

A Study of Gowon's Post Nigeria Civil War Reconstruction on Esan People of Midwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

In the study of Nigerian civil war, a great deal of emphasis seems to have been placed on the major ethnic groups such as the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. Perhaps, this is because source materials in these areas are more than in the minor ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the fact cannot be denied that attention has also been paid to smaller ethnic groups in the civil war publications. At present the coverage seems not adequate compared to the large number of smaller ethnic groups in Nigeria and this does not bring to clear understanding the implications of the war on the smaller ethnic groups. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the impacts of Gowon's post-war Reconstruction on Esan people of Midwestern Nigeria. Relying on qualitative method of historical research, the paper demonstrates that even though Esan did not benefit directly from the National Rehabilitation Commission's post war programmes, post war policies like currency exchange and indigenization were constructive to Esan people

Keywords: Post Nigeria civil war, reconstruction, Esan People, Indigenization Decree, Midwestern

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Introduction

The Nigeria civil war was fought between the republic of Nigeria and the then Eastern Region of Nigeria between July, 1967 and January 1970. The war broke out when Col. Ojukwu declared the Eastern Region an independent State from the Republic of Nigeria. When the war broke out in July 1967, the Midwest was not part of the theatre of the armed conflict. The defensive efforts of the Biafra was to protect their northern border since their main enemies were the northerners and the main focus of Federal Government was also the northern border of the Biafra. Esan was part of the federal government held areas and until the Biafran incursion into Midwest, the area was not part of the armed conflict. The political leaders of the Midwest had made their position known to Gowon "that they wanted no part of a civil war and that the region would be neutral in the event of any hostility."¹The rate of devastation of the war on Esan was minimal compared to other parts of Midwest like Western Igbo. Major towns in Esan like Ubiaja, Uromi, Irrua,

Ekpoma and Igweben did not experience huge damage like Asaba, Ibusa and Ogwashi-Uku where the federal forces were more ferocious because of their suspected loyalty to Biafra. Consequently, the Igbo speaking part of Midwest had more displaced persons compared to the non-Igbo speaking groups like Esan. Iweze declared that Western Igbo people constituted about 60% of the entire war victims in the Midwest.²

The Gowon's post war reconstruction concentrated on area devastated by the war like the Eastern States and Western Igbo in Midwest. Esan was part of the federal government controlled areas and was not so devastated by the war. Consequently, Esan was not included in the National Rehabilitation Commission's post war reconstruction programme. It was the Midwestern reconstruction programme started by Col. Ogbemudia after the liberation of the State from Biafran forces in September, 1968 that Esan benefited from directly.

This paper examines the impacts of Gowon's reconstruction on Esan people of Midwestern Nigeria. The paper is divided into four section and it starts with the introduction which is followed by the historical perspective of Esan and Midwest. The third section examines the implications of Gowon's reconstruction for Esan and the final section is the conclusion.

Esan and Midwest in Historical Perspective

Esan is the second major ethnic group in Edo state and is located on a plateau of about 134 meters above sea level. Esan people occupy a land mass of about 1,858 square kilometers north-east of Benin, the Edo State capital.³ "The 1963 Census put the population of Esan at 270,903."⁴ The people are presently in five local government areas: Esan South East, Esan North East, Esan West, Igweben and Esan Central. Esan is bounded in the West by Orhiomwon Local Government Area while on the North by Etsako East and West local government areas. 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. Before the Nigerian civil war, the people of Esan were predominantly farmers even though there is existence of other economic activities such as hunting, basket weaving, blacksmithing and cloth weaving.⁵ The area was colonized by the British and was under the Benin Province in colonial times. Esan was located in the Western Region when Nigeria had three regions and was located in Mid-Western Region when the country became four regions. When the Nigerian-Biafran war broke out in 1967, the area was under the Midwestern region, the fourth region created in Nigeria in 1963.

Esan and Gowon's Reconstruction

In Gowon's broadcast to the nation after the formal surrender of Biafra at Dodan Barracks in Lagos on January 15, 1970, he emphasized the enormous task of building the country destroyed by the war.⁶ The socio-economic and political thrust of Gowon's administration was declared on October 1, 1970 in a national broadcast to the nation. Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation, known as 3Rs, was among the programmes. The fact that the civil war had left the country devastated especially the Igbo war-affected areas made the 3Rs imperative.⁷ Gowon had anticipated the enormous task of post-civil war reconstruction and established the National Rehabilitation Commission by Decree No. 40 of 1968 which was headed by Mr. Timothy Omo-Bare.⁸ The commission focused basically in the Eastern States which are made up East-Central State, Rivers State and South-Eastern State. The commission was saddled with the responsibility

of collecting and distributing drugs and humanitarian gift from international and non-governmental agencies.⁹

In the National Rehabilitation Commission's post war reconstruction programme, the Esan was not included because the area was among the federal government controlled territory.¹⁰ Thus, Esan did not benefit directly from the humanitarian gift from the commission. It was the reconstruction programme started by Col. Ogbemudia after the liberation of Midwest from Biafran forces that affected Esan people directly. However, we are going to explore the implications of some of the post war policies of the Federal Government on Esan.

The Currency Exchange

Six months after the civil war began, Chief Obafemi Awolowo announced that the new Nigeria notes would go into circulation in January 1968.¹¹ In line with the announcement, the federal government changed her currency in January 1968. The Biafran government responded on 30 December, 1968 with Biafra's own currency. Biafra banned the use of Nigerian pound as legal tender within her territory.¹² Anigbogu remarks that "the change of currency by Nigeria in January 1968... resulted in a major financial disaster for Biafra."¹³ He further declares that it was clear to everyone in Biafra by October, 1967 that the Nigerian government was going to change her currency. But the Biafran government failed to develop a plan early enough to counter the federal government plan.¹⁴ Madiebo attributes the currency change by Nigerian government as the reason why Biafra lost the war and also questioned the lack of taking early measure to counter the federal government currency change even when every Biafran envisaged the plan by the federal government to change Nigerian currency right from October 1967. Madiebo affirms thus:

The Biafra financial disaster, if not a total collapse as a result of the change in currency by Nigeria in January, 1968, was the most important single reason why we lost the war. At the end of the financial chaos, which followed in Biafra, we had lost over 50 million pounds which could have made a world difference in our favour if properly utilized for the execution of the war. This should not have happened if prior arrangements were made to counter the move. After all, as far back as October, 1967, the common man in Biafra was already talking about possible change of currency by Nigeria. As a result of that fantastic financial loss, Biafra found it difficult to support her army at war.¹⁵

Apart from affecting the position of Biafra winning the war, the federal government change of currency also worsened the suffering of Biafran civilian population who were engaged in cross border trade with their neighbors. For example, there were some Biafran suppliers who were getting their supplies from Illushi market which is situated by the Bank of River Niger in Esan Division. The change of Nigerian currency affected this trade. Traders within Nigerian territory refused to accept Biafran currency while traders within Biafran territory refused to accept Nigerian currency. The implication of this was that the currency exchange impacted beyond the Biafran territory since it affected trade in some parts of Esan.¹⁶

As part of the reconciliation policy after the war, the federal government directed that all citizens should deposit all old Nigerian and Biafran currency with the central bank of Nigeria.

Those affected by the directive were basically the former Igbo secessionist group. The Igbo complied with the expectation of receiving the equivalent of what they deposited. Iweze notes:

The people complied with the federal government's directives and deposited their money with great expectation of receiving equivalent of the same amount deposited. In anticipation of the pending exchange, the Biafrans deposited £16 million Biafran fund and £25million in old Nigerian notes with Nigerian Central Bank through local banks. In May, 1970, however, the government changed the terms of the plan. Under the new plan, each amount deposited with the Central Bank of Nigeria for exchange was exchanged at a flat rate of £20 regardless of the amount deposited.¹⁷

"The financial disaster began with the currency exchange which climaxed with the change of bank account in 1970."¹⁸ This policy of nullifying any bank account operated during the war was under the guidance of Obafemi Awolowo, the federal commissioner for finance.¹⁹ Achebe reiterates that the action of the federal government "had the immediate result of pauperizing the middle class and earning a profit of £4 million for the federal government treasury."²⁰

After the war, Philip Effiong made practical proposal to General Gowon in a written document on re-integration, unity, re-absorption of Biafra, compensation and restoration. Gowon made a personal comment on the document and sent it back to Philip Effiong. On the problem of currency, Effiong proposed on the document:

One of the surest problems is likely to be the question of currency. The people have suffered many losses, including the dis-possession of their property both movable and immovable as a result of the 1966 crisis and the war. They were also severely hit by the Nigerian currency switch of 1967-68. All their present assets seem to be only in the form of Biafran currency.²¹

On the proposal of currency raised by Philip Effiong, Gowon responded by saying that:

The ministry of finance and central bank already have some experience on this...It is impossible to exchange £ per £ for a so called Biafran currency. Very soon, the federal military government will carry out the necessary exercise for the currency exchange.²²

The response of Gowon showed that there was a victors and vanquished in contradiction of the federal government position that there was no victor, no vanquish. Victory or defeat in war is a function of how power is projected from a position of strength even after battle field. The implication of this is that there was a conscious arrangement in place to punish the Igbo after the war. Thus winning the battle and the war and making sure that Biafran did not win the peace was high in the agenda of the federal military government. Fighting a war is governed by political rather than military consideration hence, Carl Clausewitz argues that "war is not merely a political act but also a political instrument."²³ In fighting war, there is always a goal. Gowon addressed World press on the 5th January, 1968 that:

The federal military government always keeps before it the major political goal of the current military operations. This is to create and safeguard the conditions for the lasting peace, stability and inter communal harmony so that the nation can continue its economic and social development at an acceptable pace.²⁴

The above suggests that the action of the federal government was at variance with the political goal which the government professed at the war. The legacy of the one sided peace effort after the war is the re-emergence of irredentist movement such as the movement for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra. According to Nwabughuogu, even though irredentist movement did not necessarily lead to complete breakdown of the political system, they can disrupt the process of nation building.²⁵ Not only did they obstruct mobility of persons, goods and services, but also created a sense of insecurity of life and property. Many of them caused loss of lives and property. Besides, the enormous resources put into quelling the riots or rebuilding destroyed property deprive the nation-state of money which could have been used to build infrastructure that could have brought good life to the citizens. Many youths, the future nation-builders, loss their lives in the disturbance.²⁶ Apart from the above, the phenomenon has the problem of affecting the unity of Nigeria. A situation where the process of making peace is a conspiracy against a particular segment of the country cannot produce the desired result. Hence Chinua Achebe argues that "we cannot extol the virtue of unity without first satisfying ourselves that the end to which the unity is directed is unimpeachable."²⁷

In Esan, the exchange of £20 regardless of the amount deposited by the Biafra which pauperized the Igbo became constructive. As the Igbo lacked the financial strength to re-start their business, it was easy for Esan people to take over some of the businesses in Esan that were hitherto in the hands of the Igbo before the war. Small scale business like bakeries, super markets and artisans were taken over by Esan. Ojiefoh affirms thus:

The Uromi artisans now replaced the Igbo who was there masters. Uromi sons who were traders, mechanics, drivers etc all returned home and established their various trades in Uromi. These people introduced mechanical technology like converting Volkswagen engines into plants...²⁸

Businesses in urban parts of Esan were taken over by the people of Esan. In area like Illushi, John Ekoh commanded businesses in the area. In Ubiaja mono bread was everywhere. The artisan in Esan were dominated by Igbo before the war and Esan learnt such artisan crafts like motor mechanic, auto electrician, and welding from them. The legacy of what they learnt from the Igbos was consolidated during the war as some of their Igbo masters did not come back and even those that came back saw that their positions have been taken over by Esan artisans trained by them.

One important consequence of this was that Uromi-the economic headquarters of Esan land-experienced unprecedented commercial activities as many Esan moved out of their villages to take part in the booming commercial activities in Uromi. Consequently, the civil war created several job opportunities as many Esan men and women who were before now unknown as traders and contractors because of the sharp competition from the Igbos now became known traders and contractors.

Abandoned Property

The Igbo in the hurried return to their region at the behest of Ojukwu, left behind their properties in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, the problem of abandoned property started after the January 1966 coup which brought displacement of the people throughout the country. The federal government made sure that all the abandoned properties left behind were taken care of and preserved for them by directing the state government to handle the problems associated with the abandoned properties in their state. In obedience to the federal government directives, committees were set up by every state to carry out the assignment. The committees set up in various states handled the sale of movable properties and supervised the renting of houses and commercial property. The committees comprised the state government officials and citizen of the state. After Biafra surrender, Philip Effiong declared before Gowon, that:

With regard to property, there is a feeling that if the people could be enabled to return to their property in places like Port-Harcourt, Enugu, Aba or other parts of the federation, It will serve to assure them as to the genuineness of the oneness. But people cannot hope to do this if they encounter armed soldiers on the roads who are as likely as not to take away their vehicles. An undertaking that people, especially as most of their native homes have been damaged, can return to their property in the town of the federation, will go a long way to heal the wounds.²⁹

As for looting of property and indiscipline on the parts of the army after the war, Gowon directed the field commander to deal with any acts of indiscipline ruthlessly.³⁰

Be that as it may, the subsequent events in some parts of the country demonstrated lack of sincerity in the implementation of the post-civil war reconstruction and reconciliation. This is why Ukase notes that:

From the pronouncement of General Gowon during and immediately after the war, it would appear that his administration was genuinely committed to the promotion of peace and unity, justice, equity and fairness, reintegration and reconciliation with the Nigerian federation. Unfortunately, subsequent events during the life of the administration and other successive governments tend to expose the yawning gap between these pronouncements and the practicality of their implementation. On paper, the government was actually on course; on the part of national reconciliation and reintegration, while in practical terms, the implementation of the so-called post-war reconciliation programme christened the 3rs was a mere smokescreen, a myth and an illusion.³¹

This is why even when the war was fought to keep Nigeria one, we are far from the national unity of our dream.

In the Midwest, "the return of abandoned properties to their owners became the most pressing demands."³² The Midwestern state government passed an Edict to protect the property of the Igbos that fled the state as a result of the war.³³ The state government took inventory of all

properties abandoned in the state in all important towns in the state. The Igbo people returned to Benin and major town in the state at the end of the war and, following the Federal and State Government pronouncements that their properties would be returned to them. The abandoned property committees returned about 200 parcels of landed properties to Igbo landlords in Benin.³⁴Ogbemudia notes:

The committee's work was a great success. Working with incredible speed, the committee repaired a reasonable number of damaged and abandoned houses in various towns in the state. In Benin City, for instance, sixty-four out of the two hundred and thirteen identified houses belonging to the fleeing Igbo were repaired by July, 1968. During the same period, a total sum of ₦10, 440 (ten thousand four hundred and forty Naira) rent had been collected and paid into the bank in Warri on behalf of persons who had fled. The readiness, with which people freely rented these properties in spite of the bitterness of the secessionist occupation, was a source of joy and hope for the future integration of the state. It was delightful to note the sincerity with which Mid Westerners held those properties in trust for their rightful owners. This was to me a manifestation of the genuine desire and ability of Mid Westerners in particular, and Nigerians in general to live together in peace. I took advantage of this desire to get things done. Things moved and we all worked as a team.³⁵

Some vehicles of Igbo people were recovered by the committee and given to them. The situation in the Midwest and Esan district was a reversal of the situation in Lagos and Port-Harcourt where most Igbo's properties were seized. After the civil war, the Igbo who were in majority in Port-Harcourt came back to start a new life but were denied their properties. Rivers people claimed their properties and called it "Abandoned property." The act was carried out in collaboration with the federal military government.³⁶Iweze maintains that most Midwestern Igbo properties were seized in Lagos and Port-Harcourt:

In Lagos, most Western Igbo properties were seized. Chief George Udemé, who worked with Nigerian Post and Telecommunication in Lagos, was erecting a house before the war broke out. When he returned after the war, he found it difficult to recognize his uncompleted building because the house had been completed and claimed by a Yoruba man. He failed to reclaim the building despite the Lagos state Government's pronouncement that all abandoned property in the state should be given back to their rightful owners. Engineer Anthony Okolo, a town planner and estate surveyor from Asaba, lost his houses in Port Harcourt during the civil war.³⁷

The Midwestern Igbo suffered the same fate with their Eastern Igbo counterpart because they bore the same name with the Eastern Igbo. Even the 1966 pogrom in the North also affected the Midwestern Igbo as it was not easy to differentiate them from their name. The Esan that ran back home as a result of the war went back to claim their properties. Charles Ihaza notes that his

uncle, Abumere Ihaza owned a house in old GRA, Port Harcourt and that he claimed the house after the war.³⁸

There is no available data to show Esan persons who claimed their properties in Lagos, Port-Harcourt and other parts of the country and oral sources did not show where Esan property was seized in the name of abandoned property after the war. Perhaps, the reason why Esan people were not affected by the abandoned property saga was mainly because they supported federal government cause. It was speculated by some people that after the creation of Rivers State, some Rivers people had agreed with Gowon that should the war end in favour of the federal government, the state would take over all the Igbo property in Rivers state. Onwumere affirms thus:

Historians would say that Ken Saro Wiwa was allegedly among the Rivers State indigenes who led other like minds from the state to Gowon. The outcome of their meeting was an accord with the Gowon-led government that should the war end in favour of the Nigeria; the state would take over all that Ndigbo left behind in Rivers State.³⁹

If the above assertion is correct, it means that those who were denied their properties in Port-Harcourt were the Igbo who were in majority in the secessionist group. It also means the seizure of Igbo property was in fulfillment of the accord the Rivers people entered with Gowon.

In the Midwest, it cannot be denied that the Western Igbo supported the Biafran cause. Like earlier maintained, they suffered the same fate in the 1966 pogrom in the North and they were almost treated the same way with Eastern Igbo by the Northerners. Obasanjo affirms that even the civilian populations of Midwest Igbo were hostile toward the federal troops when they arrived Agbor and Umunede. Obasanjo posits thus:

Brigade moved up along the detour and continued to lead the advance from Agbor to Umenede. Here, fighting moved through Igbo-speaking areas and hostility was encountered not only from rebel soldiers but also from the civilian population... The advance on both axis remained steady although progress was not so rapid compared with the rate of advance to Benin in the non-Igbo speaking area of operation. 6 Brigade encountered stiff resistance at Ogwasi-Ukwu and at Ibusa, the home of some senior Army officers on the rebel side.⁴⁰

Non-Igbo ethnic groups in the Midwest distrusted the Biafrans and this heightened the fear of Igbo domination. Even before the war, Esan was among the group in Midwest that supported the preservation of strong centre in the September 1966 constitutional conference. The condition of the Igbo in the Midwest as regards the abandoned property can only be compared to the situation in Kano and other parts of the North where the properties of Igbo were handed to them after the war. In the debate of reintegration and reconstruction, the abandoned property issue is of special relevance. Property recovery made a considerable economic impact in the attempt to begin a new life after the war. The situation in Kano and parts of the North is comparable to the experience in Midwest.

The way the committee set up by the government of Midwestern state handled the abandoned property issue showed the determination of the people to heal the wounds inflicted by the war. Government and the people held properties in trust for the rightful owners. "The Igbo and non-Igbo groups-Edo, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw-point to handling of the

abandoned property as one of the veritable elements in the successful reconciliation that occurred in the state."⁴¹

In Esan, the Igbo came back after the war to reclaim their properties. The Igbo people had a lot of landed property at Uromi and Illushi. Godwin Agbadamu said Fidelis Igbonezu came back to reclaim his house that later became Illushi Police Station.⁴² In Uromi, Chief J. A. Uba reclaimed his two storey building and the rent collected was handed over to him. Others that reclaimed their houses in Uromi included Patrick Aubo, Mr. Pius Eyinand, Mr. Sylvanus Nwerem.⁴³

In Ubiaja, one Mr. Hope who owned Hope Rising Bakery came back after the war to reclaim his house.⁴⁴ There were some Igbo that came back to sell their houses and landed property for a new start. After the war, the new start began with selling of property.⁴⁵ In Illushi, Mr. Emujede Philip bought his house from one Igbo man who needed money to start a new life. Similarly, Mathew Ihensekhiem revealed that Chief Emmanuel came back to Ebelle to sell his house to Chief John Omije, the Eson of Ebelle kingdom.⁴⁶ In Uromi, Mr. EzeObelle came back after the war to sell his house to Mr. Peter Oriakhilin.⁴⁷ The Esan complied with the Federal Government directives to preserve the properties left behind by people as a result of the war. The implication of this was that Esan people were portrayed in good light and it became one of the places where the Igbo began to acquire landed property after the war without fear.

Indigenization Decree of 1972

After the war, the federal military government under Gowon promulgated the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree in 1972. The Decree popularly known as indigenization Decree was meant to put Nigerian economy in the hands of Nigerians. It was an attempt to indigenize the ownership of private enterprises in the country. The Decree defined the enterprises that foreign capital was not allowed to operate in the Nigerian economy.⁴⁸ Fifty-five types of enterprises operating in the Nigeria were classified into two groups. Commercial enterprises such as retail business and many other service operations were classified as Scheduled One Enterprise and required 100% indigenous ownership, to the complete exclusion of foreign capital except those of African countries that allowed Nigerian residents to do similar businesses. An exception was granted where equity capital was not less than ₦400, 000. For instance, departmental superstores, by virtue of their size and the volume of capital involved, were exempted. Schedule Two Enterprises, which were required to have 40% indigenous equity ownership, comprised of mainly joint ventures. Most of the enterprises which were allotted to this group are intermediate or small-scale manufacturing firms.⁴⁹

The indigenization Decree identified areas in Nigerian economy that Nigerians were capable of owning and running easily. Despite this, the Decree also identified the areas in the economy that cannot be handled without foreign capital. The indigenization was a desire to build a strong economy that would come under the control of Nigerians. Nigerians frowned at the ability of foreign investor to transfer a very high percentage of their profit back to their country. Nigerian questioned that the profit would have been used to expand the economy if the ownership of the enterprises were in the hands of the local investor.

By the time the Decree went into effect in 1974, a few Igbo had recovered from the war. The Decree created an opportunity for a few Nigerian to enrich themselves at the expense of majority of the citizen of Nigeria.⁵⁰ Mohammed affirms this:

There has always been a consensus amongst most officials over at least the official aims of the policy of indigenization, which reduce to the achievement of national "economic independence". However, economic independence is a rather vague aspiration, and the belief that it has been the only significant motivating force behind Nigeria's indigenization is somewhat naïve. A close look at the Decree and their implementation suggests that "economic independence" can be a means for achieving further, and rather different ends. Moreover in any case even the official interpretation of the concept appears to be consistent with the promotion of the private interests of businessmen and state officials. In order to promote the interests of these groups such catch-phrases as "economic independence", "economic freedom", and "self-determination" were used to generate a broad base support for the policy.^{51]}

Apart from the fact that the Decree was meant to enrich few Nigerian, it was also a means for taking the economy of the country out of the hands of the Igbo who before the war had a grip of the country's economy. This is why Iweze examine the appropriateness. The Igbo who were devastated by the war had no finance to participate in the buying of shares in the indigenized companies. Thus, the post-war economic policy excluded the Igbo entrepreneurs from the process of indigenization.⁵² It is not that the policy was not a well intention one. In African it is not only Nigeria that tried to indigenize her economy. Kenya indigenization "started with the acquisition of the fertile farmland which had been possessed by white settlers in 1965."⁵³ in 1965. In Tanzania, Nyerere claimed that only Tanzanians can develop Tanzania in the interest of Tanzanians.⁵⁴

In Nigeria, the timing of indigenization Decree made it not to be for the interest of the whole country. Achebe declares that:

The Indigenization Decree which followed soon afterwards completed the routing of Igbo from the commanding height of Nigerian economy, to everyone's apparent satisfaction.⁵⁵

The indigenization policy was sold to the public as part of the plans to liberate the country's economy from the west and empower local business interest. Achebe reveals the he conspiracy in the process:

The move was sold to the public as some of "Pro-African liberation strategy" to empower Nigerian businesses and shareholders. The chicanery of the entire scheme of course was quite evident. Having stripped a third of the Nigerian population of the means to acquire capital, the leaders of the government of Nigeria knew that the former Biafran by and large, would not have the financial muscles to participate in this plot. The end result, they hoped would be a permanent shifting of the balance of economic power away from the East to other constituencies. Consequently very few Igbos participated, and many of the jobs and positions in most of the sectors of the economy previously occupied by Easterners went to those from other parts of the country.⁵⁶

The timing calls to question the reconciliation efforts of the federal government meant to unite the country after the civil war. In the situation which the Igbo found themselves after the war, any government policy that will make their economic situation deteriorate further is a serious threat to the reconciliation effort of Gowon. The end result is lopsided development due to bias public policies. Thus, permanently leaving the Eastern region backward. This means planting poverty intentionally in the people of the region. Nwabughuogu declares "that poverty breeds corruption, Nepotism, ethnicism and insecurity of life and property all of which are inimical to nation building."⁵⁷ The decree was attempted to totally prevent the Igbo from having say in the country's economy. Ukase affirms this:

And to further prevent the Igbos from having any say in the nation's economy, the federal government enacted the indigenization Decree at the height of total destruction of the purchasing power of the Igbo. The intentional timing of the enactment of this decree calls to question the truthfulness in the reconciliation process.⁵⁸

The decree demonstrated from the timing that some parts of the country used the decree to pursue its interest to the detriment of other parts of the country (Igbo). This became inimical to the process of reconciliation which Nigerian government hope to achieve after the war. Ibeanu affirms that "conflict expresses a direct or indirect between two or more actors in which they attempt to undermine the interests of one another..."⁵⁹

In Midwest, the timing of Indigenization Decree can also be said to exclude Midwestern Igbo whose area were devastated by the war from the opportunities created by the policy. In fighting to reclaim the Midwest from the Biafran forces, the federal troops were more ferocious in Western Igbo than the non-Igbo areas like the Esan which they already had their cooperation and loyalty and because of this, the war had no adverse effect on the people of Esan. Iweze affirms that:

It was a well-intentioned policy but the timing of the promulgation of the decree and subsequent implementation was inauspicious for the Western and Eastern Igbo whose areas were devastated by the civil war and who had no finance to buy shares in the indigenization companies and corporations.⁶⁰

The reason why the Western Igbo was devastated by the war was because some people from the area supported the Biafrans and this is unlike the Esan people who were initially neutral and later were loyal to the federal government. Consequently, when the indigenization Decree went into effect, the Esan people had capital to compete with those who had not suffered from the ravages of the war. Peter Oderere notes that:

The Biafra only came and stays briefly without devastation before the federal forces came to liberate Esan from the hand of the Biafra. Esan did not experience devastation like the Western Igbo. The Esan expressed their loyalty to the federal troops by saying One Nigeria when the federal forces were passing.⁶¹

The federal government considered all those that supported Biafra cause as people misled into rebellion and promised amnesty for them. Gowon declared that "I solemnly repeat our guarantees of a general amnesty."⁶² The amnesty was not for those that were loyal to the federal

government like Esan people. Esan people were major player in Gowon government. Anthony Enahoro was the commissioner for information and labour and major Oboh was the pay master in the Nigerian Army under Gowon. So Esan people were there to compete for shares declared by the indigenization decree. For example, Christopher Abebe became the first indigenous chairman of United African Company in 1972.⁶³

Another measure taken by the federal government that was not traumatic for the Esan people was review of salaries and wages of civil servants in 1971. This was followed by the Udoji award of 1975. This measure was meant to improve the living standard of Nigerians. The commission set up by Gowon to review the salaries and wages had Chief Simeon Adebo as chairman.⁶⁴ The commission reviewed the salaries and wages of public service including staff of local governments and universities as well as teachers in government public schools.⁶⁵

The Esan people being on the federal government side during the war did not suffer impediments occasioned by the above policy. They benefited from the salaries and wages increment and the Udoji award which took place during the oil boom. Some Midwesterners of Igbo extraction suffered the same fate with Eastern Igbo because they were suspected to have aided the Biafran soldiers to invade Midwest. As a result of the above, it can be argued that the post-civil war reconstruction and reconciliation led to the dominance of non-Igbo groups like Esan in the economic and political affairs of Midwest. Thus the federal government reconstruction policies impacted positively on the Esan people unlike the Eastern and Midwest Igbo.

Conclusion

This study examines the impacts of Gowon's post war reconstruction on Esan people of Midwestern Nigeria. The work finds out that even though Esan did not benefit directly from Gowon's post war policies meant to reintegrate the Igbo, policies like Currency Exchange and Indigenization Decree were however constructive for Esan people. The work also finds out that the abandoned property paint Esan people in good light as Igbo's properties were returned to them after the war. The implication of this was that Esan land were among places the Igbo began to acquire property early enough after the war. The study further finds out that Esan being on federal side did not suffer any impediment from the review of salary and wages of civil servant of 1971 and Udoji award of 1975. Those who were on Biafran side find it traumatic.

Endnotes

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