



An Appraisal of the Invasion of Midwest State By the Biafran Secessionists Government and Liberation During the Period of Nigerian Civil War August 9-September 20, 1967

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Abstract: *This paper examines the invasion of Midwest state by the Biafran Secessionists Government in August 9, 1967. The occupation of the state by the rebels also came to focus. The consequence of the invasion and liberation of the state by the federal troops were demonstrated. Data for the study was obtained through oral interview as primary sources and the secondary sources like books, newspapers, articles, journals, theses, projects and dissertation were also used. It was found that August 9 on which the people of the Midwest celebrate the yearly anniversary of the creation of their state was the day rebel troops invaded the state. It was demonstrated that while the state was invaded by the rebels on August 9, 1967, September 20, 1967, the people regained freedom. It was also found that Ojukwu's conquest and occupation of the Midwest was a miscalculated strategy to prolong the war and annex Southern Nigeria. In conclusion, the economy of the state was badly affected by the disruption of trade and movement of the population in search of safety.*

Keywords: *invasion; occupation; liberation; Midwest; Biafra*

I. Introduction

It is an irony of history that August 9, on which the people of the Midwest celebrate the anniversary of the creation of their state was the day rebel troops from the so called "Republic of Biafra" callously invaded the territory.

The Midwest has often been referred to as a miniature federation of Nigeria in the sense that the state comprises several ethnic groups which although they have a common origin, speak different languages. It is therefore to be expected that the success of the Midwest experiment to maintain good harmony and cordial relations among the various communities is a proof of the determination of Nigerians to live together as one people (Internal affairs and information; Benin City, 1968).

The realization is greater now than before amongst Midwesterners to tolerate, one another's short coming as a test of good neighborliness and of keeping Nigeria one after the terrible experience of rebel occupation. From the day Federal troops entered Benin City, Midwesterners were warned not to molest innocent citizens.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Creation of Midwest State

The Midwest Region was re-named Midwest State when General Yakubu Gowon created 12 States in May 27, 1967. It may be necessary at this point to discuss the agitation for the creation of States or regions in Nigeria. The 1957 Conference which sat to discuss the

question of Nigeria's independence took much time to discuss the issue of minorities. The agitation for state creation was so explosive that the issue of re-division of the country into more states came into focus (Ezera, 1960:245). As Nigeria approached self-government, there were developments of minor nationalism and particular demands for separate autonomy within each existing region (Ibid, 246). There was strong demand for the creation of Middle-Belt State in the Northern Region. In the Western Region, there was also serious agitation for the creation of Mid-west State while in the Eastern Region there was the demand for the creation of Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State. Ezera notes that Oba Akenzua II championed this separatist demand in 1950, when the Benin delegation under him boycotted the Ibadan General Conference because the Western Regional Conference did not recommend the establishment of a separate Benin/Delta State (Ibid, 245-246).

Midwest region was created on 9 August, 1963 based on the adoption of a motion moved by the former Prime-Minister of Nigeria, Sir Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in the National Assembly. However, the origin of Midwest region can be traced to the motion moved by Osadolo Edomwonyi in 1953 in the Benin Divisional Council urging the Constitutional Conference going on in London to include in the agenda the creation of separate state or region for Benin-Delta Provinces (Motion moved by Osadolo Edomwonyi in 1953 in Benin Divisional Council). Oba Akenzua II was encouraged by this motion hence he convened a general meeting of the people of the two provinces at his palace in Benin City on 18th September, 1953 to discuss this vital issue of state creation.

The NCNC in its election manifesto in the 1957 eastern regional elections, advocated the creation of 15 States, based on the existing provincial boundaries and ranging in population from 1.4 to 3.3 Million each (N.C.N.C election Manifesto, 1957 Eastern, Regional Elections) The Action Group had equally advocated the creation of more states provided that no region would be split into more states unless there is a majority of people wanting the separate state in the area concerned. However, the NPC, the dominant political party in the North was opposed to state creation.

As a result of the effort of Oba Akenzua II and other members of the movement for the creation of Midwest, the referendum for the creation of the region was successful (Ojiako, 1981:164). On Thursday 8 July, 1963 the final result was published, votes counted showed that 75.6% of those who voted in favour of the new region (Ibid).

Subsequently, the Mid-west region was 'created in 1963. Osadolo reports that on 9 August, 1963 the Mid-west Region was created on the adoption of a motion sponsored by the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa in the National assembly of both Houses of Representatives and the Senate amidst thunderous applause and great jubilation of Midwesterners and admirers and to great amazement and sorrow of all dissident elements who worked against its creation (Osadolo, 1981).

Gowon assumed office in a period of socio-political degeneration beclouded by an atmosphere of inauspicious circumstances, cynicism and uncertainty (Jamibowen, 1978:23). In order to calm suspicious and hatred knowing the situation on ground, he quickly reverted the country back to the federal structure through Decree 9 of September, 1962 (Decree 9, September, 1962).

The origin of Midwest State is traceable to Midwest region. General Gowon renamed Midwest region to Midwest State in 1967. In the area of the creation of states, General Yakubu Gowon deserves a very big applause. In May 28, 1967, the Federal Government under General Gowon announced the creation of 12 States. Decree No 14 of 1967 was promulgated to that effect (Decree No 14, 1967). The creation of the new states was very much welcomed especially by the minority groups who had long been clamoring for such creation in order to relieve them from the constant fear of domination by the longer ethnic groups (Ediagbonya, 2007:28).

Muhammadu posits that unless the people in the area control their own destiny, they do not stand a chance of realizing their developing own potentials (Muhammadu, 1986:3). However, this state creation in the former East Central State created seed of discord and acrimony between the Federal Government and East Central State. The Ibos saw the creation of River and South Eastern States as a way of depriving them of much needed support they could have received from these minorities in their region (Ediagbonya, 2022:219). Again, these areas were very rich in natural resources especially petroleum.

In the national broadcast of General Yakubu Gowon on May 27, 1967, he said: I am promulgating a Decree which will divide the Federal Republic into twelve states (Gowon's Broadcast, May 27, 1967). East Central State comprising the present Eastern Region excluding Calabar and Ogoja Provinces. River State comprising Ahoada, Brass Degema, Ogoni and Port Harcourt Division (Ibid).

What is essential to us in this paper is that in the creation of 12 States by General Yakubu Gowon, the former Midwest region was renamed Midwest state. Midwest state was created from the former Midwest region.

2.2 Provocative Moves by Lt. Col. Ojukwu Before the Invasion of Midwest State

It is well established that the people of the Midwest had always maintained a traditional bond of friendship with the former Eastern Region. In spite of this cordial relationship, Ojukwu made a number of provocative moves against the people of this state. In October, 1966, when he was still the Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, he ordered all Midwesterners and other Nigerians to leave the Region because he could no longer guarantee their safety (Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu Broadcast, October, 1966). After he expelled other Nigerians of non-eastern Nigeria origin, he started to use some "Midwestern Ibos", permitted to remain in his region to ferment trouble in the Midwestern State and to demand a merger with the east (An Interview with Dr. Duyile, 20-6-2019).

Lt. Col. Ojukwu also interrupted the flow of trade over the Asaba-Onitsha bridge. Goods bought at Onitsha market by Midwestern traders were intercepted and seized at the Onitsha end of the bridge under the pretext that the traders were violating his order (An Interview with Hon. Igunbor, 24-8-2020).

Despite the agreement between Ojukwu and Brigadier Ejoor, the then Military Governor of the Midwest State, our pretty traders were often robbed of their money and goods and beaten up in Onitsha. In spite of such acts of provocation, the Midwest State continued to give protection to persons of Eastern Nigeria origin, permit them to pursue their normal and varied callings and move freely in every part of the State (Internal Affairs and Information Department, Benin City, 1968).

As the crisis escalate into a civil war, the Federal Government ordered that the Asaba-Onitsha bridge should be closed to traffic from the Asaba end of the bridge. Out of sheer compassion for Eastern Nigerians who might find it difficult to return to the East, the Government of the Midwest under Ejoor delayed action for several days. Ojukwu's broadcasting stations jeered at us and his supporters laughed at us with scorn (Ibid).

Ojukwu cut off suddenly the Oji River power station in the Central Eastern State to Asaba. This goes to show that Ojukwu was not particularly having interest in Midwestern Ibos welfare (Interview with Hon Influence Osagie, on 26-8-2020). Its main objective is to lure them to support his rebellion.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Biafran's Invasion and Occupation of Midwest State

In the Pre-dawn hours more than 100 lorries carrying several thousand of rebel troops split into three columns, one headed for Sapele, Ughelli and Warri, the second moved to Agbor and Auchi and the third to Benin City, the capital of Midwest State (Internal Affairs and Information, Benin City, 1968).

With time, these traitors helped Ojukwu to gain control of the Midwest by disarming loyal federal troops. The rebels in Benin City seized the Armoury and Magazine, Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Station, the Central Bank, Government House, Post and Telegraphs Office and took over other key points in the city (Ibid, 1-3). As innocent Midwesterns began to realize what was happening, the lorries which unloaded the rebel troops were seen racing back to rebel-held areas with looted goods and foods stuffs. As a precaution, the rebel army imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew on the principal towns of the state (Ibid).

Two days after the occupation, the leader of the rebel army, Lieut. Col. Victor Banjo broadcast to a captive people and declared he had come to 'liberate' the state and planned to set-up a new regime independent to both Nigerian and 'Biafra'. His ultimate aim, he asserted was to re-unite Nigeria (Lieut. Col. Victor Banjo broadcasts to the people of Midwest state, 12th August, 1967).

It was clear later that Lieut. Col. Banjo was a stooge to Ojukwu whose main interest was the division of Nigeria. Their major or ultimate aim was the establishment of the Republic of Biafra. In another broadcast by Ojukwu on August 17, 1967, he appointed Major Albert Okonkwo as the Military Administrator of the Midwest (Broadcast by Ojukwu on August 17, 1967).

In a broadcast by Major Okonkwo to the people of the State on 18 August, 1967, he ordered all civil servants to return to their places of work immediately on the pain of losing their jobs (Broadcast by Major Albert Okonkwo on 18-8-1967). Earlier, four top officers were arrested and detailed, their whereabouts were not known. They were the Secretary to the overthrown Military Government and Head of the Civil Service J. E. Imoukhuede, the Commissioner of Police J. A. Adeola, the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Trade and Industry Olu Akpata and the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Engineer S. Umweni (Internal in Affairs and Information, Benin City, 1968).

The others who managed to escape were the Military Governor, Brigadier David Ejoor, Major Samuel O. Ogbemudia, now Lieutenant Colonel and Military Governor of the State. Adviser to the Military Governor, Chief, S. J. Mariere, The Olu of Warri, Erejuwa II, M. A. Begho (Acting Chief Justice) (Ibid, 2).

It must be said that the takeover of the Midwest State by the rebels was so painful and sad experience to the people of the state. The main towns were deserted and majority of the people went into hiding. The rebels and their Midwestern collaborators took the responsibility to coerce the natural rulers to use their positions in winning public support for their illegal or illegitimate regime. It was also observed that during their occupation, the rebels used the Midwest as a source of providing food and supplies for their hunger-striking Kinsmen. Schools were shut down and the premises converted into military barracks or mortuaries. Over 150 Civil Servants from the so-called Biafra were injected into the Midwest Public Services in the bid to control the state. Most painful was that innocent civilians were detained, tortured and at times shot.

War breeds bloodshed, killings, hatred, rancor and deaths. Tekeno observes, “it is not yet possible to give an accurate figure of Nigerian Civil War casualties, dead and wounded, soldiers and civilians with several hundreds of deaths a day among children from starvation, malnutrition, disease, several millions of families had traumatic experiences which in turn affected their morale during the war effort” (Tekeno, 1989:2).

In spite of rebels’ witch-hunting activities, the people offered no encouragement or co-operation and their defiant attitude hastened the defeat of the rebels on all sectors. The Ojukwu puppet Government of the Midwest under Major Okonkwo signed a worthless economic pact with “Biafra”. Some terms of the agreement read: “There shall be free flow of persons, goods and funds between Biafra and Midwest. Transfer of funds from the Midwest to other countries except Biafra are highly prohibited except in cases where approval of the exchange control authority has been obtained. Both government have agreed to co-operate in the banking field, including Central bank’s services (Economic Pact signed between Midwest State and Biafran Governments, 1967). This economic pact was used by the rebels to remove 2Million from Benin branch of Central bank and deposited with the African continental bank at Asaba (Ibid). In the same vein, Major Okonkwo and his Secretary, F. C. Esedebe had removed over \$68,000 from the Government Treasury in Benin earlier.

3.2 Liberation

At the noon of September 20, 1967, Federal troops commanded by Lieut. Col. Murtala Mohammed appeared on Ikpoba hill, Benin City. With Mortar guns, they shelled rebel positions in the Benin City (Internal Affairs and Information, Benin City, 1968). The rebels were on the run and at about 3:00pm, the Federal troops were in full control of Benin. With the arrival of the Federal troops, Benin City regained freedom as the people were in celebration mood and almost the whole of the Midwest was free again. The Federal troops made a triumphant entry into Benin City led by Lieut. Col. Murtala Mohammed and Lieut Col. Samuel O. Ogbemudia (Ibid, 4). As part of the victory, Samuel Ogbemudia was appointed temporary Military Administrator of the Midwest State.

It can be argued that Ojukwu’s conquest and occupation of the Midwest was a miscalculated strategy to prolong the war, ease the pressure of federation on all fronts in the former Eastern Region and annex Southern Nigeria. The tactical error proved to be a blessing in disguise as it united the country against Ojukwu’s rebellion and changed tide in favour of

One Nigeria (Ibid, 4-5).

The invasion also eloquently demonstrated that Lt. Col Ojukwu was a man of inordinate ambition and has strong desire to acquire power. His actions and activities before and during the invasion and occupation of Midwest point to his inordinate ambition.

Another demonstration of his ambition was his courage in the execution of top military officers in the Biafra army. Many brilliant professional soldiers of military distinction were victims of this assault (Ediagbonya, 2022: 185). He blamed his serious miscalculations on the capture of Midwest on some of his gallant soldiers like Major Sam Agbamuche, Major Philip Alale, Col. Banjo and Major Emmanuel, Ifeajuna. One would have thought Ojukwu would be very proud to have these fine soldiers assisting him. That was not the case because of his personal interest in secession.

It is on record that because of the failure of Biafra adventure, on the capture of Midwest, which he blamed on Sam Agbamuche, Philip Alale, Banjo and Emmanuel Ifeajuna, they were tried by a court-martial and found guilty of treason (Ediagbonya, Duyile and Nwachukwu, 2020). They were executed on the same day, the accusation against them could best be described as a fallacy, frame-up to implicate them for possible execution. Also, Dr. Chike Obi was detained by Ojukwu for his opposition of the concept of secession and Biafra (Drum, June 15, 1970).

It was clear that the secessionists' ambition to create Republic of Biafra was not possible and feasible based on the stand of organisation of African Unity (O.A.U) against such action. The O.A.U member countries with the exception of Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania and Zambia, were aware of the danger associated with the Ojukwu's declaration of the Republic of Biafra. They wholeheartedly supported the preservation of the Unity and Territorial Integrity of Nigeria despite the much pressure and insults from the imperialists. This is against the background that O.A.U feared that any concession made to secession would result in the balkanization of Africa (Ediagbonya, Nwachukwu and Duyile, 2020:44). O.A.U gave the Federal Government of Nigeria full support in its effects to crush Ojukwu's rebellion because the members of the organisation realized that the issue of secession is a serious threat to all African countries which must not be allowed to flourish because it may be used by the imperialists to break up a promising African nation (Ibid).

In spite of this obvious knowledge at the disposal of Ojukwu, because of greed and ambition, he went ahead to declare the Republic of Biafra. At the end he was humiliated and was compelled by the prevailing circumstance to flee to Ivory Coast leaving the second in Command, Philip Effiong to surround to the Federal Military Government under the leadership of General Yakubu Gowon.

Iskandarsyah Siregar remarked that meanwhile, the Covid-19 problem has complicated world civilisation for more than a year and has yet to find a permanent effective and efficient solution (Iskandarsyah, 2023). Vaccines or drugs offered by the modern world do not guarantee the health of people and communities (Ibid). Yet many individuals and nations were deceiving the world with the discovering of fake vaccines or traditional drugs to provide solution which became highly laughable and wastage of national funds.

Unfortunately, this occupation of Midwest by the rebels created a number of problems: the economy of the state was badly affected by the disruption of trade and the movement of the population in search of safety. In the effort of the federal troops to expel

the rebels from the state, many buildings and movable property were either destroyed, damaged or looted (Internal Affairs and Information in Department, Benin City, 1968).

Just as Duyile and Nwachukwu observe in the Russo-Ukraine war that, literally, it is general to assume that all wars must include deaths and suffering, people must die, people must suffer (Duyile and Nwachukwu, 2023). Hence it is said that the invasion of Midwest State by the secessionist's regime was unnecessary because it brought untold suffering and hardship on innocent Midwesterners. Many were killed because of the ambition of Lt. Col. Ojukwu.

The rebels damaged and wrecked the bridges and roads. Again the health and medical services of the state were adversely affected by rebel occupation (Interview with Barrister Aiyankhue, on 16-7-2020).

IV. Conclusion

The genesis of Midwest state is traceable to Midwest region. General Gowon renamed Midwest region to Midwest State when he created 12 States in May 27, 1967. It would be recalled that the Midwest region was created on the adoption of a motion sponsored by the Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa in the National assembly of both Houses of Representatives and the Senate.

It is well known that the people of the Midwest had always maintained bond of friendship with the former Eastern Region inspite of a number of provocative moves against the state by Lt. Col. Ojukwu.

It is quite sad and unfortunate that on August 9, day the people of the Midwest celebrate the anniversary of the creation of their state was the day rebel troops from the so called "Republic of Biafra" invaded the state. The invasion took place on August 9, 1967 and by September 30th, 1967, the state was liberated. As innocent Midwesterners were gradually recovering from their shock, the lorries which unloaded the rebel troops were seen racing back to rebel-held areas with looted goods and food stuffs.

It was noticed that during the occupation, the rebels used the Midwest as a source of providing food and supplies for their people. It was so painful that innocent civilians were detained, tortured and at times shot.

With the arrival of the federal troops on September 20, 1967, Benin City regained freedom as the people were in celebration mood and almost the whole of the Midwest was free again. The federal troop was led by Lieut. Col. Murtala Mohammed and Lieut. Col. Samuel O. Ogbemudia.

Unfortunately this callous invasion and occupation of Midwest state by the rebels created a number of problems and challenges. The economy of the state was seriously affected, many buildings and property were destroyed and others looted. The rebels damaged and wrecked the bridges and roads.

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