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### No Victor, No Vanquished:

#### The Resurgence of the Biafran Movement & its Interpretation Within Theories of War

Nnamdi Kanu was arrested for the first time on October 14, 2015, after previously founding the Igbo separatist organization The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in 2014 (Nkasi). After over a year of incarceration despite several court orders mandating his release, Kanu went on the run after skipping his court date scheduled sometime in 2017 (Salas-Rodriguez). His whereabouts were unknown until June 27, 2021, when he was finally apprehended again under rather unclear and legally murky circumstances. He's currently imprisoned in Nigeria, pending trial after being accused of encouraging and inciting violent behavior that harms and endangers the Nigerian federal government and its unification. His trial date has continuously been postponed and no one has seen or heard from him since his arrest (Obasi). Kanu's lawyer has been denied access to his client and many IPOB supporters and leaders fear the worst—that the Nigerian government, on par with its consistently violent response to separatist ideology, has preemptively killed Nnamdi Kanu before he was even allowed to stand trial. His most recent arrest is not only the focal point of this essay, but also questions the credibility of war when the group supposedly waging it has grievances that they feel mandate it, thus drawing into question the efficacy of St. Thomas Aquinas's Just War Theory among others.

To understand the support for the creation of an independent Igbo state of Biafra in eastern Nigeria, one must first reconcile this idea with the Nigerian Civil War that was fought between the Nigerian government and the Republic of Biafra in 1967. It started before that with British imperialism that ensued after the Berlin Conference. Because of Great Britain's haste to consolidate control of what is now northern Nigeria, specifically historically identified as the predominantly Muslim Sokoto Caliphate, they initiated indirect rule there, which allowed some autonomy, but did a mixture of this with direct rule in its southern counterpart. In Nigeria, geography has a direct tie to population and political power (Kobo). So even after the British granted Nigeria its independence, as many scholars agree, they neglected to lay the proper foundation for democratic self-sufficiency, and Nigeria was turned into a country of polarizing religious and ethnic factions because of its ill-suited man-made borders. The Igbo believed the north, which didn't want independence in the first place, was trying to initiate political hegemony of their region as they had under the British. A small group of Igbo militants launched a coup killing mostly northern government officials in 1966. The north retaliated by launching a genocide against the Igbo in their region, creating a mass migration that is partly responsible for the geo-ethnic divisions today. Biafra declared its independence, spurring a full-scale invasion and blockade from the federal government. 3,000-5,000 people died daily of starvation before Biafra finally surrendered on January 15, 1970 (Hurst). But Igbo people continue to be marginalized in politics. A study done by Lawrence Okwuosa and his colleagues found that the "reconciliation, reconstruction, and reintegration" promised to the Igbo after the war has still not been fully realized (867).

Kanu's recent arrest has direct ties to the evolution of the Biafra movement, which was agitated by poor governance, "a divisive political framework" that continuously falls victim to

the selfish whims of ethnic politics, religious beliefs, and familial values (Osaretin et al 265). It is now a joint effort between eastern Nigeria and the Igbo diaspora on a global scale (Daly), with tensions rising since 2015 (Forniès). The creation of Kanu's IPOB and another Igbo separatist organization, when coupled with the consistent persecution of separatist supporters, only continued to add fuel to the fire. In 2015-2016 alone, Nigerian security forces killed at least 150 Biafran activists during peaceful protests. The lack of Igbo representation in politics is reminiscent of pre-civil war conditions, with many Igbos openly sharing their distaste for how Nigeria's current leader, President Buhari, a Fulani Muslim from the north, has dealt with attacks against Igbo farmers at the hands of herdsmen from his tribe. This perceived display of ethnic favoritism has been heavily criticized (Obasi). The Nigerian government has continuously reacted violently towards any form of Igbo nationalism, for example, with Operation Python Dance II, which was supposed to be an intervention against kidnapping, a major problem in eastern Nigeria, but instead turned into a blatant attempt to suppress Biafran agitation via harassment and human rights violations perpetrated against activists and sympathizers by soldiers and the police (Campbell).

All of this conflict ultimately culminated in the root cause of Kanu's second arrest and the additional charges levied against him when the Eastern Security Network was created towards the end of 2020, the armed wing of IPOB. The Nigerian government immediately began taking military action against it in 2021. But the beginning of militant action by the IPOB only further illustrates these words from Samuel Daly, a writer for the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs: "Biafran activists seek not a seat at the table, but to overturn the table altogether." And with the launch of the ESN and the subsequent increase in violence on their end, one could say this plan was in motion. Prior to ESN, the IPOB had been the ones harassed

and harmed by Nigeria's security forces, but after, attacks against Nigerian security personnel by IPOB members became a regular occurrence and increased rapidly. The statistics cited by the Council on Foreign Relations purport that there was a 344% increase in deaths and a 59% increase in attacks in southeast Nigeria. Dozens of security personnel were killed (Nkasi). President Buhari responded to the situation by releasing a tweet that threatened to "deal with those who misbehave" in a language they understand and referenced the civil war to reinforce his point (Fornières). Consequently, Kanu, the face of the movement for Igbo secession, was identified by the federal government as the prominent agitator responsible for calling the members of IPOB to take up arms in ESN in the first place, and his fate was sealed by June of 2021.

But before this happened, Kanu had tried to use more peaceful means via the democratic process of a referendum to negotiate Biafran independence. However, much like Gandhi, who called for civil disobedience but supported violence in response to a threat on his life, Kanu similarly advised the Igbo people to begin arming themselves due to the Nigerian government's notoriously brutal approach to dissension, long before the creation of the ESN (Obasi). Kanu's eventual detainment was a foregone conclusion once he 'allegedly' (because there has been no official court ruling yet) began calling for equally as violent means as the federal government to get what he wanted. Kanu's ardent support for his movement is a clear parallel to Juergensmeyer's Cosmic War Theory, which explains how cosmic wars and the divisive mentality they thrive on can also evoke strong emotions that can be utilized to accomplish a specific objective. This is comparable to how Kanu and the IPOB purposely focus on issues that they know are relevant to Igbo people, such as the increasing poverty and unemployment rate in southeast Nigeria. They then go on to provide a hopeful salve for these wounds by discussing how an independent Republic of Biafra will fix everything via its eventual peace and prosperity

(Nkasi). But within the realm of the ‘us vs them’ ideology that dominates Cosmic War Theory, can this concept even be applied to Nigeria, and thus Biafra and its advocates, given the circumstances that birthed the ‘nation?’

Based on the conditions that led to the formation of Nigeria—the work of European countries who formed these man-made borders without consulting the actual inhabitants of the land first—the real culprit behind all of these problems is the British who rushed to consolidate their holdings by unifying what is now northern and southern Nigeria. It stands to reason that unless Igbos had historically clashed with the Sokoto Caliphate from which most northerners descend, then they were never enemies to begin with, thus invalidating the fervent ‘us vs them’ exigency that Kanu and his supporters rally behind. In fact, I would contend that because of this, the Igbo can’t really blame northerners for the latter’s geopolitical dominance that is contingent upon their large population. In short, because the root of this issue is so tangibly and obviously man-made, using Biafra as an example, it would seem that the application of Cosmic War rhetoric (which Kanu and his supporters constantly implement in their arguments) to similar situations just isn’t credible or feasible. Unlike noteworthy cosmic wars, such as the United States’ historically polarizing stance on issues like homosexuality and abortion, which are ultimately tied to religious faith, a more debatable and dubious concept to dissect that oscillates between the influence of what is divine and what is man-made, Nigeria’s current state of affairs has a very plain source that is obviously to blame for the creation of these problems. These ideas would provide evidence for what some commentators call the Igbo Problem—because had the Igbo not initiated that fateful coup in 1966, which was based on a set of conditions made by the British, it could be theorized that they wouldn’t have all these problems today (Nwuke).

Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the legitimate concerns that the Igbo continue to have today or negate the rather interesting circumstances that precipitated the Nigerian government's most recent arrest of Nnamdi Kanu—the violence that occurred because of the ESN wing of IPOB. Kanu was initially nonviolent in his actions, simply espousing his ideas via his radio station Radio Biafra, explaining to national leaders that he only sought self-determination for the Igbo. Before ESN's actions, Kanu was trying to do things democratically by gaining support to start a referendum for Igbo independence in congress, and as Chinyere Obasi of the Harvard Political Review muses, "Votes can't solve everything, especially in a nation where a free and fair election is more fantasy than fact, but it would be a start." However, with no support in politics to begin with, because of how isolated the Igbo *are* in politics, how is Kanu supposed to make this a reality? So regardless of the validity of Kanu and his supporters' claim to independence, it could still be argued that before ESN took up arms, the government's indifference to the plight of Igbos who continue to feel like marginalized second-class citizens without a voice was equally as violent. Similar to Gandhi's theorized interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, when overlooking certain aspects, Kanu *did* try and execute what the former deems to be the "right actions" of war: demonstrating fearlessness and perseverance in the face of the Nigerian government's antagonistic tendencies and remaining non-violent until provoked after turning the cheek one too many times. But even if Gandhi's theory helps Kanu's cause just a little, the ESN's actions allegedly at Kanu's command are truly inadmissible based on St. Thomas Aquinas's Just War Theory—and sets a precedent for other seemingly man-made wars.

The most relevant of Aquinas's three conditions for just war in this situation is that war must be waged by a proper authority. This brings into question what a proper authority even

looks like in the aftermath of rampant imperialism. Nigeria was not 'Nigeria' until the British told them to be, but who were the British to do this in the first place? It stands to reason that the proper authorities we're familiar with today, especially those created as a byproduct of imperialism, are nothing more than arbitrary boundaries that were crudely and forcibly made. Kanu's frustration is understandable, his cause somewhat inspiring, and his commitment to it even at the cost of his freedom, commendable. All this withstanding, it really is not the cosmic war he thinks it is, and based on the interpretation of what a proper authority is, hardly considered to be just per Aquinas's standards. This does not eradicate the plight of the Igbo, but weakens the necessity of the actions that led to Kanu's arrest in the first place.

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