

An Examination of Secession and the Nigerian Civil War, 1966-2017: Lessons for the Church in Nigeria¹

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Globally, attempts at secession are not new. Neither are the calls and agitations for secession new in Nigeria. The first actual instance of secession was in 1967 which led to the Nigerian civil war. There has been sustained quest for secession in our most recent history. However, such calls and agitations are seen by some as a monumental threat to the unity of Nigeria. The reason the Federal Military Government under General Gowon executed the civil war was to keep Nigeria one. Despite the unrelenting efforts of successive governments to keep Nigeria going as one, united and indivisible country, the calls and agitations for secession have been unrelenting too. There are others who hail such calls and agitations as grounded in legitimate concerns and express the hope that the leaders of Nigeria would incline their ears to critical and objective listening to such calls and agitations. And yet, the issue of secession has never been seriously considered, nor has it been adequately given scholarly investigation although much has been written on the Nigerian civil war from different perspectives.

A personal motivation to understand the issues involved in the Nigerian civil war and the quest for secession as they affect Nigeria and Nigerians has led to this effort. The period under study in this paper is from 1966 to 2017. The choice of this period is informed by the following significant factors: the period under study saw the sack of the First Republic. This period also saw the resurgence of threats of secession. The years between 1967 and 1970 especially give a clear attempt at secession and the ensued civil war, and help to reinforce the query whether a particular section of Nigeria has a right to secede or not. I employ historical-descriptive method in this study in attempt to understand the civil war which lasted over three years and situating it within the context of continued quest for secession. The article takes on also the period between 1980 and 2017 within which other important issues relating to secession are examined. The study presents lessons for the church in Nigeria from which to learn and gives an opportunity for theological reflection on the issues raised.

¹This paper is heavily dependent on a paper I presented in October, 2016 at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. For the purpose of this Conference, I have lifted large portions of that paper to the current presentation, taking the whole discussion rather from the Nigerian civil war and the lingering calls and quest for secession and/or restructuring of Nigeria as a nation, and exploring a few lessons for the church in Nigeria. This article was presented to Theological Education in Africa Conference as a discussion paper, 22nd – 25th May, 2017. It has been slightly revised for publication.

Issues which have provided basis for sustained calls and agitations for secession in Nigeria would be examined. Background questions to this study therefore include the following among other things: Is Nigeria really one? How was Nigeria made into the one nation it is today? Is secession in Nigeria feasible or is it even the only solution to its myriad problems? Do we have examples in history of secessions? Why do a particular people or section of a country want to secede? Can there be an acceptable basis for secession or not? Nigeria went to war in 1967 occasioned by the secession of the Eastern Region. Despite all things, Nigeria remains one! How has this been possible? I argue that the politics of secession in Nigeria must be understood in light of fragile political arrangement and shaky historical foundation of the nation. Let us then begin this discussion by defining first the concept of secession and the causes for it, to be followed by a rather sketchy background to the Nigerian civil war, the war itself, the sustained quest for secession and the lessons the church in Nigeria ought to learn.

I. MEANING AND CAUSES OF SECESSION

Secession is variously defined. I define it in keeping with political understanding as an act of withdrawal or pulling out of a group of persons or segment of a state from membership in that group or state. Secession occurs when a section of a country or state, for supposedly justifiable political reasons, declares its independence from the existing country or state of which it has been a part. From a classic sense, Allen Buchanan views secession as a situation in which “a group in a portion of the territory of a state attempt[s] to create a new state there...”² For the purposes of comparative inquiry, Pavkovic defines secession as “a withdrawal of territory from an existing state which results in the creation of a new state, regardless of other consequences that this withdrawal may have on the host state.”³ For him, secession is a political process as well as a political outcome. However, Pavkovic’s adoption of permissive approach to the comparative study of secession on the one hand and his critique of the same approach on the other hand provide a conflicting handling of the matter.

Various approaches to the study of secession have yielded divergent definitions of the subject matter which also point to the prevalence of types of secession. Buchanan identifies two major types of secession, ‘unilateral secession’ and ‘consensual secession.’ In a unilateral secession, a group of people or a territory undertakes withdrawal without the

consent of the state from which it is pulling out and without constitutional sanction.⁴ More study of this type is most urgently needed for two reasons: one, it occurs more frequently; second, “it is both more controversial and more likely to result in large-scale violence.”⁵ In consensual secession, withdrawal results from “a negotiated agreement between the state and the secessionists ... or through constitutional processes.”⁶ Where secession occurs through constitutional arrangements, it is either “the exercise of an explicit constitutional right to secede” which is currently contained only in a few constitutions or by constitutional amendment.⁷ I posit that every other type of secession can sufficiently be subsumed under any of these broad categories.

The question may be asked as to why a segment of a nation or state may want to secede. In other words, what is it that induces and justifies secession? Various reasons may be advanced for secession depending on the particular segment of the country that desires it. In the case of Nigeria’s situation, political and religious dominance is probably the biggest factor which leads to agitation or quest for secession. The other factor close to it is an intense sense of frustration of a group of people to actual cases of marginalization and an uneven development and distribution of resources. There is also the question of injustice where some people are treated unfairly in cases of elections or election and religious violence. In such context, people are victims of losses of loved ones and massive property. People feel they are victims of injustice where their loved ones are killed with impunity and the culprits are roaming the streets as free men and women. Sometimes it is a deliberate neglect of a particular section of a country that its people would want to take their destiny in their hands.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

It is worthy of note that it was the propriety or otherwise of self-governance of the regional areas as well as the entire nation that led for the first time to threat of secession from the federation by the Northern Region.⁸ Between 1960 when Nigeria gained independence and 1966 when the First Republic was sacked, there were a number of significant developments. For instance, there were allegations of fraudulent manipulation of 1963 census figures of the Northern Region against which National Convention for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Action Group (AG), and other parties protested. There were also allegations of wide-spread electoral malpractices and manipulation of results of the Federal elections in some parts of the country in 1964. Another instance of alleged electoral fraud and brazen malpractices was during the Western Regional Parliamentary elections in October, 1965. The results of the elections were rejected by United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) but accepted and upheld by the Federal Government. Madiébo posits that the said elections could be described as “the height of political folly, an expensive political exercise which ended in complete fiasco.”⁹ It was not surprising therefore the

resultant tension, rioting, and violence in the region. There was complete breakdown of law and order which provided more than enough justification for the Federal Government to proclaim a state of emergency in the region but that was not to be. Aside from these developments, the Nigerian Military was heavily polarized along political lines in recruitments, promotions, political manoeuvring, and deep involvement in electoral matters.¹⁰ Such behaviour of the political class and the military in the country was worrisome, to say the least. When Major C. K. Nzeogwu staged the January 15, 1966 coup, the justification was to “get rid of the corrupt and incorrigible politicians and have them replaced with true nationalists.”¹¹ Some prominent Northern politicians accused of corruption, oppression and dishonesty were killed in the coup. It was reasoned that a democratic election as a system of government was no longer possible in Nigeria. Thus, all the democratic structures put in place were destroyed with the involvement of the military in politics. The coup lasted until January 18, 1966; it was successful in Kaduna but foiled in Lagos by General J. A. Ironsi. Major Nzeogwu surrendered to General Ironsi under certain conditions and that was how General Ironsi became the first military Head of State in Nigeria. This inaugurated the rule of military dictatorships in Nigeria until 1979 when democratic institutions were again put in place and power transferred to a democratically elected government.

The other time in which the Northern Region contemplated and threatened secession was in May, 1966, barely six years after Nigeria had gained independence and four months after the January 15 coup. It was in riots which lasted seven days in which many Nigerians of Igbo extraction were killed as a way of protesting against General Ironsi’s Decree 34, the Unification Decree, and avenging the death of some prominent Northern Nigerian politicians like Sir Ahmadu Bello and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir Kashim Ibrahim, etc in the January, 1966 coup. Others simply wanted no part in the federal arrangement; their desire was to secede from Nigeria. This was why in northern cities like Kaduna, Zaria, Katsina, Kano and Jos, rioters carried placards on which the word ARABA was written, a Hausa word for secession, indicating the unwillingness of the Northern Region to continue in the federation called Nigeria. The Emirs and chiefs of Northern Region met in Kaduna in June, 1966 and forwarded certain conditions to be fulfilled by General Ironsi if the North would continue to be part of Nigeria.¹² Madiébo identifies three main conditions: immediate abrogation of Decree 34 to be followed by a return to status quo of the Regions before the January coup; trial of those who took part in the January, 1966 coup and severe punishment meted to them; and that no investigations be carried out into the May, 1966 riots.¹³ This was followed by a counter coup on 29th July, 1966 led mainly by some northern military officers. In the counter coup, the first military Head of State, General Johnson Agui-Ironsi, the military governor of the Western Region, Brigadier Fajuyi, and other top government officials were killed.

III. ACTUAL CASE OF SECESSION AND THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

The counter coup was successful. General Yakubu Gowon (then Lieutenant-Colonel) became the second military head of State. General Gowon threatened to deal with any individuals or groups who stood on the way in his efforts to preserve the unity of Nigeria. Madiebo indicates that General Gowon shifted his “policy from secession to confederation of autonomous states, and then straight back to one and indivisible Nigeria with a unitary government – the very system against which he had earlier told the whole world he had taken up arms.”¹⁴ Meanwhile tension had mounted between Northern Region and Eastern Region and between Gowon and Ojukwu to a breaking point. There were resumed killings of Igbo people and other southerners in organized pogroms, with estimated 80,000 to 100,000 Nigerians who lost their lives to such killings.¹⁵ To mediate between disagreeing parties, the Aburi Conference was convened and an Ad-Hoc Constitutional Conference was also convened by General Gowon. These ameliorating measures were not able to assuage the deepened crisis between Gowon’s administration and the Governor of the Eastern Region. The growing tension coupled with the pogroms in the North against the Igbos led Colonel Ojukwu to ask all easterners living in the North to return to the East immediately.

It was clear from the unfolding events that there was no meeting point any more between the North and the East and between General Gowon and Colonel Ojukwu. Colonel Ojukwu declared the independence of the Biafran Republic from the Federation called Nigeria on the 30th May, 1967. This was in keeping with the mandate of the Consultative Assembly on 27th May, 1967, for Colonel Ojukwu to declare the Eastern Nigeria “a free sovereign and independent state by the name and title of the Republic of Biafra.”¹⁶ With the declaration of secession, Nigeria’s civil war was imminent. It was a war to keep Nigeria one, according to Gowon, but for the Igbo people, it was a war of survival of a people prepared to determine their own destiny. In any case, the war which started in 1967 did not end until January, 1970. By the end of the war, over three million Nigerians lost their lives¹⁷, let alone the loss of property running to millions of pounds at the time. The Eastern Region lost the war while Colonel Ojukwu fled the country, leaving General Philip Effiong to surrender to the Federal Military Government of Gowon on behalf of the failed Biafran Republic. Gowon had declared a ‘no victor, no vanquished’ slogan after the war, instituting instead a process of social reintegration hinged on the 3Rs of Reconciliation, Rehabilitation, and Reconstruction.

From the 1970s to the 1980s, Nigeria continued to experience growing mutual suspicion and antagonism between Northern Nigeria and the Eastern Region. Many crises confronting Nigeria have assumed ethnic, religious and political dimensions. Issues such as the controversy in 1977 to 1978 in the Constituent Assembly over the inclusion of the Sharia Law in the Constitution, the resumption of military rule

on 31st December, 1983, the Matatsine uprising in 1980 to 1982, the ‘back door smuggling’ of Nigeria in 1986 into the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) as a member, the never-ending transition programme of General Ibrahim B. Babangida, and the June 12, 1993 crisis of annulment of Presidential elections adjudged the freest and fairest in the political history of the nation since independence.

IV. THE QUEST FOR SECESSION/RESTRUCTURING OF NIGERIA, 1980-2016

During the days of military dictatorships, particularly in the days of Generals Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim B. Babangida and Sani Abacha, civil society organizations protested several human rights abuses and demanded a National Sovereign Conference to discuss and decide the future of Nigeria. Successive governments have adopted measures to deal with the many crises bedeviling the country. I said elsewhere that “From the historical survey of the political journey of Nigeria, certain challenges have been recurrent thereby sustaining a culture of mutual suspicion and hatred and threatening the corporate existence of the country.”¹⁸ Some of the measures put in place by successive governments include the following among other things, the “adoption of federalism in Nigeria, entrenchment of Fundamental Human Rights provisions in the Constitution, adoption of multi-party system, modification of the Electoral system through electoral reforms, and constitutional prohibition of ethnic and religious parties.”¹⁹ Other measures also put in place by governments are the creation of more states, fight against corruption through the anti-graft agencies, Human Rights Violation Commission, National Conferences, and Single Treasury Account (STA). And yet, there have been cases of Boko Haram activities, kidnapping, Niger-Delta Militancy, herdsmen’s attacks on unsuspecting villagers and farmers, high level corruption, political and religious violence, etc. There is a growing dissatisfaction by Nigerians with the performance of government. Underpinning some of the major crises threatening the unity of the country is the factor of mutual fear of domination of either one religion over others or one region over others. Other pertinent issues beckoning the attention of the Nigerian government and Nigerians is the cry of marginalization of minority groups in the country, the question of uneven development across the country, injustice where perpetrators of crimes against fellow Nigerians are not brought to book so that justice could be seen to be served for the sake of those victimized in such heinous crimes.

The foregoing analysis is to show that the consequence of the above delineated political challenges is the emergence of pan-cultural organizations calling for secession of some parts of Nigeria. Organizations such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Biafra Independence Movement (BIM) and the Niger Delta Avengers and other concerned Nigerians have issued incessant calls for either secession or restructuring of the Nigerian State. Calls for secession of either a Niger Delta or

Biafran Republic out of the present sovereign country called Nigeria have shown that to these secessionists, “restructuring may mean nothing short of a plebiscite to determine the desirability or otherwise of Nigeria as a single political entity and sovereignty.”²⁰ Speaking to this situation, the Alafin of Oyo, Oba Lamidi Olayiwola Adeyemi III delivered a lecture titled “Imperativeness of True Federalism” in which he called on “those agitating for restructuring of the country to tread with caution.”²¹ In the bid to further push their case, Igbo groups calling for “a sovereign state of Biafra have started a major move to actualising their dream by streamlining efforts and re-strategising.”²² The result is the formation of a unified body called Biafra Peoples National Council (BNPC).³⁶

The arguments have oscillated between secession and restructuring on the one hand and maintenance of the country’s sovereignty and unity on the other. The Alafin of Oyo bears his mind on the debate about the imperativeness of true federalism in the country which has gathered new momentum, but at the same time expresses concern over some scary dimensions in the debate. According to him, “In one breath, the restructuring which had been the most popular subject in public debate in recent time can ostensibly be scaring. This has to be so in the face of various violent threats to the sovereignty of the country from some sections of the country in recent time.”²³

There are many implications of these calls and agitations for secession from and restructuring of Nigeria. The overall implication is the unity of Nigeria which is being threatened, the country’s survival all these years notwithstanding. The other implications are the growing strength of regional interests, mutual fear and suspicion, increased insecurity, people’s trust in government is greatly shaken because there are promises made which are never fulfilled coupled with some policy direction of government not effectively addressing key existential issues of poverty, unemployment, corruption, injustice, abuse of rights of others in the country, etc. There is increased tension in the country which is a time-bomb on which the nation sits at the moment.

Government response has not been consistent and proactive. The response of government could be that of negotiation with agitators for secession and restructuring or it could be the use of threats and force. The latter has been the case in most of the political history of Nigeria. In the mid-1950s, the Northern Region threatened secession and in the mid-1960s, it was the Northern Region that threatened secession. By 1967, the Igbo people actually seceded and the response of government was to create twelve states out of the four regions thereby nullifying the regional arrangement. The other response was maximum use of force in a war with the defunct Biafran Republic in which close to three million Nigerians died and property worth millions of pounds were destroyed. Recent calls for secession and restructuring since the 1980s have also intensified in 2015 and 2016 and have only been responded to by the use of threats and force by government. Could it be that the secessionists have valid

issues to be listened to or are they just making noise? What method have the secessionists used to push home their case? Is there any other way the secessionists can push their case and be objectively heard? These are questions which beg for answers. This is where perhaps the theologian and the church may help us find answers to the perpetual yearning of humans to want freedom of self-determination combined with proper legal framework.

V. LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

Given the foregone discussion, it is pertinent to inquire whether there are lessons for the church in Nigeria. What lessons can the church in Nigeria draw from such issues as examined in this article and what message does the church have for Nigerian politicians and Nigerian citizens? From theological and historical points of view, one is immediately confronted with the choice of violent demand and violent response leading to violent confrontation, thus doing more harm than good. One understands his responsibility as a teacher to help people understand the issues and particularly challenge a response that is enriching and hopeful from both government and people. Theology is not done in isolation nor is it done in the closet and left to wither away on some dusty shelves. Theology must be a collaboration of all those involved in doing theology as Christians and academicians. Again, theology and theological discourse should not be sterile exercises but endeavours which address concrete existential realities of life thereby give hope to the hurting, disenfranchised, poor, and those whose rights have been denied them or even abused. The next step would be to provide some legal and political framework which helps to situate the problems with carefully delineated guidelines for intending secessionists. The legal framework should of necessity include negotiated solutions when demands are made and this must be done with patience with one another and mutual respect. There must be determined commitment to a peaceful end of the process which should exclude violence. There are those who may argue that violence is the only language the government understands; this may be so but only when all peaceful options have been exhausted should arm struggle follow as a last resort but even so, people involved in arm struggle to press home their case must also be mindful of the consequences especially to the most vulnerable in the society.

From the standpoint of theology, every Nigerian must be viewed as God’s creation in whose life resides dignity and honour, and who wants to be free to make his or her own decisions. To determine the basis of an appropriate action and response, theology and theological discourse will be most needed. The first thing of course is to make a case for human choice and responsibility followed by other processes as outlined. The following issues emanate from the entire presentation, and a serious theological reflection can be done on each of them: Violence, Marginalization and injustice, Environmental degradation and pollution, Minority rights,

corruption, nepotism in government, inequality, etc. These are lessons the church in Nigeria should learn and speak to.

It is from these issues that the church in Nigeria needs to learn her lessons. The church must carry its theological reflections to the public and speak with one voice to the issues of violence, injustice, inequality and lack of religious freedom in some parts of the country and unite in action against such vices inimical to national cohesion and development. As yet, the church in Nigeria has not been vocal on the quest for secession in Nigeria. In the years of the civil war, the church in Nigeria did not quite respond with a united voice to the ills of the war and active peace negotiations between warring parties. The church should in event of conflict emphasise the role of individual Nigeria in mitigating violent conflicts.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I set out in this paper to examine the Nigerian civil war in the context of secession from 1966 to 2017 and draw lessons for the church in Nigeria. The resurgence of calls and agitations for secession and restructuring of Nigeria have serious implications for the unity of the country. The analysis of the issues relating to the Nigerian civil war and the quest for secession/restructuring shows that Nigeria is actually sitting on a time-bomb. I therefore offer the following recommendations:

1. The Federal government should adopt a more proactive approach in which reasons for agitations are seriously and objectively looked into with a view to addressing them. Such matters as insecurity, development issues, corruption, marginalization of minority groups and the denial of human rights to certain Nigerians on the basis of either religion or political affiliation, and issues bordering on injustice, must be looked into.
2. Government should adopt an approach of negotiations aimed at adequate understanding of issues involved. In this way, the use of force where a particular group or section of the country demands secession would be avoided.
3. Past efforts of government, particularly National Conferences should be revisited with a view to implementing objective recommendations contained therein. I am particular about the 2014 National Conference Report in which many significant issues have been captured.
4. If Nigeria is to be united indeed, then deliberate effort by government must be made to effectively integrate the different ethnic nationalities where no Nigerian is discriminated against or persecuted on account of his or her religion or political philosophy. Government must show sincere commitment to this process. If there are ethnic nationalities and religious communities that seek to harass, intimidate, and violently attack other people because they believe that they have the backing of government while at

the same time there is public affirmation of national unity is all together a farce and a display of hypocrisy. Government should be seen to be transparent in all dealings without appearance of a hidden agenda whether of political or religious nature.

5. Government and Nigerians must ensure effective religious liberty for all since the nature of the relationship between democracy and religious liberty is ideally mutually complementing and interdependent. Religious bigotry and chauvinism are inimical to the spirit of democracy, democratic tenets and peaceful coexistence.
6. The church in Nigeria should be more proactive, pragmatic, and prophetic in her ministry of the Word to a sick world such as ours and particularly to the Nigeria's religious, economic, and political situation.

END NOTES

²Allen Buchanan, "Secession," in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2013, p. 2.

³Pavkovi, "Secession and Its Diverse Definitions," pp. 6-10.

⁴Buchanan, "Secession," p.2.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 234.

⁹Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Limited, 1980), p. 15

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 15-18

¹¹Ibid., p.19

¹²Ibid., pp. 43-44

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p.84

¹⁵ Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.174

¹⁶ Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, p. 93.

¹⁷ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, p. 180.

¹⁸ Joseph A. Reni, "A Roadmap to National Recovery: Adopting an Alternative Response Based on II Chronicles 7:14" being a paper delivered on the occasion of National Day Service of the Baptist Theological Seminary, Kaduna, on 30th September, 2016.

¹⁹ Otiye Igbuzor, "Nigeria's Experience in Managing the Challenges of Ethnic and Religious Diversity through Constitutional Provisions", Citizens' Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR).

²⁰ *Daily Sun Newspaper*, August 26, 2016, p. 12.

²¹ Ibid. For a full text of the lecture, see page 34 of the above newspaper.

²² *Daily Sun Newspaper*, June 6, 2016, p. 9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Daily Sun Newspaper*, August 26, 2016, p. 34.