Reflective Statement - Claudia Dessanti

The instructions for this assignment were to write an essay about an aspect of African decolonization within its international context. With such broad guidelines, it was difficult to decide where to even begin narrowing down a research question. Moreover, African history tends to be less well-documented than other areas of history. I knew that finding primary sources would be particularly difficult.

I began by reading through my notes from the course, asking myself what had left me wanting to know more. We had briefly studied the Nigeria-Biafra War, and I had been surprised (and rather ashamed) that I had never heard of Biafra. I began to think about how the war had been perceived and understood outside the African continent at the time. I then went back to the syllabus and accessed Douglas Anthony’s article about how the Biafrans framed their struggle.1 I used his footnotes as a starting point for my research.

After selecting and reading many of Anthony’s sources, I became interested in how the pro-Biafra lobby in the United States attempted to influence official American policy, and what role the Biafrans themselves played in that process. I knew that it would be difficult to collect primary evidence, especially given that lobbyists were largely unsuccessful. Hence, I decided to look through Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) archives online. If the government faced pressure from lobbyists, it would likely be mentioned there.

Searching FRUS documents ended up refocusing my research in an unanticipated direction. In one telegram, the State Department noted that the Nigerians were complaining

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about a double standard in the American response to the secessions in Nigeria and the Congo.\(^2\) I began to think more about the connection between Katanga and Biafra (two attempted secessions in recently independent Africa). What role did the analogy with Katanga play in the international response to the Nigerian crisis? Did local actors evoke the comparison consistently to influence foreign governments?

I turned to radio. Professor MacDonald had informed us that we had access to English translations of radio transcripts from around the world through the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). I selected daily reports from Nigeria, narrowed the time frame to the months of the war, and used the keyword “Katanga.” As I went through radio transcripts, I realized that Katanga was not the only analogy relevant to this conflict, and that the Biafrans drew analogies more frequently than the Nigerians via radio. Finding a variety of analogies made me broaden my research questions: How did the Nigerian and Biafran leaderships compare their situation to comparable situations to legitimize their claims? How did foreign governments and media react? Did they employ analogies of their own to defend certain policy preferences?

I went back to my original secondary sources, did a general search on the library website, and browsed the shelves at Robarts and Graham libraries. None of the secondary sources answered my research questions directly, but they were useful indirectly. In some cases, they contained examples of analogies that local and foreign actors used. They also gave me context about who supported which side and why, and key names and dates that I could use to search primary documents. For example, John Stremlau writes that Gowon made the case for Nigerian unity to African diplomats at a briefing session on 24 April 1967 (months before the war had

begun). This suggested to me that I should broaden the time frame when searching primary documents.

Chima Korieh’s mentions that the American Jewish Congress actively supported Biafra. I wondered whether an implicit analogy with the persecution of Jews was influencing their stance. After doing a general Google search, I found a memorandum called “The Tragedy of Biafra,” which revealed that the connection with the Holocaust was in fact made explicitly.

I knew that if the Biafrans and Nigerians had attempted to elicit foreign sympathies, they would have gone through foreign media outlets. Therefore, I listed major Western newspapers that I knew were reliable. I spoke to a reference librarian at Robarts, who informed me about the historical newspapers research guide on the library website. I soon realized that using a ProQuest general search was more efficient than searching within each newspaper archive separately. This gave me results from newspapers that were not originally on my list, such as *The Globe and Mail*.

By now, I had a list of keywords to filter my searches, including Katanga, Vietnam, Israel, Congo, analogy, Balkan, Holocaust, and American Revolution. Often, when a newspaper article contained one analogy it also contained more. Thus, as I did more research, my list of keywords grew.

In addition to media sources, I examined British, French, and American government documents to identify what role analogies played in the reasoning and justification of policy responses. For British documents, I used the House of Commons debate volumes found in

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Government Publications at Robarts. To save time, I used the index to find debates about “Nigeria,” then skimmed through volumes 749 to 794 looking for proper nouns, which often indicated analogies with other countries or wars. For the United States, I used FRUS online archives. For France, I primarily used a book called *La France et le Biafra* (requested from storage in Government Publications).

Furthermore, by physically browsing the shelves at Robarts, I found an excellent sourcebook - Kirk-Greene’s *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria*. It provides 346 primary documents from the war, including press releases, speeches by various African leaders, and interviews with leaders of both warring parties.

Once I had collected enough examples of analogies, I thought about how to organize them into a theoretical framework. I spoke to Professor MacDonald, who suggested I look into communication studies’ literature about the use of analogies. I started with a search on the library website: “historical analogies foreign policy.” I came across an article by Michael Desch. Since it is a recent article on the subject, I figured it would contain a good literature review. I used the footnotes to find other useful sources, and from there I began to read broadly on the subject, incorporating sources from psychology, linguistics, and history.

When I presented my research to the class, my classmate Daviel had suggested I situate my findings in a broader context of how analogies have been used in African history. He recommended a book by Michael Eze that discusses the tendency of foreign powers to define Africa according to the “other.” But I realized that my research was not only about *others* defining Africa with analogies; it was also about Africans doing it themselves. This made me

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think of an article from our syllabus by Jean-François Bayart about the theory of extraversion, and I was able to draw the connection in my essay. For all authors not found on the syllabus, I did a Google search to verify the reputation and reliability of their work.