



## MIDWIFING NIGERIA'S FRAGILE UNITY: THE ROLE OF OBAFEMI AWOLOWO IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

**Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu<sup>1</sup>**

PhD, Associate Professor,  
Department of History and International Studies,  
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

### **Abstract:**

The focus of this paper is to examine the role of Obafemi Awolowo in restoring Nigeria's unity after the ill-fated secession attempt by the Eastern Region on 30 May, 1967. The paper obtained its data extensively from secondary sources. This is made up of books, journal articles, newspaper reports and government publications relevant to the study. It employs the historical method of data analysis in interrogating information obtained. The paper notes that the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970, a military response to the political conflict between the North and the East, almost ended in a failure. The impasse was, however, resolved through the strategy of starvation and economic blockade initiated by Awolowo which eventually instigated the surrender of Biafra forces to the Federal Government's forces in January, 1970. The paper concludes that Awolowo's ingenuity and strategic advice eventually saved the Nigerian state from imminent decimation and balkanization. His prudent management of the national treasury, as finance minister during the war years, further aided the implementation of the 3Rs post-war programme of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. This, no doubt, helped significantly in stabilizing the Nigerian polity after the cessation of hostilities in January, 1970.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Civil War, Obafemi Awolowo, Biafra, ethnicity, secession

### **1. Introduction**

Nigeria's territorial integrity was at the brink of jeopardy barely seven years after her independence. This was due to the declaration of secession of the Eastern region from

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence: email [johnsonolaosebikan@gmail.com](mailto:johnsonolaosebikan@gmail.com)

Nigeria by Odumegwu Ojukwu on 30 May, 1967; and the subsequent outbreak of civil war on 6 July, 1967. The war shook the Nigerian nation to its foundation and may indeed be regarded as the most potent threat to the survival of the country till date. The war almost ended in a stalemate and the secessionist 'Republic of Biafra' almost became a reality. The reason was that, contrary to expectation, it took the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (FMG) thirty months (6<sup>th</sup> July, 1967-15 January, 1970) to curb the insurrection and restore the nation's territorial integrity. This in turn was due to the failure of series of strategies implemented by the FMG to crush the insurrection up till 1968. Incidentally, the subsequent strategy of economic blockade, proposed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then Federal Commissioner of Finance and Vice Chairman of Federal Executive Council, proved to be highly effective as the resultant hunger and starvation forced the Biafra Army into quick surrender.

Judging from the above, this paper critically examines Obafemi Awolowo's roles before, during and after the Nigerian war of unity. His intervention to prevent the war; the idea of economic blockade during the war, as well as, his role in facilitating the implementation of the post-war policy of reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation are substantially interrogated.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

The Nigerian State has been under intense threat of secession and separatist agitations since independence. At least five secession threats were issued in Nigeria's chequered political history between 1950 and 1964. For instance, at the All Nigeria Constitutional Conference held at Ibadan in January 1950, the Northern delegation threatened to secede from the federation on two grounds: if the North was not granted half of the 136 seats in the proposed House of Representative on ground that the North contained about half of the population of the country; and if allocation of revenue derived from taxation was not done on per capital basis (Awofeso, 2017: 41). Though the Eastern and Western regions opposed the demands, they were nevertheless granted. In 1953, as fallout of the defeat of Anthony Enahoro's motion for self-government at the House of Representative by Northern members, the Western and Eastern members of the House staged a walk out as a sign of protest against the attitude of Northern legislators. The northerners were ridiculed by the Lagos crowd to the extent that on getting back to the north, they issued a threat to secede from the federation (Ojo, 2004:84). Also in 1959, Ahmadu Bello issued yet the third northern threat to secede should the NCNC and the AG form a coalition government at the end of that year's general election. For once in 1950, the West also threatened to break away from the rest of the country if Lagos was

separated from the Western region. Similarly, Dr Micheal Opara of the Eastern region rejected the 1963 census results which he described as "*worse than useless*" (West African Pilot, 29 February, 1964; cited in Ojo, 2004:85). He demanded that the figures of the north be cancelled and threatened to pull Eastern Region out of Nigeria if that was not done.

But while the above instances turned out to be mere threats to drive home particular regional grievances, the first recorded attempt by any group to effect secession from independent Nigeria, though brief, was led by Major Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro in February, 1966 (Awofeso, 2017: 41). Adaka Boro, was an Ijaw youth who founded the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS), a militia group made up of about 150 young-educated Ijaw youths. The group employed guerilla warfare method to press home its protest against what Aremu (2012:3) refers to as "*continued underdevelopment and neglect of the region*" by the Nigerian government. On 23 February 1966, Boro formally declared the independence of the Ijaw-speaking areas of the former Eastern region from Nigeria. He named the new state "*Niger Delta Republic*". The Federal Military Government led by Aguiyi Ironsi engaged the insurgents in a gun battle. They were defeated by the federal forces after 12 days of intense battle. That was perhaps the first recorded desperate attempt made by any constituent part to actually leave the Nigerian Federation (Muzan, 2014: 217)

Incidentally however, perhaps the most vociferous and violent attempt to balkanize the nation occurred 15 months later when Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the independence of Eastern region from Nigeria on 30 May, 1967 and christened the new country the "*Republic of Biafra*" (Kirk-Greene, 1971). Largely because General Yakubu Gowon was not prepared to rule over a divided nation, he vowed to preserve the unity and territorial integrity of the Nigerian federation at all cost. Consequently, he declared war against the 'Republic of Biafra' on 6 July, 1967 ostensibly to bring back the Eastern region into the country. The war came to a halt on 15 January, 1970.

The Federal Military Government of Nigeria had hoped to win the war in a very short space of time. At least two factors suggested this. One, the Adaka Boro insurrection had earlier been crushed in just twelve days. Two, the Eastern region was already decimated through its division into three states during the states creation exercise of 27 May, 1967. The Igbo had only one out of the three. The hitherto minority groups had two states of their own. Their support for the FMG was thus regarded as a foregone conclusion. But alas, the war dragged for thirty solid months.

### 3. Obafemi Awolowo And His Involvement In The Nigerian Civil War

Chief Obafemi Awolowo played a pivotal role in the restoration of Nigeria's unity and territorial integrity during the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. He was indeed one of the major architects of Nigeria's victory over secession in the 30-month Civil War. Awolowo's involvement in the Nigerian civil war came at three intervals: before, during and after the war.

#### a. Awolowo's involvement before the outbreak of civil war

It would be recalled that an attempt by the Ghanaian Head of State, Gen. J.A. Ankrah to resolve the political impasse between Yakubu Gowon and Odumegwu Ojukwu at Aburi, Ghana between 4 and 5 January, 1967 failed. This was due to controversies that surrounded the interpretation of the Aburi Accord and the refusal of General Gowon to implement same. Ojukwu had insisted on its implementation or the East would secede (Abubakar, 2002: 257; Aremu, 2014: 4). All hope seemed lost on a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

However, on May 1, 1967 Chief Awolowo and other Yoruba leaders met at his residence at Ibadan to deliberate on the stand of the Western region in the impending war which they envisaged may follow the eventual secession of the East. Four major policy proposals were deliberated and agreed upon as follows:

- a) only a peaceful solution must be found to arrest the present worsening stalemate and restore normalcy;
- b) the Eastern Region must be encouraged to remain part of the Federation;
- c) if the Eastern Region is allowed by acts of omission or commission to secede from or opt out of Nigeria, then Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation;
- d) the people of Western Nigeria or Lagos would participate in the Ad hoc Constitutional Committee or any similar body only on the basis of absolute equality with other Region of the Federations (Teniola, 2017; Ogunsanwo, 2009:125).

By implication, the West sued for peace and did not support a violent resolution of the political conflict between the Eastern and Northern regions. According to Awolowo, *"those who advocate the use of force for the settlement of our present problems should stop a little and reflect. I can see no vital and abiding principle involved in any war between the North and the East"* (Ogunsanwo, 2009:125).

In his capacity as the Vice Chairman of the Federal Executive Council and as the most prominent and neutral civilian political figure in the country, he led a four-man team of the fourteen member National Conciliation Committee (NCC) to Enugu on 6

May 1967 to persuade Colonel Ojukwu to reconsider his stand on secession and embrace dialogue. (Ogunsanwo, 2009:125). Unfortunately, Ojukwu reiterated his resolute stand not to have anything to do with reconciliation with the North and Gowon (Ogunsanwo, 2009:128). But then, Awolowo made his stand known to Ojukwu against the planned secession bid which he considered *"a tragedy and disservice to the memories of all those who have gone for Nigeria to be disbanded"* (Ogunsanwo, 2009:130). At the end of the day, the intervention of Chief Awolowo to persuade Emeka Ojukwu not to secede but allow a peaceful constitutional settlement of the crisis also failed. Sooner, Ojukwu declared the secession of the Eastern region on 30 May, 1967. The war lasted endlessly, almost ending in a stalemate until the decisive strategy of economic blockade and starvation was introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The idea was mooted by Chief Awolowo. Within about seven months of implementation, the Biafran army surrendered and the war came to an end.

**b. The Outbreak of Civil War and the involvement of Obafemi Awolowo**

When the civil war finally broke out on 6 July, 1967, Ojukwu was disappointed in Awolowo's refusal to take the Western region out of Nigeria and for supporting the north against the East. This was fallout of Awolowo's earlier pronouncement on 1 May, 1967 that *"if the Eastern Region is allowed by acts of omission or commission to secede from or opt out of Nigeria, then Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation"* and Awolowo's insistence at the London Constitutional Conference of 1953 that a secession clause should be inserted in the then proposed Nigeria's 1954 constitution (Teniola, 2017; Ogunsanwo, 2009:130).

It must be noted, however, that as mentioned earlier, Awolowo and his Yoruba political elites were not ready for war and actually sued for peace and dialogue in resolving the crisis on the eve of secession of the Eastern region. Apart from that, inadequate military preparation, wise counsel of Yoruba political leaders and application of tact and diplomacy may also be regarded as plausible explanation for the West's decision against secession then. This was Chief Awolowo's submission of 1 May, 1967 that *"We have neither the military might, nor the overwhelming advantage of numbers here in Western Nigeria and Lagos"* (cited in Teniola, 2017). As it were, the West and the North were both committed to the 'One Nigeria' project right from the first day of secession of the East. Meanwhile, in order to better appreciate Awolowo's role in the war years, it is expedient to examine briefly, the war aims and strategies of both the FMG and Biafra as highlighted below.

### 3.1 The War Aims

One major war aim of the Federal Military Government was to affirm the fact that secession was a violation of Nigeria's territorial integrity (Akinseye-George, 2002:452). In this wise, secession was regarded as unconstitutional and must, therefore, be crushed by all legal means, including force. Secondly, the Federal Government wanted to keep Nigeria one and thus retain the privilege and pride of being the most populous and greatest State in Africa (Cervenka, 1971:75). More importantly, however, the Nigerian government was determined to keep the Eastern Region within Nigeria in order to "*preserve the territorial integrity and unity of Nigeria*" (Atofarati, 1992; Cervenka 1971:75 cited in Agbese, 2002:142)). This was well-pronounced in the Gowon's saying then that "*to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done*" (Osadolor, 2002:77). Even when sympathisers from Europe and North America called for a ceasefire because of the carnage recorded in the course of the war, Gowon retorted that "*this war must be fought to the finish*" (Harnischfeger, 2012).

Falola and Heaton (2008:174) have suggested three reasons why the Federal Government of Nigeria wanted to keep the Eastern Region within a united Nigeria. One, many in the government, including Gowon, actually believed in the preservation of Nigeria's unity. Two, the land claimed by the Biafrans had about 67% of known oil reserves in Nigeria which constituted a major potential of wealth for the country. Three, there was also the fear that, if the secession was allowed to go unchecked, other minority groups in the country might also be tempted to take a similar step. Truly, this last fact has justification in Chief Obafemi Awolowo's threat earlier on 1 May, 1967 that if the Eastern Region was allowed to secede from Nigeria, the Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation (Nwankwo, 1974). Since no reasonable leader would be happy presiding over a depleted nation, Gowon was hell-bent to prevent the seeming spiral effect of the Eastern Region's secession attempt.

On the side of Biafra, the war was basically a nationalist war of self-determination. Its basic objective was to protect the newly carved state of Biafra from annihilation by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Specifically, the pogroms of 1966 and the hunger blockade of the war years were interpreted by Colonel Ojukwu and Igbo elders as an attempt to wipe out the whole Igbo population. The conclusion then was that the Igbo were living "*in the midst of enemies*" and were marginalised in Nigeria; thus it did not serve their best interests to remain a part of Nigeria (Kieh, 2002:10). This particular factor, according to Akinseye-George (2002:445), reinforced Igbo's resolve to quit Nigeria in exercise of their right to self-determination. Emeka Ojukwu later in 1991 explains this Biafran war aim in poetic manner as reported by the Hallmark Weekly Magazine of 20 January, 1999. In his words:

*"A man to whom the State brings no benefit has every right and indeed is obliged to question the oneness of that State if perforce it must include him. For a man to whom unity remains that of Jonah in the belly of a whale, that man must question his situation. ....To this man in extreme lies the obligation to quit."* (cited in Ojukwu, 2002:346)

Judging from the above discussion, it may be rightly asserted to a large extent, that the Biafran war aim was to save itself from extinction as a people.

### **3.2 The War Strategies**

Wars, across the globe, are fought using different forms of strategies. By war strategies here, we mean the methods of arranging and manoeuvring large bodies of military forces during armed conflicts. Strategies in military warfare may also be used to refer to the science or art of employing all the military, economic, political and other resources of a country to achieve the objects of war (Cohen, 2015). Every military action, whether large-scale or small-scale, must have a clear objective that is followed, despite possible distractions. Hence, military strategies and tactics are essential to the conduct of warfare as they assist in the planning, coordination and general direction of military operations to meet overall political and military objectives. In the case of the Nigerian civil war, both the Federal Military Government (FMG) and the "Republic of Biafra" experimented with a number of strategies in the course of the war. For the sake of clarity, it is essential to discuss their respective strategies separately, starting with that of the 'Republic of Biafra'.

### **3.3 War Strategies of Biafra**

Biafra's war strategies, borne largely out of desperation, started long before the official declaration of independence of the Eastern Region from Nigeria. For instance, on 30 March, 1967, Ojukwu enacted three major edicts largely as a way of showing his discontentment with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and then to generate some funds for the impending 'war' that could follow the secession of the Eastern Region. These were:

- a) The Legal Education Edict which broke educational ties between the Eastern Region and the rest of the federation;
- b) The Court of Appeal Edict that ended the right of judicial appeal to the Federal Supreme Court and
- c) The Revenue Collection Edict which ordered that all revenues originating from the East be paid to the Eastern Regional treasury rather than the Federal Government.

Apart from that, Ojukwu also decided to sequester all federal institutions and properties that were situated in the Eastern Region (Ojeleye, 2016:44-45).

Another strategy of Biafra was the effective deployment of propaganda. Biafra propaganda indeed played a pivotal role in the political and diplomatic conduct of the Nigerian civil war. The basic aims of Biafra's propaganda were to: manage information to boost the morale of the Biafran people; instill a survival ethos in its population at home despite very limited communication resources; and elicit sympathy from world public opinion through the manipulation of the sentiments of potential friends in Africa, the United States, Europe, the Far East, the United Nations and the global humanitarian and Christian organisations like Caritas and the World Council of Churches (Davies, 1995:19; Doron, 2014; Decker, 2016). Their propaganda campaign portrayed the war as the only possible response to a genocidal campaign against them with Odumegwu Ojukwu being portrayed as the saviour of Biafrans from genocide and pogrom at the hands of the Federal Nigerian Government (Doron, 2014). Despite the fact that Biafra's message remained largely focused on the genocide theme, Biafran propaganda was remarkably agile in its ability to adapt to the war's changing circumstances. Ojukwu constantly told Biafrans largely through television, radio and leaflets that "*the price of liberty is eternal vigilance*" and that they had to make sacrifices for their liberation from the tyranny of the Gowon regime (Davies, 1995:19). It was precisely that relationship between the aims of Biafran propaganda and the Biafrans' resourcefulness that allowed that message to be so effective during the war (Anthony, 2014).

It is instructive to note that the pictures of starvation, especially kwashiorkor-ridden children, on both the print and electronic media, especially, the television, raised very deep sympathy for Biafra internationally. Biafra eventually succeeded in attracting relief supplies from the Dutch and Chinese governments (Cronje, 1972:360). It equally gave them access to military supplies from Portugal, South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe ) and Israel (St Jorre 1972:218-9) in addition to the ones from France (Tedheke, 2007:422). In short, the increasing propaganda occasioned by the gruesome humanitarian conditions in Biafra drew world conscience in favour of the secessionist republic. It must, however, be added that while it aided the relief operations that went into Biafra, it did not do much to aid the international recognition of the secessionist republic. This was because, only four African countries officially recognised Biafra, namely Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia (Tedheke, 2007: 421-422).

Meanwhile, a number of individuals contributed meaningfully to the success of Biafra's propaganda machinery. These included, but not limited to, Cyprian Ekwensi who headed the Broadcasting Corporation of Biafra and the Biafra Information Service;



Uche Chukwumerije who was the head of the Directorate of Propaganda and M.C.K. Ajuluchukwu who was in charge of print media propaganda, and who managed the *Eastern Outlook* which later became the Biafran Sun, the leading newspaper in the East (Olukotun, 2002:385). By January 1968, Ekwensi was given another added responsibility as Head of Biafra's Overseas Press Service. By virtue of the new position, Ekwensi became responsible for the foreign distribution of the directorate propaganda's daily and weekly bulletins (Decker, 2016). He also censored all unofficial news stories written from Biafra for international consumption. In this respect, the Biafra's Overseas Press Service entered into a partnership with a Geneva-based information outfit called the Markpress News Feature Services, Switzerland. Ekwensi continuously fed the Markpress Agency with daily news and bulletins and coordinated further international press coverage that focused on Biafra's cause.

Radio Biafra also added more bite to Biafra's war propaganda. The radio, especially its transistor form, was easily acquired by the common man. It was also mobile. All that the average man needed to access information through his radio was just the battery which was cheaply available. This was well utilized to publicize relevant information by Biafra. The Biafra radio maximally utilized the moral boosting ability of war time information. Victory on the federal side was downplayed while Biafran breakthroughs were massively relayed as a sign of Biafra unity and prospect as a virile nation (Decker, 2016).

Though Biafra lost the war, the beauty of its propaganda was the high degree of success achieved in the campaign for international legitimacy which equally ensured Biafra's survival for three solid years.

### **3.4 War strategies of the FMG**

Available records indicate that the FMG of Nigeria implemented with different war strategies in the course of her triumph over the Biafran forces. The first strategy, which indeed was a pre-emptive action, was political involving states creation on 27 May, 1967 (Achebe, 2012:91). Prior to that date, the Nigerian Federation was made up of four regions: Northern, Eastern, Western and the Mid-Western regions. This was, however, abolished and replaced with a new structural arrangement of twelve states. The Eastern Region was divided into three states, two of them dominated by non-Igbo minorities. More importantly, the Central Eastern State of the Igbo was land-locked.

It is true that Gowon declared that the states were essentially created to correct "*the huge imbalance among the then existing four regions*" and thereby allay the fears of domination by the minority (Agbese, 2002:131; Gowon 1968); it was indeed very clear that the states creation exercise was essentially a political strategy to weaken the

support base of the Eastern Region and undercut support for the impending "Republic of Biafra" among the minorities of the Eastern Region and undermine the viability of Eastern Nigeria, if the region eventually declared its secession and independence. It was further meant to sever the vast majority of Igbo from profitable coastal ports and rich oil fields that were recently discovered in the Niger Delta (Aremu, 2016:131). The 27 May 1967 state creation exercise indeed "*introduced a new rhetoric in the dynamics of Nigerian unity*" and represented "*a strategic move to clinically counter secession by the Eastern Regional Provinces from its inception*" (Inyang; 2013:2). It brought to the fore the fact that the Eastern Region enjoyed no political unity as it contained numerous groups such as Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, and Eko people (Joseph, 2001:6). It should be noted that the strategy worked effectively. As Gowon rightly calculated, the Eastern Region minorities did not only refuse to support the Biafran cause, but also enlisted in large numbers in the federal army that defeated the Biafran forces.

The second war strategy of the FMG was the police action. This refers to a relatively localized military action, undertaken by regular armed forces, without a formal declaration of war. It is normally undertaken against guerrillas, insurgents or other forces held to be violators of national or international peace and order (The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, 2013). The police action was carried out by the Nigerian Armed Forces as a form of military intervention within the framework of "*aid to civil power*" (Williams, 2002:100). This strategy was codified into law through the Police (Special Powers) Decree 24 of 1967. It granted the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters and the Inspector General of Police the right to arrest and detain without trial, anyone suspected of any subversive act (Olukotun 2002:385). This ostensibly was aimed at getting Lt. Col. Ojukwu the 'Biafran Head of State' arrested as a way of scuffling the secessionist idea. But apart from that, the police action also constituted an attempt to "*restore federal government's authority in Lagos and the break-away Eastern region*" (Achebe, 2012:128). The police action no doubt marked the onset of the deployment of the Nigerian armed forces for the maintenance of internal security as a complement to the activities of the regular police and the Mobile Police force.

The FMG also employed propaganda as part of its war strategy, even though minimally. It is widely believed that propaganda is an important part of strategic planning in warfare. On the contrary, however, Yakubu Gowon made frantic efforts to ensure that the Nigerian information network played down the strength of the federal troops as if the conflict was a little disagreement between brothers; and that was what was relayed to the western media. Decker (2016) even submits that Gowon did not conduct the war as if he was fighting an enemy. In essence, General Yakubu Gowon's strong motive during the civil war was not to crush an enemy but to keep Nigeria one.

As a patriot and Head of Government, he did not see the Biafran side as a thing that must be crushed. Rather, Gowon saw the war as a struggle of Nigerians and his emphasis was *'how do we keep Nigeria together'*. His basic commitment was to unite the country, to keep Nigeria one, not to win a war, not to defeat an opponent, not to crush a rebellion. *"For him, it was 'how do we bring this nation as an indivisible body'?"*

Rather than embarking on any form of persuasive propaganda, he only institutionalized some slogans. According to Ngoa (2011:244), slogans can simply be referred to as rhymes with a natural sense of rhythm. They are short, simple and precise in delivering a message. They are words or a sentence put together to symbolize an event, issue, idea, policy or condition. The most common slogan invoked by the Federal Military Government and which was widely broadcast on Radio Nigeria and Television was *"to keep Nigeria one, is a task that must be done"*. Similarly, phrases like *'One Nigeria'*, *'to preserve the territorial integrity of Nigeria'*, and *'crush the revolt'* were also constant features on the Nigerian media (Davies, 1995: 157). This was supported by a mantra created with the letters of the surname of the Head of State, GOWON which reads: *"GO ON WITH ONE NIGERIA"*. This was done by the Federal Government to make the war look a just cause to stop the disintegration of the country (Atofarati, 1992:10; Davies, 1995: 157).

It is essential to note, however that all these highlighted strategies failed to effect the re-integration of Biafra into Nigeria. This necessitated the adoption of a new strategy of economic blockade by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria. It was adopted largely because the Federal Army was probably incapable of conquering the Ibo heartland by direct assault. For instance, in June 1968, Gowon promised that *"there would be no attempt by the Federal troops to drive into the heart of the East-Central state and no pursuit of the Biafrans into their homeland except as a last resort after all appeals to Biafra had failed"* (Kirk-Greene, 1971:53; Clevenger, 1975:123). In such a situation, a total economic blockade of the territory still under Biafra's control offered one of the most effective and least-costly means of eroding the secessionists' resistance (Clevenger, 1975:122-123).

Without much doubt, it was glaring that starvation was considered a legitimate weapon of war by the FGN largely out of desperation (Achebe, 2012:228,233). The main exponent of this was Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then Minister of Finance who declared in a speech in June 1969 that: *"I don't see any need why we should feed our enemies fat only to fight us harder"* (Clevenger, 1975:123-124; Guardian, 27 June, 1969). He added that *"the best way to end this fratricidal war is to stop the food allocation going to the Biafra region"* (Daniel, 2013). Adewale (2012) reports that Awolowo decided to be so hard because food supplies to the civilian population in the East were being intercepted by the Biafran army and did not get to the target audience. Given that scenario, Awolowo

said: "so I decided to stop sending the food there. In the process, the civilians would suffer, but the soldiers suffered most" (Adewale, 2012). Brigadier Hassan Katsina, the then Chief of Staff of the Federal Army supported Awolowo. He said: "I would not feed somebody I am fighting". The expressions of these leading members of cabinet, as stated above, were considered callous by the *Times Magazine* in its editorial of 28 June, 1969 which condemned the FMG for adopting a policy of famine, food shortage and starvation. It read thus:

*All the evidence now shows that starvation as an act of war is the effective policy of the Nigerian Government... One can be left in no doubt that the Government of Nigeria, whatever intentions it may have had at the beginning of the war, is now prepared to use blockade and starvation, even at the cost of a further million deaths., rather than agree to secession. This has the effect of a policy of genocide (Clevenger, 1975:124).*

This philosophy, no doubt, informed the subsequent Federal blockade of the Biafran territory by air, land and sea. Biafra's coastline was earlier sealed off in 1967 essentially "to prevent the export of palm produce and crude oil so as to destroy the economic basis of the secessionist Republic, seen as a potent weapon for achieving quick victory" (Ikpe, 1994: 94 cited in Iwuagwu, 2012: 284). This also robbed Biafra inhabitants of shipping ports to receive military and humanitarian supplies (Achebe, 2012:210). The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) also changed the Nigerian currency in January 1968 purposely to render the Biafran currency non-convertible and virtually useless and thereby cut Biafra off from the international money markets (Adejumobi & Aderemi, 2002:198; Chuku, 2002; 222). Awolowo had accused Ojukwu and his army of looting the Central Bank branches in Benin, Port Harcourt and Calabar. The need to prevent Ojukwu from taking the money to abroad to buy arms led to the change.

As a result of the economic blockade, Biafra experienced acute fuel shortage; hike in prices of foodstuffs, goods and services and the level of economic hardship intensified, beginning from May, 1968. Aboyade and Ayida (1971) cited in Adejumobi & Aderemi (2002:197) reported that then, a cup of *gari* was sold for over one pound while a cup of salt sold for 15 Biafran pounds during the period of economic and trade embargo, instead of the six Biafran pounds at the onset of the war. This astronomical increase in prices of goods was also substantiated by Harneit-Sievers et al, (1997: 113 cited in Iwuagwu (2012: 285) that "a chicken in 1968 cost five Biafra pounds (£5:16s:8d or \$14) while a young goat went as high as twenty-five pounds".

It is expedient to observe that the starvation and economic blockade strategy only succeeded in accentuating Eastern region's acute food shortage. Ikpe, (1994), cited

in Iwuagwu (2012: 280-281) identified the factors responsible for this to include: "the influx of refugees (from Northern Nigeria); total economic blockade; mobilization of men and materials for the Biafra Army; military operation resulting in population displacement; and, the capture of the food surplus areas of the Cross River Basin especially Ibibioland, Bende, Abakiliki and the Rivers areas by the federal troops in the early months of the war". Others mentioned by Iwuagwu (2012:281 ) are: "*general insecurity, which was not conducive for agricultural pursuits; loss of farmlands following evacuation of people from conquered territories and movement into lands hitherto reserved for cultivation; looting of barns and farmlands by soldiers*". Iwuagwu (2012:281) adds that "*plantations, farm settlements and other agricultural establishments that characterized government policies at the time were abandoned. Even the aggressive marketing of fertilizer and other government agricultural extension services suffered severe neglect. More than ever before, food crop production came under severe threat as the outbreak of the war disrupted food production, resulting in massive food importation given that the conducive environment necessary for agricultural production was lacking*".

The consequent effects of food scarcity were starvation, malnutrition and other nutritional syndromes and diseases (Life, July 12, 1968; Mathieu-Comtois, 2012). By the third quarter of 1968, thousands of people were reportedly dying daily (St. Jorre, 1972:384). Indeed, the total blockade imposed on Biafra drastically affected the masses who suffered high degree of impoverishment (Onumonu and Anutanwa, 2017). It is interesting to note that this strategy of economic blockade proved highly effective. It weakened Biafra's resistance and ensured its sudden collapse. For instance, a British correspondent, touring the Biafra enclave one week before the collapse of Biafra, reported that as the flow of relief supplies dwindled, Biafrans were giving up their struggle saying: "*people are now choosing, in large numbers, to risk massacre at Federal hands rather than die slowly from starvation in a shrinking enclave...*" (Sunday Times, 11 January, 1970; Clevenger, 1975:122). This perhaps informed Ogbudinkpa's submission that the Federal Army won the war due largely to the "*the collapse of the Biafran economy... due to the shortage of food*" (Ogbudinkpa, 1985: 58, cited in Iwuagwu, 2012:284 ).

The situation became extremely hopeless when attempts by relief and donor agencies and organisations to ameliorate the situation was virtually blocked by the two belligerent parties as they failed to agree on corridors of relief items into Biafra. It is essential to note that most of the limits imposed on the actions of the relief agencies stemmed from the failure of the belligerents to conclude any agreement on methods and routes by which food and medicine could be imported. From the earliest days of their involvement in the Biafran relief operation, the agencies had recognized that only the establishment of approved relief corridors offered a real prospect of moving into the

enclave the volume of food required to meet the nutritional needs of the civilian population (Clevenger, 1975:116). As such, although the international community did not stint in its provision of material resources for relief operations, the refusal of its leading members to act to break the political impasse over relief corridors condemned thousands in the war zone to starvation (Clevenger, 1975:177).

### **3.5 Awolowo and the management of the Nigerian economy in the war years**

At the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, the Nigerian government was reportedly inadequately prepared for war. Even, the government was not prepared for a protracted war. At the end however, government had spent an estimated sum of £301.5 million to prosecute the war (Awolowo, 1970). It is pathetic to note that the resources hurriedly deployed to the war were originally earmarked for the last lap of the 1962/68 national development plan. Government then had to contend with a number of economic challenges such as to:

- a) economize Nigeria's financial resources;
- b) raise additional revenue;
- c) save Nigeria's foreign exchange reserve from being run down to a dangerous level;
- d) avoid balance of payments difficulties and
- e) preserve the strength of the Nigerian pound

Some of the major policies implemented to overcome these challenges were:

- a) all government Ministries (except Defence and Internal Affairs) were compelled to make 1% savings in their approved estimates of expenditure for 1967/68 financial year.
- b) no ministry was allowed to increase its expenditure beyond the 1967/68 figures
- c) all capital projects of the Federal Government were put on hold, except on agriculture and roads.
- d) introduction of 20% capital gains tax on all incorporated companies.
- e) introduction of terminal dues on all ships evacuating mineral oil from Nigerian ports.
- f) amendment of the Income Tax Decrees through which the Federal Board of Inland Revenue to impose Turnover Tax on volumes of trade of company whether or not profits were recorded by a company for the particular years.
- g) Federal Ministry of Finance initiated the grant of £5 million annually to the States for agricultural development.
- h) drastic reduction of imports
- i) total ban was placed on some luxury goods. (Awolowo,1970)

As the Federal Commissioner for Finance, Awolowo's prudent management of the war economy yielded a positive result. Nigeria did not borrow any money from any country. This positioned the FMG to launch its post-war policy of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

### **3.6 Awolowo's involvement in the formulation and implementation of the post-war programme of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.**

The end of hostilities in January 1970 came with its own challenges. Properties worth millions of naira were destroyed, including houses, hospitals, schools, roads and churches. Lives running into millions were also lost to the war while many were internally displaced. This largely accounts for the programme of reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction that was launched by government immediately after the civil war. According to Gowon (2017), the programme was facilitated by Chief Awolowo who insisted that government's post-war spending should be devoted to development rather than to the military.

Luckily, government had enough fund to finance the programme. According to Awolowo, he ensured that the revenue which was due to the East Central State throughout the war years, particularly, the subvention of 990,000 pounds per month, was kept and saved for them. Upon their liberation, the money, running into millions of pounds, was handed over to them. The money served like a take-off grant for the reintegrated Igbo East Central State. Such a large fund could have been embezzled or misappropriated by some other government officials, but Awolowo released the money to the owners at the appropriate time. Given the above submission, one may say that the argument that after the civil war, he did not assist the East Central State financially as the federal minister of finance was largely unfounded.

## **4. Conclusion**

Obafemi Awolowo may, for long, remain the most controversial figure in the political history of Nigeria as a result of his role during the civil war. While the Igbo of Eastern region see him as their arch enemy responsible for their failed secession attempt (1967-1970), apologists of Nigeria unity agenda consider him as a hero. According to Yakubu Gowon (2017), *"Awolowo teamed up with us and helped keep Nigeria together without borrowing a kobo during the war. He and the team of elders, who were in my government at that time, advised us, and we took a decision that was in the best interest of Nigeria"*. With the above statement by the Head of State during the war years, Awolowo may be said to have been exonerated from all accusations of pursuing self-ambition and for

unilaterally implemented the war strategies, especially that of starvation, currency change and the 20 pounds policy at the end of the war. His actions and utterances of that period were done in good faith and had truly altruistic motive to save his fatherland from disintegration. Anybody in his shoes could have done the same thing to achieve the same purpose. It may therefore be suggested that Obafemi Awolowo made significant contributions to midwife Nigeria's re-invented unity and integration at the end of the civil war of 1967-1970, which is not only volatile, but has remained largely fragile.

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Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu  
MIDWIFING NIGERIA'S FRAGILE UNITY:  
THE ROLE OF OBAFEMI AWOLOWO IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

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