

The Questions

Issues in Contemporary Ethics: Secession

At a Glance

The latter part of the 20th century saw a vast majority of former colonies around the world achieve independence. Within the newly independent nation-states there were many cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups (among others) who sought to achieve their own form of independence through secession, challenging and contesting the borders as they were drawn by colonists. This brief will examine secessionism and the ability of cultural groups to exercise sovereignty.



Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, former leader of the Biafra Republic inspecting Biafran troops (Whiteman, 2011).

Case Study: The Nigerian Civil War

The Nigerian Civil War was a civil war in Nigeria fought between the Government of Nigeria and the secessionist state of Biafra from 6 July 1967 to 15 January 1970. The secessionist Republic of Biafra represented nationalist aspirations of the Igbo people, whose leadership felt they could no longer coexist with the Northern-dominated federal government. Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960 and the civil war began in 1967 but the 7 years between independence and the civil war were fraught with ethnic conflicts that included pogroms against the Igbo people in Northern Nigerian. These pogroms killed an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 Igbo and caused more than two million to flee persecution by going to the Eastern Region of the country, historically known as the Igbo homeland (Whiteman, 2011). Biafran independence was announced on the 30th of May 1967 and the Nigerian Government launched attacks on the 6th of July. The civil war lasted 3 years resulting in up to 3 million casualties, caused by conflict as well as blockades that the Nigerian government implemented against Biafra. (Whiteman, 2011).

Implications

In creating the Nigerian borders in 1914, the British did not consider how the borders for the new country cut across the 250+ cultural groups in the country, of which the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa were the most significant. Additionally, the divide-and-rule strategy that the British utilized in colonizing Nigeria had significant impact on the relationship between the various groups. While the Igbo were quicker to assimilate to British rule, the Hausas were more reluctant to do and as such were suspicious of Igbos who had immersed themselves in the British institutions. These fears were exacerbated by the British as it allowed them to rule the country without fear of the groups working together to resist. The Nigerian Civil War illustrated how countries are often allowed or even encouraged to wage war against secessionist forces as a show of sovereignty often with no recourse for the mentioned secessionist

Statehood

What is the constitutive theory of statehood?

What is the declaratory theory of statehood?

Which of these two theories

is more prominent in the international system?

Decolonisation

Should decolonisation include the creation of new borders?

Should decolonised nations continue the use of systems created by their colonial masters?

Secession vs. Decolonisation

What are the differences between secession and decolonisation?

Can decolonization and secession happen concurrently?

Why is secession treated differently than decolonization?

Further Reading

Cohen, M. (2006)
Secession: International
Law Perspectives.

Wellman, H.C. (2005)
A Theory of Secession.

Adichie, N.C. (2007)
Half of A Yellow Sun.

Achankeng, F (2015)
Nationalism and Intra-
State Conflicts in the
Postcolonial World

Seymour, M. (2007)
Secession as a Remedial
Right

Pavković, A. & Radan, P.
(2013).
Creating New States:
Theory and Practice of
Secession

De Vries, L., Pierre. E, &
Schomerus, M. (2019)
Secessionism in African
Politics : Aspiration,
Grievance, Performance,
Disenchantment.

Costa, J. (2010)
On Theories of Secession :
Minorities, Majorities, and
the Multinational State.

forces. This begs the following questions of who can lay claim to sovereignty and how do you go about asserting your sovereignty if the international community frowns upon it? Additionally, when is it just to secede, if at all? Do groups have this right of self-determination, and if so, what kind of groups?

Comparing Perspectives

In this series, one rationalist ethics theory and one alternative ethics theory are explored to present contrasting views on issues and questions raised.

Contractualism

Contractualism is an ethical theory that is focused on contracts, social and signed. Contractualist ethics judges actions taken by these parties based on whether they are in-line with the agreed upon values in a contract. With regard to the Biafran secession, a contractualist would point to the agreement signed unto by the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa at the time of independence that removed the right to secession clause and hold all parties accountable for making sure that the agreement is honoured. As such, the subsequent secession attempt(s) by the Igbo might be viewed by a contractualist as ethically unjustifiable. On the other hand, a contractualist might also argue that contracts are malleable and are not static. In other words, challenges to social contracts are often needed in order to ensure they accurately reflect the will of the people governed by it and the efforts of the Igbo people to secede represents a genuine attempt to make sure injustice does not prevail in the country.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism is an alternative ethical theory that is concerned with power relations perpetuated by colonialist structures that are still in use today. In the scenario of Nigerian independence, the power struggle that took place mostly after independence is part of the legacy of colonialism. In colonising Nigeria, the British created a system that exacerbated ethnic tension and conflicts and indirectly contributed to the persecution of the Igbos. As such, a postcolonial ethicist could argue that the Igbo did not have an obligation to continue to adhere to a system that had negatively affected them. In line with this, a postcolonial ethicist could argue that secession was an ethically justifiable action by the Igbo in order to escape the colonial structures that threatened their existence and did not allow for their self-determination.

Questions for Reflections

Despite the Biafran War coming to an end 50 years ago, secession still remains a relevant topic in the international system with various independence movements in Catalonia, the Ambazonia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and various parts of North America. The international system has stayed quiet on many of these, opting on most occasions to retain the borders of nation-states, indirectly legitimizing the violent actions that are taken by the parent state that are looking to crush any opposition to their rule. This begs the question of what makes a former colony different from a cultural group looking to be independent? Additionally, is secession different from a former colony seeking independence? If so, what makes them different? Finally, does the system of ignoring secessionist claims lead to human rights abuse by a government looking to “exert its sovereignty”? What relevant examples of this exist today?

Tamuno, T. (1970). Separatist Agitations in Nigeria since 1914. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 8(4), 563-584.

Whiteman, K. (2011, November 27). Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu. Retrieved June 27, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/27/chukwuemeka-odumegwu-ojukwu>