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Ethnic and Regional Resentments in Pre-Civil War Nigeria:

A Study of Divisions Between Western, Northern, and Eastern Nigeria

By Chuka Odike

FEATURE
IMAGE

**THE PRINCIPAL ETHNIC GROUPS
IN EASTERN NIGERIA. 15**

**15 Source:- Ministry of Information,
Eastern Nigeria.**

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Ethnic and Regional Resentments in Pre-Civil War Nigeria: A Study of Divisions Between Western, Northern, and Eastern Nigeria

By Chuka Odié · *Historical Studies* · Ozikoro.com

The resentment between Western and Northern Nigeria against Eastern Nigeria, particularly in the period leading up to and following Nigeria's independence in 1960, was driven by a combination of political, economic, ethnic, and cultural factors. This tension ultimately contributed to the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War) from 1967 to 1970.

Nigeria is home to hundreds of ethnic groups, but the three largest are the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East.

These groups had distinct cultural, religious, and historical identities:

- The North was predominantly Muslim, led by traditional emirs under the Sokoto Caliphate's influence.
- The West had a mix of Christians and Muslims, but the Yoruba had a decentralized political structure with kingdoms like Oyo.
- The East, dominated by the Igbo, was largely Christian and had a more egalitarian, republican political tradition.

These differences led to mutual distrust, as each region had its own leadership structure, priorities, and visions for Nigeria's future.

British colonial rule indirectly encouraged divisions between Nigeria's regions. The British governed Nigeria as three distinct regions



(Northern, Western, and Eastern), allowing regional leaders significant autonomy. This fostered competition among the regions, with each striving for political and economic dominance.

The North was the largest but economically less developed, with more conservative, traditional leadership. The West and East were more economically prosperous, with better education systems and greater Western influence.

The East had a higher rate of Western education, which allowed many Igbos to occupy influential positions in the civil service, the military, and the economy. This inability to compete caused resentment, especially in the North, where the political elite feared being left behind.

After independence in 1960, political power struggles intensified between the regions. The major political parties were regionally and ethnically based:

- The Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented the Hausa-Fulani-Kanuri elites.
- The Action Group (AG) was the main party in the West, dominated by the Yoruba.
- The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), later renamed the National Council of Nigerian Citizens, was predominantly Eastern and supported by the Igbo-Ibibio-Ijaw.

The Northern elite, with its larger population, had more representation in the federal government, leading to concerns in the East and West about being politically marginalized. The Igbos, in particular, were often seen as “overrepresented” in positions of power in the federal government and military, which sparked envy and hostility, especially from the North.

Due to the widespread corruption of the political class and



mismanagement then, A military coup in January 1966, led mostly by young officers, overthrew the Nigerian government and resulted in the killing of prominent northern and western political leaders. Although the coup plotters were motivated by desire to end corruption and inefficiency, it was seen in the North and West as an Igbo attempt to dominate Nigeria even when major Ethnic nationalities were represented.

In response, a counter-coup occurred in July 1966, led by Northern officers, which led to the assassination of General Aguiyi-Ironsi, the Head of State who had taken over after the first coup. This counter-coup unleashed widespread violence against Eastern people in the North, resulting in the massacre of tens of thousands of Igbos and Easterners in general.

Economic competition also played a role in the growing resentment. The Eastern region was home to Nigeria's newly discovered oil reserves, which became a major source of wealth.

Control over oil revenues and resource allocation became contentious issues, with the East benefiting from the oil boom while the North and West feared losing access to this wealth.

The mass killing of Igbos in the North and their increasing marginalization led to growing calls for secession in the East. In 1967, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region, declared the region an Independent State called "Biafra". This sparked the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted until 1970. The war exacerbated ethnic tensions and left lasting scars on the relationship between the regions.

In summary, the resentment Western and Northern Nigeria had against Eastern Nigeria stemmed from ethnic and regional differences, competition for political and economic dominance, and the inability to compete with the East are keys to this issue.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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