

**THE IMPACT OF NIGERIA CIVIL WAR ON BIAFRAN CHILDREN WITH
ONITSHA AS A CASE STUDY**

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BENIN CITY

MAY, 2024

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by NWAKAMMA CHIZARAM MIRABEL in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

Mr. Daniel A. Orobator
Supervisor

Dr. Frank Ikponmwosa
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Date-----

Date-----

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God Almighty for the infinite love and wisdom that has led me through this journey. I also dedicate this to my ever-supportive parents and siblings I am grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my sincere gratitude for the priceless value of education which should be accessible to all. My heartfelt thanks extend to Almighty God, who steadfastly supported me throughout my academic journey, serving as my constant source of strength.

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Grateful to my Friends, Mabel , Success Queen Miyepre, Ogechi Genevieve, Ruth Chioma, May God's blessings encompasses all of you.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The Nigerian civil war often referred to as the Biafra war, is deeply ranked among the most tragic events that have left an indelible mark on the sand of time, in the historical of human existence especially with reference to the political landscape known as Nigeria. It remains an important and emotive episode that contributed in shaping the history of Nigerian to what we know at present. The war was a culmination of an uneasy peace and stability that had plagued the Nigerian state from independence in 1960.¹ The two and half years (July 6th, 1967 - 14th February, 1970) was greeted with a sudden, though highly anticipated declaration of independence by the eastern region of Nigeria, under the name; “The Republic of Biafra”, under the leadership of Late LT. General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. This is the generation of the war that almost terminated the political existence of Nigeria as a sovereign independent state. Upon that declaration, the Federal government moved to stop the disintegration of the country through secession; the action which resulted in an all-out war between the two factions. Although the civil war was fought from 1967 to 1970, the conflict had far reaching ramifications on the country both in terms of the geopolitical changes and the lives of its citizens. Among those most profoundly affected by the war were the innocent and vulnerable children especially in Igbo land, including Onitsha children.

The civil war characterized by intense fighting, extreme food shortage and widespread displacement, created an environment of unprecedented hardship for children who found themselves caught in the crossfire.² The city of Onitsha located in Anambra state of Nigeria was one of the main theatre of the war. Since before, during and after the war Onitsha has been part of Biafra land and one of the major cities in Biafra. It would therefore not be surprising that Onitsha children were impacted by the war. This study delves into the multifaceted repercussions of the conflict on the Biafra children; a generation whose formative years were marred by the trauma and devastation of war.

The study explores the physical, emotional and psychological toll exacted on Biafra children during the war and its enduring impact on their lives, as some were forcefully recruited into the army for the singular purpose of prosecuting the war (Child Soldiers). Those who by circumstances of age and/or physique were exempted from force recruitment, were victims killed, mayhem, diseased, abducted, kidnapped, declared missed, some others were indirectly affected whereby their parents or guardians were killed or incapacitated due to the war.³ Thus, this brutal conflict, stemming from political, socio-economic and ethnic tension had profound consequences on various aspect of society and perhaps, none more tragic and poignant than its impact on the children of Biafra.⁴

The unfortunate aspect of Nigerian civil war historiography is that the Onitsha children and their plight during the war has not been properly given academic account. Through a comprehensive analysis of historical accounts, first-hand testimonies and scholarly

researches, this study seeks to shed light on the challenges faced by the aforementioned and the coping mechanisms they employed to survive such harrowing period. Understanding the effects of the civil war on Biafra children is not only a critical historical inquiry but also a testament to the resilience and strength of a generation that endured unspeakable hardship. By comprehending the experiences of those children, we can gain insights into the broader consequences of armed conflicts on most vulnerable members of the society and hence, work towards a more compassionate and informed approach to addressing their needs.

Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this research is to examine the impact of the Nigerian civil war on Biafran children, Onitsha as a case study, while the objectives includes:

1. To understand the geography and people of Onitsha.
2. To examine the Genesis of the Nigerian civil war.
3. To assess the general welfare of the people of Onitsha.
4. To examine the psychological impact of the Nigerian civil war on Onitsha Children (who are now Adults).

Scope of the Study

The study examines the impact of the Nigerian civil war on Biafra children. It focuses on Onitsha children and looks at the socio-political, economic and other impacts of the war on this vulnerable population. This work shall span between the 1967 (the year that mark the beginning of the war) to 1970 (the year that mark end of the Nigerian civil war). However,

the historical antecedents that led to the war will be examined, even beyond the period identified above. This is to ensure a detail understanding of the background as well as the causes of the Nigeria civil war.

Methodology

In the course Of this research, a descriptive historical methodology will be adopted. This means that relevant data and information will be gathered from two main sources, including the primary and secondary sources.

Primary Source

The primary data that will be used for this study will be gotten specifically from oral interview. An interview will be conducted from among residents of Onitsha, who could be traders, Ex-Service men, Lecturers, farmers, lawyers, traditional rulers and titled chiefs, who experienced the Nigeria civil war and as such, can provide reliable firsthand information about the happenings during and after of the war.

Secondary Sources

For secondary sources, consultations will be made on textbooks, newspapers, scholarly articles, academic journals, internet and periodic materials. Information from these sources would help the researcher to supplement and guide the information obtained from primary source, thus have a comprehension and objective research.

Literature Review

The subject matter of warfare and the traumas of war on especially on children and the vulnerable is sensitive phenomenon that more often than not, generate global attention in human society. Civil war has become one of the practical experiences of national existence, as different countries of the world have at different historical times been plunged into internal war, leading to self-inflicted pains and untold destructions. In Nigeria particularly, the civil war of 1967 – 1970 remains one of the major tragic events that have and are still threatening the political existence and national unity of the country. The memory of the reality of this war remains a major impediment to national building as well as the actualization of the long advocated project of one Nigeria, even till present. As such, several scholars from diverse fields of study have been attracted to channel their write-ups and academic contributions towards unraveling the background, causes as well as the impact of Nigeria civil war.

This accounts for the availability of myriad of literatures on this subject matter; some of which are published in peer-reviewed or scholarly journals, while others are published as edited volumes, books, biographies or speech collections. Also, enkindled by a burning desire to make sense of what happened during the war so as to be better equipped to confront this traumatic memory, share lessons learned, and preserve its legacies, many Nigerian writers such as Adichie, Achebe, Okparanta, and many others, have reconstructed the narratives about the Nigeria-Biafra War in fiction books and other forms of artistic works.

This segment of the study therefore reviews some of these literatures available on the background, causes and effects of the Nigeria civil war, with emphasis on its impact on children in Igbo land using Onitcha as a case study.

"The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend" by Frederick Forsyth offers a detailed historical account of the events leading up to the Nigerian Civil War, drawing on firsthand experiences and interviews with key figures involved in the conflict. The book examines the political, economic, and social factors that contributed to the escalation of tensions between the central government and the secessionist Biafran authorities.⁵

Maxwell A. Oditta in his work entitled, "The Nigerian Civil War: Causes, Strategies, and Lessons Learnt" provides a comprehensive analysis of the causes of the Nigerian Civil War, emphasizing the deep-seated ethnic tensions, political instability, and economic disparities that characterized Nigeria's post-independence era.⁶ The book explores how these factors culminated in the secessionist bid by the Eastern Region and the subsequent outbreak of conflict.

Max Siollun's work, "Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)" delves into the complex interplay between oil politics, military coups, and ethnic tensions in Nigeria during the prelude to the Civil War. The book highlights the role of resource allocation and economic disparities in shaping political alliances and power struggles, ultimately leading to the eruption of armed conflict.⁷

In a similar vein, Alexander Madiebo in his work, "Nigeria: The Politics of Biafra 1967-1970" provides an insider's perspective on the Nigerian Civil War, drawing from his experience as a senior military officer in the Biafran army. The book offers valuable insights into the grievances of the Igbo people, the failure of political negotiations, and the military strategies employed by both sides during the conflict.⁸

"The Making of Nigeria: The British Colonial Legacy" by Godfrey N. Uzoigwe contextualizes the Nigerian Civil War within the broader historical legacy of British colonial rule and its impact on ethnic relations and state formation in Nigeria.⁹ The book examines how colonial policies and administrative structures laid the groundwork for the ethnic rivalries and regional disparities that contributed to the outbreak of conflict.

Supporting this view, John Campbell in his work entitled, "Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink" offers a nuanced analysis of contemporary Nigerian politics and its historical antecedents, including the factors that precipitated the Nigerian Civil War. The book explores the role of political leadership, ethnic mobilization, and external influences in shaping Nigeria's post-independence trajectory and the challenges of nation-building.¹⁰ These scholarly works collectively provide a multifaceted understanding of the background to the Nigerian Civil War, shedding light on the complex web of political, economic, and social dynamics that underpinned one of Africa's most significant conflicts.

Furthermore, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, "Half of a Yellow Sun" provides insights into the experiences of Igbo children during the Nigerian Civil War. Through the

perspectives of various characters, including children, the novel vividly portrays the devastating impact of the conflict on families, communities, and individuals, highlighting the trauma and resilience of Igbo children amidst the turmoil.¹¹

More so, Sussan Schofield's memoir, "Surviving Biafra: A Nigerwife's Story" offers a personal account of her family's experiences during the Nigerian Civil War, including the challenges faced by Igbo children in the war-torn region of Biafra. The book documents the struggles for survival, displacement, and loss endured by children and their families amidst the backdrop of conflict and humanitarian crisis.¹²

Uzochukwu Amakom in 2015, conducted a research on "The Impact of the Nigerian Civil War on Igbo Children: A Case Study of Enugu State". In this academic study, Amakom examines the long-term effects of the Nigerian Civil War on Igbo children, with a specific focus on Enugu State. Through interviews, surveys, and historical analysis, the study explores the psychological, social, and educational challenges faced by Igbo children as a result of their experiences during the conflict and its aftermath.¹³

"Remembering Biafra: Narrative, History, and Memory of the Nigerian Civil War" edited by Chuks Okereke and Forsythe Nwokedi was also reviewed in the course of this study. This edited volume features essays and personal narratives that illuminate the impact of the Nigerian Civil War on various aspects of Igbo society, including children. Contributors examine the ways in which memories of the war continue to shape identities, cultural practices, and collective consciousness among Igbo children and their communities.¹⁴

Also, a research article entitled, "The Aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War on the Education of Igbo Children" by Obioma C. Nwaorgu and Ifeoma M. Amobi is considered resourceful for the purpose of this study. Nwaorgu and Amobi investigates the educational challenges faced by Igbo children in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. The study explores issues such as disrupted schooling, lack of resources, and institutional barriers that hindered the educational development and opportunities of Igbo children in post-war Nigeria.¹⁵ This work, together with several others, offer valuable insights into the experiences and enduring legacy of the Nigerian Civil War on Igbo children, highlighting the profound and multifaceted impacts of conflict on individuals, families, and communities.

Moreover, Remi Adekoya's article, "Children of the Nigerian Civil War: The Forgotten Victims" sheds light on the experiences of children during the Nigerian Civil War, highlighting the pervasive impact of violence, displacement, and deprivation on their lives.¹⁶ While not specific to Onitsha, the article underscores the vulnerability of Igbo children and the long-term consequences of the war on their physical and psychological well-being.

"The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: A Case Study of the Nigerian Civil War" by Peace C. Eze is also considered relevant for this study. Eze's research examines the effects of armed conflict, including the Nigerian Civil War, on children's health, education, and social development. While not focused exclusively on Onitsha, the study provides insights into the broader challenges faced by Igbo children in conflict-affected regions, including disruptions to schooling and exposure to trauma.¹⁷

The UNICEF's report released in the year 2000, with the title, "The Forgotten Victims: Children in Conflict" explores the experiences of children in various conflict zones worldwide, including Nigeria during the Civil War era. Though not specific to Onitsha, the report documents the widespread impact of armed conflict on children's rights, emphasizing the need for humanitarian interventions and long-term support to address their needs and vulnerabilities.¹⁸

Similarly, Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's book, "Onitsha: A Town of Surprises" provides a historical and cultural overview of Onitsha, highlighting its significance as a commercial and cultural hub in Igbo society. While not specifically addressing the consequences of the Civil War on children, the book offers insights into the socio-economic dynamics of Onitsha and its resilience amidst historical challenges, including the war.¹⁹

Also, "The Children of Ogbunike: A True Story of a Nigerian Village" by John H. Nkwoh is an ethnographic study which offers a glimpse into the lives of children in a Nigerian village, exploring their experiences within the broader context of societal change and historical events, including the Nigerian Civil War.²⁰ While not focused on Onitsha, the book provides valuable perspectives on the challenges and resilience during and after wars.

The work, "Children and Armed Conflict: Cross-Cultural Perspectives" edited by Kathleen Kostelny and Geoffrey O'Brian was also reviewed in this study. This edited volume examines the impact of armed conflict on children across different cultural contexts, including Nigeria during the Civil War era.²¹ While not focusing solely on Igbo children, the

book provides comparative insights into the vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms, and long-term consequences experienced by children affected by conflict.

These works offer valuable insights into the broader consequences of armed conflict on children's lives and well-being and are considered relevant and resourceful by the researcher for the purpose of the study, as they provide in-depth knowledge of the subject matter of this study. However, it is disheartening that specific literatures on the impacts of the Nigerian Civil War on Igbo children with a particular emphasis on the populations in Onitsha are undeniably limited. It is on this ground therefore, that this study is considered most significant, as it tends to fill the identified academic gap in this area.

Chapterization

In order to actualize the aims and objectives of the study, the research work is organized into five chapters.

Chapter One: Background to the Study

This chapter gives an overview of the entire work. It gives insight into the general issues of concern which necessitated the study. This chapter provides the foundational framework upon which the research work is built. The chapter covers the introduction, aims and objectives of the study, scope of the study, research methodology and literature review.

Chapter Two: Geographical Location and People of Onitsha.

An examination of the geographical location of Onitsha, being the study area as well the people who make up the Onitshans is the focus of this chapter.

Chapter Three: The Genesis of the Nigeria Civil War.

This chapter will present the historical background to the Nigeria civil war and also certain events that made the war an inevitable reality in Nigerian political space at such a period of time.

Chapter Four: The Impact of the Nigeria Civil War on Onitcha Children.

This chapter will assess the consequences of the Nigerian Civil war with emphasis on both socio-political and economic impacts of the war on Igbo children, with Onitcha as a case study.

Chapter Five: Conclusion.

This chapter presents the overall summary of the entire research work.

Endnotes

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17. Peace C. Eze, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: A Case Study of the Nigerian Civil War*, (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013) pp. 28 - 30.
18. UNICEF, "The Forgotten Victims: Children in Conflict" (New York: United Nations Children's Fund, 2000) p. 9.
19. Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, *Onitsha: A Town of Surprises*, (Lagos, Nigeria: Malthouse Press Limited 1991) pp. 11 - 12.
20. John H. Nkwoh, *The Children of Ogbunike: A True Story of a Nigerian Village*, (Bloomington, Indiana, USA: BestBow Press, 2015) p. 17.
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CHAPTER TWO

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND PEOPLE OF ONITSHA

Geography of Onitsha

Onitsha is situated approximately 150 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. It is located on the bank of the River Niger at approximately 60N and 70E. It was founded in the 17th Century and the original settlement was at Ndende on a low river terrace standing 30 feet above the river flood or 100 to 150 feet above sea level.¹ Originally, Onitsha has acted as an entry port between the Delta ports along the Atlantic Ocean and other trading stations on the upper Niger and Benue Rivers in the interior.² During the high flood season (between July and October), the Niger is navigable from the Delta ports past Lokoja to Baro but during the low water season (January to June), Onitsha comes into its own as an entry port where bulk cargo from the Delta ports and products from northern Nigeria are trans-shipped.³

Between 1630 and 1680, the Beninese founding fathers moved to Benin and established in Onitsha as soon as they crossed the Niger River. Many people refer to Onitsha as the "waterside town."⁴ When Macgregor Laird's trading expedition from the Niger landed in Onitsha in 1857, the community had a modest market held every four days, comparable to what was available in other Igbo communities. Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a freed slave who oversaw the Church Missionary Society team, accompanied the voyage. Later on, there was the Roman Catholic mission. Onitsha's first colleges and schools were founded by

these two Christian religious organizations.⁵ The 1860 founding of the Central Primary School in Odoakpu in Onitsha was a direct product of this missionary activities.

Historically, Onitsha has exercised a great deal of political, economic, and social influence over the surrounding area, including the neighboring towns of Obosi, Nkpor, Oba, Ogidi, Nkwelle Ezunaka, and Umunya. It should be noted that these towns existed before the founding of Onitsha.

Onitsha expanded inland, which led to the development of new residential areas along major arterial roads including Awka Road, Oguta Road, New Market Road, Old Market Road, Iweka Road, Modebe Avenue, Venn Road, Court Road, Park Road, and Old and New Cemetery Roads. The planned new residential layouts also include the GRA, American Quarters, Fegge, Woliwo, Odoakpu, and Omagba; the indigenes mostly reside in Inland Town.

The main market, one among many, is located in the center of Onitsha's business district. The physical and population growth of the town was always aided by the entrance of traders from Cameroon and all around the country. People are still drawn to the Onitsha market because of the low prices of commodities, the variety of things, the accessibility of the town, and the affordability of transportation to and from it. Advantageously situated on the Niger River, Onitsha is the only entry point between southeast and southwest Nigeria due to the Niger Bridge. When Onitsha market started to operate every day during the British colonial era in southern Nigeria, the town and market expanded rapidly at the same time.

Over the last 300 or 400 years, Onitsha became the commercial hub of Nigeria, the focal point of canoe traffic bringing yams, beans, rice, maize, and imported merchandise from the upper Niger, the Benue valley, and the coast through Benin, Warri, and Sapele.⁶ Onitsha has historically been more of a collecting and distributing center than it is of a production center, and this explains its vast trading area, which includes places as distant as Kano, Sokoto, Maiduguri, and Jos.

Onitsha also grew to become a major industrial, educational, religious, and administrative center. As an industrial center it now houses the largest number of industries in Anambra State. As a major religious center, it has the largest cathedrals for both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, east of the Niger.⁷ And as an administrative centre, Onitsha houses two local governments and has high courts and other government institutions. Onitsha's growth and trading roots have resulted in cosmopolitanism, with non-indigenes accounting for more than 70 percent of the total population.

Traditions of Origin of Onitsha People

Onitsha people are said to have migrated from the Benin Empire towards the middle of the 16th century as a result of a wave of unrest, war, and displacement unleashed by the Islamic movement from North Africa.⁸ However, just the same way it is with the traditions of origin of other tribes in Nigeria, there are different versions and perspectives of the tradition of origin of Onitsha and Onitsha people. One version their history has it that it was during

their passage through the outskirts of Ile-Ife that they acquired the name Onitsha, a corruption of Orisha Udo.

Another version maintains that their migration to the East of the Niger has to do with a misunderstanding that arose between the Onitsha family and Oba Esigie (1404-1550), following the slighting of their shrine, Udo, by the Oba. According to the legend, it was customary for newly installed Oba to pay homage to all important shrines in the Benin Kingdom by slaughtering a cow in the shrine's enclave. But Oba Esigie is said to have refused to do this at the Onitsha people's Udo-Shrine, hence the quarrel and the migration down towards the River Niger area and across it.⁹

However, Ukpabi, J. disagrees with the Oba Esigie angle and posits that the misunderstanding and migration were rather as a result of "a fight over a farmland. These other people fighting over farmland with the others and interest started coming. And because of interest, bitterness ensued and the two brothers decided to go their separate ways. One said, no, 'I will now leave you, I'm going to Ado N'Idu.' 'Ado' means border. 'I will leave you and go and settle down on my own. I'm no longer going to be with you.' That's the issue. So, the two brothers had to separate".¹⁰

Furthermore, the immigrant settlers from Benin were said to have been helped by the Igalas to cross the river to settle in Onitsha in the 16th century, which was originally called Ado N'Idu. It soon became the capital of an Igbo Kingdom. In 1857, British traders in palm oil established a permanent station in the city, and Christian missionaries soon followed,

headed by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (a Yoruba) and Reverend John Taylor (an Igbo).¹¹ In 1884, Onitsha became part of a British protectorate. The British colonial government and Christian missionaries penetrated most of Igbo land to set up their administration, schools, and churches through the river port at Onitsha.¹²

Moreover, history revealed that Onitsha became an important trading port for the Royal Niger Company in the mid-1850s. Following the abolition of slavery, trade in palm kernels and other cash crops boomed around this river port. Immigrants from the hinterland were drawn to the emerging boom town as did the British traders who settled there and coordinated the palm oil and cash crops trade.¹³

During the colonial period, areas bordering Old Market, New Market Roads, Upper Market Road, Modebe Avenue, Iboku, Old Cemetery, Old Hospital, Mbanugo St, Emejulu St, Obi Street, Benjamin St, Court, Enugu Road, Awka Road, Egerton, etc., were the settlement of white colonial masters who first lived in Onitsha. Thus, those areas are still known as Whitemen Quarters. And, even till today, the white colonial style of buildings such as you see at Yaba, Ebute Metta, and Central Lagos, can be seen existing, side by side, with the new, on these streets.¹⁴

According to Ukpabi, Onitsha is made up of three groups of people. The first is the Edos, the Ezechima's team. The second, Igalas. They were the people that were fishing at the Niger by the time Onitsha people came to settle there. The third, the Igbos who are very close to the Niger and had integrated with them. These three groups make up what is today known

as Onitsha.”¹⁵ He further posited that in the past, there were some villages in Onitsha that spoke Igala. The Igalas constituted two villages out of the nine villages that made up what we know today as Onitsha. The two villages include Ogbodu and Obigboru. The villages of Umueze Aroli, Okebunabu (which include Umudei and Ogbabu) and Olosi were the ones with Edo influence and they constitute the monarchy, as the Obi of Onitsha comes from within these four villages.

The Population of Onitsha

When the first census was conducted in 1921, the population figure for Onitsha was 8,084. By 1931, the population increased more than threefold to 26,921, with 18,356 males and only 8,565 females. This growth reflects the in-migration of male traders, civil servants, and school leavers seeking employment. From 52,745 in 1953, the population of Onitsha more than trebled by 1963. By the 1991 census, the figure was 256,941 – 136,230 males and 120,711 females.¹⁶

The 2006 census gave figures similar to 1991, but the census was not properly carried out in Onitsha. Members of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra disrupted the exercise in Onitsha and other parts of Anambra State, claiming that those areas were “Biafraland”. Using the National Population Commission’s growth rate of 2.83 percent, the 2006 population of Onitsha projected from the 1991 figure of 256,941 would have been 390,509. This figure represents the night time population; the daytime population could be up to 1.5 million, a result of commuting workers and visitors.¹⁷

Administration of Onitsha People

Onitsha is administered by the Obi, a paramount traditional ruler who is assisted by a hierarchy of male and female chiefs and age groups. The male chiefs include the Ndi Ichie (Red Cap Chiefs), Agbalanze Society (Ozo-titled men representing various lineages and quarters), and Agbalaniregwu, as well as a Council of State consisting of prominent titled men representing various lineages and quarters. The Red Cap Chiefs are categorized as Ndiche Ume (Privy Council or Standing Committee), Ndiche Okwa and Ndiche Okwaraze.

The age groups that play a role in traditional social organization include Ogbo-soachi-ani, Oro-Okwute, Otu-Agbo (age grades), and Umu-Ilo (young boys). Among women, the hierarchy includes Omu (Queen of Onitsha), Otu Odu (titled women), Ikporo Onitsha (married women), Umuada Inyemesi, and Umu- Agbogo (young girls). The Ndi Ichie advise the Obi generally and take decisions in times of emergency. They are the custodians of the prosperity and welfare of Onitsha community. They take decisions about wars and treaties and fix dates for annual festivals and other ceremonies. They communicate the resolutions of the Obi-in-Council to the Agbalanze, Ogbo-soachi-ani, and the Omu, who in turn communicate them to the rest of the community.¹⁸

The Onitsha Progressive Union is a town development union that caters for the interests of the indigenous community, who largely dwell in the Inland Town. The union works hand in hand with the Obi.

Market and Commerce

Because of its advantageous geographic location, Onitsha enjoys a strong economic position as a major commercial hub with excellent connections to other market centers in Igboland and beyond. To name a few, these additional market centers are Asaba, Ossomari, Oguta, Nnewi, Awka, and Ekwulobia. It is stated that prior to 1500, the Onitsha settlement maintained commercial relations with communities that were located along the Niger, to the north of Idah and to the south of Aboh.¹⁹

The Otunkwo market on the Niger River's bank had grown quickly by the second half of the seventeenth century, drawing traders from all over the world. Long-standing trading relations existed between the coastal city-states of Nembe, Kalabari, and Aboh, and it was generally known that their traders frequently frequented the Otu nkwo market. Without a doubt, this development made it possible for Onitsha to take an indirect part in the expanding transatlantic trade at the time. Goods brought in by the trans-Saharan caravans found their way into the Onitsha market through traders from the Savanna states along the Niger and the Benue, who were also present in the Otunkwo market. As a result, the Onitsha market developed into an inter-state market. At this time the sitting king of Onitsha would always ensure that the market was protected from the Aboh slave raiders, who were at the time terrorizing traders by firing cannons into the market.²⁰

The Onitsha market continued to attract traders from the hinterland despite the periodic battles that broke out between Onitsha and its close neighbors. Both intermediaries and traders from the coastal states flocked to the Onitsha market to transact business because of the foreign items that were brought in by the river and the local goods' rapid sale at a bigger profit margin. This improved the Onitsha market during a period when unstable conditions along the trade routes impeded trade with other regions. The Onitsha market's trade area grew throughout time. It extended inland beyond the Anambra River basin to a good part of northern Igbo land and to most parts of Awka-Orlu uplands and the Udi plateau. The Onitsha market thus became the main outlet for goods from those areas and the port through which foreign goods from the coast and from the western Sudan reached the people in these areas. As a result of the commercial activities held at the Onitsha market, Onitsha grew into a river port town, performing important river port functions for a fairly wide hinterland.²¹ It is therefore proper to state that commercial activities were already established in Onitsha long before the coming of the Europeans in the 19th century. Moreover, markets in Onitsha in the early times were both for economic and social basis, like most markets in Igboland in the early times.

Onitsha people operate four traditional markets days, including: *Eke*, *Oye*, *Afor* and *Nkwo*. Each of these markets was held on a rotational four-day basis known as *Izu*²² It is said that the markets that existed in Onitsha prior to British colonial rule were often named after a deity or held in honour of the area. They could also be named after the area in

which the markets were located, or after an important personality.²³ That explains the reason why the Megafu Market, that is situated along Oguta Road in Onitsha was named after the man who owned the location of the market space. The *Otunkwo Eze* Market was also named after the traditional ruler (Obi) of Onitsha, because it was a common belief in Onitsha tradition that the market belonged to the traditional ruler.²⁴ Apart from the Megafu market and the Otunkwo market, there were other markets that existed in Onitsha before the European contact with the people. These markets included the Ogboye and the Ogbommanu Markets.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE GENESIS OF THE NIGERIA CIVIL WAR

Background to the Nigeria Civil War

A thorough understanding of the Nigeria-Biafra War cannot be possible without an examination of the historical antecedents of the pre-1967 Nigeria. According to O. Oguibe, the understanding the Nigeria-Biafra War requires an understanding of “the political upheavals that convulsed the country during that tumultuous year; [as well as] the history of that amalgam of nations, peoples, sensibilities, and interests that had come to be known as Nigeria”.¹ For this purpose, it is expedient to first review some key milestones or conflict triggers in the prewar Nigeria that accumulated and compounded with time to become what later manifested as a full blown civil war. In the article, “Ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria: Analysis and resolution”. B. Ugorji argued that “the events that took place during the formative years of the new nation called Nigeria prepared the ground for the numerous ethno-religious conflicts that have tormented Nigeria”.²

Viewing from this light therefore, the evolution of ethnic conflict in Nigeria can be categorized into three phases: pre-manifest conflict era (1914 – 1945), a period known in Nigeria history as the time of “amalgamation and the problem of nationhood”; manifest conflict era (1945 – 1966), depicting a period of “struggle for decolonization, the agitation for constitutional reform, and the early years of independence”; aggressive manifest conflict era, begins from 1966, the most consequential and devastating year in Nigerian history. This is the period that saw the collapse of the first republic in Nigeria. The year when the first democratically elected government was

overthrown by a bloody military coup that ushered in the first military regime.³ The result of this was a three-year deadly war from July 1967 to January 1970, known as the Nigerian - Biafran war.

In order to understand phase three, especially the 1966 coup and counter coup as well as the Nigeria-Biafra War that ensued in 1967, it is imperative to briefly examine the compounded weaknesses seen in phase one (1914-1945) and phase two (1945-1966). In other words, important events before Nigerian independence in 1960 and during the first six years after independence are carefully examined in order to fully understand the foundation upon which the Nigeria civil war was anchored.

Pre-Manifest Conflict Era (1914-1945): Amalgamation Period and the Problem of Nationhood

The native populations that lived in the ancient region that is now Nigeria came into contact with the British and other Europeans throughout the pre-colonial era in a variety of ways, at various times, and for various reasons. A small number of academics and historians have extensively researched and documented the earliest indigenous communities in Nigeria. The historical analysis by Falola and Heaton, "from the period of the earliest archeological findings in the Late Stone Age to the coming of European traders in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries"⁴ up to the transition to British colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which culminated in the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates with the Lagos Colony in 1914, is of particular interest to this study. Base on the view of Falola and Heaton, "the borders of modern-day Nigeria were established in 1914 by British colonizers"⁵ through an amalgamation decree.

In his description of how Nigeria was invented, Richard Bourne stated: *On 1 January 1914, the mix of peoples in a large part of West Africa became 'One Nigeria'. The announcement in the humid city of Lagos, which had been a British colony since the Treaty of Cession was agreed in 1861 between Great Britain and Oba Dosunmu, King of Lagos, was made by Frederick Lugard, later Baron Lugard. He was now Governor-General of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, and he never liked Lagos. The name 'Nigeria' had been coined by his wife and admirer, Flora Shaw, colonial editor of The Times, in a letter she wrote to her paper in January 1897. She used it to define the territories abutting the River Niger that were then being traded in or claimed by the Royal Niger Company.*⁶

The above quotation from Bourne reveals three themes that constitute the major problems to which most of the Nigerian ethnic conflicts, particularly the Nigeria-Biafra War, could be traced. The first is that the name 'Nigeria' is alien to the indigenous peoples of Nigeria. This indicates that the name was chosen by an outsider and forced upon the populace without their consent or discussion. Consequently, the peoples of 'Nigeria' never trusted the foreign term that united them or believed that the so-called Nigerian nation was united. The second is that the union of approximately 250 ethnic groups living in these territories, as well as the north's overwhelming Muslim population and the south's predominately Christian population, was ordered and carried out in 1914 without the approval of the native peoples. It was very difficult, if not impossible, for them to coexist peacefully because of their blatant differences. The diverse people forced together to become one Nigeria have numerous differences with very little similarities. As such, ethnic

conflict became inevitable from the formative years, only seeking for the best opportunity to explode. This opportunity was of course found in 1967.

As it has been noted, respect for these groups' rights for independent existence and self-determination presupposes that before an amalgamation is executed and implemented, the groups ought to have clarity and full understanding of the terms, expectations, implications, risks and opportunities that are associated with the new arrangement. The groups' consent to be a part of a new nation should be a well-informed decision based on complete availability of needed 'information,' their full understanding or 'comprehension' of the information provided, and a condition or situation that encourages free 'voluntariness' and discourages coercion or influence of power.⁷

Lugard's argument for the forced amalgamation of the north and south with the Lagos Colony is that he wanted "to provide a unified railway policy".⁸ However, Campbell and Page stated that the reason for the amalgamation is "for administrative convenience".⁹ According to the above authors, amalgamation helped in relieving "His Majesty's (King George V) government's budgetary and tax processes".¹⁰ In a similar vein, A. Akinola affirmed that the 1914 amalgamation was motivated by the fact that "the Northern protectorate could not generate sufficient funds to maintain its own administration in spite of the annual grants from the Imperial Treasury and from the Southern Administration",¹¹ and had to depend on the southern protectorate's growing economy. By coercively merging the north and south, the British was relieved of its growing financial commitment to the north.¹²

Ugorji came to the conclusion that "the use of force by the colonialists eliminated the possibility of choice, and institutionalized a denial of freedom, of autonomy, of self-determination, and of [regional] territorial integrity" as a result of the coercive nature of the 1914 union of the north and south in Nigeria.¹³ The multiple conflicts that arose throughout the decolonization, constitutional reform, and early years of independence—finally culminating in a horrifying civil war that tore apart the Nigerian nation—give credibility to this statement.

Manifest Conflict Era (1945-1966): Period of Decolonization Struggle, Agitation for Constitutional Reform, and Early Years of Independence

The Governor of Nigeria, Sir Arthur Richards, stated in a dispatch to London on December 6, 1944, that the challenge facing Nigeria was how to establish a political system that would advance political development in line with the interests being pursued by various Nigerian groups. This assessment was based on the increased competition among the Northern Region (with a Hausa-Fulani hegemony), Western Region (with a Yoruba hegemony), and Eastern Region (with an Igbo hegemony).¹⁴ The same Arthur Richards drafted and imposed his constitution on Nigerians in 1946 without first consulting the people or giving any thought to their wishes. This constitution known as the Richards Constitution legislatively integrated the north and south in one Legislative Council and was severely criticized by Nigerians. Six years after Arthur Richards' assessment of the Nigerian problem and following a disagreement over what the constitution should entail, the clash of positions and interests among the north, west and east intensified. As Akinola noted, "with the various cultures neither exposed to each other, nor given a direction of unity, suspicion was likely to develop."¹⁵

In 1950, representatives from the north, west, and east convened in Ibadan to deliberate on the provisions of a draft constitution. T.N. Tamuno claims that the allocation of 45 members for the north, 33 for the west, and 33 for the east in the Nigerian Legislative Council was one of the contentious and polarizing issues in Richards' Constitution. The delegates from the north angrily rejected this plan.¹⁶ According to Tamuno, the northern delegates, the Emirs of Zaria and Katsina, contended that "the Northern Region would ask for separation from the rest of Nigeria on the arrangements existing before 1914" unless it was given 50% of the seats in the Central Legislature.¹⁷

The British responded favorably to the northern demand, justifying their decision based on the disparity in population figures between the north and south. The British government allotted 68 seats to the Northern Region, 34 to the Western Region, and 34 to the Eastern Region. Delegates to the House of Representatives were to be elected from their regional houses. These figures reflect the 136 elective seats for the House of Representatives included in the 1951 Constitution (known as the Macpherson Constitution), in addition to "provisions for special and official members".¹⁸ In agreement with Tamuno, Akinola observed that one major issue associated with the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 is not only that it granted too much power to the regions, the North controlled half of the seats in the federal Legislative Council.¹⁹

Self-government for Nigerians was one of the contentious and divisive topics raised in the House of Representatives. This was specifically a component of the continuous movement, led primarily by southern elites, to free Nigeria from British rule between the late 1940s and the mid 1950s. Tamuno claims that the "self-government" discussion in the House of Representatives in

April 1953 set off a series of events that once more stoked secessionist sentiment among Northern officials. Rather than the 1956 motion presented by Action Group and backed by NCNC, which called for Nigerian self-government, the Northern Members of Parliament called for self-government "as soon as practicable."²⁰

The motion for Nigerian independence by 1956 was put forward by an Action Group representative, Chief Anthony Enahoro, and supported by the members of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). For the members of the Northern People's Congress (NPC), Nigeria was not yet ready for independence. Knowing that the southerners were more advanced in western education and were occupying leadership positions in the civil services and military, it is possible that the northern leaders wanted an extension of British rule to be able to raise the status of their people in order to be in a better position to compete for federal government jobs with the eastern and western educated elites after independence when the British expatriates finally withdraws. A. Akinola argued that "because the South had produced more educated men, well-nurtured in the dynamics of Western democracy, a feeling of suspicion and political incompatibility was developed by the North against the South".²¹ This was a "legitimate fear that the North might be subordinate to the South in an independent Nigeria".²² E.W. Nafziger argued that this disagreement between the north and south over self-government constituted one of the early signs of security threat in the country.²³

It was said that northern lawmakers were attacked by crowds in Lagos during a highly hostile environment fueled by intransigent disputes and disorder between the leaders of the north and south.²⁴ A riot broke out in Kano in May 1953 "following the arrival of an Action Group

delegation, led by S. L. Akintola, in the city of Kano, on a political tour of the North," as a reprisal for the alleged harassment of northern members of parliament in Lagos.²⁵ Coleman disclosed that 277 people were injured in the Kano conflict, with 36 of them dying (15 Northerners and 21 Southerners).²⁶

Both the alleged harassment in Lagos and the retaliatory riot in Kano were early signs of a tug of war between the north and south that eventually resulted in the collapse of the First Republic in 1966 and escalated into the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1967.²⁷ This tug of war could be well understood through Steven Watt's war gaming and thinking model: Action — Reaction — Counteraction.

Aggressive Manifest Conflict Era (From 1966)

Reflecting on the precursors of the January 15, 1966 military coup, Falola and Heaton explained that since regional identities were strong and national identity was weak, the greatest fear of most Nigerians in the 1960s was that their region would become 'dominated' by another.²⁸ Southerners from the Eastern and Western Regions feared northern domination, and northerners feared southern domination. These fears led to severely flawed elections in 1964 and 1965, in which all kinds of dirty tricks were used by every side. Under these circumstances, many Nigerians came to believe that the federal system was dysfunctional and that Nigeria should cease to exist in its present form. These attitudes led directly to the overthrow of the civilian democratic regime by several military officers in January 1966.²⁹

The January 15, 1966 coup was allegedly planned by young army officers popularly known as the Five Majors or young Igbo majors³⁰ (Oguibe, 1998; Nafziger, 1973) which

include Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna with his fellow conspirators, Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, Major Donatus Okafor, Major Chris Anuforo and Major Adewale Ademoyega. The January 15, 1966 military coup which abruptly terminated the First Republic was one of the greatest milestone that changed the historical narrative of Nigeria, especially as regards the questions of conflict, tolerance and peaceful coexistence among the regions. The coup led to a more deadly and bloody counter coup on July 29, 1966 which was accompanied by months of mass execution or ethnic cleansing (popularly known as the pogroms) of Eastern Nigerians, especially the Igbos in Northern Nigeria. This led to the flight of Easterners back to their region and paved the way for the demand for secession of Biafra on May 30, 1967, that resulted in the Nigeria-Biafra War of July 6, 1967 – January 15, 1970

Causes of the Nigerian Civil War

There are diversity of approaches with regards to the causes of the Nigeria civil war. These causes is under administrative/political reasons, social-economic reasons, cultural causes and ethno-religious causes. For the purpose of this study however, we shall discuss the causes of the Nigerian civil war under two broad headings: Remote and immediate causes.

Remote Causes of the Nigerian civil war

The remote causes of the war include historical antecedents, structural defects, constitutional deficiencies and administrative weaknesses that accumulated and compounded with time, leading to the outbreak of the civil war. Some of these causes are discussed in this segment of the study.

Amalgamation of 1914

One of the very remote causes of the Nigeria Civil War was the amalgamation of the north and the south by the British in 1914. As discussed earlier in this study, this amalgamation was mainly forged by the colonialists for administrative purposes, since they were geographically close to each other. The British conveniently ignored the marked difference in the culture and the religion of these two major groups. This was a major foundation for conflicts that ravaged the country subsequently.

People from Central and Southern Nigeria believed that the British administration favoured the Hausa-Fulani people in running the affairs of colonial Nigeria. This was as a result of greater exposure of Southern Nigerians to western education, their role in the anti-imperialist nationalism and the Igbo people's republican spirit.³¹ People from the Southern part of the country were considered such an unhealthy influence that they were allowed to stay and live only in Sabon gari areas. As posited by F. Onyeoziri,³² the primary effect of the British protection was that the whole nation never benefited from a fuller social integration of the major sections of the country. British favoritism and protection did not only translate into a pro-North posture, but also engineered northern dominance in the political structure of the country. The various mechanisms through which Northern dominance was built into the system was common knowledge.

Geographically, the North was made larger than the country in a merged. The geographical dominance was given political power through both disproportionate political

representation and favored population policy. This arrangement was achieved by loading the census figures in favor of the North. The most obvious one was the fact that parts of the ethnic south like the Yoruba people of Kwara State and Benue State, were excised from their kith and kin and re-zoned, so as to make certain that the North attained a permanent numerical superiority over the southern part of the country.

The population figure was not accurate due to the fact that it was not possible to reach the women in the Muslim communities in the North. This was attributable to prohibition by Islam, which was justifiable but offered no valid excuse in inflating the region's female numerical figure beyond normal estimates. However, the northern figure was used to justify giving the north a political representation that exceeded that of the rest of the country.

Furthermore, K. Amuwo³³ maintained that the constitutional arrangement that granted more legislative seats to the Northern Region than the rest of the other regions combined in the central legislature contributed to the Civil War. To him the Northern Region was given the powerful position and its insistence on maintaining same as well as attempts by the other regions to challenge the status quo contributed to the crisis that resulted in the Civil War.

Structural Weaknesses and Struggle for Power

The structural defect in the Nigeria state and the unequal struggle for power which it engendered prepare the ground for the inevitability of conflicts and political instability in the country. The Igbo people challenged Northern dominance from 1960 to 1966. The crises of 1962 and 1963, and the 1965 West Regional election, and their aftermaths were all episodes

that displayed Igbos' attempt to break free from the relative deprivation imposed on them by the existing political structure.

Massive Electoral Malpractices

The flagrant electoral abuses of 1964 and 1965 had destroyed the institution of election as the legitimate instrument for challenging power domination thereby presenting to Nigerians the attractive option of resorting to military coup as a weapon for change of government.³⁴ Electoral fraud of 1965 election prompted Nigerians to embark on rioting, looting, mass killing and loss of faith in the ballot box. The result of these abuses on the long run was the outbreak of civil war in 1967.

The Coup on the 15th January 1966

The coup was led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogu. It alleged that all the leaders of the coup except one could be traced to Igbo origin. They were: Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu (Igbo), Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna (Igbo), Major Timothy Onwuatuegwu (Igbo), Major Chris Anuforo (Igbo), Major Don Okafor (Igbo), Captain. Emmanuel Nwobosi (Igbo), Captain Ben Gbulie (Igbo), Captain. Ogbu Oji (Igbo) and Major Adewale Ademoyega (Yoruba).³⁵ On the other hand, the major victims of the coup were mainly of the Northern origin or their Southern allies. Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of Northern Region, was killed, Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister was killed,³⁶ Ladoke Akintola, the Premier of the Western Region, an ally of Ahmadu Bello, was killed. The Premier of the Eastern Region and the President of the country, Nnamdi Azikiwe, both Igbo people were not killed by the coupists.

The casualties also included the most senior military officer, Brigadier Mailamari from the northern part of the country and some senior officers from the West but none from the Eastern region.

The casualties list also included Brigadier Samuel Ademulegun (West), Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari, (North), Colonel Ralph Shodeinde (West), Colonel Kur Mohammed (North), Lieutenant Colonel Abogo Largema (North), Lieutenant. Colonel James Pam (North), Lieutenant. Colonel Arthur Unegbe (East) the only Igbo and the Quartermaster of the Army who refused to co-operate, Sergeant Daramola Oyegoke (West), P C Yohana Garkawa (North), Lance Corporal Musa Nimzo (North) and PC Akpan Anduka (East). The coup was therefore tagged 'the Igbo coup', the belief which further heighten the cord of disunity and distrust among the major regions that make up the country.

This coup resulted in General Johnson Thomas Umunakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo and the Head of the Nigerian Army, seizing power as the first military head of state. Ironsi then instituted military rule, alleging that the democratic institutions had failed and that, while he was defending them, they clearly needed revision and clean-up before reversion back to democratic rule.³⁷ It was therefore, the view of many Nigerians that the January 1966 coup was influenced by tribal sentiments especially as the five army officers of Igbo origin who were implicated were not punished accordingly. Instead, Gen. J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi further surrounded himself with a dominance of Eastern bureaucrats and advisers, and contrary to the

advice of the Supreme Military Council, he promoted eighteen Igbo officers to the rank of colonel out of a pool of twenty one officers.

The Counter Coup of July 29, 1966 and the Igbo Massacre of September 1966

The Decree 34 of May 1966 that declared the country a unitary state by abrogating the civil services was made. This outraged Northerners, especially, and this resulted to violent demonstrations targeted only at the Igbo people. All these gave rise to counter coup on the 29th July 1966 staged by officers from the Northern part of Nigeria. The counter coup was tagged "Operation Araba".³⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Murtala Mohammed spear headed the coup. The coupists succeeded in installing Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon as Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Armed Forces. In September 1966 a lot of Christian Igbo people living in the Muslim north were massacred due to ethnic tension caused by the coup and counter coup.

The Immediate Causes of the Nigerian Civil War

The personality clash between Colonel Gowon Yakubu and Lieutenant. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu was instrumental to the outbreak of civil war in 1967. Colonel Gowon as the Head of State at the time was not the most senior military officer before he assumed his position. The most senior at the time was Brigadier Ogundipe. Lt. Colonel Ojukwu felt that Brigadier Ogundipe should have been made the Head of State. Apart from that, Lt. Colonel Ojukwu was higher in rank than Colonel Gowon and therefore insisted that 'he cannot bow to his junior officer'.³⁹ This is believed to be the major issue that

informed his decision to take the Eastern region out of the federation. However, the last straw that broke the Camel's back was Ojukwu's declaration of secession of the Eastern States from Nigeria under the name, **The Independent Republic of Biafra**, on 30th May 1967. This was the immediate primary cause of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 – 1970.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE IMPACT OF THE NIGERIA CIVIL WAR ON ONITCHA CHILDREN

Children caught in war-torn areas the world over are depicted as both victims and perpetrators of violence.¹ Most commonly they are portrayed as feeble, helpless, neglected and brutalized, with some becoming heads of households or supporters of elderly relatives. In the accounts of Cohn and Goodwingill, child recruits are represented as merciless killers and persons 'whose innocence is exploited' in the pursuit of war to win emotional support for the cause of warring factions.²

The Nigerian Civil War, though fought between the Federal troops and the secessionist Biafran troops stood out as one of the most brutal civil wars in Africa owing to the extent of its impact which was felt more by the ordinary civilian population and in particular the most vulnerable. In essence, the impact of the Nigerian Civil war on Biafran children in general and Onitcha children in particular, cannot be overemphasized. Children were victimized, traumatized and emotionally destabilized. Relief operations and materials were highly politicized by the belligerents as well as the international humanitarians, resulting in hunger, starvation, deprivation and human rights abuses especially of the vulnerable group of the population who were majorly women and children. The psychological and emotional trauma experienced by Onitcha children during the war was second to none. Innocent children watched their siblings and peers dying of starvation and diseases, and many others were lost to humanitarian agencies who took them away to Gabon and Ivory Coast and never returned

them. The death of their fathers, mothers and brothers and the rape, torture and abuses suffered by their sisters in the hands of the belligerent soldiers were more than enough to get the children traumatized and destabilized, as such left in them the unpalatable memory that continued to grow with them and affect their perceptions for the rest of their lives.

In the counter coup of 1966, the massacre of the easterners in the north, and the civil war that ensued, “wives had seen their husbands killed, mothers had seen their daughters slaughtered and children had seen their parents mown down.³ This traumatic reality would remain as the worse psychosomatic effect on the survivors, just like the realities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki affected the Japanese, even after the end of the Second World War. The easterners who lived in the north were traders and businessmen and seemed to be generally better off than their counterparts in the south. The African extended family system had placed on their shoulders the responsibility of taking care of their relatives in the south. Indeed, this dependency increased with their material fortunes. Consequently, their violent demise brought with it untold hardship and poverty to their families and relatives who largely depended on them, the majority of whom were women and children.

The attacks on the Igbo in the north led to the influx into the East, of about 1 to 2 million displaced persons between May 1966 and May 1967. The dislocation and short falls in food and shelter caused by this was not too severe at first due to the unparalleled effectiveness of the African extended family network, especially that of the

Igbo. However, this elasticity was overstretched as further influx of the easterners who escaped being killed in the north at the outbreak of war, as well as the blockade of the secessionist Biafra both air and sea put an insurmountable pressure on the available food and resources in the region.

The first casualty of this shortage of food and supplies was the women, especially nursing mothers and the children who became malnourished and were daily faced with starvation as a result of the war.⁴ In fact, by June 1968, there were widespread malnutrition cases, reported among most Biafran villages with the core hit being the women and children fleeing to avoid being killed by the federal troops. Aside from the hunger and starvation, the medical supplies available at the beginning of hostilities soon was exhausted and the blockade made it impossible to replenish the stores. This situation was further aggravated by two developments during the war, viz: the fall of Abakaliki in April 1968 and the fall of Port Harcourt in the following month of May, 1968.⁵

As long as Biafra controlled Port Harcourt, supplies by sea were effective as well as the local fishing industry, which took care of the protein needs. Abakaliki on the other hand, was one of the main food baskets of Biafra, producing and storing large quantities of yam,⁶ which in addition to garri was the staple food of the easterners. In other words, prior to the fall of these two strategic territories, to the Nigerian troops, the Federal blockade was just partially effective. Furthermore, it was after the fall of the two territories in April, 1968, that the situation of food crisis in Biafra was exacerbated, such that it came to the notice of the outside

world, following the announcement by the Nigerian Red Cross that 2 million children and 1.6 million women were in danger of malnutrition and starvation.⁷

Some of the humanitarian supplies brought in by Caritas and other faith-based humanitarian agencies could not even get to the victims, as these supplies were taken over by the Biafran soldiers. Consequently, with supply lines cut, many Biafrans slowly starved to death. Many children succumbed to diseases such as kwashiorkor.⁸

Eyewitness accounts in Onitsha, described the horrific experience of some of the women and children in the area during the war. According to her, the level of hunger and starvation was such that there was literally nothing to give the crying children to save them from hunger, until they died under the watch of their mother. Narrating her experience, Nnadi Agnes recalled, "I had a husband and seven children before the war...my husband was killed in the war; I lost my six children to death due to hunger and starvation resulting in kwashiorkor and the remaining one child was evacuated by humanitarian organization and he never returned...since then, I have been living a lonely and miserable life."⁹ At some point, the women had to trek as far as 100 kilometers to remote areas and villages through bush paths to gather nuts and bush berry, only to hand them over at gunpoint to hungry Biafran soldiers who threatened rape and murder.¹⁰ She further explained that in one such expedition, one of the nursing mothers had to abandon her baby to escape Nigerian soldiers who started to shoot when they heard the baby crying. Other instances of abandoned babies in the bush abound in Onitsha as well as in other parts of Biafran land during the war. One of such abandoned

children, now married with children, in an interview narrated how difficult life had been in his foster home where his relatives always reminded him that he was picked up by their grandmother during the war. As a matter of fact, he could not share in their family inheritance.¹¹ The women suffered at the hands of the FMG troops. In several instances, the troops invaded Onitcha, killing any adult male found, especially those perceived as Biafran soldiers, in the presence of their mothers, sisters, wives or even children. The Nigerian soldiers also hunted down any livestock, forced the women who themselves were hungry to cook, and after eating, they raped the women in the presence of their children.¹²

The starvation and malnutrition among the children was so much that women were advised to feed the children with green leaf, with especially the succulent cocoa yam and scent leaves. These leaves often were cooked, but at other times, squeezed and the extracted green fluid was being given to the kwashiorkor infested children three times daily. Even these leaves at some point became scarce.¹³ The situation was similar in other parts of Biafra land. A.A. Madiebo painted a gruesome picture at the Ikot Ekpene Prison where people were dehumanized: “men, women and children, lying, sitting or squatting among the dead, with they themselves completely reduced to skeletons and suffering from kwashiorkor.”¹⁴

Reporting to parliament on Lord Hunt’s mission, Commonwealth Secretary George Thomson stated that the Biafran starvation death rate was 200 to 300 per day. On the same day, July 22, the Washington Post reported that official Biafran sources set the number of deaths at approximately 3% of its population per week. The announcement was unclear as to whether

the figure 3% was to be applied to the whole population of 12 million or only the refugee population of 4.6 million.¹⁵ The international committee of Red Cross was so overwhelmed with these human tragedy that on the 16th of August, 1968, it released a statement in conjunction with UNICEF, World Council of Churches and Caritas Internationalism, that the Biafran situation was the gravest emergency it has had to deal with since world war II., “it is an emergency concerning not hundreds of thousands but millions of people”.¹⁶ The ICRC in September 1968, projected that there were between 80,00 to 10,000 deaths each day in the Biafran enclave.¹⁷



Biafran Children Suffering from Kwashiorkor During Nigeria Civil War.
Source: Wikipedia.com



Biafran Children Suffering from Kwashiorkor During Nigeria Civil War.

Source: Wikipedia.com

However, the Nigerian government aware of the obvious international condemnation, attempted to play down on the figures released by the independent bodies. Moreover, the quick reaction by Dr Clyde Shepherd in his statement to the External Affairs and National Defence Committee of the Canadian House of Commons in October 1968 validated the earlier claims by the independent bodies, including the Red Cross of mass deaths in Biafran villages. According to him; “the figures we have produced are obtained from random samples of death rates in villages, refugee camps and hospitals from every province in Biafra. By the end of

July, 6000 deaths a day from malnutrition or starvation was arrived at. Recently, last month the Red Cross published a figure of 8000 to 10000 deaths. Knowing how this figure was reached, I would agree with it as being reasonably accurate”.¹⁸

While these figures were still contested, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate. In fact, the dire need for relief supplies in Biafra, engendered high scale corruption in the Biafran society.¹⁹ Thus one’s closeness to a Biafran government official or senior Biafran military officer guaranteed enough ration for one’s family. Women who had no other source of help, since their men were killed in battle or declared missing, were exploited sexually before they could be allotted rations for their children.²⁰ Some others were forced to send their girls as young as eight years old to senior Biafran officers or worse still forced into marriage to the Nigeria soldiers.²¹ This even extended to military conscription, especially after the fall of Enugu to the FMG troops. Since closeness to a high government official or military officer could save one’s relations from being conscripted into the army, or better, placed in civilian “essential duties,” most of the women particularly yielded to the sexual request of the corrupt officials to save the lives of their children, husbands or male relatives.²²

The Evacuation of Children

The rate of starvation and death as a result of the war was such a colossus that the food relief brought to Biafra by various relief organizations was highly valued by the Biafran populace. Besides, the exigencies of the situation in the Biafran enclave necessitated the evacuation of Biafran children. This had both negative and positive implications. On the

positive side, most lives of the children were saved. Conversely, many mothers lost their children, who could not be identified or whose identity could not be certified. This aside the loss of their husbands was an excruciating trauma. This view was unanimously shared by most of the child welfare organizations. One of such organizations, the Swiss-based International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW) was strongly opposed to the idea of evacuating children from the Biafran enclave.²³ In fact, the Secretary General of the IUCW, Pierre Zumbach, while reluctantly conceding to the evacuation of small children to neighbouring African countries was quick to point out the dangers associated with ‘hasty and ill-conceived evacuations’. He pointed to the need for careful documentation at the very least, for records on who each child was and where the child came from and insisted that the children evacuated from the enclave should be accompanied by adults from their own tribal group, preferably by their mothers.²⁴

The fear about the identity and destination of the evacuated children was further heightened by the assumption at that crucial time that “speed was of the essence and that little else mattered. To buttress this apprehension, according to a representative of Secours Catholique, up to 25% of the Biafran children evacuated to Gabon in September 1968, were without any kind of documentation.²⁵ Recalling his earlier experience, Zumbach noted that: In the Congo, certain children shifted from one province to another with no accompanying person from their ethnical [sic] group have since lost all trace of their families. A number of these children are now vagrants in Kinshasa.²⁶ Even some of the evacuating agents expressed their doubts about the arrangement on ground for the welfare of the children. Caritas

International, one of the major agencies involved in the relief operations during the war was compelled to participate in the evacuation as a result of the inadequacies in the arrangement for the reception and care of the Biafran children in the foreign lands.²⁷ Indeed, the evacuation exercise of the Biafran malnourished and sick children to some African countries such as Gabon, Ivory Coast, etc and even Europe was a well-intended project, to save the life of a generation of Biafrans whose existence was threatened by the Nigerian Civil War. However, from the number of children who never made it back to 'Biafra land' because they were either dead or missing, it was clear that the whole project was hasty in its conception and unprofessionally executed. Indeed, the conversion of relief operatives and aircrafts for the evacuation attest to this fact. In any case, one important factor that led to the loss of these children was the lack of understanding of African culture or what Wiseberg referred to as culture bias.²⁸ According to her, "nowhere was this more apparent than with respect to the western assumption that a child who loses his father and mother is an orphan and requires institutionalization."²⁹



Evacuated Biafran Children During Nigeria Civil War.

Source: Wikipedia.com

Consequently, the need for proper identification or documentation to these European evacuators seemed less important since the children's need for institutionalization meant foster homes or orphanages and of course might have no need of coming back to their roots. Reacting to this misconception in the evacuation policy during the war period, Dr A. E. Ifekwunigwe, Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Biafra (Presently the University of Nigeria, Nsukka) and Head of the Okporo Children's Hospital during the war commented: *I would like to see it adopted as an official policy that these institutions called orphanage*

*should be actively discouraged. A home, even if poor is preferable to a comfortable orphanage when one considers the future of the child. The concept of orphans is one which is entirely new and foreign to our traditional society. It would be a great pity if, even the war, with all the tragic consequences, was allowed to disrupt our enviable closely knit family units with a praiseworthy family extended system... This wonderful system should not be disrupted by this novel idea of orphanage.*³⁰

Besides, it was argued in many quarters that most of the evacuated Biafran children were lost or not returned back as a result of the “defeat of Biafra”. It would be recalled that the government of Biafra conceded to the evacuation under four conditions; the first being that the children must be evacuated only to the four African countries that accorded Biafra full sovereignty.³¹ This condition, especially with the last one which envisaged the repatriation of the children when Biafra was settled as at peace time, presupposed that the country would emerge from the war victorious and with her sovereignty intact. However, the ‘victory’ of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria altered the calculation. Consequently, the claim of jurisdiction over these children fell to Nigeria.

To pursue the claim meant that the country would reestablish relations with these governments with whom she had severed relations with on account of their support and recognition of the secessionist Biafra or front of some agencies. In fact, the Nigerian government opted for the later preferring the United Nations High Commissions for Refugees to handle the arrangement

in order to obviate the need for arrangements with these African states, namely Gabon, and Ivory Coast. After the whole evacuation exercise, not all the children were brought back:

Recruitment of Child Soldiers

There was no public indication from the Biafran leadership prior to the outbreak of hostilities that children would serve in the war. Biafra's use of antiquated 'Mark IV' weapons from the colonial era would seem to have discouraged the incorporation of children into the fighting. The military called them bolt action rifles. Towards the end of 1967, Biafra received a consignment of 'Mars' weapons from Haiti. These light and powerful rifles could fire many consecutive rounds. Compared with the Mark IV issue, they were efficient and modern and could be operated by children, but they were in short supply. So Biafra retained most of the Mark IV and other locally available varieties, and, in the early stages of the war, armed only adults.³²

The first three months of the war saw the Biafrans lose much territory to their better-equipped rivals. The capture of northern Biafran towns and the Nsukka campus of the University of Nigeria, the think tank of Biafra, seriously threatened the young Republic whose original capital, Enugu, was less than an hour's drive from the occupied zones. Pushed to the wall so early in the conflict, the Biafran leader demanded the dispatch to Enugu within twenty-four hours of a thousand able-bodied men by each of the new territory's administrative divisions. The order stipulated that the men should 'come with anything they could lay hands on, which might kill or wound – dane guns, machetes, clubs, stones,

knives'.³³ Warriors were specifically requisitioned from traditionally warlike Igbo communities. This desperate call for men could be taken as the first official demand for all classes of volunteers – irrespective of age, experience and capability – and as a strategy to harness all available human resources to the war effort. Igbo community leaders were mandated to ensure that the orders were obeyed. Many capable men did not respond to these orders. Knowledge of Biafra's shortage of arms, which was partly responsible for her military losses soon after the commencement of hostilities, had spread. The wording of the order and the request that recruits 'come with anything they could lay hands on' spoke volumes of Biafra's inadequate preparation for the war. From this time on, Biafra began to grapple with desertions from its army. The Biafran leadership, probably forced by these circumstances, considered other classes of potential fighters not initially allowed to enlist in its army, and these were men above the age of forty and children.



Biafran Children Soldier during Nigeria Civil War.

Source: alamy.com

In Onitcha, the Biafran army began to conscript boys under the age of eighteen, preferring physically well-built boys of sixteen and seventeen years of age. Chinaemezunkwa Josephine, now a School Proprietress, shared her experience with her bother who was conscripted at the age of sixteen. In an interview, she narrated the story of his conscription thus: *On our way to Awka, to see our mother, suddenly, we heard a terrifying voice: Hey! Hey!! Don't move. If you move, I shoot!!! . . . They took my elder brother and left me helplessly alone.... That was how my elder brother, who was then sixteen years of age, joined Biafran army.* ³⁴

As the crisis deepened and more hands were needed, fifteen-year olds were recruited. Towards the end of 1968 a thirteen-year-old child was reported armed and in the company of other soldiers in the front line.³⁵ It was not stated, however, how his age was determined. In Igboland the youth age range is wide and the word ‘youth’ can indicate either social position or specific lifestyle. Males between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five or above made up the workforce under the centuries-old age-grade system.

Consequently, the Igbo customarily did not regard males of fifteen and above as children but as youths. Under this communal system, arming persons below the age of fifteen was certainly abnormal. Age calculations until shortly after independence were often problematic because of the semi-literate status of the society. Births were not always recorded in rural areas and, where they were, the records were sometimes inaccurate, having been collected after the actual birth. For enlistment into the army, dates were based on assumptions. If a child was able to handle a heavy weapon with ease, it was regarded as an indication that he was older than assumed. While it is possible that individual stature and build may have confused the ages of some Biafran soldiers, perhaps including the boy of thirteen mentioned earlier, it is also very probable that some children under fifteen years were consciously drafted into the army. It was clear from my interviews that if indeed boys under the age of fourteen fought for Biafra, they constituted a small proportion of its army. What was popularly acknowledged – and attested by many child survivors – was Biafra’s use of children between the ages of ten and fourteen as spies. Most under-eighteen soldiers who

fought in the Biafran army were conscripted, while others, volunteered after seeing school mates and peers in military uniform, issuing orders and molesting civilians. After exposure – often more than once – to the front line, some were sent home with post-traumatic stress syndrome, which during the Nigeria civil war was popularly called ‘shell shock’. Some pretended to suffer from this condition in order to induce their demobilization. For the real victims of ‘shell shock’ in Biafra it manifested in temporary deafness and displays of violent behavior. Youths unwilling to fight tried desperately to escape conscription. They hid in water tanks, roofs, caves and bunkers.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of the Nigerian Civil War on Biafran children, using Onitcha as a case study. The Nigeria Civil war also known as Nigerian Biafran war, was fought between the Nigerian soldiers and the armies of the secessionist Biafra, with Biafra land as the theater of the most catastrophic armed conflict ever recorded in the annals of Nigerian history. The casualties were mostly the weak, especially women and children, who were victimized by the belligerents on both sides as the world watched the unfolding of one of the worst human tragedy, with Europe supplying most of its deadliest machineries and weapons of warfare for financial gains and imperialistic considerations. The civil war laid bare the major problems of Nigeria as a nation but it is unfortunate that those exposed problems constantly militating against Nigerian national existence are still unresolved till today. These are unfaithfulness to the nation and to each other in particular, tribalism, nepotism, corruption, betrayal of nationhood as well as one another, power dominance, marginalization and resource allocation. Sadly, all these still dominate the present Nigeria's social, political and economic life and still constitute the major threat to Nigerian unity and national existence.

As noted in the study, several events accumulated and compounded in Nigerian that prepared the ground for conflict, thus making the civil war an inevitable child of circumstance. According to B. Ugorji, "the events that took place during the formative years

of the new nation called Nigeria prepared the ground for the numerous ethno-religious conflicts that have tormented Nigeria”.¹ Viewing from this light therefore, the evolution of ethnic conflict in Nigeria can be categorized into three phases: pre-manifest conflict era (1914 – 1945), a period known in Nigeria history as the time of “amalgamation and the problem of nationhood”; manifest conflict era (1945 – 1966), depicting a period of “struggle for decolonization, the agitation for constitutional reform, and the early years of independence”; aggressive manifest conflict era, begins from 1966, the most consequential and devastating year in Nigerian history. This is the period that saw the collapse of the first republic in Nigeria. The year when the first democratically elected government was overthrown by a bloody military coup that ushered in the first military regime.² The result of this was a three-year deadly war from July 1967 to January 1970, known as the Nigerian - Biafran war.

Located in the heart of the eastern region and as a major commercial hub in Biafran land, Onitcha once among the major theaters of the Nigerian civil war. In essence, the impact of the Nigerian Civil war on Biafran children in general and Onitcha children in particular, cannot be overemphasized. Children were victimized, traumatized and emotionally destabilized. Relief operations and materials were highly politicized by the belligerents as well as the international humanitarians, resulting in hunger, starvation, deprivation and human rights abuses especially of the vulnerable group of the population who were majorly women and children. The psychological and emotional trauma experienced by Onitcha

children during the war was second to none. Innocent children watched their siblings and peers dying of starvation and diseases, and many others were lost to humanitarian agencies who took them away to Gabon and Ivory Coast and never returned them. The death of their fathers, mothers and brothers and the rape, torture and abuses suffered by their sisters in the hands of the belligerent soldiers were more than enough to get the children traumatized and destabilized, as such left in them the unpalatable memory that continued to grow with them and affect their perceptions for the rest of their lives. As posited by A.A. Nwankwo, “wives had seen their husbands killed, mothers had seen their daughters slaughtered and children had seen their parents mown down”.³ This traumatic reality would remain as the worse psychosomatic effect on the survivors, just like the realities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki affected the Japanese, even after the end of the Second World War.

Furthermore, the study found that the rate of starvation and death as a result of the war was such a colossus that the food relief brought to Biafra by various relief organizations was highly valued by the Biafran populace. Besides, the exigencies of the situation in the Biafran enclave necessitated the evacuation of Biafran children. This had both negative and positive implications. On the positive side, most lives of the children were saved. Conversely, many mothers lost their children, who could not be identified or whose identity could not be certified. This aside the loss of their husbands was an excruciating trauma.

This analysis of the suffering and hardship faced by the Biafran children during the Nigerian civil war provides an insight to the general catastrophe that characterize warfare and

armed conflict in the human society. It exposes the inestimable trauma and hardship faced by the vulnerable in the society, mostly, women, and children during wars in Africa and the need to make due consideration of them in major decisions that affect society, including prosecution of wars. The study therefore concludes with the admonition that while it is politically expedient for policy makers and state actors to maintain rigidity in actions and decisions in the interest of the state, it is equally of great importance to pre consider the consequences of such actions on the population that constitute the state, in particular, the weak and the vulnerable which are mostly women and children.

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