aim may be to change the whole system of government, replace the people in it merely, or split a region off as a new state).*<sup>16</sup>

The 1860 U.S. Civil War, Eritrea and Ethiopia (1980)<sup>17</sup> and the Nigerian Civil War are examples of civil war. Civil wars are the most brutal wars, and this is because, in most civil wars, there is always an ethnic dimension to it. Furthermore, people fighting their fellow citizens act cruelly than those fighting people from another country.<sup>18</sup> The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 was a war between the Eastern Region (Biafra) and the Federal government of Nigeria. The war had repercussions on the Esan people of Midwestern Nigeria.

### **Socioeconomic effect of the War on Esan people**

The Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from May 1967 to January 1970, had positive and negative effects on the socioeconomic and political lives of the Esan people. In the first place, before the war, the 1966 coup and the crisis that followed it led to the displacement of the Esan people and the loss of their means of livelihood. The displacement brought them home, thereby making the villages crowded. By the end of 1966, the Midwest rehabilitation committee had registered 50,000 displaced Midwesterners, including Esan people. Similarly, the Ojukwu's proclamation ordering all non-Easterners out of the East resulted in the displacement of 15,000 Midwesterners, among whom were also Esan people.<sup>19</sup> When the Biafran forces invaded Benin on August 9, 1967, a lot of Esan people were displaced in Benin, and many of them found their way home.

One effect of the war is that it subjected the people to mental and emotional torture. The Esan people suffered from psychological trauma, especially those parents who watched their children displaced and returned home, losing their jobs, and those whose relatives were killed in the war. Similarly, the rumor that Biafran was coming to invade the Midwest set some people off balance.<sup>20</sup>

Ojiakor notes that "one major consequence of the civil war relates to the colossal loss of human lives unprecedented in the history of Nigeria."<sup>21</sup> Over five million lives were lost on both sides, with the Eastern Region, particularly the Igbo, accounting for ninety percent of whatever figure that was presented. However, it is estimated that about two million seven hundred (2.7 million) Igbo died as a result of the war. Secondly, apart from an unprecedented loss of human lives recorded during the war, a greater percentage of the citizenry, particularly the Igbo, were wounded, and some others were permanently deformed throughout their lives.<sup>22</sup> Out of the five million lives lost, there were Esan people. Sunday, Okoromi revealed that the Biafran troops killed seven people in Egbiki alone.<sup>23</sup> In Ekpon, 23 persons arrested from other parts of Esan were killed by Biafran troops on September 23, 1967. They were suspected of acting as reconnoiters to the federal troops. In Ebelle, Ewohimi, and Igweben, the Biafran forces kill a lot of mad people since most people acting as reconnoiters disguise themselves as mad people. Apart from emotional torture, the death of the people constituted a setback to their loved ones.

The insecurity and fear pervading the war affected Esan's commerce and economy. As a result of the fear of being conscripted, the youth could not continue farming, hunting, and trading activities. The burning down of the Uromi market<sup>24</sup> seriously affected trade in Esan as Uromi was the commercial hub center of Esan. The opening of the Igweben Training Depot diverted the attention of the youth of Esan from a worthwhile economic venture to the prosecution of the war—youth who were needed in the productive sectors enlisted in the Army. The war drastically reduced the volume of trade in Esan. For example, the Igala people stopped coming to the Illushi market after the Biafran troops looted their market items and used their boat to commandeer the items to the East in September 1967.<sup>25</sup> In Ekpoma, the fierce battle between the federal forces and the Biafran troops also reduced the trade volume in the area as the people became afraid to go to the market and farm. The Biafran and the Federal forces stole domestic animals in the rural communities. Iweze notes that:

*The produce of farmers and their livestock in the rural communities were either destroyed or stolen by the federal troops and other war destitute. This led to famine and acute food shortage because farming became risky due to military movements in the area during the war.*<sup>26</sup>

Ogbemudia revealed that the Midwest State experienced meat shortage during the Biafran occupation of the state.<sup>27</sup> Essential food products such as salt and eggs were also reported to be scarce in the state. The use of salt for explosives made it scarce in the Midwest, including Esan, when Biafran occupied the area. The lack of these food items reduced their nutritional value, resulting in health challenges, which are precursors to poverty.

Another consequence of the war in Esan was the capture of the young girls for sexual purposes. Young girls were potential targets of all forms of abuse, such as rape, sexual assault, and forms of inhuman treatment. The problem of sexual assault during the war made Esan young girls disguise themselves as married women, but this only reduced the problem, as even married women were sexually assaulted. Samson Aibueku revealed that in Ujemen, Ekpoma, a newly married woman was sexually assaulted by Biafran forces in August 1967.<sup>28</sup> Ojiefoh revealed that the federal forces "beat up people without cause, seize people's wives, and lock up innocent citizens..."<sup>29</sup> In Uromi, there were cases of sexual assault of young girls. Some were even impregnated without recourse to marry them. The case of sexual atrocities was prevalent in places like Uromi and Igweben because of the location of a garrison and Training Depot. Chief Idogun Cletus notes that a lot of girls were impregnated in Igweben, leading to babies being abandoned by the Federal soldiers.<sup>30</sup> The social implication of sexual activities on young girls is captured by Etekpe, who argued that early pregnancy deprived young girls of the right to education and dignity. Etekpe further reiterates that the fatherless children eventually raised from the above pregnancy become hoodlums. He thinks that there is a strong correlation between hoodlum and youth restiveness.<sup>31</sup> The war led to the breakup of marriages. This is either as a result of the death of the husband or the capture of a married woman. For example, Elder Joseph Okoyomon revealed that a federal soldier collected the wife of Mr. Isibor Peter of Idumosodi in Ubiaja. Okoyomon also revealed further that the federal troops impregnated a lot of Ubiaja girls.<sup>32</sup> Marriage institutions are sacred in Esan land, but the war led to their desecration.

Notwithstanding, some Esan women voluntarily married soldiers, which enhanced relationships between Esan and other ethnic groups in the country. Some of these Army became senior Military officers, which helped to evaluate the status of their wives' relatives. For example, Lt. Col. Daramola married Theresa Masada from Ebhoiyi, and Lt. Col. Adeniran married Patricia Okoriah from Uromi.<sup>33</sup> The war impacted some aspects of Esan culture. Chief Philip Ekeoba notes that urinating and defecating inside the living house was at variance with Esan culture. But, with Biafra and the federal forces in the area and the fear of either being captured or being killed, the people decided to put small containers inside to defecate and urinate.<sup>34</sup>

The disruption of educational activities was a significant consequence of the war. The Biafran and federal forces occupied schools, and this led to the closure of the schools. The Biafran troops invaded the teacher training college Igweben and later by the federal forces; this led to the closing of the school. The Army occupied the school from August 1967 to 1973, when the federal troops returned to the barrack. In other parts of Esan like Uromi, Ekpoma, Ubiaja, Ebelle, Ewohimi, Ekpon, Illushi, and Uzea, schools were turned to army camps for Biafran and the Nigerian soldiers. For example, St. Augustine primary school, the only primary school at Illushi, was occupied by the Biafran troops and later the federal forces. Similarly, they occupied St. Benedict primary school, Ubiaja. Ogbemudia captured the situation when he said that the secessionist invasion of the Midwest made many schools go on forced holidays.<sup>35</sup> Even when the Midwest government opened schools in the state after liberation from Biafran forces, the federal troops occupied them. For example, Agba Grammar School Uromi and St. Augustine

Primary School Illushi, to mention a few, were still closed. Before some of these schools were opened, the pupils and students had outgrown school age, as the hostility of the period did not allow proper learning to take place.

Immediately after the war, the government took over all private and missionary schools in 1971 without compensation. Even though the measure was a national educational policy, many people saw it as a means of punishing the missionaries for their role in the war.<sup>36</sup> It must be emphasized that the federal government accused the missionaries of supporting the Biafrans during the war. With the government taking schools, scholarships were introduced to assist students from poor backgrounds, and many Esan benefited from the government's kind gesture. After the war, the Midwestern state government made educational development cardinal in its scheme. The state government introduced a special scholarship for the training of female graduate teachers in July 1970 to address the problem of a shortage of female teachers in the state, and many Esan benefited from the program.<sup>37</sup>

The civil war portrays the Esan people in a good light. At the same time, the Igbo who fled Esan as a result of the war came back to repossess their property after the war. This was contrary to the situation in Rivers State, where many Igbo were not allowed to claim their properties. For example, Chief J. A. Uba met his two-story building intact at Uromi, and the rent collected was handed over to him. Other Igbo that claim their properties after the war in Uromi are Mr. Pius Eyin Arinze, Sylvanus Nwerem, Boniface Ihenfobi, etc.<sup>38</sup> In Illushi, Mr. Fidelis Igbonezu returned to claim his house after the war.<sup>39</sup> In Igweben, Idogun Cletus revealed that the Igbo people returned to possessing their houses after the war.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Elder Joseph Okoyomon noted that Igbo who fled Ubiaja during the civil war returned to possess their properties after the war.<sup>41</sup>

The civil war removed Esan's economy from the Igbo's hands and allowed the Esan to take over their economy. John Okohere notes that the Uromi people were unhappy with the Igbo before the war because they occupied all aspects of Uromi's economy. Okohere said further that the Civil War was a blessing for the Uromi people since it allowed them to control their economy.<sup>42</sup> Ojiefoh notes that "the legacy the Uromi indigenous sons got from the Igbos was well consolidated during the civil war."<sup>43</sup> Ojiefoh affirms further that "the Uromi artisans now replaced the Igbos who were their masters. Uromi sons who were traders, mechanics, drivers, etc., returned home and established various trades in Uromi."<sup>44</sup> Most of our interviewees believe the war was suitable for the Esan people because it allowed them to return home and engage in their occupation. The change of Nigerian currency during the war and the indigenization Decree immediately after the war did not only impoverish the Igbo but also routed them "from the commanding height of Nigerian economy."<sup>45</sup> The Igbo who fled Esan returned very poorly, without the capital to start their businesses. Since the currency change and indigenization did not adversely affect the Esan people, they took over the Igbo's position.

The war created animosity between individuals and groups. There are instances where people were reported to either the Biafrans or the federal forces as constituting saboteurs to them. These individuals or groups are arrested. Some people in Esan used the civil war to settle their

old scores. Mr. Joseph Odigie wrote a petition to Murtala Mohammed that the Onogie of Ewohimi was supporting the Biafra forces during the war. The Onogie of Ewohimi, Enosegbe Il, was arrested by Mohammed and taken to Asaba. On getting to Asaba, the Onogie could present 36 previous petitions written against him by Odigie even before the war. The federal forces under the command of Murtala Mohammed concluded that the problem between the Onogie and Odigie predated the war and set the Onogie free.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Pa Imoesili Agbator was arrested during the war by the federal forces at Ukpoke, Uhiele Ekpoma, because he was reported by some individuals that he was supporting the Biafran troops.<sup>47</sup> The incident of reporting each other has created animosity between the Esan people. Besides, the Biafran invasion of the Midwest created inter-ethnic bitterness between non-Igbo groups like Esan and Western Igbo groups.<sup>48</sup> The non-Igbo group saw the Biafran invasion of the Midwest as an opportunity for the Igbo group to dominate the political affairs of the state, which the Esan resented. Chief Michael A. Ojomo, from Uromi formed and financed the most effective movement that resisted Biafran in Benin.<sup>49</sup>

The unfortunate incident of the Biafran invasion of the Midwest created long-time ethnic bitterness between Esan and her immediate neighbor. This is why Iweze affirms that “the post-civil years witnessed increasing bitter ethnic frictions and prejudice<sup>1</sup> in the Midwest, especially the Igbo and non-Igbo ethnic groups”.<sup>50</sup> However, the Biafran invasion forged greater unity among the Esan people. Party politics divide notwithstanding; the Esan people were unanimous in rejecting the Biafran incursion into the Midwest.

### **Political Effect of the War**

The war had political implications for the Esan people. In the Midwest, the majority of people from the Western Igbo lost their positions in the state because of the role they played when Biafran invaded it. Col. Ogbemudia set up the Rebel Atrocities Tribunal of Enquiry in October 1967 to look into, among other things, the role played by public servants in the Biafran invasion of the Midwest.<sup>51</sup> Although the tribunal's reports were never published, Iweze reveals that top Western Igbo civil servants considered the guiltiest were dismissed from service. The less guilty were reabsorbed but demoted.<sup>52</sup> The non-Igbo groups like Esan mostly filled the vacancies created by the dismissal of the Western Igbo groups.

Another political impact of the war was that the Midwest Region remained one piece despite splitting the four regions into twelve states. Consequently, the Esan Division remained as it was when it was four regions. Notwithstanding, "Owegbe as a political force had virtually divided the state into factions, the Igbo-speaking and non-Igbo-speaking area."<sup>53</sup> The civil war affected recruitment in the Army. Omoigui argued that many viewed the Army as an unattractive profession meant for school dropouts. Omoigui affirms further that it was during the war that a large number of non-Igbo groups like Esan joined the Nigerian Army.<sup>54</sup> For example, 80 persons from the Esan Division passed out from the Lagos Training Depot in September 1967.<sup>55</sup> The war experience was, for example, in the Midwest, where Western Igbo dominated the Military during the war, leading to the clamor for a policy of equitable representation in the Military in both the state and local government.<sup>56</sup> Since the Esan people

do not want to repeat the civil war, its effects will remain unforgettable. The Esan people and Nigerians have learned their lessons.

### Conclusion

This paper examines the effects of the Nigerian Civil War, which ranged from 1967-1970, on the Esan people of Midwestern Nigeria. When the war broke out, Esan experienced no or low military presence until the Biafran invasion of the Midwest on August 9, 1967. The paper thinks the Biafra Incursion into the Midwest spread the war to Esan and other towns in the Midwest. The paper finds out that with the spread of the war to Esan, life was no longer the same, and this invariable made the war have positive and negative effects on Esan people. The war had a social, economic, and political impact on the Esan.

Ethnic bigotry is a major cause of the Nigerian civil war. In Nigeria today, the struggle for self-determination and irredentism can be attributed to the country's lack of ethnic harmony. Good governance is a prerequisite to eradicating ethnic struggle in the country. Good governance and good leadership go hand in hand. Good governance and leadership can encourage citizenship loyalty, accountability, and open consultation and strengthen civil society.

### Endnotes

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