

An exchange with a WSWs reader on ethnic conflict in Nigeria

30 September 1999

A letter from a reader

Please permit me this opportunity to correct some of the mis-impressions created by your Barry Mason on ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

By leaving out the coalition of convenience that was forged between the Igbo East and the Hausa/Fulani North, Barry Mason ignored the real cause of the Igbo-inspired 1966 coup in which Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba lost military and civilian leaders, while Igbos lost no single leader in the then Mid-West, East, or Federal areas: Colonel Maimalari, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Brigadier Ademulegun and his wife, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh were all killed; Lt. General J. U. T. Aguiyi-Ironsi, Dr. Nwafor Orizu, Dr. Michael Okpara, Mr Dennis Osadebay—were conspicuously spared, while Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was cruising in the Caribbean.

This, and the brazen abolition of the Federation followed by the publication of the "Seniority List" of Federal Civil Servants by the Ironsi government, led to the British-instigated Northern counter-coup that brought Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon to power. Nigeria has been on the slide since then.

Any ethnic conflict now has its roots in the events recounted and the subsequent military kleptocracies which, with the backing of Northern Elders and some southern renegades, totally destroyed federalism. The current cosmetic arrangement will break at the seams again whenever Obasanjo goes. Maybe by then the Igbos will realise that there is a gulf of difference between posts ("marginalisation" baby-cry), and power. Before then, Igbo leaders should tell the truth about the 1966 coup and the civil war to their children, so that, hopefully, they will be free to think clearly about who their real friends are. They will then not blame the Yorubas when the North claims the next turn.

AA

Reply by Barry Mason

Dear AA,

I apologise for the delay in replying to your e-mail. I find your letter difficult to follow. You are talking about the coup organised by army officers at the beginning of 1966 which you say was "Igbo inspired". You list leaders who were killed or not killed to prove that Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba were the victims, and that Igbos were spared when the commanding officer of the army, Major General Ironsi, brought the situation under control.

Ironsi's advisor then drew up a plan to unify the civil services of the federal government and the regions—you refer to it as the "Seniority List". Igbos would certainly have benefited from this plan. In the northern towns there were protest marches in May 1966 against the civil servant list, and apparently the idea that the January coup was an "Igbo coup" began to circulate.

Since Igbos held a lot of top positions in government jobs in the north—appointed under British colonial rule—it was easy for mobs to be whipped up against Igbos and hundreds, possibly thousands, were killed.

Certainly, these were the events that led to the counter-coup in July in which Igbo officers in the army were killed and Lt. Colonel Gowon took power.

I cannot agree with you that the source of the ethnic conflict today in Nigeria has its roots in that period, or that it was just from that year that "Nigeria has been on the slide". Even if you are correct that the 1966 January coup and the Ironsi regime were organised on the basis of an ethnic Igbo conspiracy—or a "coalition of convenience between the Igbo East and the Hausa/Fulani North" as you put it—this was not the cause of the problem. As I stressed in my article, the regional divisions were organised by the British colonialists who encouraged regionalism in the old

tried and tested tradition of “divide and rule”.

The protracted and bloody process by which the British and European colonialists developed their control over Africa should be examined further. It involved breaking up the existing social relations and organising "chiefs" and "tribes" in conveniently large enough areas through which they could rule. As Basil Davidson explains it in his book *Modern Africa, A Social and Political History* (Longman, 1989, pp. 71-72):

"When the colonies were made, the new European rulers understood little or nothing about this long and complex development of African political units. They simply thought that Africans lived in 'tribes', even though nobody knew just what the word 'tribe' was supposed to mean. How could these unknown 'tribes' be controlled as cheaply as possible?...

“[The problem] was solved partly by using African interpreters, clerks and so on. But it was also solved by using Africans who were chiefs, or men ready to serve as appointed 'chiefs' and then giving orders through them.... Gradually, in many regions, this invention of chiefs had success; and two results followed. One was the combining together of several neighbouring communities under a single chief.... The other was the treating of these combined communities as though they had always formed a single people. Inventing chiefs, in short, led on to inventing tribes. A good deal of modern tribalism was born in this way."

Thus the bitter conflicts between tribalist elites that dominated Nigeria in the period after independence were not the result of ancient ethnic rivalries but the product of British rule. The real problem was that working class people and the poor masses had no political alternative to these elites. Instead of being able to oppose capitalism and strive for their own interests, uniting together against all the groups of wealthy political and military leaders—Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani—and their imperialist backers, they were pressurised to see things in ethnic/tribalist terms.

From the way you finish your letter, calling for Igbos to see Yorubas as their real friends against the North, it seems that you want to persist with the tribalist outlook created by British imperialism. In the present situation in Nigeria, with mounting ethnic conflicts, this is both dangerous and reactionary. I hope you will reconsider your response, study further the heritage of colonial

rule in Africa, and examine the socialist opposition to imperialism, which we seek to elaborate on our web site.



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