

Igbo genocide and its aftermath – The tragedy of Africa’s unlearned lessons

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In 1966, soon after the world commemorated the 21st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and made the customary solemn declaration of “Never, Never Again”, Nigeria defiled that season of reflection, commiseration and hope. Its military officers, the police, Hausa-Fulani emirs, muslim clerics and intellectuals, civil servants, journalists, politicians and other public figures planned and executed the Igbo genocide – the foundational genocide of post-(European)conquest Africa.¹ This is also Africa’s most devastating genocide of the 20th century. A total of 3.1 million Igbo people, a quarter of this nation’s population at the time, were murdered between 29 May 1966 and 12 January 1970.

Most of Africa and the world stood by and watched, hardly critical or condemnatory of this wanton destruction of human lives, raping, sacking and plundering of towns, villages, community after community in Biafra and elsewhere... Most Igbo were slaughtered in their homes, offices, businesses, schools, colleges, hospitals, markets, churches, shrines, farmlands, factories/industrial enterprises, children’s playground, town halls, refugee

¹Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *Biafra Revisited* (Dakar and Reading: African Renaissance, 2006) and Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *Readings from Reading: Essays on African Politics, Genocide, Literature* (Dakar and Reading: African Renaissance, 2011).

centres, cars, lorries, and at bus stations, railway stations, airports and on buses, trains and planes and on foot, or starved to death – the openly propagated regime-“weapon” to achieve its heinous goal more speedily. In the end, the Igbo genocide was enforced, devastatingly, by Nigeria’s simultaneously pursued land, aerial and naval blockade and bombardment of Igboland, Africa’s highest population density region outside the Nile Delta. Earlier on in 1945 and 1953, under the very watch of the British occupation, the Hausa-Fulani political leadership had carried out two premeditated pogroms on Igbo immigrant populations in Jos and Kano in opposition to the Igbo vanguard role in the struggle for the restoration of Nigerian independence from the British conquest. Hundreds of Igbo were murdered in each occasion and tens of thousands of pounds sterling worth of their property looted or destroyed. Neither in Kano nor Jos did the occupation regime apprehend or prosecute anyone for these massacres and destruction. Tragically, these pogroms turned out as “dress rehearsals” for the 1966-1970 genocide.

The perpetrators, who subsequently seized and pillaged the rich Nigeria economy appear to have got off free from any forms of sanctions from Africa (and the world) for what are, unquestionably, crimes against humanity. The consequences for Africa have been catastrophic. Several regimes elsewhere in Africa are “convinced” of the conclusions that they have drawn from this crime by their Nigerian counterpart: “We can murder targeted constituent people(s) at will *within* the state we control ... Haul off their prized property and livelihood ... Comprehensively destroy their cities, towns, villages,

communities – precisely their agelong, priceless, inheritance ... There *will be no* sanctions from Africa – and the world”. As a result, the Igbo genocide becomes the clearing site for the haunting killing fields that would snake across the African geographical landscape in the subsequent 40 years with the murders of additional 12 million Africans, since January 1970, by regimes in further genocide in Rwanda, Darfur and Zaïre/Democratic Republic of Congo and other killings in Liberia, Ethiopia, Congo Republic, Somalia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Chad, south Sudan, Burundi.²

Yaki, it isn’t

The records of those who carried out the Igbo genocide make no pretences, offer no excuses, whatsoever, about the goal of their dreadful mission – such was the maniacal insouciance and rabid Igbophobia that propelled the project. The principal language used in the prosecution of the genocide was Hausa. The words of the ghoulish anthem of the genocide, published and broadcast on Kaduna radio and television throughout the duration of the crime, are in Hausa:

Mu je mu kashe nyamiri

Mu kashe maza su da yan maza su

Mu chi mata su da yan mata su

Mu kwashe kaya su

(English translation: *Let’s go kill the damned Igbo/Kill off their men and*

²Ibid.

boys/Rape their wives and daughters/Cart off their property)

The Hausa word for war is *yaki*. Whilst Hausa speakers would employ this word to refer to the involvement/combat services of their grandfathers, fathers, uncles, sons, brothers, other relatives/friends in “Boma” (reference to World War II Burma [contemporary Myanmar] military campaigns/others in southeast Asia, fighting for the British against the Japanese) or even in the post-1960s Africa-based “peace-keeping” military engagements in west, east and central Africa, they rarely use *yaki* to describe the May 1966-January 1970 mass murders of Igbo people. In Hausaspeak, the latter is either referred to as *lokochi mu kashe nyamiri* (English: “when we murdered the damned Igbo”) or *lokochi muna kashe nyamiri* (English: “when we were murdering the damned Igbo”). Pointedly, this *lokochi* (when, time) conflates the timeframes that encapsulate the two phases of the genocide (May 1966-October 1966 and July 1967-January 1970), a reminder, if one is required, for those who bizarrely, if not mischievously, wish to break this organic link.

Elsewhere, genocidist documentation on this crime is equally malevolent and brazenly vulgar. A study of the genocide-time/“post”-genocide era interviews, comments, broadcasts and writings on the campaign by key genocidist commanders, commandants and “theorists” and propagandists including, particularly, Yakubu Danjuma, Ibrahim Haruna, Yakubu Gowon, Benjamin Adekunle, Olusegun Obasanjo, Oluwole Rotimi, Obafemi Awolowo, Allison Ayida and Anthony Enaharo is at once revealing and profoundly troubling. Adekunle, a notoriously gruesome commander, had no qualms, indeed, in

boasting about the goal of this horrendous mission when he told an August 1968 press conference, attended by journalists including those from the international media: “We shoot at everything that moves, and when our forces march into the centre of I[g]bo territory, we shoot at everything, even at things that do not move”.³ True to type, Adekunle duly carried through his threat with clinical precision both on his “everything that moves”-targeting, especially in south Igboland where his forces slaughtered hundreds of thousands, and on the “things that do not move”-assault category. Adekunle’s gratuitous destruction of the famed Igbo economic infrastructure, one of the most advanced in Africa of the era, was indescribably barbaric.

A brief review of Olusegun Obasanjo’s own contribution (published in his memoirs, *My Command*) that focuses on his May 1969 direct orders to his air force to destroy an international Red Cross aircraft carrying relief supplies to the encircled and blockaded Igbo is crucially appropriate. Obasanjo had “challenged”,⁴ to quote his words, Captain Gbadomosi King (genocidist air force pilot), who he had known since 1966, to “produce results” in stopping further international relief flight deliveries to the Igbo.⁵ Within a week of his infamous challenge, 5 June 1969, Obasanjo recalls nostalgically, Gbadomosi King “redeemed his promise”.⁶ Gbadomosi King had shot down a clearly marked, incoming relief-bearing International Committee of the Red Cross DC-7 plane near Eket, south Biafra, with the loss of its 3-person crew. Obasanjo’s perverse satisfaction over the aftermath of this horrendous crime

³*The Economist* (London), 24 August 1968.

⁴Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command* (Ibadan and London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 78.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 79.

is fiendish, chillingly revolting. He writes: “The effect of [this] singular achievement of the Air Force especially on 3 Marine Commando Division [the notorious unit Obasanjo, who later becomes Nigeria’s head of regime for 11 years, commanded] was profound. It raised morale of all service personnel, especially of the Air Force detachment concerned and the troops they supported in [my] 3 Marine Commando Division”.⁷ Yet despite the huffing and puffing, the raving commanding brute is essentially a coward who lacks the courage to face up to a world totally outraged by his gruesome crime. Instead, Obasanjo, the quintessential Caliban, cringes into a stupor and beacons to his Prospero, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson (as he, Obasanjo, indeed unashamedly acknowledges in his *My Command*),⁸ to “sort out” the raging international outcry generated by the destruction of the ICRC plane...

What “internal affair”? Whose “internal affair”?

There was an extensive coverage of the Igbo genocide in the international media throughout its duration. The United Nations though never condemned this atrocity unequivocally. U Thant, its secretary-general, consistently maintained that it was a “Nigerian internal affair”. The United Nations could have stopped this genocide; the United Nations should have stopped this genocide instead of protecting the interests of the Nigeria state, the very perpetrator of the crime. In the wake of the Jewish genocide of the 1930s-1940s during which 6 million Jews were murdered by Nazi Germany, Africa was, with hindsight, most cruelly unlucky to have been the “testing ground” for

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 165

the presumed global community's resolve to fight genocide subsequently, particularly after the 1948 historic United Nations declaration on this crime against humanity.⁹ Only a few would have failed to note that U Thant's reference to "internal" was staggeringly disingenuous as genocide, as was demonstrated devastatingly 20-30 years earlier on in Europe, would of course occur *within* some territoriality ("internal") where the perpetrator exercises a permanent or limited/partial/temporary sociopolitical control (cf. Nazi Germany and its programme to destroy its Jewish population *within* Germany itself; Nazi Germany and its programme to destroy Jewish populations *within* those countries in Europe under its occupation from 1939 and 1945). Between 1966 and 2006, the world would witness genocide carried out against the Igbo, the Tutsi/some Hutu, and Darfuri in "internal" spaces that go by the names *Nigeria, Rwanda, and the Sudan* respectively. The contours of the territory where genocide is executed *do not therefore* make the perpetrators less culpable nor the crime permissible as the United Nations's crucial 1948 genocide declaration states unambiguously.

The very central role played by Britain in support of the Igbo genocide no doubt reinforced the scandalous failure of the United Nations to protect Igbo people during this catastrophe. Britain, a fully-fledged member of the United Nations – indeed a founding member of the organisation who enjoys a permanent seat on its security council and participated in drafting the anti-genocide declaration – supported the Igbo genocide militarily, politically and diplomatically. It is extraordinary that in his otherwise informative study,

⁹Cf. Hugh McCullum, "Biafra was the beginning", <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=5549> (accessed 14 June 2010).

Crimes Against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice (London: Penguin Books, 2006), Geoffrey Robertson, a British human rights lawyer, a queen's counsel, does not discuss the Igbo genocide anywhere in his 759-page text nor Britain's *instrumental* role in perpetrating this foundational genocide of post-(European)conquest Africa.

Britain was deeply riled by the Igbo lead-role in terminating its occupation of Nigeria and had since sought to "punish" them for this. A senior British foreign office official was adamant that his government's position on international relief supply effort to the encircled and bombarded Igbo was to "show conspicuous zeal in relief while in fact letting the little buggers starve out".¹⁰ Indeed as the slaughtering of the Igbo progressively worsened, Prime Minister Wilson was unashamedly unfazed when he informed Clyde Ferguson (United States State Department special coordinator for relief to Biafra) that he, Harold Wilson, "would accept a half million dead Biafrans if that was what it took"¹¹ Nigeria to destroy the Igbo resistance to the genocide. Such was the grotesquely expressed diminution of African life made by a supposedly leading politician of the world of the 1960s – barely 20 years after the deplorable perpetration of the Jewish genocide. As the final tally of its murder of the Igbo demonstrates, Nigeria probably had the perverted satisfaction of having performed *far in excess* of Wilson's grim target... Predictably, it was to Wilson that the Nigerians turned to, in 1969, to "sort out" the international

¹⁰Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger & American Foreign Policy* (London & New York: Quartet Books, 1977), p. 122. See also Michael Leapman, "While the Biafrans starved, the FO moaned with hacks", *The Independent on Sunday* (London), 3 January 1999.

¹¹Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, p. 122.

revulsion generated by the latter's destruction of the ICRC aircraft as we have already stated.

Arms Ban

Without British active involvement in the perpetration of the Igbo genocide, it was highly unlikely that this crime would have been committed. Nigeria did not have an arms-manufacturing capacity then to embark on this terror without external support. Forty-five years on, Nigeria still does not have such an internal military capability. It still relies heavily on Britain, currently the world's leading arms exporter to Africa,¹² for its supplies. One immediate move that Britain, the West, and the rest of the world can make to support the ongoing efforts by peoples in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa to rid themselves of the genocide-state is to ban all arms sales to Nigeria and the rest of Africa.¹³ Nigeria and other Africa genocide-states require the political and diplomatic support from abroad and the deadly array of arms ever streaming into their arsenal from Britain and elsewhere to exist and terrorise the people(s) in their territories. This is part of the cardinal and enduring lessons of the Igbo genocide. The legacy has indeed been catastrophic.

A comprehensive arms ban on Africa will radically advance the current hectic quest on the ground by peoples across the continent to construct democratic

¹²For a useful background to Britain's accelerated arms sales and transfers to Africa during the era, see Antony Barnett, "UK arms sales to Africa reach £1 billion mark", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2005/jun/12/uk.hearafrica05> (accessed 13 June 2005).

¹³For a more encompassing discussion on a total ban on all arms sales and transfers to Africa and declaring the continent an Arms-Free Zone, see Ekwe-Ekwe, *Readings from Reading*, especially ch. 31.

and extensively decentralised new state forms that guarantee and safeguard human rights, equality and freedom for individuals and peoples – *alternatives* to the extant genocide-state. Africans know very well that there are alternatives to the genocide-state. They have both the vision and the capacity to create these alternatives. For Africans, indeed, the creation of these alternatives is imperative in this age of pestilence. Nothing else.

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