

“OF WAR, SOLDIERS AND HISTORIANS”
Being a Review of P. Obi-Ani, *Post Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983*,
(Enugu: MIKON PRESS, 1998) pp.X, 141

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Many nations of the world had at one time or the other experienced internal conflicts in their march to nationhood. Nigeria is one of such nations. Between 1967 to 1970, Nigeria fought a gruelling and agonising civil war which brought the country tottering on the brink of disintegration. Igboland, the main theatre of war, was left in ruins. With enormous loss of lives and property, the Igbo emerged from the war “thoroughly demoralized, psychologically disoriented, materially impoverished and physically marooned”.¹

As is usually the case with major conflicts, when the shooting stops and the soldiers withdraw from the battlefield, historians take to their own field; but not with guns and bullets but with ink and paper, to recapture the events of the war and the aftermath. Paul Obi-Ani is one of such historians. At the end of the war, the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, in his broadcast to the Nation on January 15, 1970 announced:

*There is urgent task to be done. The Federal Government has mounted a massive relief operation to alleviate the suffering of the people in the newly liberated areas. We are mobilizing adequate resources from the Federal government to provide food, shelter and medicines for the affected population. Rehabilitation and reconstruction will follow simultaneously to restore electricity, water, transport and communications. We must, as a matter of urgency, resettle farms and reopen factories to ensure that normal economic life is resumed by everyone as soon as possible.*²

Obi-Ani's book, *Post Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983*, examines how General Gowon attempted to translate the above government pronouncements into action. The author leaves no one in doubt that he is sentimentally attached to his people. His anger derives mainly from the fact that even though Gowon won the war largely because of external support, he forbade outside aid in the reconstruction of Igboland. In his words;

Gowon could not have won the war without foreign assistance. But he was loathe, even in victory, to half-hearted help the Igbo received from the outside world during the war. Granted that the assistance of these countries probably helped to prolong the conflict, but by preventing them from contributing towards reconstruction in Igboland, Gowon's regime only showed its indifference to the sufferings of the people when it lacked the spirit to adequately finance the repairs of the war damages.³

Obi-Ani states that this action of General Gowon "is questionable impolitic and most unfortunate"⁴. He further observes that:

If General Gowon had been more restrained in his action to the humanitarian organization and other countries his government blacklisted from participating in the relief operations more lives would have been saved and the speed of recovery of the people would have been faster than it was after the civil war.⁵

So to say, by declaring a "no victor no vanquished", the Gowon regime was merely playing to the gallery and such a pious declaration was not matched with positive action; hence, the government scratched the thin veneer of a huge problem.

This is the message of the book, delivered in about 141 pages and written in a lucid, gripping language. Using selected primary and secondary data and applying the traditional historical method of narrative and analysis, the author goes on to demonstrate that Gowon's reconstruction programmes was anti-Igbo in its intention, and that is to perpetually marginalize the people in the economic and social process of Nigeria. It was against this background that the Igbo demonstrated their resilience by embarking on self help projects.

Post-Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction of Igbo land... is divided into five chapters for easy narrative and analysis. Chapter one assesses the relief measures of the Gowon administration immediately after the war. The author condemns the measures as half hearted and showed the contradictions inherent in the operation. In his words:

The estimated population of the Igbo at the end of the war was 7.5 million and that of the entire Eastern states was estimated at nearly 14 million. It is clear that only a minute fraction of the population who needed the food seriously were reached.⁶

The author goes further to observe,

The distribution of dried milk, stock fish and maize donated by humanitarian organizations did not reach the people they were meant to benefit. Most of the relief materials were stolen or diverted to unknown destinations between Port-Harcourt and Enugu.⁷

The author further notes that the relief operations were carried out in the face of systematic de-Biafranisation of the Igbo, army brutality, neglect for the Igbo disabled and orphans and the currency exchange issue in which "the Igbo people who deposited the old Biafran currency got a paltry sum of twenty pounds (20) each, irrespective of the amount of Biafran currency an individual deposited".⁸

This brings us nicely to chapter two which x-rays the main plank of the book—the reconstruction. The author tells us about the reconstruction programme in the spheres of education, through commerce and industry, communications, agriculture, health, housing, financial houses to water supply. Again, government's efforts in these regards were half-hearted and most of the reconstruction projects were done through community development efforts of the Igbo.

In chapter three, the author focuses on the social and economic injustices of the government against the Igbo. The Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970, the Abandoned Property Issue, The Banking Obligation (Eastern States) Decree of 1970, the Indigenization Decree of 1972, the Revenue Allocation Formula, State Creation, among others, all were aimed at frustrating and crippling the Igbo socially and economically.

The author devotes chapter four to the discussion of state pardon for Emeka Ojukwu. He is of the view that on this issue which the Igbo saw as the main obstacle towards their reconciliation with the rest of Nigeria, the federal government dithered and procrastinated. Later, the NPN government of Shehu Shagari gave in. Obi-Ani concludes that Ojukwu's state pardon was employed by the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) as a strategy to shore up its dwindling popularity in Igbo land and as a show of government's genuine national reconciliation after the war.

Chapter five of the book highlights the achievements of an Igbo club side, the Rangers Football Club. The writer sees the exploits of the Club both at national and inter-national engagements as helping to rebuild the confidence of the Igbo after the demoralizing effect of losing the war. In his words,

The Igbo, not having both the political and economic leverage after the civil war, needed a kind of moral booster to rebuild their shattered self-confidence.⁹

In writing the book, the author made use of dense secondary sources. But the same cannot be said of his primary sources, especially oral evidence. Judging from the entries in his endnotes and bibliography, his oral interviews hardly took him beyond the confines of Enugu and its immediate environs. Nor did the author interview the major *dramatis personae* in the war and the post-war reconstruction programme. In other words, the author did not interview the Gowons, the Ojukwus, the Asika's, the Achuzias, the Effiongs, the Shagaris and so on. This is perhaps explained by the lean financial resources available to the author which did not enable him travel the whole length and breadth of Nigeria to keep a date with his informants. This in turn derives from the fact that the average lecturer's "take home pay packets", according to the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), can longer take him home.¹⁰ But in the United States, a research such as this would have attracted generous funding from Bill Gates, Rock Feller or Ford Foundations. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, we have no such obliging Foundations nor are Nigerian leaders "patrons of history and historiography nor consumers of history and historiographic ideas".¹¹

The strength of the work lies in the fact that it is a book on war, the aftermath of war and not the conduct of it. Put differently, the work is a departure from the trend of popular literature. Most literatures on the Nigerian civil war, and in deed most wars, tend to focus attention on "the causes of the war, the marches and counter - marches and the strategies of the contending forces".¹² The book is also a work on Igbo land written by a man of Igbo extraction whose people bore the brunt of the civil war. By writing the book, Obi-Ani has done an enormous good for the Igbo. As the author rightly points out;

"The Igbo people had attained a high degree of economic prosperity, educational advancement, industrial growth and social sophistication before the 1967 - 70 civil war erupted".¹³

Then he sets out further, to lament that:

At the end of the civil war in January, 1970, most of the achievements had been shattered in the war: the war had uprooted much of the

economic infrastructure of Igbo land, claimed the lives of the cream of the society and disabled many. Confusion, a feeling of insecurity and despair prevailed among the Igbo.¹⁴

It has been severally argued that the Igbo lost the war partly as a result of certain omissions and commissions and actions and inactions of the Igbo themselves. The book thus, serves as a warning to the present and future generations of the Igbo to guard against such circumstances that made them lose a war and their prime place in the socio-political and economic strata of Nigeria and put them at the mercy of other ethnic groups who, in a fair political and economic competition, cannot withstand the Igbo.

Thirty-Six years after the war, the Igbo are still being treated as the vanquished. Under the guise of religious riots, the Igbo and their properties are still objects of attacks in several parts of country. The Igbo have continued to be marginalized on all fronts – socially, economically and politically. This is a sad commentary on the so-called government post-war reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation programme.

NOTES

1. See Foreword to Paul Obi-Ani, *Post Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction of Igbo land: 1970-1983* by O.N. Njoku, p.V1
2. "The Dawn of National Reconstruction" Being a Broadcast to the Nation by the Head of State and Commander In Chief of the Armed Forces, Major – General Yakubu Gowon, January 15, 1970.
3. P. Obi-Ani, *Post Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction, etc*, p.15
4. *Ibid.*, p.15
5. *Ibid.*, p.15
6. *Ibid.*, p.14
7. *Ibid.*, p.14
8. *Ibid.*, p.18
9. *Ibid.*, P.113
10. A. E. Afigbo, "Ethno History and Heroic History" Being a Review of O.N Njoku, *Ohafia: A Heroic Igbo Society* (Ohafia: Kalu Oyeoku Publishers, 2000) p.14
11. A. E. Afigbo, "African Historical Consciousness and Development in Nigeria" in E. J. Alagoa (ed) *Dike Remembered: African Reflections on History, Dike Memorial Lectures, 1985 – 1995*, p. 132
12. P. Obi-Ani, *Post – Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction, etc*. p. vi
13. *Ibid.*, p. I.
14. *Ibid.*, p. I.