

Ibo Refuses To Participate In Biafra Secession War

KAMPALA, Uganda—Upahbi Asika is a gifted former UCLA graduate student who has refused to follow his fellow Ibo tribesmen into secession from Nigeria.

In a civil war, in fact, he has been a stalwart supporter of the federal Nigerian government, opposed to his friends, relatives and even brothers on the other side. The government has used him as the administrator of Enugu and other Ibo areas captured by the federal troops from secessionist Biafra. It also has used him as a member of the federal delegation to the abortive Kampala peace conference that tried but failed to end the civil war that has torn Nigeria for a year.

To cynics, Asika is the federal government's "Ibo in the window." To Biafran Iboes, he is their first quint. To Nigerians, he is the hope that a united country can somehow emerge from the chaos and hatred of war.

ACTUALLY Asika is far more complex than any of these cliched descriptions. He is a brilliant student who feels so rational that he is emotional about his rationality. His belief and confidence in the force of logic and reason have kept him on the federal side despite all the emotional entreaties of his fellow Iboes, including his mother, brothers and sisters.

This does not mean he is a cold, hard man. Far from it. The 32-year-old Asika is a warm and friendly companion with quick laughter. He has been hurt by his decisions and the reactions to them. But he believes in his ideas.

Asika returned to Nigeria from Los Angeles in December, 1965, to teach political science at the University of Ibadan. He had spent four years at UCLA, where he was known as Tony Asika, and won a master's degree in political science in 1963. He completed all work for his doctorate but his dissertation before returning to Nigeria.

Asika came on the eve of the coup that brought down the corrupt civilian government on Jan. 15, 1966. Maj. Gen. Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Ibo, took over the government then.

Like most young educated Nigerians who were more honest and radical than their civilian rulers, Asika supported the first coup, though he had strong reservations. He described these reservations to his students, asking them, for example, "Who will guard the guardians?"

"Ahhh, you're a wet blanket," the students all said," Asika recalls. "It's hard to be rational in a situation like this."

SIX MONTHS later, Northern officers of the Nigerian army assassinated Ironsi in a second coup, and Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon took over the government. "Upah!" Asika heard from his Ibo friends. "They are killing all the Iboes."

But Asika refused to panic. As a political scientist, he reasoned that if the Northern officers wanted to take over the government, they could do so easily, without killing Ibo civilians. He was right, though the soldiers did kill a number of Ibo officers.

During the summer recess many Ibo teachers decided to leave Ibadan University and teach in Nigeria's Eastern region, the Ibo homeland. Asika refused to join them.

There were two reasons. First, he believed that several Ibo intellectuals had been preaching secessionist ideas for some time and were now raising the specter of anti-Ibo hatred to push their ideas along.

Second, Asika had been hired as a teacher, and he felt a moral duty to stay with his students. "As long as one student was there," he says, "I would stay. When that last student left, then I could go home."

Even after Sept. 29, 1963, when thousands of Ibo civilians were slaughtered in Northern Nigeria, Asika saw no rational reason to flee for home, as most Iboes did.

For one thing, Asika says, the killings had been provoked by Iboes who had killed Northerners living in the Ibo towns of Eastern Nigeria.

Moreover, Asika goes on, the federal soldiers and police moved in and tried to stop the killings in the North soon after they began. This convin-

ed him that there still was hope for a united Nigeria.

By the time the Eastern Region seceded on May 30, 1967, as the Independent Republic of Biafra, Asika was the last Ibo

teacher left at the University of Ibadan.

WHEN FEDERAL troops captured Ouloha a few months ago, Asika had hoped that his family would stay behind so they could join him. But, he says

softly, "they had all gone." He has no idea where they are or what has happened to them.

Last October the federal government asked Asika to serve as administrator of Enugu, the captured Biafran capital.

"My first reaction was, why me?" says Asika, who finally accepted the job despite the advice of his wife. As he herself, she feared his life might now be in danger, an obvious target for Biafran assassins.

But he relished the idea of a political scientist like himself getting a chance to carry out his political science ideas.

Asika was not blinded himself to the horrors of the war and the pain it has caused his

Ibo tribesmen in Biafra. But he says, "Civil wars are always terrible. The closer the people are, the more intense the conflict." Then he turns to a friend of his, another political scientist. "Isn't that

right?" he asks. His friend replies, "Yes, it's on page 83," and names a well known political science textbook.

Asika, the rational man, laughs at himself.

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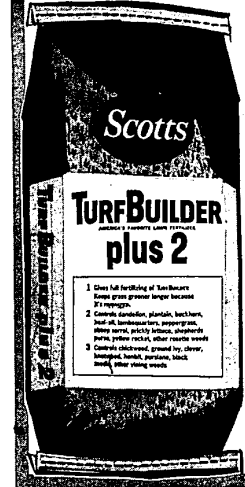
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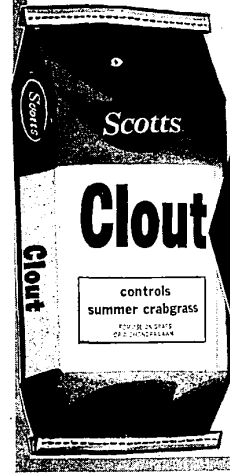
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