Memorialisation and the Peacebuilding Project in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic

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From the foregoing, it is obvious that memory initiatives (when properly implemented) are important complements of other transitional justice initiatives. They are important for both effective and sustainable peacebuilding projects through conflict transformation among hitherto belligerent groups. The need for this in Nigeria has become imminent with continual secessionist agitations in different regions of the country. The ongoing agitations (as at September 2016) by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), The Niger Delta Avengers, and also Boko Haram remain potent threats to peaceful coexistence of Nigerians in the country. Within this national context, it imperative that peacebuilding efforts encompass medium and long-term conflict intervention efforts aimed at reconciling opposing ethnic interests, addressing the structural causes of violence and providing enabling environments for peaceful and equitable development across the different regions (see Wils et al., 2006: 1). In essence, it ought to reinforce the efforts of peacemaking and peacekeeping, as is currently been carried out by the Nigerian armed forces and security agents, as a preventive measure for future agitations. The restoration of sustainable peace in the country must go beyond the application of coercive power of the state to ensuring that economic, social, cultural and humanitarian structures are put in place to create a stable society (Ghali, 1992; Miller, 2005). Amongst other things, these peacebuilding efforts which entail the establishment of non-violent modes of conflict management/interventions, will help to promote reconciliation among warring parties and heal psycho-social trauma of victims of grave crimes (Miller, 2005: 57) committed during such agitations. In the subsequent sections, I propose that the quest for ethnic reintegration and sustainable peace in Nigeria ought to entail the adoption of an official memorialisation policy and appropriate implementation of memory initiatives suitable to the Nigerian context in line with the above-discussed principles.
The Nigerian Civil War (July 29, 1967- January 12, 1970) in Perspective

2 The need for reconciliation of divergent interests presupposes the existence of differences among hitherto opposing groups. These differences are sometimes institutionalised and sustained by structures in post conflict societies when there is incomplete transitioning from previous regimes (Valls, 2003). Within the Nigerian historical context, the Nigerian Civil War, which took place from 1967-1970 was the climax of ethnic polarisation, where there was sustained aggression between the Nigerian soldiers and the Biafrans. As was characteristic of the era of Nigeria’s First Republic, the roots of animosity are traceable to the structure of colonialisation and the failure of ethnic integration within the Nigerian state after independence (see Clark, 1991). The immediate antecedents of the Civil War are arguably traceable to the infiltration of the political administrative ambience of Nigeria by the military in the ill-fated coup, popularly attributed to the five majors (Gbulie, 1981; Ademulegun, 1981; Siollun, 2009: 58-74), who were reacting to supposedly salvage the corruption infested polity of the Nigerian State. Unfortunately, the high expectations of the Nigerian populace, who were disenchanted with the misrule of the First Republic politicians, soon evaporated with the crystallisation of bitter ethnic politics within the military, which plunged the nation into three years of civil war.

3 Though there have been massive documentations of the events of the Nigerian Civil War, with diverse accounts presented by individuals and groups - ranging from key military and political actors (both on the Nigerian and Biafran side), victims, and Nigerian/foreign observers (one of the most recent being Chinua Achebe’s highly controversial There was a Country), these efforts have largely been isolated individual accounts with the Nigerian state yet to officially harness this as a didactic narrative for the younger generation. Nonetheless, there has been no mincing of words regarding the atrocities that were committed before and during the war, especially as was perpetrated against members of the seceding Biafran State. In introducing his manifesto laying out the blueprint for the modus operandi of the administrative and institutional sectors of Biafra, the late leader, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, praised the “supreme sacrifice” of his fellow Biafrans, which entailed enduring the dispossession, blockade, bombardment, starvation and massacre meted out on them by the Nigerian State. These he popularly termed acts of genocide against a “defenceless and weak people” who had been threatened with total destruction by “an enemy unequalled in viciousness.” In more precise language, Ojukwu made allusions to the arbitrary killing of about 50,000 Igbo from 28 May, 1966 and over a million more during the war, including the killing of the entire male population of a village. He subsequently alleged the insensitivity of the “world” to the plight of the Igbo on racial grounds. The Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, a Pan Igbo group which describes itself as the “the Apex organization of the Entire Igbo people in Nigeria” similarly traced the Igbo plight to the pogroms before the Civil War. In its petition submitted to the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission in October 1999, the body held, amongst other things, that the “genocidal massacres” of May 29, 1966 “are indefensible and unjustifiable.” Before this assertion, the body had declared that the pogrom was based on an unfounded assumption that the coup of January, 15, 1966 was an ethnic coup planned by the Igbo. It maintained that there was indeed no civilian involvement in the coup,
which was a counter coup to one slated for January, 17, 1966. They emphasized that the coup was intended to install Awolowo (a non-Igbo) as the prime minister of Nigeria. The group asserted that the escape of top Igbo politicians was as a result of the poor execution of the coup and the suppression of the revolt by the Army, while it also tried to justify the unitary system of government introduced by Major-General Thomas Umunakwe Aguiyi-Irons (Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, 1999: 10). While there have been variations of interpretations of this facet of Nigeria’s history, in terms of the supposed myth of Igbo conspiracy in the coup plot, it remains controversial that the escape of the aforesaid politicians was mainly among a particular ethnic group, as there was indeed a similar trend even within the military ranks, with Gen. Ironsi surviving to take over the reins of power and keeping the coup plotters in prison.

4 It could be said that from the variants of extant literature on the war, the coup was poorly planned or failed because of the escape of General Ironsi, the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian army. This appears to be more than coincidence if one considers that firstly, the four most senior army officers (Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari, Colonel Kur Mohammed, Lt-Colonels Abogo Largema and James Pam) were eliminated with success; and secondly, that the Eastern region was the safe haven for some of the fleeing coup plotters (see Amali, 1967; Ademoyega, 1981; Gbulie, 1981; Clark, 1991; Siollun, 2009). A close look at the petition by the Ohaneze Ndi Igbo reveals that there were some issues that were left unattended to in their defence of General Ironsi. These included, among other things, the selective promotion of Igbo majors to Lieutenant Colonels, and his failure to try the coup plotters who were still being paid while in detention (see Siollun, 2009: 114). The attempt at denial of the Igbo association with the coup is implicitly supported by Chinua Achebe’s attempt to present Major Kaduna Nzeogwu as being more Hausa than Igbo due to his dressing habit and fluency in Hausa, in his personal history on the war (Achebe, 2012). The position of the Igbo with reference to the coup highlights the perennial manipulation of ethnic sentiments by Nigerian elites to suit their hegemonic version of events, thereby distorting historical truths. This is a great disservice to upcoming generations as it denies them the opportunity to learn from history in avoiding the mistakes of the past. One could only imagine what the success of the first military coup in Nigeria may have yielded, especially if their reported ideals of genuine national reformation of the polluted Nigerian polity were to have been sustained and implemented.

5 For one, there could be no downplay of the ethnic origins of participants in major events in a multiethnic country like Nigeria, especially in terms of its political ambience. For example, it would be most intriguing for the North to deny the Northern origin of General Sani Abacha, much maglined for his many atrocities against Nigeria and her citizens. Rather than embark on the denial game in an attempt to achieve sanctimonious ethnic justification, it would have been most beneficial if all groups within the Nigerian State accepted their responsibilities in contributing to the state of affairs of the country today. Only then can there be a basis for moving away from the errors of the past and charting a future course. It is based on such attitudinal transformation that the murder of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, The Sarduana of Sokoto, the slain military officers and ministers,⁴ (during the first coup), the killing of Aguiyi-Irons (and 300 other Igbo officers, and the Asaba Massacre amongst other war atrocities can be put within the right perspective and addressed in a progressive manner. This is, without doubt, what this
paper proposes in bringing forth the adoption of the memorialisation policy and its rightful implementation in Nigeria.

One of the gravest memories of the Civil War was the Asaba Massacre, led by General Murtala Mohammed who is regarded as the “Butcher of the Asaba” by the Igbo (see Harnischfeger, 2011). It was an event which is reported to have capped the “food shortages, hunger, malnutrition, starvation, disease and death” prevalent during the war (Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, 1999: 18). There were also reported cases of arbitrary extermination of fleeing unarmed civilians in Aba, numbering up to about 2000, and the horrifying case of the 300 Apostolic church members who were brought out, tied and executed by the then Col. Murtala-led forces. There were also reported actions in Uyo, Calabar, Oji River and Okigwe (see Ohaneze ndi Igbo, 1999). This paper takes a cursory look the Asaba event, and the course of its memorialisation, because of its context of ethnic victimisation and genocide, which resulted in massive losses ranging from 700 males to about 3,000 civilians.

Bird and Ottanelli (2011) noted the underreportage of the Asaba Massacre, and attempted a reconstruction of the events from the survivors’ perspective. The attempt of these scholars ought to be applauded as a great foundational step for the memorialisation process of a major event during the Civil War in the bid to bring about genuine peace and national integration among different ethnic groups within Nigeria. That their exposition is done from the survivors’ perspective gives credence to the objectivity of their efforts, in opposition to the conventional hegemonic accounts which often dominate narratives of symbolic historical events in Nigeria. It is instructive to note that the occupation of the Delta region across the Niger with the declaration of Biafra had endangered the life of the Igbo resident therein (Bird and Ottanelli, 2011: 4). The nature of Ojukwu’s declaration of the secession of Biafra has also been rife with controversies, regarding his actual intentions: whether it was “demarcation of a line” as reported in an interview (See Bird and Ottanelli, 2011) or the takeover of the Nigerian government with his occupation of the Mid West and the aborted advance to Lagos. This makes it really difficult to determine if his plans were to secede the Eastern region under his command, expand the region’s territory to the Midwest and secede, or take over the Nigerian government. This is important in putting the Nigerian Civil War in perspective as there is the need to juxtapose events with the rhetorics of the major actors.

The position of the “Asaba Igbo” ought to be clarified as well in terms of their “Igbo identity” in the pre- and post-war era. More so, as it has become grossly insufficient to hinge the position of their elders in support of “One Nigeria” as that of the majority of the people (see Bird and Ottanelli, 2011: 6, 9). It would be interesting to objectively document reasons why the Asaba would not support the cause of their fellow Igbo with whom they shared similar cultural and linguistic experience. In the same vein, the identity tag of “non-Igbo” for civilians who were collaborators with the Federal troops in the Midwest in hunting down and slaughtering the Igbo, as documented by Bird and Ottanelli (2011: 6-7), is too general and portends danger for the interpretation of such sensitive events of the war. It gives a misleading impression that non-Igbo conspired against the Igbo and had plans to exterminate them. This broad categorisation of opposition and actions often lead to undue essentialisation of evil acts, which often neglects the overlaps between actors and their actions in terms of war. For instance, certain narratives about the way confirm that there were Nigerians from other extractions who empathised with the Igbo during the war, including those within the rank and file of the Federal troops (see Bird and Ottanelli, 2011: 17; Alabi-Isama, 2013). As
a matter of fact, war records have shown that not everyone who fought on the Biafran side was Igbo (see Siollun, 2009). From another perspective, Ben Okafor’s allegation of betrayal of the Boys’ Company by a top Biafran officer, who switched sides and gave information to the Nigerian troops is very informative. This betrayal that had resulted in the molestation of Biafran soldiers, whose eyes were plucked out as they were sent back to Biafra, is very revealing as it helps to unearth some of the intrigues which took place within the top echelons of the Biafra army. Such are the complexities which the memorialisation of the Civil War needs to confront in unravelling the truth of events as they happened. This is very necessary to attain the “Never Again” goal of sustainable peacebuilding and genuine national integration for unity of Nigeria’s diverse ethnicities in the post-war era. The need to learn and move on from the past has become necessary as the Igbo still feel alienated from mainstream politics in Nigeria. This is reflected by the clamour for an Igbo president since after the war, and the need for the Igbo to hold key positions in terms of political appointments. In their words, “the abortive attempt at ethnic cleansing directed at the race through a civil war has ever since transformed into an on-going policy of systematic disempowerment in all sectors” (Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, 1999: 8).

It would be falsehood to claim that there have been no attempts at documenting the events of the Nigerian Civil War; but the historicisation of these efforts for their sustainability leave much to be desired, especially with the continuous inaction of the Nigerian government at the federal level. An official attempt at memorialising the Civil War is in the shift of the colonially inherited Armed Forces Remembrance day (otherwise known as the “Poppy Day”) from the 11th of November to the 15th of January. The initial date had been declared in commemoration of the soldiers who fought during the First and Second World Wars, and also others involved in peace support operations. The 15th of January is important as the day on which the Biafra soldiers surrendered to the Nigerian State through Lt. Col. Philip Effiong. However, the military focus of this date distances civilian victims from integration into the memorialisation space, albeit both pro-Nigerian and pro-Biafra loyalists respect the memory of the heroics of soldiers who fought on either side. In Asaba, an attempt at memorialising the event of the genocide was made through annual memorial services in honour of the victims of the massacre. These memorial services were, however, erroneously suppressed by the order of the Nigerian Federal Government. In spite of this, survivors still find ways of sustaining the memories their experiences through oral tradition (Bird and Ottanelli, 2011: 14) and documented text.

A commendable effort at the memorialisation of the Biafran War is the building of the War Museum in Umuahia which houses the relics (war equipment, military uniform, galleries of the antagonists, protagonists and war victims, and remains of the Voice of Biafra) of the war. The museum is being managed by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) for the Nigerian Military. The Museum was initiated by General Theophilus Danjuma, launched by late Brigadier General Tunde Idiagbon on 15th January, 1985, and commissioned to the public on 14th September, 1989 by Lt. Col. Domkat Bali (rtd). The location of the museum is laudable for its historical relevance as it was sited on the Voice of Biafra Bunker and Ojukwu Bunker. The latter was reported to have been built in 90 days, and is a great heritage which showcases the industriousness and creativity of the Igbo at their very best (Akasike, 2011). The museum is also important in recounting the events that led to the Civil War, with a photo gallery of the...
five military majors who plotted the first Nigerian Coup, and a library for researchers and students with interests on the war (Akinade, 2005). The holistic conceptualisation of this initiative via the incorporation of arts and literature is commendable. Specifically because it counters the attempt to undermine the historical linkages between the Civil War and the first military coup in Nigeria. While it may be difficult to rightfully situate these majors as either heroes or villains, especially as their attempt was unsuccessful, it would be a great disservice to the future and history of Nigeria if the events are not objectively and properly documented. This memory initiative is thus important to help the upcoming generations relate effectively with the country’s past.

In reference to the first Nigerian Coup, an important memory initiative is the Arewa House, which houses the Centre for Research and Documentation, and is located on Rabbah Road, Kaduna. The documentation centre is properly maintained for research as an annex to the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. Its symbolic importance is in the preservation of the life and legacies of the Sarduana of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, an important religious, cultural and political actor during the First Republic. Interestingly, his birth place was on this same road where he also lived and was killed. With a rich resource library and archives, the centre also boasts of artefacts of the 19 Northern states and personal belongings of the Sarduana including his office table, kettle, mat, prayer beads, wristwatch, Quran amongst other things (Nzondu, 2013). The importance accorded the centre remains predominant in the North because of its status as being a Northern initiative, with no particular identification by the Southern government or its people. It however remains a great resource for scholars and researchers who are interested in Nigerian and Northern Nigerian history in particular. While regional initiatives are to be commended and encouraged, memorial initiatives with more national outlook would better aid peacebuilding and national integration in the country. An example has been the creation of Museums for National Unity in Ibadan and Enugu which display cultural heritages from different parts of the country. A replication of such an initiative with focus on the Nigerian Civil War would be invaluable in teaching about lessons learnt since the war.

The attempt at memorialising the role of Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, mainly credited for his revolutionary ambition in initiating the coup, was made in his home town through a statue located at the Okpanam roundabout in Delta State. This roundabout, christened Nzeogwu Square, has not generated the kind of impact which it ought to, as it is considered a mere politicisation of an important project. Consequently, indigenes of the town still clamour for an appropriate memorialisation of their son who is considered a symbol of true nationalism, honesty, transparency, frankness, impartiality, great work ethos and vision. This goes to corroborate the position above that memory initiatives go beyond mere erection of structures to a holistic approach involving different stakeholders in ensuring that it generates the right meaning and impacts it deserves.

In adding his voice to the debate on reintegration in the post - Civil War period, Professor Edlyne Anugwom of the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, in an interview, lamented the lack of attitude of the Nigerian leadership to inculcate the lessons of the war in the upcoming generation through purposeful education rather than the manipulation of ethnicity, which has become a ready divisive tool harnessed to canvass for votes during elections. For him, there is a connection between the Biafran struggle and the Niger Delta militancy, as in both cases young people (as well as adults) struggled against suppression of the oligarchs who exploit them in all spheres. With the recent resurgence of
militancy by the Niger Delta Avengers and the secessionist agitations of different factions of the Indigenous People of Biafra, the need to reposition structures and institutions of power in post-war Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The persistence of these agitations have been due to biased and isolated narratives which have precluded the transformation of mutual suspicion among Nigerians of different ethnic extractions. An important step would be creating official all-inclusive narratives of the Civil War in confronting multiple discourses which could serve to further polarise the Nigerian multi-ethnic society (see Impunity Watch, 2013: 5).

Consequently, there is need for the Nigerian nation to realise the futility of attempting to erase the memory of the Civil War through the bulldozing of historical sites of the war, the ban of the use of the term Biafra, and the change of nomenclature of sights and symbols of the war events (Brooke, 1987) since this has not yielded positive impacts. If anything, the more they had tried to bury the Biafran corpse, the more the proverbial leg of the corpse had continue to show on the burial site. In 2012, the BBC reporter, Will Ross, observed the clandestine hoisting of the Biafran flag and singing of the anthem even after about a hundred people were arrested just a month earlier for a peaceful march with the Biafran flag in Enugu. This was as a result of the lingering trauma of war and the claim that the Igbo are yet to be reintegrated into the mainstream of the Nigerian polity. The Igbo causes are being championed by different associations, both within Nigeria and in the diaspora. Notable among these groups are the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM), the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which to intensify the struggle for an independent and sovereign Igbo nation. Since the middle of 2015, there have been open protests in the South East region of Nigeria which sometimes resulted in confrontation between protesters and law enforcement agents. The continuous detention of the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu has remained one of the major reasons for restiveness in the South East and South of Nigeria. Apart from the confrontational approach, the Igbo have also employed different initiatives to reinvigorate the Biafran memory within their social space. For instance, local bars have become spaces for memorialising through the Biafran logo of the rising sun on the local beer called Hero (Ross, 2012).

It is important to emphasise the importance of civil society organisations, Nongovernmental organisations and private individuals in the memorialisation process. In making success of memory initiatives in Nigeria following the eight principles discussed above (namely Context; Critical Self-Reflection; Participation; Complementarity; Process; Multiple Narratives; Youth; and Politicisation), there is need for a public-private collaboration between the government and these other non-state actors. Memorialisation examples from Hillsborough, Rwanda, Cambodia, South Africa and South Korea, among other countries, reflect that the sustenance of memorialisation projects is largely dependent on private individuals and organisations whose skills, consistency, bravery and funds were committed to the peacebuilding process. There is then the need to initiate and harness collaborative efforts within the right historical perspectives in creating official initiatives by the Nigerian Federal Government. This would help to enliven as well as certify the assertion of “no victor, no vanquished” by Major General Yakubu Gowon. The inclusion of all stakeholders within this memory project will help complete the mission of “healing the nation’s wounds” through “reconciliation in full equality.” These steps are important for genuine reintegration of the aggrieved yet to be achieved since since the war ended over four decades ago.
NOTES

1. These majors included Kaduna Nzeogwu, Timothy Onwuatuegwu, Emmanuel Ifeajuna, Adewale Ademoyega and Chris Anuforo. This mission was asserted in a radio broadcast by the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, Major-General Johnson Thomas Umunakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi on Radio Nigeria on 16th January, 1966 (a day after the aborted coup).

2. See: Ahiara Declaration: Ojukwu’s Manifesto for a Biafran Revolution, dated May 29, 1969. This date is coincidentally currently adopted as Democracy Day by the Federal Government of Nigeria, being the day that the Fourth Republic was ushered into the country.

3. Ibid. This allegation could be considered an overgeneralisation as Johannes Harnischfeger (2011) established that there were reactions in Europe and America by the citizens concerning the plights of the Igbo as well as intervention of international organisations. See: Harnischfeger, J. 2011. Igbo Nationalism and Biafra. Afrikanistik Online. Vol. 2011, par. 49.

4. Samson Amali (1967) discussed what he regarded as an indiscretion by some people of Igbo extraction who flaunted pictures of Major Nzeogwu in the North in celebration of the murder of the Sarduana, Sir Ahmadu Bello (who championed the Northernisation policy) to the chagrin of Northerners.

5. Elizabeth Bird and Frazer Ottanelli (2011) put the figure at between 373 and 1,000 while stating that the exact number of the casualties remains unknown.

6. See Achebe (2012). The reason of distracting the Nigerian forces from the Biafran Capital of Enugu might be insufficient with Achebe’s account of Lt. Col. Banjo’s sabotage of the plan to take over Lagos and the eventual execution of the latter due to an alleged plan coup against Ojukwu’s government.

7. See Ben Okafor Remembers the Biafran War. Being an Account of his Interview on Witness organised by the BBC world Service. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18707808 Last Updated July 5, 2012. The Boys’ Company involved the use of child soldiers aged between 12 and 15 who were engaged in combat for the Biafrans and this corroborates the fact that they were greatly under-resourced in terms of humans, materials and capital. One of the positives of the war is that Ben, now a reggae musician, campaigns against the use of child soldiers in war.

8. This position was again reiterated emphatically in Achebe (2012).

9. This date is also significant within the Nigerian Polity as it marks the anniversary of the first Nigerian Military Coup by revolutionary soldiers, Majors Chukwuma, Kaduna Nzeogwu and Emmanuel Ifeajuna.

10. One great example of this is Emma Okocha’s Blood on the Niger with a latest revised edition of 2012.

11. The Voice of Biafra was the radio service which the Biafran government used during the war to relay the plight of the suffering victims of the war to the outside world.

13. Ibid.

14. Major General Kaduna Nzeogwu was for instance buried with full military honours after being killed by the Federal troops on July 29, 1967 while he was fighting on the Biafran side. The controversy still lingers on whether he was supposed to be alive to fight the Biafran War having committed treason or the need for his immortality as is being championed by his kinsmen and some other Nigerians. Major Ifeayinajuna, however, despite his exploits at the Olympics for Nigeria, remains unrecognised because of his role and failure during the coup (See Nzondu, 2013; Siollun, 2009: 36).


17. The greatest opportunity in this regard was the initiation of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission which was a failed experiment because of the ill-conceived idea of using it as a tool for settling scores with past enemies rather than objectively focusing on the institutionalisation of such a noble initiative using a formidable constitutional instrument.