



REMEMBERING BRITISH COLONIALISM AND THE

BIAFRAN WAR

Lagos, Nigeria

6.455927 3.3891088



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Executive Summary

The era of British colonisation and the Biafran War are the significant moments that have defined present-day Nigeria. The British occupation of Nigeria lasted from 1880s until October 1 1960, when the country gained independence. Long-standing divisions between the three main ethnic groups – the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa/Fulani – were exacerbated by the British and simmered into civil war in 1967. Today, the legacy of this memory is scarcely highlighted by current governments and organisations. The case studies on remembering British colonialism and the

Biafran War illustrate how societies allow colonial artefacts to become derelict. They also show how the memory of the Biafran War, a war that is viewed as one with a single victor (being the Nigerian government), is suppressed and scarcely promoted in public spaces.

Introduction

The era of British colonisation and the Biafran War are the significant events that have defined present-day Nigeria. British occupation of Nigeria lasted until 1960, when the country, which consisted of territory containing over 300 ethnic groups and tribes that had been controversially grouped into a unitary state, gained independence. Long-standing divisions between the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa/Fulani—three main ethnic groups— were exacerbated by the British and simmered into civil war in 1967. Today, the legacy of this memory is scarcely highlighted by current governments and organisations. The general trend of Nigerian society has been to allow colonial artefacts to become derelict, and memory of the Biafran War, a war that is viewed as having no victor, is suppressed and scarcely promoted in public spaces.

Legacy of British Colonialism

Background

Nigeria's experience with European colonialism began very early in the fifteenth century with the initiation of the slave trade by the Portuguese, a role that was eventually assumed by the British until the abolition of the slave trade. British colonialism focused on gaining resources and territory and fighting with tribes to gain control over the extraction and production of goods.¹ Ethnic and religious divisions within Nigeria caused the British to maintain a policy of 'divide and rule', effectively keeping different ethnic groups away from each other and allowing varying forms of self-rule in different parts of the country.² The British-controlled northern and southern protectorates were merged in 1914 under Governor-General Frederick Lugard, who practiced 'indirect rule through native authorities.' Resistance to the leadership by the Muslim communities in the north and the development of a Christian intelligentsia in the south paved the way for increasing nationalism.³ Eventually, independence was granted in 1960, but the result was intense competition between different groups that escalated into the Biafran War.

¹ Kaitlyn Alme, "Colonial History of Nigeria: Slave Trade, Resource Extraction, and the Invention of a National Territory," *Scalar USC*, June 6, 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ Harvard Divinity School, "The Colonial Era," *Harvard Divinity School*, 2021.

Dealing with Physical Colonial Legacies in Public Spaces and the Lack of Decision-Making Processes

Similar to many former colonial territories belonging to the British Empire, physical artefacts have been abandoned and are crumbling. The Nigerian memory of the British colonial footprint can be largely characterised by its indifference to this era. British governmental and residential architecture predominated throughout the era of colonisation, but much of it has been neglected and fallen into disrepair due to an encapsulating idea of modernisation that the British championed post-1960s.

As one example, in 1960, the Supreme Court building in Tinubu Square was demolished to make way for a fountain with wings of liberty representing freedom from colonial rule after Nigeria's independence.⁴ The name of the square itself, which bore the name of the businesswoman and slave trader Madame Efunroye Tinubu, was changed to Independence Square, before it was changed back to its original name.⁵ Other colonial buildings remain standing across the city, both from the Victorian Era and the Afro-Brazilian era. The contributions of the Afro-Brazilian Saros, freed slaves who returned to Nigeria, are seen as an iconic component of colonial architecture in Nigeria. The Saros rose to political prominence, and brought with them new forms of architecture and culture. The Afro-Brazilian culture in Nigeria, however, has been disappearing in recent years. According to CNN, many buildings in the Afro-Brazilian quarter have been removed and replaced as the area becomes more commercialised.⁶ Iloja Bar, one of the more famous buildings of this style, was a central and iconic building in Tinubu Square that was characteristic of the Afro-Brazilian tradition in Nigeria, but the building was demolished in 2016.⁷

Focusing on the English imperial era, some British scholars, including former English heritage director Philip Davies, have decried the crumbling remnants of colonial architecture and advocated for the UK to fund preservation efforts. Davies's claims are based on a glorification of the colonial era as a beneficial and modernising force. The Nigerian government has not done much in terms of preservation, and some buildings are being demolished mainly within highly urbanised areas, much to the dismay of historical preservationists.⁸ Yet in many parts of Lagos, especially Badagry, many colonial-built buildings still stand and are being maintained. One site, the Ikoyi Club, a European club constructed in Lagos in 1938, has seen some transformation. It was eventually opened to Africans in 1947, and today it is the 'preserve of the black bourgeoisie.'⁹ According to the Ikoyi Club's website, its

⁴ The Centenary Project, "Colonial Footprints: Lagos, Then and Now," *Google Arts & Culture*, March 2014.

⁵ Seun Akiyoye, "Tinubu Square: A befitting memorial to an Amazon," *The Nation*, November 22, 2013.

⁶ Jean-François Edvige and Chris Giles, "Lagos' Afro-Brazilian architecture faces down the bulldozers," *CNN*, July 19, 2017.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Chibundo Onuzo, "Colonial ruins are a fitting epitaph for the British empire," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2016.

⁹ *Ibid.*

membership has become one of the most diverse in the world.¹⁰

Legacy of the Biafran War

Background

After the Second World War, Britain took steps toward granting independence, creating three administrative regions loosely bound together as a state. The divisions represented the ethnic divides in the country: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest, and the Igbo in the southeast. Each group had a different dynamic with the ruling British empire and therefore conceived of different relationships with democracy, hierarchy, and religion. Tensions between these groups deteriorated into civil war in the decade following independence after a series of coups, increasing interethnic violence, pogroms against the Igbo, and the secession of the short-lived Republic of Biafra, mainly composed of Igbo. The secession initiated the Nigerian Civil War, or the Biafran War. Eventually, the Nigerian Army cut off supply chains to Biafra, initiating a famine that resulted in between 1 and 3 million death. The war has been argued by some as a genocide.¹¹

The Commemoration of the Biafran War and the Lack of Decision-Making Processes

The memory of the Biafran War has been suppressed in Nigeria. Nigeria's Armed Forces Remembrance Day is held on January 15th every year to commemorate the lives lost during the First and Second World War and the Nigerian Civil War.¹² The Remembrance Arcade, which consists of memorials to victims of these same conflicts, is located in Tafawa Balewa Square.¹³



Figure 1: "The Remembrance Arcade, Tafawa Balewa Square, Lagos" Image by Joshua Davis via Flickr [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

¹⁰ Ikoyi Club 1938, "The Club: Our Story," *Ikoyi Club 1938*, 2021.

¹¹ Chima J. Korieh, "The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the Politics of Memory," *Cambria Press*, 2012.

¹² Daily Trust, "Armed Forces Remembrance Day," *Daily Trust*, January 15, 2018.

¹³ Hannah and Beyond, "Tafawa Balewa Square," *Medium*, October 11, 2017.

Besides the Armed Forces Remembrance Day held each year on January 15th, little decisions have been taken to address the Biafran War and its legacies on a national level. A general silence and imprecise reconciliation with history, however, predominates. The use of memory or memorial practices, such as the creation of a digital archive of testimonies on the war¹⁴, has been criticised as being

... a symptom of a national (and international) unwillingness to deal with the political preconditions that made the war possible. It is merely a symbolic exercise that fails to confront a violent system. What needs to happen is some form of political justice to confront the pre-conditions of war.¹⁵

According to Tom Lodge, the predominating 'official silence has led to the transmission of selective memories or 'chosen traumas' across generations. There has been limited research on the civil war, a corollary of reluctance to memorialise the war, again allowing space for the more idealised recollections of Biafra to shape historical perceptions amongst younger generation South-Easterners.¹⁶ In addition, officials have a general reluctance to memorialise a war between 'brothers' that had no victor.¹⁷ Igbos residing in the southeast have performed their own rituals, performing burial rites for victims of the war in recent years.¹⁸

Summary and Conclusions

British colonisation and the Biafra War were two defining moments that have shaped the history of Nigeria. These two case studies, however, showed that the legacies of these two moments are scarcely addressed by current governments and organisations. As part of this trend, colonial artefacts have become derelict and the memory of the Biafran War has been suppressed and is seldom proactively addressed in public spaces. It is recommended that future decisions taken should aim to intensify the public discourse on the commemoration of the colonial period and the Biafra War. This includes the way in which physical representations of these histories are dealt with.

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¹⁴ Biafran War Memories, 'When Rocket Was Sounding,' *Biafran War Memories*, January 8, 2020.

¹⁵ Benjamin Maingangwa and Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba, 'Memory practices are not enough to remedy Nigeria-Biafra war injustices,' *The Conversation*, March 8, 2021.

¹⁶ Tom Lodge, "Conflict resolution in Nigeria after the 1967-1970 civil war," *African Studies*, 77:1, 2018, Taylor and Francis Online, doi: 10.1080/00020184.2018.1432125.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 18.

¹⁸ Okonkwo Eze, "Igbo leaders plan burial rites for civil war victims," *Vanguard*, December 24, 2013.

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Figures

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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