

## *Review Paper*

# **The Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970: A revolution?**

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**The paper seeks to cast the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 within the mould of a revolution. In achieving this aim, the paper necessarily explores the theory of revolution and at the same time carries-out a comparative analysis of civil wars that later morphed into revolutions within the international political system. The Nigerian civil war has never been referred to as a revolution. Rather, the military coup d'état of January 15, 1966, a first in Nigeria's history, has been erroneously referred to as the closest thing to a revolution in Nigeria. This paper will not only correct the misrepresentation, it will also establish the theoretical line that separate a revolution from a coup d'état. Thus, the central thrust of the paper is that as a revolution, the Nigerian civil war was meant to be a means to an end for Nigeria; the end being the attainment of nationhood for Nigeria. This conclusion is arrived at after careful and critical evaluation of the significant role revolution played in the formative years of some of the most successful nations within the international environment .The countries used in the course of the analyzes include the United States of America, France and Spain. Some of the theories of revolution that readily capture the essence of the Nigerian conflict are also highlighted.**

**Key words:** Nigeria, civil war, revolution, nationhood.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Nigerian civil war was a cataclysm that rocked the emergent Nigerian state from 1967 to 1970. The 30 months civil war was preceded by a configuration of pre-independence and post-independence crises (Thomas, 2010). The Origins of the civil war could be located in a complexity of factors ranging from the remote which includes the military coups d'état of January 15, and July 29, 1966. Other remote factors are the regional election crisis in Western Nigeria in 1965; the Tiv riots of 1964; the Federal Elections of 1964; the killing of the Igbos living in Northern Nigeria from May to September 1966 (Cervenka, 1972; Oyeweso, 1992); the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation; and, most importantly, the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups (Adeleke, , 2008).

Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu's declaration of the state of Biafra on May 30, 1967, was the immediate factor responsible for the civil war. Before this declaration, the Nigerian polity was geographically divided into 3 regions. These are the Northern, Western and Eastern regions. The Igbos are of Eastern extraction. Ojukwu's declaration will effectively excise the eastern

part of Nigeria out of the federation. Thus, it was the effort of the federal government of Nigeria to truncate the east's secession from the federation and Ojukwu's desire to ensure the survival of Biafra that started the civil war in 1967.

Like all civil wars, the Nigerian civil war was unique in the context of the nation's history. This is because it was the most vivid expression of a country turned against itself. As with civil wars in other countries, the Nigerian civil war can be analyzed within the context of a revolution. As a revolution, it is very unique in the context of Nigerian history; it is the only revolution that has ever occurred in Nigeria's checkered existence. Thus, the assertion that the Nigerian civil war could be taken to be a 'revolution' is not farfetched if one is to consider revolution as a concept and revolutions in history.

## **Theoretical framework: Revolution**

Revolution means change of a far reaching and fundamental kind (Kumar, 1989). A revolution, according to Kamrava (1999), may be defined as an event that

qualitatively changes the nature and composition of the state. It alters the way the state relates to and interfaces with society, and the larger political culture within which various types and levels of interaction between state and society takes place.

Godwin (2001) gives two definitions of a revolution. He sees revolution as any and all instances in which a state or a political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a political movement. This change is usually brought about in an irregular, extra constitutional and or violent fashion. Godwin (2001) further defines it in a more narrow sense to mean a situation that entails mass mobilization, regime change and rapid and fundamental social, economic and cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power. Goldstone (2001b) has defined revolution as an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in the society. This effort is usually accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and what he has called 'noninstitutionalized' actions that are designed to undermine authorities (Goldstone, 2001b).

However, in a paradigmatic shift, the Princeton University Centre of International Relations, James Rosenau, in their different studies on revolution came up with a novel idea in defining the concept. They tried to create a theoretical construct for civil wars and internal strives within a broad concept of revolution. Thus, for instance, the Princeton University Centre of International Studies simply defines revolution as an 'internal war' that is designed to change by violence, or threat of violence, a government's policies, rulers or organization (1964). In the same vein, Rosenau (1964) created a three-tiered typology in defining revolution from the perspective of 'civil strife'. The first tier he labelled 'personnel conflicts', which he explains as struggles over current roles in the existing structures with no aspiration to change major policies or the structure of society; the second he called "authority conflict" which is war over the arrangement of roles in the political structure of society; while the third is 'structural strife' which he explains to be a combination of both 'authority' and 'personal' conflicts.

It must be remarked here that the idea of change is a constant leitmotif that runs through the different definitions on revolution. Rosenau, Goldstone, Godwin (2001) and Kamrava (1999) all reflect in one form or the other this idea of change.

## **THEORIES OF REVOLUTION**

Revolutions have been attributed to economic failures, to the effect of modernization on autocracies, and to the vulnerability of certain regime types (Goldstone et al., 2004). In the enormous literature on revolutions, this researcher has been able to identify five major theories of revolutions. These are: The economic theory, system theory, Marxist theory, functionalist theory and power

theory.

### **Economic theory**

The major proponents of this economic cause of revolution are Davies (1962), Gurr and Feierabend (1972). Davies propounded the J-curve theory, while Gurr and Feierabend came up with the relative deprivation theory in explaining the origins of revolutionary ferment. The central thrust of the theory is that either a sudden decline in economic performance, or frustration with poor economic conditions relative to expectations raised by knowledge of conditions in richer countries lie behind explosions of revolutionary discontent (Goldstone et al., 2004).

Davies (2004) argues that a gap between value expectations and value achievements accounts for the onset of revolutionary behaviour. For example, if recent trends led to the expectation of a continued increase in satisfaction of economic and social needs, any sharp or sudden decline from that trend would result in an 'intolerable' gap between expectations and achievements.

### **Marxist theory**

The Marxist theory for the outbreak of revolution has its key note in the transference of state power from one class to another (Johari, 1995). Marx's emphasis for the origins of revolution is the means of production. A major change in the means of production according to Marx will bring about corresponding change in the relations of production. This is what will then generate revolution (Johari, 1995). This view of revolution has been amplified by modern Marxist scholars such as Theda Skocpol, Barrington Moore and Jeffrey Paige (Goldstone, 2001a). Skocpol is a leading light of this neo-Marxist school and he defines revolution as "rapid, basic transformations of society's state and class structures...accompanied and carried through by class-based revolts from below" (Goldstone, 2001b). Within this milieu a multiplicity of conflicts will then emerge which will involve state, elites and the lower classes in the society.

### **Functionalist theory**

This theory places the origins of revolutions in class conflict which is as a result of general scarcity of valuable or valued goods and the allocation of such goods (Johari, 1995). The theory sees society as a system in equilibrium between various resources, demands and subsystems. As long as the society is kept in a state of symmetry, there can never be a revolution. It is the state of a severe disequilibrium that is responsible for revolution

(Goldstone, 1980a). Chalmers Johnson, Neil Smelser, Bob Jessol, Mark Hart and Talcott Parsons are among the leading lights of this persuasion. The arena for this disequilibrium could be in the social, economic, political and religious spheres within the society. This will in turn lead to alteration in the structures and institutions of a social and political system. Thus, this anomie would have provided the theoretical background for the revolution.

### **Power theory**

Scholars who subscribes to power in the outbreak of revolutions includes Charles Tilly, Samuel Huntington, Peter Amman and Arthur Stinchcombe (Goldstone, 1980a). They look at the origins of revolutions through the prism of pluralist theory and interest group conflict theory. The theory sees events as outcomes of a power struggle between competing interest groups. In such a model, revolution happens when two or more groups cannot come to terms within a normal decision making process traditional for a given political system, and simultaneously possess enough resources to employ force in pursuing their goals.

In other words, the central thrust of the Power Theory is that revolutions occur because of the asymmetry in power relations that exist in the different political or social groups that make up a heterogeneous state. This particular theory is very apposite, as will be shown later in the course of the research, to the outbreak of the Nigerian revolution in 1967. The "civil war", if reduced to its barest minimum, was essentially a war fought to right perceived imbalance in the Nigerian power equation. One part of the tripod felt aggrieved that a preponderance of power was skewed in favour of a particular group. To correct this anomaly, the disenchanted group then had to declare war on the more powerful partner. Thus, the origins of military coups in Nigeria history and by extension the beginning of the Nigerian revolution of 1967 (Onyekpe, 2003; Amuwo, 1992).

### **System theory**

This theory states that the origin of revolution is directly attributable to the kind of political system found within a state (Goldstone et al., 2004). Whether autocracies or democracies, states in this view are not all alike. Some autocracies are personalistic; totalitarian parties run others. Democracies also differ. Some guarantee free competition and fully open political expression; but other democracies exhibit only some of these characteristics, and may retain some authoritarian traits. Pointing to these differences, drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville's conclusion that reforming regimes are the most vulnerable to revolutionary crisis, this approach argues that regimes are most prone to revolution when their

political institutions are under stress, and undergoing reform (Tocqueville, 1955). The system theory is also relevant to an understanding of the origins of the Nigerian civil war of 1967. Likewise, it was given that the Nigerian political system was under considerable strain and stress during the 1960s. Issues such as the regional election in Western Nigerian in 1964, the military coup and counter-coup of 1966 and the threat of secession tearing at the fabric of the Nigerian polity in 1966, all contributed in no small measure to this anomie (Amuwo, 1992). Thus, using the system theory as a backdrop, the outbreak of the civil war or revolution in 1967 could then be seen to be a foregone conclusion.

## **CIVIL WARS AND REVOLUTIONS IN HISTORY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Historically, many revolutions have involved civil wars. Such great revolutions as the English Revolution of 1640 to 1660, French Revolution of 1789, the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865, the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia of 1917, Irish Revolution of 1922 to 1923, the Chinese Revolution of 1927 to 1949, the Spanish Revolution of 1936 to 1939, the Greek Revolution of 1944 to 1948, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and the Angolan civil war of 1974 to 1991, to a large extent are civil wars that later morphed into revolutions (Keylor, 1992).

The French and Spanish revolutions are particularly illustrative of the postulation that most civil wars have within their kernel the germ of revolution. The French Revolution started as civil unrest without any revolutionary underpinning. The civil unrest then became a civil war as from 1789 and between 1789 and 1795 became transformed into a full-blown revolution (Grant and Temperly, 1980). This revolution brought about radical political and social changes within French society. By 1799, when the revolution ended, the French political and social terrain had been irrevocably altered. The important political consequence was the transformation of France from a monarchy to a republic. The Revolution signalled the death knell, not only of monarchy as the absolute political institution within France, but the collapse of feudalism and its ideals of servitude as the basis of society. This brought with it the idea of nationhood and incipient nationalism. With nationalism also came the idea of the 'state' as a distinct corporeal entity as unique from the Church, the Nobles and the Monarchy. This created in the French citizen the idea of patriotism since their allegiance is now to the republic (the state).

With the destruction of feudalism, the revolution redefined social interactions among the three major strata of 18<sup>th</sup> century French society. Social order and contractual relations were consolidated by the Code Napoleon. This brought such concepts as fraternalism

and egalitarianism to the fore in French social discourse. The French society was now based on meritocracy and no longer on birth and its attendant privileges.

Economically, the French revolution created a new taxation system within the French society devoid of the influence of privilege and birth. The taxation system made it compulsory for every member of the republic to pay their taxes according to their wealth. In modern day economic parlance, this taxation system is called 'progressive' system of taxation.

The Spanish Revolution also mirrored that of the French. It started as a civil unrest against the constituted authority of the Republic by the Nationalists in 1936 (Stuart, 1981). By November of 1936, General Francisco Franco, who was the leader of the opposing Nationalists' forces, had succeeded in turning the revolt into a civil war. Between 1937 to 1939, the civil war then assumed the garb of a revolution, and by the time it ended in 1939, the social and political terrain of Spain had been irreversibly altered (Stuart, 1981). An important political consequence was that the revolution turned Spain into an authoritarian state with a military dictatorship at its helm.

## THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR AS A REVOLUTION

It is in the context of the foregoing that the Nigerian civil war is described in this paper as a revolution. The Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 was an internal war fought between two antagonists. On the one hand were the Igbos in Eastern part of Nigeria, while their opponent was the Federal Government of Nigeria. The Federal Government fought the war to maintain the corporate existence of Nigeria, while the Igbos harping on the principles of self-determination, were basically interested in creating an independent state called 'Biafra' carved out of Nigeria. This process of creating this new state by the Igbos and the counter measures adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria to truncate this process was the single most important factor for the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war on May 30, 1967 (St. Jorre, 1972).

As stated earlier in the course of this analysis, history is sprinkled with instances of civil strifes, or civil wars or revolutions that were designed to alter the status-quo within the state. Once again, the French Revolution of 1789, the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 and the Spanish Revolution of 1939 are quite apposite in illustrating this point.

Writing of the Spanish civil war, Stuart Hughes (1981) opined that:

*"...it can be seen as a battle of ideologies – a social revolution..."*

Commenting on the similarities between the American civil war and Nigerian civil war, St. Jorre (1972) made the following observation:

*"Like the American conflict, it was a war about nationhood and self-determination... it concerned outside intervention and the struggle between the great powers".*

It is further worth pointing out, just as St. Jorre has done, that the Nigerian civil war bore striking similarities to the American civil war of 1861 to 1865. The American war was fought between the Confederate South and the Unionist North. Moreover, just as in Nigeria, the American war started with the declaration of the confederacy in 1861 (Thistlethwaite, 1979).

Historically, most states striving towards nationhood have experienced a revolution in one form or the other. A cursory look at the history of such countries as America, China, Russia, Britain, France, Cuba and Egypt underscores this assertion. At the root of every revolution is a desire for change. At the base of the Nigerian civil war is also a desire for change. This is not uniquely a Nigerian phenomenon. As earlier stated in the course of the analysis, it is an established fact that the experiences of such diverse countries as America, China, Russia, France, Cuba, Spain and Mexico at the end of their civil wars or revolutions was greatly responsible for wide ranging changes in their respective societies. This change achieved for such countries in the long-run a more integrated and cohesive society. Of particular significance is the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. With the success of the revolution in 1917, Russian society underwent a change. Russia changed its name to USSR. The USSR consisted basically of 15 republics (Spector, 1969). Among these are Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic states. Into this ethnic hodge-podge was also added the people's different religions and norms. From Estonia's Lutherans to Russia's Patriarch; from the Kazari's Mohammed to Georgian Orthodoxy, the revolution made it possible for a semblance of homogeneity to be created out of anarchy. The revolution made it possible for the USSR to weld together this unwieldy mix and still create a powerful nation out of it. It was out of this cauldron that the powerful USSR of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged (Spector, 1969).

In the same vein, with the conclusion of the Spanish revolution in 1939, General Francisco Franco and his Nationalists comprising the monarchists, Falangists, technocrats and members of the armed forces, were able to fuse the diverse fractious elements within Spain together (Mann, 2004). To be noted are the four rebellious provinces of Galicia, Andalucia, Catalonia and Basques which were pitted against the dominant rule of Castille (Berentson, 1997). General Franco forged and seamlessly weaved these provinces into a unified Spain. He then channelled the energies of the different provinces into building a strong and virile nation. The modern and industrial development of Spain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century started from this period.

Post-civil war Nigeria should have taken this road. Nigeria's "revolution" occurred seven years after

independence, early enough in the life of a country to exploit opportunities of the post-revolutionary period for nation building. Yet, thirty-eight years after the end of the Nigerian civil war and sixty-one years after Awolowo (1966) wrote that Nigeria is “merely a geographical expression”, Nigeria is still grappling with the problem of nation building.

## CONCLUSION

A revolution is a means to an end. It is not an end in itself. Revolution is a tool that is employed within a state to bring about desired changes. A revolution by its intrinsic character is ‘mass oriented’. A coup d’état on the other hand is restricted to a ‘clique’ or a ‘group’ or a ‘chosen few’. It is conspiratorial in nature. By the same token, a civil war is also a means to an end. The result from this is also change from the *status-quo*. The end of the Nigerian civil war was meant to have been the beginning of that change for the country. This would have been a change from a disparate heterogeneous polity to a cohesive functional and viable nation. That this transformation did not occur is largely a result of the failure of Nigeria to acknowledge her civil war as such. Had Nigeria recognized her civil war as a revolution, she probably would have gone the way of USA or France in her socio-political and economic development.

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