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The Forgotten Victims: Ethnic Minorities in the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970

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Abstract: The Nigeria-Biafra War attracted enormous international attention not just for the brutal events of the period, but also because of how the conflict was interpreted, especially by foreigners. The ghastly images of victims of the war dominated the international media and roused the world's conscience. The conflict took a toll on human lives on both the Igbo and the ethnic minorities in Biafra. While the Igbo tragedy was largely perpetrated in Northern Nigeria, that of the Biafran minorities – Efik, Ijaw, Ogoja, Ibibio – occurred mainly in their homelands. The gory experiences suffered by the Biafran minorities have largely been neglected in the historiography of the Biafra War. This paper examines the experiences of the ethnic minorities in Biafra during the war between July 1967 and January 1970. It argues that the minorities suffered a high degree of persecution, molestation, injustice, psychological torture and other forms of suffering which have not been fully examined in existing literature. The war subjected them to layers of loyalty and disloyalty both to the federal authority and the Biafran government. The paper asserts that these minority groups in Biafra were as much victims of the war as the Igbo. Hence, they should be accorded due recognition in the historiography of victimhood in the Nigeria-Biafra War.

Keywords: Biafra; Ethnic; Igbo; Massacre; Minorities; Nigeria; Victims; War.

Introduction

The idea of “minority” is a concept that has posed some definitional problems among scholars. Owing to the fluidity of the concept, there has not been any internationally accepted definition. The earliest attempt to provide a definition for the term was made in 1977 by Francesco Capotorti, the former Special Rapporteur of the United Nations, who defined minority as:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions,

religion or language.¹

The problem with this definition is that it only covers persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities. There is no provision for other minority groups in terms of different social categories grounded in sexuality, gender, age, class, race, etc.

Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities adopted in 1992 recognizes minorities as a group of people with similar national or ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic identity, and provides that states should protect their existence.² The article makes reference to the same groups already identified by Capotorti. But other groups such as sexual minorities, gender minorities, age minorities, and other minorities who also need rights, are omitted and consequently appear voiceless and unprotected. With the rapidity of socio-cultural, political, and economic changes taking place all over the world, the concept of minority continues to pose more questions than can easily be answered. A more workable definition of minority should thus be seen in terms of context. Based on this, I define minority quite broadly as any group of people that is disadvantaged when compared to the rest of the population. The “minoritization” of a group should therefore be seen in terms of the situation and not just numerical weakness. For instance, a group can be a majority in terms of numerical strength but a minority in terms of political representation. In this situation, the group sees itself as a political minority and agitates for equality and justice. The minorities referred to in this paper are the ethnic minorities in Nigeria, and they are minorities because of both their numerical weakness and poor representation in the national politics.

The Igbo Victims

The Nigeria-Biafra War started on July 6, 1967 and ended on January 15, 1970. The former Eastern Region of Nigeria seceded from Nigeria and declared its independence on May 30, 1967, following the massacre of the Igbo people who were living in the northern parts of Nigeria. The federal government of Nigeria responded to the secession with “police action,” that is, a partial military operation designed to crush what it perceived as a rebellion. These actions were the beginning of a war that lasted about thirty months. But what was originally interpreted as a

¹ Francesco Capotorti quoted in Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation” HR/PUB/10/3, accessed August 5, 2012, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/MinorityRights_en.pdf, 2.

² OHCHR, “Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities Adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 47/135 of December 18, 1992,” accessed February 28, 2013, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/MinorityRights_en.pdf.

domestic conflict later took on an international dimension as state and non-state actors like Britain, the USSR, France, the Red Cross, and the World Council of Churches became involved in the conflict. The war received one of the highest humanitarian interventions in recent history. The massive number of children and women facing starvation attracted the attention of groups like the World Council of Churches, the International Committee of the Red Cross, *Caritas Internationalis*, Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and UNICEF.³ The relief effort resulted in unusual Jewish-Christian co-operation.⁴ Countries like the United States, Germany, France, and the Nordic Countries made enormous contributions towards the relief effort.⁵ The international media also highlighted the humanitarian crisis in the war-torn region and successfully brought this part of the world into global focus. *The New York Times*, *The London Times*, *La Stampa of Italy*, and *Le Monde of France* were some of the newspapers that effectively covered the war.

The dominant argument in the historiography of the Nigeria-Biafra War, both within academia and the popular media, is that the Igbo were targeted for extermination by the Muslim north. A year before the war, during the 1966 massacres of Easterners in Northern Nigeria, the alleged indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets and the widespread hunger in secessionist Biafra did a lot to rouse the world's conscience to the humanitarian crisis facing Biafran peoples. The international media played a significant role in exposing the humanitarian tragedies, especially in the Igbo-speaking parts of Biafra. And many years after the war, scholarly accounts of the war, mostly by scholars from the Igbo-speaking parts of Biafra, have privileged insights into some of the most hideous acts unleashed on Biafrans during the war. Yet, not much has been reported about the atrocities perpetrated against the minorities in Biafra, both by the Nigerian military forces and the Biafran militias. This is a gap in Biafra's history.

Newsweek, in one of its reports titled "The Resurrection of Biafra," stated that "some of the worst massacres of the war, in fact, occurred when federal troops captured minority regions -whereupon the minority tribesmen turned on the Ibos in bloody fury."⁶ This quote presents the Igbo as the victims in the hands of the minority groups, without reference to any experience the minorities might have

³ National Archives Enugu (NAE) MSP/6 Catholic Relief Services, Special Issue: Nigeria/Biafra Relief, Summer Edition, 1968.

⁴ NAE, MSP/6 Catholic Relief Services, Special Issue: Nigeria/Biafra Relief, Summer Edition, 1968.

⁵ The Nordic countries comprise of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden and their associated territories, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Svalbard, and Åland Islands.

⁶ "The Resurrection of Biafra," *Newsweek*, March 24, 1969. Ibo refers to the same group as Igbo. Ibo was commonly used in colonial writings.

had in the Igbo-dominated region before the arrival of the federal troops. Another report claimed that “in some areas outside the East which were temporarily held by Biafran forces, as in Benin and the Mid-Western Region, Ibos were killed by the local people with at least the acquiescence of the federal force: about 1,000 Ibo civilians perished at Benin in this way.”⁷ Nigerian troops were said to have hunted and killed Igbo males above the age of five, leaving the impression that the war was waged in a genocidal spirit.⁸ Colin Legum, a Commonwealth correspondent for *The Observer*, London, also noted that “the worst killing occurring among the Ibos has come from the struggle itself that inevitably produced conditions of famine.”⁹ Peter Enahoro, who seemed to have sympathised with Biafra wrote: “The Ibos are bearing the burden that rightly belongs to all who sought progress for Nigeria.”¹⁰ Gordon Wainman, a volunteer for the Canadian University Service Overseas at Kurra Falls in Nigeria, reported the massacre of 30,000 Igbos in Northern Nigeria.¹¹ Wainman said that many of those who were killed were either buried in mass graves or left to rot in the fields with a thin layer of dirt thrown over them to reduce the stench of the decaying flesh.

While not denying the gruesome atrocities committed against the Igbo during the Biafra War, there is an error in the representation of the victims of the massacres. For instance, some of the victims of the 1966 massacre in Northern Nigeria were members of minority groups but were generally grouped with Igbos. The report of the G. C. M. Onyiuke-led tribunal clearly shows that many people belonging to ethnic minority groups in Eastern and Mid-Western Nigeria were victims of the May 1966 attack perpetrated by Northerners.¹² Members of the minority groups were easily mistaken for Igbos because it was difficult to differentiate between the two by mere physical appearance. There were no facial marks as could be found among the Hausa and the Yoruba, and the pattern of dressing, mostly western, was similar. N. U. Akpan, Secretary of Government, Republic of Biafra, noted:

The killings in North in 1966, particularly those which occurred from

⁷ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “A Condemned People,” *The New York Review* ix, no. 11, December 21, 1967.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Colin Legum, “Nigeria vs. Biafra: On Taking Sides,” *Christianity and Crisis: A Christian Journal of Opinion*, xxix, no. 9 (March 26, 1969): 151.

¹⁰ Peter Enahoro, “A Night of Deep Waters” *Nigeria/Biafra*, April 1969. Peter Enahoro was the brother of late Anthony Enahoro, former Federal Commissioner for Information and Labour under General Gowon. Peter’s support or sympathy appears to have been with Biafra.

¹¹ Gordon Wainman, “I had a Ringside Seat at a Nigerian Massacre,” *Toronto Daily Star*, December 14, 1968.

¹² Report of the Atrocities Tribunal: Appendix B: Eyewitness Accounts of the 1966 Pogrom, December 1966.

the end of September, were indiscriminately directed against people from Eastern Nigeria, known in the North by the generic name of *Yameri*...The subsequent attempts in the North to distinguish between the Ibos and other peoples of Eastern Nigeria came too late to make any impression on the non-Ibo members of Eastern Nigeria, who now shared the same fears and dread of the North as the Ibos.¹³

The indiscriminate killing of members of Eastern Nigeria accounted for the divided loyalty of the minority leaders. While some supported the Biafran secession, others felt it was better to remain as Nigerians.

The Politics of Ethnic Minorities in Nigeria

Nigeria, like most African countries, is a multiethnic society with many ethnic minorities. The ethnic minority groups in Biafra include, but are not limited to Efik, Ibibio, and Ijaw, and are located along the Eastern border and the oil rich southern coast. They are found in the present-day Cross River, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers, and Bayelsa States, forming a larger part of the area now known as the Niger-Delta region. In 1966, they constituted about 40 percent of the population of Biafra, formerly Eastern Nigeria, while the Igbo made up the remaining 60 percent. Although these designated minority groups belonged to the Igbo-dominated Biafra, they still maintained their distinct ethnic identities throughout the war. All the minority ethnic groups had their separate historical origin, distinct language, and cultural practices.

Part of the overarching argument about the war is that it was a war of two majority ethnic groups - the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo.¹⁴ This interpretation is simplistic and available evidence suggests otherwise. It was rather a war between the minorities and the majorities in Nigeria. The first and second military coups on January 15 and July 29, 1966 respectively, ushered in a historic moment in the history of the minorities in Nigeria. The Richard's Constitution of 1947 created a faulty regional structure that encouraged regionalism in Nigeria's post-independence politics. Apart from the fact that one of the regions was large enough to dominate the other two regions, the political parties in the federation were regionally oriented with politicians like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello, depending on ethnic and regional support to achieve national power. For instance, the NCNC led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo, was seen as an Igbo party while the NPC led by Ahmadu Bello, a Hausa, was considered a Hausa-Fulani party. The Action Group was called a Yoruba party because its leader, Obafemi Awolowo, was Yoruba. Within the existing regional structure,

¹³ Ntiyong U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1866-1970* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 152.

¹⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Condemned People."

minority aspirations were sometimes ignored but could easily be used to promote party propaganda.¹⁵ Leaders of the minority ethnic groups found themselves in a disadvantaged position in the entire federal political equation. It was against this background that minority leaders in different regions formed movements that started agitating for the creation of more states where their interests could be adequately protected. Some of the major movements that were formed before independence included the Calabar-Ogoja-River (COR) State Movement in the Eastern Region, the Mid-West State Movement in the Western Region, and the Middle-Belt State Movement in the Northern Region. These movements were neither cultural nor national groups but were “situationally” or circumstantially formed to agitate for minority rights in the larger state. Though not homogenous, the ethnic minorities were able to form formal structures that represented their groups, a development that challenges constructivist arguments that the “lack of pure identities means that groups are not homogenous and cannot be represented through formal structures.”¹⁶

The leaders of these state creation movements believed that the formation of more states would eliminate their fears of domination by the majority ethnic groups. This concern led to the setting up of the Minorities Commission by the colonial authorities in 1957.¹⁷ It was evident that state creation would allay the fears of the minorities and guarantee more stability in the federation, but the Commission pointed out that if new states were created, they would be given two years to settle down before independence could be granted to the country.¹⁸ As events later revealed, the euphoria of gaining the long awaited independence blinded the national leaders to other realities. As the domination of the minorities continued, riots from minority areas like Tiv lingered. The Tiv under the leadership of Joseph Tarka had agitated for the creation of the Middle-Belt State. The Mid-West minorities in the former Western Region formed their own state as a result of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) plot against the Action Group (AG – a Yoruba-led party). The Mid-West creation was a way of weakening the influence of the Action Congress in the Western Region.

The growing agitations of groups dedicated to improving the fortunes of minorities in Nigeria received a remarkable boost by Nigeria’s first and second

¹⁵ NAE (Unclassified document), “Understanding the Nigerian Crisis,” Benin: Department of International Affairs and Information, Benin, 1968, 5.

¹⁶ Stephen May et al., *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8-9.

¹⁷ Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 242.

¹⁸ Nigeria Ministry of Information, *The Struggle for One Nigeria* (Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1967), 3.

coups of the late 1960s. While the first coup dismantled the influence of the Hausa-Fulani potentates, the second coup dislodged the Igbo from their positions of military control. These developments altered the balance of power and ethnic minorities in the army and civil service became central players in Nigerian politics. General Yakubu Gowon, who is Ngas, a minority ethnic group in the Northern Region, had Colonel Akahan, a Tiv, as his Chief of Staff. Some commentators interpreted the new leadership structure as the government of Middle-Belt minorities that emerged to dominate politics of Northern Nigeria.¹⁹ When Lt. Colonel Joseph Akahan died in a plane crash, some leaders of the Middle-Belt region accused Northern leaders of masterminding his death.²⁰ Although there was no evidence linking Akahan's death to Northern leaders, the ensuing controversy led to the withdrawal of Tivs from different parts of the North to Tiv land. At the centre of the civil service were minority group members such as Allison Ayida, Philip Asiodu, and A. A. Atta, who were regarded as the "super-permanent secretaries" because of their influence. People also regarded these "super-permanent Secretaries" as members of the "Oxford tribe" because they had received their degrees from Oxford University.²¹ Ayida and Asiodu, particularly, belonged to Gowon's three-member kitchen cabinet.²² Edwin Ogbu, who was a Permanent Secretary in charge of External Affairs, was equally a minority from the Middle-Belt. Apart from Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba, some of the commissioners who largely championed the war politics were of minority ethnic origin. Anthony Enahoro, Commissioner, Ministry of Information and Okoi Arikpo Commissioner, Ministry of External Affairs were minority members. There were obviously other members of Gowon's cabinet from the majority ethnic groups but those of the minority ethnic groups appeared to have wielded more influence. The Nigeria-Biafra War era was perhaps the first time members of the minority groups could occupy many important positions in the military, politics, and civil service. The assistance provided to Gowon by the increased number of minorities in the civil service and army was critical in the administration's successful prosecution of the Nigerian civil war.

The minorities' ascendancy after the July 1966 coup created an opportunity for them to address the grievances which they had long expressed through their movements. The project of state creation came at a time when the country was in a political stalemate. The coups and countercoups, the massacres of Igbos in different

¹⁹ Department of State, Telegram, The Death of Akahan, August 1967.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ John J. Stremmlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 26.

²² Ibid., 150.

parts of Nigeria, the failure to implement the Aburi Accord by the Nigerian government, the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, and the creation of twelve states by General Gowon worsened the tension between Nigeria and Biafra. It was a clash of rights, and both General Ojukwu and General Gowon seemed to have legitimate claims. Biafrans claimed the right to survival while Nigerians claimed the right to the corporate existence of the country. Two new states were carved out of the former Eastern Region, leaving it with a total of three states. This seemed to be a trump card for the federal government to court the minorities and forestall the Eastern secession. That was obviously the immediate objective but the long term goal of the minority leaders in state creation was to liberate the minorities from majority dominance. While the argument in favour of state creation was ostensibly to ensure stability and national unity, it was no less a struggle of the minorities against the old dominant majorities in the various regions. Within the Hausa-Fulani leadership, state creation was considered a dangerous development, but to the new states like Kwara and Benue-Plateau, it was an opportunity to get liberated from the Hausa-Fulani hegemony.²³ For some of the ethnic minorities in the former Eastern Region, state creation meant liberation from the alleged Igbo domination.

Ethnic Minorities as Victims in Biafra

Violent conflicts such as the Nigeria-Biafra War inflict serious injuries and create victims of all kinds. To the outside world, the known victims of the war were the Igbo who, apart from being targets of the 1966 massacres, also suffered indiscriminate bombings and monumental starvation that allegedly took about two million lives. Within the forty-two years since the war ended, more revelations about the war atrocities on the minorities have emerged. Surviving records and oral histories of the war suggest that minorities in Biafra became individual and collective victims of the war. These accounts also reveal how individuals and groups committed heinous atrocities under the pretext of either fighting a war of survival for Biafra or a war of national unity for Nigeria.

One recurrent question that comes up about the Biafran minorities is: what was the attitude of the minorities to the Biafran secession? This cannot be answered with certainty. While Biafra claimed that the minorities were wholeheartedly in support of the secession, the federal government maintained that the minorities had been longing to be liberated.²⁴ Suzanne Cronje, one of the most prolific journalists on the Biafra war, observed that “the feelings of the minorities were

²³ National Archives United Kingdom (NAUK), FCO 38/222, Political Affairs, (Internal) Demonstration.

²⁴ O'Brien, “A Condemned People.”

difficult to define.”²⁵ In the first place, the anti-Igbo uprising which would have come from the minorities as people that needed liberation did not emerge, nor was there any noticeable form of unrest among the minorities under the Biafran administration. Loyalties were, in fact, divided. The supporters of the Biafran secession were those who felt that the Easterners as a group had shared the same fate as victims of the 1966 massacres and expulsion from the North, while those who joined the Nigerian government saw it as an opportunity to have a separate state of their own and be free from any domination. Although the ethnic minorities had clamoured for a separate state of their own, it was very difficult to determine what they actually wanted during the war. A plebiscite could have given them an opportunity to express themselves but the proposal was strongly rejected by the federal government who felt it would imply a withdrawal of the federal troops to the prewar boundaries.²⁶

To understand the divergent attitudes of the minorities to the Biafran secession, an examination of oral histories from people who occupied positions of authority during the war as well as from ordinary people is necessary. The Ikun in the present day Cross River State presents a good example of the crimes committed against the minorities. The Ikun clan is in the Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State. The people share a common boundary with the Ohafia, an Igbo clan, in the present day Abia State. When the war broke out, Biafra stationed some of its troops in the Cross River region, including Ikun. According to a female survivor-victim of the Biafran occupation, the Ikun initially supported Biafra and had friendly relations with the soldiers, who were also accommodating. As time went on, tensions emerged. Some Ikun men were suspected of collaborating with Nigerian soldiers. This led to arrests, looting, rapes, and other atrocities in Ikun land.²⁷ William Norris of the *London Times* who visited Biafra, also reported an eye-witness account in which some men of Ibibio ethnic origin were beaten to death at Umuahia on April 2, 1968.²⁸ These Ibibios who included old men and young men were apparently suspected of collaborating with advancing Nigerian troops. They were reportedly frog-marched across an open space while the local people attacked them with sticks and clubs.²⁹ Oral testimony by the survivor-victim corroborates

²⁵ Suzanne Cronje, “Two Levels of Truth,” *Nigeria/Biafra*, April 1969.

²⁶ U.S. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume E-5, Part 1, Documents on Sub-Saharan Africa, 1969-1972, Document 35.

²⁷ Anonymous, Oral Interview by Atu Charles at Amanki Village in Ikun Clan of Biase Local Government Area, April 14, 1994. Transcript in my custody. The informant is described as victim-survivor because, she lost her four day old baby and grandmother.

²⁸ Department of State, Telegram, Nigerian Rebel Atrocities, May 1968.

²⁹ Ibid.

this account. According to the eyewitness, Biafran soldiers allegedly took Ikun men to Ohafia for a meeting but never brought them back. The informant also alleged that the soldiers returned to the community and rounded up some men within their reach and shot them. This survivor who lost her four-day old son and her grandmother seemed to have suspected foul play from the Ohafia people who share a common boundary with her community. The victimization continued until the Biafran headquarters likely issued an order that people should not be killed again.³⁰ By this time, the remaining people had escaped the community, leaving behind only the soldiers, the Ohafia, and some Ikun who were said to be of mixed blood - half Ohafia and half Ikun. These remaining groups, according to the survivor-victim shared the fish ponds, forests, and farms belonging to Ikun people.³¹

In a related account, B. J. Ikpeme, a member of a minority group and retired Senior Medical Officer in the then Eastern Region revealed atrocities perpetrated by Biafran soldiers against the minorities in some towns in the present-day Cross River and Akwa- Ibom States. Ikpeme argued that Ojukwu's declaration of the Republic of Biafra had been issued against the wishes of the majority of the people of Calabar, Ogoja, and Rivers Provinces, who for many years had agitated for a separate state of their own. According to Ikpeme, the Igbo leadership, who did not like the minority agitation, decided either to force the five million non-Igbo minorities into the new republic or eliminate them. It was on this basis, claims Ikpeme, that Biafran soldiers were quickly sent to the minority areas to "keep down the people, detain or even kill all who dared raise a voice in protest against the idea of Biafra."³² It was during this period that the non-Igbos started experiencing different forms of inhumane treatment, ranging from torture, detention, to killing. Ikpeme himself was detained in what he described as a "concentration camp" and was later transferred to a prison cell where he was given urine to drink when he demanded water.³³

Ikpeme described instances where the Biafran soldiers allegedly perpetrated atrocities against some members of non-Igbo groups. In Asang town in Enyong, from where Ikpeme originated, about four hundred people were carried away to an unknown destination. Another town called Attan Onoyon in the same

³⁰ Anonymous, Oral Interview by Atu Charles.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Presbyterian Church of Canada Archives (hereafter PCCA), "The Secessionist Regime and the Non-Ibo 'Minorities' in the East of Nigeria." This was a text of statements at the Peace Talks on the Nigerian Civil War, at Kampala, Uganda. Ikpeme who was a retired senior medical officer in the former Eastern Region also served as a member of the Federal Government delegation at the Kampala Peace Talks.

³³ Ibid.

Enyong was burnt down with many people killed by the Biafran soldiers. In Ikot Ekpenyong in the present day Akwa Ibom State, Biafran soldiers were said to have shot many villagers. Ikpeme also recounted that similar killings carried out by Biafran soldiers took place in places like Ikot Okpot and Idoro. He equally alleged that when the Nigerian troops landed in Calabar on October 18, 1967, about 169 civilians in detention were lined up and shot by Biafran soldiers. This same allegation had also been published in *The New York Times* as an informational advertisement by the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in New York.³⁴ These two accounts, given by the survivor-victim of Ikun and Dr. Ikpeme, portray similar pictures of gross atrocities but with different underlying objectives.

Biafra ran a special operations group known as the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighter (BOFF). This was a paramilitary organization set up by the civil defence group in Bende.³⁵ This special operations group was instructed to suppress the enemy, but they apparently targeted some minorities in Cross River and Akwa Ibom States on the account of sabotage against the Biafran government.³⁶ Philip Effiong, who was from one of the ethnic minorities, probably ordered the BOFF's "combing" operations after the death of one Major Achibong. In an interview, the informant did not reveal the circumstances surrounding the death of Major Achibong who was equally a member of a minority group. He argued that if Effiong ordered any "combing" operation, it could not have been aimed at exterminating members of his ethnic group. What the informant's testimony reveals is that some members of the BOFF who also operated as the Bende Special Operations group could have taken advantage of the assignment to accomplish selfish interests. For instance, an intriguing revelation about the Bende Special Operations group shows that some of its members decapitated their victims for ritual purposes.³⁷ Head-hunting in warfare was a cultural practice in some parts of Biafra known as Old Bende. This tradition survived up to the beginning of the twentieth century. In the pre-colonial era, it was culturally acceptable for members of a certain age-grade to go to war and come back with human heads as trophies. Successful warriors who brought back trophies were highly honoured among members of their age-grades and in the whole community. The war situation might have created an opportunity for the warrior group to reactivate a tradition that had faded out as a result of Western influence.

Although all the minority groups suffered different forms atrocity, the

³⁴ "The Nigerian Civil War: the Way Out," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1968.

³⁵ Bende area covers some local governments in the present-day Abia State.

³⁶ S. B. A. Atuloma, Oral Interview by Sydney Emezue at Umuahia, September 18, 1990. Transcript in my custody.

³⁷ Ibid.

minorities in the Rivers area seemed to be worse off. Apart from torture and other forms of human rights abuse, they were also evicted from their homes. For instance, when two strategic villages on the New Calabar and Sombriero Rivers fell to the federal troops in February 1968, the news that followed was that the majority of the soldiers that led the operation were Rivers young men, predominantly Kalabari. As a consequence, many people from Bakana, one of the major Kalabari towns, were removed and sent to Igbo towns like Umuahia, Owerri, Abiriba, and Ozuitem, most likely to avoid further infiltration of the enemies.³⁸ Chief Samuel Mbakwe, who served as Biafran Provincial Administrator for Okigwe Province, noted the influx of refugees from Port Harcourt but did not explain whether or not they were forcibly removed by the Biafran forces.³⁹ We do know that Biafrans tended to regard anyone who stayed at his post and was overrun by the federal advance as a collaborator. An Irish priest who served in Rivers State reported that the Igbo soldiers were suspicious of some Rivers people who sometimes led federal troops through their lines along hidden creeks.⁴⁰ This attitude, according to the priest, created a mixture of panic, fear, and hatred among the Biafran troops towards some indigenous people of Rivers State. People who were maltreated were said to have been involved in this act of “sabotage” against Biafra.

At Bolo and Ogu in Okirika, and Onne in Eleme, the villagers suffered the same fate. After the battle at Onne, Biafran troops removed the town inhabitants suspected to have collaborated with federal troops and sent them to the Rainbow Town headquarters of the Biafran 52 Brigade in Port Harcourt. Graham-Douglas, who was also thrown into detention, claimed to have seen about three hundred men detained in the Rainbow Town. He asserted that no fewer than six thousand Rivers people were sent to different refugee camps in Igboland.⁴¹

It is important to point out that propaganda played a prominent role in the Nigeria-Biafra war. Some of the pamphlets published by Nigeria and Biafra or their agents were loaded with misinformation. Commenting on a section of Graham-Douglas’ pamphlet titled, *Ojukwu’s Rebellion and World Opinion*, John Tilney of Liverpool observed, “That may be propaganda. What Graham-Douglas says may not be wholly true. But we are all plagued by propaganda by both sides.”⁴² Both Biafra and Nigeria professionally engaged propaganda as a potent tool in the war. While Biafra hired Markpress, Nigeria engaged the services of Galatzine Chant

³⁸ Nabo B. Graham-Douglas, *Ojukwu’s Rebellion and World Opinion* (Lagos: Nigerian National Press, 1968).

³⁹ Samuel Onunaka Mbakwe, Oral Interview by Sydney Emezue at Avutu/Etiti, September 18, 1990. Transcript in my custody.

⁴⁰ Donald Musgrave, “Priest Tells of War Atrocities,” *The Irish Times*, May 23, 1968.

⁴¹ Graham-Douglas, *Ojukwu’s Rebellion*, 17.

⁴² House of Commons Report on the Nigerian Situation, London, August 27, 1968.

Russell and Partners for the public relations job.⁴³ Graham-Douglas' story that the minorities in Biafra had suffered more hardships and molestations than the Igbo could claim to have suffered at the hands of Northern Nigerians was apparently part of Nigeria's propaganda which he also presented in London in August 1968.⁴⁴ Graham-Douglas' comments about Biafra had been criticised by an official of the British High Commission for lack of inside information about Biafra.⁴⁵ He was equally described as talking "out of the back of his head" because of unverifiable comments he made about the Catholic Church.⁴⁶

J. O. J. Okezie observed that Graham-Douglas' switch to the Nigerian side might have led to the Igbo attitude of distrust towards the minorities. He pointed out however, that the sabotage accusation was not limited to the non-Igbo. The Onitsha people who were indisputably Igbo also suffered the same intimidation and humiliation. Many of their prominent leaders were said to have been detained by the Ojukwu-led government for allegedly contributing to the fall of Onitsha and Enugu.⁴⁷ A brigadier in the Biafran Army narrated his personal experience in the sabotage accusation. The officer stated that two members of a local militia had written an anonymous petition against him. When the writers were discovered, they confessed that they had undertaken to cut down his popularity. The two officers were brought before Ojukwu by Major General Effiong who ordered their execution. The officer in his magnanimity refused to execute the petition writers.⁴⁸ This illustrates how the sabotage syndrome assumed a life of its own and became an instrument of victimization against innocent persons. There is no doubt that many people lost their lives without substantial evidence, as is common during times of war whether in Africa or elsewhere.

Violence towards the minorities was not perpetrated only by the Biafran troops. The federal troops were equally culpable of this crime. In Andoni area of Rivers for example, an appeal was sent to the Biafran Head of State narrating how the villages were attacked on Sunday, March 31, 1968 as a result of their loyalty to Biafra. The report alleged that the attack was led by five collaborators who were likely members of the minority group. One of the victims of the attack was said to be an undergraduate student of the University of Ibadan who was a member of the Biafran Provincial Enlightenment Committee. Apart from burning down

⁴³ NAUK, FCO 65/ 445/1, Nigeria Press: Biafran Propaganda.

⁴⁴ "Graham -Douglas Speaks," *West Africa*, August 17, 1968.

⁴⁵ NAUK FCO 23/182, Nigeria and Biafra, 1968.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ J. O. J. Okezie, Oral Interview by Sydney Emezue at Umuahia, September 17, 1990. Transcript in my custody. He was a medical doctor and first republic politician.

⁴⁸ P. C. Amadi, Oral Interview by Sydney Emezue at Owerri, September 19, 1990. Transcript in my custody. Amadi was a brigadier in the Biafran Army.

houses and property, the petitioners also alleged that over 500 persons including children were killed.⁴⁹ Similarly, approximately 2,000 Efiks were reportedly killed in Calabar by the federal troops. The victims were said to be returnees who revolted against the federal occupation. The killing was reported to Gowon who subsequently appointed Dr. J. B. Ikpeme as Chief Justice when the killing had nearly been completed.⁵⁰

The Nigerian Air Force left their own mark in the minorities' areas. They were accused of indiscriminate bombing of civilian occupied areas. William Norris of the London *Sunday Times* in an article titled, "Nightmare in Biafra," reported how the high-flying Russian Ilyushin jets dropped bombs in civilian centres in Biafra. He stated that,

Slowly, but effectively, a reign of terror has been created. The ruins of Mary Slessor Memorial Hospital at Itu, of the hospital of Itigidi, and of the Cheshire Home at Port Harcourt, stand as a kind of grisly memorial to something that must be if words are to retain any meaning. It is certainly not war.⁵¹

These targets were all in the minority areas. Cronje similarly reported that the Nigerian Air Force had bombed the minorities as much, if not more than the Igbos.⁵²

The plight of the minorities had been so alarming that several Nigerian students of Rivers State origin in London staged a peaceful protest against the killing and displacement of their people. In addition to a peaceful march from Trafalgar Square to the House of Commons in London, they also sent out petitions to the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), His Holiness Pope Paul VI, Emperor Haile Selassie, the British Prime Minister and other relevant groups, asking them to bring pressure on the warring parties to stop the senseless killing of innocent and defenceless people of Rivers State.⁵³ The petition may not have produced any direct result but must have contributed to the pressure on the warring parties to negotiate for peace.

The war had been fought not just for political reasons but also for economic motives with oil resources in mind. And for a national economy that had begun to depend on oil, control of the oil-bearing region that was inhabited by the ethnic minorities became crucial to winning the war. Recent discoveries by the Ministry

⁴⁹ Eastern Nigeria, Ministry of Information, *The Case for Biafra*, first independence anniversary edition (Enugu: Ministry of Information, Republic of Biafra, June 12, 1968), 28-29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁵¹ Quoted in Eastern Nigeria, Ministry of Information, 23.

⁵² Suzanne Cronje, "Two Levels of Truth" *Nigeria/Biafra*, April 1969.

⁵³ NAUK, FCO 38/222, Demonstration.

of Defence-sponsored humanitarian demining project buttress the claim that the oil rich minority areas were hotly contested in the war. Although the war had ended, people in different parts of the then Biafra continued to die from accidental explosion of unexploded mines. According to Emeka Uhegbu, the field administrator of the United Nations mandated demining project, the minority areas of Rivers State had the highest number of landmine victims. Akwa Ibom and Imo States follow on the list.⁵⁴ The demining team discovered 400 unexploded bombs in a forest in Rivers State. These bombs and landmines had killed several unsuspecting villagers who went to farm, resulting in the nickname, “evil forest.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Brutal conflicts such as the Nigeria-Biafra War inflict painful injuries on all people. The few cases examined in this article show that the ethnic minorities were also individually and collectively victimized. Gowon’s creation of new states and Ojukwu’s declaration of the Republic of Biafra created a sharp division among ethnic minorities. This meant loyalties and disloyalties to the two warring parties. Upholding Nigeria’s principle of twelve-state structure meant sabotage to Biafra, while supporting Biafra’s secession implied rebellion to the Nigerian government. The minorities in the oil-rich region seemed to have been worse off in the war. The warring parties wanted to control the region and its oil resource. It was largely for this reason that the region assumed strategic importance and became a theatre of war.

General Gowon’s declaration of “No Victor, No Vanquished” after Biafra’s capitulation was a good social therapy that helped calm the war tensions among the groups that were involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, the vestiges of the war are still present in the minority areas. The unexploded bombs in these highly contested areas still pose a huge threat. People continue to lose their legs and lives following accidental explosions. The victims of these accidental explosions are yet to be given adequate rehabilitation.⁵⁶

Despite the sufferings of the ethnic minorities during and in the aftermath of the war, their perspective in the civil war discourses remains almost forgotten. Their victimhood, like that of the Igbo, should be accorded a place in the historiography of the Nigeria-Biafra War. The struggle for Nigeria’s unity wouldn’t have been possible without the minorities. The struggle over control of the oil-rich region placed them in a disadvantaged position by exposing them to more dangers and

⁵⁴ Emeka Uhegbu, interview by author, July 14, 2011. Field Administrator, Ministry of Defence-sponsored Humanitarian Demining Project. The project was mandated by the United Nations Organization under the Ottawa Convention of 2001.

⁵⁵ Uhegbu, interview by author.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

destruction. Recognizing the ethnic minorities as victims would place them in their rightful position in the nation's history.

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