

OLOKORO WOMEN IN THE WAR, 1967 – 1970**Ezeogueri-Oyewole, Anne Nnenna**

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NIGERIA**ABSTRACT**

The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) commonly referred to as the Nigeria – Biafra war was one of the most tragic events ever recorded in Nigerian history. It brought in its wake a wide range of untoward experiences and consequences to virtually all segments of the society in both sides of the divide. However, the monumental tragedies of the war were greatly felt in Igbo land, the central theatre of the war. Most often war is viewed as a man's theatre where he is both the actor and the recipient of the act, with the unconscious assumption that either women or children (the most vulnerable group) are usually untouched by the happenings of wars or that their stories do not constitute any direct addition to the events of wars. Yet Igbo women, like in many societies haunted by wars went through horrific experiences during and after the Nigeria - Biafra conflict. Many of them were wives, mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, fiancé, or simply friends to the soldiers. They bore the scares of war long after the soldiers had departed the battle fields either in coffins or abandoned to be eaten by vultures or as battered souls who became the responsibility of these women. Yet their stories seem neglected as accounts are taken of the casualties of wars, except for a few documentations mostly carried out by female writers who must have noticed the existing lacuna. What these women faced and even their roles in the civil war have hardly been captured in existing literature on that national tragedy. The paper therefore, discusses the war and its advent to Olokoro area as well as Olokoro women's roles in it. These roles include Olokoro women's contribution to the upkeep of the Biafran soldiers, the maintenance of the war refugees in Olokoro, as red cross and caritas volunteers, at the home front, in war time trade, as farmers and also their experiences with the soldiers, both Nigerian and Biafran.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian civil war, popularly known all over the world as the "Biafran War", was fought from 2nd July 1967 to 15th January 1970. The war was between the then Eastern Region of Nigeria and the rest of the country. The unfortunate war largely resulted from bad leadership, which was compounded by a coup led by mostly Igbo military officers on January 15, 1966. The immediate cause of the civil war itself may be identified as the coup and the counter coup of 1966, which altered the political equation and destroyed the fragile trust existing among the major ethnic groups. There were retributive and sporadic massacres of the people of the Eastern region, especially the Igbo, and the pogrom on them was indiscriminate. As a means of holding the country together, the Federal Military Government created twelve states from the original four regions in May 1967¹. The former Eastern Region under Lt. Col. Ojukwu saw the creation of states by decree "without consultation" as well as the massacre of the Igbo as the last straw, and declared the Region an independent state of Biafra. The Federal Government in Lagos saw this as an act of secession and illegal. Several meetings were held to resolve the issue peacefully without success. To avoid disintegration of the country, the central government was left with only one choice of bringing back the Region to the main fold by force. The war was fought therefore to reunify the country. While the Federal side expected a quick victory, the Biafrans saw the war as that of survival and were ready to fight to the last man². By August 1967, Biafra extended the war to the Mid - Western Region with the aim to relief pressure on its northern front and to threaten the

federal capital, Lagos. Both sides employed political, diplomatic and psychological strategies to prosecute the war. By the end of April 1969, after almost two years of bloody and destructive war, the envisioned quick victory had eluded the federal side but the rebel enclave had been drastically reduced in size though Biafra still held on. Peace conferences were held but none achieved a cease - fire and an end to the war. By the Christmas of 1969, it was obvious that the end of the civil war was near. The Head of State of Biafra, Lt. Col. Ojukwu, realizing the hopelessness



Fig 1: Biafra Proclamation on 30th May 1967

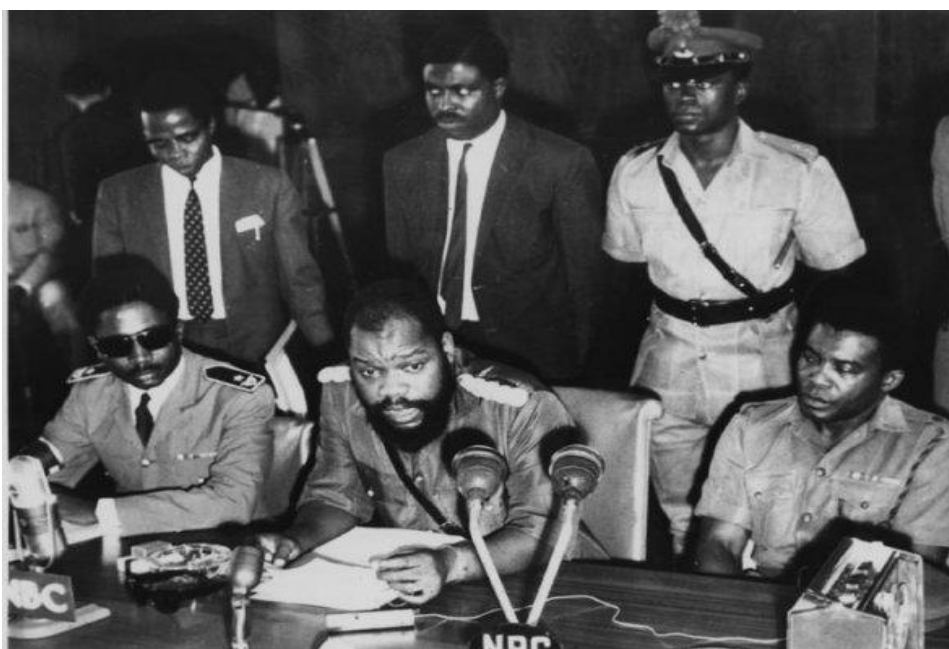


Fig 2: Lt Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu giving a press conference after the Biafra Proclamation

Source: Umuahia War Museum



Fig 3: New head of state Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu in Enugu shortly after the declaration of independence and formation of the new state of Biafra, June 10 1967 takes the oath of office

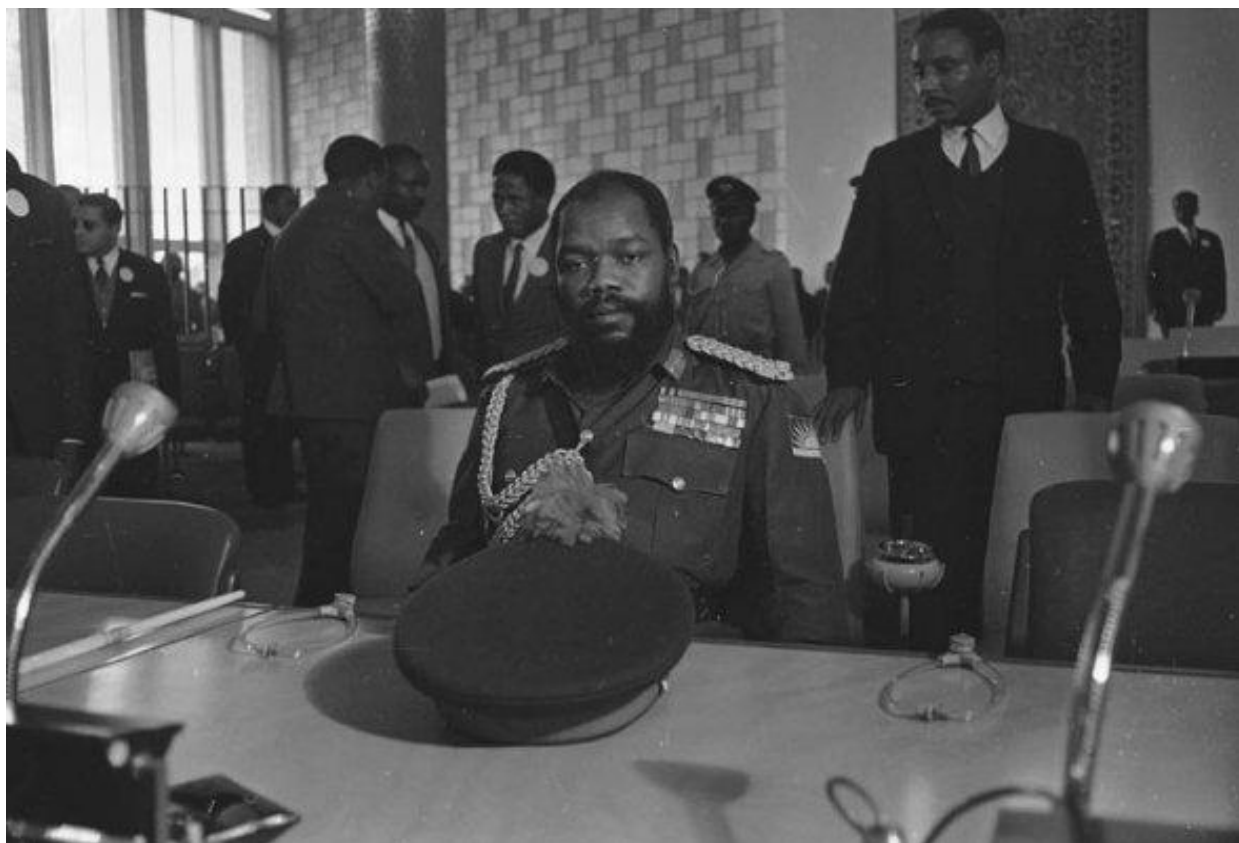


Fig 4: Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu at Nigerian-Biafran peace talks in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where the Emperor Haile Selassie is chairman of the committee Aug 5 1968

of the situation fled the enclave with his immediate family members and officials on the 10th of January, 1970. The Commander of the Biafran Armed forces who took over the administration of the remaining enclave -Major Gen. Philip Effiong- surrendered to Federal Government on 14th January 1970, bringing an end to the war and bloodshed³. The war which started gradually later engulfed other parts of the then Eastern region. Igboland was the central theatre of the war. Like other parts of Igboland, Olokoro community witnessed the heavy effects of the war. The Federal troops tried to bomb the community, like their other Ngwa, Oboro, Ibeku and Old Umuahia neighbours but were not immediately successful. This baffled the Federal troops who entered Olokoro only at the collapse of Biafra. There was complete pandemonium everywhere due to the terrifying bursts of arms which filled the air and got people running helter-skelter for their lives. Some people even contemplated committing suicide. But two Olokoro sons, Elder Uwandu of Umudere and Mr. Paul C. Umeh of Umuajata, summoned up courage and met the invading soldiers. Within a few hours, Olokoro dramatically changed from a conflict ground to a conference ground. The sounds of various weapons gave way to the sounds of various Nigerian languages. Mr. P.C Umeh, with interpreters in various Nigerian languages negotiated peace with the troops. This risky but wise



Fig 5: Mrs. Cecilia Ekweronu who on hearing terrifying burst of arms entered into sudden labour giving birth in cocoyam farm

and courageous undertaking by these Olokoro sons contributed much to save many lives that would have been lost at the last minutes of the war. It was an act worthy of commendation and of historic note⁴. Following this timely intervention, the Federal troops entered Olokoro without resistance. They, therefore, neither lost a soldier nor sustained injuries nor had no cause to be unnecessarily destructive. Umeh's diplomatic speech and peace offer was instantly interpreted in many Nigerian languages. This gave the soldiers a sense of welcome as they voluntarily surrounded the interpreters that spoke in their respective languages⁵.

What, above all, won the soldiers' sympathy was their discovery in the crowd of two Hausa women married to Olokoro men. This convinced the predominantly northern soldiers beyond doubt that Olokoro was not a place to be molested. Some of the Hausa soldiers became emotional when the two women openly testified to receiving preferential treatment from Olokoro community throughout the harsh war situation. The troops found it incredible that Hausa women could be found safe in an Igbo community even in the heat of a war that had stirred up so much ethnic hatred. The Nigerian soldiers then advised that Olokoro people should surrender and shout "One Nigeria" on seeing them. This they did and Olokoro became a refugee camp for their surrounding neighbours. It is pertinent to add here that all this does not mean that Olokoro women did not feel the adverse impact of the war, like their counterparts in other eastern parts of the country ⁶. Traditionally, women in the area that became Biafra engaged in a variety of occupations, including trading, pottery, fishing, and, of course, farming. These activities were seen as forms of assistance to their husbands. Often, women would rather describe themselves as 'housewives' and not as income-earners ⁷ although most of them earned a lot of money from their various occupations. Thus, their being described as "housewives" does not imply that they were fully devoted to home care alone.

The events which precipitated the Nigeria-Biafra War have been exhaustively dealt with in existing literature. ⁸ As indicated earlier, these events resulted in the declaration of secession by the Eastern Nigerian military governor, Col. Odemegwu Ojukwu, on the 30th of May, 1967. Biafra was a nation with great potentials but with little resources to support a war. Thus, everyone was called upon to participate actively in the war effort. Though the average Biafran woman was unprepared for war, like the men, she responded with commitment and enthusiasm. These responses were in services which ranged from the respectable to the 'ignoble'. Indeed, they were not only called on to participate but they were actually direly needed ⁹.





Fig 6: Maize harvest in Olokoro

There was a whole variety of experiences of the war which were peculiar to women. Many of these resulted from traditional female roles as 'housewives' and mothers, while some resulted from the fact that many women became *de facto* household heads and income-earners ('breadwinners,' as the common parlance is) as a result of the war. Women also contributed considerably to the effort to win the war, while their sex exposed them to peculiar risks and temptations during and immediately after the war¹⁰. The War brought with it so many problems that demanded urgent attention. Hunger increased because "men could not move about freely" seeing that those (men) who came outdoors were conscripted into the army. There was also acute shortage of food in Biafra due to the economic blockade by Nigeria.¹¹ This resulted in rampant malnutrition among Biafrans, especially children and pregnant women. Amidst all these problems, Olokoro women's reaction was similar to the account given by Emerah Obiageri about Ukpok women who did not fold their hands and went to sleep but rather took up the challenges of the hard times. Though they were not involved in physical or armed combat in the effort to help Biafra win the war, they contributed to civil war efforts in a variety of ways.¹²

The Roles of Olokoro Women in the civil War Upkeep of the Biafran soldiers

Olokoro women were very active in meeting the food needs of Biafran soldiers. One of the most devastating effects of the war, which became noticeable very early, was acute shortage of food. The situation grew worse as the war progressed. Available supplies were never enough to meet the needs of either the armed forces or the civil populace¹³. It could be recalled that the Federal authority had applied some economic measures aimed at forcing Biafra to abandon secession. There had been a near-total sea and air blockade of the Republic

of Biafra. This was done with the aid of foreign governments. For instance, Arinze stated that “former officers of the British Royal Navy supervised the blockading operations of the Nigerian Navy, and they did this with full acquiescence and support of the government led by Labor Party Prime Minister Harold Wilson”¹⁴. Lyndon Johnson, the then US President was alleged to have backed Nigeria – and supported this blockade - because Europe and America “cannot afford to have a Japan in Africa: Biafra must be crushed. And there are reasons behind this. The Biafrans invented the things now being used in Brazil, where we have cars run on sugarcane fuel.”¹⁵ As the encirclement of the republic increased, the food producing areas within the republic shrank¹⁶. Neither men nor women could farm their crops as they had done before the war for fear of being conscripted into the Biafran army or being killed in the war. Women could not carry on with their local trade. A few ventured into “ahia attack” but this was a very dangerous undertaking.

The Nigerian government adopted starvation as an instrument of the war against Biafra. In fact, in August 1968, the Nigerian army set up positions along Aba/Umuahia road and cut off all food supplies to these areas. For three days, outburst of light machine guns and repeater rifles was continuous and neither side gave an inch¹⁷. Following this policy, no relief was allowed into Biafran territories (Olokoro inclusive). Whatever filtered in had to be delivered at night by air-unworthy planes and on dirty runways. Many pregnant women died from malnutrition-related ailments particularly kwashiorkor. These women not only struggled for their own survival but in many cases, also that of their children¹⁸. Reporting to parliament on Lord Hunt’s mission to Nigeria, Commonwealth Secretary, George Thompson, said 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 death 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.”¹⁹

Hearts G.A. Ofoeze observed that starvation was introduced in the spirit and principle of Igbo annihilation. This was evident in the statement made by Brigadier-General Benjamin Adekunle, Commander, 3rd Marine Commando Division, Nigerian Army to a French radio reporter, as quoted by Ekwe-Ekwe “ I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no missionary and no UN delegates. I want to prevent even one Igbo from having even one piece to eat before their capitulation. We shoot at anything that moves and when our troops march into the centre of the Igbo territory, we shoot at anything even at things that do not move.”²⁰ Even the theme song of Radio Kaduna government controlled, “Let us go and crush them. We will pillage their property, rape their womenfolk, kill off their men-folk and leave them uselessly weeping. We will complete the pogrom of 1966” collaborates this. Also Obafemi Awolowo’s (the Finance Minister of Nigeria in 1968) opinion further attests to this when he said that “All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don’t see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder”²¹

The food crisis in Biafra was caused in part by the Federal military strategy of placing an economic embargo on Biafra. Though the primary motive may have been to starve Biafra of military resources it, however, worsened the food situation in there²². Salt, a biologically essential for human survival, was scarce and so in high demand. A regular intake of this mineral is important to human health. The salt producing areas, especially around Okposi and Uburu in the present Ohaozara Local Government Area of Ebonyi State²³, fell to Nigeria early in the war. The resultant scarcity brought a steep rise in the price of salt. Milk, an

important source of protein, was in short supply too. Stockfish, a major source of protein for the Igbo became very scarce.²⁴ As a result of the shortages, malnutrition-induced illnesses became very rife in Biafra. Kwashiorkor was especially pandemic. Among the features of the condition were general loss of weight, swelling of the limbs and discoloration of the hair. Growing children, pregnant women, the aged and nursing mothers were prime victims of this affliction. In addition to kwashiorkor, there were residual diseases associated with malnutrition, for instance malaria and tuberculosis. The effects of these ailments on the high-risk groups were very devastating. They died in large numbers before the relief organizations began to help with their supplies²⁵. Jacobs puts the number that died of starvation in Biafra during the war at more than two million people, 70 percent of them children under the age of five²⁶. Ezeani puts the number of deaths in the war at 3.5 million²⁷. Many women in Olokoro lost their children to these illnesses.

There was acute shortage of food very early in the war because the people could not engage in both farming and trading for fear of their lives. Handicapped as it was, the Biafran government began very early to appeal to individuals and groups for assistance in feeding the servicemen²⁸. In order to encourage people to make contributions to the effort to win the war, print and electronic media gave wide publicity to such donations. Many of the media had special slots or columns for publicizing donations and donors. This created and sustained keen sense of competition between women of different communities to excel each other in supporting the troops, especially with food. This fitted well into the traditional pattern of competition among Igbo communities. It was obviously in order to tap into this vital source of food supply that women were represented at local branches of the Biafran War Council²⁹. Women responded to these appeals promptly. Olokoro women were part of the effort to meet the food needs of the soldiers. They did this by levying themselves at village levels some quantities of specific food items especially garri, *egusi* and palm oil. The quantity of food items contributed by each village was related to its population. For example, bigger villages like Amangwo were asked to donate more food items than the smaller ones like Umuntu. The women in each village divided their own share among themselves³⁰.



Fig 7: A Biafran doctor hands out cups containing the daily ration of powdered milk to a line of children at a refugee camp in Anwa, Biafra, Aug. 5, 1968



Fig 8: 9 yr old Igbo albino clutching an empty corned beef tin Biafra, Nigeria. April 1968

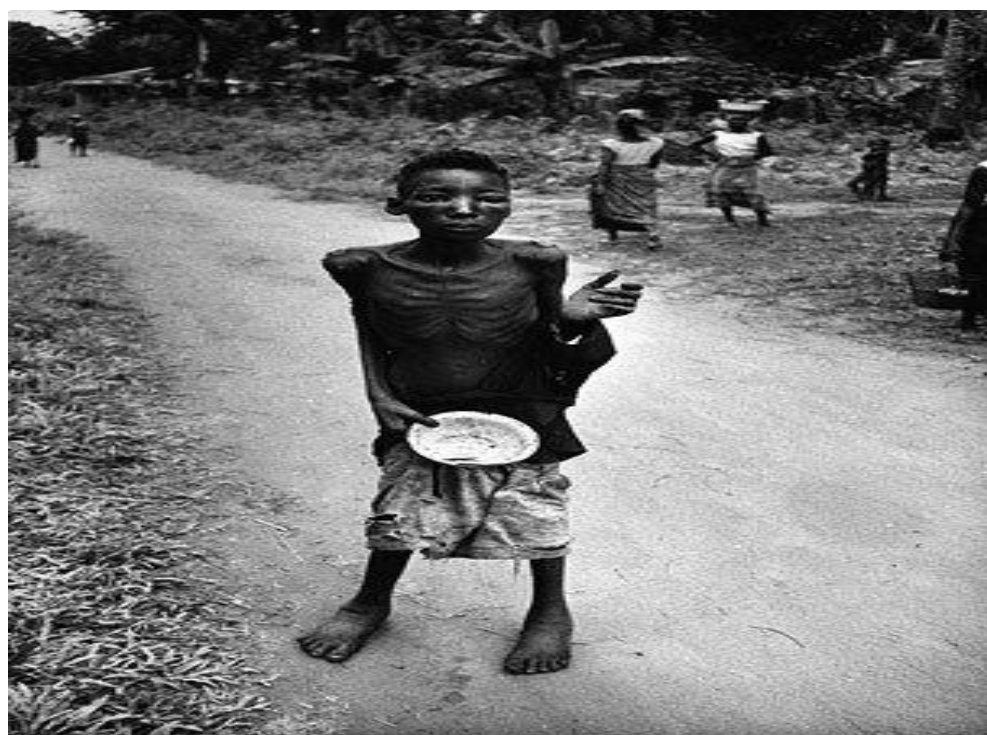


Fig 9: Sixteen-year-old Igbo boy, Biafra, Nigeria, 1968

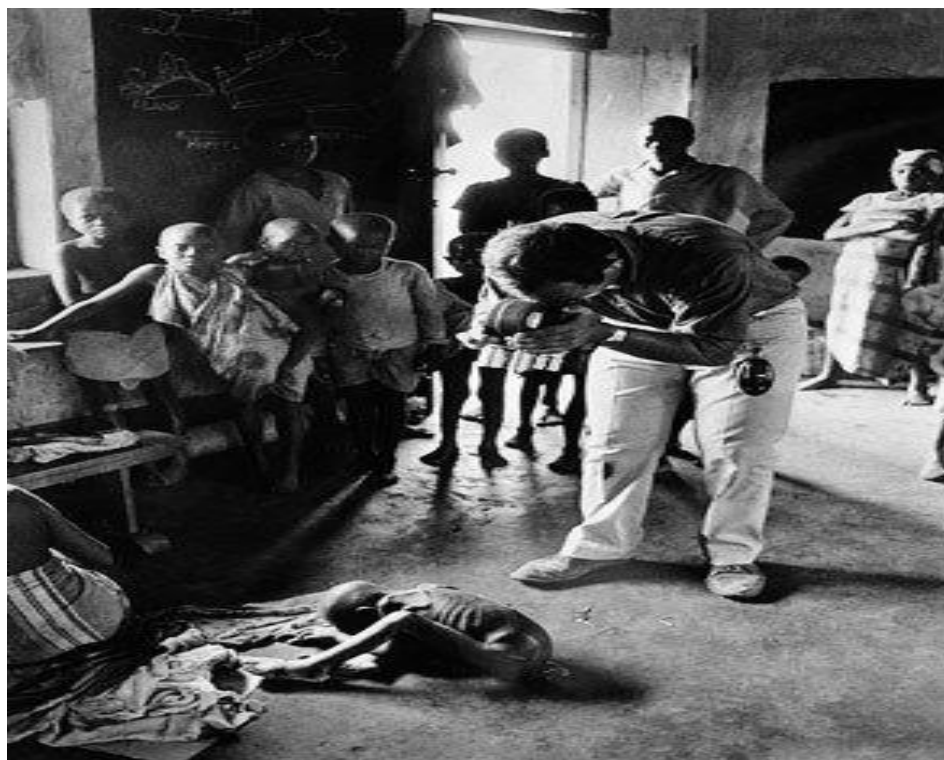


Fig 10: Cinematographer Raymond Depardon Biafra, Nigeria August 1968 by Gilles Caron

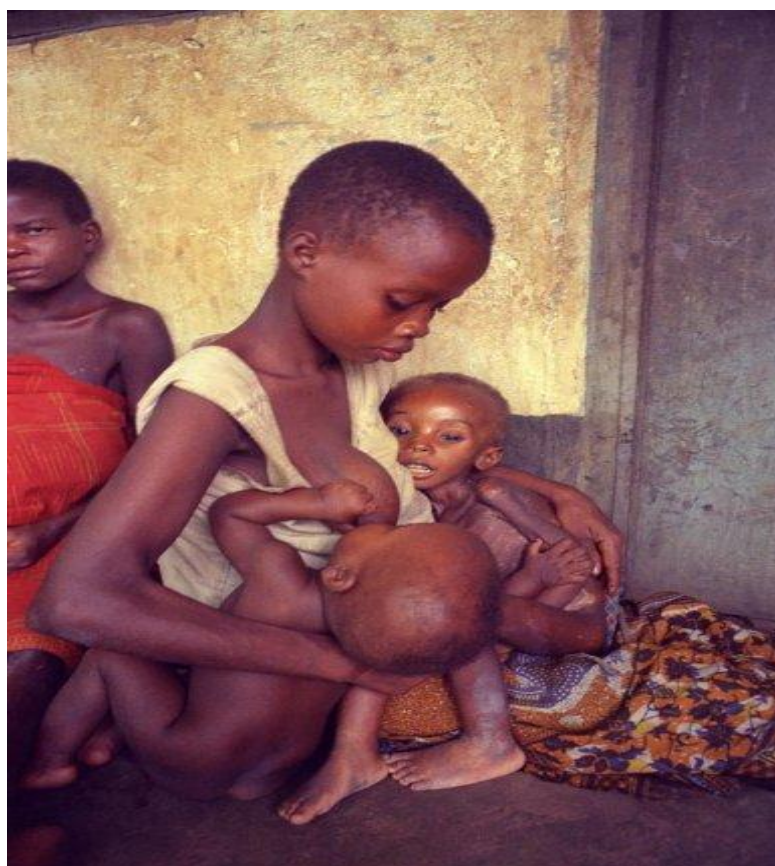


Fig 11: A young mother bosom feeds her five-month-old baby boy while holding her starving four-year-old daughter, near Anwa, Biafra, Aug. 5, 1968. The daughter died a few hours later

To facilitate easy collection of the food items, each village had a representative. The representative had to make sure that her village submitted its own share of levied food items to the central body. This contribution was later carried out compound by compound under the women organization which was headed by a leader and secretary. The food items collected were then taken to the Biafran military camps in Umuahia town. The contribution of food items was usually done twice a month³¹. Food items donated were mainly proceeds from the farms like cassava which was harvested and converted into garri within two days instead of the conventional three to four days due to the war situation. Other items include *egusi* and palm oil. Besides donating food items and cooking for the soldiers, Olokoro women also prepared 'dry packs' of *eberebe jigbo*, a kind of snack usually eaten with coconut or palm kernel. Significantly, the contributions were voluntarily made, not forced. Their contributions were a testimony of their patriotic devotion to the young Republic of Biafra. Women who, for one reason or the other, were unable to make their own contributions were not punished³². Through their contributions, the women appreciated the sacrifice made by the Biafran soldiers in order to save the Biafrans. Also, many saw the contributions as necessary civic or moral duty³³.

Olokoro women did not only contribute food items, they also helped to cook for the Biafran soldiers. The women leaders worked out a schedule for these women to prepare food for the soldiers. The military authorities resorted to forceful methods in preparing food for their men when it became obvious that the system could no longer afford the luxury of keeping some soldiers on full-time kitchen duties. Sometimes women were forcibly commandeered by the Biafran soldiers to cook for them. And the women usually got no compensation in cash or in kind for their efforts³⁴. The positive disposition of women towards the upkeep of the Biafran soldiers lasted only for a short period, to early 1968. As the Biafran territory shrank and food supplies diminished, the women began to come under increasing pressure in meeting the food requirements of their families. Hardly any of them had anything to spare for the state and the army any more. Life had become one big struggle for survival. The soldiers, for their part, began to feel abandoned and neglected by the populace and government. In response, they began to do whatever they could to survive. They established special units called 'survival platoons' within each brigade or battalion.

Usually, it was the duty of the units to prepare food using items forcefully harvested from civilian farms. The soldiers raided farms, homes and barns in search of food items. These actions often brought the soldiers into serious conflict with the civilian owners of the crops, most of them women. There were countless incidents of women who were manhandled by soldiers while trying to stop them from removing their crops. The civilians for their part did not always take the situation calmly. They sometimes resorted to violence against the soldiers³⁵. In addition to donations of material resources to the win-the-war effort, Olokoro women also prayed in formal as well as informal groups for the safety of the soldiers and civilians as well as a victory for Biafra. Many interviewees claimed to have participated in one prayer group or meeting or the other during the war. The prayer groups fostered by the harsh experiences of the war, flourished even after the war ended³⁶.

Maintenance of the war refugees in Olokoro

Many Biafrans fled to and lived in the bush or farmlands when their homes were overtaken by war. For such people, such flight meant living almost or completely without neighbourhood. Some sought for refuge in other places. The attitude of people to refugees among them varied greatly. While some hosts were generally kind and accommodating,

others were out rightly hostile. The reasons for this were the existing relationships between the refugees' own community or ethnic group and those of their hosts; and the effects of the war so far on the host community; the perceived role of the refugees in the capture of their own community by the enemy³⁷. For example, Ibeku community was regarded as a friend and brother to Olokororo even before the civil war. In fact, some Olokororo villages such as Umuajata, Okwu, Amuzu, just to mention but a few, trace their origin to Ibeku villages of Ajata, Okwuta and Amuzuukwu. These villages do not inter-marry because of their blood relationship with one another. This cordiality was absent in Olokororo's relation with Oboro. Their relationship was strained because Ndioru and Nnono, both in Oboro, betrayed Olokororo during the invasion of Olokororo by the British on 28 September, 1902³⁸. Thus, the reception given to their Ibeku "brothers" was more favourable than that of Oboro. Olokororo community witnessed a great influx of refugees in their hundreds from places like Ibeku, Oboro, Ubakala Ogoni and Ngwa. The safety of their lives being uppermost in their minds, these refugees left their homes in haste and arrived with nothing. They found accommodation in public places such as primary schools, churches and camps. Following the fall of Umuahia in 1968, Ibeku fled to their neighbor Olokororo, who had prepared places for them before their arrival. Those who had Ibeku friends and relatives made out spaces to accommodate the visitors. In addition to this, some Olokororo people provided food items to the refugees. The cordial reception of these refugees arose from the age-old close and friendly relations³⁹.

The refugees' situation was so pathetic that they were always seen moving around the villages begging for food. They wore torn and tattered clothes, looking haggard, pale, anemic and hunger stricken. Indeed, a good number of them might have died but for the women that supported them with food or food items from time to time. Some of them were hired by the women to work on their farms in return for food items such as garri. Some of the refugees who lived in private homes enjoyed the hospitality of their hosts and hostesses⁴⁰. Life in the refugee camps was, expectedly, anything but convenient. Most of the buildings were open halls with hardly any provisions for privacy and conveniences. Inmates hardly had enough space for beds and their personal effects. Typically, they laid out their mats on the floor to sleep. Sanitation was extremely poor and health problems associated with this and overcrowding, were rife. Bed bugs and other parasites tormented camp residents. Death was common.⁴¹

As Red Cross and Caritas Volunteers

Many people in the Biafran enclave owed their survival largely to the international relief organizations. Three major relief organizations were active in Biafra: the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.), Caritas, representing the Catholic Church, and the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.), 'representing some twenty-eight groups and seventeen industrial nations.' Thanks to the combined efforts of these organizations, in the late spring of 1969, an average of 300 to 350 tons of badly needed essential foods and other items were airlifted into Biafra every night, including protein foods and salt. Some of the items flown in had been commonly used by the people, such as stockfish, salt and corned beef. Others such as salted stockfish, powdered milk, egg yolk and corn meal (commonly referred to as 'Formula Two' and 'Garri Gabon' also called Formula One)⁴², were novelties. The Red Cross, a humanitarian organization, has been present in Nigeria long before the war. The Nigerian Red Cross Society, an off-shoot of the Red Cross, came into existence in the year 1917, when the country was still under British rule. It had branches and outposts in schools, colleges and tertiary institutions in the three regions- Eastern, Western and Northern regions. The Society's activities include both the traditional first-aid training and services known

today as “community-based health programmes” under the International Federation’s new community-health approach. Members are also active in emergency-relief preparedness and disaster-relief operations, assistance to refugees, anti-HIV/AIDS programmes and ambulance services. They are also involved in welfare services such as homes for motherless and abandoned babies, blood-donation programmes, charity visits to hospitals, prisons and homes for the handicapped. They carry out programmes to promote knowledge of Red Cross ideals, principles and international humanitarian law and, finally, tracing and youth-development activities⁴³. With the outbreak of the war, this organization together with Caritas International intensified their efforts in helping the sick and supplying relief materials to Biafrans. Young men and women who voluntarily joined these organizations got emergency training in order to help the sick and innumerable starving war refugees.⁴⁴ Olokoro women played active role in this respect, especially the young and educated ones. Most of the women volunteers had been nurses before the war. When they joined the Red Cross, they applied their nursing skills to take care of the sick and war refugees suffering from one illness or the other. They were mostly attached to health centres and sick bays, a kind of cottage hospital established during the war located in several refugee camps in Olokoro.

Here, they played vital roles in complimenting the efforts of other trained personnel (i.e doctors, and other health workers) in caring for the young, the old and other afflicted persons. According to Mrs Selinah Ezeogueri, a trained nurse and one of the Caritas volunteers; about seven sick bays⁴⁵ existed in Olokoro during the war. They were located in ahia-ama in Umuajata, ahia-ebo in Amizi, Okwu, Umuoparaozara, Mgbarigba in Umuajata, Itaja Obohia and Amuzu, all in Olokoro. With the assistance and supplies from these two international organisations, they were able to provide Medicare for war casualties. The efforts of the women volunteers yielded positive results because some children and refugees who contracted several illnesses such as kwashiorkor, chicken pox and measles would have died in the war, but survived. Volunteers like Mrs Umezurumba saw to it that these children were treated by the Red Cross and those that could not be handled at Olokoro were sent to Gabon. The nurses kept reliable records of relief items brought in by Red Cross volunteers. These included corn meal, stock fish, corn flour and egg yolk.⁴⁶ As volunteers they were not paid salaries, but often they got food items from the Red Cross stocks⁴⁷. It was not only Olokoro women that served as Red Cross volunteers. Some Olokoro men, like Dr. P.C Umeh and Mr Albert Uhiara, also joined the female wing of the organization and were immense help in the distribution of relief materials in Olokoro. Some men did this to evade conscription into the army.

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 30. Lady Emily Ogbonna, 66years, Chairlady Women's Association, Amizi Autonomous Community, interviewed at Amizi Olokoro on 17/2/2013.
 31. Lady Emily Ogbonna, 66years, Chairlady Women's Association, Amizi Autonomous Community, interviewed at Amizi Olokoro on 17/2/2013.

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35. A.H. Sievers, J.O. Ahazuem and S. Emezue, *A Social History of the Nigerian Civil War: Perspectives from Below*, ---p. 137.
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45. Mrs Selinah Ezeogueri 80years, Retired Chief Nursing Officer, interviewed at Umuajata Olokoro Umuahia on 21/2/2013.
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